



TREADING
WATER

ASHLEY RAE

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TITLE PAGE_

Treading
Water
Book Three
Ashley Rae

Treading Water, by Ashley Rae

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DEDICATION_

But what is more difficult – recovering yourself, or recovering
your entire life?

1. PRAYERS_

JORDAN

THE FLOOR FALLING out from under me, while highly unlikely but fully possible, would cause me to plummet thousands of feet to my death before I even knew what happened. This scenario has been threatening to play over and over in my head for the past six hours, though I have been fighting to keep it at bay.

Flying has never been a fear of mine. Typically, I lose myself in a good show or nap from takeoff to landing. I don't know if I'm developing a sense of paranoia, if the stress of everything that has happened over the last month is getting the best of me, or both. Either way, sleep has failed to overtake me as I continue to subconsciously imagine all of the different ways that this flight may ultimately lead to my death.

I continue to pray to a god that I'm not even sure I believe in, though I've been asking a lot of Him (or Her) lately. Surely I'm getting close to the limit of requests one can make in a lifetime.

With a dull ding, the overhead signal for seat belts comes on, prompting me to slowly open my eyes. I'm running on fumes, and while I would love to have my feet on solid ground again, I'm not sure when I'll be able to sleep next after we land. The pilot comes over the radio, telling us we have about twenty minutes until we'll be landing. After reminding us that our seats need to be up and trays put away, he announces the weather in Honduras— "eighty-five, sunny and beautiful," though the idea of why I'm on my way to this country is anything but enjoyable.

Sitting up in my minimally padded seat, I stretch my arms over my head and pull my hood down. A flight attendant comes around to collect any trash, and the man sitting next to me throws away his seventh empty beer of this flight. He's clearly buzzed— but hey, who can blame him. Some things, such as traveling and gambling, are much more enjoyable when you're less than sober.

I feel a little guilty thinking this, but it's true. Pleasure is the reason that alcohol companies not only stay in business, but prosper in our society. My relationship with alcohol has changed dramatically, but that doesn't mean that recognizing that I enjoy being intoxicated makes me a crappy person—or one with no self-control.

I wish I could say that I know how Adrian is doing with his recovery, but as of right now, I'm as clueless as the rest. It's been about a month since I last saw him, and our communication has been minimal. I know it's necessary, and I trust him no matter the circumstances, but I would be lying if I said that this doesn't make me a little uneasy.

Before he left for Honduras, we were just beginning to settle back into our new relationship. Only a few weeks had passed between us finally getting back together, falling back into a rhythm with one another, and him abruptly having to go back home. While I love him—more than I thought it was humanly possible to love someone—I can't help but feel a little bit of uncertainty as to how things will be between us now. We've adjusted to him being sober, a new lifestyle, overcoming all that we have both been through in the past few months. Now, we'll be adjusting to being in a new country, facing whatever he has been dealing with since he's been here, and so much more.

Still, the thought of running to him in the airport is what has taken priority playing over and over in my head while trapped in this isolating airplane. Among a full flight but all alone, my daydreams continue to return to his tattooed arms wrapping around me, his lips meshing with mine, inhaling his perfect scent when I finally see him again. How I'm going to hold him so tight as his presence engulfs me, vowing to never lose contact with his skin again for the rest of my life.

“Will this be your first time in Honduras?” the man next to me asks, breaking me away from my merry-go-round of thoughts.

I nod with a tight smile, looking at his brown eyes. He's likely a few years older than me. His black hair buzzed pretty short.

“You’re going to love it. Anyone going with you?”

“Everyone’s already there. I’m the last to arrive,” I say.

It’s a vague version of the truth, but it’ll have to do. With everything Adrian has been dealing with, my best bet is to lie as low as possible—even when talking to complete strangers on an airplane.

“Traveling with friends?” he asks, not willing to let the conversation die out so I can continue to doze off until we touch down.

“Friends and my boyfriend,” I answer.

“Wow. Kind of a bummer your boyfriend didn’t wait for you so you didn’t have to fly alone, don’t you think?”

“Nope,” I say with a pop. “Just the way our schedules worked out. I’m happy to see him now that we’re both free.”

2. SOLVING PUZZLES WITH MISSING PIECES_

JORDAN

ONE MONTH AGO

Something's off.

I don't know what, and I surely don't know why, but I still can see that something isn't right.

The way that the color drained from Adrian's face as he talked on the phone while sitting on the boat earlier today made it obvious. I didn't even need to witness that moment to know something wasn't right. He has been acting funny ever since then—quiet, less affectionate, unengaged. Anyone who knows him as well as I do knows these are indicators of something unsettling. I feel confident in our new relationship, but still not confident enough not to worry if it's because of something that I've done.

My time away from Adrian was filled with activities that I'm less than proud of—not only entertaining but provoking Alec, indulging in any substance I could find—including male attention. While I know he's not clueless about this behavior, I also know he doesn't hold it against me in the slightest, but I still can't help but wonder if somehow he's gotten word of something that I did that will push him over the edge of not wanting to get back together.

Loving someone is confusing, draining, and selfless, but it's oh-so-fulfilling. Loving Adrian is also the easiest and most human-nature thing I've ever done. It's like he was embedded into me, into every particle and fiber of my creation. I would have loved him against my own will had I needed to—there wasn't any way around it.

Now, as we drive toward my house in a stuffy car full of our closest friends, I can't help but wonder if this love could ever be broken. In my heart, I know it has a place where it will live and never die, nourished by the seeds that have always been waiting for Adrian to come around and water them, to

shine the sun I feared would be hiding forever. Some things are out of our control, meant to be surrendered to what's greater than us—and my love for Adrian, undying and determined, is one of those things.

Of course, I won't deny the human nature to fear things we can't control. Surrendering yourself, and something that consumes so much of you it could crack you straight in half, bone by bone, is a valid reason for concern. I trust Adrian with my life, my heart, my future, my past, and everything in between—but that human nature, that defensive instinct, is what's currently driving the car that dictates my emotions and logical thinking.

“I love you,” I whisper against his skin, quiet enough for only the two of us to hear in this small space, before burying myself against his body.

“I love you more than you could ever comprehend,” he whispers back, kissing my head, tracing circles on my bare thigh with the pad of his thumb. The same pad of the same thumb that makes me come undone more than I ever thought possible is also the one putting me back together when fear and mental torment threaten to rip me apart.

Jake's car hugs the curves of PCH as we make our way back home, the beginning of summer showing its feathers with warm air at dusk that rushes through our lungs and hair. I soak in the quiet noise, the radio playing loudly, though not loudly enough to penetrate my bones and blood. By the time we pull into our garage, only Adrian, Jake, Camilla, and I remain in the car, only slivers of sunlight lingering in the pale blue sky.

Jake pulls into the garage, clicking the button on his car ceiling to close the door behind us. Adrian shuffles silently, gathering our belongings from the floor. His arms are full of beach towels, sunscreen, hats, and sunglasses. I offer to take some from him, but he shakes his head with a forced smile. I nod once, slipping out of the door and walking into our house.

I have no desire or will to speak the entire way to my room.

There are things I want to say, of course. Questions I want to ask and fears I want to express. I long to scream, to beg him to explain why he's acting this way, and more importantly, beg him to go back to the way things were just a few mere hours ago.

Simple.

No longer complicated.

We had uncomplicated it.

Easy.

As much as my personal instinct is to hide—or to run, as Adrian has acknowledged—I force the words up my throat and into the air between us, watching as they float and sway and take up no room but also *every inch* of the space.

“What’s going on?” I ask, suddenly transported back to a past version of myself and our relationship when I was meek and walking on eggshells for no damn reason. I thought this self-deemed powerless and frightened woman was gone, yet here she was once again, alive and well, as she controlled my actions.

Adrian looks at me with a sympathetic, tight smile, pulling me into his chest. Behind those sympathetic eyes, I see the emotion he’s trying to hide—*fear*.

“Nothing, *mija*,” he breathes, his firm arms and chest sandwiching me against his skin. Typically, this would be enough to engulf me and get my thoughts to move on, but the thick air and never-ending silence don’t allow me to do so.

“Please be honest with me,” I plead, resting my head against his shoulder. “I’ve told you before that I can’t handle anything besides transparency, and I mean it, Adrian. I won’t stand by and brush things under the rug again, and I know something is wrong.”

His silence is deafening, and the room seems to match it as it becomes impossibly more still than before. My only answer is the sigh that enters and leaves his lungs, the warm air tickling my ear.

“Is it something I did?” I ask quietly, not daring to look him in the eyes. I keep my cheek pressed against the fabric of his T-shirt, though he doesn’t keep me waiting for long.

“No,” he rushes out, pulling me farther away from him and placing his hand on my cheek. “God, no, baby. Everything with you is perfect, you’re perfect, and so much more.” His lips press against my nose. “This has nothing to do with you, or us, at all. I promise. I love you more than I did yesterday and the day before, and that’s never going to change.”

“But there is something,” I push, acknowledging his lack of complete denial. His eyes trace my face as I watch his shoulders deflate slightly before being met with a single nod.

“I promise, it’s nothing to do with you. The only thing I’m worried about is your safety and what I have to do to ensure it. *We’re fine*, mija,” he stresses. “But I need you to trust me to take care of this. I don’t know what it’s going to look like, and I don’t have a clear-cut plan, but I need you to trust me. That’s all.”

I nod slowly as he takes my hand in his, pressing his lips to the back of each knuckle. “Can you at least fill me in on what’s going on?”

His eyes stay on my hand, his thumb running lightly over my skin. “I want to, but I don’t even know what’s going on.” He pauses. “I have to go back to Honduras for a bit, Jordan.”

3. NEW DESTINATIONS_

JORDAN

I FEEL the plane begin to make its descent, my ears fighting with the pressure of the cabin as we get closer to the earth. The hum of the landing gear lowering lets me know we're only minutes away from being one step closer to seeing Adrian. Finally, after a few last prayers for a safe landing and staring at the inside of my eyelids, we glide smoothly on the runway and slowly taxi toward our gate.

After coming to a complete stop, I unbuckle my seat belt and grab my backpack from beneath the seat in front of me. My suitcase in hand, I wait in line until we begin to deplane. Once I step foot onto the bridge, the tropical air rushes through my lungs, and I'm immediately ready to lose my hoodie that protected me from the plane's strong air conditioning.

The Honduras airport is small—much smaller than LAX—with people trying to navigate the terminal. My focus remains on the exit signs, pointing me to customs. After a new stamp on my passport, I hike my backpack up and make my way past baggage claim. Trying not to be overwhelmed by the busy, cramped airport, I finally make it outside and scan the crowd for the sweet face I've missed so much. Cars are being loaded, and people walk in every direction. No matter how hard I focus, I can't spot Adrian in the sea of moving people, so I pull my phone out of my back pocket and hit his name in my contact list.

My service is spotty, so while the call tries to connect the best it can, dial tones cut in and out. I attempt to reach him three more times with no luck before opting to send him a text and sit on a nearby bench. The sun is strong overhead, and beyond the airport perimeter, lush green trees decorate the landscape, swaying in the light tropical breeze. Pulling my hoodie over my head, I stuff the thick fabric into my backpack before zipping it closed again.

Still no new messages or calls from Adrian—or any that have actually gone through—I kick my feet up on the bench in

front of me, taking a moment to calm my nerves and soak in my new surroundings. He knew my flight—hell, he even booked the ticket for me. I know him well enough not to be too worried that he isn't here yet.

People-watching for the next fifteen minutes, I observe all walks of life that you can find in a small Central America airport. Locals greeting family members as they load luggage into their cars, tourists trying to find the next step in their journey, and children following their parents through the bustling outdoor area. A couple of men in their thirties walk up to a car in front of me, loading scuba diving gear into the trunk and loudly greeting their friend who is picking them up.

As I'm entertaining myself by watching them, an elderly man approaches me, sitting on the opposite side of the bench. He silently observes them as well, only speaking once their car has pulled away, and near silence now fills the space.

"My wife and I used to come here when we were younger, when we had just begun dating. She liked to watch the planes, I liked to watch the people. I'm guessing you lean more on my side with that one, correct?"

He finally looks at me, green eyes piercing my gaze. I nod slowly, giving him a polite smile.

"You never know who's going to walk in or out of those doors. It's kind of humbling, in a way, to be reminded that we're such a small part of a giant crowd," he mumbles, accent thick around his words. "But, as much as I would love to spend the next few hours on this bench, we have places to be."

Slowly standing, he turns to face me expectantly. I wait a moment, eyes darting around the surrounding area.

"Ah," he breathes. "Adrian told me you would be hesitant to go with me. Here," he grunts, pulling his phone from his pocket and holding it to his ear.

"*Bueno. Puedes hablarse, por favor?*" he says before a pause, then hands the phone to me. Putting it to my ear, I wait for whoever is on the other end of the line to speak first.

“Hi, mija. Did you have a good flight?” Adrian’s voice sings through the phone like a sweet melody, melting into me. His accent has thickened during his time here, but I know the tune of his voice in any circumstance.

“I did, but I’m in desperate need of a shower with this humidity.”

Adrian chuckles, and the sound of it makes me bite back a smile. “Well then, go with Salvador. He’s my grandpa on my dad’s side. He’ll take you back to his house and help you get settled in, and I’ll be there soon.”

A slight bit of disappointment eats at my chest, but I brush it off as quickly as it came. I had been hoping to finally see Adrian once I landed, but I’ve come this far. A little bit longer without him is just a drop in the bucket.

“Okay, sounds good. Don’t be too long. I miss you,” I breathe.

“I won’t. I love you so much, mija. See you soon.”

“I love you too,” I reply before ending the call and handing Salvador his phone. Pulling my backpack over my shoulders, I give Salvador a polite smile and grab my suitcase, which he immediately responds to with a shake of his head and open palm extended to me. Obliging, I pass him my suitcase and begin to walk alongside him into the small parking lot.

“You’re a smart girl, waiting for Adrian to give you instructions on what to do. But with how much I’ve heard about you, I already knew that you were smart.” He chuckles.

“Thank you,” I say with a smile. “I figured being in a new country, it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

He nods, leading me to an older SUV. Opening the trunk, he loads my suitcase, then motions for me to hand him my backpack.

“You’ll like it here. Maybe having you here will convince Adrian to stay closer to his family,” he says with a smirk, and the resemblance to Adrian is almost enough to stop me in my tracks.

With a small nod, I make my way to the passenger seat and climb in.

“As I’m sure Adrian told you, I’m Salvador, his abuelo. We’re all very happy to have you here. Are you hungry?”

I nod, buckling my seat belt. “It’s nice to meet you as well. Yes, I am very hungry. Flying really tired me out, too.”

He presses his foot on the clutch and shifts the car into reverse, then into first gear as we make our way toward the main road. “Choluteca is about an hour or so from here. We got lucky that the roads were decent today. My wife, Claudia, will have food for you, I’m sure. Her English isn’t as good as mine, though, so be prepared.”

I smile in appreciation at his forewarning. “That’s okay. My Spanish isn’t perfect, but it should be good enough for me to get by.”

We begin gaining speed as we travel down the highway, greenery nearly engulfing the road on each side. Mountains cascade in the distance and my hair moves with the tropical air that rushes in the open car windows. People on motorcycles and crammed into buses pass us as they drive the opposite way, and Salvador turns up the radio to let Spanish love songs fill the vehicle.

We wind through the country roads for a little over an hour before pulling off onto an unmarked dirt road. Navigating bumps and puddles from the ever-rainy weather, Salvador approaches many forks in the road and seamlessly chooses the correct path, despite the fact that I’ve yet to see any street signs or markings since we left the pavement. Finally, we come to a slow stop in front of a yellow-painted house, barely visible behind the gate that protects the property. Salvador leaves the car, opens one side of the large gate, and pulls onto the property before shutting it behind us again.

“Watch your step. Some of the ground needs to be replaced,” Salvador says as he leads me to the back of the car, opening the trunk and retrieving my belongings.

The driveway consists of stones and pavement creating a less-than-level surface, and vibrant plants cover the border of the front yard.

“Thank you,” I tell him, taking in my surroundings as he leads me to the front door of the modest yellow house. Inside, a burst of air-conditioned temperatures greets me, cooling the sweat that clings to my forehead.

“Hola, Claudia,” he says loudly as I close the wooden door behind me.

The house is much less modest on the inside than it is outside, its exponential beauty hidden for only those who are trusted enough to enter. I look at the large living room that we’ve walked into and spot an island belonging to an open kitchen off to the right. Shuffling and clattering happen out of my view until a short woman with jet-black hair turns the corner, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

“*Ahhh miya, estoy muy animada que estas aqui! Tienes hambre, si? Ven, ven. Necesitas comida.*” (Ahhh, sweetheart, I am so excited you’re here! You’re hungry, right? Come, come. You need food.)

I chuckle, letting her take me into her embrace. “*Si, muchas gracias. Estoy muy contenta de estar aqui.*” (Yes, thank you very much. I am so happy to be here.)

“Let’s show you your room first,” Salvador says with a laugh, leading me down the hall.

“*Donde estas ido con ella? Necesita comer. No puedes hablar ingles cuando no mequieres entendarte.*” (Where are you going with her? She needs to eat. You can’t speak English when you don’t want me to understand you), Claudia interrupts, shaking a pointed finger at him.

“*Le estoy mondstrando su dormitorio,*” he says with a wave, leading me down the hall.

We enter the first door on the right, where a queen bed and two end tables wait. It’s a simple room with no art to decorate, only a large window taking up half of one of the walls. He

places my small suitcase next to the bed, and I drop my backpack next to it.

“You’ll be staying in here until Adrian arrives, then for a few more days. After that, Claudia and I are going to visit her sister. You guys are welcome to take our room while we’re gone.”

“Thank you,” I breathe, tracing the room with my eyes. It feels surreal to be in Honduras. The only thing that would make it any better would be if it were under normal circumstances and if Adrian was already here with me. “I can’t tell you how happy I am to be here.”

He nods once. “We’re very happy to have you. I know Adrian will be excited when he gets here.”

“Do you know when that will be?”

Knocking on the wooden desk next to him, he shakes his head with a sigh. I can see how troubling this is for him—the stress probably eats at him as much as it does me. While that makes me feel less alone, it also rips at the tissue of my heart with how serious this has become.

“I hope soon. But don’t worry, mija. You will see him soon.”

His attempt to reassure me hurts almost as much as it helps, but I appreciate the small effort.

Any reassurance must be better than none.

I give him a tight smile, trying to show complete trust in him. Though he may be Adrian’s family, I don’t feel fully confident until Adrian is standing in front of me, his skin against mine and heartbeat sounding against my ears.

“Come on, before Claudia thinks I’m keeping you from her cooking.”

With a laugh, I follow him out of the bedroom and to the main living area. Plates of food cover the tiled island, steam rising toward the ceiling from the different options Claudia has prepared.

“Bueno. Estos son tamales de pollo, arroz, frijoles, ensalada, y pescado. El pescado es hipogloso, y es muy nuevo. Necesitas comer mucho, amorcito,” Good. This is chicken, rice, beans, salad, and fish tamales. The fish is halibut, and it is very fresh. You need to eat a lot, sweetie), Claudia says, piling a mass amount of food onto a plate and placing it in front of a barstool.

“Muchas gracias. Todo de la comida huele muy bien.”
(Thank you. All of the food smells so good.)

She smiles and kisses me on the head, then retreats to her room. Salvador grabs a water bottle from the fridge, finishing half of it in one swallow.

“Tonight, we will play a card game. If you don’t know it, I will teach you. Claudia doesn’t like to play, so she’ll join us on the patio. Do you like beer?”

I nod, not wanting to turn down his offering, though I know that beer and I don’t have the best relationship. Despite that, I’m still confident enough with my growth and outlook on alcohol to have a drink with him tonight.

“Good. We are going to rest now. You should do the same when you finish eating,” he says with a smile before retreating down the hall.

4. SHORT-LIVED RELIEF_

JORDAN

DAYS PASS with no contact from Adrian.

Not only am I getting antsy, wandering around his grandparents' house with nothing to do and nowhere to be, I'm also getting agitated. And worried.

Adrian isn't one to leave me hanging—especially in a country I've never been to, at the liberty of his family I've never met before. Don't get me wrong, Claudia and Salvador have been more than excellent hosts and company to have with me, but I still can't get the main reason why I'm here off of my mind—and what's keeping me from seeing him.

Aside from Adrian being MIA, my time spent here has been enjoyable. During the day, I help Claudia with chores around the house as she tells me old stories about Adrian, his siblings, and his father. I get some pieces that have been missing about his past before he moved to the US and his family's history here. She teaches me how to make tortillas, properly fry fish, and tend to a garden in such hot weather.

Most days, it rains. Some days it's a light sprinkle, and others, it's full-blown thunder and lightning. The power has gone out once, which lasted all night, but luckily the Jiminez household has a generator, which kept power to the kitchen so the food didn't go bad.

When Salvador gets home in the late afternoon, we typically have a late lunch before the whole house goes down for a nap. I use this time to catch up on work or to stare out the window and into the courtyard as my thoughts eat me alive for a bit. On the days I don't have much work to catch up on, I'm happy when naptime is over, and I have my new housemates to keep me occupied.

Once the sun has fully set and we're hungry again, we take whatever delicious meal Claudia has prepared for us onto the back porch. Cicadas keep the yard from ever becoming silent, along with our conversations and laughter. Salvador and I always sit with the intention to finish a game of Conquian, but

Claudia's stories and discussions have kept us from doing so. I don't really mind—I don't completely understand the game anyway, and spending the evenings having a Honduran beer with Adrian's grandparents as Salvador fills the space with cigar smoke has become a sense of normal that I now look forward to.

I click off the TV, placing the remote on my chest as I lay on the couch. Today, Claudia and Salvador headed to her sister's house in the mountains, a few hours away. They weren't sure when they would come back, and now my evening ritual is no more. This makes it much harder to look past Adrian's absence over the first five days that I've been here.

Right when I'm planning to drag myself off of the cushions and be productive with a workout, I hear keys jingling as the heavy front door clicks shut. I dart up, expecting to see Salvador returning for a forgotten item when my eyes meet the piercing green ones that I would know from a mile away.

"Hi, baby," Adrian says, rushing over to me.

I jump off of the couch and run across the living room, crashing against his chest as his arms wrap around me. I take in his musky scent, and he presses his lips to mine with a sense of sweetness and completion I had nearly forgotten.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be here sooner, but God, have you been taking up every second of my thoughts," he breathes against my skin, and I keep my eyes closed as he kisses me once more.

"I missed you," I finally say, still afraid to speak or move and not feel him against me, *with* me.

"How have things been? They've been good to you, I hope?"

I nod, letting the warmth of his gaze wash over me. "They've been great. I was really starting to dread them being gone, actually." I laugh.

Adrian chuckles, tucking a piece of hair behind my ear. “Well, you don’t have to worry about that anymore, mija. I’m going to pick up the kids when they get out of school, and after that, it’s going to be far from an empty house.”

