



# Exiled

AN UNLUCKY 13 NOVEL

JESSIE WALKER

# EXILED

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BLACK DIAMOND NOVEL

UNLUCKY 13

JESSIE WALKER

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ABOUT EXILED

*Welcome to Black Diamond Resort and Spa...*

...paradise for the banished, and my newest prison.

Growing up, I was the problem child teachers didn't know  
what to do with.

The troubled teen whose parents wished was never born.

The system's made of cracks, and I fell through each and  
every one, all in a futile effort to protect the family legacy.

They tried to fix me.

Doctors...therapists...teachers...pastors...

And they failed. Epicly.

Now, eighteen, and fresh out of Hell, I'm thrown into the last  
place I ever expected.

Rehab.

Enter **Nolan Dresden**.

Newly divorced. A recovering alcoholic. Almost double my  
age.

He doesn't think he needs to be here anymore than I do, and  
all he sees when he looks at me is a privileged little prince.

But when a team building exercise takes a deadly turn,  
stranding Nolan and I out in the wild for a night, not only do  
we find ourselves bonding over our shared trauma...

But surrendering to a current neither of us can escape.

Six weeks.

That's all we have together before we have to come up for air.

He's worried I'll grow attached.

I'm worried he's right.

But like the storms that rage inside me...

There's no stopping the inevitable.

And when all is said and done, it'll be a miracle if either of us  
walk away unscathed.

***“Close your eyes. I’ll close mine too.”***



# KEEP IN TOUCH WITH JESSIE

## **Website:**

[www.authorjessiewalker.com](http://www.authorjessiewalker.com)

## **Other Published Works by Jessie Walker:**

[Where There's A Will \(Lost Boys, #1\)](#)

[If There's A Way \(Lost Boys, #2\)](#)

[Still Beating \(Lost Boys, #2.5\)](#)

[Little Bird Lost \(Aviary Duet, #1\)](#)

## **Stalk her here:**

<https://linktr.ee/authorjessiewalker>

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for picking up this book.

*Exiled* is part of the multi-author Unlucky 13 series, but is considered a standalone.

This book is my lightest to date, but still far from light.

It is my spiciest to date, and that's just fact.

And if you're unfamiliar with my previous work, then all I have to say is remember, please, that this is fiction. And while I do my best to handle sensitive topics as delicately as I can, I'm not one to do a disservice to my characters, nor the story they want to tell, by watering anything down.

This is not a dark romance, but it does get heavy at times. And for some readers, the relationship within these pages would be considered bordering on taboo and inappropriate simply because of the one MC's age and experience...or, rather, lack of.

But again, it's purely fictional. And it's intended only for mature readers 18+. This book should in no way be used as a guide, or self-help book.

For a detailed list of triggers, as well as resources, you can find them here:

[Exiled Content Warning](#)

*For those who were overlooked.  
Who slipped through the cracks.  
Who are screaming from behind glass.*

# EXILED PLAYLIST

[Listen on Spotify.](#)

**Storm** / Lifehouse

**Love Is Complicated (The Angels Sing)** / Labrinth

**Animal** / WildHeart

**Reveries** / Bones & Bridges

**Never Felt So Alone** / Labrinth

**Throwing Knives** / Framing Hanley

**Big Green Eyes** / The Dangerous Summer

**Lonely Bones** / The Honest Heart Collective

**Champagne Coast** / Blood Orange

**Move a Mountain - Stripped** / Dan Lancaster

**Kiss the Sky** / Machine Gun Kelly

**Bring Me Back To Life** / The Dangerous Summer

**The Feels** / Labrinth

**Otherside** / Perfume Genius

**RUNNING** / NF

**Pretty Boy** / Lennon Stella

**Ocean** / Martin Garrix, Khalid

**Already Numb** / Dayseeker

**Never Whole** / Landon Tewers

**4runner** / Brenn!  
**War** / Chance Peña  
**Northern Attitude** / Noah Kahan  
**Memories** / Above the Fallen, Zachary Britt  
**Mannequin** / Night Argent  
**The Raging Sea** / Broadside  
**Haunted** / Acacia Ridge  
**Lens** / Bilmuri  
**Animal** / Troye Sivan  
**Swan Upon Leda** / Hozier  
**Where You're Coming From** / Vincent Lima  
**Alone In This Bed (Capeside)** / Framing Hanley  
**Sweetheart** / Kerry Courtney  
**Still** / Exit  
**Cruel World** / Active Child  
**Hurricane** / Dream on Dreamer  
**Watercolor Eyes** / Lana Del Rey  
**Anchor/SLOWED AND REVERBED** / Caleb Russell  
**Misguided** / Glass Tides  
**Wild, Love** / Jonathan Plevyak  
**Forever** / Labrinth

# WELCOME TO BLACK DIAMOND

Black Diamond Recovery Center was founded in 2001 by father and son, Craig and Dexter Diamond. Wanting a place for those in the public eye to go to seek help with their addiction and mental illness, Black Diamond came to fruition.

We recognize that addiction and mental illness are complex diseases that affect every aspect of a person's life, and we provide comprehensive care that addresses all of our clients' needs. Unlike other recovery facilities, we don't just treat the addiction; we treat the whole person. Our approach is designed to provide support and healing for our clients' physical, emotional, and mental well-being, helping them achieve lasting recovery and a brighter future.

During your stay, you'll enjoy relaxing living quarters, gourmet meals, and luxurious amenities—all carefully curated with your healing and comfort in mind—while still receiving the utmost levels on anonymity.

The heart of man is very much like the sea, it has its storms, it has its tides and in its depths it has its pearls too.

VINCENT VAN GOGH

# PART I



# CHAPTER ONE

---

NOLAN

A storm is moving in.

Here on the island, they pass by pretty quickly.

But they can be brutal. Devastating.

I sit under a cluster of palm trees with my denim-clad legs kicked out in front of me, feet bare, toes half-buried in the sand. It seems softer back here in the shade. Silky. Cool. Untouched by the sun. I cup the sand in my hands, glance down, and watch it slip through my fingers.

Thunder rolls closer now than it was moments ago, mingling with the sound of the waves crashing against the cliffs, slamming onto the beach. A strong breeze blows through, and the palm trees draped above me brush together, swaying, emerald green against the bruised sky. In the distance, the hazy, butter-yellow sun disappears between a thick swatch of storm clouds.

I'm alone, just how I prefer it. How I always have, but especially here.

Well, with the exception of Abby of course.

My chest tightens at the reminder.

I'd take never being alone again, if it meant having her at my side.

More thunder rumbles, quiet but lingering. A drop of moisture hits my foot and I look up, squinting through the fronds as more raindrops slip through, the palm trees unable to hold the water any better than I could hold the sand.

Somewhere far away, past the trees and rocky knolls hiding this little hidden cove, a voice calls out, followed by laughter. Genuine laughter. On this side of the island, it's not often you hear such a sound. Not when there's this pervasive sort of heaviness pressing down around us, like a black cloud we can't seem to escape.

That's rehab for you.

Even on the sunniest of days, there's blackness hovering in the horizon, just out of sight, waiting for you to forget it's there.

Not for the first time, I wonder what it's like on the other side of the island. The resort side, where rich pricks and nepo babies go to hide and decompress from whatever fuck ups led them to the remote, luxurious Black Diamond Resort and Spa. Be it scandal, crime, or whatever else they're running from.

Difference is, their baggage gets them a private vacation. Mine gets me mandatory bi-weekly therapy at the Black Diamond Recovery Center, a for-profit inpatient rehabilitation and mental health facility found at the bottom of page three in the brochure.

But something tells me I'd be even more miserable over there in the land of sunshine and smiles.

More alone than even I could bear.

The wind starts picking up, and as much as I want to stay out here and watch Mother Nature unleash her wrath upon the ocean, I should probably head back. Out in the middle of the Pacific, with a cell phone about as useless as my first Nokia flip-phone, all we have to rely on for simple luxuries like weather forecasts and news from the outside are the powers that be running this pretentious little island oasis.

Dusting sand off my lap, I'm about to push myself to a stand when I hear it.

A branch snapping.

Easing back down, I turn my head, squinting through the sheet of rain blowing through just in time to catch the figure storming through the trees.

In all the times I've been down here since I discovered this little hideaway, I've yet to run into another soul. I'm not stupid enough to think no one else knows about this place, but it was nice while it lasted, pretending it was just mine.

It's a man by the looks of it. Younger than me. He carries himself with an almost boyish, stubborn sort of deliberateness. *Stompy*.

I hold very still so as not to startle him. It's clear he's upset. Distracted. His dark, wet head hangs forward, gaze aimed at the ground, hands balled into fists at his sides.

Unlike me in my jeans and work boots, he's dressed far more appropriately for this climate.

Khaki shorts.

Pale green linen shirt left untucked.

Brown leather flip-flops.

It's pouring buckets now and I blink away the drops falling on my face.

I know I should say something—alert him to my presence—but there's something about his demeanor, a frenetic sort of energy radiating from his quickening steps, that keeps me silent.

Even when he passes by, rushing past my line of sight a mere ten feet away from where I sit half-hidden, sheltered under the palms, I remain frozen.

Low, indistinguishable mutterings reach my ear, carried by the wind. I cock my head, straining to make out what he's saying, but it's no use.

I glance back the way he came, craning my head to see if anyone followed, say like his therapist, or one of the counselors. A friend. Anyone.

It's obvious he's in great distress, and yet somehow he's alone out here. He can't be going through withdrawal—those in detox are in what they call Level Red, and are basically under constant supervision in the medical ward. It works the same for those here for mental health reasons. The greater a threat they are to themselves, the less freedom they get.

And yet...

He comes to a sudden stop when he runs out of beach at the base of the cliffs.

Looming up ahead of him, there's a steep, but climbable path that I imagine leads right up to the top. Rocks jut out from grassy, weed patches, spread out thinly before growing more dense the higher and steeper you get.

Not that I've tried climbing it—there's a chain barrier, with a sign hanging in the middle that reads *Do Not Enter*—but from sight alone, I know it's got to be doable.

He must think so too, because he charges forward and easily throws a leg over the chain, flat-out ignoring the written warning.

I frown. *What the hell is he doing?*

“Hey!” I call out, shooting to a stand. A cloud of sand kicks out from under me, dousing my boots and socks where I had set them to the side, but I pay it no notice.

With my gaze squinted and locked ahead, I abandon the meager coverage the palm trees provided, barely aware of the rain and wind slapping my face, tossing my chin-length hair around every which way.

All I see and know is the guy whirling around, stumbling back in shock, hand splayed over his heaving chest. Dark wet hair swept over his forehead. Big, brown eyes boring right through me.

“What are you doing?” I have to shout to be heard over the crashing waves. I lick my lips, catching salt-tinged rainwater on my tongue. Jogging toward him, I throw a hand out toward the barrier separating us. “Didn't you read the sign?”

He continues to stare right through me, making me wonder if he even heard me.

My steps slow as I reach the path. Keeping to my side of the barrier, I shake my head, squinting through the rain. “Did you hear me?”

Still nothing.

My gaze drops, sweeping over him.

I was right. He is young. But younger than I actually anticipated. *Is he even eighteen?* He has to be. He wouldn't be here if he wasn't, but still, it's jarring.

He's just a fucking kid. What the hell is he doing in a place like this?

*No older than you during your first stint,* a voice reminds me.

Lightning cracks, echoing jaggedly off the cliffs, spider-webbing the dark gray sky with white seams of light. I see it reflected in his eyes. So dark right now, they look nearly black.

I shove my wet hair back, slicking it off my face. "We shouldn't be out here," I say loudly. A strong gust of wind blows through, rattling the chain, spraying us with seafoam.

His jaw clenches and he turns his head, craning his neck to look up the cliff. I follow his troubled, longing gaze, a prickle of unease dancing along my spine, twisting my gut.

*Wait, was he...*

My gaze snaps back to the kid's face. Wetness clings to his long, inky lashes. It reminds me of something Mel said once long ago, about how unfair it is that boys always have the prettiest of eye lashes.

Throat thick for reasons I can't quite explain, I drop my gaze. His shirt is completely soaked through, the thin fabric plastered to his chest. His arms are rangy. Neck elongated, elegant, made more so by the natural tapered point of his chin, and upturned nose.

And he's pale, like he hasn't spent much time in the sun. It's currently cast in a sort of dusky shade of violet, compliments of the ocean and storm grays.

Despite his current state, there's a notable air of superiority to him. A refinedness that I'm well acquainted with, having married into such.

I know his kind.

“Get back to your room, kid,” I say gruffly, shaking my head, about to turn away.

“I’m not a kid.” The words come out gritted, his voice raspy.

I pause. Cocking my head, I duck my gaze just enough to peer back at him from the corners of my eyes.

He stands taller, firmer. “I’m eighteen.” His expression is grave, like it’s something terminal. And I suppose it is. Becoming an adult. Next stop up *is* a grave.

Ignoring the itchy feeling at the pit of my stomach, I arch him an unimpressed brow.

He huffs, glaring at me. It doesn’t last though. Maybe a second at most before he’s diverting his attention to some unseen spot on the ground.

“What are you doing out here?” I ask again, exhaustion softening some of the natural harshness in my voice.

He shrugs. “Needed air. Figured I’d go for a walk. Maybe a swim.”

I blink. “A swim,” I repeat skeptically.

Again, I find my gaze following up the path toward the distant, shadowed jut of the cliff. If he was already up there, I don’t think I’d be able to see him from down here.

“It’s storming,” I say blankly.

“It’s already passing.”

I narrow my eyes, returning my sights to him.

He’s not...wrong. The rain is starting to slow, and time between flashes of light and thunder seem to be increasing by the second.

He tips his chin up at me, jaw clenched, neck tendons straining. There’s a challenge in his eyes, but it doesn’t feel directed at me.

Sighing, I gesture at the sign between us. “You’re not supposed to go up there. It’s dangerous,” I say tiredly.

His brow furrows and he glances down, staring at the chain dividing us—the wooden sign flapping in the breeze. He studies it like he’s never seen such a thing before.

“Oh,” he whispers so faintly that I see it more than hear it—the syllable pursing his rain-damp lips.

He’s a good-looking kid. I can’t not notice that. But not so much because of his soft, nearly perfect symmetrical features that I imagine most models would envy, but rather the way he wears them.

There’s a sort of careless ease to him, to the way he stands and carries himself, and turns his nose up at me like I’m less than. He looks clean, polished, and privileged as fuck, and those kind of people are almost always inhumanly pretty. Man, woman, everyone.

My old man used to joke about how the wealthy spike their morning coffees with the elixir of beauty. Money gets you everywhere, but beauty makes you stand out—it makes you feel like you belong, he’d told me. What’s wealth matter if you’re alone at the end of the day? Even youth has nothing on beauty. Beauty can withstand anything, even aging. Even if it is just at face-value.

Movement has my attention shifting to the kid’s hands. They still hang at his sides, but no longer in fists. He taps his fingers together—thumb to pointer, then thumb to middle finger, then his ring finger, then his pinkie. And then he does it all again. Over and over and over again like some nervous tic.

Something twinges in my chest, spreading a tightness up my throat.

I don’t like it.

I don’t like this.

I came out here to be alone, and now here’s this kid invading my space, having what looks like some kind of silent temper tantrum. I can only hope after today, should he choose to wander out to this hidden cove, it’s when I’m not here.

At least when I’m alone, I can almost pretend I’m back home in the backwoods of Vermont, surrounded by endless



evergreens and sprawling mountains. With miles separating me from the next neighbor, and no one but bears to sneak up on me.

*And Abby. I'd have Abby.*

Silence stretches out between us, intensifying the ache in my chest. Save for the waves rolling into the beach, slamming up against the rocks, and the low crackles of thunder fading into the distance, it's quiet. So quiet, I can almost imagine there's no one else here. That there aren't people screaming and writhing in detox hell just beyond the tree line.

That there isn't a resort on the other side of the jungles and mountains behind us, full of rich, fortunate pricks having the times of their lives, while the less fortunate over here have to suffer in exile to prove a point.

That my daughter isn't thousands of miles away, forgetting me with each passing day I'm not there.

"Where are you going?"

"Back inside," I grumble, putting my back to him once more, trusting he won't be so stupid as to actually try and climb the cliff. The rain has all but completely stopped, but the water is still pretty choppy, and there's no telling what the hell is up there anyway.

Maybe it's not dangerous at all. Maybe it's just out-of-bounds to island guests. Maybe it leads to where the staff stay. Who knows?

"W-wait!" he stutters out, and I hear the chain rattle, like maybe he grabbed it to climb over. I don't look back, but I sense him jogging after me, hear his flip-flops flapping through the sand.

Shaking my head, I glare straight ahead and quickly collect my shoes and socks.

*I don't fucking need this shit.*

"Hey!" he pants. "Wait!"

I stop and whirl on him.

This time, he's a lot closer. He rears back, stumbling, eyes wide.

Nose flared, I curl my lip up. "What?" I bite out.

His lips slam together, his throat bobbing with his heavy gulp. A flush creeps up his neck, spreading over his cheeks.

I bug my eyes at him, silently urging him out with it.

His gaze dips to my chest, and he seems to pause, like something's caught him off guard. His dark brows knit, lips pursing. He looks...confused.

Frowning, I drop my gaze, not understanding what it is that snagged his attention and put that look on his face.

My tattoos?

My thin white V-neck is completely soaked through from the rain. It clings to my torso, putting my ink on full display.

It's nothing crazy—not like I'm covered head to toe. Just a nice shoulder piece in the American traditional style that extends from my right forearm to up and over my pec. At the top, near my collarbone and extending over my shoulder up my neck, constellations peek out from between thick clouds. Down my arm, a woodsy scene backdropped by rolling mountains. All in shades of black and gray.

I have other pieces, but this is probably my favorite apart from the date scrolled across my heart just next to where this ends. I started this piece at eighteen, and have been getting it slowly filled in the years since whenever the mood struck, waiting for the day it finally felt finished.

I thought the date of my daughter's birth would've been it. Like that's what I was waiting for all along to say, *There. It's done.*

But there's still something missing. I just haven't figured out what yet, or been inspired to even try.

A throat clears and I peer up through my lashes.

The kid stands a little taller, putting him only a few inches shorter than me at his full height. He lifts his chin haughtily,

looking off pointedly at some spot in the horizon. Features tense.

The sun hidden only moments ago peeks out from where the storm clouds have begun to dissipate, cutting a ray of light over the boy's face, turning his brown eyes a molten gold.

My lip curls, and a humorless laugh rumbles my chest. *Right.*

His head snaps forward, eyes wide, cheeks ruddier than they were a moment ago. "What?"

Shaking my head, I turn away. "Typical," I mutter.

It's not the first time I've gotten a reaction like this, all just because of my ink. Though you'd think the younger generation would have more appreciation.

*Jesus, way to make yourself sound ancient.*

I'm only thirty-two. Emphasis on *only*. I'm hardly an old man.

But these days I feel a lot older. And a lot more jaded than I probably should be. And I look at this kid and all I feel is fucking exhausted.

And pissed off.

At him. At me. At Mel. At the universe.

"What the hell does that mean?" he says quietly with a hint of a growl.

Somewhat surprised by the attitude, though I'm not really sure why, my brows draw up. I rock back on my heel and turn just enough to cut him with a knowing look.

He's quick to compose his little snarl, taking on an air of snootiness. He blinks rapidly, giving his head a little jerk, almost like he's trying to shake out the redness from his cheeks. Like he's a fucking Etch A Sketch.

Spoiler alert: it doesn't work.

Movement draws my attention downward to where he's again tapping his fingers together, faster now.

I frown.

*What the hell is up with this kid?*

“You jonesing or something?”

“Huh?” he mutters, blinking all doe-eyed up at me. His fingers still.

My brow arches significantly more. I gesture at him. “You tweakin’? Withdrawing? You know—” And like the prick I am, I bring a finger to my nose and sniff. “—looking for a little fix. That why you out here, kid? ’cause newsflash, you ain’t gonna find it. Not here.”

*Though I’m sure some have found a way to sneak in contraband.*

But I don’t tell him that.

His brows slam down over his eyes and he gives a stilted, but firm shake of his head. Fingers curling into fists. “What? No, no I’m not— That’s not—”

Scoffing, I wave him off. “Yeah, okay, sure, and I’m only here ’cause I wanted to work on my tan.”

Again I go to turn away when he stops me.

“I’m not an addict.”

There’s something in his voice that gives me pause.

“Sorry,” I mutter. I peer over at him, giving him a quick once-over. “Forgot there’s other reasons to be here.”

He frowns, his lips forming a little pout that makes him look even younger. More innocent. Less stuck-up and more just...out of place.

Again, I find my gaze shifting past him to where the rocky cliffs loom over the beach, dark and ominous. It’s still fairly cloudy, but the sun hits them just right, bathing the jagged edges in shadows.

*A walk. A swim.*

*He wanted to go for a swim.*

*But...the ocean's right there, lapping at the sand mere feet away.*

As if he senses the direction of my thoughts, he stiffens. "I —"

His breath hitches, stealing whatever it is he wanted to say.

Our gazes collide, snapping together, and something heavy and knowing passes through us. He searches my eyes like he's looking for something, or maybe trying to explain himself. Silently and desperately.

He looks lost.

Defeated.

And it tugs on something inside of me I'd much rather ignore. Something that has me searching right back, seeking... something out, something I can't put a name to.

In this moment, brief and fleeting as it is, he's not just some kid, not some stranger.

And I'm not some jaded alcoholic, fourteen years his senior, pissed off at the goddamn world.

We're just two lost souls, trapped in this hell masquerading as paradise, banished from the outside world, looking for a way out.

He sees me, and I see him, and it's...

It's—

I whirl around, storm away, hands white-knuckling my shoes, sand kicking up at my feet.

All I can hear is the whoosh of waves clashing with the blood roaring in my ears.

I feel him staring after me.

This time, he doesn't stop me.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

SKYLER

**T**he first time I realized I was different, I was six and in the middle of a breakdown over a broken crayon.

I remember how I was in the process of carefully filling in the last ribbon of the rainbow on our coloring sheet when it snapped, producing a tiny jagged purple mark just outside the bold black outline. A mark no bigger than my pinkie nail.

My entire kindergarten class stared at me, before all but diving behind Mrs. Golden when I shot to a stand, screamed bloody murder, and kicked at my desk, swiping everything in sight.

Papers fluttered in the air.

Cups of crayons and markers rolled off the table.

Chairs toppled over.

It was as if a tornado blew through the room in the form of little fists and howlish yells and unchecked tears streaming down too-hot cheeks.

I couldn't stop.

I remember that.

I couldn't stop.

I never could when I was possessed by the storm.

It was far from my first outburst—what professionals would later call *meltdowns*. Far from my last. But it was the first time where my brain seemed to click on, and I realized just how alone I was. Still too young to get control over it, but too old to live in blissful ignorance.

It was terrifying, being aware of what was happening, and not being able to stop it.

And that's when I started to hurt myself.

Collapsing in a heap, I started bashing my fists on the floor.

And when that wasn't enough, my head.

That's when Mrs. Golden lunged forward, grabbed me, and I punched her in the face.

I was *six*.

*Autism*, someone speculated.

But no, at that point I talked just fine, even if I had delays earlier on. Could articulate my needs when I *wasn't* freaking out. Showed no learning disabilities, aside from difficulty paying attention or staying motivated. Easily maintained eye contact...most of the time. I met whatever other markers they tested for back then. *Just enough*.

I passed or whatever...just enough. And that was all my parents cared about, and it was never brought up again.

So then I started seeing a child psychiatrist.

Got pumped with meds. Slapped with other diagnoses.

ADHD.

Conduct disorder.

Bipolar.

Suddenly I was either a human ping-pong ball, unable to sit still, so jittery it was like someone shot me up with liquid lightning...

Or a zombie, completely checked out, unable to do so much as lift a crayon, much less kick over a desk or bang my head off a wall.

*He'll grow out of it, they'd say. He just needs more supports. Different meds.*

And my parents...well, they tried everything. I'll give them that.

Everything but what I actually needed:

*Them.*

The first time I was shipped off to boarding school and they wiped their hands of me, I was seven. Not even a whole year after trying therapy and meds.



If it didn't work immediately, then it didn't work at all. It didn't matter what professionals told my parents, that they just needed to give it time. As soon as I slipped up, they'd grab my hand, drag me out of whatever situation I got myself into, and take me for another opinion.

There were *a lot* of opinions over the years.

A lot of med trials.

And a lot of boarding schools.

And not just your stereotypical, run of the mill fancy prep schools hidden in a castle in the woods...but the kind less talked about. The kind for the rich but troubled, hidden right in plain sight.

*Troubled.*

I got that label a lot too.

The thing is, I never *felt* troubled. Not when I was getting into fights, or throwing stuff across the room in a fit of rage, or clawing at my scalp and ripping at my hair like I could somehow escape myself.

I just felt lonely.

Scared.

Confused.

Overwhelmed.

I just needed it to all stop. The noise... the itchy feeling...

I just needed someone, anyone, to look at me and see me—get me—*listen* to me...

But that isn't what I got. Not from anyone who mattered, counted, or lasted.

And just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, I got sent to Canaan Academy, an all-boys residential treatment center run by a bunch of old pastors looking to shove religion down our throats to cure whatever it is ailing us.

Because only through Jesus do you find reform.

At least, that's what they promised my parents.

Marisol and Charles Sinclair didn't get what they wanted either.

That was a year ago, and now I'm here.

Rehab.

My last chance or whatever, now that I'm eighteen.

It's too bad rehab is even *less* what I need.

"Skyler, I can't help you if you don't give me *something*," Dr. Maddock says not unkindly from her perch on the edge of her desk, pulling me from my thoughts.

I blink. I didn't notice her move.

I must've checked out again.

Last I remember, she was behind her mahogany desk, hands folded over my open file. Not that she gave it more than a passing glance. She said as much, that she'd rather start fresh.

I didn't believe her. Still don't.

No one ever wants to hear my side of the story. They only ever care about what's in that file, what my parents say, what I'm sure Canaan had to say about me to cover their tracks.

And then what the doctors noted in the hospital...what my parents assumed too...

My eyes drop to my arms.

The fading marks and doctor's reports speak for themselves. My entire history condensed into that file speaks for itself. So why talk at all? Why bother?

It doesn't matter what I have to say. It never did.

A sigh fills the room. It's a sound I'm quite familiar with. One that's soft, gentle, but exasperated.

My knee starts to bounce and I have to dig my nails into my palms so as not to start tapping my fingers again. I didn't miss her gaze on my restless hands when she called me in.

I glance at the clock. That was thirty minutes ago. My time's almost up.

Twisting my lips together, I meet her gaze, not backing down, even when it feels uncomfortable. I don't want to miss anything. Eyes say a lot more than any other feature. A lot more than anything spoken.

*And yet even then, sometimes I get it wrong...*

Wincing at the reminder, I hunch my shoulders, shaking my head.

*Adam was a fluke. He knew what he was doing. He knew how to trap me.*

For some reason, a pair of dark green eyes flash across my vision, intercepting the memory. In my head, I hear the distant thrash of waves. The faraway roll of thunder.

*I didn't get his name.*

All thoughts of Adam forgotten, I focus on the scene barreling through my head instead. The one with the rugged man with the tattoos, scruffy face, and damp, chin-length brown hair. The one who snuck up on me on the beach not even a whole hour ago, and yanked me out of the chaos in my head with hardly any effort at all.

The man who stole my breath, and jumpstarted my heart, and made me forget all about the cliffs and my need to dive into the ocean.

*Him.*

I think of him and I relax.

*"What are you doing? ... Did you hear me?"*

The memory of his rough voice tickles the back of my mind, like a quiet little buzz, the kind that you feel more than see, like when you're underwater and everything's all whooshy. Quiet, yet not. The closest thing to a noise I can tolerate when everything gets too loud.

My lip ticks up, and I glance down at my lap, easing the tension in my fists.

That man...he was so...miserable...

Grumpy.

Feeling eyes on me, I peer up through my lashes, my barely-there smile dimming.

Dr. Maddock's head is tipped to the side. She's taken off her readers and now nibbles on the tip, brow furrowed in thought as she studies me curiously. I fight the urge to squirm, my pulse quickening.

I hate this feeling. Now more than I ever did before.

Like a lot of things, Canaan Academy took what were once little nuisances and turned them into little nightmares.

She lowers her frames, tosses them on the desk, and stands suddenly.

I flinch.

Either she misses it, or is kind enough to not draw attention to it. Rounding her desk, she grabs my folder—the one I imagine was sent her way after I went through intake earlier today—lifts her gaze to mine, arches a brow, and makes a show of opening it, lifting the first sheet without so much as sparing a glance at what it contains.

She then proceeds to feed it through the shredder next to her desk.

My eyes widen, bugging out of my head.

She does this with the next sheet, then the next...

I dart my gaze between her and the shredder currently eating up my life's story.

“Something tells me, none of this is going to help me help you,” she says.

My head snaps up, and I feel something clunk in my chest when her face blurs.

She smiles sadly, knowingly, and gives me a small nod.

My rapid-fire pulse no longer feels like a timer ticking down to when I explode...but rather a spark flicking to life, heating up the dark, hollow place in my chest. The one I never thought would see light again.

My chin quivers.

*This is a trick. It has to be.*

Once she's finished destroying the last bit of history cursing me to this existence, she tosses the empty manila folder into the trash, and pulls out a crisp, new one from her drawer.

"These might still exist elsewhere," she says gently. "But in this office, just between us, as far as I'm concerned, your treatment starts today."

I swallow thickly.

She writes what I imagine is my name along the tab of the folder. "So, before we end today's session, can you meet me halfway here and tell me one thing about you. Anything. Just something to jot down so we don't leave today with an empty folder." She caps the pen, lifts her head and gives me a wink. "Call me superstitious, but it sets a bad precedent."

Sucking my cheek in, I consider her, debating whether or not I can trust her.

Because she's right. The notes and reports still exist. Almost everything's digitized these days. I'm sure she has it all on her computer anyway.

And still...

My heart gives a little thump, and again, green eyes flash across my head. The last image I have of him before he all but ran off, leaving me alone on the beach.

I could've gone up to the cliffs after that.

But I didn't.

I came back here, to the main building, found my way back to the tiny waiting room that had sent me into a claustrophobic spiral earlier, and...waited to be called into my new therapist's office. I was late, and yet she waited for me.

It's like she knew I would run.

Knew I'd find my way back.

*Dr. Laura Maddock*, her plaque next to the door read, I remember.

*Laura.*

*Latin origins.*

*Means victory, or may refer to the laurel plant.*

Eyes burning, I shrug a shoulder, and say the only thing I'm willing to give right now. "My name is Skyler."

Dr. Maddock gives me an encouraging nod and smiles. "It's very nice to meet you, Skyler." Standing, she comes around, and I half expect her to reach out for my hand to shake like she did earlier.

But she doesn't, and while I would've shaken it again no problem—it's what I've been taught, how I've been raised; it's reflex at this point when I meet doctors, quick and fast, just enough to seem normal—I feel something unfurl in my chest at the gesture. Like some invisible pressure I didn't even know was there has been removed.

I inhale and push to a stand, following her to where she opens the door for me.

She gives me a nod. "Until next time."

Throat unbearably thick, all I can do is nod.

This time, I can't hold her gaze. All I can do is stare at the floor through a sheen of tears as I exit her office, bypass the guy waiting for his turn, and stride down the hall, barely paying attention to where I'm going.

Someone asks me if I need help finding my room, but I ignore them. I only got to see it once before they were sweeping me off to my intake physical, but I made sure to memorize how to get there.

It's the first time I don't have to share a room with someone. The first time in a long time where I have somewhere to retreat to that is mine and mine alone.

Sure, during holiday breaks growing up, I'd get to go home to my own room. But it was very few and far between. It

never really felt like mine anyway.

And since turning eighteen a couple weeks ago...

Well, everything was a bit of a blur, and then it wasn't, and now I'm here.

In *rehab* of all places.

Shaking my head, I find my room, lift the bracelet they slapped around my wrist to the little reader under the handle until it flashes green. I shove the door open, letting it close behind me with a quiet click.

I head straight for the big bay window across the room on the other side of my bed, and whip the curtains open. I don't have a balcony. The windows don't even open. But the view is pretty amazing.

White-knuckling the curtain, I breathe deeply in and out through my nose, neck tendons straining.

The sun is out, bright as ever, like it didn't even rain earlier. No sign of any storm having had passed. As if I imagined it all.

Maybe I did.

I was so blinded by panic and my need to get off this island in any way that I could, that for all I know the storm that rushed in and out seemingly out of nowhere *was* just a mental manifestation of the tempest ripping apart my insides.

It's still there, despite the sun shining brightly back at me from a partly cloudy horizon. An itch clawing at the back of my head I can't ever seem to scratch.

My gaze drops to the line of trees blocking off the beach. From up here, I have a clear view of the white sand. The glittering teal ocean. The surrounding rocks and cliffs.

I can't see the cove though. It's hidden by thick foliage.

But I know it's there.

*If I went back, would I find him? The rugged man with the frown, grumbly voice, and lonely green eyes...*

*Would he be waiting for me?*

I freeze, the thought catching me off guard, eliciting a sharp intake of air.

Blinking at the haloed sun reflecting over the rippling sea, I bite my lip until it burns. Until I taste a hint of iron.

*No...*

No, there's no way I imagined *him*.

But something tells me there's no way he'd be waiting for me either.

Why would he?

I'm just some fucked up, spoiled rich kid with more privilege than he knows what to do with. That's all he saw.

That's all anyone ever sees.



# CHAPTER THREE

---

NOLAN

**T**he kid's watching me again.

Huffing a quiet grunt, I slouch further down in my metal folding chair. I kick my legs out, and cross my arms more tightly, dipping my chin toward my chest as I willfully ignore the dodgy glances that keep bouncing my way from the seat directly across from me.

*So much for him not being an addict.*

I don't even know why I'm surprised he lied. It's what we do. Lie, lie, lie until it kills us.

If he thinks I'm going to acknowledge him, he's got another thing coming. As far as I'm concerned, yesterday, down at the cove, didn't fucking happen.

Long, dark strands of hair slip free from behind my ear, falling over my face, and obstructing my vision. I don't bother to push them away.

I need a trim, but things like haircuts aren't exactly a priority these days. Not that I'm sure where I'd even find a barber here, but this island supposedly has everything you could ever need, so I imagine it wouldn't take much effort to find one.

*Everything I need, and yet nothing I want...*

Kevin, the counselor leading today's group therapy session, drones on about accountability from his spot three chairs down from me. There's eight of us today, gathered in a circle in the center of the empty room. Not the biggest group I've been a part of since I arrived a little over three weeks ago, but bigger than most. Based on how many gaunt, unfamiliar faces I see hunched around me, I take it we must've gotten a new batch of intakes recently.

For rehab, that is. The mental health wing, or whatever they call it, does their own thing. We're kept separate for the

most part. Sure, we overlap a lot, but our treatment plans are a little different.

After all, most addicts you meet struggle with mental illness. If they don't, then odds are they're only here 'cause they got caught fucking shit up. Like crashing daddy's car because they decided to go on a little joyride.

Or some big name sports star failed his drug test for weed and this is just a formality. A vacation.

Stupid shit like that.

One and fucking done.

But those cases are few and far between in the outside world. Everyday people who end up in rehab are usually there because deep down they need it, and not just 'cause they're on a one-way ticket to the grave.

Black Diamond caters to everybody and everything. But they at least *try* to be efficient. And it just wouldn't make sense to lump us together, any more than it would to lump those with eating disorders and those with anger management problems together.

The person next to me curses under their breath, shuddering, and I find my knee bouncing, antsiness buzzing through my veins.

*I shouldn't fucking be here.*

Save my spot for someone who actually fucking needs it.

Kevin claps his hands together. "Okay, so who wants to share first today?" He looks around the room, dark brows raised above his teal-framed glasses. "Any volunteers?"

A chair squeaks along the linoleum, and in the corner of my eye, the prissy kid from yesterday sits up straighter like someone took a cattle prod to his spine. His weird little fascination with me seemingly forgotten, at least for the moment.

I'd recognize that wide, deer-in-headlights look anywhere.

We've got ourselves a virgin.

Sure, he can't be the only first-timer here, but the others are too in their own heads, preoccupied by addiction's thorny grip to give much of a damn about something as tedious as sharing their sad sagas with a group of strangers.

Red-level admits, I'm sure. Critical.

Group is the only time we see them this early on in their stay, barring those with more severe detoxes requiring a stint in the medical wing. We won't see those guys for at least a week. Then it's mandatory to participate.

Group therapy twice a week.

One on one counseling...

Seminars...classes...

And of course, my favorite: team-building activities at least once a week.

And by favorite, I mean I'd rather take a fork to my testicles than be forced to socialize and pretend I care about things like perfecting my doggy downward whatever the fuck.

"Nolan, how about you start us off?"

Blinking heavily, I cut Kevin a long sideways glance. He smiles encouragingly, and I wince. He's a nice guy, 'round my age, and never gets too pushy. I know I can say no.

And today *especially*...I definitely want to say no.

But then I look across the room, see that kid's dark eyes staring back at me, lips parted, and I find myself speaking before I can think better of it.

"Sure, yeah, whatever," I mumble, sitting a little straighter. I run my hand through my hair, shoving the long strands back. It's pointless. They just fall back around my scruffy cheeks. "Hi, I'm Nolan. I'm, uh—" I wave a hand "—seventy-eight days alcohol-free." *And before that I was five years...*

The guy next to me clears his throat, hunching himself over, and my shoulders stiffen.

*I shouldn't fucking be here.*

“Nolan?”

I glance to Kevin. He gives me a little nod, telling me it’s okay. He knows my story. Knows why I’m here. But I really don’t feel like getting into all of that today, again, for the fifty-millionth time.

“Is that how long it takes?” someone whispers.

I turn my head, meeting the gaze of a young woman a few seats down. Her eyes are blue and bloodshot. Heavy bags sink beneath her eyes. Long, stringy blonde hair falls over her shoulders, nearly reaching her lap.

I open my mouth, close it, unsure what I can even say.

Eyes bore into me from all sides, pleading and desperate. Somehow, though, it’s the kid’s eyes across the room that I notice above all else. It takes an insurmountable effort not to look his way and lash out.

His gaze doesn’t feel desperate. It feels nosy. And that pisses me the fuck off.

Wetting my lips, I consider my next words carefully. “I’m an alcoholic. An addict. Have been since before I was even eighteen, and will be ’til the day I die.”

The girl’s eyes well up with tears. I can’t decipher her age. She’s definitely in her twenties, but addiction has a way of stacking years on you, making it hard to place where in her twenties. She looks bone-tired. Beat down.

It’s how I imagine I looked once.

Clearing my throat, I shrug. “I relapsed about six months ago. I was five years and some change sober at the time. I... slipped...”

My voice fades as memories surge forward.

LAUGHTER.

*Twinkling multi-colored lights.*

*The scent of pine lingering in my nostrils.*

*Snow falling gently outside.*

*Abby smiling that gummy grin up at me from her spot on the floor as she banged around some blocks she just got from Santa.*

*I'm smiling.*

*I'm happy.*

*I'm at peace.*

*My brother-in-law steps out to take a piss. Mel's with her sisters in the other room, giggling, tipsy off the eggnog they've been scooping out of a punchbowl all night. The bowl sitting unattended on the sofa table next to the tree only a few feet away.*

*One glass can't hurt...*

*I'm better now.*

*I can control it.*

*It's Christmas...*

THE A/C kicks on with a thud and a whine, snapping me from the past.

The woman watching me...her eyes crease with her small smile and she nods like she gets it. But she doesn't yet. She will though, and some part of her knows it.

It'll never end.

Working my jaw, I lift a hand, cracking my neck. "It's not about how long it takes," I tell her. "Sooner you accept that, the easier it'll be." I swallow thickly. "Day by day. Moment by moment, really. All we can do is...keep trying. Get back up. Don't let the fuck-ups from yesterday determine your tomorrow."

*Christ, I sound like an after-school special. How the hell did I become the spokesperson for addiction? I've never even sponsored anyone.*

I blow out a breath and look around the room. Like two magnets finding each other, my gaze almost instantly latches on his.

I'm not sure what I expected to find this time around. Maybe more of that haughty, I'm-too-good-for-you attitude. More of that dodgy nervousness.

But instead I find a...stillness of sorts.

Like I'm looking down a long wind tunnel, destruction and darkness spinning into a vortex around us.

And in the middle, there's him.

Just him.

Something flashes in his dark, bottomless eyes, and my muscles twitch, fingers turning white where I clench them. The urge to bolt like I did yesterday rushes to the surface, and only by sheer force of will alone do I remain seated.

"But it gets easier, right?" Kevin prompts softly.

My eyes burn. "Yeah."

The boy's brows knit together.

I nod and feel a small, bitter smile creep up my face. "Yeah, it gets easier."

*And that's when it all falls apart.*



### **THREE MONTHS EARLIER**

"NOLAN, PLEASE UNDERSTAN—"

"Understand what, Mel?" I grit out, pacing the length of the private visitor's room. "I completed treatment. They're approving the discharge. I passed with flying colors. Eight weeks of it. I didn't complain one bit, and I worked my ass off in therapy. I'm all set up for out-patient. My spons—"

"I know that," she whispers, interrupting me.

“And it wasn’t even like last time. I—” I squeeze my eyes shut and tug at my hair, until my scalp burns. “It didn’t even get that bad.” My voice cracks halfway through, betraying the lie for what it is. My steps slow and I come to a halt.

“Nolan...”

*I know, I know.* Tears scald the back of my eyes and I hang my head, my fingers trembling around my skull.

Detox might’ve been a breeze this time around—hardly any shakes or nausea.

What I did to end up back here, though...in rehab...

Well, withdrawal’s got nothing on guilt.

Nothing on the agony of knowing nothing will ever be the same again.

Nothing on the heartbreak of losing my daughter all because I *slipped*.

*This was so much worse. So much fucking worse than last time.*

Last time, the only one I was taking down with me...was me.

A sniff pulls me out of my dismal thoughts and I look up just as Mel rounds the small coffee table. Two full cups of coffee provided by the staff sit cold and untouched. Next to them, a stack of papers with nothing good to be found in them.

“She could’ve died,” she chokes out. “You get that, right?”

I stare at her. The organ in my chest is silent. So silent, so still, I can almost believe it’s no longer in my chest. And yet the phantom pain that shoots across the space it once occupied is enough to seize my lungs. Steal my voice. Steal the sounds around me. Steal...

Everything.

And it isn’t, is it? My heart isn’t there anymore. Not with me.



It's with a little girl I haven't seen in eight long weeks. A little girl whose whereabouts are unknown to me. A little girl who I might never see again if I don't do what Mel wants.

A little girl who could've died under my watch because I was stupid and selfish and reckless.

"You think I don't know that?" I say numbly, my voice barely audible.

Mel's face bunches and she shakes her head. "Please, Nol. Just this one last thing, okay? For me. For her. I just..."

I continue to stare at her, unblinking, barely even recognizing the woman before me.

She's lost weight. She trembles. Her clothes are wrinkled.

Her normally silky blond hair is thrown up into a messy knot, flyaways curling up every which way.

