



THE CAPTAIN

BROKEN WARRIORS BOOK THREE

A RH STEP-BROTHER ROMANCE

USA Today Best-Selling Author

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To all the men and women who serve their country
with honor and dedication. Thank you.



Broken Warriors Book 3

The Captain



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GLOSSARY OF MILITARY terms, locations, and acronyms.



CLASS SIX: SHOP THAT sells alcohol, cigarettes, soft drinks, and snacks on military installations. Some Class Six have uniform items. Class Six in Europe sometimes have things like DVD rentals and other services.

PCS: Permanent Change of Station. It's a transfer. You get moved to another base and often get PCS leave (about a month) as you might have to arrange accommodation if one isn't available on base or you aren't assigned barracks.

MOS: Military Occupational Specialties.

88M: Army job code (MOS) that identifies transportation personnel. A truck driver.

31B: Military Police.

HQ: Headquarters.

OCS: Officer Candidate School.

MIA: Missing in Action.

PFC: Private First Class (E3).

OPSEC: Operation Security. It's a list of rules and skills supposed to keep you safe and not get you identified and singled out as a person affiliated with the US military, thus making you a possible target.

POV: Privately Owned Vehicle.

JOB: Joint Operation Base.

ACU: Army Combat Uniform.

Second Lieutenant: The first and lowest officer rank. Normally straight out of OCS.

First Lieutenant: Next rank up from second lieutenant.

SGT: Sergeant.

Specialist: The last soldier rank in the enlisted personnel, right before sergeant (E4).

NCO: Non-Commissioned Officer (E5 to E9).

Article 15: Disciplinary action.

FRG: Family Readiness Group. It's a group present at company level where, at least on a monthly basis, the soldiers and family members get together to communicate about what's going on in the company.

CQ: Change of Quarters, basically guard duty at the barracks.

Zonk: In NCO lingo, it means "scram." Normally yelled to soldiers in formation.

MP: Military Police.

PT: Physical Training.

AFTB: Army Family Team Building. It's a group that creates a bridge between the army and families, especially helping spouses to understand the military life and be a functional part of it.

ACS: Army Community Service.

PX: Post Exchange. Basically the mall on an army base.

BAH: Basic Allowance for Housing.

DFAC: Dining Facility.

CID: Criminal Investigation Command (used to be called Criminal Investigation Division, but the acronym remained unchanged after the name was changed).

NTC: National Training Center.



1.

Bruised



Leith



I WISH I COULD SLEEP.

It's really cold in here, and there are voices around me and a bright light is shining right in my eyes.

I'm so tired, and my body hurts everywhere. I have to stop pushing myself so much at the gym—

“Motherfucker!” I come to when the sharpest, most unimaginable pain almost makes me hit the roof.

My eyes snap open, and there's that bright, blinding light again. I blink a few times to try and put things into focus.

I'm in a white, sterile room, and everything is spinning.

“Ouch.” I crash down breathlessly onto a pillow and try to open my eyes again, but I keep my head still.

That's better. If I don't move my head, the urge to puke my guts out is a little less overwhelming.

“What are you doing to me?” I ask, finally registering the small woman in ACUs partially covered by a white coat at the foot of my bed.

“Nurse, can you hold his leg still, please?” As the woman comes closer, the soldier who was shining a penlight in my eyes just a second ago moves to the side. “Can you tell me your name?”

I close my eyes to keep the room from spinning. I doubt the doctor would like it if I shared the contents of my stomach

with her. The nausea is almost too much to even talk. “My name is Leith LeCroy. First Lieutenant Leith LeCroy, ma’am,” I say, because I’m pretty sure she’s an army doctor, but the way she’s leaning toward me makes it impossible to see the insignia with her rank.

“Good. I’m glad we got that out of the way.” She turns to look at the guy with the penlight. “The patient remembers his name.”

I close my eyes, willing my head to stop throbbing for just a second. “Why am I in the hospital?” I ask. “Ma’am.”

“I’m Captain Jennifer Finley, and I’m your attending physician today,” she informs me. “I’m an orthopedic surgeon at the Albright Medical Center at JOB Star Cove. What I was doing to you is adjusting the bone in your leg in order to align the fracture in preparation for a cast. First Lieutenant Santiago was checking your eyes. Aside from a compound fracture in your left fibula and several scrapes and bruises all over your body, you have a concussion too. We’ll keep you under observation for your concussion, but first, we’ll take care of the fracture and make sure to keep you comfortable. That kind of fracture can cause a considerable amount of pain. I’m going to leave you in the capable hands of—”

I close my eyes again.

Shit. I wish the room would stop spinning for two seconds. How did I get here? I was just driving home with Thurston after the FRG meeting and—

“Fuck!” I jump out of the hospital bed, tear off the IV line attached to my arm, and rip off the tubes and cables that connect me to a bunch of monitors, causing them to emit all sorts of distress signals.

I stumble, holding onto the bed frame and shifting most of my weight to my right leg.

“Lieutenant LeCroy,” the captain scolds. “Where are you going? You need to go back to bed and let the orthopedic team put your leg in a cast. You might be able to do some limited walking in the next few days, but I don’t advise—”

“Isla!”

It all comes back to me in a rush.

Thurston and I came home from the FRG meeting, and Oren was a couple of minutes behind us.

Mom had gone to downtown Star Cove to get us some burgers for dinner, and Isla had come directly home from her closing shift at the library, skipping the FRG meeting.

I went looking for her after Thurston let it slip that Isla confessed to him that she loves me.

She loves me.

I have been holding back, hinting at my feelings but waiting to use the L-word because I was worried about getting hurt if she chose one of my brothers over me.

But when I heard that she loves me, I couldn't wait one more second, and I had to tell her how I felt—that I love her too, with all my heart. She's it for me, and there's nothing I wouldn't do for her. Fuck my army career, fuck the fact that my mom and her dad are married and a romantic relationship between us would set tongues wagging here on post. Fuck the disapproval, the questioning looks, and anything that's supposed to keep us apart.

I ran to her room to tell her that I love her and that I don't care about anything else. I would do anything for her, I'd jump in the fire—or in the water.

Shit.

More of what happened comes rushing into my agitated mind as I resist the doctor's and nurse's attempts to get me back to bed.

I found a handwritten note on Isla's bed. I thought it was from Thurston, but he said he never wrote her a note asking her to meet him that night at the old lighthouse at the end of the beach.

We were confused for a second, but then Oren came running into her room with the news that Joe Peters had been released, pending investigation. Apparently, there was no

evidence connecting him to the crime scenes of Connie's murder or Isla's assault, and he had been released from custody.

We freaked out, sure that Peters had written that note, trying to lure Isla out to the beach at night by pretending to be Thurston.

He had plenty of opportunities to see Thurston's handwriting, and my older brother immediately said that the note was a decent imitation but not his own writing.

We ran to the old lighthouse and found Peters there.

Oren almost killed him in a fit of rage, but Peters told us that he had just seen Isla stepping inside the old, disused building and was about to follow her. He swore left and right that he hadn't written her a note.

I ran inside the lighthouse and up the steep spiral staircase to the top just in time to find a soldier in ACUs struggling with my stepsister.

He had a cord wrapped around her neck, and she was fighting him off, gasping for air.

My arrival disturbed him, and he pushed her off the railing and into the stormy sea.

I didn't even think, I just jumped.

The sea was dark, and the big, turbulent swells crashed with unbridled violence against the cliff the lighthouse is built on.

I was desperate, frantically looking for my girl in that cold, stormy hell. The visibility was poor, but I eventually got her.

We went under as I struggled with the currents and held onto her as if my life depended on it.

I had no control over our movements, desperate not to be swept away by the formidable currents.

I tried to swim back to shore with all my might, and that was when a huge wave got us and—I can't remember anything from that point.

We must have hit one of the many sharp rocks that lurk under the water in that stretch of sea.

“Where is she? Where is Isla?” I yell, not caring about how unprofessional I look while struggling to stay upright and keep the medical team away from me at the same time.

Please, please tell me I didn't let go of her. Tell me that she's safe and that I didn't lose her.

“Lieutenant LeCroy!” Captain Finley snaps, her tone harder than the rock I must have crashed against. “I need you to calm down stat. You and your stepsister were brought here together. Last I checked, another team was working on her. I'm afraid I can't give you any more information right now. As you know, there are laws that protect a patient's privacy, and you aren't listed as a next of kin. Get back to your bed and—”

“I need to see her,” I interrupt. “Captain Finley, I need to see my gi—my stepsister.”

The petite medical officer stiffens, her gaze hard and unyielding. “I'm afraid that won't be possible. Your well-being is my priority right now, Lieutenant, and I won't entertain any other option than you getting your ass back into your bed and letting my team take care of your injuries. Then we can see about getting you some more information.”

Ha. Not a chance.

I'm normally the calm one, the levelheaded brother who keeps his cool when Oren's and Thurston's quicker tempers flare.

But not tonight.

“I need to see her now. I don't care about your regulations, Captain. I need to see her and make sure she's okay. After that, you can do whatever you want to me. I don't care if you put me in a cast or if you cut my leg off. You can write me up for this too, if that's what you think I deserve, but I'm going to see my stepsister right now.”

To my surprise, Captain Finley nods. “Fine.” She turns to look at the lieutenant who was shining the light in my eyes. Lieutenant Santiago, will you please find a wheelchair—”

“I don’t need a wheelchair, I can walk.”

The captain sighs. “Lieutenant LeCroy, I’m trying to accommodate you. I don’t have to do it, and believe me, I’m not impressed with your level of insubordination. In fact, I’m going to make sure that your commander is informed of your blatant disrespect for authority. However, I’m willing to make an exception, given the circumstances of your arrival here tonight, but if I were you, I wouldn’t push my luck, and I’d sit my ass on that wheelchair. I’m going to personally accompany you to Miss Cameron’s room, and then we’ll go take care of your leg. Am I understood?”

“Ma’am, yes, ma’am,” I say. “I apologize, and thank you, ma’am.”

The captain rolls her eyes and mutters something about my level of discipline needing work as I’m helped into one of the hospital’s wheelchairs.



Isla

I’M SO COLD.

Why am I so cold? It’s supposed to be summer.

I want to wrap myself in a blanket, but when I try to move, everything hurts.

I seriously mean everything. I try to open my eyes, and it’s a superhuman effort. My lids feel heavy, and my eyelashes hurt. How can someone’s eyelashes cause pain?

I need to get up and go to my closet to find a blanket before I freeze to death, but I can’t get up. My body hurts so much that any movement is excruciating.

I might not be in my room though, because I’m not alone. I can hear several voices around me, and if I’m not mistaken, one of them is Dad.

I take a deep, steadying breath, and then I try again to open my eyes.

Yeah, fuck no.

I close my eyes again with a pained moan. “Why is it so bright?” I say, but I’m not sure if my words are audible, since my voice sounds like a painful, hoarse rasp and my throat feels like it’s on fire.

“Isla, baby!”

Oh, I know that voice. “Leith.”

My eyes fly open, and for a second, I think I’m dead and I’m in heaven, because Leith’s light blond hair is surrounded by a halo.

No, that doesn’t make any sense. If I were really in heaven, I wouldn’t be cold, right?

Another thing that doesn’t make heaven a valid option is that Leith is wearing something odd. Is that a hospital gown?

A big, strong hand engulfs mine. “Baby,” Leith says again, and I smile.

Or at least I think I do, but I can’t be sure because Leith’s gray eyes are clouded by worry, and he doesn’t return my smile.

“Why am I in the hospital?” It takes me two tries to say that. “And why does everything hurt? Were we in an accident?”

Leith lifts my hand to his face, brushing his lips over my knuckles. “I’m so glad you’re all right, baby. If something had happened to you, I don’t know what—”

Leith and I aren’t alone though. Thurston and Oren are by my bed too.

My oldest and youngest stepbrothers are in their ACUs, tall and handsome, with matching worried looks in their dark blue eyes.

“Do you need anything, sweet girl?” Oren asks solicitously. “Maybe a glass of water?”

“Tinkerbelle, do you remember what happened?” Thurston asks. “Do you know how you got here? Did you see who

attacked you?”

I close my eyes again, feeling a little confused. How did I get here? I try to think about the last thing I remember about my day.

I was closing down the library, and I played hooky from the FRG meeting. I was making dinner, knowing my soldiers—especially Dad—would come home tired and cranky after a long day on duty.

“I don’t know,” I say, struggling to piece together the events of my night. “You got me flowers, Thurston. There was a note on my bed when I got back, and then you texted me, and I came out to meet you at the lighthouse and then—”

Thurston’s gaze darkens. “The roses weren’t from me. I’m sorry. And I didn’t text you, Tink. I’m still waiting for the insurance to send me a replacement for my phone.”

“Oh,” I say, a little confused. My head really hurts, and I feel nauseous.

“We got home shortly after you,” Thurston continues, “but you were already gone. Leith and Oren ran to the lighthouse while your dad and I went to Major Peters’ house...”

He tells me what happened, and the memories start coming back, but they are slow and fuzzy, and my head throbs painfully every time I try to remember.

My eyes find Leith’s again. “You saved me.” It isn’t a question. “You jumped into the sea when I fell. You saved me.”

He squeezes my hand, his throat working as he swallows. “If something had happened to you... It was dark, and if I hadn’t found you in the water—” His voice breaks, and he’s holding my hand so tightly that his knuckles are white, but it doesn’t even hurt. “Isla, I don’t know what I would have done if I lost you.”

“Did you see who pushed you?” Thurston asks.

I shake my head. “No. Their face was covered by a balaclava. By the look of it, it was army issued.” I close my

eyes, trying to remember and put my thoughts in order. “He was tall, over six feet for sure. Slender. I remember thinking it was Joe, but you just said Oren and Leith saw Joe when they got there, so I don’t know.”

“Yeah,” Oren confirms, moving a stray lock of hair away from my forehead. “As much as it pisses me off to admit it, Peters wasn’t your attacker. I was kicking his ass while you were up there with the person who pushed you off that railing.”

I nod, struggling to piece the events together. “If it wasn’t Joe, then I have no idea who it was.”

I feel sick to my stomach at the idea that all this time, while Joe was locked up, I thought I was safe.

When my car got keyed and then broken into, I thought they were isolated incidents. I even told myself that I was suffering from PTSD, when all along the person who assaulted me must have been watching me and waiting for me in the shadows, planning his next move. It wasn’t difficult to get me alone, because after Joe’s arrest, we lowered our guard.

“You guys didn’t see anything? Did he get away?”

They look at each other, using that weird, silent communication thing they have going on.

“I had to make a decision,” Leith mutters. “Either I tried to save you or chase after your attacker. I only had a second to think about it, and you were more important, baby.”

He kisses my knuckles again, his eyes burning with emotion and unshed tears. “The others—including Peters—chased after him once they realized that something was horribly wrong, but your attacker got away. I don’t know what I would have done if I lost you, baby. I lo—”

The door bursts open, and a crowd invades my room.

“Darling.”

Leith lets go of my hand when Dad reaches my bed in two short strides. He’s still in his ACUs too, and he’s followed by Katie, Jessica—Thurston’s ex—her commander, and the CID

agent who came to our house on the day Connie's body was found.

There's also an officer I don't recognize, but judging by the white doctor coat he wears over his ACUs, I assume he's a doctor.

"Miss Cameron, nice to see you're awake." He smiles. "I'm Major Jin, and if you don't mind, I need to take a look at you and see—"

"After the major is done examining you, Miss Cameron, Captain Morris and I would like to ask you a few questions and collect your statement of tonight's events. I—"

The major's kind smile vanishes as he turns to look at the CID agent. "You'll be waiting outside, and I'll let you know if and when Miss Cameron is ready to talk to you, *Sergeant*. Miss Cameron has a concussion, and she needs rest. Those are doctor's orders, and I'm afraid they have priority over any investigation. Am I making myself clear?"

The CID agent and Captain Morris stiffen. "Yes, sir!" they utter in unison.

"Now, aside from law enforcement, this room is way too crowded. Like I said, Miss Cameron needs rest above all. So everybody out except the patient's next of kin." He looks at Leith, who's no longer holding my hand but hasn't moved his wheelchair from my bedside. "Lieutenant LeCroy, I believe Captain Finley is right outside and you're wanted by the orthopedic team. Since you also have a concussion, the orders to rest apply to you too. Everybody out, except Lieutenant Colonel Cameron and Mrs. Cameron."



2.

Stir Crazy

Leith



A TEXT MESSAGE FLASHES on my screen. It must be the fifth message Mom sent me today.

Mom: Are you sure you're going to be okay if Doug and I go to the hospital to see Captain Rivera's new twins straight from work and then go out to dinner in Star Cove? If you need me, I can tell Doug to grab takeout and bring something back for you and Isla.

I roll my eyes but can't fight a smile at the same time. Mom means well, and her concern for Isla and me warms my heart, but she's been intense since we were discharged from the hospital.

She's always been a loving mother, and I stopped feeling disloyal to my birth mom a long time ago. I used to feel guilty about the fact that Katie is the only person that I associate with the word "Mom."

It's been like that since very early on, when she and her husband took me in, first as foster parents and then permanently.

Me: Don't worry, Mom. Go out to dinner with Doug and don't forget to give Kelsey Rivera my best wishes. I'm going to go see the twins myself as soon as I'm released from house arrest.

Mom: **Eye roll emoji** Are you sure you and Isla are going to be okay? Remember the doctor said to avoid staring at a screen for too long if your headache worsens. There are leftovers from last night's dinner in the fridge, and I made a fresh batch of soup. But if you or your stepsister want

anything from outside, Doug and I can drop it off before we go to visit the Riveras.

I sigh. Mom has barely been sleeping. The first night after we were discharged, she checked on me every two hours. It didn't matter that I told her that the general advice is to do that during the first twenty-four hours after a concussion initially occurs and that was why we were kept in the hospital for observation. She was adamant that she was too worried and couldn't sleep anyway, so she checked on me around the clock.

Me: Don't worry, Mom. I promise I'll be good. I'm going to take a nap before dinner, and the leftovers are absolutely fine.

I place my phone back on my nightstand and rest my head on the pillows piled against the headboard.

My eyes close of their own accord as I exhale slowly.

I hate that Mom is worried, but the truth is, I am getting headaches every time I stare at a screen too long or even try to read a book.

The doctor said to avoid strenuous physical activity for a couple of weeks, but it's not like I could do much with my leg in a cast anyway.

The result of all that is that I've been put on medical leave, and I've been spending most of my time in bed.

It was nice for about five minutes, but now I'm going stir crazy. I'm desperate to go for a run or work out with Oren, or even to just sit by the pool with a book.

Even being at work right now would beat this forced rest, but since I was told to avoid driving for about two weeks, even light desk duties are out of the question until my headache subsides at least partially.

I'm about to drift off to sleep when there's a light knock on my door.

I seriously hope Mom didn't decide to come home after all. I love her to death, but her anxious hovering is driving me

insane.

“Yeah?” I call out, keeping my eyes closed.

The door opens just a fraction, and I know it’s Isla even before I open my eyes or she speaks.

Don’t ask me how I do it, but it’s like I have a radar when she enters a room.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to disturb you.” She begins to close the door.

“No, Isla, wait!” I stop her, and even I can clearly hear the hint of desperation in my voice. “What’s up?”

She makes her way into my room, looking beautiful in a thin pink tank top and a pair of soft, light gray shorts that barely cover her toned thighs. Her long, strawberry blonde hair tumbles down her back in soft waves. “I was just coming to check on you and see what you’re up to,” she says, stopping by the side of my bed. “It looks like it’s just the two of us tonight. Dad just texted to tell me that he’s taking Katie out to dinner.”

“What about my brothers?” I ask.

“Thurston is at the library. Today was his first Lego building class, remember? He wanted to cancel, but they had so many people signing up that he really couldn’t. Oren is stuck supervising remedial PT since you’re on leave.”

I can’t suppress an amused smirk at the idea of my little brother having to do work in my stead. “I bet he was fuming.”

Isla nods. “Yeah, especially because Joe is back at work, and the first sergeant wanted an officer to be there too, so they’ve been paired.”

I shake my head, ignoring the throb of dull pain that spreads through it with the movement. “I hope my little brother doesn’t end up with an Article 15 by the end of the week, or worse, in jail,” I say, thinking about how hard it was to pry Oren off Peters on more than one occasion.

Isla steps closer, covering my hand with hers. “Don’t worry. I made him promise that he’ll be on his absolute best

behavior. I reminded him that he was punching Joe in the face while I was being attacked, so there's no way he could be the person who's been stalking me."

Yeah, she doesn't know Oren the way I do, and the bad blood between him and Lieutenant Peters runs deep. Joe Peters can't get past the fact that Oren had sex with Connie, and it doesn't matter that it happened the night Oren got here on post, and he had no idea that Connie was married. Connie Peters had been spreading rumors about how incredibly well endowed my little brother is. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that Peters didn't take that well.

I made things worse when I met Connie at The Cove the weekend I arrived on post and the company was in the field. I had a quickie with her in the club's bathroom. There's been bad blood between us and Joe Peters ever since, regardless of the fact that his marriage was already in trouble when Oren and I met his late wife.

"I hope that's enough," I say, looking into her gray eyes. She looks a little pale. "How are you, baby?"

Her gaze softens, her fingers gently stroking my knuckles. There isn't anything sexual in her touch, and yet, I feel it everywhere in my body. "I'm okay. I mean, I'm better. I still get headaches when I think too hard about what happened at the lighthouse, but it's becoming easier. I just wish things could go back to normal, whatever that even means around here, you know? How about you, babe?"

I sigh. "Yeah, same. I'm still getting headaches if I concentrate on anything for too long. My leg isn't giving me too much trouble as long as I keep it elevated most of the time. They gave me some excellent painkillers at the hospital, but I'm trying to wean myself off them."

She stops touching my hand then lifts her fingers to trace my jaw, and I'm glad that I made an effort to shave this morning. "Did the doctor tell you to quit them?"

I shrug. "Not quite. But I've seen a couple of soldiers struggle with addiction after an injury, and I don't want to risk

it. The pain is tolerable. I even tried to walk to the bathroom without crutches. I made it there and back okay.”

She shakes her head, a knowing smile on her face. “You’ve been doing that when Katie isn’t home, huh? If she sees you walking around the house without crutches, she’s going to freak.”

She’s so right that I can’t suppress a chuckle. “Yeah. To be honest, I’m glad she went back to work. I know she’s worried, but she’s been driving me crazy. I might have a concussion and a broken leg, but I’m not an invalid. She tried to spoon feed me yesterday, for heaven’s sake.”

Isla’s eyes flash with warmth. “To be honest, the way she’s doting on you is kind of sweet.”

I roll my eyes, but my smile is full of fondness for my mom. “Yeah, you say that because she isn’t trying to spoon feed you. I hate that she’s so worried, you know?”

Isla nods. “Dad’s worried too.”

“Is he spoon feeding you homemade chicken soup too?” I tease her.

“Ha.” She laughs. “That isn’t quite Dad’s style. The way he’s showing his concern is by making this house more secure than Fort Knox. He has one MP car permanently parked outside the front gate and one MP stationed by the back gate on the beach. They’ve been told not to come into the house unless they see something out of the ordinary.”

I consider her words. “I can’t really blame him, baby. He has to go to work, but he needs some peace of mind as long as you’re housebound. Don’t forget that whoever has been stalking you successfully broke into the house not long ago.” A selfish thought crosses my mind. “So what is he planning to do? Will he assign some MPs to protect you once you’re cleared to go back to work?”

“He asked me if I wanted to have that or if I preferred to have one of you three with me instead, like we did before Joe got arrested.”

I don't need to ask her which option she chose. "Good," I mutter softly. "At least we can make lemonade out of this huge pile of lemons we've been handed. I hate that whoever assaulted you is still on the loose, but being able to be around you without making him suspicious is a definite silver lining."

"Definitely. I'm looking forward to going back to work. Staying cooped up inside this house is killing me. But at least now that they are back to work, you and I can hang."

I can't help the smile that quirks up my lips. "You're right. That takes things up a notch from making lemonade to adding some tequila to the mix and upgrading to a margarita," I say, thinking about when Isla and I had tequila as a nightcap on the night we met.

"We could have some now, even though I guess tequila and prescription painkillers don't exactly mix."

I nod my agreement. "We can take a rain check on the tequila until we're off the meds. It'll be a celebratory drink."

She beams at me. "I'd like that. It's a date."

"Speaking about dates," I say, reaching out to play with a lock of Isla's silky hair. "Things have gotten crazy around here, but as soon as we're allowed out of the house, I'd like to take you on a proper date. Would you like that?"

Her hand returns to my face as she leans forward. "I would love that. I missed you, Leith."

Fuck, she has no idea how much I missed her too. Knowing that she was just across the hallway from me but I couldn't walk into her room with Mom's constant hovering was real torture.

Her lips are warm and so soft against mine that I immediately deepen the kiss, sucking on her bottom lip and slipping my tongue into her mouth.

My fingers close over Isla's forearms, and I pull her closer. Her soft chest smashes against mine as I keep kissing her.

The contact causes a stir in my sweatpants, but before this goes any further, there's something I need to tell her. "Isla, I

don't know what I would have done if I lost you," I say, my mouth now just a breath away from hers.

"You didn't lose me, Leith," she says, her fingers playing with the short hair at the nape of my neck. "You risked your life to save me. I don't know what I would have done if something had happened to you."

The words tumble out of my mouth without warning. "I love you, Isla. I've loved you since the day you arrived at the gate with an expired ID and I told you I should search you. I know the idea of love at first sight is unrealistic, but I was instantly captivated by you, and every new thing I learned about you only made that feeling grow. My life is yours. I wouldn't know what to do without you in it. I fucking love you, baby."

There.

I said it without even thinking about all the reasons why I've been holding back. I know she has feelings for my brothers, but I want her to know how I feel without any room for misunderstanding before she chooses.

I don't even know what I expected when I used those three little words for the first time in my life with someone who isn't my parents or brothers, but fuck does it feel good when she says it back.

"I love you too, Leith."

And just like that, I know that I really have a chance to end up with her, and I'll fight for her with everything I have, whether or not it's to be the last man standing against my brothers or whoever wants to hurt my woman.

We kiss again, and it's different this time—it's hot, hard, and desperate.

I am desperate for a lot more than having our mouths fused together, which the fact that all my blood has rushed south is proof of.

"You're so fucking gorgeous," I say against her lips, letting one of my hands trail down to trace the delicate line of her neck and shoulder. "You're perfect, Isla."

My fingers trace the side of her big, perfect breast. The way she closes her eyes with a soft gasp when I cup it makes my cock twitch and harden to the point where I'm about to lose it if I don't get to have her.

"Leith," she murmurs, skimming the hard planes of my chest with her hands and stopping at the hem of my T-shirt, teasing the skin of my stomach with a featherlight touch. "I want you, but..."

Oh, thank fuck. "But what?" I ask, circling her pebbled nipple through the thin fabric of her tank top and dying to see her naked.

"I don't know what the doctor told you, but I was given orders to avoid strenuous physical activity for a couple of weeks, and definitely until my headaches were totally gone."

The way she's looking at me, with a desire in her gray eyes that matches my own, tells me that she wants this as much as I do. "Yeah, I was told the same thing, but I fucking want you so much that I'm sure it would hurt me way more not to have you."

The beginning of a little amused smile curls the corners of her pink lips, swollen from my kisses. "Are you trying to convince me that it's medically necessary for us to have sex?"

Fuck yeah. "I think that we need each other, and we can take it slow so we could have the health benefits of it without worsening our concussions. What do you think?"

Her hand sneaks under my T-shirt, and she hoists herself up, swinging her leg over my hips to straddle me. "I think we can try, but your leg is injured, so I'm going to do all the work. You sit there and just let me take care of you, Lieutenant LeCroy."

I'm too turned on to even speak, so I communicate my approval with a grind of my hips.

She smiles, leaning down to pull my T-shirt up my stomach and chest and all the way over my head. "You're hot, Lieutenant LeCroy," she bites out, brushing her lips over mine in a kiss that's over way too quickly.

I open my mouth to complain, but the words die on my tongue when Isla lifts her tank top over her own head before discarding it behind her.

“Have I ever told you how much I love it when you don’t wear a bra?” I ask her, closing my hands over her tits.

“I hate bras,” she says, her breath hitching as she arches her back into my touch. “If it were up to me, I’d never wear one, but I doubt the library patrons want to stare at my nipples if Mia cranks up the air-conditioning a little too much.”

“Shit.” I chuckle. “I think you’d see a huge increase in the number of soldiers who use the library.”

She giggles, pinching my own nipple and causing a rush of sensation to travel straight to my cock. “I doubt the command would be impressed with the reason for the increase of foot traffic though.”

My eyes skim over her perfect, naked torso. “On second thought, you’re right. Then I’d have to start beating up every soldier who flirts with you, and that wouldn’t help my career.”

“You sound exactly like Oren right now,” she teases me.

“We’re brothers, baby. I’m just better than him at knowing when not to say everything that comes to mind, but I’m as crazy and possessive about you as he is.”

For some strange reason, the fact that she just mentioned one of my brothers while I’m massaging her tits doesn’t bother me as much as I thought it would.

Maybe it’s because now I know she reciprocates my feelings, or maybe things started to change since Oren and I shared her when he crashed our staycation a couple of weekends ago.

All I know is that I don’t question it. Instead, I file the thought away for later, choosing to devote all my attention to the perfect woman in my arms.

I take her pebbled nipple into my mouth, circling my tongue around the hard point before I graze her softly with my teeth.

“Oh.” She moans, and I graze it harder, struggling to contain my need for her.

“Leith,” she whispers as she leans down, causing her long, silky hair to brush against my side.

Isla’s lips explore my chest with slow, soft, open-mouthed kisses as her hands toy with the waistband of my sweatpants.

Her mouth trails down the middle of my abs, teasing the defined muscles of my six pack with little flicks of her tongue.

I lift my hips to help her slide my sweats down my hips. “You might love that I don’t always wear a bra, but I’m a huge fan of you being commando under your sweatpants, Lieutenant.” She smiles as my erection springs free. “I love the easy access.”

I’m about to crack a joke about it, but my mind goes totally blank when she lowers her head and takes me into her mouth.

I suck in a surprised breath as I’m engulfed by her warm, wet lips and tongue, and all I can do is look at her from beneath heavy lids as she keeps her eyes locked on mine.

This must be the hottest thing I’ve ever experienced. Isla is skilled at licking me and sucking on the head of my cock, dipping her head to take in as much of my shaft as she can. The way her tongue massages the underside of my shaft and the heat I see blazing in her gaze as she pleasures me send me toward the edge at breakneck speed.

“Baby,” I force out, wrapping her long hair around my hand. “This feels amazing, but—”

“I know.” She smiles, giving one last swirl of her tongue right under my crown that makes me see stars. “I want you inside me too, Leith.”

I watch, mesmerized, as she lifts her hips to get rid of her shorts. “I’m not the only one who went commando today,” I comment, keeping my eyes fixed on her smooth, bare pussy.

“I hate underwear in bed,” she admits. “It always seems to move and settle in the most uncomfortable ways.”

I'm not going to argue with that if it speeds up things between us. "You're so fucking wet for me, baby," I praise, running my fingers up her slit and massaging the spot where she loves to be touched. "Such a good girl."

"I thought you said that this good girl thing was just an act, remember?" She smirks, remembering what I said when we first met at the front gate at the beginning of summer.

"You're the best of both worlds, baby. You're a good person, but you're also my bad, sexy girl."

She stops me from touching her by closing her fingers around my wrists. "Good, because I suspect that bad girls have a lot more fun."

I'm definitely not going to argue with her, and I watch her as she rises onto her knees and aligns herself with the head of my cock.

"Oh, fuck," I hiss, grabbing her hips as she begins lowering herself down the length of my shaft.

It doesn't matter how many times we're together, the way she feels around me surprises me every time.

"You're so tight and so fucking wet for me, baby," I say, letting my eyes wander from her beautiful face to her perfect tits to the soft, smooth skin of her stomach and her shapely thighs.

I can't take my eyes away from the place where I disappear inside her. It's so fucking hot that I know I'll have to make sure to take care of her because, despite not having moved from my spot against my pillows, I don't think getting me off is going to take very long.

My hunch is confirmed when she begins moving. Her slick heat engulfs me every time she takes me inside her to the hilt, and it's so fucking good that I could burst within seconds.

She gets into a steady rhythm, and I watch with rapt fascination as her perfect tits bounce up and down with her movements.

“Oh.” She stops suddenly, closing her eyes and swaying a little to the side, as if struggling to maintain her balance.

“Baby,” I say, tightening my grip on her hips to steady her. “Are you all right?”

She nods, her eyes closed. “Yeah. I... Fuck, I hate this. I guess the doctor wasn’t joking when he said no strenuous physical activity.”

I guess not.

If I catch whoever lured Isla to that lighthouse, so fucking help me God, there’s going to be another murder on post.

“Maybe we should stop,” I suggest, even though it’s the last thing I want to do.

“No,” she says, opening her eyes. “We just need to slow down. I want this, Leith. I want you.”

I thought I knew how to do slow and sensual, and of course I would have preferred to learn this under different circumstances.

I don’t take my eyes off her as she changes the angle, opting for a slow grind of her hips instead of bouncing on my dick as she rides me slowly.

I hold onto her hips as she balances herself by placing her palms flat on my chest.

This isn’t fucking, this is making love. Our eyes are locked together, her soft breath fans on my lips, and the ends of her long hair brush against my sides.

“You feel so good, Leith,” she whispers, tightening her inner muscles around me as I meet her grind with a small one of my own.

“You feel incredible,” I murmur, grinding against her again. I’m rewarded with a gush of warmth that tells me she isn’t lying when she says this feels good to her too.

We keep moving together, slowly and in perfect sync with each other as we let the sensations our bodies are creating build.

“Isla,” I bite out as the electric feeling at the base of my spine takes me totally by surprise. “I—I’m going to come. Can you come with me, baby?”

She bites her bottom lip in that way that drives me totally crazy. “I’m so close, Leith.”

“I’ve got you, baby. Come with me.” I slip my hand between our bodies and find the spot I was touching earlier. Her clit is swollen and firm under my fingertips, and I press against it, rubbing it up and down.

“Holy shit!” Isla throws her head back, and the feeling of her orgasm as she squeezes me tightly with her inner muscles is my undoing.

I band my arms around her, pressing her body to mine as I pump my hips faster and harder until I finally snap.

The first wave of explosive pleasure is so intense that it almost makes me dizzy, and for once, the feeling has nothing to do with my concussion.

I let go with my head buried in the crook of her neck, my pleasure hot and bright as I feel myself pulsing spurt after spurt of liquid heat into her tight embrace.

The first few moments afterwards are pure bliss, and my body is totally relaxed and my mind is blank. All that matters is the woman in my arms.

My woman.

Neither of us talks, there’s no need.

I just hold Isla close as her breathing slows down. Her head is on my chest, and we’re still joined.

It’s dangerous to fall asleep like this. We don’t want to risk being woken up by our parents coming home from dinner.

I snicker at the thought that agreeing to live under their roof has us reverting to acting like teenagers.

I know it’s way more complicated than that. Our parents don’t care about what we do as long as it doesn’t reflect badly on the command, but having a sexual relationship with my

stepsister is firmly in that territory. What people don't know, though, is that this is the real deal. My feelings for Isla run so deep that I'm willing to do anything to show Doug that all I want is to make Isla happy.

As if on cue, my phone chimes with an incoming text message.

"Hmm, no. Five more minutes." Isla giggles, tightening her arms around me.

"I should check that," I say, placing a soft kiss on the top of her head. "Just in case it's Mom telling us that they are on their way home."

"But I'm so comfortable." She giggles.

Her phone buzzes on my nightstand too.

"Aww, come on!" She laughs.

"Here, baby." I smile, passing over her phone as I look at mine too.

Mom: Hey, Leith. Just checking in on you. Did you have dinner? Did you get some rest? I hope you're taking a nap. Let me know if you want us to bring you back anything from outside. Doug and I should be home in about an hour or so.

I roll my eyes with a laugh. "Mom is sweet, but she doesn't get that her constant texting is the very thing that's getting in the way of the naps she keeps insisting on. Do you want anything before they come home, baby?" I ask, resenting the fact that she's going to have to leave my room very soon. "Isla?" I frown when she doesn't answer me. "Baby, what's wrong?"

My stepsister is as pale as a ghost, clutching her cell phone with white-knuckle force as her small hands tremble.

"Isla, you're worrying me. What's going on?"

She shakes her head, tears glistening in her gray eyes as she hands me her phone.

Unknown: You had another lucky escape, but your luck is bound to run out. Ticktock, bitch.



3.

Promotions And Obsessions

Isla



I KNEW THAT THE CID'S investigation of the signal from the phone that's anonymously texting me would do nothing but confirm that the person who has been stalking me is in Star Cove.

There are several towers in the area, and the different messages all come from towers within the base's and town's perimeters, so when Dad calls the guys, Katie, and me into his office a few days later to tell us the news, I'm not surprised when he informs us that we don't know anything new and the person who wants me dead obviously hasn't given up on their plans.

"We have eyes everywhere," Dad concludes, his lips tight with worry. "I'm going to ask Captain Morris to extend the patrol around our property for a couple more weeks. I think, for the time being, we should resume the arrangement we had before Lieutenant Peters was arrested as long as you guys are willing to stay close to your stepsister and liaise with each other so that one of you is with her at all times. If not, let me know, and I'll have someone sent here on security detail from another base. Given the current situation, I don't trust any soldier stationed at JOB Star Cove aside from the people present in this room."

I hate this situation, but like before, I can't help but find a silver lining in the fact that my stalker is giving me a legit excuse to have my stepbrothers by my side. Dad won't question us spending time together, since we're doing so under his request.

“I agree with your assessment, sir.” Thurston is the first to speak up. “I’m more than happy to help and to do anything in my power to keep Isla safe.”

Dad nods, but I don’t miss the warning look Katie gives her eldest son.

“I’m with Thurston on this. There’s no need to get personnel from somewhere else when we can keep this in house,” Oren agrees.

“Very well. I’m going to draw up orders for the two of you.” He sets his gaze on Leith. “In your case, Lieutenant LeCroy, I got the paperwork that declared you fit for desk duty.”

Leith won’t be able to drive until his leg heals, but I know that he’s full of resources.

“Sir.” He addresses Dad with a calm, professional tone. “I’m available to help with keeping eyes on Isla. I can’t drive for a couple more weeks, but I can stay with her when she’s home.”

Dad seems to consider Leith’s words. “I suppose that could work. I was going to assign one of you to the library during Isla’s working hours.”

I do my best not to sound too excited. “Yeah, that works, Dad. I can still drive to work, and Leith can ride with me.”

“Perfect. I’m going to have a rotation drawn up for the three of you. This is still considered duty, so you’re still entitled to down time and days off,” Dad decides.

Oren speaks for the first time from his spot behind the chair occupied by his mother. “Isla’s safety is our priority, sir. I don’t mind any extra duty.”

I suppress a smile. Oren’s face is a mask of professionalism, but I catch the twinkle in his dark blue eyes. I know exactly what he intends to do during all that “extra duty.”

“Two more things,” Dad says, writing something down on his planner. “Lieutenant Peters has offered to help us on this

security detail.”

The reaction in the room is swift and unanimous.

“I don’t think that’s such a smart idea,” Thurston says.

“There’s no reason for Peters to get involved, sir. The three of us are more than capable of keeping Isla safe.”

I’m not surprised that Oren has the most violent reaction. “That’s total bullshit!” he seethes. “We’re supposed to keep her safe, not appoint a psychotic, compulsive liar to her protection. That motherfucker might not have been the person who attacked Isla, but there’s no proof that he hasn’t killed his wife. The investigation hasn’t come to a definite conclusion if there are one or two perps on the loose. I don’t trust Peters, and if anything, his wife had bruises on her that *he* caused.”

Dad looks more tired than angry when he reprimands Oren. “Sergeant LeCroy, may I remind you that this is an official meeting and that you’re still on duty and as such, your commander demands that you keep your conduct in check? That includes your language. The fact that this meeting is being held at the commander’s private residence doesn’t change the standards that are expected from every soldier present. Am I clear?”

Oren stiffens. “Sir, yes, sir! I apologize, sir, but we can’t assume that just because he wasn’t Isla’s attacker, he wasn’t the one who killed his wife.”

Dad’s tone is calm again. “Lieutenant Peters has been released because the investigation hasn’t found any evidence to tie him to any of the two attacks. And, as we know, he was with you while Isla was being attacked.”

Leith clears his throat. “I understand what you’re saying, sir, but is it a good idea to assign Lieutenant Peters to protect the same person he has been undeniably stalking? He might not be the attacker, but he kept showing up at Isla’s work, and he has been pursuing her romantically despite Isla’s numerous refusals and requests to stop his pursuit.”

Dad looks at me. “Is this true, darling?”

I nod. “Yeah. Joe keeps asking me out and trying to trick me into going on a date with him. I’ve been saying no every time he’s asked, but it doesn’t seem to make a difference.”

“Very well.” Dad nods. “I’m going to have Lieutenant Peters on driving duty, since I’m going to lose the three of you for the time being. However, in the unlikely circumstance that none of you are available, I think he’s a safer bet than having you unaccompanied, darling. After all, we knew he wasn’t the person who pushed you off that railing.”

Oren chimes in again. “We won’t have that issue, sir. My brothers and I will make sure we’re covered at all times.”

I’m about to thank Oren, but Dad isn’t done. “One last order of business before you’re all dismissed, soldiers. I have some great news for all of us.”

Whatever the news is, Dad must have kept it secret from Katie too, because she looks as curious as we do.

“Lieutenant LeCroy,” Dad says, looking at Leith with a bright smile I’ve rarely seen on him. “I just heard from the promotion board, and you’re being promoted to captain, effective immediately. We’re going to hold a special promotion ceremony at HQ next week so you can be pinned with your new rank. Congratulations, Captain LeCroy. I’m proud of you, son.”

Katie rises from her chair to hug Leith with tears in her eyes. “Oh, baby! I’m so proud of you. Your father would be ecstatic if he were here to see this.”

Leith closes his arms around his mother, but his posture is rigid as he addresses my father. “Sir, I don’t understand. I’ve been in service for barely two years, and I made my current rank less than six months ago. I’m not due for another promotion for almost five years. I—”

Dad walks around his desk, stopping in front of Leith. “I know. I’m sure you know that a promotion can be granted for exceptional acts of bravery. It’s rare, but it has happened, even post-Vietnam. As you can imagine, while we’re keeping most details of what’s going on with Isla completely confidential,

I've had to report the assaults and the harassment Isla has been experiencing to my superiors. One of those men is a four-star general who was my garrison commander when I first got my captain rank. He was impressed by the selflessness and courage you displayed when you jumped off the top of the lighthouse to save your stepsister. He nominated you for a promotion and called me this morning to let me know that, due to your excellence in service and your commendable leadership skills, the promotion board has decided to grant you the rank of captain."

Leith shakes his head. "I haven't done anything special. Any man in this room, including you, sir, would have jumped into the water to save Isla. I don't think I deserve any award, and especially not a promotion."

To my surprise, Dad nods with a smile on his face. "I'm well aware of that, Captain LeCroy, but you were the one who didn't hesitate to risk his own life to save another. Regardless of the fact that you saved my daughter, and I'll be forever in your debt, I think you should just appreciate this outcome. These kinds of promotions are becoming rarer and rarer today, so wear your new rank with pride. As your commander, I guarantee that you have the personal qualities and the skills to deserve it."

As Leith remains quiet, his mother is the first to talk. "Baby, Doug is right. This is an honor you have earned. You should be proud." She turns to look at her other two sons. "Tell him, guys."

Thurston claps him on the shoulder before pulling him into a brotherly hug. "Mom is right, dude. You absolutely deserve it."

Leith hugs him back, his protest now less fierce. "But you and Oren would have done the same thing."

"Absolutely," Thurston agrees. "But if you hadn't acted so fast, I don't even want to think about what would have happened."

I don't miss the glare Katie throws in her eldest son's direction when Thurston's voice cracks at the idea of what

could have happened to me.

It bothers me that she hates the idea of Thurston and me as a couple, but I know it's just out of concern for his career and for fear that our shared past could create issues between her and Dad.

Katie has made it perfectly clear that she thinks I'm lovely as a stepdaughter but that I'm not daughter-in-law material.

"Brother," Oren intervenes, wrapping Leith into one of his famous bear hugs. "I always knew you were destined for great things, and Mom and T are right. No one deserves a promotion more than you, and we're all grateful that your actions mean that Isla is here and in one piece. Plus, the way I see it, there's an added bonus to all of this."

A smile tugs on the corner of Leith's mouth. He knows that Oren is about to say something smart-ass or funny, since it's written all over his face.

"What is the added bonus?" Leith asks.

"You now outrank Lieutenant Peters. Seeing his face when you give him an order is going to be priceless."

Leith chuckles, shaking his head at his younger brother's constant grudge against Joe. "That's true, but remember that when I give *you* an order you don't like."

"Ha." Oren shrugs. "I'm already used to the two of you bossing me around. You've always done it because I'm the youngest. Nothing is going to change on that front."

Leith turns to look at Dad. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to sound ungrateful a few moments ago. I just have to admit that this promotion took me by surprise. Thank you for everything."

Dad pats Leith's back in a rare display of affection. "I did nothing I wouldn't have done for anyone else who had saved my daughter. And truthfully, the idea to submit your case to the promotion board for special consideration was General Sable's. All I did was back his recommendation as your commander. Now, after the tension and the constant bad news of the past few weeks, I'm glad our company has something to

celebrate. I'm sure your mom" —he chuckles, looking affectionately at his new wife— "will need a new dress for the ceremony when she pins you with your new rank."

A hesitant expression crosses Leith's face. "Sir," he says after a glance in my direction. "Mom got to pin me when I got my previous promotion to first lieutenant. I was thinking... I'd like Isla to be the one to pin me this time. If she's willing to do it, of course. After all, she was the reason why I got promoted to begin with."

If Katie is disappointed by Leith's request, she doesn't show it. "That's a great idea!" Katie beams. "It'll show the cohesion in our family."

Dad agrees. "It's decided then. Don't forget that the official version of what happened is that Isla joined her stepbrothers for a run on the beach, then she decided to check out the inside of the old lighthouse and accidentally leaned against the rotting railing. What really happened needs to be kept completely confidential until CID decides otherwise."



Isla



THE NEXT FEW DAYS ARE almost surreal.

Time seems to have rewound to a few weeks ago when my stepbrothers had been tasked with my protection, and that's the only saving grace in this whole situation.

Before, even with a few threatening text messages, the break-in, and my car being turned into a creepy memorial, the danger I was in felt less real.

I didn't remember much about the night when I was assaulted in the library, and somewhere at the back of my mind, there was the belief that this entire thing would eventually blow over.

Now it's completely different. I can't shake the sense of imminent danger that weighs on my shoulders like an oppressive blanket.

It's because I remember.

I remember gasping for air while my assailant tightened something around my throat.

I don't even know what they used, but I told the sergeant from CID that it felt sturdy and smooth at the same time. I don't think it was rope, it felt more like a piece of electric cable, with that soft plastic cover around it.

I sigh, frustrated that I can't be exactly sure. It all happened so fast.

I was truly convinced that Thurston was waiting for me at the top of the lighthouse, and the thought that it could all be a lie to lure me out there by myself hadn't even crossed my mind.

I'm definitely shaken, but even as the physical injuries from that night heal—the concussion is almost gone, and the bruises and scrapes are fading—the fear the experience left me with seems to be growing every day.

I know I need help and I should reach out to a professional to talk me through the trauma I suffered. However, knowing what I should do and actually doing it are two totally different things. It's like I'm paralyzed just as I was at the top of that lighthouse when I realized that the person waiting for me wasn't Thurston.

I knew I should have turned around and ran, but I stood there, frozen. It was just for a few seconds, but it was long enough to allow my attacker to grab me.

Right now, I have the same feeling. I know I should ask for help, but it's like I can't move. I recognize that bottling up all these feelings isn't good for me, and yet I'm here, watching and waiting for their next move.

That's really the biggest difference between before and after the night at the lighthouse. Before Joe's arrest, when my

stepbrothers were protecting me, a part of me believed that whoever was stalking me would eventually stop.

I know it was stupid to think they would just relent, but I had a feeling that the fact that I was constantly under watch would be a powerful deterrent.

Now, I know whoever lured me out that night, posing as Thurston, won't stop until they get what they want or they are caught. And it's like asking for help doesn't matter because I need this constant feeling of anxiety. It's some kind of self-preservation, and if I'm constantly on the lookout, I won't be caught unprepared again.

“Hey, sweet girl.” Oren runs gentle fingers over my arm, and I open my eyes to meet his dark blue gaze. “Are you okay? You haven't moved in a while. At first I thought you were asleep, but the way you just sighed told me it wasn't the case. Is it too hot? Do you want to go inside?”

It's Sunday, and we've been lounging by the pool all morning.

The house gradually emptied as Dad and Katie went out on a brunch date, and Thurston and Leith left to play basketball with some of the HQ officers who have a standing game once a month against the MPs at the main gym on post. Leith can't play, but he wanted to go and cheer for his team.

“I'm okay. Thanks, babe.”

He lowers his head to place a soft kiss on my lips. “You feel warm. Are you sure you don't want to go inside?”

I shake my head. “No, I'm actually enjoying the sun. I need the fresh air. I'm always cooped up inside the house, and this feels good.”

Oren nods, his eyes skimming over my bikini-clad body. “Do you need some more sunscreen? I don't want you to burn, you have fair skin.”

I giggle at the hopeful expression in his eyes. “Sergeant LeCroy,” I tease, “we both know very well what's going to happen if you put your hands on me under the guise of helping with sunscreen.”

His smile widens. “That wouldn’t be a bad outcome, if you ask me.”

I check him out the same way he just did me a second ago. “Nope. It wouldn’t be bad at all,” I say, taking in his broad shoulders, the sculpted expanse of his chest, and his chiseled, defined abs.

Inches upon inches of golden, tan skin decorated by black ink only adds to the sexy perfection of Oren’s body.

My eyes finally land on his strong thighs covered by his red swimming trunks, and I can’t help but lick my lips at the thought of what’s nestled between those thighs.

“See something you like?” He smirks, arching his blond eyebrows. His eyes blaze with the same desire that’s coursing through my body. “If you keep licking your lips that way, you’re going to find your mouth full of cock, Isla.”

I repeat the action, letting my tongue wet my lips in a slow, deliberate motion.

“Shit,” Oren mutters. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, sweet girl.”

Growl.

Oren freezes in place, as he was about to lean toward me. “Was that your stomach?”

The sun might be hot, but it has nothing on the heat that’s rising to my face right now. “No, I—”

Growl.

“When was the last time you ate something?” Oren asks.

“Last night,” I admit. “I just wasn’t hungry this morning.”

“Well, fuck,” he says, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear. “It looks like I’ll be filling your mouth with lunch instead.”

I shake my head, frustrated by the fact that when it isn’t one of our parents or that stupid concussion cockblocking me, it’s my traitorous body. “I can have lunch after—”

Oren silences me with a finger on my lips. “No can do, sweet girl. I’ll stuff that mouth or any other place in your body with cock if you want, but I need to feed you first.”

I huff, exasperated. “But I want—”

Yeah, what I want and my stomach’s agenda are obviously two different things, because another loud groan proves that Oren’s plan is better than mine.

“Come on, let me make you lunch,” Oren says with a soft smile. “What I’m planning to do with you later will require a lot of energy, so we need to make sure you’re fed first. Plus, you’ve been losing weight, sweet girl, and we need to keep up those gorgeous curves I love so much.”

I sigh, resigned to the fact that my lust will have to wait. “I can make us lunch.”

Oren won’t have any of it. “No, let me feed you. I make a mean BLT. The secret is in the bacon being crispy and the right ratio of mayo to bread. You stay here and relax, and we can eat out here. Does a BLT and an ice-cold Diet Coke sound good?”

My mouth waters at the idea, and I relent. “Okay. But then are we going to pick up from where my stomach so rudely interrupted us?”

“You can bet your sexy little ass on that.” He winks before walking inside the house and leaving me by the pool.

I pick up the book I was trying to read earlier but set it back down shortly after. For some reason, I can’t concentrate on anything today, and I feel restless.

“Hey, Isla.”

Joe’s voice startles me, and I gasp.

“What are you doing here?” I ask him, placing my hand on my chest as if that could slow down my increased heart rate.

He’s in civilian clothes—basketball shorts and a tank. “I missed you, and I thought I’d come check on you.”

He came from the back gate by the beach. “Did the MP who patrols the back of the property let you come in?” I ask.

He offers me his usual cocky smile. “He didn’t see me. He has to check in with his NCO every hour, and I waited until he was on his phone, then I slipped in by walking behind him.”

Fuck. That’s some protection.

I guess I’m going to need to talk to Dad about it. They need to do a better job of guarding the property, or there’s no point in wasting personnel hours. If Joe could easily slip in undetected, then so could have someone with ill intentions.

“My mom made you a batch of her famous lemon bars,” he says, showing me the dish I didn’t even notice he was carrying. “She heard you’re going back to work this week. That must mean you feel better, right?”

As I look at him, I’m invaded by the mixture of feelings I experience every time Joe Peters is involved. I liked him, I really did.

When we first met at the gate, which was the same day I met Oren and Leith for the first time, I felt immediately attracted to the dark, handsome officer with his charming and slightly cocky attitude.

“What do you want, Joe?” I say, feeling suddenly tired.

His gaze darkens, and a frown appears on his handsome features. “I just came over to bring you these lemon bars and ___”

“Cut the bullshit.” My voice sounds harsher than intended, but I *am* tired—tired of feeling like I have a constant target on my back, whether it is because of my stalker, the busybodies in the FRG, or Joe’s constant attempts to insert himself into my life. “You couldn’t give two shits about your mom’s lemon bars, so get to the point. I was about to have lunch and then maybe go down for a nap, and I’d rather you tell me why you’re here before Oren sees you. I’m not in the mood to try and restrain my stepbrother to avoid another murder being committed on base.”

Joe shakes his head. “I don’t know how you can feel safe while being alone with a volatile, violent, two-hundred-pound gorilla, seriously.”

I feel offended by his words. “Oren is the sweetest, most gentle man I’ve ever met. He only gets violent when you’re around. So whatever you want, spit it out and go before he sees you.”

His hands grip the dish with his mother’s baked goods with white-knuckle force. “I see how it is,” he says bitterly. “Your stepbrother can beat the crap out of me multiple times, and he’s sweet and gentle. I make one mistake and—”

“No!” I raise my voice and get up from my lounge. “You don’t get to compare yourself to Oren.”

He barks out a mirthless laugh. “I don’t know what I have to do to get through to you, Isla. I can’t believe you refuse to even look me in the eyes. And to think that things between us had started so well.”

I lift my eyes to meet his gaze. “I can look you in the eyes, Joe. Things between us definitely took a turn for the worst when I realized that you lied to me. You asked me to dinner, and you took me to your room knowing full well that you were married. Then, after I told you that I don’t sleep with married men and didn’t want anything to do with you, you wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

He’s stubborn, I have to give him that. “You know that things between Connie and me were complicated.”

I snort. This guy is unbelievable. “Complicated is just another word for you cheating on your wife. I clearly told you that I wanted no part in whatever was going on between the two of you, and instead of leaving me alone, you tried to worm your way into my house using the friendship between our fathers. I told you no, and you didn’t listen—”

“How many times do I have to apologize for what happened on the beach?”

I’m so angry, I’m literally shaking. “When you didn’t stop when I said I didn’t want you?”

There's pain in his voice, and that's why, despite everything, I can't manage to hate him. "I know it's no justification, but I told you I was drunk. If you want me to apologize again, I will. I'm getting help, I swear."

He seriously doesn't get it. "It isn't just that time, Joe. How do you not understand? Were you drunk when you showed up here to ask me out *after* you told Connie that you wanted to try to fix your marriage again? After you lied to her to convince her to do whatever you wanted in bed the night before she died?"

He takes a step forward, effectively trapping me between his body and the lounge. "I didn't kill her, just like I didn't attack you."

"I saw the bruises you left on her, Joe!" I snap. "I don't care if you didn't kill her and if you aren't the person who wants me just as dead as Connie. You knew she wasn't into whatever you wanted to do to her, and you knew that the only reason why she gave in was because you made her believe that you two had a chance. I don't care that you didn't kill her, Joe. You lied to her exactly like you lied to me. You might not be a killer, but you're a liar."

He closes his fingers around my forearm. "I'm in love with you, Isla."

"You don't even know what love is, Joe," I retort with my eyes fixed on his. "If you love someone, you don't exploit them to fulfill your needs. You don't lie to get your way."