I let out a deep breath I hadn’t realized that I was holding, falling back into his embrace. Part of me was afraid he was just doing a touch-and-go, but knowing he’ll be returning with his siblings gives me some peace of mind. Adrian wraps my legs around his waist, carrying me across the living room and onto the couch. I sit straddling him, running my fingers over the lines of his tattoo.

“Does that mean that you guys are coming here for good? Things are starting to clear up?”

He chews his cheek, moving his gaze to the wall behind me. “I wouldn’t say we’re in the clear, but it’s a day-by-day thing. The kids are happy to come to the beach, and I need a break from that town. Just the last few weeks have reminded me why I never moved back.” He chuckles, running his hands up and down my thighs.

“Have you heard anything about where she might be?” I whisper, trying to swallow the tennis ball of anxiety that has built in my throat. “Your mom?”

Adrian’s chest rises and falls with a deep breath. “I have a few ideas. Just gotta narrow it down without ruffling too many feathers. But once all of this is cleared up, they’re moving back to Long Beach with us. I’m not dealing with any more of this shit. Too much of a trigger for me,” he grumbles.

“I was worried that this might do that—make you tempted to use again...” I trail off.

“It has,” he admits. “At times, it sounds so insanely relieving and necessary. But now that I’ve got you with me again, that trumps any drug I could get my hands on,” he says with a half-smile, his eyes half-cast as he leans his head back on the couch cushion.

The pads of his fingers begin to move higher up my thigh, slipping beneath the fabric of my shorts. I lean into him, my

lips hovering above his. Parting them slowly, I hover above his touch, letting his hot breath mesh with mine. When he can't take the tension anymore, his hand finds the back of my neck, pulling me into a kiss. It goes from slow to greedy and powerful within a few seconds. His teeth taking my lip between them. Our hands become feverish, our skin covered in goose bumps while burning hot, like an inferno has met a tornado and somehow they've become a beautiful form of threatening danger.

That's always been the thing with us—no matter what happens, or how much time we spend apart, we're instantly drawn back together the moment we see one another. Neither of us can fight it nor want to. Being together, skin to skin, unguarded and enveloped in love—it just feels right. It makes everything else feel *wrong*.

Adrian's fingers lift my shirt, and cupping my breasts, he moves his mouth to my neck, nipping at the sensitive skin before moving to my collarbone, then soaking my nipple in his warm mouth.

"All I've thought about is you," he breathes before letting his tongue tease my skin once again, pulling my nipples tight. "This moment is the only thing that's gotten me through being away from you."

I let out a soft moan as pleasure rolls through me, and it amazes me at what he can make me feel with the simplest of words and actions. I pull my shirt completely over my head, tossing it to the side of the couch. Adrian's fingers find the button of my shorts, releasing them and slipping his hand inside. He slowly creeps inside my panties, teasing me with each movement.

"Let's go into the bedroom," I whisper, and those five words turn on an animalistic gaze in his eyes.

Gripping my ass, he lifts me with ease and brings me to the guest bedroom, our mouths tangling with one another the entire way. He falls onto his back with my legs still straddling his waist, taking his lower lip between his teeth.

“You are the best thing I’ve ever laid eyes on,” he growls, his eyes tracing each curve of my body.

Slipping off of him, I remove my already unbuttoned shorts and let my black thong follow. That sight is enough to push him over the edge.

“Get your beautiful, sexy, perfect ass over here,” he says as he grabs my ass, pulling me back on top of him.

I laugh as I hover above his waist, letting him unbutton his jeans and pull his already-hard cock out. I grind my hips slowly against him, our flesh meeting in a way that causes his eyes to roll back.

“You know exactly what you’re doing to me,” Adrian groans, and that earns him another chuckle.

“I do,” I admit. “And I love doing it.”

He smirks at me, giving me a wink before guiding himself inside of me. Slowly, so agonizingly slow, he leads my hips lower, allowing me to feel every inch of him as it enters until I’m sitting on top of his pelvis, completely full and out of breath at the sensation. My head hangs back as he lifts me again, then lowers me back onto him, repeating this movement until we slowly gain speed.

The air becomes thick between us, and I look at him beneath heavy lids as we become one once again, though I’m not sure we’ve ever been anything less than that. In one quick motion, he flips us over, my legs wrapped around his firm physique as he hovers above me, staring so deep into my eyes as he makes love to me that I’m sure there is no heaven aside from this moment.

5. JACK OF MANY TRADES_

ADRIAN

LEAVING Jordan after sex is my least favorite thing to do, yet somehow it feels that's all I've been forced to do since we met.

I want to lie in bed and run my fingers over her silky skin, inhale her scent, and let my eyes linger on hers for eternity. To pretend the world doesn't exist for just a while longer.

This is the first moment of serenity I've had in the past month since I left California. The idea of going back to my new normal here, without her, is enough to make my stomach turn. I take a deep breath, trying to slow my exhale so she doesn't notice that my heart rate instantly increases at just the thought of not being with her for a second more. If I can't live in this moment without worry, I want her to live in it for as long as she can.

At least one of us deserves that.

"I gotta get going, babe," I breathe, kissing her blond hair.

Half asleep, she nods lightly, not moving her head from my chest or budging at all. I bite back a smile, shifting slowly to free myself from her embrace, as much as I don't want to. She quietly adjusts on the pillow and falls back into a slumber as I get dressed and slip on my shoes.

The kids' school is about thirty minutes from here if conditions are right. Driving in Honduras is a much more slow-paced activity than back home, so I give myself twenty minutes of wiggle room for anywhere I need to go. The ETA on my GPS isn't as reliable as I'm used to.

Opening the security gate, I pull my car out of the driveway, ensuring to lock it behind me. My grandparents live in a relatively safe part of town, but with everything that's been going on, I can't help but to still be paranoid. One more problem and my sanity might be pushed over the edge. Having Jordan here increases that risk—which is why I was so hesitant about having her come at all. Finally, too much time

had passed with too little of her in my life, so for my own selfish reasons, I caved.

Shutting the car door behind me, I make my way down the dirt road and toward the kids' school. With about an hour to kill as I drive, I connect my phone to Bluetooth and dial Robert. After a few rings, he answers. Right on schedule.

"Adrian. Glad to hear from you," he asserts as my car hugs the mountainous curve.

"I'm sure it's just the highlight of your day," I joke, tossing a sunflower seed into my mouth and chewing on it.

"How have you been since we last spoke? Holding up alright down south there?"

I nod, even though he can't see it. "Ready as hell to get back north, but I'm alright. Jordan got into town, and I think that made my tolerance of being here go up a slight bit."

"I imagine it has. How long will she be visiting you?"

"No set date to return home yet, but when she does, I'm going with her. I can't keep my life on pause forever. I need to go back to work, and the kids need stability. She doesn't know yet, but when I buy her ticket home, I'm buying mine too. And the kids', if circumstances haven't changed," I mumble, spitting a sunflower-seed shell out my window.

Robert knows why I'm here—sort of. I told him my mom disappeared, but I haven't told him that she was possibly taken or that she might have lost her mind and willingly run off. I don't know the legalities, and quite frankly, I don't like paying them any attention. I'm here to take care of the kids until she comes home. That's it. The rest is water under the bridge.

It took me a while to come to terms with that, but it's true. I can't take care of her and what she's involved in, just like I couldn't control my dad and what he involved himself in. The best thing I could do—take myself out of the equation—has already been done. The rest, besides the safety and well-being of my siblings and life partner, is out of my hands.

"I'm sure she'll be happy to hear you're coming home. How do you feel about returning to your normal life? Are you

worried about the adjustment process for you or your siblings?”

I zone out while I drive, greenery flying by me on both sides of the road as I ponder Robert’s question.

I am worried about going home.

I’m worried about having to act like none of this ever happened and fall back into step as I did before.

More than that, I’m worried about stress pushing me back to old temptations and pitfalls.

“I’m not worried about the kids adjusting yet. My hopes are still for my mom showing face by then, and for them to go back to their old routine. Taking them with me is a last-resort option. But I know if I have to take them, they’re resilient. It may not be fun, but they’ll adjust as they need to, and have plenty of support doing it.”

“Good,” Robert agrees. “And what about you? I know all of this has been tumultuous and surely has you spread thin. How are you coping with everything?”

“I’m alright,” I breathe, shaking my head to focus on the road and not the storm between my ears. “I feel like I’m handling things pretty well. Just been so busy I haven’t had much time to think about it. When I do get overwhelmed, and I feel guilty admitting this, sometimes I’ve been craving to drink. Luckily, I’m so busy, I don’t have the time to give in to the temptation.”

“For now,” Robert reminds me. “But there’s going to come a time when things slow down, and that craving may still be lingering. I want you to use the tools you have before to keep your sobriety and mental health a priority. Use the rating system, remain active, and you *need* to get into a meeting when you’re back in town. That community and freedom of feelings are essential to your success. I would hate for you to take any steps backward when you’ve come this far. But if you do, I have the confidence you can overcome any setbacks you face. Recovery isn’t linear, but our goal is always to avoid as many obstacles as we can.”

“You’re right. Once I get my feet back on American soil, I’ll be sure to reprioritize myself. I’m almost there, so I can assure you will be seeing my face in your office days after I land.”

Robert chuckles. “I plan on it. Take care of yourself in the meantime, and you can always call me if you need. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Thanks, Robert.”

I end the call, continuing along the ocean-view drive once I escape the grasp of the mountains. My mom lives a little ways from Choluteca, but the commute to the kids’ school will be part of our daily routine for as long as Jordan is here. She’ll enjoy that town much more, and we all need a change of scenery.

The salty, moist air rushes to fill the car as I roll the windows down, and I welcome the warm sun on my skin. While I love my life back home in California, the vitamin D is much more plentiful this close to the equator.

Before my trip back here, I always thought of Honduras as my home. While California was where I built my life, this is where I came from. Where my blood has roots, and my identity began.

Now that I’ve returned, I realize it’s evolved to be the opposite. The relationships with my loved ones, my goals and accomplishments, my beloved daily routine—all of that is what creates a home, and all of that is back in California. While spending time with my family and revisiting old places and memories has been food for the soul, in a sense, it doesn’t make me feel as at home as I once thought it would.

Maybe that’s part of being an immigrant. Your idea of home changes with you, and you take pieces of each place and culture that you live in and make them your own. Make them a part of you and your life. And I feel blessed to have my roots in one area of the world that I still cherish so very much, while the rest of my growth is done in a different pot—still reaped from the same Latino soil I was born in.

I pull up to the kids' school—two campuses aside one another—and park across the street. Children run in the fenced courtyard, bright murals decorating the concrete walls. Walking up to the wrought-iron gate, I pull it open and greet their teachers. After signing them out, I find Melissa drawing with chalk alongside her friends. She spots me with a smile, finishes her art piece, and comes running.

“Adrian! *Quiero comer helado!*” she yells, right as her body crashes against mine and her arms wrap around my waist. At five years old, she's still on the smaller side, but I've got faith that her growth spurt is just around the corner.

“*Siempre quieres comer helado.*” I laugh, ruffling her hair. “*Posiblemente despues de que encontremos tus hermanos.*” (You always want ice cream. Maybe after we find your siblings.)

Grabbing her arm, I pull her up into a piggyback-ride and wait for Gabriella to find us. Moments later, she appears with a gap-toothed smile as she pushes her long, black hair out of her eyes.

“Hola, Adrian.” She giggles, waving to her fourth-grade teacher as we make our way to the gate. Once outside, we walk beneath the pinus oocarpa trees to the next-door middle school campus.

“You both had a good day, I'm guessing?”

Gabriella nods, while Melissa giggles into my ear. “Angel got in trouble for calling Humberto a *capullo*,” Melissa whispers before she bursts out laughing.

“You're not supposed to say that,” Gabriella chimes in, kicking a rock.

“I didn't say it! Angel did!” Melissa squeals before continuing to laugh at her own joke.

“You may not have said it first, but you did repeat it,” I point out, hiking her farther up my back. “I better not hear of you saying anything like that.”

“I don't say swear words,” she whines, and I kiss her hand that's intertwined with the other, securing her to my back.

“I know, I know.” I chuckle, reaching the gate to the middle school. Nico is sitting on the floor inside, fidgeting with the button on his uniform. His brown hair partially blocks his eyes, and he peers up at us between the strands before standing silently and joining us.

Haircut. Right.

Add that to my list of to-dos.

“Hola Nico,” Melissa taunts, kicking her feet.

“Hi Melissa,” he grumbles, leading us out of the middle school courtyard and toward the street.

“Why so glum?” I ask.

“I don’t know what that word means,” he answers with an eye roll.

“It means grumpy. Why are you in a bad mood?”

“I’m not in a bad mood,” he argues, and I let it go. Middle schoolers aren’t my forte. Hell, kids aren’t my forte, but I’m making it work the best I can for the time being.

We make our way over to my car, Gabriella informing us of all the details about her science experiment they’re working on in class as we walk. When we get to the car, I buckle Melissa into the back seat and let Nico take the front.

“We’re going to swing by the house and then go to Abuelo’s house for a few nights,” I inform them, which earns a happy shriek from Melissa and a groan from Nico.

“Why can’t we just stay at home? What if Mom comes and we’re not there?” he asks.

I give him a sympathetic look but don’t let the dread that’s pouring over me show. “Mom will know where to find us. She’s just tied up with some stuff right now. Bring your swim trunks, and we’ll go to the beach. Plus, Jordan is waiting at Abuelo’s. We can all have dinner and spend some time together.”

This earns a sly look from Nico, a mischievous smile growing across his face. “*That’s* why you want to go to

Abuelo's. Because your *girlfriend* is there," he taunts, and I shake my head with a grin.

"Yes, that is exactly why I want to go to Abuelo's."

6. A FRIDGE FULL OF
MEMORIES AND PANTRY FULL
OF JOY_

JORDAN

I'VE JUST FINISHED GRABBING my clothes from the clothesline and folding them when the front door bursts open, a cloud of dirty school uniforms and crazy black hair stampedes into the house.

“Hola, Jordan!” Melissa yells, kicking off her tennis shoes and running to jump on the couch.

Gabriella carefully unties her shoes and places them neatly next to the front door before smiling at me, missing teeth and all, and making her way to the refrigerator.

“Hi, Jordan,” Nico says while simultaneously making his way down the hall and to one of the bedrooms.

“Hi, guys,” I reply before taking a sip from my water bottle. “How was school?”

“Good,” Melissa cheers, jumping onto her bottom and turning on the television.

“It was good. How long have you been here?” Gabriella asks, opening a bag of chips and sitting at the dining room table.

“Oh, just a few days,” I say casually, right as Adrian walks in the door, his arms full of suitcases and duffel bags.

“Here, let me help you,” I assert as I make my way over to him, only to be greeted with a shaking head.

“I got it, amorcito. But thank you.” He places a kiss on my lips and another on my forehead before making his way down the hall and into the bedrooms. He reappears moments later, luggage-free, and rests his forearms on the kitchen counter beside me.

“How was the drive?”

He shrugs, his half-smile distracting me from the fact that the world still exists—and that his siblings are surrounding us from every angle. “Not bad. The kids will have to get used to

getting up a little earlier to get to school on time, but they'll adjust."

I nod, running my fingers through his hair and brushing it off of his forehead.

"You just reminded me." He chuckles. "Nico! Haircut in half an hour. Don't get too comfortable."

A groan comes from one of the bedrooms, causing us both to hold back laughter. "He looks like Shaggy with that damn hair," Adrian sighs. "I've been meaning to get it cut for a while, I just haven't had the time or anyone to watch the girls."

"Well, I am more than happy to watch the girls. I'll have them help me with dinner while you guys are gone. Maybe watch a movie."

"Thank you, mija," he breathes, wrapping his arms around my shoulders and pulling me into his chest.

I peer up into his bright-green eyes, grinning at him until he pulls me in for a long kiss, which is subsequently interrupted by Melissa.

"Ew. Why do you guys need to kiss?" she asks, now standing beside us.

Adrian chuckles, lifting her up and resting her on his hip. "Because we love each other, Mel. That's what people who love each other do."

"Abuelo and Abuelita love each other, but they don't kiss."

"I promise you, they have kissed plenty since they first met," Adrian assures her.

"When did they meet?" she asks.

"A long time ago." Adrian laughs, placing her back on the floor. "I'm taking Nico to get a haircut. While I'm gone, you both are going to help Jordan make dinner. Did you hear me, Gabriella?"

Gabriella nods, eating her chips and watching whatever cartoon Melissa chose for them.

“And be good,” Adrian continues. “I’m going to be very upset with you both if not.”

“They’ll be *fine*,” I assure Adrian, giving him a pointed look. “I’m going to change.”

I make my way down the hall, arms full of freshly washed clothes. Adrian follows, shutting the door behind us as I fill the dresser drawers neatly.

“Be nice to them.” I chuckle, changing into a freshly washed tank top.

“I know,” he says through an exasperated breath. “It’s just been a lot, trying to remember everything I have to do for them. School, meals, friends, haircuts, everything. They’re great kids. It’s just been an adjustment.”

“I know, babe,” I agree. “But now there’s two of us. I’m sure it’ll make it much easier. Just tell me what I need to do, and it’s done.” I walk over to where he’s leaning against the wall and wrap my arms around his firm waist, resting my chin on his chest to look up at him.

It’s been almost a year since we met. I had never known there was a hole in my life before he came into it, and to be honest, I don’t know if there even *was* one. But once he entered my realm, every atom and molecule shifted around his presence.

“I don’t know how I ever lived a second without you,” he whispers, brushing his thumb over my cheekbone.

“Well, good thing you’ll never have to again,” I remind him.

His green eyes study mine, looking into a place within me I’m sure that only he can see. Somewhere he left footprints on my heart and bones, changing the chemical make up of my soul. A place that only he can reach and that I don’t want anyone else to ever know exists.

“I gotta get going,” he whispers against my skin, sending goose bumps down my neck before pulling me in for a kiss.

I let his lips and scent engulf me, wishing I could live in this moment for the rest of my life, no matter all the flaws of our current situation.

“Any requests for dinner?” I ask in an equally quiet tone.

“None at all. The house is all yours, baby. I’ll be back in about an hour.”

With a quick peck on my forehead, he grabs my hand and leads me down the hall, knocking on the door next to the room I’ve been staying in.

“Nico,” he summons. “Let’s get going before they close. Can’t have you looking like Shaggy any longer.”

The door opens a few moments later, Nico looking somewhere between bored and content. His resemblance to Adrian is uncanny—while Nico has brown hair and brown eyes, their facial features are a lot alike. For being only twelve years old, he’s taller than most kids his age and has the same attitude as Adrian when I met him—which is both an endearing and somewhat scary factor.

“Who’s Shaggy?” he asks.

Adrian rolls his eyes, shaking his head with a laugh. “Shaggy. From Scooby-Doo? Please tell me you’ve seen it.”

Nico shrugs his shoulders, giving Adrian a blank stare. “Never heard of it.”

“Kids these days,” Adrian mutters, turning down the hall and waving for Nico to follow him.

I make my way back to the kitchen, opening the fridge, and beginning to decide what to cook. When the front door opens, I glance quickly in that direction, and Adrian gives me a wink before Nico closes it behind them.

Every time he leaves, I’m afraid he won’t come back. But every time he gives me that look, I know that even the largest of tidal waves couldn’t keep us from one another.

Before tackling dinner, I clean the kitchen a bit and try to make sure the house is as comfortable and tidy as possible for the kids while they’re here. After, I begin shuffling through the

few ingredients Adrian's grandparents left behind, trying to rack my brain for something easy to make for five people when I get a tap on my arm. Gabriella is standing beside me, light brown, innocent eyes calmly waiting for my attention.

“What are we going to make?”

“Well,” I begin with a soft smile. “I'm trying to decide that right now. Do you have anything you really want for dinner?”

She makes a thin line with her lips, staring into the refrigerator with the same focus I had just moments ago. From the little time I've spent with Adrian's family, I know Gabriella is the quieter one. She tends to blend into the background of her busy two siblings, so I soak in the moment of us getting to spend a little time together.

“I really want a hamburger,” she says just above a whisper, a small smile breaking across her lips.

I nod slowly, returning to my study of the contents of the refrigerator. There are no traditional hamburger patties, but we do have some ground beef that probably needs to be used before it goes bad. I know there's some bread in the pantry and a few other things we can throw together to make our version of a burger.

“Hmmm. I think we can make that work. Why don't you wash your hands, and we'll get started? This might take a bit since it's both of our first times making burger patties from scratch,” I explain.

She nods excitedly, hurrying over to the kitchen sink and running the water. I'm about to call Melissa's name when I spot her asleep on the couch, her hands pressed together beneath her sweet little cheeks.

For a girl that's always on the go, she looks even more precious when her little body makes her give in to rest.

“Alright,” I begin, grabbing a large mixing bowl from a cabinet. “Why don't you grab some spices from the pantry, and I'll get the ground beef ready.”

Gabriella nods, gathering all of the spice bottles from the pantry and setting them on the counter next to the mixing

bowl. I empty the beef into the bowl and have her translate the spices she knows in English to me. I'm actually very glad to have her help, as my knowledge of Spanish words for spices stops after salt.

I take out a smaller bowl and begin trying to create a seasoning for the beef that will resemble a burger—which I have absolutely no idea how to do, but I can try—while doing my best to get to know Gabriella a little better.

Most of my time with kids is spent with my younger siblings, and that doesn't consist of anything but one-way conversations. I'm still not sure what the hell to talk about with school-age kids who know more than twenty words.

“How has school been for you? Do you like your teacher?”

“Yeah,” Gabriella sighs, twirling her hair around her finger. “My teacher is nice, but I don't like a girl in my class.”

“What's her name?”

“Nadia.”

“Why don't you like her?” I ask calmly, not losing my focus on creating a meal I've never made before.

“She keeps being mean to me because I can't read the same books in English that she can.”

I nod slowly, not trying to react in a way that may cause her to feel shameful or embarrassed. “Do you like reading in Spanish or English better?”

“Spanish,” she replies instantly. “English words are too hard to read and say.”

“Well, why don't we work on reading some English books together? Have you told Adrian about Nadia being mean to you? Has he helped you with your English?”

She shakes her head, keeping her focus on spices as I add them to the bowl and take whiffs of it to see if I have the ratio even close to correct. “No. Adrian can be in a bad mood sometimes when we get home from school, and I always forget to tell him in the morning time.”

I nod, wiping my hands on a washcloth once I'm satisfied with my makeshift seasoning. "Well, I'll talk to him about it. But for now, after dinner, we can read a book together and practice some of your English words. Sound good?"

Gabriella nods, and I tap the counter next to me. "Good. Now come over here, and we'll start making the burger patties." I grab a large plate out of the cabinet. "What we're going to do is pour the spice in and mix it in with the meat. Then, we'll use our hands to make them into about a tennis ball size. Why don't you pour it in?"