Melody Caldwell-Dresden is nothing if not carefully poised and put together at all times. She's fierce and confident, and kind to those she loves. Understanding. *Soft*.

She's not...this.

She brings her pale shaky fingers to her lips, clasping her palms together like she's in prayer.

*Praying to me? Pleading with me to understand why she needs this?*

"It's just six weeks," she says.

*But I already did eight, I think. This isn't how it works.* I shake my head and try to tell her as much, "Mel, I don't need \_\_\_"

"You do though!" she shouts, her voice shrill. I don't know who it surprises more.

My eyes widen, mirroring hers.

Her chest heaves and she drops her hands to her side in fists. Lifting her chin, she clenches her jaw, and sears me with her hardened gaze.

*There she is.*

*There's the woman I fell in love with, I think sadly, realizing just how far we've grown apart. How far I've fallen.*

Because this is the first time she's aimed that look at me, instead of the asshole snobs in her parents' circle. The ones who never had any qualms about making it known how much they disapprove of her marriage to a man with nothing to his name.

The people that would turn their noses up at me, barely acknowledging my presence all these years, despite how hard I worked to be a partner worthy of an heiress.

*Nothing's ever enough.*

*Nothing I do will ever be enough.*

I see that now, in her pale blue eyes.

Our marriage is over. And no amount of rehab will change that. It's been over for months, well before I fucked it all up. The papers on the table are just the final nail in the coffin.

The only thing I have left worth living for now is our daughter.

The only thing I care about is seeing her. Being a parent to her. And I can't very well be a parent to Abby if I'm living my days in rehab.

But I also can't be a father to Abby if Mel keeps her from me.

"This is all I have to do?" I say tightly. "One last stint, and you'll let me see her?"

Mel's chin quivers and she nods.

*And what about shared custody?* I want to ask, but I know better than to push it right now.

*Baby steps...*

"My parents are paying. Daddy said this place is the best of the best, and he's happy to do it, so please don't fight us on this," she tells me, and it takes everything in me not to roll my eyes.

Knowing Tim, he probably only thinks it's the best because it's the most expensive out there. Hell, this whole thing was probably his idea. If there's something to fix, you bet your ass he's going to be the one marshaling this thing. Anything for his little girl.

*Jesus, when did I become so bitter?*

"Just six more weeks?" I say, wanting to make sure I know what I'm committing to here.

"Yes. Six weeks. That's it. I just... I need this, okay?"

I grit my teeth and nod shortly. "Okay."

Turning away from her, I grab the first thing on top of the stack of forms she brought in with her. The divorce papers.

She already signed her portion, so I numbly follow suit. We already went over everything with our lawyers. We signed a prenup when we got married four years ago, at the behest of her parents of course—not that I fought it—which makes all of his a little easier. Not like I have many assets. Not like I want hers.

I just want my daughter.

My land and contracting business is a plus I can be grateful for later.

Next up is the consent for transfer of records to Black Diamond. Below that, more forms to fill out.

I bring the pen to the first page, just over where to sign, but pause, hesitating. I glance up through my lashes. "You promise this is it? I can see her when I get out?"

Her mouth parts, but nothing comes out.

"Melody," I grit out in warning. "She's my daughter too."

Tears fill her eyes, her lips pressed together so tightly, they're bleached of color.

"*Mel,*" I beg thickly, my voice cracking. There's no mistaking the plea in my tone. I'll get on my knees and beg if I have to. Whatever she wants me to do to prove what happened will never fucking happen again.

I'd die before letting that happen.

Lesson fucking learned.

“Yes. I promise, okay?” she whispers shakily, wrapping her arms tightly around her middle.

Releasing a sharp breath, I nod, look down, and scribble my name, signing my fate away.

Black Diamond Recovery Center, here I come.

# CHAPTER FOUR

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**NOW**

SKYLER

**N**olan.  
It suits him.

His eyes flick to me, and it *definitely* takes me a second too long to look away. I'm usually better about this. It wouldn't be the first time I've had a problem with staring longer than is socially acceptable.

But there's something about him that just kind of...strips me raw, making it hard to mind my manners.

Like yesterday, when we were on the beach. He was so blatantly dismissive, there was no way I'd mistake it for anything else, and yet I found myself pushing, pressing, trying to keep him there. Despite how frazzled I was.

It was as if he stepped right into my storm, reached into the eye, and threw me back out. Somehow tapping into this braver, less refined version of me I've only gotten glimpses of before. A version of me that just didn't...

Care.

*He made me forget...*

"...seventy-eight days alcohol-free," he finishes telling the room.

Pressing my lips together, I duck my head and stare at my feet, willing my eyes to behave. I know I'm being rude, and if the furrowed glares he's been shooting me since we started are anything to go by, he thinks so too.

But I can't seem to stop.

*He remembers me, right?*

"I'm an alcoholic," he goes on. "An addict. Have been since before I was eighteen, and will be 'til the day I die."

I glance up through my lashes at the sound of his rumbly voice. Honestly, it takes a couple seconds for what he's saying

to register, because I'm too distracted by the way his hands come together on his lap. They're tanned and veiny—kind of rough-looking, telling me he's not a stranger to hard labor.

I open my palms and stare down at them, frowning. Not even a single callous or scrape. Nails clean and trimmed. I used to bite them when I was a kid, but my mother was quick to nip that in the bud, swatting my hand any time I lifted it to my mouth. And then when I was sent away and she was no longer around, it was Headmistress Beatrice with the rod.

*“Filthy, unclean boy!” Thwap, thwap, thwap.*

I clench my hands into fists.

“...relapsed about six months ago. I was five years and some change sober at the time. I...slipped.”

His words spark an ache in my chest, one that spreads up my throat, mingling with my own pain. It's not so much what he's saying, but how he says it. Like he's given up. Like he might as well be wearing chains, and walking to his execution.

I know addiction is a lifelong disease, but to hear it put so bluntly, to see it up close without the veneer of literature and glamorized media, it's a lot less dramatic and just a whole lot of sad.

Peering up through my lashes, I watch the way Nolan's face slackens, his eyes glazing over as he darts his gaze around the floor unseeingly.

Someone clears their throat. Another shifts in their chair.

The silence persists for another long moment, and then the A/C kicks on and he seems to come back to himself.

“It's not about how long it takes,” he says, his voice strained in a way it wasn't before. “Sooner you accept that, the easier it'll be. Day by day. Moment by moment, really. All we can do is...keep trying. Get back up...”

Blood rushes to my ears, muffling his voice. I clench my hands together tighter, and in my mind's eye I'm no longer here, in this room, on this island, but back at my parents'

estate. I'm talking and crying and begging them to believe me...

But they don't.

And I'm tired.

More tired than I've ever been in my life.

*I have no one.*

The scene playing out in my head converges with the one playing out in present time when Nolan's weary, reddened gaze crashes headlong into mine from across the circle.

And everything just sort of...stops.

In my head, I'm cracking open a little orange pill bottle. One by one, I wash it down with a bottle of my father's expensive vodka. It burns, but I'm already on fire. Burning for my sins, just like Pastor Gabriel told me I would.

*He was lying. Making stuff up. You don't actually believe that,* a voice reminds me.

Across from me now, Nolan's gaze furrows, and I wonder what he sees.

Does he hear me screaming?

His face tenses, almost like he's flinching, revolting against something.

Someone asks a question—Kevin, I think.

Nolan's eyes sear mine. "Yeah." His lip curves up in a smile, but it's an ugly thing. A painful thing. It shouldn't even be called a smile. "Yeah, it gets easier."

I frown at the bitterness in his tone, wondering why it sounds like a truth...yet feels like a lie. A familiar itchy feeling crawls along the back of my neck and I hang my head, staring blankly at my too-smooth palms.

Fortunately, before I can spiral, Kevin breaks us off into pairs rather than have us go around the circle sharing, just like he said he would at the beginning. I focus on that and take a deep breath.



Everyone turns to their neighbor, but when I look at the guy on my right, he's already walking away with the person on *his* right. Same with the woman on my left.

An icky feeling churns in my gut.

*Even in rehab, it's all the same...*

I dart my gaze around, feeling sweat gather at my neck and on my palms when I see everyone pairing off. I try to do the math—it would be just my luck to be the odd one out.

But then I see Nolan, sitting across from me, staring down at his hands again, his gaze far off in thought. The chairs on either side of him empty.

I look to Kevin who's flipping through a clipboard. He peers up at me over his reading glasses, looks to Nolan, then back to me and nods with a small encouraging smile.

I gulp.

Wiping my hands on my shorts, I push to a stand and make my way across the circle. Rubbing my fingers together, I wet my lips.

“H-hey.”

Nolan tenses.

He flicks his gaze up, and, again, all I can do is stare.

*Were his eyes that green yesterday?*

His features tighten the faintest bit. If I wasn't standing so close, I would've missed it. Rather than grace me with a verbal response, he kicks a leg out, hooking his ankle around the chair next to him, angling it toward him.

Huffing, he leans forward, running a hand through his hair, and with the other, gestures at the seat.

*Okayyyy then.*

I gently ease down, sitting with my back ramrod straight, hands clasped together in my lap. My toes curl against the flip-flops, and I peek at Nolan through my lashes, waiting for him to say something. Maybe acknowledge yesterday.

But the longer I stare, and the longer he goes avoiding my gaze, the more I realize I'll have to be the one to kick this off.

"Champion," I whisper.

His face pulls down with a deep frown, his gaze lifting to mine. "Excuse me?"

My mouth opens, closes, fumbling for a couple seconds, before I finally manage to say, "Nothing, just, uh..." My face heats. *Come on, Skyleer. Out with it.* "Your name. Nolan." I test the name out for the first time, loving the way it rolls off my tongue. "It's of Irish origin. It means champion."

A long beat passes where Nolan just stares openly at me.

*Nice. Way to break the ice.*

Dropping my gaze, I curl my toes deeper into the leather soles of my flip-flops. An itch skitters down my arms, gathering in my palms. Mouth sealed shut, I try to breathe normal.

"I'm not Irish."

I still.

My head snaps up, and I find Nolan cocking his head, peering back at me with a funny look on his face. "Did you just pull that out of your ass or something?"

I blink, and then a short, abrupt noise bursts out of me. A snort, I think. Eyes wide, I shake my head. "No." I dip my head shyly. "Well, sort of, but like...it's true. It's a fact. I just...I have this thing. With names and meanings."

Nolan's brows pull together, almost like he's pissed off. Or maybe disturbed. It should probably worry me—it wouldn't be the first time I got a look like that. One that's usually accompanied by abrasive words, mocking laughter...maybe even fists.

But for some reason, it just feels...different with him. I can't explain it.

"And you just...memorize them? All of them?"

Chewing the inside of my lip, I shrug. “As many as I can. But first names only though.” I shake my head with a quiet huff. “Last names are a little more complicated—most are hybrids of all different sorts of meanings, etymologies, and they’re not unique to a person, so it doesn’t really give me anything to work with.”

“Yeah...” he says slowly.

I wince. “I know. It’s weird.”

“Yeah, little bit,” he says slowly.

Blinking into a frown, I eye him curiously—cautiously—waiting for the other shoe to drop. The one made of cruel barbs and cutting scorn. That or for him to stand up, wave me off, and tell Kevin he refuses to be partnered up with a freak.

But it never comes.

“I’m Skyler,” I blurt loudly...too loudly.

Nolan’s brows raise. “Let me guess. Your name means sky.”

My gaze dips to his shoulder, where a thin gray cotton tee covers the tattoo I spotted yesterday.

A small smile tweaks my lips. *He has the night sky inked in his skin.*

“No,” I hear myself say, quietly this time, almost a whisper. “Surprisingly enough, it actually means scholar.”

He grunts and I lift my gaze, flushing, waiting for him to either make some snide remark or give me a hard time for ogling his body like I did yesterday.

It upset him, me staring at him. I could tell that much. He didn’t like it when I looked at him. “*Typical*,” he’d said, and something about that harshly spit-out word felt more hurtful than if he had just ignored me and kept walking.

“Yeah, I uh, know,” I manage to stumble out quietly, shaking off the memory. “Not very accurate. Parents really messed it up with that one.”

*Set for failure from the start...*

A long moment passes before he says, “What makes you say that?” There’s something in the way he asks it, like he doesn’t actually want to be asking me, but feels like he needs to. I wonder why he even bothers.

Still, I find myself answering, “Well, for one, a scholar is someone who takes learning very seriously, and is probably really intelligent.” His frown deepens, almost like he knows what I have to say about that, and for whatever reason doesn’t like it, so I quickly move on, ignoring the little flutter of nerves in my belly. “And two, scholar also implies things like college and universities. I turned eighteen two weeks ago and ended up in rehab instead, so…” I trail off with a little shrug.

Another grunt.

*Is that...a laugh?*

He’s tougher to read than most. Maybe it’s the beard. It’s not super thick, but enough scruff to cover the lower half of his face, giving him a rugged, devil-may-care look about him. His lips are full though, not hidden. So maybe if he actually tried to smile, it’d lighten him up.

But maybe not.

There’s just something very *rawr* about him.

“Did you just growl?”

“What? No.” My cheeks heat.

His gaze dances around my face with a look of concern.

“How old are you?” I blurt, my voice cracking.

His eyes narrow. “Thirty-two.”

I nod, happy I wasn’t too far off with my estimations. I clocked him to be around thirty-five. It’s the beard, certainly. And the smattering of chest hair I got a peak at the other day. And the general grumpiness he’s got going on. If it wasn’t for those things, I would’ve guessed younger.

“My first time in rehab, I was eighteen too,” he says in that reluctant tone of his. He sighs and waves a hand. “But I’d been

drinking for years already at that point. It just didn't really seem like a problem 'til I got my first DUI."

My eyes widen a fraction and before I can stop myself, I blurt, "Your first?"

He scowls, and I wonder if maybe I pushed too hard. But with his next words, I realize it was toward himself. "Let's just say I didn't take my first stint too seriously. Didn't see I was spiraling, so I just did what I had to to get released, and went right back to it."

"What happened?"

He gives me a pointed look. "Anyone ever tell you you're really fucking nosy, kid?"

More heat creeps up my neck. "I'm not a kid," I say on reflex.

"But you are." There's that unfazed, point-blank tone of his again.

This time I don't like it.

Leveling him with a hard look, I say more firmly this time, "But I'm not. Haven't been for a long time. The law just acknowledges it now."

His brows creep up his forehead, disappearing behind the waves of brown hair curtaining his face. It's a couple shades lighter than mine, and long enough to tuck behind his ears, unlike my dark, nearly black hair that's cropped short on the sides, and left thick and wavy on top.

I sit up a little straighter, pulling back my shoulders. Father always said people take you more seriously when you have good posture. Not that it's gotten me far in life, but it does seem to get Nolan's attention at least.

Though his scoff tells me it's not the good kind.

He did this on the beach too.

It's like he takes me even less serious when I try to be serious, and that's just really confusing.

“And no,” I say in a surprisingly steady voice, despite that angry flutter in my stomach turning to an all-out stampede up my chest, shortening my breaths. “No one’s ever actually said that to me before.”

I’ve been called rude, yes, usually for staring. Or for not responding when someone’s talking to me, or in the way I’m supposed to.

But nosy? Never.

Some of his annoyance seems to dissipate, replaced by that begrudging curiosity again. He searches between my eyes like he can find the answers there.

He won’t though.

I could be gagged, restrained, and silently beg all I want, and it never makes a difference. He’ll see what he wants to see. That’s all anyone ever does. They only see themselves. They see the truth they want to believe in.

Or...

They look away.

But, then again, I lied to myself when I saw desire in another boy’s eyes, and look where I ended up. So maybe looking away *is* the answer.

“I find that hard to believe,” Nolan finally says skeptically, pulling me back to the conversation at hand.

I glance up, lifting a shoulder, not sure how to explain. Frankly, it’s baffling even to me. I’ve never been this comfortable around a stranger right off the bat. Hell, I don’t know if I’ve ever been this comfortable and open ever. I feel like I’m bursting at the seams with all the things I want to say. Things I’ve never told anyone before.

There’s just something about him—about the way he talks to me and looks at me that holds me captive. He doesn’t handle me with kid gloves, but nor does he treat me like a pariah. A freak.

My whole life it’s been one or the other—dismissiveness or scorn.

With him I've gotten neither so far. Even when he *is* dismissing me—or trying to—he's...not. He's still looking right at me, even when I get all flustered and have to look away. He's still listening to me, even when he clearly doesn't want to be.

And he's...nice. Ish.

Okay, so he's not *mean*.

He's just...intense. *Yeah, that's a good word for him.*

And I guess I just...like that.

I don't know *why* exactly. There's just a *feeling* here... something...and I can't explain it. I don't even want to try. But I want more of it, whatever it is.

“Why are you here, kid?” he says gruffly, yanking me out of my thoughts.

I roll my eyes at that word again, and freeze, caught off guard by my reaction.

Nolan cocks his head, watching me intently. Like he too senses my confusion. My shock.

*What the hell's going on with me?*

Giving my head a little shake, I sit up straighter, lifting my chin, and tell him, “It's complicated, but it's a mistake. I don't \_\_\_”

Another scoff, this one far more telling than the other.

“This again?” He gestures to my arms. “Then what are those?”

I follow his gaze to the faint bruises and marks along the inner sides of my arms. *Track marks.*

They've faded for the most part, but a couple scarred over thanks to Pastor Marcus, who clearly did not know how to find a vein.

Crossing my arms, hiding the marks, I peer up through my lashes. “It's not what you think,” I whisper, my voice sounding very far away.

He shakes his head. “Yeah, okay, sure.”

I flinch.

Just like that, the man from a second ago is replaced by someone I no longer recognize...yet familiar all the same.

Nolan curls his lip at me, the closest to a smile I’ve gotten, but it turns my blood cold. Icing over and crumbling any warm thoughts I may have had of him a second ago.

*What...what just happened?*

“Seriously? Look, I get it. We lie, we deny, we make up excuses. That’s what addicts do. But that’s out there,” he says, jabbing a finger past me toward the door. “That’s the shit we pull when we’re using, not in recovery. In here, your bullshit’s pointless. You wanna get this done and over with, and go back to whatever it is you were doing that got you in here, right?”

I frown down at my lap, not understanding. I’m not supposed to be here. I’m not like him. It was a mistake. I just need to explain.

But before I can so much as stutter a word out, he steamrolls ahead.

“Well the sooner you accept you have a problem and take accountability for your fuck ups, the quicker you can be done and out of here, instead of wasting everybody’s time.”

I flinch, but it does little to deter him. If anything, it just spurs him on.

“I know your kind, kid.” Shaking his head, he gives me a look of disgust. “Spoiled, rich, stuck-up.” He tips his head to the side. “Let me guess. Got bored? Thought you were invincible? Maybe got too high one night and drove daddy’s precious Bugatti into a porch?”

Shaking my head, my mouth opens, closes—like that fish in Dr. Matyschki’s office I used to stare at growing up while he spoke with my parents.

Like then, I struggle to find my voice to correct him. He just needs to listen.



It's no matter though, because he's clearly already drawn up his conclusions about me.

And that—realizing just how wrong I was about him after all—well, that just fucking guts me.

Why I even thought he was different is beyond me. Why I even care is a mystery. It's not like we were going to become friends. He's fourteen years older than me, and clearly wants nothing to do with me.

I really am just some pathetic kid in his eyes.

I suddenly feel so much smaller, smaller than I have in a long time. Canaan messed me up, sure, but this...this is different.

This is like being back home listening to my parents argue about what to do with me.

This is like being back in all those doctors' and therapists' offices listening to everyone tell me how I feel and why I do what I do, while I could do nothing but sit there.

Like then, my tongue won't work. I can't speak. I don't know what to say. It changes nothing.

So I just...shut down.

Withdraw.

Retreat.

“...first world problems mean nothing here. You—”

“Nolan.”

It's the quiet I tune into first. As if I was underwater, I breach the surface with a quiet gasp. It's quiet, so quiet it's loud, grating on the nerves.

Lifting my gaze, I take in the wide, darting looks coming from all around us.

Some look pitying.

Others look exhausted.

One glares, but not at me, at the man sitting across from me.

“That’s enough,” Kevin says softly from where he stands over Nolan, hand clasped around his wide shoulder. Something twinges in my chest at the sight, but I don’t know why. I just know I don’t like it. I feel...tight and itchy inside.

*Kevin, I recite inwardly. Irish origins. Means handsome...*

I forcibly drag my gaze up to Nolan’s green eyes. They’re nowhere near as vibrant as they were when I walked over here.

His lips part, but nothing comes out this time. Some emotion flashes across his face, but it’s there and gone far too fast for me to make sense of.

His gaze drifts down my chest and I follow it to where I furiously tap my fingers together in my lap. When I realize what I’m doing, I stop, clenching my fists until my nails dig into my skin.

I need...I need to go. I can’t be here.

I barely hear Kevin speak as he draws our session to a close.

My knee bobs, and as soon as Kevin says we’re dismissed, I bolt without a backward glance, barely cognizant of the people I push past in my haste to get out of this stifling room.

Like yesterday, as soon as I’m free, I make a beeline straight for my room in the dorm portion of the building.

But this time, instead of going for the window, I cut into my private bathroom.

Leaving it dark, I shut the door behind me.

Surrounded by nothing but blackness and the sound of my heart thudding fast in my ears, I fall into a heap, curl up into a ball as tight as I can, press my hands to my ears, and let the storm ravage me from the inside out.

It starts in my toes, then zips up my legs. Prickles my fingers, and tightens my muscles.

Everything’s too much. Too loud.

I want to scream, so I do, but I muffle it into my knees, pressing my mouth so hard against my skin, I feel my teeth

break skin.

The urge to bash my fists into the tiled floor is strong, but I resist. Instead, I just rub them into my head...my ears...

*Breathe.*

*Just breathe.*

*It will pass.*

*It always passes.*

*Ride it out.*

My body quakes. My heart thunders. I cover my ears so tight, the whooshing is all I can hear.

My thoughts and impulses are a cyclone I can barely withstand, much less make sense of.

But I hold on.

I scream into my knees and I hold on and I don't let it out. I keep it contained.

I am stronger than I was, stronger than these storms that plague me, and I will not let this place break me.

I will not let stupid, sexy, grumpy men who speak cruel, ignorant words be another thing that tears me down

He doesn't know me.

They don't know me.

*No one does.*

I survived death, and I can survive this too.

# CHAPTER FIVE

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**ONE WEEK EARLIER**

SKYLER

One thing I wish someone told me before I tried to kill myself, is how much more painful it is to come back to life than it is to die.

Maybe if I knew how agonizing it would be if I failed, I would've opted to stay.

Or, at the least, I would've tried to be a *little* more efficient.

My body thrashes, lungs spasming, heart pounding so loud and fast it feels like it might burst through my ears right along with my brain.

Everything hurts.

It *burns*.

Like I've been submerged in liquid fire.

But I can't seem to get my body to move away, and there's something going up my nose.

*Plastic? A straw?*

I don't understand.

Whatever it is though is long and it slithers down my throat like a snake, scraping against the spasming walls of my insides, glugging liquid into my body that has my stomach cramping and bile sloshing, rising, surging from my lips.

I try to scream, but all that comes out is a choked groan and deep, chest-wracking gags.

"He's awake!" someone calls out, though it sounds muffled and warbly. Far away.

*No, no, please no*, I beg silently in between the static filling my head.

All I can think is that I'm back *there*, and this is just another desperate attempt to fix me. Purge me of my sins. Make me *right*.

*I got out, I got out, I got out—*

The snake wiggling around my throat stops moving suddenly, and then there's a sucking sensation, as everything inside me seems to be getting vacuumed up. For a moment, there's relief, and awareness fades once more...

Only for it to return with a vengeance in what feels like seconds later, when more liquid gets pumped inside me, bringing with it a tide of bile that scalds the back of my tongue.

It's only then that I register the multiple hands gripping my shoulders and back, as they fight to keep me on my side.

*Don't touch me! Don't fucking touch me!*

I try to pull away again, but it's no use. My body is not my own. It's *theirs*. It hasn't been mine for a long time. Even in my daze, I know that much.

*Please, please, I was good. It wasn't my fault. Please.*

Heaving sobs spill from my lips, lubricated by the surge of foul-tasting vomit exploding onto the pillow. My limbs twitch—practically convulsing. Spit gathers around the corners of my chapped lips, doing little to stifle the discomfort.

Pain and desperation are all I know and it wars with the darkness threatening to pull me back under. I don't remember it, but miss it all the same—that heavy, pitch-black nothingness that weighed more than the nightmares that haunt me. I just wanted to sleep. I just wanted to be away from it all.

*Did I die? Is that what happened?*

*No, you imbecile,* a voice reprimands me. *You clearly couldn't even get that right.*

The voice in my head sounds an awful lot like Mother's.

My thoughts are loud and yet disjointed in the midst of all the activity, short-circuited by the physical sensations ripping through my system, and the voices clamoring around me.

The past once again converges on the present, making it difficult to rationalize where I am, even though some primitive

part of me *knows* I'm no longer *there*.

*Hospital.*

The word flashes across my head, breaking through the fog.

I got out.

I made it.

*But that already happened.*

I struggle to remember what happened in between.

All that exists is then and now and suffering.

All that exists is ice cold nothingness that burns like fire, engulfing me from the inside out.

“You’re okay now, honey. You’re okay,” a soft feminine voice murmurs by my ear, and for a moment everything else quiets, fading into the background. I latch on to the voice continuing to utter assurances, digging my nails into the sheets as I silently urge her to keep talking, keep going.

Fingers stroke my forehead. It feels cold. Sticky. But I lean into it all the same.

Other voices slip in, deeper, harsher.

I squeeze my eyes shut, my limbs quivering and jerking every so often. But it no longer hurts. I’m just cold. Hollow. Exhausted.

Something sharp pricks my upper arm—a needle. I don’t even flinch. Nor do I shrink away from the hands gripping me, moving me as they see fit.

It’s all just so far away, and I’m just too heavy to move, like I’m sinking right through the bed, and deep into the earth.

*There we go*, I think. Or maybe someone says it.

I can’t be sure.

All I know is I’m not scared anymore. I’m no longer burning alive.

*Even Hell didn’t want me...*

Finally, finally, the blackness takes hold of me once more.  
And I let go.



THE NEXT TIME I come around, it's to Mother's nasally voice.

"He's a black stain on the Sinclair name."

She doesn't even bother to quiet her tone. I wish I could say it's intentional. But no, it's much worse than that. She just doesn't care.

"Marisol," my father says in that dry, pitiful way of his.

Letting my eyes remain closed, I picture her whipping her hand out in my direction, pointing a sharp burgundy lacquer nail my way. "Look at him. You told me that place would set him straight—"

I flinch, but I don't think they notice. Or maybe I just do it in my head.

"—but all it did was fuck him up more." A loaded beat passes. "I mean, *drugs*, Charles? *Drugs*?"

I don't even have to open my eyes to know my father is currently pinching the bridge of his nose. "I don't know what you want me to say—"

"I want you to tell me how such an esteemed school failed so spectacularly," she hisses. "Kenneth said Canaan was the best of the best for boys like him."

"Drugs don't discriminate, Marisol," he says calmly, like he's talking to a child.

"Clearly, but how the hell did he get access to them?"

"Well, he did overdose on your—"

"That's beside the point." This time, in my mind's eye, I see my mother slashing her hand between them.



They continue to bicker, but I sink into my head, only half paying attention, caught somewhere between the lingering effects of whatever sedatives they gave me, and just plain old indifference.

No matter how old I am, or what circumstances I find myself in, it's always the same.

*They're always the same.*

Exhaustion weighs heavily on me, pressing down on my eyelids, despite the claws of consciousness pricking my awareness, prodding me to wake up.

*Pay attention.*

*You're not safe here.*

*Don't let your guard down.*

A choked sound builds in the back of my throat, getting caught when my body protests.

It burns.

Like my insides have been shredded.

I start to panic, not remembering at first. *What...*

Flashes of memories burst across my vision.

Bright lights.

The tube. Liquid sloshing around inside me.

The hands cupping my face and holding down my shoulders.

*They saved me...*

A sob works up my throat, and I don't know if it's from relief or frustration, but it's as overwhelming as it is painful. All these feelings I can't put words to, even if I could speak—even if I wanted to...

*What's the point of anything?*

“...woke him.”

An exasperated huff, then, “Skyler, Skyler!” Mother barks, and I sense her draw near. Wilting into the bed, I try to turn

away, but I can't. I'm trapped.

*Just like at Canaan...*

The monitor next to my head starts beeping faster...

Louder.

I lurch up, only for something to yank me back down. Something pulls at my ankles. My arms. Footsteps thunder into the room, and there are hands—so many hands grabbing me.

Voices rise around me, clamoring to be heard.

It's too bright, even behind my eyelids.

Grunts and whines scrape up my injured throat—the only sounds I'm capable of making, my screams carrying out no louder than soundless gasps that bring an ache to my jaw and straining muscles.

One second, I'm fighting for my life. Thrashing, trapped in the prison that is my head...my body...

And then the next, I feel warmth gushing through my veins, turning my limbs into sand.

I'm sinking...

Sinking...

Sinking into the mattress.

The world dims, and once again, I'm gone.



“BUT I’M EIGHTEEN,” I say in a small, raspy voice, staring down at my lap unblinkingly.

It's the following day—I *think*—and while my throat sears like nothing else, my head is clearer than it's been in a long time.

And I'm no longer restrained.

“Yes, and you’re clearly no better fit to take care of yourself than you were as a child,” Mother bites out.

I flinch, bringing my knees up, hugging myself.

My parents stand over my hospital bed, shoulder to shoulder, in a familiar united front. The kind that tells me they won’t be budging on this. The kind that tells me it’s already been done, whatever *it* is.

*I’m an adult now...*

*I don’t understand.*

*I’m supposed to be free now, and they’re telling me I’m not?*

Behind them, a woman shuffles awkwardly, pulling me from my thoughts. She introduced herself as my social worker when she came in, but my parents were quick to swarm in around her, blocking her from my view.

“If we could just—” the social worker tries to interrupt, but Father is quick to take over the conversation as always.

“What your mother means,” he says pointedly, ever the mediator, “is that we don’t feel you currently have your best interests in mind, Skyler. Fortunately for you, addiction is perfectly curable if you’re willing to put in the work.”

I frown at my knees. “I don’t—”

“Son, denial does us no favors. The evidence speaks for itself.”

Chewing the inside of my cheek, I pull at a loose thread in my sweats. I’m glad to be out of the scratchy hospital gown, but of course my parents brought me the wrong pants. These are too loose. Too worn.

“If I may—”

Again, the social worker is cut off, this time by my mother.

“Rehab will get you cleaned up and right as rain, and then we can reconvene with the lawyers and Dr. Matyschki to discuss what comes next.”

I blink long and hard. “Next?” I whisper.

“We’ve discussed with Frank and adjusted the stipulations regarding your trust,” Father explains, referring to their accountant. “Seeing as you’re incapable of managing your own life at this present time, and are a viable danger to yourself, Dr. Matyschki, as well as Frank, and our lawyer, recommended that we put proper measures in place to protect our assets as well as this family’s reputation. The paperwork for guardianship will be filed today. And then you’ll be on the first flight out tomorrow to Black Diamond.”

“Black Diamond?”

“Yes, they have a rehabilitation program built within a luxurious resort and spa, from what I hear, so you’ll want for nothing there. It’s the best that money has to offer, and more importantly, it values privacy and anonymity above all else.”

*Right. Because that’s what’s important here.*

It’s ridiculous. They talk as if they’re more important than they are. They’re not famous—they’re just business savvy and know where to invest.

But if there’s anything that holds true for Charles and Marisol Sinclair, it’s that their egos will always outweigh any legacy they strive to have.

There’s simply no reasoning with them.

Swallowing hard before I can remember how sore my throat is, I wince and work my jaw around, massaging my fingers into my neck as if I could smooth out the raw, irritated flesh within.

“Stop fidgeting and pay attention,” Mother hisses.

*I’m not fidgeting*, I snipe inwardly, knowing better than to try and defend myself out loud. Not that I’ll be able to get more than a word out before Mother cuts me off.

Stilling my movements, I finally manage to ask. “How long will I have to be there?”

“Dr. Matyschki recommends a sixty-day stay minimum—just over eight weeks. Depending on your progress as noted by

the staff and therapists who will be working with you there, this could be extended if need be.”

I nibble the corner of my lip and nod.

*Dr. Matyschki is an idiot.*

He’s been our family doctor since I was born, and for as long as I’ve been forced to go to him, I’ve been invisible at best and a bug under a microscope at worst.

Even when I’d have physical exams, and my parents stayed outside, he barely acknowledged me unless it was to ask me a bunch of questions I couldn’t answer. Not in a way he seemed to want me to explain it, or in a timely manner.

Which of course would then just reinforce what my parents already told him, and eventually I just gave up trying altogether.

“This place won’t be like Canaan,” my mother says, “where you get to run free, doing whatever the hell you want.”

*Ugh. If I could scoff without risking more damage to my throat I would.*

If I had any doubt before that they completely disregarded what I told them the other night—or yesterday, whenever it was; it’s all kind of fuzzy—I don’t anymore.

I should’ve known better than to think they’d start listening now that I’m technically no longer a child. Even thinking I’d been *fixed*, they still couldn’t care less what I had to say.

That sinking, heavy feeling returns, one not unlike how I felt walking up the stairs of my parents’ estate, up the stairs, and down to my parents’ en-suite bathroom.

Pointlessness should feel light, like it did when the drugs settled, and my vision blackened.

My last memory was of flying, and it felt very fitting.

I suppose it’s this body grounding me to earth that makes it all feel so unbearable.

*Why couldn't they just let me go if I'm this much of a burden?*

“Are you listening, Skyleer?” Mother snaps.

I shrug before I can think better of it. Because no, no I wasn't.

What does it even matter anymore? I'll be going wherever they send me, doing whatever's forced of me, just like every time before this. Even becoming a legal adult changed nothing, not if my parents' pockets have anything to say about it. Surviving death didn't even make a dent in my fate.

I think I get it now, like really get it—that whole “damned if you do, damned if you don't” thing people say sometimes.

*Maybe I didn't die because I'm already in Hell.*

*Maybe Pastor Gabriel was wrong, and I've already been damned all along.*

Mother huffs and waves me off. “I can't deal with this.” Her heels click along the floor, growing faint as if she's leaving the room.

I peek up to confirm as much.

The social worker—I don't think she gave her name—meets my gaze and I quickly avert mine to somewhere over her shoulder.

She moves closer, just as Father says, “This poor attitude you've got going on isn't going to fly anymore, son. If you don't get your act together, we will be forced to come up with a more long-term solution.”

I tense.

*Long-term? Is that...Are they considering putting me away for good?*

My pulse spikes, and if I was still hooked up to a heart monitor, I know it'd be beeping like crazy.

*They can't do that...can they?*

“Mr. Sinclair, if I could please have a moment alone with Skyler, I’d—”

A sigh fills the room, cutting her off mid-sentence, and in my periphery I catch my father nodding, waving us off. “I’m going to go make sure the arrangements are in place for his transfer.” Turning on his heel, he pauses just as he passes the young woman. To her, he says, “Don’t be surprised if you can’t get him to talk, or even look at you. We’d hoped he would grow out of it, but as you can see...” He trails off with a sound of disgust.

It’s not often my father is so outwardly disappointed with me. He’s usually far more understanding. But then again, maybe it’s just easier to convince myself he isn’t too disappointed in me when Mother’s so much louder about how much *she* is.

I feel him staring at me, and I blink rapidly, trying not to cry. “This is your last chance,” he says gruffly. “Prove us wrong, and you’re free to do as you please. Prove us right, and we’ll do what needs to be done for your sake and ours.”

He pauses meaningfully, and I chew so hard on my inner cheek I taste blood.

“I don’t want to have to resort to long-term care for you, Skyler,” he says, almost gently. More gently than I’ve ever heard him speak. “You’re better than that. Those places aren’t for people like you. But if you don’t grow up and get yourself under control, we’ll have no choice. It’ll be that or prison or a grave at this point, and while you might not have any preferences, we do. Understood?”

Chin trembling, I nod.

“We’ve done all we can for you, Skyler. More than most parents would. Don’t waste that privilege on account of adolescent stubbornness. It’s time to grow up and be the man I know you’re capable of being.”

Another pause, then, “I’ve seen it. I know you’re stronger than this. So does your mother, and that’s why we get so frustrated sometimes.”

His steps draw near, his shiny black dress shoes glinting under the overhead light.

A hand comes out to touch me, and I tense, bunching into a human ball before I can stop myself.

He sighs, muttering something under his breath.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I murmur, “S-sorry.”

“We’re just trying to help you,” he says for what feels like the millionth time. It sounds so... empty. Hollow.

It does nothing to unfurl the tension constricting my body.

“But we can’t help someone who doesn’t want to be helped,” he says with an air of finality.

He doesn’t push himself through my visible discomfort to touch me. Instead, he turns, walking away, his squeaky, steady steps growing faint, before disappearing completely.

I should be grateful he respected my space. But like usual, I just feel sad. Frustrated.

Lonely.

*Why can’t I just be normal?*

“Skyler?”

Blinking, I lift my head, willing the tension from my shoulders. I forgot there was someone else in the room.

I force myself to meet the social worker’s gaze, letting my vision grow unfocused so it doesn’t feel so intense as I tell her, “I’m sorry about them. They don’t mean to be rude. They just are.”

She coughs, but tries to cover it up with a hand to her mouth and a gentle clearing of her throat.

I drop my chin on my knee, stretching out my other leg, and go back to picking at the loose thread on my sweats, not caring about the tear forming as I pull and unravel it, winding it around my finger.

She draws closer, and I can sense her watching me intently. As if she’s waiting for something.



Was she here when I freaked out and they had to sedate me?

Is she scared of me?

People often are, which is funny, because I'm not exactly scary looking. I wouldn't say I'm skinny, but I'm far from big and muscular. And frankly, the idea of hurting someone churns my gut.

It always has.

At least...I *assume* it's fear that drives people to give me a wide berth. Or I suppose it could be that I just make people uncomfortable. Not always, but it seems to be a running theme in my life.

*Watch out for that Skyler. He's a loose cannon. Steer clear or who knows what he might do to you.*

People who've learned first-hand what I'm capable of, should I grow uncomfortable, just assume touch in general repulses me.

It doesn't. Quite the opposite actually.

Problem is, my body and my brain aren't always on the same page. And the page could flip without even a second's notice, especially when people come at me too fast and too strong.

Most of the time, though, it's for no other reason than just a gut feeling. One I can't reign in and fake my way through, even if I tried.

It doesn't make sense. And people don't like to listen to things that don't make sense. So I've long since stopped trying to explain in order to change their minds.

The social worker's saying something, I realize, so I force myself to tune back in.

“...legal department, but it probably won't be much help at this point, unfortunately. They've already gotten a professional to rule you as incapacitated on account of chronic mental illness and now, subsequently, addiction as well as a failed suicide attempt.”

*Failed?* I think, my forehead wrinkling. *Doesn't the word attempt imply as much?*

She pauses as if waiting for me to say something, but I don't know what she's looking for, so I say nothing.

"I'm so sorry, Skyler. I wish I could be of more help."

Frowning, I look up at her, and this time, I do meet her gaze.

Her eyes widen, like maybe she's taken aback.

*Like touch, this too is hit or miss.*

"It's okay," I tell her, blinking probably far too fast than is normal. Dragging my nails down the inside of my fingers, I add, "I know it's out of your hands."

And I do know this.

I'm not stupid, despite what people like to assume about me just 'cause I'm awkward and can't always control myself when I get upset.

My parents have enough money and influence over the people on their retainer to get away with pretty much anything. They always have. I've heard enough over the years, between the house staff, and angry phone calls carrying through the walls...

At the end of the day, I'm a liability.

Simple as that.

The social worker—her badge reads Anna, I notice, and I relax even more—says nothing. She looks about as lost as I feel, or maybe I'm just doing that thing a therapist once said—projecting? Mirroring?

*Who am I....*

"This might be good for you," she says gently. "For no other reason than it gets you a whole ocean away from those idiots you have for parents."

I blink hard.

Looking up through my lashes, I find her giving me a small smile and shrug.

*Anna.*

*Hebrew origin.*

*It means grace.*

“Don’t let them bully you,” she says in a hush. Her mouth tightens. She’s young, probably only a few years older than me. “Prove them wrong. But for *you*, not them.”

And with that, she nods, turns on her heel and leaves, arms wrapped tightly around a closed binder.

Wide-eyed, I stare at the empty doorway, not really seeing anything as my thoughts overtake me.

*Prove them wrong...*

My father’s final words play back to me.

*“We can’t help someone who doesn’t want to be helped.”*

I shake my head

*I’d help it if I could...*

And that’s the crux of the problem, isn’t it?

How can I prove them wrong...

If they’re right about me?

# CHAPTER SIX

---

**NOW**

NOLAN

I'm an asshole.

It's not news to me.

I've always been prickly and often too quick to judge. Quick to shut people down.

A therapist once told me it's a defense mechanism from growing up the way I did, watching my old man struggle week to week to keep us afloat after Mom died.

That's the kind of shit that sticks with you. It sours your perspective of the world, of people. Hardens you.

Seeing the way Pops poured his blood, sweat, and tears into his construction business, only for good ol' gentrification to steal all his customers, stealing their homes, and filling it with wealthy, modern well-to-do's who didn't give a rat's ass about hard working, blue-collared family men like my dad...

Yeah, it's fucked.

How I ended up marrying into the kind of family that wouldn't have hesitated to put my dad out of a job beats the hell out of me.

Then again, Mel was always a different breed of rich. The kind that doesn't hesitate to hand over a crisp one-hundred dollar bill to a homeless man, regardless of what he'd do with it. Hell, she'd give up her inheritance in a heartbeat if it meant solving world hunger.

She's just that kind of person. One untainted by the poison of money. Something that's harder and harder to come by these days, it would seem.

And my Pops loved her.

Still, I'm not too far up my own ass to overlook when I fucked up. And this afternoon, in group...

Well, I fucked up big time. I see that now.

Hell, I saw it the second Kevin halted my tirade and I came back to myself—back to this reality.

Whatever Skyler's reasons are for being here are frankly none of my business. And therefore not up to me to judge.

I don't even know what came over me. One second, we're getting along and I'm sharing like we're supposed to, and then the next I just...

Snapped.

All I could think was, *How fucking dare this kid?*

It was like the room faded, Skyler disappeared, and in his place was a culmination of all my deepest insecurities, twisted into something ugly.

Hell, he couldn't even take a single damn iota of accountability when I pointed out his track marks.

*The proof is in the pudding, kid.*

Or in this case, the skin.

I saw his face though—his shame, his frustration—and while a part of me felt for him, the bigger part of me was just straight up *done* with his better-than-thou bullshit.

*But that wasn't even it, was it?*

Huffing a breath, I stalk the rest of the way down to the cove, the sound of waves crashing along the surf growing louder as I draw closer.

I shove thick fronds out of the way, keeping to the small hidden path.

The crystal white beach appears ahead, just as I skid down a short, but steep, rocky hill and plant my boots in the sand with a soundless thud.

I get two feet and freeze.

My heart thuds heavily in my chest, my thoughts fading as all my attention homes in on the boy sitting a good twenty feet away, right in front of the encroaching water.