He swallows, his throat working as if he's trying not to cry. "I know I've made mistakes, Isla, but if you could just give me another chance, I—"

I don't know why I can't hate him. I should after everything he's done, but a part of me feels sorry for him. "I can't, Joe. Please don't ask me anymore."

His jaw is tight, ticking as he keeps his brown eyes on me. "Which one of your stepbrothers are you fucking?"

It's complicated.

It's ironic how those are the first words that come to my mind. "Joe, please go." Those are the words I keep saying to him lately, but they never seem to sink in.

"You're fucking more than one of them." It isn't a question.

"I asked you to go. Please."

He lets go of my arm. "Are you fucking all three of them?" His eyes widen when the realization hits him. "You're such a fucking hypocrite, Isla. You judged me for lying about being married, but you don't have any qualms about fucking Thurston? Or is it just marriage that is a problem, and having just a fiancée or a girlfriend still makes someone game for you?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but Thurston is single," I bite out.

Joe's tone is harder than I've ever heard it. "That isn't what Lieutenant Bowman is saying."

I can't suppress an eye roll. "Jessica is delusional." She's exactly like Joe, now that I think about it. "She won't take no for an answer. No matter how many times Thurston tells her, she won't give up."

His eyes are blazing, and his voice drops an octave. "So am I the only one you don't want to give a chance to?"

I meet his gaze, dropping all pretense and putting my cards on the table. "I care about you, Joe. Don't ask me why, but I do. You aren't perfect, but I'm not either, so I'm going to be honest with you. When I slept with you, my head wasn't in a good place. Coming back here stirred up a lot of memories, and not all of them were good. I always intended for our hookup to just be a one-time thing. Then I found out you were married, and I got caught up in all that drama with you and Connie. But the real reason why I don't want there to be more between us is that you lied to me, Joe."

I pause, my breath catching in my throat. That's why I've been hesitant to trust Thurston again. It isn't just that he hurt me, it's that he lied to me the entire time we were dating, and I

don't want to find myself in that position again. However, the difference between Thurston and Joe is that I understand why Thurston couldn't tell me what was going on in his life. OPSEC has been ingrained into me by my father, so that's why I'm even entertaining the idea of giving him a second chance.

“So this is it?” Joe asks me.

I nod. “You lied about the one thing I can't forgive. I don't sleep with married men.”

His tone drips with exasperation. “But if I had told you the truth, you never would have even considered sleeping with me.”

I can't believe this man. “Yeah. But do you understand how your lie drove me to do something I totally despise? You made me the other woman, and you didn't give me a choice.”

He shakes his head. “I wish I had known how important this cheating thing was for you, Isla. But can you at least agree with me that people cheat? It isn't right, but I'm not the only one who did that, and Connie was cheating on me too. Can't you get past it? One mistake and I'm done?”

I don't owe Joe anything, but I really want him to understand where I'm coming from and accept that his behavior has made any romantic involvement between us totally impossible. “It's the kind of mistake you made, Joe. You know my parents divorced years ago, right? My mom had been cheating on Dad for months and months. She met her new husband at work, and they began an affair. He was married too, and they destroyed two families so they could be together. After lying and deceiving their spouses for the better part of a year, my mother left without even telling me. One day, I just came home from school and her things were gone. She left a note for Dad, but she didn't even give us an address or a contact number. Her attorney handled everything so they could get a divorce, but she never even tried to reach out to me. To this day, I don't even know where she lives. I haven't gotten any Christmas cards from her, and she wasn't there when I graduated high school and college.”

My voice fades and tears well in my eyes, making it really hard to keep my composure.

“I’m so sorry, Isla.” Joe’s voice is softer now.

“Do you understand why I swore to myself that I would never be like my mom? That I would never do to anyone what she did to my dad? You made me a cheater, and it’s the one thing I can’t forgive. I know you aren’t a completely bad person, Joe, but since we met, being married isn’t the only lie you’ve been caught in. I’m not saying I’ve always been perfect or one hundred percent honest, but I don’t think I could ever trust you the way I’d need to if we were to be more than friends.”

The bitterness in his tone is back. “But you said you just wanted a one and done. Did I ever even stand a chance with you then?”

He’s right, he really didn’t. “I’m so sorry, Joe. I know I hurt you, but I never promised you anything more than one night. I didn’t think I needed to explain how a romantic relationship between us was way more than I could take. I guess I should have been clearer on this, but I never thought you wanted more than what I was offering, especially with the personal relationship our fathers have. I didn’t want to complicate things even more.”

He sighs. “And fucking all three of your stepbrothers is simple? Are you at least being clear with them about what you want?”

I open my mouth to explain, although I’m not even sure what I’m about to say, but Oren chooses that exact moment to step back outside.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Peters?”

My stepbrother is carrying a tray with two plates and two glasses of soda.

The two men truly bring out the worst in each other. “Is this the way you welcome one of your superiors, Sarge?” Joe snickers, his shoulders squared and his tone arrogant. “I guess my dad is right when he says the army has become too soft.

You can't even yell at soldiers anymore, and that's the result—soldiers who don't know their manners. As an NCO, though, your behavior is a real disgrace to your rank and your company.”

Oren doesn't look affected by Joe's harsh words. “Fuck you, Peters. You aren't in uniform, and you aren't here on official business. At work, I might have to show you some degree of respect, but off duty, I can kick your ass. And sure, you can write me up for that, but just take a second to think about how that would make you look.”

The air crackles with the hostility between the two soldiers, and I'm worried about Oren's self-control snapping any second now.

“I just came over to bring Isla some of my mom's lemon bars. I was just about to leave,” Joe says.

“Don't let the door hit you on your way out. And by the way, if you were going to the officers' basketball game,” Oren chides, eyeing up Joe's clothes, “you're going to be late. Thurston and Leith left over an hour ago.”

Joe's fists clench at his sides. “I know. I showed up, and apparently, they had enough players for today.”

Oren barks out a sardonic laugh. “Ha. See what happens when you're a douche? You can command respect at work, but you can't use your daddy's rank to make people like you, Peters.”

To my surprise, Joe agrees. “You're right, LeCroy. I know I'm not the easiest person to work with, and between that and what happened to Connie, I guess I can see your point. Isla just made me realize that I have some amends to make to a lot of people around here.”

That's why I find it difficult to hate Joe. His tone is sincere, and I really don't think he's completely bad.

“Thank Nellie for the lemon bars, Joe,” I say, nervous about the way the two men are staring each other down.

My phone vibrates on the small table by my lounge. I pick it up, thinking it might be Dad, but my heart rate immediately

spikes when I see the anonymous number.

Unknown: Ticktock, slut. Ticktock.

“What the fuck?” Joe bites out, taking my phone from my trembling hands. “Isla, does Lieutenant Colonel Cameron know about this?”

I sigh. “He does, and so do the MPs and CID. They’ve pinpointed the signal to various locations in Star Cove, so they have no idea who’s sending me these texts.”

“Listen,” Joe says, giving my phone back. “I’m not saying this to try to get in your pants, I swear. The message was loud and clear that you don’t want me. I know the commander tasked your stepbrothers with your protection, but if you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to call me, Isla. Your father is right not to want you alone, and maybe you should consider looking for a job elsewhere. Move away from here, you know?”

“Sweet girl, are you okay?” Oren asks me as we watch Joe walk away through the same gate in our backyard he came from.

I nod slowly. “Yeah. I just—I keep wondering who could hate me so much around here to want to hurt me. It just doesn’t make sense. Joe was the obvious choice, but I seriously don’t think he has anything to do with this. He was fighting you at the lighthouse while I was being attacked, and even now, he was right here when the text message came. He didn’t even have his phone on him.”

Oren doesn’t look entirely convinced. “That doesn’t mean anything. There are tons of ways to schedule a text message and send it from an anonymous source. It could still be him.”

I shake my head, becoming more and more confused with every passing second. “But we know for sure he wasn’t at the top of the lighthouse with me.”

“What if he isn’t working alone? What if he hired someone else to do his dirty work and that’s why there’s no evidence about him killing Connie?”

That's a thought that hadn't even crossed my mind, and Joe's words echo in my ears.

Move away from here.

Maybe it would be the right thing to do, but how can I move when my heart is tethered to three soldiers who are stationed here in Star Cove?

I don't want to lose what I have with my stepbrothers, so the real question is, can they keep me safe long enough for law enforcement to catch whoever killed Connie Peters and is tormenting me?



4.

Together

Oren



I SMILE AT MY BROTHERS as they step foot inside the main bar of the NCO club at the edge of post.

They have an officers club, but it's pretentious, so I invited them here where I feel more at ease.

“What can I get you, gentlemen?” Lauren, the bartender, comes to our booth as soon as Leith and Thurston take a seat.

“I'll have what he's having. It looks good,” Thurston says, eyeing the frosted mug of beer in front of me.

“Me too.” Leith smiles.

“Coming right up.”

I chuckle at my older brothers. “Ha, why am I not surprised that you want what I'm having?”

Thurston offers me his trademark smirk. “Why do I have the feeling that we aren't talking about beer anymore?”

Leith nods. “Yeah, why did you invite us here, brother? Not that I mind having a drink with my two favorite pains in the ass, but nothing good ever came out from the words ‘we have to talk.’”

I'm not surprised they worked out that I had a reason for inviting them here. “Let's wait until Lauren brings your drinks, and then we'll talk.”

Obviously my brothers can't pass up an opportunity to make fun of me. I swear, being the youngest sucks.

“Did you and Lauren...” Thurston asks, arching an eyebrow in a suggestive way.

“No, we didn’t.” I roll my eyes. “Remember what Dad used to say? ‘Don’t shit where you eat.’ I also think it’s safe to apply that even to drinking. This is the only place where I can come when I want a quiet drink here on post. The pub and The Cove are too busy, but it’s quieter here. I wouldn’t have ruined that by hooking up with Lauren.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t notice that she has the hots for you though,” Leith says, looking toward the bar where Lauren is pouring their beers.

I sigh. “Yeah, I know. She asked me out once before you even got here. I explained that I didn’t do relationships and I would rather not make things awkward by hooking up with her, since I planned to come here often.”

Leith shrugs. “Fair enough, but I think she still hopes that you might change your mind.”

We interrupt our conversation when Lauren approaches our booth with two beers for the guys and a fresh one for me. She also puts a basket of popcorn on the table. “This is on the house, guys. If you need anything, just holler.”

We thank her and wait until she’s out of earshot before we say anything else.

“Yup, definitely hot for you.” Leith chuckles.

“Whatever. I didn’t ask you two assholes here to talk about random girls I didn’t bang.”

Thurston levels me with a hard look. “What’s the matter then? For some reason, I think this is about a chick too, one we all banged.”

“Don’t be crass, T!” Leith scolds him.

“Chill out, dude.” Thurston’s tone is defensive. “It was just a joke. You know how I feel about her. There’s always been only one woman for me, and that hasn’t changed despite the six years that have gone by, but it’s true that we’ve all been intimate with her by now, right?”

Leith looks at me, and Thurston immediately picks up on that. “What am I missing here? Why are you two looking at

each other that way?” I know the exact moment when it dawns on him. “You fucking didn’t! You were with her together?”

I don’t like his outraged tone, but I also don’t regret one second of the weekend I stayed behind when Thurston accompanied Mom and Doug to that army conference. “So what if we were? We’re three consenting adults.”

Thurston doesn’t take it well, just like every other time Leith and I would do something together that had to do with football and he wasn’t included since he decided to play lacrosse in high school. “Is this some fucked up master plan to edge me out and make sure that she chooses one of you two over me? That’s not fair. I’m already starting with a handicap because she hasn’t completely forgiven me for how things ended between us six years ago.”

Sometimes my brother is something else, I swear. “Cool your jets, idiot,” I snap. “There’s no master plan to hurt your chances with Isla, and if anyone should feel threatened, it’s Leith and me now that you’re back in the picture. You were the one that got away—her first kiss, her first time, her first everything—and she’s going to forgive you, trust me. If you think she won’t, you obviously don’t know Isla very well. Just give her time and grovel, but I can see it in her eyes every time she looks at you. She still loves you.”

Leith agrees with me. “Oren is right, T. I don’t think Isla would have ever let you touch her again if she wasn’t ready to forgive you.” He sets his eyes on me. “So why did you ask us here? Stop beating around the bush.”

I nod. I’m not surprised they worked it out, since they know me as well as I know them. “Yesterday, while you two were playing basketball, Peters showed up at the house.” I tell them what I overheard. “I don’t like it, guys. That motherfucker is obsessed with Isla. It was like a repeat of what happened on the beach,” I say, looking at Leith. “She told him she wasn’t interested, and it was like he was totally deaf.”

Leith’s eyes darken. “Did he put his fucking hands on her again?”

I bark out a laugh. “Fuck no. The motherfucker might be bold, but he isn’t that stupid. He must have known I was going to be home with her, so he didn’t even try. If he had touched her, he’d be dead right now.”

“No shit.” Thurston laughs.

“I’m proud of you for keeping your temper in check, bro,” Leith commends me.

“I was hanging by a fucking thread,” I admit. “But our girl? She didn’t take any of his crap. She was way nicer than Peters deserved, but she told him he’s definitely wasting his time if he’s trying to get with her.”

Thurston nods. “I had no doubt. Isla has always been feisty. She’s sweet and loving, but she’s never let me get away with *any* shit.”

“The thing is,” I continue, “I don’t fucking trust Peters. I don’t like him, and I don’t want him to go near Isla again.”

As expected, Leith shrugs. “I don’t like him either, but what do you want to do about it? He’s still under investigation, but just for Connie’s murder. We all know that Peters didn’t assault Isla. We were both at the lighthouse, Oren, and unless Peters had a long-lost twin brother, he was running up those stairs behind us while Isla was struggling against her attacker.”

I run a hand through my hair. It’s short by civilian standards, but I need a haircut before Leith’s promotion ceremony. “I know that, at least on a rational level, but deep down, I can’t help the fact that I don’t trust Peters.”

Thurston considers my words. “The issue is that CID isn’t sure if they are looking for the same person in relation to Isla’s assault and Connie’s murder. There was no DNA found on either Connie or Isla. Connie was attacked from behind, and there was a rainstorm that night, so unfortunately that helped whoever killed Connie by erasing a lot of evidence. DNA would have been the only way to establish a clear connection between the two crimes. So as it is, the two cases are being investigated in parallel, but there’s uncertainty if they are looking for one or two people. In theory, Joe Peters only had a

motive to kill his wife, not Isla, and that was confirmed by the fact that he was at the lighthouse with the two of you at the same time as Isla was being attacked. However we look at it, though, right now, CID has absolutely no evidence to support a murder charge. Not for Peters or anyone else. They literally have no idea what happened that night.”

I consider Thurston’s words. “Did Doug tell you that?”

He shakes his dark head. We share the same eyes, which are the same color and shape as Mom’s, but I got Dad’s blond hair while he got Mom’s dark hair. “No,” he answers, tracing his frosted mug with nervous fingers. “Jessica did. Captain Morris assigned her to the case as a liaison with CID.”

I’m momentarily distracted from the reason why I asked my brothers here. “So are you two still talking?”

Thurston lets out a frustrated huff. “Not by choice. Jess keeps trying to talk me into a relationship with her. She’s doing the same thing Peters is doing to Isla. I keep saying I’m not into her, and she doesn’t hear it.”

“Does Isla know that you’re talking to her?” Leith asks. “I believe you when you say that you aren’t interested in your ex, but you know the way it would look if Isla found out that the two of you are still talking.”

Thurston snickers at our brother’s warning. “Of course Isla knows. I’m being completely honest with her. First off, I don’t trust Jessica not to try to make it look like I’m being ambivalent. Secondly, when I promised Isla I’d never hide anything from her again, I meant it. I already lost her once, and if fate gave us another chance, then I’m not going to be the one who screws it up. But, dude,” my eldest brother says, looking at me, “what did you want to talk about? You didn’t ask us here to talk about me and Jessica, right?”

I shake my head. “No. While Peters was about to leave, Isla got another one of those anonymous texts.”

I explain the content.

“Fuck.” They both share my same concern.

“Whether or not the person who is after Isla is the same person who killed Connie, it’s obvious that they are hellbent on hurting our girl,” Leith says gravely.

I nod. “And that’s exactly why I asked you here. I know we said that we’d all date Isla until she made a choice between the three of us, but I think we should put that on hold and concentrate on protecting her.”

Thurston looks surprised. “Are you saying you want us all to take a break from dating her?”

“No,” I reply. “I want us to stop competing for her. At least until they catch the psycho who’s after her. Let’s concentrate on being with her and protecting her. If we aren’t fighting each other for her attention, we can be totally open and work with her safety in mind. I know it’s impossible for the three of us to be by her side at all times, but we should be there together as much as we can. That will help with the gossip on post, and three sets of eyes are better than just one. We obviously can’t count on the MPs to keep her safe. Peters walked right around the MP by the back gate while he was distracted. I was inside making lunch, and I can’t stop wondering what would have happened if her attacker had shown up instead of Peters.”

My brothers look at each other and then at me with serious expressions on their faces.

Leith is the first to speak. “I think it’s a great idea. We’ve been coexisting peacefully for a few weeks. Let’s put aside anything that isn’t getting closer to her and protecting her.”

Thurston lets out a dark chuckle. “I’m not surprised you would say that, since the two of you already ‘shared’ her.” He nods. “I think Oren is right though. We need a united front, because if we’re fighting between us, we risk losing sight of the most important thing. Isla’s safety should be our priority.”



Thurston



SIX YEARS AGO

I think I love Isla.

Like, I'm in love with her. She's everything I can think about. She's my first thought when I wake up in the morning, and my last one before I fall asleep at night.

It's like she's gotten under my skin, and I've never needed anyone the way I need her. If I don't kiss her, it's physically painful, and in the few hours every day when I'm not with her, all I can think about is when I am going to see her.

I've never experienced drug addiction, but this must be the way junkies feel, constantly jonesing for their next fix.

"Hey, babe!" She comes running toward me on the sand, her long, strawberry blonde hair whipping behind her in the wind. "Have you been waiting long? My nana wanted some help collecting the wild lavender she uses for her ice cream, and it took us forever."

Her gray eyes are darkened with worry, and I smile at her, putting her immediately out of her misery. "No, I just got here. Mom needed help with some stuff too, so I'm glad you didn't have to wait here."

The words "we should swap phone numbers" are on the tip of my tongue, but I hold back.

Dad's lectures about OPSEC and not exposing him and his special forces job echo in my head, and I swallow the words back.

How am I going to stay in touch with her without social media? That's another thing Dad prefers my brothers and I stay away from.

Whenever Leith, Oren, or I mention getting a social media account, Dad frowns and reminds us how easy it is to give out vital information by accident. He always tells us how when we first moved to Fort Bragg, the FRG leader posted about the company's Christmas party on Facebook.

It made total sense to spread the word like that and to make it easier for everyone to RSVP that way.

“Who would ever think there could have been something wrong with that, right?” Dad asked us every time he told us that story. “Tell it to every single family who RSVP’d ‘yes’ and got their house broken into on that night while they were at the party. Some people had their places totally cleaned out, and they even lost their Christmas trees and all the presents that were already under them, since the party was on Christmas Eve. We’ll never know who did it because the FRG leader left the privacy settings to ‘everyone.’ We’ll always wonder if it was someone from post, strangers, or even an inside job by someone in the company. Everyone who attended had an alibi, and the command wasted a ton of time checking the whereabouts of everyone who didn’t attend, but the truth is that if someone in the company was behind it, they could have outsourced the job, or it could have been anyone who read that post and didn’t belong to the military. Certainly not just one person, though, because of the number of houses that got hit.”

That story always comes to mind every time I think about creating a social media account or giving my number to anyone who doesn’t live on our same post. Do I think that Isla could ever be a threat? Fuck no.

But how can I be sure that all her friends and the friends of her friends or anyone who could see her social media is just as safe?

What if her phone or her account are hacked?

This stuff is keeping me up at night because I hate the idea that this thing between us has an expiration date. I don’t want this to be over at the end of the summer, but I don’t know what to do to keep our relationship going without relaxing OPSEC. Maybe I could talk about this with Dad next time he calls and see what he thinks. I haven’t even asked Isla where she calls home during the winter, since it sounds like she’s here in Star Cove visiting her grandparents, but how can I ask her when I’m not sure how much I can share with her about my own life?

At first, I didn't worry about it, convinced it was just a hot summer fling.

Little by little, though, I fell for her, and she's become my entire world, so I need to find a way to keep our love alive when the summer is over.

"Thurston? Are you sure you aren't mad at me?" she asks, noticing how distracted I am.

"Yeah, sorry. I was just thinking."

Her lips quirk up in one of those smiles that light up everything around us. "Are you sure?"

My eyes skim down to her striped red and white tank top. It's tight, so tight that I can imagine everything that's underneath it.

My cock stirs in my shorts as I look at her big, perky tits and narrow waist, and all I want to do is to peel that top off her and feel every inch of her skin with my fingers and mouth.

I nod. "Yeah, I'm okay. I was just thinking that I want to find someplace where we can be alone," I say, placing a kiss on her soft pink lips. "A place where I can touch you the way I want to."

Redness spreads on her neck and face.

Things between us are getting hotter every day, and I keep daring to try more and more every time we're together.

I have a condom in my pocket, and it feels as if it weighs a thousand pounds.

I don't want to push her too far, but at the same time, I want her so badly I could explode. "I love you." The words leave my mouth without thought.

She smiles. "Are you sure, Thurston?"

I cup her jaw with my hand, forcing her to look into my eyes. "I swear I love you. You're all I can think about all day, every day."

Her smile widens. "Me too."

Shit.

Those words are the best and the worst thing I've ever heard at the same time. How am I going to hold onto this feeling beyond the summer?

Present Day

She's breathtaking when she comes down the stairs in a little black cocktail dress that hugs her figure in all the right places.

I always ribbed Oren when he went clothes shopping with Mom and gave her fashion advice, and I never really noticed fashion choices that much.

I mean, if a woman has a nice ass and nice tits, I notice no matter what she's wearing.

But now I understand what my little brother meant every time he commented that Mom looked "hot and yet demure." Isla looks so good I could eat her.

"Wow, you look beautiful," I say when she stops near me.

I don't even care about the snort and eye roll that comes from Mom. I decided that she'll have to accept that my feelings for Isla are never going to go away. I'll talk to Doug about it, and if need be, I'll move out and get transferred to a different company. Whatever it takes to be with the woman I love.

If she can forgive me, of course. The mistakes I made in the past are still hanging above us like an ominous dark cloud.

"You don't look so bad yourself, Lieutenant." She smiles, letting her eyes rove over my dress blues. "Ready to go get Nana?"

I swallow the lump of anxiety in my throat. "Let's go," I say, guiding her out of the house with a hand on the small of her back.

I finally got my POV. Shipping your stuff via the army's official channels is free, but it takes a minute. I'm just glad I don't have to borrow my brothers' vehicles every time I want

to go somewhere. It's ironic for a truck driver not to have his own ride.

I open the passenger door of my Ford Mustang GT and then run to start the car.

Isla warned me about not being late when picking up her grandmother. Apparently, Lieutenant Colonel Cameron got his obsession with punctuality from his mother.

"Ready?" I exhale, wiping my clammy hands on my pants before gripping the steering wheel.

"It's going to be fine." She smiles.

Isla isn't even trying to hide her amusement at my nervousness over meeting her beloved nana for the first time.

"It's easy for you to say that. You aren't the one who has to live up to how much your nana loves Oren. If she doesn't like me, he's never going to let me live it down."

Isla giggles. "You're worrying way too much, Thurston."

Am I? There's no way Isla is going to choose me if Nana doesn't approve of me.

I take a deep breath as I park the car in one of the visitor spots at the assisted living center where Ms. Cameron lives.

"Seriously, babe, relax," Isla says, covering my hand with hers on the navy blue fabric of my pants.

Babe.

That's what she used to call me six years ago. There's a soft light I haven't seen in a while in her gray eyes. "Easy for you to say. What if she hates me?"

Her smile is soft, but there's a hint of mischief in the curve of her pink lips. "Just be yourself. Nana can smell bullshit from miles away."

Well then, I guess at least if she ends up hating me it's better that she hates me for me, right?

"Okay, let's go." I sigh, rushing out of the car to open the passenger door for her.

I'm nowhere near ready to face Isla's nana, but all I can hope is that she sees past the mistakes I made when I was a silly teenager and understands how much I love her granddaughter.



5.

Tough Love



Isla



I JUST TOLD THURSTON to be himself, but in reality, I feel like I'm walking behind enemy lines right now.

I know Nana will always respect my choices, but how can I expect her to like Thurston if I'm not even sure I can get over the way he ended things with me in the past?

We walk hand in hand toward the front door of Nana's little condo, and I take a deep breath as we stop on the top step.

His dark blue eyes shine with determination as he smiles at me, squeezing my hand in his much larger one. "Let's do this. Just know that even if Nana hates me, I'm still not giving up on you."

I find myself returning his smile as I nod.

Lately, believing what he says is becoming easier and easier.

We are no longer the inexperienced kids we used to be when we first met and fell in love. We also have no more reasons to hide things from one another.

If only our parents weren't married and his mother wasn't completely against the idea of us being together, maybe then Thurston and I would stand one chance in hell.

"Sweetheart, you look beautiful." The door opens, and Nana beams at me, pulling me into her embrace. "And you

must be the famous Thurston,” she says with a smile that promises nothing but trouble.

“Second Lieutenant Thurston LeCroy at your service, ma’am,” Thurston says, stiffening and offering his hand to shake. “But you can call me Thurston, ma’am.”

What in the world? I look at him with wide eyes, willing him to relax.

Nana’s smile widens as she ushers us inside her condo and into the small living room.

Thurston and I sit together on the two-seater couch, and Nana takes a strategic spot on the recliner opposite us. This feels almost like a job interview, and I guess in some way it kind of is.

“Thank you for coming to pick me up today,” Nana begins. “Lately, I’m not comfortable driving when it gets dark, so I appreciate the ride.”

Thurston nods. “Absolutely, ma’am. Isla’s family is my family, ma’am.”

Nana’s smirk is adorably naughty. “It would definitely appear that way, since my son is married to your mother.”

Yeah, I know. The smart-ass gene definitely runs in my family. It might have skipped a generation with Dad, but perpetuating that particular family trait is safe with me. I undoubtedly get that from Nana.

“Hmm, yeah, but even if our parents weren’t married—what I mean is that anyone who’s important to Isla is important to me,” Thurston explains.

“That’s very thoughtful of you, and I can definitely say that your brothers are an asset to your family name. Your parents raised some fine young men.”

The dig in Nana’s words isn’t lost on me. She purposely complimented Oren and Leith to see how Thurston will react.

“Thank you, ma’am.” Thurston smiles, choosing to ignore the fact that he wasn’t included in the “fine young men.”

But that's only the beginning. Nana definitely has more in store for him where that remark came from.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Thurston. I believe you and my granddaughter go way back."

He nods. "Yeah, we do. We met here in Star Cove six years ago, then we lost touch, but I never forgot your granddaughter, ma'am. When I saw her again and learned that our parents were married, I couldn't believe my luck."

Nana's eyes narrow as she goes on the offensive. "It's nice to put a face to the guy who took all Isla's time that summer. Her granddad and I barely saw her once she met you."

Thurston stutters, at a loss for words. "I—I'm sorry, ma'am."

"And now I believe you want to pick up right where you left off all those years ago. Am I correct?"

One thing that hasn't changed about Thurston is the fact that once he makes up his mind about something, he gives it his all. His next words do funny things to my heart. I know my fear to trust him with it again will always be there, but at the same time, I can't change the fact that my heart has always belonged to him.

"I love your granddaughter, ma'am," he says with steely determination. "I've loved her since the first time I saw her on the beach six years ago."

That was probably the wrong thing to say, because Nana's smile doesn't reach her gray eyes, and her tone is suddenly cold. "Is that so? I hope that means that you'll take care of Isla's heart this time."

My stepbrother tightens his hold on my hand, taking Nana's provocation head-on. "I'm aware that I made mistakes six years ago. I have no excuse for my behavior, but I was young and I wasn't ready for the feelings I developed for your granddaughter. I wasn't prepared for how fast and hard I fell for Isla," he says without attempting to hide his regret. "Those feelings grew deeper than I expected, and what happened to my dad made me do the stupidest thing I've ever done. I'm not

going to make that same mistake twice. I'm no longer scared. I'm all in, and there's only one thing I want, and that's a future with the woman I love."

There's a beat of silence as Nana considers his words. "You talk a big game, young man. I hope for your sake that you mean it this time, because if your recklessness causes my granddaughter to shed even one more tear, I guarantee that an entire army wouldn't be enough to protect you from my fury."

Thurston nods. "I wouldn't expect anything less from you, ma'am."

Nana keeps her eyes fixed on him. "Good. Because as far as I know, there are still some obstacles in your way. How you're going to handle them will make all the difference."

He doesn't flinch at the hardness in Nana's tone. "I'm not scared, ma'am. I know our parents' marriage makes things harder, but I'm prepared to show your son and my mother that this is the real deal. Isla comes first, and nothing else matters if I don't have her in my life."

His words cause my heart to beat faster. I've never heard him so sure about his feelings, and I think he really means every word.

But Nana isn't satisfied by his declaration. "So you're telling me that no matter what happens, you'll be by Isla's side? I won't have to find another box with a pregnancy test hidden inside?"

I've let Nana say what she needed to say, but this time I intervene. "Nana, that isn't fair. Thurston didn't know about that pregnancy scare."

Her hard gaze settles on me. "That might have been so, but he certainly behaved selfishly enough to put you in the position to have to take that test, and he wasn't here to deal with the possible fallout."

"Nana, it takes two to tango," I say, lowering my gaze to my lap where my fingers are laced with Thurston's. "I behaved as irresponsibly as Thurston back then."

To my surprise, Thurston agrees with Nana. “No, Tink. Your nana is right. I never should have behaved the way I did. I loved you with all my heart, but I hadn’t learned how to protect you, whether it was from difficult circumstances or from myself. I can’t do anything but promise that things will be different this time around. Back then, I was a selfish boy, but I’m hoping to have the chance to show you that I learned my lesson. Loving someone means putting them first, and now I know that.”

God, I want to believe him more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my entire life, and I almost do.

“Very well,” Nana says. “I assume that putting Isla first means accepting her decision if she chooses one of your brothers?”

I fight the urge to groan. Nana isn’t sugarcoating any aspect of the situation.

“It does, ma’am.” Thurston lets go of my hand before wrapping his arm around my shoulders in a show of possessiveness. “Truth be told, my brothers are good men. I know they love Isla just as much as I do, and I can’t blame them, just like I can’t blame Isla for falling for them. If Isla chooses Leith or Oren, I’m sure that either of them would treat her right. I can only hope that, in the end, she’ll choose me, but I won’t stand in her way if she doesn’t.”

Nana relaxes in her chair, her naughty smile making another appearance. “In that case, you have my blessing to date my granddaughter, Thurston. As of right now, I’m totally team Oren, even though I think Leith is just as amazing. You’re in third place, but I can be bribed, and I’m not against the three of you competing for my approval.”

“Nana!” I scold her.

“I’m going to make it my mission to take that number one spot not only in Isla’s heart, but in yours too, ma’am,” Thurston says with his most charming smile.

“I’m looking forward to that,” Nana says with a twinkle in her gray eyes. “And from now on, you can call me Nana. Just

remember that I'll be watching you, and if you hurt my baby girl, there's going to be hell to pay."

Thurston's smile reaches his eyes. "You have my word that I'm not going to fuck—I mean, mess up. I'm not going to mess up again, Nana."

She nods, finally appeased. "All right then, let's go to this promotion ceremony. I wish we had more time to hang out, but my son hates tardiness almost as much as I do. Next time you're here, young man, we'll bond over some homemade ice cream."

Thurston's smile widens. "I'll be looking forward to that. My brothers can't stop talking about your delicious ice cream."



Oren



THE CONFERENCE ROOM is at full capacity, because every soldier and several family members are here for the promotion ceremony.

Normally, these affairs are way more informal. I remember my promotion to sergeant in the motor pool right before a mission during my last deployment. I didn't have my mom or a pretty girl to pin me, so the first sergeant of my previous company did the honors.

Today, Lieutenant Colonel Cameron pulled out all the stops for the soldiers who are going up in rank. All the soldiers were instructed to wear their ASUs, which are also called dress blues, and a reception for the promoted personnel and their families has been organized by the FRG.

"Nana, it's so good to see you." I beam, leaning down to kiss Isla's grandma's cheek. "You look radiant."

The older lady returns my smile. "I have no choice when the men in the family all look so handsome. Where's Leith? I

don't see him."

"He and the other soldiers who are being promoted are waiting in a different room to be called up by the commander once it's time to get pinned."

Nana nods. "Excellent. I can't wait to congratulate him. You must be so proud, Katie." Nana smiles at Mom.

"Absolutely, Mary."

If Mom is disappointed by Leith's request to have Isla pin him, she doesn't show it. Ever since she set foot into this room, she's been all smiles. The only signs that she isn't totally ecstatic tonight are the warning looks she's been shooting Thurston's way after she saw him take a seat next to Isla.

All the details of what happened have been shared except the most important one—the real reason why Isla fell from the top of the lighthouse has been kept confidential.

I don't know if this is the right way to go about catching the person who's after my stepsister, but I get the reasoning behind CID's order to keep the details of what happened at the lighthouse under wraps.

They are hoping that our stalker will feel emboldened by having gotten away undetected and will become sloppy next time. MPs and CID personnel are here today to observe everyone's behavior, especially when Leith is promoted to captain. They are looking for any reaction that could give something away or, at the very least, a reason to look into their whereabouts and possible motives.

There's also the necessity of containing the panic that has been spreading around the entire base since Peters was released.

It has become obvious that there's a killer walking free around base. While the commander hasn't issued any special security measures for the general population—like a curfew or an order to stay indoors—the MP presence around post has noticeably increased.

“Ladies, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to check that everyone is ready backstage. We’re due to start in five minutes, and you know better than I do that our commander detests tardiness.”

Nana chuckles. “Doug takes after me for sure. Go, darling, I’m sure we’ll have time to catch up later.”

I smile at Nana and give Mom’s hand a squeeze. “I’m going to be right back, but if you need anything in the meantime, don’t hesitate to ask Thurston.” My older brother nods, smiling at Nana. He’s such a suck up, but I can’t fucking blame him for wanting to stay on Nana’s good side. I’m sure that when Doug realizes that our feelings for Isla are anything but brotherly, having Nana in our corner will make a huge difference.

I leave the room, and I almost don’t see Peters on my way next door.

“So explain to me how it works, Sarge.” He smirks provokingly. “Do you and your brothers take turns with Isla, or do you like to share?”

I take two steps toward him, using my taller stature to tower over him as intimidatingly as possible. I know I can’t put my hands on this motherfucker, especially not inside this building while it’s crawling with other officers and NCOs, but I’m dying to wipe that arrogant smile off his face.

“Shut the fuck up, Peters,” I bite out, my voice so low that if anyone else walked by, only the lieutenant could hear me.

“Or what?” he retorts.

He’s baiting me, and while I want nothing more than to give him what he wants, I’m not that stupid. “I’m needed next door, so it’s your lucky day, asshole.”

He shakes his head, that smirk still firmly in place. “I seriously wonder what Isla sees in someone like you. I could even understand your brothers, but you? I guess she’s just getting the whole fling with a boy from the wrong side of the tracks out of her system.”

I know I should walk away and ignore him, but the words leave my mouth before I can think better of it. “What the fuck do you mean?”

The side of his mouth quirks up in a cruel grin. “Commanders’ daughters don’t slum it with NCOs, Sergeant LeCroy. Or do you think that your stepfather would ever approve of you?”

I clench my fists. I won’t hit him. “You might be right.” I chuckle darkly. “But guess what? However this ends, Isla keeps coming back for more, while it only took her one time in your bed to decide that you weren’t worth the hassle.”

I walk away before Peters can say anything else, telling myself that he’s totally full of shit. Isla would never say that she loves me if she didn’t mean it. I know what we have, and I don’t think rank makes a difference for her. She loves me for me, and she loves my brothers the same way. I’m confident enough in what we have that I don’t feel threatened by her feelings for Leith and Thurston.

“Everyone ready?” I ask the NCOs and officers who are ready to get promoted. “The commander will welcome us to the ceremony with a short speech, and then he’ll start calling you out there. Your loved one who’s pinning your new rank on you has been instructed to walk up to the front of the room when they hear your name. We have volunteers from ACS taking pictures, so you’ll have a nice memory of today. Any questions?”

There are nods and murmurs of assent around the room, and I take in the number of people in our company who are advancing in the ranks today. I should have been here too, but let’s just say that I’ve been a little too distracted to work on the promotion points I need to make staff sergeant. Peters’ words echo in my ears, but I shake them off. I know Isla doesn’t care about what rank I wear. However, I can feel the pressure every time I speak to Mom or Doug. They want to see me progress in my career, and they don’t get that Dad was a sergeant, an E-5, and that this rank means something to me. It’s one last connection that will be lost forever once I become an E-6.

My eyes meet my older brother's, and I nod, approaching him and the female soldier who's standing by his side.

"Are you ready for your moment of glory, brother?" I smile, because despite my own career hang-ups, I don't feel one ounce of jealousy. I'm proud of Leith and grateful that he jumped off the top of that lighthouse, or the woman we both love wouldn't be waiting in the other room to pin his new rank on him.

I swallow back the guilt I feel at the thought that my reaction to seeing Peters at the lighthouse that night delayed us getting to Isla and could have cost us everything. That's actually why I've been trying to keep my temper in check around him.

"Hey, Sarge," Specialist King greets me.

"King, what in the living hell are you doing here?"

The petite soldier, who's been wreaking havoc in our company since setting foot on base with her habit of trading sexual favors for six packs of beer, smiles. "Haven't you heard? In a couple of minutes, I'm going to become Sergeant King."

I open the folder where I placed my paperwork for today and look at the promotion list, knowing full well her name isn't on it. "Are you sure? I don't see—"

"It was a last-minute addition, Sarge," she explains, tucking a strand of strawberry blonde hair that escaped her bun behind her ear. "I made the points I was missing too late for the cutoff for this promotion board, but Juan pulled some strings to get me included. We're getting married in eight weeks, and we decided to buy a house in town rather than getting ourselves on the housing list on base. It'll be a nice change of pace instead of being immersed in the constant grind of life on post. But as you can imagine, Star Cove isn't cheap, and the bump in my pay will help."

I don't dwell on her reasoning, because I know it's complete bullshit. I'm sure our first sergeant wouldn't be waiting too long on the housing list. I know on post housing

reserved for his rank would be pretty great, probably better than what he'll be able to afford in town where rent and house prices often exceed the BAH rates.

I'm pretty sure the first sergeant has opted to live off post to avoid being neighbors with the same people who gossip about his future wife's reputation in the company.

"I guess congratulations are in order then, Sergeant King," I say, clapping her on the shoulder and meeting Leith's gaze over her head. "I'm going to have you walk out there right before my brother then, since he'll be closing today's festivities."

One of the second lieutenants comes over to warn us that Lieutenant Colonel Cameron is now speaking, and the first soldier will be walking out in a few moments.

The room empties quickly, and once Specialist King is called, I'm left alone with my brother.

"So Sergeant King, huh?" I comment. "I'm not sure if that'll make things better or worse for her."

Leith immediately catches my drift. "In a way, soldiers and NCOs will have to respect her rank now."

We both know it isn't that straightforward. "I guess in theory that's how it should work, but we'll have to keep an eye on her, dude. You know better than me how soldiers can be. How do you think her current peers will react when they are given orders by someone they fucked for a six pack of beer? Or the other NCOs if there's any disagreement?"

Leith nods. "Yeah, you're right. First Sergeant Fernandez-Fernandez can only protect her to a certain extent. Our commander is obviously aware of King's peculiar situation, but you're right, we need to keep an eye on her. If I were Juan, I'd put in for a transfer and go somewhere where his fiancée's reputation won't follow them."

"It's a complex situation." I sigh. "You know better than me that the army might seem huge, but in reality, it's like a small school courtyard during recess. You can meet people you haven't seen in forever at an NTC camp or in line at Class

Six. Gossip spreads like wildfire regardless of borders and distance, so a PCS might not make much difference to King's reputation. At least here, the first sergeant has a good relationship with his commander."

Leith nods, patting my back the same way he used to do when we were kids and he taught me how to play football. "That's really good insight on the situation, brother. This company is really lucky to have you. I wish we had more soldiers like you, no matter their rank."

His praise means more than he can ever imagine, because I know it's given with total honesty.

I open my mouth to thank him, but we hear the round of applause signifying that it's time for Leith to step out there and live his moment of glory.



6.

Busted



Leith



I GO THROUGH THE PROMOTION ceremony in a daze. I barely hear the words of commendation coming from our commander and his deputy.

All I can see is the look of pride in the eyes of the two women who mean the world to me.

Mom and Isla are looking at me with shining eyes as I make my way in front of Lieutenant Colonel Cameron, hobbling slightly on my broken leg. Thankfully I'm healing nicely, and I'm able to walk without crutches. Being housebound was driving me insane, and I can't wait to get the all clear to drive again.

I need to summon all of my self-control to resist the urge to kiss Isla after she pins the new rank with the captain insignia on my chest.

We hug, and I count to five before I release her, hyperaware of the countless pairs of prying eyes that are fixed on us at this very moment.

I'm going to have to wait until we're alone to ask for the congratulatory kiss I think the occasion deserves.

"I'm so proud of you," she whispers into my ear right before pulling away. "Thank you."

It's odd to stand here listening to the company's commanding officers talk about valor, courage, and selflessness. I feel like a total fraud as I receive compliments

from soldiers and family members after the actual ceremony is over.

What was I supposed to do? I couldn't stand there and let the woman I love die, the same way I cowered under the table when my birth father killed my birth mother.

Thinking about the people who gave me life is strange. The guilt I've felt since that Memorial Day weekend night when I was eight is still very much there, but I haven't thought about them as my parents in years.

Whenever I think about Mom and Dad, the faces that come to mind are those of the late Sergeant LeCroy and his wife.

"Leith," Mom says, wrapping me into a tight hug. "Congratulations."

The look of pride in her dark blue eyes does more than years of therapy in the way of helping me get over the guilt I've carried for all these years. Rationally, I know that as an eight-year-old kid, I couldn't have done much to save my birth mom. I also know that saving Isla didn't have anything to do with my past, and call me crazy, but it's the beginning of my redemption.

I didn't just join the army to follow in my late father's footsteps, I also did it because serving my country is a way to make up for the fear that paralyzed me that terrible night when I was eight. I'm here to make a difference, to protect my country and its people, and to give my life meaning.

"I wish the FRG had organized this reception at HQ rather than here," Thurston says, eyeing Lisa Turner, the FRG leader, who's flanked by her husband, Sergeant Turner, as she talks to Mom and Doug.

Isla agrees. "Yeah, me too. Unfortunately, it comes with the territory of being the commander. At least Katie takes all these obligations in stride," she says, looking at the way Mom, ever the perfect hostess, floats from one conversation to the other. "She's making sure that everyone has a drink and that no one is feeling ignored or out of place. My mom used to hate this stuff. She used to resent every second she had to support

Dad. It all started when he made captain and got his first company command.”

I can’t imagine how hard it must have been for Doug to have a wife who didn’t support his career. “Yeah, Mom seems to live for this kind of thing. She used to be the same way when Dad was alive. It was on a smaller scale since Dad was an E-5, but she was always ready to step in whenever a family in his company was in need. Our table was always open to any single soldiers who were too far from home during every holiday.”

Isla beams. “They are a match made in heaven. I’ve never seen my dad so happy.”

I step closer, wrapping my arm around her waist, careful to keep that contact as brief as possible. “What about you? Do you think you could see yourself in a similar position in the future?”

I’m obviously picturing her as my spouse, hosting a dinner when I’ll get my own command.

The implications of my question aren’t lost on her. “I don’t know,” she admits. “A part of me understands my mom’s issues with military life. When I was in college, the freedom and lack of obligations was exhilarating, but at the same time, I really missed the feeling of having a close-knit army family around me.” Her face is lifted as her gray eyes bore into mine. “I’d support you no matter what, Leith.”

The urge to kiss her is almost too strong to resist, and for a second, I think, *Fuck it*.

I should claim Isla right here, right now, in front of our family, the company’s command team, and the FRG leaders.

The only reason why I don’t is because I know Isla has feelings for Thurston and Oren too, and I can’t take that choice away from her.

All of a sudden, I understand exactly where Oren is coming from when he says that we shouldn’t ask her to choose. We all love her, and if she feels the same way about

each of us, who's to say that it's wrong? We could all be happy rather than risk breaking everyone's hearts by forcing a choice.

“Er, guys?” Thurston's voice causes me to snap out of my musings as he clears his throat and points to the middle of the room where some eyes are definitely on Isla and me.

I still have my arm around her, and our faces are closer than what's considered appropriate between stepsiblings.

I catch Sergeant King's knowing smile as she winks at me from where she's standing next to her fiancé, Mom, and Doug.

Thankfully, my stepfather seems engaged in conversation with the first sergeant, but Mom's eyes are firmly set on Isla and me.

I step away from her, forcing myself to stop touching her, and I pull Thurston into a hug for good measure, just as a decoy.

It looks like my tactic worked when Mom averts her gaze, and I relax, looking around the room to make sure that no one else is staring. “Hey, T.” I chuckle, nodding toward one of the couches where Oren just sat down next to Nana, offering her a flute of champagne. “I think we should bring Nana some canapés and maybe see if we can google a recipe for an old-fashioned. That's why Oren is her favorite, he's constantly flirting with her.”

Thurston whips out his new phone, opening the browser. “On it, Captain.” He uses my new rank with a smile, and there's amusement in his voice, but no sign of scorn or jealousy.

“How did it go with her anyway?” I ask him as we make our way to Doug's well stocked bar. “You didn't have a chance to meet her before today, right?”

Thurston nods, a small smile curving his mouth. “I think Nana and I came to an understanding, but it wasn't before she gave me some real tough love.”

The way he says it makes me chuckle. “Oh? Did you get your ass whooped by that sweet old lady?”

“Ha.” Thurston laughs, shaking his head. “Isla told her what happened between us all those years ago, and the ‘sweet old lady’ was out for blood. She made it clear that if I screw up again, I’ll be wishing for death.”

I wouldn’t have expected anything different from Nana. “Isn’t she the best?” I ask him. “You can see exactly where Isla got her feistiness from.”

My older brother nods. “No shit. I’ve learned my lesson, and I know better than to cross either of them ever again.”

“So how are things between you and Isla?” I’ve been meaning to ask him for a few days, but things have been busy between returning to work and making sure that one of us is always by our stepsister’s side.

Thurston’s gaze is fixed on the bottle of top-shelf whiskey he’s trying to open when he sighs. “I don’t want to jinx myself, but I think it’s going a little better. We haven’t had a chance to talk about it, and I’m trying to give her space, to show her that I’m not the selfish kid who broke her heart six years ago. I think that maybe spending time together is starting to show her that she isn’t the only one who suffered that summer.”

I find a maraschino cherry to garnish the cocktail Thurston just mixed. “I know leaving her was hard for you too. You didn’t talk about her for a long time, but Oren and I knew that your pain was about much more than losing Dad. I’m glad you’re getting the chance to make things right with her, but I don’t blame her for letting you grovel a little.”

Thurston barks out a laugh. “Why am I not surprised that you’re enjoying it?”

I shrug, my tone now serious. “She’s just trying to protect her own heart, T. She’s never forgotten you, and until she met us and saw you again, she’d never been able to open up to anyone, so please be patient with her, it’ll be worth it.”

I want to say more. I know Thurston isn’t the sharing type. I never thought I was either. I want to say that I think our little

brother is right and that Isla needs all three of us beyond what's happening now with her stalker.

This isn't the time or place, though, and maybe I should give him some time to figure it out by himself. "Let's go bring Nana the cocktail and ruffle Oren's feathers a little bit."

Thurston's eyes drift to a spot somewhere behind me. "Yeah, let's do that before Jessica decides to come find me. I wish Mom would let this go and stop inviting her over."

I turn and follow his gaze to a corner near the dining table where Thurston's ex and Lieutenant Peters seem to be deep in conversation. "Maybe Peters will do you a solid and take her home tonight," I tease.

"One can only hope," he says, rolling his eyes. "We had a clean break, and Mom made things worse by meddling and pulling strings to get her stationed here. I'm trying my best not to hurt her, but it's hard when she won't take no for an answer."

I shake my head. "That's something her and Peters have in common."

"Let's just go hang out with Nana," Thurston says, picking up a paper napkin to go with the drink he just made. "She might be a tough lady, but I think Oren is onto something here. She's absolutely cool once she's done scaring and threatening you with a fate worse than death if you hurt Isla."



Leith



I GRAB TWO BOTTLES of water and walk out of the kitchen on my way upstairs. The house is finally empty after the last of our guests said their farewells.

Even though Mom didn't hire caterers this time, the FRG leaders were incredibly helpful and refused to go home until all the leftover food had been packed away and the living

room and kitchen looked pristine, as if my promotion party had never happened.

I smile as the memory of the first party my brothers and I had ever thrown hits me unexpectedly. It was the year before Dad's last deployment. He surprised Mom with a romantic weekend in Hawaii for their anniversary and had left Thurston in charge of the house, Oren, and me.

I was the only one who bothered with any social media out of the three of us, and the invitations to a mega party were sent via messenger before our parents' car had left our driveway.

The morning after, the house looked like a natural disaster had raged through it.

Of course we spent the rest of the weekend trying to clean up and repair any visible damage, and we even thought we had gotten away with it.

Until Dad praised me at breakfast for how well we cleaned up. I had completely forgotten that the one condition we had for us to be allowed to use social media was to let Dad have our passwords so he could check that our activity didn't pose a risk to the secrecy required by his special forces job.

I wonder what he would say if he saw me and my brother now. Would he be proud of us, like Mom says? Would he rib me and Thurston for deciding to join the army as officers rather than enlisting like him and Oren?

There's no way to know for sure, and the only thing I know without a shadow of a doubt is that he would love Isla.

He would understand why all three of us are head over heels for the commander's daughter.

I walk toward the stairs, careful not to make too much noise with my dress shoes. I would have changed into something a little more comfortable, but Isla's instructions were very specific when she texted me to join her upstairs in my sexy officer uniform with a drink once the coast was clear.

I probably should have chosen something a little more exciting than water, but I know my girl doesn't like to drink

too late into the night, since it messes with the quality of her sleep.

I've been itching to kiss her and touch her all night, and I know she felt the same way, judging by the look in her eyes when she pinned me with my new rank.

I don't know which rank I'll hold at the end of my military career, but I'm sure I'll never forget today. Having Isla there made me realize that I always want her by my side. I want to share my life with her, experiencing both the successes and challenges together.

I quicken my pace, excited to hold her in my arms, but I stop as I pass Doug's office on one side of the hallway on my way to the stairs.

The light is on, and the door is slightly ajar.

I stiffen, straining my ears to listen for any suspicious noises. The patio door that connects Doug's office to the backyard has been repaired since the break-in a few weeks ago.

There are still MPs patrolling the perimeter of the house, but just like Peters sneaked in easily the other day, anyone could do the same, and with Isla and Mom in the house, I'd rather be safe than sorry.

"Son." Doug's voice reaches me from inside the room as I stand there, trying to listen in while being as quiet as possible. "Come on in, and let's have a little debrief and a nightcap."

I exhale, relieved that I don't have to fight off an intruder, and step into the room. "I was just heading upstairs," I inform my stepfather, taking in that he changed from his ASUs into a pair of sweats and an old Army PT shirt.

He gives me a once over of his own, his eyes stopping on the two bottles of water I was about to take upstairs. "I see you're still all dressed up, Captain." His smile doesn't reach his eyes, and I can't help but wonder if something happened.

"I was just walking through the house to make sure that nothing was amiss before retiring for the night," I offer.

My words are followed by a beat of silence as Doug opens the glass door on one of the wooden bookshelves behind his desk. “Is bourbon okay?” He doesn’t wait for my reply before pouring the dark amber liquid in two heavy tumbler glasses. “Let’s drink to your promotion. You don’t make captain every day, and I can guarantee that after that, advancing in rank only gets harder.”

I nod, accepting the glass but not making any move to drink from it. I haven’t been craving alcohol much since coming home from the hospital, and even the few beers I had with my brothers a couple of days ago went straight to my head.

Doug takes a sip from his glass, keeping his gaze on me. It isn’t the first time that I’ve noticed how similar his eyes are to his daughter’s.

“You look tired, son. Have you been sleeping okay?” he asks.

“I’ve been sleeping as well as can be expected, sir,” I say honestly. “The first few days back from the hospital, sleeping was all I was doing. Now I’m kind of looking forward to getting back to normal. There’s nothing like forced rest to make one restless.”

“Are you seeing anyone, Leith?”

The question is totally unexpected, and my knee-jerk reaction is to answer it with another question. “Come again, sir?”

His eyes bore into mine with steely determination as he repeats the question. “I just asked if you have a significant other, aside from immediate family. Is there a girlfriend... or a boyfriend, I guess?”

I open my mouth to say something, but I’m at a complete loss of what to say. I don’t want to lie to him, but at the same time, I don’t want to say anything without warning Isla and my brothers first.

“Is there anything you need to tell me, *son*? Anything that has to do with whatever is going on between you and my

daughter?”

Oh, fuck.

I bring the glass to my lips, downing the bourbon in one single gulp. I guess we’re doing this right now, whether I’m prepared for it or not. “Did you hear any gossip, sir? Because I guarantee that—”

Doug sets his own empty glass down on a coaster on his desk, keeping his gaze on me. He doesn’t address me as my commander, but his tone isn’t less authoritative when he speaks. “No, I haven’t heard any gossip. Should I expect to hear anything?”

“Sir, I—”

“I can’t believe I didn’t notice before tonight,” he says more calmly than I’d have given him credit for. “You’re sleeping with her, son. Don’t bother denying it, it was glaringly obvious. You had your arm around her, and the way you were touching her said more than a thousand words. You don’t touch a woman that way unless you’re fucking her. Trust me, I know.”

I flinch at his use of the F-word. I’ve seen Lieutenant Colonel Cameron mad before, and I’ve witnessed him reprimanding soldiers, including my brothers, firsthand, but I’ve never heard him use any kind of expletive before. He normally leaves that to the first sergeant.

“Sir, I’m not fucking your daughter—” I begin, but he interrupts me.

“Do us both a favor and don’t deny the evidence, son. I can’t believe I didn’t notice when it has been right here in front of my eyes this entire time.” He doesn’t raise his voice, but it would probably be better if he did, since it would be easier to decide how to handle it. “I was impressed by your dedication to keep Isla safe. I thought that asking her to pin you today was a gallant gesture. I can’t believe I didn’t notice before. Now that I think about it, it was obvious all along.”

I get that he’s upset, but before he orders me to stop seeing Isla or gets me orders to Korea or lends me to the Space Force

for a mission to Mars, I need to set the record straight. “Sir, I ___”

“Be quiet, Captain!” he snaps. “I can’t believe you abused my and your mother’s trust. Isla hasn’t had an easy life. I’m aware that my demanding military career is partially to blame for a lot of the difficulties she had to face, but things have been particularly difficult since her mother left us. Isla has never recovered from being abandoned by her mother, and she’s been overcompensating for the lack of that love and attention by seeking attention wherever possible. Her college years have been challenging for her. She’s been sharing her time with men who have taken advantage of her need to be loved and—”

I’ve never interrupted Lieutenant Colonel Cameron before. No one ever dares to do that in the company, not even Major Peters.

However, I can’t bite my tongue. “I’m not fucking your daughter, sir.” I put all my determination into my next words, because I need him to believe me. “I love your daughter, Doug.” I choose to use his first name because while he’s still my commander, this is a conversation I should have with Isla’s father first and foremost. “I’m in love with her, and I’m sorry if I didn’t come to you about it sooner. At the beginning, Isla and I wanted to be sure that what we have is the real deal, and then we were just waiting for the right time, but with everything that happened, we never had the chance. My feelings for Isla run deep, and I’m extremely serious about it, sir. I have the most honorable intentions, and I’m sorry you had to initiate this conversation, I should have come to you sooner. Isla is the one, sir. I fell in love with her the second I checked her expired ID the day she first arrived on post. At first, I fought it and tried everything in my power to hold back those feelings. I knew things would be complicated by the fact that you’re my commander and that you’re married to my mother, but I love your daughter. I want a future with her, sir.”

Silence descends between us again, but while I was fighting not to squirm under my stepfather’s hard gaze a few moments ago, now I look at him proudly. He can yell and

retaliate however he sees fit, but I need him to understand that when it comes to Isla, I'm as serious as a heart attack.

“Correct me if I'm wrong, son,” he finally says, “but are you telling me that you intend to marry my daughter?”