Gabriella grabs the bowl with her small hands, fingernails chewed unevenly down. Pouring the spices in, she bites her lower lip as she focuses, and I can't help but notice the behavior trait she shares with Adrian.

"Perfect," I announce, grabbing a fork and mixing the meat with the seasoning. Once it looks even enough, I grab a handful and turn to Gabriella. "So, grab a big handful and make it into a ball. It doesn't have to be perfect. Once you do that, go ahead and place them on this plate over here and move on to the next one. Since there's five of us, we'll try to make ten, so everyone can have two burgers if they want."

She nods, reaching into the bowl and grabbing some of the meat. We work simultaneously, forming burger patties and preparing them to be cooked. As she finishes up the last one, I move over to the refrigerator and pull out an onion, tomato, and a head of lettuce that is near being unusable.

Beggars can't be choosers, right?

I slice the tomato and teach Gabriella how to do so in the process, then get her started on breaking the lettuce into smaller pieces. Placing the ingredients into bowls, we have a pretty decent burger assembly line going, working diligently to the sound of Melissa's show that lulled her into a nap.

"Next is the onion," I drawl, grabbing it off the counter and looking at Gabriella. "This is going to hurt your eyes. Maybe it's best if you sit by Melissa while I cut it."

Gabriella frowns, staring at the onion in my hands. “But I want to help. I brought my swimming goggles.”

“You want to go swimming right now?”

She shakes her head with a deep laugh, and it’s one of the first times I’ve seen her cheeks grow pink from joy. “No! I can use them so my eyes don’t hurt while you cut them.”

I nod my head with a smile, impressed by her ingenuity. “That’s not a bad idea. Why don’t you go grab them while I start to skin this thing.”

Gabriella takes off running, turning down the hallway to the bedrooms, and returning with her clear goggles already on tight. I can’t help but laugh when I see her, strapped up and ready to tackle the process of cutting an onion.

“Alrighty, here we go.” I chuckle as she stands beside me.

I explain to her how to cut an onion so that the pieces aren’t too big, turning it diagonally and cutting different sections. She watches and listens intently, asking questions as to why I cut certain ways—some I can answer and some I can’t, given Adrian has always handled most of the cooking between the two of us. As we near the end of the onion, the front door swings open, Nico and Adrian shuffling in from the now rainy outdoors.

“Nico, take off your shoes so you don’t get the floor dirty,” Adrian grumbles, untying his laces and placing his sneakers outside.

Nico sighs loudly, mimicking his brother’s actions and closing the front door.

He begins to trudge through the house, his hair dripping onto his irritated face, before spotting Gabriella and me in the kitchen.

“Gabriella, why are you wearing goggles in the kitchen?” he says with a laugh, instantly changing his expression from angry to amused.

“Because we’re cutting onions,” she says confidently, smiling up at me.

“I didn’t want them to hurt her eyes, but she still wanted to help, so she found a way to make it work,” I follow up, sliding the last of the onions into the bowl.

“You two must be quite the team,” Adrian says with a smile, coming behind me and placing a kiss on my neck.

“What are we having for dinner?” Nico asks, sitting on the couch next to Melissa as she begins to wake, rubbing her eyes with the heel of her hands.

“Hamburgers,” Gabriella answers. “Me and Jordan are making them from scratch.”

“You can make hamburgers from scratch?” Nico asks.

“You can,” I answer, moving to the stove and warming up a pan. Gabriella comes over to me with the plate of patties, and Adrian rests his hip on the counter.

“Why don’t you let me do this part? You guys have already worked your asses off getting everything else ready.”

“It’s fine,” I assure him, putting some oil onto the pan. He looks at me with raised eyebrows and a grin, causing me to laugh. We both know that look is due to my lack of culinary skills.

“Fine.” I chuckle, giving him a kiss and stepping away from the stove.

He grabs one of the patties and places it into the pan, smashing it down with a spatula. The crackling of the oil and meat fills the room, along with the delicious aroma of garlic.

“I’m going to have Melissa take a bath and get in her pajamas,” I inform him. He gives me a thoughtful look with a small smile, and I can tell how much the help with such a small task takes a little bit of weight off of his shoulders.

“Gabriella, why don’t I set you up in the shower in our room so you can change out of your uniform before dinner?”

She nods and follows me as I pick up a sleepy Melissa, carrying her to the bathroom in the hallway. Gabriella grabs her pajamas and waits as we fill the bath and Melissa gets in. I walk her into our bathroom and turn the water on, placing my

shampoo and conditioner where she can reach, as well as a clean towel on the counter.

“When you’re done, come meet us in the kitchen. Dinner should be ready by then.”

She nods, and I close the door, going back to check on Melissa. I wash and condition her hair as she tells me about her favorite song from school, then proceeds to sing it five times in a row. She uses her fingers to count to twenty in English, and we chat about the show she was watching before she fell asleep. By the time she’s dried off, dressed, and her hair is brushed, food is ready when we exit the bathroom. Gabriella and Nico have changed the channel on the TV and are relaxing on the couch together as Adrian cuts the loaf of bread and prepares it on a plate.

“Alright, we’re doing this buffet style,” he informs us as we make our way to the kitchen. “Everyone grab two pieces of bread, a burger, and whatever toppings you want on it. Melissa, here’s yours, baby.”

Adrian hands her a burger and holds her up so she can pick her toppings before setting her up at the dining room table. Gabriella and Nico make their burgers. Next, Nico piles two patties into one burger and both of them sit on either side of Melissa.

In this moment, I realize how long it’s been since I’ve had a real family dinner. My mom stopped making dinner years ago, and we never ate together before she died. She and my dad split up when we were all still young. I can’t remember a time when we all sat together at a table. But now, as different and unconventional as this is, I can say I’m having a family dinner for the first time in many years.

Adrian makes me a burger exactly how I like it, placing a deep kiss on my lips as he hands me the plate. With a steep inhale and holding back a grin, I walk over to the table and take a seat next to Gabriella. Adrian sits across from me, shooting me a wink before sinking his teeth into his burger. I do the same and we spend the next five minutes devouring our dinners in comfortable silence. The only sound that fills the

room is chewing, a dull television show that no one is paying attention to, and Melissa's humming.

This is the moment I realize my heart is still full.

The moment I realize that there is a life after pain and grief.

7. SILENCE BEGS TO BE
FILLED_

ADRIAN

THE HOUSE IS QUIET.

Not just for the first time today, but for the first time since I got here. The house is quiet for the first time in over a month.

Usually, by the time I crash into bed, Melissa has had a meltdown, me and Nico have spent the day battling, and I'm worried about everything under the sun. Tonight, it's as if just Jordan's presence has shifted the energy and made things fall into a rhythm. It's a new rhythm, but a rhythm nonetheless.

Not only is it quiet, but it doesn't have the same sense of isolation and hopelessness that it did before. Any silence was previously a reminder of the position I'm in—that we're all in. This time, it's a sense of safety and reassurance. That maybe I can do this—we can do this.

I roll over in the bed, looking at the time. Two thirty in the morning. This means I have four hours left to sleep before I need to wake up, shower, and start getting the kids ready for the day. Jordan's breath flows in and out of her lungs as she sleeps peacefully next to me, and I pull her warm body against mine, pressing my chest against her delicate figure. As I interlace our fingers in front of her, she shifts her hips slowly against mine, back and forth to get even further under my skin, where she belongs.

I press my lips to the side of her neck, covering her skin in light kisses to avoid waking her. I want to bask in this moment, in all of the small moments where I get to be in her presence. In the simple moments of us doing mundane things, because those mundane moments are what make up the best years of our lives. And any year with her *is* the best year of my life.

As if my touch can summon her out of the deepest of slumbers, she begins to slowly roll over, replacing her neck with her lips against mine and letting them part. Our tongues flow together, releasing a sweet breath from her lungs as she wraps her fingers around my bicep. I can barely make out her

blue eyes in the dark room when she opens them, peering up at me through thick lashes, above the freckles that are sprinkled across her cheeks and nose.

“What time is it?” she whispers.

“A little bit after two thirty,” I answer, tucking a loose strand of blond hair behind her ear. “Go back to sleep, mija.”

She shakes her head lightly, placing a quick kiss on my lips. “I don’t want to. We’ve hardly had any time to ourselves since I got here. It doesn’t matter what time it is, I’m taking what I can get.”

I chuckle, admiring the way she makes the air in any room feel lighter whenever she’s in it. She’s right. After dinner, we put the kids to bed. Gabriella took the longest to fall asleep after reading with Jordan, and I must have fallen asleep before Jordan even came back into the bedroom. Tomorrow, it will be the same thing over again, though on Friday, I’m hoping to have time to show her around while the kids are in school.

“I’m so happy you’re here. I didn’t realize how much I needed you until I didn’t have you with me.”

“I’m happy I’m here too. I don’t ever want to be apart from you again,” she breathes, and my hand finds the nape of her neck, pulling her into me.

Her grasp moves to my chest, studying each muscle, and the ink she can’t see in this dark room with her fingertips. I roll over slowly, placing my hand under her thigh and pulling her on top of me. Our pace never breaks, slow and thoughtful with each movement of our mouths. I fall more in love with each kiss, each needy breath we take, and I don’t know how I can fall for her any further when I surely should have hit the earth by now.

But I continue to fall, fall, fall.

My hands study her curves, removing her shirt, wandering every inch of her body until I dip my fingers below her panties. She lets out a sigh of relief as I massage her in all of the places I’ve not only become familiar with but memorized, learned to master. Even with the mounting desire that never

fades, I keep my actions slow and meticulous, engraving her into my mind once again. Sliding one finger inside of her, she lets out a soft moan around my name, and that sound sends electricity from the bottom of my spine to the top, summoning goose bumps to my skin.

We don't speak, but so much is said. Slowly entering and exiting her, I feel her muscles tighten around me when I know I've hit all of the right places. I continue to work her, slowly dripping down my fingers and palm until I know she's close to her point of euphoria. When she quickly arrives there, her legs begin to tremble as they can no longer hold her weight, leaving me to hold her up as she descends into the place of no return. Her teeth bite my bottom lip, her hands skimming over the stubble on my cheeks as she looks for some form of control, but the effort is futile. Another deep breath leaves her lungs as she falls onto my chest, her head resting beneath my collarbone.

I lightly trace her spine with my fingertips, willing her back to sleep with each inch I touch. But unwilling to give in, she slowly lowers her hand into my boxers, gripping my length that is already hard for her—that has been since our first kiss. Her mouth melts further onto mine, my hand gripping her soft hair, as if we could possibly pull one another any closer. She pulls my boxers down enough to free my cock from the fabric, and I simultaneously shift her panties to the side, cupping her with my palm.

This soft movement earns me a small moan right before she brings our hips together, letting the contact with her pussy bring a groan from my chest. She glides against my length slowly, and our kiss ends, but lips don't part as we desperately fight against our breathlessness. Unraveling me thread by thread, she slowly lowers herself onto my cock, and the sensation still has enough force to make me dizzy.

Inching her way down my length, each second sends me further into a spiral until the inside of her thighs meet mine, and we couldn't possibly be more embedded into one another. Our hips rock together, made of a magnetic force that can't exist within anyone or anything else. I grab rabidly at her hair,

having the control I held shortly ago stolen from me once again.

“I’ve never loved anyone like I love you,” I breathe, fighting the electricity that’s threatening to travel through my lungs and take over my brain. “Every inch of you was made for me. I could spend the rest of my life inside of you and die more than complete.”

Jordan’s mouth finds my neck, nipping and biting at my skin as she continues to guide my length in and out of her. The pain of her teeth against my flesh is welcomed, wanted, and all I’ve ever dreamed of—in both the darkest and most pleasant of ways.

She is, after all, the reason I know I’m still breathing.

Our bodies grow slick with sweat, her eyes rich with desire—though I’m not sure who holds the most wealth in this moment. We continue to participate in this silent song, each small movement the beat, our stares the words of a thousand albums put together. She pushes, I push back, and we continue down the road only we know. Her pushes become stronger, her walls tight around me, begging me to stop working against her and to start pushing in her direction instead. I want to live in this moment, to never let it out of my grip, but finally, I give in, letting her have me as a whole, unable and unwilling to put up a fight. Her nails dig into the back of my biceps as my cock jerks inside of her, causing me to feel the only form of drunk I ever want to experience.

Her movements slow to a stop, and she rests on my chest, naked and bare and *mine*, and I can’t, for the life of me, figure out what I did to deserve this—or catch the breath that she’s sucked from my body, now floating around the room surrounding us.

We sigh simultaneously, earning a small giggle from her, which brings a smile to my lips. My eyes remain closed as she drops to the mattress beside me, wrapping her leg over mine.

“What time do we need to get up to take the kids to school?” she whispers before losing the fight against a yawn.

“You don’t have to come with me, mija. You can just rest here. I have some errands to run, so I’ll be back when they’re done.”

The sound of her sigh gets my attention, and I shift my body to face her, wrapping my arm around her and pulling her flush against my chest.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just feel like you’re keeping me in the dark about things. We agreed not to do that anymore, and it makes me nervous if you are again. Triggers me.”

I stroke her hair with my hand, watching the silhouette of the trees outside of the window that ebb and flow with the wind. “I’m sorry, amorcito. I don’t mean to keep you in the dark. Honestly, I don’t know much myself. It’s hard to give you answers that I don’t know yet, but believe me, I want to.”

“What errands do you have to run tomorrow?”

“I need to start going through my mom’s house and packing up everything. Preparing the kids to come back home with us, talk to their school. Just tie up loose ends so *we* can all go home.”

She pauses for a moment, letting the words linger in the room. “You don’t think she’s coming back?”

I shrug, moving my touch from her hair to her bare back. “It’s been a month. Even if she is coming back, we can’t all keep living in limbo, waiting for that day. The kids need stability—*we* need stability, and staying here isn’t giving us that. We need to go home.”

“But that’s not their home,” she breathes, the air tickling my neck. “This is. Are you sure that’s what’s best for them?”

“No,” I admit. “I’m not sure that’s what’s best for them. I’m not even sure what I make them to eat every day is what’s best for them. But it’s the only option I have. Overnight, I was thrown into raising them with no definite end date. I have to resume my life, and now they have to be part of that.”

Her hand finds the back of my neck, pulling my lips to meet her in the warmest embrace. She tries to pause time with her touch, and God knows she could if only the rest of the world would let her.

“Do you want me to go with you tomorrow and help?” she whispers, her lips mere centimeters from mine.

“You can help me by staying here and making things normal for them when they get home. We have a few more days of escaping reality. We might as well make the most of them.”

She nods lightly, and I kiss the tip of her nose, tucking her head against my chest. “Part of me thinks she knew this would happen. That she wanted them back in the States and didn’t know how to get them there, so she did what she knew would make me come running.” I sigh, closing my eyes, unsure if I’m talking to Jordan or myself. “Or maybe that’s just my wishful thinking, creating hope out of nothing.”

“It doesn’t matter where hope comes from, as long as it shows up eventually,” Jordan mumbles, her body relaxing moments later as her steady breath signals her return to sleep.

8. A STREET CALLED
MEMORY LANE_

ADRIAN

“I HAVE to tell the kids they’re coming back home with me,” I announce as soon as Robert answers the phone, not giving him a moment to say hello.

“Okay,” he drawls. “And I’m guessing this is causing you some stress, correct?”

“Fuck yeah, it’s causing me stress,” I grumble, trying to hold my eyes from rolling at his observation.

The days like these—where pressure mounts and the world won’t let me just *catch up* with it—are the days I feel my past creep up on me from behind. I can’t always outrun my addiction, but boy, do I try. When hurdles get placed in front of me, one after another, I feel the change in my pace struggle against the pace of addiction.

“Is this triggering anything particular in you? Irritability, cravings, threats to your sobriety?”

“All of the above,” I admit.

“Well, I know Jordan is there with you now. Have you talked to her about this? Or talked to anyone, really?”

“I can’t talk to Jordan about this too much,” I answer with a shake of my head, focusing on the dirt road in front of me as I head back to my grandparents’ after dropping the kids off at school. “She’s been doing good with not drinking and being sober. I can’t transfer my stress onto her and risk both of us fighting a relapse. If this was the *Titanic*, I’m Jack. I’m not going to throw Rose off the damn door and watch her sink.”

“Everyone knows there was enough room on that damn door for both of them.” Robert chuckles. “Think of your life that way. If you guys are going to be a team, you need to start acting like it. Holding things back from her will only create a further division—a crack in the door, if you will. You can choose to float on it together, or try to navigate the smaller foundation on your own.”

“I wish you didn’t make so much fucking sense all the time,” I grumble, letting a deep breath flow through my body.

“Teamwork makes the dream work.” Robert laughs. This is the reason he’s the only therapist that I’ve stuck with. All the others I’ve tried would be appalled by my language and attitude—which have both gotten much better since I started treatment, for the record. Robert just finds it amusing and appreciates my honesty—I think.

“My addiction is a stress trigger for her, and I know that. She’s already going through so much because of me—she’s in a different fucking country because of me. How can I dump this on her too?”

“Don’t dump it on her. Open up to her. Showing someone what’s going on inside of your head and letting them understand is different than emptying it out onto their plate and expecting them to deal with it.”

“I don’t know,” I breathe. “She just does so much for me. It would make me extremely guilty to make her stressed.”

“Maybe guilt is what you need to stay sober right now,” he reminds me. “And you once were the one doing so much for her. The last few months before you left, you dedicated them to making your relationship work and helping her get on her feet through both addiction and her mother’s death. It works both ways—remember that. You’re a team, and part of that is sometimes carrying more weight than the other. As long as the act is returned, it’s nothing to feel wrong for.”

“I know,” I sigh. “I just hate causing her any stress. In a perfect world, she wouldn’t ever feel upset again, and I certainly wouldn’t ever be the cause of it.”

“But this isn’t a perfect world—this is your world. If you never dealt with hardships, it would be impossible to truly appreciate those moments of utter bliss. Instead of fighting the hand you’ve been dealt, do the best you can with the cards in front of you. How do you think the kids are going to react to this move?”

“Hell if I know. They lived there before, but it’s been so long. I doubt they’ll be excited about their whole life being uprooted, but they’re resilient.”

“Kids always are. If you need help getting them adjusted, let me know. One of my old colleagues specializes in adolescent therapy. When do you plan on coming home?”

“I’m going to buy us tickets for Monday morning. Give us time to get settled before I go back to work on Thursday.”

“Well, you know where my office is. My desk is looking too clean without your feet resting on them every session. Feel free to pay me a visit.”

I crack a smile, reminiscing on the leather chair my ass has become well acquainted with. “You’ll be seeing my smiling face very soon. Give you something to look forward to.”

I end the call, pulling onto the street of my grandparents’ house—and where the smiling face that I’m looking forward to is waiting for me.

I’ve seen the greatest struggles before, and made it up mountains when it comes to my mental health and addiction—but once I reach the peak, there’s always another one waiting to be overcome.

This is nothing new, I remind myself. I can do this. Take the cravings like waves, and find any way to stay afloat. I’ve made it through the depths of hell compared to this. Now, I just have to keep focused on the single steps needed in order to remain happy, despite all of these changes.

I promised Jordan we would explore the town today while the kids are at school and spend some time at the beach this weekend with them. I’ve gotten all of their paperwork organized, school files in order, stuff packed up, and am basically ready to take them away from their home with as much of their belongings as we can bring with us. For now, I’m allowing myself one more blissful Friday in our own slice of paradise before we’re forced to resume with the rest of the world.

I pull the car into the driveway and begin to shut the gate behind it, only to be interrupted by a voice sweet like honey and light as air.

“I thought we were going out today?” Jordan calls, sitting on the front step, her hand blocking the sun from shining in her eyes.

The light breeze shifts her sunshine hair, her soft lips turned up perfectly into an imperfect smile.

“Knew you wouldn’t forget about that,” I laugh, walking over to her.

“Did you want me to?”

“No, mija. I didn’t want you to forget. I never want you to forget.”

“Even the bad memories?” she asks, peering up at me as I take her hand in mine and pull her to stand.

“The good, the bad, and the ugly. I always want you to look at me for exactly who I am, look at us for exactly what we are and all we’ve been through. Forgetting the bad would only do both of us a disservice,” I answer, pulling her in for a kiss.

She smells like roses with an ocean aroma, and I never knew two different things could collide so perfectly.

“Where are we going today?” she asks cheerfully, following me to the passenger side of the car. I open the door and she slides in elegantly without the slightest bit of effort.

“Well, first we need to get some food in you. After, figured we can walk around the town center, get you a few things to take home with us.”

She smiles, clicking on her seat belt as I close the door and make my way to the driver’s seat. Living on the outskirts of Cholulteca, it’s about a twenty-minute drive to the town center. I shift the car into reverse, pull off the property, and head that direction.

The town is bustling with locals, the hot sun high overhead as we exit the car. I parked a few blocks away from the town center, allowing us time to walk past the colonial buildings that decorate the landscape.

“This is not what I was expecting,” Jordan exclaims, taking in the old architecture as we creep closer to the town center.

“In a good way or a bad way?” I ask, taking her hand in mine and tracing the back of it with the pad of my thumb. Our feet navigate the stone streets and uneven sidewalks, Jordan’s eyes studying the new landscape.

“A good way. It’s so busy and lively. I feel like I’ve hardly seen anyone since I got here. This is much different than what I’ve been used to,” she breathes, falling into step beside me.

“It’s the biggest city in this part of the country,” I inform her. “Lots of business stuff happens here, not a big tourist destination. But I love it. Reminds me of coming to visit my grandparents when I was a kid.”

We continue our walk, taking in the energy and beauty of the city. Jordan points out all of the details she notices, asking me questions and making observations of a place that is new to her, but so well known by me. Cars and people on foot move past us, and by the time we’ve made it through the town center, the sun has become even stronger on our skin.

“Why don’t we start to head back to the car? There’s a great restaurant on the way. We can eat and head to the market after,” I tell her.

She nods happily, our hands still interlocked as we walk the opposite way.

“I’m going to tell the kids today or tomorrow that they’re coming back home with us,” I mutter, committing myself to doing it by telling her I will.

She pauses for a moment, the only sound the rhythm of our feet as we walk. “When do you plan on going home?”

“I’m going to buy us tickets for Monday. Talked to my captain, I can go back to work on Thursday. Since their school here is year-round and it’s not at home, I’m going to look into camps or daycare or something for the girls during the day, see if Trevor can watch them at night during my shifts.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” she argues. “I’m working remotely, and Camilla is always home. School starts in like a month from now. Just have us watch them when you’re working.”

“Mija, I’m not going to dump that responsibility on you. They need to get used to my place and what it’s going to be like living with me. But thank you.”

“The five of you are not going to live in a two-bedroom apartment,” she counters, her tone more clipped than before. “We have two extra bedrooms that aren’t being used, plus the office, if we really need it. It’s stupid for just me, Camilla, and Jake to be living in that big of a house and you guys all living on top of each other. Just move your stuff in with us. We’ll get them set up in the guest room and my room, and I’ll move to the master.”