He's encased in shadow by the falling sun, but I can tell he's got his back to me.

A sudden image flashes across my head, converging with the scene before me—it's of Skyler earlier, hanging his head, gaze growing glazed and far-off.

Then it's his fingers I see—twitching in his lap, before tapping furiously. Knees bobbing anxiously.

You'd think that would've knocked some sense into me and cooled my jets. But no, if anything his change in demeanor got me even more riled—or rather brought to light some ugly, bitter version of me I've never met before.

Frowning deeply, I debate leaving. He clearly came here to think, not to go for round two.

Still...why come here of all places?

Why risk running into the asshole who berated him in front of a room full of strangers? It's almost as if he wants to tempt fate.

I watch him for a long moment.

*Skyler.*

It's a unique name, especially for a boy. It's... pretty. But so is he, so I suppose it fits him.

I rear back. *The hell?*

I shove the thought away with a scowl.

From my spot hidden by the trees, I watch as Skyler cups his hands in the water sliding up around him. He's still wearing the tan shorts he had on earlier, and he doesn't seem to care that they're getting covered in sand and seawater.

The sun lowers slowly over the horizon, stealing what glitter of light reflected on the ocean just as he turns his head to look over his shoulder.

I suck in a sharp breath.

As if he knew I was there all along, watching him, he finds me instantly. And he doesn't turn away.

We're too far away from each other to make out any details, but I know he's staring right at me, just like he did yesterday, and like he did today across the circle.

*What is it about this kid?*

*Why does he put me all out of sorts?*

My lips tighten, and I spin on my heel to head back the way I came, leaving him to his peace, when it feels as if I hit a wall.

I freeze, chest heaving, gaze staring into the thick tree line without really seeing anything.

"Fuck," I mutter, and against my better judgment, I find myself turning around and stalking down toward the water.

I feel Skyler's wary gaze tracking my face when I join him, but I just ignore him and plop to my ass next to him. Grimacing at the firm, wet sand scraping against my jeans, I pull my legs up and rest my forearms on my knees, staring straight ahead.

An entire foot separates us, ensuring we don't touch, and yet I feel his presence like it's a snaking live wire, sparking the little hairs on my nape to attention as if we *were* touching.

There's just...something about him.

Something frenetic that makes him hard to ignore, even when he's still. If anything, it's more intense when he's not fidgeting about.

Like that feeling right before lightning strikes. You know it's there—know it's coming—and while you know you should take shelter, there's a part of you tempted to see it firsthand. Feel it in the air, even at the risk of getting struck down.

Clearing my throat, I muster a quiet, "Sorry."

He says nothing, but he's still staring at my profile.

He does that a lot, I notice. Stare. But only when I'm not looking. Or rather when he *thinks* I'm not looking.

I dart him a sideways glance. "For earlier. During group. That wasn't about you. I hope you know that. But I made it



about you, and for that I'm sorry."

He blinks down at his hand, rubbing his fingers in the sand. "It's okay."

"It's not. Whatever your reasons are for being here, it doesn't excuse my behavior. It was uncalled for. You...you didn't deserve that."

His throat clicks with an audible swallow, loud enough to hear over the tide coming in.

It's a clear night. No signs of rain showers or storms. The sky is lit up gold with the fading sun, painting the world in a rippling, honeyed glow.

"Thank you," he says after a moment. Then, "And I'm sorry too."

"Skyler, you didn't do any—"

I don't miss the hitch in his breath when I say his name, but he's quick to recover. "Not directly, no," he rushes out. "But I...I struggle sometimes. With reading the room, you know? It probably came off...rude. Insensitive. Being dismissive like I was."

I frown.

"I didn't mean to," he whispers.

Movement out of the corner of my eye draws my attention to where he curls his toes into the sand, the muscles in his calves rippling with the strain.

My mouth dries and I quickly squint up at the horizon. I clear my throat. "I know."

That's not completely true, and he's gotta know that, but he leaves it be.

For a long moment, neither of us says anything. All that can be heard is the sound of the crashing waves, and faint calls of seagulls carrying on the breeze.

I find myself rubbing my ring finger, right over where there's the faintest strip of slightly paler skin. It's been months

now since I wore a ring, but it still feels so heavy sometimes—the absence of it. Proof of my failure.

“My parents sent me here,” he says out of nowhere, his voice hesitant. Like he’s testing them out for the first time. “They assumed things, and they wouldn’t listen—no one would.”

My brows knit together when it hits me. “And I did the same thing earlier.”

I feel his shock in the way he snaps his head toward me, but I don’t take my eyes off the ocean as I force myself to add, “But I am now. So...”

It takes him a stunned moment before he picks up where he left off. “I know what it looks like. My arms, I mean. But I didn’t...”

His voice trails. He does that a lot, I’ve noticed.

I frown and glance over where he has his arms stretched out in front of him. They’re faint, mostly healed over or faded, and honestly, if it wasn’t for the fact we’re in rehab and I was, well, looking for some kind of sign as to why he’s here...I probably wouldn’t have noticed.

Again, I’m baffled by why I was even paying such close attention to begin with.

“I didn’t do this,” he whispers so quietly, at first I think I heard him wrong.

And then I freeze, tensing all over.

“Someone did this to you?” I blurt harshly, whipping my head toward him. I don’t even realize I’ve taken his wrist between my fingers until he lets out a gasp.

My eyes shoot up to his wide, brown gaze.

His throat bobs and he nods jerkily, but then more strongly.

I curl my lip up, shaking my head. “What the fuck? These are from needles.”

He just nods some more.

There's something there, something in those swirling dark orbs begging me to understand. By the desperate sort of shock in his eyes, I get the impression this isn't the first time he's revealing this...but the first time someone's actually taking him seriously, and he's trying not to get overwhelmed.

"It's okay," I say, releasing his arm when I realize I'm still holding it.

Fisting my hand in my lap, I train my gaze downward and nod, waving him to keep going.

A beat passes, then he says, "I'm here because I tried to kill myself."

My muscles solidify, my gaze growing hazy, vision doubling.

"I'm not an addict," he says simply, as if what he just stated isn't the equivalent of a bomb. "I've never done drugs willingly, except for the pills I took to kill myself. Whatever it was they injected me with, I don't think it was super addictive. It was just a mild sedative, I think, I don't know. Something to make me susceptible."

"Susceptible to what?" My voice comes out faintly. My lips are numb. Everything in me just feels...numb at what I'm hearing.

He speaks so calmly of all of this. Matter of fact, if not a little unsure.

"Um, well, it-it was a part of their therapy practices. Behavior m-modification," he stutters out. "It was a school—a special school, like a reform...school." He mutters something under his breath, huffing in frustration.

"Like a school for troubled teens?" I say, remembering hearing about those as a kid. Boarding schools for students who got themselves in trouble. A sort of last-stop before juvie thing, to try and get them under control.

"Yeah. This one was an all-boys school. Religious too. Run by a bunch of pastors."

Unease unfurls in my gut, twisting it all up.

“Most of these schools...they don’t do this kind of thing, at least, not that I know of or for the reasons they, uh, did it to me. I—”

“How is this legal?” I cut in with a quick shake of my head. I peer up at him, frowning deeply. “How do they get away with this?”

His eyes are wide, and a little red around the edges. He shrugs. “I don’t know. It feels like it shouldn’t be...and like I said, it’s not every school. Some of the ones I went to were actually not that bad.”

“How long have you been going to schools like this?”

“Since I was seven.”

My eyes bug. “Why?”

His full lips thin into something harsh and bleak, and he shakes his head. His eyes tell me he wants me to know, but something holds his tongue hostage.

“It’s okay,” I quickly assure him. “I just...I can’t believe this shit happens.”

His eyes glimmer with some emotion, but he’s quick to divert his gaze, hiding whatever it is from me. There’s a tremble to him now that wasn’t there before, and a glance down shows him digging and clawing his fingers into the sand.

My brow furrows and I feel my own fingers twitch with the need to reach out.

As soon as the thought enters my head though, I catch it, wrap it up tight, and throw it away. I don’t know what’s gotten into me today, but now’s not the time to question it.

Instead, I turn my focus back to the horizon and ask, “So why are you in rehab? Not to be rude, but shouldn’t you be in the mental health program they have? I feel like, well, that would probably better suit you.”

He inhales deeply, and I sense him nodding. “Yeah. It would. But my parents took out a conservatorship on me when I OD’ed. They make all the decisions, and they decided I was an addict. So here I am.”

I stare blankly at the rippling sea. “A conservatorship? Like that thing Britney Spears had?”

A short, hoarse laugh escapes him. “Yeah, exactly that.”

I shake my head at a loss. “Why? You’re eighteen.”

“Exactly,” he whispers. “And I nearly killed myself. In my parents’ eyes, I’m unfit to take care of myself. That, combined with everything else...”

“What do you mean?” I prompt when his voice trickles off again.

He shrugs. “N-nothing. They just...they don’t listen.”

“Right,” I whisper gently. Something tells me it’s a lot more complicated than that, but I urge myself not to push it. It’s none of my business.

A moment passes before he speaks again. “They told me if I go to rehab, get clean, and prove I’m cured and no longer a liability, they’ll dissolve it. Otherwise...” his voice shakes. “Otherwise they might have no other choice but to...to put me somewhere.”

Eyes wide, I swivel my head toward his. “Like, what, a mental institute?” Even to my own ears, my voice is rough and layered with outrage. “What the fuck? You’re not...” I shake my head, at a loss of how to word it without being offensive.

His throat bobs and he lifts a shoulder. “It d-doesn’t matter what I am or what I’m not. I’m...a liability.”

I make a face at that word being used again. It’s clear he’s just repeating what he’s been fed. “How so?”

He stares at me, that glimmer in his eyes pulling at me once more. All I can do is stare back, begging silently for some kind of...I don’t know, solution. It makes no sense, and yet I just...fuck, I hate this for him. I don’t even know him, not really, but hell, if I don’t feel protective of this kid, enraged at the idea of someone locking this boy away and for what?

He’s not a liability. He’s fucking *sad*. Since when is that a crime?

“You’re mad,” he whispers, brows furrowing like he’s confused.

“Fuck yeah, I’m mad,” I growl before I can help it. I throw a hand out, and he flinches.

Grimacing, I mutter a sorry and lower my hand in my lap, clasping it with my other. “How the hell can they do that? How can anyone do that to their own kid?”

Head hunched between his shoulders, he shrugs. “It wouldn’t be a mental institute, exactly...more like a long-term care facility. I’m not...crazy.” He shakes his head, frustrated, his cheeks heating. “I mean, I’m not—“

Scowling, I shake my head. “You know they’re in the wrong, right? They fucked up, not you.”

He stills, his eyes going wide. And he just stares at me.

*Goddamnit.*

“Fuck, I’m sorry.” Blowing out a harsh breath, I look away. “As a parent, it just enrages me. I can’t fucking wrap my head around it. Shit. Shoot, sorry. I keep curs—”

“I’m not a kid,” he grouses for what feels like the umpteenth time. “You can curse around me. Fuck, fuck, fuck. See? I curse too.”

I cut him a wry look, a short grunt of amusement escaping me, relieved at the much needed moment of levity. Brief as it lasts.

His lips twist together, eyes lowering to peek out from under his thick lashes. And I feel a great sinking in my chest. Like someone just pulled the rug out from under me, and I’m here falling, flailing, lost to...to something I can’t name.

Hell, if he doesn’t look so *young* in this moment. Young and innocent and just... screaming for someone to swoop in and save the day.

And oh how that reaches right into my chest, pulverizing me.

How the hell I can look into this boy's big, sad brown eyes and see not only myself, but see the man I wish I was is a mystery. Not only do we have fourteen years dividing us, but a whole landmine of vastly contrasting experiences. It makes no sense why I suddenly feel this sort of...I don't know, kinship to him?

It's got to be the guilt. What I did to Abby—what I *almost* did...

The fact that I'm here, banished to this island, rather than with my daughter...

And then this morning. Everything I said, the way I took it out on Skyler, the way I feel right now, so angry, so helplessly infuriated...

It's got me all twisted up inside. Confused.

I'm lonely... So fucking lonely, and up until now, I never minded.

But now...

Sitting up abruptly, I lower my legs, crossing them, and I glare out into the ocean.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

"You have a kid?" he asks, his voice quiet. There's something to his tone I can't place.

I nod. "Yeah. Abigail. Abby. She's..." I frown. "Well, she's two now. Her birthday was last month."

He doesn't say anything to that.

"I should probably head back up," I say gruffly. "Mel will be calling me soon." *She better...*

She hasn't called me in over a week. A new record.

Climbing to a stand, I dust off my jeans and hands, then turn and offer him my hand.

Skyler blinks up at me, his cheeks heating to a faint pink.

I frown, but then he's diverting his gaze and grabbing my hand—surprisingly tight—his skin gritty and damp from the

surf.

Hauling him up, I can't help but notice how small his hand feels in mine. Not as small as Mel's, but daintier than I'd imagine most guys' hands feel. Not that I've really gone around thinking what it's like to hold a guy's hand.

Once he's steady, I release him and whirl around, casting a look around the empty beach. "You should probably head back too. It's getting dark."

He says nothing to that.

The urge to walk him to his room is strong—stronger than I'm expecting, and it sends a bolt of unease ripping through me, spurring on the other part of me—the bigger part—the part that just wants to bolt and never look back.

It has to be 'cause he's a kid. Never in my life have I felt such a visceral need to protect someone, save for my daughter. I'm just transferring my shit on him—all these fatherly instincts need somewhere to go after all, and without Abby here...

"Nolan?" he says quietly.

My eyes slide shut as all sorts of thoughts and urges fire off inside me.

*What...what is this...*

*I don't understand...*

*I don't...*

"Yeah?" I grit out tightly.

A beat passes before he murmurs, "Thank you."

I still, every muscle in my body tensing, my thoughts silencing.

Turning my head over my shoulder, I blink back at him.

His gaze is aimed at the ground, and I can't help but appreciate how the little remaining orange light sort of just... pulses around him. While I'm here, caked in shadows, turned away.



*I'm always turned away, aren't I?*

“For what?” I say faintly, my pulse thudding loudly in my ears.

He flicks his gaze up through his lashes—his black pupils glittering. “For listening.”

And my heart just...*thunks*, flopping over somewhere in my chest.

I'm vaguely aware of nodding, and then I'm striding away, storming toward the trees, putting much-needed distance between us.

The blood roars in my ears, drowning out the ocean.

*For listening...*

At the last possible second, I twist around, and call out loudly, “Skyler!”

He hasn't moved from his spot near the water. He lifts his head, cocking it curiously.

“Stay away from the cliffs.”

At first, he says nothing, and I count my breaths. One, two, three—

“Okay.”

The breath leaves me with a whoosh, and I nod. *Good enough.*

I'm not even sure what inspired me to say it, other than the reminder of how I found him that first day. Between that and our conversation just now, what he revealed...

*I heard you, Skyler. Fuck, I heard you.*

*Please hear me too. Please listen...*

Without so much as a goodbye or see ya later, I do what I always do when shit gets too deep—too real, too confusing...

I turn my back and bolt.

All I can do is trust him...

This stranger.

This kid.

This boy who just needed someone to believe him.

*It has to be enough.*

# CHAPTER SEVEN

---

SKYLER

**M**y first week at Black Diamond passes at a snail's pace.

It's only Wednesday, and I'm already struggling to accept that I have *seven* more weeks of this.

Rehab is certainly not what I was expecting.

Aside from my one-on-one sessions with Dr. Maddock scheduled for twice a week, and group therapy on Friday afternoons, occasional seminars, and something called Focus that I have tomorrow, I can't deny that I'm, well, bored.

I'm in literal paradise, but here I am, once again sitting in my room, playing a word game on my phone until my eyes cross, while music plays from the speakers. I don't even have my headphones—something my parents conveniently forgot to pack in my bags.

*Assholes*, I think, smiling faintly at the sentiment.

Ever since my talk with Nolan on the beach, I've been making it a habit to be more...actively angry at my parents. It's not like I wasn't before, but it's like there was a wall up, keeping me from really thinking too much on it. On the best of days, it just felt pointless to feel anything. On the worst of days, I worried they were in the right, and it was *me* who was wrong.

My insides get all warm and gooey—and not in a bad way, but definitely not something that should be happening—when I remember how horrified and enraged Nolan was when I told him how I ended up here.

It was the last thing I was expecting.

No one's ever been...angry on my behalf before.

Just getting him to believe me felt like an impossible feat, which is why I shut down in group last week, and didn't even bother speaking over him and fighting to be heard.

I gave up fighting a long time ago.

Hell, I don't know if I ever fought, to be honest. Not of my own volition, at least. My anger is always something I'm prey to, not in charge of—something for me to dread, because it never feels justified and usually only makes things worse.

Shoving the thoughts away, I lock my phone and set it on the nightstand, reclining back in my bed.

The Framing Hanley song that was playing fades, switching over to the next in queue—"Raging Sea" by Broadside.

I squeeze my eyes shut, wishing I could lose myself in the music, but it's impossible when I don't have my headphones on to block out the rest of the world.

I tap my fingers against my thighs in time with the music, bobbing my head.

*I wonder what Nolan's doing...*

Groaning at myself, I arch my head back into the pillow and blink up at the ceiling.

"He's married," I say, testing the words out loud, hoping maybe if I actually give them voice, it'll finally resonate with the rest of me.

No, he didn't outright say he was, but who else could Mel be? That's who he said would be calling. And he has a daughter, so it makes sense. I didn't even think to look for a ring, but then again, not everyone wears one.

*Ugh. I need to stop.*

I swear all I've done this last week is think about Nolan, replaying our talk on the beach, wishing I could go back and say all the things I didn't have words for at the time. I was just...

I was so caught off guard by his reaction. It got me all tangled up. *As usual...*

I wanted to tell him I'm listening too. I wanted him to feel like he could talk to me, even if I'm not always the best listener. But I try. And sometimes I succeed, so long as I'm in a good headspace, and there isn't a lot going on around me.

And it's just Nolan too, something about his rumbling voice that makes it impossible *not* to tune in and listen to every word he utters. Each one feels precious. Like a hard-won prize for being patient.

And I'm very rarely patient.

*And he's very married. With a kid to boot.*

Sighing at the reminder, I push myself up off the bed, and wander over to my window. I shove the curtain aside, and peek out at the distant ocean. It's a cloudy day, but so far it hasn't rained.

My gaze lowers to the paths peeking out between the thick foliage surrounding much of the island. It's mostly jungle, save for the rocky cliffs and white beaches.

Not for the first time, I can't help but marvel at how different this place is compared to what I expected for a rehab. Nor is it anywhere close to being like Canaan or any of the other boarding schools and residential treatment centers that came before it.

At least, so far.

Then again, I'm eighteen now. Legally an adult.

Not that that necessarily means anything. Clearly. Canaan Academy was notorious for abusing their credentials as a legitimate high school to keep students in their grip months past the point they aged out.

Only reason I got out as quickly as I did, is because my parents showed up unannounced a couple days after my birthday and pulled me out after learning I met all the requirements to graduate. And I was subdued enough when they came for me, that they must've thought I was finally cured.

Fast forward two days later when I finally felt like myself again after months of being doped up on whatever cocktail of meds they'd been forcing down my throat, I finally snapped.

First thing I did was go downstairs to find my parents and tell them what happened. My limbs were trembling, my voice

quivering...sweat dripping down my temples.

I barely noticed though.

But they did.

Nor did I see how skinny I had gotten, and I don't think they noticed either until I was seizing on my bathroom floor not even a half hour later and no longer invisible to them.

*Just another nail in my metaphorical coffin...*

I don't even remember all that I told them when I found them seated at the dinner table. It spilled from my lips like a dam had broken.

Everything that was done to me.

What Adam did.

What the Pastors did to me.

It's all a blur and not—something intangible, yet still feels like a serrated blade scoring my insides every time I think about it or talk about it. Like I'm looking on from the outside, yet still feeling it as if I was still there, still back in the basement of Canaan.

One of the few things that stands out bright from that evening, is when my mother stood up from her chair, stormed over to me in her heels, and slapped me across the face—not hard, no, never hard enough to leave a mark, but hard enough to effectively shut me up, halting me in my tracks.

She hadn't done that in years.

But I also hadn't acted like that in years—rocking back and forth on my heels, muttering, mumbling, barely in control of my own voice as I rambled and hyperventilated my way through what had happened to me.

I remember how Mother had turned away from me, throwing out an irate hand. "*Well so much for that,*" she'd said with a huff.

And I remember shaking my head, holding my cheek—my ear—feeling like I was sinking, falling, *drowning...*

*“DIDN’T YOU HEAR ME?” I whisper.*

*There’s a scoff, then, “What, that you’re gay? We figured as much. It’s not a big deal.”*

*Something knocks loose in my chest, and nausea swells my throat. The dining room floor swims through a veil of unshed tears. “Did...did you know what they’d do to me...” I barely manage to get out before she interrupts me.*

*“Oh, Skyler,” Mother intones in that way she does when she thinks I’m being dramatic. It’s a tone I’m well familiar with, and it hits me—hit me so hard, it’s a wonder it doesn’t send me flying across the room.*

*It will never end. Never stop. This...this is my life. I turned eighteen—became a legal adult—and nothing. Changed.*

*My father takes that moment to finally speak up, but I barely register what he’s saying as a sort of numbness falls over me. “I sincerely doubt it was like what you’re describing, son. I’ve heard their methods can be intense, but it’s to help you. We don’t care that you’re gay, and I doubt they did either. It was about curbing these little tantrums of yours so you could be a functioning and contributing member in society.”*

*I feel myself nodding, not knowing what else to do.*

*They don’t care.*

*“You look at us when we speak to you!” my mother screeches, and I flinch, but do as she says. As I always do, even though it hurts.*

*What I see looking back at me is the same thing I always see. But I’m no longer the same person I was.*

*When she turns away from me, I quickly leave the room. Their heated voices follow, but it’s between them, never them and me, so I ignore it. Knowing they won’t follow.*

*My feet move on autopilot, carrying me to the liquor cabinet in my father’s study. With a handle of vodka in hand, I make my way upstairs and to my parent’s en-suite bathroom.*



*It's like my brain has already decided for me. My body knowing exactly what to do.*

*Everything hurts. Everything shakes—like I'm caught in an earthquake, barely able to stand up straight, much less get my mother's bottle of pills open. Xanax. Her favorite, and such a cliché.*

*Everything about this is such a cliché...*

LOOKING BACK, I should've known better than to stay in their bathroom. Situated right above the dining room, there was no missing the loud thud of me hitting the floor however many minutes later it took to choke down what I could without vomiting.

It was all black at that point, save for one fuzzy flash of clarity, one I can't even be sure was real, and not just something concocted—the moment my parents stormed into the bathroom. My body jerking, head knocking against the floor, liquid drowning me, spilling out white on the tiled floor. And my mother's wide eyes as she dropped to her knees, crawling toward me, clutching my face as I watched on from where I floated above.

*Yep, definitely concocted.*

Movement from out the window draws me fully back to the present, and I frown, squinting when I recognize the man stomping down the path.

*Nolan.*

I stand straighter, hand spread wide over the glass like I could reach him—touch him—summon him to me.

My frown deepens, when I realize he's...upset.

He's shaking his head, throwing his arm out. Against his ear, he holds something—his phone, it looks like.

I can't make out his features from way up here, but everything about his demeanor screams frustration. Tension.

My insides twist with an unfamiliar sensation—a need to make it better. But how?

It's ridiculous.

I'd be as helpless down there as I am up here.

I wet my lips, forcing a swallow.

*Is it his...wife? Mel?*

Something in me just...revolts, crumbling at the idea of him being married.

*Even if he wasn't, there's no way he'd be interested in you,*  
a voice reminds me.

I scowl, but it's not like I can deny it. He's probably as straight as can be, and even if he wasn't, it's clear he only sees me as a kid. A troubled kid at that.

That much is obvious.

My gaze dips, lashes fanning over my cheeks.

Just once I wish someone would see me for me, beyond all my issues. Beyond my age.

I just want someone to take me seriously.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

---

NOLAN

**S**ix more fucking weeks.

Well, seven if we're counting the fact I only had one last week to go before I was set to go home and finally see Abby.

When Mel called me back yesterday, almost two weeks since we last spoke and after probably a dozen missed calls from me, I knew I wasn't going to like what her reasons for avoiding me were.

Hell, I already had a feeling—a sinking, horrible feeling—but I convinced myself I was just being paranoid.

Well, so much for that.

The second I answered, only to be met by a shuddering breath, then the most guilt-stricken, “Hi, Nolan,” I’ve ever fucking heard, I knew.

She was going back on her word.

*“WHAT THE FUCK do you mean I have to stay another six weeks?” I practically growl, coming to a halt just where the paths break off into those leading to the bungalows. “Fucking hell, Mel, we had a deal.”*

*She sniffs, and there's a jostling sound, like maybe she's switching ears, or wiping her face.*

*I try to feel guilty, I do. But it's hard to do that, when I'm pretty sure I've already reached my quota of remorse.*

*I'm tapped out.*

*All that's left now is festering resentment.*

*“I know,” she says in a small voice.*

*“Then let me come home,” I beg, my voice breaking. Staring aimlessly around my surroundings, I can feel my heart*

*rate picking up. My chest squeezing. This can't be happening, not again.*

*“I just... I need you to do this. A few more weeks can't hurt —”*

*“A few more weeks?! Mel, I've been in rehab for almost three months straight. I don't—”*

*“Ninety day stays are perfectly normal.”*

*I scoff. “Who told you that? Tim?”*

*At the mention of her father, she hisses, “No. No, I looked it up. Spoke with your doctor. Spoke with the staff there—”*

*“Here? Mel. Jesus Christ.”*

*“I'm sorry, okay, but I think I have every right to hear about how you're doing.”*

*“I can tell you how I'm doing,” I grit out, smacking my chest.*

*“And I don't trust you!” she shouts.*

*I freeze mid-step, my shoulders dropping.*

*Now she's outright crying on the other end of the line, and all I can do is stand here at a loss.*

*Pinching the bridge of my nose, I take a deep, measured breath, reining in my temper. Fighting with her is not going to do me or anyone any good.*

*“Melody,” I say, “ninety days is perfectly warranted for some cases, I don't refute that.” I infuse as much understanding and patience into my words as I can. “It made sense five years ago. But this time, this time I—”*

*“Stop telling me it wasn't that bad this time!” she says in a guttural voice. “I don't care how much you were drinking, or how easy it was this time for you to sober up. You nearly killed our baby, Nolan! She could've died. If I didn't get home—” Her voice hitches, words breaking off on a sob.*

*I squeeze my eyes shut, nodding though she can't see.*

*Memories surge forward all at once—blurred and distorted, wrought with screams and cries and emotion too heavy to bear.*

*I thought I was dreaming...*

*“I can’t make it go away,” Mel whispers shakily. “I want to, okay? I wish I could see past it and move on. But I-I c—”*

*“I know,” I say numbly. Hanging my head, I grip my hair, pulling until it stings. “I know.”*

A WHISTLE BLOWS, piercing the air, yanking me out of my thoughts.

Shaking my head, I look up, freezing when I find Skyler standing a few feet away, staring wide-eyed back at me.

I scowl. I can’t help it.

Obviously, I know he couldn’t actually hear what I was thinking—remembering—but it still feels like an invasion of privacy.

His cheeks pink and he diverts his gaze, hiking up his backpack.

Of course, he chose to do the hike as well. What the hell was he thinking? Especially dressed like that, in his fancy, pressed shorts and linen shirt.

*Jesus*, I think, glancing down at his white sneakers, shaking my head.

“Alright, everybody. If you’ve done the nature hike before, you know the drill...”

Tuning out the guy leading today’s hike—one of the only Focus activities I actually enjoy, seeing as it gets me away from everybody. Well, everybody but the poor shmuck they decide to partner me with—I shrug off my backpack, and pull out my phone, unlocking the screen.

Nothing.

Blowing out a breath, I ignore the nosy eyes watching me as I brush my hair back. I shove the phone back in the front pocket, zipping it up.

“...yourselves today.”

Someone groans, while others murmur in excitement.

I grit my teeth and clench my fists, forcing myself to count to ten as I take deep breaths.

*Fuck this place. Fuck everything.*

The cravings have returned with a vengeance since my talk with Mel, and it's made me more miserable than ever. As if the promise of getting out next week was holding them at bay, now nothing—not even my shame over nearly killing my daughter—is enough to keep them back.

What's the fucking point anymore? I'm trapped here, and for what?

*Nothing will ever be enough...*

I adjust my straps, and check that my canteen is hanging securely. It's not an ideal set-up—just your basics, all provided by the facility—but it's just a day hike.

I'd kill to have my own shit though, including better boots. All I brought with me were my black Timbs I usually wear for work, and these things are on their last legs.

Grabbing the rubber band off my wrist that I stole from Dr. Weaver's desk during yesterday's emergency therapy session, I pull back my thick hair in a small, messy knot, and tuck the strands that have slipped out behind my ears.

I hear footsteps crunching along the dirt, and my fingers still as I glance up through my lashes.

“Hi,” Skyler says, smiling tentatively. His gaze darts to mine, then away, then back.

My frown deepens, and I lower my hands, straightening. “What?”

He turns rigid at my harsh tone, and he drops his gaze.

*Shit.*

Muttering a curse, I glance around, brow furrowing when I see everyone partnering up and heading into the jungle.

“I-I was wondering if you wanted to be partners?” Skyler says, his voice cracking nervously.

*Great. Just great.*

Of course I wasn't paying attention, so now I'm stuck with the last person I should be stuck with. Especially when I'm in a mood like I am today.

I was hoping they'd randomly pair us off.

*Better yet—let me go alone.*

But that wouldn't be very team-building of them, would it?

Grinding my teeth, I give a short nod, not meeting Skyler's gaze.

I gesture toward the woods and start heading for a small break in the trees.

“W-wait, aren't we supposed to—”

I whirl around, leveling Skyler with a hard stare.

His eyes widen and he gulps.

Mouth tightening, I wait for him to try and object once more, but he just dips his head, eyes darting anywhere but at me.

“Let's go,” I grit out, stomping off into the jungle. “The sooner we get in there, the sooner we get out.”

*And the sooner I get to be alone in my misery again...*



# CHAPTER NINE

---

SKYLER

**W**e're lost.

We have to be.

I'm pretty sure I just saw that same tree with the same marking a little while back. But then again, everything looks the same out here. It's hard to believe we're still on the island. This far in, it's all jungle.

It's been a long time since I heard the lapping of waves.

It's hot and muggy. I'm soaked with sweat. But that might have everything to do with the fact I have to all but jog to keep up with Nolan, and I'm clearly more out of shape than I thought.

I can't even focus too much on that nagging curl of panic in the back of my head—I'm too busy trying to avoid tripping over roots in my haste, because *someone* had to take us off-trail.

It's not the first time I've been forced on some wilderness excursion, but that was several years ago, in the mountains of Montana, as part of some militaristic boot camp my parents thought was a good idea.

*"It'll toughen you up,"* Father had insisted. *"Teach you discipline. Perseverance. You'll be a better man for it."*

It was snowing, frigid, and I had someone screaming at me the whole time.

I was fifteen.

*And to think, back then, I thought that was as bad as things could get...*

On the plus side, it's at least quiet this time around, save for my quick, harsh pants, the brushing of leaves, and a low barely-there buzzing coming from the trees.

If there are birds—other than the seagulls that stick to the beaches, that is—they're silent.

I'm surprised, honestly, that there isn't more wildlife, especially this far into the jungle.

But nope, just mosquitos and those little flying gnat things that hover around my face.

I can't decide which is worse: freezing my ass off or getting eaten alive.

*But it's not Canaan...so that's something.*

I feel another prick in my arm and I slap it, squashing the little beast. I grimace. At this rate, I'm going to be a giant, walking, itchy red welt by the time we finally get out of here. The bugs didn't seem to bother us too much when we kept to the trail, but the deeper into the vegetation Nolan leads us, the worse it seems to be.

Glaring at his back, I grumble, "Are you sure you know where you're going?" I don't even bother masking my crankiness. This sucks.

Again, he ignores me. Not even a grunt of acknowledgement this time.

Nolan commandeers the jungle like a man on a mission. His objective? I have no idea. I thought it was to get this over with as quickly as he could, but now I'm not so sure. If anything, it's like he *wants* us to get lost.

He's a mere five steps ahead, but he feels miles away. I can't even remember the last time he spoke. Probably not since we broke off from the rest of the group. But even then, he barely acknowledged me.

It stings. I won't lie. I really thought we'd...I don't know, made progress on the beach last week. Bonded.

He apologized. I opened up to him...

It's not like I expected we'd suddenly be best friends after that, but I don't know. There's just something about him, something that just...calls to me? A kinship of sorts. A loneliness in him that resonates with the loneliness in me.

And I guess I just...thought he felt it too.

But once again, I'm left floundering, feeling like a nuisance just for existing.

The physical distance grows between us yet again, and I huff out a harsh breath, hiking up my backpack before pushing off into a light jog. Up ahead, I see the slash of a stick through the air, wielded like a sword, batting through the dense foliage as Nolan sets out a path for us.

Kind of him, except for the fact he's clearly forgotten he's not alone. Another limb thwacks me in the chest, shoving me back, and I clench down on my teeth, daggering a glare into his back.

Seething curses under my breath, I shove away the leaves and stomp over the gnarled roots, my chest heaving with strain. If I wasn't so terrified of getting stranded alone out here, I'd turn around and give him the space he so clearly wants.

There's nothing worse than feeling unwanted with no other alternative. Even if it's not personal...it *feels* personal.

Not for the first time, I wonder if his bad mood has anything to do with the phone call I witnessed yesterday. Was it his wife? Did he have a fight with her?

Just like every time I remember he's married, my chest cinches. My stomach churns. There's just this...icky feeling I can't shake, no matter what I tell myself, and I hate it.

Why? Why him? I don't even *like* him. Okay, I don't like him that much. He's rude more often than not. Brash. Clearly wants nothing to do with me. *But what else is new there...*

My thoughts trail off as my gaze dips, dragging down his broad back. His white t-shirt is drenched through with sweat and smudged with dirt. I can make out black swirls of ink going across his shoulder blade, reminding me of the tattoos I spotted when we met.

I take in his tapered waist. Then lower...

My mouth dries.

He's in jeans again. Ripped, faded, and tight in all the right places. Places I shouldn't be ogling like the sick pervert Pastor Gabriel told me I was.

*He was wrong. What happened to you was wrong*, I remind myself, nodding like I can truly convince myself. Deep down, logically, I know what transpires in the bowels at Canaan Academy is messed up, but still...

If Nolan knew of lustful thoughts taking shape in my head, I don't even want to think what he might do. Abandoning me out here would be the least of my worries.

The pressure in my chest twists into something gnarled and jagged, like thorny vines reaching down and wrapping around my rib cage, squeezing tight, shredding me.

My gaze drops to the ground, seeing without really seeing.

Hatred and shame merge and sizzle in my veins, bringing a tremble to my fingertips. I fist the straps on my backpack, just over my chest, squeezing until my knuckles turn white and my fingers go numb.

*Stupid*. Shaking my head, I glare down at the rough terrain, stomping over the roots and rocks littering our path, like I could squash these feelings inside me. *It's all so stupid. None of that stuff matters anymore. Block it out. Just get through this hike, that's all you need to do. You can break down about it later.*

Somewhere distantly overhead, a seagull squawks. Leaves rustle. I think I even hear a—

“Was that a monkey?” I blurt loudly, coming to a sudden halt, all other thoughts forgotten.

I tip my head back, darting my wide-eyed gaze around the trees.

I don't know whether I'm excited or concerned. Monkeys are friendly, right?

*But these are wild monkeys.*

Nolan doesn't slow his pace. I don't even think he heard my outburst.

Now I'm getting *really* pissed off.

It's hot. I'm thirsty. The bugs clearly have it out for me. And now there's a *monkey* that may or may not be stalking us like prey.

"Hey!" I bark. Stomping forward, I'm not paying attention, when it finally happens—my sneaker; my once clean, perfectly white Hermes, now scuffed with dirt and grass—gets caught under a gnarled root.

A half-gasp, half-grunt bursts out of me as I go sailing forward, arms flailing at my sides.

Quicker than lightning, Nolan's there, hands snapping out, gripping my shoulders, catching me just in time.

Our gazes clash inches from each other. We're so close, I can see my reflection in his pupils.

My lips fumble to say something.

Brows dropping low, he shakes his head with a scowl and all but picks me up by the waist, plopping me down on the dirt next to him. "Watch where you're going."

With that, he releases me and turns away, resuming his determined strides.

Face bunching, I shake my head. "No."

He pauses, mid-step. Just when I think he might ignore me, he turns his head to look over his shoulder. He gives me an arched look. "No?"

I lift my chin, standing up straight, and give a short shake of my head.

"You're not going to watch where you're going?"

I open my mouth, then close it, and shake my head. "No, I mean yes, I mean—" I growl in frustration and stomp around him, putting us face to face and so I'm blocking his path. "I'm out of water."

Rolling his eyes, he reaches behind him for his own bag, pulling out his canteen. Water sloshes inside when he shoves it toward me.

I blink down at it.

He huffs and shakes it, the sound bringing a pang to my gut.

Wincing I grab it, quickly remove the cap, and bring it to my lips. It's tepid, but it feels like heaven sliding down my parched throat. I didn't even realize how thirsty I was.

"Easy," he grouses, ripping it away from me. "Save some for both of us. I don't know if we'll find a stream or not."

Running the back of my hand across my lips, I glare up at him. "Well maybe you shouldn't've taken us off the path they told us to stick to."

"Well maybe you should've rationed your water."

"It's hot."

"Exactly."

Gritting my teeth, I search his face, feeling the sudden urge to stomp my foot like a toddler. "We should've been back by now. It's been over an hour. They said it should only take an hour. We're lost."

His lips purse. Glancing down, he pulls his phone out of his pocket, unlocks it, and frowns down at the screen.

A humorless laugh escapes me and I shake my head. "Great."

"We're not... lost," he says quietly. Lifting his head, he bypasses my glare to take in our surroundings. He runs a hand through his hair. "But we should start heading back."

This time, I'm the one rolling my eyes. *No shit.*

He cuts me a look and I realize I said that out loud. My cheeks heat and I turn away, heading back the way we came.

He sighs. "You're going the wrong way."

I pause, looking around. "No..."

He draws up behind me, grabbing me by the shoulders, and turning me forty-five degrees. "We came from this way."

I blink. “How do you know that?” My voice is distant even to my own ears, as all my attention seems to home in on the heavy, warm weight of his hands, and the broad, hard chest pressed along my spine, radiating heat like a furnace.

He smells like the earth. Heady. Musky. *Manly*.

He huffs a short laugh that has my hackles instantly rising. “Not my first hike, kid,” he says roughly.

And then he’s gone, taking his sweltering heat and scent that shouldn’t smell good at all with him.

I scowl, mentally shaking off whatever *that* was. “Not a kid. And it’s not mine either.”

He says nothing, but I feel the skepticism rolling off him in waves. Turning to face him, I cross my arms and lift my chin. “It’s not.”

“Sure,” he murmurs, shouldering his way past me. He doesn’t so much as spare me a glance.

“It’s not.”

“Uh huh.” He grabs the stick he must’ve dropped to catch me, twirls it in his hand to gather a better grip on it, and slices through a cluster of bushes.

Fisting my hands at my sides, I stomp forward. “It’s. Not,” I grit out as flashes of Montana flash through my eyes. A chill works through me, creeping down my arms, standing up the little hairs.

*Endless woods.*

*Mountains as far as the eye can see.*

*It’s cold...*

*So...*

*Cold...*

Then suddenly it’s not Montana anymore, but a windowless room in the basement of Canaan Academy.

*Pitch black.*

*Ice cold.*



*An incessant, high-pitched buzzing fills the room, quiet at first, then louder—sharper.*

*“Let us pray,” a deep voice warbles over the loudspeaker, crackling through the piercing ringing.*

*I squeeze my hands over my ears and scream—*

That irritation from before surges forward once more, blackening out my vision, and before I know it, I find myself lunging forward and shoving Nolan in the back.

Nolan’s not exactly built like a tank, but he’s far sturdier than I expected. Still, I catch him off-guard enough that he stumbles forward.

Quickly catching himself, he whips around, eyes blazing. “What the fuck?”

Stomping forward, I shove my trembling finger in his chest, right over his sternum—hard. “You have *no* idea what I’ve been through.” The words wrench out of me, surprising both of us.

His eyes widen, mirroring mine, and like always during a confrontation, my voice cracks, fading, my tongue...swelling, as I’m being pulled back into my body.

“You don’t know me,” I say forcefully. Again I jab him in the chest. Harder this time. I have to push up on my toes to meet him nose to nose, desperate to get it out—get it all out—before I clam up completely. “You don’t have a clue. This is —” My voice chokes off with a silent gasp and I shake my head in frustration.

I go to jab him again—the only thing I’m capable of when the words won’t come—when a warm, calloused hand encloses over mine, holding my finger to his chest.

*“You.”* I seethe through my teeth.

*Gone. It’s all gone.*

My heart pounds against my skull. My chest rises and falls with quick, heavy breaths.

Nolan's gaze sears into mine, boring deep, like he can reach in and claw the words tripping me up free. There's an air of aggression to him that is unmistakable—a warning in his firm grip that should have me pulling back, cowering, and stuttering through profuse apologies.

It's what I've done my whole life. Over and over and over again. I explode—sweep in like a tidal wave—and then I retreat. Slinking back to where I came from, deep, deep into the bottomless black where no one can find me. Tongue-tied and forgotten.

*Invisible.*

But that's not what happens this time, and I don't look too closely as to why that is, or how it's possible. Especially with him looking at me the way he is now—like it would take nothing at all to snap my fingers or throttle my neck.

*And yet I'm not looking away....*

“You have no idea.” The words fall heavy, quiet, and foreign from my lips. The only thing I'm capable of saying.

Nolan's frown deepens, his gaze sweeping over me, almost like he's seeing me for the first time. Like he's trying to figure something out.

Emotion scalds the back of my eyes and I fall back onto my heels, shaking my head.

“I just...I got nervous,” I say quietly. I swallow, and it's a slow, lumpy kind of swallow that seems to take forever. I stare down at our joined hands. *He's still touching me.* “I didn't even realize I drank all my water. I didn't mean to. And...and I'm worried we're going to get stranded out here, or-or in trouble for wandering. I don't even know what time it is. I—” My rambling comes to a halt and I flit my gaze up to his warily. “I'm sorry I pushed you.”

His dark brows droop low and furrowed over his green eyes. In the shade of the jungle, his irises look darker than ever, almost black.

My mouth dries, and my pulse is suddenly all I can hear.

Fingers clench against mine, reminding me—and him—we're still touching.

Releasing me abruptly, he takes a step back. As if his hold on me was tied directly to the vice on my lungs, a sharp gust of air punches out of me.

Wrapping my arms around my middle, I look away, craning my head over my shoulder. Willing the heat in my cheeks to dissipate.

I hear him mutter something and I shift my gaze ahead once more. His back's to me, and he's running his hands through his hair.

“What was that?”

He grunts and shakes his head before peering over his shoulder at me. “Don't be sorry,” he says. His mouth tightens at the corners. “I was being a dick.”

