

A man with a large, intricate tattoo on his back is seen from behind, looking out at the ocean. A woman with long hair and sunglasses is in the foreground, looking towards the right. The background shows a blue sky and ocean waves.

MAVERICK CARTER
IS THE ONLY RUSE I EVER FELL FOR...

RUSE

MALIBU COVE CHRONICLES #1

BELLAMY ROSWELL
CECE PEREZ

RUSE

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CECE PEREZ



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Cover By: Kate Farlow; Y'all That. Graphic.

ISBN: 9798360014157

ISBN: 9798360056201

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*TO THE GIRLS WITH SUNSHINE IN THEIR EYES, A BRILLIANT,
LUMINESCENT GLEAM FULL OF HOPES AND DREAMS THAT ARE YET
TO BE BURNED OUT BY THE SHEER DISAPPOINTMENT OF REALITY.*

*TO THE GIRLS WHO SHED TURQUOISE TEARS, ERRANT AND
PASSIONATE, FLOWING ENDLESSLY LIKE THE DEEP BLUE SEA.*

THIS IS A STORY OF HEARTBREAK AND THE HIDDEN BEAUTY IN IT,

NOT ONLY MAKING YOU FEEL SORROW AND DESPAIR,

BUT ALLOWING YOU TO FEEL ANYTHING AT ALL.

A HEART THAT BREAKS IS A HEART THAT BLEEDS,

AND A HEART THAT BLEEDS IS ALIVE.

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MALIBU COVE CHRONICLES

*SALTY AIR, SANDY BEACHES, CRYSTAL WATERS,
AND NEVER ENDING SUNSHINE.*

WELCOME TO MALIBU COVE.

A GLIMPSE INTO THE LIVES OF MALIBU COVE'S ELITE.
WHERE SECRETS RUN DEEPER THE TIDES OF THE PACIFIC
OCEAN.

Ruse is Book One in the *Malibu Cove Chronicles*, *FOUR* epic New Adult Romances following a group of friends as they navigate the scandalous world of Malibu Cove High.

RUSE Tropes include:

#stepbrother #enemiestolovers #revenge #blackmail
#fallenpopulargirlandtherebelbadboy #oppositesattract
#forbiddenlove

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*TWIN SOULS MEETING FOR THE THIRD TIME. THE FIRST WAS WHEN
THEY WERE CREATED. THE SECOND WHEN THEY BROKE APART,
DRIFTING OFF TO SEPARATE CORNERS OF THE WORLD, SPENDING
THEIR ENTIRE EXISTENCE FINDING THEIR WAY BACK TO ONE
ANOTHER.*

THIS IS THEIR STORY.

— **BELLAMY ROSWELL**

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PLAYLIST

CRUEL SUMMER - TAYLOR SWIFT

MALIBU - MILEY CYRUS

PERFECT - ED SHEERAN

MINE - BAZZI

WATERMELON SUGAR - HARRY STYLES

RIDE FOR ME - DANIEL DI ANGELO

ADDICTED - DANIEL DI ANGELO

LOVE OVERDOSE - DANIEL DI ANGELO

MAKE ME FEEL - ELVIS DREW

BABY WHY - SARAH COTHRAN

ALONE WITH YOU - ALINA BARAZ

MY WHOLE LIFE - ALINA BARAZ

TAKE MY BREATH AWAY - EZI

SOME KIND OF DRUG - G-EAZY FEAT. MARC E. BASSY

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BLURB

Marriage. Happily-ever-after. Endgame.

It's all a fucking ruse.

To have and to hold, till death do us part.

Or until the neighbor fucks your husband and leaves hers to marry yours, whichever comes first.

My parents' divorce hit me like a train wreck, creating a domino effect of epic proportions.

My mother checked into rehab after swallowing a container of pills. I was dumped by my *perfect* boyfriend because of my newfound *tainted* reputation.

My father eloped, proceeding to move-in the adulterous neighbor, and to make matters worse, she brought with her a troublesome, drug dealing, gang banging, no-good teenage son.

The devil himself, **Maverick Carter**.

The only problem was as much as I vowed to hate him for what his mother did, I couldn't stay away.

He brought out the worst in me, but also made me feel things I never had experienced.

Mav was my drug, a highly addictive and lethal dose of danger mixed with chaos.

To date the town bad boy is a thrill itself, but when said bad boy is your wicked stepbrother, it makes it all worth the wild ride.

Though, like I said, it was all a ruse.

Maverick Carter was the only ruse I ever fell for and look how it left me.

Broken-fucking-hearted.

My name is Phoenix Bancroft, and it looks like

I was the only fool all along.

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PROLOGUE

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PHOENIX

Summer: sunshine, bikinis, and bonfires.

Summer in Malibu Cove: scandals, secrets, and blackmail.

The sun's bright rays warm the crisp Spring air while laughter echoes along the sandy shores of Zuma Beach, and happiness erupts from every child along the sunshine coast of Southern California. School's out, bikinis are on, and all the teenagers in Malibu Cove are preparing to live life careless and carefree for three long and scorching months. Not like they live responsibly for the other nine months of the year, but summer is a free pass. Anything and everything is possible.

From scenic sunset strolls on Matador Beach, to cliff jumping at Pointe Dume, and down to Pacific Park on the Santa Monica Pier, the possibilities are endless.

Wind in our hair, sand in our toes, pomegranate margaritas in our hands, and blonde surfer boys squirming their way into our hearts. Summers in Malibu Cove are EPIC. For three months, we play, party, and pretend the world is ours for the taking, living every second as if it were our last. Friendships are golden, relationships flourish and bloom, and even the nemesis drop their weapons retreating from battle until the summer's end.

Nothing compares to surfing the rolling waves and riding them until the sun goes down on the horizon, spending nights camped along the beach's sandy shore, or soaking up sunshine laying out by the pool.

Affluent teenagers run wild and free down the streets of Malibu Cove, while the adults remain locked away in their mansions, their offices, or on exotic vacations, clueless to what their offspring are really up to. But all is fair for the summer, as long as it lives up to their absurd expectations.

The only problem, summer doesn't last forever. All is fun and games until the sun sets, the air cools, tourists head home,

and the oceans' wayward waves wreak havoc along the shore, and in our homes.

But for three months it's nothing but tan-lines, joyrides, and summer flings.

At least that's how it all started for me the summer before my senior year of high school. Everything was perfect.

I had the boy; I had the perfect friends; everything was just as it was supposed to be.

Until it wasn't.

Summer ended early for me that year, and nothing would ever be the same.

The curtains lifted, the rose-colored sunglasses fell off, and everything I'd been blind to became blatantly obvious. Nothing was as it once seemed.

Secrets were revealed, scandals wreaked havoc in my household, and my picture-perfect life ceased to exist.

After all, life in Malibu Cove is anything but perfect.

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CHAPTER
ONE

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PHOENIX

Senior year is supposed to be the culmination of your epic teenage years. The best of the best. The happiest of times. The most memorable moments. Memories that'll last a lifetime.

Or so it goes.

At least that's the way it's portrayed everywhere you look. It's what we're raised to believe is true. This is Hollywood after all.

Movies show you a faux glimpse of the high school ideal. The glitz and glamour that is supposed to exist, yet is hidden under layer upon layer of anxiety, despondency, and cruelty.

Don't get me wrong, some parts are true. The cliques, the popular mean girls, the gorgeous, almost too good to be true fuckboys, but nothing rings truer than the lies hidden behind the curtain of idealistic adolescence.

It's all a facade, and mine was finally, and viciously, ripped off like a super glued Band-Aid to reveal the harsh reality underneath.

For me, senior year is the beginning of the end. A catalyst that will likely ensure the end of my picture-perfect life. A brutal reminder that everything I once held dear, everything I had in the palm of my hands, has been ripped away from me for good.

And no, this isn't me just being your typical, over dramatic teenage girl.

This is my reality.

My father cheated. My parents divorced. My mother turned suicidal. My father remarried. I gained a new stepmother, and worse, a stepbrother. Though I'm sure my misfortune is far from over. This is only the beginning. Soon enough, I'll be able to take a deep breath, examine the damage, and hopefully it won't be too late.

Though there is one thing I'm almost certain of. The actions I take, the choices I make, the decisions I come to, will all amount to one thing.

Utter-fucking-chaos.

“SO, TELL ME AGAIN HOW YOU'RE NOT HIGH ON XANY OR drowning in the bottom of a bottle of Hendricks?” my best friend inquires, not bothering to hide the judgmental sneer in her voice. She's standing before me, Parisian Pink lips gaping open, baby blue eyes shot wide, and a rose gold vape pen stuck in her hand while a cloud of cotton candy scented smoke floats between us.

It's the normal reaction I've been getting from everyone around me after what happened earlier this summer. I should have expected no less from her.

I take a deep breath, my annoyance resting on the tip of my tongue, but hold back, trying not to sound like a total bitch as I answer. I mean, she's only asking what everyone else is too scared to ask.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath to calm my displeasure. “Because, Dee, I refuse to end up like my mother stuck in a rehab facility or like my brother pretending nothing's happened,” I scoff, angrily slamming the door of my locker, making the others beside it vibrate with the force of the bang. Around us a few gazes turn our way, but soon enough they drop to the floor, knowing better than to be caught staring.

Shrugging my bag over my shoulder, the weight of it makes me hunch to one side. Thank God for lockers. There is no way I'd be able to carry all the textbooks I'm required to lug around for my senior year. Instead of taking it easy and enjoying the last of my teenage years, skipping class and spending my afternoons at the beach like my rest of my friends, I'll be drowning myself in every AP Honors class

hoping to get into a college as far away from here as possible. Because there's no way I'm taking any of my father's money.

My best friend leans back against her locker clutching her English Honors textbook against her chest and taking in another puff of candy scented smoke. The teal shade of the metal door behind her blends in with the color of the brand-new outfit she purchased when she forced me to go shopping with her at The Village this weekend. Apparently the other twenty outfits she purchased throughout the summer weren't good enough for the first day of senior year. Instead, the cashmere shorts and off-the shoulder crop top were the perfect *fit*.

"I'm sure Brooklyn is dealing with everything in his own way," Donovan replies, tucking her hair behind her ear, oddly understanding of my brother's nonchalance. She nips at the edge of her bright pink bottom lip, a telltale sign she's nervous and unsure if she's spoken out of line. The old me would have given my bestie hell for taking his side instead of mine, but like I promised myself just last night, the old me is now dead.

What was it *the* incomparable Ms. Swift once said, "*The old me can't come to the phone right now, oh why? Cause she's dead.*"

I roll my eyes at Donovan's refusal to say anything negative about my dear brother, who she's not so secretly been in love with since before she could walk. Typical of her, but for once I thought my best friend would take my side.

I meet her anxious pink pout with a stern and irritated scowl that lets her know exactly how her previous statement made me feel. "No, Brooklyn is acting like a total asshole and prefers to put all the blame on my mother instead of the fucking sleaze of my father. Everyone else already does."

More heads around us turn our way when my voice reaches a higher octave, but my indignant glare is quick to make them turn away. It's the first day of school, so obviously the hall is buzzing with teens hugging as if they didn't just see each other every day this summer. Well, some didn't, those who spent their summer vacationing in the Hamptons or down

in Key West and have just arrived back with the same golden, glowing tans the California sunshine gives you. I've never understood the reasoning behind vacationing to a faraway beach when the ocean is our front yard, but come to think of it, spending the summer anywhere but Malibu Cove has its appeal.

At least I wouldn't have to deal with the snide stares and conniving snickering from those who stayed home and witnessed my downfall, also known as the end of my life, and the beginning of something I'm not sure will end any differently.

Of course, when news spread about my father's affair with our equally married neighbor, everyone started talking and speculating about my parents' marriage, coming up with their own conclusions about their liaison. It's funny how many people became experts and marriage therapists suddenly voicing their unnecessary and unsolicited opinions on the subject.

Mainly, the rumors said my mother was an inattentive wife who drove her perfect husband to cheat. After all, a man could only endure so much negligence, he has needs. What they don't know is that my whole life, mom's been struggling with demons of her own, which were summoned thanks to daddy dearest's humiliating infidelity.

That's what life is like in the suburbs off the coast of Southern California. Never a dull day, and rarely a moment of happenstance in paradise.

Donovan slams the door of her locker, waving her hands in the air, exasperated. "I'm sure he doesn't blame her. I mean, why is it always the woman who gets blamed when her husband cheats? It's either she's not satisfying him in bed, or spending too much time with the children, or my personal favorite, *has let herself go.*"

I laugh, not because what Donovan is so passionately expressing is funny in the slightest, but because the irony of it is sadly almost comical. "Because we live in a patriarchal society full of misogynistic assholes who believe women as a

whole are to blame for everything wrong in the world.” I roll my eyes just as the first bell rings, giving us a five-minute warning to get to class. It’s the first day of school so obviously nobody moves, expecting to use the overused excuse they couldn’t find their homeroom.

It’s bullshit, but the teachers won’t dare say anything about it.

As for Donovan and me, we don’t move, both having AP English right across the hall for our homeroom.

Malibu Cove High is exactly what it sounds like. Located at the top of a pristine cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, MC High is everything you’d expect from a school off the wealthiest coast of California. Pristine white marble floors, state-of-the-art school facilities, including university grade lecture rooms, a modern gym and equipment room for MC High’s pro-level sports teams, and everything you’d expect from any Hollywood Film portraying flawless high school students using gorgeous twenty-five-year-old actors.

Salty air, sandy beaches, crystal blue waters, and never-ending sunshine surround us daily. Combine that with impeccable blonde babes always in bikinis, weekly bonfires on our finest beaches, unfairly gorgeous jocks who live and breathe football, and disreputable scandals knocking down everyone’s door.

That’s what it’s like to live the life of Malibu Cove’s Elite.

Here, secrets run deeper than the tides of the Pacific Ocean, and they drown us just the same.

However, with power and prestige comes a giant price to pay, and mine might just be my sanity.

“So,” Donovan asks, changing the subject once she’s realized I’m done chatting about my current situation. “Have you seen him?” She innocently twirls a strand of beach blond hair in between her fingers.

Donovan’s your typical affluent SoCal blonde babe, always in a bikini, a hot pair of Daisy Dukes, or a cheer uniform. I also happen to be a blonde and an ex-cheerleader -

I'll have to break that news to Dee at some point - but after this summer, things feel different. My priorities have somewhat shifted.

Though I don't have to ask what *him* she's referring to, it's blatantly obvious. The bane of my existence, my beloved new stepbrother.

"No, and I'm not planning to," I snap at her, my footsteps quickening in response as I head toward the open classroom. "My life's goal is to avoid him at all costs."

What is it with her pushing my every button this morning?

I'm not usually this irritable but I had a shitty night's sleep dreading the god awful first day of school, and it's turning out just like I imagined it would last night while I lay restless in my bed.

"You're going to be living together Phoenix, I don't think that's going to be possible," she mutters, trying to keep up with me, once again stating the obvious about my unrealistic expectations.

Donovan's sure giving the *Dumb Blonde* reputation grounds for reason today, as if we needed any more. The girls at MC High may not be the brightest tools in the shed or whatever, but at least they look shiny, expensive, and pretty.

I laugh, not a genuine laugh, more like an aggravated chortle at her comment. "Oh, trust me, it will be."

I've signed up for literally every extracurricular activity imaginable this year to ensure I spend as little time as possible at home. The school newspaper, student government, I almost went as far as joining the chess club, all to avoid my father's new wife and her son.

"I wonder why he's come back. Wasn't he living in New York with his billionaire grandmother?" she leans forward and asks as we step under the doorway of our homeroom.

I sigh, knowing damn well this inquisition won't end if I don't give her what she wants. My bestie is relentless. "Connecticut, and it was an aunt," I reply bored. "He was attending some ritzy boarding school, which was supposed to

ensure he would be accepted into any Ivy League of his choice, as if his parents' generous donation wouldn't take care of that."

"So, what happened?" Dee blurts out, and I've just about stopped caring.

"Rumor is he was kicked out." Oliver, my other best friend and the third member of our inseparable trio, shows up out of nowhere just as we enter the classroom. "Guess he went ape shit when he found out his mother cheated on his dad and nearly beat a classmate to death. Like the poor kid ended up in the hospital with multiple injuries."

The look of utter bewilderment on Dee's face makes me laugh, though not as much as the worry and fear visible in Oliver's dark brown eyes.

I first met the said asshole in question when I was ten years old, and the Carters moved in next door to us. They were a quiet family, rarely seen outside their household, much less at any of the events and parties my family frequented at the Malibu Cove Country Club. On the rare occasion they did come out to some social event, it was only Mr. And Mrs. Carter that were seen, making the existence of their son always a topic of conversation amongst the progenies.

However, it's been eight years since I last saw him, the summer before he abruptly left and disappeared into thin air, never coming back home during summer break or holidays. My parents weren't very close to our next-door neighbors, so I never quite found out the truth about why he left.

Well, at least I thought they weren't close, though apparently my father and Mrs. Carter were quite *chummy*.

"And how do you know all of this Oliver?" Donovan asks, meanwhile Olly brushes his brown hair off his face and gives her his best, *do you really have to ask*, expression. "Right," she sighs, taking a seat at the desk beside me.

The classroom has five rows of six light oak-wood desks and turquoise chairs. Olly takes the desk in front of Dee just as

everyone settles into their seats right before the second bell rings and Mrs. Phillips enters the room.

Mrs. Phillips is an older woman, maybe hitting fifty soon, with short brown curly hair which looks like it has never seen the end of a hairbrush nor met with a blow dryer. They're not kinky curls, more like sad, loose, and frizzy tendrils waving inward and outward in opposite directions. She could use some leave-in conditioner, or a hair mask-treatment like the one I did just last week to revitalize my hair which has been drowning in saltwater and chlorine for nearly four months.

Maybe I'll bring her a bottle, after all, my hairdresser Stacy gave me a few extras to pass around making the girls visit her salon to get the magnificent treatment known as the *Beach Babe*.

Though I'm not sure the hair treatment would even be helpful. Not only is Mrs. Phillips' hair a tattered mess, but the woman is wearing a long boho skirt in some weird tie-dye hippie pattern, and a loose white linen shirt that makes her look more like a grandma than someone who is a few years older than my father.

The room of course looks more like a fancy university classroom with modern tables and chairs, and one of those electronic white boards hanging at the front of the room. They're made to display whatever it is she's writing on her iPad, and with the brand-new ones we received this morning, we'll be able to send out answers directly to the board.

"Well, it looks like everyone has made it in on time, so we're off to a great start," she says, and immediately the entire class looks around the room, eyes rolling and silent snickering. My gaze travels around and I notice all the seats are occupied except for the one directly behind me. "Well then, let's begin," she adds, proceeding to take roll call, while I dig into my bag, rustling through my things, and pull out my notebook.

Everyone is shuffling around and taking out their belongings when suddenly simultaneous gasps are heard throughout the room. I glance up to the front and toward where everyone's glaring, thinking something terrible has

happened, and find a guy standing under the doorway of the class, eyes locked directly on me.

Now it's me who gasps for air. At least I feel like I do, as I stare into the bluest eyes I've ever seen. Cobalt blue with traces of cerulean and cyan marbled around in luscious swirls. His jaw is sharp and covered in a slight shadow, his cheekbones as defined as a runway model or a chiseled Greek God's marble sculpture, while dark hair, wet and tousled, falls in loose waves along his face.

Tattoos cover the entirety of his visible body, and I can only imagine they continue underneath his all-black clothing. Black ink twists around his neck like thorny vines pressing into his Adam's apple, making me want to trace along every line with my tongue. I swallow hard as I watch it move in sync with his unsteady breathing. The divine being in question is tall and lean, but immaculately toned, dressed in jeans with chains hanging from the pockets, a V-neck T-shirt, and leather jacket. He's a fucking wet dream. One I wouldn't mind rocking myself to sleep on.

I can see the small gauges in his ears, the horseshoe on his lip, and silver rings across every one of his tattooed knuckles. This dude is easily the hottest guy I've ever seen, in a "*you never would have guessed I'd be into this*" kind of way. Not when my ex-boyfriend is the living equivalent of a *Frat Boy Ken Doll*, whose name, you guessed it, is Chad.

Everyone can see his eyes are glued to mine, and from the corner of my eye I can see their gazes going back and forth between us.

The sexy stranger smirks knowingly, the edges of his plump lips turning upward as he catches me admiring him.

"Phoenix Bancroft. Phoenix Bancroft."

Donovan leans over and elbows me, bringing me out of my lustful haze. She anxiously, yet casually, nods toward the front of the room where Mrs. Phillips' currently glaring at me, clearly pissed I've made her repeat herself.

“Oh, here,” I call out, as a wave of snide laughter and snickers instantly fills the room. Steadily, I turn my head back toward the epitome of sex standing by the door but gone is his sexy smirk and in its place, a torturous scowl that makes a shiver run down my spine for a completely different reason. He’s enraged, his eyes now so dark they’re obsidian, his thick brows creasing in the middle of his forehead, and tattooed knuckles fisted tightly at his side.

What the hell?

Though just as I’m about to turn toward Donovan and see if she’s noticed the sudden shift in his demeanor, Mrs. Phillips continues. “Maverick Carter,” she calls out, her gaze circling around the classroom.

I notice his lips quirk up before I hear him, probably because I haven’t looked away from them since the moment he walked in. “Here,” he utters, not making a move to further enter the room.

Again, simultaneous gasps are heard in the otherwise silent classroom, but I ignore them, completely fixated on his voice. A voice exactly like I imagined it would be, deep, gravelly, and dripping in seduction, making me shiver, and simultaneously raising the hairs on the back of my neck in awareness.

“Well, I’m glad you could join us, Mr. Carter. If you would please find your seat.” Mrs. Phillips finishes taking roll call, while he unhurriedly struts toward the empty desk behind me. I watch in anticipation, my heart beating loud and in sync with his heavy footsteps along the marble tiled floor.

No, no. God no! Why is the universe so cruel? Why did it have to be him?

I feel his daunting gaze burning into me as I try my hardest to keep mine directed at the blond head of the girl in front of me. *This cannot be happening. Oh God, please let this be a dream.*

I close my eyes and count to ten, hoping the moment I open them back up, I’ll be back in my bedroom once again,

awakening to the sound of my alarm clock. After all, I don't remember sleeping well, I could very much be stuck in a dream.

Though the moment a hot breath tickles my neck as the chair behind me squeaks, I know this is all too real.

"Hey there, sis," he whispers so only I can hear, his voice now as slick and smooth as silk. Instead of opening my eyes, I shut them tighter, trying my hardest to keep calm. I feel him lean in further. "I've been dying to meet you."

My eyes shoot open as the last syllable leaves his lips, and in my peripheral, I see Olly and Donovan staring behind me with jaws dropped to the floor. Probably exactly what I'd look like if my mouth weren't shut so tight. If I weren't biting down on my tongue and drawing blood, I know my jaw would be right there with theirs. Bemused and utterly horrified.

Maverick Carter is sitting behind me, looking like the devilishly sexy, wicked rebel bad boy he is rumored to be. Maverick Carter is my new stepbrother, and I'm afraid hating him just got a tad bit harder than I'd expected.

"OH MY GOD, PHOENIX, DID YOU SEE HIM?" DONOVAN shrieks, her voice a sharp mix between a yell and a cry, as we walk out of our homeroom and into the buzzing hall. I turn around enough to smack her on her arm, begging her to shut up, just as Maverick struts past us, not bothering to look our way as he pushes through the crowd of students shuffling to their next class.

It was almost impossible to sit still for the hour and a half we were in class, pretending like I wasn't one hundred percent aware of his bewitching presence. He didn't talk to me, didn't toy with me after his attempt at intimidating me when he first sat down, but I knew he was watching my every move. I could feel his gaze on me, sending a wave of heat through me. I've never felt that way before, especially not from a simple stare,

but Maverick didn't seem like he was just anyone. He seemed like trouble, and that meant he was going to be a problem.

"Can you not Donovan, he could have heard you," I whisper snidely, giving the judgmental girls who walk by a fake smile before rushing to the girls' restroom down the hall, yanking Donovan by her arm to follow.

Though, of course, my chatty best friend doesn't stop talking. "So, what, I mean he clearly knows who you are..."

"And he doesn't look thrilled." Dee's cut off by Olly as he joins us, locking the door behind him. "I mean, he was practically burning a hole through your head with how laser-focused he was on you P."

"Oliver Radcliff, you do know this is the girl's restroom, right?" Donovan berates him, waving her arms in the air.

"Bite me Kennedy, there's nothing in here I haven't seen before," Olly screeches back at her. God, these two are insufferable sometimes. I need to choose better friends.

The restroom is just as impeccable as the rest of the school with a row of six stalls, five sinks with gold fixtures, and a small plush seating area.

"Both of you just shut up!" I slam my fists down on the sink in front of me, turn on the faucet, and splash a handful of cold water on my face before looking up at my reflection in the mirror. Tired blue eyes, swollen and red, long blond hair mocking me, constantly reminding me I look just like her.

A woman who was too weak, too pathetic to move on from her cowardly husband's betrayal.

In our world, affairs like these are as common as a housekeeper, and as frequent as Botox injections after twenty-five. Most women can sweep their husband's indiscretions under the rug in order to keep up appearances. They forgive and forget, or at least forget long enough to host their next dinner party or for the three hours they spend at the country club. Then it's back into their separate rooms, in their separate house wings, avoiding each other until the next social event. Rarely does the husband put an end to whatever illicit affair

they were a part of, but one thing they never do is ruin a twenty-year marriage because of it.

I guess my father and Mrs. Carter never read the terms and conditions of their marriage contract.

As for my mother, well, it looks like she didn't take her own advice either.

Since I was old enough to understand my place in our world, to be a priceless accessory on my husband's arm, and a shiny trophy in his million-dollar glass display case, it was always, "*Phoenix, you must learn to turn a blind eye to whatever happens outside the walls of your household. As long as your status and wealth are not at risk, anything goes in a loveless marriage.*"

Yet here we are, miles apart because she failed to take her own god-awful advice.

"Phoenix, we're sorry, okay? We didn't mean to upset you. I guess we just didn't think he'd show his face around here," Donovan murmurs, running her fingers through my hair, as a mother would to a child, to calm me down. It doesn't work.

I turn to her, my back now painfully pressing into the sink. "Why wouldn't he, Dee? His mom married *my* father, moved into *my* house, and is currently digging her claws into my father's bank account."

"Just give him a chance, Phoenix. Maybe you'll be surprised. I mean, I knew he was going to be hot, but God-fucking-dammit, he is unreal," Olly adds, fanning himself off dramatically with his textbook.

Donovan nods, biting her lip, "Yeah, I haven't seen a guy with that much sex appeal, like ever."

I can't help the eye roll that comes next, as I turn back to the running water, nearly overflowing. "He's a fucking cliché, guys. Dark, broody bad boy with a knack for dropping panties, and one too many strikes on his rap sheet. Bottom line, he's bad news."

The only problem is lately bad news is all I seem to attract. For my sake and sanity, I just hope I'm strong enough to stay

away.

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CHAPTER
TWO

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PHOENIX

The first day of school, as expected, was a drag. If I had to sit there and listen to one more snide remark or hushed whisper about *Poor Phoenix Bancroft, crying herself to sleep because of her mommy's secret drug addiction and her daddy's infamous slut habit*, I was going to have a fucking aneurism. No joke.

At least those who blatantly cheered at the sudden demise of their school's reigning IT girl were a little less fake. Also, as expected, Chadwick Hollingsworth III didn't bother to acknowledge my existence, not that I cared in the slightest. I just find it funny how last month, he'd declared his undying love for me with a ten-thousand-dollar diamond necklace.

A necklace, of course, I returned to him, shredded into pieces, the day I found him sleeping with some faceless skank not two days after he'd broken up with me. Typical.

Though as of now, to everyone around me, *The Pretentious Princess Phoenix Bancroft* is tainted. With a scandal like the one that befell my family, I'm as good as dead.

Again, if only I cared.

People often mistake Malibu Cove for a free spirited, liberal, and carefree beach town on the southern west coast. Essentially, it is until you drive up the hill toward suburbia. That's where the real gems are found. The elitist class that reigns with the same archaic laws and power-holds of our patriarchs on the motherland, reign supreme on this side of town. The most dominant, privileged, and influential group in High-Society, they are everything wrong with the world.

And I'm everything they aspire not to be.

Stepping into the foyer of my mega-beach-mansion sitting at the top of that hill I was talking about and leading out onto the private beach, I take a deep breath and exhale all the pent-up anger and emotion I've been hauling around all day, like a stone lodged in my throat suffocating me to my untimely

death. Being a teenager is impossible in today's cancel-culture, but it's nothing compared to the exile and shunning of upper-crust society.

Though I'm glad to be home and finally done with the first day of school, which, despite everything, wasn't as horrible as I expected. At least I didn't have to see him again.

Maverick, my darling new stepbrother, who is not only going to be living in *my house* but also attending *my* school with *my* friends. Well, they're no longer my friends. I'll have to make Olly and Dee swear to never speak his name nor cower in his presence ever again. Especially to never mention how perfect his sharp, chiseled jaw is, nor the enticing color of his blue eyes behind the blackest, thickest lashes. That ought to keep him away.

Out of sight, out of mind.

I didn't have to worry about him here at the house. I was determined to stay hauled up in my room for the rest of my life in order to prevent ever crossing paths with him. Or maybe he'd hide like the recluse I'm sure he is.

Either way, I'm determined to steer clear of him and whatever scheme he's ought to be concocting.

Wandering into the kitchen on my way to my bedroom, I grab myself a sparkling water out of the refrigerator and an apple from the fruit bowl sitting atop the white marbled island in the middle of the expansive modern kitchen. It's unreal for a kitchen to be this big given we never use it, but I'm sure our housekeeper Marta brags to the other housemaids of the neighboring houses she has the biggest, most impressive, and lavish workplace.

I twist open the bottle of Pellegrino and head toward the narrow, winding staircase at the far end of the room, heading up to the second floor. Bringing the bottle to my lips for a long refreshing sip, I nearly trip on the first step, the water splashing all over the front of my white crop top.

"Fuck," I curse to myself, staring down at my now see-through top, the baby blue lace of my bra is visible through the

damp fabric. “Ugh,” I groan, “Can this day get any worse?”

Out of the silence that surrounds me, I hear a low, guttural groan. Instantly, the hairs on the back of my neck raise in awareness, my skin prickling with goosebumps as I feel another presence in the room. All the air in the room suddenly goes cold and dreary, except the warm blow of breath creeping against the back of my neck.

“Is that a challenge, *sis*?” The moment the words leave his lips, I know it’s him, and instinctively turn behind me as quickly as I can manage without tripping on my own two feet. Again.

“What the hell are you doing, creep?” I shout out, immediately regretting turning so quickly. He’s barely a foot away from me, all six plus feet of lean, defined muscle hovering over me, covering me in a blanket of heat, his cologne sneaking its way through my nostrils, making me incredibly dizzy.

“Where are you off too in such a hurry, *sis*?” His teasing tone makes me uneasy and on high alert, forcing me to take a step back and up the staircase.

I had to open my big mouth and wish for the impossible. Closing my eyes, I pray it was a mistake, that he’s not really there, or on the phone with some other nonexistent sister.

Though I don’t think it works. Deciding to ignore him is the best way to deal with this unwanted situation, I turn and rush up the gray sandstone stairs without bothering to look back. However, just before I take the last step to reach the top, a hand reaches out to grab my arm, turning me toward him, nearly knocking us both down at the impact.

My chest crashes into his, a firm hand coming down on my lower back, the other gripping tightly behind my neck. “I asked you a question, little *sis*,” he drawls, hissing the sound at the end with intention. Leaning forward, his mouth comes across my ear, licking teasingly as he whispers, “Didn’t mommy tell you it’s rude to ignore your elders?”

Struck by fear or something of the sort that has me all trembling and flustered, I have a moment of weakness where I almost succumb to his childish game of intimidation, but after the shit day I've had, I don't have the time nor energy to play any of his games.

"Fuck off," I jab at him, pushing him off me, surprising him, and getting at least a foot of distance between us as he falters and takes a step back.

I don't think he thought I had it in me, though the smirk he gives me in return catches me off guard. It's not at all what I expected. Instead of angering him further, my defiance seems to amuse him in some awfully sickening way.

He's still in the same outfit from school. His hair though, is unruly and looks like he was out running, or it was previously swaying in the wind. Maverick catches me staring, instinctively biting his lip, and trailing his tongue over the horseshoe ring on his bottom lip. I can't help it, and my gaze follows the teasing movement.

"Say it again, only this time like you mean it." He takes a step forward, once again closing the small gap of space between us and this time there's no ignoring the sudden heat pressing against my core.

He's testing me. Trying to figure out how easy it's going to be for him to push me around and make me run and hide to the safety of my bedroom and eventually out of my house. Were it any other day, that's exactly what I'd do, but I'm so damn tired of everyone telling me what I need to do, how I need to feel, what needs to happen next.

I'm done with this perfect life I was living and am no longer interested in rejoining the society that cast me out because of my father's mistake and my mother's weakness. I am not her. I am not weak, and I'm going to show Maverick Carter exactly what that means.

You picked a fight on the wrong day, dear *brother*.

I reach up and trail my fingers, as erotically as I can manage, down his cheek, the tiny bristles of his coarse shadow

tickling my fingertips. Tipping his chin down to meet me, I step up on my tippy toes, softly grazing his lips with mine. “Fuck off,” I moan breathily, like the slut I’m sure he thinks I am. I step back, quickly regretting it as a fire flows through me from the electricity that passed the moment I touched his lips.

His eyes darken for a second, just as his jaw stiffens beneath my touch. I’m sure he felt it too. Maverick swallows hard and I can feel his breath hitch, his heart beating unsteadily and mimicking mine. I almost think he’s about to lean forward and kiss me when his hand against my lower back pushes me further into him.

“Again,” he groans, biting down softly on my thumb tracing his bottom lip. My thighs clench as a wave of desire hits me, nearly knocking me off my feet. If it weren’t for him practically holding me up against him, I’d be rolling down the stairs to my death.

Well, this is working the way I was expecting it to. Except now I’m too flustered to know what comes next.

A nervous chuckle escapes me at how easily he believes I’d be stupid enough to kiss him. My heart might be currently pummeling its way out of my chest, but I’m not stupid enough to act on it. There it is again, someone underestimating me. It’s only fair I give him a free pass. It’s not his fault he’s new around here.

Leaning away from him, I speak in the sultriest tone I can manage without running out of breath. “You’re not my type, honey, and I know how this is going to play out.”

I feel him smirk against me as I stare into his eyes, now gleaming with curiosity, and somehow notice he’s moved in closer. “Care to enlighten me?” he utters, amused.

I can feel his thick, hardened erection pressing against me, and now it’s my turn to swallow down my pride. Maverick is only proving I was right by using his desirability as a weak trick against me. I’m sure it works on any other desperate chick he’s come across, and to be honest, any other day it may have worked on me, but not today, Satan, not today.

“You think you’re just going to come in here, put your hands on me like it’s the most natural thing, accompanied by your little bad boy charm, and I’m going to beg you to have your way with me? Only once you have, you’ll remind me how pathetic and easy it was to fool the poor little rich girl whose life is falling apart because of her daddy’s inability to keep his dick in his pants.”

My voice cracks and he laughs in response, a deep, menacing laugh that sends shivers over me. Fuck, this guy is good. Remaining calm and as cool as a cucumber while I’m over here burning up and nearly begging him to snap the tension.

“Lucky for you, I’m not your type. I mean the *Fuck Boy Ken* to your *Malibu Barbie* is the complete opposite of me,” he mocks, raising a brow, his lip ring teasing me as he flicks it with his tongue.

For a moment I wonder how he even knows about my relationship with Chad, but then I recall the rumors of our breakup continue to circle down the halls. The beauty of Malibu Cove High, rumors, and gossip flow quicker than the errant waves of the Pacific during a perilous thunderstorm.

It’s my turn to meet his teasing smirk with one of my own, careful to make sure I don’t give away how skittish I really am. “Like night and day,” I admit, although Chad is nothing of mine anymore, but he doesn’t need to know that bit.

Maverick steps into me, his fingers pressing deeper into my waist as he walks us backward continuously, pushing me until my back hits a wall. He shifts so I’m caged in against him, both of his hands on either side of my head, while his mouth comes dangerously close to mine. I can smell his breath as he exhales, minty fresh with hints of something entirely intoxicating that isn’t allowing me to think straight.

“Hate to bearer of bad news, Nyx, but sadly for you, I’m everyone’s type.”

I inhale sharply when his fingers press into the bare skin showing beneath my top, his eyes lowering to my chest, getting a glimpse of my bra through my now see-through shirt.

Desire gleams in his blue eyes as his pupils dilate, but he quickly reins it in and they're back to ice cold.

"Nyx?" I stutter breathily, confused by the sudden nickname, and ignoring his arrogant yet otherwise totally accurate comment.

"Nyx, Goddess of the Night." A smile presses against his lips, a real smile this time, not the usual teasing smirk he constantly wears, and it makes my knees weak. The only thing more daunting than his wicked smirk is this playful grin. Dangerous and intoxicating. "Because unfortunately, after the shit that's happened to you, you've been banished to the dark side. Welcome to the club, *love*."

I scoff, turning away from him. "Is that supposed to be some kind of threat?" I can't help but rebuttal, even though hearing him call me *love* does something terribly exciting to me. Wrong but enticing. Fuck, I need an ice-cold shower immediately.

"It's an olive branch, Nyx." His gaze drops to my damp top while his fingers tug on the small string between my breasts. He pulls slowly, untying the bow, and causing my top to fall open, revealing the swell of my breasts pressed up against him. "This new arrangement can be easy for you, or I can make it hard," he bites down on his bottom lip as his gaze moves from my cleavage back to my eyes. His groin presses into me and I feel just how hard he can make it. "Take it or leave it."

I want nothing more than to take it. To give in to whatever it is he's offering, but I know better. This is all part of his plan. He thought he'd show up here and take advantage of all the perks this new arrangement would offer, but oh fuck was he wrong. He can take my dad's money, he can live in my house, hang out with my friends, but there is one thing he'll never get from me.

And it's the only thing I know he wants - the sweet spot between my legs.

I press my pussy against his growing, surely throbbing erection, and nearly moan at how thick and long he is. Desire

flares in his eye once more, his hand moving to grip my ass to pull me even further into him. Leaning forward, I press my lips into his neck, licking circles along his Adam's apple, and up to the stubble along his jaw.

A guttural groan leaves his lips, reverberating from deep inside of him.

“I'd rather take my chances, *Maverick*.”

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CHAPTER
THREE

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PHOENIX

“Fuckkk... You’re so responsive, Nyx. The way your body reacts to my touch, it’s like I was meant to touch you, to lick you, to tease you.”

His hard, muscular body falls heavy on me as he lies over me, pressing into me, and crushing me while simultaneously licking circles along my neck and down through the dip of my breasts, nearly squeezing all the oxygen out of me. I writhe in pleasure beneath him at the erotic way his tongue moves against my nipple through the thin fabric of my bikini top.

It’s intoxicating how he expertly flicks my hard nub, making a patch of goosebumps appear over my sweat glistened skin. I moan, loud and needy, and the bastard chuckles. But the sound that leaves him makes me only hornier. Fuck. I’m so wet, I can feel my arousal seeping out of me, turning my bikini bottoms into a damn slip and slide.

I feel his grin widen against my flesh, as another gravelly sound leaves him.

“Get off of me if you’re going to mock me,” I sneer, though I really don’t want him to.

“Careful, Nyx, you don’t want to piss me off. Not when I’m in control of your next orgasm. I can give it to you, or I can deprive you of what you want most. Be a good little girl or I’ll have no other choice but to punish you.”

“Fuck you!” I spit out, but his mouth comes down on my nipple, biting and tugging, until I’m whimpering like a needy slut.

“Soon baby, very soon.” His hand dips beneath the small patch of fabric of my bottom, calloused fingertips rubbing back and forth through the wetness puddled underneath.

“Nectar of the gods,” he growls, removing his fingers and bringing them up to his lips. Slowly he shoves them into his

mouth, sucking them, his eyes closing as he savors them. “So fucking sweet.”

“Oh god, Maverick, please touch me. I need you to touch me again.” He’s smiling, grinning from ear to ear. I can’t see him because I’ve closed my eyes, reveling in how good his fingers feel once again sliding through my pussy lips, but I know he’s smiling triumphantly.

Expert fingers enter me as his thumb presses against my clit, bringing me to the edge of my climax. “Yes, right there. Oh, fuck.”

“Be a good little girl and come for me.”

I’m almost there, riding his fingers, grinding against his palm. So close. “I’m...”

Bzzt. Bzzt. Bzzt.

My phone vibrates loudly against my nightstand, waking me from the erotic dream I was just having. I sit up startled, sweat clad, and overheated, but one-hundred percent relieved to find I was only dreaming. I’m panting heavily, out of breath, and out of control. Pressing my thighs together, I feel just how aroused I am and fall back onto my pillow with a thud.

A dream. It was only a dream. But oh god what a dream it was.

I can’t hide the slight dissatisfaction at the realization I was only dreaming. It felt so real. He felt so real. Hell, I nearly orgasmed in my sleep.

That’d be a first.

Half awake, pissed off, and disappointed in myself for having a sex dream about the gorgeous fuck-head, I reach over to my nightstand for my phone, which is currently still buzzing relentlessly. The bright light from the screen blinds me as I try to tear my groggy eyes open to unlock it.

The screen blinks, alerting me to four unread messages. I click them open in the order they came in.

DEE: NOBU, 6:30. WE'LL SWING BY AND PICK YOU UP. 4:45P.M.

DEE: PHOENIX? HELLO? WE'RE SUPPOSED TO GO TO NOBU FOR OUR CELEBRATORY FIRST DAY OF SENIOR YEAR DINNER. ANSWER ME, BITCH! 5:10 P.M.

BROOKLYN: DAD SAYS DINNER IS AT 6. YOU BETTER BE HERE P. 5:45 P.M.

OLLY: LEAVING MY HOUSE, WE'RE ON OUR WAY TO PICK YOU UP P. DON'T MAKE US HONK... 6:10 P.M.

I look at the digital clock on the top right-hand corner of my screen. It's 6:15 pm. I'm fifteen minutes late to this supposed dinner with dear old dad and have only fifteen minutes to get dressed for dinner with Dee and Olly.

Just perfect.

Another message chimes just as I lock my phone and set it down on my mattress. I'm still dressed in my outfit from earlier, thank God our newest principal decided to hell with our old-fashioned schoolgirl uniforms, and realize I must have passed out after my altercation with Maverick. That explains why I was so turned on and had a wet dream about him.

Ignoring my phone still vibrating on the bed, I walk over to my attached bathroom and fix my makeup as best as I can. I don't have time for a shower and re-do it all, so a bit of mascara and eyeliner will have to do.

Grabbing my hairbrush, I comb through my waves, using some water to tame the baby hairs on my forehead. My hair is naturally highlighted with hues of blonde, gold, and caramel, giving me the perfect sun kissed shade many pay hundreds for at the salon and still fail to achieve. Luckily, it doesn't take much for me to look well put together.

Walking over to my closet, I quickly undress, slipping out of my panties, which are drenched, and throw on a short, white sundress, pairing it with wedge sandals.

My phone continues to vibrate incessantly against the mattress. "Ugh!" I grunt, while opening the new texts.

BROOKLYN: DON'T MAKE ME COME UP AND GET YOU P. 6:25 P.M.

BROOKLYN: I SWEAR P, GET YOUR ASS DOWN HERE. 6:26 P.M.

DEE: WE ARE HERE!!! 6:30 P.M.

Ignoring Brooklyn's incessant texting, I quickly type out a reply to Donovan.

ME: I'LL BE OUT IN FIVE. 6:32 P.M.

Reaching the bottom of the steps, quiet not to announce my arrival, I hear laughing coming from inside our dining room. I recognize my father and Daphne, her high-pitched laughter unable to be mistaken, and think about sneaking out and not making my presence known, but something urges me to enter the room. All eyes turn to me the moment I step under the archway leading into the dining room.

The dining room, as is much of the interior of the house, is all shades of white and gray, with navy blue and teal accents, and gold embellishments. The walls and ceilings are eggshell white, the floors and most of the furniture are an ashy gray-wood, and the giant light fixture hanging from the foyer, and the ceilings in both the kitchen, dining room, and living room, is a cross between a chandelier and a disco ball, all cut crystal and gold finishes.

Luxury Beach House Chic at its finest.

"You're late," my father calls out, his earlier playful attitude now gone and in its place is the usual brooding scowl I know so well.

Austin Bancroft is everything but fatherly. Rarely do I remember a time when we had one of these family dinners where he was present. If we ever dined in, it was my mother and I who'd sit in silence in this room, and Brooklyn, on the rare occasion he was home, would join us, though never by choice.

"I'm not staying," I mutter back, Brooklyn's gaze burning me as he glowers in my direction.

“I told your brother to text you dinner was at six,” my father says curtly, trying and failing to keep his composure. The thing about dear old dad is despite his winning personality and lacking charisma, he’s still known to everyone in our world as a stand-up guy. Those in his immediate circle and business associates turned a blind eye to his infidelity and poor choices, instantly taking his side.

“And I made plans since family weeknight dinners have never been a thing around here. I’m going out.” I turn back toward the door, though I’m startled by my father’s loud shouting.

“You will stay for dinner!” he exclaims, standing, and slamming his hands down on the table beside him. The table vibrates, the china and cutlery bouncing before crashing back down. Beside him, Daphne flinches at his sudden outburst. It’s so barbaric and unusual I can’t help the chuckle that escapes me.

“Austin,” Maverick chimes in from his seat beside his mother, calm, collected, and out of his damn mind. I had paid no attention to him, though it was impossible to not feel his presence, especially since I’m sure his stare was fixated on me. But I can’t make eye contact with him. I’m not sure I’d be able to mask my arousal after that dream. “Just let her go out with her friends,” he continues, “We’ll have plenty more family dinners my dear sister will join.”

Maverick’s eyes find mine, a teasing smirk appearing on his face.

The nerve of the asshole, acting like he has any say in the choices I make. I’ll be leaving regardless of what he and my father have to say.

Brooklyn scoffs, clearly agreeing with me, and stands to meet my father. “If she walks, then so do I.”

I roll my eyes at the jerk. Real mature brother.

Suddenly, a car horn blares loudly from outside, bright lights from Donovan’s car in our driveway shining through the floor length window leading out to the backyard.

My father slams his fists down again. “No one is leaving. Brooklyn sit, and Phoenix, stop being difficult and sit down.”

“My dear,” Daphne coos, placing her hand adoringly on my father’s, attempting to calm him. Her bright pink nail polish matches the pantsuit she’s currently wearing, giving Barbie something to talk about. Although she has a son my age, Daphne Carter doesn’t look a day over thirty. That’s what money will do for you. “Maverick is right. She already had plans. It’s not fair to her and her friends who are already waiting for her.”

“And that’s my cue. Don’t bother waiting up Daddy,” I call out, waving my hands in the air and shimmying my ass, as I turn and walk out toward the front door.

“Phoenix!”

My father’s obnoxious yelling is the last thing I hear before I slam the front door behind me.

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CHAPTER
FOUR

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MAVERICK

“She needs to learn to show some respect to her father. I’ve had enough of my children parading about town like they have no responsibilities in life.”

Hypocritical for a man who cheated on his wife of twenty years with another married woman for at least eight of those years, to demand respect from his children. Brooklyn and Phoenix Bancroft have never been expected to show responsibility for anything in their lives. Bred by the patriarch of the Bancroft Dynasty, the two golden children of Malibu Cove found themselves amid scandal when their father’s affair came to light earlier this summer.

“Austin, sweetheart, she’s a teenage girl. It’s in her nature to want to hang out with friends instead of spending the night at home with her family.” I scoff at my mother’s feeble attempt to calm her new husband. I honestly can’t figure out what she saw in the old man.

Austin Bancroft is a Class-A douche. Sure, my father wasn’t the greatest husband, usually traveling on business more than he ever was at home, but he did it to ensure his family had the best life they deserved. It gave her no right to disrespect our family that way.

“So, if she gets to skip out on these new Brady Bunch dinners, I’m out,” Brooklyn, my beloved new stepbrother, a cocky, brainless jock, yells out as he stands, his chair creaking against the tiled floor.

“Sit down Brooklyn,” Bancroft Sr. demands. Brooklyn easily slinks back into his seat, defeated. “The two of you desperately need some values instilled in you. This ends today. From now on, every Wednesday and Sunday are mandatory family dinners. We will have breakfast together daily, and if I spontaneously decide to add another family night to that schedule, then I will.”

I roll my eyes at his idea of bonding with his children. Let's see how long that lasts with his two spoiled brats who don't have a care in the world for what daddy says. Being a good parent doesn't mean suddenly forcing yourself on your children and demanding they give you the respect you think you deserve. It means giving them the freedom to do as they please, yet instilling values and morals that allow them to see what's right from wrong.

Leading by example.

Modeling appropriate behavior.

Cheating on their mother and nearly sending her to the grave is number one on the *how to drive your children away* list.

I excuse myself to the restroom, instead heading out onto the back patio, and pull out my phone, opening a new text message thread. Thanks to Austin's idea of creating a more united family, I already have Phoenix's phone number saved in my contacts. I type out a quick text, congratulating her on her little show of rebellion, telling her father to fuck off.

ME: BALLSY BABE. MUST ADMIT, I DIDN'T THINK YOU HAD IT IN YOU.

Our earlier scuffle on the staircase took me by surprise. A pleasant surprise, no doubt. After seeing her for what she thinks is the first time, I knew I had to pull a mask over my face and not let her see how attracted I was to her physical appearance.

Phoenix may think the first time I laid eyes on her since I came to town was this morning in class, but I've been back in Malibu Cove for over a month. I've been lurking about, parading around town, and tracking her every move. It was a lot harder than I had expected, especially since after the scandal, she became reclusive and barely came out of her house. The few times I could see her, she was with that blonde, Donovan I think her name is, I saw her with on the first day of school. She's cute, though nothing compared to the beauty of Phoenix.

Where Donovan is a sweeter, more innocent kind of beautiful, Phoenix is flawless and alluring. With hardly any makeup on, she's impeccable. Fair, but golden tanned skin, the brightest aquamarine eyes, and a figure that would make every plastic surgeon in Hollywood claim they worked on her. She's thin but toned, natural muscle formed from just being active, with wide hips to hold on to, a plump ass, and breasts the perfect size to fit nicely in my hands.

I knew Phoenix was going to be pretty. She's always been easy on the eyes, even as a bratty little girl ten plus years ago when I was living next door. Though I never expected a fucking goddess. Phoenix Bancroft is easily the hottest girl I've ever come across.

We saw little of each other as kids since I was always locked in my room hating life and the absent family I had, and she was hopping back and forth from ballet practice to the local country club. But I knew she existed. It was hard to ignore the golden-haired princess of the infamous Bancroft's. Especially since my mother was so obsessed with knowing everything about them. Then, on my eleventh birthday, I finally found out the reason for her obsession.

After a moment, three little dots appear on my screen, and I know she's reading this from the car with her two *besties*. I'll admit she looked good enough to eat in that cute little dress she changed into after our altercation earlier.

I couldn't help getting painfully hard as I had her body pressed against mine, and from how perfect she felt beneath my touch. I knew I was attracted to her - I'd be dead not to be - but something about the way I felt as I had her caged against the wall, doesn't sit right with me. It made me uneasy to see just how strong of an effect she had on me, not to mention I didn't expect her to push back.

I love it when they push back, which they rarely do.

Being who I am, and looking like I do, I've never had to ask twice, let alone beg for anything from the opposite sex. Chicks threw themselves at me back at my old school, and wherever else I showed up to. I had my fair pick of prime

pussy, but none of it, despite how fine and well bred, was enough to satiate me. It was average. But something tells me what's hiding between Phoenix's legs is pure fucking art. Intricate, exquisite, and rare.

I thought I'd give her a little taste of what living with me was now going to be like. Yet again she surprised me, standing her ground, and even challenging me. However, what surprised me more was how good she smelled, not to mention how hard my dick got with that sassy little mouth of hers.

Poor girl doesn't know the only thing that turns me on more than the thought of dominating and asserting myself on her, making her erotically uncomfortable, is her fighting back.

The three dots appear and disappear, and I know all kinds of thoughts must run through her mind. I can't help the smile that creeps over my face when her name flashes on my screen. Of course, I saved her contact under Nyx, the nickname I gave her earlier today.

Again, not something I was expecting to do.

NYX: I'D TAKE THAT AS A COMPLIMENT IF I KNEW WHO IT CAME FROM, BUT AS I DON'T, I'LL KINDLY SAY FUCK OFF. HOPE THIS DOESN'T MAKE YOUR DICK TOO HARD.

My smile widens as I picture her brows creasing in the middle of her forehead, in that cute way it does when she's angry. My little Nyx has a dirty mouth. Who would have thought?

In the little time since I've become reacquainted with my new stepsister, this is the third time she's kindly told me to fuck off, and just like the other two times, my dick can't help but get achingly hard.

Now it's my turn to return the favor.

ME: NICE ONE, SIS. I'LL ADMIT PICTURING YOU TELL ME TO FUCK OFF IS JUST AS ENTICING AS HEARING YOU WHISPER IT IN MY EAR AS YOU MOAN MY NAME.

I wait for two minutes and there is no reply, so instead I send out another.

ME: THANKS A LOT, BY THE WAY. BECAUSE OF YOU NOW, DADDY IS DEMANDING WE ATTEND FAMILY DINNER TWICE A WEEK AND BREAKFAST EVERY MORNING.

That quickly gets her attention.

NYX: YOU'RE WELCOME, BRO.

P.S. FUN FACT: INCEST IS ILLEGAL IN ALL FIFTY STATES, DEAR BROTHER OF MINE. THOUGH I'M SURE YOU'RE USED TO A LIFE BEHIND BARS.

ME: IT'S ONLY ILLEGAL IF IT'S NON-CONSENSUAL SIS, AND SOMETHING TELLS ME YOU WANT IT JUST AS BAD.

This little back-and-forth banter is becoming too entertaining. I need to get laid, and quick.

Without waiting for another response, I put my phone on silent and shove it back into my pocket, heading back to the dining room to finish the lovely dinner we were having. I find my mother rubbing Austin's back as he leans forward, still sulking from his earlier failed show of dominance. Brooklyn is scowling beside him, playing with the food on his plate, not having touched any of it.

I find my seat and dig into the peppered steak, roasted potatoes, and steamed vegetables. It'll do no one any good to have this delicious food go to waste, so within no time I devour it, cleaning my plate before the housekeeper comes to clear the table.

The rest of the evening goes on without a hitch, and finally, after dessert, Brooklyn and I excuse ourselves from the table. My new brother follows me out onto the back deck, overlooking the ocean below.

"Some view isn't it," I mutter, trying to break the heated tension and awkward silence while pulling a joint from my pocket. Brooklyn's eyes immediately brighten up as he takes a seat beside me, reaching for the joint in my hand. Producing a lighter from his pocket, he lights it, taking a long hit before passing it back over to me.

"What was it like when you found out?" he asks, not bothering to look me in the eye, but I know exactly what he

wants to know.

Getting right to it are we now.

“I was at a party on campus. Some douche pulled up a photo on his phone of your dad with his tongue down my mother’s throat and his hand up her skirt. I don’t know how he got it, but he did. I called my dad to ask what the fuck was going on, but not before I beat the poor asshole and sent him to the hospital with a concussion and three broken ribs.”

“Fuckkk,” Brooklyn mutters, already high as a fucking kite.

I keep talking, unsure why it is so easy to speak on a subject I hate speaking about. “The worst part, my father had no fucking clue. He was out of town on business and was planning on surprising my mom with a vacation to Paris for their anniversary a week later.”

“So, why’d you come back?” he asks. There’s no resentful tone in his voice, instead all I hear is a genuine curiosity.

“Was kicked out of my boujee prep school for the minor altercation, though I’m lucky my father convinced the asshole not to press charges. Since my dad has no other permanent residence and spends his time traveling for work, I’m stuck living with my mother until I graduate. I’m almost nineteen, but my father has stipulations for my trust fund. I must go to college or wait until I turn twenty-one to have access to it.”

Brooklyn scoffs, taking another long hit from the joint. He runs his fingers through his blond hair, the same naturally highlighted color as Phoenix, before he continues. “What’s the point of having all this money if all the assholes are going to do is make us wait around to spend it,” he spits out, taking a drink of the flask in his hand I hadn’t noticed he held. His eyes, eyes the exact shade of blue green as his twin sister, find mine as he offers it.

I shake my head slightly and refuse it, wanting to at least be sober enough to stay up and wait for Phoenix to come home. “It’s payback,” I mutter, my gaze now focused on the waves before us moving back and forth in sync with my

breathing. It's dark out, only the light of the back deck and the moonlight illuminating the sandy beach ahead. "Their fathers' did it to them, so they feel it's only fair if they pay it forward."

My comment makes Brooklyn laugh, and he nods in agreement. "That's why I'm going to get myself a football scholarship and get as far away from him and his happily ever after." He takes a long swig of the flask, nearly emptying it in one gulp. "I won't need anything of his."

I don't doubt what he says. I haven't yet seen my stepbrother play, but if what they say about him is true, he's a beast on the field. He and his best friend Grant Fitzpatrick made varsity as freshman and have been co-captains since. They're an inseparable and incomparable duo, neither one eager to share the title of captain since they're both on the track for a full ride scholarship and a draft to the NFL. Though as I watch Brooklyn, eyes red and barely able to stay open, I fear the scandal that's befallen his family may be a roadblock on his way to stardom.

Legend says the mighty fall the hardest, and Brooklyn Bancroft looks like he might just break.

IT'S JUST AFTER ELEVEN WHEN THE FRONT DOOR CHIME RINGS and a loud rustling comes from that direction as Phoenix tries, and fails, to shut off the alarm. If I don't step in to help her, she's going to wake up the whole damn neighborhood, bringing the cops in to search for an intruder. Although that would be amusing, I really don't want to end my night with the cops at our front door.

Brooklyn went off to his room shortly after our little bonding smoke-out-sesh on the deck and is most likely passed out by now. Austin and my mother also retreated to their bedroom hours ago, while I was the only idiot who hung out downstairs waiting for her to return. I'd like to say it was merely to annoy the sassy little brat, but my dick couldn't go

to bed without knowing she was home, safely tucked into her bed.

Fuck.

I adjust my pants to hide the bulging erection caused by the unruly thoughts that have been circling my mind since I watched her shimmy her ass as she walked out earlier. Now it's throbbing once again as I watch her drop her keys repeatedly, her short dress hiking further up her legs as she bends over, giving me a nice glimpse at her lace panties.

Stepping up behind her, I can't help myself and lean in, inhaling the delicious scent of her perfume. Subtle citrus notes, coconut, and floral undertones. Fuck, she smells incredible, like an ocean breeze on a warm sunny day in paradise. I close my eyes and can hear the waves rumbling outside, or maybe it's just my heartbeat thundering in my chest.

Regardless, I open my eyes and watch Phoenix step out of her heels making her stumble nearly failing to the floor. Instinctively, I reach out to steady her, my hand gently grabbing her by the waist.

Phoenix gasps in surprise, or maybe it's a faint moan which slips out, either way, before I can react, she turns to face me, pushing me back, her knee coming up to greet my throbbing cock. No, let me rephrase that, to assault my cock.

"Fuck," I curse, nearly falling to my knees as I double over in pain. The damn bitch has good aim, I'll give her that. "What the fuck was that for?" I yelp, my voice a silent croak as I try to catch my breath.

Her face pales in shock. "What the fuck Maverick? You scared the hell out of me. I thought you were an intruder." However, once she realizes where she's maimed me, a mischievous grin appears on her lips. "Serves you well for sneaking up on a girl in the middle of the night. Didn't your daddy ever warn you against that?"

"I was inside the goddamn house. Why would I be an intruder?" I groan, still trying to catch my breath. She got me good, making my erection ache both from pain and arousal.

She scoffs in annoyance. “What if you followed me here and inside my house? How was I supposed to know? Besides, you grabbed me. I wouldn’t have kneed you if you hadn’t touched me. Daddy didn’t teach you about consent either, apparently.”

A small chuckle escapes me at her fervor. “You were about to fall. I was doing you a favor.”

“Next time don’t.” She brings her hands to sit indignantly on her hips, making her look awfully adorable as she tries her hardest to look intimidating.

“Oh, I sure as hell won’t make that mistake again. Fall on your ass for all I care.”

She pouts, “Fine,” turning back toward the alarm system still blaring loud.

“Fine.” I stand and reach behind her and enter the code into the keypad, shutting off the alarms just in time before it sends the emergency signal. “Go to bed before you wake up the whole damn neighborhood. It’s a school night, and it’s almost midnight.”

She rolls her eyes, annoyed, but then turns and grins wide like she’s just remembered something amusing. “Whatever you say, *daddy*,” she leers, picking up her heels, and heading toward the staircase.

I shake my head, finally able to stand up straight, and watch her flaunt her ass as she walks away. Fucking tease.

How I’d like to smack that perky little ass of hers and teach her not to disrespect me. She may be a little disobedient brat toward her father, but to me, she’ll learn to show respect. Although I’d have a hell of a good time punishing her snarky little ass.

CHAPTER
FIVE

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PHOENIX

The next morning, as expected, after a night of drinking with Donovan and Olly, I woke up with a raging hangover. I may have gotten a little carried away, particularly because of a certain dream I couldn't get out of my head, and a certain stepbrother who has crawled his way under my skin. Two days I've known the cocky bastard, and in those two days I haven't been able to get him out of my mind. It didn't help that the guy who's quickly becoming the bane of my existence, and the star of the damn dream that made me consume so much sake at dinner, wouldn't stop texting me and getting me all hot and bothered, and I mean it not only in a bad way.

It also may not have helped that when I arrived back home from our celebratory sushi and sake dinner, stumbling, and a little buzzed, he snuck up on me and nearly gave me a heart attack. I'm not used to anyone watching my every move and frankly, if this is the way things are going to go from now on, we have ourselves a major problem.