Fuck yeah.

Obviously I don't say that.

“I do, sir. I haven't proposed to Isla yet because, like I said, I was waiting for the right moment to approach you about it. I'd prefer to have your blessing when I ask her.” I don't say that I'd ask Isla to marry me even without his blessing. I don't need to, since it was clearly implied in my words.

He nods. “That changes everything.”

I watch, wide-eyed, as Lieutenant Colonel Cameron rises from his chair and walks around his desk. “I couldn't think of anyone I'd rather see my daughter with than you, Captain LeCroy,” he says, slapping my back. “I guess at least something good came out of the terrible situation we've been dealing with for the last couple of months.”

I accept the hand he offers me, and as I shake it, it occurs to me for the first time that this is a double-edged sword.

Marrying Isla is what I want, I have no doubt about it, but I was caught in the confrontation with Doug like a deer in front of the proverbial headlights. I reacted without thinking about Thurston and Oren, and I know I need to talk to them stat.

I've been more and more inclined toward accepting Oren's idea that the status quo isn't bad and we don't necessarily need Isla to choose, but I know how I'd take the news of an engagement if roles were reversed, so I need to make sure that my brothers hear the news from me.

“Sir, I can't tell you how glad I am to have your blessing, however, I need to ask you to keep things between us for now.”

“Are you worried about gossip?” he asks.

“The situation is complicated, sir,” I admit, knowing full well that I can't tell him that I'm not the only stepson who's in

love with his daughter. “I wanted your blessing before I popped the question, and I was hoping we would find a way to share the news with the company, limiting any gossip and drama.”

He smiles. “Sure, I understand and appreciate that. Of course I’m going to have to tell your mother. You’ll soon understand that whenever anyone asks you to keep a secret, it always contains an exception where your spouse is concerned. Ideally, you’ll go through life with no secrets when it comes to your spouse. The only exception is work, obviously, where matters are covered by security clearance. Believe me when I tell you that I learned about the consequences of lack of communication in a marriage the hard way.”

I know what Isla told me about her parents’ marriage, and it sounds like the exact opposite of what I hope for my own future. “I’m sorry about that, sir,” I say honestly. “But I guess things do happen for a reason, and I can only tell you that I’m glad you and my mom met. I’ve never seen her so happy since —”

Since Dad.

Neither of us mentions our family’s painful past, and I wonder, not for the first time, if Lieutenant Colonel Cameron has ever met Dad before. After all, the army isn’t as big as one imagines, and the special forces is an even smaller group of elite soldiers.

However, he speaks before I can ask him that question. “Your mother means everything to me, Leith, and you and your brothers are an even bigger credit to her than her gorgeous looks and her wonderful personality. I’m proud of being your stepfather, and I know Isla will have a great man by her side. After all, we wouldn’t be having this conversation if you hadn’t saved my daughter by risking your own life.”

“Thank you, sir. Your approval means a lot,” I say, hoping that his approval will mean Mom’s approval by default. I can’t help but worry about the reaction she had when she learned about Thurston and Isla’s past. I wonder if he knows, but I

think that's a question I should ask Mom, just in case she hasn't been as forthcoming with Doug as he seems to think.

"You really need to start practicing calling me Doug a little more often, Leith, especially since I'm going to be your father-in-law as well as your stepfather sometime soon." He chuckles.

"Yes, sir. I mean, Doug. Just remember that I haven't asked Isla yet."

My stepfather laughs. "Judging by the way she was looking at you, I think we need to start considering venues and a date."

Excitement collects in the pit of my stomach, but asking Isla isn't the only thing I have to do. I also have to tell my brothers, and I don't know how they'll react to this unexpected turn of events. I hope they'll understand that I didn't plan this to get the girl at their expense. "I seriously have no idea what Isla wants, Doug. She might want to wait and have a longer engagement, even if she said yes. I don't want to make any plans until I've talked to her."

He nods, but it's impossible to miss the tension in his shoulders. "Ask her soon, please," he says, clapping me on a shoulder. "But if she says yes, we might need to discuss timing."

Oh. "Is there a deployment on the horizon?" I ask, surprised because I haven't heard any rumors at HQ.

He shakes his head. "No, but once the nature of your relationship becomes public knowledge, I'd rather make things official ASAP. I understand it's ridiculous because you're both adults, but I wasn't the only one who noticed how close you and Isla have become. Sergeant. King was staring at the two of you the entire time, and that was what attracted my attention to begin with. I know you two aren't doing anything wrong, but you're living under the same roof, and even though you haven't grown up together, the fact that you're stepsiblings will set tongues wagging. I don't want your relationship to be turned into something seedy when it's not."

I know exactly what he means, and I don't disagree. Not that I care about what the FRG leaders and the rest of the company think about me, but I've seen careers ruined for much less, and I don't mean just my own career. "Yes, sir. I mean, Doug."

I step out of my stepfather's office, thinking that one way or the other, Six Pack King is responsible for Isla and me being busted. I'll find out very soon if I should thank her or not.



7.

Rules Of Engagement

Isla



THERE'S A KNOCK ON my bedroom door.

“Just one moment,” I call out, massaging the moisturizer into my skin more vigorously to get it off my fingers.

I pad out of my en suite bathroom and walk toward my door, wondering who it could be. I'm waiting for Leith, but I doubt he'd knock on my door with the risk of Dad and Katie being awake.

Thinking about the devil, I guess Dad or Katie would be the only ones who would knock on my door and not text me or use the secret passage in Oren's closet.

“Leith?” I whisper, unable to hide my surprise as I open the door. “What are you doing here? People might still be up and—” By “people,” I mean our parents.

“Can I come in?”

Something in his expression gives me pause. Leith is normally the calmest and most composed among my three stepbrothers, so the way he barely seems to be able to stand still is definitely cause for alarm.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, stepping aside to let him into my room.

He's carrying two bottles of water, and he's still in his ASUs.

“Yeah, everything is fine, baby,” he says softly, taking a step toward me.

His gray eyes skim over me, and it's impossible to miss the appreciation in his gaze as he takes in my pale baby blue

nightie. It's short and light, almost gauzy, and the see-through fabric is decorated by hand embroidered yellow and white daisies that are placed strategically on the chest to partially cover me. The weightless fabric does nothing to hide my tiny white lace panties.

I stand still as his eyes skim over me, excited by the heat I see in those silver depths.

The way he's looking at me makes me feel beautiful, and I start a slow perusal of my own, taking in his broad shoulders, his strong chest and trim waist, and his long legs in his army dress uniform.

His eyes reflect the dark color of his army blues and makes the light blond of his hair stand out even more than normal.

"How come you're still in your uniform?" I ask. "Not that I'm complaining because you look—"

He silences me with a kiss.

His lips are hot on mine, pressing insistently until I let him in, immediately kissing him back with everything I have.

Leith is normally slower and gentler, and this hot urgency is more Thurston's style, but I'm definitely not complaining.

My arms surround his neck as our kiss deepens, my nipples straining against the barely there fabric of my nightie.

He tightens his hold on me, until my chest is pressed tightly against his and a flood of heat invades my entire body when he nips my bottom lip, giving my ass a squeeze with his big, strong hands.

"Isla, there's something I need to tell you." His eyes search mine as he breaks the kiss, and I know something must have happened or he would be undressing me right now rather than trying to talk.

"I hope it's something good." I immediately worry, because in my experience, nothing good has ever followed the words "I need to tell you something."

There's a moment of hesitation before he assures me, "It can be good."

I open my mouth to say something, but he lets me go, takes a step back, and drops down on one knee.

He can't be—

“Isla Mary Cameron,” he begins, his eyes so intense that my heart picks up its pace. “I love you. I knew I was going to be completely, hopelessly in love with you the day we met, and I was right. Every day that goes by, I fall harder and deeper, and I don't want to live another day without making you mine and telling the whole world that I'll love you and protect you until my last breath. Isla, will you marry me?”

Holy shit.

I don't say that, but I mean... fuck.

Okay, I don't even say that.

“Yes!” The word comes out as a knee-jerk reaction, I'm not sure that I've even finished processing his question. “Yes, I'll marry you.”

“Thank fuck.” He stands up abruptly, sweeping me off my feet and kissing me again.

“Leith, Leith.” I push against his chest, because while I want nothing more than to celebrate the only way I know how to, this was a total surprise. “Babe, we have to talk. I love you, and I want to marry you more than anything in the world, but —”

I don't even need to finish the sentence. “But you would have said yes to Oren or Thurston if they had been the ones who asked?”

I nod, relieved that he doesn't look angry. “Yeah. I know I'm the worst girlfriend and possibly fiancée ever, but I haven't made a choice yet, and to be honest, I don't think I'm ever going to be able to choose among the three of you.”

There. I said it.

I've known that I couldn't choose for a while, but with everything that's been going on, I haven't been able to find the right time to tell them. I guess a part of me was hoping that at

least Leith would be on board with Oren's idea of sharing me, especially after the three of us were together not long ago.

He nods, his expression serious but not angry. "I thought that might be the case," he says calmly.

"I really want to marry you, babe, but—" I hate the way reality is crashing down on me, but we can't ignore our situation. "What about our parents? Things haven't changed. Last time I looked, our parents are still married to each other, and Dad is still your commander."

His voice is soft as he cups my jaw. "Some things actually have changed. Doug knows, baby."

Leith proceeds to tell me the details of his conversation with Dad.

"So is this why you proposed?" I ask, lowering my gaze and hating the insecurity in my voice.

"Absolutely not." His tone is firm as he tilts my face up, forcing me to look at him. "Once I realized that I was in love with you, I knew I wanted to ask you to marry me, baby. The situation with our parents and my brothers is the only reason why I didn't ask you at the hospital. I've never been in love before, Isla. I've never even told any girl that I loved her. I've been waiting to tell you because I don't use the L-word lightly. What happened at the lighthouse helped me realize that my feelings weren't just lust and that they weren't amplified by the competition with my brothers."

"They weren't?" I ask, our faces so close that the smallest movement will close the negligible distance between our mouths.

"No. I probably would have jumped to save anyone who was in danger, but the way I felt when I saw you fall off that railing—my heart stopped, Isla. I realized that without you, I couldn't breathe, couldn't live. Since we came home from the hospital, I've been thinking about a solution, and how to work things out with my brothers and break the news to our parents. I guess part of the problem is solved."

Our lips touch, but it's a brief and shallow kiss. I want nothing more than to melt against him, but my brain is buzzing with a million things right now. "I'm glad that Dad approves of us."

Leith smiles, pride gleaming in his gray eyes. "He's happy about it, and he'll help us control the narrative and squash the gossip that the news of our engagement is guaranteed to cause."

I sigh, wishing I could feel as optimistic as he does. "Right. I don't know if it's possible to control the gossip. Not when the FRG leaders are also leaders of the gossip mill."

He tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear. "They can talk as much as they want, but with the commander on our side and our relationship being official, they'll have to be very careful. This isn't King and the first sergeant, this involves the commander's immediate family. Their husbands will be the first to keep them under control, because they care about their careers."

I hope he's right. I've seen firsthand how vicious those ladies are, making everything sound dirty and coming up with their own conjectures whenever they don't have all the facts. "Is that what you're planning to do with me? Keep your spouse 'under control?'" I can't resist the urge to provoke him.

"Oh hell no." He chuckles. "Some soldiers have the problem of having to 'control' their spouses because they married wrong. I have no doubt about your support of my career, baby. I know that you aren't an immature attention seeker, and your energy will be devoted to our family and your own career, which, by the way, I'll support fully."

I know what he means.

I have no doubt that Leith will support my career as much as the army will allow him. "I'd never do anything to hurt you or your career, babe," I say softly. "But I appreciate that you don't feel the need to 'control me.' I think that's where my parents' marriage failed. Mom didn't care about anything or anyone but herself, but Dad reacted to the lack of support he got from her with an iron fist. Once, they had this huge

argument when we got orders to Germany. Mom flipped out and told him that she wasn't going to go. They had a screaming match, plates were smashed, and Dad yelled at her that the army came first and she needed to do as she was told."

Leith shakes his head. "I can imagine. Dad had to counsel soldiers who were having marital issues all the time. He used to quote this old saying that if a G.I. needed a wife, the army would have issued him one. He said it sarcastically, but the old guard really believed that, and I guess sometimes it still works that way. It takes a special kind of woman to love a soldier."

I trace the lines of his perfect jaw with my fingers, my heart clenching in my chest. I've never felt so close to anyone before—except Oren and Thurston. "I love you, Leith," I say, tears welling in my eyes as I'm overcome with emotion. "I owe you my life. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you, I hope you know that. I can't wait to marry you, but—"

He doesn't need me to say it out loud. "But you feel the same way about Thurston and Oren."

I'm about to confirm it when Oren steps into my room from our shared closet.

His dark blue eyes blaze with fury, and I'm about to plead with him to stay calm, but Leith beats me to it.

"Brother, please give me a chance to explain before you react."

Oren's huge fists are clenched so tightly by his sides that his knuckles are white. "Please. I'd love to hear an explanation that doesn't sound like you went to Doug behind my and Thurston's backs," he bites out.

Leith's shoulders are stiff with tension as he sighs, looking at his younger brother. "It isn't what you think, okay? And Thurston and I told you many times to stop eavesdropping. You never get the entire story by listening in to people's conversations."

Oren's jaw works as he tries to keep from yelling. I've seen him do that a few times, and I'm grateful for his attempt to stay calm. The last thing we need is to wake the entire

house and make our parents privy to how much more complex things are between their four children.

“Then fucking tell me the entire story, *Captain*. Tell me that you didn’t betray me and Thurston after we talked about how to handle this relationship. Because from where we left things the other day, I would have maybe expected some stupid shit like this from Thurston, but you seemed to be on board, and I fucking trusted you.”

“And you can trust me.” Leith’s tone is firm. “I swear, this isn’t the way it sounds.”

I watch the two of them like one would watch a tennis match.

“Then explain, because from where I’m standing, it sounds like you used what happened to earn Doug’s approval, and you just asked Isla to marry you *after* we agreed that maybe asking her to choose wasn’t the way to go.”

Leith opens his mouth to say something in response, but I intervene. “Excuse me, you made a decision about our relationship?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest. “Without me?”

Oren and Leith immediately stop arguing with each other and explain how they met up to talk about our situation.

“Babe, we merely talked about keeping up the status quo indefinitely,” Leith explains.

“Yeah,” Oren agrees. “We didn’t mean to decide anything without you, but since the few times we talked about our situation, you told us how you wished you didn’t have to choose, we thought that maybe you didn’t have to.”

“Especially after your dad asked us to always be by your side, we thought, what if we could do that beyond protecting you? We’re all in love with you, but we also love each other, and we don’t want to see our brothers hurt,” Leith offers.

His gray eyes are shining with honesty, and I know he would never lie to me, and neither would Oren. “And you all agreed to... what? Share me?”

They both nod. “Yeah, sweet girl. We want you to be happy, and we all want the same for each other, so we talked about the possibility of keeping things as they are if that’s what you want. We agreed that unless you *wanted* to choose, we wouldn’t ask you to,” Oren explains.

“We were in agreement,” Leith adds. “Well, Oren and I were. Thurston wasn’t totally sold on it, but he promised to give it some serious consideration.”

I can’t believe this. “Do you really think Thurston would be okay with this relationship long term?”

Oren sighs. “I think he’s coming around to the idea more and more. He admitted that if you can find it in your heart to forgive him for how he fucked up six years ago, then maybe he can learn to accept that you love Leith and me the same way you love him.”

Shit. “He’s forgiven, guys. What I’m working toward is trust. That’s the hardest part, trusting that he won’t run away again.”

Leith takes my hand into his much larger one. “He’s aware of that, and he realized that if you can forgive him, then maybe he can accept that you have the same feelings for all three of us.”

My heart picks up its pace at the idea that they would do this for me.

“Yeah, that was the idea, but it looks like Leith decided to claim you all for himself.”

“No, I fucking didn’t,” Leith snaps, clearly exasperated. “If you give me two seconds to explain, I can clear this mess up.”

Oren nods, sitting on my bed, and I take a seat next to him, holding his hand as his older brother relays the conversation he had with Dad.

“So, yeah, I’m going to marry Isla, but that doesn’t change a thing between the four of us unless we want it to. You have to admit that if Isla had a husband, people wouldn’t question her being close with you and Thurston. Everyone who knows

us and how close the three of us are. We're always together, so they wouldn't ask too many questions if we hung out a lot."

There's a beat of silence as Oren considers what Leith just said. "Maybe. But people could still talk."

"True," I agree. "But I think Leith is right that me being married to one of you would cause less questions than seeing the four of us always together anyway. We'd have to be discreet regardless, so for two of you, nothing really changes. It's not like we can be totally open about what's going on between us, right?"

Oren looks slightly placated. "It makes sense, and I guess since we can move around with the army, people would just think that we stick together since we're far away from home."

Leith claps him on the shoulder. "Yeah, that's definitely a way to explain our closeness."

"But I'm still pissed that you get to be the one who marries her."

The disappointment in his eyes does funny things to my heart. "I know, babe, but marriage is just a piece of paper," I soothe him, climbing onto his lap and wrapping my arms around his neck. "I'm so happy that we have a real shot at being together. It just sucks that I can't legally marry all three of you, or I swear that I wouldn't care about our parents' reaction or what people say. I love you with all my heart, Oren."

He accepts the soft kiss I place on his lips. "I love you too. I'm just mad at myself because I know that even if Leith hadn't been the one who saved you, it would have been harder to get your dad to accept me as your future husband. Thurston maybe could have had a chance, but Peters is right. Commanders' daughters don't marry sergeants."

I hate the resignation I see in his dark blue eyes. "Babe," I murmur, wishing he could see how much I love him. "I'm not saying that this is true for other commanders' daughters, but this one? I would be proud to be your wife, and in an ideal world, I'd be allowed to marry both you and Leith." And

maybe Thurston. We're still repairing our relationship, but I can't deny that my feelings for him have never gone away.

"Really?" Oren's tone is hopeful, and I hug him tighter.

"Really. You're the first one I opened my heart to after years of shutting off all my emotions, Oren. I couldn't love you any more than I do."

My words finally seem to convince him, and he closes his arms around me, but his eyes are fixed onto his older brother. "And you fucking swear that if you and Isla tie the knot, it doesn't change things between us?"

Leith claps Oren's shoulder, coming to stand behind me and surrounding my back with his own arms. "That was never my intention, brother. I promise. The only one who can change things between us is Isla, but I meant what I said the other day. I'm not going to ask our girl to choose between us, no matter whose name ends up on the marriage certificate."

Oren looks appeased. "Fine. Don't mind if I enjoy watching when you have to break the news to Mom and Thurston though." He chuckles.

"Yeah. I'm going to need your help with T, dude. As for Mom, I'm hoping she's going to be on board once she sees that Doug approves and this isn't going to have an impact on her marriage or my career."

Just like that, I'm engaged to one of the men I love.

To one of my stepbrothers.



8.

Ghosts Of Hookups Past



Thurston



SIX YEARS AGO

Star Cove's Public Library is in the main square in downtown Star Cove.

I've been spending most of my days on the beach with Isla, so I admit that I'm a little lost in the old, elegant section of town where most of the buildings date to the late nineteenth century and follow the style of the Belle Époque.

I take in the imposing building of the library and decide to step inside when I don't see Isla outside.

I see her before she spots me, looking gorgeous in a blue sundress and white flip-flops, intent on browsing the new arrivals in romance.

"If you're looking for a sexy male hero and hot sex scenes, look no further," I whisper in her ear, circling my arms around her waist. "I'm going to make anything you read in those books pale in comparison to what I'm going to do to you the second I get you alone."

I must have surprised her, because she reacts with a little frightened jump. "Thurston!" she yelps. "Oh my god, I'm going to buy you a bell to wear around your neck. You scared the shit out of me."

I chuckle, nuzzling her delicate neck. "I thought the first rule of libraries was to be quiet."

She turns in my arms, her gray eyes narrowed as she scolds me. “Yeah, being quiet is one thing, but sneaking up on people like a fucking ninja is another.”

I love it when she gets all worked up. She’s too cute. “I could totally be a ninja,” I decide. “Ninjas are hot, right?”

She shakes her head, unable to stifle the smile that’s creeping up on her soft pink lips. “Maybe. But I’m sure ninjas are on time. I was waiting for you outside, and I thought you stood me up.”

I apologize, tightening my arms around her. “I’m sorry. My brothers called from football camp, and I lost track of time. I promise I’m going to make it up to you,” I say, lowering my lips to her collarbone.

“Brothers? Plural?” she asks curiously.

I hesitate, Dad’s words about OPSEC echoing in my head like every time I interact with anyone who isn’t part of my immediate family and doesn’t live on post. “Yeah, I have two brothers,” I offer, telling myself that Isla knowing that doesn’t make me a target. “They both play football and decided to go to camp while I stayed with Mom.” Shit, this is why I’m so careful not to share any details about my family. What am I going to say if she starts asking questions about my parents?

I don’t want to lie to her, but at the same time, I know I can’t tell her about Dad’s deployment.

Fortunately, Isla’s attention is focused on my brothers. “Are they younger than you?”

“I’m the oldest, but we’re pretty close in age. We all go to the same school, and they both play varsity football.”

The interested glint in her eyes makes my gut churn with jealousy.

“See?” she teases. “I’m not so sure if ninjas are hot, but I do like football players.”

Ha. I’m glad Leith and Oren aren’t here, because I bet if they saw Isla, I’d have some serious competition on my hands. “Not as hot as lacrosse players,” I inform her. “Football

players are pansies. They wear so much padding. Lacrosse players are much tougher, and we're very good with our sticks," I say, nuzzling her neck again.

She giggles, always so ticklish.

"Shhh!" someone scolds, causing Isla to stiffen in my arms as I attempt to nibble on her earlobe.

"Stop it, babe!" she whisper-yells. "You're going to get us kicked out."

I chuckle. "That wouldn't be so bad, right? Then we could find a quiet spot by the old books that no one ever reads. I could get you alone, and then I could show you how excellent I am with my stick."

She pushes me away, her eyes wide as she hugs the book she selected before I walked into her chest. The movement pushes her tits together, and my eyes track that movement. "Seriously, Thurston. I love this place, and if you get me banned, I'm going to be mad at you. There's no way in hell I'd ever risk getting caught making out in here by Bobbie."

It's my turn to get annoyed. "Who the fuck is Bobbie? I hope he knows that you have a boyfriend or—"

"Bobbie is the librarian, babe." Isla laughs. "She's an adorable older lady, and I would hate to disappoint her by getting caught doing something inappropriate in her library. I almost signed up as a volunteer before I met you."

That shouldn't surprise me, that's so typical of Isla. "So was I a distraction from your beloved books?" I tease.

"Yup." She smiles, letting me pull her closer again. "My reading has definitely suffered since I met you."

I can't help but feel a strange sense of satisfaction at the thought that she might love me more than her books. "But you learned a lot of other useful things by hanging out with me, Tinkerbelle."

I lean in for a kiss, but she pushes me away. "God, you'll be the end of me, Thurston. I can't resist you."

I fucking love that. “I’m not complaining about that, gorgeous.”

She gives me another little push when I try to get closer. “Let me borrow the books I wanted, and then I promise we’ll find a place where we can be alone. But no funny business in the library,” she says in that stern tone that never fails to make me rock hard. “Here, hold this. They have the entire series, and I’ve been wanting to read it for a while.”

I take the book she passes me as she turns to take two more books from the shelf. “Perfect For Them—Forbidden. An RH stepbrother series,” I read out loud, looking at the shirtless guy on the cover. “Stepbrothers?”

Isla turns around, clutching two more books to her chest. “Yeah, the heroine in this book falls in love with her two stepbrothers and their best friends. I’ve been waiting for the last book to come out, and I want to reread the entire series. It’s so hot and romantic.”

I shake my head. “She’s fucking her brothers?”

“Stepbrothers,” she corrects me. “It’s a little taboo, but I love it. Chase and Reid are amazing, but I also love their two best friends, Bryce and Parker.”

Girls and their fucking romance novels. My mom reads that shit too. “How many guys does this girl fuck?” I ask.

“It isn’t just about fucking,” she explains with an eye roll. “I mean, there are a lot of super sexy scenes, but I love how the guys want to make her happy, and they’d do anything for her, even with all the obstacles. I’m also dying to know if Oliver will be able to win her heart—”

I don’t get it. “How is it romantic if she’s fucking all these guys? Are they okay with her cheating?”

She bristles at my question. “There’s no cheating. Have you ever heard of reverse harem?”

“Reverse what? Nope,” I admit.

She puts the other two books in my arms, hooking her own arm in the crook of my elbow. “Oh my goodness, reverse

harem romance is my favorite. It'll blow your mind."

Present Day

The library isn't very crowded one hour before closing on a Monday night, and there are no special events like my Lego building class or the knitting class tonight either.

The few patrons are a couple of people browsing the DVD rental section, two soldiers reading the free magazines in the first room, and the library technician at the front desk. Her name is Rachel, if I'm not mistaken.

I pop my head into Isla's office, but she isn't at her desk, so I climb the stairs to the top floor, sure I'll find her somewhere around the fiction section.

"Hey," I greet when I spot her by a little metal cart laden with hardbacks waiting to be reshelved.

"Hey yourself." She smiles, and for a second, the look in her eyes transports me back to the time when I met her at Star Cove Public Library six years ago.

Her outfit is more formal than the sundress she had on that day, and her smile is a little more guarded than it was back then.

I can't avoid a pang of guilt at the thought that I'm responsible for putting some of that caution there.

At the same time, though, I notice that she's starting to smile at me when she sees me. It isn't the bright smile of six years ago, but it definitely beats the scowl that used to be there when we saw each other again.

I want to take that uncertain smile as a sign of progress, a sign that she's on her way to forgiveness.

"Hey, T."

I hadn't noticed Leith sitting in one of the plush chairs in the corner with an open book on his lap. I shouldn't be surprised that he's here, since Doug still has us on protection detail despite the fact that there haven't been any more break-ins or anonymous texts in the last couple of weeks. I don't

blame my stepfather, because after what happened at the lighthouse, we can't be too careful.

“What are you doing here?” my brother asks.

“I'm here to swap places with you. Our command has organized a dinner to welcome the senior officers that are arriving for tomorrow's AFTB conference, remember?”

Leith closes the book he was reading. “No, I remembered the conference, but I had completely forgotten about the dinner.”

Typical Leith. Whenever it suits him, my brother has selective amnesia, I swear to God. “Yeah, well, it's captains and above, so you're wanted in the conference room of the base hotel.”

The corner of his mouth lifts in the beginning of a smirk. “You know you don't have to gloat that way, right?”

I can't help but bark out a laugh. “Sorry. I'm just enjoying the perks of my lower rank, Captain LeCroy. Those dinners are total snooze-fests.”

Leith shakes his head, his smile widening. “And you wonder where Oren gets his annoying gloating from. Sometimes the two of you are carbon copies of each other.”

“Whatever,” I argue, but there's no heat in my tone. “We all know that you're Oren's favorite brother.”

Leith rises from his seat. His cast was taken off a couple of days ago, and he's finally been cleared to drive, but his movements are still a little rigid, so he's mostly on desk duty.

“Are you ready, baby?” he says, looking at Isla who has continued working with her eyes trained on the two of us.

“For what?” she asks.

“For dinner. Some of the officers in attendance are here with their spouses, and of course your father has Mom by his side. I thought we—”

Isla's eyes darken. “I'm sorry, babe, but I can't go to that dinner. I'm not dressed for it, for starters,” she says, looking at

her black pencil skirt and dark green blouse. “And the library is open for another hour. I also can’t leave Rachel by herself. Mia wants a librarian on shift at opening and closing times. Did you tell me about this dinner? I don’t remember you asking me to go.”

Leith knows when he’s wrong. “No, I think I forgot about it too.”

She takes a few steps in his direction, stopping in front of him. “There’s no way I can get away from work early tonight, even if it’s dead around here. I’m still on probation, and I know Mia would never fire the commander’s daughter, but—”

Leith tucks a strand of Isla’s long hair behind her ear. “I understand. It’s my fault for forgetting about it. Plus, now I remember why I didn’t ask you. Doug wants to wait for the next FRG meeting to announce our engagement, so they don’t really expect me to bring a plus one.”

She traces the lines of his jaw with gentle fingers, like she’s done with me so many times. I’m surprised when the affectionate gesture makes me jealous but not angry.

Maybe there’s hope that this sharing thing could work after all.

“Don’t you need to go change into your ASUs?” she asks. “You know my father is a stickler for punctuality.”

“No, it’s informal. Smart casual for civilians, and ACUs for soldiers, so I guess I can go directly from here.”

He has his eyes fixed on hers, and he’s looking at her as if she were his entire world.

I know because it’s the same way I look at her.

“Go then. You don’t want to be late. Dad hates it even more when it’s his own family that’s tardy.”

Leith closes the distance between them, kissing her softly. “If you need to leave this room, make sure you take Thurston with you, okay? Things have been too quiet lately, and I don’t like it.”

She promises to be careful before giving him one last, brief kiss.

“I don’t need to ask you not to leave her side, T,” Leith says, clapping my shoulder on his way out of the room. “I know you care about her just as much as I do,” he adds, lowering his voice so only I can hear him.

He walks out of the room, and just like that, Isla and I are alone.

We haven’t had a chance to talk one-on-one since Leith told us about the engagement.

Doug has kept me busy driving him all over post for countless meetings in preparation for this week’s AFTB conference, and in a way, I didn’t mind.

The distance gave me the chance to process the news and to analyze my feelings for a change, so I’m way calmer than I’d be if I hadn’t had the chance to think about our situation.



Isla



OUR GAZES ARE LOCKED in a staring match.

Even if I wanted to, it would be impossible to tear my eyes away from his dark blue ones, and I’m rooted to my spot, unable to move a muscle as I watch him watch me.

Fuck.

Thurston is so handsome in his crisp ACUs that he takes my breath away. It isn’t the first time that I’ve had this thought, but looking at him in his uniform feels a little strange. It’s almost as if we were transported to a parallel universe where the memory of the boy who loved me six years ago has morphed into this perfect, sexy soldier.

My stepbrother.

He's the one who moves first, taking a few steps closer to me and stopping right in front of me, the tips of my shoes almost touching the tips of his boots.

I'm still captivated by his dark blue gaze, but now he's so close that I can see the white flecks around his pupil, and it's like staring down at deep, impenetrable waters.

His eyes haven't changed in all these years, nor has the way his lips quirk up every time he's about to speak to me, as if he's trying to stop himself from smiling.

The rest of him is similar but also different. Thurston is taller now than he was at seventeen, and his shoulders are broader. His body is still fit, but his muscles are bigger and more defined.

His perfect facial features are sharper, probably accentuated by the short high and tight haircut. He's exactly the way I would have imagined him now if he hadn't been brought back into my life by our parents' marriage.

"I haven't had the chance to congratulate you on the engagement." His voice is soft as he takes my hand into his. "I've been busy, and I didn't want to say it in front of our parents or by text message," he explains.

I guess it makes sense. "I thought you were angry."

I've grown over the last six years as well. Back then, I never would have had the courage to say what I just did. I liked the little bubble Thurston and I created, and I tried my hardest to protect it from the outside world. I guess he did the same, but the way things ended between us taught me that if you constantly shield your relationship from the real world, you'll never know how strong it really is. It's fine to have a little bubble where nothing else can touch you—God knows I've been needing that a lot lately—but you can't make permanent residence inside it.

"I guess when Leith told me the news, I was angry," he admits.

"What about now?"

He squeezes my hand, his eyes so dark and intense that I almost miss his next words. “I’m not. Or at least I don’t think I am. It really depends.”

“On what?” I ask, more nervous than I care to admit.

“On what your engagement really means. Leith swore to me that you saying yes doesn’t mean that you chose him over Oren and me,” he bites out almost accusingly.

“It doesn’t. I love Leith with all my heart,” I offer. “But that doesn’t change my feelings for you and Oren. It would have been hard to say yes if Leith hadn’t accepted that.”

He takes another step forward, and I can feel the heat radiating from him. My body immediately takes notice, like it always does whenever Thurston is near me. There are butterflies in my belly, and it’s as if every beat of my heart pumps more blood everywhere, making all my senses feel sharper.

“So it’s true? You aren’t going to choose?”

The uncertainty in his voice is mixed with hope, and I nod.

“I can’t choose. The three of you mean too much to me, and letting any of you go would tear me apart.”

“Then I’m not angry,” he says confidently. “I wasn’t angry when Leith kissed you just a moment ago. If you want me as much as you want them, I can deal.”

I guess it’s a start. “Dealing isn’t enough, Thurston.” It costs me all of my courage to say that, but what the heck, right?

Go big or go home.

To my surprise, he agrees. “Yeah, I know. I’m fine with it, really, Isla. I’ve given it a lot of thought. You know I love you, and after you, my brothers are the people I love the most in the world. I see how happy they make you and you them, so how could I be angry? I’m not saying that I’ll never be jealous, but I’m willing to work on it because that happiness doesn’t happen every day. There’s just one thing that worries me.”

He doesn't avert his eyes, and I don't need to push him to open up like I used to when we were younger.

"They haven't hurt you the way I have. I want this to work, but I'm so afraid that you love them more than you'll ever be able to love me. It isn't a deal breaker, because I don't care if it takes me my whole life to earn your forgiveness, but I wish you could look at me the way you look at my brothers."

The look in his eyes tells me how much this admission must have cost him. "Thurston, I love you," I say simply. "I meant it when I said that I forgive you, and I'm learning to trust you again. I *know* you'll never hurt me again on purpose. It's just a matter of taking that final leap of faith and overcoming the tiny speck of fear that's still there. You know I'm a stubborn bitch, right?"

His lips twitch into his trademark smile, his blue eyes twinkling with amusement. "You're my stubborn little Tinkerbell."

I frown. "I thought we agreed that you'd stop calling me that."

His smile widens as he takes a final step toward me, stopping so close that our chests are touching. "I'm never going to stop calling you Tinkerbell."

I roll my eyes. "You're impossible."

"I thought we agreed on that a long time ago." He chuckles. "But I'm serious, Isla. I hope you believe me when I tell you that I'm not going anywhere. I'm here for the good and bad stuff, and I won't run when life gets hard. I've learned how much that could have cost me, and I might be an idiot, but I never make the same mistake twice. Please forgive me? For real?"

My heart feels so full that it's about to burst, and the air between us is so thick that you could cut the intensity with a knife. "I've already forgiven you. If I hadn't, I would have let Nana loose on you."

He chuckles again. "Damn. I had no idea how much danger I was in until I met her. You kept Nana as your secret

weapon.”

There’s a hint of real fear mixed with the amusement in his tone. “And I’m not afraid to use it if you fuck up again.”

His expression turns serious. “Noted. I love you, Isla.”

Thurston’s lips touch mine, and it’s immediately hot and consuming.

He kisses me hard, his lips slanted on mine as his tongue explores my mouth with skilled, confident strokes.

Our chests are smashed together, and I hold onto his tall, strong body like a lifeline.

“Babe,” I pant, trying to put some distance between us by pushing on his chest. “I love this, but we’re in the library.”

He nips my bottom lip, tightening his hold on me. “I know. Remember that time when we met at the public library?”

I push a little harder, but he doesn’t budge. “Yeah, I was trying to get some books, but you kept talking dirty to me and being so handsy that I was sure we’d end up getting banned.”

He tries to kiss me again, and when I turn my face to the side, he attacks my neck. “After that day, I never looked at a library the same way. Every time I went to the library to study, both at school and in college, I thought about you. I’m lucky I managed to finish my degree, you know?” he says as his open mouth glides down my neck.

“Really?” I squirm as my nipples harden, straining against my bra and the fabric of my blouse.

“Fuck yeah. Try studying with a constant hard-on.”

“Douche.” I snort, trying to escape his hot mouth and wandering hands, which only results in me backing up against the shelf I’m supposed to be restocking. “I bet you had tons of girls dying to take care of your hard-ons and make all your filthy library fantasies come true.”

He comes so close that there’s no more space between our bodies, pushing me fully against the shelf. “Not a fucking chance. You were the star of every single one of my library

fantasies. The only thing that could have possibly made my fantasies hotter was if you were the librarian.” His eyes rove over me, setting me on fire. “Oh, wait. You *are* the librarian, and I’m so fucking hard.”

I can feel that as he grinds his hips, pushing his steely hard-on against me.

I’m so wet that my panties are soaked, and I can feel it dampening my thighs.

“Thurston, stop,” I say, closing my eyes because if I keep looking into those smoldering blue depths, I don’t know what’s going to happen. “I *am* the librarian, which means that I’m at work.”

“There’s no one here,” he argues, sucking on that spot on my neck that makes me lose control.

“There are people downstairs. Someone could come up here to borrow a book, or Rachel could come looking for me,” I argue.

It’s hard to argue with a hot soldier who’s hellbent on kissing every inch of exposed skin he can find. “You could text her to go home early,” he tempts me, sucking on my neck in a way that’s sure to leave a mark.

“Thurston.” I groan as his hands slip under my skirt, skimming up my outer thighs. “If there are still patrons, she can’t kick them out before closing time.”

“Okay.” He takes a step back, and for a second, I think he’s given up on his library fantasy, but I should know that Thurston rarely gives up when he wants something badly enough. “Follow me.”

He grabs my hand, dragging me with him as he weaves around the shelves of fiction books, getting deeper and deeper into the stacks. “No one will see us here,” he says, stopping in the “Fake Memoir” section in the farthest, darkest corner of the second floor.

“Someone could still find us,” I object, but the heat in his blue eyes makes me relent.

“Some of these books are so obscure that they gathered dust without ever being read,” he says, pointing at the heavy volumes with bizarre titles like *Some Like It Hot: Marilyn Monroe’s Secret Wedding With The President*, or *Abraham Lincoln, The Real First Man On The Moon*.

I must admit that Thurston has a point. “There’s something so sad about books that never get read,” I muse.

He cups my jaw, his lips extremely close to mine as he advances until my back touches the shelf. “You’re right, but in all fairness, who would want to read a fake memoir? It doesn’t make any sense. No offense to the authors, but either write a memoir or write fiction.”

I nod, my eyes fixed on his soft lips. My whole body buzzes in anticipation of his next kiss as his minty breath caresses my lips. “Yeah, I guess it’s an odd genre.”

“But the point is,” Thurston drawls as his eyes skim down my body ever so slowly, “that no one will look for us here, and if anyone did, we’d have enough time to avoid getting caught.”

I can’t believe I’m seriously considering doing whatever he’s planning here in the library.

My resolve, however, is fading with every passing second. “Okay. But we need to be quiet, and you have to promise that you’ll stop the second we know someone is coming.”

His lips quirk in a wicked smirk. “Oh, someone will be coming, Tink. I guarantee that.”

I don’t have the time to react to his smart-ass line as, rather than kissing me like I expected, Thurston surprises me by dropping down on his knees.

“What are you—”

Thurston works fast, sliding the fabric of my pencil skirt up until it’s bunched up over my hips and his mouth is on me.

He licks a hot path over the lace of my panties, from the crux of me to the spot that’s been throbbing with need since he started kissing me. “Fuck, you have no idea how much I love

how wet you get for me, Isla,” he growls against my lace covered clit, his breath warm in contrast to the cold, air-conditioned air of the room. The vibration caused by his words makes me gasp as a wave of sensation increases my wetness tenfold.

He slants his mouth over my clit, sucking on it softly, lifting my leg onto his shoulder to open me up and get better access.

I haven't let him do this to me since we saw each other again. “Babe, I—” I object as he stops sucking to use the tip of his tongue to flick my nub, using the thin lace to create a delicious friction.

I don't even know what I'm objecting to, or maybe I do, as my heart beats so fast that I'm afraid it might burst.

This is too much, too intimate, and I don't know if I'm ready for it. I'm not sure if I trust him enough to let him have me this way.

“Please, Isla.” He's the one begging now, his dark blue eyes imploring me as his fingers tighten on my hips. “I promise I'll never hurt you again. I'll never leave you. Never again. Please believe me.”

I really want to believe him, and I know if our love ever stands a chance, I need to take risks and trust him.

“I believe you.” It comes out as a strangled sound as he delivers a long, rather persuasive lick that causes a full body shiver.

I try not to think about what would happen if anyone came up here and saw me pushed against the bookshelf, with my skirt bunched up around my waist and my leg hitched onto Thurston's shoulder as he eats me noisily. My stepbrother, however, isn't the only one making noises. I'm trying my best not to moan too loudly, biting onto my bottom lip as he works on me.

Thurston has definitely changed since we first dated as teenagers, and it isn't just physical changes. He learned a few things on how to get someone off using his mouth.

Not that he wasn't good before, but where my seventeen-year-old boyfriend acted mostly on instinct, the grown-up version of him, Lieutenant LeCroy, definitely knows what he's doing.

The feeling of his mouth on me is exquisite torture as he sucks on my clit almost to the point of it being painful, but then he flicks his tongue on it to soothe and tease.

He works me to the edge quickly, and I close my eyes when I'm so close to the edge that all my muscles have tensed up, aching for just a little more.

"Isla, look at me," he orders with that skilled, wicked mouth still on me. "Look at me when you come."

Who am I to disobey his hot orders?

The way he's looking at me and the soft, passionate bite he gives my throbbing clit—with barely a graze of his perfect teeth—are my undoing.

"Oh my god." I gasp as I snap.

The first wave of bliss washes over me, so powerful that it catches me by surprise.

Thurston's strong hands hold me still as I ride every second of my orgasm, his mouth relentless until I become too sensitive and I beg him to stop.

"Do you have any idea how fucking hot you are when you come on my tongue?" he growls, standing up and seizing my lips in a hot, messy kiss.

His lips are hot and swollen from the friction with the lace of my panties, and I can taste myself when his tongue slips inside my mouth.

Thurston's body is pressed against mine, pushing me flush against the shelf. He's so hard in his ACU pants, and when he thrusts his hips to make me feel how much I affect him, I decide that I want more. I *need* more.

"I want you, babe." I break the kiss and attempt to turn around to lean against the shelf and offer him my behind.

“I want you too, but not like that, please, Isla,” he pleads, keeping me pinned in place as his hands tighten on my hips. “Every time you and I have been together since we met again, you’ve insisted on taking me from behind, or you rode me and gave me your back. I fucking love to look at your ass, but please, I need to look at you while I’m inside you. I need to see that there’s hope for us. I know I’m asking a lot, but I want forever with you. Please show me that and let me look at you while I fuck you. Let me make love to you, Tinkerbell.”

Holy shit.

He is asking a lot.

I know that he really means it when he says that he’ll never betray me again, and I want to trust him.

There’s still a kernel of fear lodged in that corner of my heart that’s covered in scar tissue.

If I give him this right now, if I let him fuck me against the wall the same way he did on that last night, then that means I’m all in.

Can I let him destroy that last wall I carefully erected around my heart? Can I truly let him have me without protection?

He has the power to mortally wound me, but only I have the power to let him repair, once and for all, what he broke all those years ago.

Only I can make myself whole again, but I need his help.

“Yes,” I whisper, pulling him closer for a deep, slow kiss as my fingers work on the tan belt around his ACU pants.

“I love you, Isla,” he says against my lips as I pull his erection out of the opening of his pants, stroking his thick, hard shaft.

“I love you too,” I say, looking into the dark blue depths of his eyes. “Don’t ever leave me again, Thurston.” It’s an order and a plea, a wish and a prayer.

“I couldn’t ever leave you. I’ve been lost this whole time without you. There are a lot of things I don’t know in life, but

I know that I can't live unless I have your love."

I believe him.

For real this time.

Thurston's fingers run over my lace covered slit, and I'm immediately throbbing again.

"I need you, babe." I pant as he pushes the fabric of my panties to the side, lining himself up with my entrance.

"Fuck, have I ever told you how much I love how wet you always are for me?"

I know the question is totally rhetorical, and all I offer is a moan of encouragement.

"I'm home now," he growls as he lifts me by the backs of my thighs, pushing himself inside me with one single thrust. "You're mine."

Any possible answer I might have had is swallowed by the way he takes my mouth, kissing me as he gives me time to adjust to his invasion.

"Oh!" I gasp against his mouth when his first thrust sends a wave of electric pleasure up my spine.

His second thrust makes me tighten my thighs around his hips as my inner walls contract around his thick, hard shaft.

The feeling of him is so perfect without any barriers between us that I realize that my orgasm is already building. "I'm so close, Thurston." I moan, biting his earlobe. "So, so close."

"Thank fuck," he mutters, pounding into me harder and harder. "Because you feel too fucking perfect. So tight, so wet for me. You're going to make me lose it."

The next few snaps of his hips are hard and fast, his cock hardening each time he plunges into me to the hilt.

He sets a punishing rhythm, and my body craves every inch of him, spasming in sync with his movements.

“Don’t stop, baby, please,” I beg as I feel that familiar, pleasurable tingle that’s always a telltale sign of the end.

“Not in a million years.” He punctuates his promise with a few jabs of his hips as he surges into me so hard that the shelf behind us shakes.

I come with a desperate gasp, squeezing him tight as the intense pleasure sweeps me under. I’m so wet that I feel it running down my thighs, all the way down to my knees, and I realize that I’m squirting again.

“Isla, I’m going to come,” he warns me, squeezing my buttocks so hard that I’m sure he’ll leave a bruise.

But I don’t care. I want to feel him lose himself in me the same way I’m lost in him.

I know he’s close to his breaking point when I feel the head of his cock harden and swell, rubbing my inner walls in a way that sends new shocks of bliss all over my body.

The first spurt of warmth makes him bite into my neck in an effort to keep from crying out.

His hips pump faster and harder, nailing me against the bookshelf as he floods me with his hot, liquid pleasure.

“God, I fucking love you so much,” he says with his face still buried in the crook of my neck as he’s buried deep inside me.

“Fucking is definitely the keyword here.” I giggle, teasing him.

He lifts his face to look into my eyes, a defiant smile on his soft, sexy lips. “You have such a smart mouth. It’s one of the things that has always driven me crazy but that I also love the most about you, my hot little Tinkerbell.”

I giggle. “Good, because as you know, it’s pretty hard to shut me up.”

“Oh, I could think of a very good way to keep your mouth too full to talk,” he challenges with a wicked glint in his dark blue eyes.

“Babe, put me down.”

His hands tighten on the backs of my thighs. “No can do. You feel too good, and I’m not walking away this time. I might actually be up for round two if you give me five sec—”

“No, babe! Put me down,” I whisper-yell, pushing on his strong chest. “I think someone’s coming up here.”

He freezes in place as we both strain to listen, and sure enough, footsteps sound on the metal staircase that connects the two floors of the library.

“Shit, you’re right.” He chuckles, finally putting me back onto my feet.

I frantically push down my skirt and straighten my blouse as I run trembling fingers through my hair.

“How do I look?” I ask him, glaring at him as he lazily tucks himself back in without one damn hair out of place. The only sign of our activities on him is the redness around his swollen lips.

“You look sexy.” He grins.

“Seriously.” I huff, because I’m sure that must be code for I look like a mess.

“Isla?”

We hear Rachel’s voice a few moments before she turns the corner, and I give my hair another hopeless combing, knowing that I’m probably just making things worse.

“Hey, Rach.” I smile, doing my best to ignore the rush of heat that’s already creeping up my neck. “Everything okay?”

My colleague’s eyes go from me to Thurston before she clears her throat. “Yeah, everything is fine. There’s no one downstairs so I was about to shut down the computers when I heard a loud noise coming from up here, and I came to check that you hadn’t fallen off the ladder while reshelving.”

Shit. We weren’t being as quiet as we thought. I open my mouth, trying to think fast and come up with an explanation, but Thurston is quicker than me. “Thank you for checking,

Rachel.” He smiles. “I was helping Isla, and I dropped a couple of books. I was making fun of her for being small, and I guess I miscalculated my height. I wanted to prove that I could reach the top shelf without the ladder and failed. I just finished putting everything back.”

If Rachel notices the lack of a ladder in this section, she chooses not to point it out. The only hint that we’re totally busted is that she comments on the peculiar choice of our location. “Glad no one got hurt, Lieutenant, and thank you for giving Isla a hand. What book were you reshelving here? I don’t think I’ve seen anything being borrowed from this section since I started here.”

Thurston doesn’t let her words embarrass him. “No? People don’t know what they are missing. I was actually returning *Me and The Queen: Memoir of a Royal Corgi*.”

Rachel’s smile tells me that the gig is definitely up. “Really? Is it any good.”

“It was a riveting read, I definitely recommend it,” Thurston says with a smile. “Fake Memoir is definitely the most underrated section of this whole library. I’m planning on checking out many other titles.” His blue eyes are fixed on me as he says that.

“I’ll definitely have to try some of these titles if they are so entertaining then. Thank you for the recommendation, Lieutenant.” She smiles. “Since everything is fine here, I’m going to go, if it’s okay with you, Isla.”

I nod, relaxing only when the library technician walks out of sight.

“Let’s go too, babe,” I say to Thurston, still trying to overcome the embarrassment of almost being caught having sex with him in a public place.

“Hey, Tink. What’s up? Are you okay?” he asks, pulling on my hand just before I walk out of the fiction room.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just glad that Rachel didn’t call us out on what we were really doing. I can’t imagine what she must think of me, especially because Leith let the news of our

engagement slip in front of her earlier, and now she practically caught me red-handed with my fiancé's brother."

Thurston doesn't look worried about it. "Rachel looks like a cool chick, and if she asks any questions about why you were with me, I can definitely help her with another book recommendation."

I stop at the top of the stairs, turning around to look at Thurston. "A book rec? What do you mean?"

He winks at me, the shameless asshole. "I was having a bit of trouble wrapping my head around this sharing situation on a long-term basis, and Oren passed me a series of books he got from you."

I'm confused for a second. "Really? What books?"

"*Perfect For Them*. You got those at the library all those years ago, remember?"

I narrow my eyes. "Ah, that's where my copies are! That's one of my favorite series, and after borrowing them from the library, I decided to purchase my own copies. He must have stolen them when we were going through Nana's house to decide what needed to go in the yard sale. I'm glad I haven't lost them."

Thurston chuckles. "Well, shit, I'm relieved those were your own copies. Imagine the late fee if you hadn't returned them to Star Cove Public Library after six years."

I shudder. "Oh my god, never! I'm a librarian, and not returning a book is one of the worst things I can think of."



9.

Clear And Present Danger

Isla



“LEITH?” I CALL OUT, poking my head into the living room.

There’s no sign of my fiancé, and I pull my phone out of the pocket of my athletic leggings to check for texts.

“Leith is at HQ with your father, darling.”

I jump and drop my phone, a little startled when Katie’s voice comes from behind me.

“Oh, is he? Thank you. I was waiting to go on a run with him, but I guess it’s canceled.”

My stepmother and mother-in-law to be nod. “Yeah, you know tomorrow is the last day of the AFTB conference, right? We got word last night at dinner that this bigwig, four-star general from the Pentagon is planning to come to the closing ceremony and the final dinner tomorrow night. He’s the head of the commission for base expansions, and he wants to take this chance to observe the transition of JOB Star Cove from a small base to a post the size of Fort Bliss. As you know, that’s still a work in progress, and it would mean a lot for your father’s career if the mission was seen as proceeding successfully by his superiors, so he called up all the officers and the high-ranking NCOs to make sure that we impress the general.”

It makes sense. “So no PT today, I guess?”

Katie nods. “Yeah, between the conference, the general’s visit, and the company’s normal operation, the next couple of days will be extremely busy, and I guess PT is the first thing that gets scrapped on days like these. But what are you doing

up so early?" she asks, looking at the sky that should just be losing the dark colors of night in favor of the pretty pastel hues of dawn. "It's barely five."

I point at my running outfit. "Leith is still doing reduced PT after they took his cast off, and I decided to go running with him rather than my usual morning swim."

"Nice idea," she replies. "I'm not saying that you have to get up early with your soldier every day, but I did it our entire marriage with my late husband, and I like having breakfast ready here at the house or bringing it to your father's office every day. It's our thing, and with him always working such long hours, sometimes it's the only quality time we get together until the weekend."

I'm grateful for Katie's constant support of Dad. My mother never would have even fathomed getting up at the crack of dawn to have breakfast with Dad. She actually used to encourage him to shower at the company's HQ, complaining that no matter how quiet Dad tried to be, he would always disturb her sleep by making too much noise when he came home after PT.

"Yeah, I might try to do this breakfast thing too once Leith and I are married. I'm not so sure I can keep up PT once he's off the reduced program. I'm really not a runner."

Katie smiles. "So what are you going to do then? Go back to bed?"

I shrug. "I don't think so. I'm awake now, and I doubt I'd be able to fall back asleep. I might knock on Oren's door and see if he'll promise to go a little slower and do PT with him. He runs every day, so I'm sure if he isn't awake, he'll be getting up soon."

My stepmother shakes her head. "Oren is already out. Doug tasked him with going to DFAC with Sergeant Turner and fetching breakfast for all the officers."

"Oh." I'm a little disappointed to learn that my hot sergeant isn't home. I was hoping to lure him into the shower with me after running, but obviously I don't say that to my

stepmother. “I guess I might do some reading then and go for my usual swim later.”

“If you want some company, why don’t we go running together? I was about to go for a run around the hill.”

I just now notice that Katie is wearing black leggings and a gray and teal athletic crop top, and that her long, dark hair is up in a ponytail.

“Hmm, I—”

The words “no, thanks” are on the tip of my tongue, but I end up nodding as she smiles expectantly.

I’ve been giving Katie a wide berth since her reaction after the whole “milk and cow” incident.

She couldn’t have made it clearer that she disapproved of any romantic involvement between Thurston and me, and after the way she initially tried to push Joe on me, I feel no shame in admitting that I flat-out avoided her.

I know she doesn’t hate me, and her disapproval is just motivated by fear of repercussions on her marriage and Thurston’s career, but I’ve never been a good liar, and I don’t know how to act when I not only didn’t stay away from Thurston, but I also fell in love with Oren and Leith.

I was actually really worried about what she would say once Dad told her about Leith and me.

So far, however, her only reaction to the news has been a special family breakfast where she congratulated us on the happy news and offered her help with any wedding plans we might have.

Since that day at breakfast, I’ve put even more effort into avoiding her, just in case that was a front she put on for Dad’s sake.

“Come on, let’s go running. I could really do with some company,” she encourages me. “You have no idea how many times I’ve tried to convince Nellie to come running with me, or even Lisa Turner, but no one around here seems to care

about staying fit. Plus, your father asked me to stick with you until one of the guys can come back from HQ.”

“I guess that settles it then,” I say, putting on my bravest smile. I don’t tell her that I really hate running and I was just going with Leith because he’s nice enough to slow to a gentle jog and we end up talking more than we run.

I doubt that Katie doesn’t put one hundred percent into her exercise routine, at least if I have to judge by her enviable figure.

With her tall, slender, and toned body, her long dark hair, and the intense dark blue eyes she passed onto her sons, I understand how she attracted Dad so quickly.

She’s also kind and witty—when she doesn’t catch her stepdaughter and eldest son making out in the bathroom.

Luckily for me, Katie must have realized that I’m not really a runner, because as we begin running slightly downhill toward Major Peters’ house, she keeps a very leisurely pace.

I run slightly behind her, relieved that she seems to be concentrating on the exercise and slightly hypnotized by the way her ponytail swings from side to side in sync with her slightly bouncy gait.

I’m so enthralled with watching the rhythmic movement of her dark hair that I don’t notice she has stopped, and I almost crash into her.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I say, taking a step back, but I freeze in place at the hard look in her eyes.

“Isla, I’ve asked the boys, but they are uncharacteristically tight lipped,” she starts. “What in the world is going on?”

“I—what do you mean?” I stutter.

She takes a deep breath, bracing her hands on her thighs and leaning slightly forward as if she were winded. “I thought I was clear a few weeks ago when I told you that your father and I were hoping to blend our families into one. I asked you and Thurston to put an end to whatever it was that the two of you were doing.” Her tone is calm, but the fact that she isn’t

raising her voice doesn't mean that she isn't angry. "And your response to that is to start something with Leith?"

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. I really don't know what to say.

I don't want to lie, but at the same time, I can't admit to what's going on between the guys and me. Not yet at least. Maybe not ever.

I push that awareness to a corner of my mind to examine later, because right now, I have no time to dwell on the implications of the choices my stepbrothers and I made. I have to deal with Katie, who's clearly waiting for an answer.

"I—"

"My three boys have always been very close," she says, keeping her gaze on me. "They've only ever had each other with the constant moves dictated by military life. You should understand that better than anyone. I've spoken to Leith, and he's head over heels for you, Isla. He can't wait to marry you, and he jumped off a literal cliff for you, for fuck's sake!"

I jump at her choice of words. It's the first time I've ever heard Katie use that kind of language.

"I love Leith with all my heart," is all I can offer, because it's true.