I hesitate a moment, trying to wrap my head around the idea. Living with Jordan has been a dream since we started dating, but as our lives go, now that idea has become much more complicated. My hopes of her moving in with me now have the footprints of three kids all over them.

“Are you sure you want that? Really think about it, mija. There’s going to be a full house all of the time, and you won’t have any time to yourself if we’re living together. I can’t risk us having any more problems between us, and I’ll do anything I can to avoid that.”

She chuckles, stopping her pace and pulling my hand so that I’m facing her. “We practically live together, Adrian. This won’t be much different from what we do now, except I won’t have to cart my stuff back and forth between our places. If we plan on being together for the long run, which I hope we do,

we'll have to make living together official at some point. Plus, I want to spend some more time with the kids, if they're going to be living so close now. It'll make the house feel less empty without my mom to have them there. Give me something to focus on."

I let out a deep breath, letting her blue eyes bore into me. Eyes full of light and hope and *joy*, despite everything she's been through the last year. Ones I wasn't so sure I would see again when we were in the depths of addiction and recovery—though that recovery never truly ends.

"Are you okay with moving into the master? It's not going to be too hard on you?"

She shrugs, and we continue walking toward the restaurant. "I have to face it at some point. First I'll offer it to Jake, he'll be annoyed if I don't."

"He's always annoyed." I laugh.

"True. But if he doesn't want it, then yes. I'll be fine being in there. I don't want to sell the house, neither does he, so we have to start making it our own. Not removing her from every corner, but letting the memories of her sit beside new ones."

"I'm proud of you," I disclose. "I'm really, really proud of you."

"I'm proud of you too," she cheers. "I'm proud of both of us. Who would have thought that we would have come this far when we first met."

"I don't even recognize those people anymore." I laugh. "Part of me wonders if that's why we're here. My mom saw how good I was doing—I was sober, got a great job, and was with the girl of my dreams. She kept mentioning to me, when she was staying with us, how she wanted the kids to have a life like that. I can't help but think that she took extreme measures to make sure that happened. Ran off and let me come get them."

"Well, they were extreme, if that's the case. But it worked."

“It did.” I laugh again. “But I don’t know. After Isabel told me my dad’s death may not have been suicide, all the signs are pointing at her disappearance having to do with that. I just don’t want to accept it, but I’m going to have to, eventually.”

Jordan wraps her arm around my waist as we walk, mine going over her shoulder. “I wish I knew the answers, that I could tell you how to best handle this. But I think you’re already doing that. I love you.”

“I love you, mija.”

9. BREAKING HEARTS AND HOMES_

JORDAN

GABRIELLA, Melissa, and I come walking back to our towels on the beach, ocean water dripping down our hair and skin. Adrian and Nico are kicking a soccer ball around on the sand, a warm breeze rushing through their hair as they run to get the ball.

Tomorrow, we fly home. The kids don't know it yet—I keep waiting for Adrian to tell them, as I think the sooner the better, but I understand why he hasn't. I would be nervous to break news like that as well. For the next few hours, we will continue to live in our little moment of bliss and denial. We all deserve just a little more of that time.

Melissa has been chatting about everything under the sun since we got to the beach a few hours ago, Gabriella chiming in from time to time. I realize how they're the perfect balance for each other as sisters. One is quiet and observant, the other speaks her mind and lets everyone observe her. Kind of like me and Jamie—Jamie the responsible and level headed one, me the impulsive and unsure sister.

As much as I love Honduras, I am very ready to get home and see my family. More than that, I'm ready to have Adrian back home. This country is beautiful and kind and welcoming, and while I could stay here forever, in our moment of bliss, reality is just on the other side of that time, calling our names and pulling us toward it.

I drop myself onto my beach towel where Gabriella joins me, and Melissa is at our feet playing with sand towels. My little shadow, Gabriella. Ever since she's been staying with us, she's spent a lot of time following me around and doing whatever I do. It's nice, if I'm being honest.

“Adrian!” Melissa yells, waving her hands at him. “*Quiero comer, tengo mucho hambre!*” (I want to eat, I'm so hungry!)

Adrian laughs, picking the soccer ball off the ground and walking toward us. He shakes the water from his hair, pushing

it out of his face, and my eyes linger on his muscles that move beneath the ink carved into his skin.

“Where do you want to eat, Melissita?” He chuckles, his accent much thicker around his words than it was before he came back here.

“Somewhere delicious,” she exclaims, throwing handfuls of sand into the air.

“Don’t do that, you’re going to get it in everyone’s eyes,” he reprimands, sitting on the towel next to me. “Why don’t we pack up our things and find somewhere to eat,” he says with a wave in the direction of shops and restaurants lined along the sand.

Nico silently obliges, folding his towel and throwing a shirt over his head. We all begin to gather the items we brought with us, Adrian helping Melissa pack shovels and buckets into the mesh bag he brought them in. Once we’re dressed and ready, we wade through the sand and across the beach, sweat and ocean water causing our shirts to stick to our skin.

“Let’s go here,” Adrian says as he points to a small, outdoor restaurant to our right.

We all make our way to the tree-covered tables, dropping ourselves in the plastic chairs in the sand, as Adrian walks to the counter and orders our meals. He returns moments later, a stoic look on his face, and I know that our moment of bliss is about to come to an end.

“There’s something I have to tell you guys,” he announces, leaning his folded arms on the table and making direct eye contact with each of the kids. “I know this is going to be weird, but tomorrow, I’m going to have you guys come back home with me.”

“Back to Mom’s house?” Nico inquires, his eyebrows furrowed.

Adrian scratches his cheek, looking down at the white table in front of him. “No, back to California.”

Nico's mouth goes agape, his brown eyes wide as he stares at his older brother. "What the hell do you mean back to California? *Why* would we be going there?"

"Because, Nico. I have to go back to work, and I can't leave you guys here by yourselves. As much as I don't want to, I have to."

"*But Mom is coming back,*" Nico seethes. "Why can't we just stay with Abuelo and Abuelita? We don't need to come home with you. I don't want to come home with you."

"I know you don't want to, but you have to. I don't know how long it's going to be for, but I've already talked to Abuelo and Abuelita. We'll say goodbye to them after this, and make sure all your stuff is packed up."

"But—" Nico begins.

"I'm sorry, Nico. I know this isn't what you want, but it's what has to be done. We're going to figure this out as we go, and you'll be with us the whole time. Things will be okay, I promise."

Nico slumps back in his chair, his brown eyes beginning to fill with tears that he tries so hard to fight back. Gabriella stares at him, stoic as always.

"Does this mean we get to go back to your house?" Melissa asks me.

"Yes," I say with a smile. "You get to come back to my house."

"*I love your house,*" Melissa exclaims, right as the server brings our food to the table. He places plates in front of each of us, and likely sensing the tension, retreats from the table.

"I'm sorry. I really am. But this is what I have to do to take care of you guys. It'll take time, but you'll be okay and I promise, California isn't that bad. I could think of worse places to be. We can surf, and you'll make new friends. Just give it a try," Adrian sighs, before picking up his fork and beginning to eat.

The girls and I do the same, and reluctantly, Nico follows.

10. FINDING THE
DIFFERENCE IN GOODBYES_

JORDAN

WE PULL up to the house, Salvador and Claudia's car waiting in the driveway, and my stomach tightens a little bit. The kids jump out of the car, running inside and not even looking back to see if we're following. Adrian and I watch as the front door closes behind them, a weird sense of happiness and heaviness in the car with us.

"Are your grandparents going to let you take them with us?" I ask quietly, my eyes fixed on the yellow house.

He sighs, running his hand through his hair. "They aren't happy about it, but yeah. They're going to let me. They don't want me to take them, but they know it's what's best for them."

"And your mom? Still no idea on where she is or who she's with?"

He shakes his head, keeping his gaze on the house as well. "I've talked to everyone. At first, I thought it was some of the shit my dad is wrapped up in. Someone was scared she was going to talk. But Isabel told me yesterday that someone saw her driving toward the border by herself, and a neighbor saw her slowly packing her car with her stuff. Now, I'm confident enough that disappearing was her choice. I'll never understand why, but I've never understood a lot of the choices my parents made."

I nod silently, unsure of how to make the idea of a mom abandoning her kids anything but heartbreaking and horrible. Losing one parent had already been hard enough on them, but now, with Adrian's mom gone as well, I can sense the weight that has been abruptly thrown onto his shoulders. I don't know how to raise kids, and I don't think Adrian is any more well-worn in that area than me. Once we get home, we have no choice but to adjust as we go, and hope that we aren't screwing up every decision we make.

"We should go inside," Adrian whispers, reaching to open the car door. I grab his hand with mine, stopping him before he

can leave.

“I love you,” I announce, shifting my gaze from his eyes to the ink on his skin. I run my fingers along the patterns, trying to summon the perfect thing to say—if such a thing does exist. “I know this is a big obstacle for us, and it’s going to be hard for *all* of us to adjust. But I think we’ve been through obstacles just as big, if not bigger, alone. I’m happy that we have each other to take them on together, from now on.”

He pulls his hand from my grip, bringing it to the back of my neck and pressing his lips against mine. “I am too, *mija*. I don’t know how I ever made it through anything without you, but I’m so thankful we pushed through and hit the point of being in things together.”

I nod quickly, emotion welling up in my throat as I kiss him one more time. Exiting the car, I don’t give myself any more time to think about anything but the current moment. If I trigger fight or flight mode to get from here back home with all of us intact, I won’t have the ability to let this stress and fear overcome me.

I follow Adrian to the front door, making our way into the busy household. Claudia is in the kitchen with Gabriella, Melissa wrestling with her abuelo, and Nico sunk deep into the far end of the couch, a blank stare covering his face.

“Hola,” Salvador calls to us, giving us a small wave. Melissa is twisted upside down on the cushion next to him, a bright smile taking over as she laughs at him tickling her. Claudia waves to us from the kitchen, her eyes slightly red from tears that have now dried, before beginning to braid Gabriella’s hair.

“Hola,” we call out, Adrian going to Claudia’s side and talking quietly with her. I take a seat between Salvador and Nico, watching the television. There is no right thing to say, or do, so I say and do nothing. It seems like my best bet at this point. I don’t want to cause even more problems for their family, and I sure as hell don’t know how to fix the ones they’ve already got.

“Jordan, would you like to play one last game?” Salvador asks, his voice calm and even.

“Of course I would,” I say with a smile, standing and following his lead to the back patio. Cicadas are chirping and a dry breeze moves the evening air around us as we settle in around the table. Salvador lights a cigar, inhaling the thick smoke as he shuffles the playing cards.

“As always, I doubt this is a game we will finish.” He chuckles. “But finishing has never been the goal of the game. It’s about enjoying the steps it takes you to get there. I hope that all of you realize that, too. If we spend our time waiting for an outcome to be happy, we may never see happiness at all.”

I nod, watching the cards quickly flick in his hands and pile on top of one another. “I’m sorry that this all happened. I’m sure you miss Adrian, and his dad, for that matter. Missing the kids now must make that worse.”

He pauses a moment, taking another hit of his cigar. “We will miss them, but that shouldn’t stop them from going with you. Claudia’s sister is very sick, and she will probably be living here with us soon. Making the kids experience more death, in their own home, than they already have, wouldn’t be fair. We are getting older. As much as we want to take care of them, and her, we aren’t able. Adrian and you are. Visiting them and letting them live with you will be hard, but it will be worth it.”

“You guys will come to visit us?”

“If you’ll let us, yes. California is not home to us, but it’s not a bad place for a vacation. Especially when all of our grandchildren are there. Including you.”

I smile softly at him as the patio door opens, Melissa coming to sit on Salvador’s lap. He lays the cards out on the table, and we spend one final evening submerged in Honduran games, beer, and summer air.

11. A NEVER-ENDING CYCLE OF REINVENTING NORMAL_

ADRIAN

AFTER BEING GONE for a few months, you start to adjust to your new surroundings. Part of this adjustment is forgetting smaller details about the life that you aren't participating in on a daily basis. For me, these details include three major things:

1. Jamie, Jordan's sister, and her husband, Brian, have moved back to California. They have been spending a lot of time at Jordan's house every day.
2. Camilla is living with Jordan, and Jordan is working remotely for her dad. They also spend a lot of time at her house.
3. The Fourth of July, like any holiday, is a very busy day for first responders. This is also my first day back at work for the fire department.

To say that adjusting back to life in California has been a difficult adjustment would be an exaggeration of some sort, but it's more true for the kids than it is for me—or at least, most of the kids.

We've been back since yesterday, and today is when the real adjusting—a slow but inevitable process—will begin for all of us. Once we landed in the early afternoon, we came home and began unpacking. To no surprise, Jake took the master bedroom when offered, which I was happy about. We're invading his home, which he put no protest to, but the least we can do is offer him the space and privacy of the overly large suite.

We got the kids settled into their rooms, Jamie came over with take-out, and we all sprawled out in the living room, stuffing our faces and watching a movie. Melissa and Gabriella didn't even make the end of it before falling asleep, and all five of us crashed for twelve hours last night.

Well, at least me and the girls did. Jordan is yet to wake up, and I assume she is still sleeping in her dark, cozy room

that I left her in just an hour ago. Nico hasn't woken up either, but I blame that more on pre-teen behaviors than I do jetlag. Jake was gone before the sun rose, and Camilla is coloring with the girls in the living room as they watch cartoons.

Camilla has always been one of my favorite people. She's a great friend to Jordan, down to earth, and now, another support system for my siblings in their new home. I listen as they laugh and joke in Spanish before finishing off my coffee and rinsing the mug in the kitchen sink.

"Y despues, yo fuiste a la mercado," Camilla continues, her eyes focused on the drawing of girls riding bicycles down the street. She catches me out of the corner of her eye, dropping her marker and turning to me with a smile. "I complained about it being too quiet around here when you guys were gone. You sure found a way to fix that." She laughs, leaning back against the couch.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I tried to take them to live at my place, but Jordan wouldn't allow it. You know how persistent she can be."

"That I do." She laughs. "What do you guys have planned for the day?"

I blow out an audible breath, leaning my palms against the back of the couch. "Where do I begin. Finish unpacking the girls' stuff, try and get Nico to talk to me, have practically everyone we know over for dinner tonight. Just normal Tuesday activities."

She gives me a sympathetic smile, tapping her fingers on her chin. "Why don't you let me and Jo handle the girls today. Take Nico surfing or something, get him out of the house. We could use some extra breathing room around here."

I shake my head, running my fingers through my hair. "I can't ask you guys to handle all of that on your own. There's way too much to do for me to just leave."

"Well, it's a good thing there's four of us to handle it then. The best way to get him used to being here is to show him what's here. I'm sure you had a hard time getting used to it

when you moved here—I know I did. The more you show him it's not hell, the more he'll start to believe you.”

I pause a moment, recognizing she's right. I was even younger than Nico when I moved here, and I still had a really hard time. He's old enough to understand that his whole life has been ripped out from under him, and in his eyes, I'm the one to blame for it.

“He hates me so much right now.” I chuckle, shaking my head. “We already butted heads before I moved him here. He's just so much like me, it drives me insane.”

“Trevor said he was the mini version of you,” she says, her eyebrows knowingly raised.

“He is,” I sigh. “I've got to go take a shower. Do you mind?” I ask, waving my hand toward the girls.

“Oh, no. Not at all. I've got them, take your time.”

“Thanks.” I turn toward the kitchen, taking a right and heading up the open staircase. “Hey, Cam?” I say, leaning down to see her between where the ceiling and banister meet. “When did you see Trevor?”

“Uh, just lately around town,” she mutters, not looking up from her *now* very important drawing.

I wait for any more details, but when it's clear there's none she's willing to give, I shrug it off and make my way to the second floor. Jordan's door is still closed, the upper area of the house so silent you would never know that anyone was downstairs.

My hand twists the silver knob, opening the door to see the curtains drawn, Jordan's bed now empty. Morning light filters into the clean room, and I'm momentarily transported to the first time I spent the night here, and decide I won't allow her to change any aspect of the space now that I'm living here, too. It still represents her in the best of ways.

“Hello?” she calls from the bathroom once I shut the door behind me.

I stay silent, making my way to the bathroom and opening the door, where she's running a brush through her hair. Pulling it back into a ponytail, she smiles at me in the mirror, and I lean against the doorframe to soak in the sight of her dimple covered cheeks.

"Good morning, *mija*," I soothe, placing my hand on her hip bone as she turns on the sink. I watch her move gracefully through her skincare steps. No matter how much I have of her, I still can't get enough, and if I ever had a downfall, that would surely be why.

"Did you sleep good?" I ask, standing behind her and placing my other hand on her hip so her body is flush against mine.

"I did sleep good." She laughs, drying her freshly washed face on a towel. "Did you sleep good?"

I shrug, kissing her neck. "I always sleep good when I'm with you. You don't even need to ask."

"Good," she chirps, moving on to face lotion. "I'm going to take the girls to pick out some stuff for their room today. I'll see if Camilla wants to come. Do you want us to take Nico? Or do you want to take him?"

I shake my head, pressing the pads of my fingertips firmly against the dainty bones beneath her skin. "I'll take him later today. Think I'm going to drag him surfing before, then we'll get groceries for dinner tonight, if you don't mind."

"I never mind not having to make a trip to the grocery store," she teases. "But the least I can do is stop by, considering you're cooking for everyone tonight."

"I meant if you don't mind me leaving you guys for a bit," I counter, kissing her temple. "Not going to the grocery store. That I will be doing, like it or not."

She rolls her eyes playfully, turning around to face me and leaning her back against the counter. "Of course I don't want you to leave us, but I think taking Nico surfing is a good idea. I doubt he would want to spend the day shopping." She chuckles. "But I am taking over grocery shopping duty."

Gabriella needs to practice reading in English, and that's the perfect place to do so."

"She's having trouble reading?" I ask, my brows furrowed together as Jordan nods.

"Yeah, she mentioned it back in Honduras. She's got six weeks until she starts school here, so reading every day until then is a must."

My hands lean on the counter on either side of her, caging her against the cool marble. I roll my neck before letting out an exhale, closing my eyes. "I'm so bad at this. I didn't even know she was having a hard time reading. How am I supposed to take care of all three of them if I can't even take care of one of them?"

Her hands find my shoulders, resting against my shirt. "You're not bad at this, you're just starting to learn. I don't think anyone is born with knowledge on how to parent—look at ours, for example. But this is why we're going to divide and conquer. You focus on Nico today, and me and Cam will take the girls. Don't complicate it, babe," she asserts, lifting her weight from the counter and kissing me. I melt at her touch like an ice cube thrown onto hot cement, pooling beneath the feel of her lips against mine. I silently beg her not to break away, pushing the boundaries I know we're facing, but she stops me with a simple smile.

"You know I want to have sex with you right now," she says with a smile, blue eyes staring at me through thick lashes. "But we have children to tend to now, babe. We skipped a lot of steps and went straight to full-blown parent mode."

I let out a groan as she grabs my hand, pulling me toward her bedroom door with a laugh. "That's how I feel on the inside, too," she says over her shoulder with a suggestive grin, and I sneak a grab of her plump ass before she leaves the room. I follow in step, stopping at the guest room that Nico is now sleeping in and knocking.

"What," he grumbles, and I open it slowly.

"Sleep good?"

“Not really,” he says, annoyed. He’s shaking his wet hair after a shower, about to throw on a T-shirt.

“Lighten up, Nico. Seriously. I know this is hard, but you and I are going surfing today. I don’t want to share the waves with a pessimist.”

“Don’t know what that is,” he mutters, rolling his eyes.

“Someone who is unhappy. A complainer. Don’t be one today. Get on some trunks and we’ll hit the surf shop on the way, get you a board.”

“I get a board?” he asks, one of his brows raised. I know this sparks something inside of him—he loves the ocean, and his boards were always the old ones I had gotten most of the use out of.

“Yes, you get a board, and a wetsuit if you want. Water’s not nearly as warm here as it is at home.”

“Great,” he grumbles, and as much as he tries to hide it and keep up this cool guy facade, I can tell he’s actually happy about one thing in California so far.

The same thing that got me through all of the toughest times in my life—adjusting to America, overcoming addiction, fighting for the girl I love. Battling against the waves, unsure if you’ll win or lose, but learning to enjoy the ride no matter the outcome, is a form of therapy that no money can buy.

12. PAST THE
CONVENTIONAL_

JORDAN

THE CAR IS full to the brim with all the little girl decor your heart could desire when we start to unload it. Pink, purple, orange, and yellow have officially taken over the car, and soon will take over the spare bedroom downstairs. It has never been more obvious that four girls live in one household. And I'm loving it.

Gabriella and Melissa are taking the spare bedroom downstairs, across from Camilla's. There were already two twin beds in that one, so it works out well. And since Cam says she doesn't like being alone down there, she's more than happy to have some company just a few feet away.

The girls continue to unload their new belongings—opening the packaging as soon as they step foot into their room and decorating it to a tee. Cam and I get started on groceries, loading the refrigerator as sounds of their giggling and excitement fill the air.

“So, how was it here without me? You and Jake at each other's throats?”

She laughs, shaking her head. “It was lonely, but no. I didn't see him all that much. I think we were both kind of busy.”

“Busy with Trevor,” I say casually, nudging her shoulder with mine. She might think I forgot about him calling her on Memorial Day, but I will let it be known that I didn't.

“Not busy with Trevor,” she drawls, pausing for a moment before facing me. “But yes, I was with him a bit.”

“What's going on with you guys, then? Are you dating? Fucking? All of the above?”

“It's not like that,” she says with an eye roll, though the grin she's fighting back tells me otherwise.

“Is he coming tonight?”

“You’ll have to ask *your* boyfriend that question. I haven’t talked to him.”

“You’re impossible,” I continue with a chuckle, though I’m interrupted before I can keep teasing her. The front door flies open, Nico bursting in with a whole new attitude.

“Nico!” Adrian yells from outside. “Come back out here and wash the sand off your feet before you go inside.”

“Oh, right,” he says, looking at me with an apologetic smile. “Sorry.”

“That’s fine.” I wave him off. “That’s what the broom is for. Happens when you live by the beach.”

He laughs, going back outside and returning moments later with Adrian. “Jordan, you didn’t tell me it was so fun to surf here.”

“We were so busy last time you came to visit, we never got the chance to go. Did you guys have a good day?”

“*Such* a good day,” he enunciates, sitting at the dining room table and pushing the hair out of his face. “Adrian bought me a new board. You *have* to come see it when you’re done, it’s so much nicer than my old ones. Oh, yeah—do you need help?”

“That’s okay,” I say over my shoulder with a smile. “We’re almost done. Why don’t you go shower and I’ll check it out after?”

“Perfect,” he cheers, climbing up the stairs and heading to his room.

Adrian takes the chair Nico was in, tapping his knuckles against the table. His demeanor is softer, lighter as he rests his muscles that are surely sore from his first surf in over a month. Camilla lifts herself to sit on the counter, and I rest my back on the marble next to her.