Luckily, my father left the house early in the morning before anyone else was awake, so I didn't have to deal with his sudden need to set rules and bark out ultimatums. Brooklyn took off to football practice, and Daphne also left for the office, leaving me all alone to enjoy my breakfast in peaceful silence.

For a moment, I was afraid Maverick was still lurking about the house but was pleasantly surprised to find his car wasn't in the driveway either.

After a delicious and nutritious breakfast of coffee and nothing else, I jumped into my white Range Rover and drove the mile and a half to Malibu Cove High. Living so close to school has its perks, and one of those is waking up fifteen minutes before class starts and still making it in on time.

The first half of the day was a breeze. Although Maverick was in my homeroom class, he never once bothered me. Not

that I'm complaining, it was nice not to have to look over my shoulder every five minutes to see if he'd glued my hair to the table or cut off a strand. The asshole just sat in silence behind me, grunting every so often.

I was on high alert, breathing steady, and ensuring I didn't slouch or lean too far back. I acted as if his daunting presence behind me was the most normal thing in the world, when in reality I was terrified about how I really felt.

Like I said, the gorgeous bastard is under my skin. Lucky for me, I don't date bad boys, nor am I looking to date anyone.

"Hey Phoenix," I hear come from behind me as I head over toward the table at the edge of the courtyard Olly and Dee are waiting for me at. You have got to be kidding me. A day and a half, not two full days, is all the peace I was privy to. I'd recognize Chad's voice even if the scent of his Aqua Di Gio perfume weren't making me increasingly dizzy as he approached me.

A staple in his mundane morning routine, Chadwick Hollingsworth III, has not a hair out of place, not one wrinkle on his perfectly ironed ensemble, and not a blemish in sight. Thick golden blond hair combed over to one side and gelled in place, golden tan skin, natural from hours spent in the sun, and honey-colored eyes that look like they have specs of sunshine woven into the light brown shade.

He's every girl's dream guy. Money, class, power. Bred by the patriarch of the Hollingsworth Dynasty, a family of powerful men who dab in everything from banking, hedge funds, and oil, the youngest of the Hollingsworth boys is a paragon. Until you peel back the layer of perfection he wears as a cloak and find a tar black soul, slimy, and emitting a putrid stench.

Chad showed me his true colors the day he left me, instead of comforting me after my father's affair. Not that I cared much when I found him three inches deep in an unsuspecting pussy. Yeah, I said three inches.

Nonetheless, had he cheated on me at any other time, I'd have brushed it off, but it came at a time I realized I'd lost

hope in the male species as a whole.

“What do you want, Chadwick?” I snicker, rolling my eyes as I turn and give him a fake, practiced smile. He knows I have no intention of keeping this conversation going for long, nor am I interested in anything he has to say. Regardless, my stupid primitive breeding reigns supreme, and I stay to see what the hell he wants.

“Come on P, it’s like that now,” he whines, suddenly acting as if not three weeks ago he was telling me it was time to go our separate ways. He’s a future politician after all, and this is the kind of shit the opposing contenders dig up.

“What else would it be like, Chad?”

“I miss you, Phoenix.”

I roll my eyes, unable to keep this charade up for much longer. “Oh, fuck off Chad. You miss what I looked like hanging on your arm, attending those stupid, boring charity galas for your father’s company at the club. You miss how every man in the room envied you for showing up with me, and congratulated you for acquiring such a well-bred, pristine piece of ass. But you don’t miss me, the girl who put up with your bullshit, because I thought you were a decent guy.”

He’s appalled, mouth gaping open as he watches me turn into someone I never had been before. The old Phoenix would have never raised her voice at him or called him out on his shit even if I’d agreed with what I just said. I’d have bitten my tongue and pretended he was exactly the type of guy I needed to end up with and would have married the fucker if my mother and father had any say in it. Luckily, the only thing this scandal secured is that they don’t.

“What the fuck, Phoenix? I’m here trying to give you a second chance, and this is how you react.”

I can’t hold in the rampant laughter that erupts from deep inside of me, and soon enough I’m doubling over, laughing like a freaking maniac.

The whole courtyard full of judgmental, prying eyes, is watching us, everyone surely thinking I’ve completely lost it,

not to mention how dare I ridicule a Hollingsworth. They wouldn't be wrong in assuming that. I lost all hope and interest in what they thought the moment they turned their backs on me.

Not that I was attached, but these conniving little assholes worshiped the ground I walked on not two months ago. Now it's like I've grown an extra head or contracted some deadly contagious disease. It was social suicide after a scandal like the one that tarnished my family's name and credibility among the elite of Malibu Cove.

If only the culprits were the ones held responsible. But they remain unscathed. High school is fucking brutal, but high school in Malibu Cove is unbearable.

"You think, not that I'm the one who needs to be given one FYI, I would take a second chance with you, Chad. You're pathetic, an average fuck at best, not to mention you're more high maintenance than anyone I've ever met, which, says a lot." The crowd gasps, catty bitches snicker, the jocks hoot and holler, and everyone else, even those not interested in the average teenage drama, are invested.

From the corner of my eye, I see a girl walking toward us, her blond, oxidized hair cut into a short bob sitting along her shoulders, sways as she struts over.

She halts as she comes to stand directly in front of me, placing her hand adoringly on Chad's shoulder. "You're nobody now, Phoenix," she mutters, getting into business which doesn't concern her, but that's what she always does, jumping in where she isn't wanted. "A fallen queen, a dethroned monarch," she coos, and my god I nearly slap the bitch for jumping in.

Tatum Mortimer, evil, manipulative, and an overall Bitch with a capital B. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for women exploring and embracing their sexuality, I mean men do it all the time and get away with it, but when you use your looks and your body to exploit or gain the upper hand, it's just plain wrong.

And that, my friends, is exactly what Tate does. Every captain of every sports team at Malibu Cove High, whoever is standing at the top of the social hierarchy pyramid, Tate Mortimer is lying spread eagle beneath them.

Even like that, the “self-proclaimed Queen B of MC High” is nothing more than a plaything, a pastime to all those who’ve fallen for her schemes. I say fallen, but I’ve yet to hear any complaints. Not even from my brother Brooklyn, wide-receiver, and co-captain of the MCH Football team.

Stopping myself from launching at her and yanking her damaged hair from her scalp, which would probably be easier to do than expected, I hold back testing my restraint, and instead give her my best-behaved smile. “It’s funny that you really think that Tatum,” I purr, stepping into her and taking a strand of her hair in between my fingers. I twirl it around, hearing the rough bristles rub against each other. “Either way, I don’t give a fuck. Dethrone me, I dare you. Besides, everyone knows you’ve always wanted my crown.”

I blow her a kiss for good measure and turn to walk away, not letting either of them get in another word.

Donovan and Olly give me a small apologetic smile, but I wave them off silently, telling them I’m fine and not to bother coming over to me. They don’t need to be caught up in my mess. I need to get out of here, but just as I am about to exit the courtyard and head over to my Rover parked in the staff lot deciding to call it a day, I spot him standing under one of the large oak trees, watching me, studying me, and mockingly taking notes.

Beside him, Brooklyn scowls gazing back and forth between the two of us, somehow reading the unspoken message. I don’t know why the two of them are anywhere near each other, suddenly fearing they may be getting along, but I doubt it. Brooklyn isn’t stupid enough to get into bed with the enemy.

Let’s hope neither am I, because when Mav catches my gaze, I nearly melt into a puddle of wanton need at the way his eyes roam over me. His expression is unreadable, a mix of

anger, pride, and frustration. Whatever it is, it's hot, and I quickly turn to walk away, not wanting to feel any more vulnerable than I already am.

I may have just put on the show of the year in front of all my meddlesome classmates, but inside I'm as broken as they say I am.

A fallen Queen. If only the fall wasn't so grueling.

“WHERE ARE YOU OFF TO IN SUCH A HURRY?” MY KEYS FALL out of my hands and onto the pavement as Maverick startles me, appearing out of nowhere. My hand flies to my chest, my heart beating erratically as I try to catch my breath.

We're in the faculty parking lot, away from most of the prying eyes of my classmates, but a few who are coming back from lunch are observing our exchange. The great thing about MC High is they allow us to leave campus for an hour during lunch which is why I'm on my way out.

“You're a stalker, you know that. Why the hell do you keep sneaking up on me?” He notices my gaze flicking back and forth between him and the few heads looking our way, and he purposely moves in closer, placing one hand against the edge of my windshield, the other along the door handle, caging me in against the car.

“Cause it's fun,” he utters nonchalantly, the childish grin he gives me knocking the air out of my lungs for a completely different reason. Mysterious and brooding, Maverick is damn sexy, but this carefree, playful guy, he's dangerous. Because suddenly I feel the need to keep him around.

Not to mention he smells fucking incredible. Whatever it is he wears, or whether it's his natural scent, I'm bottling it up.

“It's not,” I huff out, trying to push him off me. It's a total fail. “What do you want, Maverick?”

“We're back to Maverick,” he murmurs, leaning his head forward. “What happened to *Daddy*? I thought I was growing

on you.”

Someone shouts, “*Get a room!*” from a distance and I quickly push him off me.

This time, he doesn’t push back. “If you want me to call you daddy, then we have bigger problems to discuss. I know why I have daddy issues. Why do you?” His scowl proves I’ve struck a nerve, but as easily as it comes, it goes, and back is the titillating asshole.

“I can show you, but then I’d have to kill you.” He’s grinning, but for a second, I’m not sure whether he’s joking or not.

“Whatever, just leave me alone. Death would probably be easier than having to deal with you daily.”

“Cute, keep telling yourself you don’t enjoy my company, babe. I’m sure if I were to say,” he steps forward again, strong fingers wrapping around my hips, “Slip my fingers underneath this sorry excuse for shorts, I’d find you more than enjoying this moment.”

“Yeah,” I moan purposefully, “You’d also get a lot more than you bargained for when my knee meets your cock once again like it did last night. Need a refresher, babe?” I spit out, and that’s my cue to get the fuck out of dodge.

Without waiting for another snarky response, I bend over to pick up my keys, smiling triumphantly at the deep groan that leaves him as my ass rubs him on my way down, and unlock my door, opening it, and slipping inside. But before I can slam it shut, his hand moves to block the door.

My eyes drop to the ink along his knuckles, symbols I’m not familiar with stamped along each one. “Not so fast,” he growls, claiming my attention. The deep blue color of his eyes is mesmerizing, but the way his lip twitches as he stares down at me makes me press my knees together. The black leather of my seat, which has been sitting in the blistering sun for hours, burns the back of my thighs, but it’s still a less tantalizing sensation than the one between my legs.

Maverick notices, smirking, and biting his bottom lip teasingly. “Just wanted to give you props for that little show you put on. Ballsy once again, babe. You continue to surprise me.”

I don't have the energy to continue this insidious back-and-forth banter, so I agree, brushing off his comment like it means nothing.

“Thanks for the compliment, but I'm not like the other brainless girls you're accustomed to. I won't drop to my knees and spread my legs for you because you call me pretty and praise me. I've dealt with my fair share of boys like you, and honestly, I'm sick of them. Go find someone else that would stoop down to fuck you. You're not at my level, babe.”

Finding the bit of courage I have left, I pull the door shut, start up the engine, and swerve out of the school parking lot with no destination in mind. I need to get as far away from him and his captivating blue eyes.

TWO MONTHS HAD COME AND GONE IN NO TIME. I STILL remember like it was yesterday, walking into my mother's bedroom, the eerie silence and icy, ominous air that surrounded me as I stepped inside, foreshadowing what I was about to discover.

We'd never been really close. I mean, we were as close as once could be to their mother in our world. She knew I existed, spoke to me more often than not, even if it were to tell me what I was doing wrong or how I could improve myself, but she showed a fragment of concern for my well-being. I saw her for most holidays, received the annual birthday and Christmas cards, accompanied by either a thousand dollars shopping credit, or a brand-new designer handbag. I preferred the latter because it meant she had put some thought into it.

From my father it was always jewelry, but even that was picked out by his assistant and delivered to my bedroom door

the night before. The note card always said the same thing. From Dad.

No signature, no endearing term, nothing. Simply seven letters typed on a single postcard.

However, early on, I learned never to expect anything from him.

On the odd occasion we were home, I'd join her for dinner in silence, or occasionally we'd go out to eat at either our favorite cafe or the country club she frequented. I hated it there, but she was a different woman when we'd go, so I would suck it up for the few hours we spent there. It was always about keeping up appearances. Ensuring you always looked your best, acted as if nothing and no one could hurt you, and like your life was perfect.

The moment you let the perfectly crafted disguise slip, and someone saw the first crack in the illusion, no matter how minuscule, you were done.

Reputation tarnished equals life over.

I still couldn't have faked the shrilling squeal that left my body when I saw her lying on the floor of her bedroom unconscious with the empty container of prescription sleeping pills resting in her hands. My life flashed before my eyes, and the saddest part was, not once did any of it warrant the tears that shed from them.

I didn't call 911, I couldn't. It was Brooklyn who dialed the number after he rushed to my mother's bedroom after hearing my scream. He crouched down beside me and held me in his arms. He didn't attempt to comfort my mom, didn't check her vitals, or attempted to perform CPR. No, he just held me against his body and assumed my mother was dead.

She wasn't, though if you ask her, she wishes she were. Because now not only was she the wife of an adulterous bastard who left her for his mistress, she was a weak, pathetic woman who attempted to kill herself, and failed.

I don't know what it was about today that had me driving the ten miles to the rehab facility she was in.

Maybe it was the fact that I felt as weak and pathetic as she must have that day.

I pull into the parking lot of Cliffside Malibu: Luxury Rehab and Detox, which looks more like a five-star hotel than a rehab clinic. Of course, not only is it meant to hide the fact that the rich and famous are inside struggling with various addictions, but it also costs eighty-thousand dollars a month to be a patient. I would imagine the luxuries included are nothing shy of perfection.

The enormous white mansion, sitting on two acres of land with direct views of Zuma Beach, is magnificent. Large white sandstone pillars line the wrap-around porch leading into the yard where they host yoga classes, and contains other various amazing amenities, pools, and spas. I remember finding the brochure in my father's office the day after my mom was admitted into the hospital. I wanted to stay there. It looked like the perfect escape.

It wasn't until a week after my mother's suicide attempt, after they pumped her stomach and released her into my father's care, that he admitted her into the facility. Since they were still married, he had full control over her medical decisions once she was deemed unfit and not psychologically able to care for herself.

Much to my mother's dismay, a week later he filed for divorce, and a month after that, my father was once again a married man. By that time, my mother had chosen to stay at the center, unable to step back into the world that was sure to cast her out once they heard about my father's new marriage.

Once inside, I'm immediately greeted by a woman dressed in a long, perfectly ironed, and tailored white lab coat over her navy dress. "Welcome to Cliffside Malibu. How can I assist you today, my dear?"

I pause at her question, unable to muster out the words. I know this place is super exclusive and with that exclusivity comes discretion, so I'm not sure if my mother's checked in under her own name or a fake one.

“Would you like to step into my office, dear?” she asks, looking around at the three other people currently in the next room I assume is a waiting area. She takes two steps forward. “I’m Cassandra. I am willing to help you with whatever it is you need.” Cassandra’s smile softens and I suddenly realize she thinks I’m here for an intervention.

I clear my throat, “My mother, um, Elaine Ban, I mean Astor,” I murmur, giving her my mother’s maiden name. Unlike my father’s wife Daphne, who still uses her ex-husband’s surname, my mother dropped Bancroft the day after the divorce was finalized.

Her eyes light up with realization, “You must be Phoenix,” she whispers, and I’m suddenly taken aback by the fact she knows my name. “Elaine has told me so many wonderful things about you.”

Again, I’m baffled by her response. My mother saying positive things about me to a stranger makes no sense when nothing I ever did was to her standards.

“Actually,” I mutter suddenly, unable to face a woman I will surely not recognize, “This was a mistake I should...”

Cassandra interrupts me, reaching out and grabbing my arm before I can run out of here. “Come with me dear. Elaine is out by the pool. I’m sure she’d love to see you.”

Reluctantly, I follow Cassandra through the facility, mesmerized by how amazing this place is. It is everything you’d find in a five-star hotel and more. A salon and spa, a cafe with specialized menus, vegan, keto, gluten-free, and a raw juice bar. Down to the right is an elevator bank leading to the nearly two hundred rooms on the property.

We step out into the yard, where two Olympic sized pools are located surrounded by a large outdoor deck with cabanas and lounge chairs, another juice bar, and a small boutique.

“This place is...”

“Paradise,” Cassandra offers, “At least we try to make it for our guests.” I realize she doesn’t use the term patients, which is what they are.

Lying on one of the black lounge chairs on the second row from the pool, I spot my mother, dressed in an all-white one-piece swimsuit with a matching cover up, and a straw sunhat over her luscious blond hair. Her large black sunglasses cover almost the entirety of her face, and beside her on the table is a stack of magazines, and one of those green juices from the juice bar.

“Elaine darling,” Cassandra sings-songs, “I have someone very special here to see you.” As if Cassandra mentioned nothing more than her juice order arriving, my mother doesn’t bother looking our way. Instead, all she does is lower her sunglasses, balancing them on the bridge of her nose while inhaling a deep breath.

Releasing her breath, she slightly tilts her head to her left, meeting my gaze with a disapproving expression. “Phoenix,” she mutters, bored, “What on earth are you doing here?”

Beside me Cassandra gasps lightly, surprised by my mother’s reaction. I guess the woman who spoke wonders about her daughter is nowhere to be seen.

“Making a huge mistake apparently,” I stammer under my breath before turning and walking the way we came. I don’t stop for her berating comment, I don’t stop at Cassandra’s pleas, I don’t stop until I’m almost at the front door exit, nearly crashing into a man entering.

Tears threaten to release, but I hold them in, willing myself to maintain the calm composure I was taught and perfected.

“Phoenix?” the man in front of me calls out, and that’s when I see he’s no man at all. Well not an older man like I’d assumed, but a guy my age, a classmate of mine.

Cole Sheppard. The most popular guy at MC High, and everything Chad wishes he were. I’m shocked to be running into him here, but as the rumor mill goes, he also happens to have a bit of a drinking problem.

Cole is everything you’d expect to find in Malibu Cove - your typical surfer type. Tall, muscular, shaggy bleach blond hair, glowing tan, rocking abs, perfect in every way. Not to

mention he's a pretty down-to-earth guy. But even the best of us have monsters lurking under our beds, waiting to strike when we're at our lowest, and the breakup he had earlier this summer was his rock bottom.

I'm not one to join in on the gossip, but I know Cole pretty well, and after running into him here, at the same facility my mom is currently at, I realize the rumors must be true. His home situation is pretty much on the same level as mine, and like I said, I don't judge him, but I also don't blame him.

"Cole," I respond, seeing his shocked expression and not wanting to pry further into why he's here or for him to see past my mask of indifference and notice I'm falling apart. I rush away from him and out the door with not so much as a goodbye.

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CHAPTER
SIX

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PHOENIX

Bright sunshine, the perfect weather, salty air, and incomparable views are exactly how one would describe summers in Malibu Cove. Year-round hordes of college kids, honeymooning couples, and vacationing families from all over the world travel to Malibu Cove to enjoy the optimally warm weather on our eclectic sandy beaches.

Standing on the balcony of my family's beachfront property, staring out at the deep blue waters, I'd have to agree. This is paradise.

Barely ten o'clock in the morning and the sun's rays are already shining brightly and warming the crisp summer air. It's enchanting, gazing out into the turquoise ocean waves, watching seagulls perched along the sand, soaring into the clear blue, cloudless skies, and the smell. God, the smell is exhilarating, a salty scent so strong you can taste it on the tip of your tongue.

I hear high-pitched laughter echoing in the distance and spot Donovan and Olly walking along the sandy path down below. My two best friends are coming over to spend the first weekend since we returned to school, swimming in my expansive saltwater infinity pool.

Yes, the sea may be my front yard, but there are days I prefer to lie out and soak in the rays hidden away in the privacy of my secret oasis.

Though it's no longer as sacred as I'd like.

I let my hair down to fall in long beach waves along my shoulders and slip on a pair of black flip-flops. The teal triangle bikini I've chosen today not only matches the exact color of my eyes, but emphasizes my natural sun-kissed tan, giving me an extra glow. The small triangles of fabric allow for the perfect tan and barely visible tan lines.

Walking down the steps that lead out into the adjacent beach, I find Donovan and Olly waving excitedly as they

approach me. Donovan's wearing a pair of denim cut-off shorts and a coral triangle bikini top, her blond hair matching the golden color of the sun in the sky, and even from this far I can see the almost crystal-clear color of her eyes. Beside her, Olly skips excitedly in nothing but a pair of lime green Hawaii themed board shorts.

With a wide smile on my face, I head over to join them, continuing to stare out into the expansive waters up ahead. "With a view like this, why wouldn't travelers come from all over the world to our little nook of paradise?"

Donovan sighs in agreement, her gaze following where mine goes. "Yes, our perfect paradise."

"Lucky for the two of you who live out here among the fishes," Olly jokes, turning to admire our beachfront million-dollar mansions. The Kennedy's, Donovan's family, have lived next door to me since before we were even born. David Kennedy, Dee's dad, has been best friends with my father since they were kids, and our grandfathers first purchased the adjacent properties.

It only made sense growing up that we also became best friends.

Oliver, however, lives further in town in a swanky six-bedroom house with his two dads. He may not be dipping his toes in the sand when he steps off his front porch, but that doesn't mean his mega mansion is any less impressive.

The two of them follow me through the gate and onto the deck, setting their stuff down on the lounge chairs lined up by the edge of the pool. Our newly renovated backyard deck, thanks to my new step-mommy, is complete with a fully stocked outdoor kitchen, two daybeds at the far end of the pool, and a large outdoor fire pit and furniture set all surrounding the sixteen by twenty-four-foot pool cascading out onto the beach.

This outdoor living space is the only thing keeping me sane.

As expected, my father has been absent since shortly after school started, when he and Daphne left for their honeymoon, leaving me with my annoying brother and irritating new house guest. Luckily, I've also avoided him at home, and have only had a few encounters at school, however, he's still been a pain in my ass.

But what is most irritating is the fact that I haven't been able to get him, or those text messages he sent, or the altercation we had in the parking lot out of my mind. Ugh, why did he have to be so infuriatingly hot?

Dee removes her shorts and lies back on the lounge chair, ready to soak up the rays of the now blindingly scorching sun. "Don't forget we have the bonfire tonight," she says, covering her face with the sunhat she's pulled out of her tote. "It's the first of many, but the most important one of our senior year."

Oh yes, the beloved bonfire. How could I forget?

Every summer, we spend a minimum of six hundred hours out on the beach, either at one of the many oceanfront tourist festivals or nightly bonfires. That doesn't stop once school starts and the long, hot summer nights cool down.

"I heard Cole Sheppard supposedly ordered over fifty kegs for tonight," Olly states, and I'm instantly reminded of my encounter with Cole at Cliffside. I've avoided him at school, not wanting him to ask why I was running out of there. Not that he would. He's probably more embarrassed I saw him there than anything.

"Ugh, my head is already pounding from how badly I know I'll be hungover tomorrow," Dee scoffs, making an overly dramatic gagging sound.

Olly erupts in a fit of laughter, "You mean that's what you'll sound like when you're choking on Brooklyn's dick tonight?"

Dee is quick to chuck her bottle of tanning oil, barely missing Olly's head. "You son of a bitch," she cries out, only making Olly laugh harder.

I roll my eyes at the two of them and make a gagging gesture. “Eww, can you please never again mention anything about my brother’s dick, Oliver? Especially not my best friend doing anything with or to it.”

Now it’s Olly who chucks the bottle at me, “Oh lighten up P. It’s not like we don’t already know Dee would give up her left kidney for it.” I’m just about to throw the bottle back his way when suddenly a brand new, shiny, black Aston Martin convertible pulls up right outside the wrought-iron gates of my property. “Wow, that’s a hell of a car,” Olly yells out, straightening up on his lounge chair.

Donovan joins him, fanning herself with the gossip magazine in her hand. “And that’s a hell of a man,” she coos. She brings the mimosa I had laid out for her to her lips, taking a swift drink just as Maverick steps out of the car dressed in all black, donning a pair of dark Aviator sunglasses. I swallow back hard, nearly choking on my saliva.

Olly licks his lips as if savoring something delicious, “Now that’s a dick I’d like to talk about.”

“I wonder what he’s doing here?” Donovan asks, far too curious.

“Gee Dee, I don’t know, maybe because he obviously lives here,” Olly scoffs, proceeding to take a sip of his equally fruity cocktail.

I once again roll my eyes at their banter just as my stepbrother emerges from his car.

My palms start to sweat, and my mouth goes incredibly dry. Maverick is unfairly gorgeous, and surely melting panties away everywhere he goes. It’s just a natural reaction to be feeling this hot and flustered in his presence. That’s the lie I must make myself believe.

Mav opens the gate leading into the yard and casually stalks toward us, removing his sunglasses as he stops in front of us. His hair is freshly cut, short on the sides but still slightly long up top. Beautiful blue eyes leave me breathless, and if the smirk on his face is any sign, he is aware I am checking him

out. Olly and Dee gasp beside me when a wicked twinkle flashes in his eyes as they roam over my body, splayed out before him in an itty-bitty bikini.

“Welcome to our humble oasis,” he calls out, holding his hands out as if showing them the house, breaking me out of my daze.

“They practically live here, asshole,” I sneer, making him chuckle loudly, not once turning away from me. It’s like he’s swallowing me whole with just his gaze, a hint of humor mixed with something I know is desire, only because I feel it too and know it’s the exact expression currently written over my face.

Again, I can’t breathe. The wicked look he’s giving me is making me dangerously hot in all the wrong places. Well, the right places, only not meant for him. As if hypnotized, I can’t stop staring into the blue depths of eyes that slightly soften his rather rugged façade. Square jaw and perfect cheek bones covered in a slight stubble, hair slightly disheveled like he ran his fingers through it after it was styled, or from the summer breeze flowing through it. Bottom line, he’s unfairly good looking.

“Well, I think I just came in my pants from all the lingering sexual tension coursing in the air,” Olly whispers to me. Only Maverick catches the end of it, his crooked smirk lifting at the corners.

My cheeks go blazing hot, unbelieving of what my best friends just let slip out.

“He’s kidding, of course. We’ve been laying out here all morning. The sun and alcohol must have gotten to him, making him delirious and prone to say shit he doesn’t mean.” I cringe at how pathetic my lame as excuse just sounded, but Maverick keeps his gaze on me.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it. Don’t overdo it, Oliver,” he says, and Oliver all but dies at the sound of his name leaving Mav’s lips.

“He knows my freaking name,” Olly whisper-squeals. “So, Maverick, are you going to the bonfire tonight?” I smack him on the arm just as he finishes his question. “Ow,” he cries out.

Donovan’s next to speak, “Yeah, you’re welcome to join us. Everyone will be there.” So, they’re ganging up on me now. I’ll keep that in mind as I remember to never invite them over again.

“Will you be there, *sis*?” Maverick asks, and the way he hisses the last word this time like an insult makes my breath hitch.

“Yes!” Donovan and Olly shout just as I yell, “No!”

He laughs, a low guttural chuckle. “Yes, or no?”

Dee sits up and wraps her arm around my shoulder, hugging me. “She’ll be there.”

Maverick smiles, laughing under his breath. “Then I guess I’ll see you there. Anything I can bring?”

“That hot ass will suffice,” Olly mutters under his breath. But once again, I know Maverick heard. I need to teach my friend how to whisper or, better yet, keep his mouth shut. Speechless, I shake my head. “It starts at six, but you’re welcome anytime,” Olly interjects.

“Then I’ll see you at six, Nyx.”

“It’s Phoenix,” I shout out, although I hate to admit the nickname he’s determined to give me makes my stomach knot, and not in a sisterly, mortal enemy way. “My name is Phoenix!” I call out, but he’s too far gone now and simply waves an arm behind his head.

“Nyx?” Donovan asks, curiosity gleaming in her clear blue eyes.

“Long story,” I respond, not bothering to explain further.

I NEED TO GET MAVERICK CARTER OUT OF MY GODDAMN MIND.

All I've done since I saw him earlier by the pool, is think about how ridiculously hot and incredible it would feel to have his tattooed hands roam my body, teasing me as they touched and pleased me.

I can't be imagining this, not when I'm supposed to hate him. Maverick has trouble written on his forehead in bold red letters, and I need to write DO NOT TOUCH in bold on mine. I knew his arrival would be dangerous, only I never knew exactly how. Frankly, given my track record in recent months, I can't afford any more trouble.

Right around four o'clock, Donovan, Olly, and I headed up to my room to eat, shower, and get dressed before heading out to the beach for the bonfire.

Ruffling through my closet as Donovan shimmies into another pair of cutoffs, I grunt, throwing the few summer dresses in my hand on the floor. "I have no idea what to wear!"

"Anything you wear will look smoking hot, P," Donovan says. "Just pick something." She admires her ass in the mirror and gives herself a little pat before throwing on a mesh top over her neon yellow bikini top.

"Why would I want to look smoking hot, Dee?"

She rolls her eyes exasperated, as if the answer isn't obvious. "Because of your new big bro," she mocks. Falling back onto my bed with a thud. She casually starts flipping through the magazine she's brought, acting as if she didn't just insinuate I want to dress to impress Maverick.

I turn and glare at her. "As if."

Sitting up, unable to ignore me and meddle where she has no business meddling, she resigns to the fact I will not divulge any secrets on the subject. "Fine, either way you need to look hot Phoenix, this is your first Malibu Cove party since your breakup with Chad and, well," she pauses, unsure what to say, "Everything else."

Olly barges in with a tray of chilled glasses full of crushed ice and rimmed with salt, and a pitcher of margaritas. "True,

you're single now, which means you, my dear Phoenix, need to look ready to mingle."

I smack my lips, annoyed that my two best friends are trying so hard to get me laid. Didn't I tell them I'm swearing off men indefinitely? Or at least until I find one who isn't a lying, cheating, sleaze-bag, but I think I have a better chance of finding a unicorn. "But I'm not in any way looking to mingle, Oliver, not even in the slightest."

He hands me a margarita, but I set it aside, not ready to drink it. "Unless it's with Maverick Carter," he chimes in, both him and Dee laughing hysterically as they chug down their margs. Fucking assholes. I'm blushing, I know I am, so I glance away, turning my attention back to the dilemma at hand.

What the hell am I going to wear?

"Especially not that bastard," I groan, throwing the sundresses back into the closet and pulling out some jean shorts and sweaters. It shouldn't be this hard to choose an outfit for tonight, and although I'm trying to convince myself I don't care what Maverick sees when he looks at me, I have an inkling this struggle to find the perfect outfit may have something to do with my brooding stepbrother.

Olly pours Dee and himself another margarita, while mine still sits on the desk, the melting ice diluting the flavor. "That's not true, your body language definitely said you were ready..."

"And willing," Donovan adds, finishing his statement.

"Whatever. You guys are dead to me, traitors."

Donovan stands beside me, both of us now staring at our reflections in the mirror. My best friend is striking, always wearing the most fashionable outfits, flawless makeup which looks to have been done by a renowned Hollywood artist, and her hair, never a strand out of place. Beside her, I look like a disheveled mess, resembling what I feel like inside.

Sure, I was just as, if not more, put together that Dee just a mere two months ago, but how quickly things can change. In

the blink of an eye, my life as I knew it ceased to exist. The perfect life I'd been born into collapsed before my eyes, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

And now that he's here, things were supposed to be that much worse. However, in the back of my mind, I can't help but think that isn't the case. Instead of Maverick's arrival further wrecking my already crumbling reality, he's somehow kept it interesting.

"Oh come on P, lighten up," Dee coos, fluttering her lashes and giving me her best sad puppy eyes. "We were kidding. I bet Maverick will love you in anything you wear. I mean, why wouldn't he? You're a total babe. We all are."

As much as he is a pain in the ass, he's also the only other person, other than my two best friends, who's talked to me without throwing out every insult in the book or sabotaging me for their personal entertainment. But I also am not stupid to think he doesn't have something up his sleeve, a purpose for being so interested. My father ruined his perfect family, and at the end of the day, it will always stand between us.

"Again, not interested, Dee, there's just something weird about him, like he's up to something. Besides, you saw how everyone's been treating me at school. It's like I'm this new contaminated girl everyone's afraid to catch a case of. The last thing I need is to be caught anywhere with my stepbrother. Can you imagine the scandal?"

Olly groans, fanning himself, "Can you imagine how hot it would be?"

Dee nods in agreement, "No one's telling you to do anything with him P, but some harmless flirting never killed no one." Suddenly, her expression changes from amused to scheming. "Actually, you may have declared him mortal enemy numero uno, but wouldn't it be fun to make him fall for you, beg to have you, and then remind him his mother should have never fucked with yours?"

"Donovan Kennedy, you little scheming bitch!" Olly shouts, a little too enthusiastically. I can't believe what my

best friend is insinuating, though it probably isn't too far off from what he's probably scheming.

The same expression flashes in my eyes. "Actually, Dee, that's not a horrible idea. Maverick showed up here, overly confident and sure I'd be all over him, begging him to show me even an ounce of the attention everyone else gives him. He walks around like he knows I want him, like I can't help myself. If only I made him feel the same."

Olly wraps his arms around us, embracing us in a giant bear hug. "You two are a pair of manipulative, conniving bitches, but I'm all here for it. I love it! Let the games begin."

After a moment, Olly releases us and I quickly grab a band T-shirt from a concert Dee and I went to last year, having scored backstage passes from her record producer uncle, and a pair of black boots. I hold it up to them, asking for their approval. "Yeah wowza. You're going to look fucking hot P."

I can't help the giddy, exhilarating feeling coursing through me at just the thought of it. Maverick Carter is messing with the wrong girl. Phoenix 2.0 is a total bitch. "He'll definitely think twice about mocking me now."

Dee scoffs, falling back onto the white, pillowy soft comforter. "Yeah, if he can think of anything at all."

Using my looks to get something I want, or rather don't want, isn't something I'm used to. But drastic times call for drastic measures, and I need Maverick out of my house and out of my life.

"What are you going to do?" Olly asks, and I must admit he looks slightly afraid of my answer.

I give him a wicked smile, accompanied by a teasing wink. "I'm going to beat him at his own game."

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CHAPTER
SEVEN

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MAVERICK

I immediately spotted her, dressed in something I never would have imagined seeing her in, but now that I have, I don't think I could ever get the image out of my head. Instead of sporting a typical bikini top with cutoff jean shorts like every other chick around me, or like the one she had on earlier today, Phoenix is wearing a band tee, my favorite band tee, as a dress, the fabric barely covering her ass, pinned together by a thin gold chain around her waist. Her long legs, silky, toned, and beautifully tanned, shimmer against the setting sun, while the boots she has cuffed around her calf highlight the naturally earned muscle.

This girl is easily the sexiest chick I've ever laid eyes on.

When I first arrived, I watched her from afar as she kept to herself, everyone around her going about as if she didn't exist.

It was obvious on the first day of school that Phoenix Bancroft was not the same chick who reigned supreme over the halls of Malibu Cove High in the past. The precious princess had fallen from her pedestal thanks to the illicit affair between her father and my mother.

An affair that ended my parents' marriage, got me kicked out of boarding school, and brought me back to this godforsaken town. But the thing I wasn't expecting was that this new begotten reputation fits her like a glove.

The defiant, rebellious girl I never expected her to be is the one who's driving me fucking crazy.

I've kept to myself as well, not looking to make any friends at a school I won't be at long. Thanks to spending the first three years of high school at a college prep academy, I have enough credits to graduate after this first semester, which I plan to do so and get the fuck out of here. By then, my plan should have fallen into place, and I won't need my father's trust fund to get me started. Blackmail isn't my finest tactic, but it's effective, and it's what I plan to do.

“It’s a beautiful day out, isn’t it?” I turn and find a petite blond who’s appeared out of nowhere beside me. “I’m Tate,” she says, as if I don’t already know. This chick’s been eyeing me like a piece of prime meat since the first day I stepped foot at MC High, and she looks just the part of vicious predator I’ve heard she is. Not to mention, the little standoff with Phoenix the other day proved the rumors are true.

Phoenix is everything Tate wishes she were. Popular, beautiful, and overall likable. Even if Phoenix isn’t sitting at the top of the school’s social pyramid anymore, I know when she was, she was untouchable. Loved by everyone for her easy-going nature, Phoenix is a marvel amongst the legions of spoiled rich girls in Malibu Cove.

“Maverick,” I reply curtly, not giving her what she wants, which is a full conversation, if not more.

“I know,” she coos breathily, fluttering her lashes. Though unlike with Phoenix, when Tate does it, she comes off desperate. “You’re the new guy, Brooklyn and Phoenix’s new *brother*,” she states rather than asks.

“Stepbrother,” I correct her, even though every chance I get I remind Phoenix I’m her brother. For some reason, I don’t want Tate to assume we’re close siblings.

“*Riiiiight*.” She sarcastically elongates the word. “Her dad, your mom, the entire school knows what happened. What a scandal? Though if I’m being honest, I can’t say it was a shock. Everyone around town knew Mr. Bancroft was a whore and his stuck-up wife belonged in the looney bin.”

Despite agreeing with pretty much everything Tate is saying, coming from her as rather an insult to Phoenix than a simple observation, it doesn’t sit well with me. *What is it with my stepsister getting under my skin?*

“That’s pretty cheeky of you, Tate. Given what I’ve heard of you.”

“So, you have heard of me.” She winks, running her fingers over my shoulder and around to my chest. “What can I say? No one is happier to see the untouchable Phoenix

Bancroft back on the ground with the rest of us mere mortals. It's no wonder Chad dumped her ass when we found out, knocking her off the pedestal he and the rest of the school held her on." I can smell the stark stench of jealousy radiating off Tate like rotten meat in the middle of a slaughterhouse.

"What have I told you about talking shit, Tate?" Suddenly Brooklyn appears beside us, making Tate jump in surprise. There is a warning in his words, but his indifferent, rather bored expression is giving mixed signals.

"Brooklyn, I didn't see you there," she squeals, jerking to run her fingers over his exposed chest.

"Yeah, that explains why you're talking shit about my family, Tatum." Ignoring her advances, Brooklyn chugs the can of beer in his hand, disposing of it on the ground once he's done.

"Oh Brook, you couldn't care less about the shit your family's going through. Don't stand up for her suddenly when you've been talking shit yourself all summer."

Brooklyn's gaze hardens as he stares at Tate, a warning loud and clear with the way he looks at her. I have had little interaction with my stepbrother, other than the few times we've seen each other around the house and at school, and that night last week we sort of bonded over careless, shitty parents while smoking a joint. Unlike Phoenix, who seems to be torn apart by my arrival, Brooklyn's nonchalance is quite unnerving for a guy whose mom nearly killed herself over his father's infidelity.

But I'm not here for him. No good will come from starting something up with Brooklyn who likes his father a lot less than I do. No, the only way I will ruin Austin Bancroft is by ruining his beloved daughter, and I might even enjoy myself while I do.

Phoenix Bancroft will pay for her father's sins, and I will be her executioner.

AFTER OUR UNEVENTFUL TALK WITH TATE, BROOKLYN LEADS me over to his group of friends, who are the same group that's been hanging around his sister. They also are the only ones at this party, and back at MC High, who aren't afraid to be caught near Phoenix, maintaining their friendships despite the scandal surrounding her family.

"Hey guys," Brooklyn calls out, and the lot of already inebriated popular kids turn to look at us, "You've all met my new bro, right? Everyone, this is Mav, Mav, this is everyone."

There's an awkward silence for a moment, no one knowing how to react to my arrival amongst their tight-knit group, especially given the circumstances of my being here, before they all jump in to introduce themselves. A few are people I remember from my first week of school, and some unfamiliar faces I wouldn't remember even if I had met them. Not only because they're rather forgettable amongst the sea of lookalikes and wannabes, but I've made sure to only focus on the individuals who might be of use to me.

Not to mention there's only one person here I've kept my eye on, and she's the only one who watches me impassively, not bothering to respond at all.

"Phoenix," I mutter, meeting her gaze and instinctively biting my lip as her eyes glaze over with desire. She thinks she hides her attraction to me well, but it's written all over her face. Or at least I'm able to see it.

Her eyes glower down at me, annoyed I showed up when she clearly didn't want me to come. "Maverick," she utters curtly. The way my name rolls off her tongue does something very unsettling to me, even if it's meant to be spit out like an insult coated in utter disdain.

"You came." I smirk at her, hoping she caught on to my double entendre.

"Of course, I wouldn't miss it." Her blond hair falls against her shoulders in natural beach waves, bright blue-green eyes bear very little makeup, and her sun kissed skin is practically flawless except for the soft trail of freckles over the bridge of her nose. They're perfectly placed, almost like one

of those new filters on the gram. Deliciously plump and wet lips, glimmering with a light red tinted gloss, making me ache to taste them and discover if they're just as sweet as I imagine.

I can't help the urge to kiss her, but I need to find even an ounce of self-control. That cannot happen, yet.

Distracted by my thoughts, I turn and find Phoenix has disappeared, moving toward a table set up for beer pong away from the group sitting around a fire pit. I step forward to follow her, making sure nobody sees me, which luckily, they don't since they're all drunk or getting there, laughing about, oblivious to us. All accept one.

"You're the owner of the new Aston in Brook's driveway?" a guy named Cole asks, halting me in my tracks. I've seen him around, heard about him too. The golden boy of Malibu Cove, well besides my stepbrother who's currently the black sheep of the town.

He's supposed to be the good guy, perfect both in looks and personality. Cole Sheppard is the ideal.

I turn to face him, fisting my hands at my side in frustration but give him the friendliest smile I can muster. "Yes, that would be me."

"That's a sick ride," he mumbles, and I realize I was wrong. This dude is trashed, only he must be often since you wouldn't be able to tell if not for the bright red tint of the whites in his eyes.

Fitz, the guy standing next to Brooklyn who I know is the third part of their trio of MC High celebrities, comes over and oats Cole on the back, making him jerk forward. "Cole's dad owns a franchise of luxury dealerships up and down the coast, so anything about cars excites him,"

"Maybe a little too much," the chick that's been glued to Phoenix's hip all evening mocks. Donovan Kennedy. She's hot tonight in those tiny shorts she usually wears and might even be worth my time if it weren't for the way she ogles my stepbrother. Hmm, I may hit two birds with one stone with that one, except I don't think Brooklyn even knows she exists.

“Well, if you ever want to take it for a drive, that baby can go.”

Cole’s eyes brighten up with excitement. “Shit, I will definitely take you up on that.”

“Alright then, it’s a date,” Donovan laughs, but Cole just brushes her off, annoyed.

For a second I think if it were under any other circumstance, I might just fit in a place like this. Go figure. I’m just as, if not more, loaded than they are, drive the baddest cars, go to the same ridiculously expensive high school, and have the same shitload of mommy and daddy issues I’m sure they all suffer from.

“Don’t pay attention to her,” Brooklyn says, eyeing his sister’s best friend. “She doesn’t know a damn thing about anything other than bikinis, cheerleading, and gossip.”

Ignoring them, I excuse myself, which is easy to do when someone announces there’s a beer pong tournament happening at the table to our left, and over to the cooler lined up on the side of the seating area to the right. Grabbing a cold beer, I look up to find Phoenix has gone off toward the water instead of rushing off toward the game like everyone else.

“Can I offer you a drink?” I ask Phoenix, sneaking up behind her as she swirls her toes in the sand beneath her feet, holding her boots in her hand. The soft white sand covers her red painted toenails, as she continuously, and quite nervously, wriggles them around.

“Yeah, I’ll have a beer, please.” She shocks me when she accepts. I didn’t think she’d take anything from me.

Instead of acknowledging it with a snide remark and test my luck, I snap the cap off using my teeth, and hand it to her. She scoffs and rolls her eyes, mumbling something under her breath as she takes it.

Silence floats around us as I follow her gaze, watching the waves roll in and fade out in sync. It’s peaceful out here, completely different from what I’ve become accustomed to the last eight years. Being shipped away to Connecticut shortly

after my eleventh birthday, I haven't spent a summer on the west coast since. Of course, I spent them flying out to the Hamptons or driving out to Cape Cod with my friends.

“What do you want, Maverick?” she blurts out, and for once, I'm dumbstruck. I have no answer for her, because honestly, I have no damn clue.

I was determined to come here and make Austin Bancroft pay, even though I know it's equally my mother's fault for getting involved with the fucker. But not only did he ruin my parents' marriage, he's the reason I was shipped off to some preppy boarding school in Greenwich. At least that's what everyone thinks happened. What they don't know is that I was sent to a reform school for the troubled boys and girls of the rich and infamous. A school meant to whip me back in shape after I beat someone so bad, I sent them to the hospital.

That was the first time I caught my mother with him. It's funny, that's also what got me kicked out.

“Well, I thought I'd be polite and come offer my little sis a drink since everyone else ran off to play some game and left you all alone.”

Irritated by my mocking her, she smacks my chest, trying and failing to push me away. “Don't act stupid, it's not cute. You know that's not what I meant.” Her eyebrows scrunch together as if she's deep in thought, her tongue pressing against the inside of her bottom lip. “Why are you here?”

“I was invited by your besties, remember?”

Again, her annoyed glare proves she's about to strangle me. “To Malibu Cove, Maverick.”

“It's home.” I give her an answer I know she won't believe, but honestly, it's all I have. There are so many reasons I'm back, the main one being to make sure her father suffers for everything he's put my family through, but unlike when I first arrived, I'm not one hundred percent sure I know how that's going to play out.

Phoenix stares up at the sky, shaking her head like she doesn't believe a word I say. “That's bullshit and you know

it.” Of course, she can easily see through my lie, which should scare me more than excite me.

This isn’t going the way I had planned. I need to reel myself back in. Stepping forward, I reach for her, taking her hand in mine, and turning her to face me. “Then what’s your theory, Nyx? Why do you think I’ve come back after all these years? Because I’m sure you’ve come up with a whole scenario in that pretty little head of yours.”

She watches me intently as a tense, almost murderous, look crosses her face. “I’m not sure yet, but I know you’re not as innocent as you’re trying to come off.”

My lips twitch as she pulls away, my mouth curling up into a playful smile. “I’m not innocent, Phoenix, and I ain’t trying to make you believe I’m a good guy. You should be weary around me because I assure you, I have no clue how this is going to play out.”

Turning so she is standing directly across from me, she scoffs, raising a brow and meeting my teasing smirk with one of her own. It’s sexy as fuck and has me shifting to hide my dick pressing against my jeans. “You don’t seem like a guy who doesn’t have everything planned out ahead of time.” Slowly she moves closer to me, just a few inches of space between us, and I swear I see the sparks and currents of the magnetic field between us.

“Oh, I have a plan.” I take the final step forward, closing the space between us, and brush away a stray strand of hair that’s glued to her sweat glistened face. “But I wasn’t expecting you to be a problem.”

Stunned, she takes a step back, but my hand comes down to the small of her back to keep her from moving. “And how am I a problem?” she mutters, her breath hitching slightly as she stands her ground and doesn’t cower down. I watch a bead of sweat trickle down her forehead as I bring my fingers down lower and around her upper thigh, slowly slipping them beneath the hem of her shirt, leaning forward to press my lips against her ear.

I try my hardest to make it look as innocent as possible since we're standing in the middle of a crowded beach, but the loud hoots and hollers prove everyone's still fully engrossed in the other activities.

Leaning closer, as close as I can possibly get without causing a scene, I inhale the decadent scent of her shampoo, coconut, and vanilla, with soft notes of citrus. "Because I wasn't planning on wanting to fuck you so badly."

Now it's her turn to inhale sharply the moment my thick erection presses into her. I swear I hear something that sounds an awful lot like a moan leaving her lips. I can't help myself. She makes me so painfully hard it's almost impossible to be near her. It's like my dicks in this permanent state of arousal. Just the mere mention of her name, or scent of her perfume floating in the air has me instantly hard.

"So, Maverick?" Suddenly, and frankly imprudently, I hear her best friend Donovan call out to me as she comes over to join us, startling us both. Phoenix clears her throat and pushes me back so quickly she almost trips. I can't catch a fucking break and get a minute alone with her. "What brings you back to Malibu Cove?" Donovan asks, the mocking smirk on her face proving she is aware of what she interrupted. This girl is going to be a problem.

Back. Of course, they all are aware I used to live here when I was a kid, whether they remember or were reminded is irrelevant. "Just came for a change of scenery," I reply calmly, brushing off her insinuation. "I've been stuck in a snobby prep school for way too long. I thought some fresh California air might help."

"Then it isn't true you were kicked out for nearly beating a classmate to death?" Tate joins in appearing out of nowhere, clearly already knowing the answer to her stupid question.

Soon enough the entire group moves closer to join us, all except Donovan and maybe Tate, unknowing of what was happening between Phoenix and me.

"The key word there is nearly darling. He survived, and I left before they gave me the boot."

Cole, the guy who earlier fawned over my Aston Martin, throws his hands in the air exaggeratingly. “Fuck, remind me never to piss you off, Carter. This face is worth too much.”

“Oh, don’t be such a dick, Cole. You know Maverick wasn’t intentionally looking for a fight. It all comes back to his mom’s affair with our very own little princess’s dad.” Now that was intentional. Tate obviously knows more about me than she originally let on. I’m going to have to keep my eye on her because she is quickly becoming a complication and I already have too many of those to deal with.

I laugh at her dig, brushing it off and making her believe there are no hard feelings for the insult she casually threw out. Phoenix, however, well, her face is the color of the sun right before it’s about to set. A bright shade of red, almost purple, from how angry she is. She’s about to say something, I can see her lip curling, her jaw clenched tight, and the hostile glare she’s giving Tate almost makes me take a step back.

Instead, I interrupt her. “If you already know so much, then why the fuck are you playing dumb and asking Tatum? Or is it not an act and you’re genuinely that fucking stupid? I knew they said blondes were good for nothing more than a good, dirty fuck, but jeez I didn’t think things were this serious.”

The guys burst out in hysterical laughter while Tate stands in shock, her jaw dropping to the floor, until a dangerous rage takes over. Donovan and Phoenix, who were smiling at my mockery of Tate, are now also directing their furious glares my way at the blonde dig.

“You, my man, are a fucking god, Maverick!” Cole shouts out, raising his hands in the air and bowing down to me repeatedly. “All hail The Brutal King Maverick,” he yells even louder, making all the people who weren’t anywhere near us come rushing over to see what all the fuss is about.

I can’t help laughing at Cole’s hysterics, not to mention the way Tate just stormed off, stomping away with her tail between her legs, is equally satisfying.

But in all the commotion, I lose sight of Phoenix, until I spot her and Donovan in the distance, heading back toward the

Bancroft's Mansion.

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CHAPTER
EIGHT

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PHOENIX

Two weeks come and go without another peep out of my dear stepbrother. Between the heavy workload I've had, thanks to all the honors classes I was adamant to tackle, and the after school extracurriculars I signed up for, I've stayed busy and out of his way.

It's relieving, sure, but I can't help feeling a tad offended he's just ignored me all together. I shouldn't care. It's exactly what I wanted. To stay as far away from him as humanly possible. Then why the hell have I been in such a sour mood since?

I know exactly why. Because despite what I may say out loud, the thoughts of what he said to me down at the beach the night of the bonfire don't seem to fade away from the forefront of my mind.

I wasn't planning on wanting to fuck you so badly.

My heart nearly stopped the moment those words left his lips. Not knowing how to react to them, I simply played them off like they hadn't made my thighs squeeze closer together, or my breath hitch at the thought of what it would feel like to be fucked by Maverick Carter. I know he purposefully said it to get this exact reaction from me. It's obvious I'm attracted to him, I'd be dead if I weren't, but this attraction needs to be viciously murdered.

It's not only ridiculous to be so entranced by someone I've just met but there are so many reasons I should stay the hell away from him.

A) HE'S NOTHING LIKE THE GUYS I USUALLY DATE NOR WOULD I EVEN BE INTERESTED IN DATING HIM.

B) HE'S A TOTAL ASSHOLE WHO IS SURELY ONLY TRYING TO GET ME INTO HIS BED TO PROVE HIS DICK IS MAGIC OR SOMETHING.

C) HE'S HIDING SOMETHING. A SECRET PLAN, A VENGEFUL SCHEME. MAVERICK HAS SOMETHING UP HIS SLEEVE I'M SURE OF IT.

D) IF ALL THE ABOVE AREN'T SUFFICIENT REASONS, HE'S MY STEPBROTHER FOR GOD SAKES!

One dubious scandal is enough for this lifetime. I can only imagine what bedding my stepbrother would do to the remaining minuscule shred of my dignity.

I can't let my mind go there, to the dark, forbidden places it has no business going.

“What do you think about this one?” Dee asks, holding a light pink halter top against her chest as she admires her reflection in the fitting room mirror. I give her a bored shrug as I walk over to sit on one of the pink leather chaise lounges in the large sitting area outside the changing area.

Of course, after Donovan was finished with cheer practice, and I completed my first introductory meeting with the student government club, we headed down to The Village, an upscale outdoor shopping center stretching across the Pacific Coast Highway, home to our favorite luxe boutiques and delicious eateries. The Village is only the best place to be, and our second home, well, third if you count the beach, which we don't, since that's just our front yard.

Walking distance from the water's edge, we typically spend the entire day out here, shopping, eating, and enjoying the warm summer air. Our nights are spent between MC High parties and enjoying the opulent nightlife Los Angeles has to offer.

Of course, we have our favorites and those typically include the ones who don't give us shit for only being eighteen. Echo Rooftop Bar and Lounge atop the Lotus Hotel in Westlake Village is one of those places, and just so happens to be where we're headed tonight.

After grabbing an Iced Oat Milk Latte from Caffe Luxxe, we headed over to Chelseas, one of our favorite high-end boutiques, for some much-needed retail therapy. At least those

were Donovan's words, not mine. I would have skipped out on the shopping-spree, but was afraid I'd test my luck, and end up running into Maverick back at the house.

So here I am, leaning back on the comfortable lounge chair, while Dee tries on piles of clothes she's picked out, sipping my latte, and scrolling through my phone. I open Instagram, and impulsively search for Maverick's profile, not able to contain myself. Of course, his feed is never anything more than photos of his car, and faceless images of him and a few others I don't recognize, who I'm sure are his friends from back in Connecticut.

"You're right, the blue one brings out my eyes. Phoenix, are you even listening to me?" Donovan pouts. I wave her off, silently telling her it's perfect and I agree, when something catches my eye. The circle around Maverick's profile pic icon, which is a candid of him in the distance next to his precious Aston Martin, glows pink, notifying me he's posted on his story.

Out of impulse, I click his picture, immediately exiting out when I realize what I've done. I don't follow Maverick. I never could, but I'm sure he can see all who view his story, and now my name will be amongst those.

Although, he does have over fifty thousand followers, so what are the chances he even checks who's viewing his stuff? Having over a million followers, I don't and have permanently turned off all my notifications.

Deciding it's safe, I open the story once more, and nearly gasp out loud when I see what it is. It's not a story, but a live video, and Maverick is sitting in our home gym, shirtless and glistening with sweat, while he lifts at the bench press. The camera is set up against something and in the perfect path toward where he lies, catching his muscles contracting, as his grip tightens against the bar.

He's facing the phone, his knees bent at a perfect angle over the edge, his chest rising and falling with every weight lift, and a muffled groan escapes his lip as if he's struggling. I can easily see he's lifting at least one hundred and fifty pounds

combined, two sets of the dark green weights which are each fifty pounds on each side, plus the fifty-pound bar itself.

A loud sound makes me jump, and looking around, I realize it came through the phone. He sets the bar back in place, and grabs a towel from his right, wiping the sweat off his face before standing and walking toward the phone. I'm in awe of how perfect he looks shirtless, never seeing him in anything other than jeans and T-shirts, his sweat outlining every perfect crease of tattoo covered muscle.

From this vantage point, I can easily see the sweatpants he's wearing, heather gray, and perfectly outlining the shape of his cock as he lowers to look at the screen.

I inhale sharply, for some reason it feels like he's caught me staring straight into the camera like he knows I'm on the other side. I know it's ridiculous, especially given the almost twenty thousand people who are tuned in watching and dropping little hearts and red faces with tongues sticking out on screen as they drool over him.

Well Maverick, I never knew you were this thirsty for attention. But looking at him as he smirks wickedly into the camera, I can imagine why.

He's sinfully sexy, more perfect than I ever would have imagined.

He blows a kiss into the camera, and I swear I see his lips mouth my name, when suddenly someone creeps up behind me.

"My fucking God, that man is walking sex!" Oliver yells in my ear, catching me red-handed watching Mavericks' story.

My phone and latte both fly out of my hand, crashing against the marble tiled floor. A large puddle of beige colored coffee spreads all around, but my phone luckily remains unscathed.

"Son of a bitch Oliver, you scared me." Around us the shoppers and employees of Chelseas, which is supposed to be a boujee boutique with class, glare at us as they watch our exchange. Lucky for us, they wouldn't dare lose out on our

business, so they quickly look away and resume their daily mundane duties.

“You mean I caught you spying on your insanely gorgeous stepbrother and now you’re all hot and bothered and pissed you ended the video?” The young fitting room employee, who looks even younger than us, quickly rushes over with a handful of towels, immediately cleaning up the mess I’ve made on the floor. I give her an apologetic smile and mouth, sorry, but she shakes her head as if it’s no big deal.

Everyone in Malibu Cove knows who we are and who our parents are, and although they consider us exuberantly rich and spoiled assholes, they know to never be caught dead insulting one of us.

“That was his Insta story right,” Olly continues, practically walking over the girl on her knees. “I heard Becky Marsden whispering in class today about how he randomly makes Lives of himself working out and looking good enough to eat.”

Donovan barges out of the fitting room, half-dressed and a shocked expression written all over her face. “What the hell was all that commotion?”

“Oh nothing, just caught our girl here salivating over that sexy ass fuck stepbrother of hers.”

“Shut up!” Both Donovan and I shout, but obviously for different reasons.

Donovan adds, “No way. Did you creep into one of his lives? I heard Becky Marsden talking about them today.”

Olly gives me a, *I told you so*, look. “And neither one of you thought it prudent to warn me?”

“We didn’t think you’d go creeping.” They look amused, like this is just the funniest thing they’ve ever witnessed.

I’m red with anger, but also embarrassment, and dare I say, arousal. “I wasn’t.”

They both give me their best, *you can’t lie to us*, expressions, and I don’t bother denying it anymore.

“Are you guys talking about Maverick Carter?” asks the employee kneeled before us. She’s looking up at us like there isn’t a reason she shouldn’t be talking to us. Her blond straight hair, slightly darker than mine, is pulled into a slicked back ponytail, and her eyes are light green and almond shaped.

With a face free of makeup, nothing more than just some light mascara over her lashes, she looks awfully young to be working here. She’s pretty, yet different from the usual girls working at these places. She seems laid back, not superficial, and kind of tomboy even. Instead of wearing miniskirts and crop tops like the rest of Chelseas’ employees, she’s dressed in black leggings, Lululemon no doubt, and a plain white tank. Her outfits fitted, showing off her toned physique no doubt from time spent working out or maybe even from playing a sport.

I hear someone clear their throat and I realize I’ve spent a little too long sizing her up. “You know him?” I ask, a little more jealous than I hoped to come off.

She snorts loudly, making the other employees turn annoyed once again. Okay, now it’s obvious this chick is different. “God, no, but I’ve heard of him. I mean, who hasn’t?”

“You go to MC high, right?” Olly asks her, and she nods. Huh, I wouldn’t have guessed.

“Yeah, I’m a sophomore, and although I’d never be caught dead trying to talk to him, I’m aware of the chaos he’s caused.”

Come on Phoenix, she’s a sophomore, sixteen at most, and here you were jealous she was one of Maverick’s groupies. “What are you talking about?” I ask, wondering what chaos she’s referring to. Maybe there’s something she knows about Maverick that I don’t.

A blush creeps over her freckled cheeks. “Only that every girl at MC High is obsessing over the broody, tattooed bad boy. He’s freaking perfect. Hot, mysterious, and just so damn lickable.”

“Amen sister!” Olly shouts, high-fiving her, and joining in their fit of laughter.

“Why are you working here if you go to Malibu Cove High?” I ask, annoyed she’s so interested in him. Of course, he’d probably be interested too given the opportunity. She’s cute, killer body, and I have an inkling he’s into blondes.

She shakes her head vehemently, laughing as if it’s the most ludicrous thing. “Oh, I don’t work here.” However, she doesn’t further explain why she’s here. “I mean, my mom owns this store. I just came in to help her today because she had a few girls call out sick. They all went to Duke’s last night after work and got food poisoning.”

“Your mom is Chelsea Landon?” Dee and Olly both ask amazed, like they’re in the presence of a celebrity.

I guess they kind of are. Chelsea Landon is not only a renowned ex runway model who was named the most beautiful woman in fashion for three consecutive years, she’s also a huge philanthropist and environmentalist. She started Chelseas five years ago when her modeling career ended after the infamous scandal about her ex-boyfriend, actor Dane Francois, not being the father of her daughter.

As you can tell, scandals here in Malibu Cove are a dime a dozen, and they usually end up ruining one’s reputation.

Chelsea, however, turned things around for herself, proving she never once made Dane believe he was her daughter’s biological father, and she came prepared with receipts. Now she spends every dime of her earnings from Chelseas on restoring the local beaches and advocating for the protection of the environment. She’s sort of like my hero.

“Yeah, I’m Levi,” she says, extending her hand out to me. She smells like my latte, but I shake her hand, not wanting to appear rude. Though now that I know she’s one of my classmates, I’m sure she’s no better than me.

Although this entire exchange, she’s been awfully kind and nothing compared to any of the girls at our school, us included.

“You’re Phoenix Bancroft,” she states before I can even introduce myself. She turns toward my friends, “Donovan Kennedy and Oliver Radcliff.”

“You know who we are?” I ask rather suspiciously. Again, I even said it myself. Everyone knows who we are.

Levi laughs, catching herself when she realizes none of us follows. “Of course, I do. You’re only the reigning Queen of Malibu Cove.”

“Ex,” I mutter with obvious distaste.