I say nothing to that. What could I? It's true. He's being a dick.

Sighing, he waves me on. “This way.”

We get about ten steps before we hear it.

A thud, followed by a groan.

My eyes widen and I swing my gaze around.

The groan cuts off with a gasp, and my eyes widen right when I see it. Just up ahead, a break in the trees reveals two guys—two half *naked* guys—going at it against a tree.

*What...*

My mouth parts, but a hand comes down, sealing over my lips.

Hot breaths dance along my ear, and I'm frozen. Stock-still. Unable to actually believe what I'm seeing, out here, in the middle of the jungle. Between two *men*.

Nolan walks me forward suddenly, spinning me, and shoving my back against a wide tree. All the while his hand stays plastered over the bottom half of my face.

My wide, unblinking gaze meets his as he looks between me and the scene just past the tree he's currently pinning me against.

*Oh God, did they see us?*

Nolan's got one arm braced against my chest, and his knee's wedged between my thighs.

Moans, pleas, and the distinct sound of flesh smacking against flesh fills the air. It's all I can hear next to the blood steadily rising in my ears.

My stomach clenches, and Nolan's frown deepens.

And that's when I feel it.

*Oh...oh no, oh please no.*

Nolan's gaze snaps down to mine, widening.

I try to shake my head, my entire body trembling so hard, I'm practically vibrating out of my skin.

Tears sting the back of my eyes, and I can't breathe—I can't fucking *breathe*.

Nolan's palm is sweaty against my face, and I pant against it, tasting the saltiness of his skin with each inhale.

My cock twitches. Right against his thigh.

My *hard* cock.

*Nonononono—*

Nolan blinks a couple times, like he's coming out of a daze. He shakes his head, swallows a couple times.

*Oh God. He's going to hate me. He's probably disgusted.*

And just like that, I'm no longer in the woods.

IT'S DARK.

*Cold.*

*I'm strapped to a chair, and someone's standing over me with a needle.*

*I'm shaking my head, pleading, denying what they saw, what they think they know about me...*

*"I'm not gay."*

*I am, but I'll say whatever they want if it means letting me go.*

*A piercing sound fills the room and I squeeze my eyes shut, gritting my teeth.*

*Too much, please, it's too much...*

*The noise on the intercom fades into a low buzzing. There's crackling, and then a voice...*

*"Dear Heavenly Father, today we come to Thee—"*

A HAND TUGS on my hair and my eyes fly open.

Nolan's brows sit low and heavy over his eyes, knitted in the center. He shakes his head and his mouth moves, framing words I struggle to make out.

*It's okay, he's saying.*

But it's not.

It's not.

*I'm not.*

I shove his hand off my face, and push past him, storming blindly into the surrounding jungle, willing my feet to carry me as far away as possible.

Something wet hits my lip, and I realize I'm crying.

A roar fills my ears. My fingers clench and flex at my sides.

All I can do is keep walking—running...

And hope I somehow fall into a hole, and never have to face Nolan again.

# CHAPTER TEN

---

NOLAN

**S** *hit, shit, shit.*

Gritting my teeth, I quickly adjust myself in my jeans. My cheeks are warm, and my skin feels too tight, and I kind of want to punch myself in the nuts.

I blink rapidly at the space Skyler just occupied, the grooves along the tree blurring as my vision crosses.

*What the fuck was that?*

My hand tingles with warmth where I'd held it over his mouth.

Branches snap behind me, followed by quick, uneven footfalls crushing the dirt and leaves. Yanked away from my spiraling thoughts, I whip around, mouth parted on a silent protest to be quiet.

But he's not there.

Skyler's gone.

Heart pounding in my chest, I dart my gaze around, worry for the kid surging to the forefront of my mind, eradicating everything else.

*Not a kid.*

He's the one who said it like a dozen times, yet the voice in my head is all mine.

Clenching my jaw, I nod. *Eighteen. He's eighteen.*

Fuck, he's only eighteen.

And I'm *straight*.

Well...I thought I was.

Yeah, no, definitely not thinking about *that* now. Hell, any of this. I'll revisit this entire clusterfuck later when I know he's safe and I'm back in the privacy of my own villa, and I'm

no longer sporting an erection for another man, one who's almost half my age.

*It's confused. My dick's confused. That's all this is.*

*Confusion and friction and...and...*

*Jesus fucking Christ, he's barely eighteen. What's wrong with me?*

The two guys on the other side of the tree line are still moaning and panting, though the fleshy sounds of them fucking seemed to have eased up.

I shudder, shaking myself. *Enough!*

Slamming a steel wall down between *that* and me, I set my sights on the trees ahead.

*Skyler. I just need to find Skyler.*

I don't like the wild look he had in his eyes before he bolted. Not to mention the hot tears bubbling up from those big, way too innocent brown eyes.

Abandoning the men to their business, I leave as quickly and quietly as I can to get some distance from the little porn show and catalog my surroundings. Looking for disruptions in the terrain to tell me what direction Skyler ran off.

"Fuck," I mutter near-soundlessly. Blood rushes to my head, creating a sort of swelling sound in my ears that mingles with the whooshing noises of the jungle.

Channeling every bit of tracking knowledge I've gained over the years, I follow my instincts, tracing the barely-there path Skyler left for me.

A break in the bushes.

A footprint.

Crushed leaves.

The farther away I get from the men fucking against a tree, the sharper my focus becomes.

Finally, after what feels like hours, but is probably only minutes, I see a flash of movement ahead.



“Skyler!” I bark, not caring if those guys we left behind hear us. We’re far enough away now, it’s no matter.

My ill-timed erection is nothing but a memory now, and I can breathe a little easier. I can almost pretend it didn’t even happen. Hell, if that’s what Skyler wants, I’m happy to forget it completely. More than happy.

*Jesus. What if he’s off to report me to security?*

*As he probably should...* a voice in my head remarks.

“Skyler!” I call out again. I know he heard me, but now he’s *running*.

Huffing in frustration, I quicken my pace. This deep in the jungle, it’s dense as fuck, and I’ve got nothing but sensation to guide me and keep me from stumbling off an unsuspecting cliff.

I guess he really wasn’t lying when he said he’s done this before. Not that I really thought he was lying—okay, so I did at first—but pushing his buttons is...well, it’s fun.

But I also feel like he needs it? Needs someone to give him shit and spur him on.

Something tells me he hasn’t had a lot of that.

And then when he shoved me and stood his ground, despite the beet-red flush to his face and quiver to his lips and words?

Yeah, something tells me that’s new too.

I saw him visibly retreating. Shutting down. It was the same cornered look in his eye I saw the first day we met, and then again even more pronounced during our first group together when I laid into him.

I was too blind to it then—not until it was too late—but this time I saw it, caught it, clung to it, and unraveled it.

And all I could think was *No. Don’t hide from me.*

Hell if I could explain it.

Whether it was his own irritation, or my silent challenge, I don't know, but whatever it was worked. It had him pulling back his shoulders and jutting his chin up at me all haughty-like, just like I've come to expect from him.

And suddenly it was all *there! There he is!*

And I was *relieved*.

Proud even.

*Jesus, do you even hear yourself?*

The whooshing in my ears picks up, and it takes me a second to realize it's not my blood roaring or the leaves brushing, but the ocean.

*Shit.*

With long, hard, ground-pounding strides, I scramble forward and grab Skyler by his shoulder, tugging him to me.

His yelp cuts off with a gasp as he stumbles back, crashing into my chest. I skid us both to a stop, steadying us, his backpack smashed between us. My other arm braced around his middle.

“Christ, kid. Slow down,” I grumble breathlessly, sliding my other hand down his shoulder, resting it just over his heaving collarbone. It juts out sharply with his harsh pants, and I frown. “You're gonna get hurt.” *Or give yourself a heart attack.*

He's on the thinner side, but clearly *very* out of shape. I noticed earlier too, which is half the reason I figured this outdoorsy stuff was all new to him. His lack of preparedness and fancy, expensive sneakers only compounded my assumptions about him.

But right now, I don't think it's so much the exertion doing this to him, as it is something else...something deeper.

From my height advantage, I can make out his bulging eyes as he darts them around. Lips shivering. Cheeks stained red with tear tracks running down them in rivulets.

*Well fuck.*

Easing my hold on him, I step back so we're no longer touching. I raise my hands and step around him, not taking my concerned gaze off his face.

His eyes flash to mine, so dark, I can barely make out any brown. Lips pursing, he glances away. His entire body trembles.

"It's okay," I say slowly. My voice comes out deeper, rougher than I anticipated. He flinches and I wince, clearing my throat. "Sky, I'm so fucking so—"

"I'm sorry," he squeaks—like honest to God, hand over heart, he *squeaks*.

My lips twitch. I can't help it. He's, well, shit, he's kind of adorable when he's like this. Not sure what that says about me—actually it says a whole fucking lot, and nothing good—but my own thoughts and feelings are the least of my concern right now.

I only have him in mind.

I can beat myself up later.

Lowering my hands, I clear my head, putting on a stern face as I duck my head to meet his gaze, willing him to see my sincerity. "It's o—"

"I can't do this," he rushes out, voice raspy and barely there. Redness creeps around the edges of his eyes, followed by a thick sheen of tears. "I c-can't—"

*Well fuck me.*

He gulps and lifts his head, wildly looking about, neck tendons straining.

"I-I can't. I can't, I can't—" He wheezes, his voice getting choked off.

"Skyler, hey, stop. Look at me."

Skyler shakes his head. Shit, he's not just out of breath, he's hyperventilating.

I grab his shoulder, shoving him down to a squat, and nudge his head forward. I splay my hand across his upper

back, above the backpack. “You’re gonna pass out. You need to relax.”

He tries to fling himself away from me, but I just grab him, holding him in place. “Stop. Just focus on breathing. Feel my hand. Listen for the ocean.”

He shakes his head, fingers digging into the earth.

*It’s right there, Sky, I silently urge. Listen.*

Seconds turn into minutes before he finally seems to be calming down.

Blowing out a breath, I rub a circle over his back, my fingertips brushing over the skin peeking out above his collar. He’s soaked with sweat, yet he’s cold to the touch. I don’t miss his little shiver.

My mouth dries, and it feels like there’s a boulder-sized lump shoving its way down my throat, settling somewhere in my chest. The urge to slide my hand up and comb my fingers through his short dark hair is sudden and strong.

It’s something I used to do with Mel when she’d get in a fight with her parents over dating me and throw herself into my arms.

Something I did with Abby too as a baby when she was colicky. Rubbing her fuzzy little head was the only thing that helped sometimes. Even when my wrist went numb and my eyes grew heavy, I forced myself to keep going, knowing it was the only comfort I could bring her.

At the reminder of my daughter, I snap my hand back and step away. Skyler stills, and I feel that rock sink down to my toes, rooting me to the spot.

*What the hell is this?*

*What is he doing to me?*

*This isn’t me.*

Running my hands through my hair, I look around, trying to get a feel for where we are. In the corner of my eye, I notice

Skyler shakily push to a stand. He keeps his back to me, hands flexing at his sides.

“So I thin—” Before I can so much as finish my thought, he’s off again. Though this time, he at least refrains from running, instead choosing to trudge away, like the moody teenager he is.

“For fuck’s sake,” I rumble, shaking my head before jogging off after him again. “Skyler, just hold up!” Just up ahead, I see an endless, glittering teal sea peeking out from between the trees.

Sounds begin to filter in then. Music. Laughter.

...Splashing?

Frowning, I pull my gaze away from Skyler’s hunched back and look around, just now noticing the jungle seems to be breaking up. Through the thick fronds, I see peeked rooftops.

“The hell?”

*There’s no way he got us back that quickly, right? Is he even looking where he’s going? I could’ve sworn—*

My boots skid down an unexpected decline, and I have to reach down and push up from the dirt to steady myself. Wiping my hand over my jeans, I pick up my pace, eyes lasered in on the guy striding purposefully into the light.

A volleyball goes sailing through the air, making it look like it’s arcing right over Skyler’s head, when really it’s a lot farther away. Still, it’s enough to tell me *exactly* where we ended up.

“Fuckin’ hell,” I grouse, pumping my legs so I can catch up to him. “Skyler!” I hiss just as he slows down.

“What?” he mumbles, glaring at some unseen spot on the ground.

“Where the fuck are you going?”

“My room.”

My eyes bug out. “Your room is on the other side of the island!”

Skyler shakes his head. “What?”

He goes to push past me again, so I quickly jump in front of him. “Slow down, kid,” I grit out.

Skyler lifts his gaze, shooting fire from those deep brown eyes. Scowling, he says, “I’m not a fucking kid.”

I scowl right back. “Well you’re acting like one right now. Having a little temper tantrum and storming off.”

The second the words spill out, I regret it.

Well, that is until he presses his hands to my chest and shoves me. “Fuck you.”

This time, my body expects it, and I don’t budge an inch.

His scowl deepens and I find myself biting back a smile. *There we go.*

“Just leave me al—”

Sighing, I turn and step back, putting us shoulder to shoulder. Reaching over, I grab his chin, directing his attention to our surroundings. “Look.”

A long beat passes.

Then, “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.” I roll my eyes. “We’re on the resort side. The complete *opposite* of where we should be.”

He swallows with an audible click, and I cut him a sideways look just in time to clash with his fleeting glance.

His brow furrows and he quickly turns to stare straight ahead. Blood rushes to his cheeks, seeping warmth into my fingers, reminding me I’m still holding his face.

Clearing my throat, I quickly release him and look away.

*Jesus. What the hell is wrong with me today?*

I’m not a touchy-feely guy. In fact it’s something Mel used to give me shit about back when we first started dating. Unless it was a precursor to sex, it just didn’t cross my mind to initiate anything. Hugs, cuddles, holding her hand...you name it.

I can be assertive in the bedroom, but outside...well, it's just not my thing. I'm not repulsed by physical affection; I just don't need it, so I don't always remember others might.

Up until now, my daughter was the only exception.

My fingers tingle so I shove both hands in my pockets.

*No, nope, it's nothing. He just brings out my protective instincts, just like Abby. That's all this is.*

I wince at the thought, because, yeah, no, definitely not lumping them in the same category. Ever. Not after what happened against the tree.

*Don't think about that.*

Skyler clears his throat, pulling me from my thoughts. He steps back and pushes his hair back. It's slicked with sweat, making it appear darker—nearly black.

I cut my gaze over Skyler's head, aiming a fierce glare at one of the guys playing a game of volleyball when it looks like he wants to approach us. I shake my head, silently telling him to back off, and he holds his hands up, retreating backward before turning to rejoin the others.

"Here," I say gruffly, reaching back for the half-full water bottle hooked to my bag. I can tell by Skyler's expression, he wants to object so I shove it at his chest. He grabs it on instinct when I let go. "Couple sips now, so we have some for the hike back."

Not waiting for a response, I unhook my backpack, swinging around so I can dig out my cell phone.

I tap the lock button, bringing the screen to life. It's blank. No messages or missed calls. But it's not like I was expecting any—I barely have any service anyway. The deeper into the island you go, the worse it is, which is why the staff are so insistent on the buddy system and keeping to trails when we do these wilderness activities.

"Fuck," I mutter, when I spot the time.

Squinting off in the distance, I take in the sun glaring brightly over the treetops. It's still high in the sky, but it won't

be for long. *Gotta love island time.*

Dimming the screen, I shove the phone in my pocket and get my bag re-situated. Tightening the straps, I turn to find Skyler staring off into the distance. His fingers are clutched around the black thermos like it's a lifeline, his gaze aimed far-off into the distance. A droplet of sweat trickles from his hairline, skating down his cheek before clinging to the sharp jut of his jaw.

My gaze lowers, curiosity and something less definable stirring in my belly when I take in other little details I was blind to before, but now see in startling clarity.

Like the gentle curve of his bicep, and his flat, broad chest. His linen shirt is practically see-through, clinging with sweat to his lean torso. The top couple buttons are undone, exposing his smooth, pale skin. His sharpened collarbone.

Lower, above the waistline of his shorts, where his shirt's bunched up near his hipbone, the band of his boxers peeks out.

I'm not sure why my gaze lingers there, or why I feel this irrational need all of a sudden to not fix it, but ruck it up higher and see if the skin there is as smooth as the skin on his arms... his face...

He's young, yes, there's no denying that, but...

I mentally rewind through everything that happened...the way he looked up at me, eyes wide and pitched black with hunger, right before it was overtaken by stark, cold fear.

*He didn't seem so young then. He didn't feel young...*

I squeeze my eyes shut, and whip around, pinching the bridge of my nose with my thumb and forefinger.

*Fuckfuckfuck, this can't be happening. This is a nightmare. Wake up now! Wake up!*

A laugh rings out from far away. Leaves rustle.

I crack open an eye, bracing myself.

*Get it the fuck together.*



Roughly clearing my throat, I shake the mental images away. “We should probably start heading back. It’s already six,” I rush out gruffly.

He whips his head toward me at the same time I turn around, and I can’t help but feel like he forgot I was here. It’s like that first day on the beach all over again, when he looked right through me, confusion crinkling his chocolate brown eyes. Like he’s trying to recall how he got here.

He gulps, and my eyes drop to where his Adam’s apple ripples with the movement.

Something sizzles in my chest, tightening my jeans.

*Jesus, I’m gonna be sick.*

He all but shoves the water bottle at me, the water sloshing inside, and this time he’s the one to whip around.

Staring at his back, I blindly hook the canister to my backpack. My mouth opens, but the words stay trapped in the back of my throat.

I don’t know what to say to make this better. For either of us.

I’m not even sure what I’m surprised by more, the fact Skyler got hard against me, his reaction to it, or the most baffling, fucked up thing of all—

I got hard too.

*Did he notice?* I wonder.

At this point, I sincerely doubt it. Otherwise he probably wouldn’t be freaking out so much. So much so, he doesn’t even notice how badly *I’m* freaking out.

Maybe I should tell him...

*Are you an idiot? What difference would it make? He’s a fucking teenager! And it’s not as if you’re—*

I release a harsh breath and shake my head, putting all thoughts other than what’s ahead behind me. Waving him back toward the trees, I mutter, “Come on.”

My steps plod angrily through the dirt and grass.  
Skyler, quiet as a ghost, follows.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

---

Nolan

**I**t feels like the sun is setting faster than normal.

Dark, dense jungle surrounds us on all sides.

I'm not *too* worried. While this is a sharp contrast to my woods and mountains back home in Vermont, I've always felt more confident and more myself out in nature.

Skyler hasn't said a word since we abandoned the resort side. Then again, neither have I.

What could I possibly fucking say?

Tension radiates between us, yet if he notices, I couldn't tell you—he's withdrawn inward, buried so deep it feels like a crime to try and break the silence, even if I wanted to.

Truly, what would I even say? *It's okay that you got turned on. In case you missed it, I did too.*

A branch snaps somewhere nearby and Skyler freezes, whirling around.

"Easy," I murmur, pushing past him to look around. In all my other times exploring this jungle, I've yet to run into anything dangerous. As far as I'm aware, the only dangerous predators around here are what's in the ocean. "It's probably just a bird or monkey."

"So that *was* a monkey earlier?"

I cut him a look, surprised he's actually talking.

He shudders and crosses his arms, sparing darting looks above us.

"You're afraid of monkeys?"

"No," he says quickly. He shrugs. "I just don't want something to jump out at me, or...on me."

"Right." I glance up, taking in the bruised sky peeking through the leaves. Pulling out my phone, I check the screen. *It shouldn't be this dark already.*

My battery's only at twenty-five percent, but if we're where I think we are, we should be okay. Flipping on the flashlight, I aim the beam into the trees. "There's a shortcut this way, I believe. Should take us around the beach, rather than through."

"How do you know?" he asks, but he follows me without hesitation.

"Studied the map."

"There's a map?"

"In our intake packet."

"Oh. Right," he mutters. Then, "I just didn't think we'd get to wander around like this, without—"

I make a face even though he can't see it. "It's not a prison." I wave a hand. "Okay, we can't exactly *leave*, not without a boat. But, at least they more or less let us do what we want."

"Yeah," Skyler says quietly.

There's something in his tone...but I don't ask. I need to focus and make sure I don't accidentally walk us off a cliff. From what I recall about this side of the mountain, the terrain is far less friendly.

"Did you bring it with you?"

I wince, realizing he means the map. "No. I didn't expect us to end up on the other side of the island. I took us farther out than I planned."

A quiet moment passes. "And then I took us even farther."

I shake my head. "This isn't on you."

And I was right earlier. It does seem like Skyler knows what he's doing out here. He's not once complained. Doesn't seem to mind being covered in dirt and sweat.

Maybe I was wrong about him after all.

We're quiet as we carefully make our way down a steep incline, grabbing the rocks and roots jutting out as we make

our descent.

Ahead, a big break in the canopy shows a smear of thick dark clouds across the sky.

“Shit,” I breathe, my steps slowing. I thought it was darker than usual for this early in the evening, but I was hoping it was just the jungle playing tricks on me.

“What?” Skyler says, worry pitching his voice.

“It’s gonna storm.”

We both stare off at the horizon.

“Well, we’re almost back, aren’t we?”

I wet my lips and look around, squinting. Nodding, I say absently, “Yeah I think so.”

“You think so?”

I shoot Skyler a look. “I’ve never been this way.”

“You said it was a shortcut.”

“Yeah, except the map didn’t fully account for how much more work it is to hike this way.” I grimace and glance away. “It’s shorter, but the difficulty is adding time we no longer have.” I give myself a little shake. “Come on.”

We carefully climb our way across another jagged, rocky slope, using rocks and trees for balance so as not to tip sideways and roll off the face of the earth. From up here, I can hear the waves crashing along the cliff’s edge, but I don’t *see* where it ends. All I can see is a rippling glittering ocean off in the distance turned navy from the thick storm clouds above.

The sun is nothing more than a patch of orange light at this point, doing jack shit to light our way. Thankfully I have my phone. I’m not sure why Skyler hasn’t taken out his, but I don’t ask. I’d rather him have his hands free. I make sure to angle the beam of light so my body’s not blocking it completely.

Just as we reach the other side, I feel the first drop of rain. I look around to see if there’s anywhere we can take shelter to ride it out. If it’s anything like the other storms I’ve

experienced in my time here, it won't last long. But if the electricity bristling my skin, lifting the little hairs around my nape, are anything to go by, this one's going to be swift, but brutal.

The terrain is tricky enough without having to endure ripping winds and heavy torrential downpours while we do it. Not to mention the fact that we're surrounded by tall trees, and I've seen lightning bolts hit the island that would give the wrath of God a run for its money.

We reach a steep, abrupt shelf where there must've been a landslide at some point. A look up and down each way shows it extends as far as the eye can see. It's not impossible to climb, but it's going to require a bit of work.

"Here," I say, stuffing my phone in my pocket. The flashlight shines dully through the denim, but it's better than nothing and only for a moment. I extend a hand, and Skyler hesitates only a moment before taking it. "Now use your other hand to— Yep, like that, perfect," I mutter gruffly when he grips the nearest tree trunk.

I use my free hand to cup the underside of his ass. The hand in mine twitches, and I clear my throat, diverting my gaze. *Focus. Don't think about that.*

"On three." I spread my legs, finding a good stance so I don't fuck my back up. The bottom of his backpack bumps my forearm and I adjust my hold on him, desperately trying to block out the sensation of his surprisingly plush ass filling my palm. "One, two, thr—"

My rough voice cuts out with a grunt as I heave him up. Using my momentum, he uses the tree to swing himself up. He releases my hand, just as my fingers slide away from his bottom. He plants both hands in the dirt, fingers flexing for purchase as he all but crawls the rest of the way up.

The sky flickers with lightning.

Adjusting the straps on my bag, I reach for the same tree Skyler used.

“Here,” he says, reaching for me, but I just shake my head and bring my other hand to the tree, and using my core strength, pull myself up.

In the corner of my eye, I see Skyler step back. I feel his eyes on me as I curl forward and swing myself up with a grunt, landing flat on my feet in a low crouch. Dirt kicks up around me, and I feel the ground start to give, so I jog a couple steps forward, crashing headlong into a hard, lean body.

Warm, dirt encrusted fingers grip my biceps. Our chests bump, and his forehead hits my chin with a dull thud. His hands seem so...*small* compared to the muscle rippling under my skin. He can barely get his hands around me.

“Sorry,” he gasps, shivering.

I grab his shoulder to halt our momentum, then turn him around before my body betrays me again.

“Come on,” I say, brushing past him to take the lead. I find another stick and start hacking away at the dense growth blocking our way. I don’t realize Skyler’s veered off, until I hear him call out.

“Look!”

Pausing mid-step, I whip my head around. Skyler doesn’t even wait for me, he just jogs ahead through a small clearing he spotted.

“Shit,” I mutter, turning to follow. “Hey, wait up, you don’t —”

My voice cuts out when I see what it is he found.

A bridge.

“This should save us time, right?” he says loud enough to be heard over the water rushing somewhere beneath us.

Shaking my head, I say, “I don’t like the look of that thing.” It’s made of wood slats and frayed rope, and it swings precariously with the wind gusting through.

*Jesus.*



Either he doesn't hear me, or he's set on ignoring me, because he's already making his way over the rocky patch separating the woods from where it breaks off into a cluster of cliffs.

"Skyler," I bark out. "Just wait. Fuck."

Brows furrowed, I dart my gaze around, my mind racing as I try to recall if I spotted this on the map. It looks...familiar. I know there are bridges like this all around the island, but the ones I've seen are far more sturdy and newer looking than this one.

"Come on, *Tarzan*. Don't tell me you're scared of heights." He laughs, and something just...shifts in my chest, like a rusty seal breaking open at the sight of his lip curving up just before he turns away.

My mouth dries. My heart thumps a little faster. Harder.

The rain's picking up and thunder rumbles, but it's all so far away in this moment, leaving me with nothing but the echo of his laughter carrying on the wind, mingling with the crashing of waves, and I just...

Freeze.

It takes me a moment to realize why I'm struck stupid—why I'm suddenly overcome with this urge to...to do something, I don't know what, but I feel this...this *need* inside me...

*That's the first time I heard his laugh.*

Lightning streaks across the sky, immediately followed by a boom of thunder. Chills race across my skin, but Skyler doesn't seem fazed. As quickly and carefully as I can, I hobble my way across the rocks to catch up to him.

"Hey, just—" A strong gust blows through, stealing my voice. I have to squint through the sheet of rain slanting through to see anything. Panting, I manage to get out loud enough for him to hear me, "There might be a better way."

"But look!" He points off toward the other side of the bridge. I follow his finger to where there's a dangerous, jagged

looking cliff looming over us. I shake my head, confused, but then I see it's not the cliff he's pointing at.

It's what's below.

The cove.

It hits me then with the force of a wrecking ball, knocking the air out of me as it all finally clicks together. Where we are. What I'm looking at.

I'm already shaking my head. "Skyler!" I shout, but it's too late.

Wind whips through the air. Rain slaps my skin like prickly little needles, soaking me, and plastering my hair to my cheeks. Drenching my beard. My clothes. But I hardly notice.

Skyler grabs the rope on either side, and heaves himself onto the bridge like it's nothing. Like it's not just old rope holding him suspended over a deadly inlet of water.

"Skyler, wait!"

He takes a few careful steps, before doing a little bounce as if to test its durability.

My body turns rigid, my eyes widen, and it feels like my lungs are in a vice.

He looks over his shoulder, grinning wildly, cheeks streaked with rainwater, dark hair tossing all about his head. And in my mind's eye, all I see is that sign from the day we met—*Do Not Enter*.

"See?" he calls out, smiling breathlessly. Beautifully.

*Fuck me, he's... he's beautiful.*

"It's fine. And look." He turns just his head, pointing to what he did earlier. "Our cove."

My chest constricts. Throat squeezing.

*Our cove.*

I lunge forward, scrambling for the bridge, mind blank with nothing other than the need to just *get to him*. It's like my

body already knows what's about to happen before my brain has a chance of catching up.

“Sky—”

*Crack.*

He freezes.

I suck in a breath—a shout—a curse—a plea—

*Nononono—*

Even through the pouring rain and pervading darkness, I can see how white his knuckles are where he grips the rope railings on either side of him. His shoulders hunch up, almost like he's bracing himself.

Just as I skid to a halt where the bridge starts and grab the railing, he whirls around, those big, sooty brown eyes of his wide and terrified, pale, trembling hands outstretched toward me.

“SKY!”

*Snap.*

Lightning cracks across the sky, echoing the sound of wood breaking—rope splintering—

A roar fills my ears, and all I see is him.

*Him.*

This sad, pretty boy I wanted nothing to do with.

A boy who was just smiling and laughing a second ago, who is now looking back at me, begging me to save him, his mouth open in a silent scream. His cheeks white, devoid of that flush I didn't even know I adored until it was gone.

*Skylar.*

And then *he's* gone.

It collapses. All of it. The entire bridge just...crumbles, taking him with it as it plunges into the tempestuous water below.

I crash to my knees right along with the destruction, hitting the dirt with a thud I don't feel, arms outstretched like I could reach out, pluck him up, and pull him toward me.

But he's too far away.

*He's too. Far. Away.*

I curl forward, fingers biting in the earth, and watch in horror as his body hits the water. "SKYLER!"

Lightning splinters the plum-hued sky—blinding my vision with bright white flashes. Thunder explodes, bouncing off the rocks. Rain soaks me down to the bone, and Skyler is...

Gone.

Just like that...

*He's gone.*

# CHAPTER TWELVE

---

SKYLER

**I**t happens so fast.

Faster than last time I died.

Before I can so much as cherish my final breath, the wood gives out beneath me and I plunge through the air like a missile, hitting the dark, angry water feet-first with bone-racking force.

Instincts kick in immediately, overriding my panic, and I seal my lips together and hold my breath just as I'm swallowed up completely.

The lightning disappears.

The thunder dulls.

Water rushes up around me.

And Nolan's broken shout cuts off with a whoosh.

It's all just roaring, suffocating blackness.

My limbs thrash—arms pumping, legs kicking out as I fight my way to the surface. Lightning flashes, and I see it, flickering above through a veil of rippling water. *There.*

I reach for it, clawing at the air just as my hand breaks through.

*Come on, come on, come on—*

A gasp punches out of me as my head follows suit.

Whipping my head around, I try to get my bearings. A darting glance above shows no sign of the bridge, save for dangling frayed ropes and slats of wood knocking against the cliff's edge. Something knocks my shoulder—a piece of the bridge.

I look toward where I last saw Nolan, but he's gone, and something like grief sinks down into my bones, threatening to do the ocean's job and pull me under.

*I just wanted one last look at him.*

His wide, horrified gaze will be the last memory I have of him.

His voice calling out my name, the last time I'll ever hear it.

*No one's ever looked at me like that.*

*No one's ever yelled for me like that.*

It hurts...

Hurts that that's all I'll ever have.

And yet...

Saltwater burns my eyes, mingling with the scalding hot tears brimming to the surface. Thrashing, I look around, barely cognizant of the water gurgling into my eyes and mouth, praying for a miracle.

This can't be it.

There's the cove of course, and I spot a small beachy patch a little way's away, but as soon as I try to swim for it, a rough wave clips me and the current pulls me back. Seafoam gushes into my mouth and I cough, flailing, using all my strength to keep my head above the water.

A frustrated scream explodes through my clenched teeth. My chest heaves. My limbs grow tired.

*I don't want to die. Not now. Not yet, not yet...*

*I haven't even gotten a chance to live.*

It's ironic, considering how I got in this mess in the first place.

*But that was before...*

Time slows, but I know in reality it's only been seconds since I hit the water. My chest strains to savor the oxygen before it's ripped from me.

*Please, please—*

Thunder booms, echoing off the cliffs. Another angry swell moves in, seafoam obstructing my vision. My eyes burn. My lungs burn. Everything...burns.

I try to keep toward the land, hoping if the waves push me hard enough I'll be able to find purchase and hold on long enough for the storm to pass.

But then before I can so much as gasp, back to back waves crash into me, and I'm thrown against something hard. My neck jerks, and pain sears my hip, my entire right side. Mottled black spots flash across my vision just as I'm swept back under. My body arches—

*Thwap.*

I open my mouth in a silent scream as I'm thrown again, tossed every which way. Something jagged rips into my leg. It's all heat. All pain. Water gushes down my throat.

I kick and flail, but it's no use.

My vision blackens around the edges, snuffing out what little visibility I had.

A calmness overtakes me—a stillness, not unlike what I felt last time, as the toxins drowned me.

I don't know when I stop fighting—I don't remember making the decision to give up.

*That's not what this is.*

*It's not.*

I have just enough dazed awareness to take stock of my body—my limbs floating lifeless around me, as if they're no longer a part of me.

It no longer hurts.

I don't feel anything.

Somewhere far away, I hear something—Nolan screaming my name. *A memory.* The last one I had of him. Just like before, it strikes me stupid, thinking this man who barely knew me—who hardly seemed even able to tolerate me most of the time—had that look on his face. For *me*.



*It's okay, I think, willing the waves to carry my sentiments toward him. It's okay. It's not your fault.*

I feel myself shutting down, my thoughts fracturing—

*I wish I got to kiss him. Wish I got to know what it was like to be loved.*

In this moment, it doesn't matter that he's straight or married.

It doesn't matter.

Nothing matters.

Just the echo of my name clawing out from his throat, broken and scared and desperate.

Just the image of those wide forest green eyes—terrified. For *me*—tattooed across my brain.

Just the phantom sensation of those big rough hands holding me, steadying me, as he peered down at me, brows furrowed deeply over those rich eyes.

Forget a lifetime of memories flashing through my head. If I could just stay here, in this moment, with him...

Something flashes—lightning—and in my head, I hear a deep voice telling me it's okay.

I try to shake my head, but my body is no longer mine. My body is gone.

*No. No, this isn't what I wanted, I realize.*

Stars dance across my vision, and I think of the tattoo on Nolan's shoulder.

The night sky.

If there's a heaven, I hope that's where it is.

Embedded in his skin.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

---

NOLAN

I move on autopilot.

Gripping rocks and swinging myself from reeds, I barely notice the scrapes and bruises forming as I slide and skid and climb my way down the bluffs.

I only have one mission in mind:

*Get to him.*

Rain and wind slam into me from all sides, making my descent even more slippery and treacherous than it would be on a clear day. I shake my hair out of my face and spit out water, skidding down another steep slope, caked dirt and grit kicking out behind me. My blunt nails get caught on one of the many crags—tissue splits and shreds—but I don't stop.

When Skyler went under, I had about a split second to decide how I wanted to do this. Jump in after him...

Or climb down the cliffs.

The only thing that stopped me from immediately diving in after him from where the bridge snapped, was an image of Abby flashing across my mind's eye—her gummy smile and big blue eyes and tiny, chubby hands reaching for me.

I couldn't do that to her.

I couldn't risk leaving her like that.

But I also couldn't leave *him*.

It just wasn't even an option.

*I'm coming, Sky. Just hold on. Just hold on for me.*

Finally, after what feels like an eternity spent rappelling down the cliff, I hit a small beach area tucked in between the rocks.

My boots hit the sand with a wet *thunk*. I shrug off my backpack, my chest heaves, and I whirl around, looking wildly

about the water, hoping to see a familiar dark head. A hand. Anything that indicates where he is.

“Come on,” I mutter, voice trembling. I shove my hair away, blinking through the downpour. My body arches forward with the instinct to just dive in, signs of life be damned.

*Abby. Think of Abby. Be smart.*

Waves crash into the inlet, and from the looks of it, the strong current seems to be pushing the water back into the cove.

*He's still in here... right? He didn't get swept away already. I'm not too late...*

My hands form fists at my sides as I whip my head toward the ocean, a choked sob rocketing up my throat. I'm shaking, adrenaline coursing viciously through my veins. If he's already out there...

*This can't be the end.*

*This isn't how his story ends.*

Deep down, I know the odds aren't good. I knew it the second I heard that first *crack*. For all I know, the impact killed him. This side of the island is littered with jagged rocks sticking out of the water like icebergs.

Where he fell looked clear enough, but that was on the surface. With the force with which he fell...the height...

The strength of the waves right now...

It's imperative I get to him.

Even if...

*No!* I rapidly shake my head. I can't think like that. It's not too late.

It's not.

*There!*

Something pale flits through the water, there and gone so fast, it's possible I just imagined it. But it's enough. I don't

think—I don't even consider how fucking reckless this is; hell, suicidal—I just dive in.

The water is warm, as expected, but for a New Englander like me, it still surprises me.

Rather than push to the surface, I kick deeper, bulleting toward where I saw a glimpse of what I hope was a hand. I keep my eyes open, but with the storm raging on above, I can hardly see a damn thing under here. All I have is unpredictable, intermittent flashes of lightning to go by.

Something thwacks me in the leg—likely a piece of the bridge. Shaking my head, I feel more than see the bubbles that burst free from around the corners of my lips.

I'm going to need air soon. I might be in decent shape when it comes to all things hiking and lifting, but when it comes to holding my breath under water, not so much. I can't even remember the last time I swam.

*Come on*, I silently will. Just one more—

The world lights up around me. It lasts hardly more than a second, but it's enough.

*There!*

Kicking my legs out behind me, I dive even deeper, cutting big strokes. More lightning flickers, giving me just enough visibility to ensure I'm gunning right for him. A rush of a current shoves at my side, and something else clips me in the arm, but somehow...

I get to him.

I reach, straining, fingers flexing—

His wrist. I circle it with my fingers with bruising force, ensuring he doesn't slip free. Heaving his lifeless body toward me, I wrap an arm around him and tap into what strength I have left to push us to the surface.

Bursting free with a choked gasp, I have less than a second to cherish air and prepare for the waves coming in from seemingly all sides. It's like a vortex up here—choppy and

pissed off. It throws punches left and right, doing its best to try and drown us.

But it's also probably the only thing that kept Skyler from being swept into the ocean.

My chest heaves, lungs straining, heart racing, as I whip my head around, looking for land. For shelter. Anything that will save us from a watery death.

Skyler is unconscious, head lolling. I grip him tighter to me, curling my arm under his and around his chest as I use the other to keep us above water.

I don't think he's breathing, but I don't have time right now to worry about that.

If I don't get us to shore, it won't matter anyway.

With my free arm, I push and shove at the waves like I could fight them off. The current is stronger than anything I've ever experienced, and it's got to be by sheer force of will that I'm somehow able to heave the two of us toward the first accessible spot of land I can find.

It feels like the water swirling in this cove is battling it out with the ocean—fighting for who gets to claim us.

Snarling through my teeth, I swim with everything I've got, squinting through the curtain of hair plastered over my eyes, and the sea-foam sloshing over our heads.

Another strong swell of waves crashes through, giving me the push I need to haul us onto a giant flat rock. Not risking letting go of Skyler for even a second, I have to all but claw my already shredded nails into the rock, clutching for some kind of purchase—a hand hold.

My hand slips and I shout in frustration, saltwater gurgling into my throat.

Thunder booms above, followed by more flashes of light. I can no longer tell the difference between the rain pouring down and the water crashing over our heads.

*Please!* I silently beg, praying to whatever higher being might have pity on me. On us.

Finally, *finally*, I manage to get some kind of grip—on what, I don't know, it doesn't even matter—and I release Skyler just enough so I can heave my body onto the rock. His arm's going to be bruised at this point from just my grip on him alone, but at least he'll be alive.

*I hope.*

Shoving that thought away, I turn and dig the heels of my boots into the rock, gripping Skyler under his arms. Grunting, I heave his deadweight out of the water and into my arms.

Shoving the hair out of my eyes, I squint through the sheet of rain slanting down on us, taking in the swell coming our way.

*Fuck.*

Standing, I mutter an apology, and all but drag Skyler's body across the rocks. Turning my head over my shoulder, I see a narrow strip of beach a few feet away. A stream of water trickles in, separating the rocks from the sand.

Bending down, I get a better hold of Skyler and hobble my way across, being mindful of the slippery rocks as I drag more than carry him across.

*This will have to do.*

Lowering him, I roll him onto his back. My chest squeezes at the sight of his pale face. Those thick, inky lashes fanned out over his high cheekbones. The dark mop of hair swept over his head.

He's not breathing. I already knew this, but now it's...it's hitting me. All of it is starting to hit me.

My hands tremble with adrenaline as I tip his head back, and prop his mouth open. Dipping down, I press my lips right over his and exhale two strong, shaky breaths right into him.

*Come on, Sky.*

Sitting up, I shift onto my knees and lean over him, pressing my hands over his chest. I don't bother checking for a pulse. I just know I won't find one.

His lips are still red though. Despite how cold they feel against mine, it still gives me some hope.

I'm not too late. I can't be.

*One, two, three...*

I silently count my way through short, firm compressions, trying to keep a calm, measured beat, but I can feel myself fraying, growing more desperate. Tears sting my eyes. Panic thrums at the base of my throat.

“Come on,” I choke out before bending down and giving him two more breaths. I start compressions again. “Breathe, Sky. Just one little breath for me. You can do it.”

*One, two...*

A wave crashes to shore, water flooding around him, right up to his ears, before dissipating and leaving only foam clinging to the rocks. A frustrated noise bursts out of me.

Time does that thing again where it feels like every second passing by stretches out for an eternity. It's probably only been five minutes since he hit the water, but it feels as if hours have gone by.

“Skyler,” I croak. “Please. Don't do this...”

More compressions.

More breaths.

More compressions...

“Damn it, Sky, *breathe!*” I shout raggedly.

More breaths...

More compressions...

*No. No, no, please, no—*

“SKYLER!” I shake him and I damn near punch him in the sternum. I drop my mouth to his slackened lips once more, and *breathe—*

I feel his flinch just before water gurgles up from his lips, splashing mine.



Gasping, I pull back, giving him room. His body lurches, arching, water sputtering from from his mouth with heaving, chest-wracking coughs.

I quickly turn him onto his side, watching in shock as his body repels all the water he swallowed.

“Skyler,” I whisper shakily.

My eyes squeeze shut, and my hands fumble over his trembling arms as he tries to hold himself up. The sounds of his choked gasps are the sweetest symphony to ever touch my ears.

Fingers press into my arms with bruising force, and I snap my eyes open, my heart stalling in my chest when I find Skyler blinking heavily up at me. He looks dazed. Confused. But hell, if the sight of those chocolate brown orbs aren’t the best damn sight I’ve ever seen.

His brow furrows, and his lips tremble as they form a single word in question—a syllable. *No?*

*My name. He’s trying to say my name.*

I smooth the hair over his head. “It’s okay, you’re okay now, I have you. You’re safe. It’s okay.” I barely even register the words spilling rapidly from my mouth like a chant. Water droplets hit his cheek, so I bend over him, trying to keep the worst of the rain off his face. But it’s no use. I’m drenched, dripping. *Fuck, am I crying?*

Clearing my throat, I tear my gaze away, blinking rapidly through the rain. Wind blows through and I shiver. The storm is still going strong—it’s only been minutes after all. We shouldn’t be out in the open like this.

“Come on,” I whisper, standing, helping him up by the shoulders.

He can hardly bear any weight, so I all but carry him toward the cliffs, remembering at the last second to swipe up my bag. I don’t see our cove from this angle, but I do see the ropes hanging down the rock face from where the bridge once hung.