"Do you?" Her tone is clipped as she crosses her arms over her chest. "Isla, you haven't known my sons for a long time. Well, maybe that isn't true in Thurston's case, but let me tell you something about Leith. When my late husband and I were called and asked if we could offer him temporary shelter after his father killed his mother in front of him—"

Her voice hitches in her throat, and I know she's trying to keep herself from crying.

"Katie, I—"

"That night," she continues, "Leith followed us home without saying a word. I can't even imagine how scary it must have been for that sweet, intelligent, eight-year-old boy to hide under a table while his father was stabbing his mother to

death. There was no telling what would have happened to him if the neighbors hadn't called the MPs because of the noise. It took me one hour to coax him out from under that table, Isla. Forensic had to wait until then to examine the crime scene. We almost had to drag him into our car. He was in such deep shock that he wouldn't talk or move, and do you know what changed that? What made him talk again? His brothers."

I nod, feeling tears stinging behind my eyelids. "I know." My voice is barely above a whisper. "Leith told me that."

Katie shakes her head. "He did? Then you'll know how much he loves his brothers, how close he is to them. You probably also know how important loyalty is to Leith. Everyone in his life constantly failed him until he came home with us."

The love Katie has for her sons is as clear as day, and I wish I could explain. I wish I could tell her how much I love each of her sons and how I've never lied to them about anything. I know that if I came clean about the relationship I have with my stepbrothers, she wouldn't understand. "I would never do anything to hurt Leith. All I want is to love him and make him happy." That much, at least, is the truth.

"What about Thurston?" she bites out. "I can't believe that you would try to come between my sons. I see the way Thurston looks at you, Isla! Whatever there was between the two of you, it's obvious that he hasn't forgotten you. What do you think is going to happen when Leith realizes that you're sleeping with Thurston behind his back?"

Loud, sudden thunder makes me jump, scaring me out of my skin.

I lift my face to look at the dark, ominous clouds that have amassed in the dawn sky, plunging us back into darkness. I hadn't noticed how dark it was getting and how the wind is picking up speed, whooshing around us and touching my skin with icy tendrils.

"Katie, I'm not—"

She shakes her head. “I know my sons, Isla. Thurston is still in love with you, and even if you aren’t cheating on Leith with him, what do you think seeing you with his brother will do to him? To their relationship?”

I rub my face with my hand. If I told her the truth, she would never approve. Hell, she probably wouldn’t even believe me.

“I wish that Jessica wasn’t useless,” she gripes. “If she could find a way to get back together with Thurston, at least —”

Another thunderclap sounds close to us, probably on the beach, accompanied by a violent gust of wind.

The shrubs directly behind my stepmother rustle noisily. “Did you hear that?” she asks nervously, looking from side to side. “Is there anyone there?” she calls, raising her voice, her gaze intent on the shrubs and trees that line the perimeter of Major Peters’ house.

The foliage behind her rustles in response as a shudder works its way down my spine. “I don’t know. It’s hard to see anything since it’s getting so dark,” I reply, feeling the hair on my arms rise.

“Let’s run back home,” Katie decides, giving my forearm a squeeze. “I have the feeling that we aren’t alone, and it’s about to start raining anyway.”

As if to confirm her statement, the first drop of rain falls on the paved road right in front of us.

The air is charged with electricity and saturated with the earthy smell of rain mixed with the scent of the sea and wet sand.

Another rustle coming from the vegetation around us convinces me to get a move on as the drops of rain begin falling heavily on the ground.

I run next to Katie, overtaking her as we climb back up the hill to the commander’s quarters, my eyes trained on the ground that’s becoming slippery as the rain increases in strength and frequency.

“Ah!”

I turn around to look at Katie, but I can't see her.

“Katie!” I call as the rumble of more thunder and the roaring sound of the rain drowns my voice and impairs the visibility to almost nothing. “Katie!” I call again, now positively scared.

What should I do?

My sense of self-preservation tells me that something is seriously wrong and I should run to the house, lock myself in my room, and call Dad and the MPs.

I can't leave without Katie though.

“Katie!”

I strain my ears when I think I hear another scream, but the storm is so furious, with strong winds, pelting rain, and thunder, that I can't be sure.

“Shit,” I mutter, shivering because the temperature has rapidly dropped to the point that it doesn't even feel like summer anymore.

I spot movement to the side that's farther from the road, where a tall hedge borders the beginning of our quarters.

I take a couple of hesitant steps toward the noise, knowing deep in my bones that it's the stupidest thing I could do.

I swear to God I'll never laugh again when someone leaves the group in a horror movie to walk right into the hands of the killer.

I've always rolled my eyes at that, chalking it up to sloppy writing, but now I get it.

I can't run to safety without Katie. What would I say to Dad and the guys if something happened to her, and I didn't even try to help?

“Katie, where are you?” I yell, cupping my hands around my mouth as if that could actually make a difference.

“Isla!”

It's her.

I lift my head to look at the dark gray clouds in silent gratitude and then walk toward the hedge that separates the perimeters of our property from the maritime pines that cover the unbuilt part of the hill.

The voice came from the outer side of the edge, where bushes and high grass cover the ground.

"Oh my god, Katie!" I rush to my stepmother when I spot her crumpled on the ground on her hands and knees. "Are you all right?"

Yeah, I know. She obviously isn't all right, but I'm praying with all that I've got that she is.

"You're bleeding!" I gasp when she lifts her head, and I notice a large gash on one of her temples. "Did you fall?" I ask her, taking in the scratches on her arms and legs.

"Help me up, quick." She pants. "I was grabbed and hit with something hard. I almost lost consciousness, and they ran. They might be looking for you. They are still out there."

I help her back up onto her feet, wrapping my arm around her trim waist to help her stay upright. "Who is they?"

She shudders. "I don't know, it happened so quickly, and it's hard to see anything. They were wearing gloves and tan boots. Probably ACU pants."

Fuck. That sounds exactly like the person who attacked me more than once. "Let's get you inside. We need to look at your head, you're bleeding."

"We need to get away, fast. Someone is out there. Let's get in the car and drive to HQ. We'll be safe there," she says, taking a tentative step with my help.

Maybe she's right. Last time, my stalker had managed to break into the house, so what if they are waiting for us inside?

"Okay. My car is in the garage."

"Mine too," she says, hobbling on unsteady feet.

“Katie.” We stop in front of the closed garage door. “Wait here, I’m going to go inside through the front door and—”

“You shouldn’t,” she disagrees.

“I have no choice. I left my keys inside.”

She shakes her head. “Never leave the house without your keys, Isla. It’s basic safety.” She maneuvers to extract a key ring with her car and house keys. “I always have a spare on me wherever I go.”

I press the button to the garage door fob and wait anxiously as the double door slides up. “Let’s get inside.” I exhale, relieved that we’ll at least be out of the furious lashes of the rain.

“Oh no!” we exclaim in unison at the devastation that awaits us in the garage. “Someone must have been in the house.”

There’s no other possibility. Both my car and Katie’s have smashed windshields, and all the tires have been slashed.

I don’t know what to do. Panic tightens its grip around my throat. We aren’t safe here, and we clearly aren’t safe outside.

Whatever I do, I can’t leave Katie alone.

“Okay,” I murmur, encouraging Katie to lean against the side of my car. “What would Dad and the guys do?”

Katie might have a concussion, because her blue eyes look slightly unfocused as she looks at me.

“They’d say to secure the perimeter first,” I offer. “If there’s someone who wants to harm us out there or inside the house, then we need to get to safety. It’s more than obvious that we can’t outrun them with you in this condition.”

I hand her the keys.

“At least we’re alone in here. Lower the garage door while I lock the door that connects the garage to the rest of the house. Once we’re secure in here, I’ll call Dad. There wasn’t anyone in front of the house, but there should be MPs

guarding both access points. We'll stay here until either one of our soldiers or the MPs come to get us."

"Okay." Katie nods.

I rush to flip the lock on the door that leads into the kitchen from the garage. Standing with my back to the door, I draw comfort from the solid wood behind me as I dial Dad's number.

My eyes are fixed on the garage door that's coming down ever so slowly.

"Come on, Dad. Pick up," I pray under my breath as the phone rings and then goes to voice mail. "Nothing. He must be in that meeting. Let's try Oren," I decide, thinking that if the meeting is for officers and the higher enlisted, then hopefully Oren is being kept on standby in case Dad needs something or he's catching up with paperwork in his office.

"Shit!"

The power in the garage goes out, leaving us in the dark and, most importantly, leaving the garage door lowered to chest level.

I run to my stepmother, handing her my phone. "Call Oren. I'll lower the door manually."

I jump to grab the handle on the inside of the door, freezing in place when a pair of ACU pants and muddy, tan boots appear in front of me.

I scream, losing my grip on the handle and landing on my butt on the hard concrete of the garage floor. I scoot backwards, shuffling on my hands and feet, feeling the rough floor scratch my palms, but I can barely feel the pain, because panic has me in such a tight grip that I'm struggling to breathe.

"Isla, what's going on?" Jessica's voice reaches me from the other side of the door. "Are you okay?"

She pushes the door up and enters the garage. "Katie!" she exclaims, looking at my stepmother in the scarce light that comes from outside where the rain is still falling with unprecedented violence. "What's going on here?"

I take in her ACUs, her boots, and the gloves on her hands. “What—what are you doing here?” I ask, turning to look at Katie behind me with a silent question in my eyes—was it Jessica who grabbed her outside earlier?

My stepmother is staring at Thurston’s ex-fiancée with a dazed look in her blue eyes, and by the way she’s trembling slightly, I suspect she might be in shock.

“I was here on guard duty,” Lieutenant Bowman explains. “We did a quick check of the perimeter with my colleague who was at the back of the house, and then I saw you and Katie coming into the garage.” Her eyes drift behind me to Katie. “Are you all right, ma’am?”

I answer in her stead. “No, she isn’t all right. Someone grabbed her out there while we were running.”

I explain what happened and how we were trying to get ahold of Dad but he didn’t answer his phone. “I was about to try Oren, but I wanted to secure the garage first. Someone vandalized our cars while we were out running, and we don’t know if anyone is in the house.”

Jessica nods. “Stay here. If that’s the case, then we need reinforcements. Let me call my command.”

The noise of footsteps distracts her as she’s about to connect the call.

“Lieutenant, the outer perimeter of the property is secure.” Another MP, a sergeant, comes running up, stepping inside the garage to get out from the torrential rain.

He’s dressed exactly like Jessica in standard ACUs, tan boots, and gloves.

I look at him, making a mental note of his name—Morales.

Sergeant Morales is about six feet tall, of slender build, and fits the description of my and Katie’s assailant, but so does a huge number of soldiers on post.

The thought hits me for the first time that I’ve been assuming that the person who’s been stalking me and tried to

kill me in at least two separate occasions is a man. But all I've ever seen of "him" is his ACU pants and tan boots.

At the lighthouse, the face of the person who attacked me was totally covered by a balaclava.

I take a step backwards, my mind reeling with the thought that Jessica appeared on post the morning after Connie's death and my attack at the library.

I observe her more carefully. Could she be the person who's been tormenting me? She's tall, maybe not quite six feet, but it's not like I took exact measurements of my attacker.

The timing of her arrival is suspicious, and while I can't think of what her possible motive for killing Connie could be, it's more than obvious that she sees me as the only obstacle to a reconciliation between her and Thurston.

I file that thought away for later, distracted by the noise of vehicles stopping in our driveway.

"Isla! Mom!" Oren bursts into the garage, his blue eyes assessing me before immediately going to his mother. "Are you hurt?" he asks, taking a step toward me.

I look at him, trying to plead with my eyes not to touch me. The last thing we need is to make Katie suspicious about the nature of our relationship too. "I'm fine, Oren. Just a little shaken. But someone grabbed Katie while we were running. She might need medical attention."

Oren runs to his mother's side, kneeling next to her. "Did you see who did this to you?" he asks, touching the side of Katie's face with gentle fingers.

As Katie explains what happened, Dad, Thurston, and Leith arrive in the double garage that's now starting to look pretty crowded.

"Darling!" Dad runs to Katie's other side. "Let's go," he says, scooping her up into his arms. "We need to take you to the hospital."

At the same time, Thurston and Leith come to check on me, the latter taking me into his arms. "Baby, are you okay?"

I accept the soft kiss he places on my lips, leaning against his strong chest as the adrenaline of the last hour leaves my body and I start feeling extremely tired. “I’m fine, Leith.”

He cups my face with his hands. “We need to get away from here. I’m not going to stand here waiting for something else to happen to you. I’m going to ask for a transfer. We’ll get married, and we’ll get as far from Star Cove as the army will allow us. Maybe Hawaii or Germany.”

I don’t respond, my eyes tracking the way Jessica is looking at me and my stepbrother.

“Leith and Isla are engaged,” Thurston tells his ex.

“Oh my god, congratulations! That’s amazing news!” Her expression changes from a frown to a beaming smile.

Yeah, right.

It doesn’t take a genius to work out that she thinks that my engagement with Leith puts me out of the picture and increases her chances of getting back together with Thurston.

I don’t dwell on the little kernel of insecurity that forms in a corner of my mind, instead turning to listen to Dad and Katie who are having a disagreement.

“No, I don’t need to go to the hospital, Doug. It’s nothing that a little bit of rubbing alcohol, a Band-Aid, and an aspirin won’t fix. I have too much to do to waste time at the hospital with the AFTB closing dinner tonight.”

Dad’s tone is firm, but his gaze is soft as he looks at his wife. “Darling, you took a hit to the head. You might be concussed, and I’m not taking chances with the woman I love. Please, let me take you to the hospital. I’ll delegate all the workload for the remainder of the morning to Major Peters, and I’ll come to the hospital with you—”

The way he openly expresses his love in front of us speaks volumes about the depths of his feelings for his new wife. Dad has never been so expressive with his feelings. I’ve never doubted that he cares about me, but I can count on one hand the times he said “I love you” to me or my mom, at least in front of other people.

The guys all chime in, expressing their own concern for their mother.

“Enough. All of you,” Katie says, rubbing her forehead with a trembling hand. “Your nagging is making my headache worse.”

“Mom, please. Doug is right. You can’t be so cavalier with a head injury,” Leith intervenes. “What would you have told me to do if I had refused to go to the hospital after the lighthouse?”

Katie’s gaze softens as she looks at him. “I get it. But I’m muddy and tired and I—”

“Darling, how about a compromise?” Dad offers. “I have Major Jin’s personal number. I can ask him to come by in about one hour. That should give you some time to clean up. If he says you’re okay, I promise the boys and I will stop nagging you, but if the doctor says you need a scan or an X-ray or anything else, then you’ll let me take you to the hospital. Do we have a deal?”

One of the qualities that makes Dad an excellent leader is his knack for persuasion and skills as a negotiator.

“Okay,” Katie finally relents. “But I might need some help to get in the shower.”

Dad immediately offers his help, but Katie shakes her head. “Don’t worry, handsome. Go make sure that Bradley has everything under control and ready for tonight. Isla, do you mind coming upstairs with me?”

I’m surprised that my stepmother is asking for my help, but I wrap one arm around her waist and walk her out of the garage and up the stairs.

“I’ve got it from here,” she assures me once we enter the master bedroom. “I only wanted to say something to you, Isla. In private.”

I feel dread collecting in the pit of my stomach as I meet her gaze.

“I wanted to thank you for worrying about my safety out there. You could have run to the house, but you kept looking for me.”

I don't know what to say. “Don't mention it. It's not like I could leave you out there in the storm.”

She sighs. “Yeah, I suppose. But still. Look, I want to make it clear that I have no problem with you. I think you're a lovely girl. I don't know what exactly is going on between you and my sons, and I guess that Thurston is right to be mad at me because of my constant meddling. You'll understand how I feel when you're a mother too. All I want is to see my sons happy and fulfilled in life, so I'm going to stay out of their business like they want. I have one request for you though.”

“What is it?” I ask her warily.

“Thurston is still in love with you, and Leith is obviously smitten. Whatever happens, please don't hurt them, and try your best not to come between them. If one of them will have to deal with rejection from the woman he loves, he'll need both his brothers by his side.”



10.

Important Decisions

Oren



THE NCO CLUB HAS BECOME a favorite hangout spot for me and my brothers.

This time, as Leith and Thurston sit at the booth I'm occupying, I have beer delivered before they even sit down.

"And here are your fried pickles and jalapeño poppers, Sergeant LeCroy." Lauren smiles, serving the food I ordered.

"I seriously don't understand how you stay in the shape you do, dude," Thurston says, looking at the fried food as if it could leap out of the basket and cling to his hips just from thinking about eating it.

"That's why I do PT every day, no matter what," I say, popping a popper into my mouth and moaning at the gooey, melty goodness of the cheese inside. "You prefer to eat salad, while I'd rather double up on PT and eat what I want. Plus, Isla loves fried pickles and jalapeño poppers too."

My eldest brother shakes his head. "I'm just surprised that you aren't both five hundred pounds."

"Oh, believe me, aside from PT, Isla and I have better ways to work off the extra calories," I say with a dark chuckle.

Before Thurston can react to my provocation, Leith intervenes, dipping a fried pickle into one of the little cups of ranch on the side of the basket. "I could totally get behind that way of working off the extra calories."

I bark out a laugh. "Or in front of it."

Leith joins me, but Thurston doesn't look amused. "Stop being so crass. You especially." He looks at Leith. "It's your

fiancée you two are talking about.”

“Lighten up, dude!” I clap him on a shoulder. “Isla would be the first one to joke about it. If this thing between the four of us has one chance in hell to work, then we should be able to talk about her between us.”

Leith agrees. “Yeah. But we should ask Isla before sharing certain things. She knows it isn’t about bragging, but I want to make sure she’s totally comfortable with us sharing intimate details of each of our relationships with her. Let’s just say that weekend was one I’m going to remember forever.” He wipes his fingers on a napkin, pointing at the food I ordered. “And these are delicious, T. You’re seriously missing out.”

Thurston is finally persuaded to try the food, and I can’t hide a satisfied smirk when he admits that it’s worth running a couple of extra miles here and there.

“So,” I say, as the empty baskets are cleared and new beers are set in front of us. “Why did you want to talk to us, Leith? I love having a beer and a bite to eat with my brothers, but I’m sure that’s not why you asked us to meet you here.”

He takes a sip of his beer, nodding before he explains, “Yeah, well, there are two things I wanted to talk about. First off, I’ve been shopping for a ring for Isla, and since we decided that we’re all with her, I was wondering if you two wanted to weigh in on the options I narrowed down. I want to do a proper proposal, and I thought that we could all drop down on one knee.”

Thurston considers it. “Yeah, I mean, that would be nice, but it’s not like we can all marry her, right?”

Leith shrugs. “I’m thinking beyond the piece of paper that makes it legal. Her last name is going to be LeCroy anyway, and if we’re all in this together—”

“I like it,” I decide. “I’d love to take a look at what you’re thinking she would love, and maybe if T and I chip in, we could get her something really beautiful.”

Leith takes out his phone to show us some pictures of stunning diamond rings. “That’s up to you. I didn’t ask you

guys because I wanted money. And after all, I make captain's pay now, so I should pay for a larger share anyway."

We argue back and forth about what proportion we should contribute to the engagement ring, but surprisingly, it isn't like when we were kids. Thurston and I insist on paying an equal share, since despite Leith officially getting married to her, this relationship is only going to work as long as we're all equal.

We settle on paying equal shares and choose a beautiful two carat brilliant cut diamond set in a plain, white gold band.

"Do you know her ring size?" I ask.

Leith chuckles. "Yeah. I stole her favorite custom ring, the one she likes wearing every day. I took it to the jewelry store here on post and got it measured."

Thurston shakes his head. "Dude. This morning she was going crazy looking for it. She thought she took it off at work while washing her hands and left it in the library's bathroom."

Leith shrugs. "I already put it back on her nightstand. I could have taken her with me to the store, but I wanted to surprise her."

"Did you guys talk about a date for the wedding?"

Leith explains, "Not yet, but Doug wants it to be soon so that we don't give people the opportunity to gossip. He wanted to ask Mom if she minds turning the ball for their wedding celebration into a joint thing."

"But that's in two weeks!" I gasp. "Plus, I don't know if Mom is going to be happy to share the spotlight with Isla. She kept going on about how her and Dad didn't get a wedding, and this was her chance to at least have the party she always wanted. She was already sad that Doug decided to postpone it after..." I stop. I don't need to say the words "after Connie" out loud.

Leith sighs. "If Mom says no, we might elope and then have a small reception afterwards, but I want Isla to have a proper wedding ceremony."

I like the fact that Leith is thinking about Isla's happiness. "I think you're right. Even though in this day and age, women know that they don't need a man to be happy and feel accomplished, I think it's still every girl's dream to walk down the aisle in a beautiful dress, looking like a princess—"

I'm getting so carried away, imagining Isla in a white dress with a long train and a veil covering her perfect face as she walks down the aisle on her father's arm, that I don't think my brothers will ever let me live this down.

"Aww." Thurston chuckles. "So you don't watch girlie movies and read romance novels just to get more pussy, huh?"

I narrow my eyes, looking at my older brother. "No, I don't. There's nothing wrong with enjoying a good love story. And you can't argue that Isla wouldn't look like a dream in a wedding dress."

"I'm not arguing with that," Thurston snipes. "But you should see the twinkle in your eyes when you say that. I can't help but imagine *you* in a long gown and a veil."

I laugh. "You're such a dipshit. Is it that hard to believe that I'm genuinely into romance?"

Thurston cackles, amused at my reaction. "Leith, help me out here. Tell him that he's just a giant suck up with all this 'I'm in touch with my feminine side' bullshit."

Leith snickers, obviously amused by our argument.

"Ha." I glare at him, but there's no heat in it, and we're both trying not to laugh. Bickering and ribbing are how the three of us have always resolved things. "My softer side wasn't so funny when I coached you on how to ace your first meeting with Nana and when I let you borrow the books I found in Isla's old room."

He stops laughing and wraps one arm around my shoulders. "You know I was just messing with you, Oren. I actually don't think Isla and I would be in the good place we're at right now without your help. Thank you, little brother."

I laugh at the “little brother” comment. I haven’t been smaller than Thurston or Leith since the eighth grade. “You’re welcome, asshole. Just know that if you ever hurt Isla again, I’ll use my powers for evil rather than for good. I know you love her, but you’ve used your one and only ‘get out of jail free’ card. Are we clear?”

Thurston nods. “Crystal. I learned my lesson, believe me. I was young and stupid, and now I know without a shadow of a doubt that I can’t live without Isla, so much so that I’m crazy enough to accept that you and Leith are part of this relationship.”

I hug him. “I love you, T.”

He smiles. “Right back at ya. You can be a pain in the ass, but you’re our pain in the ass. Right, Leith?”

“Right. But choosing the engagement ring isn’t the only reason why I asked you guys here. There’s something I want to talk to you about. What happened yesterday is bad. Mom got hurt because she was with Isla. The moment one of us wasn’t by her side, everything went to hell.”

He isn’t wrong. “We just need to be better at it until we figure out who’s targeting our girl. Doug will have to accept that until that happens, one of us needs to be assigned to Isla’s protection on a regular basis. It doesn’t matter what general is visiting, or even if it’s the president. Until Isla’s stalker is behind bars, one of us is by her side,” I say.

Leith exhales, staring into his mug of beer before lifting his gaze to look at Thurston and me. “In theory, yeah, but whoever wants to hurt her is obviously pretty smart. Don’t forget that they left that note pretending to be Thurston. We can’t predict their every move because we have no idea who we’re up against. And they obviously have no issues hurting anyone else in the family. We can’t live in constant terror, and Isla can’t be a prisoner in her own home. What happens if we have to go to the field or deploy?”

I think about it. “Well shit, I guess since the person who has it out for her is a soldier, they’ll be gone too. Doug can also leave one or more of us on Rear D.”

Leith doesn't seem convinced. "Right. But that might not always be possible. Injured and pregnant soldiers are often used as Rear D. We can't be sure that, depending on the mission, our commander can spare us. And what if the soldier who is attacking Isla doesn't belong to our company? This base has more than quadrupled in size in the last year. Isla works at the library, and anyone could have seen her there and gotten obsessed with her."

Fuck.

He's right.

"You have a point," Thurston concedes. "What do you suggest?"

Leith's mouth is flattened in a determined line. "I think a PCS is the only way to end this situation once and for all. Remove Isla from danger."

Thurston is the first to react. "Have you talked about this with her? Did she say she wants to go?"

I nod. "Yeah, wait a minute. She has a job here."

Leith shrugs. "We'll be married, so she can get a job at any other army library and use her spousal preference. I'm sure Doug would help too—he has so many connections—and if that fails, she can work at any civilian public library."

I'm still not convinced. "What about Nana? Isla came here to be with her family. And what about Thurston and me?" I ask.

"That's why I'm bringing it up with you two before I speak to Isla or Doug. I understand that you want to be with her, and I'm not trying to take her away from you. I was thinking that we should all go. After all, Mom asked Doug to pull strings to have us all stationed here, so it isn't far-fetched to assume that we'd want to stick together."

Thurston and I look at each other. "So we'd all PCS?"

Leith nods. "That's the idea."

"What about Mom? She wanted to have us all close. She won't be happy if we all move," I point out.

“I know.” Leith sighs. “But after what happened to her yesterday, it might be easier to make her understand that this is the best option for everyone’s sake. It doesn’t have to be forever, but right now, we’d be fools to keep playing Russian roulette with the life of the woman we love. What if next time, we don’t get there on time?”

We all consider the implications in silence. “I suppose you aren’t totally wrong. I’m up for reenlistment soon anyway, and I could ask for a PCS, but we need to talk to Isla first.”



Isla

I DROP MY HOUSE KEYS into the pretty ceramic bowl at the entrance. “God, I’m really tired.” I sigh, leaning against the sturdy dark wood cabinet in the foyer. “I guess I could take a shower and change too, since you need to change out of your ACUs,” I decide, looking at my tired reflection in the mirror hung above the cabinet.

Oren stops behind me, his tall, solid body so close to mine that I can feel his comforting heat.

“Maybe we could shower together?” he murmurs into my ear. “You know, conserving water these days is the responsible thing to do. For the environment.” His huge hands land on the dark wood of the cabinet on either side of me, and his chest comes into contact with my back, effectively caging me between the cabinet and his body.

I’ve definitely been in worse positions.

“What do you say?” He nuzzles my neck, letting his soft lips glide over my pulse point. “I could give you a little massage and take the edge off a long week.”

Heat collects between my thighs, and my nipples are two hard points straining against my bra. “I love showering with you, babe,” I say, letting myself luxuriate in the contact with his front and unashamedly brushing my butt against his crotch. “I don’t think we can though.”

He nibbles on my earlobe. “I promise we’ll be quick. I know Nana hates tardiness, and I don’t want to lose my spot as her favorite.”

I giggle as he peppers my neck with soft, fast kisses that make me hot and ticklish at the same time. “I don’t think being five minutes late could change Nana’s opinion of you, babe. She absolutely adores you.”

I can feel his lips opening in a satisfied smirk against my neck. “Then I think you should let me wash your back, sweet girl,” he whispers.

I inhale a fortifying breath. “I wish we could. Your mom is home. Look, her keys are in the bowl.”

I meet Oren’s gaze in the mirror, and the dark blue depths of his eyes make butterflies flutter their wings in the pit of my stomach. It doesn’t matter how long we hang out, that magnetic blue gaze still gets to me like it did the day we met.

“I swear Mom is the biggest cockblocker in the history of cockblockers,” he grumbles, pressing his body against mine for a tantalizing second. He’s hard in his ACU pants. “Do you think it’s possible to die of blue balls?”

I turn around to face him, still caged between the cabinet and his body. “I miss you too, babe. With the AFTB conference last week and Mia on leave, I’ve been swamped, but maybe we could do a little detour to Nana’s house after we drop her back at her place after dinner?” I offer.

I should probably stop calling my grandparents’ house “Nana’s place” since Nana put my name on the deed, but I can’t help it. To me, that place, so full of memories of equally happy and sad times, will always be Nana’s house.

“That’s the best idea I’ve heard in a while,” Oren agrees. “I never realized how hard it would be to be alone when our parents are home. I’m kind of grateful that they are gone quite a lot to so many conferences and events, or we would never have the chance to be together,” he muses.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Oren sighs. “That’s the only thing I hate about you and Leith being engaged. It’s made sneaking into your room a lot riskier, but the motherfucker can just openly spend the night in your bed, and Mom and Doug don’t say anything.”

I run my fingers along his perfect jaw. “You know that I love you just as much as I do Leith, right?” I say with my eyes fixed on his. “Maybe the idea of a PCS isn’t the worst thing that can happen right now. If we’re away from our parents, you and Thurston can move into our on post housing, and as long as you keep your rooms in the barracks just as a front, no one will care about what we do. Did you guys hear anything from Dad?”

Oren shakes his head. “Not yet, but we should get some news any day now. We all asked for either Hawaii or Germany. I haven’t been to either, but I hope we get Hawaii. The idea of you pretty much always in a bikini makes it the most desired option.”

I laugh at the way he wiggles his blond eyebrows. “You’re such a goofball. I wouldn’t be able to always be in a bikini, I’d still have to work.”

He shrugs. “Only if you want to. With the three of us pooling our resources together, you won’t have to.”

I push on his ripped chest, putting some distance between us. “I know I don’t *have* to work, but I want to. I want to have something that’s just mine. Not that you guys aren’t enough, but I never saw myself as a stay-at-home wife. I respect people who choose to do that, but it isn’t what I want. Nana always said that a woman should be as independent as she can, and I agree with her. Plus, what would I do with myself if you guys deployed?”

Oren tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “Seriously, Isla, I understand. I was just merely saying that you’d have the option to stay at home if you wanted to. You never know, you might change your mind since there are going to be kids, but I’ll support whatever you choose to do.”

“Kids?” I gasp. “I—fuck. I guess I hadn’t thought about that.”

He offers me a naughty little smirk. “Oh, believe me, I’ve thought about it more than once. You’d be an amazing mother, Isla, and the idea of putting a mini Oren or a sweet mini version of you in that sexy body of yours has crossed my mind a lot.”

The smoldering heat in his eyes elicits an unexpected response from my body. I rub my thighs together as the throbbing between them becomes more and more insistent. “What if I get pregnant and it isn’t yours?”

The words leave my mouth before I can think better of it. I avert my gaze, thinking that maybe we didn’t think this relationship through. The guys agreed to share me and not to ask me to choose, but a baby could change everything. “If I got pregnant, how would we know who’s the father? Would you guys want to get a DNA test?”

I’m surprised when Oren doesn’t flinch. “No. The three of us talked about it when we discussed not expecting you to choose. Any kids we’d have would be *our* kids. They’d belong to all of us.” He hesitates for a second. “As long as that’s what you want.”

I really hadn’t thought about that, but I love the way the guys are thinking. “Yeah, I don’t think it would matter to me who’s the biological father. I love each of you with all my heart, and I think any child would be lucky to have one of you as a dad, but all three? Our children will be the luckiest kids in the world.”

The corners of Oren’s lips quirk up with amusement. “I’m looking forward to taking Nana out to dinner, but now I’m also looking forward to baby making practice afterwards.”

I can’t help but giggle. “In that case, I suggest you start changing into your civilian clothes and we get going. The sooner we’re done with dinner, the sooner you can show me all your baby making moves, Sergeant LeCroy.”

He stiffens, bringing his hand to his forehead in a military salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Hmm, it’s good to see that they still teach soldiers something at boot camp.”

Katie’s voice makes us both jump.

I got so carried away with the conversation about kids that I had totally forgotten that my stepmother was home.

Luckily Oren had stepped away from me, and he’s much better at defusing potentially compromising situations. “They absolutely do, Mom, and even if they didn’t, serving with our first sergeant would make a perfect soldier out of pretty much anyone.”

Katie nods. “So I hear. First Sergeant Fernandez-Fernandez is respected and feared all over base.”

We all agree on that. I’d go so far as to say that he’s more feared than Dad, but I don’t say that out loud.

“I was thinking about ordering out for dinner,” Katie says. “There’s a new Mexican place that just opened outside of post, and I was thinking that we could try it.”

“That would be great, Katie, but Oren and I had plans for dinner with Nana. We were about to go get changed and pick her up. She’s been craving proper Italian food, and we have reservations at the best restaurant in town.”

If Katie is disappointed, she doesn’t let it show. “I love the close relationship you have with your grandma, darling.” She smiles. “Do you mind sitting down with me for a few minutes while Oren gets changed? There’s something I’d like to talk to you about, but I promise it won’t take long. I know where Doug gets his fondness for punctuality from.”

I exchange a look with Oren, and he shrugs to indicate that he has no idea what his mother might want from me.

“Sure, I was going to change too, but I guess a skirt and a blouse will be just fine,” I say, offering her what I hope is a genuine smile.

My heart thunders in my throat as I follow my stepmother into the living room. I don’t know what she could possibly want from me. All I can think about is that she’s upset about

either my wedding crashing her own wedding celebration or, even worse, she found out about our PCS plans.

“I spoke to Thurston this morning,” she begins. “He is surprisingly supportive of the idea of you marrying his brother. He denies that there’s anything going on between the two of you that would hurt Leith. It seems very odd to me that he’s changed his tune so suddenly. If you know Thurston even a little bit, you’ll have to agree that he’s a wonderful man, but he’s as stubborn as humanly possible. Given the fact that he isn’t back with Jessica, I decided to ask you what’s going on.”

I should have known that this wouldn’t be an easy conversation, for as much as I hate how involved Katie is in her sons’ lives, I can’t blame her for caring about their happiness. God knows I would have wished even a scrap of that attention from my own mother when all I got was indifference.

“Isla, are you and Thurston having an affair?”

Her dark blue eyes, identical to Thurston’s and Oren’s, are fixed on me, and I’m glad that I can deny it without lying to her.

“No. We are not.” I wish I could tell her the whole truth about the nature of my relationship with her sons, but I doubt she would ever accept it. Or Dad.

The only person I can be totally honest with is Nana. I’m sure she’s going to support anything that makes me happy, no matter how unconventional.

There’s a beat of silence as her eyes scan me like a human lie detector. “I believe you,” she finally says. “I don’t understand how Thurston could go from determined to win you back to accepting you marrying his brother, but I guess I don’t know my sons as well as I thought I did. For once, I’m actually relieved that I’m wrong.”

I’m dying to rise from my seat on the couch and run to my room or to Oren’s Jeep, but I know Katie is expecting some kind of explanation.

“Katie, Thurston and I aren’t the same people we were six years ago.”

That’s the truth too. Seventeen-year-old Thurston never would have shared me with his brothers.

“I see the way he acts around you, though,” Katie objects. “He isn’t angry or tense, especially after what happened to you and Leith. I’ve watched your interactions, and you don’t seem angry with him anymore either, like you were when you guys first moved into the house.”

I can offer Katie another kernel of truth. “We talked about everything, Katie,” I admit. “I have resented Thurston for years for how he ended things with me that summer, but there were so many things I didn’t know back then—how he lost his father, and he didn’t know how to deal with such big feelings at the same time. He felt guilty that his love for me had distracted him, and he punished himself by ending things.”

Katie considers my words. “It sounds exactly like Thurston’s reasoning. For what it’s worth, Isla, I didn’t know about you. I mean, sure, I thought there must have been girls, but I assumed he was chasing different girls and dating around like he did at school with the cheerleaders. I had a lot on my plate with having to handle the PCS on my own while my husband was deployed, and I told him to have fun. He deserved it, especially since he had sacrificed his summer to drive up here from Texas to allow his brothers to go to football summer camp. I wish he had told me what was going on. I would have made it clear that what happened to his father wasn’t his fault.”

Katie’s eyes are full of unshed tears, and even though things between us didn’t start on the best terms, I can’t help but admire how much she loves her family. She’s the kind of mom I cried myself to sleep wishing for since I can remember.

“I’ve never told you how sorry I am for your loss, Katie,” I say honestly. “I can’t even imagine what you must have gone through. If something happened to Leith, I—” Or to Thurston or Oren.

I don't know who moves first, but as I lose my battle with tears, I'm enveloped in my stepmother's arms.

She's crying too, holding me tight. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate your words, darling. I'm sorry too, Isla. I wish I hadn't talked to you the way I did after I learned about your past with Thurston. I have no excuse but that my sons are everything to me and that since it's been just the four of us, I've been fighting for our family. When I caught wind of the involvement between you and Thurston, I went into defense mode. I just thought about how that could hurt his career and my marriage when I finally had my three kids back under my roof and I had found love again. I hope you can forgive me and understand that there was nothing personal against you."

I nod, too overwhelmed by emotion to form coherent words. I understand how she feels about her sons because I feel the same way. There's nothing I wouldn't do for my men, and I would never hurt them.

"Well then," Katie says, releasing me with a shaky smile. "It looks like we have a wedding to put together in just a couple of weeks. Leith really wants to have it at the same time as the reception your father and I have been planning for our own wedding."

I'm relieved that there's no animosity in her voice. "Leith and I appreciate you sharing your day with us."

But I should have known that things with Katie are never that simple.

"Don't get me wrong, Isla, I'm excited about one of my sons getting married, especially since things with Thurston are good, but what I don't understand is why you two are in such a rush. Doug and Leith both explained it's necessary to avoid vicious gossip since you were stepsiblings living under the same roof when you fell in love. However, I don't see why you need to marry so quickly. I think announcing the engagement would have the same result. After all, some people will gossip no matter what."

That isn't totally untrue. Some of the spouses in the company, including our FRG leader, will probably look for

something sordid.

They would have a field day if they knew what was really going on between my stepbrothers and me, and hopefully having a quick wedding to gossip about will be enough to keep them from digging deeper.

“Yeah, people will talk, but we hope that if we make things official, the gossip won’t feel quite so juicy,” I offer.

“Are you sure this is why? Is there anything else that’s putting a rush on the wedding?”

Her blue eyes encompass my figure, stopping for a long moment on my stomach.

Oh.

“No,” I say with a nervous laugh. “I’m not pregnant, if that’s what you’re thinking. We just don’t see any reason to wait, and being married will make things a lot easier with the PCS.”

I realize my mistake only after the words have left my mouth.

“PCS? What do you mean?”

Oh, shit. “Uhm, Katie, I was waiting for Leith to sit down with you, and we were going to tell you together. Leith has asked for a transfer.”

I explain that the need to keep me safe is the only reason behind Leith’s idea. “Whoever is targeting me won’t be able to follow us to our new duty station.” I don’t add that Thurston and Oren have asked for a transfer too.

I’m not sure that this is the right thing to do, but the guys have decided to wait until the transfers are confirmed to talk to their mother. They decided that we will all go or all stay, and I’m happy with that part of the deal, because I don’t want to leave Thurston and Oren.

“Isla, are Thurston and Oren asking for a transfer too?” she asks.

I open and close my mouth a couple of times without making any sound. “Did Dad tell you?”

Katie sighs. “No, Doug didn’t make a peep about it. He was probably waiting until everything was finalized to break the news.”

I don’t understand. “Then how—”

“Sweetheart,” she says without the anger I expected in her tone. “I know my boys like I know the back of my hand. College and Oren’s enlistment have separated them for a few years, but the three of them have always been a very close-knit unit. I was sure that once they reunited, they’d try to stick together as much as possible. I guess I got what I deserved after all,” she says, lowering her gaze.

“What do you mean you got what you deserved?”

Her eyes are shiny again, and I feel really bad when she explains what she meant. “I came down on Thurston like a ton of bricks about messing around with his stepsister. I got involved by getting his ex stationed here. Leith and Oren saw this and sided with their brother when he told me to butt out of his life. Even before I knew about the feelings between you and Leith, I could see how they all liked you. I was worried about all of them catching feelings for you and ruining their bond and my marriage with your father. I’ve been pretty vocal about the need for them to leave you alone, and now this is my punishment. I’m going to lose them over my meddling. I only have myself to blame.”

Maybe I shouldn’t feel sorry for her, since she was pretty cold toward me when she was mad at Thurston and me, but I can’t bring myself to feel any resentment for her wanting to protect her sons and her marriage to my dad. “Katie, we aren’t moving because of you, I promise. The guys might get mad when you interfere, but they never doubt that your heart is in the right place. I’m not happy to go either. I came here to be close to Dad and Nana, especially when it comes to her, and I hate the idea of being far away again. I wasn’t here when Grandpa died, and it really plays on my mind that we don’t

know how long Nana has left. If she went while I was away, I'd be devastated."

Predictably, Katie pleads for us to stay. "Then don't go. I promise I'll be better at keeping my nose out of your business, and once you're married, you and Leith will get your own place on post. You won't even have to put up with me every day. Stay, please."

I hate to disappoint her, and I really want to have a good relationship with her, especially now that she's also my mother-in-law as well as my stepmother. "I really want to, but I can't. Leith is right, it's too dangerous here. If it was just me, though, I'd stay. However, after what happened at the lighthouse, I can't risk one of the guys getting hurt to protect me. Someone wants me dead, and whether it's the same person who killed Connie or not, I'm not sure. The only way to solve the problem is to remove ourselves from Star Cove. It doesn't have to be forever. We can go for a couple of years and then come back here or see where Dad's career takes the two of you and we can follow you."

I really hope Katie will understand that this isn't about her and will accept our decision without putting more stress on us.

The doorbell breaks the silence that has descended between us, making us jump.

"I wonder who it could be at this time. Your dad should be home any minute, but he wouldn't ring the doorbell," she says.

We have our answer when Oren walks into the living room followed by Jessica and her commanding officer, Captain Morris.



11.

Problem Solved

Isla



CAPTAIN MORRIS GREETs us politely. “Mrs. Cameron, Ms. Cameron, how are you?”

After exchanging a couple of pleasantries, Katie asks him for the reason for their visit.

“We were hoping to talk to your husband, ma’am,” he says.

“Did you try headquarters? This is a busy time, and Doug has been working late most nights this week,” she informs him. “But he should be home soon, and if I can help you with anything in the meantime...”

The MP captain hesitates for a moment. “I guess you might want to hear this too, ma’am. We could wait for Lieutenant Colonel Cameron and fill you in on the latest developments as well.”

Always the perfect hostess, Katie offers coffee, but the two MP officers decline. “Some water would be great though, if you don’t mind, ma’am,” the captain says. “I’m trying to limit caffeine after 4 p.m. I’m not a young officer anymore, and I need my sleep these days.”

Oren offers to fetch the water, and we all wait in uncomfortable silence until the beverages are delivered.

“We’re here to inform Lieutenant Colonel Cameron that we’re about to make an arrest in Connie Peters’ murder.”

Katie is the first to recover from the surprise. “Who are you going to arrest?”

“Lieutenant Joe Peters, ma’am.”

I can't help but voice my perplexity. "Again?" I say. "This would be the third time, and none of your past two attempts managed to stick, Captain."

Jessica intervenes. "We have new evidence to support our decision."

"Lieutenant Bowman is correct," Captain Morris explains. "We just got the results of some of the DNA tests performed on samples recovered from Mrs. Peters' body. Those took longer than usual because the samples were contaminated by the wet sand and seawater the body had been in contact with. However, the skin particles found under Mrs. Peters' fingernails are a match with her husband, Joe Peters."

Oren pounds his open palm with his fist. "I knew it! I knew that motherfu—" He stops in his tracks at the withering look his mother throws in his direction before the expletive has totally left his mouth. "I knew that Lieutenant Peters was lying," he corrects.

I don't know why, but I'm still not convinced. Call me crazy, but I believed Joe when he swore that he didn't kill Connie and he didn't assault me, and of course we know that he didn't assault me at the lighthouse. "Forgive me if I express my doubts, Captain Morris," I begin. "I promise I'm not trying to do law enforcement's job, but there are other ways that skin could have gotten under Connie's nails. I told you how I saw bruises on her a few hours before her death and she admitted to having spent the night with her husband and..."

I already told the MPs and CID how Joe manipulated Connie into having a rough sexual encounter with him by promising to give their marriage another try.

Jessica nods at my implication. "We know that. We're looking for further evidence, and this time there won't be any stones left unturned, so to speak."

"What do you mean?" Katie asks.

"Last time, we were only able to obtain a search warrant for Lieutenant Peters' personal quarters in the barracks," Captain Morris explains. "We're aware that Lieutenant Peters

spends a lot of time at his parents' house, so this time we asked the judge to extend the warrant to the lieutenant's parents' on post housing as well. There's a CID unit on standby, ready to come in as soon as we inform the garrison commander, and we can proceed with the arrest. Lieutenant Peters is the only person of interest in this case and the only one with a real motive for that homicide. We've never stopped investigating him, but we had no evidence to tie him to the crime scene until now. He doesn't have an alibi, and we hope to find further evidence to support our case since we're aware that his defense team is going to claim that the skin got under Mrs. Peters' nails the night before. We're confident that he's the man we're looking for, and it's only a matter of time before we collect enough evidence to support our theory."

The implications of this new development aren't totally lost on me. Even though I knew it was impossible that Joe was my attacker after the lighthouse, there was a part of me that thought that, like in Connie's case, Joe was the only person with a reason to come after me. He is obsessed with me, and he's never made a mystery of it.

Katie shakes her head. "I'm sure you must have a valid reason to proceed with the arrest, Captain Morris. I was really hoping that Lieutenant Peters would end up being innocent. His mother is such a sweet woman, and I can only imagine her devastation over this. I was just there about an hour ago to discuss some of the awards we want to give the volunteers who helped us with the AFTB conference. The way Nellie runs the ACS is exemplary. She really doesn't deserve this."

"Ha," Oren scoffs. "This isn't about Major Peters' wife, Mom. You're right, she seems nice. Too bad she gave birth to a psychopathic asshole."

I glare at him. Whatever his opinion of Joe, he should be more careful where he voices it and in front of what audience. "Let's go, Oren. Nana will be wondering where we are, and she'll be embarrassed if we show up late for our reservation."

He rubs the back of his neck, looking repentant, but I know he isn't by the glint of amusement in his eyes. The bad blood between him and Joe runs deeper than I thought.

“Mom, we really should go. Are you going to be okay here with Captain Morris and Lieutenant Bowman?”

Katie sighs. “Yes, sweetheart. Don’t keep Mary waiting. I already texted Doug, and he’s on his way here. Everyone is innocent until proven guilty, and I know he’ll want to show Nellie and Bradley some support.”



Oren



I TURN THE ENGINE ON and back my Jeep out of the visitor parking spot in Nana’s assisted living complex.

Isla is suddenly quiet, and I wonder if she’s still mad at me for believing that Joe Peters is Connie’s killer and that if he isn’t the soldier who assaulted her, he must know something.

We argued a little on the way here, and in all fairness, she was mostly mad at my lack of restraint in expressing my opinion of Peters in front of the MPs.

I know she’s right and I should be careful, because the asshole might be shady as fuck, but he still outranks me. She’s also right that Doug would have been less than pleased with my behavior too.

I should have just apologized and begged for her forgiveness, but I take after my dad, and I’m a smart-ass who always has to have the last word. I kept insisting that Peters is a murderer and that I don’t understand why she keeps giving him the benefit of the doubt.

Isla put on a happy front for Nana’s sake, but I could tell she was tense all evening.

“Sweet girl, are we still planning on going to your house to spend some alone time together?” I know it was the wrong thing to ask when she sighs and shakes her head.

“I think we should take a rain check on it. We shouldn’t have stayed after dinner for a night cap and a movie if we really wanted to go to the house. It’s after ten, and Dad and Katie will get suspicious if we’re much later. It would be different if Leith was with us.”

I know she’s absolutely right, and that’s another reason why I wasn’t against Leith’s plan to move away from Star Cove and our parents. However, I also know she’s still annoyed with me, and I can’t leave it alone. “You’re right. I didn’t have the heart to disappoint Nana when she asked us to stay, and I guessed you wouldn’t want to be alone with me anyway after our discussion earlier.”

Mom and Leith always tell me that I don’t know when to shut the fuck up, and I guess they are right.

“No, it isn’t like that, Oren,” Isla bites out, turning to look at me as I drive toward the back gate of the base. “You know what happens when you assume, right?”

I guess I deserve to be called an asshole, and I don’t argue with her, extending my hand to get her military ID and slowing down to show both our IDs to the gate guard.

“I hate it when you’re mad at me, Isla,” I say after a few minutes of tense silence.

“I’m not mad at you, Oren.” She sighs. “Just disappointed that you don’t get that I wasn’t trying to defend Joe. I was merely expressing my opinion on the case. My comment to you wasn’t about defending Joe either, it was about protecting you from yourself. Joe is the vindictive type, and I don’t want you to get in trouble. I know you have your reasons to hate him, but you need to be smarter about how you go about voicing those feelings, that’s all.”

Yeah, now I feel like a real piece of shit.

If Isla had done the girl thing, saying that she wasn’t mad at me before giving me the silent treatment or telling me that I should know why she was mad when I first asked, I’d be pissed and willing to pick a fight.

Isla is different, and this is why I fell in love with her. She doesn't play games. She's direct and will tell you exactly what you did wrong.

I pull over into an almost empty lot where people who want to sell a vehicle can park it and post the asking price and details, like year of manufacturing and mileage about the vehicle they wish to sell.

There's no one here at this time of night, and I pull the hand brake, turning fully to look at my girl.

"Fuck, you're right," I say.

"Oren, this isn't about being right or wrong," she argues. "I love you, and I care about what happens to you and—"

"I love you too," I interrupt her. "You are right on all counts, and I should listen to you. I should have apologized rather than trying to defend my stupid behavior. You're right that I hate Peters. I hate him for so many reasons. For how he treats the soldiers, for how he lets his daddy clean up his messes, for how he treated Connie. The sleeping around, the cheating... Connie wasn't a saint, but he started it all. I hate him because he fucked you, and I'm fucking jealous. The thought of him with you is just—"

She places a soft hand on my arm. "Babe, that was a huge lapse of judgment on my part. But it was just a one-time thing, and I swear I don't have any feelings for Joe. For some reason, I can't hate him because I see how broken he is, but I swear that's all there is to it. You're the one I love with all my heart."

Me and my brothers.

I can accept that. "I know. Please, Isla, understand that my jealousy has nothing to do with you. Sometimes I'm a fucking caveman, and I'm possessive as fuck. I'm okay with you being with Leith and T, but when I think about you with Peters—" I close my eyes. "It's not even about you sleeping with him, to be honest. Back then, you didn't know me, and you didn't know him. You had no way of knowing that he's a cheater and a liar. What makes me see red is what happened on the beach the night of our parents' rehearsal dinner. The thought that if

Leith and I hadn't arrived, he would have forced himself on you... I think about it every time I fucking see him. I know I have to work harder on controlling my reactions, and I'm sorry for causing you and Mom stress earlier. What I'm never going to be sorry about is my need to protect you. I love you, and anyone who even thinks about hurting you is my enemy, Isla."

Yeah, I should have definitely led with this earlier.

"Babe, I love you too, and I understand both the jealousy and the need to protect me. I feel the same way about you. I wanted to scratch Connie's eyes out when you told me that both you and Leith hooked up with her. The reason why I reacted the way I did to your behavior is because I hate the idea of you getting in trouble. What if you do something that puts our PCS in jeopardy? You know we aren't going anywhere without you, right? Joe was one huge mistake I won't repeat. So please, whatever he says, or no matter the circumstances, count to ten before you react wherever Joe is concerned."

I nod. "I promise I'll do better. But if that asshole ever even tries to touch you again, I'm going to kill him."

She laughs. "You're so hot when you go all caveman on me."

My lips curve in a smile at the sultry little look she's giving me. "Want to see hot, you sexy little thing?" I say slowly, letting my eyes rove over her body, which is still clad in the pencil skirt and blouse she wore at work. "I had never understood this thing some guys have for a sexy librarian until I met you."

Redness rises to her face, plainly visible even in the dim lighting of my Jeep. She's so fucking adorable when she blushes. I know it's because she's getting turned on, because Isla isn't a shy woman and I love that about her.

"Really?" she teases.

"Open any porn website, and you'll see tons of sexy librarian videos." I chuckle, remembering that night when I

caught her on a little solo session with her laptop. “Or do you prefer stepbrother videos?” I provoke her.

She doesn’t back down, her smile mirroring my own. “Oh, I don’t know, babe. Stepbrothers are so exciting, hot and a little forbidden, and sometimes stepbrothers and libraries just mix pretty well.”

I laugh. “Yeah, I don’t know all the details, but T told me that he finally earned your full forgiveness in the library. He wouldn’t say any more, but he mentioned that he’ll be staying clear of Rachel for the foreseeable future, so I can only imagine what went down.”

She giggles. “Oh, believe me, Thurston went down for sure.”

Ha. Lucky motherfucker. “Dammit, he beat me to it,” I joke, but I’m not totally playing. I’ve been thinking about cornering Isla in the non-fiction section, or somewhere that doesn’t see a lot of foot traffic, and having my wicked way with her.

Isla’s eyes are full of a desire that mirrors my own. “I was so scared of getting caught and so turned on at the same time,” she whispers. “And I’m not against finding out how you play out your sexy librarian fantasy, Oren. After all, you just said it’s a whole trope in porn.”

She’s seriously the woman of my fucking dreams. She’s so beautiful, especially when she’s looking at me like I’m the little *amuse-bouche* she needs to end her night.

I avert my gaze from her heaving chest, looking around the deserted parking lot as dark clouds gather in the night sky, obscuring the stars and the little slice of moon that was illuminating the night before. “There’s no one here, but we could still get caught if we decided to try out another popular trope in porn. Sex in a car is a thing for a reason,” I say, letting my eyes fall to my lap where my cock is harder than the steel exhaust of my car, straining against my jeans to the point that it hurts.

She's on me before I can even recline the seat, her lips soft, hot, greedy, and sweet.

"Fuck," I growl, kissing her back and grabbing her sexy buttocks as she flings herself over to my seat, straddling me.

It's a tight fit, and I push on the lever to slide my seat as far back as it'll go.

"Oren." She moans against my lips, her hands sliding down my chest on a journey down to the buckle of my belt.

"Fuck." Yeah, I know I'm repeating myself, but in my defense, all my blood has migrated south, and all I can think about is that I need more.

More kissing, as I nip her plump bottom lip.

More touching, as I lift her skirt and massage her toned, perfect ass.

More, more, more.

"God, you're so big." She gasps, freeing my erection from the front of my jeans and stroking me so perfectly that I could blow my load just like this.

But I'm not sixteen anymore, and she isn't the cheerleading captain who wanted to find out if the rumors about the size of my cock she heard from the locker room were real.

I was an inexperienced sophomore back then, and she was a senior. She took my V-card in the back of her Escalade one day when Leith and Thurston were going to pick up Mom from therapy after school and I had no ride home.

Well shit, I guess I did get a ride that day, but that's beside the point. I used to be embarrassed by the rumors about my "monster cock" and how girls asked me out just to find out what I was packing, and it stayed with me until very recently.

Isla has never complained about my size. She likes it, and we're working toward the only thing she's a little worried about.

“Oren, where did you go?” she asks as I close my eyes, feeling myself hardening even more in her hands. “You seem... distracted.”

I don't tell her that I was thinking about how much I want to fuck her tight little ass. I want it so much, but I like how we're slowly working our way up to it. I'm not jealous that she let Leith have it, because I know I'm a lot to take in—quite literally.

“I was thinking that I was disappointed that we couldn't go to your house, and I wouldn't get to have you tonight, but this —”

“Less talking, more fucking, babe,” she scolds, giving me a squeeze that makes my balls tingle.

I smile against her frantic kisses. Who am I to deny her what's rightfully hers?

I push her skirt all the way up, so that it's bunched around her thin waist. My fingers brush against her as I work on pushing her panties to the side.

The garment is tight, and so is the space inside my car. That's it, I'm trading it in for something a lot bigger inside. To whoever said that bigger isn't better, I call bullshit.

The fabric of her panties is damp and hard to move to the side enough to allow me to uncover the part of her I so desperately need.

“Babe,” she murmurs, letting go of the base of my shaft to help me with the task at hand.

But I'm an impatient motherfucker, and I need her so much that I think I'm going to die if I don't feel her tight, wet heat wrapped around my dick ASAP.

Rip.

I pull savagely, tearing the thin lace, and finally expose her gorgeous, pink pussy.

“Oren!” she exclaims as I line myself up with her entrance.

I chuckle because she doesn't sound mad. "I'll buy you a new pair," I offer.

"Fuck that," she says, lifting her hips to give me room to maneuver. "I need you. Now."

She's so goddamn perfect.

I'm inside her with a fast, powerful snap of my hips, and I don't stop pushing until my balls rub against the insides of her thighs and the smooth lips of her bare pussy.

"Oh God, you're so huge." She pants, her forehead against mine as neither of us moves to give her time to adjust to my invasion.

"Isla," I say, lifting one hand to cup the side of her face. "I love you."