Levi scoffs, “Oh please. Everyone, myself included, knows it’ll take a lot more than one scandalous affair to knock you off your throne. And Tatum Mortimer is the last person who’d wear your crown.”

Dee agrees. “She’s right. People hate Tate more than they don’t hate you if that makes sense.”

I brush off their comments, frankly, not caring what my current social status is. “Well, she can have this metaphorical crown everyone’s talking about. I don’t want it. High School is going to be over in nine months and all this bullshit will be meaningless. It’s meaningless now.”

Levi laughs giddily. “God, you’re even more badass in real life. I mean in person.”

I raise a brow quizzically at her, but her smile doesn’t falter. “Thanks, I think.”

“Levi!” one girl at the front register shouts out, interrupting whatever Levi was going to say. “We need you up here.”

“Sorry girls got to run. Mom’s out of town and if this ship sinks, I’m going down with it. It was nice meeting you guys, officially.” And just like that, she skips away, literally the girl is skipping through the store on her way to the front register.

“Well, she was...” Olly starts, but Donovan interrupts him.

“Interesting.”

Yeah, she was.

Turning my attention back to the phone in my hands, I remember why we were in this weird situation to begin with. “I’m going to go grab another coffee. I’ll meet you guys back at my house for drinks before we head out to Echo.”

“Woah not so fast, Little Miss Bancroft,” Olly calls out, grabbing my arm as I turn to walk away. “We’re not done with you.” Grabbing onto me tightly, he walks us back over to the lounge chairs, Donovan following closely behind us. We sit, more like they sit and hold me down, serious expressions crossing both their faces.

I know where this is going, and I don’t like it.

“Look, I didn’t mean to click on the Live, okay. But once I did, I’ll admit it was hard to look away.” Their eyes go wide at my admission. I’m not dumb enough to deny that Maverick is a vision. Hell, he’s more than that. The guy is literally walking sex. A trim and toned body that looks like it was molded by the most renowned sculptor in the world, and a face that could only be described as an artistic masterpiece. But it’s what’s inside which taints his almost perfect exterior. I may not know a lot about the brooding bastard, but I know no one is that perfect, and he is no exception. He’s hiding something, a big something. And if I’m not careful, I might just fall right into his trap.

“However, there’s nothing else to it,” I continue. “No secret, no ulterior motive. This isn’t a fairytale that’s going to end happily ever after for us. That’s not the way life works. Bottom line is, I trust him as far as I can throw him.”

Olly and Donovan stare at me stunned, unsure of how to even reply to what I’ve thrown at them, when suddenly, my phone vibrates in my hand, alerting me to an incoming new message. All eyes turn toward the device in my hand, and my heart nearly stops when I see his name appear on my screen.

MAVERICK: I HOPE YOU LIKED WHAT YOU SAW, NYX. I CAN ALWAYS GIVE YOU A PRIVATE SHOW.

I’m speechless, dumbstruck, and unsure of how it’s even possible he knows I was watching. There’s no way he saw me among all the viewers tuned in, but I knew the teasing smirk

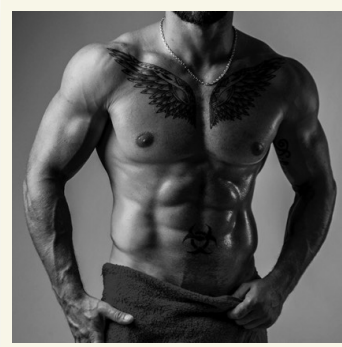
he gave the camera felt too personal. Had I accidentally pressed something and sent a message? Not likely, but either way I'm perplexed by the situation and slightly exhilarated.

He knows I was watching. He's offering a private show. Of course, he is, thinking I'm sitting here drooling from what I saw. Yet instead, my mouth feels incredibly dry.

"What is it, Phoenix?" Dee asks when she sees the stricken look on my face. I shake my head, unable to form a coherent thought that could explain this conundrum. What the hell am I supposed to say to that? Do I even reply, or act like I never received it?

Before I can decide, my phone vibrates again. This time, an image appears along with the incoming text.

MAVERICK: FOR YOUR EYES ONLY. ;) **PHOTO ATTACHMENT**



Okay, if I was dumbfounded before, now I'm completely rendered catatonic.

Tanned, wet, glistening skin fresh from the shower, water droplets still dripping down the black ink scribbled along every inch of his chest. The way he's flexing his well-defined muscles makes the veins on his arms and abdomen bulge, leading down to the deep V of his pelvic bone, before disappearing beneath the white towel hung low on his waist.

My mouth is now watering, my cheeks flushed, and a tickling heat spreads all over my body, making me clench my thighs in response.

Olly notices, leaning over me and pulling the phone out of my hands. I don't even react, the device easily slipping away

from me. “Oh, good god, the lord is good,” Olly shouts out in sarcastic prayer. “That man is a fucking God, capital G-O-D!”

Donovan plucks the phone out of Olly’s hand and gasps. “No kidding.” Handing the phone back to Olly instead of me, she stands hooking her arm in mine, and yanks me forward, leading me toward the array of dresses, miniskirts, and see-through tops she’s hung on her fitting room door. “We are so getting you a killer outfit to wear tonight. Maverick needs to see you leaving the house dressed to kill.”

Oliver stands to join us and hands me back my phone. “What are you going to reply?”

I debate for a second if that is even warranted a response. He wants me to beg for it, to admit to him how much I enjoyed it, but that means he wins. Without replying, I tuck my phone back into my purse and look through the dresses hung in front of us. I guess a new outfit wouldn’t hurt.

A gold satin dress with thin straps and a hem that would barely sit under my ass, catches my attention. It’s perfect. The fabric is so shiny it almost looks as if specs of glitter are woven into the material and feels so smooth between my fingers as I pluck it off the hanger.

“Oh, he’s going to die when he sees you in that,” Dee utters, her tone of voice almost maniacal. “It’s perfect P.”

She’s right, it’s perfect, and although he may not physically die, I know the moment he sees me in this, he’s going to wish he had.

“Checkmate.”

CHAPTER
NINE

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PHOENIX

The moment we left Chelseas, I drove straight home, speeding down PCH at eighty miles an hour. Miles and miles of blue water faded in the distance, giant palm trees swayed in the wind, and the coastal summer air blew through my hair as I drove with the windows down. The eagerness I felt to put on the new dress I'd purchased was the adrenaline rush I didn't know I needed, but even more thrilling was the need to see Maverick's jaw drop when he finally sees me in it.

I keep telling myself it's only payback for his teasing and sending of an unsolicited, almost dick pic, but deep down I know I crave to see the hunger glazed over his eyes as they roam up and down my body devouring me with wanton need.

It's like a drug, the way he looks at me like I'm his next meal and he cannot wait to feast on me. A dangerous drug I can never become addicted to, because the day I do is the day I lose.

I never could have imagined this game we started playing would be so exhilarating, but to say it is, is an understatement. Seeing him was the only thing on my mind the entire drive home. I didn't even drop Olly off at his house, instead depositing them both on Donovan's doorstep and having her drive him home. Or maybe he'd get ready there and save us the trip later when we take the Uber to Echo down in Westlake Village, about a twenty-minute drive from here.

It was about six-thirty when I arrived back home, and immediately jumped in the shower, using my favorite Chanel body wash, lathering it on my loofa and rubbing in circular motions along my silky, smooth skin. Of course, the moment Dee and I started going to get laser hair removal treatments instead of sugar waxing, it was a game-changer. Now, every six weeks, we head out to our favorite salon in Calabasas and come back as smooth as a newborn baby. And I mean everywhere.

Opting for a little more makeup today, smokey shades of nude glitter eyeshadows to compliment the color of my eyes along with a dewy look supermodels wear so well, I look like I've been sitting in the sun for the past hour, gleaming gold and shimmering bright. My cheekbones and jawline are perfectly contoured, and on my lips, a sticky rose gold lip gloss, which tastes even better than it looks.

Slipping on the matching strappy stiletto heels that wrap around my lower calves like a snake, I walk over to the full-length mirror beside my closet, admiring the unrecognizable woman staring back at me. I look like I walked straight off the cover of *Vogue*, or off the New York Fashion Week Runway. Gone is the beach babe and in her place a golden goddess ready to slay the wicked god next door.

Maverick wasn't home when I arrived nearly three hours ago, at least I don't think he was. The Aston wasn't in the driveway, and I haven't heard it pull in since. However, I was in the shower prepping for over thirty minutes, and my getting ready playlist, full of fuck you songs, was blaring loudly through the built-in surround sound speakers in my room.

It's nearly nine o'clock, and the plan was to meet at Dee's house a quarter after nine to pregame before heading over to Echo. Yes, it's only Thursday, but in Malibu Cove, every night is a party night. Whether it be at a club, at the beach, or in a bar, every spoiled, rich teenager is anywhere but the safety of their own bedroom. My brother included, who also has been out since I got home, and I don't expect to see him until tomorrow.

Taking one last glance in the mirror and adjusting the hem of my dress, which, as expected, barely covers my ass, I grab my gold clutch and head downstairs, hoping I'll run into Maverick on my way out.

It's dead silent as I descend the winding staircase leading into the magnificent foyer, feeling like Charlize Theron in one of those J'Adore Dior commercials. Reaching the bottom of the stairs, I realize there isn't a soul in sight. I was at least expecting to see my father in his study or Daphne wandering

aimlessly around looking for something to complain about, but no one's here.

From the kitchen I hear a ruffling sound, like someone tapping against the tiled floor. Out of the corner of my eye, our housekeeper appears, startling me, though not as much as she's startled herself. "Ay Miss Phoenix, you scared me niña," she says, calling me a little girl in her native language.

"Sorry Marta, I didn't think anyone was home."

"No one is home, Miss Phoenix, just me. Mr. Brooklyn left early this morning and hasn't come back, Mr. Bancroft and Mrs. Carter left for dinner a few hours ago, and El Señor Carter," she pauses just as the engine of Maverick's Aston Martin shuts off when he pulls into the driveway.

We both stand still, watching as Maverick enters through the front door a minute later. Obviously looking picture perfect in dark ripped jeans, a black T-shirt fitted around his biceps, and a single thin, gold chain hanging from his neck.

How I wish I could just yank the chain forward and pull him into me, inhaling his delicious scent I've become dependent on. Like a magnet, his gaze is pulled to mine the moment he walks in, nearly causing him to run into the small entryway table to his right.

His eyes are laser-focused on me, burning a deep hole into the most profound parts of my soul. However, his face remains expressionless, like he's trying to solve the Earth's oldest mysteries all in a matter of seconds. Flabbergasted, stunned, and completely starstruck.

Checkmate.

My victory dance doesn't last long because the moment my lips part to say something, a challenging smirk dances across his lips. In four long strides he reaches me, close enough I can smell the hints of what he's smoked mixed in with his favorite aftershave. I lick my lips in response to how amazing he smells, and once again, like a magnet, his eyes are drawn to the glimmering gloss painted on them.

A feral groan leaves his throat, his eyes roaming further down between the dip of my breasts and lower to the shimmering glow of my long and lean legs.

Marta drops the bag she's holding, startling us and reminding us she's standing right there watching this display of primal need. If it weren't obvious before, the thick tension around us proves the attraction between Maverick and I is stronger than we ever could have imagined.

"I..." Marta stutters, her gaze never once leaving us. On the other hand, Maverick's bored expression when he looked toward Marta is gone, and his gaze, once again fixated on me, is burning with carnal desire. He wants me, and bad. "I need to finish cleaning," Marta murmurs to herself, turning and scurrying back to the safety of the kitchen.

Rolling my eyes, I scoff at him. "You scared the housekeeper away with your feral growling Maverick. Didn't think you were such a savage animal."

The wickedly tempting smirk he's perfected appears once again and makes my damn knees weak. "Oh, you have no idea babe."

The endearing term, although it would usually annoy me being spoken by Chad or anyone else for that matter, excites me coming from him. He makes the word sound desirable, like I need to hear him say it to explain just how much he wants me.

Stepping forward, his fingers splay out on my lower back, just below the edge of the backless dress. Sparks fly at the contact of his cold, calloused tips, rubbing back and forth against my heated flesh. Unadulterated lust is visible in the way his eyes continue to travel down my body, watching me like he might miss something if he so much as blinks. They're undressing me, joined by his fingers aching to do the same as they twitch against my lower back, pressing into me and tugging on the fabric.

For what feels like hours we stand motionless, speechless, our breathing unsteady but in sync, our eyes glued together so

forcefully, I fear they will incinerate if I tear them away, and his hands, they tighten with each quavering beat of my heart.

The chill of the air conditioning sparks goosebumps all over my skin, or is it my arousal from nothing more than the feel of his hardened erection pressing into my heated core? His whole body shifts closer when he senses me try to take a step back to breathe, and I nearly moan out loud at how good it felt when he rubbed against me. God, I've never been this turned on by anything or anyone.

This plan has backfired. I was supposed to be the one dressed to kill, rendering him speechless, and making him beg to touch me. Instead, if this continues, I'll be the one dropping to my knees, begging him to have his way with me. And once I'm there, I'll wrap my glossy lips around the thick, growing cock that's making me whimper with need.

His voice hums in my ear, so gravelly, almost as if he's in pain. "Fuck Nyx, I know you can feel it too." Suddenly my dream, the one where he's the infamous star, comes to the forefront of my mind.

"The way your body reacts to my touch." Leaning forward, he lowers his mouth to my neck, blowing hot air softly against me. "It's like I was meant to touch you." His wet tongue trails its way across my pulse point and down to the hollowed dip of my throat, my body nearly trembling in his hold. "To lick you."

"Yes," I groan, as long, skillful fingers dip under the hem of my dress, grabbing my ass, and kneading my skin in his hands until I'm a whimpering mess. I press against his erection, grinding up and down against the zipper of his jeans. It feels so good I can feel my release building up. My nipples are pebbled, rubbing against the smooth, cool satin, and hardening as they press into his chest.

"To tease you."

It takes me a moment to register it all, but once I do, I'm hysterical. It can't be. How is it possible that everything he's just whispered to me is exactly what I imagined he said in my

dream? It's impossible. I must be hearing things, making it all up in my mind.

The loud vibrations of my phone in my clutch take us out of our daydreams and bring us back to the land of the living.

“Shit, get off of me!” I shout, pushing him away and nearly falling back in the process. But Maverick's quicker than me and balances himself while simultaneously reaching out for me and keeping me steady.

Both his arms are wrapped around my waist, his face at level with mine as he hovers over me. I can practically taste him, “Whoa there, no need to get all crazy on me. I wasn't doing anything you didn't want me to. Nothing you weren't letting me do.”

I struggle to get away. “You wish this is what I wanted.”

A sexy as fuck laugh leaves him, making me wonder when the hell did laughter become sexy?

“Then why weren't you pushing me off you? Why did you let me put my hands all over you? Why were you rubbing yourself on my cock if you don't want it?”

Those are all excellent questions and ones I don't have the answers to, nor do I plan on finding them, so I ignore him, continuing to wrestle out of his grip. Though it's useless. He's like a metal chain wrapped tightly around me and I can't escape.

“Let me go Maverick. I need to leave.”

He laughs wholeheartedly. “The only place you're going is back upstairs and into your room. It's a school night, Nyx. Mommy and daddy wouldn't approve of you going out on a school night.”

“Bite me asshole. You can't tell me what I can and can't do.”

Maverick releases me, but he doesn't step back. He steps forward until my back hits the edge of the staircase railing. “Oh, but I can, sweetheart. Go upstairs and lock your door. It's for your own safety.”

IT'S TWO AM, AND I'M IN MY BEDROOM ALONE AND UNABLE TO sleep, my mind teetering on the edge of madness with thoughts about what just happened.

How-fucking-dare he?

Maverick Carter is a manipulative, egomaniac, and sociopath who thinks only of himself. The audacity of the gorgeous bastard, thinking he can waltz into my life with his devil-may-care attitude, and control it.

As if.

It's a school night Nyx. Mommy and daddy wouldn't approve of you going out on a school night.

The nerve of the asshole to think he could prohibit me from going out, especially after he had his hands all over me. The moment I came into my room, I released the breath I was holding in, screaming, and throwing things to relieve the pent-up tension I was feeling. I didn't relieve myself. My arousal was still as present as it was downstairs, aching for me to slip my hand under my thong and make myself come to the image of the smug bastard fresh in my mind.

Yes, it's true I didn't end up going out, but that was simply because I wasn't in the mood anymore after our little encounter. To make matters worse, Maverick takes off not ten minutes later. *The shithead!*

I had no other choice than to sit in my room, still dressed in the sexy gold dress I bought, sulking, and cursing his name as I devoured a bowl, or two, of cookies and cream ice cream, the real shit not that fake no-calorie bullshit they sell claiming to be made of unicorn milk.

I texted Dee and told her I was staying home, and I'd explain later, but I don't plan on explaining and she probably won't ask. I'm sure she and Olly assumed it had something to do with my stepbrother, given the stupid plan we came up with to taunt him with the dress I'm currently still wearing. It didn't

work as planned. They offered to come over, but I told them I was going to call it a night.

I didn't and playing on my laptop has been an episode or five of *The Vampire Diaries* - my go-to emotional support shows when I need a good cry and want to blame it on yet another one of Mystic Falls resident's untimely deaths.

The one I'm currently watching, the infamous break up scene where Damon begs Elena to open her eyes and see just how toxic their relationship really is. Elena breaks down and yells at him, admitting he's to blame for literally everything negative that's ever happened to her, yet she can't help loving him.

Ladies and gentlemen, *The Bad Boy Effect*.

Dark, and mysterious with an inkling for murder and causing trouble, Damon Salvatore should be the last person/vampire ill-fated Elena should have ever fallen for, but the darkness is what drew them together. The thrill of being bad and giving into that which others tell you to steer clear of. Their love's a fucking tragedy, yet she can't turn her back on it, no matter the consequences.

I scoop another mouthful of the frozen, creamy concoction into my mouth, pondering my future.

Is this what comes next? Am I cursed to live a life of tragedy, making poor decision after poor decision because of the devastating shit that's befallen me? Will this scandal define me?

Because that's what it feels like. Since the moment I discovered my father's affair, which coincides with the day my mother tried to kill herself, nothing but tragedy has followed me.

I go over my list of misfortunes.

1) MY PERFECT BOYFRIEND, WHO I NOW REALIZE I FELT NOTHING FOR, BROKE UP WITH ME.

2) THOSE I THOUGHT WERE MY "FRIENDS" TURNED THEIR BACKS ON ME.

3)THE EVIL WHORE WHO RUINED MY LIFE NOT ONLY MARRIED MY FATHER BUT BROUGHT HER SPAWN TO LIVE WITH US.

4)AND NOW HE'S HERE, THE BANE OF MY EXISTENCE, WREAKING HAVOC IN MY WORLD.

I slam the screen of my laptop shut, falling back onto my pillow, and yelling into the air as I throw my now empty bowl of ice cream across the room. It crashes loudly against the wall, just as a loud howl comes from the same direction. I sit up, terrified of who or what is inside my bedroom.

To my unsuspecting surprise, I find Maverick standing in my doorway, wide eyed and fear stricken, as he stares between me and the broken porcelain on the floor.

Shit, I almost hit him. "Fuck, I missed," I mutter out loud, pretending it was no accident.

Okay, I obviously didn't know he was standing there, but hell perfect timing. Maybe the universe hasn't completely forgotten about little old me.

"You better fucking tell me you had no clue I was standing right here when you threw that," he growls as he steps into my room, without permission of course, walking toward me with the permanent scowl etched on his face that both terrifies me and enthralls me.

"Now why would I lie, Maverick?" I tease coyly, once again falling back onto my pillow, ignoring the fact he's in my room. I stare up at my ceiling, completely disregarding he's getting closer to me by the second with no intention of stopping. My heartbeat quickens, my palms tremble in anticipation of what comes next. "You didn't lock your door, Nyx?"

"And why would I listen to you?" I close my eyes. If I can't see it, it can't hurt me. It's bullshit, but my high on ice cream mind doesn't know that. I guess I might have withheld the part about popping a Xany before devouring the bowl of refined sugar. Ice cream can only do so much, and I wasn't really in the mood for anything stronger.

“Closing your eyes won’t make me disappear,” he groans, his gravelly voice like music to my ears. It baffles me how he’s so in sync with what goes through my mind, like he’s inside it or somehow looking in.

Must be his super-villain power.

Or maybe I’m just that transparent.

I can feel his gaze burning me as he stares down at me, surely admiring the outfit I’m still wearing. I don’t budge, but I do, however, rub my thighs together, making the fabric of the dress ride up higher. “No, but it will at least stop me from puking everything I just ate at the sight of you.”

He chuckles as if unbelieving of what I’ve said, settling down on the bed at my feet. “Keep telling yourself you don’t want me, it’s cute.”

I sit up suddenly, irritated by his arrogance, my head slightly spinning from the sugar rush and the awareness of his nearness. “You know what hot shot? You need a goddamn reality check.” I lean forward, getting on all fours, and slowly crawl over to him. His eyes grow hungry as he watches me prowling toward him, poking at his rock-hard chest under his black shirt with my pointer finger. “You may be hot, in an, *I’d fuck him just to piss off daddy* kind of way, and have horny chicks throwing themselves at you daily, but you’re a total fucking dick. That in my book cancels out any looks, no matter how good.”

By this time, his smirk is wide, stretching ear to ear, and doing something very off-putting to my insides. “Is that so?” he asks, leaning closer and pushing against my finger. It’s ridiculous he now looks even sexier than before, his hair damp and slightly falling over his face on one side.

I want to retreat to my comfortable spot on the bed away from him. He’s close, too close. Alarms start ringing loudly in my ear, red flags waving like they’re surrendering before me. I can smell the sweet aroma of his breath, a mix of peppermint, bourbon, and smoke, rolled together with the sweetness of a watermelon flavored jolly rancher he swirls back and forth in his mouth.

It's hypnotizing. My eyes drop to his mouth, where the light pink candy teases me and taunts me with a good time. To be licked and sucked by his full lips and teased by the metal ball of the piercing on his tongue clinking against it. The guttural sound that leaves his lips haunts me, no matter how sure of myself I may have sounded, it's all just gone to shit. I lick my lips in response and another feral groan, this one almost frightening, leaves him.

"Is that also what you were thinking when you were watching me workout? Tell me, did you enjoy the picture I sent?"

I want to deny it, but the way his lips move with every syllable he speaks renders me speechless. "I..."

"Shh," he whispers, bringing a finger to my lips. "There's no point in denying it, but don't worry, there's plenty more where that one came from."

My eyes remain glued to his mouth and the candy swirling around on his tongue, clinking against pearly white teeth. Why couldn't they be yellow, stained, and rotting from years of smoking and drinking black coffee? Then there would be no way I could be tempted.

I want a taste, just a small taste to appease this hunger that's suddenly appeared inside of me, growing with every breath he takes. Maybe one taste is all I need to make this stupid obsession go away.

As if he's one hundred percent aware of my sudden need, his fingers trail my forearm, making their way up and over my shoulder, tracing the deep dip of my collarbone. I inhale sharply, my heart beating unsteadily as his fingers dip further, pulling the thin straps of my dress down, the top falling beneath my breasts.

They're out, perky pink nipples saluting their captain, eager and needy. Ready. I'm not very big, a B cup on a good day, despite my mother's plastic surgeon practically begging me to let him work on them, but they're nice and round, sitting high on my chest where an eighteen-year-olds tits are supposed to be.

Maverick bites his bottom lip in approval at the sign of me topless before him, and I practically moan as a cool breeze flows through my open balcony door. I'm still on all fours in front of him, but the carnal look in his eyes makes me fall back, my ass now resting on the backs of my bare feet.

"There, there Nyx, no need to be so eager. Daddy will show these girls some love." I cringe at the word *daddy*, not so much at the inappropriateness of it, but the way hearing it leave his mouth sends a pang of heat between my legs.

Lowering his mouth to my chest, he slowly eases my body backward until I'm lying flat on my bed beneath him. I bring my knees up instinctively, my dress hiking up my waist as I bend them at a ninety-degree angle, making room for him to settle between, and he does, an unspoken permission to do so written in my lustful gaze.

What the hell, Phoenix? You're making this too easy.

He plays with the candy, bringing it between his teeth before lowering his mouth to my erect nipple. Slowly he swirls the wet candy around one peak, tracing circles around my areola, over my collarbone, and down the dip of my barely-there cleavage, leaving a slimy, sticky residue behind.

He continues moving onto the other and back again as my panting gets louder, my body writhing in agony beneath him, begging him to touch me, to lick me, to suck and take what he obviously wants. But he doesn't. He just simply keeps tracing my nipples with the sweet candy.

"This is so unhygienic," I groan, chuckling to myself. He doesn't speak, all he does is completely envelop my body with his, bringing hip lips and the candy to my mouth. He raises a brow and I open my mouth in response, somehow understanding his nonverbal request. Soft, demanding lips crash down onto mine, eagerly kissing and biting, consuming me whole. Mav tastes just like I imagined, only better, sweet, and spicy, slightly bitter, yet delectably delicious. The candy floats back and forth between our mouths, becoming smaller and smaller as our kiss continues.

Suddenly, he pulls away, just as I hear the front door alarm sound, “Front door open.” My father’s voice and Daphne’s laughter are heard downstairs, and my body instantly freezes as I notice my bedroom door is wide open.

“Get out,” I whisper-yell, proceeding to push Maverick off me and toward the open door.

“What is it, sis? Afraid mommy and daddy are going to walk in and find out I’m having a bit of fun playing with my new little sister,” he mocks, only I find none of this funny. “I may have taken my babysitting duties too far.”

I stand abruptly. “Shut up, Maverick, and fuck you.”

“Yeah, you were about to Nyx,” he mutters, not able to contain his smile.

Shaking my head, I deny what is blatantly obvious and chalk it up to a horrible lapse in judgment. “As if. Fuck you for taking advantage of me in my intoxicated state.”

“Intoxicated? What the fuck are you talking about?” he demands, all humor suddenly gone from his face.

Fear consumes me at the wild look in his eyes, suddenly more terrified than aroused. “I took a Xany, which obviously had a terrible reaction with the pounds of sugar in the pint of ice cream I devoured. It’s the only explanation for my psychotic behavior.”

He stands to join me, shaking his head as he walks toward me, pressing me into the wall beside my bed. A strong hand grips my shoulder keeping me in place as he pushes my thighs apart with one of his, settling between me. “Whatever, I know if I were to stick my fingers into that itty-bitty thong you’re wearing right now, I’d be coated in your nectar.”

I swallow down hard trying not to sound like a needy whore when I reply. “Natural reaction, it was simply my body excreting cervical fluid because of the arousal. Would have happened if you were anyone else.”

Mav closes his eyes and slowly shakes his head in disapproval. Long dark and natural curled lashes beautifully outline his gorgeous deep blue eyes as he opens them and

looks hauntingly into mine. “Okay, don’t you ever call it cervical fluid again. The next time your body excretes anything, it’ll be your come all over my face.”

Fear ripples through me once more, though this time because if I don’t push him away, that will be exactly what happens next. “Not happening. I only get a limited number of lapses in judgment, and I’ve already passed my quota with you. Now get out!”

Without another remark, Mav stalks out of my room, and I eagerly slam my door closed behind him, turning the lock before he sneaks back in and between my legs again. “What the fuck was I thinking?” I curse aloud, slamming my head back into the door.

Rushing over to my bathroom, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My dress remains bunched around my waist, the shiny, sticky trail of the candy reflecting in the light overhead. That was gross, yet so incredibly hot.

How does he keep getting me to behave like a madwoman?

Turning my shower on, I quickly undress and stand under the running water of my shower head, washing away any trace of Maverick and what almost happened.

That’s when I notice it, swirling around against my tongue, the sweet taste of watermelon. I smile unwillingly, turning toward the mirror and seeing the pink candy in between my teeth.

CHAPTER
TEN

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MAVERICK

Well, that was fun. Until I walked out with the biggest hard on and the worst case of motherfucking blue balls. Did I plan to walk into her bedroom and do what I just did? Planned it, yes. Think it'd happen, well no.

I knew I'd be able to crack Phoenix at some point. Catching her sneaking into my Insta Live earlier today was all the proof I needed. She was curious, tempted, and all this back and forth we've been having was bound to break her sooner rather than later. But I must give her some credit for holding out as long as she did. For fighting our attraction as hard as she has.

However, what I never expected was how fucking perfect it would be to taste her, even if it were only for a second. I assumed she'd be incredible but didn't expect perfection. Since the first time I almost stole an innocent kiss from her luscious lips, I've been aching to have her, yet now that I've had a small taste, it's only made me crave her more, and craving her was never part of the plan.

The only problem, I couldn't help myself. She looked good enough to eat in the gold silky dress she was wearing on her way out of the house. If you could even call it a dress. It was more like a small piece of fabric wrapped around her luscious curves, barely covering the parts that needed to be covered, but exposing way more than it hid. Like hell I was going to let her leave looking like that and risk some other fucker devouring what's mine.

I had to stop her, and I did, sending her to her room then proceeding to leave. Again, I didn't think she'd listen, but she did, though it may have been more out of anger than obedience. On the other hand, I couldn't stand being in the same house with her looking like that after what had just happened between us and doing nothing about it. I had to control my urge to take her right there and then in the middle of the foyer, or slam her back against the wall, or better yet

bend her over the railing of the staircase, hitch her dress up and over her perky ass, and thrust myself so deep into her, you'd hear her screams along the shore.

But I sure as fuck couldn't do any of that, and I wasn't about to rub one off when I could just leave and get the real thing elsewhere. Though I couldn't. Not without feeling sick to my stomach at the thought of someone else's lips on my cock when I only wanted hers.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

Sure, I was a little surprised when I saw her name pop up on my feed, alerting me she had joined my live video earlier today. I may have specifically set up an alert to track if she ever visited my profile or watched any of my stories, but it was just to keep tabs on her and ensure my plan was working. However, when her name appeared, I couldn't help the smile that tugged at my lips. Phoenix was getting curious, and brave, and it made my dick twitch just thinking about it.

Though as soon as she signed off, no doubt realizing what she'd done, I knew I couldn't just let this opportunity slip away from me. I needed to let her know I'd caught her.

That's when I texted her, sending her a photo of me straight out of the shower, my skin still dripping with water droplets, and a towel wrapped low around my waist. I knew I looked good, and it's not that I'm being cocky. I've worked hard to be in the shape I am. Hours spent weekly at the gym, watching what I eat and staying away from junk food, not to mention watching the amount of alcohol I consume.

Though she never responded. Not even a snide or smart-ass remark. Not even a *what the fuck are you doing?* Nothing. I thought I'd won that round. She was caught red-handed, and I swore I'd throw it in her face later, but that wasn't the case.

She was ready, and that confused the fuck out of me.

The sly twinkle in her eye when she watched me walk in through the front door told me it was her plan all along for me to catch her wearing that alluring outfit that wrapped perfectly around every inch of her. This little game must have been her

form of *payback* after the photo I'd sent, and I had to admit she one upped me. I couldn't keep my hands to myself. I couldn't hide the hunger I felt, the need to have her under me, to hear the sweet little sounds she makes when she comes.

Our moment was cut short when my mother and Austin showed up at the perfect time. If they hadn't, who knows how far Phoenix would have let our little game go. Cause I sure as hell know I wouldn't have stopped it. She was panting, practically coming from just the feel of the candy rubbing against her nipples. Makes me wonder what she was watching on the laptop lying in front of her, and if she'd be willing to make our own. Or if she had been thinking about it just as much as I had.

I wasn't prepared to take what I needed tonight. After our argument earlier, I knew she'd be pissed, so I left, giving her some time to cool off, not to mention show her I am, in fact, the one calling the shots around here. I drove around for a bit, stopping at the liquor store in town for a pack of cigs and a forty. It was that or going out to the club I'm sure she was headed to and finding a chick who'd take care of what I needed done. Though the thought of it being anyone but Phoenix was insulting. I had to come back to her.

It wasn't until after we were nearly caught by Austin and my mother, that I once again left needing to be as far away from her, and what I almost let happen, as possible. I drove out to the Palisades, to the house of an old friend I needed to pay a visit to. It had been weeks since the last time we spoke, and I required an update on what I'd hired him to do. The clock was ticking, because the more time I spent at the Bancroft Mansion, the harder my execution of this plan was going to get.

Pulling into the long, winding road toward Amalfi Drive, I arrive at a large, brown brick Spanish style villa owned by none other than Brent Radcliff, an infamous private investigator I hired to dig up any and everything about Austin Bancroft. The good, the bad, the filthy. I wanted it all. I knew the head of the Bancroft household was dirty. Hell, he'd cheated on his wife of twenty years, for at least eight of those

years. Not to mention I doubt he stayed faithful to my mother, his mistress, the whole time, nor that she was his first.

As the CEO of Bancroft Industries, an architectural firm specializing in the construction of luxury prime real estate around the Southern California coastline, Bancroft was easily a multi-billionaire. And everyone knew with more money came more power, but also more secrets. These secrets would be my insurance.

Thanks to my father, who I rarely spoke to and saw even less, I had three years to go until I could see a cent of my trust. The little money I had as an allowance was nothing compared to what I needed to be on my own, and there was no way I was living with Bancroft for three years. I needed to find a way to get my money and go. That's where Brent came in. He would get me all I needed to blackmail Austin, and get the hell out of this town, and away from Phoenix, before I did something I would regret.

Parking the Aston in the circular pebbled driveway, I walk up to the front door, and am met by Brent's butler, Armen, a look-a-like Alfred to Brent's Bruce Wayne. "Mr. Carter, welcome. It's late. We weren't expecting you until tomorrow."

He's right, it's well after three a.m. but I couldn't wait until tomorrow. Besides, Brent's like a vampire up at all odd hours. It's all part of the job. "Cut the bullshit Armen. I know Brent doesn't sleep. I'm here now and it's urgent. So quit stalling and let me in."

The old man's nose wrinkles in annoyance, but he does as he's told. He knows his place, but better yet, he knows who my father is, which means I'm dangerous if ignored. Mathieu Carter is a ruthless entrepreneur, and a cutthroat billionaire you don't want to have as an enemy. As owner and acting CEO of Car-Tec, a technological conglomerate specializing in everything from electronics, impenetrable security systems, and military grade equipment, my father is a powerful magnate.

That's my legacy, and Brent Radcliff knows it.

Armen leads me into the expansive mansion which is nothing compared to what you see on the outside. Terracotta colored blank walls, sparse wicker furniture, and with absolutely no signs of anyone living in it, you'd think this house was just put on the market. Brent lives alone of course, and you can tell. The only place in the entire house that is occupied, is the twelve-car garage in the basement, housing the luxury automobiles he collects.

Armen clears his throat loudly as we step into Brent's study. "Mr. Radcliff, pardon the interruption."

"I told you I'd call you if I found anything, Maverick," Brent calls out from the throne-like burgundy chair behind his deep mahogany wood desk. Everything in this room looks exactly opposite of the entire house. Dark, gothic, and fit for a man who lives a secret life after hours.

To the rest of the world, Brent Radcliff is a business tycoon and one of the head investors in Car-Tec, but he's really my father's clean up guy. His personal PI and, if I'm being honest, my father wouldn't be who he is today without Brent digging up dirt and scandalous affairs on all his business rivals.

"Yeah, well, it's been two weeks and nothing, Brent. I told you over the phone this was urgent. I don't have time to be sitting around waiting for your call."

The fucker laughs, "What's changed? Last we spoke, you seemed to have all the time in the world to bring Bancroft to his knees." That was the case, but the problem now is I need to do it before his daughter brings me to mine. Of course, I don't give that insignificant piece of information to him.

"It doesn't matter. The point is, I need you to come up with something of value to me. I'm tired of the fucking run around. You don't sleep, you work all hours of the day, I don't believe Austin is meticulous enough to keep everything hidden so well."

"You're right, I work at all hours of the day. Secrets never sleep, and those who commit them, don't either. It's when the

sun goes down, and the lights come off, that the players come out to play.”

“Quit it with the bullshit Brent, do you have anything of use to me, or should I take my business elsewhere. Let me remind you, that wouldn’t be good for business.”

His smile doesn’t fade, instead it grows wider, almost proud that I’ve threatened to fire him for not delivering. “You’re in luck, my dear boy. I was going to call you in just a few hours, but since you drove all the way out here to see me, I guess there’s no time like the present.”

I walk over to the velvet chair sitting across from his desk. “This better be worth the money I’m paying you, Brent,” I mutter, leaning over his desk and meeting his gaze.

Once again, he laughs, this time louder than before. “You mean the money you’re going to owe me after you drain the bastard of everything he has,” he says, reminding me I haven’t formally given him any form of payment, you know locked trust fund and all.

I don’t bother giving him a response, not that he’s expecting one from me. Instead, I sit back on the plush chair, cross my leg over my knee, and silently await his news, my glare letting him know I’m not in the mood for another one of his little metaphors.

Brent stands from his chair and walks over to the portrait of himself hanging on the wall behind him. It’s huge and gaudy, and only someone as pretentious as Brent would have one hanging in his own house. I wonder if Austin has one somewhere in his study. After all, I haven’t been inside, and he seems just as arrogant as Brent, so I’m sure he does. Maybe in his bedroom, but the thought makes me shudder in disgust.

Brent runs his fingers through his silver dyed hair. “There are few things in life us men pride ourselves on,” he says, removing the large frame, and revealing a hidden safe. “Our money, power, cars, women. Some of those hold more importance than others.” He continues speaking as he unlocks the safe, punching in a four-digit code followed by a retinal scan, and retrieves a large yellow envelope from inside.

“Evolution prevails, yet men fail to learn to prioritize, putting money and power above all else, including family. Some hide it well enough, while others...”

I interrupt his theatrics before he can continue, “Cut the bullshit Brent, spill it.”

Brent throws the envelope on the desk before me, and I immediately reach for it, though I don’t open it right away. “It’s a goldmine Maverick,” he says, a wide smirk tugging at the edge of his lips. The look in his eyes tells me why he does what he does. Brent uncovers the deepest darkest secrets of the wealthiest people in all of Malibu Cove and its neighboring affluent neighborhoods. He unleashes career ending scandals, and reputation tarnishing affairs with the potential to take down entire dynasties. The worst part, he enjoys every second of it. Like a drug he’s become addicted to, the failures of others are his greatest successes.

“What is this?” I ask, undoing the small metal clasp and flipping open the flap.

“Austin Bancroft did the one thing men in his position do everything in their power to prevent. Worse than any affair, worse than his divorce, worse than even the threat of bankruptcy.” He pauses but I know it’s just for effect. “Austin Bancroft had a love child.”

My eyes fly to his and then back down to the contents of the envelope. “A child?” I ask, reaching into the envelope and retrieving a packet of photographs and a birth certificate among other things.

Brent nods, coming around the desk, and leaning back against it right in front of me. Deep indigo eyes watch me meticulously. “Younger than the twins he had with his ex-wife, but not by much. A year, maybe two. A short-lived affair that was almost impossible to track down, but I’m that good.”

Flipping through the photos, I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face. Brent was right, this is gold. A man like Austin Bancroft would die if this secret came out, but worse now that my mother is in the picture, she’d threaten to leave him, that I’m almost certain of. I can’t believe she’d

think a man like him who wasn't ever faithful to his wife, could be faithful to her. If he has a child with another woman, who's saying this bastard child is the only one out there.

“Does he know?”

Brent tugs on the birth certificate in my hand. “His name is signed on the dotted line under the name of the father, but the child doesn't bear his last name. Better than that however, he takes care of all their monetary needs. Never kept a relationship with the mother, but either through blackmail or by law, all under wraps of course, Austin pays for both their livelihood.”

“And no one else knows?” I stare at the photo in my hand and suddenly realize the resemblance to Phoenix and Brooklyn is uncanny.

Brent shakes his head and shrugs his shoulders. “I don't even think the child knows. There is no trace of an actual relationship, just a money trail.”

The smirk that spreads along my face proves how pleased and impressed he's left me. “Thank you, Brent, you've outdone yourself.”

“And I'm glad you never once doubted me,” he mocks sarcastically. I roll my eyes, ignoring his jab.

“We'll be in touch.” I stand ready to walk away when Brent moves to interrupt me. “Don't worry the money will be in your account the moment he signs the check.”

THE ENTIRE DRIVE BACK TO THE BANCROFT'S MANSION, OF course I took the scenic route down the Pacific Coast Highway needing to clear my head and gather my thoughts, I couldn't stop thinking about the bomb Brent had just dropped on me. A ticking time bomb capable of annihilating everything Austin Bancroft had built with his dirty hands and deceitful schemes. I knew he was a despicable human being, that much was obvious in the fact he'd had a lengthy affair with an equally

married woman, and then convinced his mistress to ship her son off to boarding school across the country to cover up his infidelity.

My mom was a fucking idiot if she thought Austin cared even an ounce about her, given I'm sure he fucked his wife and countless others the entirety of their relationship. But now I had even more proof he was a disgusting son of a bitch.

An illegitimate child, a bastard not only while he was married to another woman, but something he kept hidden from my mother and the rest of the world. The best part of all of this, I knew exactly how to get to this kid.

Brent went above and beyond this time, not only getting me the child's birth certificate, signed by Austin himself, along with a money trail of child support he paid since day one, but also gathered photos, addresses, and everything else I needed to find this person and enact part one of my plan.

In the back of my mind, way back past all logic and reasoning, there is a part of me that feels a small amount of guilt for not only outing this child in front of everyone but imagining how this revelation will affect the Bancroft children, how it will affect Phoenix. Although she hates her father probably as much as I do, this will be yet another blow to her pristine reputation, and I'm not entirely sure she can handle it. Not to mention I may feel partially responsible for her downfall, since in recent days, she's been all I can think about.

However, that may be the exact reason I need to see this through. I can't let any girl, no matter how beautiful, sexy, and enticing she may be, ruin everything I've worked so hard to accomplish.

It was already past dawn when I arrived back at the house - the sun rising to its peak in the clear blue sky, not a single cloud visible, and the ocean's waves sat silent in a blanket of calming peace. A single drop of sweat trickled down my forehead as I walked in through the foyer, not because it was already eighty degrees out, but because I couldn't help being a tad bit nervous about what I was about to do.

I couldn't sit on this a minute longer, I needed to let Austin know I had something on him I wouldn't be keeping to myself unless he complied with my every demand.

When I pulled into the driveway, I noticed Brooklyn pulling out, surely on his way to football practice, but both Austin and Phoenix's cars remained where they were last night. He was home, as was she, but given how early it still was, she was most likely asleep.

Trying not to be obvious and instead lurking around in hopes Austin himself would be the one to summon me, I head over toward the living room only used to entertain his guest and pour myself a glass of his prized bottle of scotch from behind the bar. I'm not opposed to drinking so early in the morning, some days call for it, but what I intend is for Austin to see me, given the French doors of his study face the bar at the end of the room. I throw back the two fingers of single malt scotch in one swift gulp, proceeding to pour myself one more right when the doors to his office open.

"A little early for scotch isn't it, son?" he mutters, as he struts over to where I stand, grabbing the bottle out of my hand before I can pour myself a second serving.

Austin's dressed in his usual laid back business attire, khaki dress pants and a short sleeve linen polo in some god-awful shade of pale orangey pink. His blond hair is impeccably styled and gelled to one side, not a single hair out of place, but it's the crow's feet around his outer eyes and the frown lines along his forehead and around his mouth, which shine the truth about his almost fifty years of age, despite the hideously bronzed tan he got back in Miami Beach, where they traveled for business after their honeymoon in Paris.

"Early yes, but certainly not uncalled for," I stammer curtly, setting the glass down, and turning to walk away. I'm still dressed in last night's clothes - clothes I know he saw me wearing when I walked out last night as they'd just arrived.

"Wait," he calls out, and I can't help the upward twitch of my lips forming a faint smile at how incredibly easy this is

going to be. I stop in my tracks, turning my head back to face him.

“Yes?” I mutter questioningly.

“Come into my office, there is something I wanted to speak with you about.” He doesn’t wait for my response, instead turning and heading back into his study assuming I’ll follow suit. I do but for an entirely different reason. This is exactly what I was hoping would happen. “Have a seat,” he says as he rounds his desk and sits on the brown leather chair behind his wooden oak desk.

The space, which I’d never stepped foot in before, differs greatly from the rest of the house. The walls are an off-white almost cream color, bare of any decor other than frames of the men of the Bancroft Dynasty from previous generations, the furniture a darker more natural wood than the rest of the house, not to mention it reeks of cigars and single malt scotch, among other things. Kind of like walking into a room full of wealthy English aristocrats during the 1920s.

I obey, sitting on one of the two matching leather armchairs opposite of him, leaning back and pulling a cigarette out of my pocket. “You don’t mind, do you?” I ask, and the distaste that crosses his face proves he does but won’t say a damn thing.

“Of course not,” he responds, hiding his true feelings on the matter. Instead, he leans back, arms folded across his chest and watches me light the cigarette and blow a cloud of smoke up into the air toward the ceiling. “Maverick,” he starts, unsure of how to continue whatever it is he’s planning on telling me. “I know we haven’t started off on the best of terms.”

“You mean because you fucked my mom and ruined my parents’ marriage?” I make sure to leave out the part about him being involved in shipping me out of my house and off to boarding school at the age of ten. I’m certain he has no idea, but I know he’s responsible for that, and I’m planning to keep it that way until I find it necessary to come to light.

The shock written all over his face is all the evidence I need to show he was not expecting that response from me. Sad

to say all his hard work of sending me to a reform school was wasted. If anything, it only taught me the discipline I need to ensure my revenge scheme goes down without a hitch.

“Your mother and I...”

“Cut the bullshit Austin, may I call you Austin?” I interrupt him, but don’t wait for him to respond. “I don’t care what you and Daphne decide to do with the rest of your lives. Frankly, I stopped caring about what happened to my family long before you entered the picture. So do us both a favor and stop pretending to care one bit about this conversation.”

“Look son,” he says, standing abruptly and slamming his hands down on the desk before him. He must realize he let his anger and frustration show, quickly reeling it in, lowering his shoulders, and leaning forward, glaring at me with an impassive expression.

I stand to meet his daunting stare with one of my own. I’m much taller than him, and given his long and lean physique, much stronger too. I may only be eighteen, but this man knows I’ll tear his pretty little face in two if provoked. However, he tries to keep his composure.

“Don’t call me son, Austin. You already have one of those, and I’m not interested in having another daddy. One absent father is enough.”

“You’re right, an absent father who you may have not noticed, left you in my care. That means you are in my house, you follow my rules, or you’re out.” He rounds his desk once more and comes to lean on the desk right in front of me. “You may not think I’m capable of that, but you are no longer a minor, therefore no longer your mother’s responsibility. If I’ve allowed you to move into my house with my children, it’s because she asked it of me. Don’t confuse your being here with anything more than a pity favor to her. Trust me the moment I say you’re out, she won’t hesitate to oblige.”

A heavy laugh leaves me at the absurdity of him thinking he’s calling the shots around here. That’s my fault, the poor fool has no clue what’s in store, and suddenly I’m not in a hurry to enlighten him.

Though maybe it will be more rewarding to hit him when he least expects it. I'll let him continue to think he has any say in what happens around here, and when the time comes, I will burn down everything he's built and claim it as my own.

Taking a step forward and invading his space, I press a finger into his chest, watching him slightly cower down at my advance. It's a subtle movement but I recognize the motion. "You must be confusing me with someone who gives a shit what you think. Don't fool yourself old man, you may think you're in charge here, but you have no fucking clue what I know."

He huffs, puffing out his chest, smoke practically coming out of his nostrils at how angry he is. "What the hell does that mean?"

Shaking my head and laughing. I relax my shoulders and take a step back. "Nothing you need to worry yourself with right now. You'll know when I want you to know. For now, I'd walk around looking over my shoulder Bancroft. You're a man with many secrets, one who should always sleep with one eye open. You never know when they'll come to light."

I can see the unease wash over him, hundreds of things going through his mind all at the same time. I know the possibilities of what it is I'm referring to are endless. A man like him has so much to hide, and so much at risk. Austin masks his undying fear with a false sense of confidence that is so flimsy, it doesn't withstand the weight of my glower. "Are you threatening me, boy?"

I raise my hands in surrender, "Just making you aware of the dangers a man of your power status risks. Don't push me Bancroft, you won't like it when I finally push back." The threat slips out of my lips so easily, like second nature. I guess I'm more like my father than I had expected to be. This is exactly what he does to any rival or enemy who crosses his path. If he gave me the time of day, I know he'd be proud.

"You're making a terrible mistake creating an enemy out of me Maverick. I could make your stay here very easy, or I can make it like nothing you've ever experienced."

This is turning out to be more amusing than planned, watching Bancroft appear confident of himself, yet simultaneously his insecurities wreak havoc in his mind. He's terrified but isn't willing to show his cards. Well, neither am I.

“Do what you need to Austin, I'll be doing the same. Do tell Phoenix I'll see her at school, I wouldn't want to wake her myself. I have an inkling she had a pretty long night.” I add a wink for good measure in case he didn't catch the sarcasm dripping from my lips. But his seething glare tells me he knows exactly what I was going for with that comment.

Austin steps forward, his chest now pressed against mine, “Stay the hell away from my daughter Carter. Daphne's son or not, I won't hesitate if you so much as lay a finger on her.”

I pat the fucker on his shoulder, not once giving my true feelings away. “Pleasant talk, Austin. I look forward to more of these bonding sessions in the future.”

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CHAPTER
ELEVEN

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PHOENIX

Another week has come and gone and I'm still as anxious and miserable as ever. I've avoided Maverick every chance I've gotten since that night in my bedroom I almost committed the deadliest of sins. No not just sex, but sex with Maverick Carter. That's like having sex with Satan himself. Blazing hot, dangerously passionate, surely incomparable, and sinfully delicious, sex that would no doubt do more harm than good. Even if it might possibly be the best sex I'd ever have, I can't let myself go there for so many reasons.

Which is why I have a plan. It's called the *Keep Maverick's Dick out of Phoenix's Vagina Plan*.

Oliver came up with the name of course, even though he doesn't know the extent of how close I came to letting said dick in my vagina, yet so far, it's worked perfectly. The main reason being my extensive list of after school extracurriculars, particularly Student Government. It was quite a surprise when I totally didn't hate it and have looked forward to our weekly meetings every Tuesday and Thursday. Mainly we sit around Mrs. Phillip's classroom, our AP English teacher who also oversees the club, and discuss all the different fundraising and charity events MC High hosts throughout the year, particularly the End of Summer Fair down at the Malibu Cove Pier. The entire pier shuts down for only MC High's finest and their guests, raising money for the year's dances and senior activities. This year's theme has been chosen and it's pretty darn epic.

"*Summer Lovin*, really Cole?" Darcy Bennett, a girl I've kind of formed a unique after school friendship with, groans as Cole writes this year's theme on the white board hanging at the front of the class.

It was a surprise to me too the first day I walked in and saw Cole Sheppard sitting at the front of the room, but he is MC High's golden boy, so it makes sense he'd be involved in

something so crucial. Maybe it's also because he would rather hide out here than back at his house for whatever reason. We've never spoken about running into each other at Cliffside, but now and then, I catch him watching me expectantly, like he wants me to ask him why he was there. I won't. When he's ready, he'll come to me.

Cole and I aren't the best of friends, but we run in the same circle and have known each other pretty much our whole lives. He's more Brooklyn's friend, but my brother's been acting weirder than me these past few months so I wouldn't be surprised if they hardly talk anymore.

"Yes, my dear Darcy," Cole chimes, "*Summer lovin' had me a blast. Summer lovin' happened so fast. I met a girl...*" he continues, breaking out in song.

I laugh along with the other twelve students that make up the group, while Darcy blushes as Cole continues singing to her, being more introverted than any of us. In the past, I hadn't spoken much with Darcy, despite having her in a few of my classes all throughout middle school and high school, but that may be because until last week, I had no idea who she really was.

Darcy has been living in Malibu Cove for almost ten years now, but the girl who's currently sitting across from me with gorgeous, chocolate brown hair, striking blue-gray eyes, and a face that can only be described as angelic, isn't anything like the sweet little Darcy I remember with glasses, braces, and patches of freckles along the bridge of her nose.

Talk about a glow up. Not that she wasn't beautiful before, I'm sure she was, but now Darcy is turning heads left and right, even in the totally unflattering clothes she wears. I mean just look at the way Cole is flirting away with her, not to mention the poor girl is clueless which makes it all that more adorable.

Darcy tucks a strand of her dark hair behind her ear as she rolls her eyes. "I know what it means Cole, we've all watched the movie *Grease*, I just don't get how that can be a theme?"

Cole being the Don Juan that he is, places a hand on her shoulder adoringly. “Sweetheart, Darcy Baby, do you or do you not remember the iconic end scene, where they are at the carnival...”

“Yes Cole, I got it real original,” Darcy mutters, nervously shrugging away from him.

Cole moves back toward the front of the room, scribbling a drawing of the pier on the whiteboard. “Well, that is what our summer fair is going to be like. Think Pacific Park only way better.” He turns back to face everyone, all gazes except Darcy’s, attentively focused on the gorgeous surfer boy fashionable dressed in a pastel green and pink linen polo, decorated with small palm trees and the top three buttons undone, and a pair of distressed jean shorts. “And yes, before any of you object, costumes are a necessity. Mandatory.”

I can’t help the laugh that escapes me watching him so excited about something. The smile on his face warms my heart. I hadn’t seen Cole like this since before this summer. “Wow Cole, I’ve never seen you so enthusiastic about anything else other than booze, partying, and air-headed babes who throw themselves at you and spread their legs.”

He glares at me but quickly shakes it off. “That is the nicest compliment anyone has ever given me Phoenix Baby,” he murmurs, placing a hand over his chest where his heart is. Something about Cole seems different and although it’s almost foreign to see him this way when alcohol isn’t involved, I’m rather enjoying it. And if the laughs around the room are any sign, so is everyone else.

“It wasn’t...” I pause seeing as this isn’t going anywhere and look down at my phone on the desk in front of me. Shit, it’s nearly five o’clock in the evening meaning we’ve been sitting here for almost three hours. It’s funny it didn’t seem that long at all. “Okay fine, Summer Lovin,” I answer mockingly, gathering my belongings, and tapping Darcy on the arm, silently telling her to join me.

Cole walks over to me, brushing my hair away from my face and cupping my chin, tilting it up to meet his gaze. “Yes,

my dear Phoenix, and you are the perfect Sandy.”

I snort, embarrassingly loud. “Yeah, not going to happen Cole. Darcy, let’s get out of here before this idiot blesses us with anymore of his singing and psychotic ideas.”

“Is that what that was?” Darcy mocks, and I realize I’m really starting to like this girl.

Cole shouts after us, but neither one of us turns to humor him. “Whatever P, but mark my words, you will be my Sandy!”

“I NEVER THOUGHT I’D BE SITTING IN PHOENIX BANCROFT’S backyard. If you can even call this a backyard.” Darcy follows closely behind me as I lead her over to the fire pit surrounded by plush outdoor couches and loungers. The fire’s already burning, making me wonder if anyone else is home, but I didn’t see any other cars in the driveway.

After the meeting, Darcy and I headed back to my house, although she was adamant I didn’t have to give her a ride, and even more insistent I take her home, here we are, sitting out on the deck, putting together all the details to make this End of Summer Fair the best Malibu Cove has ever seen.

I have to admit a part of me was being selfish in not letting her go home, not wanting Maverick, nor Brooklyn, and especially not my father to bother me when they came home. Dad’s supposed family dinners have been nonexistent since he and Daphne have been gone, but they flew back from Florida last week, and although I’ve dodged him so far, I’m afraid what that means moving forward. As for Maverick, who I’m also still avoiding, his Aston isn’t in the driveway, neither is my brother’s Jeep.

However, another part of me, a piece I didn’t think existed, is really enjoying being part of the club. When I was little, I absolutely loved the lavish and extravagant parties my mom used to host for her country club and high society friends. Watching the party planners work, going back and forth

between the decorators and caterers, the florists who'd create these elusive centerpieces and walls of flowers, and even the staff that would work the events pristinely dressed and impeccably mannered, it all felt magical once pieced together. I used to picture myself growing up and hosting my own exuberant parties, only they'd be bigger, better, and I'd have a say in all of it.

This is part of that dying dream. I may no longer host those same societal events I dreamed of as a kid, but I can throw the biggest, baddest end of summer rager Malibu Cove has ever seen. It's more my scene, anyway.

"We're talking cotton candy and popcorn machines at every corner," I utter excitedly, Darcy watching me with a curious expression. It's like she's trying to figure out whether I'm being serious or not. It makes sense for someone like her, an introvert who's used to living in the shadows and dark corners being invisible, to wonder if "*the It girl*" is really trying to be her friend or not.

I give her a warm smile, and she obliges. "Ooh and snow cones. I love snow cones," she shouts excitedly, only blushing when she realizes how childish it sounded. I laugh, not at all bothered by her enthusiasm. I appreciate I'm not the only one. I add snow cone machines to the list I've started on my laptop in front of me, as I research carnival rides and games we can rent out for the occasion.

"Look at this," I tell her pointing at the various booths and games up on my screen. "We can have the different sports teams and clubs volunteer their time to work the booths and food carts, and since we're most likely going to set up the bigger rides along the parking lot nearby, we can ask any of the restaurants in town if they'd be willing to have a table or bring a food truck and park it along the edge of the lot before the dock."

Darcy's eyes light up with excitement. "You think they'd do that? I'd kill for some pizza from Giovanni's."

I meet her enthusiastic grin with one of my own, suddenly way more excited than I had expected to be. "We can always

charm our way down there and ask.” I give her a teasing wink. “Same with the sports teams and clubs. We can convince them all to volunteer, say four hours each, or alternate between themselves. We’re talking about a weekend open for twelve hours a day plus set up, I’m sure we’ll have enough.”

“We can do a kissing booth and have the football teamwork at that one.” I pause and look up at her when her voice suddenly breaks. “Not that I want to kiss anyone on the football team, I’m just saying they’d probably bring in the most money.” A bright red flush creeps over Darcy’s face and her eyes go wide when we hear a car pull into my driveway.

My heart beats loudly with anticipation, but soon enough I realize it’s only Brooklyn. “Don’t worry it’s just my brother. Unless he’s the guy on the football team you want to kiss?” I tease her and soon regret it when a look of utter shock flashes in her eyes.

“Eww no, I mean nothing wrong with the guy, sorry no offense, he’s your brother.”

“No offense taken. I agree, eww.”

She chuckles lightly, “He’s just not my type. He’s too, well blonde, not to mention cocky.” We both start laughing hysterically just as Brooklyn and his best friend Fitz, walk over to us.

The infamous Grant Fitzpatrick, son of NFL Hall of Famer Gerard “Giant” Fitzpatrick, quarterback, captain, and probably the hottest guy in all of Malibu Cove. Fitz, as everyone calls him, is one of those hard to come by unicorns that is equally matched in personality as he is in looks. Brooklyn and Fitz have been friends for as long as Dee and me, the four of us practically raised together, vacationing to the same places, spending nights at each other’s houses, holidays, and pretty much every other minute of every day.

“What’s so funny?” Brooklyn asks, his gaze quickly shifting toward Darcy when he realizes I’m not alone. Darcy notices too, suddenly her legs are crossed on the lounge chair and her gaze is focused on the notebook in her lap. In this exact position Darcy looks adorable, dark hair falling over her

face, hands tucked into the pockets of her cutoff shorts that fit way too loose, and her baggy, unflattering shirt hides the amazing body I'm sure she has underneath. It's funny to watch Brooklyn's eyes go wide with the realization that my house guest is hot, but what's funnier is she has no clue. "And hello to you, girl who's not my sister's annoying bestie."

Darcy doesn't look up at his comment but suddenly, Fitz is the one who steps forward and speaks. "Hey Darcy," he says all too casually.

"Wait, you know her?" Brooklyn asks, surprised, looking back and forth between her and his best friend.

"Yeah, she's my neighbor. You know her too, asshole," Fitz grunts, smacking Brooklyn on the arm.

A dumbfounded look takes over my brother's attempt at flirtation. "Wait, that's Darcy Bonnet?"

"Bennett," the three of us say simultaneously, Darcy finally looking up and meeting Fitz's gaze.

"Hey Grant," Darcy says, calling him by his first name nobody but his parents and teacher use."

"Grant, who the fucks Grant?" Brooklyn teases, suddenly being a little too flirty with Darcy.

"Whatever Matilda," Fitz counters back at her, making her roll her eyes annoyed.

"Matilda? Wait, I feel like I'm missing something?" Now my poor brother really looks awfully confused.

"It's nothing," Darcy shouts out, packing up her belongings.

But Fitz doesn't brush it off. "When Darcy first moved in next door to me, we were like eight, she had short brown hair with bangs and always carried around this stupid book."

"It wasn't stupid. I was a child, and it was my favorite book." Darcy turns to me as if needing to explain herself. "It was the book but had the cover from the movie."

Fitz ignores her and continues with his explanation. “Anyway, the girl on the cover looked exactly like her, so I started calling her Matilda. Then I found out her middle name is Mathilde, which is like the French version of Matilda, and it stuck.”

Darcy snaps back, “It didn’t stick, you just refused to stop using it.”

“Just like you refuse to call me Fitz,” Fitz counters, and suddenly this back-and-forth bickering is turning into something more.

Darcy rolls her eyes as if unable to comprehend his stubbornness. “That’s not your name.”

Brooklyn waves his hands in the air exaggeratingly, pretending he’s holding Fitz back from launching at Darcy. “Alright kids, stop fighting. What are you and Matilda up to P?” Darcy glares at my brother. “I mean Darcy.”

“I was just leaving,” Darcy mutters under her breath as she stands and gathers her belongings. She’s slightly shorter than my five-foot four frame, and incredibly shorter than Brooklyn and Fitz who both are well over six feet, but it’s the ill-fitting clothes that swallow up her already petite frame making her look like a small child.

I stand to meet her, blocking her exit. “What no, we haven’t finished.”

She steps around me, her gaze pleading me to let her go. “I’m sorry Phoenix, I have to. I have a lot of homework and we’ll finish this all up on Tuesday.”

I nod in agreement, understanding her silent pleas, but not forgetting to ask her later why she suddenly became so uneasy. “Okay well at least let me get my stuff and take you.”