We must be at the base of the cliff—the tall, jagged one that Skyler was heading for the day we met. A glance across the choppy waters confirms as much.

Skyler is still gasping and coughing wetly at my side, fingers gripping my arm so hard, I'm sure I'll have little crescent shaped indents from his nails. His feet drag, scraping and fumbling across the rocks.

“Look,” I whisper, holding him tighter.

Not waiting for a response, I adjust my hold on him, practically lifting him off his feet as I book it toward the dark opening half-hidden behind some weeds. A cave.

I crouch low, peering inside once we reach it, silently praying we can both fit in there. It can't be more than five feet tall, but it's definitely wide enough for us both, and it's empty, so it'll have to do.

At least until the storm passes.

Right now, that's all that matters. That and making sure Skyler's okay.

I help Skyler into the cave first, keeping a hand over his head to keep him from bashing it off the rocky, curved ceiling. He's trembling, unsteady, stumbling around like a newborn calf. As soon as he's inside, he collapses in a heap.

I'm right behind him, and I don't hesitate—don't think—I toss the bag to the side and tug him to me, all but dragging him onto my lap. Wrapping my arms around him, I squeeze my eyes shut and bow my head to his shoulder.

“It's okay.”

His coughs and gasps give way to broken sobs.

“It's okay,” I whisper, my voice cracking. “It's over now. You're safe, sweetheart, you're safe.”

I don't know who I'm trying to comfort more, me or him. The adrenaline crash barreling through me is like nothing I've ever experienced.

*How the fuck did he survive that?*

*How the fuck did we survive?*

And then a new voice—one that sounds a lot like Mel—

*What the fuck were you thinking?!*

Skyler shudders, and I squeeze my eyes shut even tighter, blocking out the voice—the memory—the...regret.

*No.*

Emotion swells my throat, scalding my insides and I shake my head against his chilly, damp neck, breathing him in. He smells like saltwater. Like terror. As if summoned, an image of him right before the bridge collapsed assaults my vision.

It's an image I don't think I'll be rid of anytime soon, one that will haunt me for the rest of my days. And I realize, *No, I don't regret a fucking thing.*

Skyler moans, and it cuts off with a hitch. Pulling back, I turn him just in time. "Just get it out," I murmur, giving his back a couple thwacks as he bends over, vomiting up more water on the stone. "It'll be okay."

"Hurts," he rasps, cringing physically, like even speaking is painful.

He seizes up again, and coughs up more water.

*Fuck. How much did he swallow?*

My slaps turn to calming circles as he finally seems to settle. His shoulder blades and spine ripple against my hand through his thin, soaked shirt.

His shivering picks up, and his coughing turns to something else.

"Hey," I whisper roughly, tugging him to me.

A broken, harsh sob crawls up from his throat, fingers clawing at my arms. I squeeze him to my chest. I can't stop touching him. Petting him. Gripping him right back. It's like we're terrified if we stop—if we let go—we'll disappear. Like maybe this is the only thing truly keeping us alive right now.

“Nolan,” he whispers, turning his face into my neck, just above my collarbone.

I press my cheek to his head, wrap my arms around, fusing him to me. He feels so small right now. So fragile. And it fucking *hurts*.

He mumbles something I can't make out.

“What was that?”

I don't know if he even heard me, but he continues to chant murmurings into my throat. Pulling back, I strain my ears, and finally decipher what it is. And when I do, my heart just... stops. Everything in me stops.

“I don't wanna die. I don't wanna die...”

He whispers it over and over again, his voice barely even there, until it's just a string of indecipherable syllables mixed in with his fast, uneven breaths.

I cup the back of his head, fingers tangling in his thick, wet hair. “Shh. I know. I know.”

He shakes his head as if trying to tell me I don't—I don't know—but I do...

I do.

I barely know him, and yet in this moment, I've never felt closer to another human in my life apart from my daughter. But this is different. It's...vicious and agonizing in a way I've never felt around Abby.

It's like I'm crawling out of my skin—like something in me wants out, and no amount of strength is going to keep it in.

Lifting my gaze, I peer blankly at the storm raging on outside the cave.

“It's okay,” I whisper shakily. “You're safe now.”

“Nol...”

“I know. It's okay. I've got you.”

*We're safe...*

A hand presses over my heart, fingers digging in through my shirt. He's shaky and cold in my arms, but his hand is a warm, steady pressure I can't deny. Can't ignore.

*What...is this?*

We're safe...

Yet safe is the last fucking thing I feel in this moment.

And still, I can't let go.

I won't.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

---

SKYLER

Everything hurts.

My breaths rattle and my stomach churns, pushing more ocean water up my throat. All I taste is salt.

*Dry drowning. What if I'm still drowning? That's a thing isn't it?*

I shiver, digging my nails into the strong, ripped arms hugging me from behind in a death grip. It's already hard enough to breathe, and his hold on me makes it near-impossible.

But I don't tell him to let go or ease up.

How could I, when no one's ever held me like this? I can't even remember the last time someone *hugged* me, period, and isn't that just pathetic?

I almost died—*again*—eighteen and never even been hugged properly.

*Virgin, too, don't forget that,* a voice pipes up.

*Ugh.* Again, pathetic. And definitely not the time to be thinking about that.

Saltwater and tears cling thickly to my lashes. Now that I'm safe, it's as if all the panic of drowning—of dying—is returning ten-fold. I can't help but compare it to when they pumped my stomach. I barely remember it, but I remember how scared I was. How much it hurt.

I'm choking on sobs, and Nolan's petting my hair, hushing me. "I know, I know. I've got you. You're safe now."

He keeps saying that. *I've got you.*

More sobs rocket up my throat. So forceful, my stomach roils, protesting.

I try to push away, but Nolan's grip is unyielding.

"Nol," I murmur tightly. "Sick."

He stiffens and mutters a curse, releasing me, just in time for me to lunge to the side, and heave what's left of my guts onto the cave floor. More water sputters out, mixed with vomit. My nose runs, my eyes leak. My whole body trembles.

Finally, when I'm nothing more than rough dry heaves and crackling breaths, and I feel thoroughly empty, my shoulders slump.

Wiping the back of my hand over my face, I sniff and swallow a couple times, testing my breathing.

*Better...* but still a little rattley.

“Okay?” Nolan whispers. The storm and waves are loud, yet his ragged voice carries, bouncing off the cave walls.

I nod. “Th-think so.” Turning, I fall back on my ass, facing him. “You j-jumped in after me?”

I don't mean to say it like a question. Obviously he did.

He shrugs, running a hand through his damp hair, pushing it back. “Yeah,”—he shakes his head—“well, sort of. Climbed down the cliff and then dove in.”

My throat tightens. “Smart,” I murmur.

His jaw visibly clenches and he nods, eyes peering up and snagging mine. A long, heavy moment passes.

My chin quivers. “You-you shouldn't've done that,” I find myself saying. I wrap my arms around myself, wishing they were his. Wishing I could crawl back into his lap, but something tells me that moment is long gone.

Shaking my head, I gently clear my throat and lower my gaze and go on, “You could've died. You—”

“And you would have if I didn't,” he says in a deep, strained voice. He sounds angry, and an icky feeling settles low in my gut, replacing the overly full feeling from before.

I sniff. “But you-you—”

“I what?”

Peering up at him, I say, “You have a wife. A kid.”



Some indecipherable emotion passes through his expression, pulling his lips down.

“Risking your own life to save me wasn’t—”

“Worth it?” he says in a growl.

I still. “If you died trying, no.”

His jaw ticks and he looks away.

Chewing the inside of my cheek, I wait.

“A thank you would suffice,” he finally says shortly.

He’s mad. I don’t blame him.

He’s got to be realizing now too just how stupid that was, coming in after me. We got lucky. Really lucky. How I survived the fall without crashing into a rock is a miracle, one I don’t even want to look too closely at. Just the memory has my lungs clenching, seizing my breath, and a shiver racing down my spine.

But how he managed to find me...get me out in time before I got swept into the ocean...

*We shouldn’t have survived that.*

*How the hell did we survive?*

I hug myself tighter, feeling like I could cry. “I’m sorry,” I whisper.

I sense more than see the stillness that overtakes him.

“I got excited, and I wasn’t thinking—I never think, I just —” I shake my head, frustrated, remembering all the times I got in trouble growing up, all because I couldn’t just step back and *think*.

All the times, my brain just sort of glitched and I turned into a human tornado, unable to stop myself.

*“You’re an embarrassment.”*

“If anyone should be apologizing,” he says gruffly, yanking me to the present, “it should be me.”

I stiffen, bracing myself, but then his words register.

“It was my idea to take the shortcut that wasn’t even a fucking shortcut. I should’ve kept you behind me, so—”

“So I didn’t do anything stupid.”

He quiets, and I glance up, finding him looking at me with a troubled expression.

I swallow and shrug, looking away. My jaw ticks. I feel like I’m going to start crying again.

“Skyl—”

“What do we do now?” I blurt.

A long beat passes, where I think he might push the subject. Fortunately, he lets it go.

“I guess we wait it out,” he says. “It’s getting darker by the second. Soon, we won’t even have the lightning to go by to see. If someone doesn’t find us by morning, then at least we can climb back up and go back the way we came.”

“The tide?”

I feel more than see him shake his head. “I don’t think it’ll reach this far back, but I’ll keep an eye on it.”

I nod. *Okay then.*

Shifting, I pull my legs out in front of me and I wince. A glance down, just as more lightning flickers through the cave, shows me why.

“Shit, you’re bleeding,” he says just as I notice the gash on my calf.

Now that the adrenaline seems to be wearing off, and I’m no longer choking on ocean water, my other injuries are making themselves known with a vengeance.

My hip aches, and I vaguely remember getting thrown into something hard. A rock?

I’ve no doubt I’ll have a nasty bruise tomorrow. More than one.

Then there’s the six inch gash on my calf that looks pretty gnarly. Not so much deep as it is shredded. It seeps blood onto

the sandy stone beneath me.

I flinch when I notice Nolan scooting toward me. He holds a hand up, raising a brow. “Can I?”

I study him warily, then nod.

Extending my leg, I bite my lip, bracing myself as he circles his big hand around my ankle, his fingers nearly touching.

With surprising gentleness and care, he lifts my calf onto his lap. I suck in a gasp, that gives way to another coughing spell.

Nolan frowns, casting me a quick concerned look. I nod, silently telling him I’m okay.

His mouth tightens into a hard line. Looking down, he focuses on my leg, brushing a thumb over the skin surrounding the wound.

I fight a shiver, feeling the rasp of his calloused digit skate over the dusting of dirt and blood matted hair.

He releases me, but doesn’t move my leg. Instead, he reaches back, and peels off his shirt.

My eyes pop open wide, but he’s concentrating too hard to pay me much notice.

The thin fabric resists parting with him, and I don’t blame it. I kind of wish I had more time to fully appreciate the way it molded to his skin.

But then I’m graced with his broad, bare chest instead, and I can’t really find it in me to desire anything else. Not when there’s lightning flickering over us, illuminating the miles of smooth skin laid out before me. Not when there’s all these muscles and tattoos and a dark smattering of hair across firm pecs, and my pulse is quickening, and my mouth is watering. Even his nipples are sexy.

*Stop.*

Squeezing my thighs together, I clench my hands in front of my chest, reminding myself I almost died.

*He could've died.*

Ogling this straight near-stranger who probably can't stand me and can't wait to be free of me is the last thing I should be doing.

I watch him curiously as he brings the wet shirt to the gash on my leg, cleaning the blood and dirt from it.

I chew on the inside of my lip, far too enamored with the intense concentration he's got going on. His dark, chin-length hair hangs wetly around his jaw where it slipped from behind his ear. Even encased in mostly shadow, his face looks deliciously scratchy with stubble I want to bury my nose in and feel against my teeth.

He wrings out the shirt, twisting it up, and then uses it as a makeshift bandage, wrapping it around my calf. It's gray, and already it's stained through with my blood.

"You could've used mine," I whisper.

He lifts his gaze but doesn't say anything right away.

Not knowing what else to say or do, I simply shrug a shoulder.

His face hardens. "Where else are you hurt? Did you hit your head?"

He sounds pissed off at the idea, which makes me want to lie. But he doesn't give me a chance.

Without waiting for me to respond, he leans forward, reaching for my hair, inspecting my scalp.

I suck in a sharp breath when his hard, hairy chest brushes my knee.

His gaze snaps to mine—pupils glittering back at me.

*Come on, lightning. Don't fail me now.*

"No," I mutter. "I don't think I hit my head. Just my hip." As if prompted by my words, I feel a sharp twinge radiate up my side.

He nods and looks down. "Show me."

I give a jerky nod. Not moving my legs, I twist and reach down, tugging up the hem of my t-shirt. He helps, cupping my hand with his.

Does he even realize what he's doing? The effect he's having on me?

He winces, and at first I think it's because he realizes we're basically holding hands. But then he says, "I can't really see..." As if prompted, more light flickers across the cave. He hisses. "Yeah, that's gonna be ugly."

Frowning, I quickly follow his gaze before I lose visibility, not at all surprised to find a smattering of purple over my right side, stretching out from where the band of my boxers peeks out, all the way up to my ribcage.

The cave darkens once more. "How 'bout your ribs? Your chest? I was pretty rough with you."

I blink a couple times. And then it hits me. "You gave me CPR?"

His shadow nods. "Also dragged you a bit." But I barely hear that last bit.

"Like..." I swallow and look down, a quiet buzzing filling my head. My lips tingle, and I know it's just in my head, but I chase that phantom feeling like I could relive it.

How ironic is that? My last thought before blacking out was of wishing I got to know what it was like to kiss him.

"You weren't breathing," he says slowly, and if I'm not mistaken, his voice is huskier than it was a moment ago.

I flick my gaze up through my lashes.

A little noise rumbles from deep in his chest, and he shakes his head. "Don't do that."

I'm about to ask him what, but then he reaches forward, and using his thumb, he releases my lip from where my teeth had it pinned.

Everything in me just...stills.

I'm pretty sure I go offline there for a second.

My eyes widen, and his snap up to mine...

Up...

From where he was just staring at my lips.

Lips that he touched with his, and I wasn't even conscious for it.

*It was CPR, dumbass. Nothing romantic about it.*

Lightning flashes—crackling in the night—just as his thumb brushes over my lower lip. My lashes flutter, shoulders shudder, and for whatever reason, it's suddenly hitting me now

---

Nolan saved my life.

Literally.

Not only did he rescue me from drowning, but he breathed me back to life.

How is that *not* terribly romantic?

Something passes through his gaze, there and gone too quick for me to grab hold of—not when it's quickly swallowed up by more shadows. And then he's pulling out from under me, easing my leg to the stone.

"I'd say keep it elevated," he says in the gruffest tone I've ever heard from him, "but we're kind of slim for options." I feel more than see his gaze leave me.

Standing to a crouch, he makes his way toward the cave opening.

Eyes wide, I stare straight ahead. *What just happened?*

Minutes pass where neither of us says anything. It's still raining, but the thunder seems to be fading—the lightning growing farther and farther apart.

I wrap my arms around myself, trying to keep my trembles at bay.

"Cold?" he asks when my teeth start chattering.

I give a little shake of my head even though he can't see me, nor is it true. I am cold. I shouldn't be though.

“You’re crashing. Coming down from an adrenaline rush,” he says softly, knowingly. “Shock’s wearing off.”

I nod, knowing this. “Y-yeah, I...I think I’ve experienced it before.”

“Yeah?”

Again, I nod. “At Canaan.”

“Canaan?”

I swallow, wincing at the rough, textured feel of it. “Y-yeah. Canaan Academy. The s-school I was at bef-f-f—” I clench down on my molars, hunching my head between my shoulders.

His shadow draws closer, and I feel his body heat radiating. “Here.” An arm comes around me, turning me into that hard, sweltering chest of his.

“You don’t have to...”

“I want to. I don’t...I don’t like seeing you cold,” he admits softly, almost reluctantly. Like it’s a secret.

“Oh,” I whisper as my eyes drift shut and I sink into him. His other arm wraps around me, holding me tight, encasing me in his scent. His heat. He’s trembling too, but he’s still so *warm*.

So tough.

In his arms, nothing can touch me.

“So Canaan is the school where they were drugging you?” he asks after a moment.

He’s leaning back against the cave wall, legs stretched out in front of him, with me half curled up in his lap.

I wet my lips, wincing when I taste bile. *Gross*. Nodding, I say, “Yeah. Yeah, that didn’t happen anywhere else.”

His heart thumps steadily against my cheek, and I clench my fingers, resisting the urge to reach out and touch him.

“Did it...” he trails off, clearly unsure.

I tilt my head back, peering up at his hidden face. “Did it what?”

I sense him fidgeting, and I frown.

“Did it have anything to do with...earlier? What happened back at the tree, I mean.”

I tense, grateful for the dark pressing in on us, preventing him from seeing my face.

*And me from seeing his.*

I forgot about that.

And here I am, half sprawled out in his lap.

“Skyler,” he says, and I sense his hand move—lift—like he might cup my cheek. He must think better of it, though, because it fades back into the shadows. “You know I don’t care, right?” he whispers.

And I can’t help it. I flinch.

He stiffens. “What—”

“Sorry. Not you. It’s just...” My face bunches, and I shake my head. “That’s what my parents said. When I told them what happened. It was right before I...I tried to—”

This time, he does touch me. Just two fingers curled under my chin, that somehow hold the weight of a thousand wishes in it. He lifts my gaze to his, and it’s dark, so dark, yet I can feel his gaze touching mine.

*Does he feel mine too?*

“Bad phrasing. Got it. What I mean is I’m okay with it. You being...” He trails off pointedly.

I nod. “Gay.”

He relaxes at that, releasing my chin. “Yes, gay. I have no issue with it. Please know that.”

Throat thick, I nod and lower my gaze.

“Is that why they sent you there?”



I shake my head. “No.” Shifting around, I get more comfortable and rub my cheek into his pec.

He sucks in a breath, and I tense, cringing. *Shit.*

But he quickly relaxes once more, adjusting his hold on me.

“They didn’t exactly advertise it, what they were doing. It was really just a...shitty coincidence, I suppose, that I ended up getting that...treatment.”

“Conversion therapy,” he says softly.

I nod. “They called it reparative therapy. It’s probably how they fly under the radar. It’s just small print under a list of things they have to offer for troubled youth.”

“But isn’t that illegal?”

I shrug. “Technically...no. At least, not in Indiana from what I read.”

“Fucking hell.” A beat passes, then, “Is that where you’re from?”

“Yeah. What about you?”

I hear a small smile in his voice. “Vermont.”

Nodding against his chest, I tell him, “That actually makes a lot of sense.”

He barks a short, startled laugh. “How so?”

I tap his thigh, over his jeans. “You were very ill-prepared for an island.”

His chest shakes with a quiet laugh. “Fair enough.”

Biting back a smile, I hide my face in his chest.

He blows out a long breath, and I hear a soft thud, like maybe he threw his head back against the wall. “God, what the hell just happened?”

I wince. “That was...” I shake my head, at a loss for words.

“I don’t know how we survived that,” he mutters.

*Double wince.*

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“You say that a lot.”

I shrug.

A hand comes up to my head, fingers forking through my hair. “Don’t beat yourself up over it, ‘kay? We survived. That’s all that matters.”

I sniff, nodding.

“Sky...”

*There it is again. Sky.*

He called me something else too, didn’t he? *Sweetheart.*

*No, no, you definitely just imagined that.*

“I’m not married.”

Everything in me stills.

He clears his throat, and if I’m not mistaken he’s suddenly very cagey. Nervous even.

Unsure why he’s bringing this up, all I can do is rub my fingers together and stare aimlessly ahead.

“You said wife before, and I just—well, I wanted you to know we’re divorced. I signed the papers before I came to Black Diamond, so it’s final.”

I blink a couple times. “Is it because you relapsed?”

He releases a low, unsteady laugh, and I cringe. “Sorry, that was nosy, wasn’t it?”

He grabs my shoulder, gently pushing me off his chest.

Ducking my head, I scoot back, crossing my legs together.

I feel the distance between us grow, and the rain seems much heavier outside the cave suddenly—louder. As if his proximity was somehow warding it off—muting it.

“Sorry, it’s just...I have a hard time talking about this,” he says barely loud enough to be heard over the rain and wind.

I nod, despite the fact he can't see me.

"I fucked up. Big time." He lets out a ragged sigh before continuing. "Long story short, I got drunk while I was supposed to be watching Abby—my daughter—and I...I fell asleep. Passed out. You know."

More lightning flickers just as he waves a hand, and I feel a pang in my chest when I get a glimpse of the harsh planes of his face.

"Nolan, if you don't want to talk about it..."

He shakes his head. "No. No, you told me yours, so I should tell you mine. That's how it works, yeah?"

"No, not if you're not comfortable."

The quiet that follows is heavy with tension. Deliberation. It thunders again—the vibrations echoing off the cave walls. Then—

"I almost killed my kid, Skyler."

My eyes widen, and my mouth parts.

"We were playing in the... Well, I don't know what the fancy name for this kind of room is, but it's where we had our indoor pool."

"A natatorium," I whisper.

"Yeah, that," he says, his voice faint. "Anyway," he goes on roughly, more distinguishable, "she was on her little blanket, playing with blocks. We were on the other side of the room, far enough away from the pool that it didn't even occur to me to worry about it. I was on a lounge chair drinking a beer from my thermos..." His shadow moves, and I get the impression he's looking down at his lap—wringing his hands together. "Not my first. Not even my fifth. I didn't...I didn't plan for Mel leaving that day, but she got called into work—she had no idea I'd started drinking again. I was...I was really fucking good at hiding it, which made me believe I had power over it, and..."

Chewing my cheek, all I can do is watch him through the flickering darkness—this man, this strong, invincible man,

barely holding it together as he forces the words out.

“I didn’t realize how far gone I was. The second she left, I should’ve stopped. But I...I thought I could handle it. Thought it’d be okay to keep going. I *felt* like I was okay.” He gulps. “All I did was close my eyes. I remember that. I just...I didn’t...I didn’t think I’d fall asleep.”

My stomach drops, and I blink rapidly, reminding myself he said he *almost* killed his kid. He didn’t kill her. That’s what matters.

“Mel came home to find Abby c-crawling by the edge, like right by the fucking edge, reaching...for a ball she dropped,” he chokes out. More lightning flickers—thunder rumbling quietly, distantly—revealing him just as he pinches the bridge of his nose and hangs his head forward, his dark damp hair curling around his face.

“Nolan,” I whisper.

“Seconds. That’s all it would’ve taken. And I wouldn’t’ve even known. Not until it was too late.”

My eyes fall shut.

“She’s making me stay here another six weeks,” he says. “I was supposed to get out next week. That’s why I was so fucking pissed off today.”

*The phone call*, I realize, nodding.

“And I can’t even blame her, can I?” he says raggedly. My eyes open when I sense him get up.

His shadow wanders over to the cave’s entrance, his silhouette crouching in front of the opening, obscuring the fading, quivering light. The rain has started to let up, and it’s getting darker—much darker. Soon, we won’t be able to see at all. Not in here.

A ball of panic forms at the base of my throat, making it hard to swallow, but I ignore it. It’s not about me right now.

“I shouldn’t be here,” he says forcefully, and there’s something to his tone. A distance. Like he’s no longer speaking to me. “Not anymore. I did everything she wanted,

and it's still not enough. I don't know if it ever will be. I just want to see my daughter again. I just want to hold her. I never even got to do that before she was just...gone..."

His voice tapers off, and I find myself pushing to a stand. I wince, my body aching, but I press forward, ducking so I don't hit my head.

When I touch him, he flinches, but settles once he realizes it's just me.

Over here, in the mouth of the cave, I can make out his profile—see how his lashes lower, his gaze lingering on where my fingers brush his forearm.

"It's been almost three months," he whispers.

I nod.

His eyes are dark when they lift to mine, and filled with so much agony, it steals my breath.

"And the worst part is..." He shrugs. "I wouldn't even blame Mel if she kept her away from me forever. It's the not knowing—her dangling the carrot—that is slowly killing me I think." He shakes his head. "Maybe she already decided, but this is her way of keeping me sober an-and alive. I just... I just need to know."

With my heart in my throat, I let instinct guide me and wrap my fingers around his arm, lean forward, and rest my forehead against his shoulder. And for five long seconds, I just stand there, breathing slowly, listening to the waves crashing against the rocks mingling with his short, choppy breaths. Comforting him in the only way I can think of.

"Seeing her has been all that's keeping me from drinking. Remembering what I did...the guilt...it's been the strongest motivator. And now..."

I blink a couple times, frowning in concentration as I try to think of something to say.

He laughs quietly, and it's a serrated, pained sound that scrapes through my insides. "Suppose that just goes to show I do in fact belong here. That I'm not...better..."

I swallow thickly, and give his arm a squeeze, saying without words that I'm listening. I'm here. Hoping it's enough.

*I'm so out of my depth.*

All this insistence about not being a kid...and yet, in this moment, I've never felt younger. More sheltered.

Sucking in my cheek, I will words to come. But they don't.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, he drops his head to mine, and murmurs, "Thank you."

I shake my head with a silent scoff. *I didn't do anything.*

He pulls back, tipping my chin up. "I mean it." He searches my face, a troubled look passing through his glittering eyes. "I just...thanks for not dying on me."

My eyes widen. That's...not what I was expecting.

"And thank you for listening, and not trying to..." He looks around. "Fill my head with bullshit."

I frown.

"What I did was fucked up, and the last thing I need is someone trying to excuse it, or make light of it."

*Ah.* I nod, understanding, and suddenly it's as if the bubble's been popped, and I realize—I *do* know what to say.

It's as obvious as if it were there all along.

"It was fucked up."

He nods jerkily.

"But you're here, aren't you?"

Cocking his head, he eyes me questioningly.

I wave at the ocean. "You haven't given up. Whether or not Mel's right in prolonging this..." I shrug, ignoring the way my voice shakes. *Just keep going. Focus on the facts. Reason.* "Well, it's no matter. What matters is you haven't given up. You could've told her no, and got on the first boat out of here. The fact you're staying and putting in the work, despite how... well, shitty and lonely it must be—how hopeless it probably

feels—you're still here. You're still fighting for your daughter.”

Nolan stares at me intensely. Too intensely.

I duck my head, feeling my neck heat.

*Shit, did I mess it all up?*

*Maybe I should've just kept my mouth shut.*

*Maybe—*

Nolan moves deeper into the cave, giving me no choice but to drop my hand. And I slump, wincing, internally beating myself up.

*I never get this right.*

“C'mere. You shouldn't be standing.”

I blink a couple times, then peek up through my lashes to find a large shadow waiting for me deeper in the cave.

Gulping, I step toward it.

A hand brushes mine, and then I feel him lower to the ground. He gives my hand a tug, letting me use him for balance so I avoid further injuring my leg.

I sense him taking off his waterlogged shoes, so I do the same. Followed by our socks.

It's completely dark now, and despite how many times I blink, I can't get my eyes to adjust. It must be so cloudy still, even the moon and stars are hidden. There's not even any light coming from the island.

“Did I...did I say something wrong?” I hear myself say, my voice wavering.

A long, weighted moment passes, and then fingers bump and brush mine before curling over them and squeezing. “No. Sky, no, you said everything right.”

I frown into the dark, wishing I could see his expression.

There's something in his voice...

Something I can't decipher.

It has my pulse racing, and the hair at the nape of my neck standing on end.

Something metallic knocks off the rock, pulling me out of my thoughts. I hear water sloshing around, and a throat swallowing.

That's when it hits me. "My backpack," I whisper.

He grunts, handing me his canteen.

"Well, not that it was mine," I quickly amend.

"Drink, Skyler," he orders gruffly. So I do.

It's kind of rough going down, bringing a newfound ache to my chest, but I take slow sips, just like I did in the hospital after having my stomach pumped.

"Shit," he bites out.

"What?"

Squinting, and failing to make anything out, all I can do is rely on my sense of hearing as he shuffles around. Digging something out of his pocket, maybe?

"What are the chances that rice will help this?" he says dully.

*Oh.* His phone.

Chewing my lip, I shake my head. "I'm sor—"

"Jesus, don't apologize," he utters like it pains him. "It's nothing. Just a fucking phone."

*Right.*

"What about yours?" he asks after a moment.

"I didn't bring it."

"Well that's good at least."

"Yeah..." I whisper, my voice fading.

He sighs roughly. "Lay down, okay? Get some sleep. You've gotta be exhausted."



Nodding, I realize he's right. As if his words summoned my fatigue, it rolls in with the force of a freight train, drawing my attention to how heavy my limbs feel. How fuzzy my head feels.

There's an ache too—radiating through my entire body; one I know will be worse come morning—but right now, it's still somewhat stifled. Distant.

It's so dark in here...

Heavy. Oppressing.

It reminds me far too much of that room in Canaan, where they'd shut off the lights, and leave me with nothing but that dreaded intercom. All my senses deprived except for my hearing.

I shudder at the memory, feeling the urge to clamp my hands over my ears, if only to remind myself that I *can*. Because I'm *not* there—not strapped down, and unable to block out the noise.

As if sensing where my head went, Nolan says, “Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere. It'll be light before you know it.”

“Will you...”

“What?”

I swallow, and manage to rasp, “Lay with me. You... you've gotta be tired too.”

At first I'm not sure he heard me. If I didn't know any better, I'd think he somehow disappeared altogether. He's just that still.

But then he murmurs a quiet, barely there, “Yeah,” in that low, grumbly voice of his that sends a chill down my spine. A *good* chill.

I feel him lay next to me, and it's such tight quarters, there's no keeping us from touching.

His bare arm presses against mine and I blow out a sigh of relief. Right now, even my misplaced cravings for him can't

touch me. Another ache I'll have to deal with tomorrow.

*He's so warm...*

"Sleep, Sky," he says in that tight, unreadable voice of his.

And despite how hard I try to stay awake to enjoy this, knowing this closeness can't possibly last—knowing come light, when we return to the facility, it'll be just a memory.

For all I know, he's just being nice right now because he doesn't feel like he has any other choice. We're trapped here together after all.

*And we nearly died...*

My pulse quickens at the reminder.

I shift around, trying to get comfortable.

He sighs, then there's big, strong hands nudging me onto my side so I'm facing away from him.

"Here," he grunts, putting an arm under my head. With the other, he curls it around me, holding me to his chest. "Better?"

I nod, but then remember he can't see me. "Y-yeah."

Another grunt.

His bicep is surprisingly soft pillowing my cheek. With my ear pressed against his skin, there's that familiar sort of whooshing in my ears that mingles with the waves coming from outside the cave.

It's soothing, as is the heavy arm thrown across my waist.

Rolling my lips together, I hunch down, getting comfortable.

Against my scalp, I can feel his unsteady breaths. "Close your eyes, Skyler."

Biting my lip, I do just that.

I swear it's as if the big, black maw of sleep was waiting for me. Because no sooner than I close my eyes, do I feel myself drifting, my thoughts fracturing, my awareness dimming.

Canaan is gone, but now it's replaced with an ocean—black and endless, and I can no longer tell where the surface is.

My fingers bite into flesh, and Nolan holds me tighter.

Just as I have no choice but to let the current take me, I swear I feel Nolan press a kiss to my head. “I’ve got you.”

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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SKYLER

**W**hen I dream, it's the kind that starts off more physical than mental, with sensations mingling with my slow then sudden awareness. Like I'm floating...

Floating...

Falling...

And it's suddenly all hot, hard heat, and fingers biting into my arm, and *Oh! Oh! This is what it's like...*

MY BODY MOVES *beyond my control, hips thrusting, swiveling, grinding...chasing delicious friction.*

*It's that movement I tune into first.*

*My arousal I register second.*

*A quiet whine fills my ears, and I feel more than hear a sharp intake of air, the hard, but pliable heat beneath me rippling, tensing, before caving in around me.*

*A chest.*

*Arms.*

*Big, so big...*

*He's so big.*

*My hands move of their own volition, tracing the body beneath me. It's naked—he's naked—and his skin is furnace-hot and slick with sweat. My tongue pokes out, wetting my lip, just as I curl my body tighter around his, clenching my thighs, desperate for some kind of relief.*

*The fog is lifting with every second that passes, as reality trickles in, piecing itself together.*

*But I resist.*

*I want to stay here.*

*I know if I wake up, I'll lose this forever, and I never thought I could have this. Not with him.*

*Another moan. Another sharp inhale. A shudder...*

*"S-Sky."*

*It's okay. It's just a dream. I can have him here. I can—*

*My thoughts spiral and fracture, piecing off indistinguishably. It's all sensation now. All desperate, shameless need. No thought. No reason. No anything. Just...*

*Him.*

*I know you, my body whispers. I know you and you are mine.*

*"Skyler," a tight, throaty voice mutters.*

*"Mmmm," I hum, hiking my leg higher, fingers grappling, grasping, climbing over his shoulders. My nose finds his skin, and I inhale, shuddering at the musky, earthy scent of him.*

*"Skyler. Wake up."*

*No...*

*Please don't make me.*

*Mine, mine, mine.*

*"Skyler." His voice is a ragged, desperate plea... familiar...and suddenly there's now a face in my mind. A name. And it's not just my body anymore that recognizes him, but my brain too as I piece it all together and—*

MY EYES POP OPEN.

*No...*

*Oh, God, please God, no...*

*I'm frozen. Eyes wide, staring at nothing.*

*My cheek is smushed against a hard, sweaty chest, prickly hairs brushing my damp lip. My hand is clenched rigidly around a massive shoulder, and my cock...*

I fly back, scrambling away, all but throwing myself against the cave wall. I have just enough wherewithal to duck my head so I don't bash it against the ceiling where it dips low.

My entire body trembles as I stare blankly ahead. It's dark. Really dark, but there's enough light slipping into the cave from the rising sun for me to make out Nolan's silhouette.

Tears sting the back of my eyes, and my throat swells, bile rising swiftly.

*What did I do? What the fuck did I do??*

Nolan heaves himself up onto his forearm, his upper body half-turned toward me. His chest rises and falls rapidly, showcasing the rippling muscle. He's still in his jeans. They're ripped over his thighs—the frayed denim straining where he curls a leg. Bare foot planted on the hard ground.

I shake my head, mouth parting, but no words come out. What the hell do I even say?

From here, I have the perfect vantage point to watch his hard swallow. His gaze is downturned, lips parted, stubbled chin dipped toward his chest. The tendon in his neck strains beneath the loose strands of hair curtaining half his face.

I curl my fists, nails digging into my palms.

*That didn't just happen. That really didn't just happen.*

My dick twitches as if to tell me, *Yes, yes it did*, reminding me I'm still hard. How am I still hard? I bunch my face, cringing.

What a cliché I am. Mauling a man in my sleep. I curl my legs up to my chest, squeezing my thighs together right along with my eyes, willing it away. If only I could erase the last however many minutes I spent dry humping Nolan right along with my boner.

Hunching my shoulders up by my ears, I bow my head, biting my lip so hard, I feel the skin give, and taste iron.

Blood thunders in my ears, warring with the distant sounds of the waves. It occurs to me how quiet it is now. It's no longer

raining, and the ocean laps gently at the rocks, almost as if it's trying to apologize for what it did to us yesterday.

There's a shuffle, and a muttered curse. I tense, holding my breath.

He's gonna leave me here. I just know it. He's going to bolt, find his way back to the rehab, and tell them I molested him. That there's a pervert on the island—a predator who has no self-control, preying on men while they sleep.

I shake my head, whimpering. *Please, please don't. I'll be good. I didn't mean it.*

“Skyler.”

My name is no louder than the faintest whisper, yet it echoes in the enclosed space, making it feel like it's coming from everywhere at once.

I seal my eyes together even tighter, shaking my head. “I'm s-sor—”

“Skyler,” he grits out like a warning.

And then it all happens in a whirlwind.

One second we're on opposite sides of the cave, and the next I'm being dragged across the ground by the ankle.

Yanked forward with brutal, barely restrained strength, Nolan lays me out across the rocky floor. My neck snaps back, my head bumping off the hard ground with enough force for me to see stars, punching a sharp gasp from my still-aching lungs. My eyes fly open, mouth agape.

*What—*

“Goddamnit,” he growls through bared teeth that practically glow in the dark.

He sounds furious.

And just as I open my mouth to apologize and beg him not to kill me, he pounces.

One hand grips my jaw, while the other squeezes my waist, dragging me under him. And then he's there— everywhere—



endless muscle and hot skin. I'm smothered in it. Lost in the sensation and scent of Nolan.

Nothing else exists, not even my confusion.

He buries his face in my neck, biting my name through his teeth. "*Sky.*"

My hand smacks against his back on instinct, and I hook my leg around his back, just over the swell of his ass. I arch into him, throwing my head back, digging my skull into the rough, gritty floor.

*What am I doing?*

*What the fuck is going on?*

Slotting his leg between mine, he grinds up against me and I gasp, gaping up at the ceiling when I feel it, wedged right against my own aching need.

*He's hard too.*

*Holy shit, Nolan's hard too.*

"Nol," I whimper, squeezing his bicep.

"Shut up," he grits out. Teeth scrape the soft skin under my jaw and my eyes roll back. He pants hotly against my flesh, grinding his hips into mine. "Just...shut up. *Fuck!*"

A keening sound pushes its way past my lips, coming from some deep, untapped place inside me. Heat envelops my neck, my cheeks, no doubt turning me bright red. I'm pretty sure I'd be shaking like a leaf if I didn't have what feels like two-hundred pounds of solid muscle holding me down, locking me in place.

I wrap my legs around him tighter—so far gone, knowing he's just as lost to this as me that I can't even feel self-conscious. I'm all animal instinct and red-hot need, and all that matters right now is getting as close to him as humanly possible.

If the bruising grip on me and rock-hard cock digging into my stomach is anything to go by, he's feeling it too.

This...hunger.

A desperation like none other.

*We almost died*, is all I can think.

Like that fact has unlocked something in us—opened a door to something I didn't think was possible. Something I don't think he ever considered.

We're plastered together from head to toe, grinding into each other with unabashed need. Hands clawing and digging for some kind of purchase. Limbs tangled. There's no telling where I end and he begins, because we're rolling around, mindless and starved for something no words could ever do justice.

There's only this.

Only his teeth in my neck and my nails in his back and our cocks rubbing together ferociously through denim and cotton.

He's so much stronger than me—broader in every sense—but I don't feel small right now. I don't feel vulnerable.

I feel ravenous.

Nolan rubs his scratchy face all over my neck like he's trying to embed his scent in me, and hell if that isn't the single most hottest thing to happen to me in my eighteen years.

It's something I didn't even know I craved, not until this very moment.

To be owned, wholly and completely. To be devoured, so consumed by another person that no fiber of my being is left untouched by this man.

He lifts his head, dark, unfathomable eyes meeting mine. There's just enough purple light peeking in, that I can see his sparkling black orbs glaring back at me.

His wild gaze darts all over my face before lingering on my lips. His nostrils flare. "Fuckin' hell," he mutters, reaching up and swiping his thumb across my lip.

It stings, reminding me I gnawed the shit out of it earlier. I watch in utter rapture as he inspects the thick digit, eyeing the dark smear of blood with a deep frown.

My tongue pokes out, dancing over where his thumb just grazed. “Sorry,” I whisper.

His gaze flies to mine, blazing with a maelstrom of emotion, his nostrils flared. Just when I think he might put an end to this though, he brings his finger up to his mouth, sucking the blood clean.

A whimper breaches my lips, and I feel heat gather at my groin, drawing up my nuts.

*Oh God.*

Growling, he reaches down, and rips my shirt open, buttons flying. I find my own fingers creeping down and undoing my fly, then I’m shoving down my shorts. My boxers.

*I don’t know what I’m doing, I don’t know what I’m doing...*

Nolan scoots back, undoing his jeans.

Impatient, I sit up and crawl toward him, only vaguely registering the pain shooting up my calf and side. But I ignore it. It’s irrelevant. All that matters is this.

Nolan...

And getting as close to him as I physically can.

For however long he lets me.

I shove him on his back and climb up on top of him. He goes willingly, his eyes widening up at me. I duck my head, afraid if I look too long at him, the spell will shatter, and I’m shut down, or he’ll see the storm lurking behind my eyes—the one that never retreats for long—and stop this. And neither of those things I want to happen.

*More, my body demands. Moremoremore—*

Slinking down his torso, I suck and bite and kiss at every inch of flesh I can find. Ingraining his taste into my tongue. The roughened texture of his flesh. His scent.

I want him as lost to me as I am to him.

Nolan's moaning and arching and digging his fingers in my scalp.

My hand shifts toward his center, bumping over the bulge in his boxers peeking out from between his open fly.

I wet my lips and peer up at him, keeping my gaze trained on his chin so I don't lose the courage. "C-can I?" I whisper.

His moan is long and reedy. "Sky...what are we..."

"I wanna taste you," I admit in a fevered hush. "Please let me taste you."

His body jolts—his cock twitching against my trembling palm. "Fuck. Goddamn it. What..." He trails off breathlessly, shaking his head at a loss. Yet his fingers bite into my scalp, holding me...and he thrusts up into my palm.

Burying a smile beneath my teeth, I duck my head, pressing it to his pec.

Groaning, he cards his fingers through my hair, holding me there. "That's it," he pants. "Take what you need. Whatever you want," he mumbles as I suck at his skin, gnawing at him, right over the firm swell of his pec. "Kill me for all I care."

Ignoring that, I burrow my fingers down his boxers, my stomach fluttering at the feel of his short, rough pubes scraping at my smooth skin. His cock is rock-hard against the heel of my palm, yet silky to the touch. And he's warm, so warm. And *thick* too—much thicker than me—almost too thick for my fingers to wrap around when I tug him free.

I pant into his damp skin, my body shuddering.

So much sensation...so many startling different textures...

It should be overwhelming, and I suppose it is, but only in the best way possible.

He moans my name again and I slide my mouth over his chest, loving the way the hair scratches and tickles at my lips along the way. I find a nipple, and poke my tongue at it, curious. When he shivers, I smile, pulling the rigid bud between my teeth.

“Jesus!” he gasps, arching into me.

*He likes that.*

Given all the encouragement I need, I suck and nibble at his nipple for a bit, if only to elicit more of those deep-chested purrs vibrating his chest.

He tastes so good—salty, like the ocean. Heady, like the earth.

And something that’s just him—undefinable and addictive.

I don’t know what’s happening to me. It’s as if something hidden deep inside me has yawned to life, and crawled its way to the surface, taking over my body, quieting my brain and all the second-guessing I’d normally do.

Be it the near-death experience, the darkness of the cave, the dream I was having still clinging to my awareness, or the simple, inexplicable fact that Nolan’s body is laid out for me like a platter to feast upon, something I never in a million years thought I’d have...

I have no idea.

All I know is his little groans and grunts and praises are a siren song I can’t ignore—the taste of him a drug I can’t resist—and hell if I’m going to dwell on all the why’s of it now. Not as long as he lets me have this.

I move to his left nipple and play a little with that one as I slide my hand lower, fully encasing his heavy cock in my palm. My fingertips brush his balls and his entire body draws up like a rubber band about to snap.

Humming in pleasure, I slither down his body, leaving kisses and bites in my wake. His firm abs clench, rippling against my lips...my tongue...

My free hand splays across his chest, sliding down with me, blunt nails scoring his skin following the path my mouth laid out for it.