“Seems like that went well,” I begin.

Adrian has a sense of happiness to him that I haven’t seen in a while, and in the same position Nico was in, it’s blaring just how many physical—and mental—qualities they share.

“I forget he’s still a kid.” He chuckles. “He’s so mature, and with him being the oldest, I always expect him to behave like an adult because he always steps up to the plate for our sisters. But today, I feel like he got to be a kid again for the first time in who knows how long.”

“It seems like you got to remind him that he’s still a kid,” Camilla mutters. “I didn’t know he had this side of him when you guys got here.”

“Yeah,” Adrian agrees, leaning back in the chair. “How did today go? The girls were good?”

I wave him off, pulling my hair over my shoulder. “They’re always good. Plus, how could they not be when we spent the whole day shopping. You should see their room. It’s quite a work of art now.” I laugh.

“I bet.” He chuckles, running his fingers through his hair. “What time is Jamie getting here?”

“Seven. Hey, did you ask Trevor to come?” I ask, keeping my eyes fixed on Adrian and away from Camilla, who is playing it surprisingly cool at the mention of his name.

“Yeah, he can’t make it. He’s got plans.”

I watch Camilla’s shoulders sag slightly at his words, though she recovers quickly. I let it go, knowing she’s always been a pretty private person. It’s not something I can get out of her in front of anyone else.

Adrian stands, striding across the kitchen and giving me a quick kiss. “I’m gonna go change and check out their room before I start cooking.”

I watch as Adrian’s bare back strides away from me, his muscles moving with his tan skin as he makes his way down the hall. Camilla must see my love-struck stare, because she breaks me out of it before it can go on too far.

“I can’t believe you didn’t come home with a ring,” she whispers, swatting me on the shoulder.

“You thought I would?” I ask, grabbing the cutting board and setting it out for Adrian.

“Everyone thought you would.”

“We’ve only been back together for a little bit,” I tease. “Give it a year or two, then we might.”

“You guys have been together for a year, not a little bit,” she corrects. “Even when you weren’t together, you were never truly apart. I think even you guys knew you would end up being together again.”

“I wish I would have seen it more that way at the time and not entertained my fucking ex,” I mutter, rubbing my temples with my fingertips.

“Who cares about that. You both have done shitty things. It doesn’t mean you don’t love one another. People get married because of love, not because they’re perfect.”

I sigh, resting my hip on the counter next to her. “It wasn’t a trip like that, so I honestly never expected it. I still don’t. But, now you’ve gotten my hopes up.” I give Cam a playful eye roll, and we both chuckle.

Families are unconventional. Hell, ours sure is. Right now, our family consists of my best friend, my boyfriend, my adopted brother, my half-sister, my dad, his one-year-old twins, and my boyfriend’s younger siblings. But I know, in this moment and every moment I’m with them, that I would take this unconventional family over some vanilla version of the Brady Bunch every time. A full house is a full house, and no matter whose house it is or who is filling it, the love is enough to burst from the windows and sing out onto the streets. I think that’s all it takes to keep me ticking.

13. REINTRODUCTIONS_

ADRIAN

FOR SOME REASON, I'm fucking nervous.

I've only met Jamie a few times, and the first time was at Jordan's mom's funeral, when she recognized my name in such a poor manner she hit her head on a table when I was mentioned. I've never cared much about first impressions, but that one wasn't my favorite I've ever given, to say the least.

Jamie seemed nice, and she did give me some of the best advice I've received from someone who wasn't a professional. She's always seemed to be rooting for me and Jordan—or just rooting for Jordan and her happiness, which would make me even more fond of her. My nervousness maybe because I never had a relationship with Jordan's mom before she died, and this seems to be the closest thing she has to a mom now.

Now, I get to spend the evening with her, under the circumstances of me moving into Jordan's damn house. If that isn't enough to make someone nervous, I don't know what is.

Pulling a white T-shirt over my head, I put on some deodorant and freshen up, hoping not to seem like I just fried myself in the sun surfing with my little brother all day. The last thing I want for Jamie, or anyone, to think is that I'm taking advantage of Jordan and her helping me.

Walking next door, I tap my knuckles on Nico's door, waiting for him to let me in.

The door swings open, Nico peering up at me with a little less anger than before.

“Did you show Jordan your board?” I ask.

“I forgot,” he groans, throwing his head back dramatically.

“Well, what are you waiting for? I'm sure she'd like to see it. She could probably kick your ass in surfing, too,” I joke, grabbing his shoulder and shaking it. This earns me a smile before a small protest.

“No way,” he drawls with a laugh.

“Yes, way. She’s really good. Put her on that board and she’ll make better use of it than you will.”

He pauses a moment, chewing his cheek. Usually, eye contact is hard to earn from him. He’s closed off and stubborn, just like I was at his age. But just like Jordan did to me, I’m slowly chipping away at his walls. We share the same causes of pain, but our pain isn’t the same. All I can do is try to understand it and try to be there for him.

“I like tu novia.” He giggles. “No wonder you like her. She’s good at surfing and she’s nice.”

“And she’s pretty,” I add. “But that’s just a nice bonus.”

“Was she pretty when you were kids?”

“I didn’t know her when we were kids.” I chuckle. “Why? Got your eye on a girl back home?”

He shrugs, his eyes darting around the room.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I say with a laugh. “And is that part of the reason you were so mad we came here? You didn’t want to leave tu novia?”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” he says with an eye roll. “And she’s not the only reason I was mad. I miss Mom. I wish she would come home.”

“Me too,” I sigh, pulling my lips to the side. “I miss her a lot. You must miss her a lot, too.”

“I just hate having to take care of Melissa and Gabriella when she’s gone,” he mutters.

“Well, now you don’t have to worry about that. Just worry about being a kid. Have fun, make friends here, we’ll go to the beach a lot. You’re going to meet Jordan’s family tonight, and you already met Camilla, she lives here. They’re all going to take care of the girls *and* you from now on.”

“I need to show them my board,” he interrupts, his eyes going wide as he signals the end of our conversation.

I shake my head as a smile takes over my face, joining everyone downstairs moments later.

I worry about my brother. I know what both my nature and nurture caused me with my addiction, and I would never forgive myself if he had to face what I did. Trying to help him work through his emotions instead of running from and numbing them is the best way I can think to achieve that.

Jordan and Cam are sitting on the couch, having a glass of wine when I make it down the stairs. Jordan gives me a nervous smile and I walk over to them, kissing her on the head.

“I’m going to start on dinner. Should be done around seven thirty or so.”

“Thank you,” Jordan says quietly, just as Camilla sings out, “Thank you, Adrian, we love you,” earning a laugh from both Jordan and me.

I know Jordan feels weird about drinking around me. She may feel weird about drinking in general, but since I got sober and she got a handle on her bingeing, I can tell me seeing her drink puts her on edge.

Truthfully, it doesn’t bother me if she drinks. It does bother me if she drinks a lot, but now it’s pretty easy to trust she won’t do that unexpectedly. Like I’ve told her before, just because I can’t drink, doesn’t mean no one in my life can drink either.

As I begin pulling ingredients from the fridge, the garage door swings open, Jake trudging inside. He gives me a single nod, kicking his work boots off and sitting at the dining room table.

“Need any help?” he asks, pushing his dirty blond hair back from his eyes. I raise an eyebrow at him, rinsing mushrooms in the sink.

“Did you just offer to help me cook?”

He rolls his eyes, tapping his work boot on the floor. “I just offered so I wouldn’t feel like such an asshole when I asked you to hand me a beer out of the fridge. Doesn’t mean I was actually going to do it.”

I chuckle, handing him a cold can before the pop of it opening fills the air. “You should really hang out with Nico.” I laugh. “I think the two of you would get along just fine. You’re both equally angry all the time.”

“What are you making?” he asks, disregarding me.

It’s easy to forget how Jake is and take it personally. But anyone who knows him well, also knows that his stoic personality is what makes him Jake.

“Gonna barbecue some chicken and vegetable skewers, some rice and salad.”

He nods, watching me as I prepare the food and taking a sip of his beer. “Why the hell are you making so many? The kids will probably only have one each.”

“Jamie’s coming too, and I’m not sure if she’s bringing her husband, so I figured better to have more food than not enough.”

“Fuck, I forgot she lives here now.” He laughs. “If we had another room, she would probably move in with how much she’s fucking here.”

“Do you want me to have the kids all share a room so she can?”

“No, dumbass. Last thing I want is for my older sister and her husband to live here. She’s close enough across town.”

“Be nice,” Jordan taunts, flicking him on the back of the head. “Or I’ll invite Dad over, too.”

“And I will leave if you do that,” he grumbles.

The front door swings open, yet another body entering the room—or three. Jamie walks in, a twin on each hip.

“Gimme,” Jordan exclaims, taking Xavier from her sister and giving her a hug. “You should have told me you were bringing them, I would have gotten more food.”

“That’s alright,” I interrupt. “I had a feeling she wouldn’t be coming alone. Made extra just in case.”

“Adrian,” Jamie greets me, coming into the kitchen and giving me a hug. I kiss Kayden on the head, who kicks her feet and leans her head onto her sister’s shoulder. “Feeling better after a full night of sleep, I hope?”

“Much better.” I laugh, watching as Nico drags Jordan and Xavier to the garage to show off his surfboard. “Nico, let them be,” I yell over my shoulder, focusing on preparing our dinner—also known as a small feast for nine people.

“Oh, he’s fine. It’s a sibling party. That’s what’s gonna happen.” Jamie laughs, right as Camilla comes up to her and grabs Kayden.

“Awww, Jamie. You think I’m your sister? I mean, we do look alike.”

“I don’t think you’re our sister,” Jamie teases. “I know you are. Look at this place. You’ve been here for too long, and now, you’re not going anywhere. We won’t let you.”

Cam laughs, opening the refrigerator and grabbing a bottle of wine. “Want a glass?”

“Please,” Jamie sighs, sitting across from Jake. “It’s been a day. Thank you for cooking, Adrian.”

“Glad to do it,” I say with a smile.

Melissa and Gabriella come running into the dining room, leaving their new den for the first time since I’ve been home. Jordan certainly knew what she was doing with their decor, to say the least. I don’t remember the last time I saw them this entertained without a television in front of them.

“Hi, girly pops!” Jamie yells and bends down to hug them. I pick up the tray of food, shooting an observant Camilla a smile as I make my way to the barbecue outside. Leaving the sliding door open, I listen to the sounds of a full house and delicious meal being prepared, and realize that I do know what’s best for them. I may not know it when I make the decision, or for a while after, but this evening, I get the reassurance I need.

The screen door opens behind me, sliding shut as Jordan walks outside, Xavier snug on her hip.

“They’re getting big,” I tell her, positioning the skewers on the hot iron grade of the barbecue. “Just a few months since I last saw them, and I can already tell.”

“You are getting big, aren’t you, bubbas,” she says to Xavier, planting a kiss on his cheek, then one on my lips. “I don’t know why she brought them this late, they need to go to bed soon.”

“I think they’ll survive.” I chuckle, glancing in her direction between my actions.

I don’t know what comes over me—if it’s my pure, undying love for her, the baby that fits perfectly on her hip, or the way that in the seemingly worst situations, we’re still happy—but all I want is to rip her clothes off here, make bare love on the deck, and make this moment our life forever.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“You know what,” she teases, leaning her head on my shoulder and watching as I adjust the food on the grill.

“I probably do, but I still want to hear you say it.”

“Like you want to do things to me that I shouldn’t say in front of my one-year-old brother.”

“I always want to do those things to you, mija.” I laugh, wrapping my arm around her shoulders and pulling her into my side. “I want to do much more to you than you probably think.”

“I can only hope.” She chuckles before a deep exhale. “Can you believe it’s already almost been a year since we met?”

“I can’t.”

“Me neither. I just wish we hadn’t wasted so much of it fighting and not being together.”

“Well,” I begin. “We have the rest of our whole lives now. I think a few bad months in the grand scheme of a few decades isn’t too bad.”

“Yeah.” She chuckles again. “I guess that’s true. Now we have all of the bullshit out of the way and just get to enjoy being happy.”

“That we do. But if you can say bullshit in front of Xavier,” I say as I point at him, his chubby cheeks lifted into a smile. “Then I can say all of the things I want to do to you in front of him.”

Jordan smirks at me, shaking her head. “We’re going inside. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Be in there in about ten.”

—

I place the tray of skewers into the center of the dining room table, taking my seat next to Jordan. Nico sits on my other side, Melissa next to him, and Gabriella across from her. Camilla is directly across from me, Jamie across from Jordan, and Jake sitting at the head of the table. This feels like some new era version of the last supper with so many people in this house.

For the most part, everyone is in very good spirits. The twins are tired, as Jordan predicted, but still giggly. They spent the last half an hour playing with the girls, which was a double win as it kept everyone busy while we finished preparing for dinner.

“Here, let me get that,” I tell Jordan, taking her knife and fork and cutting the chicken into smaller pieces. She smiles at me, rubbing her hand over her brother’s hair before feeding him a bite.

“Jordan, are those your children?” Melissa asks, just tall enough to see over the table as she sits.

“No, they aren’t my children,” Jordan laughs. “They’re my brother and sister.”

“Where are your children then?” Melissa continues, looking between Jordan and me.

“We don’t have any children, Mel,” I tell her before taking another bite.

“I would beg to differ.” Jamie chuckles, sipping on a glass of red wine as Kayden chews on a bell pepper in her lap. “This house is pretty full of them.”

“You’ve got me there.” I laugh, kissing Jordan on the cheek.

“When does school start for them? Are you sending them to Harbor Isla or Vista Mesa?”

“Harbor Isla,” Jordan answers before I even have a second to consider. “Starts August eighteenth, so about six weeks from now.”

I shoot her a side-eyed smirk.

“What?” She laughs. “It’s a better school. And the drive is only five minutes longer.”

This woman. Everything that is on my plate, she splits into two—pain, stress, fear. Everything that is much easier to digest in smaller portions.

“And Nico, what grade are you going to be in?” Jamie continues.

“Seventh.”

“Lucky you. The middle school is just around the corner, right next to the beach.”

“Sweet,” he mutters before continuing to inhale his food at an ungodly rate.

“Jake, Camilla, and I went there,” Jordan tells Nico. “You might have some of the same teachers that we did.”

“You mean they’re still alive?” Nico asks, one eyebrow raised—which earns groans and laughs from all adults in the room.

“Jesus, Nico, we’re not ancient.” I laugh, grabbing Xavier from Jordan and placing him on my lap so she can finish her meal.

Camilla continues to joke with Nico about how ten years isn’t *that* long, though for someone who’s barely been alive longer than that, I can understand how it seems this way. I bounce Xavier on my knee, earning giggles and screeches from him with bigger bounces, as I listen to the chatter of my younger siblings and the love of my life. Out of the corner of my eye, I feel Jamie’s stare on me. When I look up, she gives me a smile and what I hope is a nod of approval, before finishing the rest of her wine.

“I’m going to bring the kids by your work on the Fourth of July to visit, if that’s alright,” Jordan says to me through all the noise.

“I would love that.”

“I can’t believe you have to go back already. I wish you could have just a few more days off.”

“Me too, mija.” I chuckle. “I guess they think a month and a half just wasn’t enough.”

“I sure don’t.” She smiles at me through her lashes, her cheeks a light pink from the thoughts that wine has running through her head right now.

“I know you don’t.”

Jamie stands from the table, walking to the sink with Kayden and placing her glass in it. “Well, thank you very much for the dinner Adrian, it was delicious. And thank you, Jo, for not cooking. We all appreciate it,” she says with a wink. “I’ve got to get these two back home before they turn into monsters.”

“I’ll help you,” I announce, securing Xavier in my arms as I stand. “Anything I can grab?”

“Looks like you’ve already got it all. I left the diaper bag in the car. Goodnight, everyone. Let’s do it again soon,” Jamie calls, making her way to the front door with me behind her.

We walk to her car and I go to the opposite side, opening the door and buckling Xavier into his car seat. When he's all fastened, I give him and Kayden a wave before closing the door.

"The first time I saw you, Jordan hardly spoke to you. The second time, she threw you a party. Now, you're practically parents," Jamie says, leaning against the car.

"Yeah," I mutter. "Didn't expect it to happen like that. Sorry. I know how it must seem from an outside perspective."

"Don't be sorry. It doesn't matter how it seems from an outside perspective, as long as the two of you are happy. It may be out of the ordinary, but you must be doing something right—both of you. I've never seen her this happy before, and she never would have made these sacrifices for anyone else. I suspect I can say the same about you."

I nod, running my hand through my hair. "I don't even think happy begins to describe it for me."

"Good," she says with a smile, opening the car door. "Good night, Adrian. Call me if you need anything."

14. ALONE IN A FULL
HOUSE_

JORDAN

BEING responsible for three children is tiring, but the most enjoyable tiring thing I've yet to experience.

Moments of silence and solitude are seldom in this house, but I sure do enjoy them when I can. Tonight, Camilla is out of town with her mom, and Jake went to get some drinks with Ryan and Trevor. The kids went to sleep around nine, and I've been bingeing crime documentaries like my life depends on it. Probably not my best choice of media to consume, given how paranoid I get when I watch them, but sometimes, we all give into our guilty pleasures. Adrian is off of work tomorrow morning for a few days, and we'll get to enjoy some beach days and surfing with the kids. Until then, I'm making the most of these quiet moments by myself.

It's already almost two in the morning when I decide to turn off the TV and head to my room. The house feels eerie, like someone is watching me as I move through the space, but I attribute that to my choice in entertainment for the last few hours. Jake should be home quickly, so I leave the lights on downstairs and in the hall, making my run upstairs a less daunting task. After placing my empty water glass in the sink, I race upstairs as if someone was on my tail.

As my head hits the pillow, I hear the front door slam shut. Jake usually texts me when he's almost home to see if the garage parking spot is open, but I'm guessing he knew everyone else is gone and it's his to take.

"Jake?" I yell out to him, waiting for a grumbling response not to wake the kids up, though that response never comes. I throw my feet over the side of my bed and onto the floor as I shuffle toward the stairs.

"Jake, why the fuck are you slamming the door so hard? You're going to wake the kids up when you break a window." I sigh in an even, annoyed tone as my feet make their way down the steps.

I ignore my crime show paranoia and focus on keeping my footing in the dimly lit hall with no contacts in. The living room is empty, the motion light outside the front door on the porch shining brightly.

Rolling my eyes, I walk toward the door to double check the lock, and a force comes barreling into me. It knocks the wind from my lungs and pins me down flat on my stomach, unable to move from the hardwood floor. I turn my head to see what happened before my face is pushed back, my cheek pressed against the cold ground as a hand holds me in place.

My knees bend repeatedly, kicking whoever's on top of me in the back, but it's no use—they aren't budging. Air escapes my lungs as their knees tighten around my rib cage, unable to expand and take another inhale. I struggle to free my hands from beneath their knees, to turn my body over or find any way of escape, but there's no way out. Kicking my feet, I slam one against the wall behind me, causing the floating shelf to fall from its place hanging above me. It lands on top of my foot, shooting an excruciating pain throughout it before going completely numb. I attempt to scream in pain, and fear, but there's no air in my lungs to allow me to do so.

My head starts to grow dizzy with a lack of oxygen, panic rushing over me as the adrenaline has nowhere to go. The knees on my rib cage tighten their grip, causing a pinching pain between each bone, sending cracks throughout my chest. Agony takes me over, and I'm so disoriented as I struggle against whoever has me pinned down, it feels like I've just gone ten trips on a teacup ride.

If this is a robbery, why don't they just tie me up and take our shit without causing me so much goddamn suffering? The tv is theirs to have, as long as I made it out with no more than ten broken bones. As I try to speak and reason with them despite my inability to do so, I feel a sharp metal blade against the side of my neck, my head still being held aggressively against the cold tile floor. My eyes fall closed as I wait for the cool knife to cut my neck, preparing myself for the powerlessness to further itself. The end pokes into me, threatening to break the skin at any moment with an ounce of

pressure more. As I surrender to my fate, unable to scream or breathe from the knees moments away from breaking each of my ribs, my limbs go limp. My shoulders relax and I rest my chest against the ground, unable to fight whoever is holding me down. My body and brain begin to doze off, my head spinning as a warm breath releases against the back of my neck. Fear subsides as I slowly lose my grip on reality.

“I don’t see why you thought you could just walk away.”

The voice sends chills down my spine, bringing one last moment of consciousness, though I’m not sure if this is reality or what my brain has waiting for me on the other side of this battle.

I struggle one last time as I try to free my arms or head, to which he only tightens his grip.

“Shhh. This was much easier when you accepted what you’ve done. You think you can just walk away from the mess you’ve created?” His words hiss into my ear.

There isn’t any air in my lungs to even mutter a response. I close my eyes again, surrendering to his hold one last time, becoming numb as purple stars danced in my eyelids. I slowly drift out of consciousness, left unable to protect myself, before the darkness finally takes over.

15. SLEEPING BEFORE
SIRENS_

ADRIAN

THE FIRE TRUCK drives out of the fire station, down to Belmont Shore in the dead of night. A report of an assault rattled the firehouse as we stumbled out of our beds, down into the truck and through the empty streets of Long Beach. Passing through the grid-styled neighborhood, we turn down Jordan's street, and the engineer shuts off the wailing sirens to not wake those lucky enough to be sleeping around us. I stare out the window to watch for her dark bedroom window, where she and the kids are quietly sleeping, longing to be in her bed with her.

As I wait for her house to zip by my window, we slowly draw to a stop in front instead, and my heart stops. Panic rises in my throat as I tumble out of the truck door, looking for her, the kids, anyone who was in the house to make sure they're okay. Surely this has to be a mistake. It *has* to be.

Two police cars and two ambulances sit blockading her house, lights flashing. I run across her patio, not stopping to assess the situation, and head straight to the living room. My colleagues yell to me from the truck, confused by my urgency as I ignore their directions.

Jake sits on the couch, being interviewed by a policeman, his knuckles and palm bleeding through a gauze wrapped around them.

"Jake, what the fuck happened? Where is Jordan?" He stands up to block me as I push past him, searching through the house to find her. The girl's bedroom door is still closed, Nico nowhere in sight.

"Adrian, she's okay. She's in the ambulance out front right now. The kids are all still asleep, and if you quit fucking yelling, they might stay that way."

I turn to him and push my finger into his chest. "What do you mean, she's *okay*? What the fuck happened?" Jake takes a step back and holds his hands up in front of his chest.

“Don’t fucking come at me. If I hadn’t walked in, *my* sister, *your* girlfriend, would be dead. You’re pointing fingers at the wrong guy. Anthony’s outside so if you’re looking for someone to tear apart, go find him and not me.”

“What?” I barely choke the word out. “That’s who’s in the other ambulance?” My fingers run through my hair, gripping at the roots. “And they want to take him to the same fucking hospital as her after he assaulted her? The only place they should be taking him is to fucking jail.” I grind my teeth with every word.