“No, it’s totally cool, I’ll call an Uber.” Darcy fiddles nervously with the sleeves of her shirt and is clearly uncomfortable with whatever’s going on.

“No, that’s not safe, at least not on your own,” Fitz counters back at her becoming visibly upset which isn’t something I’ve ever seen from him. Clearly it is uncommon

even for Brooklyn who looks over at his best friend confused. Fitz is usually as calm and carefree, the literal epitome of a *boy next door*, kind, empathetic, trusting. There is no way Darcy, who is practically his female equivalent, is the person to bring out this never-before-seen part of him.

“I can drive you,” Brooklyn offers.

“Nonsense,” Fitz snaps back, “I’m driving there anyway, I’ll take her.” For a second the four of us stand in awkward silence, unsure what the hell just happened. Darcy is visibly equally embarrassed and annoyed, Fitz is glaring directly at her, and Brooklyn and I stare dumbfounded at each other trying to figure out what to do next.

“Where’s this party we’re going to?” Donovan shouts walking over to us. I wasn’t aware she was coming over today, but she must have seen us from her upstairs balcony.

“Oh god, here we go. I’m out y’all,” Brooklyn says, stomping off into the house. “Catch you tomorrow at practice Fitz.”

Donovan’s smile fades when she sees my brother walk away specifically because she’s arrived. *What the hell is up with everyone today?*

“Nowhere, Dee,” I say, but the hurt in her eyes quickly disappears and back in place is her winning smile. “My friend Darcy is leaving. Brooklyn, wait!” My brother stops in his tracks turning back to me annoyed.

“Before I forget, how do you think the football team will feel about hosting a kissing booth this year at the End of Summer Fair?” Both Brooklyn and Fitz’s eyes light up with excitement.

“Oh, hell yeah!” they both shout, high-fiving each other in a totally annoying *jock* way.

“A kissing booth?” Donovan asks.

“Yeah, Darcy and I are helping plan the End of Summer Fair and it’s going to be Grease themed, like the movie. You know the famous end scene at the carnival. We’re thinking we

can fundraise a lot of money if the football team oversees the kissing booth.”

Fitz nods his head, “Well count us in, and if their captains are in, you know the rest of the team is a done deal.”

I reach for Darcy, giving her a small goodbye hug. “Now I see which guy on the football team you want to kiss,” I whisper so only she can hear.

She shakes her head, “Oh God no, I’d rather kiss your brother.” The boys are out of earshot, but I know Dee catches the end of her comment.

ONCE DARCY AND FITZ LEFT TOGETHER, MUCH TO HER dismay, I sent Donovan on her way and headed inside and up to my bedroom for a much-needed shower and change of clothes. It was nearly seven in the evening when I finally headed downstairs to the kitchen, my stomach growling from not having eaten anything since lunch earlier today. Wearing a pair of spandex shorts and a matching sports bra, my wet hair up in a messy bun on the top of my head, and my face free of any makeup, I tiptoe quietly toward the refrigerator, hoping no one is home, and praying to find a charcuterie board Marta usually keeps stored for days like this when I forgo dinner.

“Bingo,” I mutter to myself, spotting a salami, prosciutto, and brie tray sitting on the shelf right in front of me with a post-it note with my name on it. I absolutely love Marta and will make sure to pick her up one of her favorite eclairs from Le Macaron next time I’m in Santa Monica.

I pick up the small charcuterie board and set it down on the counter, reaching back over to grab something to drink.

“Your father’s looking for you,” Daphne says, appearing out of nowhere, scaring me half to death, making the glass pitcher of orange juice fall out of my hands, and come crashing down on the floor with a loud bang.

“Shit woman,” I yell, stepping away from the shards of glass currently on the ground beside my bare feet. “Warn someone next time. You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

Her face pales, matching the white sundress she’s wearing, when she looks down and notices the trail of blood dripping from my foot along the floor. “Fuck,” I curse under my breath.

“What the hell was that?” Maverick shouts, rushing into the room with Brooklyn right behind him. They’re both dripping in sweat probably coming from a workout sesh in the gym since they’re dressed like they were, in matching black basketball shorts and white Adidas tanks.

“Nothing,” I reply curtly, glaring at a shocked Daphne who stands with her mouth wide open in front of me. “Your mom just scared the hell out of me, and I dropped something.”

“Shit P, you’re bleeding,” Brooklyn says, stating the obvious.

God, I can’t believe he’s my brother sometimes. Blonde, brawn, and brainless. “Gee thanks Captain Obvious, I hadn’t noticed.” I’m not sure if it’s the sting of the glass embedded into the bottom of my foot or if that’s just my natural reaction when my idiot brother is concerned, regardless I piss him off enough to make him walk away.

“Whatever, bleed to death,” he curses walking right back out of the room.

“I’m sorry Phoenix,” Daphne pleads, clearly flustered and back to the land of the living. “I didn’t mean to startle you, dear. I’ll go look for the First -Aid kit. Marta!” she exclaims walking toward the staff quarters.

I shake my head at her idea of helping by getting Marta to do it for her. Of course, she doesn’t know where a First-Aid kit would be. “Fuck,” I groan, trying to take a step forward with my right foot. It’s useless, the glass is pricking my skin, making it painful to try to walk.

“Jesus, Phoenix, don’t walk on it,” Maverick scolds, moving toward me with a bored look on his face, like I’m a child incapable of understanding what he’s saying.

I can't help staring at his ass in delight as he steps around me and grabs a kitchen towel from one of the cabinets in front of me. He tugs on his tank, using it to wipe the beads of sweat currently dripping down from his forehead, revealing the perfectly tanned and defined muscles of his abdomen. Visions of him working out and lifting on the bench press come back to me, followed by the image of him wet, freshly showered, with the towel wrapped low on his waist and that immaculate V-shape of his *Adonis Belt*, leading down under his shorts.

Maverick winks when he catches me staring. Frustrated and annoyed yet again, I hop on one foot toward the kitchen island, attempting to sit on one of the stools. "God-dammit!" I exclaim, stepping on yet another shard of broken glass.

"My God woman, you are going to be the death of me," Maverick curses under his breath, just before scooping me up and into his arms, and setting me down on the counter in front of him. He settles in between my legs which have involuntarily opened for him and places both palms flat against my upper thighs as if keeping me still. As if he knows my first instinct will be to jump right back down, he holds me in place with both his firm hands and daunting gaze. "Don't move Phoenix," he warns, his voice low, and gritty making me shiver.

I yelp feeling the cool surface of the marbled island against the back of my thighs, and he immediately catches the way goosebumps quickly cover my skin, my nipples instantly hardening under his heated blue stare, but in my head, I blame it all on the cold marble underneath me.

"It's cold Mav, what the hell!"

He chuckles, not moving a muscle, instead pressing down harder on my thighs. "You're bleeding Phoenix. There is literally glass sticking out of your foot. I sat your stubborn ass up here so you'd stop walking around on it and dig the glass deeper into your skin causing even more damage."

"Well, if you're expecting a thank you, I'm sorry to disappoint you but you're not getting one from me. Not when it's *your* mother's fault I'm in this predicament." The asshole

laughs harder, not taking me seriously. “Ugh,” I groan, annoyed and irritated with him. But suddenly my breath hitches and I freeze under his touch as his cool, calloused fingers slowly inch higher up my thigh, playing with the hem of my skintight shorts.

“You really shouldn’t be walking around the house wearing this Nyx,” he grunts low and raspy, making me tremble with a sudden need and arousal. I swallow the knot lodged in my throat and am rendered speechless. Maverick’s tongue peeks out to lick his lips, his teeth digging into the pink flesh of his luscious and thick bottom lip. My eyes travel down to his mouth, and I instinctively lick mine, mimicking his move.

I’m met with a whiff of his cologne, and the same woodsy and delicious scent I’ve gotten lost in before hits me as I inhale sharply. I can feel my body unwillingly leaning forward, my eyes still focused on his mouth and how badly I want to press my lips against it.

Just. One. Taste.

“I found the...” Daphne suddenly enters the room, stopping in her tracks the moment she sees her son and me in this compromising position. Maverick shuts his eyes, shaking his head, and cursing under his breath at his mother’s interruption. I want to push him off me but that would only make this situation and what we were about to do more obvious. Instead, I lean further away from him and cross my legs, but my foot hits the back of the counter making me shriek in pain.

“Shit!” I cry out, Maverick and Daphne’s gazes both coming back to me and my bloody foot.

“Here,” Daphne says, walking toward us and handing the first aid kit to Maverick. Yeah right she was going to aid me herself, the woman looks like she’s about to faint and I’m not sure if it’s the sight of blood that makes her woozy or the fact she caught me almost kissing her son.

Marta rounds the corner rushing over to us, “Ay dios mio,” she exclaims in Spanish, “Mi niña what did you do?”

“It’s just a little blood Marta, I’m fine.” Maverick scoffs at my nonchalance, unzipping the kit and pulling out some gauze, alcohol wipes, and a pair of tweezers. “You know the first thing they teach you in a first aid course is to always wear gloves.”

He looks up at me amused but ignores my comment, proceeding to open the alcohol wipes with his teeth, like you would a condom. *Why the hell am I thinking about condoms?* My thighs press together as I wiggle uncomfortably on the counter. He notices proving it was his intention all along to have those unwanted thoughts run wild through my mind.

Without a warning, he bends my knee upward, pushing it back to a ninety-degree angle, putting me in the most awkward position. I look like I’m weirdly stretching, the bottom of my heel resting against the countertop. “A little warning asshole.”

“That would ruin the fun,” he utters back playfully.

“Maverick,” Daphne murmurs, trying to sound as calm as possible as she watches her son with his hands on me.

“Daphne, why don’t you go be useful and clean up the mess you caused instead of standing there staring like you’re about to pass out.

“Maverick,” she shouts louder, offended by his easy dismissal of her. But she doesn’t argue further. Instead, she flips her hair, turns, and stomps away, likely to go cry to my father, wherever he is.

“I’ll go get the broom and mop,” Marta mumbles, leaving Mav and I alone in the kitchen once more.

“Finally,” he scoffs, slowly wiping the blood off the skin around the cut where the glass is still embedded.

“Ugh that hurts,” I cry out, throwing my head back in anguish. Without warning, he presses his lips against the pulse point in my neck rendering me immobile from the shock of his actions. Slowly sticking his tongue out, he licks circles up and down my neck, in between delicate kisses.

“What are you doing?” I ask, breathless and sounding more aroused than I’d have wanted.

“Distracting you,” he whispers back, continuing his assault on my flesh. It feels so good I don’t have the power to stop him.

“Maverick, you can’t. Someone will see.” I feel him reach for something beside me and he suddenly pricks my skin, pulling the shard of glass out using the tweezers.”

“Son of a bitch!” I shriek looking down and watching more blood trickle out of me.

“Stop moving, I have to make sure there isn’t any more glass in the wound.”

“What, are you suddenly a doctor?” I utter sarcastically. “If you were, you’d have known not to pull anything out in case it had punctured a vein and I could bleed out to death on the counter.”

“Relax drama queen, it’s not that deep.” Grabbing some of the gauze he places my foot flat against his shirt, my blood staining his white tee. Today of all days he wears white.

“What the hell are you doing Maverick? You’re getting blood all over yourself. This is totally unsafe, not to mention terribly unhygienic.”

Leaning forward and pressing my foot further onto his chest, he raises a curious brow proceeding to do something I’d never have imagined him do. Mav brings his thumb, coated in my blood, up to his mouth, stamping a bloody fingerprint along his tongue. I’m both disgusted and alarmingly aroused. *What the fuck?*

“Mmm,” he hums as if savoring the taste. “Sweet as sugar. Just like the rest of you.”

“You’re sick Maverick,” I spit out, turning away from him, afraid he’s going to see the lustful arousal in my stare.

He chuckles lightly. “Then stop whining and squirming away, or I’ll do it again.” I obey, not because I want to, but because I don’t think I’d be able to stop myself from launching at him and kissing him senseless if he were to do it again.

After a few minutes he grabs the kitchen towel from beside us and wipes his hands clean, having removed all the debris, cleaned my wound, and wrapped it in gauze and a bandage.

“Good as new,” he says, eyeing his masterpiece. It looks just as good as if I’d have gone to the emergency room. “Now if it becomes infected, don’t worry. I’ll gladly cut it off.” My face pales and my eyes shoot wide at his comment. “Relax Nyx, I’m only kidding.”

“You seem used to tending to wounds,” I state, but it comes off more like a question.

“What can I say, I used to get in my fair share of fights. Couldn’t go to the nurse’s office after every single one, without the risk of getting expelled. I had to learn how to treat them myself. Although, I never got glass shoved in me, maybe a blade or two, but it was mostly fists.”

“Maverick,” I shout in shock. He’s admitting to having been stabbed before, on multiple occasions, and is brushing it off like nothing.

“Don’t worry your pretty little head Nyx, I’m indestructible.” I roll my eyes at his arrogance and sarcastic humor, jumping off the counter. But before I can, his arms are around me catching me before my foot touches the ground.

“Shit careful Phoenix,” he berates, “It’s still raw. It’s going to hurt if you try to apply too much pressure on it like walking.”

“What am I supposed to do, hop on it?” I joke, but evidently, he doesn’t find my humor funny.

Instead, he sits me back down on the counter, and turns, crouching forward, and motioning me to jump on his back. “No way,” I say, shaking my head in refusal.

He turns and looks at me over his shoulder. “It’s either this or I carry you in my arms up the stairs, your choice Nyx.”

“Ugh,” I groan, wrapping my arms around his neck, and my legs around his waist. As soon as my pussy presses against his back, I nearly moan, already aroused and ready to rub myself against it. It takes all my restraint not to move my hips

and grind against him, especially when his hand grips my ass, pushing me further up.

“Buckle up baby, you’re going on your first ride on the Maverick Express.” I can’t help but laugh at his playful attitude and the stupidity of his statement.

“Whatever, just take me to my room, Mav.”

“Aye, Aye Captain.”

We walk through the foyer and up the stairs all the way to my bedroom door, but just as he twists the knob, my arms tighten around his neck. “Wait,” I call out, stopping him in his tracks. “Put me down, I don’t think you should go in there.”

He doesn’t laugh, doesn’t mock my fear of him once again entering my room and having a repeat of the other night. All he does is turn his head, smirking teasingly at me. “Afraid you’re going to want to take a ride on something else if I do, Nyx?”

There it is. The suspicion that I can’t be in the same room with him without throwing myself at him. I mean essentially that is what I fear, but it doesn’t mean I couldn’t stop myself if I wanted to.

“Shut up, asshole. Just put me down here. I don’t want you to think you can put your hands and mouth on me again like you did last time.”

Instead of putting me down, he somehow effortlessly swings me around, so I’m suddenly sandwiched between him and the door of my room, my arms and legs still wrapped around him, but my pussy now pressing against his stomach. “Maybe if you didn’t seem so needy and desperate for me to put my hands and mouth on you, then I wouldn’t have.”

“Me? Desperate? Please...”

Without warning, he presses his groin against me, and I can feel his dick through the thin fabric of his shorts. “You all but begged on your knees for it, sis.”

“A terrible lapse in judgment, but I wasn’t the one who came into my room wanting that to happen. Admit it, you saw

me in that dress, and you couldn't help yourself.”

“I'll admit that every day.” He licks his lips, “Seeing you in that piece of scrap you call a dress, made me so fucking hard. Not as hard as seeing you out of it, and not as hard as I am right now. But you also need to admit that you were creeping in on my Live, and you couldn't help but touch yourself to the little photo I sent.”

I gasp when his fingers dig into my ass cheeks, his thick erection pressing into my heated center. I lean forward, my mouth pressing against his shoulder to stifle my moan. “Put me down, Maverick,” I moan into his neck. “Please.”

He obeys, this time without hesitation or a smartass remark. Instead, he places a soft kiss on my forehead, his lips lingering a moment too long. “Admit it to yourself, you want this just as bad as I do. Because I already know it's the truth, you just need to accept the fact that we,” he lowers his mouth and presses a kiss to my cheek. “Are going to happen.”

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CHAPTER
TWELVE

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PHOENIX

The events of yesterday continue to circle tirelessly in my mind. I can't sleep, can't shut off these vivid visions of Maverick standing between my legs, my blood staining the white fabric of his t-shirt, while he tended to my wound, gentle and careful not to hurt me. It was not only bizarre and out of the norm for him, but it confused the hell out of me. *How could someone who has done nothing but provoke and anger me, suddenly be so concerned with my well-being?*

The answer is simple; he wasn't. This must be all part of the scheme he's concocted to ruin me. I know he's given me no reason to be so suspicious, but there is something about him I can't quite figure out, and that means I don't trust him.

I came straight home after school, promising Dee, I'd meet her and Olly for dinner after a shower and some much-needed R and R, mainly because I was hoping to run into Maverick. I've been so confused since last night, after everything he said to me, and need to clear the air. I'm determined to confront him and see what kind of mind games he's playing. It makes no sense for him to act this way in front of others when he clearly loves to remind me he's not innocent and I should be wary around him. His mother nearly caught us making out for God sakes, and that is not the kind of added drama I need in my life.

However, to my disappointment, Maverick wasn't home and by the looks of it, wouldn't be home for some time. I gave up on looking for my stepbrother and focused on getting ready to go out to dinner with my friends.

"Phoenix," my father calls out as I pass his study on the way to the front door. I groan aloud, frustrated and in no mood to deal with him today. Ignoring him and hoping he lets it go, I continue on my way. "Phoenix please, I need to speak with you."

"I'm on my way out, Austin, maybe tomorrow," I snap back, brushing him off and not bothering to turn and look at

him. He knows I'm headed out since I've not only changed out of my earlier outfit and into a blue strapless dress and done my hair and makeup, but my keys are jingling in my hand as I walk by.

"Not tonight," he says matter of fact. That gets my attention, and I immediately turn and glare at him. He's not used to me being so dismissive since we rarely speak, yet lately he's had some stick up his ass when it comes to *mending* our relationship. I call bullshit.

"Excuse me?"

My father steps out from under the doorway and stalks over to me, anxiously running a hand through his perfectly styled hair as he struggles to come up with an explanation. "I know things may have been different these last few weeks Daphne, and I have been gone, but that ends today." He clears his throat and straightens his back, his posture suddenly impeccable as he tries to come off authoritative and in control. It's laughable almost, but I humor him mainly because I'm still in shock. "I made a promise to Daphne that I would be spending more time with you and your brother, so like I said in the beginning, family dinners are now mandatory. And the first one, since you missed the last one, will be tonight. Text your friends and let them know you won't be going."

Hysterical laughter erupts from within me as I double over, unable to control it. Austin is clearly not amused which only adds to the humor of it. "You're kidding me, right?" I ask after my fit of laughter. "There are so many things wrong with what you've just said, the first being how you promised your mistress you'd spend more time with your children instead of wanting to spend it. Sorry dad, but I don't need a parent that feels forced to spend any time with me. Save it for someone who gives a shit. I've never needed you and I sure as hell won't start now."

Fury rages within his marbled eyes and consumes the stoic expression he so desperately tries to keep in place. Tugging on the collar of his pristinely ironed button up, he clears his throat with as much restraint as he can possibly show. "Watch your

tone Phoenix, and might I remind you Daphne is my wife, it's about time you come to accept that."

I scoff, rolling my eyes and refusing to meet his stare. "Seeing as you two eloped, I'll take your word for it dad." Without waiting for his response, I turn and head straight for the front door not stopping for anyone or anything in my way.

"That's not what I meant, Phoenix. It is time you and your brother..." The sound of his voice is muted by the shriek that leaves me the moment I come crashing into a rock-hard body that's crossed in my path. Maverick's muscular hands come around me, long fingers digging into my waist as he keeps me from falling back on my ass. Heat instantly travels through me, electrifying and immobilizing.

"Woah there sis, where are you off to in such a hurry?"

"Out." I whine, pushing away from him but he doesn't fully release me. *What is it with him always catching me when I'm about to fall?* It is infuriating, yet as much as a small, and I mean minuscule, part of my subconscious enjoys the sound of that, I need to squash the little bitch before she gets any other barbaric ideas in her head.

"But you'll miss dinner," Maverick mocks, his tone of voice completely fake and full of sarcasm. He's smirking at me, aware of my reaction to having his hands on me once again. As much as I want to hide it, I know the arousal is painted over my face like a permanent mask.

Behind me, I hear my father loudly clear his throat, an almost growl-like sound leaving him. "She has plans." Suddenly his chest is pressed against my back, glaring at the way Maverick's hands are still on me, and must be clearly going through mid-life crisis with how hot and cold he's being.

I half turn in his direction, catching his gaze flick back and forth between my stepbrother and me. "I thought I wasn't allowed?" I tease, calling him out on his bullshit mood change.

"It would be a shame to make your friends wait, we'll continue this conversation tomorrow." It's comical really. Just a second ago he was against me leaving and now I shouldn't

keep my friends waiting? In front of me Maverick chuckles, finally releasing his hold, and I immediately miss his touch.

That's when everything becomes crystal clear. Austin's decision didn't suddenly change for my benefit, the answer is simple, and frankly hilarious. He doesn't want me near Maverick. Funny how he's the one who brought him into our house. It's clear in the way his eyes flicked back and forth between us just a moment ago, and his grueling scowl shows his dislike. *Interesting.*

It shouldn't be, and I shouldn't be so adamant to play with fire, mainly because how prone I am to get burned by the flames, but this is too good an opportunity to pass up. Austin wants me out of the house now that Maverick will stay for dinner, and that just makes me want to stay to spite him.

I turn completely toward my father, my back now to Maverick, and it's almost as if I can sense his heated gaze travel down my body. "Don't worry daddy," I purr, making the vein of his forehead protrude more than usual. It's vibrating angrily on his forehead, his jaw ticking, and eye practically twitching with ire. "I can always see my friends another time. Wouldn't want to miss a family dinner, given we're so *close.*" I purposefully take a step back and press my ass against Maverick, his hand coming out to grip my hip, quietly groaning in my ear.

At this point my father is livid, but he doesn't dare admit what he fears. How would it look to throw out his suspicions with no tangible proof? Instead, he turns and walks away from us, slamming the door of his study, the crystal chandelier above my head, vibrating from the force of it.

"You're playing with fire Phoenix," Maverick whispers, digging his fingers deeper into my flesh. My father's gone yet he hasn't taken his hands off me, or worse, I haven't asked him to.

Instead, I stand frozen in place, incredibly aware of his erection pressing into my ass and remember I'm wearing a dress that's way too short, one I wasn't planning on him seeing me in. Not after what happened between us the last time he

saw me in a revealing dress, this one not much more modest than the other.

Hot breath tickles my neck as his fingers sensually trail over my skin, up my forearms, and around my shoulder, leaving goosebumps in their wake. God, I'm trying so hard not to tremble against him, my arousal pooling in my thong, making me terribly uncomfortable. I need to toughen up, to stand my ground and push back letting him know that as much as I may want this, I'm determined to not let it happen.

Moving away from him, I turn to face him head on, no longer feeling his touch makes me relax a little, until I look up into two deep and daunting pools, the clearest shades of blue and gray swirled together. I inhale a sharp breath. "It's in my nature Maverick. I've never been reckless, always cautious, and careful, but that's not who I am. It's not what I was meant to be, and I'm just now figuring that out."

Maverick takes three steps forward to close the distance between us, leaving nothing more than two inches between our lips, and the alluring scent of him is almost too much for me. I close my eyes, unable to hold back if I look into the lustful blue of his irises that watch me with an intensity I feel all over my body.

The magnetic force field between us is indescribable and unparalleled to anything I've ever felt before leaving me with so many unanswered questions as to why.

Why is it that I'm not only drawn to him like a moth to a flame, but unable to control my feelings and actions where he's concerned? Why am I so affected by his mere presence, by his callous yet tempting touch?

I've prided myself my entire life on being in control of my actions, my reactions, and intrinsic motivations but when Maverick came into my life, barreling in like a destructive and perilous storm, threatening to take down my indestructible ship, it threw me overboard and now I'm drowning in the sea's rogue waves.

"Nothing about you is simple Phoenix. You're intoxicating, magnetic, a fucking force to be reckoned with.

It's why I can't stay away from you. Why despite how hard I'm trying, I can't help myself where you're concerned. I've also prided myself on being in control of every one of my emotions, yet you're wreaking havoc around me bringing out feelings I never knew existed. Tell me Nyx, how am I supposed to fight that?"

If I was ever out of breath and rendered speechless because of Maverick Carter, this moment here is the reason. I open my eyes and nearly fall apart from the way he's looking at me, not only intensely aroused but yearning for an answer to this dilemma he's facing. We're on the same boat, neither one of us knowing how to navigate these reckless waters, drowning in them, and gasping for air as we descend. He's desperately looking past the walls I hold in place, my security, my one and only safeguard against him and his undisclosed agenda.

But I don't have an answer for him. All I can do is leave, walk away, and save myself before the waves catch me and pull me down. I need to walk away before I drown in him.

I only hope, for my sake, it's not too late.

"How's school?" DAPHNE ASKS, TRYING HER HARDEST TO break through the deafening silence during this dinner from hell. For forty-five minutes we've been sitting here, sulking and pouting, the tension growing thicker and thicker every minute that passes by.

My father sits at the head of the table glaring daggers at Maverick sitting across from me beside his mother, while Brooklyn sits to my right across from her. The dining table we're at, the larger one in the expansive dining room we rarely use, not the one in the sunroom beside the kitchen we usually eat in, is huge and sits about twelve people yet the five of us are all nestled to one end. Awkward, silent, and clearly uncomfortable, but everyone's too damn proud to be the first to leave.

“It’s going great,” I answer with a smile as fake as I can muster, being the first person, other than my father’s wife, to speak. It’s infuriating how she’s pretending to be so innocent, acting like her presence here is simply a coincidence. Not like she ruined my parent’s marriage by slithering her way into my father’s bed like the unruly, home-wrecking whore she truly is.

She twirls a loose strand of her fake blond hair around her finger, the hot pink acrylics on her fingernails a sight for sore eyes, “Your father tells me you’re in cheer. It must be exciting getting ready for all the rallies the football team will have this year, especially now that scouts will come from the best universities to watch Brooklyn play.”

My brother scoffs, irritated by her fake interest in his extracurriculars, but I pity the woman. At least she’s faking putting in the effort, not that she deserves any of our kindness whatsoever, seeing as she ruined our family, but at least she’s trying to mend the relationship with her son, and stepchildren, not like my father. Unsure whether it’s genuine interest or not, since I’ve realized I’m terrible at reading people’s true intentions, Daphne seems to care about what Maverick’s up to. Although she did ship him off to boarding school at the age of twelve, so I may be totally off.

I look between her and Brooklyn and can feel the animosity radiating off my brother. “Actually, I’m no longer on the cheerleading squad,” I respond, getting a few heads to turn my way in surprise.

“What do you mean?” Brooklyn asks, clearly pissed off he isn’t aware of my departure from the squad. “Who the hell is going to be cheering for me then? You were the only one who didn’t look like a complete fool out there.”

I roll my eyes, “Sorry to disappoint you brother, although I think that was weirdly also somewhat of a compliment.”

“Don’t let it get to your head, P,” he counters back. “Every other chick on the squad is a ditzzy airhead.”

“I quit cheer, why are you all acting like I’m ruining my future?” My father’s scowl is instant. “Don’t worry dad, I’ve

taken up other clubs and honors classes to ensure I get into a university far away from here.”

My father slams his hands upon the table, a habit he’s formed lately. “Why would you quit? Bancroft’s quit nothing. And why the hell would you go to university far away? We have plenty here in California, and if nothing else, then you don’t go. Your mother never went to college.”

“Yeah, and look where she is now,” Brooklyn scoffs, and I quickly smack him on the back of his head.

“Watch your tongue asshole. We both know why she’s there, and not going to college isn’t the fucking reason. Although she might have been better off if she had. Then she wouldn’t have been blinded by her parents and married the first man they chose for her.”

Austin slams his hands down once more. “Enough, I will not let you insult me this way.”

I sit up straighter in my seat, meeting my father’s furious glare head on. “You’re really asking why I’d leave father? Have you forgotten everything that’s happened? I mean I wouldn’t be surprised. You not only ruined our family’s reputation with your inability to keep your dick in your pants, but you’ve also made us the laughingstock of all of Malibu Cove’s social scene. I don’t want to be in cheer because of the conniving bitches relishing in my “downfall”, and I want to get into a school far away from you and your new happy *family*.”

His face goes beet red, bulging eyes nearly black from how focused they are on me. Beside him I can see the fear in Daphne’s eyes. I don’t think even she’d be able to calm the beast inside of him. “You will not speak to me that way you ungrateful brat. I’ve given this family everything. Have you maybe thought that I’m not the only one to blame here? Your mother is unrecognizable, why would I stay married to a woman I don’t know anymore.”

I stand and meet him, slamming my hands down, and leaning forward over the table. “Then you get a divorce, you

don't publicly humiliate her by having an affair with your married neighbor. God, are you seriously that dense?"

"I've just about had it with you Phoenix."

Maverick stands to join me, his hand resting atop mine on the table. "With all due respect Austin, and I say this with the utmost sincerity, fuck off. Phoenix is only saying what all of us are thinking. The two of you really outdid yourselves as parents of the year. Don't try to force us to be one big happy family, instilling values, and good morals, when the two of you don't have the slightest clue what that means."

The vein in my father's neck nearly bursts. "How dare you speak to me that way? You're nothing of mine."

"Yeah, but I am," Brooklyn interjects, standing up, and placing his hand on mine. "And the feeling is mutual dad."

My father's face falls, unable to piece together what's unfolding before him. Both his children and his stepson are holding hands, all on the same side for the first time. Brooklyn's never been dad's favorite, and he may not have shown his disdain toward my father, preferring to blame my mom for everything that transpired between them, but I know he's been angry with him in his own way. B's never been good enough for him. Not good enough at football, or smart enough to take advanced classes. Brooklyn is beauty and brawn minus the brains to take over his company, and dad's never let him forget it.

Though I've never been daddy's girl either, not like Donovan who's her father's pride and joy. I always hated her relationship with her father because it reminded me of what I never had. I know my father's wary of me, given I remind him so much of my mother and his disdain toward her is clear, but now it's even more clear than before.

"The three of you will sit down and finish your dinner or get up and go to your rooms. There are going to be plenty more rules set in this house, because I will not let my children run amuck through town like rebellious punks." His gaze meets Maverick's as if he's the one to blame for this newfound rebellion.

“Like Mav said, fuck off dad.” Brooklyn’s the first to walk away and head toward the front door, but Maverick is quick to follow his lead. Though before he takes off after my brother, he turns to me, extending his hand out for me to take.

“Care to join us, Nyx?” he asks, a wicked smirk kissing his lips. I step forward without speaking and place my hand in his letting him lead me off toward where my brother’s run off.

We leave my father and Daphne, sitting and staring with shocked expressions as they watch their children getting along for the first time, and having each other’s backs.

“Well, at least the kids are getting along,” I hear Daphne mutter, before Mav pulls me out the front door.

“THAT WAS FUCKING EPIC!” BROOKLYN OBNOXIOUSLY SHOUTS out into the night while pulling a joint out of his front pocket. Beside him Maverick shakes his head, a ghost of a smile he’s unable to hide tickling his perfect plump lips.

For a second I’m sucked into the rush of it all, wanting to enjoy every moment of adrenaline coursing through my veins as the late night, summer breeze blows through my hair. From telling my father off, to walking away hand in hand with Mav, to watching Austin’s jaw hang wide open, and all the blood vessels in his eyes burst with rage. It was exhilarating. A force I had never felt before and now craved to feel more of.

I’ve always aimed to be the perfect daughter. Despite not caring I’ve been insignificant to my parents where it really matters, other than a shiny trinket they could use to brag about and prime to continue their legacy, I’ve always tried to be the girl they expected me to be. Picture perfect, prim, and proper, until three months ago when everything about my perfect life went up in flames because of them. It was then all the hard work I’d put in became demeaning and insignificant.

Which is why I am now here, consequences be damned.

The moment we stepped out of the house, Brooklyn headed straight toward Maverick's Aston, calling shotgun as Maverick wordlessly unlocked his car, lowered the top down, and let us slide in as he sped off toward the highway. We rode out into the night with no destination in mind, we just needed to get out of there.

It was unlike anything I'd have expected from my brother and stepbrother, who, until today, hadn't spoken more than two words to each other as far as I knew. Yet here they were behaving like old friends passing each other the lit joint.

"You should have seen his face P, the moment you stood and took Maverick's hand, he all but had a fucking aneurism. God, I'd pay to see that." I knew something was off about Brooklyn during dinner, and the already half-smoked joint in his hand makes perfect sense.

The interior of the Aston is almost as mesmerizing as the exterior. Sleek black leather seats, a new car smell mixed with the same intoxicating scent that lingers on Maverick. The engine vibrates under my fingertips sliding along the leather, as he speeds down the coast's vacant highway at over ninety miles an hour. The wind blows through my hair, and I can't help but relish in how freeing it feels.

Reaching over into the front seat, I yank the joint out of Brooklyn's hand and bring it to my lips, inhaling the intense aroma of the smoke before blowing it back out. "God this is awful," I mutter, coughing and passing it back to him.

"It's not meant for little girls P," he jokes, but beside him Maverick remains silent. I look up and catch his gaze in the rear-view mirror, but his expression is unreadable. I swear I saw him smile slightly at my attempt to smoke, but just as easily as it came, it vanished leaving no trace behind.

Deciding it's best to ignore him I turn to stare out into the cool summer night, watching the trees pass us by, the ocean so dark you can see nothing but the moon illuminating the still waters, and sparse stars twinkling in the night sky.

We're silent for another ten minutes, until Maverick drives up a winding hill, toward a bluff at the edge of the water. I

don't think I've ever been out here, but our surroundings look distantly familiar.

"Where are we going?" I ask but he doesn't answer me.

Brooklyn's now borderline catatonic, leaning back in the seat with his eyes closed. I wouldn't be surprised if he's passed out by the time we arrive wherever it is we're going.

Maverick pulls up to a dirt road at the bottom of a small hiking trail and sets the car in park. Turning off the engine, he opens the door and steps out of the car without saying a word. Brooklyn sits up and follows his lead leaving me alone and confused inside the Aston.

The moment I open the car door and step out onto the side of the cliff, I immediately regret not changing out of this damn dress before dinner. It's nearing the end of summer and although the nights are still warm, at the edge of the water the air is always cooler, and tonight's breeze sends a wave of chills over me.

Brooklyn heads over to the right side of the bluff, taking a seat on a large boulder near the edge of the cliffside. Something about him seems completely unusual, like for the first time in the last three months, he's relaxed and at ease. It may be the weed he's smoked or the rush from walking out on our family dinner, but I can't help the smile that creeps over my lips as I catch small glimpses of the old Brooklyn.

"You really need to choose your outfits better," Maverick says, coming up behind me and subtly wrapping an arm around my waist. My smile fades while my skin comes alive at the contact, every nerve ending firing off and sending waves of desire through me.

"Is there a problem with what I'm wearing?" I murmur, pretending I'm not at all affected by his closeness. It's a terrible lie and the chuckle that reverberates from within him proves how blatantly obvious my body's reaction to him is.

"The fact you found it appropriate to wear for a family dinner," he mutters in annoyance. The judgmental comment makes me alert and ready to fire back some feministic remark

about his misogynistic statement, but as I turn to face him, it's not disgust or judgment I see, it's unequivocal desire written all over his face.

"Might I remind you that wasn't my plan for the evening," I answer back, reiterating I was on my way out with Dee and Olly before my dad stopped me.

"And what made you change your plans?" Maverick steps closer to me, his hand still resting on the edge of my hip. The heat that spreads through me as a whiff of his cologne hits me is exhilarating. I inhale sharply turning to see if Brooklyn is watching us, but I find my dear brother leaning back against the wall with his eyes closed.

Turning my attention back to Mav, I tilt my head up to meet his gaze, praying I don't do something stupid like lean forward and press my lips to his. As much as I want to, I can't let myself go there tonight. Not with Brooklyn not even ten feet away.

"Witnessing how angry it made my father to see me by your side. Figured it would be a giant fuck you to him, and it worked."

A sexy smirk pulls at his lips. "And why do you think he hated the idea of you near me?" Annoyed he's asking questions he already knows the answer to, I roll my eyes and turn away from him, but he reaches out and captures my chin, turning my head back to him. "Maybe because he saw the way your body reacted to my touch, just like it is now."

Mav's hand on my waist moves lower, fingers grazing me as it wraps around my lower back and grips a handful of my ass. My gaze is transfixed on his and the desire I see reflected in it, hits me like a rogue wave ready to drag me away if I don't hold on to him. "Maverick, we can't." "Brooklyn is..."

"High and clueless, baby. God, you look so beautiful." He lowers the hand gripping my chin down to my ass, taking another handful, and pressing me against his hardened cock. I whimper at the feel of him, hard and aching to be inside of me. "So, fucking, beautiful Nyx, illuminated under the light of the moon, in the darkness you shine my goddess." His lips find

my neck arching back for him to nip at the skin. He does, whispering against me. “The chaos and darkness that lives inside of you, that runs like black tar through your veins, shines like an eternal flame which has been swallowed by the shadows of your melancholy. Tainted by pain and darkness yet still perfection personified.”

The realness of his words shocks me yet makes me melt to a puddle of need at his feet. Everything I never realized I wanted to hear, yet coming from him, it’s everything I needed. This inexhaustible game we’ve been playing is excruciating, and I’m so fucking tired of having to hold back from what I really want. I can’t resist him any longer, but I need to find the strength to. I can’t give in, I cannot allow this to happen anywhere near my brother, whether he’s high or not.

It takes all my inner strength to pull away from him and walk over toward the railing at the edge of the bluff. I pray he doesn’t follow, but it’s useless. He’s already made up his mind, and it’s telling him I’m his.

A hand wraps around my waist like a thorned vine tightening, making me ache as he pushes my back into his chest while his left hand rests just above my left breast. I can feel my heartbeat vibrating against his palm. “We’re going to happen, Nyx. I told you to stop kidding yourself otherwise.”

I shake my head in denial but don’t move a muscle nor object. I can’t. Frozen in place by his touch and begging for his fingers to move a little lower. For him to sing those words to me once more.

“You’re out of your mind if you think I’m going to fall for any of your tricks.” My voice comes off breathier than planned and it’s obvious how much he affects me. How much his touch weakens me, and how much of a lie my words are.

Mav releases his hold on me, and at once it’s as if the blanket of warmth and safety that was tightly wrapped around me, protecting me, is gone, and in its wake, he leaves nothing but a fierce and bitter coldness. “You will, and soon baby. I will have you in every way possible. That’s a fucking guarantee.”

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CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

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PHOENIX

The last time I felt this content was the night my life changed drastically, for worse. That itself should have been a telltale sign it wasn't going to last.

That dreadful night three months ago, I was out clubbing at Echo with Dee, Olly, and Chad, spending way too much money on expensive fruity cocktails and the best bubbly money could buy, and dancing the night away to the hottest DJs in all of So-Cal. I was oblivious to everything happening in my surroundings, all that mattered was that I was having the time of my life with the people I cared about.

We were celebrating my eighteenth birthday, something I hadn't originally wanted to do, but was coerced by my best friends, anyway. I refused a party but a night out at my favorite place, being surrounded by people I didn't know, was my ideal way to spend my time. To not have to worry about keeping up appearances or faking how perfect my life was, because in that moment, within the crowd of strangers chanting my name and singing to me in their dreadful voices, I was the happiest I'd ever been.

Like I said it never lasts.

As I drove home in my Uber at three in the morning, high off life, and what I believed to be a fragment of happiness, I could have never expected what I'd soon come face to face with. My mother was throwing my father's belongings off their bedroom balcony as he stood down below screaming his lungs out, calling her a variety of vulgar names, and degrading her in the worst possible way.

I tuned out their ear-splitting screams, brushing it off as just another one of their petty arguments which happened more often than you'd think, entered the house, and locked myself in my bedroom until the next morning. When I found her just a few hours later, I realized this time it was so much more than some insignificant argument they'd later shove under the rug.

It was then the shred of happiness I felt, disappeared. Obliterated, completely erased from my mind, never to be felt again.

I promised myself I'd never again fall victim to the false ideal of being happy. I saw firsthand how it all crumbled before me, how every day my mom would put her mask in place and fool all of those around her, acting like all was well in the world, when she was falling apart from the inside. My father's demand for a divorce was the last straw that brought down the perfectly crafted disguise. I didn't want to end up that way. I refused to.

After finding out my father was cheating on my mom with none other than our neighbor, I felt lost in the town I once felt comfortable calling home. At every turn there are memories of the people who turned their back on me after the scandal that changed my life. Lies and betrayal, friendships, the fake ones at least, lost in time. Time I would never get back.

My father made me lose all faith in men, and Chad cheating on me before texting me we were through, was the sugar-coated cherry on top. The only man I didn't completely hate was my best friend, Oliver. Even my brother Brooklyn was currently on my shit list.

But none were higher than my dear stepbrother, Maverick. Written in blood red ink, with a giant X mark next to it, Maverick was enemy number one. And I'd checked that list twice.

I was becoming so blinded by my hatred for him I forgot all about the other first-class gentlemen who continuously let me down.

Especially after everything that's happened between us in the short time he's been here. Visions of him hovering over me, his body hot and heavy against mine, have tortured me for days. Thick, dark pink lips teasing me, a wet tongue licking me. Our kiss was magnetic, a torturous pleasure I should have never allowed myself to indulge in, yet I couldn't resist. And I'll be punishing myself for it for all eternity.

And then the bastard had the audacity to say that *we are going to happen*, whatever that means. Not to mention the way he stood up for me in front of my father and took Brooklyn and I out to distract us from the train wreck that is our home life.

The way he whispered to me everything I didn't know I needed to hear.

Tainted by pain and darkness yet still perfection personified.

It's a goddamn lie, yet leaving his lips, I wanted nothing more than for it to be true.

I cannot let myself go anywhere near crossing the bright red line that's drawn between us. It was a close call a couple nights ago when Daphne almost walked in on Maverick doing more than just aiding my wounds, and last night in front of Brooklyn, we're lucky my brother's an idiot who was near catatonic from how intoxicated he'd been.

I stare down at the phone in my hand, watching it ring for the third time in the last five minutes, yet I can't bring myself to answer, afraid if I do, I'll give in and give her what she wants. I'll be their puppet once more.

The first text came in last night while Maverick, Brooklyn and I were driving back to the house. I refused to let it bring down the good mood I found myself in, but my attempts were in vain. Maverick noticed right away, watching me through the rearview mirror as my gaze remained focused on my lap, my teeth digging into my bottom lip trying to keep my composure while I figured out what I was going to do. I could feel his eyes watching me curiously, noticing the smile I wore all night had quickly disappeared and was replaced by a grim pout.

It was unnerving how easily he could see right through me, not to mention it scared the hell out of me. I never wanted to be vulnerable to anyone, which is why I kept everyone at arm's length. I was extremely particular with those I allowed into my inner circle, and for good reason. Because the moment my life went up in flames, everyone's true colors came to light, and they were horrifying.

But Maverick was something else entirely. I couldn't read him like I'd learned to read everyone else. I knew his intentions weren't innocent. With everything that had transpired between us, between our families, they couldn't be. Yet I wondered if deep down, he was as unsettled and confused as I was.

He tried to stop me as we walked in through the front door, but since Brooklyn was acting like he was severely intoxicated, I escaped upstairs and locked myself in my room while he dragged my brother to his.

Back in my room, I reopened the text message, staring down at the screen, my eyes burning with acidic tears as I reread it repeatedly.

Elaine requests your presence.

It didn't say your mother misses you or your mother wants to see you; she requests my presence like some business associate or worse, a stranger.

I shouldn't blame Cassandra; she has no other choice but to obey my mother's requests and keep her happy. It's what my father pays almost a hundred grand a month for. But that doesn't mean I have to.

Regardless, here I am, sitting in my car, in the parking lot at Cliffside Malibu, coming to her beck and call. After the last time I was here and she practically kicked me out, I shouldn't have come back.

I guess I'm a masochistic and have grown to favor pain above all else.

After fifteen minutes of sitting in my car trying to talk myself out of coming inside, I head over to the front desk reception, my knees trembling as I unsteadily tread along the white marbled floors, my reflection mocking me while I stare down at my feet. My heels pitter patter along the marble, but I don't miss a step. Even though I'm anxious and feeling like I'm about to pass out, I keep my composure, walking just like I was trained to by the etiquette coach I had since I was seven years old. One foot in front of the other, heel to toe, shoulders

back, chin up, facing forward, and each step only a second apart.

Before I reach the young brunette receptionist wearing a cream-colored blouse and matching pencil skirt, perfectly perched behind the large, marbled counter, Cassandra pops up in my peripheral, heading directly towards me, impeccably dressed in a white, pristinely tailored and ironed pantsuit.

“Phoenix my dear, I’m so glad to see you.” Her tone of voice, a soft falsetto, is harmonizing and almost hypnotizing, bringing my attention to her, but I quickly snap out of my trance and remember what I’ve come here for.

“I received your messages,” I stammer curtly and without emotion. “I thought it would be prudent to come tell you in person to stop calling me. Stop texting me, I want nothing to do with this place nor the woman who lives here.”

Her face pales in shock, as her gaze travels around the room hoping no one has caught my rampage. “Phoenix dear,” She places a hand on the small of my back and urges me toward a hallway leading toward her office. “I understand where your frustration is coming from.”

“Frustration?” I mock, pull away from her. “Oh, honey I’m not the least bit frustrated. This is rage.”

Cassandra laughs my comment away, looking around with a fake as hell smile in place, in case any visitors are witnessing my outburst. “Why don’t we go speak in my office dear?”

“Stop calling me that and acting like you’re not being a total bitch. I said what I came here to say, and now I’ll be leaving. Don’t call me again.” But before I can stop away from her, leaving her standing with her jaw dropped, she reaches out for me and grabs me by the shoulder.

“Listen Phoenix, it is important that you listen to what I have to say.” Her grip on my arm tightens, but she’s quick to release me when a group of four women, dressed in long white lab coats approach us.

“Dr. Hastings, is everything alright?” One woman asks, curiously staring between Cassandra and me.

“Everything’s great Dr. Allen,” she answers, but clearly Dr. Allen isn’t satisfied by her response. “This here is Phoenix, she’s Ms. Astor’s daughter who has come for a visit.” I glare at Cassandra’s blatant lie but decide it’s best to not make a scene in front of the group which is surely composed of Psychiatrists and doctors.

“Oh, how wonderful,” Dr. Allen says, “I’m sure Elaine will be pleased by your visit dear. She speaks so much about you during our daily talks.”

“Actually, I...”

“We were just on our way out to see her. I will see you this afternoon for our conference Dr. Allen.” Without another word, Cassandra drags me toward the same exit we took last time that leads out toward the pool.

“Cassandra, wait, I don’t want to see her.”

We stop abruptly, right before stepping out the back door, and I yank my arm out of Cassandra’s hold. “Look Phoenix,” she mutters, slightly less composed, “I understand you’re upset, hurt even, but your mother, Elaine, needs you. She needs to know that she has your support, her family’s support. It’s the only way she will get better.”

A faint chuckle escapes me. “She doesn’t deserve it. Not after the way she treated me the last time I was here. Not after the way she disregarded having a family. How pathetic can someone be, trying to take their own life because of something their husband did, forgetting she had two children who still needed her? The fact she was willing to leave us to fend for ourselves, although that’s exactly what we’ve been doing our whole lives, proves why she doesn’t deserve my forgiveness.”

“Forgiveness?” I hear someone blurt out behind me, and instantly my body freezes in panic. Without turning around to face her, I know it’s her, and I’m afraid she’s heard every word I just shouted out. The look of utter disbelief on Cassandra’s pale face proves I’m right in assuming my mother’s heard what I said, and she isn’t happy about it. “You think I want your forgiveness?”

I slowly turn to face my mother, but the woman staring back at me is nothing like the woman I remember. Her clear blue eyes radiate an anger I've never seen before, not directed at me at least. My mother was always indifferent to everything that concerned my brother and me. She was careful not to show too much emotion, careful not to make the mistake of showing us she truly cared but was never outright cruel. She was an uptight woman, but anyone in her position, who was brought up with her morals and beliefs, bred to be a woman of power and status in our upper crust society, would behave the same way. And there was nothing Elaine Astor cared more than her reputation, status, and keeping up appearances, and that's the one thing that was taken from her.

Yanked away against her will, leaving her tarnished and weak. Two words you'd never in a million years think you'd hear associated with the Astor name. And that was the true issue. Who knows if my grandparents ever reached out to her in the months since the incident. By how panicked Cassandra sounded in the twenty voicemails she left me, I doubt she'd heard from them.

My grandparents live full time in Manhattan, where my mother was born and raised, and lived until meeting my father at a party in her family's Hamptons house her senior year of high school. His family was west coast old money, and my mother was east coast royalty. Two peas in a pod, meant for each other, or so everyone thought.

Then again, nothing my father has done, not the affair nor divorce, compare to her trying and failing to take her own life and ending up here. Although in my world a stint in rehab is as common as a trip to the plastic surgeon, it still is frowned upon if it comes to light. And if I thought my mother was uptight and pretentious, she's Bubbly Betty compared to my grandmother Eleanor Astor.

“Given your response, I assume you believe you've done nothing wrong, mother.”

Now it's she who laughs. Her blond hair is perfectly combed, her white sundress with not a wrinkle in sight, her nails clean and polished with a pink-nude color, and her face

as flawless as ever. You'd never guess three months ago she was a drunken, drugged up mess, chasing away her demons who threatened to take her down.

"You're just like him, the both of you are. Ungrateful, spoiled, and useless." My heart sinks at her outburst. Although I wasn't expecting a warm hug, nor a pat on the back, I didn't think she held such resentment and hatred for me. This wasn't the woman I remembered. This wasn't the woman I stood up for against all those who degraded her behind her back. The woman I hoped I'd find, changed and willing to be there for her family.

But this was the woman Elaine Astor truly was. Deep inside, in all her fame and glory, my mother was exactly who she needed to be to move past the scandal that had befallen her.

Reborn, and revamped, she is risen.

"You're right mother, and just like him, I will leave you." I turn away from her but not before I catch a glimpse of hurt flash in her eyes before disappearing behind the cruel and icy blue color. I look up at Cassandra, who believe it or not, has tears pooled in her eyes. "Don't call me again. You heard her, and hear me now, she is dead to me. After all, that's exactly what she wanted."

I NEED TO FOCUS ON GETTING AS FAR AWAY FROM THIS PLACE as possible and in turn away from my parents. After the visit I paid *Mommy Dearest*, it's never been any clearer to me I don't belong here. Doing everything in my power to fit in and be a part of Malibu Cove's Elite Society, to have a family, was a waste of time, energy, and my overall sanity. Because the moment I stepped out of the straight and narrow line, I was shunned.

Leaving is my only option. Leaving this perfectly imperfect life behind, leaving him. To do so, I must remain focused on my future, learning to live life on my own terms,

and unfortunately that leaves no time for any man. No matter how sinfully sexy, tattooed, and dangerously addictive he may be.

“So, are y’all going to Tate’s tonight?” Brooklyn asks in some weird fake southern accent he’s picked up, as he comes around the corner entering our theater room. Located in the house’s attic, and my favorite room other than my bedroom, our built-in theater is home to a one hundred- and twenty-inch, full screen projector, and three rows of the comfiest, leather recliners known to man. Various classics movie posters line the walls of the room, giving it a total Hollywood Studio vibe. Eclectic yet cozy.

“Sounds good to me,” Donovan replies all too eagerly, shifting toward my brother who seems oddly chipper this afternoon.

“No,” I snap, both Dee and Brooklyn spinning to face me with stupefied grimaces.

“What do you mean no P? It’s a party,” Dee mutters, anxiously chuckling, and silently begging me with her gaze to reconsider. It’s obvious she’s adamant on going because Brooklyn is the one asking if we’ll be there, but I don’t think it’s for the reason she wants it to be. My darling bestie, if only she could see how wrong she and Brooklyn would be. My idiot brother wouldn’t know how to appreciate a girl as amazing as my best friend. I mean, he’s fucked Tate for God’s sakes. More than once, which in my books is no longer grounds for a mistake or a lapse in judgment.

I throw a handful of cheese popcorn in my mouth, “Yeah, Tate’s party,” I mumble between chews, “Why on earth would I go anywhere near that bitch?”

Brooklyn scoffs, leaning back against the doorway. “Oh, get over it Phoenix, it was one simple joke about mom, and you got your panties all up in a twist.”

One simple joke he says. More like one God awful joke about my mother, not three days after she tried to commit suicide. The evil skank thought it prudent to ask how my poor mommy was doing, having heard she accidentally took a few

too many diet pills. After all that was what she needed. *You're not supposed to take more than prescribed for them to have a quicker effect. Didn't she understand that, or does she need brain supplements too?*

I glare daggers at my dear brother. “One joke about our mom who not forty-eight hours prior was getting her stomach pumped asshole.”

He stares up at the ceiling bored, “Well, nobody told her to take the damn pills P.”

My heart sinks. I cannot believe my brother might be as cruel as he is behaving, especially after the heart to heart we had a few nights ago. I know Brooklyn had taken the divorce with a grain of salt, simply showing indifference toward both my parents, but we nearly lost my mother. It doesn't matter if she wasn't a great mother, or even how she treated me last night leaving me no hope of ever seeing or hearing from her again, I know deep down she was suffering.

Before last night, I knew this scandal was slowly killing her, and the conversation we had proved I was right. It may not have been the loss of the love of her life, which I doubt she truly cared about my father, but the shame accompanied by being cheated on, dumped, and humiliated that way. I thought that ought to have meant something to Brooklyn.

I was wrong.

It ruined her, but Brooklyn didn't know what I knew, and yet he didn't care. I guess he's more like the woman who brought him into this world than he thinks.

“Whatever, come or don't. I don't care. All I know is it's going to be epic. She invited one of her dad's clients to perform, hasn't said who, but her dad represents some of the best.” Of course. Tristan Mortimer of Mortimer Records, one of the top record labels in the industry, is Tate's father. Equally pleasant company, Mr. Mortimer is a top-notch perv who uses his position as the head honcho of the label to lure in young, upcoming new artists. It's all just speculation, but I wouldn't doubt it given the whore he has for a daughter.

I guess that's being unfair on my part. After all, I'm not uptight and suicidal like my mother, nor a cheating narcissistic sleazebag like my daddy.

"Hey man, are we leaving or what?" Fitz calls out, as he enters the room and joins us.

Brooklyn snorts, "Yeah going, Phoenix here is skipping the party tonight."

Fitz's gaze finds mine, his sweet puppy dog eyes pleading with me. "Come on P, it's going to be sick. Tate may be a total attention seeking bitch, but man can she throw a party."

I shake my head, and he doesn't push. I know deep down Fitz finds my hatred toward Tate justified. The girl is a total bitch to everyone and is the *typical high school mean girl*, hiding her insecurities under her cruel tongue.

However, Brooklyn doesn't seem to get the hint. "Yeah, what he said. And while you're at it, why don't you bring that Darcy chick, she was hot." Both Fitz and I immediately turn to glare at Brooklyn, but I do one better and flip him off.

Yet something about Fitz's reaction seems a little off. I know why I'm rolling my eyes at my insufferable brother, needing to keep Darcy as far away from him for her own safety, but I can't help wondering why Fitz is looking at my brother like he wants to strangle him.

Beside me Donovan scoffs, annoyed, acting like what Brooklyn's said didn't affect her.

As soon as the guys leave, Dee turns her body toward me, glaring angrily. "Please tell me you were just joking. P come on, I want to go to the party, and I can't go without you."

"Dee, you know I hate Tate, I loathe her. I can't just show up at a party at her house."

"We'll barely even see her with the amount of people that will be there. Plus, I'm hoping the performer is none other than Baker Brooks."

Baker Brooks the country star God. Born and raised in Malibu Cove, Brooks is a MC High legend. It's great to see

one of our own out there conquering the world, and after hanging out with Baker last summer at one of Tate's dad's events, I have to say no one deserves the fame and fortune more than him.

"Dee, I don't get why you want to go. You know Brooklyn actively fucks Tate. For someone who's in love with my brother, I don't get why you'd want to be anywhere near her."

Her cheeks flush, worry suddenly clouding her eyes. "Tate is not worthy of dating Brooklyn, he knows that. He's just killing time with her. Besides, if I avoided everyone Brooklyn actively fucks, I'd have no friends. Well, except you. I mean you heard what he said about your new friend Darcy," she says snidely.

"Do you need anyone else?" I ask, only making her more annoyed. "Come on Dee, are you jealous of Darcy? Because you shouldn't be. Darcy told me she isn't interested in Brooklyn. If anything, I think she might have a thing for Fitz."

"Really?" she asks, her eyes lighting up. "Then we should totally make that happen, at the party."

"Slow down there Dee, I said she might. Don't get any ideas or start with your supposed matchmaking skills. I won't push Darcy on that, besides, even if I was, I'm not going."

She pouts. "Phoenix."

"Donovan."

Dee leans over her recliner, wrapping her arms around my waist. "Pretty please with a double scoop of rocky road and mint chip ice cream, and a dollop of whipped cream on top."

I glare down at the top of her dirty blond head. "That's playing dirty Donovan Kennedy."

She grins wide, lifting her gaze to meet mine. Big, round, blue eyes excitedly staring at me. "It's the only way I know how to play."

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

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PHOENIX

“Hot damn Phoenix, you look smoking,” Ryan Easton, my brother’s other best friend, calls out as Dee, Olly, Darcy, and I walk over to their table. It took a bit of convincing, okay a lot of groveling on Donovan’s part, to convince Darcy to come with us. I told her if Darcy agreed, then I would too, only I didn’t think Darcy would ever agree to come to a MC High party at Tate Mortimer’s house. A pool party at that. Especially not since Tate’s made her life more miserable than mine.

All eyes in a fifty-foot radius turn to me, every single guy from our school eating me alive with their stares.

“Dude, that’s my sister,” Brooklyn grunts, elbowing Ryan in the ribs. He crouches forward, a tad bit over dramatizing the act.

“Thanks, Ryan,” I mutter, flipping my brother off. I ditched the edgier grunge look of the last party and resorted back to my usual boho chic style. Jean shorts over my white two-piece bikini, and a coverup with wide embroidered sleeves.

“You sound surprised Ryan, Phoenix always looks hot,” Olly counters, making Ryan shift nervously.

“Yeah, I’m just saying she looks...”

“Enough about my sister and what she looks like. We get it. She’s beautiful, she’s related to me after all,” Brooklyn, whines leaning against the cocktail table. Twenty tables surround the giant pool in the middle of the expansive yard, filled with those huge obnoxious floaties, and drunk teens in tiny bikinis and board shorts. *And is that a surfboard in the middle?*

A large stage is set up at the front of the outdoor deck, surrounded by inflatable pools filled with ice, beer, seltzers, and hard liquor bottles.

Tate Mortimer has outdone herself once again.

“Oh god, why did I agree to come here,” Darcy whispers as she leans toward me. I’m about to answer when Fitz suddenly interrupts me.

“So, P,” Fitz calls out as he waltzes over to us, throwing his arm around my shoulder, “What made you change your mind?”

I elbow him yet end up more hurt than he does when my bone hits his rock-hard abs, yet all the dark-haired varsity blues boy does is chuckle. “Dee wanted to come. You know I get sucked into everything she does. And Darcy here, has never been to an MC High party.”

“Yes, it’s very easy to get sucked into these gorgeous beauties,” Ryan says, hugging Dee under his arm, and throwing another over Darcy. For a moment Dee tenses, a bright pink flush covering her cheeks and Darcy’s as red as a lobster, or what I looked like last summer when I fell asleep on my stomach on one of the lounge chairs, and nearly burned to a crisp.

Brooklyn clears his throat, proceeding to take a swift drink of the beer in his hand, frustrated. “Ryan, why don’t you go get the girls a drink,” Brooklyn orders, and Dee stills under my brother’s murderous glare.

“Why don’t you go?” Ryan counters, though the moment Brooklyn’s angry eyes find his friend, Ryan caves. “What can I get y’all?”

Well, that was weird.

“I’ll have a Topo Chico, Mango,” Dee and Olly both shout at the same time.

“Alright, and you, Darcy?” Ryan mutters, looking over at Darcy and me.

Darcy turns and looks up at me confused and panicked, “I don’t...”

“We’ll both take a Strawberry Guava.” I answer for her and the look of relief that washes over her face makes me

smile. I'm glad I met Darcy and have gotten to know her better. She's exactly the friend I need right now. A friend who isn't judgmental or well versed in my *world*, simply someone who watches from the sidelines and tries her hardest to stay out of the limelight. I could learn a thing or two from her and I plan to.

It also helps that Donovan is looking at her with a scheming look, ready to play matchmaker between Fitz and Darcy in order to keep her as far away from my brother as possible. I'm in as long as it means the two of them get along.

"Ryan, wait! I'll go with you," Cole calls out running after him.

"Darcy," Brooklyn mutters, coming over to sit by us around the large fire pit we've moved to. "Why haven't I ever seen you at a Malibu Cove party?"

Darcy shrugs her shoulders, her gaze shifting to the right where Baker Brooks, the top country star of the moment, serenades his number one hit, *Caroline*, while a rowdy crowd of drunken teenagers sing along at the top of their lungs. We stayed back not wanting to be shoulder to shoulder with the crowd and are enjoying the concert from the comfort of the large lounge area beside the pool house. It's secluded and out of the way from the rest of the party, perfect for wanting to lie low.

Since the moment we arrived, the judging stares and snickers started, most of them surprised I showed my face given everything that's happened. The other half were eager to watch, expecting a cat fight to break out between the party's host and me.

"No reason in particular, I guess it just isn't my scene," Darcy replies, tucking her brown hair behind her ear. She's in her usual casual attire, jean cut-off shorts that look to be a size or two bigger than what she wears, and a loose-fitting tank over her hot pink bikini. At least I got her to put on a swimsuit, just in case.