With the hand still holding his cock, I stroke my fist up, twisting my palm around his fat crown, just like I like it when I touch myself.

He seems to like it too based on his little hisses and thrusts into my hand. He shifts under me, and then he's shoving his jeans and briefs down over his ass, giving me better access.

Wetting my lips, I peek up at him, but only for a split-second. Not wanting to lose my courage, I slide my fist down, gripping him at the root. I dip my head, and lap my tongue at his slit, catching a hot, salty drip of pre-cum.

Nolan gasps, body jerking. I press my other hand down on his stomach. Not that I'm in any way strong enough to hold him down, but he gets the message and eases back, chest heaving with deep, ragged breaths that echo off the cave walls.

I suckle at the head, moaning at his taste.

*God*, and the way it feels, his weight against my tongue, his thickness stretching my lips...

Sparks of pleasure pop off all throughout my body, sending rippling, toe-curling satisfaction thrumming through my veins.

And for a moment, all I can do is slump against him, slide my eyes shut, and sigh around him in relief, mouth stuffed full with cock.

*Nolan's cock.*

How dare Canaan try to steal this from me? How dare they try to taint something that feels so good, so right?

And for what? Because clearly they failed. Spectacularly so.

I feel a giddy laugh bubble up, and he jolts like it tickled him. I take him in deeper, so deep, my throat protests, squeezing around his tip.

He gasps, stiffening.

Not gonna lie—it hurts. I'm still so raw from nearly drowning last night, but hell if I'm going to let that stop me.

Fingers twist in my hair, tugging, prompting me to peek a glance through my lashes.

"Christ," he murmurs, lips slackly framing the words. His eyes dart all over my face before screwing shut like he's in

pain. “What am I doing?”

Despite his words, he throws his head back, and arches up into my mouth like he can't resist. The strong cords in his neck stand out glaringly in the thinning darkness, pulsing with his swallow.

Something stutters in my chest, bringing about a wave of awareness.

Easing off him, I swallow and lick my lips, chasing his taste. Savoring it.

“Is this okay?” I whisper, nervous all of a sudden. “I, uh, never did this before.”

His body jerks, quaking, muscles constricting inward. He lowers his chin to his chest and meets my gaze.

My cheeks heat, and I squirm, fighting the urge to hide my face.

His hand roughly cups my cheek. A thumb drags over my lip, pulling it away from my teeth.

“It's perfect,” he rumbles. Then so quietly, I'm sure I'm mistaken, he mumbles, “You're perfect. God fucking help me.”

And then he's shoving his cock deep down my throat.

It's rough. Aggressive. It burns...

Tears sear my eyes, spilling from the corners, not unlike the drool dripping down my chin.

All I can do is hold on. Take it. Let him fuck my face, like this is what I was meant to do all along. Nothing else exists—not what came before. Not what will come after.

Just. This.

Fingers rake roughly through my hair, clasp the back of my head. “Good, so so good,” he mumbles, a snarl gutting out his words. “Fuck, why is this so good?”

My eyes flare, cheeks flaming, my chest heating to near-combustible temperatures. If my heart hasn't melted yet, I

can't imagine it has much longer to go before nothing's left.

Something fractures in his expression, and his dark, glittering eyes grow hooded, almost hazy, like he too is lost in a spell. *No...like he's possessed.*

"There you go," he grits out, fucking my mouth. "That's it. You're taking it so good."

A thrill skates down my spine, sheeting my skin in goosebumps.

Spurred on by his praise, I open my mouth wider for him, hollowing my cheeks, wrenching my jaw open as far as it can go. Taking him deep, deep, deep to the back of my throat.

Again, my body constricts when his cock gets lodged back there—trapping a cough.

"Fffuck," he chatters out between his teeth. And he just holds me there on his cock. My nose flares for breath, and more chills break out across my shoulders. "God, look at you. So goddamn sweet."

My lashes flutter shut at the unexpected compliment, and I slide my free hand down between my legs, cupping my cock in my hand. I'm painfully hard, my tip weeping like a faucet.

Never have I been so simultaneously uncomfortable and turned on in all my life. I didn't think it was possible...

Nolan finally eases his grip on my nape, letting me slide back. Strings of spit hang between my wet, swollen, stretched out lips. I gasp, choking on air.

Swallowing a couple times, I hurriedly guide his tip back to my mouth, rubbing it over my tongue.

A ragged moan claws its way out of his mouth.

"Fuck, I'm so close. How am I so close already?" he mutters.

Popping off his tip, I lower my face, trailing my tongue down a thick, pulsing vein, leading right to where his balls curl up. The skin is soft—delicate. I rub my nose into them,



breathing him in. “You taste good,” I murmur, my voice wrecked, hardly even recognizable.

“Jesus. You’re killin’ me,” he utters in a strained voice. “What are you... what are you doing to me...” he babbles near-senselessly.

I jerk myself harder, chasing that delicious friction. Pressing a kiss to each swell of his nuts, I then run my tongue up between them, up over that throbbing vein, and take his fat head back into my mouth.

Using my fist, I try to stroke him in time with my sucks. It’s awkward, at first, betraying just how inexperienced I am. But if anything, that’s what sets Nolan off.

He tenses, his body vibrating. “S-Sky,” he croaks, grabbing the sides of my head. “Fuck. I’m gonna—”

Chills scatter over my skin. My cock throbs something fierce, and I squeeze myself at the base at the same time I bow my head, this time willingly taking him back as far as I can go.

Again, I gag, and he tenses, fingers strangling my hair.

And then he’s twitching, groaning, and—

“FUCK!” he roars, shooting hotly down my throat. His hands hold my head in a vice, anchoring me to his massive cock so I have no choice but to just lay there and try not to choke as I take everything he has to give me.

He comes for what feels like forever—gushing rope after rope into my open throat, my waiting mouth, soaking his release into my taste buds—my gums—until it’s overflowing and dribbling out of the corners of my lips.

*Wow, that’s a lot.*

His hold on me finally eases—his spurts diminishing—and I pull off, gulping, swallowing everything I can manage.

He’s groaning, trembling, his fingers pawing and petting blindly at my hair.

I give one last little suck to his slit before pulling off.

Sitting back on my heels, my face bunches when I look down at where my cock juts out painfully from my fist, ruby red and glistening at the tip.

I sense Nolan sitting up on his forearms, thighs spread out as far as they can go, jeans bunched around his calves, his heavy, spent cock flopped against his stomach.

My eyes seal shut and I suck in my bottom lip, eating up the remnants of his release clinging to my lips. A breeze blows in, carried on the waves, hardening my nipples.

Nolan groans low and dangerously, and I tense, shuddering, a whimper skating free from my throat just as I topple over the edge.

All while I shatter, jets of cum painting my clenched stomach...I feel him watching me, devouring me with those wild, fierce green eyes.

I moan to the heavens, and I pray...

Pray that he never looks away.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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NOLAN

**M**y head is glaringly quiet, empty of all thoughts but of what's immediately pressing.

First thing's first: get myself dressed.

Pushing to a stand, I ignore the dazed eyes watching me as I hurriedly tug my boxers and jeans up, tucking my cock back where it belongs. Back where it should've stayed.

*What the hell were you thinking?*

Turning away, I squeeze my eyes shut and take a much needed moment to collect myself.

I'm still breathless. Still trembling. Still coming down from the best fucking orgasm I've ever—

*NO!*

Panic surges forward, setting waste to everything else.

*Don't think about it, I silently urge myself. Later. Freaking out now will only make things worse.*

He doesn't deserve that. Not after what he's been through.

Somehow, in my spiral, I do recognize that much at least.

"Nolan?" he murmurs shakily.

*Fuck.*

I hold up a hand, and shake my head. "Not now. Get dressed."

A long moment passes where I wonder if he might ignore me, but finally I hear a sigh, followed by the shuffle of clothes telling me he's doing as I said.

Crouching toward the cave opening, I peer into the faint light washing over the sea. It's so calm now—quiet—it's hard to believe this is the same ocean—the same rocky bay—we almost lost our lives to last night.

A sharp hiss has me whipping around, gaze dropping to where Skyler hunches over, tightening the shirt wrapped around his calf. He's got his shorts on, but he's still shirtless.

"Shit," I breathe, hurrying to his side and dropping on my knees. "Let me."

Skyler's hands are trembling, and if I'm not mistaken he's paler than he was a moment ago. Even his cheeks that were flushed just moments ago, are now devoid of any color.

He's already fixed the shirt he had wrapped around his calf, but blood seeps through the fabric, dripping down his shin from where it must've ripped open.

"It's okay," he says softly, but there's no mistaking the tightness there. He's hurting.

My gaze snaps up to his in a glare. "It's not."

He flinches at my tone, ducking his head even further.

Biting back a slew of curses, I adjust the make-shift bandage around the worst of the gash. Pulling back, bile rises swiftly when I take in the nasty blackened bruises going up his right side.

I shake my head. *Fucking hell. What did I do? What the hell did I do??*

"I told you, it's fine."

"And I told you it's not," I grit back.

He sniffs, and fuck if I don't feel like the world's biggest piece of shit.

"Fuck," I croak.

He blinks, peering back at me through his dark lashes. His jaw works furiously, like he's trying to keep his emotions at bay.

"I'm so sorry," I utter quietly, shaking my head, disgusted with myself. "That shouldn't have...I don't know what I was...I just..." I slam my lips together when words fail me.

Skyler scrunches up his face like maybe he wants to protest—or lay into me for what I did—but just as soon as he opens his mouth to speak, we hear it.

A voice calling out.

*Is that...a a megaphone?*

It's the familiar sound of a motor that registers next.

Skyler's eyes widen, his focus shifting past me. "Is that...?"

I nod. "A boat."

Grateful for the perfectly timed rescue—for more reasons than one—I grab Skyler's dirty shirt off the floor. The buttons have been torn off, but at least it'll provide him some coverage.

Quickly, and as gently as I can, I ease the shirt up one arm, then the other. Wincing right along with him when the movement pulls on his injuries.

I help him with his shoes next. If anything, the boat seems to be drawing nearer, so I'm not too worried they'll leave before I can alert them to our location.

Once I've tied his shoelaces, I push back to a crouched stand, eyeing him up and down, carefully avoiding his gaze. His shirt hangs open around his torso—dirty and wrinkled. His shorts stained with dirt. Blood dripping down his leg.

"Come on," I mutter, turning away, ignoring the eyes raking over my bare back.

Grabbing my backpack, I throw it over my shoulder and quickly exit the cave, holding a hand up to ward off the piercing sunlight.

I sense Skyler ambling up behind me. He's limping—he tries to hide it, but there's no mistaking it.

A voice calls out again and I blink a few times, waving my arm. "Over here!" I shout.

There, in the bay, a small boat, not unlike the ones they use to transport us here from the mainland, hovers not far from our

hidden cove.

Skyler shivers next to me and I glance over at him, worried. He's in a world of agony if his grimace is anything to go by.

*Or he's traumatized...*

*Both, probably, I silently amend.*

Shaking my head, I let it hang in shame, my eyes drifting shut.

The man on the boat calls out something through the megaphone, but I don't hear anything under the rushing of blood in my ears.

Everything that happens next, happens in a blur, as if I'm outside myself, watching on as the boat reaches us, and we climb inside. I vaguely recognize the man as the same one who transported me here on my first day.

He's asking questions, and on autopilot I answer, remaining vague.

*We got lost.*

*The bridge collapsed.*

*We took shelter in a cave.*

Skyler remains quiet.

The man commandeering the boat bypasses our cove, steering us around a jutting cliff, and before I know it, he's pulling in along a narrow dock.

Waiting for us are a handful of workers, some vaguely familiar, some I've never seen before. They've got their golf carts and their radios and someone's got blankets. The guy driving the boat must've alerted them when he spotted us.

Two women whisk Skyler away as soon as we hit the beach.

Someone's trying to convince me to get checked out in Medical as well, but I quickly shake my head, refusing, insisting I'm fine.

And I am...

Physically.

“In that case, you’re coming with me,” a security personnel says gruffly, clasping my shoulder. He guides me toward another golf cart, gesturing for me to climb in.

Up ahead, Skyler glances over his shoulder.

Our gazes connect for a single, weighted beat just before the cart disappears behind the trees, ripping him from my sights.

Only then do I let the weight of what I’ve done crash over me. If I wasn’t already seated, I have no doubt it’d take me to my knees.

*What the fuck did I just do?*



# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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NOLAN

**B**y the time I finish up rehashing our little adventure with the staff—the PG version—and get back to my bungalow, it's nearing lunch time. Having not eaten since yesterday morning, my stomach growls and twinges with hunger pains.

Shrugging off my bag, I toss my useless phone on the two-seater table, and head for my little kitchenette to scrounge up something to eat.

There's a mini fridge stocked with waters and creamer for coffee, a microwave, a Keurig, and a basket full of snacks and coffee pods. All the basics you'd find in a typical hotel suite, minus the mini bar.

At Black Diamond—well, the rehab at least—we have the option to either get our meals delivered to us, or we can go to the restaurant, dining hall thing they've got going on in the main building, where there's a buffet as well as dine-in.

Typically, I get my meals to go from the dining hall and bring them back here to eat. It seems like that's what a lot of people prefer to do here, unless you're of the rich and famous variety who stick to their private quarters.

While I know I can get my food catered and delivered—I'm here on Mel's dime after all—I'd much rather not stoop to that level. It feels icky. Always has, taking and using someone else's money like that.

Peeling open an oatmeal, I run the faucet, filling the cup to the line, stir, then pop it in the microwave. Once that's going, I turn around, and rest my ass against the counter. Running my hand through my hair, I wince at the gritty texture.

“Fuck,” I mutter, sliding my hands down my face. It turns into a long drawn-out moan as I tip my head back, blinking hard at the ceiling.

I grip the edges of the counter and blow out a harsh breath, dropping my head to hang between my shoulders. Now that

I'm alone, everything that happened in the last twenty-four hours seems to surge forward all at once—a maelstrom of memories assaulting me from every which way.

Pressed up against Skyler behind a tree as we listened to those guys fucking.

Seeing his panic when he got hard against me.

Feeling my own dick respond.

Chasing after him.

The rain. The storm. The bridge...

My pulse speeds up as the memory of him plummeting into the ocean flashes across my mind's eye. It's all a blur now—climbing down the cliffside. Diving in after him. Dragging him to shore. Giving him CPR...

My fingers find my lips of their own volition.

And then it's no longer the harrowing rescue I'm remembering.

I squeeze my eyes shut. But it does me little good, when all I see behind my lids is him. Naked and writhing, spread out before me...

*Ding!*

Shaking my head, I mutter under my breath, "Get a grip," and turn to grab my oatmeal. It's plain, so I rip open a couple sugar packets and stir them in.

Grabbing one of the rolled cutlery sets, I bring it over to the table, kick out a chair, plop down, and stab my spoon into the pasty texture.

I sit facing the sliding glass doors to the patio. Outside, the sun is out, bright as ever. Not a cloud to be seen today. But that's also how it was yesterday morning, so who knows what the weather has in store for us later.

I barely taste the oatmeal as I shove spoonful after spoonful into my mouth, but it sinks down in my gut like lead. I get through half before I give up, tossing what's left in the trash. I throw my spoon in the sink, not bothering to rinse it.

The cleaning crew comes here only once a week—something I insisted on when I arrived. I don't need that pampered, spoiled shit.

Bypassing the bed, I head straight for the bathroom and crank the shower on. I unbutton my still-damp, dirt-caked jeans and go to shove them down along with my briefs, when I catch my reflection in the mirror. I pause.

On the surface, I look exactly the same, if not a little worse for wear. My beard is slightly thicker. My cheeks more tanned than they were yesterday. My hair is a greasy, tangled mess hanging around my face, ends split where they dance over my hunched shoulders.

I straighten, approaching the mirror. Gripping the counter, I lean forward, and stare directly into the green eyes peering back at me.

“Who are you?” I ask.

I dip my gaze down to my lips, frowning. Then lower to where my Adam's apple dips with my swallow.

My broad chest flexes, collarbones protruding. Pecs and biceps swelling, firming...straining under my skin, making the ink ripple like it's coming to life.

I release a shuddery breath when I see it—a bruise right next to where the ink trails off in the center of my chest.

*Skylar.*

As if prompted by his name, the memories return with a vengeance, so hard and fast it punches a small noise from my throat.

My nipples harden, tingling, and the image of him bowing his head and biting one skates to the forefront of my mind.

*No. No! This isn't happening.*

Whirling around, I finish stripping off my clothes, kicking them away. Steam billows out from the standing shower. My cock fills, blood rushing from the base.

I slide the door shut and turn my back to the glass, facing the wall. Standing directly under the spray, I squeeze my eyes shut and tip my head back.

My hand finds my rigid length, and I squeeze it in my fist with a groan. *“Fuckkkkkk.”*

Hot water spills down my cheeks, cascading over my shoulders and down my chest. My free hand slams against the tiled wall and I bow my head to the cool, hard surface.

“What the fuck?” I mutter, breaths choppy.

I run my hand up and down my cock, twisting it right at the tip just like I like it.

Just like Skyler did before dragging his fist down and bending over me, taking my dick in that pretty little mouth of his.

*“I, uh, never did this before.”*

Choked, guttural groans and grunts escape as my movements pick up.

*“You taste good.”*

“Fuck!” I shout, digging my forearm into the shower wall, bracing myself as I thrust into my fist, imagining it’s his mouth. His sweet, shy, warm tight mouth.

I bite back a scream.

Opening my eyes, I glare down at my hand. My cock. It’s been so long since I had any interest in getting off—months. How many times have I tried jerking off when I couldn’t sleep? How many times did I try to pass time and kill the boredom with my hand, pretending it was some nameless face, a pair of tits, a sweet peach of an ass.

*I bet Skyler’s ass is sweet.*

“F-f-fuck,” I chatter, shaking my head.

I try to bring images of women to my head, but it’s pointless. All I see is him.

Then I try to imagine another man, someone more burly, closer to my stature and age—someone who's not *barely eighteen*—thinking and hoping maybe he just unlocked something that was always there. Something I just never looked too closely at.

*I'm confused. That's all this is. I'm jonesing for a drink, and I'm not thinking straight.*

But any time I screw my eyes shut, and give myself to the pleasure igniting my veins, it's not a glass of brandy I see, or an ice cold beer dripping with condensation.

Nor is it the idea of a drink that has my mouth watering.

It's him.

All I see is a slim, toned build, and thick pretty lashes, and a sinful red mouth that belongs to the last person I should be fantasizing about.

Hell, is it even a fantasy anymore, when it's the reality of experiencing it—*him*—that spurred this on?

Gritting my teeth, I breathe harshly through my nose, trailing my fingers down my nuts and skating the tips across the drawn-up swells, pretending it's a curious tongue. And the steam, hot, unsteady pants.

A choked sound unlike anything I ever heard come out of me fills the small enclosure, bouncing off the walls. Never have I been so fucking grateful I let Mel get me a private bungalow.

I can't imagine the walls are very thick in the dorms.

Turning my head, I bury my face in my bicep, biting down on my flesh hard enough I'm sure there will be a bruise. One similar to the mark Skyler left on my pec.

*Fuck.*

The guilt that's been steadily rising all day, crashing over at me any time I seem to forget what I did—rises once more to the surface, mingling with the pleasure and need wreaking havoc on my senses.

I'm drowning in it all.

He told me he's never done this before, and what did I do? I encouraged him. I didn't pull back and stop, or even try to talk about it.

I...*fuck*, I'm older, experienced, and I took complete and total advantage of him, a barely eighteen-year-old virgin. An *injured* one at that.

I should be fucking disgusted with myself. They should throw me in jail, legal age be damned.

What I should not be, is in the shower, jerking off to the images of him licking my cock like a lollipop, seconds away from busting a load all over the shower walls.

Groaning, I grip my shaft in a punishing hold. My balls tingle, tightening.

I pant raggedly into my arm, frustrated tears biting the backs of my eyes.

"Please," I whimper, not even sure what I'm begging for.

In my head, I see Skyler pulling back after I came down his throat, a drop of my cum clinging to his shiny, swollen lips. His neck and cheeks beet-fucking red from a combination of exertion and beard burn. Eyes hooded, pupils blown all to hell.

I remember sitting up on my forearms, like I was going to chase him down on his back, drag him back under me, and return the favor. It's what I wanted—what my body wanted—but then the image of him getting himself there stopped me in my tracks.

On his knees, thighs spread, his hand tugging furiously at his thick, rigid length. The way his balls seemed to clench under his fist. The way his red, shiny tip spurted cum all down the side of his knuckles.

That moan.

That sweet, wrecked moan that sounded like angels singing to my ears.

My body shudders and I dig my forehead into the wall, curling my toes into the tile as I stroke myself harder, mouth parted against my bicep.

I think about what his cock looked like afterward, softening, draped over his thigh, flushed and slick with cum.

Fuck, how badly I wanted to crawl forward, dip down, and lick him up. Suck him between my lips, feel its heavy weight on my tongue...wait for him to get hard again, and bring him to the brink with nothing more than my mouth.

Hell, maybe I'd even slip a finger down between his thighs, seek out his hole—

*"FUCK!"* A deep-chested roar rips out of me just as my cock erupts, spraying the shower walls with my release.

My body jolts, my vision whitening.

Slumping against the wall, I'm barely aware of the shower even running. My thoughts drift, becoming hazy.

I have no idea what the fuck this is.

All I know is I have just seven more weeks to endure, and I'm going to do everything in my power to stay away from Skyler Sinclair.

For my sake...

But most of all, his.



# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

---

SKYLER

I t's official. Nolan's avoiding me.

All week, I thought maybe it was just in my head. That I was just being paranoid. Clingy.

I mean, sure, we didn't leave off on the best of terms—he was clearly freaking out a little, not to mention feeling unnecessarily guilty over my injuries—but still.

I thought...

I *hoped*...

And every night, I've been tossing and turning, replaying what went down in the cave until I finally gave in and touched myself, Nolan's name ground out into the pillows as I shuddered and came in my hand.

It's becoming a problem. Never in my life have I been this horny.

It's like finally getting a taste of another man opened the floodgates, and now I'm addicted.

And it's ridiculous, because it's not even like being gay is new for me. It's been a fact for as long as I remember. Girls just never held any appeal, and the second I learned liking boys was an option, I ran with it and never looked back.

Well, at least in my fantasies.

And it's not like I've never touched another cock, or jerked off to the fantasy of another guy touching me, licking me, fucking me...

But this was different.

This wasn't another boy, whispering lies into my ears while we awkwardly jerked each other off in the supply closet.

This was a man—all man—someone rugged and experienced, who took what he wanted and didn't tell me lies,

but praised me, told me how good I was, and growled out my name like an animal pouncing on his prey.

What we shared was so much more than anything I could've ever dreamed up. Sure, I've seen porn here and there, but it's been years, and the stuff I saw didn't hold a candle to what transpired between Nolan and me.

I didn't think sex could be like that, and we didn't even go to third base, much less kiss.

But the raw, unfettered, animalistic need as we tore at each other, grappling and sucking at skin like it was imperative we consume as much of each other as we could...

It went beyond just basic lust.

Beyond desire.

It was need in its basest form, the kind of need that sparked a wildfire in our blood, making feral, primal beings of two starved souls on a mission to devour one another.

But despite knowing this, that it was...situational—despite knowing we may have never crossed that line had Nolan not saved my life; had we not gotten stranded in a cave together; had I not woke up thrusting against him...

Despite how we left things after...the way he could barely look at me...the way he dismissed me when we got back...

Despite all of *that*...

I hoped.

God help me, I *hoped*.

And isn't that the saddest, most pathetic thing you ever heard? *Of course* he regrets it. *Of course* he wants to pretend it never happened.

And yet...

*It could be worse*, a voice sing-songs, and I wince, knowing it to be true.

Hurt feelings are nothing in comparison to what Adam did to me, but still. Something about this just flat out stings in a

way Adam's betrayal never did.

Perhaps it's the unknown of it all, the not having any closure.

Adam was a dick, yes.

But Nolan's a ghost.

And I'm just here, burning and burning with no end in sight.

A door shuts, yanking me out of my thoughts. It's Friday, so I'm back in group therapy—I go twice a week, on Wednesday and Friday afternoons—and while I recognize just about everyone else here, including Kevin who leads us, there's one glaring absence.

Nolan.

While we don't share Wednesday group, we do share Fridays. Or so I thought. We're allowed to move our schedules around if need be, but they prefer us not to for this sort of thing.

They're all about the routines here, I've learned. And from the short time I've been here, and the little observations I've collected, Nolan's nothing if not a creature of habit.

Knowing what I know now about his background though, it makes sense. He veered off one time, and look what happened.

I suppose it's an addict thing. Or rather, a recovery thing.

It might not seem like a big thing in the heat of the moment, but all those little detours eventually catch up. A new course is taken. It's no longer safe, but since you're so used to safe, you don't see the danger, until it's too late, then *Bam!*—life falls apart.

I might not know addiction, but I do know what it's like to let your guard down and have the rug ripped out from under you.

Tucking my hands under my thighs, I squeeze my legs together, resisting the urge to fidget when Kevin starts

speaking.

*He's really not coming.*

It's all the confirmation I need. Nolan's well and truly avoiding me, even going so far as to put that ahead of his own needs. And if that isn't just a kick to the gut. I don't know if I'm more guilty or...well, annoyed.

My face bunches with a scowl and I stare blankly down at the vinyl flooring until the tiles blur. With each passing second that it sinks in how far he's willing to go to ignore me, the more irritated I become. The more I feel myself spiraling.

*Maybe he's sick.*

*Yeah, and maybe Adam was just joking around. Maybe he was just trying to protect himself. Maybe he didn't think his step-dad, Pastor Gabriel, would do what he did.*

I squeeze my eyes shut and mentally shake away the thoughts.

Nolan isn't Adam.

This is different.

This is...

This is...

"Skyler?"

Swallowing tightly, I open my eyes to look around the room, noticing everyone's watching me. My pulse quickens, pounding heavily in my ears, and it feels like there's ants crawling up my spine, spreading out over my entire body.

*Shit.*

"Are you okay? You look a little pale."

Someone coughs. "More like green."

Kevin sighs and shoots the guy slouched to his left an unimpressed look.

"Um, I—" I try to speak, but my breath hitches and I snap my gaze toward the closed door, wishing Nolan was here. Not because I sucked his dick, but because there's something about

him that just...I don't know, settles me, even when he's the source of my anger. Just like on our hike.

*He saved your life.*

I shake my head. *No, no, it's more than that.*

"...gonna puke..." a voice says, trickling into my awareness.

"...what's wrong with him?"

Someone snickers.

*"Can't you control yourself, Skyler?"* I hear my mother's voice thrashing around my skull.

*NO!*

Bolting for the door, I barely notice the chair I kick across the room. I distantly hear someone calling after me—Kevin, I think.

I know I'm being ridiculous, but when I get like this—when my thoughts spin out of my control, and I get swept up into the chaos—I can't stop it. I really, truly can't, no matter how hard I've tried to master it over the years.

I need to be alone right now, because if I'm not, I will tear that room apart. I'll bash my head through a wall. I'll make a complete idiot out of myself, more than I already have.

And none of this is because I'm angry, though I am angry, and getting angrier by the second. But this is more than that.

I've taken anger management courses over the years, and I know I'm not like others who struggle with episodes like this.

My vision doesn't turn red.

I'm not bloodthirsty. I don't need to punch someone... though I will in the heat of the moment, blindly and without intent.

What happens to me is strictly internal, as if my brain is a computer that's overheated, and every sound and texture and emotion being perceived is being amplified to the nth degree. Grating against every single nerve in my body.

*Sensory overload.*

*Sensory overwhelm.*

*Meltdowns.*

All terms my doctors and therapists would throw around when I was growing up, when it was clear it wasn't just your run of the mill temper tantrum.

You hear about it all the time. People make light of it, use it as an excuse to get out of shit, tack it on as a personality trait.

They don't get it. No one fucking gets how bad it can be until you've lived it.

Until you find yourself sitting in the wreckage of your own making, fists bloody, nails frayed at the ends, chest heaving, and fingers twitching with little aftershocks.

At best, it's a nuisance.

At worst, it can be deadly.

My vision tunnels, blackening around the edges as I hasten my steps toward the stairs. There's an elevator, but I can't risk losing my shit in there, only for someone to witness it.

My room. I need my room. My bathroom.

Dark, quiet, nothingness.

Just as I turn the corner, and the stairs are in sight, something catches the corner of my eyes, slowing my steps.

A warning voice in my head urges me to keep moving.

But I can't.

The doors open to outside as someone enters, and it just so happens to be the door I ran out of my first day here. The one that faces the pathway leading to the hidden cove.

Jaw quivering, I shake my head. Tap my fingers together. Count to five.

*Go upstairs. Don't go out there. He's probably not even there anyway. And even if he was...now is definitely not the time to talk. Not when you're like this.*

I squeeze my eyes shut, bite my lip.

Here's the thing about these meltdowns—what makes them potentially so dangerous... what's gotten me into trouble every time I thought I finally got a handle on it—it takes what little impulse control I have on a good day, obliterating it into nothing.

A roar fills my ears, muffling the voice of reason I try so desperately to latch on to.

I want to listen—I do—I don't want to be a prisoner to these...compulsions, or whatever they are that overcome me when I get like this. I don't want to mess shit up more than I already did, but I don't know how else to get rid of it.

Blowing my way outside, I squint, adjusting to the blinding light. I dart my gaze around, and before I can think better of it, I find myself heading down to the cove.

Somehow, I just know he'll be there.

And he is.

Nolan's sitting with his back to me, silhouetted by the high, afternoon sun. The teal-hued ocean spread out before him as wide and far as the eye can see ripples and glitters.

Storming down there, my jaw clenches, my nostrils flare.

I notice he stiffens the faintest bit, so I know he hears me.

Rounding him, I glare down at him and open my mouth to say something, when his expression gives me pause.

He looks exhausted and wary, but not at all shocked by the sight of me. In fact, I have the sudden suspicion he's been expecting me.

And that just pisses me off more.

"You weren't in group," I say stiffly.

He stares at me for a long beat. Then, "I went yesterday."

"Why?"

This time, I get nothing.

"You're avoiding me."



He scoffs quietly and looks down at his lap. Like every time I've seen him, he's in ripped, light wash jeans that are scuffed with dirt, like maybe he works outside a lot. "There's nothing to avoid. I don't owe you anything."

My eyes bug out at him, and something just sort of... cracks inside me. Scowling, I bite back a scream, and I just—

I kick sand at him.

"Hey!" he barks, shooting to a stand. "Seriously?"

My fingers tap together. "You're being a dick," I utter in a small voice.

He wipes off his face then his shirt. "Yeah, what else is new?"

"I thought—"

His gaze snaps up through his lashes, and he arches a brow. "Thought what? I saved you from drowning, and now we're besties for life. Didn't realize saving your life came with stipulations."

My teeth snap together. *Is he for real?*

"Fuck you," I growl, stepping forward, jabbing him in the chest.

He stares down at me, and I can't help but notice there's a light missing from his eyes. Like he's closed himself off from me.

"I thought maybe...maybe we could be friends," I mumble pathetically. "We...we went through something together—"

He reaches down for his shoes. "Pretty sure they call that trauma bonding."

"It's more than that!" I all but shout.

He stills, fingers paused around the scuffed boots.

My mouth fumbles, cheeks heating. That itchy, crawly feeling returns, surging forward like it never left. "I mean, I—" My breathing picks up, sounding funny even to my own ears. I

can feel myself trembling, and I look around the beach wildly, searching for something...something, I don't know what.

I whirl around, and it's just me and the ocean.

*There.*

“What are you doing?” Nolan calls out behind me as I kick off my flip-flops.

Ignoring him, I stride purposefully into the water—fully clothed—waves splashing around me where they crash along the surf.

“Skyler!”

Once I get chest-deep, I dive in.

Water rushes around me, and everything is silent and whooshy.

Only then, do I finally let myself scream.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

NOLAN

“**S**eriously?” I growl through my teeth.

Cursing under my breath, I stalk after Skyler, water and sea-foam kicking up around me.

“Goddamnit, Skyler, come back here!”

He ignores me, clearly dead-set on making a repeat of last weekend.

You’d think after what happened on our hike, he’d stay clear of the ocean. But no, no, let’s try our luck for round two.

I mean, sure, the waters are calm today—a stark contrast to what we experienced last weekend—but in my head, all I see is the pale, limp body I had to drag across the beach and breathe back to life.

*Fuck this.*

I pounce on him just as throws his arms above his head and dives in head-first.

Grabbing him with an arm braced around his middle, I hoist him out of the water. He breaks through the surface mid-guttural scream. Water cascading down his head, gurgling from his open mouth.

“What the fuck?” I shout, carrying him back toward the beach. He’s kicking and coughing, and squirming like hell, so I drop him on his feet once we’re closer to shore.

He whirls on me, chest heaving, lip curled up in a snarl. He shoves me in the chest, so I shove him back. Then he splashes water at me, so I splash him back right in the face.

A frustrated scream bubbles up from deep within his chest and I huff under my breath. “You’re acting like a child,” I grouse, rubbing my eyes.

“Fuck you!” he grits out, splashing me again.

“Jesus, stop.” I go to grab his arm, and he bats me away. Then, before I can so much as catch my bearings, his other hand comes up, slapping me across the face.

My head wrenches to the side, my skin tingling where his palm made contact with my cheek. It wasn’t a hard hit—more startling than anything.

Blinking hard a couple times, I turn my gaze to cut him a searing look. Now I’m getting really pissed off.

He goes to slap me again, but this time I’m ready for it. I grab his wrist, twisting his arm, and put myself behind him so I can restrain him. “Enough,” I grit out right next to his ear.

I can feel the scream building in his chest, rocketing up his throat. I squeeze him around his waist, holding him to me, a frown pulling at my features.

“You’re shaking,” I murmur, concern replacing some of my anger.

His entire body trembles, practically vibrating. And the more rigid he tries to hold himself, the worse it gets. Like he’s fracturing apart from the inside out.

Frowning, I release my grip on his wrist and bring my hand to his chest, spreading my fingers wide.

His heart is fucking racing.

It’s then that his hitched breaths register. It reminds me of when I chased after him in the woods.

“Is this a panic attack?” I ask quietly.

His head gives a small, jerky shake. *No.*

*Okay...*

He chokes on what sounds like a sob. “T-tighter.”

At first, I’m not quite sure I heard him right. But then he’s clawing at my arms, not to get out of my hold, but to...keep me here...

*Oh.*

I don't question it, I just fit both arms around him, and wrap him in a bear hug from behind. Holding him so tight, it's probably got to be uncomfortable, especially seeing as it's only been a week since the incident, and he's gotta be sore still. But if anything, he just sort of...slumps. His head drops forward and the tension in his shoulders unfurl.

Like he can finally relax. Breathe.

Emotion thickens my throat. I don't quite know what this is, but with each passing second that I just hold him, and feel his tremors dissipate, his pulse slowing down, his body giving up the fight...

I feel...settled.

Like something inside me is clicking into place, and I too can breathe more easily.

*He's too young for you*, a now-familiar voice pipes up. One that's been making an appearance all week, any time I found myself caving to what I want. *You're not helping matters here. You'll just confuse him.*

Clearing my throat, I ease my hold on him. He stiffens at first, his fingers flexing against my forearms, but then they slink away as he lets me pull back.

Spinning him around by the shoulders, I duck my head to meet his downturned gaze. "What's going on? Talk to me."

Skyler blinks rapidly, and if I'm not mistaken, it's not just water trickling down his cheeks anymore.

"Sky," I sigh, my voice raspy. *Fuck me.*

His throat bobs and he shrugs. "You...you just can't do that, okay?" he says so quietly, I have to strain to hear him over the waves hitting the beach. "You can't make me feel one thing, and then...and then..."

My brow furrows as I try to make sense of what he's saying.

"I'm not nothing."

I still. "What?"

He gulps again, and his jaw trembles.

“Sky—”

“I know you’re straight. It was a mistake. You regret it. I-I get that, okay, but...but—”

My eyes widen as it all starts to piece together. What he’s implying.

But that’s not why he just lost his shit...right?

He shakes his head, sniffing.

*Well, shit.*

“I don’t...I don’t know...” His head snaps up and he looks around wildly, eyes red and bright with more unshed tears.

He looks trapped—desperate to find a way out of here—and hell, if it doesn’t break my heart.

His hand comes up to his neck, massaging the area just under the soft hollow at the base of his throat. He stares off at the distant horizon like he’s miles away from here, lost somewhere in his head.

It’s not the first time I’ve seen him clam up like this—he did it that first day in group when I laid into him—but this is the first time I’m looking, *really* looking.

He’s not shutting down.

He’s spiraling.

Wetting my lips, I say, “You’re right.”

He flinches and I quickly shake my head, backtracking. “No, no, I mean...you’re right to be upset and pissed off with me. I took the coward’s way out by avoiding you, acting like nothing happened.” I pause. “I didn’t mean to make you feel like...nothing?” It comes out like a question and I wince. *Fuck, I’m so bad at this.*

Skyler blinks a couple times and swallows tightly, brows knitting together in a frown. Movement draws my attention to his side, where he taps his fingers together just over the surface of the water.

I cock my head, watching him for a beat, and then I reach out, taking his hand in mine, stalling their frenzied movements.

Skyler freezes.

Lacing our fingers together, I squeeze tight, and look up to find him staring at me with big, wide brown eyes. There's wariness there, but something else too—something deeper that I can't put a name to. It has my pulse quickening. My mouth drying.

*Fuck. What am I doing?*

Throat tight, I give him a small smile, hoping he doesn't mistake the fear shining through my eyes as anything to do with him. He's stunning and innocent and—

*Goddamn, what's wrong with me?*

I try to pull free, but he squeezes tighter.

“Skyler,” I say, shaking my head. “I'm so sorry. You're so young, and I just—” Regret burrows deeply between my brows. “I should have nev—”

He scowls, but there's also a graveness to his eyes I don't miss. “Don't do that. I'm eighteen.”

I'm nodding before he even gets the full sentence out. “I know that. But—”

“So if that's what you're worried about, I—” His eyes widen, like a lightbulb just went off in his head. “Wait, you don't think you took advantage of me, right?”

I open my mouth to speak, to tell him that's exactly what I think—what I *know*—but he's still going. His earlier...panic, or whatever it was that had him tripping up his words seemingly forgotten.

“If that's why you've been avoiding me, I promise you have nothing to be worried about.”

My lips tighten into a hard line. I'm not sure I can believe him, even if I wanted to.



He huffs something like a bitter laugh, and his cheeks turn pink, eyes drifting to the side like he can't bear to look at me. "If anything, I took advantage of you. Forced myself upon you while you were sleeping." His voice cracks and he cringes. "I —"

Reaching for his cheek, I arch a brow, once again ducking my head to follow his gaze as I turn him toward me. "No offense, sweetheart," I say dryly, "but you're not exactly the evil villain you're trying to make yourself out to be."

His eyes widen, and I realize what it is I just said—what I called him.

*Damnit. Where did that even come from?*

My hand cupping his cheek tenses, fingers flexing against his flushed skin. He's so smooth, so pretty compared to my hairy, unkempt ass. What he even sees in me...

I shake my head, releasing his face to let my hand hang at my side. Our others remain joined, and while the urge in me to pull back, shut down, and stop this before it goes any further is still so strong...

My other urges sprinting forward are stronger.

"You should've said no, or stopped me," he whispers, not taking his eyes off me. Despite what he's saying, there's almost like a sort of challenge in his eyes. Like he's daring me to refute what he's saying...

Hoping I can tell him he's wrong.

He shrugs. "I just thought—"

"That I wanted it?" I say dully.

His throat bobs.

I scoff and look away, peering into the blue horizon. "Well, that's 'cause I did." I roll my eyes. "If it wasn't obvious."

He stills. Even the fingers curled around mine seem to go lifeless. "But..."

"Doesn't mean it was right. I was...really rough with you. You were hurt, and the way I-I—"

His teeth mash so hard, I hear it, and I turn toward him and throw my arm up just as he splashes water at me.

“Hey!”

“Stop acting like I don’t know what I want,” he all but snarls.

I blink, slowly lowering my hand as I straighten.

He grabs our joined hands and lifts them between us, all but shoving them at my face. “What is this?” he says with a shocking amount of venom.

I open my mouth, only for nothing to come out.

“You’re saying one thing, but this is telling me something else. It’s confusing.” He huffs and looks away, face reddening.

“I don’t know,” I whisper. This time, I stare at our hands as I tug mine free, watching the way our tangled fingers skim over each other, like a bow made of ribbon coming undone.

Throat thick, I say, “I feel sick about it.”

*And yet not sick enough to stop yourself from jerking off to him... over and over and over—*

Skyler flinches inward like someone sucker punched him.

“Shit, no,” I breathe. “Not like that. Not because we... not because you’re a guy.”

He’s tense still, but I can tell it’s more so because he’s just bracing himself at this point. And fuck, if that doesn’t shatter a bit of my resolve. If only because I can’t help but remember how free and loose he was when we were in the cave that morning. No sign of this tension he seems to carry with himself at all times.

Something I didn’t look too closely at until now...

Frowning, I say, “I’ve never wanted that with a man before.”

He’s utterly motionless, save for a couple rapid blinks.

“I just...” I search his face, running my teeth over my lip as I debate my next words. “I’m also very newly divorced.

Hell, I haven't been single since I was in high school, and that was over a decade ago." A beat passes, before I go on, "So I'm confused, for one. This is all just...a lot to come to terms with. Okay? Your age is a big factor here, yes, probably the biggest, but it's a bunch of other things too." I pause meaningfully. "We're in rehab, Skyler. I know you don't need to be here, but I...I do."

He gives his head a little shake, his lips parting, closing, then parting again like he's struggling to find his words. "You...you really wanted it? With *me*?" His voice cracks the slightest bit, and fuck, I don't know what it says about me, but I'm pretty sure the mushy feeling in my chest is not normal.

I don't get mushy. Ever.

But here I am, ready to sink to my knees and melt into the earth for this boy.

"Jesus, Sky," I say quietly, shaking my head. "I told you I did."

*And I still do. Desperately. That's the problem.*

"And you..." His gaze searches mine, wariness mingling with hope peering back at me. *Fuck, he really might just kill me yet.* "You liked it? Like...I did okay? And I—"

On the outside I'm fighting a smile, but inside I'm pretty sure my heart is failing.

*Lie. Tell him you hated it. Tell him you never want to do it again.*

But that's not at all what comes out.

"Yeah," I breathe, "you did good."

His eyes light up, and fuck if his lips don't rise into the most breathtaking smile I've ever seen.

I sigh. "Look—"

"I'm sorry I kicked sand at you," he blurts, his cheeks turning a rich ruddy color, eyes rounding as if just remembering what happened.

I curve a brow at him, waiting.

He winces. “And slapped you.”

I stare at him.

“Twice.”

More staring.

He massages the back of his neck with his free hand. “So, I, uh, sometimes get really in my head about things. And then I just sort of...I kind of explode. I don’t really know how else to describe it, other than this...this buzzing itch I can’t ignore. I’ve gotten better over the years but...”

He huffs and looks away.

I study him, more curious now than anything.