She smiles, her inner walls giving me a little squeeze that sends sparks of heat down my spine, making more blood rush down to my shaft. "I love you too. But you talk too much. Now shut up and fuck me."

Who am I to deny her? I'm a soldier, and taking orders has been ingrained in my head since the first day of boot camp. "Yes, ma'am," I say, accompanying my words with two fast, hard thrusts.

From that moment, we lose ourselves in each other. The rest of the world ceases to exist, and there's only us, our bodies joined in the confined space of my car.

We work together, pushing, grinding, thrusting, and squeezing to wring out every ounce of pleasure we can give one another.

There's only skin against skin and mouths, tongues, and lips as we consume each other to the edge of—

The noise of an engine and a loud pop makes us freeze as a car drives past the parking lot on the main road that crosses the entire base.

"Don't stop, don't stop," she begs me, and I couldn't even if I wanted to.

I'm too far gone, and I feel myself explode inside her.

I fumble to reach for her clit, but she swats my hands away as the first wave of her climax hits and her inner walls clench around me in a viselike grip.

There's more grinding and kissing as we ride it out to the end, forgetting about the engine noise.

"What are you thinking?" she asks me a few moments later, her head hidden in the crook of my neck as we attempt to calm down.

"Boot camp," I answer semi-truthfully.

"Huh?" She laughs. "Boot camp? Was I too bossy just now, like a drill sergeant?"

Her amusement makes me laugh too. "No," I answer. "You told me to shut up and fuck you, and I immediately obeyed, and then I thought that's what I do since boot camp. And then I thought I could totally do a sexy boot camp with you. You'd be the hottest drill sergeant ever."

She shakes her head. "Boys are weird."

My smile widens. "Girls are too."

"No, we're not," she says stubbornly.

"Why, what do you think during sex? Men have to concentrate on not coming too soon. That's why we tend to get a little distracted sometimes and—"

"Fuck!"

The expletive comes from both of us as we jump apart.

"Was that a car door being closed?" Isla asks.

"I think it was," I say, straining to hear more and looking into the rearview mirror.

Sure enough, a dark SUV has stopped a few yards past the entrance to the parking lot, the emergency lights blinking in the night to signal that they are having some kind of trouble.

I hope they just stopped to send a text or answer their phone, or something trivial like that, so it won't take a long

time before they are on their way, because obviously if we can see them, they can see us.

The driver's door opens, and a man gets out, walking around to the back of the vehicle on the side closest to us. "They are having car trouble." I sigh, debating on what's the best course of action.

I know I should go see if I can help them, and I would in a heartbeat if I wasn't in a car with fogged up windows with my panty-less stepsister.

She sees my hesitation. "Go, babe. Go see what's going on. I'll clean up very quickly and come right out." She opens her purse, showing me a pack of baby wipes. "Nana always used to carry some with her when my cousins and I were little, and I guess the habit stayed with me. You never know when you might need to wash your hands and have no water—or in this case, not my hands."

I smirk, feeling a primal sense of satisfaction that I made the mess she's about to clean... that she's mine.

I throw another glance at the man who's still standing by the back of his car, clearly talking on the phone now.

"Oren, go see if they need help," Isla encourages me. "I'll be right behind you."



12.

SOS

Isla

I make quick work of wiping between my legs and shove the used wipes back inside my purse to deal with later. I see how clean and tidy Oren keeps his car, so I don't even think about using the glove box.

I get out quickly, grateful that I dress conservatively at work and my skirt hits my knees, hiding the fact that my ripped underwear is somewhere under Oren's seat.

I reach the black SUV moments after Oren. A man is now crouching by one of the rear tires, busy taking out the bolts that secure it.

"Good evening, can we help?" Oren asks kindly.

The man turns to look at us, and his face is now illuminated by the streetlight a couple of feet away from where he stopped his car. "Sergeant LeCroy, Isla."

It's Major Peters. I hadn't recognized him from behind.

"Do you need any help, sir?" Oren's tone is suddenly sterner, like I notice it is whenever he's at work.

"That's very kind of you, Sergeant LeCroy, but I should be okay. I have a puncture in my tire, so I'm just going to put on the spare to get home."

I know there's no love lost between Oren and the two Peters, but my stepbrother insists on helping, like I know Dad would expect from any of his soldiers in front of a superior. "Let us help, sir. It looks like there's another storm looming on the horizon. I never thought California would be so rainy in the summer, but you don't want to get caught in the rain while you're trying to change a tire."

"Well then, thank you, Sergeant," the major says. "I'm just about done unbolting the damaged tire. If you could help me

with the jack just over there..." He gestures by his side, and Oren takes the heavy jack and puts it in position as Major Peters attempts to take off the punctured tire. "Oh, this is strange. It isn't coming off," Dad's deputy says, grunting as he pulls harder.

"Let me have a go, sir," Oren offers. "Sometimes this shit—I mean this type of stuff is a little stiff, especially if it's the first time the tire is removed."

Major Peters nods. "Yeah, I've had this car for about four months, and it never had a tire changed before tonight. Thank you for stopping. If I had to do this alone, it would have taken me much longer, and the ice cream in my front seat would get to Nellie in the form of soup. She's having a rough night." He looks between Oren and me. "The MPs came with a search warrant and arrested Joe. Again. They also left the house a complete disaster zone, and Nellie was trying to keep busy by straightening it up, but she couldn't stop crying. I went out to get her favorite cookies and cream ice cream. She's always loved it. She practically used to live on the stuff when she was pregnant with Joe."

Oren and I nod at his story. I think this is the most Major Peters has ever said to me. I only ever see him at the FRG meetings or if there's a company function or if Dad and Katie have him and Nellie over for dinner, and on those occasions, he's polite but pretty quiet.

"Let's get this tire changed then," Oren says, crouching next to the major. "There's nothing worse than melted ice cream." He throws a glance my way, the corners of his lips quirking in the beginning of a smile. He's probably thinking about the first time we hung out, just the two of us, and had a movie marathon. He went out after I'd gone to bed to surprise me with ice cream, and things changed between us when he walked in on me trying to use my vibrator after getting so turned on by sitting next to him all evening.

"What are you doing out here at this time?" the major asks.

"We were going home. Oren and I took my nana out for dinner and we stayed later than planned. These days she's

starved for company.”

Dad’s deputy’s eyes flit between Oren and me, and I hope he isn’t going to comment on the fact that Oren’s Jeep is parked in the almost deserted parking lot.

I’m sure he’s thinking exactly what I fear, because his brown eyes, so similar to his son’s, have an almost amused glint when he speaks next. “I don’t think I’ve had the chance to congratulate you on the engagement with Captain LeCroy, Isla. I know your parents are planning to make the announcement at the next FRG meeting, but I wanted to be the first to say congratulations.”

His eyes go from me to Oren again, and I immediately regret that we stopped to help him. He’s clearly trying to get a rise out of Oren.

“Thank you, Major Peters,” I say, fighting to keep my tone as neutral as possible. “I’m sorry about Joe’s arrest. For what it’s worth, I believe him when he says that he didn’t kill Connie and he has nothing to do with the assaults on me.”

Major Peters sighs, wiping his hands on the front of his pants. “Thank you. I wish the MPs and CID weren’t a bunch of useless idiots when it comes to this case. They arrested Joe based on some new DNA evidence that doesn’t make any fucking sense. There are a dozen ways Joe’s skin could have ended up under Connie’s nails, especially since they spent the night before together.”

I nod. “Yeah, that’s what I told Captain Morris too, but that means they still don’t have the evidence they need.”

Oren makes a noise, as if he’s about to say something, but I shake my head at him. This isn’t the time or place for him to express his contempt for Joe.

Major Peters presses his lips together in a bitter, displeased smile. “I’m glad at least someone on this post is using their fucking brain.”

I flinch at his expletive. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him cuss before tonight. “Hopefully they’ll be able to clear this all up once and for all,” I say, doing my best to sound supportive.

“I doubt it.” Major Peters frowns. “This time they are convinced they have a case. They searched Joe’s bedroom at the house and found an old flip phone in the back of his closet. That’s what they are using to support their DNA evidence.”

“I don’t understand,” I say. “Was it Connie’s phone? I don’t think she had an older phone—”

Major Peters shakes his head. “No, it wasn’t Connie’s phone. I have no idea whose phone it is, but they found some pretty important text messages on it. They were sent to your phone, Isla. All sorts of threats and taunts. The last few are just a couple days old. They think that’s the evidence they were after and arrested my son. He swears that he has never seen that phone and he has no idea how it ended up in his room. I believe him. Someone is trying to frame Joe, I swear. Obviously the MPs were sure that he was lying.”

“Well fuck,” Oren says. “Are you surprised they don’t believe him, sir? After all, he lied about his alibi the first time.”

I glare at Oren.

This is exactly what we were arguing about before things got... better between us. He has to stop going after Joe, and especially his father. There’s nothing to be gained from it.

“Let’s help you change that tire, Major,” I say before Major Peters can react to Oren’s provocation. “I understand why Nellie is upset, and that ice cream is melting as we speak. I’m going to go get the spare while you two lift the car,” I offer, eager to get back home. Thankfully, the two men listen to me, and they grab the stubborn tire together, managing to pull it off after a couple of tries.

I walk to the open trunk, immediately spotting the spare tire. “Ouch, fuck!” I yelp when something sharp snags on the side of my hand, breaking the skin.

“Isla! What’s up?” Oren is by my side in a heartbeat.

“I—I don’t know, I must have gotten my hand caught on something, maybe one of the hooks the tire is secured on.”

Oren points the light coming from his phone at my hand. “Well shit, you’re bleeding. We need to find something to stop it.” He starts rummaging around in the trunk, extracting a silky scarf with a pretty floral pattern on it and wrapping it around my hand.

“No, not that scarf,” Major Peters scolds him, stopping right behind us. “That’s one of Nellie’s favorites. She left it in the car last Sunday after church. I have a first aid kit in the trunk, let me take it out.”

Major Peters insists on doing the medication himself, muttering that he doesn’t want Dad to hear about this and think that he didn’t take care of me.

“Thank you, Major,” I say, folding the scarf once he’s done putting a Band-Aid on my cut. “I’m going to get this cleaned and bring it back—”

“No need,” he says, taking the scarf from me. “I’m going to the dry cleaners tomorrow anyway, and I’ll drop it off there. Like I said, it’s Nellie’s favorite, and I don’t want there to be anything else to upset my wife right now if I can help it.”

I understand where he’s coming from. “I get it. Sorry about staining it. I’m going to come by tomorrow and bring some more ice cream and a care package for Nellie. She’s such a kind, lovely lady, and I hate the stress she’s under right now.”

Major Peters sighs. “I appreciate the sentiment, Isla, but I know my wife, and it’s going to be hard for her to face anyone right now. Maybe give her a couple of days? I’ll let Doug know when she’s ready for visitors, if that’s okay.”

I nod. “Sure. Thank you, Major.”

Thunder breaks the quiet summer night, the lightning illuminating the dark sky as if it were daytime for a moment. The first drops of rain fall on the metal of the car.

“Let’s change that tire, sir, before we all get soaked,” Oren suggests, grabbing the tire faster and much more efficiently than I did earlier.

“Don’t worry, Sergeant. Take your sister home, I’ve got it from here. See you at PT on Monday morning,” Major Peters

says.

“Are you sure, sir? It won’t take me a second to—”

“I’ve got it from here. Good night, Sergeant LeCroy. Good night, Isla.”

I shiver as the rain increases in frequency, soaking my hair. “Good night, Major Peters.”

“Isla, please call me Bradley. I’ve known your father since you were just a baby. Go on now, go home before the roads get flooded.”

I heave a sigh of relief once we’re back inside the Jeep. “Do you think Major Peters knows what we were doing in here?” I ask Oren as I try to wring out the rainwater from my soaked hair.

“Didn’t you hear him? Call him Bradley.” Oren snorts, rubbing the short blond hair on the top of his head. “I know that guy and Doug go way back, but he’s such a fucking douche. It’s no surprise he gave life to a waste of space like Joe. Did you hear what he said? He called you my sister.”

Yeah, I heard that. “If he said that,” I consider, “I can only imagine what the rest of the company will say once we announce my engagement with Leith.”

Oren shrugs. “If they can’t take a joke, fuck ’em. They can talk and gossip all they want, but the fact remains that my brothers and I aren’t related to you. Leith and I didn’t even know you existed until a couple of months ago, so if they want to make things weird, they have to find something different than the whole stepsibling bullshit.”

I don’t disagree with him. “Yeah, you’re right. But you know how those people are. They are going to hold onto anything that can distract them from their boring lives, and it doesn’t matter if their gossip affects someone else.”

My stepbrother nods. “Yeah, but hopefully we’re going to move soon, so we won’t be here to hear their nonsense. Plus, they can talk as much as they want, because it doesn’t change the fact that you aren’t our sister, sweet girl.”

His dark blue eyes are so intense as he says that, that my breath hitches in my throat. “I can only think about what they would say if they knew that I didn’t just fall for Leith, but for you and Thurston too. That would definitely be juicier than the stepsibling thing.”

He leans toward me, his shoulders so wide that he makes the interior of the car appear smaller than it really is. “I just know that I love you and that I can’t blame my brothers if they do too.” He cups my jaw with a huge but gentle hand. “Now let’s go home before I do some more stuff that would definitely be wrong if you were my sister.”

I giggle at the amusement in his tone. “Eww, Oren! That makes it sound so wrong.”

His smile fades for just a second. “That’s exactly why I don’t give two shits about what people say. They’ll make anything sound dirty just for entertainment value. Now, though, the stuff I’m going to do to you when we get home if everyone is asleep and I can sneak into your room is positively dirty.”

I cover his hand with mine. “Is that a threat or a promise?”

He beams at me. “Come on, you’re like a little icicle right now. Let’s get you out of those wet clothes and warm you up the best way I know how.”

He turns the ignition on, and I can’t help but think that Oren always keeps his promises.



13.

Past And Future

Thurston

Six Years Ago
“I love you.”

I kiss her, and it starts sweet and soft until I can't rein myself in. My desire for Isla is like a fire that's constantly fed by the smallest little things—her smile, her laugh, the way her long hair brushes against my arm when we walk, and especially the way her eyes light up when she sees me, as if I were her entire world.

I love her sweet but fierce nature and how she's witty and smart. She gets so animated when we talk about books, and her passion just stokes mine.

She's everything I can think about day and night. Making her laugh, kissing her, making love to her.

I love her mind just as much as I love her soft, sexy body.

“Hmm,” she murmurs as I break the kiss to look into the gray depths of her eyes. “I love you too.”

Hearing those words never gets old, and I pull her closer to my chest, kissing her again and breathing her in while my hands massage her soft tits.

It's like putting kindling to a fire, and before I know it, I have her pressed up against the wall of the old lighthouse.

I'm so hard that it hurts, and I need her more than I need air.

“What's up?” she asks softly as I hesitate to take things further.

I rest my forehead against hers, willing my pulse to slow down. I could take her against this wall, it would be so easy. She would let me have her fast and hard, but I have to go

home, and I can't be this selfish. Chasing my own pleasure would only take minutes, and I want to take care of her too. "I have to go home," I say reluctantly.

The summer is almost over, and I don't know what to do with her. I don't want to lose her, but with Dad MIA, our PCS to Star Cove isn't a sure thing.

Even if it was, all I know about Isla is that she's spending the summer here with her grandparents. I have no idea where she calls home. It could literally be anywhere in the country.

"I have to go home," I say again, feeling like I already miss her. "My mom needs some help with a few things, and I promised her I'd have dinner with her. Can we meet back here in a couple of hours?"

She nods, smiling softly, and after another brief kiss, we walk in opposite directions on the golden sand of the beach.

Mom was going to the base today to try and discuss our options with Dad missing.

Once I hear what they told her, I'll have a better idea about what to do. I want to tell Isla that Dad is a soldier and he's deployed. I should be able to get away with vague details, but I need to discuss it with Mom first.

If I can at least tell her that we're a military family, we can try to find a way to stay in touch.

Hopefully Mom will agree to let me have a social media account or a message app without Dad's supervision. I'll do anything to be able to keep Isla in my life.

I know things aren't good when I spot a car with the military base stickers on the windshield parked in front of the small apartment Mom and I have been renting this summer.

I rush to the door, hesitating with my hand on the handle as fear constricts my throat. This can't be good news. Maybe Dad is hurt. If he was fine and on his way home, they wouldn't have sent someone to see us in person.

My heart hammers against my chest as I force myself to open the door. "Mom!" I rush to her side as she cries in the

arms of a blonde army officer in ASUs.

I pull her into my arms, looking at the two soldiers in the room as Mom sobs desperately against my chest.

The captain who was holding Mom utters the words that I've been fearing to hear this entire time. "Good afternoon, I'm Captain Lewis, and this is Lieutenant Jones. We're chaplains with the..."

The rest of her words as she tells me which company they belong to don't even register.

I'm vaguely aware of what I'm sure are words expressing compassion and sympathy, but all I can hear is "killed in action."

I don't even pay attention to the details, and for the first few moments, all I can think of is that maybe if I stare at them long enough, their words will change.

Maybe if I leave the room and come back inside, we can do this again and they'll tell me that Dad is in a military hospital somewhere, badly hurt but alive.

Yeah, it must be how this works.

I rise from my seat, determined to leave the room because this isn't true. It can't be.

Sadly, the thing that tells me that this is real are Mom's tears.

I wrap my arms around her again, burying my face in her long, dark hair.

My chest is heaving, and a painful lump is lodged in my throat, but I can't cry. I can't let myself cry, well aware that if I do, I'm never going to stop.

I take the numbers the chaplains are offering and nod in all the appropriate places when they tell me what's going to happen next, but I'm not really retaining anything.

All I can hear is Dad's voice in my head. "It's all your fault."

He repeats those words over and over, and fuck, he's right.

If only I had been writing him every week. If only I had been here waiting for his calls like I always did when he'd been deployed in the past. If Isla hadn't been consuming all my dreams and my every waking moment, he would be coming back home to us.

This is all my fault.

I fucked up, and there's nothing I can do now. Dad is never coming back. We won't be moving to Star Cove, and I'm going to have to be there for Mom and my brothers.

I have to end things with Isla. I don't have time for her, and I don't know if I'll ever see her again anyway. I'm not sure what's going to happen to our family now.

All I know is that this is all my fault, and losing the girl I love is what I deserve.

Present Day

I'm waiting for Leith right outside the commander's office at our company's HQ.

I should have gone in with him, but I was stuck in the motor pool.

"Hey, Thurston." My ex, Jessica, comes in, taking her cap off. "Still at work?"

I nod, feeling uneasy at the hurt I see in her brown eyes. She's been texting and calling me for the last couple of weeks, but I've ignored her. I've made myself scarce every time she came to the house with the excuse to check on Mom or to update Doug on the investigation that led the MPs and CID to arrest Joe Peters.

"Yeah, I just finished work, and I'm waiting for Leith. I rode with him today."

"You guys work hard," she comments. "I would have thought after the AFTB conference, you'd get some shorter days."

"Ha. I wish." I snort, shaking my head. "We were expecting some easier days, but something happened, and everyone is being punished right now."

“Oh no. I’m so sorry.” She extends her hand to touch my arm but changes her mind at the last second and lets her hand fall to her side. “What happened?” she asks.

“I had to supervise a couple of squads of soldiers tasked with cleaning all our vehicles in the company motor pool. They had to make sure that ‘the floor is so clean, I can use it as a motherfucking mirror to shave in,’ to quote First Sergeant Fernandez-Fernandez. He practically gave the whole company an ass chewing.” I shudder, thinking about how he bellowed the order with a look on his face that promised a world of pain in case the job wasn’t done to absolute perfection.

“Yikes,” Jessica commiserates. “I thought officers and NCOs weren’t allowed to yell at soldiers anymore. Shouldn’t this be a new army?”

I sigh. “In theory. But our first sergeant is old school. Cleaning to his standards took most of the day.”

“Surely that isn’t an officer’s job?” she comments. “Last time I checked, your company has plenty of NCOs who could have supervised a cleaning crew.”

I agree. “Yeah, and I would have totally complained that the job was beneath my rank and one of the NCOs could have been more apt for the task, but right now, I’m happy I’m not an NCO,” I say with a shudder.

“Why?”

Leith is taking forever in there, and I decide to sit in one of the chairs in the waiting area outside the commander’s office. Jessica takes the seat right next to mine.

“I never used to understand what my dad meant when he said that NCOs get the worst of both worlds,” I consider. “He used to say that sergeants, especially if lower in the ranks, are made to feel the pressure both from above and from below. I saw firsthand that he was right today. The first sergeant yelled at the entire company because one of the high-ranking officers visiting our base for the AFTB conference happened to come into the motor pool where his driver had parked the car he had

been assigned while visiting JOB Star Cove. General Kaminsky stepped on a puddle of oil and stained his boots.”

Jessica doesn't get what the problem is, but MPs have cars too, and maybe she could learn a thing or two from my experience today. “It's a motor pool, oil comes with the territory.” She shrugs.

I bark out a laugh. “The general looked our first sergeant right in the eye and commented on how when he was a young officer, fresh out of OCS, his commander ‘would have had them clean the floor with their fucking toothbrushes, had he gotten oil on his boot.’ I'm quoting here.”

“Shit.” Jessica laughs nervously, understanding how unpleasant my day was. “I have to admit that your first sergeant is scary.”

I almost flinch at the memory of the withering look First Sergeant Fernandez-Fernandez gave the soldiers in formation.

“I hope you understand that a comment like that one put me to shame, but also casts a bad light on our commander and as such on this entire garrison, since we happen to be his company,” I repeat his exact words.

“So the orders for the soldiers were to clean the motor pool and every vehicle to pristine condition, and I was tasked with supervising the job. I felt sorry for myself until the first sergeant looked at the NCOs lined up in front of him. He said that if standards are slipping in this company, it isn't only the soldiers' fault. Soldiers get lazy when they are allowed to become lazy by lack of leadership.”

“Damn,” Jessica murmurs.

“He gave us a lengthy speech about how NCOs are the backbone of the army and how when they become ‘fucking complacent,’ they bring shame to this company and to the entire garrison and give a deplorable example to the soldiers.”

My ex shrugs. “I mean, he isn't totally wrong. What did he do to the NCOs?”

I shake my head. “His smile had an evil glint that promised even more pain than what the soldiers were going to be in. So

I guess I got away with a relatively easy mission. He decided that all the NCOs had to shoot their weapons and repeat their PT test today. Whoever didn't get a satisfactory score would get his leave canceled as a punishment until they could improve by at least ten percent."

Jessica's expression displays the same awe I felt when I was standing in formation. "Even though you're an officer, T, I wouldn't piss that guy off."

I agree. "Yeah. I don't think my rank would protect me at all if First Sergeant Fernandez-Fernandez was mad at me. Yeah, in theory he's an enlisted soldier and I'm an officer, but his rank has way more weight than mine. Plus, he has the respect of our commander."

"I think you should be covered, though, when it comes to your commander, since he's also your stepfather, right?" she says.

"I wouldn't be so sure," I admit. "If I really fucked up, I don't think Doug would risk his career to protect me, despite what Mom might think. I'm not saying that in a derogatory way either, Jess. I admire our commander's integrity."

Jessica takes my hand, her eyes suddenly intense. "I think we both know the main way you could alienate your stepfather to the point that not even your mother could persuade him to forgive and forget." She laces her fingers with mine, resisting when I attempt to retract my hand. "I hope that whatever was going on between you and Isla is over now that she's engaged to Leith. I saw the way they were looking at each other the other day, Thurston. Your ex loves your brother, and your commander approves. Don't fuck it up by trying to come between them."

She doesn't know anything about my and Leith's relationship with Isla. "You're my ex too," I snap, pulling my hand back.

"Only because you won't see that you and I make sense. I understand the pressure you're under with your career and—"

“Jess, we’re over,” I interrupt her, biting my tongue over the fact that Isla understands that too. “We were over before we packed our bags after OCS.”

I see the tears welling in her eyes, and I hate myself for causing her pain.

“So that’s it? You won’t give our relationship another chance? Even if Isla is never going to be yours?”

God, I wish Mom hadn’t gotten involved. This was already done, and bringing Jessica here only reopened that old wound. “Jess, a part of me will always love you,” I say honestly. “But I told you before, what I feel for you isn’t what I should feel for the woman I marry, and that’s regardless of what happens with Isla.”

Her lips flatten in a tight, displeased line. “I don’t understand. You and I worked. We made sense.”

We did, but when I broke up with her a few months ago, I admitted that I was with her for the wrong reasons. I asked her out during a mixer organized by her sorority because in the dark, from behind, her long, strawberry blonde hair reminded me of Isla’s. “Jess, marrying you wouldn’t have been fair to you. You deserve better. You deserve someone who’s crazy about you. I’m sorry I’m not that someone.”

She takes a step back, and I know her well enough to see that she’s barely keeping the tears at bay. “So what are you going to do? Are you going to try to steal Isla from your brother? What are you going to do if she rejects you? Be alone forever? At least I know you’ll never love anyone the way you love her, and I’m prepared to accept it. I love you enough for the both of us, and in time, I’m sure you’ll forget about her.”

My heart breaks for her. “You’re right, Jess,” I say with my most honest tone. “If Isla didn’t want me, my only choice would be to be alone. I wouldn’t do to someone else what I did to you. I’m so sorry. You deserve better than to be someone’s second choice. I hope, in time, you’ll find someone who’s madly in love with you.” I absolutely mean it. I know I’m at fault here and that my heartbreak was no justification for being with her just because she reminded me of Isla.

The only redeeming factor in my behavior is that I ended things as soon as I realized what I was doing. Even if it took me years to come to terms with the fact that I was trying hard to love Jessica, but my heart wasn't there—it couldn't be because it belonged to another.

The door to the commander's office opens, and my brother comes out. "Hey, T." He smiles. "Lieutenant Colonel Cameron and I waited for you, but I guess that motor pool was dirtier than I thought."

I roll my eyes. "Believe me, regardless of how dirty it was before, now you could eat your dinner off that floor, and those trucks and vehicles are cleaner and shinier than the day they came out of the factory."

Leith chuckles. "I can't wait to see them. While you were playing cleaning crew, I got everything sorted for our PCS. Six weeks to go, and we'll be in our next duty station. We go on PCS leave right after the wedding."

I nod, feeling a sense of relief at the thought that all this stress we're under will soon be over and we'll be able to concentrate on what matters, which is Isla.

"You're moving?"

I flinch at Jessica's gasp. "Yeah, we all are," I inform her, slightly irritated about her reaction and the guilt that rears its ugly head at the back of my mind. I don't owe my ex anything. We had a clean break, and we wouldn't be in this situation if it wasn't for Mom's meddling.

"But... But you just got here!" she insists.

"Look, Jess, you know better than me that someone has been trying to hurt Isla and she can't live with a permanent security detail tailing her. We—"

"But we arrested Lieutenant Peters," she protests.

Leith intervenes. "I don't think that makes a difference. You know that Peters was right behind Oren and me that night at the lighthouse while Isla was being attacked by someone else. It's obvious that if Joe killed Connie, someone else is stalking my fiancée."

Something crosses my ex's expression, and I immediately pick up on it. "What?"

"Nothing." She reacts immediately, shaking her head.

Yeah, not so fast. I might regret having a relationship with her, but I dated her for years, and I know when she's hiding something. "No, that's not what your face says, Jess. If there's something we don't know, now would be a great time to talk."

Her eyes widen with fear. "I—I can't tell you. This part of the investigation is being kept on a need to know basis and—"

"And if this affects Isla's safety, we should definitely know," Leith bites out. "We live with her and, as you know, we're in charge of her protection. Plus, you know we'll keep quiet if it's important for the investigation."

Jessica still looks hesitant. "You're right, but my career is on the line here. If Captain Morris found out I went against his express orders, I might get in real trouble."

I don't buy it. "I doubt that whatever it is, Captain Morris wouldn't report to the commander, seeing that Isla is his daughter and lives under his roof. You can tell us now, or we can go directly to your commanding officer. Your choice."

My words seem to do the trick. "Okay, but you didn't hear it from me, just in case this comes back to bite me in the ass," she says, lowering her gaze, her hands grabbing the edges of her chair.

"Sure," Leith and I agree.

"We have reason to believe that what happened at the lighthouse was some kind of setup."

There's a tick in Leith's jaw. "How so?"

"We arrested Lieutenant Peters after we found a burner phone in his PT duffle bag. As you know, that was the phone used to text your stepsister, but that wasn't the only incriminating evidence in his possession. We found several notes written to Isla, asking her to meet at the lighthouse." Her brown eyes are fixed on mine. "Peters was obviously trying to

learn how to reproduce your handwriting. He had a copy of your PCS papers that he must have been using as a sample.”

Fuck. “That motherfucker!” I grind out, careful not to raise my voice because, despite the late hour, you never know who might be lingering around HQ, and the walls have ears around here. “I guess it would be relatively easy for anyone who works at HQ to get ahold of those kinds of papers or counseling reports.”

Leith doesn’t look entirely convinced however. “It doesn’t make sense. We saw Joe with our own eyes while someone else had their hands on Isla.”

“We think he lured Isla to the lighthouse using those counterfeit notes, and hired someone to carry out the attack and take our attention off of him. After all, he got Sergeant King to lie about his alibi. It’s his MO. We’re just trying to find more evidence. If we find the person he hired, the case is closed, so you might want to wait before you move.”

Right. “Jess, we can’t wait for your investigation. It took you weeks to get to this point. What if whoever attacked Isla tries again? Forgive me for the lack of trust, but we can’t afford the risk.”

My ex is stubborn, another thing she has in common with Isla. “But why would someone who was hired by Lieutenant Peters risk being arrested for no extra money? Especially now that Peters is in jail?”

I’m about to tell her that we’re not going to hang around to find out the answer to that question when Doug comes out of his office.

“Oh, guys. I was hoping you’d still be here.” He looks tired, and for the first time since I met him, he looks like he’s in his mid-forties. “Your mother is about to walk out of her office, and Isla is supposed to finish her shift at the library. Katie is texting her and Oren to go home and get changed. We were thinking about going out for dinner in town and picking up my mother on the way too.”

“A family dinner is just what the doctor ordered after such a busy week.” Mom smiles, coming from her own office a couple of doors down from Doug’s. “Oh, Jess, how nice to see you. Would you care to join us?”

I throw an annoyed glare in Mom’s direction. I told her that things between Jessica and me are positively over, but she’s as stubborn as humanly possible. I wonder if that’s why I fall for stubborn women too.

Thankfully, Jessica declines. “I would love to, ma’am, but I’m on duty tonight. Rain check?”

I walk out of HQ, annoyed that they are chatting as if they are long-lost friends. “I wish Mom would let this shit go,” I murmur as I climb into Leith’s truck. “She’s still worried about us fighting over Isla and Doug finding out about our past. What would it even matter now, since Doug is okay with you marrying his daughter?”

Leith shrugs. “At this point, I think it’s more about the fact that she knew about your past with Isla and hid it from him.”

Leith might be right. “Yeah, it’s possible. Remember how worried she was about the note with your writing?”

“Yeah, she tried to pass me asking Isla to meet me at the lighthouse as some kind of peace offering. Doug believed it because he isn’t an idiot and he had picked up on the tension between Isla and me. Honestly, I can’t fucking wait to move. I never thought I’d say this, but Mom is making my life harder.”

My brother agrees. “Yeah, moving is the right thing to do. We’ll be away from danger, from gossip, and the watchful eyes of our parents. We’re lucky they accepted one of us being with Isla, but I doubt Mom and Doug would come around to the idea of a four-way relationship.”

Leith is right. “I hate lying to them, but there’s no other way. I guess this is the price we need to pay for finding happiness in something so unconventional.”



14.

Surprise, Surprise

Isla

“So it’s true? You’re moving?” Mia steps into my office, lowering herself into one of the chairs facing my desk.

I save the order of upcoming fiction books I was working on, and then I close my laptop to look at my boss. “Yeah, I’m afraid so.”

“But you literally just got here,” she complains, adjusting her big glasses on her nose. “And in such a short time, you’ve done such a great job, Isla. I mean it. You’re flexible and accommodate my schedule needs, you’re great at your job, awesome with the patrons—whether they are soldiers or families—and all the techs love working with you. You’re going to leave huge shoes to fill.”

I sigh. “Thank you, Mia. You have no idea how much this means to me. I wish I could stay, but after what happened at the lighthouse...”

She’s one of the few people who’s aware of the threat against me because the first time I was assaulted, it happened here at the library.

“I don’t really blame you.” She sighs. “But I heard there was an arrest, so I was hoping that would mean you were safe.”

I explain that I don’t believe Joe is my attacker. “The MPs and CID are trying to prove that if he didn’t attack me, he’s behind it in some way. Regardless, Leith wants to go.” She’s also one of the few people who know about the engagement.

“I don’t totally blame him, but what I want to know is what *you* want?”

Not to be dead or seriously hurt. Those are the first words on the tip of my tongue, but I go with, “I’m okay with moving, Mia. I’m not naïve enough to think that we can always be stationed in the same place as Dad and Katie, so I know that, sooner or later, we’d have to go. I’m just not ready to leave Nana. Part of why I decided to work and live here was so I could be close to her. Losing Grandpa was so hard on her, and I wanted to be near her. I haven’t even told her yet. I’m planning to do it this weekend. Dad and I will sit down with her and break the news.”

“Do you think she won’t understand?” Mia asks.

I shake my head. “Oh no. She will understand. That isn’t what I’m worried about.”

My boss looks perplexed. “Then what’s the problem?”

“We haven’t told her about the attacks, the stalking, and the threatening text messages. She’s going to be pissed that we kept her in the dark.” *I hate being treated like a child!* “I can already hear what she’s going to say, and she isn’t wrong.” I sigh. “But we didn’t want to scare her.”

Mia sympathizes with my predicament. “I know it’s hard with aging family members. My pregnancy had some complications, and we didn’t tell my great-aunt. She’s almost one hundred years old. We had to tell her when I was put on bed rest, and rather than having issues with her health because of worry, her blood pressure shot through the roof because she was furious.”

That’s exactly what I’m worried will happen with Nana.

“Hey, ladies.”

Oren knocks on the ajar door to my office. “Are we ready, Isla?”

“Ready for what?” I ask, confused.

“We’re going out to dinner,” he offers, and that’s when I notice that he isn’t in his ACUs.

“Dinner sounds wonderful, but you’re way too early. I still have two hours before my shift is over,” I object.

“Nah, I’d say your shift is over right now.” Oren chuckles with the trademark smirk that means he’s up to something.

“Yeah, you must have misread the schedule,” Mia agrees with a wink in Oren’s direction. “You were officially off the clock... ten minutes ago.”

I look between the two of them. “Okay, someone better tell me what’s going on. You two couldn’t be more obvious that I’m missing something.”

Mia shrugs, trying to look innocent and failing miserably. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, come on, Mia,” I say, narrowing my eyes. “You should be the one who’s about to clock off to go pick up your daughter from daycare.”

She offers me a sheepish look. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. My husband is on leave, and he’s going to take care of our little hellion, so I thought I’d give you a break from closing.”

“See?” Oren beams. “Now come on, the car’s outside.”

Mia shoos me out of my own office, and Oren takes my hand, literally pulling me outside without even stopping when Rachel waves goodbye from the front desk.

I’m ushered to Leith’s truck. “Hey, baby.” My fiancé smiles, the epitome of relaxed in a tight T-shirt that shows off his bulging biceps, his gray eyes covered by stylish sunglasses. “Ready to go?”

“Ready for what?” I repeat as Oren opens the passenger door for me, and I spot Thurston sitting in the back in a white T-shirt and jean shorts that remind me of the way he used to dress when he was seventeen.

Leith helps me with my seat belt as Oren closes the car door and joins his older brother in the back seat. “Can someone tell me what’s going on?”

“Nope,” the three LeCroy brothers answer in unison.

I glare at Leith and throw a withering look at Oren and Thurston through the rearview mirror. “You guys know I

fucking hate surprises,” I complain.

The last surprise was that Dad and Katie had eloped, and I haven't even completely recovered from that. Even though I have to admit that their relationship was the catalyst for my guys to be stationed here and to become my stepbrothers.

“Tinkerbell,” Thurston murmurs, his warm, big hand rubbing my shoulder from the back seat. “Trust us? You're going to like this surprise.”

The other two nod, their handsome faces lighting up with huge smiles.

“Come on, Leith. Let's get going. We have half an hour to drive and a ferry to take.”

A ferry? What the hell is going on?

The question is on the tip of my tongue, but I take a deep breath and decide to trust them. Until now, they've hardly ever let me down.

Six Years Ago

“Hey, babe!” I beam at Thurston when I spot him waiting for me on the boardwalk.

“Tinkerbell. You look beautiful,” he whispers, touching his lips to mine.

We've been seeing each other for weeks now, but my heart still quickens its pace with excitement every time I see him.

I don't want to think about the fact that the summer is almost over and Thurston will have to go home.

“Hey,” he murmurs, pulling me closer and kissing the top of my head. “Where did you go just now?”

I lift my face to look at him, at those intense, dark blue eyes, and for a moment, I get lost in their depths. “Nothing, I was just... thinking,” I say, not wanting to ruin our date with my sad thoughts about how our time is running out.

“Uh-oh,” he teases me. “Do I need to be worried? What's going on in my girlfriend's smart head?”

I force myself to forget my gloomy thoughts and smile. I want to enjoy every second we have together and live in the here and now. “Seriously, nothing. I was just thinking about how we usually meet on the beach. This is different.”

A shadow passes across that pure blue gaze. “You don’t want to be here?”

I shake my head. “No, babe. I don’t care where I am as long as I’m with you. I was just hoping for some... alone time,” I admit.

My words change his mood, and a huge smile lights up his face. Damn, he’s so handsome. “Then you’re in luck.” He beams. “I have a really fun date planned for us—dinner at Joe’s, games at the arcade, and then I have a surprise, but I guess I can tell you.”

Hmm, I don’t really like surprises. Every time something unexpected happens in my life, it’s always bad. Dad’s sudden deployments, Mom leaving without so much of a word or a letter. Yeah, fuck surprises.

But his face is full of excitement, and I don’t want to ruin the happy mood between us, so I force a smile. “What is it?”

He squeezes me closer to his side. “I got us a hotel room. You know, we always hang out on the beach and at the old lighthouse when we want to be alone. I really want to take my time with you tonight, be totally naked, and kiss every inch of your body. Fuck, I hope there’s a nice bathtub in the room so we can take a bath together.”

Tears well in my eyes at his words. What am I going to do when the summer is over? I’m in his arms, and I’m already missing him. “Can we just go to the hotel room now?” I whisper, pulling on his T-shirt so there’s no space between our bodies. “The dinner and the arcade sound fun, but I want to be with you, Thurston. I want to be in your arms every minute I can.”

He misunderstands my words, thinking I’m talking about when I have to go home later tonight. “Can’t you call your grandparents and say you’re sleeping over with a friend?” he

asks hopefully. "I mean, technically it isn't really a lie, because you're only leaving out the word 'boy' from boyfriend."

I'm talking about the end of the summer, but I know that saying so would ruin our night. "My nana wouldn't believe I'm going to a sleepover," I muse, leaving out the fact that aside from my cousins when they are here and Bobbie, the librarian, I really never had any friends in town. She thinks I've finally made some new friends, but a sleepover might really be pushing my luck. "I can say that we're watching the sunrise. That would give us the entire night. So can we skip forward to the hotel part?"

He kisses me, his lips lingering on mine, and I melt into that feeling that makes my heart hurt for being so full it might burst.

"How did I find the perfect girl?" He smiles, those blue eyes twinkling with amusement and a touch of mischief. "We can go to the hotel, but let's stop at Joe's and get our dinner to go. I know you, and you're going to get hungry later."

"Perfect, let's do that," I agree.

I can barely stand still as he uses a keycard to unlock the door to our hotel room. I pull him to me for a hot kiss even before he's had the chance to shut the door behind us.

He closes his arms around me, and I'm only vaguely aware that the thud I hear is the bag with our takeout dinner hitting the floor.

He sweeps me up in his arms, carrying me to the bed where we land in a heap, our mouths still joined in a frenzy of kisses.

The first time he takes me is hard and fast, but I'm so excited that it doesn't take me a long time to join him over the edge.

"I'm sorry." He pants as his cock still pulses inside me and my entire body is tingling with the rush of pleasure he just gave me. "I swear I'm going to go slower now. I just needed you so badly."

I smile against his lips, reveling in the feeling of his fit, solid body on top of mine. "It's okay. I was in a hurry too, and it felt good. I'm just glad that you planned this right." I giggle, lifting the box of twenty-four condoms he just opened a few moments ago.

"Maybe I didn't plan this as right as you thought," Thurston complains a few minutes later as his foot almost hits me in the face as he tries to shift his position in the bathtub. "Why does this kind of shit always look so hot in movies? They don't show you how hard it is to maneuver without killing yourself or your girl."

We're sitting in the bathtub facing each other, and there's no way we can make love this way. There's barely enough room for both of us, and our limbs are pressed together.

"Maybe I can climb on you," I suggest. "Just sit still."

I barely manage to extricate my legs from their crossed position, but as I attempt to kneel, I slip forward.

Soapy water splashes everywhere, and I face-plant in the water right by Thurston's crotch.

"Isla!" He pulls me up by my biceps. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I sputter, spitting out the sudsy water. "Well shit, at least I landed next to your dick."

He pulls me closer, but the tub is a slippery nightmare, and he falls back, his head missing the edge of the tub by mere fractions of an inch. "Fuck," he says as he finally manages to sit up. "I should have found a hotel with bigger bathtubs, but this place is all I could afford. I'm sorry, Tinkerbelle."

I smile, carefully circling my arms around his neck. "The room is nice and clean, babe, and it was the sweetest idea ever. Let's just get out of this tub and take the fun back to the bed before one of us gets hurt. What do you say?"

His eyes descend from my face to my breasts, stopping on my taut, hard nipples. "Okay. But I swear one day, I'll take you to a nicer hotel with a big tub."



Thurston



PRESENT DAY

“Are we there yet?” Isla asks as we leave Star Cove’s city limits.

I smile from the back seat, unable to resist the urge to tease her. “I told you guys we should have blindfolded her. Now she’s going to be a total pain in the ass until we get there.”

I brace myself for her reaction, but I guess she knows me too well and doesn’t fall for my provocation.

“There, where?” She giggles, meeting my eyes in the rearview mirror and winking at me.

“Ha, nice try.” Oren smirks. “I told you it’s a surprise, and the entire point is that you don’t find out until we get there.”

Oh, my little brother walked right into it.

“But where’s there?” she singsongs. “And when are we getting there?”

“I’ll give you a clue,” I taunt her. “It isn’t in town.”

She twists in her seat, maneuvering with her seat belt so that she’s kneeling and hugging the back of her seat, facing Oren and me. “No shit, Sherlock. Oh come on, guys! You’re being mean. Where are you taking me?”

“We’re taking you out to dinner in Coral Cove, hence the ferry ride,” Leith relents. “Now please, for God’s sake, sit down properly. I don’t want to end the night at the hospital if we have an accident.”

Oren scolds him. “Dude! Why the fuck did you tell her? You seriously suck at surprises, you’re worse than Mom.”

He winks at Leith.

Good thinking. If we argue about the location, she won't suspect that the surprise doesn't end there.

"Yeah, seriously, Leith," I chime in. "All this work to keep this a secret and you caved within minutes. I really hope you're never captured by the enemy, or you'll give away any secret you know before they even show you to the torture chamber."

We argue back and forth until the docks come into view.

"Don't think I can't recognize a diversion tactic when I see one," Isla mutters, crossing her arms over her chest. "You soldiers are all the same, and unluckily for the three of you, I grew up with my father who could teach a master class in diversion techniques. I've never been to Coral Cove. What's so special about it?" she asks.

Oren takes pity on her and explains, "There's a famous Michelin star restaurant at the island's country club."

"Awesome!" She beams. "I just hope they serve decent portions because I'm starving."

I chuckle. "We'll make sure to inform the chef that you're hungry." I love a woman who likes to eat.

Leith parks the car in our spot on the ferry. There aren't that many cars since this is the last ferry tonight. I'm glad that things aren't as busy as they'll be in a couple of weeks when the Fourth of July weekend comes around.

"You know," Isla says, leaning on the railing and inhaling the sea breeze. "I really appreciate you guys taking me out to dinner, but you didn't need to go through all this trouble. I'm excited about eating Michelin star quality food, but I don't need fancy dinners. A pizza or a burger from Joe's Shack would have been just fine."

Leith settles on the other side of her, and the soft light in his eyes makes it impossible not to see how he feels about her. "We know that. But we wanted to treat you to something special, and by going out of town, you can have a date night with all three of us without worrying about what people will say if we see anyone from the base."

She smiles, linking her arm with his and cozying up to him. “True. As long as we’re military, we’ll always have to be careful. It doesn’t matter where we’re stationed.”

I agree. “Oren and I accept the situation, Tink. We can be seen together, but PDA is a big no-no except with your soon to be husband. This is why we wanted to have a romantic dinner away from where we can be recognized.”



15.

Put A Ring On it

Isla

The sun is dipping into the sea, coloring the blue waters of Coral Cove with pretty pastel tones.

We don't talk much as Leith drives across the entire small island. The radio is on, and my face is literally glued to my window as I watch the tidy streets bordered by wildflowers and mansions that line the area close to Main Street where the shops and restaurants look upscale, undoubtedly catering to a wealthy crowd of tourists.

By the time we park in front of an imposing white building and a valet in a uniform rushes to open my door, the sky is dark and the first few stars are beginning to appear in the huge summer sky.

The inside of the country club style building is even more luxurious than I was expecting—all dark wood, polished brass, and silk upholstery.

As my stepbrothers walk toward the concierge counter, I pull on Thurston's hand. "I think the restaurant is that way," I inform him, pointing out a discreet brass plate that says "Restaurant."

I recognize his little smile as that slightly irritating smirk he always has when he knows something I don't.

"What?" I glare.

"The ferry we came on was the last one for the day. Leith got us a room. He's checking in now."

I watch as the concierge hands him a small folder that must contain the key. "We're staying here?" I gasp. "You guys should have told me. I didn't bring anything. I don't have a change of clothes, no nighty, and not even any clean underwear for tomorrow. Seriously."

Oren stops by my other side with a smile that resembles his older brother's. "I've got you covered, sweet girl."

And I shit you not—because certain things can't really be made up—he dips his huge hand in the front pocket of his jean shorts and extracts a crumpled piece of pink and black fabric.

"What in the—" I stop in my tracks, too shocked to say anything when he grabs the garment by the straps. It's one of my favorite lace and silk nighties. "Are you serious?"

His smile widens as he puts the nighty back in his pocket and extracts a pink lace thong from his other pocket. "See? I packed for you. I'm sorry, I forgot to bring a bra, but you're wearing one now or you can go braless tomorrow."

Is this guy for real?

"Oren, babe, I wouldn't call this packing. I mean, I guess I appreciate it, but you could have gotten a bag. Even a tote bag or one of your army rucksacks would have been—"

"Nah." He winks. "I had to do everything in secret, and I didn't have much time after work. Plus, the guys and I don't have any change of clothes with us either. We figured if we really need anything, we can go to Main Street, but it's just one night, so we should be fine."

I don't know what to say. "You take the concept of traveling light to a whole new level, babe. I hope you're more prepared when you pack for the field."

He chuckles. "Duh. Of course. I'll have you know that I'm awesome at packing. I just had to improvise because this was a last-minute thing. We didn't know when we'd get to come here, we were waiting for the ri—"

"We were waiting for the reply from the hotel about availability since it was such a spur of the moment idea," Leith intervenes, standing between Oren and me and practically elbowing his younger brother out of the way. "Come on, let's go to our room."

He wraps his arm around my shoulders, and I let him guide me toward the elevator on the opposite side of the lobby.

My fiancé is smiling, placing a soft kiss above my ear, and nothing looks amiss as Oren and Thurston follow us closely, but my spidey sense is on high alert. My three men are hiding something, I'd bet a billion dollars on it.

I know something is definitely up when we get to our room and the small elevator opens on a hallway with just one door—the door to our room.

I've been to some nice hotels the few times I was Dad's date to some army balls, but never anything like this.

This isn't just a hotel room, this is a penthouse.

"Sweet Jesus!" I gasp at the apartment that's the epitome of luxury.

Dark wood floors, leather couches, and the biggest flat screen TV I've ever seen outside of a movie theater decorate the living room.

I walk through it to what I'm sure is the master suite with a huge, California king-sized bed all done in the hues of white and silver.

Something finally clicks in my mind when I walk into the master bathroom where a huge sunken bathtub dominates the space. "Thurston," I call out. "You chose this, didn't you?"

He smiles, probably remembering the only other time he took me to a hotel and tried to have sex with me in the tub, but we had to abandon our plans because the bathtub was way too small for two people. This would comfortably welcome six.

"It was Thurston's idea, I admit it," Leith says, taking my hand. "But I chose the place. Remember when I wanted to take you away after I went to that leadership training course, but we had to cancel after Joe was arrested for the first time?"

I nod. "Yeah, I was disappointed, but we no longer had an excuse to go away."

He lifts my hand, bringing my knuckles to his lips. "Well, now you're my fiancée and we don't need an excuse."

I turn to look at Oren and Thurston. "This is amazing! But didn't Dad and Katie ask questions when they saw you come

with us?”

“Nah.” Oren smiles. “We told them we were coming with you to help keep the ruse of the surprise and then we’d go do our own thing. Doug said we definitely deserve a little time off.”

My heart skips a beat as I look at my three stepbrothers. They never made me feel like keeping me safe was a burden, but I realize how hard they’ve been working to juggle their normal work schedules and practically being my bodyguards, so I feel a little guilty when I ask, “But you and Thurston aren’t really leaving, right?”

A look passes between them. “Not a chance, Tink,” Thurston says softly.

“Yeah, this is our getaway, all four of us,” Oren agrees. “Plus, I’m not missing out on this dinner with one of the most famous, up-and-coming chefs in California.”

His words remind me that I was worrying about the lack of luggage not two seconds ago. “Guys.” I sigh. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I love the surprise, and I couldn’t be more excited about dinner, but I wish you had told me about this and gave me a chance to pack.” I look down at my navy blue pencil skirt and teal blouse. “This place is so elegant, and I’m definitely underdressed.”

Oren winks at me. “Then so are we. We didn’t bring any luggage either.”

Men are so infuriating. I can’t believe that they didn’t think about bringing some better clothes to come to a posh place like this one. “I hope we get to have that dinner then. Have you seen this place? A lot of country clubs and resorts like this one have a dress code for their restaurants and bars.”

Their smiles widen, and I don’t understand what’s so funny. “Am I missing something?”

Leith pulls me toward the double patio doors at the opposite end of the master bedroom. “We aren’t worried about the dress code because we won’t be going down to the

restaurant to have our dinner. We arranged to have their complete tasting menu served out here.”

The wonder of a few minutes ago when I stepped into the penthouse has nothing on my gasp of surprise when Leith guides me out to a private deck.

A wrought iron and glass table is set for four. There are flowers everywhere in huge, stone planters mixing their exotic scents with the salt that a light breeze is carrying from the ocean.

I walk to the railing, looking at the beach just a few yards away where the calm sea is whispering a love song every time a wave kisses the shore.

“You can see Star Cove from here,” Leith says, pointing at some lights at the horizon of the beautiful night sky. “Those brighter lights are the marina and the pier, and farther down, that’s our base.”

I’m absolutely speechless. “This place is breathtaking. Thank you so much, guys.”

“Would the most beautiful woman in the entire world like a glass of champagne?” Oren asks, pointing at the ice bucket that’s sitting on one side of the table.

“Thank you,” I say when he offers me a glass of cold bubbly, but my attention is drawn by the fairy lights that cast a romantic glow on the beautiful scene in front of me. “Is that ___”

I take a few steps to a raised area of the deck, spotting a hot tub that’s installed right into the flat stones that pave that part of the deck.

“Just in case you didn’t like the jacuzzi tub in the bathroom,” Thurston whispers as he hugs me from behind, his warm breath caressing my neck.

I turn around to face him, meeting the deep blue of his eyes. “I have no words. I feel like a princess.”

“Isla,” he says softly. “I hope you know how much I love you and how grateful I am for this second chance, because if

you hadn't found it in your heart to forgive me, I don't know what I would have done."

For the first time, I believe him completely. There's no doubt in my mind that Thurston loves me and that he's never going to betray me or walk away from me again.

Our lips meet halfway as we close the distance between us at the same time.

I melt against his kiss, thinking that his were the first lips that ever kissed mine and every time he kisses me, I feel like I'm home.

Home.

That is what Thurston, Oren, and Leith are for me. I've spent my life moving around the world, following Dad's career, and I might spend the next twenty plus years doing the same since I'm going to marry a soldier.

The thought makes me smile against Thurston's lips because military life meant so many sacrifices, from the holidays without Dad, to every time a new PCS dictated leaving my friends. I blamed the military lifestyle when Mom left, done with all the sacrifices required for the sake of Dad's career.

I swore more than once that I would never fall for a soldier, and yet, here I am. I'm in love with three soldiers, and I'm going to do whatever it takes to love them and support them.

Home isn't a physical place, but the people that make you feel safe, strong, and invincible.

"Hey, you two." Oren chuckles, coming closer. "Get a fucking room. Oh wait, no need, we have one. Can I get some love too?"

Thurston scowls at his younger brother, breaking the kiss. "Wait your turn." There's no heat in his words, and I decide it would be fun to tease him a little.

I'm about to say something, but I'm distracted by Leith's phone when it beeps with an incoming text message,

immediately followed by a knock on the suite's door.

"It's dinner," he announces, stepping back inside to let in the three waiters who are wheeling in three carts laden with trays covered by silver domes.

Leith tips them, declining their offer to serve each course.

Little white cards describe what's under every dome, and I've never had such exquisite food in my life. There's a sausage and cheese crostini with a delicious mushroom foam, crispy fried artichoke hearts, handmade lobster ravioli, mini filet mignons wrapped in prosciutto, and many more small dishes with the best the land and sea have to offer.

We sit outside, trying everything and feeding each other the best bites.

The conversation flows between us, light and a little flirty, and for the first time in forever, I'm just enjoying the company of the men I love without worrying about anything or anyone else. There are no disapproving parents, gossiping soldiers and family members, or mysterious stalkers lurking in the shadows.

"Guys, this is the best night I've ever had." I sigh, licking the spoon after the last bite of a fresh, wild berry pavlova that I would like to serve at my wedding if the chef is available. "But to be honest, every night is perfect when I'm with you. I just wish it could always be like this, just the four of us."

Another one of those looks passes between the guys. "Isla," Leith murmurs, standing up from his chair and taking my left hand into his. "I want nothing more than that. *We* want nothing more," he corrects himself, dropping down on one knee.

I gasp as Thurston and Oren do the same, and I look at my three stepbrothers at my feet, wondering what this is about.

"Isla," Leith says softly, extracting a small, black velvet box from the pocket of his shorts. "I know I already asked you to marry me, but I think you deserve a real proposal, and this ___"

“This is from all three of us,” Oren interrupts him. “We know we can’t all say I do at the altar, not officially, but if you say yes, sweet girl, this is it. The four of us forever. No matter where we are in the world, no matter what life throws at us, we’ll always be by your side to love and protect you until our last dying breath. You’re everything to me, Isla. I love you. Will you marry me? I mean, us?”

His dark blue eyes are overflowing with emotion, his deep voice gentle as he looks at me, hoping and praying for a yes.

I open my mouth to utter that word, because he must know, *they* must know that I feel the same way about them, but Thurston takes my other hand, bringing my knuckles to his lips.

“I’ve loved you from the first time I saw you on the beach six years ago. There’s never been anyone else for me, Isla. There will never be another woman who completes me the way you do. Six years ago, I was a stupid boy, and I hurt you. I owe you everything for giving me a second chance and for forgiving me, but letting you go was the worst thing I’ve ever done. It showed me that I can’t live without you. You’re what makes my world beautiful and exciting and magical. Marry me, Tinkerbell.”

My heart is beating so fast and so loud that I’m sure they must be able to hear it. There’s only one word I want to say to them, but Leith opens the box. “Isla, I started falling for you from the second you showed up at the gate with an expired ID. Everything in our circumstances told me that you were out of my reach, from our parents being married to each other to your dad being my commander, and your complicated past with Thurston to the fact that Oren felt the same way I did. I told myself that the wise thing to do would be to walk away. That my life had been complicated enough without falling for the one woman I had no business having feelings for. That there was no way I could ever be good enough for you. But I was a fool thinking I could just be your friend or your stepbrother. I’m yours, baby, if you’ll have me. We all are. Will you do us the honor of being Mrs. LeCroy?”