Without warning, Tate shows up and joins us, catching the end of Darcy's response, while she moves to sit in Brooklyn's

lap. “Come on Brooklyn, it’s because until last week our little Darcy here was an ugly duckling. She’s just now transformed into an average looking goose.” Tate’s face squirms in disgust, clearly insulting Darcy, who despite her ill-fitting outfit is ten times more gorgeous than she is, just to make herself feel better.

“Fuck off Tate,” Cole snaps back, taking the words right out of my mouth. “You’re just hating on her because everything you see there is natural beauty, unlike your plastic, Botox infused ass.”

“Bite me Sheppard,” Tate counters back, but it’s a lousy comeback and everyone knows it. With that, Tate stands and stomps off toward the group of *friends* she keeps, linking her arm around a person I hadn’t noticed was here.

Chad.

He’s dressed in a pair of navy-blue board shorts and a pale pink linen polo, with small navy-blue anchors embroidered onto the expensive fabric. Designer no doubt, even his underwear is. His hair, golden and pristine, looks longer than his usual perfectly trimmed style but somehow it compliments him. Tate reaches up on her tiptoes, whispering something in his ear, and making him turn toward us, his gaze meeting mine. A sly smirk draws at his lips, and I can’t help but feel his eyes rake over me, desire gleaming in their depths.

That’s odd. In the almost two years I spent with Chad, never once did he look at me the way he’s watching me now. Shaking the thoughts of him out of my head, knowing it will do no good to reminisce on the past, I lean toward Darcy, whispering in her ear so no one else can hear, not that they’re still paying attention having quickly moved on to play some drinking game someone’s suggested.

“Ignore the bitch, everyone else does. She’s just jealous I’ve been knocked off my hypothetical pedestal, and they still refuse to put her on one.” Darcy smiles, though she hides her laugh behind her hand, her gaze shifting toward them.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m used to girls like Tatum. You’re forgetting I’m invisible and that title usually comes

with a mean girl or two.” Darcy’s smile fades at her confession, but nothing about the way Brooklyn and his friends, including Fitz, were looking at her when we arrived, proves that statement. She places a hand on my thigh, and leans toward me, “And by the way Chad’s eyes haven’t once left yours since we arrived, I’d bet my life no one could ever replace you.”

SURPRISINGLY, I’M HAVING MORE FUN THAN I’D FIRST expected, possibly because I’ve avoided Tatum and her conniving stares since she left us earlier. Between a few games of beer pong and a dip in the pool, this is the most fun I’ve had in weeks.

It might also be because I haven’t seen Maverick roaming around here tonight, not that I’m looking for him, or was even expecting him to show up, but his absence is noted. Especially since every five minutes someone asks if anyone has seen him.

“Let’s go back into the pool,” Dee whines, tugging my arm toward the pool steps. Darcy and I came out about an hour ago, needing to pee, and have yet to go back in.

Beside me Darcy shifts uncomfortably as I nod, stripping out of my cover up. I didn’t put my shorts back on, and honestly have no idea where they ended up. “Come on Darcy, let’s take another quick dip before we get out of here. I promise it won’t be much longer.” I chug the fifth or sixth seltzer I’ve drunk, not to mention the shots I took in between, before setting the empty can on a table to my right.

“I think I’ll sit this one out, there are a lot more people in the pool now and I just don’t want...”

Dee cuts her off with a smack of her lips, “Come on Darcy,” she whines, shimmying in her neon orange bikini highlighting her golden tan. “You look smoking,” she coos, lifting Darcy’s tank over her stomach and revealing a tan and toned abdomen.

“Oh my god, Donovan!” Darcy squeals, tugging her shirt back down.

From the pool, Brooklyn and the guys hoot and holler annoyingly, chanting for us to *take it off* and jump in the pool to join them. A bright red flush covers Darcy’s cheeks as she nervously fiddles with the hem of her shirt, tugging it as far as it can go, stretching the loose material further.

Dee scoffs, flipping the guys off. “Darcy, we already saw your banging body. It’s a shame you don’t show it off more. If you would have seen the way the guys were practically drooling over you, just like they are right now, you’d change your mind.” Dee winks at her, and Darcy’s cheeks darken in embarrassment.

“No one was drooling over me, especially not when the two of you look like that and are standing next to me, which is totally fine. I would prefer it if they don’t.”

“Whatever,” Dee says, dipping her toes in the water. Ryan swims up to the edge of the pool reaching his hand out for her to take. She does, slowly descending into the turquoise water. Tate’s pool is not only Olympic size, but the bright turquoise bottom reflected through the clear water, gives it a gorgeous tint. “I’m going in with or without y’all.”

Slowly she fades under the water, a drunk Ryan wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her in deeper. From the corner of my eye, I can see Darcy shift uncomfortably where she stands, her gaze following the rest of the group still egging us on.

“What is it, Darcy? I mean you can’t be uncomfortable, we were in the pool just a moment ago?”

“There weren’t this many people and...” she pauses, and I can tell she’s staring directly at Fitz who’s gaze also watches her with a strange expression. “I think it’s time I head home. This is way out of my element and it so fucking obvious I don’t belong here Phoenix.”

“Come on Darcy, you belong here just as much as any of them do. We’ll chill in the pool for a while and then I promise

we'll head out. Believe me, I can't stand being in the presence of Tate much longer anyway, without shriveling up and dying."

My sarcasm relaxes her, and she laughs slightly, nodding as she removes her T-shirt and slips out of her shorts. Dee's right, Darcy has a cute body she hides beneath her ill-fitted clothes, but I don't judge her for it. To each their own.

"Yeah baby, woo-hoo!" Cole and Ryan both shout out as Darcy and I step into the water.

The pool is crowded with obnoxious teens with drinks in their hands, giant pool floaties, and some including Dee and Ryan, getting a little too cozy underneath the water.

I have noticed nothing between the two of them before, but the way Dee's gaze is focused on Brooklyn despite Ryan's hands around her waist, makes me believe there's a method to her current state of madness.

"Don't be a dick Cole," I scoff, splashing his face as I slide in beside him. Brooklyn scoots in closer to Darcy but just before he throws an arm over her shoulder Fitz shifts sending a wave of water toward them.

"Why don't we play a game of truth or dare," Fitz says, everyone's eager attention shifting to him.

Cole slides up next to Fitz throwing an arm around his shoulder, "Ooh yes, let's make it strip truth or dare. You pussy out of the dare or refuse to answer with the truth and you gotta strip an article of clothing off."

"We're in fucking bikini's moron, stripping would mean we'd be completely naked," Dee interjects, but based on the look on all the guys faces, that was exactly their plan.

This time my brother slides in between Ryan and Dee and pats the top of her head like you would a dog or a small child. "My goodness, Donovan Kennedy, you are a genius," he mocks, "Blonde, beautiful, and brilliant."

None of us miss the sarcasm in his statement, well none except Donovan, whose blush creeps across her face and neck,

surely from the fact my idiot brother, despite insulting her, called her beautiful.

Quickly realizing everyone's looking at her, Dee shakes it off and flips him off. "Fuck you to Brooklyn," she curses, pushing away from him and getting as much distance as possible.

"Kids come on, we're missing out on the fun. Let's see, I'll go first." Cole's gaze flicks back and forth between the group, silently playing eenie, meenie, miney, moe before landing on me. "Yes, my darling Phoenix," he murmurs, swimming up beside me and lifting me in his arms.

"Oh, no you don't, Sheppard. I never agreed to your stupid little game." I try my best to wriggle out of his arms but it's impossible. The guy may be long and lean but there is no doubt his entire body is made of pure muscle. Hours and hours spent on the beach, in the water, and surfing every wave he can ride, Cole is ripped. "Let me go, Cole."

"Truth or dare, P?" he asks, ignoring my pleas. There's no use. Everyone's watching me, even a group of my classmates whom I have no idea what their names are, swim over to us, eager to see what I will decide.

But before I can respond, the last two people I want anywhere near me, swim through the crowd, bodies falling to the side making room for their arrival. Arm in arm, well more like limbs entangled around one another under the water, they make their way directly to Cole and me. Even Fitz and Brooklyn shamelessly move to the side to make room for them, but their glares prove they're just as happy as me to see them.

"Well, this ought to be interesting," Tate murmurs, her shrill voice figuratively making my ears bleed. Her blue eyes, just like Chad's beside her, are bright red and glossy, but whereas hers stare at me with a deep hatred, his don't leave Cole's hands still wrapped around me. "Why don't I go first," she says when no one else speaks. "Tell me Phoenix, why is it you and Chad broke up after two years of unconditional love?"

I can't speak, my throat's constricting, bile rising inside me. Not just because I have nothing to say to the bitch, but I'm physically incapable of verbalizing a simple coherent answer for her question. I bet she knows exactly why we broke up, and Chad's fear-stricken expression proves me right. "I know, he divulged that information the other day when we were um, hanging out," she coos, with a fake ass wink.

"Tate," Chad warns, but the bitch doesn't hold back. Her eyes flare with anger, and I'm trying my best not to combust or erupt in flames.

"Well, I guess we all know it's because he cheated, am I right?" she asks but she doesn't expect an answer. She knows. "But tell me dear did you ever discover who it was he cheated with?"

Rage consumes me, her penetrating gaze making me want to throw myself on her and yank the fake extensions out of her hair. Her makeup of course is still perfectly intact, yet she still looks as trashy and plastic as she is.

Everyone around us watches me intently. Their mocking stares and quiet snickering make my body tremble in anger. I can't believe I hadn't put two and two together before. The day I found Chad balls deep in some skank, my vision blurred, fury overwhelming my senses. I didn't see her face - all I saw was a blanket of blond hair splayed out on the bed beneath him. But now it all makes sense, and her snide smile tells me I'm right. *How could I have been so fucking stupid?*

I can't stand to be in her presence any longer. If I do, I'm not responsible for what happens. But if I walk away now, she wins. She'll only prove to everyone watching that she took him from me, and my fleeing will make them believe I give a shit, which I clearly don't. The two of them deserve each other.

I don't get the chance to decide my next move. I don't have the time to react, because in the next second, without warning I'm given an out. Brooklyn's fist slams into Chad's unsuspecting, yet well deserving jaw, his head flinging to the side by the force of my brother's punch.

“Fight!” some asshole shouts over the clamoring of the crowd and just like that, everyone in the pool scrambles, as Brooklyn and the guys throw punches at Chad and his posse of pretentious fuck boys.

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CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

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PHOENIX

I needed to get out of there.

It took me only five minutes to rush out of the place, watching chaos unfold before me as fights broke out all along Tate's property. It's not like my brother and his friends to fight, but the fact Brooklyn stood up for me like that, warms my heart. Especially since the two of us have been on the outs since everything that went down between our parents.

Ten minutes later, I was wandering aimlessly onto the beach all alone at two o'clock in the morning, which is probably the worst mistake I had made since agreeing to come to Tate's party. Second to starting a brawl and fleeing as fast as I could.

As I rushed out toward the beach earlier, I heard Dee and Darcy calling out my name, but their cries were lost in the sea of squeals from the rampant, drunken teens fleeing to safety.

I drank more than I usually do, thanks to Donovan and the twelve pack of Topo Chico Seltzers we drank and am nearly tripping over myself as my bare feet curve into the grainy sand to keep me balanced. I tried to have fun, genuinely I did. Being around Olly, and Dee has been my only safe-haven, even Darcy's company has kept me from losing my mind, but being back around the guys today, my brother, Fitz, Cole, and Ryan, I almost felt normal. That is until she came over with him.

Tatum and Chad were the sole reason for my excessive drinking tonight. The two of them, combined with the anxiety of being around my classmates and listening to them blatantly talk shit about my weak-minded mother, made me furious. I wasn't about to prove to them that crazy runs in the family.

And after the bomb they just dropped on me and everything that came after, I needed some fresh air.

I slipped off my sandals, basking in the feeling of the cool sand between my toes. I've been out here for twenty minutes,

my phone vibrating incessantly in my hand, but I don't want to talk to anyone right now. I can't face them until I'm sober and my walls of confidence are back in place. Not after what everyone just found out.

I know they're all asking themselves the same two questions. *Was it the first time? If not, how long had it been going on?*

Tiptoeing along the edge of the water and up the pier, I'm suddenly startled by deep grunting and loud moaning sounds coming from the darkness. *What the fuck?* I thought I was alone out here. I saw a few people rushing out here, but they've been gone for some time. And I know for a fact mountain lions are not common in these areas.

I chuckle out loud to myself, "Really Phoenix, mountain lions?"

Walking over toward the noise coming from underneath the pier, yeah, I realize that is the typical "*this is how you get killed in a horror movie*" stunt, I come across a man and a woman making out against the railing. *Gross.*

"You have got to be fucking kidding me!" I unintentionally shout out, startling the pair of lovers. I guess my filter must be broken tonight. Their gazes instantly shift toward me, and to my surprise, I recognize the deep blue, decadent eyes of the assailant. Eyes that were nowhere to be found tonight, eyes that keep me up at night. Well, this explains it.

"Shit," he grunts, hurriedly pushing the chick off him, and tucking himself back into his jeans.

"I'm," I chuckle nervously, "I should go," I stutter, turning my back away from him and the mystery blonde he just had his tongue in.

"No wait," he calls out, following me. He's shirtless, torn black jeans unbuttoned and falling dangerously low, revealing that same sexy V-line I saw a few weeks ago and haven't been able to get out of my mind. Luckily, it's dark out, yet I can't help but imagine if the shadow I saw a moment ago was the outline of his cock before he tucked himself away.

If it was, holy shit.

“She should join us, Maverick,” the chick sings songs, and it’s at that moment I realize who she is. *Fucking bitch, how the hell did she get out here so quickly?* “Apparently she and I have a type.”

I grunt and shoot forward reaching for her, but Maverick’s arms catch me and haul me back. Though I don’t miss the glimpse of fear that flashes in her eyes. “You should head back to your party, Tate. It sounds like things have settled down. I’ll catch up with you later,” Maverick snaps, dismissing her without so much as a backward glance.

“Ugh fine but you’re missing out,” Tate sneers, stumbling away, not failing to wink at me as she passes me by.

Fucking bitch.

I roll my eyes, scoffing at the incredulous bitch. In my mind, however, that scene in Mean Girls where the entire school is behaving like savage animals plays out with me pouncing on her. Kind of like it just occurred back in the pool.

“You didn’t have to get rid of her. I’m leaving.”

I make the mistake of turning back to Maverick once I’m out of his arms, and again fall victim to his mesmerizing gaze which is currently luring me into the abyss. He tugs his T-shirt on over his head. “No please, you saved me from something I’d regret in the morning,” he jokes.

Are you kidding me? This is amusing to him.

I roll my eyes even harder, exasperated by his casualness. “Oh fuck off Maverick, it didn’t look like you were *regretting* it. Do you even know why the whole brawl broke out in the first place and why the bitch bailed on it?”

Instead of acting annoyed, he looks quite amused, chuckling as he runs his fingers through his black wavy hair. “Why?”

“Ugh never mind.” If he wants to shove his tongue down her throat and his cock anywhere near her, that’s his prerogative.

“What are you doing out here alone, anyway?” he asks, ignoring my drunken rambling, but his eyes never once leave me. Instead, they drink me in, raking over my body and leaving a trail of chills in their wake.

“I needed some air,” I snap, but just as I say it, a shiver crawls up my spine, the wind picking up slightly. It’s early September now, nights turning cooler as we fall into Autumn.

“Were you not having fun?”

For some odd reason, I easily forget I couldn’t get away from him fast enough. “I can’t believe I once found these stupid parties *fun*.”

He chuckles, clearly from my state of unease. “Come on, I’ll walk you back.”

Blinking rapidly, I stare up at him, confused for a moment before realizing what he’s saying. Oh, there is no way I’m going back to that party now. Not after what I just witnessed.

“No can do,” I murmur immediately, cursing myself for sounding so stupid. “I mean, I’m not going back. I’m going home.”

He chuckles louder now, clearly laughing at me. “Then I’ll walk you home.”

“I know my way.”

His hand rests on the small of my back, and suddenly I’m gravely aware of the fact I’ve been standing here with him, wearing nothing but my thin triangle top bikini and high-waisted cheeky bottom. I left the party as quickly as I could, ditching my shorts and coverup, and grabbing only my phone before rushing out. Shit.

“I’m sure you do. Doesn’t mean I can’t walk you,” he responds, his eyes roaming hungrily over my body on full display.

I scoff indignant, remembering how just two minutes ago I caught him with his tongue down Tate’s throat and now he’s here, looking at me like he’s planning on doing just the same. As if.

“Aren’t you eager to get back to the party and finish what you started?”

Mav’s gorgeous blue eyes light up with curiosity instead of becoming angry because of my sarcastic jab. “Is that jealousy I hear on the tip of your tongue, Nyx?” he smirks, nipping at his bottom lip, his hands crossing over his chest. “You know you’ll always be my favorite watermelon flavored kiss.” He winks and my body reacts to the memory, heat rushing to my center as he murmurs the last word, slow and steady. I can’t go there again. With just the way he’s staring at me, I’m dangerously aware of how badly I’m turned on. Snap out of it, Phoenix.

“Yeah right. More like utter disgust,” I groan, reminding myself he just had his tongue shoved down Tate’s throat. “I seriously thought I was going to vomit when I caught you with your tongue down Twit Twat Tate’s mouth.”

“Twit Twat Tate?” he asks, curious to know more, and I realize the nickname Dee, Olly and I gave Tatum freshman year slipped out. Oops, guess I did drink more than I’d thought.

“Nothing, just a sweet nickname I gave her years ago. You know cause well, it’s self-explanatory.”

A wide grin spreads across his face, reaching from ear to ear, clearly entertained. “Damn, now I’m curious to hear what nickname you and your little friends have given me.”

My faulty filter continues to fire off. “Sex-God Rebel with too many causes, Maverick the Great, to name a few Olly came up with. If you ask me, my favorite is Satan’s Spawn.” I turn away from him, not wanting to give him any more attention. Apparently, yet again my confession is more intriguing than insulting.

Beside us, the waves are quietly rustling in the ocean, almost dormant, whispering into the night. In the sky, the full moon glimmers brightly, illuminating the walkway back toward the long row of houses, dimly lit in the distance.

A stretch of million-dollar beachfront mansions extends down the shore of Malibu Cove, Tate's nestled about a mile away from mine and Dee's.

"Clever Nyx," he responds, bringing me back to the moment before me. I lower my eyes in submission, nervous I've said more than I should. "Do you want to be my Queen of the Night?" I freeze, shocked by his comment, my eyes flicking back to his, unsure of what he meant by it, and trying to find answers in the depth of his watchful stare.

Maverick's been adamant about using that god awful, totally unclever nickname, which I'm not ashamed to say I looked up. *Nyx*. The primordial goddess of the night. The daughter of *Khaos*.

Come to think of it, given the circumstances in recent months, it's perfectly fitting.

Though what shocks me is the title accompanying the nickname. *Queen*, his queen. *What on earth does that mean?*

I decide to ignore it, continuing to walk down the illuminated path toward my house. I thought brains were supposed to stop working while intoxicated, not begin overthinking.

"Hold up Nyx, I told you I'd walk you."

I hurriedly wave him off. "No need, I'm good."

He chuckles, a deep, throaty sound that makes me shiver as I feel his step close behind me. "Okay, either way, we're going to the same place. It would be stupid, not to mention completely absurd, for us to walk separately."

Dammit, he's right, and the smug bastard knows it.

Suddenly, as we continue down the path to my house, I realize I didn't let anyone know I was leaving the party. My phone's been buzzing non-stop since I disappeared.

I unlock my screen, ignoring the fifteen missed calls and over thirty unread text messages, and begin typing a quick text to Olly and Dee in our group chat.

ME: LEFT THE PARTY, THERE'S NO WAY I WAS STAYING THERE A SECOND LONGER. SAW SOMETHING THAT MADE ME GAG ON MY WAY OUT, SO I'M CALLING IT A NIGHT. PLEASE MAKE SURE DARCY GETS HOME SAFE.

I lock the screen, but almost instantly, it vibrates with a reply.

OLLY: BITCH, WHAT THE HELL! WE'VE BEEN TEXTING YOU LIKE CRAZY! I SWEAR I WANTED TO SEE YOU BEAT THE SHIT OUT OF THAT BITCH. BTW, WHAT THE FUCK? SPILL IT.

DEE: WHAT THE HELL P, YOU SCARED US HALF TO DEATH? I'M SUPPOSED TO SPEND THE NIGHT AT YOUR HOUSE!

Shit. I forgot Dee, and I planned to make a weekend out of tonight. Party Friday night. Brunch Saturday morning, hungover and with impressive appetites.

ME: RAINCHECK. I PROMISE I'LL ANSWER ALL QUESTIONS TOMORROW. BRUNCH AT NOON, MY PLACE. I'LL ORDER IN FROM GEOFFREY'S.

That ought to make it up to them. After all, food is the way to my best friend's hearts.

OLLY: A WOMAN WHO KNOWS THE WAY TO MY HEART. A TRUE RARITY.

DEE: FINE, BUT YOU BETTER GET THE LOBSTER QUICHE. BTW FITZ TOOK DARCY HOME ;)

ME: DONE.

Gripping my phone in my hand, I look up and find Maverick staring down at me. His eyes watch me curiously, unsure if there is a smile currently on my face when I was just scowling at him not two minutes ago.

“What?” I ask, baffled by his blatant staring. It's unnerving the way he's looking at me, like he's undressing me with his eyes, not to mention creepy.

“The boyfriend texting you?” he drawls,

“What?” I ask, confused by his question.

“Are you texting your boyfriend? Is that why there’s suddenly a giddy smile on your face after texting?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but no. I was texting Dee and Olly, letting them know I left the party you know in case I go missing or end up dead on the beach. Come to think of it, I should alert them I’m with you.”

The last part sends a teasing smirk across his face. “Afraid I’ll hurt you?” he whispers, deep and gravelly as he approaches me. “Because you should be.” His fingers, long, tattooed, and calloused, trail a path over my cheek and down my neck, tracing over my pulse point. They wrap around my neck, his thumb pressing against the dip in my throat, and I swallow hard, feeling my pulse vibrate against his touch.

I inhale sharply and he chuckles at the notion. *Son of a bitch.*

Mav drops his hand stepping back. “Come on, let’s walk.”

“How is it so simple for you guys?” I blurt out, not making any sense. I’m not stupid when it comes to the laws of attraction. I know despite everything that’s happened lately I remain one of the hottest girls in Malibu Cove. I can see the primal arousal when he looks at me. Forbidden for sure, but it’s there, and I’m afraid he senses it’s more than reciprocated.

But he just had his tongue down someone else’s throat for God sakes, Twit Twat Tate’s to be exact, and now he looks like he wants to shove it down mine.

“Walking?” he asks mockingly.

“No dumbass, sleeping with random women all the time. Being a cliché fuckboy.”

He scoffs, “First of all, ouch. I don’t sleep around all the time and if I’m being honest, Tate’s not all that random. Second, are you finally admitting you want to sleep with me, sis? Not that it wasn’t obvious.”

“Fuck you Maverick, of course not. I’m just saying you guys just pick your bait and conquer.”

“Alright, let’s get you home. You’re not making any sense.”

“I’m being serious. How is it so simple to just fuck around with different people and not care what the rest of the world thinks of you? How could my father just disregard his marriage because of that *woman* for so long?” Tears prick the whites of my eyes, threatening to make their appearance and drowning the two of us in a wave of reckless despair.

“Phoenix,” he mutters so tenderly, reaching out and wiping away a stray tear from my eye. I quickly pull back and turn away, ashamed of what I’m allowing him to see. “Phoenix, what did he do to you?” I turn back and look at him, baffled by his question.

“What?”

“Chad, your boyfriend, is that what this is about?”

“No. Fuck no. We broke up,” I answer softly. “My father cheated, my mom went bat shit crazy, and my life became one giant Hollywood sized scandal. Guys like Chadwick Hollingsworth III have reputations to uphold, and I no longer fit the mold of the perfect girlfriend/trophy wife he needed.”

Anger clouds his eyes. “Fucking bastard.”

“No, trust me, he did me a favor. It wasn’t till he dumped me via text which said, and I quote, “*we aren’t a good fit*”, did I realize I can’t stand the guy. Chad meant nothing to me.” I feel myself needing to clear up.

“You don’t have to lie to me. I can tell he hurt you and I’ll make the bastard pay.” His reaction is unnerving and unexpected. I can’t believe Maverick is getting so defensive.

“He... I...” he moves in closer, pushing a loose strand of hair away from my face.

“Nyx, you can trust me,” he groans.

It’s too much. Everything I’ve been going through the last six months comes crashing down on me. The affair, my downfall, Maverick Carter.

“No, I should go.” I push him away and rush down the beach toward my house. I can’t trust him. I now know I can’t trust anyone.

Despite that, I’m aware Maverick is following closely behind me, and something about that excites me more than it should.

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CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

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MAVERICK

I should have let Phoenix walk back home alone. After all, I needed to put some distance between us. But I couldn't.

I was so close to bringing my lips down on hers, the mere sight of her under the moonlight was too stunning to ignore. Though the way she found me under the pier, with Tate's tongue in my mouth made me sick to my fucking stomach. I only gave in to Tate because she was easy pickings, practically throwing herself at me since the moment I stepped foot in Malibu Cove.

Since I couldn't get the thought of Phoenix looking so fucking gorgeous out of my head, laughing with the guys who were ogling her all night, I needed a distraction. My cock was throbbing and painfully hard, I needed to find release before I exploded into a million fucking pieces. It obviously didn't work because here I am, walking down the sandy beach beside her, watching her sexy as fuck body sway with every sultry step she takes.

After the commotion that broke out at Tate's party, Phoenix must have run out, ditching her clothes, probably losing them somewhere along the massive crowd that rushed out, which is why she's in nothing but the skimpy bikini that leaves nothing to the imagination and is making my aching cock, throb violently in my jeans. I don't know exactly what went down at the Mortimer's mansion, since I left early on as soon as I saw Phoenix arrive and realized I would not be able to keep my hands to myself if I went anywhere near her. I stayed out of her view and eventually left the party unnoticed, pacing back and forth along the shore, and smoking a joint down under the pier.

When Tate appeared just moments after the fight broke out inside her party, I was high as fuck and was picturing it was Phoenix's blond hair I had wrapped around my fist, violently tugging it back and hearing her moan my name as I kissed her.

But it wasn't like anything I remembered. Because Tate was not her.

Now, as I follow closely behind Phoenix, all I can think about is how much I want to be doing all those things to her. Phoenix Bancroft has gotten under my skin, and that wasn't part of the plan. I can't let it happen again.

Three quarters of the way to the house, Phoenix slows, allowing me to catch up with her. Five minutes later, as we arrive at the back gate of the property, she struggles to enter the security code into the pin pad unlocking the gates. I swear this place is a fucking fortress with all the locks and codes needed to open before entering, but I guess when you're one of the richest men on the West Coast, you can never be too careful. Especially not when you have a gorgeous temptress living under your roof. I can think of a million ways I'd break into this place just to get to her.

I easily move around her, entering the four-digit code myself, and we both tirelessly watch the gate open immediately. She's stiff and in a drunken daze as the black rod-iron slides through its tracks, and I have to pull her body toward me to prevent the gate from hitting her as it opens. The moment my fingers graze the soft skin above her waist, my cock instantly throbs, pressing hard against my jeans. I groan, biting down on my lip to suppress the guttural sound that leaves me, and follow her toward the back sliding glass door leading into the house, watching her continue to struggle with her keys, as she tries to unlock it.

"Need a little help there?" I ask, her body stilling as if she's just now realizing I'm behind her again. Fuck, she didn't seem this drunk earlier. *What the hell am I doing?*

Slowly and with a lustful expression visible in the glazed-over look in her eyes, she turns and blatantly stares, her small frame enveloped by mine towering over her. Beneath me she feels minuscule and all I want to do is wrap my arms around her and press her skin against mine, savoring the feel and taste of her for as long as I can, exerting power over her like never before.

Though I don't move a muscle. I'm incapable of moving in the slightest, afraid the most innocent of touches is going to have my dick firing off and I'll be coming like a prepubescent boy in my pants. Instead, I watch the sudden rise and fall of her chest, and the way her hair, now in messy waves, falls between her breasts. My frame casts a shadow against hers, just as the solar paneled sensor lights flicker on and illuminate us in the darkness that surrounds us. Her eyes are suddenly crystal clear and glossy, the whites a pale pink color showing how fucking trashed she is. Or has she been crying?

Whatever happened earlier tonight, has her this way, and suddenly I'm pissed I don't know how to fix it.

Shaking the unnerving thoughts out of my head, I take my own keys out, unlock the door, set the alarm, and follow her down the hall and up the stairs to her bedroom, not wanting to leave her alone in case she needs something.

Though when we arrive at *my* bedroom, she pulls out her key once again, trying to unlock the door. Austin had locks installed in every room of the house after it almost got broken into last summer. He now trusts no one, not even his own staff to come and go from the house when no one is here. The only person who has access to everyone's rooms is Marta.

"I can't get the door open," she admits, struggling to fit her key into the keyhole of my bedroom door.

"The door to your room?" I ask, amused, laughing at the fact that not only is she completely missing the keyhole of the doorknob, but it's the wrong fucking key. I expect her to realize the mistake she's making, but I'm also in no hurry to correct her.

"Yes, asshole, I don't know why, but my key isn't working." She huffs, blowing her hair out of her face and pouts, and I've got to say it is the most adorable thing I've ever seen.

I smile to myself, realizing this girl is far more wasted than she seems. No wonder she wasn't making any sense earlier.

“Here, let me try,” I tell her, moving toward the door. Instead of taking her keys, I reach into my pocket and retrieve another set. With one quick turn of the knob, the door opens. “After you,” I say, motioning her to enter.

Phoenix walks in and puts her keys down on the “table” to her right, yet instead of landing on the invisible table, they fall straight to the floor.

“Where’s my table?” she asks, “And my light switches. I can’t see anything.” My room is pitch black thanks to the blackout curtains I had put in and even though it’s next to hers, the setup inside is much different. Moving beside her, I walk over to the wall on my left and turn on the lights, watching her squint as the bright light blinds her.

“Aaah,” she groans. “Turn it off. It’s too bright.” I do as she asks, dimming the light, casting a small shadow along the room.

Her gaze travels through the room, wall to wall, floor to ceiling. “Why is everything in the wrong place?” She takes a minute, her eyes squinting as she tries to focus. “Oh my god!” she yelps, covering her mouth with her hand. “This isn’t my room!”

My grin widens as her eyes continue to flicker back and forth. “No,” I murmur, “It’s mine.” She takes a step back, tripping, and slamming her back against the wall behind her. *Is she really that drunk?*

“Mav I...”

“Made a mistake and walked into the wrong room? No worries, we’ve all done it. At least you didn’t fall asleep in my bed and wake up in the morning not knowing where the hell you were,” I say, trying to lighten the mood with a charming smile.

“You’ve done that?” she asks, her wide eyes innocently looking up at me and making my cock flinch in my jeans. Fuck she’s beautiful.

“Yup, a few times, actually. Lucky for me, it was only my roommate’s bed.”

“I feel like an idiot. How can I forget where my room is?” she mumbles, overwhelmed by not only what’s happened but I assume what occurred earlier tonight.

I trail a finger over her cheek, once again stepping into dangerous territory. “Hey, it’s no big deal. It was a simple mistake.” *Why do I feel the need to comfort her?* Her heated skin cools the inside of my icy palm, but I don’t fail to notice the way she flinches away from me when I touch her.

“I’m sorry, it’s just been a long day. Can you let me out and point me toward my room please before I end up in Brooklyn’s.” Ignoring her, I don’t back away or drop my gaze from hers.

Instead, I take a step closer to her, pushing her back against the now closed door. “What is eating up that beautiful heart of yours?” I ask, shocking the hell out of the both of us. *Where the fuck did that come from?* Phoenix looks up at me just as stunned, her big, glossy aquamarine eyes silently pleading for me to leave it alone.

“I…”

“What did Chad do to you?”

Her body suddenly goes stiff, and her expression shifts from stunned to appalled by my question. “What makes you think he did something to me?” she blurts out, leaning back away from me. It’s no use, my hand rests at the small of her back keeping her close.

“Well, for one you guys broke up, and two, that look in your eyes, that vulnerability, can only mean one thing: heartbreak. I saw the way he was looking at you today.”

It’s true, one reason I left the party was the way Chad was staring at her, like he knew her. Like he knew what made her tick, what her body craved. I know it’s fucking bullshit, he could never be enough for her, but part of me wonders if she’s still pinning over him. I know he did her dirty, breaking up with her after her dad’s affair became public instead of sticking by her side like a real boyfriend would have.

However, from what I've heard, they were together for two years. It had to have meant something to her.

Phoenix's shoulders straighten, and she cocks her head to one side. "Why are you so sure he broke my heart? Maybe I broke his?" she stammers, growing defensive.

"I wouldn't doubt it, baby," I reply. "Losing you would surely drive any man crazy. But he must already be insane if he dared to hurt you."

I can tell I've shocked her yet again, the way her body relaxes into my hold. A soft blush creeps along her cheeks, down her neck, and across her chest, her whole body now flushed and aroused. I inhale sharply, taking in the scent of her perfume. Fuck she's intoxicating. She's growing weary but the need to hold her walls up in place is much stronger than her desire to let them fall.

"What's it to you, anyway? Why would you care? You're my stepbrother for all of two hours and now suddenly you feel you deserve to know what goes on in my personal life."

Well, that I wasn't expecting. "I just..."

"Forget it," she huffs under her breath, pushing me off. "I should get going."

Shaking my head, I press harder against her, my hand grabbing her wrist and holding it up over her head. She winces, wriggling away, but it's no use. There is no way she'll be able to fight against me. "What did you mean by what you said earlier?" I ask, not wanting to let her go. She looks confused, angry, but overall curious. "It must be so simple for guys to sleep with random women all the time?" I remind her.

She nips at her bottom lip, her thighs clenching as I mimic her move. "It's true. Men use women all the time and even date a handful at a time."

"Is that what you think?" I counter, raising a brow defiantly.

"Yes."

“I’ve never been with two women at the same time. Even when I’m not in a quote-unquote *relationship*, if I’m sleeping with one woman, I won’t sleep with another until things are through with the previous one. Non-Exclusive exclusivity.”

She scoffs rolling her eyes, and the urge to bend her over my knee and smack the defiance out of her perky, round, and sexy ass almost makes me break my restraint. “Like that’s any better.”

“Yeah, my methods might seem strange to some, but they work. They keep me from being hurt.”

“So, you shoving your tongue down Tate’s throat earlier and now here trying to do the same with me, is you only being with one woman at a time?” Phoenix tries her hardest to seem unaffected but the tinge in her voice as it reaches a higher octave at the end, proves she’s jealous of my earlier lack in judgment.

“That kiss with Tate meant nothing. She came onto me, and you just caught us before I pushed her away.”

“You’re saying if I hadn’t interrupted the two of you, you wouldn’t still be currently fucking her against the pier?”

Her jealousy is now blatantly obvious.

I can’t believe I’m having this conversation with her. She’s drunk, hell she walked into my room thinking it was her own. I shouldn’t be arguing with her, let alone undressing her with my gaze. She looks even more beautiful in the dim light. Her small triangle bikini top emphasizes the top of her perfectly shaped breasts. She has no shoes on and stands a good foot shorter than me, but her demeanor makes her appear taller. Her blond hair is disheveled, and her skin glistened with sweat caused by the run on the beach.

No woman has ever questioned my ways before, and it is tantalizing that this feisty chick isn’t afraid of telling me exactly what she thinks. Maybe it’s her alcohol ridden brain that’s making her so brave, regardless I am achingly turned on.

I lower my head, moving in closer to her as she watches me intently with doe eyes, big and round and the clearest blue-

green color. Her makeup is slightly smeared but gives her an even more seductive look. Her lips are plump and pink and all I want to do is kiss them. I stand directly in front of her, looking down into her eyes, and can sense the effect I'm having on her.

"You think you have it all figured out?" she asks, breaking our connection and leaning her head to the side slightly.

"Yes," I reply, closing the distance between us, my lips grazing her cheek. "All women want to be used at one point. Women don't want exclusivity, no matter how many times they try to convince themselves they do. All relationships end in heartbreak and regret. Sleeping with different men here and there doesn't make anyone a slut, and it protects them from being hurt by an unfaithful relationship. Everyone goes in knowing what to expect." Phoenix looks up at me like I'm speaking in some other language, yet there is a curiosity in her eyes. I can't figure out what she's thinking.

"You know women pretty well?"

My fingers graze her silky skin, trailing over her ribcage and up her arm making her shiver. "I can tell what a woman wants and when she wants it. I know how to pleasure them without making them feel used or dirty. It's all in the way you approach sex. I don't take without giving. In fact, I give, and give, and give." My lips find the pulse point in her neck, and I lick small circles along her skin. "And in the end, that's sometimes all I need." Her mouth drops open and I can feel her breath hitch. God, all I want is to kiss her again, but I know I shouldn't. Quickly, I step back and turn away from her.

"I..." I hear her inhale a sharp breath. "Show me," she whispers, barely audibly. I freeze at her words.

Suddenly, I hear a soft thud and turn back to look at her. My heart nearly stops when I find her standing in nothing but her blue thong bottom. Her bikini top on the floor at her feet.

I swallow hard to stop myself from rushing over to her and throwing her onto my bed, sucking those perky tits in my mouth and tugging on her taut nipples.

“Nyx,” I groan, warning her, but it comes off more like a feral growl.

“Mav,” she nearly moans back in the slickest, sexiest voice I’ve ever heard.

“What are you doing?” Not once looking away from her exquisite body, the perfect hourglass figure, five foot four with perfect size B cup breasts, a slim waist leading into beautiful hips, and an ass I can just imagine is just as amazing.

“Show me how to be like that. Show me how to be unattached. I can’t stand to be hurt like my mother. I won’t. Show me how you do it,” she pleads, and it’s enough to make my dick painfully hard. Taking slow and steady steps, she comes up beside me and reaches for the hem of my shirt, tugging it up.

“Please,” I growl, placing my hand on top of hers against my waist. “You’re drunk. You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“Oh, but I do. Trust me, I’ve sobered up rather quickly.” Licking her lips, she stares at skin showing at the bottom of my shirt. I tug it up and over my head, now shirtless before her and the hunger in her eyes is too much for me. Biting her lip, she hooks her finger in my jeans.

“Phoenix,” I warn one last time.

“You asked me to trust you.”

“I meant to confide in me, to tell me what’s going through your pretty little head.”

“How am I supposed to trust a word you say?”

I lean forward, resting my lips against her forehead. “I’m not him. I’m not your father.”

“Then show me you’re not like him, Maverick. Show me I can trust you,” she murmurs, giving me the most seductive look. The shocking part is she isn’t even trying to. That’s just who Phoenix is. Naturally alluring and hands down the sexiest woman I’ve ever come across. I can’t contain myself anymore and crash my mouth onto hers, taking her in for a passionate,

mind-numbing kiss. Her lips, so hot and sweet, her tongue eagerly moving perfectly in sync with mine, like a race to see who can go deeper, harder, faster. I bring my hands to her head cupping her face between my palms, and slowly trail them down her body, admiring every inch of perfection they caress, until I reach her ass, gripping one cheek in each of my palms.

She groans, driving me crazy and I hoist her up, her legs instantly wrapping around my waist holding on for dear life.

“Maverick,” she moans breathless, our mouths coming apart for just a fraction of a second. Her hands twist in my hair while mine stay on her ass, holding her against me, grinding her up and down my hard shaft. She’s hot, so fucking hot. “I need more,” she pleads. “Show me more.”

“All in good time, baby.” I whisper into her neck, sinking my teeth into her sensitive flesh. God, she smells incredible, and tastes even better. Her usual fruity perfume mixed with the saltiness of her skin from the saltwater pool. “Now Maverick, I need more of you.” She kisses me hard and needy, her mouth trailing kisses down my neck, every slick of her tongue scalding hot.

Unable to contain myself, I take her mouth again, and walk us back to the bed, throwing her down rather harshly. Once against the mattress she arches her back, giving me a better look at her incredible figure. Immediately her legs fall open, ready for me to settle between them.

“Maverick.”

The sound of my name leaving her luscious lips is too much and I’m almost prematurely ejaculating in my jeans like a fucking preteen going through puberty for the first time. Unbuckling my jeans, I tug them down, kicking them off and standing in nothing but my boxers, my erect dick making a tent in them. Her gaze lands on my building cock, and I’m so eager to have her lips and sweet little cunt wrapped around it.

“I’m the one that’s supposed to show you how a woman should be treated. Let me.” Phoenix stares up at me with the most lust filled eyes I’ve ever seen, and nods barely noticeable. “Are you sure you want this?” I ask again, not

willing to take advantage of her and have her later throw it in my face out of spite or regret.

She sits up glaring at me - her aroused gaze now cloaked with rage. "Can't you just give me what I want and stop acting so damn chivalrous? You're the one that keeps reminding me *"we are going to happen"*. I said yes Maverick, that's all the consent you need." I stand still in front of her, my gaze dropping to my feet. Fuck she's got a mouth on her, and her sassy little attitude is making me want to fuck the hell out of it. My eyes find hers again and her expression softens. "I want this, Maverick. I need this."

Slowly I strut toward her, kneeling on the edge of my bed. The black silk sheets are a stark contrast to her sun-kissed flesh, even in the dim light casting shadows around her she gleams. As she watches me stalk toward her on my hands and knees, she swallows hard, sliding all the way back until her back is pressed up against the headboard.

I bring my lips to hers, breathing against her perfect mouth. "Baby, I'll fuck you till you can't even remember your own name. But first," I mutter, yanking her legs down, her head flailing against the pillow, and covering her body with mine, "I need to taste you, all of you."

"Yes," she groans, arching her back and giving me better access.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

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PHOENIX

“You’re so fucking perfect, Phoenix.”

“Mav,” I whimper, unable to say anything else, nearly dying of embarrassment as I lay practically naked before him. Maverick Carter, my hateful, sexy as sin stepbrother, is kneeled between my legs telling me how beautiful I am as he takes a deep inhale lowering his nose to my pussy. Fuck me, I’m so turned on its unbearable and frankly painful.

I could die and go to heaven right here, right now. The sight of him smiling above me, shirtless as I lay beneath him in nothing but my cheeky bikini bottom, is too much. I feel like I’m going to combust spontaneously, or at least prematurely orgasm. *How did I end up in this predicament?*

Oh yeah, my mouth wouldn’t stop babbling and my brain was firing off alcohol induced thoughts verbalizing them into incoherent phrases. The way he kissed me was like nothing I’d ever experienced before. He kissed my chin, my neck, my chest, moving around and licking his way around, gripping my ass in his hands and digging his fingers into my flesh making me so wet and needy for him to shove something else inside of me. The thick, hard bulge in between his legs stealing my breath away.

His hand reaches behind me, pulling me closer to the edge of the bed while lowering his mouth to my breasts and perky nipples.

Cobalt eyes turn dark as he stares at my taut, hardened peaks. “Fuck Nyx, these are just fucking perfect.” Mav’s frenzied mouth comes down over my nipple, his free hand kneading my other while rolling the tip between his fingers and tugging. I’m writing beneath him, the sensation almost surreal. I can come right here and now from only the feel of his tongue licking and his mouth sucking.

His wet tongue flicks and sucks expertly. “Aaah Maverick,” I gasp. It feels so good.

Chad had never made me feel this way in the two years we were together, on and off. Maverick has barely even touched me, and I’m already a pile of exposed nerves firing off like hellfire. His tongue finds my other nipple and does the same wondrous tease over and over. Rough fingers trail down my stomach and find my waist, slipping under the fabric of my bottoms until he reaches my incredibly needy and slick pussy.

“Fuck baby, you’re so wet,” he grunts as his hands slide back and forth through my arousal. “You feel so good, so greedy and ready babe.”

I can feel my pussy already pulsating, begging for something to strangle. “Maverick, please, don’t make me beg.” I never beg, but I’m not against starting now.

He chuckles, the fucking bastard chuckles but God he looks so beautiful when he’s not sulking or scowling at me. Panty melting, heart stopping smile, that’s the perfect way to describe it. “Slowly baby, all in good time. I’m nowhere near done with you.” He moves his fingers back and forth, inserting one at a time, stretching me, and preparing me for his thick, monster cock outlined in his jeans.

“Aaahh,” I cry out in pleasure. He’s three fingers deep in me and I can feel him spreading me.

“Such a sweet sound, baby. God, you’re so tight, I can already feel you pulsing and tightening around my fingers.” He continues to move in and out of me, his fingers curving to hit that fictitious spot in my core, as he teases my nipple with his other hand.

I say fictitious because no other guy I’ve ever been with has found it. I mean I haven’t been with many. Chad and I were sixteen when we started officially *dating* and between the times we’d *take a break*, I only fooled around with two other nameless guys I met at the Echo. No one has ever made me feel the way Maverick is.

“Mav I…”

“Let go baby, let go for me.”

His voice, so deep and gravelly, brings me to the edge and his wish is my command. “Fuck, yes. I’m coming!” I moan as I reach my climax and explode around his fingers. My orgasm trickles through me, my pussy tightening around his fingers begging for more.

“So beautiful,” he whispers, pulling his fingers out and sucking them into his mouth. God, I nearly came again just from watching him taste my arousal on his long, tattooed fingers that were just inside me making me feel an ecstasy I’d never felt before. “So, fucking perfect.” He comes back up and kisses my lips, taking me in for another mind-numbing kiss. I can taste myself on him, God can’t believe I just orgasmed with just the touch of his fingers inside me.

Fucking amateur Phoenix.

“I’ve never,” I whisper, almost embarrassed. “I’ve never come like that before.”

“Well, I’m glad to be your first,” he answers with an ear-to-ear smirk that almost has me coming once again. His hands move back down to my pussy.

“What are you…” my words die in my lips as he removes my thong and picks my legs up over his shoulders, settling his mouth between them.

“Oh, I’m not done with you yet. I haven’t even had a real taste,” he utters, like it’s the most casual thing in the world. He kisses the insides of my thighs, moving his way to my pussy.

Immediately, I can already feel another orgasm building inside me just from looking down at his head of dark wavy hair between my legs. The first stroke of his tongue is tantalizing.

“So sweet, fuck Nyx,” he says, devouring me slowly with his experienced mouth. “How is it possible for you to taste this fucking good?”

“Yes,” I moan, raising my hips and moving back and forth, grinding against his face.

“Slow and steady baby, we’ll have time for you to ride my face soon.” He continues to lick every fold, every inch of me and teases me, his tongue sinking into me, his teeth biting my clit, tugging as I whimper so close to another orgasm.

“Shit, I’m coming again.”

“I’m ready for you baby, let me have it,” he murmurs, and I come so hard at his demand, I think I’m about to pass out.

Two mind numbing orgasms is all it took for my mind to go completely blank. Two mind numbing orgasms from one deliciously sexual man. *Is this what I’ve been missing out on having been only with Chad? Is this the sexual pleasure I can get from any man, or is it just because it’s Maverick?*

“Phoenix!” Suddenly I hear shouting coming from the hallways, startling me and making me jump up in shock. The sudden sound of my name coming from someone who’s not the sex-God currently making me scream his, has taken me out of whatever lust induced coma I was just in.

“Oh my god,” I cry out, proceeding to cover my mouth with my hand in regret.

I jump off the bed, and run toward the closed, not locked, door of Mav’s bedroom. Only then do I realize I’m completely naked.

Maverick follows behind me, carrying the T-shirt he took off. “You might want to at least put this on.” The fucker can’t hide his devious smirk obviously finding this moment amusing.

I stare, baffled at him like he’s crazy. “Phoenix!” they shout once more and now I can distinctly make out Brooklyn’s voice. Fuck, my brother cannot catch me walking out naked from our stepbrother’s room.

“Shit, what do I do?” I ask, panic written all over my face, and audible in my cracked tone of voice.

“You remember we share a connecting door, right?” he mocks pointing toward the door separating our bedrooms. “I mean, unless you want to step out into the hall looking like you’ve just had two mind blowing orgasms.”

“Mind blowing?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh yes, don’t deny I blew your mind.” I blush, unable to respond. I don’t take the shirt from him, instead, I walk over naked toward the door connecting our bedrooms. *How can I suddenly be so embarrassed when just a second ago I was shouting his name as I came into his mouth?*

Mav comes up behind me, pushing my hair over my ear.

I pull away from him as a shiver crawls up my spine, not able to let myself fall back under his spell. I reach for the knob and turn it, luckily the door opens, and I quickly slide through, closing it and locking it before reaching for the towel from my shower earlier still thrown over my desk chair. It’s a good thing I hung it here instead of throwing it in the laundry hamper in my bathroom for Marta to find.

I wrap the white plush towel around my naked body just as Brooklyn bangs loudly against my bedroom door. “Phoenix, are you in there?” He’s frantic and I’m suddenly more afraid than worried.

Running my fingers through my hair, trying to tame the *thoroughly fucked* part off me, I walk over to the door, unlock it, swing it open, and hit my dear brother with a death glare. “What the fuck B?” I shout, beyond irritated.

Relief washes over his eyes. “God, I’m so glad you’re okay. Wait, what the hell? Are you naked?” His gaze drops to the towel wrapped around me, suddenly anxious and uncomfortable.

“Well, I was about to shower B, you’re the one barging in on me in the middle of the night.”

He shakes his head as if remembering why he’s at my door. I’m surprised he’s even home, given how wasted he was earlier, I assumed he was going to crash at Fitz’s place, or go home with whatever needy chick he could mindlessly fuck.

“Donovan said you just left. I was worried about you after everything that happened.” For the first time in months, I see sincerity in my brother’s blue eyes when he looks at me. A genuine worry and regard for my safety and wellbeing. It’s

unnerving but I can't say I don't like it. I missed him, more than I care to admit.

“Well now, you see I'm fine, goodnight, Brooklyn.”

I dismiss him and he turns to walk away, but just before he takes the first step, he extends his hand blocking me from closing the door. “Where'd you go?” he asks, a hint of curiosity and suspicion etched in his question.

“What do you mean?” I mutter away to anxiously, hoping it's not visible in my nervous expression.

My brother lifts a brow and runs his fingers through his dirty blond hair. “Maverick's car is in the driveway. Did you see him when you came in?” Uncertainty coats the blue of his eyes, and I must bite on my tongue to keep calm.

“I came straight here as soon as I left. I don't know when Maverick came in,” I answer dismissively.

He doesn't look convinced, but he drops it. The alternative is just too awkward a truth for him to even imagine.

I'M READY FOR YOU BABY, LET ME HAVE IT.

And like an obedient little girl I complied.

I awaken with a pounding headache, an inconceivable shrill pain digging at my temples and forcing my head down on the pillow like a heavy cement block tied around my neck weighing me down. However, the ache in between my legs, the erotic, tantalizing sparks have me squirming on the mattress in an almost painful pleasure. An ache so intense I feel as if I'm going to explode.

I force my eyes open, immediately remembering the events of last night, a flash of memories of the embarrassment I made of myself, throwing myself at Maverick like some needy, desperate hussy. Or worse like Tatum Mortimer.

I can still feel the weight of his body on me, the feel of his lips and mouth kissing me, tasting me, and bringing me to the

precipice of the most intense and surreal pleasure I've ever experienced.

Forcing myself out of bed, I quickly shower and get dressed, heading down to the kitchen to order brunch before Donovan and Olly arrive. I do not want to keep my two besties waiting. *Hangry* does not look good on them.

To my surprise, the two of them are already in my kitchen, dancing around making themselves mimosas and a pitcher of Bloody Mary's. However, it's the potent scent of coffee that hits me like a wave of happiness.

"Oh, sweet God, thank you for giving me such amazing friends," I shout out, rushing toward the kitchen counter and reaching for a mug, pouring myself a cup of coffee. I lean over and hug Donovan from behind. "Thanks, Dee," I say, leaning my head on her shoulder.

"Anytime, babe, though I'm not the one who made the coffee." I watch her, confused by what she's saying. *If it wasn't her, then who?*

I'm too lost in my thoughts to notice their gazes drift behind me.

"If I would have known you'd be this grateful over a cup of coffee, I'd have made you one a lot sooner, *sis*." My skin prickles with goosebumps at the sound of his deep, raspy, morning voice. Maverick walks up behind me, running his stubble-covered chin against my bare shoulder, making the nerve endings in my pussy, fire off like they weren't just getting the same attention from him last night.

I feel him inhale as he runs his nose through my hair. "Mmm, I'd do anything to hear that sound leave your lips, again." Suddenly my cheeks flame, knowing well enough he isn't talking about the moan I let out when the sweet aroma hit my nostrils as I walked into the room. No, he's referring to last night as I moaned and called out his name while I rode his fingers and came all over him.

I take a sip of my coffee, trying my hardest to ignore the heat traveling down between my legs, reminding me just how

incredible last night really was, and climb onto one of the kitchen stools.

In front of me, Donovan and Olly stare in complete and utter shock, like they've just seen a ghost or something unbelievable, eyes open wide, and jaws dropped to the floor. "Are we still down for Geoffrey's?" I ask, ignoring Maverick's inappropriate comment and their reactions to his nearness.

Dee snaps out of it first, reaching for the bottle of champagne sitting in a bucket of ice on the counter, her gaze flicking back and forth between Mav and me. I know she's trying to read the situation, and I hope she does soon because I have no fucking clue what's going on. My best friend is the most inquisitive, and intuitive person I know.

"Well, I just called and placed the order, used your credit card by the way. It'll be here in twenty. I let them know it was urgent."

"Good," I utter back curtly, taking another sip of the warm, delicious, and bold coffee in my hand. That's when I feel him take a step back, but the awkward and heat filled tension in the room continues to threaten to smother us in a thick, heavy fog, lingering around the room. God, please make it stop. I can't bring myself to meet Maverick's gaze when he walks around me and reaches for the pitcher of Bloody Mary's in Olly's hand. I can feel his eyes stuck on me like the tackiest glue there is.

My jaw drops when I catch sight of him, wearing black basketball shorts hung low on his waist and nothing else. The perfectly defined muscles of his chest, abs, and back make my mouth water, and by the looks on my friends faces, he has that same effect on them.

"So, guys," Maverick interjects, leaning back against the island countertop. My gaze follows the muscles of his lower abdomen, down to the deep V hidden behind the thick waistband of his shorts. "Did you notice Phoenix just disappeared from the party last night? You know after the whole fight broke out. I wonder where she went?" The asshole winks at me and I know I've been caught staring.

“Nowhere!” I mumble under my breath, shifting my gaze back to the cup in my hand. The fucking asshole knows exactly what he’s doing and how my friends will respond.

Olly decides now of all times to snap out of his daze and jump into the conversation. “No really P, what happened last night? You said you would answer all our questions today.”

“Yeah, P, what were you up to?” Maverick adds, mocking the whole situation.

“Out,” I shout at him, pointing to the front door, but the bastard laughs it off.

He stands up straight and leans toward me, whispering into my ear. “Tonight, we’ll continue where we left off. This isn’t over. I haven’t had nearly enough.”

My face pales at his forwardness, and I feel like slithering down to the ground in embarrassment of what he’s implied. Fucking asshole.

“Okay what the hell was that all about P?” Donovan shouts the moment Maverick retreats upstairs with his coffee in one hand, a Bloody Mary in the other, and my dignity neatly tucked into his back pocket.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I groan, side stepping her and heading toward the glass sliding door leading onto the backyard deck. “Is the food here yet?”

Dee runs behind me to catch up, her heels clicking against the marble floor. “Oh, no you don’t Phoenix.” Before I can reach the handle to slide the door open, she blocks my path, slamming her back against the glass.

“Shit Donovan, you’re going to break the damn thing,” I cry out, but it doesn’t seem to faze her. No, my bestie is on a mission. Remember when I said she was the most inquisitive soul I’d ever met. Add persistence to that resume too.

I roll my eyes and give in to her badgering knowing she won’t stop until she gets what she wants. “Nothing happened okay. I was drunk, ran into him down at the beach on my way out, saw something incredibly unpleasant, and I came home.”

Dee places her hands on her hips and skeptically raises a brow. “Try again.”

“Fine, he walked me, more like followed me home, and when I was struggling to unlock the door of my room, he helped me. The problem is when I stepped in, I was confused, asking him why everything inside was rearranged.” Dee laughs hysterically while Olly comes to join us, bewildered by the story, nearly dropping the tray of drinks in his hands.

“It’s not funny Donovan. I walked into *his* bedroom, not mine. Can you imagine how humiliated I felt, all while he laughed like it was the funniest thing in the world.”

She nods her head still blatantly laughing at the turn of events. “Oh, if only I’d been there.”

Yeah, if only, then maybe she would have stopped me from indulging in my stepbrother, especially after what I caught him doing with Tate not twenty minutes prior.

I grab a champagne flute from Oliver’s tray and gulp it down in one drink, while Donovan slides open the door and follows me out.

“It was awfully nice of Maverick to tend to your drunk ass,” she says, as we walk over to the lounge area under the deck patio. “Are you sure that’s all that happened?”

I set my empty flute down and refill it with the ice cold Veuve Clicquot. “Of course, I’m sure, Dee. What are you insinuating?”

“Nothing, just be careful P. He may be as hot as they come, but he’s got a rep.”

A rep I’m aware of. Nobody here is more informed about my stepbrother’s notoriety. The rumors floating around about his violent and aggressive tendencies, not to mention his father’s infamous acquaintances and illegal extracurriculars, are more than rumors. They’re hard cold facts about the life he led before returning to Malibu Cove. A life I know very little about. But maybe that’s for the best.

“Maverick sees me as an annoying, spoiled brat. Besides, he’s always calling me sis. We’re practically family, you have

nothing to worry about.”

Her tone suddenly turns serious, as does the look that washes over her face. “I wish I could get you to see the way he looks at you P. Or even the way the tension in the room builds the moment the two of you are within fifty feet of each other. It’s palpitating, heated, and almost suffocating. If you saw that, then maybe you’d realize Maverick Carter does not, in any way, shape, or form, see you as his sister.”

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CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

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MAVERICK

“So, Maverick, I hear you were caught down by the beach with your tongue down Tatum Mortimer’s throat,” Ryan states more than asks, as he approaches the table the “Cool Kids of MC High” occupy, underneath the sycamore tree in the main senior courtyard.

He places a tray of food, packed with two cheeseburgers, crinkle-cut chili cheese fries, and a tray of buffalo hot wings drenched in ranch, on the table in front of him. It never ceases to surprise me the amount of food a high school football player consumes during preseason. Of course, instead of your typical gross cafeteria food, everything in the Malibu Cove Dining Hall comes directly from the five-star restaurants in the area, or you get to leave the campus for lunch, but I rarely see the guys do that.

“Or was something else caught down hers?” Cole jokes as he joins us, high-fiving Ryan before he sets an equally full tray of food in front of him. I ignore the two of them, not because they annoy me, but because I have no interest nor intention of answering either of their questions, again. Instead, I blow out a ring of smoke toward them and take another hit of the neatly rolled up joint I lit up, choosing to skip the lunch line.

“I’ll say exactly what I said to you guys during first period earlier when you asked me. Nothing happened. I was interrupted, more like distracted, before I made a mistake I’d surely spend the rest of my life paying for.”

Brooklyn joins the three of us, and I can’t help noticing the tray of food, like the full one in Fitz’s hand beside him, is missing. The two co-captains find their seat on the bench across from me, easily joining in on our conversation. “Oh yeah, and what distracted you?” Brooklyn asks.

I almost think of lying or changing the subject, but it’s about time to put my plan into action. I came here for one reason, and one reason only, and that is to ruin Austin Bancroft and his two illustrious children. Sitting at their lunch table,

mingling along with their friends, and enjoying my time here wasn't part of the plan. I wasn't supposed to make friends, and the way these guys are treating me, inviting me into their little group when I know it's not something they normally do, is exactly what it feels like is happening.

Things are getting out of control.

I turn my attention toward my stepbrother, who watches me with a heedless expression I can't quite read. Brooklyn is still wary around me, and I'm almost proud he sees the dark side of me that shouldn't be trusted. "I ran into Phoenix on her way home," I mutter, and almost instantly his demeanor changes, firing on high alert. "She didn't quite look like she could make it out of the party on her own, so being the gentleman and protective stepbrother I am, I walked her home. She was fumbling with her keys when we arrived, so I let her in and waited with her till she sobered up. I didn't want to leave her alone. She was pretty drunk."

"When she left the party, she didn't seem that drunk," Fitz says, looking back and forth between Brooklyn and I, trying to get a read on the situation and my stepbrother's reaction. Brooklyn gaze is now burning into me, his jaw ticking, and lips twitching in anger. I know he almost caught us, and I know when he ran into Phoenix, she was beyond flustered and acting suspiciously guilty. I heard their entire exchange and I also know that he stood outside my door for five minutes before retiring to his after she slammed her bedroom door in his face.

She lied and told him she hadn't seen me, and now I'm here telling him I was indeed with her.

"You've got something to say, Fitz?" I counter his suspicion.

"Just saying it was an eventful night, you know given the shit that went down between her and Tate. Seems unlikely she willingly left with you after catching you with Tatum." The four guys drop their gazes to the tabletop, refusing to look me in the eye, clearly to not give away any more information they already have.

So that's how they found out about Tate and I. Phoenix must have had an interesting conversation with her besties and told them part of what happened. At least I don't think she'd have confessed what happened between us.

"So, the fight was between her and Tate?" The question slips out of me before I can stop it. Neither one of the guys answers me, but their stoic expressions say it all. Well, this is news to me. I knew something had happened and given the rift between Tate and Phoenix I've become privy to, I knew it had to do with them. An argument about some dude no less, since it's obvious Tate obviously wants everything Phoenix has, or had.

"Whatever, I'm telling you the girl couldn't walk straight, let alone comment on my decision to be with Tate. I'd be an idiot to leave her out on the beach in that state, helpless and vulnerable."

"I bet that's exactly how you'd prefer it, isn't it Maverick," Brooklyn sneers, almost spitting his words out at me.

I can't hold back the chuckle that leaves my lips, and that only makes Brooklyn scowl deepen. I swear I hear him growl, like a rabid animal ready to pounce on me and stake his claim of alpha. Little does he know, the only alpha around here is me, and his sweet little sister can attest to that.