“I know I act like a child when I get like that. It’s... embarrassing, and definitely doesn’t help my case here, but—”

I shake my head. “I shouldn’t’ve said that.”

He’s young, yes, but he’s not a damn toddler having a fit because I said no to cookies for breakfast. He clearly has something else going on under the surface—something he struggles with.

“But it’s true,” he refutes softly. Sad brown eyes glimmer up at me, and while there’s a lot of shame to be found in their depths, there’s also something else too. A mature sort of... understanding. Sincerity. “I know how I get sometimes, and I...I wish I had better control of it, but—”

“Hey,” I say, reaching for his hand once more and giving it a quick, firm squeeze. “It’s okay.”

He doesn’t look like he believes me.

“Neither of us handled this well. Okay? It’s not all on you.”

Skyler swallows and finally gives me a nod.

“I’m sorry I made you feel like you were nothing.”

He sucks his cheek in and nods again.

I blow out a breath, considering my next words. “Skyler... I can’t—”

His face bunches. “I know,” he cuts in.

I stare at him.

“I know it’s not gonna happen again. I just...” He trails off and looks away. “You didn’t hurt me, okay? I liked it. I wanted it. Don’t...feel guilty, or...or relapse because of me. I don’t want to be the thing that sets you back.”

A pang ignites in my chest at his words, and my gaze falls to where our hands fit together, fingers so effortlessly laced. I’d meant to let go—it was just to reassure him—and yet here we are again.

Working my jaw, I debate what to do here.

The rational, responsible part of me is telling me to take the out he’s offering me.

But the part of me that remembers what Skyler looked like, mouth stretched around my cock...

The part of me that’s been replaying those moments in the cave over and over again in my head these last few days, despite how hard I tried to think about anything but.

The part of me that is curious...desperate...lonely and miserable and can’t think about anything beyond *now, now, this is all you have now...*

Well, that part seems to be much bigger and louder.

Even louder than the voice calling me all sorts of sick names. Ones that are arguably accurate.

Even louder than the warning bells going off, telling me what a bad idea this is. I’m an *addict*. This is rehab. This is... the last thing I need right now.

“You really want this?” I hear myself whisper.

He stills. Slowly, slowly, his gaze returns to mine and he holds it with a firm nod. “Yes.”

I swallow tightly. Now I’m the one struggling not to look away.

“But only if you do.”

A short rusty laugh escapes me at that, and I rub my palm over my mouth, nodding.

“I can’t promise you anything,” I tell him, dropping my hand, repeating my earlier statement. “I’m here for six more weeks, and then—”

“Me too,” he rushes out, fumbling over his words. His gaze widening.

I crack a small smile. “Yeah?”

A nod. The eyes peering up at me are big, wide, and hopeful. “At least, that’s what I was told when I arrived. Eight weeks total. Ish.”

“Right. Ish.”

He lifts a shoulder, looking self-conscious all of a sudden. “It wouldn’t really make sense outside of here. Right?”

I frown.

“I’m young and inexperienced, as we’ve already covered, but I’m not stupid.” His gaze skitters away.

Shaking my head, I start to say, “Sky, I didn’t—”

“I know that if anything happens here, it will stay here. And-and no one has to know.”

*Jesus.*

“It’ll be our little secret. Plus, I know this is just a”—he waves a hand—“stepping stone for you. And maybe it could be that for me too. A learning experience.” He peeks up at me nervously, biting his lip.

My eyes bug, mouth drying so fast I have to smother a cough.

He shrugs, and this time there’s *definitely* a glint in his eye, subtle that it may be, telling me he knows exactly what he’s doing. And if he doesn’t...

Well, fuck me and have mercy on my soul. I never stood a chance.

I clear my throat. “And you’d still want that?” I say slowly, studying him with hard, suspicious eyes.

He shrugs, not missing a beat. “I want you.”

I freeze.

His cheeks light up red, eyes snapping wide. But he doesn’t back down. If anything he stands taller, jutting his chin out in that way I once hated, but now can’t help but see it for what it is.

He’s not looking down at me.

He’s just putting on a brave face.

Realizing that has what little resistance I had left in me, crumbling into dust.

“I mean, I want...I want to know what it’s like.”

A wave rocks into my waist, nudging me closer to him, putting us chest to chest. “Like?”

He rolls his eyes, but I don’t miss the little shiver racing through him at my proximity. “You know.”

I roll my lips together. “Mhm. Right.”

“I mean, I’m not, like, using you. You’re hot. And nice, well—no not-not nice, but you—”

I arch a sarcastic brow. “Saved you from a watery grave?”

Skyler rears back, scowling. “I don’t want to fuck you because you saved my life.”

Another startled cough bursts out of me, and this time I do start choking.

He frowns and looks off in thought. “Well, I’m pretty sure I’d prefer it if you fuck me, but you get the point.”

I wheeze, bringing my free hand to my chest to massage my sternum.

It makes no difference that he says this all so clinically. Just the blunt words coming out of that once shy, fumbling mouth are enough to send any red-blooded man to an early grave.

“I know what I want, Nolan.” He lifts his chin and charges on, despite the fact he’s shaking like a damn leaf. “And I want you to fuck me because you make me feel safe. You make me feel good and taken care of.” A beat passes. “I...I trust you, and I don’t give that out easily.” He pauses. “I almost died. Twice. And I’ve never even got to live. I want to live. I want to feel...normal.”

I stare at him. *Who the fuck is this guy?*

“What?” he says defensively, trying and failing to hold my gaze. “You’re looking at me weird.”

“Nothing, it’s just...” I wipe my hand over my mouth, unsure how to put this into words. “You say that you trust me, and yet, the very reason I’m on this island is because I’m *unsafe* for my two-year-old daughter. I didn’t take care of her.” My voice breaks.

Skyler stills, and finally seems to be able to meet my gaze for more than just a split second. He searches between my eyes, studying me intently. Then—

“See this scar?” he blurts and lifts our joined arms, and I find my gaze dropping to the patchy discoloration stretched out across the inside of his wrist. “I got it trying to cook dinner for myself. I was five. My mother was on a business call, and she forgot to feed me.”

My eyes flare, molars mashing. *What the fuck?*

“And you know what she did? She yelled at me. Blamed me for hurting myself. And as soon as she got me cleaned up and heated up some leftovers, she left me alone in the kitchen to eat while she returned to her business call.”

Slowly, I look back up at his face. How...

How could anyone fucking do that to their own kid?

“What you did was...bad. Yeah.” He nods. “But my mom...she doesn’t have a disease. She didn’t feel bad. She didn’t beat herself up over it, or try to fix her behavior so nothing like that ever happened again.”



I grit my teeth together, anger and heartbreak for a child I never met ripping me apart from the inside.

“You’re not a piece of shit, Nolan,” he tells me point-blank. “I told you in the cave, remember? You’re here, aren’t you? Well past the time you should’ve already been home with your daughter. You messed up, yes, but you’re clearly doing everything you can to fix it.”

Emotion swells my throat, making it impossible to speak.

“Do you know what the name Abigail means?” he says out of nowhere.

I shake my head, a buzzing replacing the waves in my ear. But none of it is loud enough to drown out his next words.

“It means a father’s joy, Nolan.”

I stare at him.

And stare at him some more.

“You’re not the villain you make yourself out to be either,” he says gently, a small knowing smile curving his lips.

A long moment passes where we both just look at each other, almost as if we’re both seeing each other with new eyes.

Or at least, it’s like I’m seeing him for the first time. Maybe he’s seen me this whole time, and I just couldn’t wrap my head around it until now.

He might be young—definitely too young for me—but I remember what he said that day we first officially met, in group, when he made that vague, but pointed statement about the law only recognizing that he’s an adult now.

I barely know him, and from the little I do—from what he’s told me, what I just witnessed—something tells me I’ve barely scraped the surface.

Something tells me I’ve underestimated him.

Working my jaw, I consider what I’m about to do. What floodgates I’m about to open.

Out there, in the real world, I've no doubt some circles of people would condemn this.

But here, on the island, exiled from all we know and hold dear...

What's stopping us from making the best of a shitty situation?

Neither of us are here on our own terms. But this...us...

It's all ours. Only ours. *A secret...*

And he *is* eighteen.

He's giving his consent.

I hold on to those two facts like they're all that's keeping me afloat.

My eyes slide shut, and I bring my fingers to the bridge of my nose, my nostrils flaring. Nodding, I tell him stiffly, "Okay."

*God forgive me.*

I sense more than see him perk up, startled.

Opening my eyes, I reach up, pushing his wet messy hair back. "Okay."

Something flashes in his eyes—something that looks a lot like the pressure I feel giving way in my chest, speeding up my heart.

Cupping the back of his skull, I bring us even closer, dipping down so I can press our foreheads together. He sucks in a breath.

"On two conditions."

His tongue pokes out, wetting his lip. So close to brushing mine, but still so far away.

"Next time you feel the need to dive into a body of water to escape your feelings," I tell him in a rough, restrained voice, "just...find me instead. I'd much rather you throw sand in my face than worry I'm going to find your dead body washed up on the beach."

Skyler winces, nodding against me.

“Okay?”

“I don’t want to burden—”

“Not a burden. Use me.”

He stills. “U-use you?”

Pulling back, I nod, then start dragging him by our joined hands back to the beach. “When it gets all loud and you feel itchy, like you’re crawling out of your skin, and you feel like you might do something stupid...” I glance over my shoulder. “Find me.”

Skyler’s mouth ticks up.

“I can take it, okay?” I say loud enough to be heard over the water slamming into the shore. We hasten our steps so we don’t get shoved by any incoming waves.

When we hit the beach, I turn, still gripping his hand. “And I’m listening. Whatever you want to say.”

Skyler nods. “Okay, but I...” He looks around, chewing his lip. “I don’t really want to talk right now.”

I huff a short laugh at his honesty and give his hand a tug. Reaching down for my boots, I say, “Me neither. But I really do want to get out of these clothes before it starts chafing.”

Straightening, I cock my head, and arch him a brow. “I’m still recovering from last time.”

He smiles shyly, ducking his head.

He looks ridiculous—hell we both do, I’m sure, drenched and fully clothed.

I jerk my head toward the trees. “Come on.”

“Wait,” he says, quickly running over to grab his flip-flops. He returns to my side and grips my hand once more, trying to keep up with my long strides. “You never told me the second condition?”

Dragging my lip between my teeth, I slow down and cut him a sideways glance, eyeing him up and down as we walk.

“The second you no longer feel comfortable with this, say the word and we stop.”

He blinks, nodding. “Okay. But I doubt that’ll happen.”

I shake my head, muttering a quiet curse.

*Killing. Me.*

“But I have one condition of my own.”

Surprised, though I probably shouldn’t be, I make a gesture for him to proceed.

He pauses, turning toward me and forcing me to stop too.

Our eyes meet, and for a moment he just stares at me—directly at me—an unreadable emotion passing through his eyes, darkening them. It’s probably the most intense eye contact I’ve ever experienced, and I feel my pulse quicken.

“Don’t regret this when it’s over,” he whispers. “No matter what. I want this to be a good thing, Nolan. Please don’t... ruin it.”

I still, my mouth parting, though I’m not sure what to say.

*The age thing, I realize. He’s asking me to drop it.*

Don’t ask me how I know that. I just do. And as tough of a pill as it is to swallow for me... it’s clearly a touchy subject for him too.

And I remember what he said, several times, about no one listening to him.

And I just told him I’m here for just that.

*I think I’m beginning to understand.*

His cheeks darken, and it looks like it’s taking everything in him to not look away. Hell, his eyes practically shiver with the effort.

Cupping his cheek, I nod slowly, and I tell him, “I won’t.”

His jaw moves against the heel of my hand and he nods back, eyes searing mine. “Thank you.”

Groaning, I turn away, and all but drag him to my room.  
“Keep up, or I won’t hesitate to throw you over my shoulder.”

He huffs. “You wouldn’t.”

I cut him a pointed look. “Bet.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY

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SKYLER

Nolan leads me into his private bungalow, and *no*, he doesn't have to carry me.

*Pity.*

*Maybe next time.*

It's late afternoon, pushing evening, and nothing else is scheduled for the day.

I know Dr. Maddock is probably going to hear about what went down in group—and I should *probably* check in with Kevin, in case he sent anyone else to check on me—but I see my therapist bright and early Monday morning. We can discuss my little meltdown then.

And Kevin...

Well, I'll just have to cross my fingers he didn't send a search party out after me.

Either way, that's a problem for Future Skyler.

Because Present Skyler...

"You comin' in, or just gonna stand there?"

My eyes snap over to where Nolan sets his boots down by the dresser. Gulping, I nod and take a step into the bungalow, letting the screen door swing shut behind me.

His mouth quirks up, his gaze downturned. His damp brown hair curtains his face, growing wavy now that it's starting to dry. His jaw is not as scruffy as last time I saw it, but there's still a solid layer that makes my mouth water, remembering how it felt turning my neck and chest all red.

I set my flip-flops by the door, looking around, taking it all in.

Nolan's place is small and quaint with all of the basics you'd expect for a little villa on the beach. I knew rehab—the

expensive, exclusive ones like this one—were nice, but even I'm impressed how un-clinical it all feels.

My room is basically a hotel suite, and this cottage set-up might as well be a villa in the Maldives, like the one my parents own and stay in two months out of the year.

“Is it to your liking?”

Straightening, I look over at where Nolan studies me, head cocked, fingers paused around the hem of his soaked shirt.

I swallow and shrug. “It's nice.”

He coughs, biting back a laugh.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He shakes his head.

“No, what?” I insist, crossing my arms.

He eyes me, brows knitting together. Lip ticking up, he says. “I think I get it now.”

I huff and spread my hands. “What?”

He wets his lips and strides toward me with slow, even steps like he has all the time in the world. I try not to bristle or quiver, all my nerve-endings seeming to stand to attention.

This whole confident, take-charge, give-no-shits thing he's got going on? Yeah, it really does it for me.

“You're not stuck up.”

I make a face.

He comes to a stop mere inches away from me. Arching a brow, he says, “You're defensive. And I don't mean in a bad way. You're just...” He tips his head to the side. “I guess I just see it now. You're protecting yourself, that's all. And I'm sorry I made assumptions.”

Searching his face, I feel my frown deepen.

His features pinch and he glances down, eyes darting around my chest like he's struggling with something. “I didn't always have the best experience with wealthy people growing up. And then, some of the people in my ex's circle... It makes



me defensive, and when I get defensive, I don't shut down like you, I lash out."

I blink. "Oh."

He looks up through his lashes, meeting my gaze. "Oh?"

Nodding, I say. "I get that. And I'm...I'm sorry if I ever gave you the impression that I thought I was better than you. 'cause I'm not."

He stares at me for a long beat.

Then, huffing, he shakes his head and says, "You barely even know me. And yet you say that like it's a fact." He eyes me curiously.

I shrug. *Because it is.*

He's right, though, we don't know each other—not really.

I know why he's here. He kind of knows how I ended up here.

Our lives are just caricatures, the moments that led us to Black Diamond exaggerated, emphasized in bold slashes, while the rest of us remains thinly sketched, practically invisible, depending on how you look at it.

Sure, he got a glimpse of the more complicated, less clear-cut parts of me earlier on the beach. The parts of me that are unexplainable—undefinable—but make me who I am at my core.

The parts behind what he just so rightly called out as a defense mechanism.

*"Stand tall,"* my mother would always tell me. *"Be a man. You won't get any respect from anyone, cowering like you do."*

A finger crooks under my chin, nudging my head up. "Hey, none of that."

"Sor—"

He arches a brow and I slam my mouth together.

Despite all the times my mother and father berated me for the same thing, this feels different. I don't feel like he's

admonishing my meekness, so much as...drawing me out, telling me it's okay. Like he sees me—the real me—and he's telling me it's okay. It's safe to come out now.

Inhaling deeply, I nod.

He pulls away, stepping back, and grabs the bottom of his shirt.

Not taking his eyes off me, he tugs it up over his torso, revealing miles and miles of tanned skin and rippling muscle.

*Jesus, is that an actual six-pack?*

He pauses with the shirt bunched up around his broad chest, tattoos peeking out from beneath the thin, wet cotton. “You still sure about this?”

My eyes fly to his and I nod jerkily, my throat unbearably tight. “I promise I'll tell you if I'm not.”

His lips purse, almost like he's not happy with that response. But before I can insist just how certain I am, he yanks his shirt off, tossing it to the floor. Not taking his eyes off me, he proceeds to unbutton his jeans, and shoves them down over his hips. Leaving him in nothing but skin-tight black boxer briefs.

“Do you not own shorts?” I hear myself say.

Nolan shrugs. “Hate shorts.” He toes off his jeans, kicking them off to the side, and approaches me. Without hesitation, he reaches for my fly and pops the button.

I suck in a sharp breath, fists clenching and releasing at my sides.

He eyes me with a look of challenge, almost as if he's silently daring me to stop him—stop this.

*Yeah, over my dead body.*

Rather than say that out loud though, I just stare back defiantly, silently urging him to keep going.

His mouth twitches, and he tips his head, as if conceding. “How's your leg?” His gaze dips with his words, and the soft

white bandage wrapped around my calf makes itself known, reminding me it's there.

*Probably wasn't supposed to go in the ocean with that...*

"It's getting better. Didn't even need stitches. Just glue," I say, shrugging.

"And your side? Your ribs?"

"A little sore, but nothing I can't handle. The bruises are already fading." *Sort of.*

He nods. "I'll be more careful this time."

I roll my eyes, and he pinches my chin. "Behave."

My dick twitches, and I feel a flush ignite my cheeks.

He arches a knowing brow, and I dart my gaze away. "It looks worse than it is, okay? I promise I'll tell you if it's too much."

*Don't hold back, please don't hold back,* I chant inwardly.

He releases my chin with a grunt. "Lift."

I do just that, raising my arms so he can peel the wet shirt away from my skin and over my head.

"Fucking hell," he growls, throwing the ball of fabric behind him. It hits the floor with a wet squelch. His frown deepens, when he catches the bruises going up my side. And I try not to feel self-conscious, now that we're in the light of day, standing face to face, shirtless and exposed.

Not to mention the fact that I'm suddenly highly aware of how different we look. Nolan's all hard, rippling muscle, and bulging biceps, whereas I'm just...smooth and soft? I'm definitely on the thinner side, thanks to the shit Canaan put me through I'm sure, but there's just no muscle definition. Whatsoever.

I'm paler too, next to his naturally tan skin.

And if ever there was a time I was self-conscious about my age—on top of our striking physical differences—it's seeing

all that dark hair smattered over his defined pecs contrasted with my smooth, flat chest that really drives it the fuck home.

“I, uh, know I’m not—sorry I’m not more—”

A calloused finger presses over my lips, silencing me.

My pulse jumps.

Nolan’s still frowning when he says, “You’re beautiful.”

And I think I just sort of...wink out of the existence there for a second.

“Like I said, I just wasn’t expecting this,” Nolan goes in a distracted voice just as his gaze drops, like he’s trying to figure something out. “I never thought I...” He trails off.

My throat clicks with an audible swallow, and I try not to squirm as he scours my skin with a look of intensity I’ve never quite seen before. Most definitely not a look I’ve ever seen aimed my way.

My toes curl into the cool tile and I finally manage to say, “So you’ve never been into a guy before?”

“No, not really.” He follows the path his finger makes down my chest, eyeing it curiously. “Well not enough to think anything of it, much less act on it.”

“But you want to act on it with me?”

His gaze lifts. “What do you think?” he says, just as he drags his rough fingers to my nipple, pinching it, eliciting a sharp gasp from my lips.

I arch into his touch, grateful he seems to be ignoring the bruises. At least for the moment.

He hums. “You like that.”

“Uh huh.”

“Tell me how far you’ve gone before.” Not a question. An order.

I shake my head, wincing at the idea of sharing this, but knowing, somehow, he’s not going to drop it. “Kissed a guy. Uh, just one. Jerked him off too...well, we both did...together,

I mean..." My voice fades, memories rising to the surface as if summoned.

A hand cups my cheek, pulling me back to the present. "Hey, where'd you go?"

I swallow thickly and mumble, "Nowhere."

His brows dip heavily over his eyes. "Do we need to slow down? Stop?" Something dark and knowing peeks out behind his crystal green irises, and I realize what he must be thinking. What conclusions he might've just jumped too.

Shaking my head, I quickly rush out to assure him, "No, no, it's...it's not what you're thinking."

He eyes me skeptically.

"He just wasn't who I thought he was, and it...it was shit after. *After*, okay? Not during." *During was...nice.*

Nolan studies me for a long moment, then nods. "Well, he's an idiot."

A laugh erupts out of me.

His frown only deepens. "I mean it." He sweeps his eyes all over me, hands skating over my shoulders, fingers trailing down my arms. Like he's mapping me out. Learning the texture of another man.

"They're all idiots," he says, ensnaring my wide gaze with his. "Every single asshole who's ever made you doubt yourself, or made you feel less than."

My mouth parts, but nothing comes out.

"I'm sorry your first time didn't turn out well."

"It wasn't..."

He shakes his head. "Sex is more than just penetration."

I gulp.

His lip twitches. "Nervous?" he says huskily.

"N-no."

Nolan drops his head, his hair falling around his face. “Don’t worry. We’re not doing that today—”

“But— My voice cuts off with a hitch when Nolan reaches down my pants, palming me through my briefs. He leans forward, resting one hand against the wall by my head, his shoulder hunching up by his ear as he uses the other to stroke me.

My eyes flutter shut.

He presses his forehead to mine, so close I can feel each puff of air escaping from his lips, hot and heady on mine.

“We’ll take it slow,” he murmurs, bypassing my mouth to brush his lips over my jawline. I tip my head back on reflex, giving him better access. “We have six weeks to explore.”

*Yeah, and I don’t want to waste a second.*

Swallowing, I blink up at the ceiling.

“This for me?” he says, fisting my dick. A thumb swipes over the tip, and I look down between us to find a wet spot has formed in my gray briefs. He presses into it, right over my covered slit, making a sticky mess.

A moan slips past my lips and I rock my head up and down against Nolan’s. His nose brushes my cheek.

“Tell me.”

“Y-yeah!” I gasp, arching into him, thrusting my cock deeper into his hand. “Yours.”

Nolan groans. “Fuck, I love hearing that.” He pulls back, pinching my chin with his other hand. I meet his gaze through hooded eyes. “While we’re here, this is mine. No one else’s. Understood?”

I poke my tongue out, wetting my lip, and give him a jerky nod.

“Say it.”

“Yes. Only yours.”

His thumb slides up, pushing past my lips, dragging over my tongue. “Good boy.”

My eyes widen, rolling back as I shudder. “H-how are you...”

“What?”

I force a swallow so I can get the words out. “So o-okay with this. I mean—” A gasp stutters out of me when he slides his hand around my waist, fingers curving around my ass.

He hums, lowering his face to my neck where he sucks a spot over my pulse point. More chills zip through me, sparking a tingle in my toes.

“You mean okay with touching another man?”

I pause at that.

*A man. Not a kid.*

My lip curves up in a dazed smile.

*Finally.*

“I don’t know, Sky,” he says, sounding sincere. There’s also a hint of uncertainty there, telling me that a part of him is just as puzzled as I am. “But I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it. What it was like to touch you. Feel you.” His breaths quicken, his voice turning ragged. “What I wanted to do to you...”

“Really?”

“Yes. You’ve flipped my entire world upside down.” He says it like it’s a marvel, not a curse, and my smile widens.

He eases my briefs over my hips, sliding them over the curve of my ass, exposing my skin to the surprisingly chilly air. Or maybe that’s just my nerves at being fully bared to him in the light of day, while he’s still in his boxers.

Lips trail over my collarbone. My skin pebbles in his wake.

“What did you wanna do?” I whisper.

I hear him swallow. And then I feel his mouth open against my skin, just under my shoulder. He buries his teeth there, just breathing. Panting heavily. “Would it scare you if I said everything?”

My entire body trembles and I clamp my fists together, resisting the urge to touch him. I want to—fuck, do I want to—but I don’t know if I can.

That’s silly, right?

He’s here, taking free reign of my body, and yet I’m not sure if I’m allowed to do the same.

“Fuck, your skin tastes good,” he moans. “Like the ocean, but sweeter.” He crouches more, dragging his mouth down my chest. His scruff scratches along my skin, prickling my nipple, hardening it. He hums, taking the rigid point between his lips and sucking hard.

“Fuck,” I breathe sharply. “*Nolan*,” I whine.

He chuckles cruelly, biting down on my nipple.

My hands fly back, scrambling for the wall for something—anything—to hold on to. My fingers brush a shelf, and I hold it tight, paying little mind to the way the corner jabs into the center of my palm. If anything, the pressure grounds me.

Something rattles and shakes, falling to the floor, but neither of us look to see what it is.

“I wonder...” he murmurs, lowering to his knees. “Do you taste like the ocean everywhere?”

*Oh my—*

Ignoring the briefs still wrapped around my knees, Nolan grips my waist and presses forward, burying his face in my groin. My cock is thick and rigid, squished between his scruffy face and my stomach.

He inhales deeply and I shiver, nails biting into the shelf—the wall—wherever I can reach behind me.

“Fuck, sweetheart,” he grumbles. Pulling back, he peers up at me through his dark lashes, and I gape at the sight.



This big, strong, rugged man down on his knees, face inches from my cock. Shoulders bunched tight with muscles. Tattoos on full display.

His mouth kicks up in a wicked grin. “Barely even touched you yet, and look how wrecked you are.”

I feel it then. The boiling heat spreading over my face. Down my chest.

“So pretty and pink for me.” He pokes his tongue out, not taking his eyes off mine as he licks a languid stripe up the underside of my cock.

My breath hitches with my intake of air, neck tendons straining.

His eyes, so dark, there’s no green in sight...they sparkle up at me, glittering with a mix of arousal and satisfaction. “Can’t say I ever thought I’d find myself here.”

I whimper, nodding. It’s all I can do.

“You’ll tell me if you don’t like something?”

*Not possible*, I think, but I nod some more anyway.

He releases my hip to curl his hand around my shaft—finally, *finally* touching me bare. It’s the second time I’ve felt his calloused hand around my cock, and I can’t help but compare it to my own touch.

All week I’ve chased this feeling—wringing my dick raw, jerking it until my hand ached, grinding so hard into my bed, I’m surprised I didn’t wear a hole into the mattress...

And I realize now just how futile it all was.

How insufficient.

How could anything ever possibly top this?

*Careful...*

Shaking my head, I slam a steel door down on *that* whole train of thought.

This is just for fun. For learning. It’s temporary.

It's just his confidence getting to me. It's sexy, and it's twisting me all up, putting absurd ideas in my head.

*Just love this for what it is. In the moment.*

“Skyler.”

“Uh huh.”

“Look at me.”

I crack an eye open, peeking down at Nolan. I don't even know when I closed them.

He presses a kiss to the tip of my cock, smirking. “Where'd you just go?”

My toes clench against the floor, heels arching up, as I thrust obscenely into his face. *Nowhere, everywhere, I don't even know who I am anymore.*

His grip on me tightens, holding me back.

“Please,” I utter into a low, keening moan.

He narrows his eyes, and just when I think he might make me really beg for it, he takes mercy on me. Sucking the head of my cock into his mouth.

“Ffff-fuckkkk,” I chatter and moan simultaneously.

Humming around my dick, he takes me in deeper. Slowly, so slow, I can feel every inch of me slipping into that hot, wet heat.

*Holyfuckholyfuckholy—*

Pulling off me, he licks his lips, and gives me a wink. “Not bad.”

And then it's all hot suction and silky wetness, groans and moans and nails digging and clawing.

At some point, he reaches for my hand, pulling it to his head. Given all the permission I needed, I bury my fingers in his long, messy, damp hair, tugging and pulling, riding his face like I can find the gates of Heaven through his throat.

He growls around my cock, shooting liquid heat across my groin, down my thighs. My balls clench up, and I feel myself

falling, falling, *crashing*—

My moan cuts off with a yelp when Nolan abruptly pops off my dick at the same time he wraps his fingers around my nuts, squeezing. Cutting my orgasm off with practiced precision.

Senseless babbling fumbles from my lips as I curve forward, hands clamped around Nolan's skull, fingers flexing.

“Easy,” he drawls in a graveled voice, quickly shoving down my briefs, so I can step out of them.

He then reaches for my thigh, hooking my leg over his shoulder. Adjusting his hold on my balls, he palms my junk, pushing it up out of the way so he can dip under with his nose. Then his tongue. Flicking my taint.

I gasp, mouth wide, frozen open.

He growls from deep within his chest, sounding more beast than man. Turning he nibbles the inside of my thigh, right next to the crease of my ass. I'm practically sitting on his face with this angle.

“As much as I want to see how fast I can get you hard again, I'm more curious to see how long you can last.”

I whimper.

“Mmm,” he hums, nosing my balls. His scruff rubs deliciously along the sensitive skin of my inner thighs. My crease. My taint. He's everywhere.

A sudden wave of self-consciousness hits me and I feel my body stiffen. “M-maybe I should shower first,” I say, my voice cracking.

“Abso-fucking-lutely not,” he all but grunts before pushing his tongue up over my taint.

But then he stands, dropping my leg, catching me just as I stumble forward.

“I want you just like this,” he says, grabbing me by the waist, and scooping me up. Hands gripping my ass.

My legs come around his waist on instinct, my arms around his neck. I gape down at him, but he just cranes his head, nipping me on the chin.

I'm on the smaller side, sure, especially next to Nolan, but I'm not exactly pocket-sized. Yet he carries me over to the bed like I weigh nothing.

And while a part of me wants to insist he drop me before he throws his back out or something, I can't help but appreciate what it feels like being overpowered like this—manhandled in a way that feels possessive and primal and so, so wrong, yet so, so right.

Rather than throw me on the bed, he surprises me by turning, and sitting back against the headboard.

*Right. My injuries.*

To be honest, unless attention is drawn to it, I forget it's there.

When I was younger, a doctor told my parents I had a high pain tolerance. But it's not that I *don't* feel it... I'm just good at shoving it back, I guess. I channel it into something else. Something that makes more sense.

And with so many *good* sensations currently overwhelming my nerve-endings—the desire licking my veins, the pressure in my cock, the way Nolan's rough hands feel skating across my soft skin...

I barely even register the dull, uncomfortably tight feeling radiating up my body.

It's a little awkward maneuvering our limbs around, but he manages to scoot back, while I tuck my knees around his waist, straddling him.

My hands find the headboard and I look down at his upturned face, momentarily stunned by our switched positions.

“That's better,” he says, lowering his gaze to drag it down my chest, my torso.

My own eyes follow, and I find our cocks shoved together, separated only by a thin layer of fabric. His boxers are black,

but there's no masking his arousal.

My mouth dries.

As if sensing my thoughts—my wishes—he reaches between us, and slides his briefs down just enough to release that thick, heavy cock of his.

He's only a little bigger than me, mostly in width, with a thick vein that runs up the underside.

I remember what it felt like rippling over my tongue—pulsing as he shot jets of cum down my throat.

My teeth mash into my lip. *Fuck, I need to taste that again.*

“Goddamn, you kill me when you do that.”

My gaze snaps up, just as Nolan reaches for my chin, using his thumb to pry my lip free. Smoothing over it, he stares with heavily hooded eyes.

For a second, I think he might actually do it—kiss me.

But instead he just shakes his head and palms the side of my neck, digging his thumb in the soft spot under my jaw, giving me no choice but to crane my head back.

“That's it,” he says, and I realize I'm grinding against him, circling my hips.

His cock is so hot against mine. So silky smooth, despite how rigid it is. His pubes scratch along my lower belly.

“Seeing as how we're both a little inexperienced here,” he rasps, “how 'bout you crawl up here and feed your dick to me. Ride my face. Figure out what you like.”

I shudder. “B-but what about you?”

He moans, cupping my waist, urging me to scoot up.

Sinking down into the pillows, he stretches his legs out behind me, and palms my ass, guiding my cock to his face. “Trust me, I'm all set. See?”

Frowning, I glance down. But he just pinches my chin and turns my head to face the other wall.

My mouth pops open, eyes widening, when I see the two naked men staring back at me.

*Us.*

For a second, all I can do is stare at my reflection. I barely even recognize the guy currently on his knees, dick jutting out obscenely at the bearded man laying on his back, licking his lips.

My eyes dart all over the wide dresser mirror, taking in the scene.

Nolan stretched out on his back, an arm curved behind his head, the other stretched out past me, hand slowly, casually stroking his meaty cock.

“Stunning, right? Who knew?”

My gaze whips to where Nolan eyes me with a dangerous, wicked sort of cockiness. Like he knows exactly what he’s doing to me. If he’s nervous or doubting any of this, give this man an Oscar, because you’d never know.

His mouth ticks up. “What’s that frown for?”

“You sure you haven’t done this before?”

He arches a brow. “No. At least not with a man.” He wets his lips before dragging his teeth over his bottom one.

A hot, sticky hand smooths over my ass, kneading the flesh. He guides me forward. My dick taps his lip and he opens, sucking me in.

Shuddering, I fall forward, catching myself just in time, gripping the wooden headboard so tight, it whines in my grasp.

He pops off with a long lick, leaving a string of spit between us. “So I’m your first.” Another wet, open-mouthed kiss to my crown. “Your only. No other mouth has been here.”

Eyes flaring, I nod. “No one.”

Groaning like he’s in pain, his eyes slam shut, and he slides further down rubbing his mouth and nose all over me. “Fuck, I like the sound of that. Too much.”

His hand clenches around my ass, fingertips slipping between my crack.

His breathing has picked up, and I glance over my shoulder, finding him working his cock over with firm, fast strokes.

“What about here?” he murmurs against my nuts. “Anyone touch you here? Kiss you here?”

Chills wash over my shoulder, spreading down my spine. My arms. Gooseflesh pebbling in their wake.

“No.” Thrusting up, I grind my junk all over his face, head thrown back as my moans fill the room. I cast another look at the mirror, watching this stranger—brown hair askew, cheeks flushed, lips swollen and red like they’ve been kissed and bitten to all hell, parted in pleasure.

My chest heaves in time with my rolling hips, my arching back. I move like a wave, retreating, dipping, crashing along the shore that is Nolan’s tongue as he slides it between my legs, down between my thighs.

“That’s it,” he grounds out, slurping at my skin. “Fuck my face like a good boy.” He slides lower and I kneel up straighter. It’s as if our bodies are in complete sync—riding a current as old as time, and Nolan and I can do nothing but give in to nature’s course.

“You watching, sweetheart? Watching us in the mirror. Watching the way I make you feel?”

A choked groan escapes me and I nod, baring my teeth, nostrils flared. The guy staring back at me is not one I recognize. On the surface he’s all me, but it’s as if something inside this polished veneer—some primal, carnal creature I never knew was there—is crawling its way to the surface. Ripping out of my skin in garbled curses, animalistic moans, and full-body spasms.

“Goddamn,” Nolan moans, rubbing his beard all over me. His fingers dip deeper in my crease, the tip of one brushing my clenched hole. “And here?” he pants. “Anyone touch you here?”

I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head.

“Skyler, answer me.”

“No!” I gasp, thrusting, before pushing back, seeking out that curious digit.

“Have you? Have you touched yourself there?”

I screw my eyes shut, bite my lip, and nod. Then, “Y-yeah. Couple times.”

“Show me.”

My eyes pop open and my body jerks. “*What?*”

A hand reaches up, encircling my wrist. Dispersing all my weight to my other arm, I let him guide my hand back behind me.

“That’s it,” he says thickly, making room for my fingers, spreading my cheeks so I have room. “Here, let me get you all nice and wet.”

Before his words can so much as register, I feel his face dip, and then—

“*Oh!*” I half-scream, half-gasp as he spits.

Right at my hole.

Oh...oh God...oh...

“Nolan!” I yelp, barely aware of my cock sliding and thrusting against the pillow. It’s dry, and should probably be uncomfortable, but if anything the contrast of the rough friction of the cotton, mingled with the hot, wet heat of his mouth between my legs, has me seeing stars, on the brink of shattering.

He takes my finger, smoothing the tip around my hole, rubbing in the wetness, and softening the ring of muscle until I’m able to breach it.

Garbled, guttural noises crawl out of my throat. Turning my head, I squeeze my eyes shut and bury my face in my arm. As much as I want to watch us in the mirror, this is just too much. It’s all too much.



My finger nudges my opening, and Nolan growls. “*Fuckkkkk*, baby, that’s it.”

Panting hotly into my skin, I feel my muscles lock up, my thighs trembling. I’m a ball of sensation, pulled and tugged and rubbed to its breaking point.

Something warm and wet skates over my finger—his tongue.

Moaning, he licks around my digit, adding more wetness, helping me slide in deeper with little thrusts of his hand. His other hand is no longer holding my cheeks apart, so his scruffy face is buried there, trapped with my finger.

A glance at the mirror shows he’s stroking himself again.

I watch as I grind furiously into the pillow above his head. My ass is on his face, while he uses my finger to fuck me. Muscles I didn’t even know I have ripple and strain in my arm where I hold myself up. My knuckles white against the headboard slamming against the wall.

Nolan pushes my finger in deeper, sucking hot, open-mouthed kisses around the surrounding area. Flicking his tongue over my rim. My knuckles.

I stretch and curl my finger, seeking that spot inside me. It’s hot—tight—the pressure unbelievable, bordering on painful, but then—

White-hot pleasure ignites my veins, coursing through my body like a blazing fire. My mouth opens on a guttural moan, pitching into a scream as my climax rushes over me.

My balls draw up impossibly more, my dick jerking. Hands-free, I pulse and pulse, shooting ropes of cum all over the pillow.

I’m vaguely aware of Nolan baring his teeth between my cheeks, his beard digging into the soft, sensitive skin. His groans and growls increase tenfold, and I feel him stiffen, jolt, freeze—

He lets out a long, deep, body-tingling groan I feel more than hear, just as something hot and wet splashes my ass.

The reverberations send chills racing up my spine, and little aftershocks that have my cock twitching, dribbling out more cum.

*Oh God.*

My arm gives out. Pretty sure I collapse.

Somehow I don't smother Nolan. He easily scoots out from under me, pulling my finger gently from my hole. He pats my ass, and I drop in a heap on my side, careful to avoid the pillow I just came all over.

Panting heavily, I crack my eyes open just as Nolan crashes down next to me, his green eyes wide with shock. He swallows hard, then his gaze drifts to the side, to where there's a giant wet spot on the pillow between us.

He reaches out, touching it with his fingers almost like he's never seen jizz before.

My mouth kicks up in a sleepy smile.

His gaze cuts to mine, and I can't help but notice how wrecked he looks. Temples damp with sweat. Cheeks flushed. Beard glistening.

His lips shine too, darker and fuller than I've ever seen them.

My tongue pokes out between my teeth. His eyes drop, a furrow forming between his brows.

"The cleaning crew is gonna hate you," I mutter.

He snaps his gaze back to mine.

I roll my lips together, and I can't help it—I giggle.

His eyes widen, and for a second I think he might be freaking out. Like it's finally just hitting him what we did.

*Uh oh.*

But then he pounces, crashing on top of me—well, half on top of me. I might've forgotten about my injuries, but he clearly hasn't.

Big, calloused hands find my wrists, slamming them into the bed next to my head.

He looks down at me with a fierce, wild look about him, tangled hair falling around his face, the ends teasing my cheeks. Our faces are inches apart, chests heaving and brushing every time we inhale.

The scratchy hair on his chest rubs against my nipple, and I squirm, feeling his spent, sticky cock squished against my thigh.

“What in the hell was that?” he says in a rough voice filled with wonder.

“I don’t know,” I say breathlessly.

His gaze drops to where my lips stretch out. I can’t stop smiling.

His face bunches and he nods. “Okay then.”

The words are spoken softly, almost like they’re not meant for me.

Before I can ask what it means, he pulls back abruptly.

“What—”

Reaching down he grabs my hand, yanking me up. My mouth opens—fear momentarily rising to the surface when I think he might be getting rid of me—but before I can so much as get a syllable out, he picks me up, hauling me over his shoulder.

The air punches out of me, and I grab the first thing I can find for purchase—his ass. “What are you doing?” I say in a high-pitched voice I barely register as my own.

Swinging upside down, I have a perfect vantage point of his balls and soft cock swinging heavily between his thighs. My fingers clench around his firm ass, and I feel him suck in a breath.

“You know I can walk, right?”

He’s got one arm around the back of my thighs, and with the other, he pats my ass. “I know. Your side okay?”

“Yes,” I say, and I mean it. He’s angled me so that the pressure is on my good side. “What are we doing?” I ask as he carries me into his bathroom.

Rather than lower me to the floor, he turns toward his shower, easily bending to crank it on. From this angle, I can see our reflections in the mirror. We make quite a sight—his broad, tatted, muscled form, and my pale ass sticking out above his shoulder.

It should be ridiculous—cartoonish—but hell if I’m not addicted to our stark differences.

Straightening, he turns to look over his shoulder, meeting my straining gaze in the mirror as I try to keep my head up.

“I’m gonna get you clean,” he says, and it’s then I notice the streaks of cum drying over my ass and lower back.

My eyes widen, mouth drying.

“And then I’m gonna mess you all up again.” He smirks devilishly. “See if I can get more of those screams out of you.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.”

Turning, he lowers me, setting me down on the tile. Walking me backward, he gives me no choice but to stumble back under the still-cold spray.

I flinch, crossing my arms.

He bites his lip, cocking his head, standing just outside of the water.

We study each other for a long moment, an unspoken conversation transpiring between us, heightening the tension in the room, right along with the water temperature.

Steam billows out around me, slipping through the open door past Nolan.

I watch him from under my thick lashes, wondering what he’s thinking.

What he’s planning.

Something tells me that was just the beginning.

Something dark flares in his eyes, spiking my pulse. Blood thunders in my ears, clashing with pipes creaking, and the water raining down on me.

“You gonna come in, or just stand there?” I say, throwing his earlier words back at him.

His mouth ticks up in a knowing, devilish grin.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a warning bell blares. But I ignore it.

All that matters is the man stalking toward me.

Pouncing on me.

Owning me...

*Six weeks.*

*I'm all his and he's all mine for six weeks.*

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

---

NOLAN

“**F**uck, I could sleep for a week after that,” I rumble into Skyler’s shoulder.

He hums in agreement, lashes fluttering over his cheekbones.

I drag my finger down the center of his chest, marveling at the sight of all that smooth flatness. His small red nipples. The gentle dips of his ribs. The faint line of dark hair trailing down from his belly button. His cock, draped softly over his thigh.

So different from a woman’s body, yet no less perfect.

If I had any doubt before that I was bisexual, I don’t anymore. How could I after what we just did? How could I when I lay here, staring at his sexy body, and all I want to do is taste every inch of him?

Skyler rolls his head toward me, reaching up to feather his fingers over my hair.

I suck in a breath, and he pauses, as if realizing what he just did.

Peering up at him, I grab his wrist, holding him in place when he tries to pull back.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he murmurs.

“Doesn’t seem like nothing.”

He searches my eyes, and it strikes me how intense his gaze is. It’s almost like he’s forcing himself to not look away—or perhaps, the opposite, like he fears something else will rip his gaze away, something beyond his control.

I don’t know where that thought comes from, but it’s... curious.