While Oren and Thurston wear their hearts on their sleeves, Leith has always been the most composed and reserved of the LeCroy brothers. He's always kept up the polite, calm veneer expected from the perfect US Army officer. My eyes are locked onto his silver gaze, and I can see that he means every word.

“Yes,” I say, fighting hard to keep my tears under control. “Yes, I’ll marry you. I love you, and Oren is right. I wish I could legally marry each of you, but it doesn’t matter what the law says. You own my heart, guys. Each of you. I would be honored to be Mrs. LeCroy.”

I watch as Leith takes the huge diamond solitaire out of the box and slips it on my finger with a steady hand.

“This ring is from all of us, baby. I hope you like it,” he says. “If you don’t, we can exchange it and the matching wedding band we ordered.”

I shake my head, admiring the perfect, brilliant cut diamond and the way it sparkles under the fairy lights that illuminate our private deck. “No, I love it. It’s perfect, just like the three of you are perfect for me.”

Leith stands up, pulling me into his arms and crushing his lips on mine. His kiss is soft and hard at the same time.

His lips feel soft and silky against mine, but he’s kissing me hard, the delicious pressure of his mouth coaxing mine open.

Our tongues are tangled together, and heat is coursing through my body, but I’m pulled into another set of arms before our kiss can evolve into something else.

“Fuck, sweet girl.” Oren moans against my lips. “I’m so happy, I could fucking burst. You make me so happy and so fucking hard. Harder than any diamond.”

I smile at his words, kissing him back as my heart feels so full, it might overflow. “I love making you hard, babe,” I whisper. “You’re my perfect, sexy sergeant.”

Before he can kiss me again, I’m in Thurston’s arms. “Thank you,” he murmurs against my mouth. “Thank you for

forgiving me, Isla. I swear I'll spend every day of my life loving you and trying to prove to you that I'm worthy of that forgiveness."

I pull back slightly, breaking the kiss to look into his dark blue eyes. "Don't thank me, babe," I say, tracing the line of his perfect jaw with my fingers. "You are right that we can't live without each other, so I had to take a risk because what's the alternative? You're right that I complete you because you complete me. My heart would be missing a piece without you, Thurston, and I know you won't hurt me again. I trust you."

His lips find mine again, and I let him consume me the way he always has since our first kiss.

As Thurston kisses me long and deep, I become vaguely aware of another set of lips gliding down the back of my neck and Oren's big, gentle hands lowering the zipper of my skirt.

"T, her blouse," he tells his older brother, and Thurston breaks the kiss to lift my blouse over my head.

"God, you're so beautiful." He smiles, letting his eyes take a slow perusal of my pale pink bra and panties.

My body immediately reacts to his heated gaze. My nipples are two hard points, straining against the lace of my bra.

"I don't know what I like better," Oren says from behind me. "The sexy way her underwear shows us just enough of her body, or looking at her soft, naked skin."

His skilled fingers find the clasp of my bra and undo it with just one touch.

Thurston slowly slides the straps down my arms, discarding the garment on the wood deck. "I've always loved your tits, Tink," he says, closing his fingers around one of my breasts and massaging it.

"Oh." I inhale sharply as he suddenly pinches my nipple, lowering his head to take the hard, sensitive peak into his mouth.

“Her tits are perfect,” Oren agrees from behind me. “But so is her ass.”

He slides my panties down my hips, leaving me totally bare in front of them.

It’s the first time I’ve been naked in front of all three of them, but I’m not embarrassed. Each one of them makes me feel beautiful and wanted.

The only thing that worries me is how it will be between the four of us. Oren and Leith have shown me that they can happily share me—after a hesitant start.

But what about Thurston?

This thing, this relationship with the three of them will only work if we’re all on the same page. They don’t have to share me in bed if they can’t handle seeing me with the others. I’m worried because Thurston has always been more possessive than his younger brothers, and I don’t want jealousy to destroy what we just got back.

I don’t have any time to dwell on my worries, though, as the guys have been quick to shed their own clothes, and I squeal as Thurston sweeps me up into his arms and walks us toward the hot tub.

He lowers us into the warm water, settling down with me on his lap.

I kiss him, feeling the water swirl between our bodies with every small movement, making me grow hotter with every passing moment.

“I’ve been dreaming about this since we met,” he whispers, nibbling on my ear as one of his hands caresses my breast. “Remember how tiny the tub was in the hotel room I got us six years ago? We almost broke our necks trying to make love in it.”

“This is amazing, babe,” I admit. “But I love that memory too. It was such a romantic, hot night. Even if we couldn’t do much more than kiss in that bathtub.”

He nods, nipping my bottom lip. “You’re right. I was so fucking excited to have you in a bed. The beach was romantic, but we were always worried about someone walking by that lighthouse and seeing us.”

The way he takes my lips next is full of barely contained passion, and I let him explore my mouth while his hands explore my body under the water of the hot tub.

I feel his excitement growing against my outer thigh, but unlike all the times Thurston and I have been together—six years ago and in the past few weeks—this time we aren’t in a hurry. There are no stragglers walking by the beach or parents coming home earlier than expected.

“Can we join you?”

The question comes from one of the only two other people present, and the words “of course, babe,” are on the tip of my tongue, but I stop myself from saying anything.

I look at Thurston, waiting to see what his reaction will be.

His arms instinctively tighten around me, and there’s a sudden tension in his muscles.

“Sure, come on in,” he says a little tightly.

He’s trying. I know this is hard for him, and he would never be able to share me with anyone but his brothers.

Oren steps into the hot tub in all his glorious nakedness, wearing a huge smile on his face as he comes to sit so close to us that his shoulder touches his brother’s. “I love when you kiss her, T. It looks so fucking hot,” he says, and I feel Thurston relax marginally.

“Do you think so?” he asks, sounding slightly uncertain.

“Fuck yeah.” Oren nods. “Isla melts against your lips, and I can only imagine how hard her nipples are right now under the water.”

He extends one of his hands and cups one of my tits to verify what he just said.

“Just like I thought.” He chuckles, dropping a hot kiss on my shoulder. “Our girl is so turned on, and that’s all thanks to you, brother.”

Thurston smiles, his fingers playing with my other nipple. “Is that so, Tink? Do I turn you on?” he whispers.

I don’t have the chance to answer his question, because Leith enters the tub and sits opposite us. “I’m glad you learned some pool etiquette, Oren,” he teases. “A few weeks ago, our little brother almost got his ass kicked when he joined Isla and me in the pool without an invitation. At least this time you asked.”

Oren flips him off, but there’s absolutely no heat in his expression, his face relaxed with an amused smile. “Ha.” He smirks. “You’re so full of shit. You didn’t mind me joining, and we had the best weekend of our fucking lives, taking Isla together. I dare you to disagree.”

Leith’s smile mirrors Oren’s as he shrugs. “Sure, you’re lucky it was hot, but you weren’t exactly invited to begin with.”

They argue back and forth for a few beats, until Thurston intervenes. “You had a hot weekend? Are you sure? Or did you spend it arguing like the two dumbasses you’re being right now?”

Oren doesn’t rise to his older brother’s provocation. “No, we eventually got on the same page, and it was fucking awesome. Tell him, sweet girl,” he says, looking at me.



16.

Loving Isla - Part 1

Leith

Isla's eyes flit between Oren and me. "I'm sure you already told him."

Oren shakes his head. "We told him that the three of us spent the weekend together and that it was amazing, but we didn't share the details."

Isla sounds incredulous. "Really? You didn't tell him what we did?"

I come to Oren's aid. "He's right, baby. We didn't tell him. We didn't know if you'd be happy if we did that."

Isla looks to be deep in thought for a moment. "I think there should be no secrets between the four of us," she decides. "If anything happens, good or bad, it's only fair to share it. That includes what happens in bed. I know you aren't bragging to your friends about your sexual conquests. So yeah, I'm okay with the three of you talking about it in as much detail as you want. I trust you."

I nod. "We thought you'd feel this way, but we wanted to be sure."

"There should be no secrets between the four of us," Oren agrees.

Thurston moves a lock of Isla's long, strawberry blonde hair away from her shoulder, kissing the soft skin there. "So it looks like I'm the only one who's never had a threesome—or in our case, a foursome. The only experience I have with stuff like this is what I've seen on the internet. Is that what you guys did?"

I'm about to explain, but Isla precedes me. "Yes and no. It was... It's hard to describe. Oren and I started making love, and then Leith joined us."

Thurston's look is intense. "How did he join? Did he watch? Did you give him a hand job?"

Isla turns in his arms, facing him completely, so she's straddling him. "He was watching at first, but I wanted them inside me at the same time, so he got behind me and took my ass."

I watch as the expression on Thurston's face changes. He's curious and definitely jealous, but there's also concern in his eyes. "Did you like that?"

Isla nods slowly, cupping Thurston's face. "It was amazing. I know it probably sounds crazy, but they made it all about me. They took care of me, babe. It was my first time doing anal, but they took it slow, making sure that I felt good. They made me come so many times, and it was one of the hottest experiences of my life."

Thurston doesn't say anything for a long moment, considering Isla's words. "I'm glad they took care of you, or I wouldn't care that they are my brothers, and I'd have to kick their asses. But is that what you want, Tink? You want us to share you that way?"

I can hear the uncertainty in Thurston's voice.

"It was one of my fantasies to have them both at the same time, babe. The reality of it surpassed my imagination, it was so hot."

I know what his next question is going to be even before the words leave his mouth. "And do you want to be shared by all three of us?"

She nods. "That would be so exciting, but I only want it if you're comfortable with it."

This is a turning point.

Sharing Isla in bed isn't a deal breaker. It doesn't change what's in my heart, and I'm pretty sure she feels the same. However, if Thurston agrees to try, it means that he has complete trust in this relationship.

"I love you, Isla," he says. "And I love my brothers. I think I want to try, as long as we can still have times when it's just the two of us."

We all agree. Neither I nor Oren want to share our fiancée every single time.

“Do you want to try then?” she asks him.

“Now?”

Isla turns to look at me and then Oren on her other side. “Are you guys up for it?”

Oren is the fastest to agree. “Fuck yeah.”

I agree. “I’m up for anything you want, baby.”

She turns again to look into Thurston’s eyes. “We don’t have to do anything if this is too much,” she assures him.

My older brother looks nervous, but I know he wants to make our woman happy. “What are the rules?”

Isla offers him a little shrug. “There are no rules. We make them as we go along.”

“We do have one rule,” I correct her. “You tell us if something hurts or doesn’t feel good, and we immediately stop.”

She smiles. “Yeah, I forgot about that, but we don’t really need a rule. If something doesn’t feel right, we all need to let each other know, and there will be no hard feelings. I know you guys would never want to cause me pain.”

“Unless you beg us for it,” Oren adds with a dark chuckle. “Like a little spanking here and there. I know you like it.”

Isla giggles, looking at Oren with a sultry smirk. “Oh, yeah. I love being your bad girl.”

I observe Thurston’s reaction as Oren scoots a little closer to Isla while she’s still straddling our older brother and plants a ferocious kiss on her lips.

It’s a sight to behold. Oren’s big hand is splayed across Isla’s delicate jaw as their mouths clash fiercely against one another.

She emits little excited moans, and I don’t have a problem admitting that the sight of them together is getting me hard.

There are many reasons why I'm not jealous, and I try to silently communicate them to Thurston when our eyes meet over Isla's shoulder.

Oren loves her just as much as we do. He would fight for her with his last breath, and he would die for her. She loves us back with her whole heart, and she loves us equally. She's Oren's best friend, and she's mine. Our friendships might manifest in slightly different ways, but there's no doubt in my mind that she truly doesn't have a favorite between us. She loves each of us the same way we love her.

Last but not least, watching them only spurs me on to act on all the things I know I want to do with her tonight. That's the beauty of it. If we share her this way, we can join in.

Thurston hesitates for just one second, but then he seems to make up his mind, and he nods at me.

I can't help but smile as I watch him grab one of Isla's tits and close his mouth around her pink, taut nipple.

Our girl reacts by arching her back to give him better access, her moans swallowed by Oren's kiss.

It's one of the hottest things I've ever seen, and while I'm dying to be a part of the action, I just sit here a little longer and watch them. I stroke myself slowly and languidly, feeling the warm water caress my body and letting my desire build.

I know I'm the luckiest man in the world because the woman I love loves me back and has agreed to marry me. I'll be the one who officially has her on his arm, so I can be patient for a few minutes and watch the other two people I would do anything for show her how much they want her.

Isla props herself up on her knees, offering me a mind-blowing view of her perfect ass, as she breaks the kiss with Oren. "I want you, Thurston," she says, keeping herself balanced by placing her hands on his shoulders. "We've waited six years to do this, and I want to know how it feels to have you inside me while we're in the water." She lowers herself onto him, and I watch through the clear water as he enters her, inch by inch, until she's sitting on his lap.

His arms are wrapped around her waist, and Thurston closes his eyes when Isla grinds her hips.

“Oh, fuck,” he murmurs, and I can’t exactly see it, but I can imagine what he’s feeling, because she must be squeezing him tight with those amazing inner muscles of hers.

Oren is watching them intently too, and we don’t need hard rules between us if even the most impulsive among us gives them a few moments before he joins in.

He gets his cue that it’s okay to get closer when Thurston and Isla get into a steady pace, her hips undulating rhythmically as he meets her movements with slow thrusts of his hips.

“Hmm,” Isla moans when Oren’s lips trail over the back of her neck and down one of her shoulders, while his fingers trace a slow path down her spine.

I’m fascinated as his huge hand reaches the base of her spine and rather than massaging her toned buttocks, Oren begins playing with her crack. His fingers disappear in that secret valley, and I can’t see exactly what he’s doing, but I can imagine him teasing her puckered hole by the way he’s moving his wrist in a slow, circular motion.

Isla has confided in me that it’s taking her a little bit longer to allow Oren where only I have been allowed so far. I’m glad my little brother understands that this isn’t because she doesn’t trust him. I don’t blame her at all. I know I’m well above average when it comes to size, but I’m glad I played football for years, because seeing other guys in the locker room cemented my self-confidence. I can definitely say that Thurston and I are big, while Oren verges on the scary side of huge, so it’s understandable that our girl is asking him to go slower when it comes to getting inside her tight little ass.

Obviously, though, Oren enjoys teasing and playing as much as I do, because he keeps massaging between her buttocks as she grinds on Thurston.

“Babe,” she gasps. “Stop.”

His wrist immediately stills under the hot tub water. “I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?”

She turns to look at him, stopping the hypnotic movements of her hips on our older brother. “A little. It burns more than it did last time you played in there with your fingers. It feels... dry, I guess, even though we’re in the water.”

Oren nods. “It makes sense. Last time I used your own natural lube, but I guess the water washes that out.”

Yeah, they are right. “If we want to play with Isla’s perfect little ass, we need lube,” I intervene.

Isla’s eyes meet mine over her shoulder. “But won’t the water wash that away too? I was really hoping I’d get to have all three of you at the same time tonight, but like this, it hurts way too much. Even a finger feels impossible in the water.”

I smile, feeling a little smug that I thought about it. “We need a silicone-based lube that will still work in the water.” I reach for the small packets of lube I made sure I had with me when Thurston told me why he wanted a room with a big tub.

“You were prepared?” Oren beams. “You know what, brother? I swear I’m never going to rib you again about being a pretty boy officer. You’re worth every extra cent the army pays you if you planned every detail to this extent.”

I roll my eyes, chuckling as I get up from my spot and go to sit on the other side of Isla, offering Oren one of the sachets. I know he isn’t being sarcastic, and he means what he said as a compliment.

Oren rips open the packet of lube, pouring the viscous liquid over his fingers before submerging his hand again.

“Oh yeah, this makes it much easier.” He smiles as he moves in and out extremely slowly.

“Motherfucker.”

The expletive comes from Thurston, who’s closed his eyes again, his jaw ticking as he visibly tenses up. “I—fuck. Whatever you’re doing to her, please stop. You made her

tighten around me, and it feels too good. I don't want to come yet."

"Sorry." Oren chuckles, not sounding repentant in the least. "I'm going to stop, but it's a shame, since we were already in with two fingers and our girl is going to be ready to take one of us soon—if she wants."

Thurston relaxes marginally as Oren moves his hand away from Isla's buttocks. "Please, Tink, don't move," he begs, resting his head on the padded spot on the edge of the tub. "I'll be okay in just a second, I promise."

Isla nods slowly. "Okay. But can I kiss you?"

Thurston makes a noise of approval when her soft lips touch his, and for one second, I can't do anything but watch the way they kiss, slow and tender.

My heart feels so full looking at the way they express their love for each other, and I don't want to intrude, but at the same time, I want to share this moment with them.

My hand sneaks between them almost of its own accord, zeroing in on Isla's clit.

I find it immediately, putting pressure on it with the tips of my fingers, knowing that she can take it after grinding on Thurston for a while.



Oren

I'M GLAD I'M NOT THE only one who has no patience.

It's incredibly fun to watch Leith snap when his excitement has gotten the best of him.

He's always been the most composed and in control out of the three of us, and I knew Isla was the one for him when I saw the way she gets him to relax, let go, and be spontaneous.

That's exactly what's happening now as Isla and Thurston kiss in a way that pulls at my heartstrings. They are so slow

and tender, and I can almost imagine how they were six years ago when they first fell in love.

Leith and I are both watching them, and while I'm pleased to say that I keep my hands to myself, our newly decorated captain loses his cool and begins rubbing between Isla's thighs.

I smile when she breaks the kiss with Thurston, throwing her head back. I watch her come apart on Leith's fingers. It happens fast, which is a testament to the fact that my brother knows exactly where and how to touch her.

"Oh my god!" She moans, and I realize that Thurston slid out of her and is holding her against his chest while Leith keeps touching her through her climax.

Thurston's arms are closed protectively around Isla, but his eyes are fixed on Leith, and he's scowling.

"I'm sorry, T," Leith says, suddenly realizing that he interrupted their tender moment. "I didn't mean to intrude, I ___"

Thurston shakes his head. "I'm not mad because you made her come," he bites out. "I'm mad because you almost made *me* come, asshole. Next time you decide to get involved, give me a heads-up. I really want to do this thing with all of us, but I almost ruined Isla's night. You know better than me how fucking amazing she feels when she comes all over you. I almost blew my load thanks to you."

I can't blame him, because I know exactly what he's talking about. My cock gets harder at just the thought of Isla's soft, silky pussy tightening around my shaft in the wettest, warmest embrace I've ever felt. Fuck, I need that pussy now.

"I'm sorry, T. Truly, I didn't think—" Leith repeats, but he's interrupted by Isla's lighthearted giggle.

"I'm sorry, guys. You know what our problem is?" she asks, her gray eyes twinkling with mischief as she turns her head to look at each of us.

I'm dying to know what she's going to say, so I humor her. "What is it, sweet girl?"

“Too much talking and not enough fucking,” she says, suddenly dead serious.

I can't help but burst into laughter. This woman is fucking perfect, and I can't believe my luck that she decided I'm worthy of her.

“Oren, focus,” she scolds me.

“Yes, ma'am.” I stiffen, fighting hard to school my face into a serious expression but failing miserably.

“Guys,” she says with an eye roll that's meant to conceal the little smirk I see pulling at the corner of her mouth. “We're doing this wrong. We all need to relax and go with the flow. That's why when we had the weekend together, it was so awesome. It was unplanned, and we just let things happen.”

She's damn right, and both my brothers acknowledge it.

“Adding Thurston to the situation,” she continues, “shouldn't make a difference. We're all in this together, and there's no right or wrong. I love each of you, and I can never have enough of your kisses and being in your arms. I'm sorry if I neglected you and Oren, Leith. I just wanted a moment to give Thurston what he wanted all those years ago, even though I doubt he hasn't played out his fantasy of having sex in a bathtub with one of his other exes.”

“You're right that we probably need to relax, Tinkerbell,” Thurston says. “But you're wrong about sex in the bathtub or in the water in general. It was something I always wanted to do with you, and I've never even thought about it after you.”

That makes Isla smile brighter. She's one possessive little thing, and I love that about her. “Good. And believe me, this might be the first time we fuck in the water, but it won't be the last. I love how it feels, and your cock feels absolutely huge.”

I snicker, and she glares at me. “I didn't mean that it normally isn't big, Oren.”

“Hmm, okay,” I say sheepishly.

“But, babe,” she continues, looking at Thurston, “why were you trying so hard not to come?”

Thurston's tone is serious when he admits his performance anxiety. "I don't want to let you down. You want us all together, and here I am, about to blow my load before one of the others has even touched you."

Isla exhales, caressing my eldest brother's jaw with gentle fingers. "Relax, babe. Even if you had come, you wouldn't have let me down. You're twenty-three, Thurston. I'm pretty sure you could come and go again after a few minutes. It isn't the end of the world, okay?"

He shrugs. "You're right. I just didn't want these two dipshits to make fun of me for coming first."

She traces one of his eyebrows with her fingers in a soothing way. "No one is going to make fun of anyone when we're all together," she says firmly. "It doesn't matter if one of you comes first. Right, guys?"

She looks at me and Leith, and I swear to God, I want to be mature and stay serious, because the truth is that unless we're playing, I'd never make fun of my brothers if I thought I could really hurt them.

I almost make it, but then I catch Leith's smirk in the corner of my eye, and there's no way I can keep my composure.

"Guys!" Isla scolds us. "Are you for real right now?"

"I'm so sorry," Leith immediately apologizes. "I just—you keep saying 'coming first,' and it reminded me how Thurston used to yell 'first!' when we'd go anywhere without Mom and he called shotgun. It's just funny how he'd hate to be first now."

Now if Leith had said anything else, Thurston would have probably been pissed off, but he bursts into laughter too. "Oh, shut up, you idiot," he barks out. "We're not twelve anymore."

Before I know it, we're all laughing.

"I can just imagine you doing that, babe," Isla says, giggling. "You've always been so competitive. Remember our races to the lighthouse?"

Thurston smirks evilly. “I sure do. I always let you win back then.”

“You did not!” Isla gasps. “Take that back. I always won fair and square.”

He chuckles. “In your dreams, Tinkerbell.”

She bristles, crossing her arms over her chest, making her tits stand out in a way that goes straight to my cock. “Well, tough shit. That was then and this is now. And now there are no competitions when we’re all together. Am I being clear?”

What do I always say about pretty boy officers? They are trained to follow orders like perfect little robots.

“Yes, ma’am,” Thurston and Leith both say.

But I’m not a pretty boy officer. NCOs know very well when to obey and when to get creative with the orders they receive. “No, ma’am,” I say defiantly. “Whenever we’re together, there’s definitely going to be a competition for who gives you more orgasms. And you’re right that we need to stop talking so much and fucking more, because as it is right now, Leith made you come, and I didn’t, and I can’t have that.”



17.

Loving Isla - Part 2



Thurston

MY LITTLE BROTHER STANDS up a few seconds after issuing his challenge and lifts Isla off my lap, sitting her on the stone paved edge of the hot tub.

“Move over, T,” he orders, elbowing me out of the way and kneeling between our fiancée’s sexy thighs.

I watch with rapt fascination as he lowers his head, grabs the backs of her thighs, and rests Isla’s legs onto his broad shoulders, opening her up to his mouth.

“Oh,” she gasps as Oren licks a hot path on her smooth, bare skin from entrance to clit.

“Fuck, you taste so sweet, Isla,” he murmurs, licking her and repeatedly flicking his tongue over her sweet spot.

He’s right, she tastes absolutely heavenly, and I think that my brothers—with all this talk about sharing the woman we love and how we’re all in this together—have completely fucked with my head.

Because seeing him eat Isla out right in front of me should make me jealous, right?

Wrong.

Not only doesn’t it make me jealous, but I also think it’s hot, and the noises she’s making as he laps at her, licking and sucking on her clit, are enough to make me close my fingers around the base of my shaft.

Who knew that my little brother was so good at eating pussy?

I think I’m not jealous in the slightest because I know I can make Isla come on my tongue too—and I was the first to ever

make her come—but surprisingly, I totally dig this orgasm competition.

I look at Leith, and as our gazes meet, I know we're thinking the same thing—we need to up our game. There's no way we can let our little brother win when it comes to eating pussy or anything else for that matter.

We both watch as Oren keeps working her with his mouth, licking and sucking. His hands are holding onto her hips, and he's just using his lips and tongue to take her right to the edge.

I know the second she's about to come. I've always known when she's close.

Obviously there are many physical clues, like her labored breathing, the tension of her muscles, and how flushed her soft skin becomes, but the telltale sign for me has always been the way her eyes darken when she's seconds away from coming. Her eyes lose almost all her green flecks, looking like a dark, slate gray.

“Oh my fucking god,” she screams right on cue.

She's breathtaking with her head thrown back, writhing as Oren's face is buried between her thighs, relentlessly licking her until she pushes him away.

I smile, remembering how she gets so sensitive when you play with her clit that she doesn't want to be touched there for a while after she comes. That was normally my cue to plunge inside of her and have her come again and again.

I almost expect Oren to do that, but I'm surprised when he stands up instead, holding Isla to his chest. He drags his lips over her temple, murmuring something to her as she comes down from her high.

I guess tonight is a night full of surprises, because I've never seen my little brother act so tenderly toward anyone—okay, that's unfair. He might yell and cuss at his soldiers to instill some fear of the consequences if they ever cross him, but Oren has always been just as sweet to Mom.

“Now I feel better.” My little brother smirks, winking at me and Leith, the asshole. “And just so you know, we aren't

even close to being done with you, sweet girl. You said you want all three of us at the same time. Is that still the case?”

She nods, a lazy smile forming on her lips.

“I want nothing more than to feel you around my cock, Isla,” he drawls. “But it’s up to you where you want me. You tell us what you want, and we’ll make it happen.”

Shit.

I’ve never seen Oren like this. I’ve heard him say that there’s nothing he wouldn’t do for Isla, but now I know it’s true. The little brother I grew up with would have told her what he wanted and taken it, he wouldn’t have given her all the power.

Isla has never been shy or submissive about what she wants, and this time is no exception, but it’s as clear as day how much she cares for Oren, because her first concern is to make sure that his feelings aren’t hurt. She knows him well and sees how his tough exterior is just a front to protect a very sensitive, very loving heart.

“I want you to fuck my pussy, babe,” she says, cupping his face between both hands. “I know we’ve been working on the... backdoor, but I don’t think my ass is ready for you yet. Is that okay?”

I spy his reaction. I know he’ll go along with whatever she asks, but it’s impossible to miss the honesty shining in his eyes when he smiles at her.

“I know, and it’s totally okay. We’ll get there, sweet girl. We’re going to be married soon, and we’ll have a lifetime to train you to take my cock in your ass.”

Those words would sound harsh and very dirty in any other situation, but the way he’s looking at her makes them sound anything but. Romantic is the word I would choose to describe Oren’s posture and tone of voice. “So tell me, are you going to take me in that sweet, tight little pussy or will you suck me off with that sexy little mouth?”

Her eyes leave Oren to flit between me and Leith. “Babe,” she asks, looking directly at me. “You and I have never done

anal. Is it something you're into?"

Oh, fuck.

My cock twitches at just the thought. "I—I don't know," I admit.

She opens her mouth to say something, but I rush to explain what I meant.

"I've never tried. I mean, I've thought about it a few times but... I don't know, there was never a right time."

Or a right person.

I don't say that last bit.

"Then if you want," she offers, "I'd like to try that with you tonight."

My heart picks up its pace, and my cock is so hard that I don't know how I don't pass out from all the blood that's migrated between my thighs. I'm excited but anxious at the same time. What if I hurt her? "I would love to try but..." I inhale deeply to try and calm myself. "We don't have to do this unless you really feel up to it. I can—you can use your hands, your mouth, I can wait my turn, or I can even just watch. It doesn't have to be—that isn't why we brought you here tonight."

I don't even know why I'm saying that. I guess I'm just nervous about trying something so new in front of my brothers, *with my brothers* involved in the act.

"It's what I want, Thurston," she says with all the certainty I know so well in her tone. "You have no idea how many times I've imagined having the three of you like this since I saw you again."

I close the distance between us, stepping right by her side. "Really?" I ask.

"Really." She nods. "Even before I forgave you and we kissed again. I was already dating both Leith and Oren, and I had been wondering what it would be like to be with both of them, and when I saw you again... you kept popping up in my head and forcing your way into my fantasies. Even when I had

no intention to ever speak to you again. It made me so mad, but the orgasms I had imagining myself with all three of you... I had to buy myself a new vibrator, since I totally burned out my favorite one.”

This woman will be the death of me, I swear. She’s always been honest to a fault, but now it’ll be impossible not to conjure images of her with her favorite vibrator whenever I have a solo session.

“Aww, I wish I saw that.” Oren chuckles. “I don’t know if you two have seen her play with her vibrator, but damn!”

Isla winks at him, not embarrassed in the slightest. “If you want, I can invite you next time or record it and send you a clip to enjoy when we aren’t together,” she offers, and then she explains how Oren walked in on her one night. “I was watching a stepbrother video for inspiration, and Oren happened to come to my room. The door was slightly ajar, and he stood there, watching.”

I roll my eyes. “Creep.”

“Hey!” Oren reacts. “I was bringing her ice cream. I’d want to see you in my fucking shoes, T. She looked so hot.”

I’m about to ask him what happened, but Isla intervenes. “The reason I’m telling you that, Thurston, is because I mean it when I say I’ve been dreaming about the four of us together. I do want what I just asked you to do, if you’re into it.”

I nod. “Then yes. I just—please tell me if it hurts. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Isla takes my hand into hers, pulling me closer. “We’ll go slow. I’ve only done it once with Leith, but it felt good, and Oren and I have been playing back there for... training purposes.”

Oren chuckles, wiggling his blond eyebrows. “I’m her favorite drill sergeant.”

His goofy joke does the trick of breaking the tension. Isla and my brothers look totally happy and relaxed, and I can see how they trust one another.

I want this.

I want to be a part of what they have. It'll make my relationship with Isla grow too, I'm certain of it.

"Okay then," I say.

"Oren, to answer your question, I'd love for you to fuck me while Thurston is behind me." Then she looks at Leith. "And I've never had you come in my mouth. Every time I start going down on you, we get sidetracked, and I really want to taste you, babe."

Both my brothers nod. "Yes, ma'am."

Leith throws me a packet of lube as he opens another one. "Lube up, brother. Oren and I will take care of Isla."

I watch them both pour lube on their fingers and kneel in the water as they begin rubbing the lube on the outside of Isla's puckered hole.

The scene is hot, and she seems to enjoy it when they enter her with one finger first, spreading the lube inside of her, and then adding fingers and more lube each time.

They work like a well-oiled machine as I spread the lube all over my tip and shaft.

"Are you okay?" I ask, stepping closer to her, unable to resist the urge to rub my lubed up fingers on the front of her pink pussy.

I know she's excited by the way she gasps at my touch, her skin so flushed and swollen.

I keep touching her, rubbing on her little nub and applying pressure as my brothers keep stretching her other hole, preparing her for me.

It's hot and surreal at the same time, and I decide that they both made her come and now it's my turn before this goes any further.

I increase the speed, rubbing tight circles on her clit and lowering my head to kiss her exposed neck as her head is thrown back again.

Her chest is heaving, and she's so beautiful that I want more of her, I want everything she can give. "Look at me, Isla," I order.

She opens her eyes, and there it is—they are dark and gray, and I know what to do to give her a final push over the edge.

I pinch her clit between my thumb and forefinger, rubbing lightly, and that's it.

Isla comes with a rush, her pussy gaping as she clenches her muscles around air.

"Sit," Leith instructs me a few moments later, and I do as I'm told, sitting on the edge of the hot tub, with my legs in the water.

"Ready, sweet girl?" Oren coaxes her, helping her back onto her feet as he and Leith help position her between my legs.

"Hold yourself up, T," is Leith's next order.

I comply, fisting the base of my shaft and feeling the silky, oiled up rim of Isla's little hole.

Her fingers close above mine and she guides me inside of her. It feels a little different than her pussy, tighter, and there's more resistance at first.

For a second, I'm really worried that I'm going to hurt her, but she lowers herself on me very slowly. Oren is supporting her weight with one arm banded tightly around her waist, and Leith is peppering soft kisses on her lips and face, murmuring words of praise and encouragement.

After the first moment, when the head of my cock is past the tight ring of muscle at her entrance, I slide easily inside until she's sitting on my thighs, her back flush with my chest.

It feels... holy shit.

"Let's get into the water, babe," she murmurs, and I don't know if my muscles work on autopilot or if my brothers help us down, because all I can think about is how good this feels.

It's impossibly tight and warm, and I'm already fighting the urge to come when I haven't even moved.

"Are you all right, Tink?" I ask her, both because I need reassurance and because at this point, I need any distraction I can get to avoid blowing my load.

"Hmm," she says. "It's... You're big, Thurston. It doesn't feel bad, it's just a lot to take in. It was the same with Leith. Fingers are much easier, but it'll feel better in a minute, once I get used to you being in there."

"You look so fucking hot," Oren says, taking a couple of steps toward us. "Doesn't she, Leith?"

Leith nods. "You should see her, T. She was made for you. For us."

"Oren." Isla pulls him closer. "I need you, babe."

My little brother doesn't let her ask twice. He takes her lips with a soft, lingering kiss.

I feel her body relax against me as she opens up more, and I sink so deep into her that I'm no longer sure where she ends and I begin.

"I'm going to fuck you now, sweet girl," Oren whispers. "Ready?"

I can't see Isla's eyes, but she must be signaling that she's ready for him, because Oren begins entering her with a slow but confident thrust.

I can feel it.

I feel every inch of my brother's shaft as he enters Isla, our cocks separated by just a thin layer of skin.

It should be weird. I've never been in such an intimate, vulnerable position with someone else present, aside from the person I was having sex with.

I hold my breath for a few seconds, waiting for embarrassment, or even worse, regret.

Nothing comes.

This feels right in a way I never thought possible.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” Oren praises her, kissing her again.

Then he begins to move. It’s slow at first, as he retreats only slightly to then thrust back in, grinding his hips at the end.

It’s almost too much, and I grit my teeth so I don’t succumb to the tingling that has started at the base of my spine. I can feel them both—Oren as he pushes inside her, and her inner muscles as they greedily hug his thick shaft, fluttering when the movement drags his shaft over the end of her clit.

He does it again and again, and I don’t even have to move for my body to be flooded with sensation.

I’m concentrating so hard on delaying the orgasm that’s already making my dick pulse and my balls tingle, that I don’t see Leith until he’s standing right by my side.

“Baby, you look so beautiful,” he says, pinching one of her nipples and causing Isla’s muscles to tense up as her body reacts to the sensation.

I know she loves to have her tits touched and kissed. Normally, I’d be the one playing with them, pushing us both closer to the edge, but right now, I have to bite my bottom lip so I don’t cuss him out. I had no idea that taking Isla with my brothers would be so fucking hot.

My only consolation is that with the way both Oren and Isla are breathing, I don’t think they are that far behind me.

“Leith,” she half whispers, half moans, licking her lips. “Let me taste you, babe.”

At the risk of repeating myself, tonight is full of surprises.

If you ever told me that I would enjoy watching my woman with someone else’s cock in her mouth, I probably would have told you to fuck off.

I can only partially see it by craning my head from behind her, but the way her pink lips wrap around the head of Leith’s

cock and she swirls her tongue right under his crown sends a wave of heat through my entire body.

“Shit.”

I don't know who says that.

It could be me because I seriously feel a warm current travel down the entire length of my shaft. Her ass is so tight, and every time Oren moves, I feel him pulsing just as dangerously as I am.

It could be Oren because I can see the tension in his neck and shoulders, and the tightness in his jaw as he moves in and out of her, taking care to apply indirect friction on her clit with each thrust.

It could be Leith when Oren's sudden movement pushes him deeper into Isla's mouth.

“Go harder, deeper,” she begs him when Leith withdraws slightly. “Fuck my mouth the same way Oren is fucking my pussy, babe.”

I close my eyes. Sweet Jesus. Isla has never been shy, but this new, dirtier talk is really doing it for me, and I need a minute.

When I reopen my eyes, I almost regret it, because... fuck.

Oren's hips snap forward in a faster, harder pace that practically makes her bounce on my cock.

I didn't even realize that I'm moving too, grinding my hips into each of his thrusts.

The feeling is so exquisite that it almost couldn't be any better. Almost.

Because I can see that Leith is granting her wish, fucking her mouth hard and deep. His hands are gathering Isla's hair on the top of her head, using the grip to control the movement.

The only other noise in this warm summer night, aside from our moans and grunts, is the sloshing of the water in the hot tub in perfect sync with our tempo.

I'm done. Fucking done.

I don't want this to be over, but I can't stop the orgasm that's been building from the second Isla and I set foot in this tub.

"I'm going to come," I warn, but I don't know exactly whom.

"Me too," Oren grinds out with another thrust that makes us all moan.

"I'm right behind you, guys," Leith informs us, stopping with his crotch flush with Isla's face.

The only noise that comes from Isla is a soft moan, and I don't know how to interpret it.

She sounds like she's having a good time, but I haven't forgotten that there is an orgasm competition in play here.

If I'm coming, then I'm going to make sure she does too.

My hand finds its way to her front, and I can't really see it with Oren in the way, but believe me, I could find her clit in the dark and with both my hands tied behind my back.

I rub it hard and fast as the first burst of heat shoots out of me.

I grunt victoriously when she follows me over the edge, her muscles clenching so tightly that she's practically milking me.

"Fuck. I can feel you both." Oren moans with one last thrust.

He's right, I can feel his length pulsing as he empties himself inside Isla.

"Oh, shit." I look up to see Leith stare into Isla's eyes, the evidence of his release overflowing and running down our girl's chin.

It's over eventually, but no one moves for a long moment as we bask in the kind of bliss that can only happen when you love someone with everything you have.

We disentangle from each other slowly and carefully, and Leith is the one who sweeps Isla into his arms before getting

out of the hot tub.

Our eyes meet over my brother's shoulder, and she has the brightest smile I've ever seen.

"Hey, guys?" she calls out. "Please promise me that we can do this again."

I didn't even realize that I'm smiling too. "I'm going to start an internet search with 'hotels with big tubs near you.'"

Oren chuckles. "Fuck yeah."

The motherfucker high-fives me, I shit you not.

"Hey!" Isla scolds him. "Why does he get a high five?"

Oren's eyes widen. "Uh, I'm sorry, sweet girl. I didn't mean anything by it, I was just... the bath thing was T's idea."

Isla giggles, obviously pleased to have gotten a rise out of him. "I should get one. You couldn't have had this much fun without me."

We all high-five her because you know what? She's damn right.



18.

Bridal Shower

Isla



I BEAM AT LEITH AS I close the door to my office, walking right into his open arms. “Hey, sexy captain,” I greet, placing a chaste but lingering kiss on his lips. “I’ll be counting the minutes until the FRG meeting is over so we can be alone.”

He smiles, squeezing me tighter against his fit, muscular body. “Same. Ready for the big announcement?”

I roll my eyes. Normally having a late shift at the library would excuse me from FRG meetings—as the commander’s daughter, it looks nice when I show my support by attending company meetings and functions, but technically I’m not obligated to attend—but tonight Dad and Katie are going to announce my engagement to Leith, so my presence is required.

“I can’t wait for this to be over, babe.” I sigh, indulging in his embrace a little longer. “I hate all these politics, but at least after tonight, we won’t have to worry about hiding our relationship.”

Leith’s lips quirk up in a little smile that reminds me more of Oren’s expression when he’s about to crack one of his smart-ass jokes. “That’s true. And what do you plan on doing once the fact that I’m the luckiest man in the world has been made public knowledge?”

I can’t help but smile back. If he’s fishing for compliments, I’m more than happy to oblige. “Hmm, I don’t know. I’ll hold your hand in public, sit right next to you at these annoying meetings... heck, maybe I’ll kiss you while we’re in line at the deli counter in the middle of the commissary.”

His smile widens. “Is that so?”

I nod, pulling him closer to my lips. “Totally. And wait until I’m Mrs. LeCroy, then nothing will save you from having your ass grabbed in the commissary.”

Amusement flashes in his gray eyes as he chuckles against my lips. “Now, Mrs. LeCroy, are you going to get me in trouble?”

“No,” I counter. “That’s the whole point. Once we’re married, no one can say anything.”

His smile is full of mischief when he explains why I’m wrong. “It depends, baby. If you grab my ass on the weekend when I’m in my civilian clothes, you’re correct. It might not be totally appropriate, but no one could really say anything. Things are different if I’m in uniform.”

“What? Why?” I ask, wondering if he’s pranking me.

“It’s a code of conduct, Isla. Military personnel in uniform have to behave a certain way, and while a chaste kiss with my fiancée or wife is acceptable, a kiss with tongue and you grabbing my ass in public could get us both in front of the commander.”

He sounds serious. “No way. Is this for real?”

Leith nods. “Have you ever dated a soldier before me?”

I shake my head. “Nope. I stayed far away from soldiers. I wasn’t sure I wanted to live with all the restrictions that destroyed my parents’ marriage, to be honest, and I didn’t want the complications that came with my dad’s command positions, even when he was just a company commander. It wasn’t just the scrutiny and having his eyes on me all the time. I didn’t want to wonder if someone was interested in me for the connection I provided.”

Leith understands. “It makes sense. And now you’re okay with the restrictions?”

For a second, I get lost in the depths of his gray eyes. Right now, the color is so light that it’s almost transparent, and there are white and gold flecks close to his pupils. “I have to be. I seriously didn’t look for any of this, Leith, but the second I met you and Oren, I knew I was in trouble. There’s nothing I

wouldn't do for you, so I'm going to have to accept the restrictions, and it's like it was meant to be anyway, since my first love, the one that got away, is also a soldier."

He chuckles. "We're lucky you feel this way, baby, because avoiding excessive PDA isn't the only invasive rule for soldiers."

I sigh, feeling the warmth of his chest under the jacket of his ACUs. "I know. All those PT tests and going to the range and field exercises—"

There's a mischievous glint in his eyes when he interrupts me. "I didn't mean just that kind of stuff, baby. The army has all sorts of laws, rules, and regulations that dictate very intimate details of a soldier's life. From how you wear your hair to facial piercings to sexual positions."

"Come again?" I ask, confused. "What does the army have to say about sexual positions?"

He's dead serious when he explains, "By law, soldiers are only allowed to have sex in the missionary position."

What the fuck?

"Bullshit." I laugh. "That's ridiculous."

Leith doesn't smile. "It might be so, but it's true. It's an old law, and I doubt that anyone would ever care to enforce it, but it was never abrogated."

That's unbelievable. "So I guess you aren't as perfect as I thought, Captain LeCroy," I tease. "I have it on very good authority that you're a rebel."

This time he smiles. "Ha. I'm willing to bet that every single soldier breaks that rule over and over, and I can tell you that I definitely intend to break it tonight. I called dibs with my brothers, and I can guarantee that I'll be spending a lot of time behind you. First eating that sweet little pussy of yours and then fucking it all night." His voice is low and provocative, and his warm, minty breath is fanning on my lips.

I don't even tease him for calling dibs—I swear men never change much from rowdy teenagers—and his words cause a

wave of heat that runs down my spine and collects between my thighs. “Do we really have to go to that FRG meeting?” I complain, thinking that if everyone is at the meeting, we’ll have the house to ourselves.

Leith sighs. “I’m afraid so. We can’t really miss our own engagement announcement, but I think it’s going to be fun, you know? Every time I look at you, I want you to think about all the things I’m going to do to you later when we’re alone. How I’ll kiss every inch of your beautiful body and own every part of you with my hands, mouth, and cock. I want you to think about all that and spend the entire meeting wet and ready for me.”

I’m wet and ready for him right now. “Sometimes I hate you, you know?” I laugh, exhaling slowly to calm my quickened pulse. “You’re such a cocktease.”

He releases me from his embrace, winking at me as he takes my hand. “Takes one to know one, Isla. Come on, we don’t want to be late to this meeting, or there’s going to be hell to pay. Mom was so excited.”

I roll my eyes as we start down the hallway and toward the front room of the library.

Leith’s phone vibrates. “Speak of the devil,” he says, showing me the screen.

Mom: Hey, sweetie, could you please stop at the house before coming to the FRG meeting? Doug forgot some awards he has been working on. He left the folder on the coffee table in the living room. Thank you so much for doing this. See you and Isla soon.

I sigh. “Let’s do it before my motivation to attend this meeting vanishes in thin air. But Katie isn’t helping one bit. You have no idea how hard it is to step inside the house and not blow off the meeting to spend some quality time with you, babe.”



Leith



THE DESIRE IN ISLA'S eyes mirrors my own, and I don't tell her that I'm just as tempted as she is to skip the FRG meeting in favor of a couple of hours of undisturbed time in her bed.

But my sense of responsibility has been ingrained in me way too deeply. I spent practically my entire life in the army, so I can't ignore my duty. If disappointing Mom wasn't bad enough, I could never openly disobey my commander's orders, so I know my choice is made.

"Come on, baby," I say, helping her into the passenger seat of my truck. "Let's get through this meeting, and then we can go out to dinner, just the two of us. We don't even have to stay at the house tonight. I'm sure our parents won't care if we spend the night in my room at the barracks."

She smiles, placing a soft kiss on my cheek a second before I put the truck into drive. "I like the way you think, Captain LeCroy. We could even go to my house and be as loud as we want."

I chuckle. "The only reason I mentioned the barracks is because the base hotel is closer, and I'll be counting the minutes until we're alone. I plan to break all sorts of old-fashioned army laws with you tonight."

The drive home doesn't take too long. It's getting close to dinnertime, and the roads on base are almost empty.

I park in front of the house, sighing as I look at the dark windows. I throw a look in Isla's direction. I'm tempted to ask her to wait for me in the truck, because if she follows me inside, I don't think I'll be able to keep my hands to myself.

She knows exactly what I'm thinking. That's why I fell so hard and fast for her, because she really gets me, and it's not only when I'm having X-rated thoughts.

"How about a quickie?" she asks. "We could be in and out in under five minutes. Can you be that fast?"

Fuck, the way she's looking at me is turning me on so much that I could be done in half that amount of time.

I nod, climbing out of the truck and running to her side to grab her hand. We run inside the house, giggling about what we're about to do. "Bathroom or kitchen?" I ask, stopping in the foyer just long enough to weigh our options.

"Living room," she decides. "I've thought about you bending me over the couch since the first night we met, when you took me home from The Cove and we drank tequila. Remember? Before I even knew about our parents."

I squeeze her hands, pulling her toward the living room. "How could I ever forget? I couldn't get you out of my head since I saw you at the gate, baby. You have no idea how close I was to doing just that. I wanted you so badly, and I was furious about you and Peters—"

Her lips crush against mine as we stumble into the dark living room, her hands frantically pulling on the zipper that closes the front of my ACU jacket and mine closing around the perfect globes of her buttocks, dragging her closer to the erection that's tenting the pants of my uniform.

She has the jacket open and attacks my tan belt. Her deft fingers are about to open the buttons of my pants when the lights come on.

"Surprise!"

We freeze, startled by the people that come out from any possible hiding spot in the room and adjacent rooms.

Shit.

I look wide-eyed at several officers, NCOs, and soldiers in my company as the first ones try their hardest to pretend like they didn't notice that my pants are half open, the latter snickering at the undignified way I try to straighten my uniform.

Isla is as flustered as I am as she stares at Mom and Doug, First Sergeant Fernandez-Fernandez, Sergeant King, and a few of the FRG leaders.

Mom is as red-faced as we are as she claps her hands, pretending that we didn't just get caught with our pants down—almost literally in my case. “Surprise!” she repeats, pointing at the “WEDDING SHOWER” banner that's hanging over the dining table.

I thank God for Nana as she comes forward, followed by Oren, handing each of us a glass of champagne. “Congratulations to the happy couple!” She beams, applauding cheerfully and encouraging other people around her to do the same.

I wrap my arm around Isla's waist, and I'd be lying if I said that I don't love the way she leans against me.

I'll always be your rock. No matter what life throws at us, I'll support you and catch you if you fall.

That's the thought that enters my mind as I shake the hands of soldiers and family members who come forward to congratulate us.

My eyes meet Mom's for a brief moment, and her smile causes a warm feeling to spread in my chest. I'd never known that feeling of being loved and protected until she and Dad took me in and made me a part of their family.

I owe them everything if I'm going to have my own family and a good career, and I'm surrounded by love.

And talking about love...

“Well shit, that was what I call an announcement.” Oren snickers, handing me a crystal tumbler filled with a dark amber liquid that looks suspiciously like bourbon.

I'm about to tell him to shut the fuck up, not caring that I'm in uniform and the entire company command is in this room, when Thurston flanks me on the other side. “You already had a fan base after saving Isla at the lighthouse.” He chuckles. “Now you're done. I heard a few of the younger spouses talking about you. They're saying that you're hot and that they wish they'd seen what you're packing because by the tent in your pants, it looked impressive.”

I roll my eyes. “Shut up, T. You of all people don’t have a leg to stand on,” I say, lowering my voice. “If memory serves, Mom caught you making out with Isla in the bathroom.”

He flashes me his most annoying smile, clapping me on the back. “Yeah, but at least it was just Mom and not half the company.”

I sigh, watching as Isla is surrounded by some of the spouses and Captain Rivera’s wife puts one of her baby twins in her arms. “Yeah, well, I wish Mom didn’t have this obsession with surprises,” I say as my mind goes to the fact that her elopement with Doug was a surprise too. “If she told us about this party, I wouldn’t have been caught with my pants down.”

“Quite literally.” Oren laughs.

“You two, though, could have dropped a fucking hint or something,” I scold him.

“Actually, we couldn’t,” Thurston explains. “Mom kept us in the dark too, probably knowing that we wouldn’t keep it secret. It was a surprise for everyone. She organized everything with the help of Nellie Peters and the FRG leaders. They didn’t tell anyone to make sure it wouldn’t get back to you or Isla somehow, but also because they only invited the people who showed up at tonight’s FRG meeting. Otherwise, they would have had to do it elsewhere, because this house is huge, but it can’t fit the entire company.”

I take a sip of my bourbon and wince as it burns its way down to my empty stomach. “I’m glad she invited Mia and Rachel though,” I say, observing Isla hugging her boss and one of the library technicians she’s the most friendly with. “They are really the only people Isla likes in this room aside from family.”

Oren agrees. “Yup, you’re right. Oh, shit.” He chuckles nervously. “It looks like Mom pulled out all the stops and there are wedding themed games.”

Yeah. I watch with a mixture of fascination and horror when First Sergeant Fernandez-Fernandez gets recruited for

the first game.

The ladies take turns getting blindfolded, and after being spun around, they have to pin a corsage of flowers on the first sergeant's lapel.

"Ha." Oren grins. "I've seen this game in a movie, but they had to pin a dick on a cardboard cutout of the groom."

"Yeah, right. I'm glad it isn't a dick," I grumble.

"No, you took care of bringing that to the party." Oren laughs.

I'm about to hiss at him to fuck off, but what do you know, karma is a bitch.

"Oren, Thurston!" Mom calls out. "We need participants for the next game. This time the men will have to show their skills."

I watch with perverse satisfaction as both my brothers, Doug, Major Peters, and a few other soldiers are blindfolded and sat down at the dining table. Their task is to find an engagement ring inside a pie by digging with their mouths.

All the women are cheering and clapping, and I stay back, relieved that I wasn't selected to play this game.

"I would hide if I were you, Captain." Sergeant King comes to stand by my side with a bottle of beer in hand. "I'm pretty sure your mama has some super embarrassing game planned just for the groom-to-be."

A laugh escapes me as I shake my head. "I'm afraid you might be right, King. I just hope whatever it is, it's over quickly. Not even the commander and the first sergeant were safe from tonight's games."

Sergeant King smiles. "I just came here to congratulate you on your engagement, Captain LeCroy. I'm impressed you managed to get the commander's approval with the whole stepsibling thing going on. Did he catch you giving his daughter some lovin' like you were about to do earlier?" She smirks.

I bristle at her disrespectful words, but I know King doesn't mean anything by it. That's the way she normally expresses herself. "No, we didn't get caught in any compromising situation. But the commander noticed how *close* his daughter and I had become and added two and two together."

She nods. "Well, I guess you won't get to become garrison commander without being smarter than your average soldier, now ain't that true? And it didn't take a fancy college degree to see how into each other you were."

I nod. "True, but I'm relieved that it's out in the open now. I wanted to thank you for keeping our secret, by the way, after you saw us kissing at the company picnic."

Sergeant King winks at me. "Oh, that was no bother, sir. I ain't no snitch, and we all know that those are bound to get stitches and all that jazz, right? Besides, keeping my mouth shut paid off." She takes a thick roll of twenty dollar bills out of the pocket of her ACU pants and briefly shows it to me.

"I don't understand," I say. "Did someone pay you to keep our secret?" I'm not ashamed that my mind goes to a dark place. So help me God, if she's been blackmailing Isla...

Her eyes widen as she catches my drift. "Oh hell no, Captain!" She giggles. "I was a vault. I didn't breathe a word of what I saw to anyone. But I ain't just the subject of gossip in this neck of the woods, I hear it too, so I banked on it."

I frown, still not convinced that King didn't extort that money from Isla. Can you blame me with everything that's been going on? "How did you bank on it?"

Her satisfied smirk is back as she explains, "Those FRG bitches, sir—excuse my French. They spend their time gossiping about everything and everyone. When Juan made it clear that if they said another word about me, he would make their husbands pay, they turned their attention on the commander's daughter. They had a bet going on which of her stepbrothers she was fucking. Obviously, since I had inside intel, I put my money on you. Your odds were five to one, and Mama got paid tonight!"

“What the fuck, King?” I gasp, surprised by the nerve those women have to bet on something like that and slightly offended that my odds weren’t so good.

Sergeant King shrugs. “Don’t take it personally, Captain. Sergeant LeCroy was everyone’s favorite. You know, since he’s well known for his... assets.”

I narrow my eyes. “How do you know about my brother’s assets? I know he never came to your room with a six pack.”

She giggles. “No, he didn’t, and like I told him many times, I would have done anything for him for free.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, keeping my eyes on my brothers with their faces deep in those pie dishes. “Then if it wasn’t from you, how did the FRG ladies know that my brother has a big cock?”

King shrugs. “The soldiers talk, sir. You’ve all showered at HQ after PT one time or another.”

I relax. I guess that makes sense.

“Everyone thought it was him because of that big cock. But there was also your oldest brother who was always staring at her. You had the worst odds because of how serious you always are. Everyone thought you’d never risk your career for a fuck, no matter how good, but the ladies agreed that you’re a hottie.”

I shake my head. “Oh, well then, if they agree on that... King, put that fucking money away, for God’s sake,” I hiss. “If the commander catches wind of this bet, I guarantee that not even your fiancé will be able to save you from the biggest Article 15 you’ve ever seen.”



19.

Makeovers And Gifts



Isla



AFTER THE FIRST MOMENT of embarrassment, the wedding shower isn't so bad.

Katie has convinced every high-ranking officer in the garrison command to participate in the games she organized, and everyone is enjoying themselves.

One of the funniest games is called bridal makeup, where the women—spouses or female soldiers—have to let a randomly selected male soldier do their makeup for their “wedding day.”

“Obviously our beautiful bride will be one of our models, and I’m going to participate too. Who else wants to get a makeover from one of our brave soldiers?”

Nellie Peters steps forward, and so does Sergeant King, who was talking to Leith during the last game.

Nana giggles and comes to stand next to Katie and me. “I guess this is my best chance to have a young man in uniform put his hands on me, so count me in!”

Dad shakes his head, laughing at Nana’s antics. We both know how she loses her very few inhibitions after a few glasses of champagne.

The next volunteers are Mia, Rachel, and Mrs. Rivera.

The last few participants need a little extra encouragement, and I feel a little bit of perverse satisfaction when I propose Jessica—who has been staring at Thurston the entire time—

and Lisa and Regina, the FRG leader and treasurer. Usually I'm not vindictive, but those two have been watching me and whispering since the lights were turned on. Had it been anyone else, I'd shake it off and think that they were admiring my gorgeous engagement ring or wondering if I'm going to choose flowers or a tiara, but knowing the way they roll, I'm pretty sure that whatever they are saying isn't kind and possibly untrue.

"Okay, everyone." Katie smiles, picking up one of the caps the soldiers wear as part of their ACUs. "The names of every male soldier in this room have been put into this hat. Now, the ladies who are getting the makeovers will each draw the name of the gentleman who will make them wedding day beautiful. Isla, you should go first, since you're definitely the next one who's going to walk down the aisle."

I laugh, making a big show of choosing one of the folded pieces of paper. "Let's see who gets to make me look like the bridal version of Pennywise."

I pass my chosen piece of paper to my stepmother, and she opens it, announcing. "Sergeant Oren LeCroy."

Oren comes forward with a huge smile on his face. "This should be fun." He chuckles, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

"You better be nice to me." I glare. I think I've been embarrassed enough tonight to last me a fucking lifetime.