Memories of the way her body squirmed beneath me, writhing in inconceivable pleasure from my calloused touch. The sounds she made, the sweet aroma of her arousal, and the way her lips parted ever so slightly, her ragged breaths escaping through the small opening between her plump lips as she moaned for me. My cock instantly becomes hard as it very well remembers everything my mind does.

"Whoa boys, calm down," Cole says, bringing me out of my memories. Fitz sits up straighter, ready to do anything his best friend requires of him. These boys seem like lovers not fighters, but if the rumors around have any validity to them, and if I'm not mistaken around here, they usually do, Brooklyn hasn't been himself in quite some time.

“Phoenix was drunk, end of story bro. Besides, she was deadly hungover the next morning. I was a total gentleman to our sister, end of story. Besides, I think I dodged a bullet with Tate. That one screams trouble, and definitely not the good kind. It’s a good thing Phoenix showed up when she did.”

I can see the internal fight happening in Brooklyn’s mind, ravaging his thoughts as he watches me intently trying to figure out my game plan. The need to believe nothing happened between Phoenix and I, versus the impending doubt and suspicious way he ran into her last night. He doesn’t know what’s true and what’s a total bullshit lie, but he’ll believe the lies I’ve told him, he has to, because I don’t think he’s ready for the truth. Hell, I don’t think I am either.

Brooklyn reaches out for the joint in my hand, and I pass it to him as a peace offering. He clears his throat after taking a long hit. “Yeah, good thing.”

“MR. CARTER. MR. CARTER. MR. CARTER!”

I heard her the first time; I heard her the second time; but it’s the third time that really struck a nerve. I’m not sure what it is about high school teachers and the obsession with hearing the shrilling tone of their voices, but I’ve just about had it with this bitch.

“Do you genuinely enjoy the fucking sound of your voice or are you adamant on bursting our eardrums with the screeching tone that leaves you Mrs. Thomas?” I ask, making more than a few students gasp out loud, while the others burst out in hysterical laughter.

“That’s enough!” she squeals, making the entire room explode in thunderous roars. This classroom, unlike the rest, is set up in various rows of bar height tables, each with a sink, torch in the middle of the table, and a large magnifying glass you’d find in a college science lab. The desks are a clear-cut white marble with specks of dark blue and gold swirled along the top, and instead of desk chairs we’re sitting on white,

round and backless stools, which are incredibly uncomfortable. I lean forward, my elbows on the desk and wink at Donovan who sits in front of me next to Ryan who's gleaming triumphantly at me.

Donovan however, watches me suspiciously, not with amusement or bewilderment like the rest of the class.

"Mr. Carter, please exit my classroom and head to the principal's office this instant. I will not stand for the disrespectful tone of my students and the blatant insults you just threw at me." The woman's practically fuming as she huffs out the last of her words.

"No matter how true they ring," I add, and it only irritates her further. "Not a problem Mrs. T, I was done with my assignment, anyway." I turn and wink at Darcy, my chosen lab partner and if I'm not mistaken, Phoenix's newest pet project. And I don't mean that in the insulting and demeaning way it sounds. Darcy Bennett is the newest addition to MC High's long list of leading ladies.

She's gorgeous, in a very subtle and natural way. She's a little tomboyish for my liking, but I think it's only to hide whatever insecurities she's had over the years. From what I've heard until this summer, Darcy was dubbed the "ugly duckling" not because she was ugly per se, but the glasses, braces, and boyish figure was the opposite of all the other plastics around her.

"I'll get the notes off you later, Darcy," I whisper, grabbing my backpack and heading toward the exit.

"You're the man Maverick," I hear someone call out before the door shuts closed behind me.

Great, exactly what I wanted. I didn't intend to insult Mrs. T, actually I kind of feel bad for that one, trust me though I won't lose any sleep, but it was my intention to get out of class, preferably out of school altogether. I need to put my foolproof plan into motion. I don't have time for high school and the childish drama that accompanies it.

Brett is supposed to meet me for lunch with more information on Austin Bancroft's secret love child, which I've decided is news I'm ready to make known to the world, if Bancroft doesn't pay for my silence, which I'm pretty sure he will, given his egotistical and self-righteous nature.

I head over to the principal's office, which I know will be a waste of time. Here at MC High, the students don't get in trouble by the faculty and especially don't receive any form of punishment. Their parents' paychecks and generous donations keep this place up and running, and with substantial contributions comes no responsibility. If anything, my trip to visit Principal Rutherford is a simple courtesy. He'll send me back to class with a warning and a promise to do better, and I'll be on my way.

Except I'll be on my way out of the school and to my meeting with Brett.

Walking down the long empty hallway toward the front office, my black boots squeak against the polished white marble floors as I reach the two double doors leading into the school's front office. Not a soul is out of class, just me and the light gray and teal emblem of a great white shark painted at my feet, our school mascot Poseidon.

"Good afternoon, Margarete," I call out to the older woman behind the front desk as I enter and let the doors slam shut behind me. Her graying blond hair is combed into large spiral curls pinned up in an old Hollywood style, and the bright red stain on her thin, wrinkled lips adds to the rumor she was an actress before becoming Principal Rutherford's assistant principal.

"Nice to see you again Mr. Carter, although not under these circumstances," Margarete grunts, shaking her head as she looks down at the cell phone in her hand. "Kelly let me know the quite colorful language you used in her class earlier, and I have to say that was a bit harsh even for you, son."

Shit, that I wasn't expecting. I must give Mrs. Thomas some credit, the old hag has some balls, and it seems she

wants me hung by mine. “I’m not sure I’ll be able to get you out of this one, darling. She’s filing a formal complaint.”

“Come on Marge, you really think Dick in there is going to risk pissing off Daddy Dearest for some silly pink slip.” She rolls her eyes cause she knows I’m one hundred percent right. There is no one Richard Rutherford is more afraid of than Mathieu Carter.

“Have a seat Maverick, I have to at least pretend to keep you in here longer than two minutes.”

I smirk wide at Marge, who rolls her eyes in annoyance yet can’t hide the smile creeping at the edge of her lips. I blow her a kiss and bow dramatically, thanking her before turning and taking a seat on one of the plush chairs lined up against the back wall. The administration office is set up like a doctor’s waiting room, with two rows of chairs lined up against the walls in an L-shape, and two end tables on each side one with brochures of school admissions, scholarships, and college campuses, while on the other are flyers honoring our current State Champion Football team, and all the various academic accolades MC High’s received in the last decade.

Named the top school on the West Coast for ten straight years, Malibu Cove is determined to live up to its highest potential, and that means keeping its students happy, no matter the cost.

Crossing my legs, I grab one of the flyers on the table to my left-hand side, the one about our reigning champs, and flip it open trying to kill some time before Rutherford steps out to dismiss me. My grin widens when I spot her, there in the middle of the third page, dressed in the minuscule cheer outfit, white pleated miniskirt and matching sports bra with the letters MCH embroidered along the front of the top in teal blue. The edge of the pleated skirt, as well as the trim along the waist and on the edges of the top is a teal and silver metallic color.

My dick throbs at the sight of her looking so fucking sexy. I’ll have to ask her why the hell she quit cheer, because I’d give everything to see her walking down the hall in this getup. Although, it’s the ear-to-ear smile across her lips that does the

trick. Whenever this picture was taken, she was happy. Genuinely happy.

That's not something I've seen in her since I came back to Malibu Cove.

A shadow moving in the corner of my eye catches my attention. Shifting my gaze to my right I find a chick sitting three seats away, with her gaze focused on her hands crossed over her lap. I can't see her face, her straight dirty blond hair blocking my view, but it's the outfit she's wearing that throws me for a loop. Dressed in black joggers and a matching cropped hoodie, designer no less, yet not the typical uniform of the other chicks around MC High would be caught dead in. I look down on her feet, and yup a pair of white J's confirm this girl is not like the rest of them. Maybe she's new.

Dying of boredom, I walk over to her, taking a seat on the chair to her left. "There's no detention," I mumble under my breath, making her jolt at the sound of my voice and I'm not sure if it was because she was asleep or if she's just that jittery.

"What?" she asks, clearly not having heard what I'd said. I reach over and tuck her hair behind her left ear. Nope, no headphones in.

She falls back at my contact, her green eyes bugging wide as if she's just noticed I'm sitting right next to her. "You can calm down, there is no detention for whatever it is you did that made you get sent to the principal's office."

"I didn't..."

I chuckle at her denial. It's cute, but it's obvious whatever it is she did, this is her first offense. "You've been bouncing your leg up and down for the past ten minutes, not to mention how you're fiddling your fingers on your lap and are biting your lip so damn hard I can see a speck of blood forming on the tip."

Her fingers move to her mouth, her thumb rubbing along her bottom lip wiping the spots of blood. She wipes her thumb on her joggers. "I'm not used to getting into trouble."

I can tell, but I don't say it out loud at the risk of sounding like a total jerk and making her more anxious than she already is.

"So, what'd you do?" I ask, but she just stares up at me bewildered by my question.

"I did nothing. My best friend, however, thought it would be funny to kiss me all to make some chick who's become obsessed with him jealous."

My laughter deepens at the innocence of her offense. "You're here because he kissed you?" I ask, making sure I heard correctly since I don't get the big deal. Hell, I see people making out daily in the halls and in the courtyard during passing periods.

"We're always pranking each other. I've known him my whole life, and that's just the relationship we have, but we're strictly platonic, he's like the big brother I never had..."

"Ouch," I mutter interrupting her.

"No, he's totally cool with that. He doesn't like me either, but this girl in my Chem class has been talking nonstop about how they supposedly hooked up this summer and she's all in love with him, and honestly it was annoying the hell out of me, so I told him he had to do something about it." She pauses but I get the feeling she's not done talking.

Turns out this chick's a chatterbox, and suddenly I regret coming over to talk to her. I look toward the front desk hoping Marge will give me an out, but her gaze is glued to something on her computer screen. Looks like I'm on my own.

"The idiot thinks it's a good idea to walk into our Chem class, straight over to my desk, and kisses me right in the middle of Ms. Hollis's lesson."

"Ahh, makes sense now," I utter in understanding. Kissing in the middle of class would probably irritate the faculty, though again, not reason for any type of corporal punishment.

"Yeah, so you can imagine Ms. Hollis, being the prude that she is, wasn't pleased."

I pull my phone out of my pocket to check the time, since this conversation here with this mystery blondie is dragging on a lot longer than I had planned. 12: 25 PM. It's almost lunchtime and I need to be out of here before the bell rings at 12:35 PM. "So why isn't this best friend of yours sitting here with you?"

I open the message thread I have with Brett, saved under *Bruce Wayne* in case anyone ever finds this phone. Brett likes to keep his anonymity from those who are not his clients. What he's doing for me is nothing compared to the dirt he finds on people in powerful places.

BRUCE WAYNE: LOTUS CAFE, 12:45. I WON'T WAIT FOR YOU.

I have twenty minutes to drive out to the Pacific Palisades which should be more than enough time if I leave here now.

"Because he said nobody sends *Cole Sheppard* to the principal's office."

The mention of Cole's name makes me look back up at blondie. She's younger than us, a sophomore maybe, but definitely not a senior. Her expression shifts to something that resembles panic when she catches me observing her intently. Something about her is oddly familiar, but I'm sure I've never seen her around here before. Maybe she's friends with Phoenix? Doubt it, she doesn't look the type. Although neither does Darcy and it seems like that friendship is blossoming.

"Sheppard, huh?" I ask, and suddenly a bright pink flush kisses the apples of her cheeks. This girl is adorable.

"Our moms have been best friends for like ever, and ever since his mom..." she stops, realizing she's almost said something she probably shouldn't share with me. Smart girl. I shouldn't be trusted, though Cole Sheppard's *mommy issues* are nothing I'm interested in learning about. "Let's just say he's pretty much family at this point."

I nod, not encouraging her to share any more information. "Well, I'm out, catch you later Blondie."

“Wait,” she calls out, louder than she’d planned. Marge takes that opportunity to look up at us. I catch her *leave the girl alone* stare before she turns her attention back to her screen. “You’re just going to leave? Weren’t you here to see Principal Rutherford?”

Naivety is strong with this one, almost makes me wonder if she really is from around here. “Kids like you and I don’t get in trouble. Take that as your first lesson Blondie. Principal Rutherford isn’t coming out to ground you for kissing a boy in class. It’s exactly why Cole didn’t show up. It’s all for show. The teacher’s around here need to feel like they’re being heard, taken into consideration when it’s the pretentious rich kids that rule the halls.”

“You sound like you know everything about Malibu Cove when you just got here Maverick.”

Looks like Blondie’s been holding out on me. She’s feisty and apparently does know who I am. “Correction, I just got back. Besides, things were a hell of a lot worse where I was at.”

Turning to walk away before she continues this conversation, I look down at my watch. I really need to get out of here.

“And where was that?” she asks.

“Far, far away,” I murmur back under my breath, but I don’t think she hears me. “Catch ya later Marge.” The old woman grunts and waves me off without a second glance.

“It’s Levi,” I hear Blondie call out just before I open the door to exit the office. I try my hardest to step out, but my curiosity gets the best of me. I half glance back at her, and find her standing, her petite, yet incredibly fit and toned figure facing me head on. “Levi Landon.”

I turn back around and take a step forward. “Catch ya later, Blondie,” I shout back before disappearing down the hall.

Once I’m out the school gates and in my Aston, I reach into the glove compartment, pulling out the file Brett gave me at our last meeting. There’s something about this girl, it’s like I

know her from somewhere, and I know I haven't hooked up with her. Not that she isn't hot and my usual type, blonde and breathing, but she's too young. Because I can grow a full beard and have had facial hair since I was fifteen, I typically attract the older ladies. Not too crazy but those hot trophy wives turned housewives need some love and a little excitement and I love to give back.

Opening the manila packet, I pull out the birth certificate and photographs, staring at the name written on the top line. A few years younger in the picture I'm holding in my hand, but there's no mistaking it. I know this girl, and she's going to be a lot easier to track down than I'd expected.

"Oh, this is good," I murmur to myself, unable to keep in my wide grin.

Tucking the papers and photo back into the folder, and throwing it on my passenger seat, I start the car, rev up the engine, and zoom out of the student parking lot. Wait until Brett hears about this.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

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PHOENIX

“Remind me again why on earth I allowed you to quit the cheer squad, Phoenix?” Donovan asks as she joins Darcy and I on the bleachers. Her bronzed complexion is flushed, sweat glistened skin gleaming under her teal and white cheer uniform, and her hair’s pulled up high into a ponytail secured with a matching teal bow.

“Because it was not up to you, Dee,” I answer, directing my attention back to the laptop currently resting on my lap.

It’s been so much fun planning the End of Summer Fair that will take place in just one week. From choosing the carnival style rides, to reaching out to the best restaurants in town to cater the event, the only thing left to do is add the final touches. So here I am, sitting on the bleachers during the football team’s practice before tomorrow’s first season pregame.

Donovan rolls her eyes as she drops onto the bench with a huff. “Ughh, it’s so not fun without you, can you believe Coach Marsden had the audacity to suggest making Twit Twat Tate co-captain? I swear I literally died. She’s crazy, like psych ward cray, if she thinks that I’d ever allow that to happen.”

Nodding in agreement so she doesn’t give me shit for ignoring her, I search the field for Fitz. He isn’t hard to spot, not only because he’s standing next to my brother at the fifty-yard line, but because that’s where the gazes of the squealing crowd of groupies to our left are directed.

“Go Sharks!” One of them shouts.

“I love you Fitz!” Yells another.

“Have my babies Brooklyn!”

Okay that last one’s crossed the line.

“Pathetic,” I groan, gagging as I watch my brother, who’s shirtless by the way, flex exaggerated in their direction.

“He’s such a slut,” Dee grunts, blowing away the loose sweaty strands of hair curling around her face.

I cock my head in her direction. “And yet you pine away for him.” She rolls her eyes at me but doesn’t deny it.

Five minutes later, Coach Rivers blows his whistle ending practice and dismisses the guys into the locker room. The team picks up their gear and hustles inside ready and begging to hit the showers. The end of summer heat on the western coast is no fucking joke.

I stand, folding the laptop into my bag and head down to the bottom bleacher to catch Fitz before he steps into the locker room. “Alright, that’s our cue.”

Darcy and Donovan rush after me, barely able to catch up before they realize what I’m doing. “Wait, what are you doing?” Darcy murmurs anxiously, her bag slouched over her shoulder as she catches her breath.

“We came to talk to them, so that’s what I’m doing. There’s no way I’m waiting for the two of them to shower and get changed. Trust me, when my dad was having my bathroom remodeled two years ago, Brooklyn and I had to share. Let’s just say he takes longer showers than me.”

“Hey Fitz!” I shout out before either girl responds.

Fitz immediately looks our way, ignoring the groupies screaming his name and fanning themselves. He changes his course and heads straight toward us causing the squeals to turn into gasps and audible pouts.

“Yo Phoenix, what’s up girl? Didn’t know you came out to watch our practices. I mean you ain’t on the squad anymore, which by the way fucking sucks, I thought you turned your back on us baby.” Fitz reaches behind his back and tugs his sweat clad tank over his neck, using the shirt to wipe the sweat glistening on his forehead. The groupies to our left gasp out loud and I swear I see one of them faint.

Beside me I hear Darcy smack her lips in annoyance as she rolls her eyes, but I don’t miss the slight gasp that left her moments ago. “Got something to say Bennett?” Fitz asks her,

catching her annoyance as well. He's gleaming, a full ear to ear grin displaying his perfectly straight pearly whites, as he flicks his head back, his dark, honey brown hair falling in perfect waves around his face. He's gorgeous, and the bastard knows it.

I look toward Darcy, just as a bright red flush covers her cheeks at the realization he heard her, but lucky for her Brooklyn jumps to her rescue. "Hey there, Darcy," he says, stepping toward the edge of the railing before us. Brooklyn leans forward, placing his forearms against the rails separating the bleachers from the field. "I'm glad you came down to watch. See anything you like? I'd be willing to give you an encore performance."

Darcy spits out a laugh, her hand flying up to her mouth to cover it from escaping once again.

"Don't be such a pig Brooklyn," Donovan snaps at his attempt to flirt with Darcy.

"Bite me Kennedy," Brooklyn snaps back, glaring at her like he wants nothing more than to wrap his arms around her neck and strangle her.

Dee gives him the finger in response as she glares back at him just as equally murderous. "In your dreams Bancroft," she sneers, flicking her ponytail back. My brother's gaze follows the movement for a second before it drops to the floor as he steps back.

I swear I have no idea what's up with these two. They used to bicker playfully all the time; I mean we've known Dee our whole lives, and he's my annoying brother, but things have gotten intense since earlier this summer. It's almost like something happened that's caused this awkward shift, and it's more than my brother's newfound attitude since my parent's divorce. There's something going on and I'm going to figure it out. Even if I must drag it out of my bestie.

"Anyway," I mutter looking back at Fitz. "As much as I'd give my right kidney to watch you guys play with each other's balls, I'm here strictly on business, Fitzpatrick."

Fitz chuckles nodding in agreement. “Alright, what’s up P?” He steps forward joining my brother against the metal.

“Remember how you agreed to have the football team set up and work a booth at the fair?” I ask, reminding him of the conversation we had a few weeks ago at my house.

“Vaguely?” he answers, raising a brow quizzically.

“Well, actually, it was a kissing booth. You said you and Brooklyn were in, and you’d get the guys on board too.”

Realization hits him. “Oh yeah, I definitely remember agreeing to that.”

“Hell yeah we’re down,” Brooklyn says, patting his QB on the back.

I clap my hands together excitedly. “Great, well we’re all meeting Friday to set up the tables and booths down at the pier. The rides and food stands are getting put in as we speak, so Friday, after school, Malibu Cove Pier. See you boys there!” I shout, turning and walking away before they can back out of our agreement.

“Wait!” They both call out.

“What do we have to do?” Fitz shouts out after us.

I turn back to glance at them, a wide grin spreading across my face. “Brush your teeth! And maybe keep a pack or two of mints on hand!” I wink just as I turn back at the girls, and the three of us head out unable to keep our excitement a secret.

“PUT THAT DOWN FITZPATRICK!” COACH RIVERS SHOUTS OUT as Fitz balances one of the long white tables they’re setting up, over his head. Brooklyn and he have spent most of the afternoon in competition, trying to prove which one of them is stronger than the other.

When Coach Rivers heard the guys were running a booth and coming over to help us set up for the fair this weekend, he insisted on coming to supervise. There was no way his boys

were going to injure themselves before the season officially started next week.

“Come on Coach, I can’t let Brooklyn here outdo me. I’m the QB. I gotta be the one on top.”

Coach Rivers, runs his hand down his face, gruffly tugging at his graying beard. “These boys will be the death of me. Alright Ms. Bancroft,” he says, turning to me as I stand watching their exchange. He looks exhausted, blue eyes that look like they haven’t slept in ages. “I’m heading home, it’s your turn. Please don’t let them try too hard, they might actually break a body part.”

I chuckle at the man who is pretty decent. Having been on the cheer squad the previous three years, I’ve spent a lot of time on the road with the guys and at practices with Coach Rivers. It’s obvious he not only loves the game, but he also cares deeply about every one of the guys on his team. And I know for a fact Brooklyn and Fitz look up to him more than they do their own fathers’.

“You got it Coach,” I tell him, placing an arm around Darcy who’s walked our way carrying a box of decorations. “We’ll keep your boys in check.”

Coach Rivers raises a brown quizzically at us as his face pales. “I’m not sure if that is better or worse. Good luck Ms. Bancroft and Ms. Bennett.”

The two of us laugh as he walks away, leaving us with our hands full of decorations that need to be put up before the end of the night. We rushed over here right after school, along with all the clubs on campus, and the football team, swim team, and cheer squad, met up with us after their practice. The lot is full of faculty members and other volunteers that have come to help set up the event, while workers finish adding the last touches to the rides and games scattered along the dock and adjoining areas.

“What was that all about?” Darcy asks, handing me the box while she picks up the other one on the dolly cart to her right.

“Just Coach worrying his boys are going to break a nail doing manual labor. You know, you can’t break the merchandise before it makes it to the shelves and all.”

We busy ourselves for the next hour, adding the banners to each one of the booths and tents, and decorating the tables with blue linen tablecloths and centerpieces

A wanton chill runs up my spine while the feeling I’m being watched lingers around me. Like a thick and ominous fog, an omen of something devious and dangerous lurking my way. The eerie feeling lingers over me while I look behind me and find everyone busying themselves with their tedious tasks and mindless conversation. I shake off the feeling, chalking it up to my crazy imagination that’s been quite unreliable in recent months, and continue to do as I was.

Bending forward to pick up another box of decorations, a sharp squeal leaves me when I find Maverick has appeared out of nowhere and is currently blocking my way.

“God-dammit you are going to scare me to death one of these days, asshole,” I shout, thwacking him against his plethora of ridiculously hard abs. It’s honestly unfair how perfect he looks, grinning down at me like he’s particularly entertained with the idea.

Has anyone ever seen the Devil grin?

Because I can almost guarantee this is what he looks like. Devilishly handsome, a vision in dark hair, blue eyes, and a tantalizing smirk that screams trouble, and is currently making my body scream in agony. Sweet, glorious agony.

Memories of our time together overwhelm me, visions of him hovering over me, his hard and heaving body covering me in a blanket of heat and trepidation. Temptation in its rawest form.

Instinctual. Primal. Animalistic and enticing.

The way his rough and strong hands gripped my body and roamed over it with the most delicately sinful of touches. His mouth, luscious and thick lips that kissed me, tasted me, and

drove me wild with dirty, commanding words and carnal desires.

Lastly his eyes that not only undressed me, and devoured me with an intensity I'd never seen, but they searched deep inside of me for secrets and feelings I'd never revealed. They peeled apart every layer of security, every wall I built, he tore it down, forcefully and unapologetically.

Stripped me down until I was raw, bare, and susceptible to his twisted games.

Yet, vulnerability never felt so rewarding.

“Need a hand with that Nyx?” he casually asks, taking the box from me before I can even muster a response. Behind me, I hear Darcy giggle as she pretends to busy herself at the tent to our right, leaving us alone with this daunting cloud of seduction floating above.

I swallow hard when my voice cracks as I try to speak. “No,” I answer curtly, yanking the box out of his grasp, and pushing past him toward the adjacent booth I'll be setting the ring toss at.

Given this year's theme, every booth is centered on a character or scene from the iconic film, so the ring toss is Rizzo's Ring Toss.

I take out the hoops that will capture the various sizes of Danny Zuko and Kenickie cutouts lined up in a pyramid shape, hanging them across the back wall of the tent where the attendant will hand them out to the participants. From the box, I take out the assorted prizes, rings and bands that will be given out to the winners, one of them worth a couple grand which one lucky winner will receive.

I dump the rings out into the four containers the participants will choose from, but his presence still lingers around, and I know he won't be leaving until I give into his stupid game. Maverick thrives on his intimidation tactics, and the games this guy loves to play always require a little push back.

Let's just say it's what gets him off.

“What do you want, Carter?” I don’t bother turning to face him, instead catch his reflection on the mirror across from me. He meets my gaze in the mirror, forcing another shiver through me only this time, it follows the trail straight between my legs.

My body trembles, nearly bending forward from the intensity of the feeling. Squeezing my thighs together, I try my hardest to suppress the moan that’s about to fly out of my mouth. Mav catches on, his teasing smirk back in place.

This is the first time we’ve been this close, alone, since that night in his bedroom. I’d avoided him the following week, spending most of my afternoons and evenings with Darcy and Donovan going over what needed to be done for the fair. Joining the club has honestly been a godsend. Not only have I been able to avoid Maverick, but I’ve also skipped out on any dinners my father insisted on and have even kept my distance from my sulking brother.

Although, something about Brooklyn’s changed this week. He seems a little less, *dead*.

“I’ve missed you Nyx,” he breathes into my neck, his fingers sneak underneath my top, sensually grazing my ribcage moving up toward the edge of my bikini strap. Slowly and purposefully, he continues caressing my flesh, trailing his fingers underneath the swell of my breasts, down my stomach, tucking his fingers into the waist of my jean shorts.

“What the hell Mav!” I shout, abruptly turning around and crashing into his hard chest. A hand comes up to silence my screams, another down to my lower back pressing me against his growing erection, and as much as the dominant move both exhilarates me and turns me on, I push him off me before someone sees.

“Shh, don’t scream baby.” His fingers move back to the button of my jeans as he walks us backward, leading us behind the curtain of the tent and hidden from prying eyes. “You know how much that turns me on,” he groans deep and gravelly, trailing kisses down my neck while I arch back giving him the room to lick and tease me. “If you’re not

careful, I might just take this sweet little cunt for a ride here and now. You know how little self-control I have when it comes to you.”

A moan escapes me making him chuckle deep, but I quickly bite down on my tongue to reel it back in. “Asshole,” I snap, turning away from him yet making no move to remove his fingers from the clasp of my jeans.

He expertly pops the button open making me gasp in shock. Another moan escapes me as his skillful fingers slip underneath the lace of my thong, instantly finding me wet and dangerously aroused. I close my eyes to drown out the surrounding sounds solely focusing on the euphoria of his fingers pressing against my clit as he cups me under my jeans.

My legs instinctively spread for him gaining him better access, allowing a long and steady finger to slip inside of me.

“Mav, we can’t,” I whimper for him, but he ignores me, bringing his free hand to my lips and shushing me.

“Don’t think Nyx,” he growls, deep and menacingly sexy. “Just feel baby. Feel the way your body craves my touch and the way it responds to me. It knows you’re mine, all that’s left is for you to catch up and realize it too.”

I throw my head back as my hips move against him, his words egging me on and bringing me to the edge ready to find the release I crave. But before I reach my climax, he stops, dropping to his knees and sliding my shorts and thong down my legs. The icy chill of the metal pole I’m pushed up against cools the heat of my flesh and makes me shiver.

I nearly scream the moment he blows softly against my pussy, his hot breath adding to the high sensation as he licks his way through my lips. I grab onto his hair, steadying myself as my legs tremble. God his mouth is a fucking wonder, expertly licking, sucking, and thrusting its way inside of me.

A loud sound, like something falling or crashing a few feet away, quickly snaps me out of my lust filled daze.

“Are you crazy?” I cry out, pulling his head back and jumping out of his grasp. I quickly pull my shorts back up and

button them, smoothing my hands down the fabric. “Maverick, someone can see us, not to mention this can never happen again.”

Chuckling hastily, he moves toward me, caging me against him once again. “Never say never, baby. Because I can guarantee it will and soon.”

My breathing quickens as I step around him, trying my hardest to put some distance between us before I say fuck it and drop to my own knees before him. “You’re out of your mind.”

He nods, all humor gone from his face. It’s unnerving the way he gazes into my eyes like he’s not only stating the obvious but manifesting it into the universe. “Yeah, but I’m in yours, and you’re in mine Nyx. The only problem is I’m starting to like you there.”

Giving me a soldier’s salute, he walks backwards out of the tent and out of sight, leaving me with the male equivalent of a hard on. “Well shit,” I curse to myself.

I think he may be right.

I step out of the booth watching him disappear into the parking lot, when out of my peripheral vision, a brash movement catches my eye.

Chad steps out of the adjacent booth not looking happy in the slightest. His glare burns through me following the direction Maverick has just disappeared into.

Shit. I really hope he didn’t see anything. Not because I care in the slightest what he thinks, but because everyone finding out about Mav and I doing, whatever the hell it is we’re doing, is the last thing I need.

“Careful Phoenix,” he whispers arrogantly, Passing me on his way out. “Guys like him don’t stick around.”

Well, that’s all the confirmation I need. Chad knows, and soon enough, so will everyone else.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

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MAVERICK

Have you ever had an emotion buried so deep into your being, it feels like you'll never be able to feel it again? As if the mere ability to feel has been stripped away because of the amount of time you've spent not only suppressing it, but fighting it?

The list of emotions that have become irrelevant to me, is longer than the list of those that remain. Anger, disgust, arousal, that's about where the list of what I'm capable of feeling starts and ends. Joy, sadness, fear, surprise, love, that's where I go numb.

Not specifically that I'm incapable of feeling them, more so that I no longer find the need to. The shit I've been dealt in life obliterated the significance of the emotions away.

Why experience happiness when you're alone your whole life, sent away from your family, left to fend for yourself?

Why continue to experience sadness, when you've been so overcome by grief and let down by people around you it becomes irrelevant to care?

The ability to fear the unknown becomes moot when every fear you had as a child becomes your reality.

And after consistent let downs by people showing who they truly are and understanding the depravity of those in power that surround us daily, well nothing surprises you.

The final, the most vital some would say, is the one I don't think I've ever truly felt.

Love.

Four letters that mean so much to most, yet to me are meaningless. I wasn't born this way - this is what I became after giving up on everything and everyone.

They say love conquers all, but that's only for those who can conquer it.

If I ever became sad, upset, or disgusted by those around me, I channeled it all into aggression. It was the only feeling that gave me any type of reward. Whether it was the underground street fights I dabbled in as a freshman, or joining in on the illicit activities the kids I went to school with inherited, the only thing that held any importance to me, also seemed to be what I thrived in.

Anger, and fuck was I angry.

All that was later channeled into something the aggression wouldn't satisfy. So yeah, I used sex as the outlet I needed when the pent-up fury and frustration didn't disappear when I shoved my fist into an unsuspecting douche, finding the need to shove my dick into a consenting pussy, but who fucking doesn't.

Which is why at the slightest sign that one of those loathsome and suppressed emotions was creeping its way up to the surface, I knew I had to shut it down. To squash the fucking *butterflies* and murder the inconsequential little shits before they in return left me that way.

How are you supposed to believe in love, when the one that's supposed to be the most authentic of examples is a fucking joke?

What just happened between Phoenix and I hit too close to home. The shit which was bubbling up to the surface when I walked away from her after nearly making her come for everyone to see, and inhaling the decadent scent that drives me wild, needed to be put to rest.

I had other things I needed to think about. It was time for me to be selfish.

“Why did you want to meet?” Levi asks as she joins me at a table outside Caffè Luxxe in The Village. The Village is buzzing with people shopping around and enjoying these last twenty-four hours of summer, although the sunshine will last for another three months. I asked Levi to meet me here the second I confirmed with Brett that my suspicions were true. I chose The Village as I needed to be in a public place where not only someone would surely see us together, but where I could

easily lure her in with the excuse of getting to know her better. What better way than over a latte.

I may have also kept our meeting public in case her reaction to what I am about to confess somehow blows out of proportion and she has some type of premature meltdown. She's from Malibu Cove after all, chicks around here are trained at an early age to keep calm and collected during the most scandalous of instances when others are around, and I'm about to test that theory.

Bringing the cup of coffee to my lips, I take a sip of the scalding beverage. It was prudent I order something to make this seem legit and the only way I drink my coffee is black and damn near boiling, not to mention with a finger or two of whiskey which I could really use right now.

I watch the weary way she gazes at me, suspicion clear in the way her eyes crease at the corners, her lips twitching like she's biting them from the inside.

"Like I said, I wanted to get to know you better." As expected, she doesn't look convinced, even slightly hostile now as her eyebrows pull in further together. "I have to say Blondie," I continue, "You left me intrigued the other day."

"Aren't you dating Phoenix Bancroft," she accuses rather than asks, not falling for my game.

Laughing lightly, I set the mug back on the table between us, bringing my gaze away from her. "Phoenix is my stepsister," I add neither admitting nor denying her accusation. The rumor has been floating around town and it may have something to do with what almost happened between us earlier at the pier.

Levi takes a sip of the sugary, almost white beverage she ordered, not convinced. "Whatever. Look Maverick, you're hot and all, like really freaking hot, but you're not really my type."

I almost spit out my drink at her comment. "Not your type?" I ask appalled, "Honey I'm everyone's type."

A light breeze wafts nearby blowing her hair away from her face. “Let me rephrase that,” she murmurs, pretending to be deep in thought. This girl is unique to put it nicely. “Physically yeah, like a million times yeah, but I know your “actual” type,” she adds air quotes around the last word. “The players, the mysterious bad boys who are always up to no good and probably have a record, not so much. I’ll admit I like my guys to be nice, pretty boys with respect for their mommas, and respect for the rules. You Maverick Carter scream rule breaker with a capital F-U-C-K. Do you not remember how worked up I was about being in the principal’s office?”

Yeah, this girl may have his last name and blood running through her veins, but that’s where the similarities start and end.

This is obviously not working the way I was expecting, so it’s time I just cut to the nitty gritty of why we’re here. “Alright enough pointing out everything wrong with me and let’s get down to why you’re really here.”

She gleams triumphantly, clapping her hands excitedly. “See I knew it. You’re more predictable than you think, Maverick.”

“Are we done with the insults?”

A blush creeps up her cheeks as she realizes how cheeky she’s acting. “Yeah sorry, not my intention to be rude, just wanted to clear the air and all.”

Reaching under the table, I pull out a file like the one Brett gave me, copies obviously, and place it on the table in front of her. She eyes it warily, like it’s going to come alive and attack her or spontaneously combust into flames.

Reluctantly she picks it up, her curiosity getting the best of her, and opens the flap. “What is this, our marriage license,” she jokes, and I can’t help laughing along with her. Her smile is infectious and so is her carefree, down-to-earth attitude. It’s refreshing. Not to mention unlike everyone else around her, she says exactly what she’s thinking. Talk about no filter.

“Funny but no Blondie, you’re really not my type either if we’re being brutally honest.”

She rolls her eyes and places a hand on her chest as if I’ve wounded her, but continues to open the packet, pulling out the papers inside.

Shock takes over her innocent smile, tears immediately pile in her soft green eyes as she looks the documents over, flipping the pages frantically, her breathing becoming more unsteady with each minute that goes by, and each page she turns.

Weary eyes find mine, begging for comfort and denial of the facts in front of her. “Is this your idea of a joke? Because if it is, you’re more fucked in the head than I originally believed.” Her voice cracks on the edge of tears.

I place my hand atop hers on the table, and although she tries to pull away at the contact, I don’t allow her to. “Now, Levi, no need for such language. Why don’t we have a conversation? I’m sure you have many questions.”

TO SAY THE EVENING WITH LEVI WENT WELL IS THE FUCKING understatement of the century. Obviously, I was wrong in thinking telling her in a public place would lessen the blow or at least her reaction to it. The girl went berserk.

And I mean yelling like a madwoman, flipping chairs, and pouring sugary iced coffee all over my Balenciaga tee.

I guess looking back at it now, I should have expected no less. Not only was this a huge bomb I dropped on her, but she also wasn’t raised with the same ideals as say someone like Phoenix. Whereas for Phoenix, keeping up appearances and playing the part was ingrained into her being at an early age, Levi grew up carefree with her liberal and ecological friendly mother who surely not only believes in climate change but advocates for it.

After pouring her iced coffee on me and demanding I give her money to buy another, Levi took off not wanting to hear any explanation about the information in the file I gave her. Regardless of her state of denial, she took the file with her, but not before reiterating she wanted nothing to do with me or any of the bullshit games I was trying to play.

So, I didn't follow her, didn't grovel and beg her to listen to what I had to say. The bottom line is I got exactly what I wanted. The truth is out, whether she reacted the way I would have preferred her to react or not. I planted the seed of doubt. Levi will come looking for answers, and when she does, I will have them ready for her. Or someone else will and the secrets Austin Bancroft paid millions for and swore to keep hidden, will be the one thing to ruin him.

Back at the house, just as I take the first step up the staircase heading to my room for a much-needed shower to rid myself of the stench of sugared coffee and almond milk, I halt in my tracks hearing voices coming from inside Austin's study. At first glance I figure he's on a heated phone call, but as I approach the door, tiptoeing so I don't give my presence away, I hear a second, very distinctive voice coming from inside.

"I don't care what it is you did Hollingsworth, you fix it, and fast." From the small open space between the French doors, I see Austin pacing anxiously and irate behind his desk. "I will not let my only daughter make a complete fool of herself and drag this family name down any further. If you must trick her into giving you another chance or beg at her feet, you do whatever it takes."

My hands fist at my sides at the bullshit that spews out of the asshole's mouth. The fucking nerve of the bastard, thinking he can continue to dictate Phoenix's life after being the reason she's been through hell and back. His wife's living in a rehab facility after trying to end her life because of his affairs and lies, his son is on the precipice of drinking his future away, and possibly even his life. Meanwhile, his daughter, despite the scandal and shaming, well she's the strongest person I know. He doesn't get to choose this ungrateful cheating

bastard. Chadwick Hollingsworth doesn't deserve her. Nobody does.

Without thinking twice or contemplating the consequences of my actions, I throw open the door of Austin's study, slamming them against the back wall, the metal hinges vibrating as I barge in with what I'm sure is a murderous scowl on my face. Chad's eyes widen and his mouth drops open in terror while Austin stands there fuming, his jaw ticking in anger, and his gaze almost as disturbing as my own.

I crack my knuckles as I approach where he stands behind his desk. "You have some fucking nerve Bancroft to think you have any influence on the choices your daughter makes."

Something in the air shifts, and instantly I realize there is more to what's going on here than I'm privy to. The way the two men knowingly look back and forth at each other, like they have some information I don't, is not only pissing me the fuck off, but making me irrational.

"How dare you," Austin spits out, dismissing Chad from the room. "Get out Hollingsworth, I have some family matters to discuss with my stepson." He spits the word out like it's insulting for him to even say.

"With pleasure daddy," I mock, only angering him further. Although the plan I had is gone to shit. This ends here and now. Austin Bancroft will pay for his limp and loose dick.

Chad exits almost immediately, closing the door behind him. By this time Austin is pacing around like a madman, running his fingers through his hair and a hand down his chin gripping the unruly beard that he's grown out in recent weeks.

Dangerously irritated by his silence and perusal around the room, I sit back on the chair across his desk and prop my feet up on the dark oak wood. He glares at me and the way I'm casually sitting in his space while he's frantic.

"How dare you just sit there like you have done nothing wrong?" he demands, slamming his fist down on the desk. Bright red and on the edge of an aneurysm, I've never seen Austin this pissed. He's in for the shock of his life.

“What is it you think I’ve done?” I ask innocently, folding my arms over my chest.

For a moment he pauses, unsure or unwilling to say what he really wants to say, whatever he and Chad were discussing before I walked in. I have an inkling what it is, but I don’t divulge what I know.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says, suddenly rather calm. “All that matters is you keep your dirty, delinquent hands off my daughter, or I will throw your sorry ass on the street despite your mother’s constant pleas. I’ve had it with you and the way you peruse around here like you’re untouchable. We both know the bastard of your father may be dangerous, but he hasn’t the slightest interest in anything you do. If he did, then you wouldn’t be here.”

Now it’s my turn to be furious, my blood practically boiling inside of me and flooding my head making my vision blur, and my hands tremble. I won’t give him the satisfaction of seeing me like this, I can’t give up now. This is my game we’re playing, I set the rules and hand out the punishment.

Leaning further back in the chair, I cross my legs over his desk and lower my head motioning for him to join me. “Sit Austin, you may have to after what I’m about to show you.”

Uncrossing my arms and taking my phone out of my back pocket, I open a photo of the file like the one I gave Levi and place it on the table in front of him.

“What is this?” he growls, picking up my phone and staring at the screen. All the blood leaves his face, and the man who was just as bright as a fucking tomato, is disturbingly pale and almost lifeless.

He swallows down the lump forming in his throat, but his eyes never once leave the small screen. Austin Bancroft is at a loss for words, no trace left behind of the arrogant bastard who just threatened to not only kick me out of his house, but ensure I end up penniless, far, far away.

Unimpressed, I taunt the asshole, not content with his response to what I’ve just revealed I know. “What happened

Austin, cat's got your tongue? Or is it so far shoved up one of your other whore's asses, that you've suddenly forgotten all about your illegitimate child?"

There he is. Austin stands about to throw my phone across the room.

"Do it," I egg him on, "There are copies of every single one of those files somewhere very safe, with orders to be released, if say, something was to happen to me suddenly, and tragically."

"What do you want?" he asks, and finally we're getting somewhere. I look around the room, noting the odd decor that is inconsistent with the nautical feel of the rest of the house is still in place. The frames of the men of the Bancroft Dynasty watch me with the same arrogant yet foolish blue-green eyes of the man across me. It still reeks of cigars and single malt scotch, which makes me crave a cig of my own, but I don't have one on me.

I sit up straighter leaning forward as I drop my legs in front of me, folding them and resting my elbows along my knees. "I once told you not to push me because you wouldn't like what would happen if I pushed back."

Bancroft's eyes never once leave mine, and for a moment I think he's trying to read my mind or something because it's as if he's hypnotized, paralyzed as he eagerly tries to figure out my next move.

"Twenty million, that's my price, and a good one at that. I know what you're worth, Bancroft, and that's merely loose change to a man as powerful as you are. You want my silence and secrecy, you want your indiscretion to disappear, that is my price."

A blatant laugh erupts from the asshole along with a terrifying dry smoker's cough. "You're out of your mind, son. I won't pay you that. Blackmail is beneath even you. What would a renowned businessman like your father think of your methods of doing business?"

I grin wide. "Frankly, I think Mathieu would be proud."

“Ahh yes,” Austin mutters, “I forget he’s the same type of vile creature.”

This is taking too goddamn long. It’s time to up my antics. “You’re one to talk Austin. But mull it over for a second or two. I’ll be here waiting for the deposit in my account. Although a check may be more efficient to erase the digital trail.”

“No one will believe you,” he utters triumphantly, like that has just solved his dilemma. “Nowadays files like the ones you’ve photographed can be fabricated and forged. I’ll claim you’re a fraud. Who’s everyone going to believe, an eighteen-year-old punk who’s the son of a notorious corrupt businessman, or me, a prestigious tycoon who in the eyes of everyone, despite some minor indiscretions, is untouchable.”

I stand to meet him coming around to sit on the edge of his desk right beside him. “I don’t need everyone to believe me. Frankly, I couldn’t care less if the world finds out. I only need one person to know the truth.” I nod toward my phone still in his hands. “Go on, look for yourself, I’ve left you a little clue.”

That catches his attention, and he looks down, swiping through the photographs on my phone, in an album I created in which I may have intentionally added a few photos of Phoenix, just for shits and giggles.

The terror-stricken look in his eyes tells me when he’s found the photo of Phoenix I took the night we walked along the beach, her long blond hair in perfect waves along her shoulders, wearing nothing but the minuscule bikini and lustful look in her eyes.

“You bastard,” he shouts, throwing my phone against the wall to our left. It shatters into pieces on the floor. “You keep your hands off of my daughter.”

I step forward so we are now face to face. I’m taller than him and his head must tilt back slightly to meet my gaze. “Oh, but I’ve already had them all over her, inside of her.” I grab a fistful of his collar, bringing him closer until we’re a mere inch away. “I made her scream as they touched her, pleased her.”

He wants to hit me, or worse strangle me. The look in his eyes as he glares murderously at me tells me exactly what he's going to do.

“Your attempt at getting her back together with Chadwick, is in vain. Phoenix is mine, I've made sure of it. And she will continue to be mine unless you pay me what I'm asking. I know you don't care about losing anything as long as you have your flawless, priceless diamond to sell to the highest bidder. Think it over, you have until next Friday.”

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CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

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PHOENIX

“*S*ummer lovin’, had me a blast. Summer lovin’,
happened so fast.

I met a girl crazy for me. Met a boy cute as can be.

*Summer days drifting away. To uh, oh those summer
nights.”*

Laughter echoes in the distance, joyful squeals and cheers fading against the music blaring loudly on the overhead speakers positioned in every corner of the blue and white striped tents and gazebos sporadically lined up along the edge of the pier. Coasters roaring against the wind, the air filled with delectable sweet and savory aromas, and the silent waves of the sea in the distance dance back and forth to the beat of the music.

This is the meaning of paradise.

I can’t remember the last time I felt this rush of emotion tingling up my spine or the fluttering of butterflies dancing around merrily in my stomach. Even three months ago I don’t remember feeling this way, but right now, as I watch my friends, Donovan, Oliver, Darcy, Cole, Ryan, Fitz, and even my brother, the real friends who stuck by my side through the toughest months of my life, this is what it means to be happy.

Today has been incredible. From the moment we arrived early this morning just as the sun was rising, to now watching it slowly set into the sky, I can’t remember the last time we were this carefree and content.

Darcy and Dee, both with pink cotton candy clouds in their hands, laugh loudly as they walk toward me with Olly on their tail lugging around a giant stuffed great white shark he just won at the ring toss. “You will not believe what just happened!” Donovan squeals, shoving a mouthful of pink sugar into her mouth.

“Oliver adopted a stuffed Poseidon?” I ask, eyeing the stuffed shark wearing a MC High football jersey.

Dee rolls her eyes annoyed I’m not meeting her same level of enthusiasm. “Funny but no. Right before Fitz and the guys headed back over to work the kissing booth, he looked over at our girl Darcy here and said, “*I’ll see you around*”.” She gushes with excitement as if what she’s said means anything specific. Darcy’s cheeks flush in embarrassment, her gaze dropping to the floor.

“So?” I ask, at first confused by her comment, but then I remember how curious Dee was the last time Fitz and Darcy were a topic of conversation. I know where this is going.

“So, he was obviously, and super subtly, inviting her to go see him at the kissing booth later.”

Darcy turns to face Donovan, her hands positioned on her hips, and her eyebrows furrowed intensely. “Oh come on Dee,” she pouts, “That is not what he meant. He was just being polite and making conversation. Why would he ask me to the kissing booth? He’s Grant Fitzpatrick, All-star quarterback. He can literally have any other girl here.”

“Okay fine,” Dee says, raising her hands up in the air in surrender. “Pretend I said nothing.”

Silence flows between us for a moment before I break the ice.

“Alright well I’m going to go check on the guys at the booth and make sure they’re charging for the kisses and not just giving them out for free. Darcy, you coming with?” I ask her, trying to save her from Dee, who can be a bit too enthusiastic at times. I love her for it, and if Darcy knew Dee’s attempt at pushing her and Fitz together was a selfish reason to keep her away from my brother, she’d see my bestie means no harm. However, that isn’t something I’m going to announce. It isn’t my place.

Darcy nods, stepping beside me. “Fine,” Dee grunts, “You two go do your thing and work this amazing fair you’ve put on. Olly and I are going to go ride the *Grease Lightning*

Swings and get into some trouble. Meet you guys at the Ferris wheel tonight at eight-thirty to watch the fireworks.”

We nod and while Olly and Dee take off toward the thirty-foot jellyfish sitting in the middle of the pier, Darcy and I head to the end of the deck and toward the football team’s kissing booth. It’s the most elaborate of booths, with four large white tables set up in a T-shape, T for Thunderbirds, with a wooden wall separating the two sides. The wooden plank is painted with our school emblem, a white crest entwined with teal leaves, and a great white shark in the middle under the words Malibu Cove High. Our team mascot, Poseidon, is dancing around the front wearing a leather jacket over his MC high school football jersey, welcoming passersby to join in on the fun hidden behind the curtain covering one side of the wall on all four sides.

It was their idiotic decision to keep the identity of the kisses hidden behind the curtain. The entire varsity team has come out to put in the work, all in matching leather jackets with the words *Malibu Cove Thunderbirds* embroidered in white on the backs, volunteering their time, and mouths, to the cause. Given the popularity of the starting lineup, they figured it wouldn’t be fair to everyone else for them to hog all the kisses.

Which brings us to this elaborate setup.

The booth is already buzzing with traffic, high school girls of all ages rushing in line for a chance to kiss a glorious player of the Malibu Cove All-Star Football Team.

Darcy scoffs, watching the giddy teenage girls unable to hide their excitement as they not so patiently wait their turn in line. “If you ask me, they’re all hopping in line hoping it’ll be Grant or Brooklyn standing behind the curtain.”

I chuckle at Darcy’s disgusted face. She’s right though. The moment we announced the varsity football team was going to be manning the kissing booth, ticket sales nearly tripled. We were ecstatic, more money means we’re going to put on a hell of a senior year. However, as if the guys’ egos needed any more fluffing, the two co-captains wouldn’t stop

yapping about how they should just quit football and start a kissing booth business on wheels. *Taking their luscious lips on the road.*

My laughter continues as I watch her face contort into a horrified expression. Squeals continue to erupt as whispers trickle down the line when someone says they spotted them behind the curtain. “Yeah, you’re right. The only thing that would add to the appeal would be to snag a kiss from the infamous Maverick Carter.”

“Is that so, Nyx?”

My heart nearly stops the moment I hear him come up behind me, the silky tone of his voice sends a wave of awareness between my legs. I try my hardest not to turn around and give him the satisfaction of seeing the way my body reacts to him, but it’s inevitable. Everyone in line is suddenly looking back and forth between us, feeling the tension building up the longer it takes for me to turn and face him.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath just as he takes a step forward, reaching for me, his hand slowly caressing the sensitive skin showing at the nape of my neck. My skin prickles with anticipation, but just as easily as he touched me, he drops his hand, my flesh instantly missing the heat of his touch.

Opening my eyes, I turn to him, his eyes blazing with desire I’ve never seen from him, or anyone for that matter. It’s an intensity that immediately sets my body ablaze with need. His eyes roam over my figure, from the top of my bare arms and neck, down to my midriff showing under my strapless black top, and lower to the leather miniskirt that highlights my long legs.

I find myself looking him over just the same. Although his color scheme ceases to change, it’s like every time I see him, he looks even hotter than the time before, and today is no exception.

Dark ripped jeans tucked into his shiny black Doc Martens, and a black tee with the word *FUCK* in white capital

letters written on the front. Don't get me started on the leather jacket draped over his shoulder and the cigarette hanging from his lips. Raven hair trimmed short on the sides and slightly longer on top, and the scruff covering his sharp jaw, although it's slightly longer than a five o'clock shadow, is trimmed neatly and I want nothing more than to grip onto it as my lips meet his or feel it in between my thighs as he devours me.

Danny Zuko who?

Calm the fuck down Phoenix, you're letting your horny show. My inner subconscious reprimands me.

"Maverick," I murmur, a little breathier and needier than I expected. His eyes glaze over with lust, the bright blue color now dark and demanding.

"Tell me Nyx," he mutters in a tone that sends another electric wave of heat over my entire body. I inhale sharply, intensely aware of every nerve in my body firing at the same time I watch his lips move, anticipating what will come from them next. "What will it take to snag a kiss from the illustrious princess, Phoenix Bancroft."

The crowd that's now formed around us gasps, dull snickers and disapproving whispers fill the soft silent breeze with noise. I'm speechless but I know I need to cut the tension between us with a sharp blade before it takes over and pushes us both past the point of no return. Especially since I know my brother is around here somewhere. Yesterday was a close call after potentially being caught by Chad, and today there are too many witnesses.

"A ticket and a wait in that long line behind us," Darcy says, saving me from the ear-splitting silence.

Maverick raises a sharp brow, his face full of humor as he looks between the two of us. "Is that so?" he asks once again, challenging me to meet his sarcasm with a snarky remark of my own.

"Not even if you were the last guy here," I mock, before turning back around and rushing toward where the guys are hidden behind the curtain.

Darcy follows me, pulling my arms when I don't respond to her calling my name. "Phoenix, hold on," she says, reaching for me. "What was that all about?"

I shake my head, not wanting to go there right now. "It's nothing, now can we please make sure the booth is running smoothly so we can get out of here."

"Hey there girls," Fitz calls out, stepping into the booth. Now it's the three of us, standing in proximity inside the kissing booth.

Remember that tension I was talking about earlier, the same one Dee claims happens every time Maverick and I are near each other. Well, let's just say it's equally palpable at this very moment, and he's nowhere to be found. That's because this time the tension isn't because of me.

"Just checking to make sure everything is good. You're making money, being respectful, and not taking anything more than a kiss from every paying customer."

"Scout's honor," Fitz says, playfully saluting me.

"You were not a boy scout," Darcy sneers, rolling her eyes at him.

"For a whole decade darling," Fitz replies, his gaze stuck to her like Maverick's was just glued to mine. "Don't make any assumptions before getting to know me."

"I know you well enough," she retorts, and that is my cue to get out of here. I really hope Maverick's done the same and disappeared.

"Well, I'll just let Darcy here check in with you. I gotta go check on the Drama Club. They're in charge of the funhouse and I know that must be going horribly wrong."

"Phoenix!" I hear Darcy shout after me as I sneak back under the curtain. Though what I'm not expecting, is the hard, and I mean cement hard, wall I run into as I exit. His muscular arm comes around my waist just as the scent of his dangerously delicious cologne mixed with the lingering scent of tobacco, hits me, making me delirious.

“Careful there, you might hurt yourself.” He chuckles as I take another deep breath, this time a loud moan leaves me as my hands move up his chest. His breathing turns unsteady, matching my own as my hands continue to move up his chest. I lean back slightly, my gaze meeting his, and the intensity with which he watches me, like fuel ignites the blazing fire within me.

“We shouldn’t,” I whisper, dropping my gaze to his neck and the way his Adam’s apple moves as he swallows, his pulse beating against the ink wrapped around his neck. I want to lick my way around it and trace every black line with my tongue.

“Come with me,” he murmurs, but he doesn’t let me answer before dragging me off with him toward the edge of the pier where an eighty-foot Ferris wheel sits, its neon bright lights in shades of blue, green, and pink, illuminating the darkening sky. It’s the Autumnal Equinox, a day where sunlight and night are equal in length, and although the sun is merely setting on the horizon, it’s sure to get dark soon.

“I shouldn’t,” I call out as we maneuver around the crowd making our way toward the Ferris wheel.

He stops abruptly, my chest crashing into his back before he spins me around to face him. “That’s exactly why we should. Don’t think just trust me. Come with me, I promise you won’t regret it.”

I nod, unable to say anything rational, and follow him toward the line of people waiting to board the ride. This isn’t your typical fair Ferris wheel, no this is something bigger, better, more magnificent than anything I’ve ever seen. Small carts that seat at least six people, swing back and forth as they slowly rotate around the wheel, each in a different bright color. Lights flicker along the edge of the wheel in a pattern matching the beat of the music playing in the loudspeakers.

“I can’t,” I mutter but he doesn’t stop walking. “Maverick stop, I can’t.” This time I pull him back, halting him in his tracks.

Mav smirks, “What’s the matter huh, scared of being alone with me eighty feet into the sky?”

I shake my head at his cocky attitude. “Being with you has nothing to do with it. I don’t do Ferris wheels.”

“What?” he asks, confused, as if what I’ve said makes no sense to him.

I scoff, taking a deep breath before I confess a truth no one knows. “When we were little, my mom took us to a fair on Coney Island when we went to visit my great grandmother in New York one summer. Brooklyn and I were ten, and we got stuck at the top of the wheel for over an hour. To make matters worse, he was swinging us back and forth the entire time, while everyone down below watched shouting for him to stop. I closed my eyes for an hour straight, begging to be saved. I’ve never stepped foot on one since.”

Worry and understanding cloud his eyes, and suddenly I’m more vulnerable than I’ve ever been. It’s like I’ve just pulled the curtain that’s kept me shielded safely behind the walls boarded up around my heart, and my soul has been revealed, out in the open for him to see every flaw, every insecurity, every single fear.

“You’ll be with me. I won’t let anything happen to you,” he says, and his promise shouldn’t mean anything to me, but it does. So much more than it should.

The sincerity in his eyes as he takes my hand in his and leads me toward the front of the line, paralyzes me and I’m walking on air, floating along the clouds succumbing to his influence.

Mav reaches into his back pocket and hands the kid working the ride some cash, bribing our way to the front of the line. The kid lets us in as the people behind us whine and groan, but just before he allows the next group in to join us, Maverick stops him.

Reaching back into his pocket he takes out another hundred-dollar bill. “No one else rides on this one,” he orders, whispering something else I can’t hear into his ear. The kid anxiously nods, closing the gate of the cart behind us.

The inside of the cart is spacious, enough for six people yet it's only the two of us. The leather bench seat is cold against the back of my thighs making me jump up as I sit.

"Are you cold?" he asks, but even though it's the last day of summer, the nights are barely dropping below eighty degrees. Given the current heat wave running through town, my skin is glistening with sweat. No, the chills up my spine, goosebumps on my skin, and erect nipples are because of something else entirely.

"I'm okay, just a little nervous. Sit down, you're making me anxious." Instead of sitting beside me like I expected, he takes a seat across from me, setting his leather jacket down beside him, just as the ride starts.

Taking a sharp intake of breath, I close my eyes tight, my pointed nails penetrating the leather beneath my fingertips as the cart starts its slow ascent into the sky.

"Breathe Nyx," I hear him whisper, but I can't. I'm so close to hyperventilating and succumbing to a panic attack I haven't had in years.

I shake my head fervently, unable to speak as my knees tremble. "No, I can't do this. Get me off Maverick. Get me out of here!"

"It's too late for that baby. I need you to calm down."

His voice is soothing, and the word baby leaving his lips is almost enough to relax me, but the intensity of the back-and-forth rocking of the cart is overwhelming.

"Maverick, get me out, please," I beg, refusing to open my eyes and look at him. "I can't do this. I told you I couldn't. I can feel the cart move under my feet, the vibrations are making me dizzy. All I hear is the sharp squeaking of the metal rubbing back and forth against each other as we spin." The shrilling sound is so intense, like nails digging into the chalkboard, I can hear it over the loud music blaring all around us.

"Open your eyes, look at me."

I shake my head in refusal. “I can’t.” Damn him for dragging me on here and damn his stupid sexy face for hypnotizing me and making me act foolish around him.

“Okay then keep them closed but focus on the sound of my voice.”

That I may do. The huskiness of his voice is something I could listen to for the rest of my life.

Suddenly, the cart stops moving and once again I’m suspended in the air. “Maverick,” I squeal, “Why did it stop?”

“Don’t worry, we’re safe.”

Keeping my eyes shut I shake my head, “No, somethings wrong.”

“We’re fine, I promise.”

“If you’re not getting me off this, then distract me. Please. Maverick, I need you to do something.” Flashes of that day eight years ago when Brooklyn and I sat suspended over a hundred feet in the air come back to me, like a horror film replaying in my mind. The agonizing fear, the thunderous sound of my beating heart in my ears when I sat there thinking I would never be rescued, or that Brooklyn was going to make us fall to our death, is threatening to overtake me yet again.

“Okay keep your eyes closed and do exactly as I tell you. I promise you this will keep your mind off where we are.” I nod, unsure what it is he’s going to ask of me. It’s terrifying to not know yet equally thrilling.

“First of all, I need you to relax. You’re too stiff. This won’t work if you’re wound up so tight.”

I smack my lips annoyed, “Maybe if you weren’t such a pain in my ass, or if you didn’t bring me all the way up here just to kill me via panic attack, I wouldn’t be wound up so tight.”

“There she is.” He lets out a chuckle that sounds so incredibly sexy, I almost open my eyes just to catch the sight of the laughter showing on his face. “There’s my girl.”

I freeze, and whatever part of me had just relaxed ever so slightly, quickly reverts to its rigid state.

“Now this is going to take you trusting me. I promise you this is going to work. You just need to trust me and do exactly as I say no questions asked. Deal?”

I nod three times, not sure why I am agreeing when I have a feeling this isn't something I'm going to like.

“Alright, I need you to relax your hands. Your nails are digging so deep into the leather I swear you're going to make it bleed.”

I do as I'm told and release my grip on the seat, placing my hands gently on my lap.

“Good girl.”

A pulsing ache forms between my legs at his praise. *What the hell?*

“Now, I need you to bring your right hand up to your mouth and shove your pointer and middle finger inside.”

“What the fuck?” I blurt out but he quickly shushes me, reaching over to place a finger against my lips.

“I said no questions Nyx, which means no objections either. Just listen and do as you're told.” I roll my eyes at his authoritative attitude, which I know is almost impossible since I have my eyes closed, but I swear I do it. The way he's ordering me around is vexing yet is also turning me on. Maverick grunts irked by my disobedience and difficult attitude. “Quit rolling your eyes and suck.”

Slow and steady, I lift my fingers to my mouth and part my lips, doing as he's ordered, wetting the tips of my fingers all the way to the top of my knuckles. I hear him clear his throat and groan aloud, the daunting sound sending a rush of something foreign to my already aching pussy.