Jake tilts his head back as he speaks, his eyes challenging me. “You fucking heard me. Now quit looking at me like I’m the bad guy and go check on your damn girlfriend.” He pushes past me as my adrenaline builds even more. I follow him back down the porch stairs, ducking my head into an ambulance, ready to destroy Anthony if he’s the one waiting inside of it.

Jordan’s lying on a gurney, breathing through an oxygen mask with a splint around her foot.

Broken.

I’ve never seen her broken before.

She’s steadfast, strong and certain, no matter the situation.

Never broken.

“Baby,” I breathe, rushing next to her side and grabbing her hand, holding it in my palm. “I’m right here, you’re okay.”

She doesn’t look over at me as her eyes stay locked onto the paramedic standing over her. “Thank you, that’s what I’m trying to tell him, I’m fine and I don’t need to go to the goddamn hospital.” She keeps her stone cold stare on him.

That’s my girl. Broken physically, but strong as hell mentally.

“Any reason that she needs to go urgently? I can take her over and monitor her on the way. She’s gotta do police reports, we can do them here and then head over there so she can be comfortable.” I look at the paramedic with begging eyes.

“Ultimately it’s up to her if she wants to go. She’s an adult and can decide for herself. But if you notice any signs of confusion, amnesia, anything at all, she needs to go immediately. I highly suggest you go tonight to get her checked for head trauma, since she was unconscious when we arrived, and her foot appears to be broken.”

“We’ll definitely go tonight.” Jordan darts her eyes to me, and I keep mine locked on the paramedic. There’s no question we’re going.

I carry Jordan back into her house from the hospital, a successful CAT scan, x-rays and blood work all complete. Her police report was difficult to file due to short term memory loss, caused by the lack of oxygen to her brain, so we rushed her off to the ER where we stayed for over four hours, running tests and searching signs of any brain damage.

It put me on edge, being in the same building as Anthony. Jake had broken a glass vase over his head after seeing him and Jordan struggle through the window in the front door. He snuck up behind Anthony and knocked him out, first hit, before bashing his face in a few times with his bare hands and calling the police. By the time they arrived, Anthony was back awake with Jake pinning him to the ground, Jordan still passed out, helpless next to them.

Some higher power had stepped in and made my truck the one that responded to the call. The thought of Jordan lying on the ground, unable to defend herself and begging for her life sent a knife to my chest. *I should have been there to protect her.*

When the police left, they informed us that this wasn’t Anthony’s first attack. They believed he had paranoid schizophrenia recently onset and that he would be sent to trial to be assessed and sentenced to either jail or a mental institution. It didn’t matter where they sent him, I would still

be on edge for the rest of my life. It's my job to keep Jordan safe from anything that could harm her, and I had already failed at that once. I would never let her be in harm's way again for as long as she lives.

I carry Jordan from my car into her bedroom as she sleeps. She has a small cut on her neck and a bruise forming already on her cheekbone. Her foot's in a fucking boot until she's able to undergo surgery, which will place the bones back correctly. When they changed her into a hospital gown for her CAT scan and x-rays, her ribcage was already littered with bruises and marks. Purple, black, and blue decorate her torso, yet her chest moves evenly, unfazed by the pain and trauma as she rests.

Jake follows me into Jordan's room as I set her into her bed, sitting next to her on the soft mattress.

Peaceful.

How could anyone be peaceful—only hours after what she endured tonight?

The sky is beginning to turn a light blue from black, signaling a sunrise just around the corner. While the world continues on and creeps slowly into a new day, mine has nearly shattered completely. I place my elbows on my knees and hold my head in my hands, letting out an exasperated breath. Jake lowers himself into Jordan's desk chair, picking up a pencil and twirling it between his fingers.

"How did this happen?" I glance over to him, lost and confused, and broken at the sight of my entire reason for being laying helpless and damaged on her mattress.

He clicks his tongue. "I really don't fucking know. I'm just thanking God I headed home when I did. I walked up to the door and saw that piece of shit with a knife to her neck, sitting on her back while she was completely unconscious. I never would have forgiven myself if anything else had happened. I already can't forgive myself for letting her get hurt." He runs his fingers through his hair, tears gathering in the corners of his blue eyes, identical to Jordan's. The person who never shows any emotion is now overcome with it, and we're both

drowning in grief for someone who's right next to us, treading water in the pain that fills the room.

I move my palms up and down my face. "Neither can I. I never saw this fucking coming."

Jake pinches the bridge of his nose. "Me neither, but when she was talking to the police before you got here, she mentioned that Anthony blamed her for his plug getting ratted out. I guess she was there when one of their deals went south before."

My stomach twisted.

"What?"

Why didn't she tell me this? If he's been threatening her and making her uncomfortable, I need to know about it. Her trip to the hospital tonight only proves my point even further.

Jake continues to twirl the pencil between his fingers. "Yeah. I don't know too much about it. I'll talk to Camilla and get more info, guess she was there too."

"I wish he would have been here to pound his fucking face in. I'm just happy someone was able to do it for me. Thank you."

"Me too, bro, me too." Jake sighs as he stands and walks out of the room, closing the door behind him. I click the light off on her nightstand and carefully shift on the bed, trying not to wake her.

People believe in karma and superstition—if they say "my life can't get any worse," they think it will hear them and prove them wrong. They want some ulterior force, some higher power to be to blame for everything bad that happens, while taking the credit for the good. I've learned none of that shit matters. You can do everything right, try to correct all your wrongs, and still end up being unjustly fucked over.

When I first heard Anthony was the one that had assaulted her, I instantly blamed myself. I'm not oblivious to the fact of Anthony being wrapped up in not only addiction, but also the distribution of his choice of drugs. His attacking her had seemed like a last ditch effort to get back at me and my family

for our past involvement, or for leaving that life behind all together. But, now, this could point in any direction. We might not get answers for a while, or we may never get them. All I know is that I get to have one more night next to my girlfriend, and I will never let any circumstance cause me to take that for granted.

Shifting on my side, I study the silhouette of Jordan's plush lips, slightly parted as the rhythm of her breathing fills the quiet room. I pick up a few pieces of her hair, scattered across the pillow, and twist them between my fingers.

Life is testing us.

But there is no test we've yet to overcome.

Sleep never finds me as I wait for Jordan to wake, watching yet another sunrise between the cracks in her blinds.

16. TEARS AND PINKIE
PROMISES_

JORDAN

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN CONSCIOUS AND NOT, my ribs ache as if they've been kicked a hundred times by a professional soccer team. I can hardly breathe without excruciating pain as I linger in a state of near sleep before a cough sends me over the edge, causing me to cry out and wake myself up.

“Sh, sh, sh, baby. I'm right here.” Adrian runs his rough hand over my head as I lay still on my back, afraid to move and send another shock wave of agony through my body.

“It hurts so bad I can't breathe,” I groan, my voice hoarse and barely able to make the words leave my mouth.

“It's okay, baby. You're okay. We can go back to the hospital if you need to.” He reaches over to my side table to grab some medicine and a full glass of water. My lips part slightly, allowing him to slip a pill in. I swallow the water and tablet before letting the darkness take over again a few minutes later.

When my eyes reopen, it's still light outside of my window. Adrian's sitting in my bed leaning against the headboard, watching a video silently on his phone. I blink up at him, begging my eyes to focus on his presence and not drift back to sleep. He notices my gaze and puts his phone down, his captivating and comforting green eyes softly finding mine. A woody, musky scent takes over my senses, which have been starved of any stimulation for hours on end. A half smile melts me again, distracting me from the immense amounts of pain I'm currently facing.

“I would grab you and cuddle with you, but I don't want to hurt you,” he whispers as he swipes a strand of hair off my forehead. I stare up at the ceiling, struggling to come to.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“On and off since early Tuesday morning. It’s nine a.m. on Thursday now.”

“So forty-eight hours, basically? No wonder I’m so achy, my muscles need blood flow.” I start to sit up as an excruciating jolt shoots through my chest, knocking me back down. My hands grab the sides of my ribs, trying to breathe through the agony, but only obtaining a whimper.

Adrian runs his fingers through my hair, “It’s okay, baby, just breathe. You probably need more medicine. Six of your ribs are broken, and three bones in your foot. The last thing you need is blood flow, you just need to rest. Are you hungry?”

I nod.

“What do you want?”

I sigh slightly, the air that leaves my lungs causing a piercing in my chest with each small movement. “I don’t know anything. What are the kids having for breakfast?”

“I’m not sure, mija. I just got home from work, and Jamie took them out for the day. I’m sure they’re eating with her.”

“You worked?”

He nods, rubbing his thumb over my forehead. “I had to, but trust me, I didn’t want to. Camilla and Jake took turns sitting with you while I was gone.”

I let out a sigh, flinching at the needle sensation between each of my ribs. “I think I just want a smoothie.”

Adrian chuckles at my request. “Alrighty then, a smoothie you’ll get.” He goes to stand from my bed and I grab his hand, locking my eyes with his.

“Just order it for delivery please. I don’t want you to leave me.”

He nods once and begins typing on his phone, lying back down next to me.

Thirty minutes later, Jake walks into my room with a plastic smoothie-filled cup in hand. He sits on the end of my bed as Adrian props up every pillow our household has behind me. I slowly scoot myself back, huffing and puffing with every shift of my body before lying on the cloud of pillows. It's nice to change positions for the first time in days, aside from agonizing bathroom trips, though getting there is far less than enjoyable. Adrian props my foot up on a few folded blankets, and the three of us sit silently and watch *Friends*, the only sound in the room being the show and my chewing.

The sun is high, the air conditioning keeping my room tolerable during the hot California summer when I finally get the itch—the itch to move, to have some change of scenery, to try and have a taste of my normal life back outside of this bed. A bed I always loved before, right now, I can't stand a moment more of.

“I think I want to take a shower,” I say around a yawn, grabbing the remote and pausing the show.

I never understood Adrian's addiction to prescription pills. I liked party drugs, substances that made me social and happy. But with how well these drugs are numbing my physical pain, I can only imagine the wonders they did for his mental pain.

“Why don't we start with a bath,” he counters. “That'll be much more doable than trying to maneuver around with a trash bag on your foot.”

“Fine,” I agree. “When will the kids be back?”

Adrian shrugs, sitting up. “Jamie insisted on taking them for the day, think they went to the beach with your dad and the twins. I bet they'll be home pretty soon.”

“Oh god. My dad knows about this?”

Adrian gives me a sympathetic smile, handing me a glass of water. “Yes, he knows. We couldn't keep something like

this from him. You know that.”

I roll my eyes, the reality of this shitshow hitting me over and over. It was much easier to be asleep. “I just hope they aren’t talking about it with the kids. I don’t remember what happened, they don’t need to either.”

Adrian shakes his head, running his hand through his hair. “The kids don’t know what happened. They won’t be talking about it. Let’s just get you in the bath, babe. I’m sure it’ll be nice to freshen up.”

I watch as he stands, walking into my bathroom and running the faucet. His dark navy work shirt is still slick against his skin from his shift, and I can see the bags beneath his eyes that are darker than mine. As if the stress he had before wasn’t enough, I’ve now added even more to him, unwillingly on both our parts.

I begin to shift toward the edge of the mattress, Adrian walking back into my room from the adjoining bathroom and bringing my efforts to a halt. He swiftly lifts me from the bed, carrying me to the steamy bathroom and then helping me undress. Taking my shirt off is the most immensely painful part of this process, as I can barely move—let alone lift—my arms without flinching in unbearable agony. Adrian lifts the fabric over my head gently, running his fingertips lightly over my bare skin where the bruises lie.

“They’re going to keep looking worse before they start looking better, unfortunately that’s just how bruises work.” He kisses my temple as I turn to examine myself in the mirror.

Bruises the sizes of softballs are scattered along the side of my ribcage from Anthony’s knees squeezing into me. I have an inch long cut on the side of my neck that the knife indented into my skin. As my fingers run over the scabbed skin, I blinked back warm water. I don’t remember all of what happened. The nurse in the emergency room assured me this isn’t unusual, that my brain was trying to block out the pain and trauma of what had happened. Unfortunately, my body couldn’t do the same.

Adrian takes me gently into his arms, wrapping them around my shoulders as I sob. All I know about what happened was what people told me. At least if I could remember, I could begin to process everything, and move past what became my reality. Instead, it only reminds me that it's real by the pain and the gruesome marks left on my body.

The water is more than halfway up the tub walls when Adrian shuts off the faucet, dipping his fingertips in the water to double-check the temperature. He guides me into the bath, and I lay in the warm water, my broken foot resting on the side of the tub. Adrian rinses and washes my hair, his tender touch slowly removing layers of trauma and sweat from being in a semi-permanent horizontal state. I let the water come up to my chin, submerging myself in the weightlessness and comfort that floating in the bath brings me. I stay in there for almost an hour, closing my eyes and drifting in and out of sleep. Between the painkillers and the support of the liquid I'm in, it's the most comfortable I've been since this whole incident took place.

When I finally am pruny enough to truly resemble a raisin, I decide to leave the bath. Adrian wraps me in his firm arms, the soft fabric of a bath towel comforting my bare skin, before placing me gently on the mattress and closing the door behind us. He grabs my pajamas as I quickly shake my head back and forth, pulling the blanket over me.

"The only way I can try to sleep now is naked. I don't want any extra pressure on my ribs. Today we need to leave my room. I can't stay holed up forever."

He scoffs at me, placing the shorts back in my drawer. "Babe, you're not holed up. You're recovering from a seriously traumatic and damaging event. You need to rest."

"I need to get my mind off of everything, Adrian. Getting out of this room and seeing the kids, our family, is the only way to do that." A deep breath leaves my lungs, deflating as I hold back tears from my eyes.

"I know, beautiful, but your body needs rest. It needs to sleep and recover and heal. Please allow yourself that." He

slips under the covers next to me, draping his hand over my bare stomach. “Why didn’t you ever tell me about what happened with Anthony?”

I stare at the ceiling, trying to muster up the courage to speak.

“It was so long ago—right when we met, I think. I was fucked up and Camilla, Kaylee, and I witnessed one of their deals get rocky, but then he started selling for them, so I thought it was fine, for a while. Since then, he had just started acting weird. Showing up randomly and whatnot. I just didn’t want you to worry. I never thought he was serious, that he was just crazy and trying to take out the mess he had gotten into on anyone he could. I’m sorry. I promise.”

His voice and gaze are soft, like melted butter going through my veins. “Just please promise me everything between us will be transparent from here on out. Keeping secrets from each other leads to nothing but problems that could have been avoided between us. I never want you to go through the pain you have within the last year ever again.”

He holds up his pinkie and I link mine onto it. “I promise.”

17. MOVING SKELETONS
FROM THE CLOSET TO THE
DINNER TABLE_

JORDAN

“DINNER’S READY IN TEN MINUTES,” Adrian announces as he peeks his head into my room, smiling when he spots Camilla and me lying in my bed.

The kids are due home any minute now, and I would be lying if I said I was anything less than excited. I’ve been still for too long, and I need their energy to shake things up a bit. Hopefully some of it will rub off on me.

“Trevor’s coming by,” Adrian continues. “I haven’t seen him in a while, and I’m going to have him bring over my old wetsuit for Nico, if that’s alright.”

“Of course. It’ll be nice to see him,” I reply, holding out my hands and having him pull me to sit upright. “We’ll be down in a minute.”

Adrian kisses me, making his way out of the bedroom and shutting the door.

“Trevor, huh? And you were going to try and play it off like you didn’t know he was coming?” I tease Camilla. She shakes her head with a laugh, pulling her long, dark hair into a bun on top of her head.

“I didn’t know he was coming, but I do know that you’re extremely nosy.”

“I might be nosy, but you’re extremely private. I have to be nose-y to get you to tell me anything that’s going on in your life.”

“Well, you’re the only person I tell. So be grateful for that.”

I roll my eyes at her as she scoots to the end of the bed, plugging in her phone. “I’m supposed to go to dinner at my mom’s this weekend,” she mutters before chewing on her bottom lip.

“Will your sister be there?”

She nods silently.

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“That’s okay,” she sighs. “You’ve got enough going on—three kids in your house, a boot on your foot. I’ll survive this.”

I let out a deep breath, pausing for a moment. Camilla’s family relationships are strained. She doesn’t get along with her sister and brother-in-law, which is why when they moved back to her mom’s with their kids, she moved in with us. Now, she avoids going over there at almost all costs.

“Well, if you change your mind, let me know. I would be more than happy to go with you.”

“Thanks,” she says with a soft smile. “I’m starving, and I’ve had enough conversations with children for the day, so get your ass up. It’s your turn now.”

“Alright.” I laugh. “It is my turn now. You win that argument.”

She helps me get up from the bed and runs a brush through my hair, steadying me as I shift into a new outfit. The voices and laughter of the kids downstairs echo through the hallways, and I hear Trevor chatting with Adrian in the kitchen. When we make it down there, all three kids are watching TV. Camilla begins to set the table, and I go to the back of the couch and greet the girls.

“Jordan!” Melissa squeals. “I want to give you a hug, but Adrian said you fell off your bike and I can’t give you one because it will hurt you.”

I laugh, making eye contact with Adrian as he walks over to us. “I want to give you a hug too. Soon. I promise.”

“Adrian, what are you making for dinner?” Gabriella asks.

“Pizza and pasta,” Adrian answers.

“We had that two nights ago,” Nico grumbles.

“You’re right, we did. Because it’s easy to cook and I’m very busy this week. Go sit at the table.”

Adrian turns off the TV, earning a collective sigh, and the kids make their way to the dining room. Trevor walks past them, his sympathetic, kind eyes on me.

Trevor has always been like a big teddy bear. I don't think there's a mean bone in his body—the only time I've ever seen him angry was when someone he loved was hurt. Besides that, and aside from Adrian, he's one of the most calming and big-hearted people I know.

“How are you holding up, Jo?” he asks, wrapping his arms around my shoulders.

“I'm doing good, actually. I've been better, but I've also been worse.” I laugh. “How have you been? It's been a while.”

“I've been good. Just busy with work and all of that fun stuff. Thanks for having me over.”

“You're always welcome here.”

He pulls away from me, sinking into the couch as Adrian walks into the kitchen. “Adrian has asked me to help out over here while he works, if you don't mind.”

“Oh, you don't need to do that, Trevor. We've got Camilla and Jake living here, and Jamie is always in and out. I appreciate it, though.”

He cradles his chin with his hand, resting his elbow on his knee. “I know I probably don't need to—you guys have a lot of hands on deck. But Jake is busy with work, Jamie is building her life here. And if I'm being honest, it gets boring over at our place all by myself. I could use something to get me out of the house.”

I chuckle, nodding in agreement. “Well, if you really want to sign yourself up for taking care of three children and an injured adult part time, be my guest. We've already got so many bodies in this house, one more won't hurt.”

He shoots me a small smile, tapping his fingers on his cheek. “Thanks, Jo. And I'm really glad you're okay. That shouldn't have happened to you in the first place, and it definitely won't happen again.”

“I hope not.” I laugh, Adrian coming up behind me and wrapping his hands around my waist.

“Dinner’s ready,” he mumbles, kissing me on the cheek.

We all make our way to the table and eat another meal as a family of perfectly fitting outliers.

18. WAKING NIGHTMARES_

JORDAN

TIME BEGINS to move at a somewhat normal pace again, whether we like it or not. Bones heal. Children adjust. People work. Surgeries begin and end. School resumes. Life happens, and we're moving with it the best we can. We're learning to love every bit of it.

Camilla, Trevor, and I decide to start watching the *Star Wars* saga with the kids after I accidentally mentioned I've never seen it. Trevor tried to carry me to the couch from Cam's bedroom, but I told him to back off and let me be an adult. I love Adrian, but it feels good to take care of myself for a little. Broken foot, cracked ribs and all, I'm still capable of carrying my own weight to the living room.

Trevor and Camilla asked me a few questions about the night Anthony attacked me, but all I could tell them was that I don't remember much. When we had been in the car with Anthony picking up from dealers, I never thought we would have to deal with that again. It was short-lived, and none of us talked to any of the dealers. Once they got busted, Anthony wanted someone to blame, and apparently his mind was so distorted with drugs and paranoia, he decided I was the best one to fit this role.

I know Adrian wanted to blame himself for what happened—that the cartel his dad was involved in may be now coming after me, that they may have come after his mom. After this much time has passed, and Anthony admitting it was about the dealers, we've pretty much eliminated that possibility. He's spoken with Isabel who also didn't think that was the case, but I don't ask for details of him speaking with her. Just because we're happy together doesn't mean I don't get jealous, and something about her has triggered that in me since I met her.

Nico, Gabriella, and Melissa join us on the couch, Melissa laying her head on my thigh as we begin Episode I.

“Jordan, what do those words say?” she asks as the movie gets rolling, and I read her the scrolling introduction as it

passes.

I notice Gabriella silently mouthing the words too, and smile to myself at the progress she's made in the past few months. I never knew these children, who I had hardly met earlier this year, could take up such a big spot in my heart.

By the end of Episode II, Melissa has been asleep for over an hour, Gabriella and Nico looking close behind her.

"Alright, why don't we get you guys to bed? We'll keep watching this tomorrow night, when Adrian is home."

Gabriella nods slowly, rubbing her eyes and sitting up next to me. I kiss the top of her head before she stands, shuffling down the hall and toward her bedroom. Nico follows, his footsteps trudging up the stairs moments later.

Camilla stands to grab Melissa from me, but Trevor puts his hand on her low back to stop her. "I'll take her, Cam."

I shoot him a grateful smile, watching as Melissa's delicate frame hangs in his arms, undisturbed by the movement. "Thanks, Trevor."

I wait until he's out of the room to shoot Cam a sly smile, my eyes heavy with sleep.

"Oh, stop." She chuckles, laying on the couch next to me and snuggling up with a blanket. "He's just being nice."

"Of course he is." I laugh. "When you're ready to stop being weird and tell me what's going on, you let me know."

"I'm not being weird. I'll tell you what's going on when I figure that out myself."

Shaking my head with a smile, I sit up and grab my crutches, then make my way to stand.

"I'm going to sleep. Are you going to stay out here and finish the next episode?" My eyes struggle to stay open as I try to focus on her, swaying back and forth on my crutches. Drowsiness has become my new normal since my surgery earlier this week, and I'm sick of how much I've been missing out on because of it. But tonight isn't the time to try and fight it.

“Yeah, I’m invested now. Night, babe.” She blows me a kiss and looks back toward the TV.

Trevor walks back into the living room and stretches his arms, noticing my lack of balance. “Alright Jo, let’s get you to bed. Can you jump on my back?”

I rub the base of my palms into my eyes, suppressing a yawn. “I can’t, my ribs are too sore.”

“Damn, they’re really that bad?” he asks. I nod, my eyes closed. “Let me see.”