"Oh, but you don't know how lucky you are, darling," Katie interjects. "Oren is absolutely amazing at doing makeup."

I'm not convinced about it, not one bit. "Is he?" I ask, my tone dripping with skepticism.

"You should give me more credit, *sis*." He winks. "Remember when I told you there was a time when I was making an effort to hang out more with Mom?"

I nod. "Yeah, that's when you got into rom-coms and romance novels." What I don't say out loud is that I also

remember that he told me he did all that to feel closer to Katie when she was grieving the loss of her late husband.

“Mom had always wanted to learn more about makeup, and we must have watched every tutorial available on the internet. I’d like to think that I have a natural talent for it.”

Katie agrees. “He really does, Isla. I’d dare say that he’s better than I am at it.”

All the other women draw names, and we all take seats at the dinner table, where makeshift makeup stations have been set up by some of the FRG leaders.

“Lift your head a little bit and let me apply some foundation on you,” Oren instructs me as he chooses a compact from one of the makeup totes on the table.

“I don’t normally use any,” I object.

“And you don’t really need to because you have a gorgeous complexion, but I know what I’m doing, and we’re going for the fairy-tale princess look for the big day. Trust me?”

“You know I trust you,” I murmur as he starts applying the foundation with an extremely gentle touch. “I just really don’t like the way foundation makes me look.”

Oren nods. “That’s probably because you always chose the wrong color, and you don’t know how to apply it correctly. If you can guess that someone is wearing foundation, then it’s not done right. Look,” he encourages me, lifting a hand mirror in front of me.

Holy shit. “Wow. I don’t know what to say. I had no idea you were so talented.”

Oren lowers his head to whisper into my ear. “Bad girl. By now you should know that I have all sorts of talents.”

I feel heat rise to my cheeks, and I owe the fact that I don’t look redder than a tomato to his flawless work with the foundation. “Yeah, I should know better.”

Neither of us says anything as Oren works on the rest of my makeup, and between the light touch of his fingers and the

way his dark blue eyes are caressing my face, I would be lying if I said that my heart hasn't increased its pace.

“Here you go. *Voilà*,” he declares, picking up the hand mirror again.

I'm absolutely speechless. I don't think I've ever looked so good in my entire life. “Holy shit. I... Do you think you could do this for me on my actual wedding day?”

His smile is blinding, worthy of a toothpaste commercial. “Sergeant Oren LeCroy at your service, ma'am.”

Katie was right, I didn't really know how lucky I was, and it becomes more than obvious as I look at all the other women.

“There are some real works of art in here.” Nana giggles, totally unperturbed by the fact that she probably looks like a postmodern painting herself.

Everyone laughs at the results on the other women, and Katie announces, “Right. I'm sure it's safe to say that we won't let our husbands, or in my case, my eldest son, do our makeup any time soon. This was the last game. Give us ten minutes to clean ourselves up so we can open presents, and then it'll be time for the cake.” She offers all the makeover victims makeup remover wipes and walks to the hallway bathroom to take care of the very unflattering job Leith did on her.

“Okay, everyone!” She beams ten minutes later, looking as impeccable as she did pre-makeover. “Time for our happy couple to open all the presents you generously brought.”

“Presents?” I gasp. “I didn't need any presents. This is way too much.”

My stepmother wraps her arm around my shoulders, squeezing me closer to her side. “I told everyone that you didn't and encouraged them to make a donation to one of the charities supported by your library, but people still wanted to get you small gifts. It's a testament to how loved and respected your father is.”

Katie is right. Dad is strict with his soldiers, but every person that's ever worked under him, military personnel or

family member, knows that his door is always open. There's nothing Dad wouldn't do to help the people who serve our country and I've witnessed it countless times.

"I—I don't deserve all of this," I say, moved to the point of tears at the sight of all the wrapped gifts that have suddenly appeared on the dining table. "I've never been made to feel so welcome anywhere. Thank you, everyone."

"Go on, Leith." Katie beckons her son. "Help your fiancée open some of the gifts. They are for you too."

Dad clears his throat as I'm about to pick up the first small box. "Before you start, sweetheart," he says. "I wanted to say how happy I am and how proud this moment makes me. As a father, I've always dreaded the time when another man would take my little girl away from me, especially since my career has taken me away from you so much. I guess I have to admit that I've been feeling rather possessive of you. The more I watched you grow into a beautiful, smart, resilient young woman, the more I thought there was no way there would be anyone worthy of you."

Tears well in my eyes at the emotion that's so obvious in Dad's words. He's never been too open in expressing his feelings for me, and I must confess that I've always wished for a warmer relationship with him, particularly after Mom left us, so now hearing his words in front of everyone is a surprise.

"However, Captain LeCroy, Leith, has proved me wrong," Dad continues. "As a commander and as a father, I couldn't wish for a better man to marry my daughter. Leith, I know you're going to love her and protect her with the same devotion and valor you've demonstrated every day in the line of duty for the entire time I've known you. You've been a part of my family for the last six months by marriage, and now I get to call you son twice. You and your brothers are a credit to another special woman in my life, my beautiful wife Katie. Thank you, darling, for raising three outstanding gentlemen who make our family, our company, and our country proud. And since I'm recognizing the women in my life, I also want to say how being in Star Cove has been a dream come true, because it brought us closer to the other woman who's loved

me and my daughter more than words can express—my mother, Mrs. Mary Cameron.”

I turn to look at Nana who’s listening to Dad’s speech with shining eyes and her arm linked through Oren’s.

“I apologize for the long speech,” Dad concludes. “And for making it a little bit about myself, but there aren’t many moments in a man’s life where you get to take stock of your achievements. In my case, my achievements are my people, the three most important women in my life, first and foremost. This is why I just wanted to present my mother, my wife, and my daughter with a small token of my love for them. I know how much all three of you love roses, and I’ve found out that Star Cove has its own special rose that originated here and blooms just very briefly in the summer. It’s famous for its peculiar shade of pink and rarity. There’s no better flower to express my love for all three of you. You’re as beautiful and as rare as these roses.”

I’m touched and a little surprised by Dad’s gesture. He rarely shows this softer, romantic side of him. I never saw him do stuff like this when he was married to my mom, but I have to guess he swept Katie off her feet with stuff like that. Go, Dad. I’m feeling pretty proud of him too right now.

“Gentlemen, it’s time,” Dad orders.

Three soldiers come forward carrying long, thin white boxes. One is tied with a white bow, and the other two have silver bows.

“Oh, Dad,” I whisper when I’m presented with one of the three boxes. I place it on the table, lift the lid, and— “Oh my god!” I gasp.

Similar sounds come from Katie and Nana, and I know what I’m going to see even before I look.

“What kind of unacceptable prank is this? PFC Montez, I hope you can explain what happened to the roses on the short route between my study and this room!” Dad’s angry tone has the soldiers who carried the flowers literally quaking in their boots.

“I agree. If this is a joke, it’s in very poor taste,” Leith bites out, looking at the bunch of bloomless stems in each box.

It looks like someone cut the head off every rose, leaving just the stems.

“Well, at least whoever ruined your beautiful gift didn’t steal the note in it,” Nana says, attempting to soothe Dad and lifting a small, white square envelope.

“What are you talking about, Mom? I didn’t put any note in those flowers.”

Katie lifts a similar envelope from her own box. “Maybe the florists took it upon themselves to put one in with the recipients’ names.”

Dad sounds skeptical. “Unlikely. I placed the order personally, and I don’t recall giving any instructions or any names. After all, I was planning to deliver them in person.”

An uneasy feeling collects in the pit of my stomach, and I open the envelope with trembling fingers.

Running away won’t save you. One day soon, you’ll end up losing your head like these flowers. Ticktock, bitch.

“This isn’t good,” Katie says, her hands shaking as she passes Leith the small, square message card.

I’m watching and waiting. Your turn will come soon enough. Ticktock.

Nana’s note has an identical message to Katie’s.

I don’t understand.

“Someone better explain who did this!” Dad says, looking around the formal living room as if he expects to see someone with a pen in their hands.

Jessica comes forward. “Who’s had access to those flowers?” she asks, her tone composed and professional.

She uses a napkin to collect each note from our hands. “No one touch these, please,” she instructs us. “I’ve already seen who touched them, so let’s not put any more fingerprints on

them, just in case whoever put them on those flowers forgot to wear gloves. Can I have a Ziplock bag to store this evidence?"

Katie nods, handing over her own envelope. "Let me get you one from the kitchen. I won't be a minute."

I observe Thurston's ex as she collects my and Nana's cards. While all the other soldiers, including Sergeant King, are in uniform, she isn't part of HQ and was invited to the shower as a family friend, so she's in civilian clothes.

She's definitely trying hard, with a low-cut, tight top that enhances her generous cleavage and a black skirt that barely covers her thighs.

I can't help the bitter thought that her outfit would be more appropriate to go to a club rather than a party at the garrison commander's house.

Guilt washes over me the second that thought is formed, however, when I notice the sadness in her hazel eyes. I can imagine how this must look to her.

Thurston has rejected her for me, and now that I'm marrying Leith, the man she loves still doesn't want her.

I understand what he means when he says that he'll always care about his ex but that it's me he loves, so I have no reason to be jealous of her.

A terrified scream pulls me out of my reveries.

It comes from the kitchen, and it sounds like Katie's voice.

I move on instinct, but Leith stops me, wrapping one arm around my waist and pulling me to him. "No, stay here. Please. No one move!" he orders as he nods in my father's direction and follows his brothers, who are already out of the living room on their way to their mother's rescue.

A few tense minutes pass before Thurston returns to the living room. It's impossible to miss the tension in his body language. "The coast is clear, but I think you should see this." He's talking to Doug and Jessica.

"What's going on? I want to see too."

“Sure.” He sighs, frowning. “Jess, I’d probably call your commander.”

I vaguely hear Dad instruct Major Peters and the first sergeant to make sure that no one leaves as I walk to the kitchen as fast as my feet will carry me with Nana and Thurston hot on my heels.

“What the fuck?” I gasp.

A large sheet cake covered in fondant that’s been colored in a camouflage pattern is occupying most of the kitchen island.

Black icing spells “Congratulations, Isla and Leith, on your engagement,” but what attracts my attention are the two figurines standing in the middle of the cake. One is a girl in a pencil skirt and high heels with a book in her hands, and the other one is a soldier in his ASUs with a captain rank insignia visible on his chest.

The figurines have been made with exquisite detail, and for a second, I wonder if they are edible or made of plastic, but the reason why Katie screamed and is now crying quietly against Leith’s chest is because someone chopped the heads off the cake toppers who are clearly meant to resemble Leith and me.

The heads are on the marble island, and I assume they might have been made to our likeness because I recognize some reddish orange bits that mimic my hair color. The reason why I have to assume is because they have been smashed to tiny pieces.



Oren



THIS IS BAD.

This is fucking bad. My head is spinning at all the shit that’s going on.

I watch Mom cry in Leith's arms, her shoulders shaking with each sob, as I reach for my girl, holding her tight to my side.

Doug's eyes stop on us for a second, but I'm out of shits to give about what he thinks right now. If he thinks I'm fucking his daughter, then so be it, because I'm not ashamed of my actions, but most of all, I'm not ashamed of my feelings, and I love Isla to the point that I wouldn't think twice to kill for her. And if I catch whoever has been stalking her and attacked her twice? You can bet your ass that the motherfucker is dead meat.

"Yes, sir." My attention moves to Jessica, who's nodding while talking on the phone. "They already touched the notes, sir. No, no one touched the cake, I don't think." She looks toward Mom.

"Did you touch anything in the kitchen, Mom?" Leith whispers against her hair.

She lifts her face, shaking her head. "No, I came to the kitchen to get the cake and... and—"

Tears fall down her face, and I see fucking red as I tighten my arms around a shell-shocked Isla.

"Yes, sir." Jessica offers her phone to Doug. "Captain Morris wishes to talk to you, sir."

Doug listens to what the MP captain is saying on the other end of the phone, nodding a couple of times. "Yes, Captain Morris. Will do. Roger."

"No one is to leave the house," he declares, giving the phone back to Jessica. "Lieutenant Bowman, your commander is coming here with a couple more MPs and calling CID. He's aware that you aren't on duty tonight, but we would both be grateful if you could explain to everyone—soldiers and families—that we need to interview everyone. Hopefully someone saw something."

Jessica agrees. "Yes, sir. Do you have a list of the soldiers who are attending and the family members they brought over? It's highly possible that the person we're looking for is still in

the house, but I'd rather get a list in case someone managed to slip out unnoticed."

Mom intervenes. "I can put together a list very quickly. Lisa Turner can help me, since she has a list of everyone who brought a gift, so we could send thank you cards."

Jessica nods. "Perfect, Katie. Thank you."

"I think you're wasting your time if you think the person we're looking for is at the party," I say, causing all the eyes in the room to turn to me. "We can definitely ask if someone saw anything suspicious, but I'm not sure our perp is still here."

"Why do you think that, Oren?" Jessica asks.

I point toward the patio door that connects the kitchen with the backyard. One of the glass panes has been smashed, and there's glass on the kitchen floor. "I think someone broke in or out. There's glass both inside and outside."

Jessica and Thurston immediately look at the broken pane. "Oren is right," my eldest brother agrees. "And whoever did it cut themselves while breaking the glass. There's blood smeared on the door handle."

Lieutenant Bowman takes control of the situation. "Don't touch anything, T." She leans close to the glass to look at the white door handle that's on the outside, pointing the flashlight on her phone to take a better look since the day has turned into night while we were partying. "Yeah, blood on both sides. We'll have to check outside for any evidence that can help us determine if someone came in or left from there. But if whoever broke in cut themselves, it should be easy to find our perp."

Doug springs into action. "Right. Guys, let's go make sure everyone gets interviewed and checked for injuries. Thurston, get the first sergeant and Captain Rivera to help you. We can use my study and the den to interrogate everyone. Leith and Oren, once someone has been interviewed, make sure they leave through the front door. I think we can get started giving out orders to the soldiers and instructions to the civilians while

we wait for the MPs. I don't think there's anything else that can be done until then."

I'm about to nod when Nana's voice makes me turn toward the kitchen door, where she's standing right now. "One thing could definitely be done, Doug." Her tone is harder than I've ever heard it, and it reminds me of her son when he's pissed off. "Someone could tell me what in the world is going on."



20.

The Usual Suspects

Isla



I’VE ONLY SEEN NANA this mad once in my life before today, and it was the day Dad told her how Mom left without so much as a word the second he had come back from deployment.

Divorce papers had been filed while Dad was still gone, and Mom had asked him not to say anything. Dad complied, probably expecting that they’d break the news to me and the rest of the family together, but Mom practically skipped town while I was still at school.

I had never heard Nana use a certain type of language until that night and definitely not since then.

“Mom, let us sort out—”

“No, Doug,” she snaps. “I’ll give you five minutes to delegate things to your officers, but after that, I expect you to sit down with me and tell me what the fuck is going on. Are we fucking clear?”

Yeah, Mary Cameron is known for her impeccable manners, but believe me, she chooses when to drop her F-bombs very carefully.

Dad knows better than me that there’s only one thing you can do when Nana is fuming—you obey, and you do it fast.

“Yes, ma’am,” he says, straightening his back. “I guess the only place we can use for some privacy is Katie’s craft room. It’s small, but we need to vacate the kitchen to let the MPs and CID do their work.”

As Dad, Katie, and Thurston follow Jessica back into the living room, Oren, Leith, Nana, and I enter Katie’s craft room.

I've seen this room only a handful of times. Katie keeps all the things she needs for her craft projects in here, which are mostly picture frames she gifts to people who have a baby or get promoted and stuff she brings to company events, like prize ribbons for competitions, materials for face painting for the kids, and everything the FRG might need.

There's also a small closet where she keeps her workout clothes and things that she claims don't fit in the master bedroom due to Dad's obsession with tidiness at all times.

"There you go, Nana, take a seat." Oren offers her the chair at Katie's large desk, while Leith and I take a seat on the small couch on the opposite side of it.

"Don't try to butter me up now, young man," Nana says sternly without the usual laughter in her gray eyes. "I hate being the only person in the room who doesn't know what the fuck is going on, and I expect you all to rectify this situation immediately. Someone better start talking, or I swear to God, I'm going to lose my shit."

It's bad.

Sitting down has calmed Nana's fury, and I take a deep breath, knowing that she'll be even more mad to have been kept in the dark this entire time.

"Nana, it's a long story—"

"No, Leith," I interrupt my fiancé. "I think I should be the one to explain."

Nana doesn't allow us to distract her from her objective. "I don't care who the hell tells me as long as someone starts talking. Now."

"You know that Lieutenant Peters' wife was murdered." I start from the beginning and tell her everything, from my assault in the library on the same night Connie was killed, to the incident with the cake tonight.

I hold onto Leith's hand the entire time, and once I'm done talking, the silence in the room almost feels like a corporeal entity.

“I can’t believe you and your father kept me in the dark this entire time,” Nana finally says, the anger in her voice only partially replaced by disappointment. “Let me rephrase. I’m not too surprised that your dad kept quiet, but you, Isla... and you two young men.” Her eyes flit from Leith to Oren.

All we can do is apologize, but we know we fucked up, even though our intentions were good.

“We didn’t want to worry you, Nana,” I say, the words sounding lame even to my own ears.

“I’m not some child who needs to be protected, Isla!” Nana snaps. “I think you and Doug forgot that I spent my entire career as a head nurse in a neonatal ICU. It was a high-pressure environment, and the fact that you thought I couldn’t handle the truth is very insulting.”

I sigh. “Nana, I’m so sorry. I swear we just didn’t want to make things more stressful. The last year has been so tough for you with Grandpa passing and you moving—”

“I moved because I felt lonely, Isla,” she bites out. “Not because I’m incapable.”

I’m not convinced that this is all there is to it, and I tell her, “But why else would you move? I told you I’d move in with you. You wouldn’t have been alone.”

Nana’s tone softens. “You’re young, sweetheart. You should be with people your age, not worrying about your old nana. Where I am now, there’s always a new activity and people to hang out with. It helps me fill the void your grandpa left. And you can’t tell me that moving in with your father wasn’t good for you, since you found yourself not one, but three amazing men.”

It’s difficult to argue with her about that. “I know. But I hate that you felt like you were some kind of burden, Nana. You know aside from Dad and the guys, you’re the person I love most in the world. Even before Mom left, you were the mother figure in my life, and you’ve always been the example I followed. You are the kind of woman I hope to become.”

Nana smiles, but I know she's still mad. "Are you trying to butter me up, young lady? And for as much as it might be worth, I think you're doing just fine. You're intelligent and beautiful, and while I in no way think that a woman's worth is measured by the man she has by her side, let me tell you that I definitely envy your options when it comes to bedroom activities."

She's incorrigible, and she's making me pay for keeping secrets by embarrassing me in front of Oren and Leith. I guess it's no mystery where I get my attitude from.

"However," she says, becoming serious again. "For as proud of you as I am, I'm very disappointed that you didn't think I could handle the situation."

The door opens in that moment, and Dad, Katie, and Jessica come into the room.

"Mom, it wasn't that we didn't think you couldn't handle it," Dad says. "It's just—"

"Don't insult my intelligence, Doug," Nana snaps. "You at least owe me that. I don't care about the past, but I expect to be kept informed about everything that happens from now on, am I clear?"

"Crystal," Dad concedes.

"So I suppose that Leith asked for a transfer because of this stalker?" she asks.

"Yes, ma'am," Leith offers. "Regardless of whether or not Lieutenant Peters is involved in what's happening to Isla, after the night at the lighthouse, I think it would be foolish to stay here and continue to play this cat and mouse game. We literally can't have eyes everywhere, and if anything, tonight demonstrates that it's only a matter of time before we're caught unprepared. I hate that we have to leave, but Isla's safety is my priority."

"I don't think you're looking at the facts under the right perspective, Leith," Katie intervenes.

"Mom, I know you're sad that we were all together and now we're leaving, but—"

“But I don’t think leaving solves the problem, darling. Analyze all the latest events when you look at the situation,” my stepmother says. “Leaving could have made sense a few weeks ago, but as things stand right now, I think it’s useless.”

“What do you mean, Mom?” Oren asks.

“Isn’t it obvious? When I was out running with Isla and I was attacked, I thought it was a fluke, that maybe our stalker wanted to grab Isla and I was grabbed by accident since the visibility was so poor in the rain, but now I think the stalker intended to hurt me.”

Leith seems skeptical. “I don’t know, Mom. That’s a little far-fetched. Despite how poor the visibility might have been, you and Isla look totally different. You have dark hair, and her hair is a reddish blonde, and you’re almost a foot taller than Isla. And why would the stalker change targets all of a sudden?”

Katie looks at her sons and at Dad before her eyes land on me and Nana. “I don’t think the stalker changed targets, I just think maybe Isla was an easier target since I’m with Doug pretty much all the time, but think about it. First, I get attacked during a run, and now Isla wasn’t the only one who got a threatening message. Mary and I got one too. What if Isla isn’t the target, but Doug is?”

“That’s crazy,” is my knee-jerk reaction. “Why would anyone target Dad?”

Katie shrugs. “I don’t know. But think about everything that’s happened tonight. The threats were aimed at the three most important people in your father’s life. I’m pretty sure your father must have made some enemies during his career. After all, we’ve thought all along that whoever is doing this is a soldier, and the house is full of soldiers right now. Chances are that the person who’s been doing all of this is in the house tonight.”

I’m struggling to wrap my head around this. “I don’t know —”

“It actually makes a lot of sense,” Jessica says, looking at me. “We focused on Isla, but it’s either that our perp’s focus shifted, or we got it wrong all along. I agree that Isla doesn’t seem to be the only target, and that means that leaving won’t likely solve the problem.”

From that moment, it’s total chaos.

Everyone begins arguing about what they think about the stalker and our decision to leave Star Cove. The voices get louder and louder, and the tones become more and more argumentative as emotions are heightened by the pressure we’ve all been under.

“This is too much,” I exclaim, feeling claustrophobic, my fingers crawling up my throat as I struggle to fill my lungs with air on each shallow breath I take. “I need to get out of here. I need some fresh air.”

I open the full-length patio door that leads into the backyard and run outside, ignoring the angry voices turning to me.



Isla



I TAKE A FEW, FAST steps deeper into the dimly lit backyard, stopping by the low brick wall that separates the dining area of the patio from the swimming pool and the rest of the yard that slowly declines all the way to the sandy beach.

My breathing is quick and shallow as I inhale in rapid succession, unable to calm the roar in my ears and the tingling feeling in the tips of my fingers.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I wheeze.

A panic attack isn’t what I need right now, but it looks like I’m going to have one whether I like it or not.

“You shouldn’t be out here on your own, Isla.”

I knew someone would follow me outside, but out of all the people in that room, Jessica's voice is the last one I wanted to hear.

"Whatever!" I force out, a hand flat on the center of my chest in the futile attempt to slow my breathing. "I just need a second. I can't take this anymore."

She takes a few steps closer to me. "I can only imagine how scary being stalked must be, but—"

"It's not just being stalked!" I snap, closing my eyes as tears start to burn behind my lids. "It's the arguing and having to be escorted everywhere. It's like I can't fucking breathe."

Her tone changes, becoming less concerned and acquiring a hint of bitterness. "So this is why you convinced Leith to run away? I think Katie is right that it isn't just you whom the stalker wants. I must admit that I never particularly liked you, Isla, but I didn't think you were such a coward. How can you leave knowing that Katie and your grandmother might be in danger? I guess I misjudged you, but I shouldn't be surprised that a slut like you has no guts too."

Just like that, my panic attack is over as my stress turns into pure fury. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" I turn around to face her.

"Isn't that obvious?" She snickers. "You're scared about your own safety, and you convinced Leith to leave. You don't care that you're leaving the rest of your family to deal with this situation, and you're taking Oren and Thurston too. Tell me, are you fucking them behind Leith's back, or are you just stringing them along with the possibility that you might sleep with them to have them at your beck and call?"

Great, just what I needed tonight—a confrontation with Thurston's ex mere feet away from a house still full of people. "What I'm doing or not doing is none of your business," I snap, crossing my arms over my chest. "Now please leave me alone."

Jessica doesn't retreat, her voice low and angry. "I asked *you* to leave Thurston alone so that we could have a chance,

but you're greedy, and you don't care that you're going to hurt him and destroy their brotherly bond too."

I do my best to stay calm on the outside, reminding myself that it only takes one of the spouses in the house for the content of this conversation to be divulged all over post. "You have no idea what you're talking about. Stay out of it, Jessica."

Thurston told me many times that Jessica somewhat reminded him of me. I guess the color of her hair isn't the only thing we have in common, because she's definitely as stubborn as I can be.

"If you loved him or Leith, you'd have left without taking all three of them. I'm sure you've noticed that Oren has it for you as bad as both of his brothers. What do you think will happen when Leith finds out that you've been cheating on him with both of them?"

I can't believe this.

"I'm not cheating on Leith, Jessica. You know nothing about me and my relationships, whether it's with Thurston or his brothers. You need to accept that he isn't into you and butt out."

Her hazel eyes flash with plain hatred when she realizes the truth. "You're already fucking them all, and they'd rather share than be dumped?"

I don't utter one word. She makes our relationship sound dirty and seedy. "It isn't like that, but it doesn't matter, right?" I ask her, knowing that maybe the idea of me not choosing started that way, but it evolved into something beautiful and there's so much love between all of us. "You've already made up your mind, so please just leave me alone and go do your job. If you worked on the case rather than chasing Thurston, maybe we wouldn't need to leave to stay safe."

My provocation hits the intended target. "Fuck you, Isla. You have no idea how much I wish Leith hadn't jumped to save you when you fell off that railing."

There's something in her eyes that gives me pause. I know she wants Thurston and she hates me, but I've never seen this level of hostility. Jessica's body is tense, practically vibrating with anger, and her fists are clenched at her sides as if she were seconds away from snapping. I wouldn't put it past her to try to hurt me.

Her phone pings with a text message. "I need to go back inside," she says. "You can come with me or stay out here and take your chances. Your stalker could be lurking around if he managed to leave from the kitchen. I can only hope they'll be luckier next time they find you alone."

I watch her as she walks back inside the house with an uneasy feeling. I know I thought about it before, but I had dismissed the idea, thinking it was ridiculous.

"She's mad at you. Really fucking mad. Did anyone check her alibi for the night Connie died or the night at the lighthouse? And was she always in the living room tonight? I think it's an odd coincidence that all this shit started happening at the same time Jessica arrived on post. Don't you think?"

The familiar voice comes from somewhere behind me. "Joe?" I call out.

The jasmine bush that grows next to the wrought iron fence that delimits the perimeter of the property on three sides rustles briefly, and then Joe walks out from behind it. "Hey, Isla."

He stops a few steps away from me, still partially shrouded in darkness.

"What are you doing here? I thought they arrested you."

He takes one step forward, stepping right under one of the eco lights that illuminates the backyard. "I've been released, pending investigation," he says. "Again," he adds, voicing my exact thought.

"How is that possible? I thought they found your DNA under Connie's nails," I say, sounding accusing even to my own ears.

He stays calm. “They did, but it isn’t the decisive evidence they need to make the conviction stick. It’s circumstantial at best. I had already admitted that I spent the night before Connie’s death in her bed and that we had sex. There are a number of things we did that could have caused my skin cells to get under her fingernails. They had no choice but to let me go.”

I look at him, hoping he doesn’t decide to come closer, all my senses on high alert. “Right, circumstantial. I thought it could happen.”

His voice is low, and his tone is almost hopeful. “You did because deep down, you know that I didn’t kill Connie, right?”

I sigh. “I don’t know if you did or didn’t, Joe. The only thing I know is that you were the only one who had a motive.”

He barks out a laugh. “Right. Whatever. My ex-wife might have been a pain in the ass, but I didn’t hate her. I had no reason to kill her. And just like I didn’t kill her, I didn’t attack you, but you already know that because I was right behind Oren and Leith when you were being attacked at the lighthouse. On the other hand, though, you might be onto something that Lieutenant Bowman might be the person who’s been stalking you and tried to kill you twice. Like I said, every event the MPs and CID are investigating started happening when she arrived, and we both know she has her reasons to hate you.”

I’m confused, and I tell him, “I don’t know, Joe. I don’t know what to think anymore. It’s true that things started happening at the same time she came on post, and she was there tonight and the day Katie was attacked, but there are some things that don’t make sense. Jessica is taller than me but still much shorter than the soldier I saw at the lighthouse and here the night of the break-in. I mean, I didn’t see them well, it was always dark, but—and also, why would she kill Connie?”

Joe shrugs. “Like you said, it was always dark, and you were scared. Maybe you thought your attacker was bigger than they really were? And someone else might have killed Connie. Your attacks and her murder might not be connected.”

I meet his gaze. “Do you really think so? It would be better for you if they were, since it’s obvious that you didn’t attack me at the lighthouse. If they were looking for the same person, that would completely exonerate you.”

“You’re right,” he agrees. “But while I’m interested in proving my innocence, I’m also interested in the truth, and I want you to be safe. I don’t know the solution to this case. All I know is that someone wants to frame me for Connie’s murder. I swear I didn’t kill her. I argued with her that night, and if I hadn’t left her car and walked to the shoppette, it would have been my body on the beach the morning after. Connie was furious with me and out for blood, but she was alive and well and really pissed off when I walked away from her. I know they think they got me, but I didn’t do it. I have no idea how that cell phone with the messages to you got into my PT bag. I swear I have nothing to do with any of it. Please, Isla, believe me.”

I want to believe him. I don’t know why, and something tells me that he might have lied to me before, but deep down, I don’t think he’s a killer. The words leave my mouth in a rush before I can think better of it. “I believe you, Joe, but if you didn’t kill Connie—”

He closes the distance between us, taking my hand in his much larger one. “Thank you. Thank you. I don’t even care if they arrest me again, Isla. All I care about is that you don’t think that I could kill someone, especially not someone I used to love.”

There’s honesty shining in his brown eyes, and all the swagger and arrogance he had when we first met and when he relentlessly pursued me is completely gone. “Okay, I believe you,” I relent. “But I don’t know where that leaves us. Some stuff went down tonight and—”

The adrenaline from the events of tonight and my confrontation with Jessica have caused such turmoil in my emotions that I didn’t immediately register that Joe’s hand feels damp. “Joe,” I murmur, lifting our still clasped hands to take a closer look. “You’re bleeding. What—” There’s a thin, fairly long cut on his palm that’s already starting to scab over.

Dried blood surrounds it, and there's a tiny amount of blood on my own hand from our contact.

“Yeah, it was me who broke into your kitchen,” he admits, “but I didn't touch the cake. The toppers had already been damaged when I came in.”

I exhale, trying to calm my reaction. “What were you doing in the house? Your parents are there. You could have fucking come in through the front door. Are you crazy? Do you have any idea how this makes you look—”

He doesn't let me finish. “Yeah, I think I am crazy. There's no other explanation. I keep telling myself to lie low and to wait for the storm to pass, that I'm innocent and law enforcement will soon find who really killed Connie. And then you'll see. You'll see that I might have made mistakes, but I love you, Isla. I broke into your house because I was hoping to be able to make my way upstairs while everybody was distracted by the party and wait in your room to talk to you. Then I noticed the ruined cake, and Katie came into the kitchen and screamed, and I ran back outside before she could see me.”

I don't even know what to say to him. This is complete chaos.

“Joe, I... Look, we've had this conversation so many times, and I don't really know how to tell you that, against my better judgment, I care about you, but you and I can't be anything.”

He covers my hand with both of his. “I know I fucked up. That night on the beach, I was drunk, and I'm not looking for an excuse, I was wrong. I should have stopped kissing you the second you said no. I have no excuse. I wish I could go back and not drink or at least stop when you said no. I fucked up all my chances of you loving me back—”

I can see how much he's hurting, but I'm sick and tired of having this conversation with him. “Joe, stop. Please, stop. Look, it isn't about that night. It wasn't just you who fucked up the night of Dad and Katie's rehearsal dinner. I did too. I had just found out about the elopement and that Leith and

Oren were my stepbrothers. I was angry and confused, and when you kissed me, a part of me wanted it, a part of me wanted *you*. My body was telling me yes, but my head was telling me no, and it took me a second to make sense of it. I don't completely blame you because I sent you mixed signals."

He sighs, lowering his gaze to our joined hands. "Yeah, you did, but for as much as I hate to admit that your asshole stepbrother is right, Oren was absolutely spot on when he said it didn't matter if you kissed me back. The second the word no came out of your mouth, I should have stopped. The reason why I didn't is because I was intoxicated, but I only have myself to blame for that too. I know I've apologized before, but this time I really mean it, Isla. Please forgive me. I know you're with Leith now, and I understand it's too late, but at least tell me that you don't hate me."

I lift my gaze to his. "I don't hate you, Joe. I never have. But the reason why I didn't want to give you another chance isn't because of what happened between us on the beach, or at least that's only a tiny part of it. My mother cheated on my dad and then left us for the guy she cheated with. I swore to myself that I'd never cheat, that I'd never do to anyone what she did to my dad and me. You lied about being married, and that's what I couldn't get past. I know things between you and Connie weren't so simple, but if you had told me the truth from the get-go, then maybe things would have been different."

He laughs, but there's no mirth in it, and it's a sad, bitter sound. "We talked about this before. I wanted you so fucking much from the second I saw you at the gate. If I had told you how things were between me and Connie, you wouldn't have come to my room."

"That's true," I agree. "I wouldn't have slept with you, and there's no point dwelling on it now, Joe. Maybe we would have become friends and things could have happened between us once you and Connie were really done, or maybe I would have fallen for Leith and—"

I stop just before Oren's and Thurston's names leave my lips.

"Isla, I know you're involved with all three of your stepbrothers," he says softly. "I don't know if everyone noticed, but to me, it's as clear as day. I see the way they look at you. It's the same way I look at you. I was never sure you were into all of them, but since you're all leaving together, it couldn't be more obvious."

I lower my gaze, searching for the right words, but he precedes me.

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. Just be careful though. You haven't been as discreet as you think. Right now, it's just gossip, but keep your public interactions above any kind of reproach. The last thing you want is a scandal right before the wedding. Somehow, sleeping with your other stepbrothers while you're engaged to one sounds even worse than just plain fucking all three of them."

I know what he means. Sleeping with my three stepbrothers would make me a slut in the public eye, but doing so while I'm engaged to one of them would be a juicier piece of gossip. People would probably assume that I'm doing it behind Leith's back, and that would make me a slut and a cheater. It would reflect terribly on Dad for allowing that to happen under his roof, and it would end up hurting all of their careers.

"You're right," I whisper. "Thank you for the warning, Joe."

He smiles that sad smile again. "I want you to be happy, and if those three assholes make you happy, then I hope they know how lucky they are and they treat you right."

His tone is soft, and I know he means it. "Thank you. They really do, they treat me like a princess."

"Good. Don't think I wouldn't fight them to the death if they didn't, because I would."

I feel tears burning in my eyes. I don't even know why I'm crying. It might be the adrenaline rush from tonight's events

that's wearing off, or the fear that something bad could happen to me or the people I love before we get to leave. There's a fair amount of guilt in the mix about leaving and possibly leaving Nana and Katie in danger if it's true that I'm not the stalker's real target and Dad is.

It might also be sadness and regret for what happened between Joe and me. He lied, but I wasn't totally blameless, and there's a part of me that wishes I could take it all back.

If I hadn't slept with him, maybe things would be different. Maybe that foolish afternoon in his room in the barracks was the catalyst of other events.

Maybe Connie would be alive.

"Hey," he says softly, tucking a lock of my hair behind my ear. "Where did you go? Are you all right?"

I sigh, fighting hard not to let my tears fall. "I believe that you didn't kill Connie. I want you to be happy too, Joe."

He lets go of my hand. "You know, you're right that to be happy, to find real love, I need to stop lying. And first of all, I need to stop lying to myself. I love you, Isla, but I also still loved my wife. Does that make me a hypocrite?"

I think about it for a second. "I don't know. I can't exactly judge you for loving more than one person. That would make me a hypocrite. Just give yourself time to grieve, you've suffered a great loss."

I should know about it, since that's how I made a mess of my own life, trying to get over the loss of my mom and Thurston by looking for love in the wrong way and in all the wrong places.

"Yeah, you're right. Thank you for believing in me." He takes his wallet out of his ACU pants, extracting a Polaroid.

It's a photo of him and Connie. They are on a beach, smiling at the camera, and I recognize the lighthouse in the distance.

"This was taken the weekend we arrived here in Star Cove, almost two years ago now. She was pregnant, and we'd just

gotten married.” His fingers trace the image of his late wife with sad reverence as they skim over her strawberry blonde hair, a floral scarf, and the denim jacket she’s wearing to stop on her stomach. “It was still too early for it to show, but our baby was there too.”

I don’t even think before closing my arms around him, my tears now burning hot tracks down my face.

Even though he lied before, I believe him when he says that he still had feelings for Connie. He might have treated his ex terribly, but I don’t think Joe is all bad. It’s a gut feeling, and I’m going with it. “I’m not trying not tell you what to do, Joe,” I say, holding him tight. “But remember that love and never forget the pain of losing it. Connie is gone, but trying hard not to repeat the same mistakes you made with her next time you find love is the best way to honor her.”

He squeezes me tighter, his chin resting on the top of my head for a moment. “I hope I can. I’m so scared of getting hurt and hurting someone again. Sometimes I wonder if there’s something wrong with me... if I’m fucking broken.”

I lift my face to look into his eyes. “We all make mistakes, Joe. In one way or another, we’re all broken, but I think recognizing it is what’s important. I could open my heart to love when I realized how broken I was and that what I had been doing was making things worse. I’m not saying things will be perfect or easier, but if you’re true to yourself and to others, happiness will find you.”

“I just hope you’re right, Isla. Thank you for believing me. You have no idea how much it means to me.”

The sound of footsteps makes us turn to look back at the house.

“Isla, baby, where are you?” Leith’s voice is coming closer.

“I’m going to go back home,” Joe says, releasing me. “I don’t want him to find me here. I bet he won’t believe that I had nothing to do with that cake incident, and I’d rather not

get into a fight, especially if Oren is nearby. Good night, Isla. Please be careful out here.”

He heads down toward the beach just before Leith rounds the corner and comes into view. “Baby, what are you doing here on your own? I saw Jessica come back inside the house by herself. How could she leave you out here after what just happened?”

The words leave my lips before I can think better of it. “I wasn’t alone. Joe was here.”

Predictably, he’s alarmed. “Peters? Shouldn’t he be in jail?”

I explain everything, from why Joe was released to our conversation.

“Shit,” he says. “If that’s true, we might have one killer and one stalker on the loose around post.”

I’m surprised that he isn’t arguing that Joe killed Connie. “Do you believe that Joe is innocent too?”

He traces my bottom lip with the pad of his thumb. “If you believe him, I do too, but that only complicates things. I think law enforcement has no idea about this whole mess. They have only ever looked at Joe for Connie’s murder, and they have no idea who’s after you.”

I step closer to him, melting into his embrace as soon as his arms surround me. “Do you think it could be Jessica? And do you believe that someone is after Katie and Nana too?”

Leith sighs. “It’s all possible. We need to get Doug to talk to Captain Morris. Jessica shouldn’t work on the case. Her feelings for Thurston don’t make her as objective as law enforcement should be, but I don’t know what to think, to be honest, or if she’s involved with any of the stalking. One thing I know for sure is that Nana is still mad about being kept in the dark even though she doesn’t look scared.”

“I have no problem believing that,” I tell him. “I’ve seen her that angry only once before. She’s the one we should be scared of when she’s mad.”

He chuckles softly. “She gave your dad a piece of her mind after you walked out. She said that she’s sick of him treating her like a mushroom.”

“A mushroom?” I ask, confused.

“Yeah. Kept in the dark and fed shit.”

It’s impossible to repress the laughter that bubbles to the surface. “Typical Nana.”

Leith agrees. “She reminded me of you so much, it’s uncanny. I see why Thurston calls you Tinkerbelle, by the way. It would suit Nana too.”

I laugh. “Call her that at your own risk, babe.”

“Oh, fuck no. I’m not that crazy. Anyway, your dad asked Oren to drive Nana home and to stay there tonight, just in case whoever wrote those notes decides to do anything else. He wanted to put an MP outside her door, but it’s a little complicated since she lives off post and she isn’t military personnel.”

I’m relieved that Oren is going to be with her. “Sending Oren with her was the right thing to do. I know Nana feels more combative than scared, but I’ll sleep better knowing that she isn’t alone. What about Katie? Is she okay?”

Leith exhales slowly, resting his chin on the top of my head like Joe did just a few moments ago. “She’s scared. I don’t even blame her. She’s convinced that when she was attacked, they didn’t grab her by accident, thinking it was you, and that after today’s notes, maybe the stalker wants to hurt her and Nana too, and that us leaving won’t put an end to this.”

I shudder at the thought. I can’t handle the idea of Nana being targeted by the stalker that tried to kill me twice. “Do you think Katie is right?” I ask, lifting my face to meet his gray gaze.

“I don’t know what to think, baby. Mom was disappointed about us leaving anyway, and I get that she’s scared, but at the same time, I think she’s using the latest turn of events to try and manipulate us to stay.”

“Do you think we should?”

Leith blinks, confused for a second. “Should do what?”

“Stay. Can we even cancel the PCS?”

He nods. “We can, but I don’t think we should. First off, it would look bad on Doug, since he pulled some strings to get all three of us to the same duty station. Besides, the whole reason for us leaving is that we want you to be safe. I’m not staying here, especially after what happened tonight.”

I close my eyes, resting my head on Leith’s shoulder. “This is such a fucking mess. I don’t know what to do, and there’s so much at stake. If we make the wrong choice and something happens to Nana or Katie, I won’t be able to live with it.”

Leith’s big, slightly rough hand comes up to cup my jaw, moving my face so that our lips are just a breath apart. “Maybe we should take Mom and Nana with us,” he says. “I know it wouldn’t be ideal, and we’d have to keep sneaking around, but we’d have the peace of mind that they are out of harm’s way. If Doug is the target of this whole mess, he can get a security detail assigned to him. It could be easier to catch our perp without any distractions and any more people who can be targeted and muddy the waters.”

I don’t know what to think anymore. I feel a hot tear slide down my face, and I don’t even try to stop it. I’m not ashamed to cry in front of Leith. I wouldn’t be ashamed to cry in front of any of my stepbrothers. “I wish we knew what to do,” I whisper. “I’m so scared, Leith. You and your brothers, Dad, Nana, and Katie are our family. Just the thought of something bad happening to any of you—” My throat constricts as tears overwhelm me. “I could have lost you at the lighthouse, babe. I can’t handle any more of this. I can’t handle that if we make the wrong decision—”

His lips touch mine, warm and impossibly soft. He doesn’t deepen the kiss, he chases my tears, drying them off with soft, gentle kisses all over my face. “Then it’s decided. We’ll go and take Mom and Nana,” he says, and I envy the confidence in his tone.

“What about Dad?” I ask, feeling a mixture of relief and guilt. “We can’t leave him alone in this situation, especially if he’s the real target of all of this.”

Leith’s voice is low and soothing. “Your father is a soldier, Isla. He’s been in dangerous situations more times than you and I can even fathom, especially when he commanded a special forces unit. Believe me, he’ll be fine, and maybe not having to worry about protecting you, his wife, and his mother will help concentrate all the resources on finding who’s fucking with all of us.”

It makes sense. “Okay,” I whisper, rubbing my forehead as I feel a headache coming on.

“I’ll talk to Doug tomorrow. Let’s go to bed now. You’ve had a long day.”

I touch his lips with mine the same way he just did a moment ago. “Sleep in my bed? Please?”

Leith chuckles softly. “I’d like to see you try to keep me away, baby. After that crazy surprise party, you and I have unfinished business anyway.” He nips my bottom lip, sending a wave of electric desire to all the nerve endings in my body.

“I like the way you think, Captain LeCroy.” I smile.

He wraps his arm around my shoulders, guiding me toward the house. “Let’s go then. You’re wearing way too many clothes for what I have in mind.”

My smile widens. “And what do you have in mind?”

“I’m a man of few words, baby. I prefer to show you as soon as we’re alone.”

Leith opens the patio door, guiding me back inside the dark living room. I’m relieved that everyone has gone home.

We make our way up the stairs, trying to be as quiet as possible. This time we aren’t sneaking around, but Dad and Katie seem to have gone to bed too, and we don’t want to disturb them.

I’m eager to forget tonight’s events, at least for a little while, and Leith’s strong arms provide the perfect place to

chase a temporary oblivion.

There's only one blemish that ruins the perfection of our little bubble, one thought that plagues me the entire time, and I can't shake it off, even when Leith plunges inside me after making me come twice with his skilled mouth and fingers.

I have the feeling that I'm missing something important. It's right there in front of me, but right now, it's out of my reach.



21.

Lucky Bride

Isla



“ARE YOU READY, DARLING?” Dad says, patting my hand that’s curled over the crook of his elbow and winking at me.

“As ready as I’ll ever be, Dad.” I smile.

He stops for a second as we exit the low gate that leads from the backyard of the commander’s house right onto the beach. “I just wanted to tell you something, Isla.” His smile reaches his gray eyes, so similar to mine and Nana’s. “I couldn’t be prouder of the woman you’ve become. I know things haven’t always been easy because of my career, and after your mother left, I’m well aware that you were lost for a while.”

I’m grateful for his choice of words. He’s obviously referring to my wild phase after I was deserted by both my mom and my first love in the span of a few months—a phase that lasted six long years.

“I know I could and should have been more present, but I was lost too. I’m so glad that me finding Katie brought Leith into your life. I know you’re fond of Oren and Thurston too, and I’m excited to see how our blended family will grow.”

I giggle, trying to lighten the mood when I spot unshed tears in Dad’s eyes. “I’m not even married yet, and you’re already trying to ask me for grandchildren?” I tease him.

“Well, an old man can hope, right? I don’t mind the idea of having a younger generation around us, and don’t worry, the burden isn’t just on you and Leith. Once your brothers-in-law settle down too, I’m sure there’ll be plenty of kids.”

I stutter a little bit at the thought. One day, we'll have to break the news about our unconventional relationship to Dad and Katie. I'm glad we have Nana's unconditional blessing, but I'm not under the illusion that our parents will take it as well as she did.

But that's a problem for future Isla. Today is my wedding day, and the only thing that's worrying me are the dark clouds that are amassing over the sea, advancing toward the beach. "Let's go and do this," I say, looking at the sky with a silent prayer that the weather will hold at least until we say our vows. "The soldiers have done an amazing job creating a little boardwalk and that beautiful archway with flowers for the ceremony, but I don't want to end up swimming up the aisle."

Nothing seems to be able to shake Dad's good mood today. "Don't worry. If the weather takes a turn for the worse, Brad and Nellie offered their living room to complete the ceremony, and then the reception is at the Centennial Conference Center. We organized rides for everyone so people can have a drink. I have you covered, darling."

That makes me feel better. "It's very nice of the Peters to help, since our house is full of boxes right now."

Dad nods. "Yeah, the movers are scheduled for tomorrow, but Katie's stuff won't be included since she isn't part of the orders. I can't believe that despite being an army spouse for almost twenty years before me, she didn't learn to travel lighter."

I smile at the fondness in Dad's voice. "Ah, that must be why Leith was so shocked with how little I have?"

He laughs. "I taught you right. But seriously, thank you for taking Katie and Nana with you guys. I'm going to feel much better in dealing with this stalking situation without the women I love as possible targets. The three of you are my entire world."

I squeeze his arm. "Oh, Dad." He was never so open in showing his feelings, and I have Katie to thank for this newer, softer version of my father. "I'm so glad you found Katie. You deserve to be happy."

It took Katie and me a second to appreciate each other, but I admire her loving side. It's her meddling that needs work, but I don't say that out loud. I can only be relieved that since Leith and I got engaged and Dad gave his approval, Katie has been a lot nicer to me.

"I'm lucky to have met her, but I'm even luckier to have such a generous woman as a daughter. Not many new brides would be happy to live with their mother-in-law and grandmother."

"It's okay," I assure him. "Leith and I are taking a week to stay in Coral Cove for a romantic break, and we'll use a week to explore Hawaii before we start working on settling in, so I have a nice, long honeymoon to look forward to."

Dad winks at me. "Yeah, that's good. We all saw firsthand that there's plenty of... uhm, attraction between you and my stepson."

I feel heat rise to my face. He's talking about the embarrassing way we arrived to our wedding shower. "Right. Yeah," I mumble.

"Ha!" Dad laughs. "Look at you. You're a blushing bride."

It's impossible to repress an eye roll. "I hate that expression, but let's go. Those clouds look darker and darker, and they are getting closer. I don't want to look like a drowned rat on my wedding day. Plus, we're two minutes late," I add, surprised that he hasn't noticed.

Dad winks. "*Sposa bagnata, sposa fortunata.*" It's an Italian saying that means wet bride, lucky bride.

"Aww, Dad!" It's been a while since we were stationed in Italy, but I fell so in love with the culture and the language that I took Italian in college. "I'm convinced the Italians say that because it's such a rare occurrence in most parts of the country to have rain on your wedding day—especially for a summer bride—and they invented this proverb as some kind of consolation, but I doubt it has any truth to it. And we should seriously hurry, we're late."

“Well, it’s not like they can start without you, right? All good things are worth waiting for, my dear.”

I shake my head, laughing at his satisfied smile. “Who are you and what have you done with my father?”



Leith



THE MUSIC STARTS, AND I stiffen, turning to look toward the house.

After much debate, we didn’t go with any of the traditional choices for wedding music.

Isla and Thurston wanted an old song they used to play at the arcade down in Star Cove the summer they met, which is “She’s The One,” by Robbie Williams.

Maybe it’s weird that I agreed to have their song played at my wedding, but I didn’t have a preference, and I know I’m lucky to be the one that gets to say “I do” in front of our families.

I wish society was more accepting of nontraditional relationships, but we did all we could to make this day “our day” for all four of us.

It makes things easier that there’s nothing my brothers and I wouldn’t do for the woman we love.

“Damn,” Oren murmurs softly from a couple of steps behind me as soon as Isla appears and begins walking toward us on Doug’s arm.

“Damn indeed,” I agree.

Despite being on the beach, my brothers and I opted to get married in our ASUs, and most of the soldiers invited to the relatively intimate ceremony decided to do the same.

Mom, Nana, and Mia are joint matrons of honor, and they are in stunning lavender dresses.

Isla is an absolute vision in a simple, white silk slip dress with thin straps and a sweetheart neckline. The skirt flows softly to the ground, and I smile when I notice that she's decided to go barefoot since we're on the beach.

Her long, strawberry blonde hair falls in soft, shiny waves down her back, and a short veil is attached to a simple but elegant tiara.

"She's like a vision," Thurston chimes in from his spot next to Oren. "I can't believe we're so lucky."

I can't help the thought that I'll feel way luckier once we get to leave Star Cove and all the events of the past few months behind.

There was some debate about where we wanted to have our wedding ceremony. The chapel on base didn't feel personal enough, and none of us are particularly religious, so the beach was the obvious choice. This beach has seen a lot of meaningful events for us, some good and some tragic. Isla and Thurston's story started here six years ago, and that makes it romantic, but this was also the place where Connie died and where we almost lost Isla at the old lighthouse. The winning argument in favor of getting married here was that life is a mixture of wonderful and tragic moments, and that we all carry our baggage and the ghosts of our pasts with us.

My gloomy thoughts vanish the second Isla reaches me, and Doug offers her hand to me. "You're so beautiful, baby," I murmur, placing a soft kiss on her temple.

"You're handsome," she says with a smile as her eyes drift behind me to meet my brothers' gazes.

The ceremony is simple but beautiful. My brothers and I wrote our vows together, and Isla wrote hers thinking about all three of us.

"I promise to send you naughty text messages every time you're stuck in some long army leadership class," she says to me. "I promise to eat Jiffy Pop with you and help you clean up

from glitter bombs until we're old and gray." Her eyes are fixed on Oren behind me, and finally, they find Thurston for her final vow. "I promise to be your home, the place you always come back to."

It's my turn to speak, and I feel the responsibility of being the one who recites vows for all three of us.

My voice shakes with emotion at first, but then I continue with all the confidence in the world that this is forever. "I promise to always kiss your pain away and to take you on surprise trips. I promise to keep adding to your collection of souvenirs with your name on it, even if I have to have them specially made. I promise to let you win when we race somewhere, but I'll always be behind you. I'm never going to leave you, and I'll always tell you the truth, good or bad."

The final vow is from all three of us. "I promise I'll do my very best to always get us a hotel room with the biggest bathtub we can find."

Oren passes me the ring when the time comes, and when Isla puts on the simple titanium band I chose, I know my brothers are wearing matching ones with their dog tags.

"With the power vested in me," the chaplain says solemnly, "I now declare you man and wife. Captain LeCroy, you may now kiss your bride."

I put all my love in the kiss that follows, chuckling against her lips when she whispers, "I thought PDA in uniform was a big no-no."

"I'm sure this is the one time we can get away with it, baby. Plus, most of the people on this beach have caught you with your hands down my pants, literally."

I kiss her again, wishing we didn't have a wedding reception to go to and we could leave for Coral Cove right this second.

As planned, Oren and Thurston are the first ones to congratulate us, and if their hugs with the bride last a little too long, no one dares to say anything.

The next person I hug is Mom. “Congratulations, Leith.” She beams, kissing my cheek. “I know you and Isla will have a long, happy marriage. I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

The first drop of rain lands on the sleeve of my dress blues, and it’s rapidly followed by many others as the sky opens up in the most violent, torrential rain I’ve ever seen.

It’s immediate panic on the beach as all our guests begin running through the commander’s backyard and to the front of our driveway, where a couple of white army buses are waiting to take the guests to the Centennial Conference Center where everything should be ready for our wedding reception.

I scoop my wife up into my arms and run to my truck that’s parked out front with a huge, white bow on the front hood.

“I think the Italians are full of shit when they say ‘*Sposa bagnata, sposa fortunata.*’” Isla giggles. “There’s nothing lucky about getting drenched right when you’re about to walk off into the sunset with your sexy, hot man in uniform.”

“Not that you’d be able to see much sunset anyway right now.” Oren huffs, climbing into the back seat, followed by Thurston.

I manage to drive off before we get stuck behind the buses and the few other vehicles that are about to bring our guests to the reception. “At least we were able to complete the ceremony before the heavens decided to open up,” I remark. “I guess that’s lucky enough.”

“Wait here,” I say to Isla once I’m parked in front of the Centennial Center. “I’m going to see if they have an umbrella.”

Maybe the Italians are onto something after all, I think as the lady at the front desk offers me a large umbrella.

My brothers and I work as a team, and I carry Isla inside while Oren holds the umbrella open to shield us from the bona fide monsoon that’s transpiring outside.

“We made it.” I smile, depositing my new wife back onto her feet.

“Just barely.” She groans, looking at her bare feet. “I was planning on grabbing my shoes before we came here, but with the sudden rain, I totally forgot. Besides, my dress is clinging to my body like a second skin. Luckily it’s lined, but I swear to God, wedding dresses aren’t made to get wet. Babe, would you get mad if I asked you to take me back home? I need to put my shoes on and possibly change.”

I’m about to agree, but Mom intervenes as she comes in, followed by Doug and Nana. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to leave. It’s getting worse out there.”

Isla shrugs. “My hair is a mess, and so is my makeup. I don’t want to look like this in any of my wedding photos.”

“I can help you touch up your makeup and fix your hair, darling,” Mom soothes her. “I put your lipstick and powder in my bag before we went ahead to the beach, just in case you needed a touch up during the party.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Katie.” Isla beams. “Thank you so much. But I still need to change, and shoes would be a good idea for the party.”

I grab her hand, brushing her knuckles across my lips, and admire her new wedding band on her finger for a second before I offer my help. “I’ll dash home quickly and get your shoes and clothes.”

Mom doesn’t look happy about it. “Can’t you send one of your brothers, Leith? If you get stuck somewhere because of the rain or you get a flat or something like that, then at least we won’t be missing the groom. We can party without shoes, but you and Isla are the guests of honor.”

“I’ll be quick, Mom. Oren and Thurston have gone to find more umbrellas to help the ladies inside from the buses.” I point at the storm outside that’s gaining strength with every passing minute. “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. You go do your makeup, and I’ll be here before you know it.”

Isla kisses me. “Thank you, babe. You’re the best husband in the world.”

“Remember that tonight when I get all sorts of dibs,” I whisper in her ear, making her giggle. “Where’s this outfit and shoes? I hope you don’t want me to select it for you,” I tease her.

“I wanted everything out of the way in my room, ready for the movers tomorrow morning, so I put the clothes on the chair in Katie’s craft room, and the shoes are right there too.”

“Roger that,” I say, opening the umbrella before running outside and back into my truck.