“Good girl.”

There he goes again, praising me and speaking to me in a way no one has ever spoken to me. It's exhilarating and exactly what I want to hear.

“Now spread your legs. Spread your legs for me as far as you can.”

Halting my movements, my fingers still resting on my lips, I realize where this is going. “Oh, you’re fucking insane if you think this is happening,” I utter nervously, my voice a mixture between a laugh and a needy plea. I shake my head indignantly. This is not happening. No freaking way.

“This is exactly what’s going to happen. Now do as you’re fucking told! You asked me to distract you, did you not? Well babe, this is the only way I know how.”

In a moment of weakness or utter stupidity, completely aroused and equally intimidated by his hostile tone, I spread my legs apart. Inch by inch, slow and purposeful, my leather skirt, which barely reaches mid-thigh, rides higher up my thighs before it confines me, preventing me from spreading them any further.

“Why’d you stop?” he demands, but it’s the desperation in his voice that has me smirking at him. A rush of something foreign washes through me. Power? Purpose? Pleasure from his possessiveness?

That’s right asshole, beg for it.

My smirk widens, “That’s as far as they go. This outfit isn’t the best for this little scene you want to play out. If I’d have known...”

A deep growl leaves his lips, a growl so terrifying it has me jumping in my seat. My playful smirk widens when I know I’ve irked him. Oh, he’s turned on, rock hard and is irritated that it’s taking me this long to give him what he wants to see - my hands rubbing over my pussy as he watches.

I should be ashamed, horrified by the slightest inclination to go through with this but on the contrary, I feel empowered. It’s a sort of power rush knowing that this simple action has him so incredibly wound up, that I turn him on. Our attraction to each other has always been obvious, and maybe he’s right. There is no point in fighting the inevitable. Because he was right the other night. This is so going to happen.

“Quit playing and lift your skirt,” he demands, no trace of humor heard in his tone of voice. “I want it bunched up around your waist. I want to see the trim of the sexy little thong you’re wearing. What color is it today baby? Red? Pink? Blue?”

“Black,” I whisper, obeying his command. Feeling bolder than I was a moment ago, I lift off the seat for a slight second, lifting my skirt up just as he’s demanded, and take it one step further. Anticipating his next request, my finger grip the waistband of my black cotton thong, and I tug, slipping it down my legs before flicking it into the air toward him. At least I hope it’s toward him. But my eyes are closed, and I have no idea where it’s landed.

He groans, “My wicked Little Nyx.”

I smile wide at his endearing pet name and the word *my* again. *His*. I’m his. “That was going to be your next command, was it not?”

“Yes, but I wanted it in my hand. Now some lucky bastard down below is going to enjoy what was supposed to be mine.” Panic builds inside me at the thought I just threw my panties out of the cart and down into the crowd.

My eyes flash open but I don’t find what I’m expecting to see. Instead, I find Maverick smirking at me, a wickedly delicious and devious grin across his lips as he stares at me with lustful eyes leaning back against the cart, clenching my black thong in between his teeth.

It surely is a sight to see.

“You bastard!” I shout, but I can’t hide my smile tugging up at the sides of my mouth.

“Now, now. Let’s not forget who’s calling the shots here.”

Now that my eyes are open and I’m once again aware of where we are, fear tries to creep its way back inside of me. I nod my head urging him on. “Keep going.” The faster we get this over with, the better. It is about a twenty-minute ride on the Ferris wheel, but something tells me that isn’t enough time for what he has planned. Nor for what is going to happen.

“Spread them for me, baby. Bring your wet fingers down to your lips and coat them in your arousal. Slide them back and forth through these luscious lips of yours. I want to hear your wetness, I want to see the ecstasy in your eyes as you shove them deep inside of your tight little cunt, imagining they’re my fingers you’re tightening around.”

A loud moan leaves me as I do exactly as I’m told. I spread my legs as far as I can, giving him a full front and center view of my pussy, flushed, swollen, and already throbbing with need. My fingers find my wetness, and I slip them back and forth along my lips, my thumb pressing into my clit as I buck forward.

“Maverick please, I need you to...” my words die on my lips as another moan slips out of me. “Oh god.”

“Keep going, baby. Slip them inside one by one, shove those pretty little fingers inside that gorgeous pussy.”

“Yes,” I cry out, thrusting one finger inside, followed by another and within no time I’m fucking myself, picturing it’s Maverick who’s getting me off.

“No! K keep your eyes open. Keep them on me. God, you’re fucking beautiful baby.”

I watch him watch me, bringing myself to the precipice of my orgasm, riding my fingers like a starved woman. Even before and during the time Chad and I were dating, I’ve kept a healthy sexual lifestyle, using plenty of different toys to masturbate when Chad wasn’t fulfilling the needs I had. Not only was he mediocre he only thought about his own pleasure and most of the time that was minutes before I even felt anything.

But not only has Maverick already given me over three mind blowing orgasms, and countless others at the hands of my toys with him on my mind, he’s about to give me another. Well, this time it’s my own hands, but looking into his eyes, seeing the desire building up inside of them, the need to watch me come apart for him and know that it’s because of him, it’s enough to make me explode on command.

“That’s it, keep going. Look at me and make yourself come. You’re so close I can smell it and my god you’re intoxicating.”

Mav bites his bottom lip, his tongue licking his lips as his hands move down to rub back and forth against his groin, massaging his cock through his jeans.

“Yes, oh god, I’m coming Mav. I’m…”

I come harder than I ever have, more intensely than when it was his fingers bringing me to the edge of madness weeks ago.

“Fuck baby, you’re a true goddess Phoenix.”

Barely able to stand on my feet I waddle over to him, falling into his lap as the cart swings us in the air. “Oh shit, I’d forgotten where we were.”

He chuckles, clasping my waist as he steadies me on his lap. “I told you I’d distract you.”

“Mmm,” I groan, caressing the thick stubble on his chin with my wet fingers. “I want this between my legs Mav. I want it rubbing against me, burning my flesh, as it scratches the inside of my thighs.”

He leans his forehead against mine, shutting his eyes and shaking his head as his finger dig deeper into my waist, moving lower to grip a handful of my ass. “Fuck babe, don’t say those things to me. Not up here where I can’t give you what you want.”

My tongue comes out to play, and I lick his cheek, kissing my way down to his neck, tracing the lines with my tongue just like I’ve dreamt of doing for weeks. “Maverick please, I need more than this. More than what I just gave myself, I need it to be you baby.”

I place both hands on either side of his face leaning him back slightly so that he’s staring straight into my eyes. He closes his eyes and turns away from me, but I don’t let go. “I won’t fuck you up here,” he mutters under his breath as he fights to meet my gaze. “You deserve better than that, but I’ll give you what you want.”

He takes my fingers still coated in my arousal into his mouth and sucks them, nipping at the tips as they pop out of him. Shifting us slightly so I'm straddling him, one knee resting on the leather seat on either side of him, my bare pussy pressing against the bulge beneath his jeans, he settles his hands on my ass, pinching and tugging my cheeks apart.

"This ass, I swear this ass is going to be mine one day." I nod, begging him to take me now.

"Rub yourself on me. Take what you need from me, but I can't fuck you up here, you deserve better than a quick dirty fuck on a Ferris wheel Nyx." I raise myself up slightly, and tug on his zipper, reaching in behind his boxers for his cock.

"Fuck," he groans deeply, the sound reverberating from deep within him. He kisses my chin, moving down to kiss my neck as I arch back to give him better access. "Not here, not like this," he whispers in between kisses. "You're driving me crazy. The restraint I must show to not bend you over and take you from behind, burying myself into your tight pussy. I want to hear you scream my name and for everyone down below to hear it to."

I begin moving back and forth against his throbbing erection standing straight up between us, but his hands grip my sides holding me in place. "I don't care what you think I deserve Maverick, it's not what I need." I look at him straight in those beautiful blue eyes that haunt my restless dreams and vivid nightmares. "I need this. I need your cock inside of me right now or I swear I'll jump off this shit and go find another guy to give me what I need."

"Don't you fucking dare, Phoenix. You're mine."

I grab his cock and line it up with my aching pussy, but he stills, staring down at his erection, the tip glistening with precum. "Shit," he curses, and I know what he's referring to. Eighty feet in the air and no condom. He looks up at me, a wistful look in his eyes and I smile giving him the okay.

"I'm clean," he says, as my hands wrap around his length. He's so big. Strong, thick, and so hard for me, I can feel him

growing in my palm. I lick my lips, my tongue begging to have a taste, to feel his power on my lips.

“I’ve been on birth control since I was fifteen,” I admit. “And I got tested after I broke up with the cheating bastard.” His brows furrow. “There has been no one since then.”

“Wait a fucking minute, the bastard really cheated on you?” he curses, anger taking over his sinful expression. Well, this is new, I thought he knew.

I nod, “With Tatum Mortimer, while he was texting me we were done.” His face pales at my confession and I know he’s probably sick to his stomach at the memory of when I caught him with her that night at the beach. “That’s not important. Please forget about that right now.” Slow and steady I grab his cock once more and lower myself onto him before he objects. I was right he’s so big, stretching me as my pussy tries to fit him all in. It stings slightly, but I’m so wet that after a second, he slides in easily.

My movements become quicker, more intense as the anticipation within me builds. I’m already so close to the precipice of another orgasm as he meets my every movement with a heavy thrust of his own. Our moans are heard in the air around us, sweat dripping down his forehead, neck, and chest.

Mav leans his forehead against mine and holds me in place, preventing me from leaning back.

“Slowly down, just like this.” He uses his hands to move my hips up and down as I ride him. “Just like this, in case anyone sees us up here, you throwing your head back while on my lap might make what we’re doing obvious. This way they only see a couple kissing.”

I nod but my lips feel cold, empty without him on them.

“Then kiss me.”

With an urgency I never experienced nor expected, he claims my mouth, his lips crashing down on mine taking me in for the most mind-numbing, mind-altering kiss. Our teeth clash, tongues swirling together as he shoves his inside mine,

licking every corner of my mouth, nipping at my lips, as I continue to ride him passionately.

Our loud moans are concealed by the loud music blaring on the loudspeakers above us, a song I recognize, and oddly fitting, playing in sync with our movements. *Ride For Me*.

“I’m so close,” I moan into his mouth, while his fingers leave my hips and reach down between us, rubbing against my clit. I throw my head back in ecstasy, moving faster against him.

He reaches his free hand around my neck and pulls me forward, his lips a mere centimeter from mine. “Come for me.”

Fireworks erupt all around us, lighting up the night sky in a shower of color. Pinks, golds, greens, and blues, lights firing off with no intention of ever stopping. The sounds of the fireworks silence my moans, and I fight to fall back, reveling in the euphoria I feel, but in an instant, he reaches out for my face and keeps me in place, staring into his eyes as he kisses me once again.

“Fuck,” he groans, shooting his cum inside of me as intensely as my orgasm just was. We kiss for what feels like hours riding each other until we’re breathless and I fall forward, unable to sit up straight. Famished, exhausted, so fucking happy.

Deliriously happy.

Dangerously confused.

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CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

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PHOENIX

Silence passes between us, the noise around us drowning out our breathing as we sit here, me still on his lap, his dick still inside of me, and our foreheads pressed together, eyes closed tight, and heartbeats mimicking each other's rhythm, a sweet song only the two of us can understand. Physically together, yet our minds have wandered off to another world where what just happened between us, doesn't have any repercussions.

I fucked Maverick Carter. No scratch that, I rode my stepbrother's cock on a Ferris wheel, in the middle of our high school fair, just after fingering myself as he watched. The worst part, I'd do it again, and a million times over.

This undying connection between us is taking over every part of my mind. All I do when I'm not near him is think about him, and when we're together, I can't keep my distance.

For weeks I've fought it tooth and nail, reminding myself over and over again of how wrong it would be. He's my stepbrother, it's not only practically forbidden, but it's morally wrong. We live together, his mother had an affair with my father and married him. His mother ruined my family, ruined my life, and yet here I cannot fight this magnetic pull, risking ruining everything I have left. The scandal that would ensue if what just happened here between us was ever to see the light of day.

The gossip, the name-calling and slut-shaming that I would undergo if the world, my world, knew I fucked my stepbrother, in public.

Good God Phoenix, what has your life come to.

I shouldn't care, not after how everyone turned their backs on me, not after my family treated me like everything that happened was my fault.

If anything, I should be proud, doing this despite everyone's unsolicited opinions. The moment Maverick

arrived in my house, I knew he was here with ulterior motives. The rebellious tattooed bad boy who wore all black and bore two daunting blue eyes and a sinfully seductive smile screamed mischief and if his reputation had any validity, he had not only a temper, but an aching fist to go along with it.

The prep school, well more like a reform school, he was previously enrolled at was notorious for housing the troubled children of the most powerful people on the East Coast. And from what I'd read online, it was rumored to be just as bad behind the black iron gates. Cartels and Mafias were rumored to be using the academy as a front, using the students to sell their supply, and from there recruiting their top officers. Grooming the future leaders of the world, one at a time. The Mafia runs Sacred Heart Prep and Maverick was one of the heads behind it all. Or so I've heard.

“The ride is about to end, Nyx. We should...”

Before he says it and humiliates me more than I already feel, I hop off him, losing my balance before falling back into his arms. They wrap around me, holding me steady on his lap as he stares attentively at me not giving away any clue what he's thinking.

Does he feel the same way I do, or is he regretting it all, the way I'm trying so hard not to.

“Please let me go, I need to fix myself before the ride comes to a halt. I really don't want everyone waiting in line to board the ride, to see me like this.”

Mav nods, letting me off and I quickly stand, adjusting my skirt and pulling it back down over my ass. Running a finger through my hair, I check my reflection on my phone that was on the bench across us and wipe away the mascara running under my eyes. I look like shit, but it will have to do.

“Beautiful.” I hear him whisper behind me. I look up and find his gaze is still fixed on me, watching my every move with an adoration I've never seen before. It's not the same desire I saw in his eyes a moment ago but a stronger, almost violent need. Mav's also adjusted himself and tucked his cock back into his jeans, zipping them up just before we reach the

end of the ride. The same kid who let us on walks over to the cart to open the door and let us out.

The kid's gaze, just like the one of all the others in line behind him, is glued on us, their smirks and snickers confirming they suspect what just happened in that cart. Guess I'm not so good at hiding my *just fucked* look.

Maverick of course pays them no attention, grabbing my hand and leading me over to the opposite end of the dock where the sweet aroma of something magical hits my nostrils, and once again euphoria overtakes me. Sweet sugar, delectable dough, I am in heaven.

"Thought you might enjoy something sweet after the fuck of your life," he says reaching over and grabbing my ass.

He smirks playfully, and it irks me. "Maverick what the hell," I shout, smacking his hand away. Looking around to make sure no one's heard him, I lean forward and whisper in his ear. "You can't just say that out loud in front of people. Someone we know may overhear."

"So?" he asks, amused by my fit. He throws his leather jacket on, his black tee riding up and giving me a glimpse of tanned abs and the black band of Calvin's that makes my mouth water and my pussy clench.

I swallow hard and clear my throat. "So, no one can know what just happened. Can you imagine if someone found out? Our friends? Brooklyn?" Worry cripples me and a panic attack threatens to creep its way through me at the realization of what we just did. What if someone already saw us? We were on a Ferris wheel for Christ's sake, hanging above hundreds of people, riding next to at least twenty carts.

Mav's amused expression quickly changes when he notices my dreary frown, and something resembling ire takes over as he steps into my space, crowding me and sucking in the air around me. "Come on Phoenix, you have to be joking?" he scoffs, turning away.

I reach out and grab onto his forearm. "No, Maverick. I've never been more serious." The vulnerability I felt moments

ago when I almost gave into my feelings for him is something I can't risk happening again. It's all too dangerous, becoming too real, and it's unnerving in so many ways.

My mother trusted a man with her heart, gave him everything, and although she may not have truly loved him, even if he may not have been her better half, he destroyed her just the same. I can't imagine what would happen to me if these feelings I'm discovering are real.

"We both know what that was in there," I continue, releasing my hold on him. "It was a distraction, a game if you will."

Now it's anger, volatile and all-consuming, that appears on his face, cascading down like a volcanic wave of scorching lava turning everything in its path to ash. "That sure as fuck wasn't a game and you know damn well Nyx," he growls, gripping my shoulders and bringing me against his heaving chest.

I try my hardest to keep my composure, to continue to show that I'm not affected by him, by his voice, his touch, and the way his eyes are boring into mine searching for answers. He won't like what he finds. I look up and the vision of him standing there illuminated by the almost black sky all around us; the moon shining down upon him, it's mesmerizing, capable of making me lose all train of thought.

"It has to be Mav," I choke out, fighting back the tears pooling in my eyes. "It can be nothing more. You have to understand, you're my stepbrother..."

"Would you just stop fucking saying that for a minute!" he yells interrupting me.

Suddenly, and as if sent from the heavens above, Donovan, Darcy, Brooklyn, and Fitz appear heading directly toward us.

"There you are!" Donovan shouts, throwing her arm over my shoulder. Maverick releases me and steps back clearly frustrated and annoyed by the interruption. I, on the other hand, am relieved they've shown up saving me from whatever argument Mav and I were about to have.

Dee leans in close to me, the scent of tequila strong on her breath as the tip of her nose rests against my cheek. She gasps and giggles quietly enough that only I can hear. “You smell like sex,” she whispers into my ear. I elbow her, silently shutting her up with my murderous glare. She scowls at my action, but quickly smirks when she realizes she’s spot on with her assumption.

Beside her, Darcy looks at us in utter disbelief and that’s when I know she’s caught the end of what Dee just accused me of, and caught not only my reaction, but my obvious admission. Though if she does, she says nothing, just nods and turns away, directing her attention back to the guys in front of us.

“Where the hell were you two?” Brooklyn asks, stumbling and slurring his words. Surprise, surprise, he’s fucking wasted. When is he not lately? The only positive thing about his current state is that he doesn’t seem to suspect anything.

“Yeah,” Fitz is the next to speak, eyeing us warily. “Dee said she told you to meet us at the Ferris wheel to watch the fireworks. Where were you?” Fitz, who isn’t hammered, looks back and forth between Mav and I, accusing us with his inquiry.

I foolishly stare at them, unable to come up with a good enough lie to hide what I was doing without having them suspect. Cutting a glance to him, he’s watching me just as expectantly, challenging me to come up with an excuse.

Fucking asshole is enjoying this.

Luckily, I’m saved once again only this time I wish I weren’t.

“Well, well, look who we have here.” Her annoying and nasally voice irks me just as much as the sight of her standing there in her frumpy top, her tacky blonde hair now adorned with thick chalky pink highlights taking us back to the early 2000s. To make matters worse, she’s hanging on Chad’s arm like a clingy parasite he just can’t shake off.

Well, that's what happens when you let the vile leech sink her claws into you. A lesson I'm sure he wishes he would have learned sooner.

This little game of *whose dick is bigger than whose* Tate wants to play, is the last thing I need right now, not when I'm already one stupid remark away from a psychotic breakdown.

Wonder if my mother needs a new roommate?

"I swear I thought they started sweeping the garbage off of our beaches this week, but it looks like they missed some," Dee sneers, damn proud of her comeback.

Tate's lip twitches as she bites her tongue on the inside trying her hardest to keep composed. It's futile, since her mood is written all over her face.

Instead of pouting or returning Dee's insult with a half-assed remark of her own, she grins playfully, running her fingers up and down Chad's bare arm. I don't know what planet she's currently living on and thinks I would care in the slightest that her and Chad are an item.

"A little birdie told me a rumor about a dear friend of ours," Tate murmurs coyly, taking two steps in my direction. She releases Chad and steps around me, placing a hand along Maverick's leather clad shoulder, gaudy pink nails slowly trailing up his sleeve.

"If you're talking to birds now Tatum, I think we should be the ones who are worried." Shrugging Donovan's hand off my shoulder I step forward, coming to stand between Tate and Maverick, scowling down at the placement of her hand on him. Not sure if anyone else catches my subtle movement, but the way Maverick's scowl curls up at both ends as he shrugs her off tells me he's noticed.

The surrounding noise has reached a higher volume as the night crowd prepares to continue the party now that the sun has set and the little ones crowding the rides have headed home. People bustle back and forth excitedly, teenagers enjoying their last night of chaos before the sun begins to set

earlier on the horizon, only making their recurring escapades now fall under the watchful gaze of the moon above.

“Oh darling, the birds aren’t the only ones I’m talking to.” Tate’s gaze lifts to Maverick’s, who watches her suspiciously, a hidden message flickering in his eyes. Frankly, I’m really getting pissed off by the animosity that’s circulating in the air. Not only do the two of them seem to have some secret they’re keeping between them, but that everyone around us is now watching us closely like they know something is about to unfold here.

I should just walk away from this whole mess and ignore the bitch who’s clearly only acting this way to get a rise out of me, but of course I don’t. I can’t get myself to move, not when she’s purposefully taunting me by trying, and obviously failing, to “seduce” him.

Maybe Maverick is right. Maybe it’s time to stop hiding whatever’s happening between us and just accept it. Especially if it bothers Tatum so much.

Tate spins on her heels to face my friends who are all gathered around eagerly waiting for someone to say something on the matter. They’re not only watching her expectantly but are visibly baffled by whatever’s happening. “We all know that *Her Majesty* here,” she says with an edge to her tone, “has been a little distant and behaving oddly, even for her, since her near downfall earlier this year. You know when the scandalous affair of her parents came out and rattled all of Malibu Cove’s social scene,” she adds as if they all don’t understand what she’s implying.

“Cut the fucking Bullshit!” Brooklyn shouts rather irate and drunk as he stumbles toward her.

Tate rolls her eyes, putting her hand out to block Brooklyn from moving any closer to her.

“Why yes, I see that is still a sore subject. Any who...” she sing-songs, turning back to everyone. “I understand our dear Phoenix has been avoiding all of us tonight, but let me tell you, she hasn’t been alone. Looks like our *Reigning Queen* has found herself a *King*.” It’s at that precise moment her gaze

flicks to Maverick who has somehow moved closer and is standing protectively behind me. “Or at least a ridiculously hot bodyguard.”

I can feel his chest rising and falling, pushing against my back, while his hand rests possessively on my waist, pulling me in closer to him. Tate holds out her phone to us, and on it plays a video of Maverick and I on the Ferris wheel moments ago. You can’t see everything we were doing, but you can clearly make out I’m straddling his lap and my lips are on his.

Can’t get any clearer than that.

Donavan and Darcy gasp while Fitz mutters “*Oh shit*”, just as Brooklyn’s fist lands on the edge of Maverick’s chin, making him release his hold on me as he stumbles a step back.

Mav doesn’t fall to the ground, Brooklyn’s drunk and therefore his aim is faulty, but the contact is there no less. “You fucking bastard!” Brooklyn shouts, going in for another blow. However, this time Maverick blocks him, refusing to return the hit toward my brother. Instead, Mav wraps his arms around Brooklyn holding him in a weird sort of headlock, not only stopping him from throwing another punch but also from hurting himself in the process.

All the wandering and prying eyes in our vicinity are on us, watching and gossiping about the show these two idiots are putting on.

Behind them Chad and Tate smile victoriously, the two snakes meant for each other watching how I eagerly try to control what is happening. Laughing at how hard I’m trying to keep it all together before my life blows to pieces and I lose everything.

“Stop it both of you!” I shout, making Maverick release his hold on Brooklyn. Fitz helps by pulling my brother back, but Brooklyn shrugs him off and takes off toward the parking lot, not able to stomach looking me in the eye. “He can’t leave like this,” I cry out. However, Fitz is already responding to the terror-stricken look in my eyes.

“I’ll get him home, don’t worry.”

“I’ll go with you,” Dee tells him, reassuring me.

“I will too,” Darcy adds. “Someone needs to drive, and I haven’t been drinking.” Fitz nods in agreement, tossing Darcy the keys to his Jeep.

Anger bubbles inside of me clouding my vision as they take off after Brooklyn, the events of not only the last few months but also of these past few days flashing in my mind like a warning sign. I’ve reached the point in my life where I’m going to explode if I don’t take back hold of the reins and control my own actions and decisions. I’ve had it with everyone concocting these elaborate lies and making their own assumptions about me and my life. It’s time I put the rumors to rest myself.

“Let me make this easy for you Tate,” I mutter, deciding no one is going to get the satisfaction of dragging my name through the streets anymore. I’m the only one who has the power to decide what I do with my life. Not my parents, not Maverick, not Brooklyn, not Chad, and surely not fucking Tatum Mortimer. “Yes, I’ve found someone new to keep me warm at night. It’s easy too given he shares the room right next to me.”

Tate’s victorious grin falls, and in its place, a vicious scowl appears, nipping at her dignity and making her want to crawl into a little ball and die of embarrassment from the ego hit she’s just suffered.

I, however, no longer give a flying fuck.

Maverick’s arm wraps around my waist, claiming me, putting to rest any doubt they still may have about my confession.

“You fucking whore,” Tate screeches, her hands fisting at her sides like a temperamental child about to drop to the floor kicking and screaming. The crowd around us gasps after hearing our exchange.

Excitement flows through me at the sight of her all ruffled up and out of her element. She thought by outing Mav and I she was going to make me run away crying or beg her to stop,

but on the contrary, it made me brave enough to silence all of those who mocked me behind my back. It's my turn to smile proudly like I've won this round, and I do, making sure everyone hears me.

“Yes dear, I hear that's the way he likes it.”

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CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

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MAVERICK

She's mine.

Phoenix is mine and she's finally accepted it.

I was bewildered by her admission which was not only in front of her ex-boyfriend and number one nemesis, but with her brother and friends merely a few feet away. One thing is for everyone to suspect that we're fooling around with each other, but after what she said to me about it being a mistake, I didn't think she'd risk them knowing it was true.

Maybe it was the adrenaline rushing through her veins from what we'd just done, or the video proof Tate used as ammunition smirking like she'd just ensured Phoenix's ruin. Regardless of what the cause was, she did it, and I'll be taking advantage of all the time I can get with her before she changes her mind again.

After leaving the fair and crowd standing there gaping at us in shock, we're back home, alone. Only I'm not ready for the night to be over.

Phoenix exits my car and rushes to the gate, unlocking it before I can get out myself.

It's a beautiful night - the sky clear and speckled with twinkling stars visible beyond the calm waters in the distance fading into the vast blanket of dark blue where the sky and the sea collide. The pool lights are turned on, illuminating the blue floor underneath as a light breeze pushes the water back and forth, in slow and steady waves.

Phoenix continues walking toward the back door of the house, but I catch up to her and wrap my arms around her waist from behind, resting my chin in the crook of her neck.

"Nyx, wait," I murmur against her skin. "I'm not ready for the night to be over." She stills before turning to face me, her eyes alight with so much emotion as she looks up at me through dark lashes.

Our drive back home was silent, neither of us knowing what to do or say next. I wanted to tell her how excited I was she'd finally accepted that we were good together, but I didn't. I knew she wasn't ready to hear it. Not since I was sure there were millions of thoughts running wild in her mind about what had just occurred. Doubt, regret, and fear were probably among the emotions she was trying to sort through, and I wasn't going to push her on it.

Though now, as we stand here beside the pool, my hands wrapped around her body that's pressed against mine, with the soft song of the crickets chirping in the night the only sound we can hear beyond our unsteady breathing, I have no intention of waiting.

Having her in my arms earlier today, being inside of her as she rode me, and watching the look in her eyes as she came apart for me, was like a drug I'd become addicted to. Like an addict I'm having withdrawals and need to take another hit.

She breaks our silence first, "What did you have in mind?" I watch uncertainty wash over her face, her beautiful blue eyes looking deep into mine, silently trying to figure out my next move.

Tough luck baby, cause I have no fucking clue what I'm doing.

I'm unsure of how to respectfully answer, since what I really want is to bend her over the table under the pergola and fuck her raw until she's crying out my name into the night. Instead, I stare blankly at her, letting the chemistry between us take control. The magnetic pull is so profound I can almost taste it in the air around us as her body leans forward, her lips softly pressing against mine.

I look over her head and toward the still waters of the infinity pool behind us. A smile creeps onto my lips pressed against hers and I give her a quick peck. "Let's go for a swim."

Without waiting for her response, I grab her hand and lead her toward the pool.

“Maverick wait,” she cries out, but I don’t stop until we’re standing at the edge of the water.

“Take this off,” I demand, tugging at the hem of her leather skirt. I quickly slip out of my jacket and shirt, throwing them both on one of the loungers to our right. However, instead of following my order, she’s just standing there gawking at me. I raise a brow questioningly at her. “Did you not hear me?”

“We can’t.” She nervously looks around the yard, then back toward the house. “What if someone catches us?” she whispers, crossing her arms over her chest. She shivers and I’m unsure if it’s the light breeze in the air, or desire creeping over her skin.

“All the lights are turned off. No one is awake.”

Annoyed with my quick-witted response, she digs her teeth into her bottom lip. “Okay, well I don’t have a swimsuit on.”

She’s fishing for excuses, and I’m not amused. I want this too much to waste time playing games tonight. “Babe, trust me, you’re not going to need it.” I grin at her, making her cheeks flush a pretty pink color.

I watch desire flare in her eyes as they rake over my naked chest and down to my hand unbuttoning my jeans. I kick off my boots and tug my jeans down, standing in nothing but a pair of boxers.

“Wow,” she gasps covering her mouth with her hand at the realization she said that out loud. A deeper hue paints her cheeks as she watches me, her tongue wetting her lips.

“Your turn.” I lick my lips in response and she nearly melts to a puddle of need at my feet.

Shaky hands move to her back, thin and deft fingers slowly tugging down the zipper of her skirt. It falls to her feet leaving her bare to me, her thong currently on the floor tucked inside the pocket of my jeans. She proceeds to pull the strapless top over her head, revealing perky breasts with small, pointed nipples I didn’t get to enjoy earlier.

My mouth instantly waters at the sight of pure perfection standing before me.

Tugging off my boxers, I feel my hard cock already dripping and throbbing from how turned on I am just remembering the way she felt wrapped around me.

Fuck, I need her now.

“Mav,” she moans, her voice breathy and full of desire. “The cameras, what if he catches us.”

I take four steps toward her, closing the space between us yet don't reach out to touch her. Looking up at the security camera secured on the roof of the house pointing down at us, I reach out for her, bringing her body flush against me. “Then let's give him something to watch.”

I swallow her rebuttal as my mouth crashes down on hers, kissing her like a starved man who needs her to survive. Our lips dance together to a tune only the two of us know. She's intoxicating the feel of her tongue in my mouth exhilarating as she opens up further for me. I take her bottom lips between my teeth and bite hard drawing blood as I grip a handful of her ass in my palms.

Before she can whine and pull away, I grab her waist and dive us headfirst into the water.

Saltwater comes crashing into our faces, burning as it goes up my nose, but I don't release her lips, not until we come back up to the surface and she's gasping for air, coughing up the water she's swallowed.

“Maverick,” she coughs out, hitting her fists against my chest. “What the hell?”

I answer her question with another rough kiss, this time my cock pressing against her pussy, rubbing back and forth, begging her to open her legs and let it slide right in.

“Don't fight it. Don't fight us.” She moans into my mouth and falls back into my arms, no longer fighting the magnetic pull forcing our lips together. She tastes so sweet, hints of the funnel cake we took to-go, mixed with a taste that is one hundred percent her.

Delectable.

“Aaahh, please Maverick. I need you.” She runs her hands over my chest, nails clawing on my back as she frantically grinds against me, my cock growing as she moves. Her arms wrap around my neck pulling me in closer as her legs wrap around the back of my calves begging for me to thrust into her.

I want to, I’m so fucking ready and I can feel she is too, but I want to take my time with her. Our first time was a quick and dirty fuck on a Ferris wheel in the middle of a fair, hundreds of people in the distance unaware of what we were doing.

But here, it’s just the two of us, the sound of the pool filter masked by her soft moans.

“Please, I need you to fuck me. I can’t…”

I swallow her pleas, lifting her out of the water, and setting her down on the edge of the pool. She shivers as the cool breeze hits her wet skin, water droplets dripping down her taut nipples that are so hard I’m afraid if I touch them I will hurt her, but I can’t help myself. I take one into my mouth, kneading her other breast as I suck, my free hand pushing her legs apart to settle in between them. Taking turns showing each one of her tits equal amounts of attention, I lick my way down her stomach, enjoying every inch of her writhing beneath me.

I nip at the inside of her thighs, rubbing the scruff of my chin against her sensitive skin, remembering her pleas from earlier today.

“I want this between my legs Mav. I want it rubbing against me, burning my flesh, as it scratches the inside of my thighs.”

My tongue finds her clit, licking hard and fast quickly bringing her to the edge of her orgasm. She’s so wet, her arousal coating my tongue as I suck her clit into my mouth.

“I could spend the rest of my life lasting you. God you’re so fucking perfect.”

“Yes,” she whimpers, wiggling on the edge, lifting her hips to meet my mouth as she leans back on her elbows, reveling in

the feel of her impending orgasm. “I’m so close, but I want to come with you inside of me.”

I need no further convincing. Getting out of the pool to join her, I sit on the edge, my legs dangling in the water, and pull her over to straddle me, lining her entrance with my cock.

She cries out as I enter her, but I stifle her screams with my mouth. “Shh, you’ll wake up the whole neighborhood.” It’s like the mention of someone hearing us excites her, and she lowers herself onto my dick, slowly taking me all in.

“Fuck,” I groan, holding her hips steady. Sex has never felt as incredible as it does with her. It’s like we’re a perfect fit.

Holding her hips, I thrust into her, hard and fast, driving in all the way back as she braces herself on my shoulders and starts to ride me.

“Fuck,” she yells before biting down on my shoulder, her nails digging into my skin and grabbing on for dear life.. “Maverick, oh God.”

“Yeah baby, I’m your God and you’re my Goddess. Now ride me, ride me until you come on my dick, and I come inside your sweet little cunt.” I trail soft kisses along her collar bone and in between her breasts. “Mine.”

“Don’t stop I’m so close.” She begs and I obey, filling her completely.

“Now,” I shout as I come inside her, feeling her walls clench around me as she falls apart in my arms. She throws her head back, still riding the waves of her orgasm and I lean forward to nip at her neck, licking, sucking, marking her.

After a few moments of our bodies being flush against one another as we tried to steady our breathing, she climbs off me, but just as I’m about to jump back into the water to clean off, her hands find my thighs.

Suddenly, she’s on all fours, her ass up in the air facing away from me as her mouth hovers over my erection, which to no surprise is still hard.

I look up at her and find the most carnal and sensuous look I've ever seen appear on her face, eyes so dark and clouded with lust it's as if she's been possessed. I position myself when I see what she's about to do, and her mouth comes down to my cock, her tongue licking at the head. Without warning she swirls her tongue all around my shaft before she takes me all in.

"Fuck. Baby you don't..."

"I want to," she says, continuing to suck me. Her right-hand cups my balls as she takes me all the way back, her head expertly bobbing back and forth. I'm quickly on the edge of another orgasm when she lays my cock flat against my stomach, running her tongue down my shaft from the head to my balls.

"Come inside my mouth Maverick. I want to taste you baby, all of you."

Her wish is my command and I come inside her mouth, harder than I've come in a long time.

A few minutes pass before she releases me, licking my cum dripping out of her mouth.

"You're so fucking sexy," I murmur against her, bringing her back into my arms.

"What's next?" she asks, hopeful eyes looking at me.

That's when the gravity of what we've just done hits me like an ice-cold bucket of water. There is no going back now. The way I feel about her, the way I know she feels about me, this is real. This is what it is supposed to feel like. Those emotions I've suppressed so deep inside of me, well there's no hiding them away now.

They're front and center on the tip of my tongue, taking over every inch of my mind.

Before I answer her, I grab her waist and jump back into the water, kissing her while we're under. Coming back up to the surface, I brush her hair away from her face and cup her chin in my palm, tenderly running my thumb over her bottom lip.

“I don’t know Nyx, but I do know one thing.” She nods expectantly. “I don’t want to fight it any longer, consequences be damned.”

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CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

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PHOENIX

Autumn.

The only time of the year better than summer for us Malibu Cove residents.

Cool gentle breezes, ever-changing falling leaves, delectable, spiced lattes, and football.

It's all about football. High school football.

Our All-American reigning state champions are going for their fourth consecutive title, which coincides with Brooklyn and Fitz's fourth year on the varsity team. Coincidences don't exist in Malibu Cove. I once heard a rumor that Coach Rivers purposefully held back a student or two during his tenure, making them repeat their senior year in order for them to remain a part of the team. Rumors of course, but given the importance placed on the guys and this team, the televised games, the pro-team stadiums in which the postseason games are held, it's all plausible.

Lucky for Fitz and my brother, their futures in the majors are too important to jeopardize.

So, what better way to kick off the start of the season, the end of their high school career and beginning of their pro-level career, than with a rager in their honor.

The moment he entered the room wearing one of Brooklyn's old football jerseys, his hair unruly and not in its usual perfectly gelled state, holding a glass of bourbon in his manicured hand, and announced we were hosting a party Saturday in honor of my brother's first win as a senior, and potential draft season, I knew my father was up to something.

He only ever throws these lavish parties for his clients along with his business partners and associates, or when he's concocting a plan. This feels like the latter.

That the game has yet to happen, and the MC Sharks have yet to win, or that the scouts won't be coming to watch until

the second half of the season, doesn't bother him in the slightest, nor stops him from arranging the event tonight. It's a given that every time the Sharks play, they win. Especially against tonight's visitors, the Montecito Monarchs.

Brooklyn didn't seem bothered by the idea of my father's party, but something just felt off to me. It's like he was trying a little too hard to make nice. Not to mention, this week has been chock-full of weird experiences and unusual behaviors even for my father. Not only has he been moodier than normal, but he's also even seemed slightly paranoid, always looking over his shoulder and asking where Maverick is. Both Maverick and Brooklyn have spent little time at the house this week meaning we've yet to discuss what happened between the three of us last weekend.

We've had dinner as a family twice, which if you ask me is terribly awkward now that Mav and I are well, whatever we are. After our discussion about what that night really meant, not to forget the hot as fuck pool sex we had, he assured me he doesn't want to fight, whatever it is we were previously fighting against.

After leaving Chad and Tate standing there humiliated, with their jaws dropped and tails between their legs, Mav and I came home and spent the night together. It was his idea to go for a "swim", which turned out to be just what we needed. It started off with innocent touching, nothing erotic about it, yet it instilled in me the same pleasurable feelings having him inside of me had.

The two of us naked together in the warm water, kissing as my hands roamed all over his chest, his fingers caressing my skin, I couldn't help getting so aroused. I needed him again, so I had him. Not only did he fuck me like I'd never been fucked before but having him in my mouth as I watched him come apart because of me, well let's just say it's the most exhilarating thing I've ever felt.

But then it became so much more and that is when I realized that night, despite its drastic turn of events, was the most fun I've had in a long time, and ending the night at his side, was everything.

My feelings for him flourished while I lay with him curled up in his arms, and although he hasn't outright declared the way he feels about me, I know he cares.

Though something tells me he's kept his distance on purpose, because neither one of us is ready to admit what we feel, nor for our parents to discover what is truly happening between us. At least not until we've figured it out.

Regardless, I must admit there has been a recent shift between our *family*, especially where my father is concerned. The glares he's given Maverick the times I've seen them together in the same room are terrifying and make me wonder if there is something else going on that I don't know about. Or if Brooklyn has told my father anything about what happened that night.

Since the altercation between Maverick and Brooklyn, the times he has been home and not crashing at Fitz's house, my brother's been even more distant and broody.

Which brings me to the current scene in front of me where all of that becomes irrelevant.

Friday Night Lights.

The game is about to start and Olly, Darcy and I are sitting front row on the home side bleachers, watching the cheer squad, Dee front and center of course, spell out the words MALIBU COVE as they chant asking us to "give them a letter".

The announcer comes on over the intercom speakers, letting everyone know we have five minutes till kick off. The visiting team exits from the visitor's side tunnel, making their way onto the field in their crimson and gold uniforms, the silhouette of a butterfly etched in black on their helmets.

"Do you know if he's coming tonight?" Darcy asks, whispering in my ear over the booing coming from the crowd. They hoot and holler, calling for the Sharks to make their much-anticipated exit onto the field.

Since the day Darcy overheard Donovan tell me I reeked of sex after getting off the Ferris wheel, she's been badgering

me about what the deal is with me and Mav. I've told the two of them what I've tirelessly told myself. I have no fucking clue. Of course I haven't told them about what happened that night when we came back home.

"I don't know and don't care," I tell her, turning my attention back to the field just as the Sharks come rushing out of the tunnel, ripping through the banner held out in front of them that reads, STATE CHAMPS 2022. A little presumptuous, but probably spot on the way their track record goes.

It would be nice to know where Maverick and I stand, but I've decided I won't keep driving myself crazy trying to figure it out and fail at reading his mind. He's a complicated man and I can tell something is still holding him back. Which is why I've made it clear to him, if he wants me, then he needs to stop being a coward and come get me.

I'm done playing games. I won't allow myself to be hurt by him, and if that means keeping the walls around my heart intact until he decides he's ready, then so be it. I'm in no hurry to claim him as mine, but I'm also not opposed to the idea. The ball is in his court now, and I'm not going to do a damn thing about it.

The crowd goes wild as the Sharks win the coin toss and prepare for kick off.

Darcy and I stand to join them, rolling our eyes and mocking the way the girls, and Olly, go crazy, yelling and screaming for Bancroft and Fitzpatrick. The boys however are zeroed in and focused on the play at hand, not paying their fans any attention.

That's the thing I admire most about my brother, probably the only thing as of late. Despite his blatant disregard for anything of importance nowadays, on the field, with hundreds of people shouting his name and cheering him on as he's playing the game he loves and is incredibly good at, he's in his element.

Suddenly, the crowd around us goes silent, at the exact moment I feel an arm creep around my waist. The electric

current that follows the movement of his fingers, trickling down my lower back, and sliding underneath the cropped jersey I'm wearing - one of Brooklyn's old jerseys I cut up from freshman year before he bulked up - tells me it's him before I even turn and look for myself. The eerie silence that follows, like everyone's hushed and obsessively watching us, waiting to see what my reaction is going to be, makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand.

At school this week we kept mostly to ourselves, but that doesn't mean the rumors circulating around about the video Tate somehow got her hands on, have everyone creating their own version of what happened that night. My classmates of course, like vultures, have been hanging around, trying to pry the answers they've been unsuccessful in getting from me, from him. Weirdly everyone has begun talking to me again, saying hey during passing periods or acknowledging me at events such as tonight. It's like dating the infamous Maverick Carter has suddenly bumped my status back up making me once again relevant to those who had previously, as in three months ago, decided I wasn't worthy of their time and attention.

Not like I care but it's nice to walk through the halls and not hear hateful whisperings about yourself every single day. Or parade around town and not worry about running into someone who's going to be talking shit the entire time we're seated having dinner.

Using the hand not around my waist, he pushes my hair to one side, as his lips trace kisses along my neck following the same path his fingers were just grazing. He grunts, frustrated I've yet to acknowledge his presence.

I hear a loud and clear moan come from a chick in the row behind us, or maybe it's coming from Oliver on my left. Regardless I'm about to let one out myself when Darcy clears her throat.

Thank goodness for my friend and her aversion to Maverick's charm.

I shake off the visions of what he must look like right now, so close to me I can feel the indentation of his erection pressing against my side. “What are you doing?” I ask, not bothering to turn around and face him. I’m not amused by his show of dominance over me or whatever the hell this is, and although I am aroused, like very aroused, I’m not about to put on another show right now. The video going around is enough PDA for the week.

“The party tomorrow, are you going?” he asks, but the question somewhat confuses me. I don’t understand if he’s asking if I’m going to be there, since it is being hosted at my house, or if he’s subtly asking if I’ll be going with him. Like I said, I’m done with subtlety.

Keeping my focus on the field, which everyone is failing to do, I bring my hand to my chin, pretending I’m contemplating his question. Squinting my eyes like I’m deep in thought I purse my lips. “If you’re asking if I’m going with anyone, then my answer is that it is yet to be seen. If you haven’t noticed, I’m the talk of the school again, you know, since last weekend when I was caught riding your dick on the Ferris wheel.” Olly nearly spits out his soda at my crude brashness, while Darcy and the rest of the kids around us chuckle, some dude in the back row yelling “burn” over the oohs and aahs.

I choose this precise moment to turn around, instantly regretting my decision when the anger in his eyes nearly brands me. It’s invigorating and pushes me to taunt him further, just to see how much restraint he’s willing to show. It’s a dangerous game, but it’s obvious since Maverick arrived in town, I crave reckless danger.

Caressing the prickly stubble on his chin with my fingertips, I lower his face to meet mine, tracing his plump bottom lip with my thumb. “Apparently fucking you was all I needed to make it back on top.” I hide my anxiousness with a sly smirk, raising a brow teasingly.

But before he can react, and I know he was just about to, given the feral look that flashed in his eyes, we’re interrupted by the crowd erupting in cheers as the Sharks’ score the first

touchdown of the night, the All-Star QB Fitz of course, passing the ball to his All-Star wide receiver Brooklyn.

I remove my fingers from his face, joining in on the cheers, clapping my hands, and paying no attention to the daunting presence to my right.

Frustrated by my disregard for him, Maverick leans forward, his hot tantalizing breath kissing my neck as he scrapes the stubble on his chin against my cheek. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, but I’ll play along, until tomorrow night that is.” His fingers once again creep under my shirt, this time trailing his calloused tips along my stomach, leaving goosebumps in their wake. “Keep at it and I’ll have your perky little ass bent over my knee until the shape of my palm is imprinted in your luscious flesh. But then again, I know that’s secretly how rough you want it, baby.”

A quiet moan leaves my lips, my eyes instinctively closing at the same time my thighs clench, heat and arousal pooling in between my legs. God-fucking-dammit this man is going to be the death of me. One look, one simple touch and I’m a pile of want and need at his feet. I’ve come too far tonight to fall for his possessive alpha bullshit. I’m the one coming out on top tonight.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time Mav. Unless you’re going to follow through.” My faux show of confidence is almost comical, my voice cracking with every word I spoke.

A deep, toe-curling chuckle leaves his lips, reverberating through me. “Don’t provoke me Nyx, I’m not against bending your ass over and fucking you right here and now for everyone to see. I hear they like a little show and I know if I were to shove my fingers into your sorry excuse for shorts, teasing that sweet little cunt of yours, I’d find you soaking wet with all this dirty talk.”

And he’s one hundred percent right. It’s almost pathetic how aroused I am.

“Didn’t think voyeurism was your kink babe.” He laughs again, this time nipping at my ear. “Don’t worry, as much as I want to I won’t. Not until tomorrow tonight.”

A tense moment passes between us, nothing but the sound of our unsteady breathing ringing in my ear. His presence looms over me like a wayward storm brewing about to release its ire on me and wash away the heat crawling up my spine, showering me in a wave of frosty water.

“Wear the gold one, Nyx,” he whispers, breathily and so damn sexy, heating my neck where the cool breeze just hit me. “The gold dress you wore for me, the one meant to tease me and drive me wild. I didn’t get to admire you properly in it last time, and the moment we walk hand in hand through the doors of *our* house, I want every fucker there to know you are mine.” He reaches down and squeezes my ass at the same time he bites down on my shoulder, making me whimper like a needy whore. “Make no mistake Nyx, you are mine.”

TO CALL THIS A PARTY WOULD BE AN INSULT TO THE MASSES.

Three champagne fountains, each twelve layers high, with Veuve Clicquot dripping along the sides of the cut-crystal glasses like a golden river flowing to the beat of the delicate hymns playing in the background. Gleaming crystal chandeliers hanging from the top of the white gazebos intricately arranged around the pool with warm white string lights beautifully draped along the ceilings illuminating the otherwise dark outdoor area. Along the outer deck, two large ice sculptures, resembling the night’s honorees, and a Michelin Star 5-course buffet are set up on four wide tables against the wall.

It looks like we’re hosting a backyard wedding reception or at least an elegant engagement party, not a soiree for a high school football team, who might I add have only won their first game of the season. My father is up to something. Or maybe he’s finally lost it, I mean it was bound to happen at some point.

God that means crazy runs on both sides of the family, deeming Brooklyn and I royally screwed.

Yet everyone around us is dressed for the occasion, used to these types of events on the regular. I haven't been back to the country club since before my mother's *episode*, but this was the norm in my world prior to the life-changing epiphany I had.

The men dashing in three-piece suits, the women exquisitely put together like they are about to walk the runway during Paris Fashion Week or attend a Royal Gala fit for the Queen of England. It's all too much and frankly a little unsettling.

For a moment, I think of cutting out on the whole shindig, maybe calling Donovan and Darcy up and driving out to Nobu for some sushi, sake, and girl time, but then again, being here, showing my support for Brooklyn, might mean something to him and convince him finally to take his head out of his ass where it's been hiding for months.

Football is everything to my brother, and maybe it's all he needs to go back to being the old Brooklyn I love and miss.

Regardless of the reason, I went with it, dressing up for the occasion and ready to play the part of doting daughter and supportive sister. My nerves, however, have nothing to do with how extravagant and suspicious this affair seems, but everything to do with the tempting yet inconspicuous promise Maverick made to me last night.

I want every fucker there to know you are mine. Make no mistake Nyx, you are mine.

His commanding tone still sends a shiver down my spine at the memory of how erotic he sounded, my skin tingling with so much desire I don't know if I'll make it through the evening without him. I obeyed his demand, since it wasn't a request, and dressed in the sleek gold dress, the one I wore for him the first night he kissed me forcing me to give in to the carnal urges I felt when he was around.

Tonight, I'm hoping he does the same.

Although however excited I was just a minute ago, the moment I step out into the yard I feel this sudden and potent

urge to throw up. Maybe it's the snide stares, or the turned-up noses of those in attendance, watching me with curious and patronizing eyes. Whatever the reason may be, all I want to do is curl up into a little ball back in the comfort of my bedroom. To be invisible, inconsequential. At least then I could live my life without the judgment of others.

I make it three steps off the deck before powerful arms wrap around my waist, whisking me into the air forcing a loud squeal to leave my lips as I'm set back down. Now every single pair of eyes is on me, well on us, and the way our bodies fit perfectly together, our breathing and heartbeats in perfect synchronization.

Turning around, I lean back out of his hold and look up to meet his gaze, nearly fainting from how much desire I see in his eyes. His pupils are dilated, his nostrils flaring, and his teeth are digging so far into his bottom lip, I swear he's about to draw blood.

"Maverick," I moan, about to say fuck this whole thing and force him to take me upstairs and fuck me raw. The urge is too strong, and the need to be in his arms, pushed up against his naked chest, as his lips caress every inch of my body, nipping at my sensitive flesh, and making me writhe in pleasure is overwhelming.

A black dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and the top three buttons undone is tucked into a pair of black slacks that wrap tightly around his thighs and ass. A sleek yet classic gold chain hangs around his neck, and instead of the usual black plugs he has gauged in his ear, are two, white gold-plated diamond studs. He looks mouthwatering and suddenly I feel the urge to drag him inside and hide him in my room so nobody else can admire his beauty.

Without speaking, the raw intensity of his gaze speaking a language only I understand, he lowers his lips to mine, his hard body towering over me while his lips tease me, taunt me, making me ravenous before softly pressing against mine. This kiss is nothing like the other's we've had. There is no urgency, no need to devour, to control, it's a simple caress of two mouths. A gentle display of two souls that need to feel each

other's warmth and express with their lips what they cannot fathom to define with words.

His tongue enters my mouth quickening the speed and intensity of the kiss, my arms wrapping around his neck, tugging on his hair as he does the same to mine. Purely carnal, and full of nothing but emotion and desire.

Mav releases my lips, tugging my head back to meet his lustful dark eyes. The cool autumn breeze tickles my neck as a mosaic of dark purple, pink, and blue skies light up the sky behind him.

"Mine," he whispers against my forehead, pressing his lips to the top of my head. That's when I realize what we've done. He told me the moment we walked hand in hand through the doors of our house, everyone would know I belonged to him. We may not have walked out together, but this kiss was his way of showing everyone what we are.

I'm only furious at him for a second before the reality of it all comes crashing down on me and I'm relieved. Relieved I no longer have to hide these feelings, but most importantly, relieved he feels the same way.

Mav takes my hand and together we walk through the party, the stares from those who earlier greeted me with disdain, now greet us with smiles and well wishes. It's ironic that yet another scandal, one I thought would dig me deeper into the hole I fell into, is what I needed to amend my rather tarnished reputation. Dating your stepbrother sure rolls off the tongue better than a cheating father and suicidal mother.

Maybe it's the whole forbidden aspect of it all.

Everyone craves the forbidden or that in which they cannot indulge without judgment or conviction. They call it taboo and frown upon it, but it's everything they all desire deep down inside. The carnal urges and devious wants they hide behind closed doors, Mav and I parade around without a care in the world. Though our moment is cut short when I hear my father's voice coming from behind us.

“Phoenix,” he mutters, anger clear in the tone of voice he uses. Anger but a hint of apprehension, afraid to cause a scene in the middle of his party.

The moment I turn and find him standing arm in arm with Daphne, the two of them dressed head to toe in pristine white designer outfits, everything makes sense. The reason we’ve all been called here, the grandness of the event all hidden under the ruse of a party in my brother’s honor, is yet another one of his surprises.

A wedding reception. The one they didn’t have when they eloped two months ago.

“Phoenix, Maverick, we’re so glad the two of you could make it.” The eloquence of her voice is a mask hiding her true feelings written on her face at the sight of me on the arm of her son. As much as she tries, Daphne can’t hide her dislike as well as my father can, because deep down his reputation matters most, and he won’t do anything about his true feelings in the middle of *his* party.

“A wedding,” I mutter, biting down on my tongue to not let what I really want to say to him slip out.

“Yes,” he replies curtly and without the intention of saying more. “It was time we celebrated since we could not share this moment with those we care about most.”

“You shouldn’t have,” I murmur under my breath.

Daphne places a hand on her chest, her gaze softening. “We really wanted you, your brother, and my Maverick, to be part of the celebration.”

A loud laugh leaves me unexpectedly. “No, really, you shouldn’t have. I don’t understand what gave you the impression we wanted anything to do with this.”

“Phoenix not here,” my father groans, at the same time Maverick brings his hand up to rest on my shoulder.

Mav leans in and whispers, “We should walk away.” Oh, but I’m just getting started. Having Maverick, who genuinely seems to care about me, by my side, has given me a certain strength I never had. He hasn’t yet professed his feelings, but I

can sense they're true, and although having someone who cares about me and has my back is foreign, I realize it's everything I've ever wanted.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." We all turn to find Brooklyn, who's dressed in an outfit like Maverick's only dark blue, glaring at the four of us, his eyes already red and glossy, his hair disheveled, and a hint of pink lipstick staining his chin and neck.

My father grabs him by the arm, leading him toward the edge of the deck and away from the crowd watching us. "Brooklyn, compose yourself," he whispers so only the four of us can hear. He speaks through gritted teeth and a faulty smile. "God look at you, you reek of cheap liquor and weed."

Brooklyn pulls away from him, almost tripping over his feet as he steps back. "Glad you noticed dad, but it looks like I showed up late to my party. Wait, this is still my party, right?" I see a glimpse of hurt flash in Brooklyn's eyes, unable to stand the sight of not only my father, but clearly of Maverick and I together.

Lucky for all of us, Fitz shows up just in time and drags him away.

Not wanting to hear what else my father and Daphne have to say, I grab Maverick's hand and lead him toward the pool cabana at the edge of the water. Careful not to fall in, I step around the table set up along the edge of the pool and fall back against the lounge chair.

The sun is almost completely set now, but a small sliver of light shines through the space between the canopy of the cabana. I grunt into my hands, shielding my face from the light. "God can this day get any worse."

I almost want to take it back, knowing I may have just cursed the rest of the night with that statement, but it's honestly already been a shitshow I can't possibly see anything surprising me.

I didn't miss this at all. The way my life was before this summer was exhausting. Party after party, even if my friends

were in attendance, was dreadful. Keeping up appearances is the only thing I was taught was vital to ensure success, but it really was the only flaw I could think of that determined how unhappy one could become. The saying money can't buy happiness, one I never agreed with since buying the nicest clothes, going out and carelessly spending my father's money was something I truly enjoyed doing, I now understand is true. I was never truly happy. I was content, blind to everything that really mattered in life.

Materialism lacks in true value against that which is sacred.

Family.

Love.

I had a rude awakening, hit rock bottom, but maybe that was all I needed to appreciate everything I had and maybe took for granted.

Mav leans over me, a deep growl leaving him as he runs his fingers up my thigh, setting a blaze inside of me with the way my body is reacting to his touch. "Hey baby, don't pout." He inches his hands up higher, his fingers playing with the hem of my short dress. "Fuck," he groans, making me drop my hands to see him. "I wasn't ready for what seeing you in this dress was going to do to me."

I swallow hard, trying to compose myself and not jump his bones here in the middle of the party. Now that would be a scandal.

A frown appears when I don't respond. "We can get out of here."

Sitting up straighter, I shake my head. "No, it will only make things worse, and he'll find something else to punish us with. Another dinner or worse a family vacation. Anything to monitor us and exude his control." I cringe at the thought, but suddenly it all makes sense to me. "That's what this whole thing is about. He must have heard about us or suspected something, and this is his way of reminding us we're a *family*. Why else would he plan a wedding party now?"

I see Maverick process my suspicion, and he doesn't at all seem surprised. There is something going on that no one is telling me. The inconspicuous way my father and Maverick have been glaring at each other for weeks is more than the simple dislike of his wife's *delinquent* son.

"Why don't we go grab a drink, then we can see if you're still up for staying, or we can go up to my room and I can get you out of this damn dress that's driving me crazy."

Nice way to change the subject. I don't complain though; I need that drink, and the promise to take me out of this dress that's suddenly too tight and constricting, is very enticing.

We're standing by the outdoor bar hand in hand, with a Cosmo and bourbon neat in our respective hands, when a familiar voice emerges to our right.

"Maverick," the woman says, as she steps closer. "I'm here, like you asked."

In front of me Maverick stills, his face immediately overcome by irritation and anxiousness. I've never seen him look this worried almost like he's hiding something. Guilt. That's what I see, and it stirs something deep in the pit of my stomach.

Dread.

My eyes travel back and forth between Maverick and the gorgeous blond with stunning green eyes and hair that falls against her back in perfect beachy waves. She's tall, maybe five-foot seven in the sandals she's wearing, which highlight her pale pink toes and match the cute dress falling mid-thigh. Something about her is so familiar, yet I don't immediately recognize her. Not until the moment he calls her by her name. That's when I remember.

"Levi? What are you doing here?" Maverick demands, clearly upset about her presence.

A look of confusion washes over her, the flickering string lights above illuminating her as she stands there before us, everyone around us now staring and curiously watching her.

“What do you mean Maverick?” Levi asks, taken aback by his reaction. My eyes flick from hers back to Maverick who looks nervously around the yard. “You told me to come. You said they were ready to meet me.” Levi adds, her voice now an inaudible murmur only we can hear.

Maverick leaves my side and rushes over to her, grabbing her by the arm, mumbling something I can’t quite hear.

I’m no longer confused. Now I’m angry watching him put his hands on her like she means something to him. I recall the time I ran into Levi at Chelseas Boutique, the way she was fawning over Maverick as she spoke about him, mentioning how hot and in demand he was. The little bitch.

“What the hell Maverick? Who is she?” I shout, letting the jealousy get the best of me.

He grunts, not bothering to look back at me. “Not now Nyx.”

His dismissal only irritates me further and confirms my suspicion. “You brought her here to my house, is this some kind of sick joke?”

“I said not now,” he shouts louder.

“Then tell me who the fuck is she?”

“I swear to god Phoenix.”

Coming up behind him, I shove him toward her, making her stumble back and fall on her ass. Instead of helping her up, Maverick turns to me with fury raging in his eyes, like the violent and wild flames of hell’s inferno blazing within his blue irises. “I told you to back off Phoenix. This doesn’t concern you. Whoever she is, she’s leaving.” He turns back to face Levi who’s getting up off the floor, dusting her skirt off with her hands. “Now!” he shouts, once again grabbing her by the arm, but the chick doesn’t seem like she’s eager to follow his command.

Now it’s me who turns volatile, the fire inside of me burning rampant at his rejection. “After what Chad did to me,” I whisper, tears pricking my eyes and making his body go rigid. Slowly turning to me with a look that proves his betrayal

only slightly overshadowed by the hint of remorse, he watches me, unsure of what to say, or unwilling to say anything.

“It’s not what you think baby,” he mutters, letting Levi go and reaching for me. Mav grabs my wrist, but I pull away from him, frantically yelling for him to get away.

“Don’t touch me,” I cry out, swatting at his chest. Everyone around us is now completely engrossed in the scene playing out in front of them. Deep inside I know what this is, but I refuse to believe him capable of it, because if I do, if what I think is true, I don’t think I could survive it. I swallow down my pride and ask what I wish isn’t true. “Are you cheating on me Maverick?”

His gaze drops to his feet, shame and betrayal evident in the way he softly shakes his head denying it only because he’s run out of excuses. What does the song say, *don’t tell me sorry because you’re not, you’re only sorry you got caught*.

“Oh honey, you’re going to wish that’s all it was.”

The three of us turn to find Tate standing behind us, her hair pulled up into a high ponytail, and the still present pink streak of hair, matching the color of her outfit, falling in a spiral curl down her face. But it is the look of satisfaction written all over her face, which proves she’s the one to blame for whatever’s going on. As expected, since she’s the only person in the crowd watching us who’s smiling. The only one who seems to know exactly what’s happening.

Tate steps around us and over to Levi, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Levi, darling I’m so glad you could make it. I know it was so last minute but I’m happy you’re here.”

“Tate,” Maverick warns, glaring at her like he’s contemplating the consequences of strangling her to death. I for one say go for it. At this point I’d strangle the bitch myself.

Of course, Brooklyn decides now is the right time to show up again, “What the hell is going on?” Barely able to stand on his own two feet and yelling barbarically, he looks between Maverick and I, then toward Tate and Levi, his eyes squinting low trying to read the situation in front of him. Surprisingly, he

puts two and two together. “You brought your side chick to our house? The same house you’re currently fucking my sister in?”