I turn to the side and pulled my shirt up, exposing the marks left on my ribcage. Adrian was right. They had gotten worse with time, the bruises turning a deep swirl of purple and green a few weeks ago, though we had finally reached the point of them starting to look better.

A deep breath leaves Trevor’s lips. “Jesus. You poor thing. I can’t believe someone would do this to you.” His arms gently scoop me up by my knees and upper back. My crutches fall to the floor as I laugh, high and happy off the effects of my painkillers. “Whoops,” I mutter.

“That’s okay. We just need to get you to sleep, china doll.”

Screams burn my throat, tossing and turning in my bed. Rapid breaths leave my lungs, hammering against my broken ribs as I gain a grasp on reality. The air conditioning vent is pumping in my dark room, blowing cool air onto my hot skin. I throw myself out of bed, quickly limping to the bathroom before vomiting in the toilet.

Sweat drenches my brow as I slide my way to the bathroom floor, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. I haven’t thrown up yet from my pain meds, though the nurse warned me that it was a possible side effect, so maybe that was the cause of my sudden vomiting spell. My hands tremble as I tried to quietly calm my breathing. Waking up to a full house

of children—and Camilla and Jake—because I’m vomiting in the middle of the night is not high on my desired list of activities for today.

I pull myself up from the floor and hop my way to my bedroom door, focusing on keeping my knee bent and my stupid boot off of the floor. I flick on the stairway light and trudge my way down, in need of some cold water to balance my internal heat and chills. A deep breath leaves my lungs when I reach the bottom, turning off the light in an attempt to move somewhat stealthily through the downstairs.

Trying to see through the darkness, my hand finds the cool kitchen counter and slides along it to guide me to the refrigerator. Using the light from the open fridge, I grab a glass from the cabinet and pour myself some water, gulping it down. The sensation eases the burning in my throat from puking up everything I’ve ever eaten. I refill the glass once again and shut the door, eliminating my only source of sight. Slowly, I begin shuffling out of the kitchen, using the toe of the boot to balance between steps.

“Hey Jo,” a voice whispers into my ear, before a hand lays lightly on my shoulder.

I yelp out a small scream, dropping the glass to shatter against the floor below me.

“Jo! Jo, it’s me.” Camilla’s hands grip my shoulders as I slowly made out the shape of her face in the darkness.

“Holy shit, you scared me. I’m sorry. I didn’t even hear your door open, I had no idea you were out here.” I press my fingers into my temple, fighting against the panic and fear that momentarily took me over.

Camilla whispers as she continues gripping my shoulders. “I sleep with my door open now in case the girls wake up, I want to be able to hear them. Are you okay?”

I shake my head back and forth, inhaling a steep gust of air. “Yeah I’m fine, just freaked out, I guess.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Trevor whispers, appearing suddenly from Cam’s bedroom, shirtless. “Jordan, are you

okay?”

My eyes adjust slowly on them, struggling to gain focus. “I’m fine, Camilla just scared the shit out of me.”

He peeks around the corner of the hallway, scanning the living room and kitchen before letting out a deep breath. “I don’t know who that freaked out more, you or me.” He chuckles quietly. He picks me up again as I try to anchor myself to the floor.

“I can walk, Trevor.”

He laughs, shaking his head. “Well yeah, you showed us that, but there’s broken glass all over the floor now. I’ll clean it up before the kids wake up.” He trudges back up the stairs and into my bedroom, placing me on the bed and bringing me a fresh glass of water. “If you need something, just text Camilla or me. I’m a light sleeper so I’m sure I’ll wake up.”

“Thanks,” I whisper, rolling onto my side and tucking my hands beneath my head.

“Night,” he breathes, darkening my room again as he shuts the door. I pull out my phone to check the time, seeing a text from Adrian that had come in a few hours earlier, updating me on his shift and telling me he loves me. Squinting one eye against the bright screen, I begin to reply, though he’s probably asleep in the firehouse.

Me: I thought Trevor was gone but he’s staying in Camilla’s room. Tell you more in the morning. I love you, xoxox.

I fall back to sleep before I get a chance to see if he replies.

19. FREE PASS_

JORDAN'S SURGERY TO remove the pins in her foot went well—and seeing her loopy as hell, in her own world of pain meds, made this day even better.

In sobriety, we call any procedure or surgery that requires pain meds a free pass. And boy, can I see why. I have never seen anyone more confused, entertained, sure of themselves, and concerned at the same time. That day was spent in bed as she slept on and off, checking in on her every twenty minutes as I cared for the kids, and trying to decipher what the hell she was talking about.

I was home with her for a few days after her surgery, but had to go back to work three twenty-four hour shifts in a row to make up for it. Everyone else was in and out of the house, and Trevor even went over to check on her and help Camilla out. Jordan was still out of it, from my understanding, but it seems like everything went smoothly. Now, as I drive back to her house after my shift, all I can think about is holding her and seeing her smile—coherently, this time.

I rush upstairs when I get home to check on Jordan, only to find an empty bedroom.

“Babe?” I call out and look around for her downstairs, finding Jake in the kitchen. “Did Jordan leave?”

“No, I think she’s in the bathroom.”

I stalk over to the closed bathroom door and tap lightly with my knuckles. She’s slowly mastered the art of crutches, but trying to bathe is definitely still a challenge.

“Who is it?” she yelps from behind the door.

“It’s me, *mija*.” I crack the door and peek my head around it to see her sitting on the bathroom floor against the toilet, her shoulder leaning against the wall.

“I think I’m sick.” She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand before tilting her head to rest against the wall. Her eyes are tired and seeing her in even more pain than she’s already endured is enough to crack my heart right down the damn middle.

I kneel next to her. “That’s okay. Let’s get you off the floor and back into bed.”

She covers her forehead with her palm. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea, I don’t want to have to run in here if I need to puke again.”

“You won’t. Up you go.” I stand and hold my hand out to her, which she uses to pull herself up onto one foot, hovering her boot above the floor. Dragging her arm over my shoulder and scooping her up by her knees, I carry her back to our bedroom. Her body’s clammy and pale as she rests her eyes, laying in my arms.

“Did you eat something bad?”

She shakes her head against my chest and whispers, “It’s just from the medicine. Ever since last night, I’ve been feeling nauseous. I think it was triggered from a bad dream. I just want this to end.”

“It’ll end soon, *mija*. I promise. Your body’s just been through a lot, it’s not sure what’s up and what’s down right now.” I kiss her forehead and begin ascending the stairs. “You seem better today than you did last time I saw you, though. That’s good.”

“I feel better,” she sighs. “Can you help me try to take a shower?”

“I can do that.” I laugh, making our way into the bedroom.

Nico’s door is shut when I pass, I realize I haven’t seen the girls since I got home. “Where are the kids?”

“Nico and Gabriella are still asleep, and Melissa went on a walk to the park with Camilla.”

“Nico and Gabriella are still asleep?” I enunciate, shocked. They always wake up when the sun practically does—and that’s coming from a newly reborn early-riser.

“We were up late last night with Camilla and Trevor watching *Star Wars*. I’m sure they’re still tired.”

“Must be.” I chuckle, placing her to sit on the bathroom counter and removing her sweatpants for her. “They better not get used to this, with school starting next week.”

“Well, good thing it’s a weekend,” she says with a smile, pulling me by my shirt and meeting my lips with hers.

Her hands find my hair, tugging at the roots, and I slide my tongue across her lips, willing them to part. We continue to kiss, slowly, as my hands caress her waist, breasts, neck, back, and everywhere in between. Wrapping her bootless foot around my legs, she pulls me in between hers, nipping at my bottom lip with her teeth. I let my hands wander softly over her flesh, being sure to avoid anywhere she may still be in pain.

If you would have told me one year ago, that I would be living with the beautiful girl I fell for at a bonfire last summer, and all that we would have gone through to get here, I wouldn’t have believed a single word. Now, I get to spend the rest of my life making love to her, and I wouldn’t change a single thing about any of it.

Her mouth begins to move at a quickening pace and I chuckle, pulling back a mere inch with a smile. “Don’t do this to me,” she pants, and I pop an eyebrow up at her.

“Do what?”

“Make me wait any longer.”

“What’s the rush, amorcito? We have the rest of our lives to do this.”

She lets out a soft smile, blue eyes peering through her thick lashes, before my lips find the soft skin on her neck,

kissing it slowly and tenderly. They trail lower, studying her collarbone beneath her skin as she pulls at the fabric of my shirt, removing it. My hand caresses her cheek as I kiss her again, kicking off my shoes in the process. Her hand grabs mine from her face and lowers it as our mouths collide, our tongues swirling and lips caressing. Slipping my finger in her panties, I tease her with a close touch, causing her hips to grind against mine.

“I want you,” she breathes, only pulling her lips from mine for a mere second. “All of the time, I want you. But especially right now.”

I slip my finger inside of her, moving slowly as we kiss, but she doesn't take much building up today. If she hadn't said she wanted me, her body surely always has had a way of showing me that. Slipping in another finger, I slowly guide in and out of her entrance, sweet moans sailing from her lungs with each movement. Her nails dig into my bicep, her breaths heavy with desire as I lower my boxers, freeing my cock, and pull her panties off in a fluid motion. She eyes my length hungrily, biting her bottom lip as I move to her entrance, barely pressing my tip in. Slowly I thrust inside of her, savoring every surge of her muscles with my presence, her head falling back in bliss.

We move slowly, more slow than I ever thought possible with someone I desire and love so much. But no matter how slow we ever move, I still am left wishing every moment with her would be just a little bit longer.

20. ANOTHER EGG IN THE
BASKET_

JORDAN

“HI MIJA, whatcha up to? I just got off.” Adrian draws the beginning of the sentence out in a tone that makes me melt every time he uses it.

“Nothing, I just dropped the kids off at school, and now I am heading to a doctor’s appointment.”

“Why? Want me to meet you there?”

I smile and roll my eyes. Adrian’s begun to think he’s my caretaker, and though the concern is appreciated, I don’t want it to be forgotten that I am perfectly capable of handling myself.

“I’m good, babe, thanks. It’s no big deal, just another post-op check up. Fun stuff,” I say sarcastically.

I’ve been off of any medicine for three weeks, but I still don’t feel right. After trying to tough it out for a few weeks, it’s time to see what the hell is going on. I’m tired of not being able to eat much, and figured there was nothing some antacid and probiotics couldn’t fix.

“Sounds good, just let me know what they say and if you change your mind.”

“I will, I will. Call you later. I love you.”

“I love you more, Jordan.”

I end the call with the same permanent smile he always causes me to have and pull into the eight story medical building’s parking lot.

The air conditioning is pumping when I walk inside, the same white, sterile walls of every medical office reflecting bright overhead lights. The elevator dings upon its arrival and I step in, going to the top floor, where my general practitioner is located. I’m quickly checked in and escorted to a room. Moments later, a young nurse walks into my room wearing pink scrubs with straight, caramel hair that falls to her shoulders.

“Hi Jordan, I’m Kayla and I’ll be your nurse today. I see you’re here for some stomach pain...” She scrolls on a computer screen before looking at me above her glasses, resting on the bridge of her nose. “Can you describe to me a little bit of what’s going on?”

I sigh and land my eyes on the ceiling. “Well, ever since I got painkillers for my surgery, my stomach has been all jacked up. I thought it would stop when I got off of them, but it’s been almost a month without letting up.”

“Can you describe the pain to me?”

“It’s not as much of a pain as it is nausea. I get really sick to where I can’t fight off the nausea and end up puking, then it usually subsides shortly after.”

She purses her lips as she continues typing. “Hmm. Usually nausea caused by pain meds does stop after the dose is finished, but it could be a number of things. Let’s start by taking a urine sample and we’ll go from there.” She smiles at me and closes her laptop, tucking it beneath her arm. “The bathroom is down the hall and on the right. There will be an empty sample waiting in there for you. When you’re done, just leave it in the small metal door next to the sink and I’ll meet ya back in here.”

I hop off the bench and follow her out of the small room, down the hall to the restroom, where the door clicks behind me. Peeing in a cup is never my favorite thing to do, especially on a nearly empty bladder, but it’s a small chore compared to how I’ve been feeling.

Once done, I trudge back down the hall and into the small medical room, waiting to be sent on my merry way. Twenty minutes later, Kayla finally reappears in the room.

“Alright, so I don’t think we’ll be needing your blood today.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “Well that’s nice, considering I’m usually a fainter. It was that easy of a problem to find?”

She leans her hip against the small counter and rests the laptop next to her.

“I think so, it was pretty simple to narrow down. Jordan, did you know you’re pregnant?”

My heart stops. My breathing pauses, and I look at her in disbelief.

Moments pass of silence, and I swear to God, I’m stuck in this moment of shock. I try to speak, but my throat is so tight, I’m not even sure I’m getting any air to my lungs anymore.

“I’m guessing that’s a no, sweetie? Well, you have plenty of options we can discuss, and you have time to decide whatever you feel is best for you. Do you have someone close to you that you trust and can talk about this?”

I gulp, running my clammy palms down my orange sundress. “Um, yeah, I do, thank you. And you’re a hundred percent sure?”

She lets out a soft smile, her eyes sympathetic. “I’m sure. We ran three urine tests to double check, but if you would like, we can do a blood test today too. You’ll have to do one soon, but it doesn’t have to be today, unless you want it to be. Based on your paperwork, you should be about five weeks along right now.”

My lips remain unable to move for a moment as I struggle to speak. Finally, the words come. “That’s alright. Can I make an appointment in two weeks for the blood draw?”

She slips her glasses back over her nose and begins typing on her computer. “Let me see... How does nine on Thursday, September twenty-eighth sound?”

I silently nod my head and slip off the bench, gathering my keys and purse with trembling hands.

Pregnant?

How the hell can I be pregnant?

I’ve been on the pill since I was sixteen, for crying out loud. The last few months have been quite a ride, but I’ve only missed a couple of doses when I was blitzed out of my mind between surgeries. Shaking my head as I walked from the building to my car, I struggle to accept what she’s told me.

I

Am

Pregnant.

Adrian and I are having a *baby*.

Holy. Shit.

I drop into the driver's seat, leaving the door open. I need to feel the breeze of fresh air on my face. The wave of nausea that's riding over me isn't the same one I've been battling for the last month or so. This time, it's a form of fear, excitement, and "oh fuck, how are we going to do this?" all wrapped into one.

Forcing myself to take deep breaths, I lean my head back against the seat and close my eyes. I try to wrap my head around how they didn't catch this when I last went into surgery, but given the timing, I was either too early to show up on a test, or got pregnant right after. I had always been careful with taking my birth control, but apparently not careful enough.

I open my eyes, wiping the tears from my cheeks and closing the door. The tears stem from an emotion I'm yet to understand—this is so unexpected, it feels surreal, and the storm of feelings I'm having is something that I don't know when I'll be able to wrap my head around. Pressing Jamie's name in my phone, I start my car, and let her voice come through the speakers when she answers.

"Miss me?" she drawls.

"Yes, actually. Are you home?"

"I will be in ten minutes or so. You okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm gonna swing by real quick."

Jamie's house is filled with music when I walk in, her two yellow labs bombarding me with wagging tails and wet tongues. Their clueless bliss isn't enough to lull me into tranquility, but I still pet their soft ears and let them lick my arms a few times. I drop my purse on the entry table and walk into the kitchen, where paint swatches are covering the countertops.

"Getting right to work, I see." I laugh, sitting in an empty barstool across from her.

"Of course. I waited long enough to find this house, I'm not wasting any time in making it mine." She picks up two swatches and holds them next to each other, eyeing them carefully.

"I knew you wouldn't," I mutter, popping a handful of trail mix into my mouth from the bowl resting on her counter.

"So, what is it?" she asks, keeping her eyes fixed on the display of colors in front of her.

"What's what?"

"Cut the shit, Jo. You never come to my house unexpectedly in the middle of the day. What happened?"

I sigh, buying myself more time to face the inevitable by chewing on more trail mix. "I went to the doctor this morning," I say through my chewing.

"And? You're not dying, I hope?"

"Quite the opposite, actually," I grumble.

"I'm not sure what that's supposed to mean," she drawls, scanning her gaze among the plethora of paint options she's brought home with her.

"I'm pregnant," I clip, forcing the words from my mouth before my body talks me out of it.

Her head snaps up as she pulls her glasses from her face. "Are you serious?"

I nod, stuffing my mouth with an assortment of nuts—and every other emotion I'm currently feeling.

“Does Adrian know?”

I shake my head quickly, nearly cracking my teeth as I chew.

“Don’t go mute on me now,” she snaps, pulling the bowl of trail mix away from me. “How long have you known?”

“I just found out,” I mutter, covering my mouth full of half-eaten nuts with my hand.

“And?” she enunciates, pushing me to go on by waving her hand at me. “How do you feel? Happy? Unhappy?”

“Somewhere in between,” I interrupt her, throwing my head back with a groan. “I don’t know, Jamie. What are we going to do? We have three kids living with us, we just got back together a few months ago, he’s not even a year sober yet. We’ve barely been stable since we met each other, and now—a *baby*? I don’t know if we’ll survive this, Jamie.”

I wipe my tears, holding my head in my hand. She comes up next to me, pulling me in for a hug and rubbing my shoulder with her hand. “Hey, let’s take a deep breath here, shall we?”

I bring a deep breath into and out of my lungs, letting out an emotionally pathetic laugh. “I don’t know when I became a crier. Or so emotional.”

She laughs as well, pushing my hair out of my face. “I think, given the circumstances, you’re not nearly as emotional as many others would be. So, what are you thinking?”

“I don’t know,” I sigh. “I’m scared. Excited. Freaked the hell out. I mean, a baby, Jamie. How are we supposed to handle that, on top of everything else? What if this ruins us?”

“I don’t think anything could ruin you two,” she interrupts. “Addiction, death, and betrayal haven’t even ruined the two of you. A baby, if anything, will unite you both even further—if that’s even possible. But that’s just my opinion. You need to tell him and see if I’m right.”

“I know,” I sigh. “I’m just scared. I didn’t think I was going to have a baby right now. *He* didn’t think we were going

to have a baby right now.”

“But you are,” she interjects. “Quit worrying about what the reaction is going to be. Instead, worry about creating this new life with your boyfriend. You have all of us, and we have you guys. Let’s enjoy that, shall we?”

I nod with a laugh, hugging my sister and realizing that she’s right—instead of jumping to conclusions and worrying about pretend reactions I’ve made in my head, it’s time to focus on the situation I have in front of me.

21. BETTER THAN THE
LAST_

ADRIAN

I DOZE off while waiting for Jordan after her appointment. While having the kids living with us is better than I could have ever imagined, I don't mind having the quiet time while they're back at school—but I prefer to have it with my girl.

Right as I pick up my phone to call her, the bedroom door opens, Jordan's blond hair falling right above the waist of her shorts. She walks in, placing her purse on the desk and sits on the end of the bed.

"I was just starting to worry about you," I say with a smirk. "Come here."

She hesitates, chewing on her bottom lip. "I have something to tell you, Adrian."

I pause, studying her solemn expression, my relaxation being replaced by fear.

That's the moment my stomach drops.

All of this has been too much—not for me, but surely for her. My addiction. Honduras. The kids here. It's been overwhelming for me, but something I can handle. I have to handle it. I don't see how this *couldn't* be too much for someone who *doesn't* have to handle it.

I don't feel worthy of being alive still, sometimes—let alone being with the love of my life. My actions have to catch up with me at some point, and I worry that point has arrived.

"Okay," I answer cautiously. "Is everything okay?"

"Kind of," she mutters.

"Listen, the kids being here—I know, it's a lot. If you need space, I totally get that. We'll start staying at my house, and just spending time together. Whatever you need, mija. I just want to make sure that we make this work, no matter what. If you're up for that."

She smiles tightly, scooting closer to me. “I think we’ve made it work. It’s been hard, of course, but neither of us have weathered through this thinking it would be easy. In a sense, we’re just getting what we never really signed up for and doing the most we can with it,” she sighs. “But there’s something else we didn’t sign up for that needs to fit into the equation now.”

“What do you mean? Did the doctor say you need another surgery?” She shakes her head, tears gathering in the corners of her blue eyes as she shifts her gaze to the ceiling. “What did they say, Jordan?”

“I’m pregnant.”

My jaw goes slack as I straighten my spine, running my hand through my hair.

“You’re pregnant?”

She nods, placing her head in her hands and sobbing quietly. I wrap my arms around her, pulling her into my embrace. “Did they tell you how far along you are?”

“Not yet, but they think around five weeks,” she sniffles, resting her head against my chest. “I have to go back in next week.”

My fingers trace across her skin, letting her have her moment she needs.

Pregnant.

While Jordan has her “oh shit,” moment, I let that sink in. We’re going to have a baby of our own. Of course it’s nerve racking—it’s new and unknown—but that’s what makes me so excited. We get to start our own family—to grow the family that we already have. I couldn’t imagine a greater gift than to have a child with my best friend and love of my life.

“Are you okay?” I whisper, breathing in the scent of her hair as she rests against me.

“Yes,” she mutters, wiping at her cheeks. “I’m sorry, I know I should be happy. It’s fucked up of me to react like this, and I *am* happy. I’m just scared and confused, too.”

“Hey,” I breathe, leaning back and kissing her forehead. “It’s okay to feel however you feel. You’re young, and of course this is unexpected. But we’re going to be fine. More than fine. I promise.”

“I just don’t know how we’re going to handle all of this.”

“Exactly how we’ve handled everything else. We’re going to do what we need to do to make it work. Things are good right now, *mija*. This isn’t going to make things worse. Actually, I think it’ll make it even better. We get to have a baby in the house, to have a family of our own. We’ve already created such a beautiful life, despite everything we’ve gone through. Starting this chapter is just going to make it that much more enjoyable.”

“You’re right,” she sighs, twisting her ring on her finger. “It’s just so much. But once it actually sets in that this is real, I’m excited to have a baby. I’m sure everyone else will be happy, too.”

“We get to have a baby together,” I mutter, letting the words become reality the moment they leave my mouth. “I don’t think there’s anything in this world that I could want more than having a family with you.”

“I love you,” she whispers, falling back onto my chest as we lay down. “I love you more than I’ve loved anyone or anything.”

“*Te quiero*,” I reply, lifting her chin and placing my lips against hers. “Forever. The weight of the world couldn’t stop me from loving you. Until the end of time.”

And with that sentence, we make love. Better than the last, every single time.

22. TWO'S A CROWD,
MORE'S A PARTY_

ADRIAN

JORDAN SITS on the table at the OBGYN, awaiting another ultrasound. She catches me staring at her and smiles softly, to which I return the gesture.

Today, we find out the gender. Jordan is convinced it's a boy, but I'm leaning the other way. Maybe I'm just hoping for a girl since I find it much easier to raise my sisters than Nico, but that can also just be blamed on his age compared to theirs. Either way, my gut is girl, hers is boy. Soon, our debate will be put to rest.

"Are you ready for tonight?" I ask, leaning forward and resting my elbows on my knees.