I drive carefully, glad that the roads are empty due to this sudden summer storm. It rains often around here in the summer, and while I don’t mind rainy weather, I hope the sea won’t be too stormy to ride on when the small private boat I chartered is supposed to take us to Coral Cove for our wedding night.

The reception will end too late to catch the last ferry there, but I didn’t want us to spend our first night as a married couple in the same house as our parents. Oren and Thurston surprisingly agreed to join us tomorrow—when they are due to go on PCS leave—to avoid arousing suspicion if Mom and Doug realized that they followed us into the honeymoon suite.

I enter the house from the front door, taking the steps two at a time and thinking that one day, we will have to tell our parents that we all married Isla today, even if I’m the only one who signed the marriage certificate.

I am so distracted by my thoughts of having my gorgeous wife all to myself tonight that I enter Isla’s room. “Ha, Oren would say that I’m thinking with my little head right now,” I say to the empty house, remembering that Isla told me she left everything in Mom’s craft room.

I weave through the piles of boxes that are ready for the private movers Doug hired to ship Mom’s and Nana’s things to Hawaii after we’re done with our honeymoon, looking for the clothes and shoes my wife needs.

I find the white, high heeled sandals and the sundress Isla selected for later by Mom's desk, and I'm about to turn around when I accidentally knock against a pile of boxes with my elbow.

"Fuck!" I jump when the boxes collapse against another pile, and then another, causing a domino effect and ending up almost inside the small closet where Mom keeps her craft supplies.

For half a second, I debate leaving everything as it is, but then I shake my head, putting Isla's stuff down. I at least have to straighten up the boxes. If I left everything this way, it would bother me all night.

I work quickly, lifting what I knocked over and scooping stuff that has fallen out back into the boxes in a totally random way. I chuckle at the idea that Mom will go insane when she doesn't find her stuff exactly where she packed it, but I have no time to go through the lists she wrote on one side of each box, since I don't want to miss my own wedding reception.

"One last box, and I'm done." I huff, grabbing the box of craft materials that got knocked over all the way inside the closet.

A piece of fabric draws my attention. What is an ACU jacket doing in here? Maybe Mom took some of Doug's stuff by accident.

My heart clenches in my chest when I find the name strip *LeCroy* and the E5 insignia that have come off the jacket. I always knew that Mom would never forget Dad despite having remarried, but I didn't think she'd keep his old ACUs.

And his boots, I think, as I can't resist my curiosity and rummage through the contents of the box. "Aww, Mom." I sigh, thinking she must miss Dad so much that she didn't even bother cleaning the boots. They still have mud on them, and Dad is probably rolling in his grave at the sight of this.

"What the—"

My mind struggles to accept what I'm seeing when I find a balaclava and an old cell phone at the bottom of the box.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I grab a canvas tote from the closet and take the evidence with me, hoping that there’s any other explanation than what I think for this stuff being here.

I run like the wind, driving back to my wedding reception in the pouring rain as if the devil was hot on my heels.

My mind is in overdrive, trying to find any other explanation for what I just found. Any explanation that my mom is not Isla’s stalker.



22.

Eureka

Isla



“CAN YOU FIND US SOME place to freshen up and change, please?” Katie asks the kind lady at reception. “We got caught in the rain, and the bride can’t greet her guests in this state.”

“Just one moment. Let me give you the key to the small conference room adjacent to the main ballroom where your party is. You can change there, and there’s a cloak room bathroom through there too,” the receptionist says, looking for the key in a cabinet behind her.

“Is everything okay?” Nellie Peters approaches us, followed by her husband.

Major Peters looks like a slightly older version of Joe in his ASUs. “Everyone is in the ballroom, Katie,” he says. “I suppose we should be used to these summer storms, but I wouldn’t have been surprised to see Noah’s ark passing by while we were trying to shuttle all the women inside with the umbrellas we had at hand.”

Katie smiles. “Thank you for helping, Brad. Leith has gone to fetch a change of clothes for our bride. Could you and Doug entertain our guests with a speech or something until we freshen up our makeup?”

I shudder in my wet wedding dress as if to confirm that a change of clothes is urgently needed.

“Oh, you poor thing,” Nellie says. “I hope Leith won’t be too long, but in the meantime, you should try to dry yourself and stay warm. You don’t want to start your married life by catching a chill. Here, take this. It isn’t much, but it’s better than nothing.”

She takes off the wide floral scarf that was wrapped around her neck and drapes it over my shoulders. It's warm from being on her skin, and I clutch it closer to my body. "Thank you, Nellie. I—" I stop in my tracks.

"Don't mention it, sweetheart." She smiles. "You're a beautiful bride anyway. Congratulations. I must admit I'm jealous. Katie, you're so lucky to have gained Isla as a daughter," she says.

I only vaguely hear Katie's response, which is something about her already being my stepmother but being happy that Leith and I have fallen in love.

I'm shaking, but it isn't because I'm wet and my wedding dress is sticking to my damp skin.

I make the mistake of lifting my gaze and meeting Major Peters' brown eyes for just a split second before forcing myself to lower my gaze and pretend I'm not freaking out.

Katie is saying something to the receptionist about finding a few towels so we can dry me off as much as possible while we wait for Leith.

I barely hear the answer, my legs working on autopilot as I follow her into the room we were offered before the Peters found us.

The conference room is small, and the only furniture is a desk with a chair and a filing cabinet against the opposite wall.

Surprisingly, there's a little bathroom attached to it, but there are no towels in there. "Let me go see if the receptionist found us some towels and text Leith to see if he can bring us a hairdryer too. It looks like you just came out of the shower." She gives my shoulder a comforting squeeze before leaving the room. "Don't worry, darling. We'll make you presentable for the party in no time."

Right.

The party.

That's the least of my worries right now.

“That scarf,” I tell my reflection in the bathroom mirror. “I’ve seen it before.”

Lightning illuminates the room, as if the skies were following my line of thought.

The overhead neon lights flicker for a second before the room plunges into complete darkness.

A shiver works its way down my spine, and I scurry out of the bathroom and back into the small room as the thought forms in my head coherently enough that I can finally voice it.

“It was the same scarf I saw in Major Peters’ trunk the other night.” My mind connects the dots. “Connie was wearing that scarf in the photo Joe showed me the other night.” But that isn’t what’s making my blood run cold and curdle in my veins. “It’s the same scarf she had on the night she died. She was using it to cover some of the bruises Joe gave her the night before.”

I trace the thin, flimsy fabric with trembling fingers. “If Major Peters had it, it can only mean that—”

A bright light flashes in the room before the deafening sound of thunder announces that the storm is all but over.

I scream.

I’m not alone in the small conference room.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t come to that conclusion, Isla.”

Major Peters is standing right in front of me, a serious expression on his face.

“I... You killed Connie.”

He nods. “I had no choice. Believe me, Isla, I didn’t intend to hurt her. I was running on the road right by the beach that night. I do extra PT every night—it’s a necessary evil if I want to indulge in my weakness for bourbon and chocolate.”

He sounds like Oren right now, but I don’t tell him that.

My mind is in total overdrive as I realize that he’s standing between me and the door.

“I saw Connie’s car stopping and my son getting out. His wife was screaming at him like a banshee,” my father’s deputy continues. “She got out of the car and went after him, still screaming abuse at him and threatening to expose his lies to your father. Thankfully Joe kept walking away. I waited until he was out of sight. I wanted to talk some sense into Connie. I had helped her stay in her on post housing by telling your father that there was a delay with the filing of the divorce paperwork by the court. Your father agreed to let her stay in there until the divorce was filed, but there was no divorce because Connie kept refusing to sign those papers to buy herself more time. I just wanted her to understand that Joe needed a clean break. He had met you, and I had never seen him so into someone. You were a much better suited match for him than the white trash he married.”

I hate the way he’s talking about Connie. She wasn’t perfect by any means, but neither was Joe.

“She refused to sign the papers, saying that Joe wanted to try again and that they weren’t getting divorced. Your father had already bent the rules by letting her stay in her housing on a technicality—”

I know I probably shouldn’t challenge him, but I can’t bite my tongue. “But if they were still married, Connie had the right to stay in her on post housing.”

Major Peters shakes his head. “It’s not that simple. They were separated, and Joe had a room in the barracks. Your father stuck his neck out for me, and I couldn’t jeopardize a twenty-year friendship by getting caught in a lie. I told him they were divorced and that it would be nice if you and Joe hit it off. I couldn’t risk him finding out that my son was still married.”

“So rather than coming clean, you kept encouraging Joe to pursue me and lying to my father. Your solution was to get rid of Connie instead of telling the truth?”

There’s regret in his eyes, but like with his son, lying seems to be second nature for Major Peters, and I don’t know how much I can believe. “I told you, I didn’t mean to kill her.”

He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose in exasperation. “I told her to sign those papers and accept that the marriage was over, but she refused. She asked for money to keep her mouth shut or she would go to your father. I was furious, and before I realized what was happening...”

I close my eyes, overwhelmed by unspeakable sadness. “You killed Connie and then you let your son take the fall for you.” I can’t keep the accusation out of my tone. Major Peters isn’t just a killer and a liar, but he’s also a pathetic excuse for a parent.

“On the contrary,” he explains. “Joe had walked to the shoppette to buy himself some beer and had spent the night drinking alone in his room. He had no alibi, and I knew he’d be the first person the cops would look at. I went to see Sergeant King with a six pack of beer and a deal she couldn’t refuse. If she provided an alibi for Joe, I would help her fiancé make E-8.”

I snort, disgusted by the way he’s twisting the truth. “Right. But you also threatened to hurt First Sergeant Fernandez-Fernandez’s career if she didn’t lie for you.”

Peters shrugs. “King was known for doing anything for a six pack, but I wanted to make sure she understood that she couldn’t fuck me over on this. Things were going according to my plan, until you and your brothers got involved and convinced King to retract.”

I consider his words. “So you decided to scare me by threatening and stalking me. What I don’t understand is why you attacked me in the library that same night. Or was that a diversion tactic?”

“I did no such thing, Isla,” he says. “That night, I walked away from the beach and went to see King, then I shoved the scarf into the trunk of my POV, where it would have stayed until the waters had calmed and I could dispose of it if you hadn’t stopped to help me change my tire. I had to hide it someplace else, and I made the mistake of taking it inside the house. Nellie saw it and thought it was a present for her. I had no other explanation for it and had to go with it.”

What a clusterfuck.

“So what you’re saying is that you aren’t responsible for the threatening messages, the vandalism to my car, the break-in, and the attacks in the library and at the lighthouse?”

Major Peters confirms it. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. Someone has been trying to frame my son for a murder he didn’t commit, and I think—”

The door to the conference room opens. “I found some towels, darling. Is Leith back yet?”

I sprint forward, but Major Peters blocks my path. “Katie, don’t come in!” I warn, but it’s too late.

My mother-in-law enters the room, pointing the flashlight on her phone toward us as she closes the door behind her. “Bradley?” she asks, sounding confused. “What are you doing here? Did something happen?”

Joe’s father moves quickly, pulling Katie deeper inside the room and closing the door behind him. “Isla and I were just talking about the stalker who has been after her and how leaving Star Cove might be the right choice for her safety.” His brown eyes bore into mine. “Don’t come back, and never talk about any of the events of this summer again. It sounds like the only way to leave all of this behind you.”

I think he’s trying to give me a way out in exchange for my silence. He’ll let me walk away in one piece if I let him get away with murder.

Katie looks from me to Peters, clearly confused. “Why does that sound like a threat, Brad? Is Joe responsible for the stalking? Is that what you’re saying?”

The door opens again. “No, he isn’t saying that, and you should know, Mom. Joe isn’t the stalker, you are.”



Leith

I RUN LIKE THE WIND, stopping in Doug's study to get the handgun locked in the bottom drawer of his desk.

I don't even know why I'm getting it. It's not like I could ever use it against my own mother, right?

I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, and right now, I don't know anything.

I drive my truck back to the wedding reception in the torrential downpour, barely aware of my surroundings.

One thought is stuck in my head on a continuous loop. If Mom has been stalking my wife—and for how unbelievable it sounds, I think the evidence I just found is too damning to entertain any other possible explanation—then she might have also killed Connie.

I feel tears burning behind my eyelids. I don't want to believe that the woman who saved me, who gave me a family, gave me my brothers, and made me into the man I am today, could be a killer.

I drive like a man possessed.

Perhaps I should call Thurston and Oren, but I can't drive in this storm and be distracted. I wish Dad's truck was more modern and had the phone connected to the dashboard, but Dad was old school.

"Fuck." I stop in front of the Centennial Conference Center without even bothering to park and realize that I didn't put Isla's clothes into the bag I have with me. I took Dad's old uniform, the balaclava, the boots, and the burner phone with me instead.

I jump out of my truck and run inside the building, oblivious to the rain that's pelting my face and body and quickly soaking through the fabric of my dress blues.

I need to find Mom, but most of all, I need to find Isla right now.

I skid to a stop in the middle of the entrance hall, my head turning left and right as I decide where to go.

Go figure. Right when I need help, there's no one at reception.

Lightning must strike very close, judging by the deafening noise it makes, and that's when the entire building plunges into darkness as the electricity is cut off. "Fuck," I grind out, not even noticing that I'm starting to sound more and more like Oren.

Luck is on my side when the doors to the main conference room, where the wedding reception is being held, open, and my brothers walk out.

"Leith, thank fuck you made it back," Oren says, pointing the flashlight on his phone right in my face. "The MPs just called Doug to inform him that several electrical posts have been brought down by the storm, and they are blocking roads all around post. Doug is going to have Major Peters and the first sergeant monitor the situation and probably go back to his office after the cake, so he's eager to get started."

As if summoned by my brother, my stepfather and new father-in-law comes out right behind them. "Guys, have you seen Major Peters? I need him to help First Sergeant Fernandez-Fernandez stay on top of the situation. If the power doesn't come back, there's going to be more trouble with this storm." He then sees me. "Leith, glad you managed to get back here. I can't leave my daughter's wedding, but I'd like to get started on this party so I can be available as soon as we cut the cake. I'm putting the whole company on alert tonight. Obviously you and your brothers will be exempt from helping, since you're supposed to sign off on PCS leave at midnight. Do you have the clothes Isla needs?"

I shake my head. "Yeah, no. Right now, that isn't important. Where's Isla?"

Doug frowns, hearing the urgency in my voice. "She's in a small separate room, waiting for dry clothes. Don't worry, Katie is with her."

"That's exactly what I'm worried about," I snap. "Where's this room?"

“That way.” Thurston points to my left. “What’s going on, brother?”

I take off in that direction with my brothers and Doug hot on my heels. “I just need to find her, T. Is this it?”

I open the door when he nods, and the scene in front of me is exactly what I was hoping I wouldn’t see.

Mom is right there with Isla, but what is Major Peters doing in there with them?

I hear Doug’s deputy say that Isla is better off leaving Star Cove and never coming back if she wants to be safe from her stalker, and his tone is low and menacing.

“Why does that sound like a threat, Brad? Is Joe responsible for the stalking? Is that what you’re saying?” Mom asks.

Grief and rage are battling in my chest, and I speak before I can think better of it. “No, he isn’t saying that, and you should know, Mom. Joe isn’t the stalker, you are.”

There’s a collective gasp in the room, and everyone is surprised except Mom. “Don’t be ridiculous, Leith,” she snaps, but I know she’s lying.

Her blue eyes don’t meet mine, moving quickly from Isla, to Peters, to me, then going to both my brothers before they stop on Doug.

“I really hope I’m being ridiculous, Mom, but how else would you be able to explain the stuff I found hidden in your craft room?”

I tip the contents of the bag I’ve been carrying onto the floor.



23.

Unbreakable Vows

Isla



I STRUGGLE TO MAKE sense of what Leith is saying and what I'm seeing with my own eyes.

There are ACUs on the floor, a pair of tan army boots, a balaclava, an old-style cell phone, and a ton of wilted rose heads. My attention is fixed on the flowers. It's just the heads, and the stems are missing.

I don't understand.

Before I can start asking the zillion questions that are crowding my mind, Leith pleads with his mother.

"Please, Mom, tell me that there's another explanation for all of this. I looked at the phone, and there are some of the most recent text messages Isla has received from her stalker. Please, tell me that you didn't stalk, terrorize, and attack Isla, and that you didn't kill Connie."

Katie sighs, her shoulders slumping as if she were exhausted. "I can't tell you that, sweetheart," she says softly. "I did all the things you've just accused me of except Connie. I didn't kill her. Major Peters did, I saw him with my own eyes."

Dad shakes his head, looking at his wife and at his deputy and lifelong friend with all the confusion that's just appeared on Oren's and Thurston's faces—the same confusion I feel.

Leith's voice is distraught. I've never heard him this close to tears, except when he told me about how his biological father killed his mother in front of him. "Don't lie to me, Mom. There aren't just messages to Isla on that phone. There

are messages to Joe Peters too. You were threatening him also.”

Katie nods. “I was, but I’m not lying, I didn’t kill Connie, although I was on that beach the night she died. I’d been watching Isla all night. She and Connie looked so similar from behind or from a distance. That night, they also had similar outfits. It was rainy and stormy, like tonight, and I followed her on the beach, thinking it was your stepsister. I wanted to kill her, but I got there too late. I saw Connie and Bradley arguing first, and then he strangled her with the scarf she was wearing. I ran back to the library when I realized that I had gone after the wrong person, and I attacked Isla.”

This can’t be true. “Did you think I was dead? Is that why you left?”

She doesn’t meet my gaze. “No. I was scared off by Joe Peters. He came looking for you and almost caught me.”

I’m still trying to make sense of what Katie just said when Dad intervenes. “Darling, I don’t understand. What kind of insanity is this? You’re behind the attacks on Isla, and you’ve been threatening Lieutenant Peters? Why?”

Katie’s tone suddenly becomes hard. “You should know, Doug, or did you forget how you and your deputy sent my husband on the mission he never came back from? Sure, it was a few years ago, six to be exact. Back then, you were a major, and Bradley was a captain, but the two of you killed my husband, and you needed to pay.”

I hear Dad’s voice shaking for the first time in my life. “How did you know it was us? That information is protected. You don’t have the security clearance needed to—”

Katie laughs, and it’s a sad, bitter sound. “It was fate. It took me almost a year to pick up the pieces of my life enough to at least start functioning normally again. I owe it to my sons. They encouraged me to channel my life into something positive, like completing the few credits I needed to get my college degree. By then, Leith and Thurston had graduated high school, and I started looking for a job. The idea came to

me when I saw a government job at the military base one town over.”

The story is fascinating and horrifying at the same time.

“It was by total chance that I was assigned to an office where you needed security clearance to even step through the door. And it was still chance that the commanding officer there was put in charge of investigating some open cases that concerned soldiers who went missing and eventually perished in action. I wasn’t allowed to even look at those files, of course, but one night, I overheard a phone call. The commander mentioned a special forces operation. I didn’t even know what they were talking about, I had just come to his office to bring him a coffee, but that night, when I went home, I couldn’t stop thinking about how we never knew what happened to William. The circumstances of that deployment and that mission were still covered by security clearance, and I didn’t sleep a wink. All I could think about was that maybe I could find a way to investigate.”

Her eyes are full of tears, the same tears I feel filling my own eyes when she tells us how she managed to find some information about her late husband. “I didn’t have all the details, since the investigation was still ongoing, but I learned enough. I learned that the commanding officer of that campaign was Major Douglas Cameron, and his second-in-command was Captain Bradley Peters.” She looks at her sons before she continues. “Your father wasn’t originally supposed to go on that mission. His squad had just come back from their last run, but something happened, and Will was put in charge. He had barely four hours of rest, and then he was sent back out on the mission he would never come back from.”

The pain in her voice is more than I can take, and I know what she’s saying is true, because I’ve never seen Dad so pale.

Katie’s eyes move to Major Peters. “You made the decision that cost my husband his life. And you” —she looks at Dad, her tone hard and accusing— “signed off on that. You let him go out with barely any sleep after he had been out for an entire day.”

To my surprise, Thurston intervenes. “Mom, I’ve never been deployed, but stuff like that is normal. Soldiers aren’t bound by the same rules as civilians, especially on a deployment. Tell her, Oren.”

The youngest LeCroy brother nods. “T is right, Mom. During my last deployment, we were short on personnel for a while. We were waiting for another company to join us, but until that happened, it was pretty normal to be sent on a turn and burn. I’ve been on duty, driving a truck for twenty-two hours straight, more often than not. The other soldier assigned to my truck and I would take it in shifts. One of us would drive while the other one would sort of watch the road. You can’t blame Doug for what happened to Dad.”

Oren sounds like the voice of reason, but Katie doesn’t look convinced. “They could have delayed the mission or sent someone else. They sent your father and his squad right into an ambush, and once I had that information, I couldn’t let it go. It ate at me day and night. I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t eat. I could barely exist without thinking about how different things would be if they had sent the sergeant who was originally assigned to that mission rather than Will. I couldn’t get it out of my mind that they killed him.”

Leith is the first one to talk. “You can’t think this way, Mom.”

“Can’t I?” she snaps. “At first, I didn’t know what to do. A part of me wanted to tell you guys. I thought you had the right to know what had happened to your father. That was all I wanted. I wanted us to know so we could get closure. You were the only one who seemed to be keeping yourself together, baby,” she says softly. “But I could see it in your eyes that you weren’t all right. You had already lost two parents, and in the aftermath of losing another one, you were looking after me and your brothers. You’ve always been mature beyond your years, Leith.”

By the way Thurston is looking at his mother, I know he doesn’t understand how she came to the decision to get revenge. “You said you wanted closure for all of us, but you never told us.”

Katie nods. “I was going to, but then Oren decided to enlist instead of going to college like you and Leith. When I learned that he was going to be an 88M, a truck driver, like his dad, I was terrified.” She looks at Oren as her tears begin falling. “I asked you not to do it, remember?”

Oren looks distraught. “I do. But Mom—”

“Then your brothers told me they wanted to join the army after college, and I couldn’t take it. I couldn’t lose the three of you like I lost your father, so I started looking up Doug and Bradley to see what had happened to them. I saw that they had left the special forces.” She looks at her husband and his deputy. “You two got to leave and advance in your careers. You got to see your children grow up and become adults. My husband never got to do any of that. You didn’t even manage to bring him back for us to have a real grave to go to, so I decided that you needed to pay.”

I look at the woman who became my stepmother and my mother-in-law, and my heart clenches in my chest. My emotions are confused, a mixture of understanding, fear, sadness, and definitely a lot of anger. “Katie, that’s insane. I ___”

“You don’t understand, Isla. In the beginning, it wasn’t personal, but then it was when I found you in the bathroom with my son.”

Dad’s question isn’t what I thought it would be. “You knew about Isla and Leith, and you never told me?”

Katie’s laugh is full of bitter sarcasm. “Oh, Doug, I hope you’re more perceptive at work than you are at home. I found her in the bathroom with Thurston.”

She explains how she learned about my shared past with her eldest son. “I had been studying you. My original intention had been to cause a scandal to ruin your careers. That’s why I kept pushing Joe and Isla together. I had heard the rumors about Joe and Connie. I thought that if they got together, and then it came out that Joe was still married and how Bradley had lied to you, and you had agreed to let Connie stay in her on post housing when you thought they were divorced, that

would ruin your careers. But your daughter..." Her eyes land on me. "Your daughter was messing with my sons, all three of them."

I can't stifle a gasp. "You knew?"

Katie's hard gaze unsettles me. I've seen that look on Oren and Thurston, who share the exact color and shape of her eyes. "At first, I thought it was just a fucked up coincidence that you and Thurston had met the summer Will died, but then I saw Leith come out of your room early one morning. I saw you kiss Oren, and the tension between the three of them was obvious. You were going to ruin their careers and come between them. Your family was on the brink of destroying mine again."

I understand how things must have looked to her. "Is this why you attacked me?"

She confirms it. "I wanted you gone, Isla. I thought that you were playing games with my sons and hurting you would kill two birds with one stone, because it would punish your father. I saw you walk on the beach on your own many times, so that night, I followed you."

It's starting to make some sense. "Only, you didn't follow me."

"Exactly. I realized my mistake when I saw Bradley join Connie and I heard them arguing." She shudders. "I saw him kill Connie."

Dad intervenes. "You saw that, and instead of calling the MPs, you went after my daughter?"

Katie shrugs. "I had nothing to do with that, and I learned from you that it's important to focus on your mission."

Dad's tone is pained when he asks his wife his next question. "So you went back to the library to kill Isla?"

"I did. I put on my late husband's uniforms and his boots. I thought it would be poetic justice. It would almost be like he was getting his own revenge in person. Then Joe Peters came back, looking for Isla, and I had to go. There was no way I could ever overpower him if it came down to a confrontation,

and that gave me the idea. My previous plan was good, but there was still a risk that with your connections, you and Brad could get out of a cheating and housing mishandling scandal. But murder? If Isla died and Joe had been convicted of that murder, you'd both get what you deserved."



Thurston

I CAN'T BELIEVE WHAT I'm hearing.

"Mom, that's completely insane. I—How could you?"

She starts crying again. "I kept telling myself I was doing it for your father and for the three of you. I couldn't finish the job that night, and things became more difficult when Doug put you three in charge of protecting Isla, so I started with the text messages and all the rest. It was supposed to end at the lighthouse. That night, I had gone to see Nellie, and I hid the cell phone with the incriminating texts in Joe's room. My plan was about to come to fruition."

Leith is barely keeping his cool, and his voice is shaking with fury and heartbreak. "And you would have succeeded if we hadn't gotten there in time."

Mom closes her eyes, swallowing in quick succession as tears threaten to overwhelm her. "That night was when things started to change." She looks at Leith. "I almost killed you with Isla, and that made me snap out of it. I never would have forgiven myself if I had hurt you, baby. For as much as I was still mad at Doug, I realized I couldn't go through with it. I wanted to make Doug suffer, but when I saw you jump to save her, I knew killing Isla would be too much. She had done nothing to deserve to die."

Isla looks at her, her tone as bitter as Mom's. "So you decided to torment me instead?"

"Yeah," is the answer. "I still wanted to keep you away from my sons, and enough had happened that Joe would go to jail if he was convicted for the attempts on your life. I could still get my revenge without killing you."

This is fucking insane.

I look at the woman who gave me life and was a caring and loving mother to me and my brothers, even if she got on our nerves with her meddling. “I can’t believe this, Mom. This is too much, even for you. So you kept tormenting Isla to hurt Doug?”

Her tears are now flowing, and her chest is heaving with how upset she is.

A part of me wants to comfort her, but I can’t. I can’t reconcile the mother I knew with this hateful, vengeful woman.

“I thought I could stop when Joe was arrested, but then things got out of control with Leith and Isla’s engagement. I was confused.” She looks at Isla. “You have to believe me. By then, I regretted going after you. I saw how you loved all three of them, but at the same time, I needed to protect them.”

“We aren’t kids anymore, Mom!” I snap. “What we do with our lives and who we love is something you shouldn’t involve yourself with.”

She shrugs. “Maybe. I know I made mistakes.”

Oren snorts. “Mistakes? That’s when you cook the Thanksgiving turkey for too long. What you did...”

Mom lowers her gaze. “I know. What I did is unforgivable. I’m as bad as the men I wanted to punish.”

I shake my head. “No, you’re worse than them. They gave an order during a military operation, but you went after two people who had absolutely no responsibility for what happened to Dad.”

My little brother agrees. “That’s true, Mom.”

Her voice sounds so small all of a sudden. “I know. I came to the same conclusion when Isla came to help me rather than thinking about her own safety when we were out running.”

Isla intervenes at this point. “What I don’t understand is what happened that day. If you’ve been doing all of this, then who attacked you?”

I'm shocked by her explanation. I truly didn't think my mother was capable of this sort of deception.

"No one did. I pretended to be dragged into the bushes, and I hit my own head with a rock."

Fuck.

Doug looks like he just aged twenty years when he asks his wife the next question. "So at that point, you had decided you no longer wanted to kill my daughter and Joe was in jail. Why didn't you stop then?"

"I planned to, but Jessica was starting to ask too many questions, and I got worried that she would guess the truth. She had figured out that Connie's murder and the assaults on Isla weren't connected. I was just trying to divert the investigation elsewhere. If I was a target," she says, looking at her husband, "no one would think I had anything to do with it. I had heard you talking about moving, and the PCS was perfect. You would be far away from all this, and with Joe in jail, everyone would think he was behind it all."

It's my turn to feel perplexed. "Then why didn't you stop after the fake attack on you? Why continue to torment Isla? The engagement party was after all that."

Mom sighs. "Jessica had just told me that Joe had been released. Again. I needed to make sure that she'd think I was a target, and I ruined Mary's flowers to bury the truth even more. I almost made it. Everything would have worked according to my plan if Leith hadn't found that box."

Doug looks at his wife with the same disbelief I see on my brothers' faces, which I'm sure is etched on my own. "So all of this," he asks, gesturing between him and her and looking at each of us around the room, "was all a scheme to make Brad and me pay for your husband's death? You hated me this entire time?"

"Not this entire time, Doug," she says, sounding so pained that her voice is trembling. "At first, yes, but then I started to get to know you, and I kept telling myself that your kindness and thoughtfulness were just an act. I needed to believe that. I

realized that I was wrong and you weren't a bad person when you took care of me after I was 'attacked.' I realized that you made the decision that killed Will, but I shouldn't have held you responsible for it, and I definitely shouldn't have used your daughter to punish you. Now I see how unforgivable my actions really are. As a mother, I could never forgive someone who did to my sons what I tried to do to your daughter. For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Doug lowers his gaze. "I don't even know how I feel right now, Katie. I'm afraid that sorry doesn't cut it."

Mom nods. "I understand, and I'm prepared to pay for my crimes. I only have one question for you, Doug, and I hope you can answer it."

Isla's father snorts. "Are you for real? Why should I answer your questions or do anything for you?"

She meets his gaze. "You don't *have* to, but I hope you will find it in your heart to answer. Did you know? At any point since we met, when I started working with you, did you know who I was?"

I'm curious to know that too, and judging by the looks on everyone's faces, we all are.

"I knew," Doug admits. "LeCroy isn't a common name, after all. I checked as soon as I saw you in the office. I probably should have had you moved, but I never forgot Sergeant William LeCroy. Your husband was an outstanding soldier and NCO, a real leader. You have no idea how many times I thought about him over the years, and how many nights the guilt kept me awake."

Mom covers her face with one hand as she's about to be overwhelmed by her tears. "I don't understand," she sobs. "If you knew, why did you ask me on a date?"

I didn't think I would ever see Lieutenant Colonel Cameron on the brink of tears. "I couldn't tell you who I was and that I knew your husband. Like you said, that campaign is still completely classified. I guess, at first, I wanted to see if you were okay. It was a way to feel better about how my

decisions had affected your life. After we went out the first time, I was smitten. Somehow, I convinced myself that by taking care of you and your children, I would be honoring Will's memory."

I understand how fucked up this situation really is when Mom runs into her husband's arms. "I'm so sorry for everything, Doug. I swear I didn't know how to stop once I realized what a huge mistake I was making. Isla is a wonderful daughter, and I know she'll be a great wife to Leith. I know all three of my sons love her, and that's another reason why I changed my plan. And you... you're a good man. I know now that even if you weren't, nothing will bring my husband back. I'm so sorry, so sorry. I wish I could go back to the day this all started and not go to the library, then maybe you and I would have a chance."

Doug holds his wife for a long moment. "What a fucking mess, Katie. I don't even know what I should do. What you did is—I guess what we should do is get through the wedding reception and then discuss the situation as a family. All of us. That's if Isla and the guys agree."

We're all shocked, but Doug is right, we need to talk about this. I'm under no illusion that if this wasn't my mother, I would insist on calling Captain Morris right now.

"Yeah, Dad. I don't even know how to process all this. We need to talk about it. I—I just don't know right now."

We all voice our agreement.

"Then we'll talk about it tonight as soon as the reception is over." He looks at Isla and Leith. "You guys don't mind delaying the honeymoon by at least twenty-four hours, right?"

Leith and Isla confirm that this is more important.

"Just one thing though, Katie," Doug says, looking at his wife. "I expect you to be by my side the entire night. Take one step out of my sight, and you'll have the MPs after you. Am I clear?"

"Yes," Mom sobs. "Thank you, you're such a good man, Doug."

“Aww, how sweet. What about me?” Major Peters interrupts the moment with a sardonic laugh. “Am I a good man too?”

“You’re a piece of shit and a murderer, Bradley,” Mom snaps. “And I don’t even care what happens to me as long as you pay for what you did to Connie.”

The irony of Mom calling anyone a murderer isn’t lost on me, but I have no time to dwell on it.

Everything happens so fast that I barely register what unfolds in front of my eyes.

Major Peters moves fast, wrapping one of his arms around Isla and holding her in front of him so that her back is flush with his chest. “I beg to differ, stupid bitch,” he snarls. “If anyone moves one muscle without me saying so, I swear to God, Isla is dead.”

It’s too late when I see the flash of metal and notice the small handgun he’s pressing against the temple of the woman I love.

“Brad, your situation is serious enough without committing more crimes. Let my daughter go.”

“I don’t think so,” Major Peters sneers. “What I suggest is that you let me go. I’m going to take Isla with me as an insurance policy, and if no MPs or cops follow me, I’ll release her once I’m far enough from here. Make one movement, or send anyone after me, and your slut of a daughter will meet the same end as my late daughter-in-law. Now, get out of my way!” he orders.

Doug drags Mom out of the way, followed by Oren, who throws a desperate glance at me.

We can’t let him take Isla. I know he’ll never release her, I can see it in his eyes.

“Brad, we’re going to let you go,” Doug pleads. “But you don’t need to take Isla with you. I swear we won’t call the cops, we—”

Peters laughs. “That’s bullshit, and you know it.” He points the gun at Leith, who’s standing between him and the only door out of the room. “Captain LeCroy, I said get the fuck out of my way.”

“Not without my wife,” Leith bites out, pointing his own gun at our garrison commander’s deputy. “Let her go right now.”

Peters’ smile doesn’t falter as he releases Isla, throwing her forward as he aims his gun at the back of her head and fires two shots.

I open my mouth to scream, knowing there’s no way to warn Isla in time.

“No!”

It’s over before I know it.

Isla is on the floor with Mom on top of her.

My eyes flit between the two women I love the most in the world and Major Peters as a bullet fired from Leith’s gun hits him in his forehead.

Doug’s deputy crumbles to the ground, and after that, it’s complete chaos in the small room.

I’m frozen on the spot, my muscles refusing to take any orders from my brain as I observe Leith dropping the gun. He’s immediately on the floor, checking on Mom and Isla. There’s blood on the back of Mom’s shoulder blade.

“Someone call 911!” Leith orders, and that snaps me out of it, but Oren is already talking to emergency services by the time I manage to get my phone out of my pocket.

My stepfather’s expression is hard to decipher as I watch him look at his wife and daughter for a long moment.

“Thurston, I’m going to call Captain Morris. Could you please get the first sergeant? Tell him to come here, but be discreet. Then I need you to inform the chaplain that Nellie Peters will need his support. Once that is done, please stay with my mother. Explain the situation to her, but make sure to be discreet. It’s going to be a long night.”



24.

Game Over



Isla



ONE YEAR LATER

Hawaii

It's my wedding anniversary and, God help me, I'm going to murder one of the guys.

"You know I hate surprises." I glare at Oren, annoyed and turned on at the same time by his shit-eating grin.

"Oh, come on, sweet girl. When have we ever not given you an awesome surprise? Trust me?" he asks, offering me his hand.

I put my hand in his but drag my feet. "Whatever it is, we can't go out. I have a surprise planned for you guys, and everything is happening here."

He smirks. "So let me get this straight. You hate surprises, but you have a surprise for us?"

I nod in confirmation. "Exactly. I hate being on the receiving end of surprises but love giving them."

Oren barks out a laugh. "Typical woman. If that isn't a total double standard, I don't know what is. But since you're the most beautiful woman in the world, I think I'll let this slide this one time."

His lips crush mine, and for a second, I almost forget that he wanted to take me out somewhere.

"Oren, I mean it," I scold him. "We can't go out."

“But... the surprise. The guys and I have a plan.”

I immediately become suspicious and sneak my hand into one of the front pockets of his shorts. “Oren!” I giggle, finding that he’s rock hard.

“What?” He giggles darkly. “If you go on a searching expedition, you’re bound to find something, and I’m happy to see you.”

No shit. Judging by the size of his hard-on, he’s extremely happy to see me. “I was just looking for items of clothing, since you do my packing by shoving my clothes in your pockets.”

He laughs again, satisfied that he got a rise out of me. “That was one time. I’ve since learned that you prefer a small overnight bag. But we aren’t going away overnight.”

I step away from him, crossing my arms over my chest and standing my ground.

That’s how Thurston and Leith find us.

“Oren, we’ve been waiting out front for you two. What’s the holdup?” Leith asks.

Oren shrugs. “She says we can’t go out. I’ve been trying to coax her outside, but you know how stubborn she can be.”

I narrow my eyes. “*She* is right here.” Then I inform my other two men that whatever they are planning, we can’t go out. “Look, I already told Oren I can’t go out. I planned a nice surprise for the three of you, but for it to happen, we have to stay here.”

Oren chuckles. “See? I told you.”

Thurston advances toward me and picks me up in his arms before I realize what his intentions are. “That’s when you take matters into your own hands, dude. NCOs!” he chides his younger brother. “They can never follow one simple order.”

As usual, they start ribbing each other, and I swear it never gets old. I giggle, enjoying the show from my comfortable place in Thurston’s arms.

“Guys,” Leith interrupts them. “We seriously need to go. We’re cutting it really close, and you know how much Nana hates tardiness—”

“Shit!”

They look at each other.

“Nana?” I beam.

Leith is blushing and rubbing the back of his neck when his brothers glare at him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ruin the surprise. I—”

“Nana is coming here?”

Oren nods. “Yeah, it was meant to be a surprise, but these pretty boy officers can’t keep their mouths shut.”

Thurston puts me down, using one of his now free hands to flip his brother off. “Whatever, dude.” He turns to look at me. “Yeah, we know how much you’ve been missing Nana. Her flight should land in twenty minutes.”

I throw my arms around his neck. “Oh, babe! That’s the best present ever.”

Maybe I should relax when it comes to the guys’ surprises. I must admit that so far, they haven’t given me a bad one. “The problem is that the private chef I hired for tonight should be here any second, and I have your presents ready out on the deck.”

They all smile. “You got us presents?”

“Yup.” I beam.

“Can your presents wait until later?” Leith asks. “I’m dying to see them, but I really don’t want to keep Nana waiting.”

“I guess they can, but one of us will have to stay behind to let in the chef—”

Leith’s phone rings.

It’s a FaceTime call from Dad.

“Hey, son.” Dad smiles. “Where’s our beautiful girl?”

I step closer to my husband and wave at my father. “Dad, how are you?”

He smiles. “I’m doing good, thank you, but that isn’t why I called. Happy anniversary, sweetheart.”

I beam. “You remembered it? Thank you.”

Dad chuckles. “Of course I did. I was going to ask you how your men are treating you, but by the smile on your face, I assume that my threats of the consequences if they didn’t make you deliriously happy have hit their intended target.”

Oren and Thurston come to stand next to Leith and me. “Yes, sir!” the three of them say, stiffening as if they were at work in front of their commander.

“Listen, guys,” Dad says, suddenly serious. “I know you have to go pick up Mom from the airport, so I won’t keep you too long. I was just wondering if it would be okay for Katie to call later to say happy anniversary.”

I don’t even have to think about it. I know Katie has done a lot of terrible things, but it’s hard not to forgive someone who literally jumped in front of a bullet to save you.

Things have been a little harder for the guys, especially for Leith.

I look at them, and there’s this silent communication between them as they make a decision without needing any actual words.

“Yeah, that would be nice,” Thurston says.

“Awesome.” Dad looks relieved. “Is it okay if we call at 18:00 hours your time?”

We agree, and Dad says his goodbyes, reminding us not to keep Nana waiting.

“I guess we should go, even though I was really looking forward to giving you your presents. Who’s staying to open the door for the chef?” I ask.

“I can stay, but we might be able to open your presents after all,” Thurston says, showing me a flight tracking app on

his phone. “It looks like Nana’s flight is one hour late.”

“Oh, boy.” Oren chuckles. “I’m going to stay behind if you want, and I’m going to make sure to have an old-fashioned waiting for her the second she steps into the house.”

That’s a good idea. She’s going to be tired after driving three hours from Star Cove to San Francisco and then taking a five-hour flight.

“Since we have some time,” I propose, “would you like to get your presents now?”

Their faces light up like kids on Christmas morning.

“Does that mean that the present isn’t you, naked with sushi placed strategically all over your gorgeous body?” Oren provokes me, wiggling his blond eyebrows.

“No, you weirdo.” I laugh. “You know I’m not the biggest fan of sushi.”

Oren shrugs. “Good. I just thought that you hired a chef, and if he were to set the sushi on you, he’d have to see you naked, and then I would have to kick his ass.”

I roll my eyes at his antics. “It still isn’t sushi, but the chef I hired is a woman, so I suppose that would keep her safe in your naked sushi scenario. Come on, your presents are outside.”

I grab Leith’s hand as Oren and Thurston walk outside to the deck at the back of our property. “Babe, are you sure you’re okay to talk to Katie later?”

He stops, pulling me closer to his chest. “I’m fine. My therapist convinced me to start a conversation with her by writing each other letters, and it has helped.”

I hug him tighter. “That’s great, Leith.”

He bands his arms around me. “I must confess that if she hadn’t risked her life to save yours, we’d be having a totally different conversation.”

I nod.

We discussed this at length. “Our family has a lot of healing to do, babe. It won’t be overnight, but I’m glad we’re all working toward it.”

He brushes his lips against my temple. “I just can’t forget that night at the lighthouse. I keep having nightmares about it. What if I hadn’t found you? The sea was so dark and stormy. I know Major Peters’ bullets would have killed you, the ballistic report established that, but—”

I lift my face to meet his gaze, tracing the line of his perfect jaw with my fingers. “I have nightmares about that night too. That’s PTSD, but because you know how bad it can be and how deeply it can affect you, you need to remember that Katie was suffering with it too. That’s why she did what she did.”

Leith doesn’t say anything for a long moment. “I know. I just need some time to accept that she isn’t going to pay for what she did to you.”

That was the hardest point of contention between us. Dad, Leith, and Thurston wanted to let a judge decide what kind of punishment my stepmother—and mother-in-law—deserved.

Oren and I won them over though.

Our family had suffered enough, and the guys had already lost a parent—three in Leith’s case.

Forgiveness wasn’t immediate, but if Katie hadn’t put herself between Major Peters and me, I wouldn’t have anything to forgive. I’d just be another loss our family had suffered.

The investigation eventually concluded that Major Peters was responsible for everything, from Connie’s murder to the stalking and the assaults on Katie and me.

While it was established that he hadn’t worked alone—he had an alibi for the night at the lighthouse—the secret of who helped him died with him on my wedding day.

“Leith, your mom is getting help too,” I remind him. “She’s getting help for her PTSD, just like we all are.” That

was what convinced everyone to let the horrible events of last summer die with Bradley Peters.

Katie had checked herself into a psych ward the day she was discharged from the hospital where she had received treatment for her physical wounds.

“I know,” my husband whispers. “And eventually, I know I’ll forgive her. You’re right that she saved you, and I can’t forget that she saved me all those years ago.”

“That’s another thing I’ll always be grateful to her for, babe,” I say. “And if Dad can forgive her, I know we can too.”

Leith releases me from his hug, taking my hand into his. “Before meeting you, I would have thought he was crazy to even consider staying married to her, but my therapist asked me to imagine their situation with us in their place. I don’t think I could ever walk away from you, baby. And now I understand the way Mom felt about Dad, because I was so close to losing you—”

He’s right. “This is what the last year taught me, Leith. That love can be crazy, dangerous, and unconventional, but that real love is a force to be reckoned with. There’s beauty in the fact that our parents found that with each other in spite of the circumstances.”

I know they are in counseling because they have a lot to overcome if they want to go the distance. If I thought that my baggage with Thurston was big, theirs is a whole set of baggage.

“Hey, you two!” Oren calls from the deck. “If you don’t come out here, I’m going to open my present without you.”

Leith rolls his eyes. “What could you possibly have bought us that has him so excited?”

I giggle. “Let’s go, you can see it with your own eyes.”

“Holy shit! You got us a hot tub?” Leith sounds as surprised as I was hoping when I ordered it, and I paid extra to get it installed late last night while they went to sign off on leave.

“Do you like it?” I ask them.

Thurston wraps his arm around my waist, squeezing me closer to his side. “Like? I love it. But you’re evil, Tinkerbell. You gave us this present with a chef and Nana on their way? We won’t be able to use it the way I want until Nana goes back home in two weeks.”

“Oh no! I hadn’t thought about it,” Oren gripes.

“I’m sure we can wait a couple of weeks to rehash the night you guys gave me my engagement ring. We have a lifetime together. But until then, I have another present for each of you. Something a little smaller, but you can try it on right now.”

I take the gift bags I had waiting on our outdoor table and hand one to each of them.

“No fucking way!” Oren chuckles, ripping his T-shirt off and putting on the one in the bag. “You remembered! I love this.”

He looks dashing in his green T-shirt with the stick figures of a bride and a groom and the words “Game Over” on the front.

I got a blue one for Leith and a red one for Thurston.

“These are cool,” Leith says, putting on his own. “But what did you remember?”

I take his hand and offer the other one to Oren. “It has to do with my first date with Oren. He took me to the pier in town—”

As I tell them the story, my fingers find the beads of the custom bracelet Oren got me that night.

A lot has happened since then, and I don’t know what victories and challenges life will throw our way, but I know one thing for sure.

I wouldn’t want anyone else by my side to face whatever life has in store for me.

I hope you enjoyed Isla’s story.

I'm surely going to miss her and her hot men in uniform.

Would you like more hot, contemporary RH stepbrother romance set in Star Cove?

If the answer is yes, enjoy the first chapter of The Heartbreakers, book 1 of The Heartbreakers series.



The Heartbreakers

1.

No Peace In Hell

Peyton



“PEYTON, PEYTON! DO you think you have a shot at the World Championship this year? Is it true that *Wild Horse Energy Drinks* chose to sponsor the Cove Angels because of your reckless lifestyle?”

The paps are right up my ass, mere yards away from where I just landed.

Motherfuckers!

I unclip my parachute without bothering packing it back up and storm off.

“Peyton, Peyton!”

Those fuckers don’t give up and I’m not in the mood, so I quicken my pace and flip them off before disappearing back inside the hangar and into our divers staff area without looking back.

I begin unzipping my wingsuit as soon as I enter our private locker room.

“Hey, dude!” Channing smirks at me, loosening his grip on the hair of the brunette who’s bobbing up and down between his thighs.

He doesn’t look bothered by my intrusion and I shake my head. Typical Channing.

“Have you seen my dad?” I ask him, annoyed by the fact that we have an audience here too. I swear to fucking God, today no one leaves me the fuck alone. “He knows I hate

having any type of audience around unless it's an official diving day."

Channing's gaze glazes over, his lids growing heavier as the girl picks up speed, moaning loudly around his cock.

I roll my eyes, chuckling at how skewed my best friend's priorities are. I begin taking off the wingsuit and think that I wish my passion was football or surfing or fucking drag racing, anything but skydiving or BASE jumping; anything where I didn't have to compete with Darrius Penn.

I've just fastened the button of my shorts when a grunt coming from Channing's direction tells me that he's done with ... what's her name? For the fucking life of me, I can't remember. Britney or Bethany or something with a B, I think.

"Hey Peyton." She smiles, licking her lips and not looking in a hurry to fix her tank top that's bunched up around her thin waist. "You look tense. Maybe I can help?"

I think her name is Brooke, I'm almost sure. "Thanks B." I smile, opting for the safest option here. "I'm tired today and I need to have a word with Channing, if you don't mind?"

I wrap one arm around her shoulders, walking her to the locker room door.

"Sure, I understand. I can wait outside if you guys want to hang out later?"

Ah, yeah, no. We've been hanging out with Briana, I'm pretty sure that's her name, for the best part of a week now. I fucked her once or twice, and the fact that I can't remember her name tells me all I need to know about the idea of keeping her around.

"We have a few things to talk about, babe." I smile, opening the door and ushering her out. "I don't know how long we're going to be and I have too much respect for your time to keep you waiting. We'll call you later, ok?"

She smiles. "Aww, Peyton! You're such a sweetheart!"

I take a step back when she tries to kiss me. I mean, I've fucked my fair share of girls not only with Channing and

Jameson in the room, but *with* them. Sometimes we like to take turns, sometimes we tag team, whatever we're in the mood for, so I'm more than comfortable with them; but the fact that it doesn't bother me seeing them naked, doesn't mean that I'm attracted to them. I wouldn't even notice if she were trying to kiss me after blowing me, but tasting my friends' cum is where I draw a definite line. Thanks but no thanks.

I sit on the bench opposite Channing, who's tucked himself back in in the meantime.

"Hey, thanks man." He smiles. "I didn't really know how to get rid of Brielle."

Ah, Brielle. I knew it started with a B; Briana was close enough, I guess.

Channing continues. "I mean, when she offered me to blow me, I declined and she started crying, so I didn't know what to do."

I shake my head. "You're fucking welcome. That's why I keep telling you and J that a one night only policy is the best option. If they're gone before breakfast, they don't get strange ideas, right?"

He shrugs. "I guess."

Channing is too fucking nice, I swear to God. "Dude." I sigh. "This is where you go wrong. I mean, if you like a girl enough to keep her around, be my fucking guest; but if not, the sooner you send them on their way, the less awkward the goodbye. It's not like we promise them anything more than a good time, right?"

Channing nods but I know way too well that he can be a pushover; all it takes are a couple of tears from anyone who owns a pussy and he panics.

"So, did you see my dad?" I ask him now that his blood has migrated away from his little head and back to his big one.

"He had a couple of meetings with possible sponsors. He took J with him. They've been gone a while, so they should be back soon."

As if summoned by Channing's words, the locker room door opens and my father steps inside with Jameson in tow.

They're both in their best suits and under normal circumstances, I wouldn't miss this opportunity to rib J for being a pretty boy, but the scowl on Dad's face stops me in my tracks.

"How many times do I have to tell you guys that beyond the front office is authorized staff only?"

I level a hard stare on a sheepish looking Channing but Dad isn't an idiot. "I don't give a fuck who between you two was fucking her. But we bumped into your flavor of the week as she was leaving and she didn't miss the opportunity to get noticed and tried to stick to J."

Jameson nods, wiping some red lipstick off his face with the back of his hand. "Yeah, I thought I took her home last night?"

Channing shrugs. "You did, but then she showed up here and I didn't know what to do. I couldn't be rude, right?"

Right. And in Channing's opinion, not being rude means sticking his cock in her mouth. Fucking typical.

I'm about to crack a joke about it but Dad shakes his head and by the way he's grinding his jaw, I know he's pissed.

The meeting with prospective sponsors must've not gone like he hoped.

"That bad?" I ask.

"I have a few leads and a plan B that's ambitious but might work if everything else fails. I just need one thing from you guys," he says, with a tired sigh.

"We'll win the next events and this year we'll go to Nationals as State Champions." I promise.

Dad levels me with a hard stare. "I appreciate your drive and your motivation, Peyton; but you know better than me that diving at the level we want is fucking expensive. *Wild Horse's* money would've been a huge help. Especially if we want to beat the Angels and now, instead, they have that sponsor."

I feel fury mounting again. Always the damn Angels, always in our fucking way! “We can beat those losers this year,” I declare. “Especially with the mods I’m planning on our wingsuits.”

Dad sighs. “Can you even hear yourself, son?”

His tone rubs me the wrong way and I struggle to keep my irritation at bay. “Why, you don’t believe we have the skills? We’ve been training hard. And you know I have the technical knowledge to design cutting edge wingsuits, I—”

“Wingsuits cost money, Peyton. And they need to be tested, and that costs even more money if you want to do it in safety. I have no doubt about your skills. And the Devils’ skills. But last year the Cove Angels won State and then Nationals. That, with their legacy, means that their pockets are full. *Wild Horse* going with them is a huge blow for our team’s finances.”

I run a hand through my hair, now feeling positively furious. “Well they fucking bet on the wrong horses! Mark my words, I’ll fucking wipe the tarmac with Darrius Penn’s ass all summer. Like the French team did with him at Worlds. And then the sponsors will line up at our doors.”

I’m not being an arrogant asshole, I swear. That’s mostly Darrius Penn’s job. He wins because he joined the best team in the country and it’s his fault that years ago I wasn’t selected. “When I’m done with that asshole and his team, Star Cove will have just one team, the Cove Devils, like it should be.”

Dad interrupts me, the rivalry between our two teams runs deep and it isn’t just sport related, it’s personal. “Right. But if you want that to happen, we need sponsors. And if you want those to pan out, there’s two things I need from the three of you.”

Something in his tone and in the way he’s looking at us tells me that we won’t like whatever he’s about to say. “You need to be civilized toward the Angels. No more spats during interviews and on social media.”

I immediately react. “You know very well that they started it. They keep going for our sponsors and they signed Trent just to spite us!”

Dad shakes his head. “Right, that might be so and Trent left because they offered him more money. I know you and Penn have always hated each other, but you need to keep your fucking temper in check.”

I roll my eyes. He knows that hell will freeze over before there’s going to be peace between the Cove Angels and the Cove Devils.

“Peyton, I fucking mean it. Don’t rise to their provocations and start cultivating a better relationship with the press. That’s one of the things that drives sponsors away. Penn is the press’s sweetheart and the sponsors love that.”

I grind my jaw; I know that the ass chewing isn’t over and I willingly take the bait. “What’s the other thing? You said you needed two things from us.”

He nods. “Clean up your fucking image. Stop being photographed with different groupies at every turn. *Wild Horse* passed on us because of shit like this.” He opens his phone, showing me articles I’ve seen before.

Tons of pics of us at parties, surrounded by different girls. There’s a few where I have my hand down someone’s panties; one of J doing body shots on a topless girl at a beach party; Channing with a chick’s nipple in his mouth at a club and humping a different girl on the dance floor at the same party later that night.

Every article talks about our wild partying and numerous hookups; the press has named us “The Heartbreakers.”

I don’t fucking get what the problem is. “Are you serious? Sponsors have a problem with a party or two?”

Dad puts his phone back in his pocket, his frustration is more than clear. “You’re athletes, not fucking rock stars! Sponsors want a cleaner image and if you want to have the money for your new wingsuit, you three have to clean up your

act. No more Heartbreakers antics. Find yourself a steady girlfriend, or even better, keep it in your pants.”

I look at my two best friends and they look as pissed as I am; we aren't the relationship types and what the fuck does it matter to anyone if we play as hard as we work?

“With all respect Ken,” Channing objects. “We can try and be better with the press and ignore Penn and his team of assholes, but shouldn't winning be what attracts sponsors? And it isn't like Darrius Penn doesn't fuck around. He just broke up with his girlfriend and the rumor is that he was caught cheating. So why is it that the sponsors flock to him? He lost spectacularly at Worlds and he's one sleazy motherfucker if I ever saw one.”

Dad sighs. “It's all down to perception, guys. If he fucks around as much as you do, he certainly doesn't get caught on camera doing it. And you know better than me why he's so popular.”

I clench my fists so hard that my knuckles turn white; the urge to sink my fists in Darrius Penn's face is stronger than ever. “Because the Angels is Patrick DeLaurent's team. They are The Team.”

And I'd be in his place if he hadn't played dirty five years ago.

Dad looks each of us in the eyes. “I'm only telling you what you need to do to put us in the position to compete with him and even out the odds. And I have just the thing that will kick start your new image. And to do that, we need to look good in front of the enemy; friendly even.”

I look at Dad as if he's sprouted a second head. “Friendly? With the Angels? I'm sorry, Dad, I mean no disrespect, but what the fuck have you been smoking?” At the risk of repeating myself, we'll be friendly with the Angels when hell is under a thick slab of ice, with Darrius Penn trapped right underneath it.

But whatever my father is planning, he's dead serious. “I mean it, Peyton. No more wild nights with groupies and no

more fighting. And it starts tonight. Gina DeLaurent is having a party to celebrate her only daughter's birthday. I've scored the three of you invites; of course the Angels will be there. This is your first chance to start building your new image. This is non-negotiable. Fail to show up or get into any kind of trouble with Penn and his team, and so help me God, I'm going to start recruiting a new team for the next State event."

I look at my brothers. Channing and Jameson look as excited I am at the thought of making nice with fuckface Penn and his cronies.

The fuck am I going to their lame party! But I get my stubborn streak from my father and when our eyes meet I know that he isn't issuing an empty threat. Fuck my life, and most of all, fuck Darrius Penn!

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