“Brooklyn,” Donovan shouts, appearing from the crowd and rushing over to my brother who’s about to swing his fist at Maverick.

Great, everyone’s here.

Maverick, however, easily ducks away having seen the punch coming a mile away, and instead leans forward to steady Brooklyn who’s just shy of comatose, nearly falling over as he throws another hit.

This is all too much, and I can’t take any more of this bullshit from anyone here. However, just as I’m about to walk away, another familiar, yet unexpected person appears behind us. “Levi,” she says, placing a hand on Levi’s other shoulder since Tate’s still holding onto her right.

“Mom?” Levi says, turning around to face the woman I know and recognize.

“Chelsea?” I murmur, taking a step toward them.

Levi looks frantically between her mother, Maverick, and me, while Chelsea turns to face me looking relieved to see me or resigned to accept whatever the hell is about to happen here.

“Mom, what are you doing here?” Levi shouts.

Chelsea, who I now see is the perfect mirror image of her teenage daughter, grabs Levi by her wrist, nervously looking around the yard as if she’s hiding from someone or doesn’t want to be seen. “We need to go sweetie, now.”

Levi struggles away from her mother, once again nearly falling backwards, as Tate finally steps away. “What do you mean mom? No, I’m not leaving here.” Levi turns to me, a hidden message I can’t understand in the way she’s looking at me, like we share some secret I’m not aware of. “Not until I see him. Not until I ask him why he never came to see me.”

“Sweetie, I’ll explain everything to you but please we need to leave.” Chelsea’s desperate now, tugging on her daughter’s

arm, but Levi is relentless and frankly I'm fucking over it.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Levi, please," Chelsea begs.

From the corner of my eye my father appears, Daphne following quickly behind him trying to catch up. "What is all this commotion about? What's going on here?" He abruptly pauses the moment he sees Levi and her mother standing before the crowd that's settled around to watch the fiasco. I swear all they're missing is the buckets of popcorn and comfortable recliners to watch the drama series taking place in front of them.

My father's gaze falls on Chelsea, his eyes widening the moment her eyes meet his. "Chelsea?" he asks bewildered yet looking at her like he's just seen her for the first time in years. An almost yearning look mixed with a hint of apprehension when he catches Levi tucked in safely behind her. "What are you..."

Tate chooses this precise moment to step forward, opening her nasty mouth to speak. "Well, isn't this just wonderful, the whole family is back together again."

Maverick steps forward and reaches for Tate but she's quick to deflect him. "Tate don't," he warns.

Tate scoffs, shrugging away from Maverick and moving to stand directly between all of us. "Now that we're all here, why don't we get started on the introductions. I'm Tate," she shifts toward Levi and her mother. "This is Levi and her mom Chelsea," she says, turning back to me. "Phoenix, Brooklyn, Austin, oh and his wife Daphne who is also Maverick's mom. Oh, you know Maverick, right?" she asks Levi, who looks up at Mav with wide, teary eyes. "Let me see, am I missing anyone?" Tate continues, sarcasm clear in her tone of voice.

To my right I watch as Maverick's scowl turns furious. "Tate..."

But before he can finish what he's saying, Tate lets out a high-pitched laugh. "Oh yeah duh, the reason we're all here. Levi darling, this is Austin Bancroft, your father."

Father.

One word, six letters, yet it's capable of flipping my entire life off its axis. Again. I hear the gasps and snickers; I can feel the tension building up all around me, yet there's nothing I can do. Frozen in place, paralyzed by what I just heard.

My vision blurs, my hearing falters, and inside I can feel my heart thundering fiercely in my chest. It's a lie, it has to be. I want to believe that what the conniving bitch said is nothing but poison spewed straight from the snake's mouth, because she hates me.

I don't understand how she can hate me enough to make up this horrific lie. Maybe it's the fact that I am more popular than her, or she really loves Chad and saw me as a threat? I have to believe there is a very important reason she hates me enough to make this up because I don't think I will truly be able to recover if what she says is true.

Though I'm not so lucky, because the unsurprised expressions, the guilt staining their faces - Maverick's, Levi's, Chelsea's, my dad's - they're the only confirmation I need.

Levi is my father's daughter, my sister. A sister I never knew about, a sister only a couple years younger than me.

The only thing out of all this that doesn't shock me is the plausible assumption my slut of a father had another affair while still married to my mother. While Brooklyn and I were only babies.

The thought makes me fucking sick to my stomach.

Looking back at the crowd, the only people who look as distraught and disgusted as I must look right now, are Daphne and my brother, who obviously did not know Levi existed either.

"What the fuck are you talking about Tate?" Brooklyn snarls, grabbing her by the arm. My brother is livid, unrecognizable as his arm tightens around Tate's arm, the fear in her eyes slowly making my stomach settle. "What the fuck kind of games are you playing?"

Tate winces, suddenly playing the helpless victim. “Let go of me you brute, you’re hurting me.”

“Oh, it’s a hell of a lot less than what I’m going to do to you,” Donovan sneers, stepping into her, and pushing her chest making her stumble back.

However, I don’t say a damn thing. I have nothing to say. Levi’s sorrowful, nearly broken gaze finds mine, and the genuine pain and hurt in her eyes mimics what I feel inside, but not what I’m showing to everyone around me. I can’t let them see how broken I currently feel inside. I refuse to give them the satisfaction of knowing they ruined me. I refuse to show them they’ve won.

Maverick takes a step toward me, looking like a man who’s just been outed, walking over with his tail tucked between his legs. I should be grateful the bitch revealed his betrayal and showed me the monster I was falling for, since it’s pretty damn obvious Maverick knew about this all along.

“Nyx,” he says, reaching for me, but I instinctively pull back before he can grab hold of my arm.

I shake my head walking backwards away from him. “No,” I mutter, under my breath. “Stay the hell away from me you lying bastard.”

Remorse flashes in his eyes, guilt, pain, fear. All things I had never seen when I looked at him. All things he hid from me in order to make me fall for him and his dirty games. “Baby, please listen, this isn’t…”

“This isn’t what, huh? The way you wanted me to find out. This isn’t how you were planning on outing my fucked-up family drama? Tell me Maverick, this just because Tate beat you to it right? That’s what this is really about? You were too chickenshit to do it yourself, so your accomplice did all the dirty work for you. Did you really think you were going to get out of it unscathed?”

Maverick continues toward me. “Don’t do this. You have no idea what’s going on here. You don’t know the full story. I swear to you this fucking bitch has nothing to do with me.”

“I don’t believe a goddamn word you’re saying. Tell me, was this your game plan all along?” I chuckle. “Who am I kidding of course it was. You thought you’d come here and what, destroy the family of the man who destroyed yours. Payback right, revenge against the man who screwed your mom by screwing his daughter.” This time a louder laugh bursts out of me, masking the tears I’m trying to keep at bay.

“I have to say I don’t blame you for that. I wanted to end you myself when I found out you and your whore of a mother were coming to stay with us, but deep down I couldn’t. Not because I gave a shit, but because I realized I’m not that kind of person. It’s good to see you are. At least it’s not too late to take back everything I almost said, everything that happened between us was a lie, Maverick.”

In that moment, my father rushes toward him, slamming his fist into Maverick’s unsuspecting, yet much deserving jaw. “You son of a bitch!” he shouts, the crowd gasping at the horror, bloody on the floor spewing out of Mav’s mouth. I swear I hear someone shout to call 911. But although he’s spitting out blood, Maverick barely stumbles back before returning my father’s assault with a fierce hit of his own, which knocks him on his ass.

Daphne rushes to my father’s side, taking her husband’s side over her own son who stands above them with bloodied knuckles. “You did it,” my dad spits out, blood mixed with saliva and a cracked tooth landing on the concrete. “I gave you the money, yet you still did it. You bastard are just as dirty and corrupt as your father.” He spits again this time aiming it toward Maverick’s feet.

Mav chuckles, a devilish sound I’ve never heard from him that sends shivers up my spine, but not in a good way. No, this side of him is terrifying.

“You are one to talk, Bancroft,” he mocks, facing the crowd, making sure everyone in attendance hears him. “An illegitimate child while you were still married to your wife, not to mention your two-year-old twins at home waiting for you. And don’t let me forget the eight-year affair with another married woman.”

The last part snaps me out of whatever anger induced daze I'm in. "What are you talking about?"

Mav shifts to face me, turning his back to the crowd gathered around, at the same time my father struggles to stand. "The real reason I was sent off to boarding school across the country at age ten. I caught your father, balls deep in my dear mother when I came home sick from school one day." He laughs, though it isn't humor showing on his face. "You should have seen how they tried everything to bribe me and convince me to keep their dirty little secret."

I pale at his confession, unable to believe anything he's saying, but deep in my gut, trepidation stirs like a bubbling, boiling, pot of doubt. It can't be true. My father couldn't have done that to us. He's a decrepit man, but he's no monster. He can't be, because that would make me the daughter of a vile son of a bitch, and I'm not sure I couldn't handle it.

However, the expression, the guilty, frenzied expression marring my father's face, is a dead giveaway that what Maverick is saying, is the truth.

"I agreed to keep quiet, after all I wasn't even sure what it all meant. Though the risk was too big for Austin to sit and do nothing. So, he did what he does best. He lied and convinced my mother to ship me off in order to keep their affair secret. Of course, under the ruse of a better future for me. My father couldn't care less, he was never home. Which is why when she suggested it, he agreed."

The sound of breaking glass has me jumping in terror. "This is fucking bullshit!" Brooklyn shouts, throwing another glass from the cocktail table beside him on the floor at my father's feet, the glass shards, and amber liquid pooling under him. "You make me fucking sick, you dirty, cheating bastard."

I follow my brother's gaze and turn my attention to my father, who looks completely devastated. Shamed, embarrassed, seething with fury, but the one emotion lacking, one I don't think I've ever seen from him nor ever plan to, is nowhere to be seen. Remorse. "You were going to pay him off

to keep quiet?" I ask, unafraid of his answer, since I highly doubt anything else at this point would shock me.

Austin had the fucking nerve to play the martyr, caring more about what his guests think of him than his own two, well three, children think. "He came to me with information about the child. Said you, your brother, the entire world would find out if I didn't pay him twenty million dollars by the end of the week. He was going to use that money to take off, since he doesn't get a cent of his inheritance until he turns twenty-one."

I take it all back. Every word, every thought, every single expectation. I never expected he would say that. I meet Maverick's dark gaze, blank and devoid of emotion. "Is that true, did you? You were just going to blackmail my father, ruin our lives and bail, like a fucking coward!"

"I didn't take the money and you know that," he demands, meeting my father's scornful gaze, admitting his part in all this yet trying to justify not being the one to blame. He turns to me, taking my hands in his. "Nyx, I ripped the check. I told him I didn't want any of it anymore, I burned the information my PI gave me. I couldn't do that to you."

"That was your plan all along. That's what you came back for." My voice falls to nothing but a hushed whisper that fades into the night, the agony in my chest prohibiting me from being able to speak any louder.

"I had no choice in coming back, believe me if I had, I wouldn't have returned, but yes. I was furious. I couldn't let him get away with it all, ruining my life. I hired a PI to dig up all the dirt I could get. The worst of the worst, the stuff buried so deep you would never think to find, but I did. He uncovered the birth certificate, the money trail which proved your father paid Chelsea Landon child support from the day his daughter was born. Levi. His signature is on the fucking birth certificate."

For a second, I forgot we aren't the only ones standing here, but the loud gasps and horror-stricken expressions are a clear reminder that once again my family's dirty laundry is

being aired and hung up to dry. I could only assume we're next to be hung. "Congratulations Maverick, now it's out in the open for all to hear." My fake smile falls. "You had no right."

"Are you kidding me? You're really mad at me for all of this, like I'm the one who did this to your family?"

I take a step forward to meet him, his guilty eyes burning into me as I cup his chin with my palm, the roughness of his sharp stubble scaring my fingertips making them feel like they're bleeding.

"Don't worry baby," I whisper loud enough for my father to hear. "As far as I'm concerned, Austin Bancroft is dead to me. But do you know what," I murmur pressing a soft kiss against his cheek, "I'm not even surprised. Him I expected this from, but you." Shaking my head I inhale a sharp breath, begging the tears pricking my eyes to hold on tight and not reveal themselves until I'm in the safety of my solitude. "I never thought you were capable of hurting me the way you just did."

Mav's palm cups my face as he leans forward and pressed his lips to mine, but he doesn't kiss me. All he does is hover over me, softly grazing mine with his, expecting me to be the one to make the first move and show him I forgive him. "Nyx, baby. I swear I... I don't even know how she found out."

"Don't turn this on her. I know the fucking bitch did it for sport. For the mere enjoyment of seeing me fall lower than rock bottom. Tate's a conniving, scheming bitch, but she's not the one who did this to me. She's the one who outed the men who've hurt me more than I could have ever imagined possible. All of them."

With a soft kiss, a kiss which my body is begging me to give into, yet my mind is reminding me to steer clear of, I say my final goodbye and pull away. I close my eyes, unable to see the raw emotion in his. "My father broke my heart a long time ago, but you Maverick Carter, you destroyed every last piece of me."

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

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MAVERICK

My knuckles were white, the circulation of blood completely absent from the intensity with which I was gripping the steering wheel of my Aston, speeding down the Pacific Coast Highway at over one-hundred and twenty miles an hour. It was lifeless out here in the middle of the night, not a soul in sight as I drove out to the private landing strip my father's plane was awaiting my arrival.

It was almost laughable how he texted me the moment I walked out of the Bancroft's and vaguely said we needed to talk. We both knew that translated to you fucked up and now I have to clean your mess, again. How he discovered so quickly what happened is beyond me. Unless, of course, my mother was to blame for his sudden reappearance, though I'm not so sure she'd contact him after what had just gone down.

Chaos. No, worse than chaos. Complete and utter devastation.

My plan, the well thought out yet horrible executed scheme I'd concocted, blew up in my face and wreaked havoc everywhere it shouldn't have.

"Fuck," I cursed to myself, slamming my fist into the steering wheel, making my already blood-stained knuckles burn. The chill of the first Autumn breeze blew through my hair as I sped through the night with the top down, only the brilliant light of the full moon in the sky illuminates the road ahead of me.

This wasn't the way things were supposed to go down. I was to come back home and exact my revenge on Austin Bancroft, blackmailing him into giving me the money necessary to go off on my own until I could dig into my inheritance in two years. It was supposed to be quick and easy. Painless.

Even after meeting Phoenix, I figured I'd make the most of my time here and use her to ensure my plan worked. She was

the hottest chick I'd ever come across and I knew she would be down to kill some time, even if she pretended to hate me. I felt it in the way her body reacted to my nearness. The desire that flooded her eyes when she met mine, the way her lips parted, her tongue sneaking out to lick them when her eyes roamed over me. I knew it because I had the same reactions when I looked at her.

It was after the first night we kissed, that I decided if Bancroft didn't agree to give me the money, then I'd use his princess to get it. Only I never imagined what being near her, touching her silky soft skin, and tasting her sweetness, would do to me.

I never expected to throw it all away for her.

Which is what I did, and now I had nothing.

Before heading to the game Friday night, Austin called me into his study and handed me the check for half the amount I demanded, swearing he'd deposit the rest into my account the moment I left town for good. It was an enticing offer and frankly the entire reason I was here, but I couldn't accept it. Not after everything that happened between my sweet Little Nyx and I. Getting my revenge on him didn't matter anymore. Not if it meant losing her.

Turns out I lost her anyway, and now I'm penniless.

It doesn't matter that Tatum Mortimer was the fucking bitch who somehow discovered my plan and outed me in front of her, nor that Austin wouldn't give up until I was as far away from his daughter as possible, even if it meant dragging himself down with me. There was nothing I could have said or done to rid her of the look of complete and devastating betrayal that flashed in her eyes, so I didn't chase after her, as much as I wanted to, I couldn't. Not after the public humiliation she once again faced which this time was caused by me. It wasn't supposed to happen this way; it wasn't supposed to happen at all.

Less than five hours later, I got off my father's Cessna Citation Longitude jet and headed toward the penthouse he keeps thirty minutes out of New York city's center, not ready

to face him. To say I was exhausted would be putting it mildly, but to say I was able to sleep a fucking wink would be a damn lie. I couldn't stop replaying the look on her face when she walked away from me. It haunted my every waking thought from the second I drove off till now, lying in the spare bedroom of my father's penthouse, drunk, high, and completely resigned to ever seeing her again.

"Fuck, Uncle Matty wasn't fucking joking. You look like shit cuz."

I force my eyes open and sit up against the headboard of the bed, finding someone I never expected to see again, standing under the open doorway of the bedroom. Jet black hair similar in length to mine, a pair of deep-set green eyes drawing in at the corners with the way his mouth is pulled up at the sides, dressed head to toe in black leather, looking like an older, grungier version of me.

"Crew," I mutter, throwing my head back against the headboard. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Crew steps into the room halting when he reaches the edge of the four-poster bed at my feet. "Uncle Matty..." He pauses and the man I've just noticed standing behind him grunts, warning him to watch his tone. "I mean Uncle Mathieu," he corrects himself mockingly, in an exaggerated French accent, "Sent me out to fetch you. Something about you fucking up and getting into a shitload of trouble, again. Not that it surprised me, but seeing you, well it raises some questions, little cousin."

I roll my eyes at the asshole. "Questions I neither have answers for, nor do I feel like fucking answering Crew." Realizing he's not going to leave, I get up off the bed and head over to the adjoining bathroom, which unfortunately for me doesn't have a fucking door.

Just like the rest of the modern yet slightly industrial-like feel of the place made up of black walls, leather furnishings, stainless steel appliances, metal fixtures and accents, the bathroom is clean, with a walk-in shower with black tiled walls, concrete countertops, and black marbled sinks.

Something I'd probably have the interior decorator do at my place.

Crew chuckles as he follows behind me, patting my back in a *brotherly* way. "Yeah, I suspected as much," he says, meeting my reflection in the oval mirror in front of me. I let the cold water run out of the shiny steel automatic faucet, splashing my face before reaching for a towel hung to my right. "Come on, let's go get fucking trashed and then we can circle back to whatever's got you looking like you've been dragged to hell and back. It's been a while since I've gone out with my favorite cousin."

Not that I was expecting my father to pick me up from the airport, he has too much important business to conduct to be bothered with the mundane shit, but I was never expecting to see Crew either. Crew Carter, my twenty-year-old cousin I haven't seen in three years.

When I first left, well truthfully was shipped off to live with my father's sister Estelle and her son and daughter Crew and Cara, the three of us were inseparable. We spent nine out of twelve months living on campus, but the other three we spent together, wreaking havoc in the city. But soon enough, Cara, who is two years younger than me and four years younger than Crew, got into some trouble with some kids at school, and was bullied so terribly by a boy who pretended to fall in love with her only to ridicule her in front of the entire school. That kid was my best friend at the time and Crew hasn't really forgiven me for not protecting his little sister, who was then sent away to a psychiatric hospital after trying to slit her wrists. It didn't matter that I beat him black and blue, sending him to the hospital freshman year. Crew's held it against me since.

"I thought you were parading around in Northern Italy with Sterling, conducting your plan to take over the world."

He shakes his head while I strip out of my clothes not caring that he's still in the room, and step into the shower, letting the cold water from the large square shower head hanging from the ceiling, to fall on me, cooling the raging fire within me.

“Nah, I was chasing skirts in the South of France. Various short, deliciously French skirts all at once, if you catch my drift.” He smirks and I know he is not joking. The thing about Crew, he’s a fucking manwhore, as in threesomes, foursomes, you name it. “I was serious when I told my mother I was taking a year off to see the world before succumbing to my mundane pre-planned life under Uncle Matthieu’s wing.”

“It’s been three,” I mutter, meant to be more for myself than out loud, but he catches my dig.

“Yeah well...” Crew pauses but I don’t press the issue. “Tell me little cousin, what has you crawling back to your daddy?”

I run my hands through my hair and over my face, so furious that it’s come to this. Suddenly I’m sick to my stomach, disgusted with myself about what happened between Phoenix and I, especially after recalling how I let Cara be used by someone I thought was my friend instead of standing up and protecting her. I did the same to Phoenix. Only this time I didn’t just leave her unprotected, I was the one who used her, planning to make her fall in love with me in order to destroy her father.

Ignoring Crew still gawking at me, I quickly finish washing my hair and he hands me a towel, stepping aside so I can exit the shower. Wrapping the towel around my waist, I walk around him, entering the bedroom where I throw on a fresh pair of jeans and a black crew neck tee I brought along with me.

“I fucked up Crew, majorly fucked up.”

I turn back around to face him, since he’s been silent for all of five minutes, which for Crew is a miracle, and find him nodding knowingly, all traces of humor gone from his face. “Look Mav, he told me what happened. Daphne called, said you’d done it again and warned us you were volatile, about to erupt at any second. But she also told us about the girl. How she’d never seen you look at anyone that way.” I roll my eyes and glare at him, making him raise his hands in surrender. “Don’t worry I reminded her she didn’t know you well enough

to make that assumption, but given the heartbroken look on your face, I'm guessing she was right."

It doesn't matter what he sees or what he suspects happened, there is no fixing what I've done. I didn't come here to ask for my father's help to right my wrongs nor mend what I broke; I came here to offer him a deal. A safe-haven I could retreat to until I can leave on my own merits, in exchange for my loyalty. It's what he's always been after, especially since he plans to one day leave his fortune, a legacy I want no part of, to me.

"Enough with the bullshit Crew, I need you to take me to see my father."

"No need," a dark, daunting, and holier-than-thou voice sounds behind us, immediately making the air in the room turn grim. I look behind Crew and find I'm practically staring at my reflection. Twenty years older and dressed in an impeccable thousand-dollar suit, Mathieu Carter meets my eyes with a stern yet weirdly amicable smile. "Hello son."

I swallow the lump in my throat caused from seeing my father for the first time in years. He's older of course, though the stark black hair on his head would say otherwise, yet he cannot hide the small wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, nor the lines forming on his forehead when he smiles.

"Father," I murmur, walking over to greet him.

Reluctantly he shakes my hand, an informal gesture I've grown accustomed to. "I hear you're causing quite a ruckus back in California," he says, weirdly sounding quite proud. "However, your mother doesn't seem as amused with the little games you've been playing."

And that's it for the reunion, we're getting straight to the point. "There isn't anything that amuses Daphne Carter, or should I say Bancroft." I answer him, watching how his lips twitch and his jaw ticks at the mention of her new husband.

"Yes, well, your mother was always a peculiar woman, never satisfied with the life I provided for her."

My father takes a seat on the leather set of chairs across from the bed, Crew moving to stand behind the vacant one, while I stay exactly where I am across from him. “You knew.” I state more than ask, when the realization he was aware of her affair dawns on me.

The man who was in here earlier, certainly one of his bodyguards enters and hands him a cigar, lighting the end before once again exiting. My father unbuttons his suit jacket and crosses a leg over his knee, leaning back as he takes a puff of the cigar clenched in his tattooed and ring covered hand.

“They were never good at sneaking around, and frankly after the first two years, gave up altogether. That’s when I left and came to live in New York only going back home for weeks at a time.”

I’m appalled by his confession. “You let her cheat?”

He nods, blowing out another ring of smoke. Tobacco fills the air as he continues speaking. “If I had divorced her, I would owe her half of everything I’d built. Proving her infidelity would save me the trouble of giving her anything. However, I needed time to ensure that was the case, so when the affair finally came to light, that was my out. It’s also the reason she needed to marry Bancroft so quickly. Daphne was left penniless. I sold the house that same night, sent her the signed divorce papers, and the rest, well you were there.”

My hands fist at my side, my knuckles turning white as I dig my nails into my palm. “Why didn’t you ever come for me? If you knew about the affair, if you knew why they sent me away...”

He straightens in his seat at my demand for answers. “I could have never given you the life you had if you were with me. Traveling from country to country, spending only weeks at a time in different cities, that’s no life for a child. I agreed because I also knew I couldn’t leave you with her and risk Bancroft doing something to you or worse turning you into his mini me, since that son of his turned out to be a huge letdown. You, however, have what it takes to be someone of importance. A true king. You are my son after all.”

Unable to handle his confession any longer, I sit on the bed, my elbows resting on my knees, and my face cupped between my hands. I guess Bancroft wasn't the only one with secrets. "He has another daughter," I mumble, "But of course you know that. One who was born shortly after the twins, which is nowhere near the time he was with mom, but I know I planted the seed of doubt in her head. If he cheated on his wife and had a baby with another, he could do the same to her."

Crew and my father both start laughing loudly, leaving me sitting there with a confused look on my face which surely makes them laugh harder. "Your mother is a lost cause, Maverick. She'd turn a blind eye to any indiscretions now as long as she could keep living the luxurious life she grew accustomed to."

Beside me, my phone vibrates on the bed, but I don't bother picking it up, not wanting to hear or talk to anyone. It's probably Brooklyn calling to give me a piece of his mind, or one of her friends ready to give me hell for what I've done. Or worse, it's Austin himself going on about how I ruined his life and am no longer welcome in his house. As if I'd go back.

One thing I know for sure, it isn't my Nyx. She wouldn't call me, and even if she did, I don't think I could face her right now. Not with the amount of agonizing guilt I currently feel for what I did.

Crew looks over at me annoyed by the incessant ringing. "Mav, you should answer."

"No," I shout, throwing the phone further up the bed, but after it rings two more times, Crew walks over to pick it up, holding it out for me. "Someone named Donovan is calling. Is that her? Do you want me to answer it?" he jokes, raising a brow teasingly. The last thing I want is Crew talking to anyone I know.

I yank the phone out of his hand, about to give Donovan Kennedy hell for blowing up my phone surely to scold me for what I did to Phoenix. "What do you want, Kennedy?" I growl

into the phone, but I'm met with an eerie silence, followed by hollowed breaths and shaky sobs.

"Maverick, oh god. Thank God you finally answered."

Fear suddenly consumes me at the ominous sound of her voice stricken with grief and worry.

"Donovan what is it? Is Phoenix okay?"

"No Maverick oh god, you have to come back, it's Brooklyn." She sobs again, this time her breathing quickening. "He was in an accident. We don't know how bad just that, well it's bad. It happened last night after the party, but we just found out now. We're all headed to the hospital, Cedars-Sinai, but Phoenix, she's going to need you, Maverick. Please, you have to come back. I don't know what to do."

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CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

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PHOENIX

This morning I woke up feeling overly emotional and nauseatingly sentimental. It felt as if overnight, a floodgate was torn down and a raging wave of unrestrained emotion came crashing in, like an errant torrent threatening to drown me in its vastness if I didn't give into the feeling. I gasped for air as I sat up, suffocating from how painfully my lungs were constricting, a harrowing tightness in my chest blinding me as I sat there in agony as grief, anger, and despair overwhelmed my senses, forcing me to relive the events of the past months, of last night, feeling every emotion I felt in high definition, seeing everything that occurred clear and in vivid colors, reliving it as if it was happening all over again.

Tears I no longer believed I had in me came rushing out as I rocked back and forth, my arms tightly wrapped around my knees bringing them against my chest, holding on to dear life as the threat of falling apart yet again was clear and present.

Not sure if it's the newfound feelings Maverick had somehow awakened in me, stirring them up inside of me with his mixed signals and inconsistent messages, or if I'd finally snapped and this was the precipice of my psychotic breakdown.

Maybe it's both.

Regardless, the truth about him, which I'd always suspected but allowed myself to forget, was the wake-up call I needed to get myself out of this dream world I'd fallen into, and back to the harsh reality of life.

Life as a Bancroft, the golden child of a legendary family bred to be nothing shy of greatness. A family that not only fell into despair but disintegrated into nothingness.

But then there is Brooklyn. My brother who had once been my twin soul, yet now was unrecognizable. The way he looked at me, then back and forth between my father and Levi, then at

Maverick, it's like his eyes were devoid of all emotion. There was nothing. No grief, nor anger, not even any of the deflection he'd use as a coping mechanism. My brother was nonexistent, and after not having heard anything from him in hours, I didn't know what to think.

I found myself parked outside of Cliffside Malibu at five o'clock this morning, the sun still fast asleep. Having ignored all of Cassandra's calls and texts since the last time I was here, I had no business coming to her now. But I had to. I'd called her the moment I pulled in, awoken her, and dragged her out here to let me in to see my mother. Despite everything that had transpired since the last time she practically kicked me out, this was the only place I thought of coming.

I creep down the hall to her bedroom, of course a two-bedroom suite she keeps to herself and find her lying fast asleep on the white four-poster bed with a sheer white canopy draped overhead when I walk into her room. The rest of the space, also stark white including the walls, furnishings, and modern art pieces hung on the walls, feels rather homey, nothing like a rehab facility would.

Without thinking about her reaction, I drop to my knees by the edge of her bed and begin sobbing uncontrollably into the mattress at her side. She immediately awakens, not in panic because I've startled her in her sleep, but ready to comfort me in my moment of need. Her arms wrap around me as she cradles me against her, picking me up to sit on the bed beside her. The mattress dips as I lay atop it, my head buried deep into the crook of her neck, as her fingers run gently through my hair.

"Mama," I cry into her neck, sniffing as I try to talk through the tears.

"Oh, my sweet girl," she murmurs, and for the first time her voice sounds soft and warm like a mother's voice should. It only makes me cry harder to know that she's in there, the mother I always knew existed and loved. The mother I always wished to have is inside of her, comforting me when I need it the most.

I look up into her eyes before resting against her chest. “Mama, it hurts, it hurts so much. I know why you did it, why you couldn’t take the pain and wanted to shut it all off. I can’t Mama, the pain, it’s like I’m falling apart inside, being torn apart and ripped at the seams. I don’t think I can survive this.”

Suddenly she sits me up, gripping my arms tightly, her fingernails digging into my skin. “Don’t you dare say that Phoenix,” she shouts, her eyes red and filled with tears. “You are the strongest woman I know. You are so special, baby girl. So smart, kind, and brave. Do not give up like your weak-willed mother did. You are so much more than I ever was Phoenix, than I ever could have been.”

I throw my arms around her and in an instant, she’s embracing me too, both of us broken, grieving, and falling apart because of a man. Because of two. One who was supposed to protect me my entire life, be the one man I was supposed to be able to trust, to love unconditionally because he would never hurt me, while the other I chose to give a part of me I could never get back. My heart, soul, and unconditional trust even when everything inside of me told me I was naïve, crazy, to do it.

I chose Maverick because of how he made me feel, like I was the most important girl in the world, yet he left me battered and bruised on the inside like I was worthless.

My mother leans back against the headboard, sitting in her ivory silk nightgown, my head resting atop her lap over the plush white down comforter. “I don’t know how to move on from his betrayal, mama. He used me, played with my feelings like I was disposable. A means to an end in his revenge plan against dad.” I inhale sharply, swallowing the lump in my throat that burns dry as I try to speak. “I should have seen it coming, I knew from the start there was something he was planning but I let myself be blinded by his beauty, tricked by his affectionate words and touch. It was all a ruse he put together to make me fall for him and pay for my father’s sins. The worst part mama, I saw it coming. I was the only fool in all of this. The naïve, gullible little girl who would do anything at the sign of affection.”

My mother kisses the top of my head, something she's never done, not even when I was a baby. "I'm so sorry, baby. We did this to you. Your father and I didn't appreciate you and your brother the way we should have. We were selfish, putting our own wants and needs above yours. I will never forgive myself for that, but I promise I will do whatever it takes to do better by you."

We're silent for a moment, neither one of us knowing what to say next, emotionally drained and exhausted. "Come home mama," I whisper, quietly into the air. "I need you. I don't want to go back to his house, I can't go back and act like I don't know what I know."

She reaches down and cradles my face between her palms, shifting me over to gaze at her. The softness within her baby blue eyes, red and tired yet for once in their life, hopeful. Warmth settles inside my stomach as the scent of vanilla and rose petals, a scent that reminds me of a simpler time my only worry was not getting caught sneaking into her shower to steal some of her signature shampoo and conditioner, hoping that using it would make me as beautiful as she was.

Placing a tender kiss on my forehead she nods her head. "I promise dear, I'll be out of here soon, but I won't be coming home. Actually..." she pauses, visibly at war looking for the best way to tell me whatever it is she's going to say. "I've purchased two properties, one here in Malibu Cove for you and your brother to move into, after all you are both eighteen and I know are only at home with your father because you can't afford to leave. But I'll change that, I promise. My father, your grandfather has agreed to make your inheritance available now, instead of making you wait till you marry like he did to me. I didn't choose to marry your father because I loved him, sadly I wanted to leave my father's strict household and marrying Austin was the only way I knew how."

"Thank you, mama, for thinking of us. For putting us first."

"Of course, my dear, I'm just sorry I didn't do it sooner."

"What about the other property?"

I shift off her lap when she doesn't immediately respond, worry settling inside of me at her reluctance to speak. "It's in Florida, along the beach, beautiful weather year-round, similar to Malibu Cove, yet completely far away from your father and the constant reminder of the life I had here that is now in shambles. I'm healed darling but I'm afraid what stepping back into my old life will do to my mental health. I have a room for you there and one for your brother to come stay with me whenever you want. I promise I'll call you every day and you can spend holidays with me, but I can't have you ask me to stay here."

"I'll be alone mom, without you, with Brooklyn not acting himself. I have no one."

"My dear, you're not alone. He came to see me last week." I freeze at what she's saying. "Maverick, he came to apologize for what his mother did, for keeping quiet when he knew what was happening. He was just a boy, a baby still, I don't blame him for keeping quiet out of fear or to keep his mother safe. I would have put you and your brother in that position, but I also wouldn't have put the blame on you if he had."

Tears well in my eyes, the thought of Maverick coming to see my mother and apologize for something he had no fault in. That doesn't seem like the Maverick who showed his true colors, it reminds me of the Maverick I grew to love.

Love.

That's what it was although I refused to call it by its true name and instead by every other name possible.

Affection. Desire. Want. Lust. Infatuation. Obsession.

It was love. It is love, because sadly even after all that's happened, I still feel the same way inside.

"I don't understand."

"It was the day he went to your father with the information about the girl, about your sister. He felt sick when he left, unsure of what he'd just done, but he wanted to be the one to tell me himself, in case your father didn't pay him, and the truth came out. We had a nice conversation about what it

meant to him, and I know things turned out differently Phoenix, and I won't ask you to forgive him if you are not ready to, but I saw it in his eyes darling, hiding behind the mask of bravery and anger, deep within him, past the vengeance that fueled him and the promise of justice, I saw the love he has for you."

"I don't know if I could ever forgive him, mama. He hurt me. I've never felt this betrayed."

"I know darling and I'm not one to push you to feel something you don't. You have to be true to yourself Phoenix, but that also means opening yourself up to failure, to heartbreak. You don't want to end up like me, a woman who couldn't stand up for herself against it. A wise woman once said, *grief is the price we pay for love*. She was the Queen of a great kingdom, and she ruled it with not only her mind but also with her heart. Sometimes we're afraid to lead with our hearts in fear that they may be broken, but if they weren't capable of breaking, then they wouldn't be real. And if the person who breaks your heart, can also be the one to mend it, well we can't ask for a more perfect paradox."

Suddenly Cassandra comes barging into the room, her eyes bloodshot, and the look on her face, the look of someone who's just heard the most tragic news, or seen the most gruesome crime, sends a wave of terror through my body.

"Cassandra, what's going on? Why are you entering that way?"

"Elaine, Phoenix..." she pauses as if the words are lodged in her throat and she can't get them out. It's like I instantly know what it is. A premonition, I guess you could call it that stupid connection we're supposed to have, twin telepathy or whatever. I know that's why she's barged in looking like she's seen a ghost. "Brooklyn," she mutters, unable to finish her sentence.

"What happened to him?" My blood drops to my feet at her reluctance to speak, standing there without responding to us, making us worry more than we already are. "Where is he,

Cassandra?" I shout at her, standing from the bed and walking over to grab her by the arms.

My mom rushes to her feet. "Who dear, oh god what's happened?"

"It's Brooklyn, there's been an accident."

THE MOMENT CASSANDRA SAID HIS NAME, IT WAS AS IF A WAVE of fear washed over me, paralyzing me and rendering me unable to feel. I was numb, some would call it shock, but on the contrary, I could feel everything, hear every sound coming from the hospital monitors, hear every hushed whisper, every scream when they caught sight of him, but I couldn't do anything about it. I didn't react, I just sat there at his bedside blankly staring at how bloody, bruised, and vulnerable he looked.

"He's lost a lot of blood and has plenty of broken bones that are going to lead to a long and painful recovery. The tox report came back and the levels of alcohol in his blood were two times over the legal limit. There were other traces of amphetamines and illegal substances. The cops are outside and would like to speak with the two of you."

My mother falls back onto the chair by the door, sobbing into her hands. "My baby, oh God. Look at what you did to him Austin."

"What I, did to him?" my father shouts irate. "You're the one that tried to kill herself and had an addiction to painkillers your whole life. I wouldn't be surprised if you took them while pregnant too. He's like this because you got shipped off to rehab..."

"Fuck you Austin," my mother sneers, and suddenly Dr. Jacobs looks like he's going to be the one needing medical attention. He leaves the room surely going to ask for help or call in those cops who were waiting outside. "And tell me, why did I need the painkillers? Why did I try to end my suffering? You don't get to throw it all on me. I take

responsibility for my part in it but you Austin, you are the one who had the affair. You're the one with the illegitimate child, you are the one who was supposed to be protecting him, and now look what's happened."

"Both of you just stop!" I cry out, flipping over the hospital tray beside Brooklyn's bed. The cups and pitcher of water the nurse brought it earlier come crashing down on the floor, breaking into pieces. "Can't you see what the fighting, the secrets, all of it has done to him?" I look back at my brother who's lying in the hospital bed with a concussion, six broken ribs, a broken arm, his throwing arm, and his right leg fractured in three different places.

That quiets them down long enough for me to breathe, but instead of staying and apologizing, my father exits the room, slamming the door behind him.

"Oh dear, he's going to be okay," my mother says, coming to my side to comfort me.

I scoff, shaking my head in disagreement. "He's going to be alive, but you heard the doctor. He won't ever play football again. Brooklyn won't be okay. Football was his life, the only thing stopping him from disappearing completely. And now that's gone."

At the same moment my mother releases me, Donovan enters the room, her eyes swollen from all the crying she's done in the last six hours since we arrived. Brooklyn was brought in early this morning at about three o'clock, after driving headfirst into the center divider of the highway. His Rover flipped three times before hitting a brick wall. It took twenty minutes before someone showed up at the scene, another ten for the paramedics and ambulance to arrive and nearly three hours for them to notify my father. Once they did, Daphne texted Dee when she couldn't get a hold of me and somehow Donovan realized I was at Cliffside visiting my mother so she's the one that called and informed Cassandra.

It took me forty-five minutes to get to the hospital once Cassandra informed us and driving here with my mother panicking in the passenger seat beside me is all a blur. He had

just gotten out of surgery to stop the internal bleeding from his spleen rupturing on impact, and now he's lying motionless in an induced coma until they can get the swelling down and avoid him going into cardiac arrest from the pain.

Suddenly as I watch my brother look helpless in a hospital bed moments ago on the brink of death, everything that's occurred in recent months seems inconsequential. Meaningless when those you care about the most are whom you almost lose for good.

Tragedy quickly puts things into perspective for so many, and this right here, my brother's accident, my mother's attempted suicide, it's shown me that life's too short, time is too precious to dwell on the past and waste the future fighting and hating those who've maimed us. I don't forgive my father for all he's done, especially since he is one of the main reasons Brooklyn is lying in this hospital bed fighting for his life, but I no longer hate him. I'm better than that.

As for Maverick, who I haven't heard a word from since he left the house late last night, well there are so many things I'd say to him if he were with me right now.

"How are you?" Dee asks, coming up beside me and taking my mother's place in the room. Since he's in the ICU, they're only letting in two people at a time and since I've refused to leave the room, everyone else has been taking turns.

I squeeze her hand as she squeezes my shoulder. "Ask me again tomorrow, Dee, because right now, I don't even know who I am."

Dee wipes her tears on my shirt, and I almost want to yell at her for being so gross, but I don't have it in me to, not when she looks even more broken than I do seeing my brother like this. "He's going to get through this Phoenix, he has to. Brooklyn is the strongest person I know despite how he's been hiding behind his pain recently.

I nod, unable to say anything more. I'm exhausted, in pain, and just tired of always being so angry and sad. For once I wish to be happy, truthfully happy. Just yesterday I believed I

was, but in a matter of seconds, the curtain was pulled back and reality crept back in.

“Okay don’t hate me,” she says, speaking into the crook of my neck.

“What did you do Donovan?” I mutter, turning toward her, but my question is quickly answered when I hear the door of the room open and close.

Facing the door, I shove my best friend back, turning my body completely toward him. He’s dressed casually in black jeans and a plain tee, pristine white Js on his feet, but it’s the look on his face, the defeated, apologetic look speaking volumes in his eyes that has me inhaling a sharp breath and holding it in until I’m dizzy from the lack of oxygen.

How easily I’m once again hypnotized by his entire being, unable to breathe, to speak, to move without falling to my knees at his feet.

“I’ll go check on his pain meds, it’s been a while since they’ve administered them,” Dee says, leaving the two of us in the room alone.

Maverick shocks me when he doesn’t come to me immediately, instead walking over to my brother’s bedside. He takes Brooklyn’s hands in his, being careful not to touch the IV embedded into his veins, and then he does something I would have never in a million years expected from him.

He starts to cry. Soft, barely audible cries as he mumbles an apology about this being his fault. Instantly the feeling of helplessness which earlier consumed me is back, this time with twice the intensity as before. I rush over to Maverick’s side, wrapping my arms around him as his sobs become louder and more uncontrolled, meeting him with my own unhinged and erratic sobs, crying into the crook of his neck. We sit that way for what feels like hours until he shocks me, turning and taking me into his arms, shifting us so I’m sitting on his lap.

He brushes my messy hair out of my face, trailing his thumb under my eyes and wiping away the tears that won’t stop falling. He doesn’t speak or try to console me in any other

way, all he does is hold me tightly against him and I give in, leaning closer and placing my head against his chest.

Maverick places a tender kiss on the top of my head and inhales a deep breath. “I’m so sorry Nyx. This is all my fault if I would have known...”

“Don’t,” I say, drawing back and meeting his solemn dark eyes. The intensity of his gaze strikes me speechless once again, but I know what he needs is to hear that I don’t blame him for this.

“None of us could have predicted this would be the outcome of last night. It was a tragic accident; one we should have seen coming but still wouldn’t have been able to prevent. Brooklyn was spiraling out of control and however tragic this was, it was a way to stop that spiral, or at least make us aware in order to help him.”

“What about us?” he murmurs into my neck. Mav takes the opportunity, realizing he’s left me completely shocked and bemused, and lifts me so I’m left straddling his lap. His arms cross around me pulling me in closer to him. “These last few hours without you, replaying everything that happened between us repeatedly in my head, it’s made everything I already knew crystal clear. I don’t want to live in a world you’re not in. I can’t live without you baby, and this here was a reminder that life isn’t ours to bargain with. It can be taken from us in an instant, without warning or apologies.”

“Maverick, I...”

He presses his mouth to mine, the tingling taste of tobacco kissing my lips and making me addicted. “Don’t say anything right now, Nyx. I won’t ask you to give me an answer when you’re this vulnerable. But I want you to know mine.” Letting my mind wander, I close my eyes and give into the feeling I’ve missed. “I know you’re scared, trust me at first, I was too. But I’m not anymore. I love you Phoenix, and I want you to let me love you.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

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MAVERICK

The moment I hung up with Donovan, I knew what I needed to do. Despite what I kept telling myself, that Phoenix was better off without me, I knew there was no way I'd be better off without her. For once in his life my father gave me a piece of advice that meant something to me, and deep down I know it meant something to him.

The wealthiest and most successful of men all lack one thing, and that one thing is the courage to do what they want to do, without restraint. He never did, choosing to be a legendary force rather than giving into his heart's true desires.

I would not make the same mistake he did, and that meant I needed to fight and come back for my girl.

It's been two weeks since Brooklyn's accident, and although he's no longer in the hospital and on the road to recovery, it's going to be a hell of a long, tumultuous road.

For two weeks I've given Phoenix the space she's needed, seeing her only during class and at school. I didn't move back into the Bancroft house, and instead have been staying in Crew's hotel room, since he's decided he's sticking around for a bit. Instead of going back home, Phoenix and Brooklyn have moved into a smaller house at the edge of the water, about two miles from where they previously lived, a house their mother purchased for them. Elaine has also been staying there, postponing her move to Florida until after Brooklyn returns to school this coming Monday.

My stepbrother's been as expected, broodier than normal, trying to adapt to his new way of life, at least for the next three months. The Doc said the broken ribs would heal on their own, painfully but quickly, though it's his right arm and leg that are in a full cast, forcing him to move around with crutches he can barely use.

I came over early this morning to help with the setup for his surprise party, which he has no idea about and will surely

hate, while his mother drove him off to his physical therapy appointment. The day after tomorrow will be his first day back at school since the accident and the news that his football career is over. That has been the hard pill he's had to swallow and one I know will take time to get used to.

Regardless of what a stupid idea this is, here I am, lugging a giant inflatable pumpkin across the deck, setting it down next to the inflatable Frankenstein and ghost I'd already built. Did I mention this was a Halloween party, on the first day of October. The only thing Brooklyn likes more than football is Halloween, which is why we're making the backyard look like a haunted house married a pumpkin patch.

Anything to spend whatever amount of time I can by Phoenix's side. We haven't spoken about what I said to her at the hospital the day of the accident, but I'm dying to hear her say those three words back to me. I sound like a chick, a very needy, desperate teenage girl who needs to know what our relationship means. My how the tables have turned.

I'm about to inflate the green wicked witch, when two dainty hands with long thin fingers wrap around my eyes. "Guess who?" she asks, barely able to contain her laughter.

Instead of answering, I pry her fingers away and turn so her hands are now clasped behind my neck, and my lips are pressed against her. I kiss her, stealing her breath and whatever complaint she was about to give me about how I wasn't playing the game right.

Her rebuttal sits on her lips as she gives into the kiss, opening for me to deepen it, thrusting my tongue into her mouth as my hands find her waist and push her closer into me. She moans and I know she can feel how hard a simple kiss has made me.

"Fuck, baby I need you." She gasps when my hands grip her ass underneath the mini skirt she's wearing, finding her bare ass. I smack it lightly making her squeal against my mouth.

"Maverick," she whines, pulling away from me. I miss her lips the moment they're no longer on mine. "Not here

someone is going to see.”

“Let them Nyx, I’m done waiting around. I need you baby, and I need you right now.”

She somehow escapes my embrace, and that’s when I get a good look at what she’s wearing. A short red leather skirt barely covering her pussy, her ass cheeks hanging out of the back, along with a white strapless corset, and a red, velvet, hooded cloak, the hem ending just above the skirt. “Little Red, you have been a naughty little girl.”

Smirking teasingly at me, she bites her lip, shoving something she was hiding under her cloak at me. I grab the mask from her, staring at the gray and white fur of the wolf staring back at me. “Be my big, bad wolf Mav.”

The edges of my grin reach my eyes, and the seductively sly smile on her lips shows me she’s ready for me. I toss the bucket of orange flower petals I was supposed to scatter intricately in the pool, and wrap my arms around her waist, her legs wrapping around me on instinct. Gripping a handful of her ass in both palms, I kiss her once more, dragging her inside, and past the group of our friends that are setting up the decorations inside the house.

Yeah, I said our friends. Despite Brooklyn’s reluctance to accept Nyx and I being together, they’ve welcomed me into their tight-knit group and have made me feel like I’ve always belonged.

“Yes, get it! You’re the man Carter!” Cole shouts, hooting and hollering loudly as we pass them by, not missing the chance to pat me on the back excitedly.

“Oh god, come on, I don’t need to see that man,” Fitz groans, shielding his eyes. “She’s like a sister to me.”

“Yeah, maybe get it over with now before Brooklyn shows up,” Cole jokes, cracking himself up.

I shake my head, not willing to release her, nipping her lips and tugging it teasingly making her let out a quiet, purely carnal moan.

From the corner of my eye, I can see Donovan, dressed in a light green sequined dress, her hair in a messy bun on top of her head, and two iridescent wings sticking out of her back. “Oh, whatever guys, Brooklyn’s just going to have to get over the fact that his sister is fucking their stepbrother.”

Phoenix pulls away from me and turns to flip off Donovan who looks mighty proud of herself for annoying her best friend. “Thanks for the reminder Tink,” Phoenix scoffs, turning back around and nibbling on the bottom of my chin.

Darcy tugs on a pouting Donovan’s arm and pulls her toward the open back door we came through. “Come on guys, let’s take the party outside before they take their clothes off and do it here in front of us.”

Fitz throws an arm around Darcy who’s dressed up like a sexy version of a witch, short frilly skirt, a black top like Phoenix’s, and a sparkly black hat. “Sex, Darcy. It’s called sex. It’s not a dirty word, you can try it,” Fitz mocks, making a deep red flush cover her cheeks. Embarrassed, she takes off without Donovan who smacks Fitz on the back before she follows Darcy out. Taking the lazy route and wearing his football uniform as a costume, Fitz shrugs his shoulders like he’s done nothing wrong.

And that’s enough of them for the night, time to go upstairs and fuck my girl till the sun comes up. But before we make it to the staircase leading up to the second floor of the house where Phoenix’s room is, I crash into something, rather someone behind me.

“Ow,” Levi squeals, moving out of our way. “Oh my god, get a room!” she exclaims, making the guys who are still in the room cackle loudly.

Yeah, I said Levi, as in Phoenix’s half-sister with whom she’s trying to build a relationship. After everything that happened at the hospital, her parents nearly getting arrested for causing a scene in the middle of the ICU, Phoenix realized what her father did wasn’t Levi’s fault. She was just another victim of Austin Bancroft, who luckily grew up without his poison infecting her. Just like Phoenix was trying to move on

with her life despite her parent's mistakes, she wanted the same for Levi.

Our parent's faults don't define us, if anything it's because of those faults that we can grow stronger, already understanding what mistakes not to make. That was when she reached out to Levi at school, of course not to anyone's surprise the news of their relation was already front-page gossip and invited her to Brooklyn's party. It may not have been the best idea since Brooklyn's not as forgiving as Phoenix, but it is what it is.

"Oh, come on Levi," Cole says, coming over to save her. He wraps his arm around her shoulder, placing a chaste kiss on her cheek. "I wouldn't mind watching. Shall we go upstairs and practice what they teach?"

I chuckle at the sheer horror that flashes on her face. "And that's our cue to leave."

Once upstairs and inside Phoenix's room, I toss her on her plush mattress making her bounce and have to grip the comforter to steady herself. I kick the door shut behind us, slamming it so hard the windows vibrate from the force. Raw and carnal desire flashes in her blue-green eyes, beautiful and ocean-like wells which have a hint of gold flecks sparkling along the rim of the irises.

She's fucking beautiful, a force of nature unlike any I've ever seen which makes me feel like I can conquer the world so long as she is by my side. An intoxicating drug I've become so dangerously addicted to and have no intention of ever recovering from. Phoenix Bancroft is my poison. A sweet yet lethal poison I'd happily let consume me.

Without dragging my feet, I strip out of my clothes, reaching behind my back and in one swift movement, tug my shirt over my head, tossing it onto the floor to my left. Kicking off my shoes, I reach down and unbutton my jeans, yanking them off along with my boxers and stepping out of them as her eyes hungrily rake over my body taking in the sight of me completely naked, my erection already thick and dangerously

hard, slowly stalking toward her like a vicious predator about to consume his defenseless prey.

Her mouth drops open, and all I can think about it how perfect her lips would fit around my cock, sucking, teasing, and taking me in all the way while I relentlessly fucked her pretty little mouth.

There will be time for that, since I plan on keeping her held hostage in this room till the end of fucking time. Instead, I drop to my knees at the edge of the bed, grabbing her tightly by the ankles and tugging her closer to me until her ass rests at the edge of the mattress.

She lets out a loud, slightly terrified squeal that makes my dick throb in anticipation. Slowly trailing my rough fingertips over her silky tanned legs, I tug on the hem of her skirt and before she can object, tear it in half, the leather making a spine-chilling sound that makes her shiver under my touch.

“Maverick!” she exclaims, annoyed yet undoubtedly aroused. “My costume.”

“Fuck this costume,” I groan, moving my hands higher up her legs. “As much as I liked the sight of you in it, I much prefer what you look like out of it.” She doesn’t argue anymore and follows my movements, lifting her ass up off the bed, allowing me to tear her red lace thong and toss it on the floor along with her skirt. Before she can set herself back down, I grab her hips, lifting her sweet, dripping pussy to my mouth.

I cover her lips with mine, licking, lapping, and sucking every inch of her, tasting her sweet arousal on my tongue. She gasps loudly, covering her mouth with her hand to stifle her moans, as I rapidly continue to lick her, thrusting my tongue inside of her until she’s screaming and writhing in pleasure on the bed. Her back arches, giving me better access, and I bring one of my hands gripping her hips between us, rubbing her clit while my mouth continues to devour her.

“God, yes. Oh Maverick. Fuck, right there. I’m so close. Aaahh!”

My baby is a screamer, and the sweet sounds that leave her lips only excite me more. But I need my cock inside of her to make her come the way I need her to. I want to feel her lose total control and tighten around my dick like her life depends on it while I fuck her to the edge of her climax.

Removing my mouth from her pussy, I crawl over her body, tearing the silky corset off her, taut pink nipples teasing me, and testing my restraint. Bottom line is I don't have any left when it comes to her.

I take one of her nipples into my mouth, squeezing and playing with the other with my free hand, tugging the pebbled peak between my thumb and index finger.

Phoenix lets out another loud howl, which is the only way to describe it as I line my cock up to her entrance and thrust easily inside.

“Oh fuck, please Maverick I need more. I need you to move. I need you to fuck me.”

Placing both arms on either side of her, her back now flat against the mattress and both legs folded up on either side of my hips crossing behind my lower back, I thrust my hips, lifting her to better align our movements. My girl meets my every desperate thrust with one of her own.

“Your wish is my command darling.”

This must be what heaven looks and feels like because I can't imagine it gets any better than this. Her eyes roll back, her back arching off the mattress as I drive into her, bringing her to the edge, her slick little cunt so wet she's easily taking me all in. I'm almost there, ready to come with her, but first, I need to hear her say what I've been dying to hear for two fucking weeks.

“Say it Nyx,” I whisper against her forehead, sweat droplets dripping down from mine, glistening down between her breasts. “I know I told you I'd wait, that I wouldn't push you, force you to say it until you were ready, but I'm not as strong as I may seem. I need you to say it to me baby, because

I don't think I can handle wondering if you feel the same way any longer."

She closes her eyes again, writhing in agony beneath me, craving her release. "Maverick please, I need to come," she begs, opening her eyes to glare at me. The lust hidden behind the anger proves I'm right. Now I just need to get her to say it.

I bring my right hand to wrap around her neck, softly applying pressure, feeling her swallow down the pleasure she feels. "Not until you say it, because I do. I love you, Phoenix Bancroft. More than anything in this world and every other in existence. More than I ever thought myself capable of."

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EPILOGUE

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PHOENIX

“You brought me back to life when I thought there was nothing left to live for. I was hopeless, helpless, and destined to never think myself worthy of someone like you. A single moment without you was implausible, but the thought of a lifetime without you is insufferable. I would die before living another day without you, and I would kill to make you once again mine.”

The sight of him on top of me, his throbbing erection still pulsing inside of me as he thrusts his hips, slamming against me so pleasurable I don't think I've ever felt this aroused. I gasp for air, even though his hand isn't constricting my airway, it's the sincerity of his declaration which takes my breath away. “The thought of you committing murder for me shouldn't turn me on as much as it does,” I joke, trying to lighten up the intensity of the conversation we're having.

“If that's what it takes, baby, I'd burn the entire world down and everyone in it for you.”

He slows his movements, and that's when I know he's being serious. He's going to deprive me of my much-needed orgasm until I tell him what he so desperately wants to hear me say.

It's the truth no doubt, a truth so real, so deep, I feel it in every corner of my soul. Though saying it out loud to him, I can no longer take it back.

Am I ready for that?

“As tempting as that sounds, no thanks. I rather live in a world where you remain by my side through it all. Besides, I don't think I'd look good in an orange jumpsuit and since you just told me your plans, I'd be an accomplice.” I shield my feelings with humor and sarcasm once more, afraid to confess the truth.

“Baby you'd look fucking killer in orange.” He shifts our bodies so I'm on top of him, straddling his hips as he holds

mine in place. Slowly yet intentionally, he strokes my neck, trailing kisses along the path his fingers grazed. “But you’d definitely look better in nothing at all.” My corset that was still hanging by a thread, falls behind me, his eyes so dark and full of need. *What is stopping me from giving him what he needs?*

What is it he asks of me if only a mere token of my sentiment?

An inconsequential truth about my feelings. The inconceivable meaning of my devotion to him which rings truer than anything else in this world. My entire being burns for him. With every staggering breath in my lungs, with every unsteady beat of my heart, I fall deeper and deeper, with nowhere left to go. It’s inevitable, yet irrevocably forced.

Yet I’m crestfallen and afraid.

To love him is to give him everything. My hopes and dreams, my fears and faults. My ever-changing flaws, my undying love. Intoxicating, illuminating, and irritatingly irreversible. If I give myself to him, mind, body, and soul, I will never get any of it back in one piece. I would never again be whole.

Is that a risk I’m willing to take? A mistake I’m fated to endure? A choice I’m destined to make?

Or am I inevitably giving it all up out of fear?

Fear of falling, fear of failing, but most importantly, fear of loving. Fear is but a four-letter word used to mask the lies within our minds, but love is a four-letter feeling necessary to speak the unadulterated truth within our hearts.

I am willing to risk it all, to lose everything for a chance to be loved by him, to show him I love him unconditionally.

I don’t fear the unknown anymore, because with him by my side, we can defeat anything that comes our way.

I lower my lips to his, pressing them softly against him. “I love you too, Maverick Carter, with every inch of my being. I loved you the moment I saw you, standing across from me with this intensity in your gaze I needed to feel every day. I loved you even when you irked me, pushing every single one

of my buttons and making me beg you to touch me.” I ride him, slow and steady, building up my orgasm once again. But I won’t stop talking.

“I loved you when I thought I hated you, I even loved you when you hurt me, breaking my heart the way nobody else ever had. But in doing so you made me feel alive, showed me that my heart could break because it felt so much for you. You opened my eyes to a world I’d only ever dreamed of, and for that I will always love you.”

Maverick grips my hips as his lips crash against mine, the urgency in our movements no longer enough. He slams into me, while I nip at his bottom lip until I’m drawing blood, my orgasm so fucking close I can taste it on my tongue.

“I love you Maverick, so much I fear it will not only be the best thing to ever happen to me but also the death of me.”

His right hand grips my chin as he continues to move relentlessly. “Look at me Phoenix. Look me in the eye as I fuck you and you’ll see you’ll be the death of me, baby. Nothing has ever felt so right, and I know nothing else ever will.” My breath hitches, the genuine emotion in his words making my heart so full it feels too big for my chest. “It’s you and me baby, forever and always. Just the two of us.”

“Please Maverick, make love to me. Kiss me,” I implore, but it isn’t necessary.

He’s ready for me, eager to make me his. “Come for me baby, because you are mine and I fucking love you,” he commands, just as my orgasm ripples through me and he comes inside of me, my body vibrating with the most insane and intense pleasure I’ve ever experienced.

This is what I was missing out on, what I never believed could be true.

Marriage, happily-ever-after, endgame. Love itself, I thought it was all a ruse, but it turns out, between Maverick and me, it’s the realest thing that’s ever existed.

THE END

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book! These characters! This story!

Thank you to all our amazing readers! Without your continued support, we wouldn't be able to continue to do what we love.

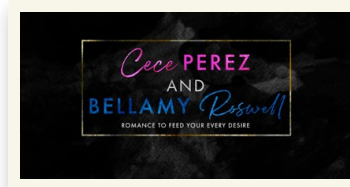
To our Alpha & Beta readers, you ladies are incredible and we're so thankful to have you as part of our team!

We cannot wait to continue to share our stories with you all <3

XOXO Bellamy & Cece

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



THRILLING ROMANCE WITH AN EDGE OF PASSION, SUSPENSE, AND
ANGST.

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BELLAMY ROSWELL

New Adult & Dark Romance Author of the Servite Academy & Malibu Cove Chronicles Series. Bellamy is a baseball obsessed Southern California native, coffee connoisseur, avid reader, and lover of angst, passionate bad boys, and sassy, fierce heroines. Bringing you bad boy heartthrobs oozing sex appeal, passion, and angst one novel at a time.



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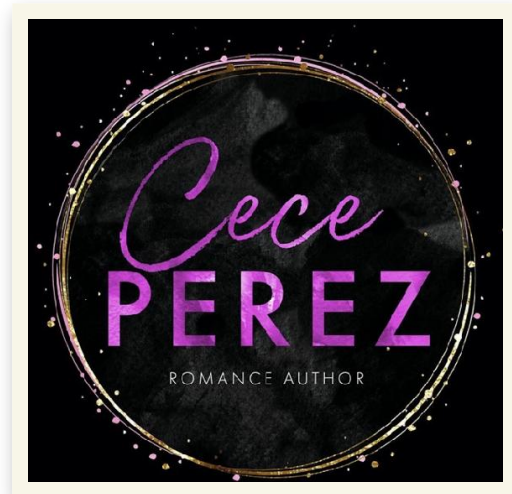
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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CECE PEREZ

Cece found her happy place in the worlds that others created from a very young age. Reading became a hobby that brought so many friendships. Through the reading community she fostered a renewed love for all things books and to her surprise, writing. Writing being deeply personal to her wasn't something she thought she would share with anyone else. With encouragement from some amazing voices in the community she made the leap to co-write her debut novel. The characters in her head are Broken Bad Boys and Girls with too much Sass. When she isn't writing, you can find her spending time with her amazing husband or cuddling up on the couch with her furbaby Jasper.



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