"I think so. Jamie's got most of the food handled, and the house is looking decent. Just need to clean a bit more before everyone comes over."

I chuckle, tilting my head to the side. "I mean, are *you* ready, *mija*. Not is everything ready."

"Oh." She laughs. "Yes, I'm ready."

Everyone is coming to our house later so we can tell them that we're expecting. Jordan's family and all of our friends have confirmed they'll be there, but the only one that knows why is Jamie. Jordan wanted to keep her pregnancy between us until she hit three months, and with that just around the corner, the time has finally come.

"Good morning," Felicity, our OBGYN, cheers as she enters the room. "How are we doing today?"

"Good," Jordan answers with a smile.

Seeing her now, compared to when we first found out she was pregnant, has been a complete change. We get to plan names, shop for baby products, and talk about our future together without any sense of fear or dread. Once the initial shock of this change wore off, we've both easily fallen into step as expecting parents.

“I’m glad to hear. This should be fairly quick since we already have your bloodwork done,” she drawls as she types on the computer, opening up the screen and connecting it to the TV that hangs on the wall. “Go ahead and lie on your back, then lift your shirt for me.”

Jordan does as she’s told, laying back on the medical bed and watching the screen. Felicity begins moving the ultrasound wand over her stomach, the familiar sound of our baby’s heartbeat filling the room. “Everything looks good,” she continues. “You’re measuring right on time. How’s the nausea? Any better?”

“Ehh.” Jordan chuckles. “Comes and goes, but I’m fine.”

“Well, that should start to subside within the next few days. It’s typically the worst in the first trimester. I’m going to be putting you on iron supplements since your blood work was showing anemia, which is very common. Not a big deal. Now let’s move onto the exciting stuff. Are we ready to find out the gender?”

Jordan looks at me with a smile and I pull my chair up next to hers, taking her hand in mine. She grasps on tightly before nodding her head.

“Alrighty then, let’s get to it,” Felicity says before looking back to the screen. “I already know from your bloodwork, and we won’t be able to see anything today, but worth a try.” She begins pointing out different body parts to us, all of which are hard to see with the naked eye, but still there. Still growing beautifully inside of my beautiful girl, day by day.

“And here, we’ve got a baby girl,” Felicity continues.

Jordan freezes, her face stuck in a wide smile as she looks at me. I bring her hand to my lips, kissing the back of it as we hold eye contact.

“You were right,” she mutters, still absorbing the news.

“I was.” I chuckle, kissing the back of her hand again. “What do you think?”

“That I can’t wait to meet her.” She laughs, wiping her eyes with her hands. I swipe a tear away from her cheek with

my thumb, then tuck a strand of blond hair behind her ear.

“Me neither, *mija*.”

Our house is full to the brim—which isn’t unusual around here, but tonight, it’s packed. Jamie walks in with both twins on her hip, kissing Jordan and I on the cheek, before placing them on the floor to explore.

“Tables are set up on the patio so we don’t all have to sit in here. It’s so nice tonight, I figured we might as well,” Jamie announces.

“You didn’t have to make everything so formal.” Jordan laughs, leaning into me as I wrap my arm around her.

“It’s not formal, it’s practical. We have over fifteen people eating here tonight. We might as well be comfortable while we’re all together.”

Jordan chuckles, shaking her head as Bryan, Jamie’s husband, walks in the door. His arms are full of diaper bags for the twins and a large wrapped gift.

“Jordan,” Melissa squeals as she runs over to us. “Is it your birthday?”

“It’s not my birthday,” she cheers, picking Melissa up and propping her on her hip. “Is it your birthday?”

Melissa shrugs, looking at me. “Is it my birthday, Adrian?”

I laugh, taking a sip of my water. “No, Mel. It’s not your birthday.”

“Then why did Jamie bring a birthday present?”

“It doesn’t have to be someone’s birthday to give them a gift,” I tease, ruffling her hair.

She sighs, looking confused, but there’s never enough silence in this house for emotions to last more than a moment.

Camilla comes into the kitchen, walking directly up to Jordan. “Alright, let me see it.”

“See what?”

“Your hand. Jamie’s got gifts, you’re having a party. There’s a secret engagement situation here happening that you’ve hidden from me, and I know it. So, show me the ring.”

Jordan laughs, setting Melissa down, who runs off to play with her siblings and the twins. “There’s no ring,” Jordan assures her. “Take that up with Adrian, not me.”

She winks at me and walks toward the living room, sitting with her family and the kids. I wait until she’s engaged in conversation to look at Camilla.

“Jesus, Cam. Don’t blow my cover an hour before it happens.”

“What do you m— oh shit.” She laughs, covering her excited smile with her hand. “Tonight?”

I nod, fighting back a laugh.

“My bad. If you let me in on stuff, I would have known to keep my mouth shut.” She chuckles, punching me in the arm.

“I didn’t decide I was going to do it today until a few hours ago. It’s been in the making for a while, though. Just no set date before today.”

“Let me see it,” she whispers.

I roll my eyes playfully at her, stepping out onto the patio and dropping into a chair. Moments later and perfectly timed, Camilla follows. I slip the box out of my pocket and open it, keeping it hidden from any other possible vantage point.

“Oh my god, Adrian. You did perfect.”

I watch as her wide brown eyes study the custom pear-shaped diamond ring I designed. It glimmers in the late afternoon sunlight, and I shut the box before any chance of Jordan seeing it comes. I want to savor her reaction for myself.

“She’s going to love it,” Camilla breathes, wiping a tear from her eye.

“So much crying today.” I laugh, running my hand through my hair.

Camilla looks at me confused, and I bite my lip when I realize the small bit of information I’ve revealed.

“I already know,” she whispers, before holding a finger to her lips, signaling me to remain quiet. “She told me a few weeks ago, but didn’t want you to know. She didn’t think it was fair for her to tell someone and not you. But she couldn’t hide it any longer, us living in the same house, and all. She’s never been a puker—even in her drinking days. It was a sure giveaway.”

I smile at her, leaning back in the chair.

“Are you mad?”

“Of course not. It was her choice not to tell anyone, not mine. I’m glad she had you to confide in. I’m glad she’s always had you to confide in, Cam. You’re a really amazing friend to her.”

“And she’s a really amazing friend to me,” she replies, standing from the bench and dusting her dress with her hands.

The gate to the patio creaks open and we look to find Trevor walking in, a dumb smile permanently on his face.

“Sorry I’m late. Traffic was a mess.”

I stand and give him a hug, then let Camilla do the same. “How you been, dude?”

“Since I last saw you a month ago? Same old, same old.” He laughs, looking at Camilla tenderly. “How’s things here?”

“Busy.” She chuckles, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Want to come in?”

He nods, taking a step and then pausing. “Before I forget, you got some mail sent to the apartment. Brought it for you.” Trevor pulls out a stack of envelopes from his back pocket, handing them to me. I don’t bother to look at them before tucking them under my arm and following them inside.

An hour later, our patio is bursting with life. Nico, Melissa, and Gabriella are sitting with the twins, engaging them in a game far above the twins' heads. Jamie and her husband sit with Jordan's dad, Pearce, and his wife, Danielle, at the table next to the kids, drinking wine and watching them play.

I walk past them and to my seat next to Jordan, across from Camilla and Dixie. Jake is to my right with Trevor and Ryan, who while I avoid eye contact with, I don't mind that he's here. Ryan has been a part of this family for much longer than I have, but my place in it has become much bigger than his. Tonight shows that. The rest, I can push to the side at that simple thought.

No one here has a fucking clue what's going on, and the two that do, don't let either of us forget it. Camilla keeps kicking us both under the table and wiggling her eyebrows, Jamie stealing glances over her shoulder whenever she gets the chance. Jordan is too engaged with her loved ones to notice, and I pretend that I don't. I let them sweat in anticipation all through dinner, only squeezing Jordan's leg as a signal when we're finishing our last bites. She smiles at me through her lashes and my lips meet her forehead as I stand, her following me.

"Thank you everyone for joining us, and as I'm sure most of you have guessed by now, we do have something up our sleeve," I say, a small chuckle collectively coming from the patio.

Pearce nods at me, surely expecting me to do what I last spoke to him weeks ago about—asking Jordan to marry me. Little does he know, that will be act two of the evening.

"This past year has been full of emotions and obstacles for everyone here, including both of us. We have seen some of the highest highs and lowest lows, but through it all, I can say I've never been happier. We both are so appreciative of all you have done for us, which is why we wanted everyone to be here tonight..." I drawl, looking at Jordan as she grabs my hand.

"I'm pregnant!" she yells, pulling my hand to her chest.

Emotions come as quickly as everyone's jaws drop, Camilla and Jamie shrieking out in joy as they stand, jumping up and down. People rush to Jordan and me, embracing us and congratulating us. I look over her shoulder to find the twins, confused by all the chaos, watching the swarm of people move about the patio. I walk over to where they're seated with the kids, kneeling down next to their table.

"Do you guys know what pregnant means?"

I get a collective head shake from everyone besides Nico.

"It means Jordan and I are going to have a baby soon. A baby girl."

Melissa and Gabriella smiling, Mel straightening in her chair. "And she's going to live here? With us?"

I nod, looking to Nico, who is trying to act too cool to smile as well, but I see the hint of it on his lips.

"What's her name?" Gabriella asks.

"I don't know yet. What do you guys think we should name her?"

Gabriella stays quiet, deep in thought, while Melissa yells out every word she can think of. "Dolly! July! Easter!" She giggles, looking up at the sky and putting her missing tooth on display.

"I'll tell Jordan what you think. Why don't we go over and tell her congratulations?"

The girls nod, bounding out of their chairs and over to Jordan. They hug her and tell her congratulations as I watch Nico coming to stand beside me. "You're going to be a dad?"

I look over at him and nod, the warm summer air beginning to transition into sunset. "What do you think about that?"

He leans against the patio railing, crossing his arms. "You'll be a good dad. You already kind of are."

I smile, giving him a nod. "Thanks, Nico. I love you guys."

“Love you too,” he grumbles, and I shake my head with a laugh before walking to sit with my girl.

Jake takes the seat next to me, his expression the typical unreadable.

“Guess that means I’m gonna be an uncle,” he grumbles, sipping on his beer.

“It does,” I mutter, looking at him. “I’m sorry we didn’t tell you sooner. She wanted to keep it a secret for a bit.”

He clicks his tongue, relaxing in the chair. “Don’t worry about it. That’s between the two of you, not me.”

I pause, watching seagulls fly slowly over the bay on the perfect summer day. With Jordan sitting next to me, nothing else matters right now. All I need is her.

“I’m happy for you guys,” Jake continues, interrupting my thoughts. “When you first got together, I never thought I would be saying those words now. But I’m proud of you both, and you deserve to hear that. Thank you for being what she needed to be happy again.”

My lips turn up into a smile as I give him a single nod. “And thank you for letting me learn that she was what I needed to be happy again, too.”

23. WHAT'S MINE IS OURS_

JORDAN

THE AFTERNOON GOES BY QUICKLY, filled with baby talk and family and friends. Ryan congratulated me, surprisingly—but what was even more surprising was that he seemed genuinely happy for us. I don't want to get my hopes up that we can be friends like we were before, but seeing the old him come back around gives me something to stand on.

Gabriella is in my lap as I braid her hair and talk with Danielle about our plans for a nursery, the warm summer air surrounding us on the patio.

“I haven't thought too much about her room yet,” I confess, weaving sections of Gabriella's thick, dark hair together. “I've just been focused on getting to the second trimester. The first one kicked my ass.”

She laughs, sipping on her wine. “Well, good thing your father and brother are experts in construction. They can do all of the manual labor you need to get it ready. Right, hun?” she asks my dad.

“Right,” he says with a smile before kissing her. “Just point and command, Jo. We'll take it from there.”

Adrian's arm is wrapped around my shoulders, his thumb tracing my skin as we chat with everyone. When they're all absorbed in their own topics, he whispers in my ear. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

I nod as he asks Gabriella to go play with the twins before grabbing my hand and leading me to the patio gate.

“Where do you plan on talking?” I laugh, following him down the steps to the boardwalk. He never lets go of my hand, assisting me with each movement as we climb over the seawall, stepping onto the sand.

“We live on the water, but lately, we've barely seen it. What better place to talk to the love of my life than right next to the ocean?”

I tilt my head with a smile, shielding my eyes from the sun with my hand. “Now who’s the one with something up their sleeve?”

He shrugs, turning to face me and pausing in his tracks. “You know, that’s the same look you gave me on our first date—or should I say, anti-date since you wouldn’t let me take you on a real one.”

“It is?”

He nods, studying me for a moment. “You were going to the beach, carrying your surfboard, when I asked you about a wetsuit. Apparently, that was an insane thing to ask, and this is the look you gave me in response—hiding your eyes from the sun with your hand, your hair moving with the wind—and that was the moment that I knew. I knew I loved you, and that I would do anything to be the one that married you.”

I let out a deep breath, watching his green eyes as he walks toward me, taking my hand in his.

“And when you look at me now, in the same way, I know that nothing has changed. We’ve changed, our lives have changed, but the way I felt about you that day has only grown stronger.”

Adrian drops down onto one knee, looking up at me from the sand. He reaches into his pocket and fishes out a small black box, opening it to reveal the most beautiful ring I have ever seen in my life.

“I love you, Jordan. You are the kindest, strongest, most beautiful woman I have ever known, and it has been a privilege to be in your life—it would be an even bigger privilege to be in it forever. I promise to always be everything you need and more, and to put you before anything and everyone else for the rest of my life. Will you marry me?”

I don’t know when the tears started, but they’re flowing freely now as I nod my head eagerly. “Of course I’ll marry you,” I answer, wiping tears from my face as he wraps his arms around my waist, picking me up and kissing me. Waves

of the bay lap against the sand as we embrace, our skin and lips and souls all one and the same.

I've loved Adrian for a year, but it feels, somehow, much longer than that. Like my body knew he would come along, and it was just waiting until he showed up to release the love I needed to give to someone.

"I love you so much," he breathes before kissing me again, repeatedly.

"I love you," I barely make out between our lips touching, running my fingers through his hair.

"Congratulations!" Camilla yells from the patio, and we look back to see our entire patio watching us, smiling and huddled together against the railing. I laugh at the sight of it, Adrian kissing me on the cheek as he picks me up and carries me back toward our home.

Our home.

Our family.

Our everything.

Once we learned how to combine it and make it ours—our struggles, our recovery, our fears, our love—these things became much easier to try to overcome. These things already affect everyone when you're facing them on your own. His addiction affected me when it affected him. My fears of intimacy affected him as well as me. But when we stopped looking at these as individual issues and instead as shared ones, navigating them became a hell of a lot easier. And having the most loving, supportive, caring fiancé in the world happens to make that a hell of a lot easier, too.

24. LOVE LETTERS_

ADRIAN

THE HOUSE slowly empties over the next few hours, Jordan sitting on the counter and watching me wash dishes as she snacks on pickles.

“This is the weirdest craving I’ve had so far,” she says as she chews. “I don’t even like pickles.”

I laugh, scrubbing a bowl. “Maybe after this, you’ll start to like them. Then I won’t be able to steal yours when we go out to eat anymore.”

“I wonder if it’ll last,” she wonders, crunching on another one. “I’m so happy you have a weekend off. If only the kids would let us sleep in.”

“Oh, they will,” I assure her, shooting her a wink. “I’ve made damn sure of it.”

“How?”

“A little friend of ours named Camilla. Put her on aunty duty until noon tomorrow.”

“Yes,” she moans. “That is the best news I’ve heard all day.”

“Better than getting engaged?” I ask with a smirk.

“I’m sorry. Second best news I’ve heard all day.” She laughs. “We better make the most of our sleeping in tomorrow, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, I know what you mean, *mija*. And I’ve been thinking that all night.”

“Good,” she cheers before kissing me, then pressing her hands on my shoulders to get down from the counter. “I’m going to get ready for bed. I love you.”

“I love you,” I call over my shoulder. “Be up in a few.”

Her footsteps retreat up the stairs before the sound of our bedroom door closing. I finish cleaning up the kitchen, then double-check all of the locks and set the alarm. Another

perfect day in the books. *And to think I can remember a time when those didn't exist.*

As I'm making my rounds and turning off all of the lights, I spot the stack of envelopes Trevor brought over, and decide to make sure none of it is important before I toss them.

Most are credit card statements, bill reminders, and other useless shit, and I flip through until I reach a white, handwritten address. Cocking my head to the side, I notice there's no return address, then flip it over and open it. Inside, a letter is folded up, covered in my mom's handwriting. Handwriting I've been sure I would never see again, now staring back at me.

Part of me doesn't want to read it—to possibly open up another can of fucking worms I would now be responsible for taking care of. But a bigger part of me can't go on without knowing what's inside. The bigger part of me that only thinks about the kids and their best interests is what tells me that I have to read it.

I sit down at the dining room table, taking a deep breath, and begin.

Adrian,

I want to begin this letter by saying that I'm sorry. I can't imagine the pain you're feeling right now, or the anger, or hatred you have for me. I don't know if this letter will help, but I couldn't stop myself any longer from sending it to you.

I want to start by saying how proud of you I am. You have grown into a responsible, happy, dependable man. For a while, I was worried I would never see that happen. I spent years doing everything I could to care for my three young children, while feeling helpless and unable to care for my oldest, who was thousands of miles away and in desperate need of someone to care for him. You haven't been dealt an easy hand—your father and I had you at a young age, we were unstable and, quite frankly, unsure of how to care for

ourselves, let alone be parents. Losing him was the hardest thing I've ever had to go through, and I know it was for you, too, no matter how much you hid it.

Watching you struggle with addiction and depression was a new type of heartbreak, and I can't imagine what this heartbreak felt like for not only you, but for Jordan. It was grueling, frustrating, and all of my deepest fears wrapped up into one horrible reality. I thought, for a while, that you may never make it out of it.

But you did. You made it out of it and became better than I could have ever expected. When I saw you sober for the first time in years, it was like looking back into the past—the happy, full-of-life little boy I had known was back. When I saw what you had made of yourself and your life, I had never felt more joy and pride than in that moment. Until it dawned on me.

I, as a parent, didn't give that to you. I wasn't able to, and I wouldn't ever be able to give it to your siblings. All alone now, this wasn't possible anymore. And I think you knew this, too. By now, I know you're smart enough to realize the truth of what's happened.

Finding a way to give my children the best life I could has always been my greatest dream—even if it meant I wasn't in it. I know this wasn't the best way to do so, but sometimes, you get so desperate, you will do anything to fix it. That was how I felt with you, that was how I felt with them, and that is how I feel now, knowing what I've put you all through.

Your dad struggled with mental health issues, which ultimately cost him his life. You struggle with them as well, and I watched them almost cost you your life. What I've kept hidden from you is my struggle with them, which has occurred since you were a child. In my early twenties, I began struggling with addiction as well. It was easy to manage when we were living in California, with people and responsibilities to keep me busy. Once we moved back to Honduras, without a husband, I no longer had the support. I kept getting worse, my life was falling apart, and everyone I love remained in the dark about it. Raising children while struggling to make it

through a simple day was becoming unbearable, and I was also going to the dark place your father lived in before he took his own life.

To see another day, I had to make a decision. It was the hardest decision I've ever had to make, but the fact that I'm writing to you now, shows me it was worth it. I am in a treatment center, and while I still struggle greatly, I find joy in knowing that you all are together and safe.

I hope that you can see my decision in a new light, just a little bit, and try to forgive me. I love you all more than life itself, and I miss you every single day. I can't wait to see you all again one day.

Until we meet again,

Mom.

Dropping the papers on the table, I lean back in my chair, running my hand through my hair as my eyes close.

I knew this.

Deep down, I knew. She isn't telling me anything I haven't known all along.

But having it put on paper, laying there for me to see, unable to deny, makes it all too real. When things become all too real, I look somewhere else for a false sense of reality. Something to put me into a dimension where none of this exists, where it's beyond my realm of caring, where I don't have to listen to the music that's playing against my will. Where feelings of euphoria can carry me away from anything that threatens to pull my life apart.

But that's what pulled my life apart. Not what I was hiding from, but what I was using to hide from it.

This time, when the waves become too big and I feel like I've forgotten how to swim, I reach for a new type of life ring. I fold her letter and place it in a drawer, turning off the lights

downstairs. I make my way to my bedroom, where my beautiful fiancée and growing baby are waiting in bed for me.

This time, when I feel like I may drown in the sorrows of life and the hold addiction will forever have on me, I make love to Jordan instead.

EPILOGUE_

Adrian

Dear Mom and Dad,

You'll have to forgive me for not writing. Life has gotten busy, and I've been keeping my mind on those who are in my life, instead of those who aren't. It's easier for me this way. But I would be lying if I said I didn't miss you.

It's been just over a year since I received your letter. Melissa and Gabriella are doing well in school, and Nico spends most of his time at soccer practice or surfing. They have all grown accustomed to their new life here, though they still love when Abuelo and Abuelita come to visit—which has been growing more often than not. Getting to watch them grow up and support them has been a blessing bigger than I ever could have imagined.

Jordan and I have a daughter, Adelle. She's six months old and the absolute sweetest thing I have ever met. I never knew there was room in my heart to love someone more, until I met her. Everything has clicked since she came into our lives, and I can say we've truly never been happier. She looks just like Jordan, though the little hair she does have is already starting to show my curls. Getting to fall asleep with her and her mother in my arms every night is beyond my wildest dreams. I feel whole again, and I owe it all to them.

We got married last month in Malibu. We eloped that morning and had a reception with all of our family and friends on the beach afterward. It was one of the most magical days of my life, aside from the birth of our daughter. Jordan is the biggest light I have ever known. She is the perfect partner, mother, friend, and woman. You both would love her as your own daughter. I know I love her more than I ever thought possible. Every moment I live is only complete with her in it.

We get to spend our days as a family now. A house that was once filled with pain and loss is now filled with love and new life. It's vibrant, chaotic, messy, and so joyful and beautiful. I get to spend my days with the people who are most important to me, enjoying every moment I get with them, watching them grow older and learn who they are. I'm still learning who I am, I think we all are, but this is a process essential to our lives. I've learned who I am when I'm sober. I've learned who I am as a whole, and addiction is part of that whole. And I've learned to live with that, too.

I would be lying if I said I didn't miss you. But I would also be lying if I said I would change anything about my life and what it's taken me to get here. I love you both. I love every memory I have with you. But I love the memories I am making with my family, in this home, even more. And I would choose those every single time.

Until I see you again,

Adrian.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS_

And there goes the biggest exhale my lungs have ever seen.

Wow. I cannot believe Adrian and Jordan's story is complete. I have been with these characters for over four years, watching them evolve and lead me to where their story was meant to be. Finishing it the right way seemed impossible, but I feel they finally got the happy ending they deserved.

To my amazing cousins Amanda, Tesia, and Megan, thank you for supporting me and inspiring me to finish this series, even when my heart was broken and the thought of a happy ending seemed unattainable.

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Until next time,

Ashley.