“It’s never been like this,” he says in a rush. He winces, shaking his head, quickly backtracking. “I just mean in

general. *I'm* never like this..." his brown eyes scour the lower half of my face, like he's debating something.

I frown, turning to press my lips to his wrist. "Like what?"

His mouth tightens, eyes glimmering with some unnamed emotion. "Comfortable."

Something loosens in my chest at that, and I find my lips tipping up in a small smile. "Well, that's good."

"Yeah," he says softly, looking down with a small, shy smile. "It is good."

Beyond Skyler, the curtains framing the open sliding door billow with the breeze, and I inhale deeply, for once not resenting the scent of flowers and saltwater.

Finally, this place feels like the paradise it is, and not like the prison I wanted it to be.

"What's wrong?" Skyler whispers.

I blink up at him. "Huh?"

His finger drifts over my lips. "You're frowning." He swallows loudly. "I could...leave...if—"

Scowling, I shake my head and crawl over him, pinning his hands up by his head.

His lips part with his inhale, cheeks flushing in that way they do so easily.

My damp hair falls around my face, the ends dancing over his cheeks. "It's not you. I just..." My brow knits as I debate my words. "I realized I've been determined to be miserable while I'm here. And I guess it just hit me that maybe I should stop worrying about what I can't fix, and just...live in the moment."

He rolls his lips together.

"I know you don't have much experience with this."

"More like none," he mutters.

His eyes round like he didn't mean to say that, and I bite back a smile.



“As I was saying...” I tease, my voice gravelly. “In a sense, I don’t either. And I don’t mean just hooking up with guys. I mean hooking up, period.”

Comprehension flickers across his expression and he nods.

“I meant it, when I said before that while we’re here, you’re mine. No one else’s. That wasn’t just me saying that in the heat of the moment.”

His throat dips with a hard swallow, and he whispers, “Yours.”

*Jesus.*

Grunting, I reach up, and rake my fingers through his hair. Like mine, it’s still damp from our shower, curling up every which way thanks to my wandering, needy fingers. I kind of love it, bearing witness to this raw, unrefined version of him.

It suits him so much better, and if I’m not mistaken, he feels it too.

Hell, he said it himself—he’s comfortable.

“Yes, mine. And I know that might be...wrong of me to ask, seeing as this is...”

“Temporary,” he whispers.

For a moment, we just stare at each other.

“Yes,” I say simply. “Temporary.”

He nods. “I know. If you’re...worried I might catch feelings, or-or—”

“I am. Not to be conceited, I just...I remember what it’s like at your age.”

He makes a face, and I lift a hand. “No regrets. Just statin’ facts.”

His scowl eases up, and he nods reluctantly.

While it still bothers me—the age thing; how can it not—there’s something about knowing this isn’t going anywhere beyond this island, that makes it feel a little less...wrong.

Especially now that I've well and truly thrown caution to the wind.

Fucked up? Probably.

But it's kind of hard to dwell on all that right now when I've got him naked and under me and peering up at me like he's terrified I'll rip this away from him without a moment's notice.

All I can think about is how upset he was down at the cove. So distraught, it worried me. If I wasn't there...

What the hell would he have done?

*Don't think like that. He wasn't trying to kill himself.*

And nor was he trying to make a statement, like I originally thought.

There was something deeper going on there—something beyond his frustration with me—and I can't help but feel like it has something to do with why he was bounced around reform schools since he was six years old.

“Seriously, Nolan,” Skyler whispers. “How are you so okay with this? I thought...”

I ease off him, but keep a leg curled around his waist so he can't go anywhere.

“Thought what?”

“You're straight.”

Humming, I reach down and run a finger down his cock, smirking when it twitches. He gasps, fingers knotting in my hair.

I peer up at him with an arched look. “Pretty sure that ship sailed the second I shoved you up against a tree and got hard over another cock pressing against me.”

He blinks at me.

Fisting his cock, I stroke it up and down, drawing it to full-mast.

*Jesus, to be this young again.*

Not that I'm old by most people's definition, but my refractory period is nowhere near as short as his is. He just came down my throat in the shower not even twenty minutes ago, and he's already raring to go once more.

And yes, I swallowed his load like a champ.

It was fucking delicious—salty with a hint of musk, and surprisingly sweet.

Who knew?

Skyler shudders as if remembering and I dip down, burying a wicked grin in his chest.

“W-wait. The tree?”

*There it is.*

Nodding, I pull his nipple into my mouth, eliciting another sexy little gasp.

“B-b-but—” He stutters out, squirming, thrusting up into my hand like he can't help himself.

Taking pity on him—well, some—I give his nipple one last little suck, then lift my head, taking in his cute, confused frown.

I reach up, cupping his cheek, forcing his own hand to drift down around my nape. Our arms cross awkwardly, but we don't move.

“I didn't know how to bring it up...Wasn't even sure it'd make things better at that point, not when I was so damn caught off guard...and, well, struggling to come to terms with what it meant.”

His frown deepens, those rich chocolate orbs of his searching mine. “You...got hard?”

I nod. “I felt yours and...hell, I don't think I ever popped a boner so quick.”

A short, abrupt laugh bursts out of him, his cheeks flaming. “Really?”

I grin, wagging my brows. “Turns out I like dick. Who knew?”

“And here I missed it,” he says, voice fading into a barely-there whisper.

Mouth thinning, I smooth my thumb over his furrowed brow. “You were a little preoccupied.”

He winces, looking down. “I thought you’d hate me. I felt disgusting.”

Growling, I pinch his cheeks together, forcing him to lift his gaze to me. “You are the farthest thing from disgusting. And even if my body didn’t react—even if we didn’t end up where we are now—I’d still never hate you, or find you disgusting. Your body reacting to what we stumbled upon, and then to my proximity, was perfectly natural.”

“Because I’m gay,” he whispers, like it suddenly means something different.

I shrug. “Well, yeah. Like I said, natural.”

He shakes his head in wonder. “How are you so okay with this?” he asks again.

“I don’t know,” I tell him truthfully. “If this was a year ago, and I still thought myself happily married, with a baby... No, I would definitely be freaking out a lot more.” I pause meaningfully. “But not because you’re a guy.”

He eyes me curiously.

I shrug, resuming my stroking. His erection flagged some, given the conversation, but with a little gasp and shudder, his cock perks up once more. “I told you. I never wanted it enough to try, but now that I think about it...I guess I’m not that surprised. And hell, not that it makes that much of a difference, but my best friend fell in love with *his* best friend. Turns out he’s bi too. So would ya look at that?” I waggle my brows to ensure he knows I’m joking when I say, “Maybe it’s contagious after all.”

Chuckling, he gives me a little shove. It’s quick to morph into a moan though, when I twist my hand, cupping his balls

into my palm.

“I’m comfortable with you too, you know? You make this easy.”

He pouts. “You calling me easy?”

A low, raspy chuckle scrapes out of me, and I give his nuts a little tug.

“Okay, I might be a little easy,” he whispers, flushing.

I dart my gaze all over his face. “That. That right there is why, I think.”

“What?”

I brush my thumb down his temple, and like magic, his eyes drift shut, eyelashes fluttering over his cheekbones.

*Christ, he’s going to be the death of me.*

When he opens them a second later, I have to force a swallow.

“That flush. Those big brown eyes,” I murmur. “You’re just so...open. So...trusting, so needy.” I lick my lips, lowering my thumb to skim under his eye. “It’s dangerous. And these lashes? Fuck, I’m a sucker for these things. They’re so full, so dark, so goddamn *pretty*,” I say in a ragged hush.

He inhales sharply, arching up into my touch. “Nol...”

“You’re so...innocent...”

He blinks rapidly, nodding, and then in a raspy voice, he says, “Innocent, maybe. But I’m not naive.” The pointed look he levels me with reminds me of all he’s been through, or at least the little he shared with me.

I nod, telling him without words I understand. And while I can’t necessarily agree, I told him I wouldn’t bring it up again. Especially not now when I’ve got him in my bed, lifting his legs for me, and granting my wandering fingers passage between his legs.

“Are you...are you gonna tell him when you get home?” he stutters out.

The tip of my finger brushes his clenched hole, and a thin, reedy sound escapes his lips. He's so vocal, so responsive. It decimates me every time.

"Your best friend. About you being bi," he forces out.

I hum deeply, distracted, and turn my face into his shoulder, prodding my finger just a little deeper, not enough to sink in but enough to drive him crazy. Against his skin, I say, "I don't know. I don't really want to think about what happens beyond these six weeks, if that's okay with you."

Nodding, he strokes a hand down my back. "Y-yeah. Same." He arches up, mouth opening on a soundless gasp when I nudge the tip just past the first ring of muscle.

Chuckling wickedly, I push up on my arm, curling it around his head. And I lean down, hovering my face just inches over his.

Letting my fingertip just sit inside him, I wait for him to come back down to Earth from wherever he went.

"Let's live in the moment, yeah?"

His fluttering eyes drift to my lips, and something stutters in my chest. "Okay."

*Does he...does he want me to kiss him?*

His tongue pokes out, quickly followed by his teeth.

"Don't do that." I murmur.

His gaze flies to mine, wide. Lips parting.

Grunting, I slip my hand out from between his legs, and snake it up his chest to clasp his neck, eliciting a little flinch.

His eyes flare with blatant interest as I shove his head deeper into the cushion, but I don't seal his airway. I just hold him. My finger curled loosely around his delicate neck.

Bending down, I mash our noses together, my nostrils flaring with a quiet snarl.

His hot shaky pants skim my lips.

"Ffffuck," I grit out through my teeth.

He thrusts up his hips, swiveling his hard cock against my equally hard length. I don't know if I'll be able to come again, but hell if my body's not strung tight with desire. With the need to claim.

Our eyes clash, and something deep, heady, and knowing passes between us.

Something terrifying.

Something that has me turning my head at the last possible second, burying my face in his neck, and his hands coming around my back, nails biting into my skin.

He mouths at my shoulder, and I shudder, sinking my lower half onto his fully.

Shoving down the urge to claim his pretty lips, I crawl down his body, and take his cock into my mouth instead.

It's still so unfamiliar—the full, surprisingly heavy weight of him. The way it stretches my lips, and brings an ache to my jaw, when I take him back as far as I can.

His pre-cum stains my tongue, awakening my taste buds.

He tastes so good, so sweet, and fuck, if I'm not addicted already.

Releasing his cock, I stroke it in my fist, and bring my other hand to my mouth, sucking my fingers into my mouth, getting them nice and wet.

“Hold still like a good boy, okay?”

A quiet, high-pitched whine sounds from the back of his throat, and he nods jerkily.

Sliding them between his cheeks, I guide his dick back to my lips.

This, we didn't do in the shower. I only sucked him off.

It's a lot smoother this time, compared to how it went down under the spray of hot water. I find a good rhythm almost immediately, and pay special attention to the little divot under his crown. Nudging my tongue at it in between suckling it in my mouth.

He whimpers, fingers twisting in the sheets. Like he's trying so desperately not to grab my head and fuck the hell out of my throat.

*Maybe next time, I think.*

This time, I want to extract his pleasure myself.

"You're being so good for me," I breathe, kissing his shaft.

He spreads his thighs wider for me, lifting his butt up so I can reach his hole. "Th-thank you."

I groan into a chuckle, burying my face in his groin. "Fuck, you're killing me."

Massaging my spit into his crease, I run my nose through his pubes, inhaling him. His rim tenses, clenching around my fingertip, just like it strangled his earlier. "You're so tense. You're gonna have to relax if you want me in there," I say, nuzzling his cock.

His chest expands with his deep inhale, and when it collapses, I feel the muscle give, allowing my finger to slide in up to the first knuckle.

*Jesus Christ, that's tight.*

Groaning, I lean up and lap at his slit, catching a fresh burst of pre-cum.

"N-Nolan," he shivers out in a moan.

"More?" I croak in between licks.

"Please."

*Fucking hell.* "God, you're so sexy when you beg," I growl, shoving my finger deeper inside him at the same time I swallow down his cock, pushing, straining, willing my throat to relax.

A gag pushes its way up but I breathe through it, nostrils flaring, eyes stinging with tears.

Skyler tenses, his body going rigid. And not in a good way.

*Shit.*

Easing off his length, I pant, "Okay?"



“Y-yeah, just gimme a second. D-don’t stop.”

Nodding, I suck him back into my mouth, turning my focus to his needy cock while he adjusts to having my finger inside him.

When he starts squirming impatiently, his hips thrusting and swiveling around, I pull off his cock. “That’s it. Just relax. Let me take care of you.” I give a couple testing thrusts.

His back arches, fingers bone-white around the rumpled bedding.

God, what a picture he makes.

“Fuck, you’re so tight,” I growl, fucking him faster, deeper. His hole practically sucks it up. “So warm. So soft. You feel so good, sweetheart.”

“Nol. Please,” he whines.

“You wanna come?”

“Y-yes!” he gasps.

“Think maybe you can take a second finger?”

He nods quickly.

Pulling back, I shove his thighs toward his chest, and let a string of saliva fall from my lips. It hits his crack, sliding down to where his hole flutters around my finger. I ease it out, and shove my spit in him, before nudging a second finger in his opening.

It’s a tight squeeze, but I remind him to breathe, and after another little more spit to lube him up, I’m able to wedge two thick fingers in his tight channel.

Skyler’s a stuttering, whimpering mess at the head of the bed. He’s now got the heels of his palms buried in his eyes, head thrown back, chest mottled pink and glistening with a fine sheen of sweat.

*Perfect*, I think ravenously, gathering his dick back into my mouth. I bob my head in time with the fingers thrusting in his hole, seeking deeper and deeper.

He arches off the bed, and I use my free hand to anchor his hip.

I suck and lap at him, the wet sounds filling the room, mingling with his ragged pleas spurring me on.

Twisting my fingers, I nudge them deeper, looking for that plush little spot inside him that will send him flying. I might be new to gay sex, but I know what a prostate is—I've heard how much pleasure could be wrenched out of a man just from pressing on that little bundle of nerves.

Hudson, my best friend from back home, practically spun sonnets about it one night when he was drunk. I shoved him and laughed him off at the time, but now I can't help but feel like I need to send him a fruit basket or something.

Skyler all but screams when I hit it, his voice breaking off into a keening whine. His body practically convulsing with pleasure.

Grunting, I hollow out my cheeks just as his dick stiffens, then erupts, filling my mouth with his hot release.

When he slumps into the bed, his balls drained, I ease off.

Swallowing, I turn my head, pressing a sticky kiss to his thigh.

He shivers.

Sitting back on my heels, I run my eyes over his body, and blow out a harsh sigh.

He blinks dazedly up at the ceiling, and a small rueful smile lifts my cheek.

Keeping my fingers lodged in his ass, I bring my other hand to my cock and crawl on my knees between his spread thighs.

All it takes is a few short jerks, a swipe of my tongue over my lip, and Skyler leaning up on his arms, batting those pretty lashes up at me for my cock to burst.

His hole clenches around my digits, and I throw my head back, spraying cum all over his spent cock. His stomach. It

even hits his chest.

Baring my teeth at the ceiling, I shudder and groan my way through the aftershocks.

Skyler sits up, scooting forward, clenching down on my fingers so as not to let them slip free.

His hands come around my cock, so I drop mine to the bed, letting him twist and stroke me through my orgasm.

He curls forward, swiping his tongue at my slit.

“Sweetheart,” I rumble.

He sucks his lip into his mouth and looks up at me through his lashes.

I grunt. “Little minx.”

He smirks, biting his lip.

I narrow my eyes. “Something tells me I’m gonna have my work cut out for me these next six weeks.”

He gives me a little nod, a small, devilish smile teasing his lips. He wiggles around on my fingers, pupils expanding, swallowing up his pretty browns.

*Jesus Christ.*

Slipping my fingers from his hole, I bring them to my mouth, stunning him mid-gasp.

His eyes widen, flaring with a culmination of shock and heat as he watches me suck his flavor off my digits.

Humming in deep satisfaction, I clasp his nape with my free hand, tugging his forehead to mine.

I slide my fingers from my mouth, and turn them, wiping them all over his lips.

His shoulders rise with a stuttered inhale.

Gripping his hair, I wrench his head back and shove my fingers over his tongue, down his throat until I feel his muscles constrict.

The sun has all but fallen, casting a hazy, bruised glow over the room.

“It’s getting late,” I murmur roughly. “Let’s get some dinner before you have to go back to your room.”

He gives a little nod around my fingers.

As much as my body revolts at the idea of leaving the sanctity of this bungalow, I know a little space will be good for us. I think we both could use time away to reflect and process everything.

And to sleep.

Because, hell if that’s possible for us at the rate we’re going.

*And to think, we’ve only just begun...*

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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SKYLER

“**Y**ou seem...different today,” Dr. Maddock says softly, tapping her pen on her notepad.

Seated directly across from her in a matching armchair, I shrug, wringing my hands together in my lap. I notice my knees have started to bob again, and I press them together, holding them still.

“I don’t mean it in a bad way. You just seem...distracted.” She eyes me curiously, a small smile playing at her lips. “Is there somewhere else you’d rather be right now?”

I blink at her. *Is she serious?*

She doesn’t say anything, clearly waiting for a response. I’ve lost track of how many sessions we’ve had now—hell, if it wasn’t for the activity calendar in our rooms, I’d forget what day it is—but I know her well enough at this point to read her body language, decipher the nuances in her tone.

Things most people don’t have to second guess, but I’ve always struggled with.

I’m pretty sure that’s why Nolan fascinated me from the start—why I felt drawn to him, aside from the obvious.

He doesn’t bullshit. He cuts right to the chase. What you see is what you get, and fuck, if that isn’t a breath of fresh air.

I don’t have to be *on* with him.

Of course, this isn’t something I realized right away. Only something I’ve come to understand in the two weeks since I started opening up in therapy.

Ironically enough, it was the Monday after Nolan and I started things, that my reservations about her—about this whole thing—just sort of...fell away.

It helped that Dr. Maddock didn’t berate me for what went down in group that previous Friday. If anything, she seemed to understand. Hell, she even *praised* me for doing what I needed

to do to get out of an unsafe situation. She said Kevin understood too, he was just worried. But I wasn't in trouble, like I thought I'd be.

No, neither of them have a clue that I sought out Nolan and spent the rest of the day in his bungalow, overloading my senses in a far more pleasurable way.

And then Saturday too.

And Sunday...

But I'm not about to tell anyone that.

Not that relations here or whatever are forbidden. It seems like a lot of people pair off while here. Actually, I even mentioned that to Nolan, and he just gave me that arched look he does, and reminded me it's not a prison. We're all adults.

The powers that be can frown upon it, but they can't stop it.

"Well," I finally say, returning to the conversation, "I can't exactly say there's nothing else I wouldn't rather be doing."

Nolan's naked body flashes across my mind's eye, and I feel myself flush.

Dr. Maddock arches a brow behind her readers.

I hunch between my shoulders, unsure what to say.

She hums, but doesn't press. "Well, we have about ten minutes left. Let's try to make the best of it, yeah?"

Wincing, I nod, knowing I need this. Want this.

So with that, I return to what we were talking about before I zoned out: Adam.

Canaan Academy.

Pastors Gabriel, Marcus, and Salvador.

All the shit they put me through, trying to turn me straight, make a godly man of me, finally funneled into words that are actually heard.

With every horror spoken, the easier my words come out, and the lighter I feel. Like with each truth unleashed, another

seal cracks open, freeing me from the chains they put me in.

Before I know it the ten minutes are up, and while I'm far from done, much less healed, Dr. Maddock smiles, tells me it was a good session, gives me my homework, and tells me she'll see me Wednesday afternoon.

Another thing that changed? I now see Dr. Maddock three times a week, Monday and Friday mornings, with an added Wednesday afternoon session following group.

It was actually Nolan who encouraged it. That following Saturday, after breakfast, we met up just like we agreed to the night before when we said our goodbyes. We hung out at the cove for a little, but I'd be lying if I said we didn't spend the majority of the day naked in his bed.

And in the shower.

We had a lot of showers that day, and most of them were not spent getting clean.

And while at first I wasn't so sure about it, the seed had been planted and at my session Monday morning, bright and early, once I realized Dr. Maddock was *happy* with me, not disappointed, I just...went for it.

She was even happier after that, and we got me all set up for extra sessions.

*"What brought this on?"* I remember her asking me.

I didn't quite know what to tell her at first, but then the more I opened up about things like my parents and how they treated me, what past doctors said about me, and what they all did to try and "help" me...

It just sort of clicked that, well, it's not on them anymore.

Like I insisted so many times to Nolan, I'm *not* a kid. I'm an adult now. I'm not locked away in some reform school. Or chained to a chair in a dark, musty basement, getting drugs injected into me while I'm forced to watch weird videos meant to brainwash me.

I'm not getting zapped for getting ill-timed boners when presented with pictures of naked men, or thrown in isolation



rooms while speakers crackle with high-pitched buzzing interwoven with looped prayers.

I don't have to watch other boys get beat while we stand around in a circle shaming them, calling them horrible names.

I'm free.

And I have a chance here—a real chance—to finally be heard and take life by the reins.

Dr. Maddock promised me as much that first day when she shredded my file.

*A blank slate.*

If I have any chance of getting out from under my parents' thumb when I get out of here, I need to have a game plan. I can't keep waiting for things to miraculously get better and work out.

*You're the ruler of your destiny.*

Yeah, I read that in a fortune cookie last week, but it holds true.

This is *my* life. Not my parents'.

So my top priority these days has been figuring out why I'm the way I am and treating the real problem, not the one caused by adults looking for quick, easy fixes.

*They failed me...*

*But I don't have to fail myself.*

After I leave Dr. Maddock's office, I run up to my room quick to freshen up. I woke up late, barely had time to grab a coffee before I had to get to my 8 o'clock appointment.

Nolan's waiting for me down at the restaurant, and we grab a big breakfast from the buffet line to bring back to his room.

"How was therapy?" he asks, holding his tray out so they drop some scrambled eggs into one of his to-go containers.

"Good," I say, grabbing a muffin. "My homework before Wednesday is to do one thing I normally wouldn't because of fear someone would punish me for it. Could be anything."

He grunts at that.

We finish up, and make our way outside. It's hot today—pushing what feels like eighty—and it's only ten in the morning. I overheard someone say something about a heatwave coming through today and tomorrow.

The sun is bright and glaring, making it so I have to squint until my eyes adjust. We hit the path leading to the bungalows, bypassing a couple others walking by.

“So what are you gonna do?” Nolan asks. “That scares you, I mean.”

I shrug, adjusting my hold on my stack of containers. Unlike Nolan, I skipped a tray. “I don't know yet. I'm kind of limited here. I mean, sure I can call my mother and yell at her, but what is she gonna do to me from thousands of miles away?”

“Still gives you anxiety, though, right?” he says knowingly.

I blow out a breath and nod. “Yeah.”

“But...”

*God, he reads me too well.*

We reach the narrow path to his bungalow, the trees giving us some much-needed shade.

I turn my head, peering up at him. “I think the objective right now is small, achievable goals. Like the kind you get instant gratification from, so you can make new connections in your brain, or whatever.” Facing forward, I pause, to let Nolan walk ahead so he can go in first. “At least, that's the gist of what Dr. Maddock said. And as much of a rush that would be to call Mother and really let her have it, and wash my hands of it...”

He nods. “She's not here, so you'd just have to deal with her wrath when you go home. Making it more of a long-term goal.”

“Exactly,” I whisper.

Inside, we set our food on the table. Nolan grabs the cutlery and starts making coffees for us in the Keurig. “Well, one, fuck that despicable woman.”

I cough out a laugh.

“And second,” he says, dragging out the word. He looks over his shoulder, long brown hair swinging with the movement. “I think I can help with this assignment.”

“Oh really?” I say, rolling in a smile.

“Uh huh.”

“What did you have in mind?”

Turning toward me while the coffee percolates, he rests against the counter and crosses his arms. Jerking his chin toward the table, he says, “First, eat something.”

I roll my eyes and go to sit down and do just that, knowing he won’t budge on this. We learned real quick that if we don’t eat before we get to the fun stuff, our food won’t only go cold, but will be abandoned entirely until evening, when our stomachs prove too loud to ignore.

“There, happy?” I mumble around a spoonful of egg.

He brings my coffee over and the creamer from his mini fridge. Shaking his head, he drags the container away from me, switching it out with one of mine. “Eat your own food, brat.”

I smirk, chewing.

“And swallow before you talk,” he grumbles.

I make a show of gulping and lower my chin, batting my eyes up at him. “Yes, Daddy.”

He glares at me, slashing his fork through the air. “Absolutely not. Red. Hard. Safe word. Potato. Whatever. No.”

I snort. “*Potato?*”

“Shut up and eat your fruit,” he grumbles, sticking a mountain sized spoonful of eggs in his mouth.

Rolling my eyes, I reach for the bowl of strawberries and bring it to my mouth, nibbling the tip. I make a face, my mouth watering and tingling in that way it does when something's too sour or sweet or cold or both.

“Jesus fucking hell,” Nolan mutters into a groan.

I'm surprised he doesn't upend the entire table with how fast he lunges for me.

Scooping me over his shoulders, I squeal. My strawberry goes flying.

He smacks my ass—hard—and I yelp. “Nolan!”

“And here your therapist thinks you're afraid to be punished. Clearly she doesn't know you.”

Eyes bulging, I stutter, “Wai-wh-what?” *Punished?*

My cock jolts from inside my shorts. No doubt Nolan feels it, seeing as it's pressed against his shoulder.

He grunts and throws me on the bed with a bounce.

All hesitation and carefulness from a week ago are nowhere to be found, now that my bruises have faded into a dull yellow.

Even the wound on my leg is healing.

I had to go to Medical the following day to get more surgical glue reapplied after my little dive in the ocean, along with a clean bandage. But I was able to remove that yesterday, along with finishing up my antibiotics. And the doctor said I could get it wet now that the gash is sealed and scabbed over.

So all in all, I'm as good as new.

*All the better for Nolan to ravage me...*

Grabbing my ankle, he drags me toward the end, and roughly pops open my fly. My shirt's already rucked up around my chest, so I finish the job, wriggling it up off my head.

Nolan removes my flip flops, throwing them somewhere behind him. My khaki shorts and navy briefs not far behind.

He takes a step back, standing to his full height. I shiver. There's just something about being spread out for him completely bare, while he looms over me still fully dressed, eyes scouring every inch of my exposed skin.

Biting my lip, I try not to squirm. I've no doubt I'm red from my cheeks down to my chest. You'd think by now, after having spent so much time naked with this man, that the effect he has on me would've faded some. If anything, it's intensifying with each day. I don't even have it in me to try and hold it back anymore. What he does to me.

My nipples tingle, hardening into rigid little buds that just beg for his fingers, his teeth.

Nolan's tongue pokes out like he senses where my mind's gone, swiping his bottom lip. My cock jumps against my stomach, rock-hard and weeping sticky pre-cum.

"Goddamn," he murmurs, brows knitting like he's in pain, or frustrated about something.

Curling my fingers into the rumpled sheets, I tip my chin forward, eyeing him through my lashes, tugging on my lip with my teeth.

He snarls, eyes narrowed with warning, but doesn't budge, fisting his hands at his sides.

*Playing difficult today, are we?* I think, biting back a smirk.

It's my favorite game to play—seeing how far I can push him before he pounces and ravages me.

A restrained Nolan, like he is now, is hot as fuck. Don't get me wrong.

But when he snaps, and it's all just teeth and nails and growls vibrating my skin?

Groaning, I clench my toes, giving a little thrust, hips swiveling in the air at the thought.

*Yeah...* Nothing tops that.

“Where are you going?” I ask when he turns suddenly, striding over to the table full of food we just abandoned. Sitting up on my forearms, I watch him with a little frown as he collects the bowl of strawberries.

Still fully clothed he climbs up on the bed, reaching over to set the bowl on the nightstand behind my head. Stretched out half over me, I wiggle, trying to get closer. His scent washes over me—clean and woodsy, mixed with the ever-present sea-salt we just can’t seem to rid ourselves of here.

Not that I’m complaining. I’m hopelessly addicted to all of it.

Lowering onto his side next to me, he rests his head in his hand and brings the other to my face. “Open,” he says, pressing the tip of a strawberry to my lips.

Narrowing my eyes, I do what he says, not taking my eyes off him, curious to see what this is about. I bite off just the tip.

“Don’t pout,” he says huskily. “Let me feed you.”

Something bottoms out low in my belly at that, spreading warmth through my limbs. My pulse kicks up. I feel my eyes flare, and something in his gaze has my lungs stuttering.

I barely taste the fruit, chewing on autopilot.

This...isn’t what I thought he had in mind when he threw me on the bed.

His eyes darken, his pupils expanding, swallowing up the rich greens.

I gulp, swallowing the fruit.

He presses more of the strawberry into my mouth, giving me no choice but to open for him. His sticky knuckles brush my lips where he holds the green leafy part.

This time, my salivary glands fill, and chills race down my neck. I wince, making a face, screwing an eye shut.

Nolan cocks his head, an amused grin pulling at his mouth. “What’s that face?”

He pulls what's left of the chewed off fruit out of my mouth. I chew, working my jaw around, cringing. "Cold."

His shoulders shake with a quiet laugh. "Not a fan?"

I shake my head, forcibly swallowing it down.

He hums, eyes narrowed in thought.

Licking my lips, I suck up the juices, savoring the sweetness. I've always had a love-hate relationship with food. Textures and temperatures can make or break something for me. And if there's one food group that's unpredictable as fuck, it's fruit.

"Roll over."

I blink up at Nolan. There's a wicked gleam in his eye, one that has my deflating cock rising up to attention once more. My breaths quicken.

I must not move fast enough for him, because he pulls back and does it himself with a nudge to my shoulder.

My ass clenches, pants puffing out of my mouth in anticipation. Rolling my head to the side, I watch as he strips off his shirt, before popping open his fly. He reaches for the dresser, grabbing the bottle of lube he bought last week.

*"It's not the weed lube, right?"* I had asked when he showed me last week.

*"The what now?"*

*"I heard there's a guy who makes weed lube on the island. Someone was talking about how they smuggled it over from the resort side."*

Nolan just stared at me long and hard, before finally saying, *"I got this from medical. Condoms too."*

*"Oh."*

Not that we've made any use of the condoms. Not even the lube, really, since Nolan's weirdly possessive and prefers to get me all wet himself.

But he takes it out now, along with a condom packet, and my eyes widen.

*Is he...?* I start to wonder, a mixture of nerves and hope swirling in my belly.

We've been doing this whole friends with benefits thing for two weeks now, and while he's fingered and blown me and eaten me out more times than I can count, we've yet to take this final step.

"*Patience,*" he said when I whined and begged last night. He was three fingers deep, and I was a whining, sobbing mess, arching and writhing and begging for mercy after being edged for what felt like hours.

That's *his* favorite game.

Seeing how long I can last.

Right next to seeing how fast I can bounce back.

It's why he's so insistent on making sure we eat first when we meet up. He knows once we get going, we can't stop. Not that he'll ever hear *me* complaining. Who needs food when you've got a big sexy mountain man to suck and lick and fill you up?

I squirm, rubbing my cock all over the bedding.

A smack rings out, my ass tingling, filling with heat. I suck in a breath.

"None of that," he says.

Nodding jerkily, I blink rapidly, squeezing the sheets near my head.

Fingers brush my brow. Closing my eyes, I inhale deeply, arching into his touch as he drags a thumb lightly over my eyelid, down across my cheek bone, trailing off my jaw.

I feel the bed give, the mattress squeaking as Nolan crawls down to where my feet hang off. He nudges my thighs apart, making room for him to crawl between them.

His hot breath hits my crease and I clench, curling and wiggling my toes, muscles straining in my legs to keep me



from grinding into the bed.

Hands come up to my ass cheeks—the right one still warm and deliciously tingly from where he smacked it.

“Relax for me, baby.”

I do as he says, sucking in a long, deep breath before releasing it in a steady stream. My face heats, knowing he’s looking right at the most vulnerable part of me. It’s nerve-racking, but exhilarating too.

“So pretty and soft for me,” he murmurs, brushing his lips over my quivering hole, his scruff digging into my cheeks. “So pliant.”

A tongue pokes out, circling my entrance.

A guttural groan pushes its way up my throat. I bring my arms around my head, grabbing the closest pillow I can find, gripping it, if only to give my hands something to do.

Nolan’s gentle laps and prodding become more vicious. He sucks and eats at my rim, rubbing his short beard all over me until I’m sure my skin is as pink as my face.

He sits back, squeezing, spreading, and massaging my cheeks, his wild gaze darting all over my ass, inspecting his work.

“Fuck, I’ll never get enough of this pretty ass.”

Moaning, my hips move of their own accord, shoving my steel length deeper into the bed.

“Feel good, baby?” he says, dragging a thick finger down my crack.

Squirming, I nod, and manage to stutter out, “Yes. Please. More.”

Chuckling deeply, wickedly, he gives my hole a little tap. “You want my cock in here?”

“Uh-huh,” I whimper.

“First, I wanna try something, okay?”

Swallowing, I nod. I'll try anything at this point, if it means getting Nolan's fat cock finally inside me.

Leaning over me, he reaches for the nightstand. I crane my neck, straining my gaze to track his movements.

I frown. *What is he doing?*

I watch as he plucks a single strawberry from the bowl, pinching the leafy stem between his fingers. Expecting him to either eat it, or try feeding it to me again, my confusion only grows when he sits back between my legs.

Lifting my head, I turn, watching him through the corner of my eye.

Hungry gaze aimed my way, he smirks knowingly. "Maybe this will help."

My eyes widen when I realize what it is he's about to do.

Spreading my cheeks with one hand, he brings the tip of the strawberry to the cleft of my ass, dragging it down my crack.

I gasp, shuddering at the cool sensation.

Nolan groans deeply in satisfaction. "You're as red as this strawberry." His gaze flits back up. "Those cheeks too. Too much?"

My throat bobs and I give a quick shake of my head. "N-no."

"You'll tell me if it is."

I nod. "Potato."

He arches a brow, mouth quirked. "No, strawberry."

And with that he presses the plush tip of the fruit into my hole.

The air punches out of me and I grab the pillow, biting my fingers into the fabric so hard, it burns, pushing my nails back.

"*Fuckkkk,*" Nolan drags out deeply, teeth gripping his bottom lip.

He wiggles the fruit, working it into my tense hole. It doesn't...hurt exactly, but it feels weird. Funny.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to get my breathing under control. My heart is racing so fast, it feels like there's a stampede kicking at my ribcage. My whole body trembles, muscles rigid from trying to hold still.

I feel wetness hit my crack, sliding down around the strawberry. Nolan's spit.

Chewing the shit out of my lip, I crack my eyes open and crane my neck to see what he's doing. But it's impossible from this angle. All I can do is *feel*.

Nolan spreads my cheek farther apart, using his other hand to drag the strawberry all around my hole, spreading his spit around. His saliva mingles with the sticky wet juices.

"There we go," he mumbles. "Fuck, sweetheart, that's it. Let me in."

I feel the first ring of muscle give around the fruit.

"Don't clench. You don't want to mangle the fruit. Easy..."

My chest expands, shoulders bunching, as it takes everything in me to stay open and relaxed for him. The last thing I'd want is for a strawberry to get lodged in my ass. How embarrassing would that be?

He doesn't go nearly as deep as I crave—thankfully—but still. I need him deep. I need him to fill me. But the slow shallow thrusts of the strawberry are a delicious tease that I feel radiating pleasure down to my toes.

He hums, a low, growly sort of hum, I can just imagine tickling my ear if I were tucked against his chest.

"Fuck, what a sight you are right now. I wish you could see this."

I mewl, sounding more animal than human.

He gives a couple more shallow thrusts, before twisting his grip on the stem, and plunging it as deep as he can without risk

of it breaking off.

Then, abruptly slipping it free of me, he bends down, burying his face between my cheeks, replacing the fruit with his tongue. Sucking the juices from me.

I groan and whine and babble nonsense into the sheet, biting the fabric between my teeth. My eyes burn, like I might be crying. It's...so...much...

Suddenly, he's crawling up next to my head on his knees. "Fucking delicious, sweetheart. Now open up, so you can have a taste."

His heavy, veiny cock bobs up near my face, and my mouth waters. I'm pretty sure there's drool sliding down my chin. Thinking, he means for me to taste his cock, I release the sheet and arch my neck, going to do just that, when a strong calloused hand clutches my jaw, stopping me. Thumbs digging into my cheeks to keep my mouth pried open.

My wet hole quivers and clenches, almost painfully empty now, shivers racketing my spine at the chill.

Nolan brings the strawberry to my lips and my eyes bulge.

His eyes hold a wicked dare, challenging me to say no.

It's filthy, and so, so wrong, and yet my cock aches with how hard I am right now.

"This should be better. Nice and warm now, yeah?" he says thickly, his voice like gravel.

The fruit is softened in a way that isn't horrible. It's not cold anymore either.

His hold on my face eases so I can bite down, right next to where his fingers curve around the leafy top.

His chest rattles with a deep, pleased growl. "Fuckin' hell, sweetheart." His gaze is locked on my mouth as I chew slowly, body on fire. I'm shivering, but I'm blazing—feverish.

This is...

This is on a whole other level.

He shakes his head, almost like he can't believe what he's seeing. He looks utterly enthralled. Spellbound by the way I chew, then gulp down the fruit. "Th-thank you," I whisper, face heating impossibly more.

I'm not sure what possesses me to say it, but I can't find it in me to regret it when Nolan throws his head back, eyes clenched tight, every muscle and tendon on display straining, pulsing in harmony, like his entire body is a fortress, locking down, trying to keep the beast within contained.

Curling onto my side, I take advantage of his momentary distraction, and lift up, licking his heavy balls.

A choked grunt escapes him and I grin, sliding my parted mouth up his long, thick shaft. Feeling the way that heavy vein pulses over my lips. Sweltering heat radiates from his skin, watering my mouth.

"*Skylar,*" he moans, clenching his fists at his sides.

I suck on the fat head, lapping up his pre-cum.

His hand comes around my head, wordlessly urging me to take him deeper.

I widen my mouth as big as it can go, taking the thick, rigid weight of him down my tongue until it hits the back of my throat. I start to gag, and he eases back. My mouth floods, chest heaving as I hold back a cough. His cock slips out, strings of spit clinging to my lips.

Nolan swipes his fingers through the mess, coating them in my saliva.

Bringing it to my hole, he easily slides the tip of a finger in. My body relaxes, giving, welcoming him in my channel.

With his other hand, Nolan guides his cock back to my waiting mouth. "That's it," he murmurs, shallowly fucking my hole with a finger as I suckle on his head. "Get my cock nice and wet for you."

My eyes flare, looking up at him through my lashes.

"God, sweetheart. You like that? You ready to feel a cock in your virgin hole?"

I shudder, bobbing my head up and down his dick in the affirmative. *So, so ready.*

The finger at my entrance dives deeper, and then it's replaced with two.

I lose myself to the sensation of being filled from both ends. His thick cock thrusting in my mouth, and his fingers thrusting in my ass. My body, curves, arching, riding him from both sides.

“Yes, take what you want. Show me how bad you want this cock. How badly you need your little hole to be filled.”

“Umghph,” I choke out around his thick girth.

He squeezes in a third finger, twisting and spreading, getting me all stretched and ready to take him. Neck craned, I stare up at him, begging with my eyes. Telling him I'm ready.

Chin dipped down, hair teasing his shoulders, he gives a little nod. “Yeah, I think you're ready.”

I gasp when his cock slips out of my mouth. Keeping his fingers inside me, he crawls back down between my legs. I feel him watching me—taking in the way my hole sucks at his fingers not unlike how my lips just suckled his dick.

Groaning, he slips them free, and pats his other hand around the bed.

A condom appears between his fingers, and he brings it to his mouth, ripping it open with his teeth.

His gaze flits to mine, black and bottomless. Shivers race through me and he smirks knowingly, wickedly.

“Sit up, baby,” he says huskily. He tosses the wrapper, and with well-practiced ease, slides the condom on.

I scramble to do as he says.

He makes a come hither motion with his fingers as he crawls backward toward the headboard.

“Now plop that pretty ass right here,” he says, patting his lap.

My eyes widen and I gulp.

“You’re gonna ride me.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

---



NOLAN

**T**his boy is gonna be the death of me.

On all fours, he crawls toward my lap, his face tilted down demurely.

A shy, nervous smile teases his lips, his cheeks flushing. He doesn't take his eyes off mine, watching me through those thick, dark lashes.

It comes so naturally to him, and I don't even think he realizes just how sexy he is. How trusting.

We actually talked about it the other day—this dynamic we sort of fell into. He's so new to all of this, and yet I never even checked to see if this is how he wanted it, with me in charge. Sure, he said he wanted me to top. But there's topping...and then there's *this*.

It's a game we slipped into it seamlessly.

He brings out the animal in me, and I bring out the sweet, submissive good boy in him.

It just is what it is, and hell if I really want to question it.

Still, I worried.

His body language is usually pretty damn telling. He's so blatantly responsive in bed, that the second he seems a little uncomfortable or tense—his gaze spacey in a way that is far from the sleepy, satisfied look he gets after he comes—I notice immediately, as if there was a giant red light flashing over his head telling me to stop. Back up. Talk it out.

*"I like it like this,"* he'd said simply. And when I pushed for more, he shrugged, and said, *"I told you, I don't have to be on. It's...nice. You know how to make me feel good. You know better than I do. And you slow down when I need it, without me having to even say a word. You just...know. It's..."*

I remember how his voice trailed off, a troubled look coming over his features before he continued, *"I might not..."*

*like that outside of here, but when it comes to sex, I...think...I need that."*

So ever since then, it's been no holds barred.

If anything, with every new encounter, he's become increasingly more playful—naughty even—like he's testing me, trying to lure out that wild, possessive caveman inside me I never knew was there.

It's never been like this for me either, not that he knows that.

But again, I try not to question it too much.

*Live in the moment.*

My new motto.

Nothing else matters but right now.

Nothing else matters but Skyler throwing a leg over my lap, his smooth flat chest stretched out in front of me. Nothing but those sooty lashes and pouty lips and the flushed cock slapping against my stomach.

Humming, I lean up and press kisses to the hollow of his neck.

"Nolan..."

At his unsure tone, I look up, and cup his cheek. "What's wrong?"

"Maybe...maybe you should get on top. I don't know what I'm doing." The words are uttered quietly, almost forced. His cheeks heat and he looks down.

I frown. "I don't want to hurt you."

He swallows, and near my head, I feel his fingers moving around the headboard restlessly.

I lift his face, ducking my gaze to meet his. "This is just to get you used to me. You can control how fast and how much you take of me this way. Then once you're comfortable..."

Again, he swallows. Nodding, he whispers, "Okay."

My brows knit. “And just ‘cause you’re on top right now, doesn’t mean you’re in charge. You get that right?”

He stills. His eyes flit up to mine, lips parting.

I arch a brow and reach around him gripping his ass with enough force to shove him forward, punching a gasp from his chest. The headboard smacks the wall, his arms bowing out—he catches himself just before he can fall.

“This hole is mine,” I growl, tapping it with my middle finger. “And I’m letting you borrow it, because I don’t trust myself not to slam into you the second I feel your tight channel squeeze around my cock.”

Eyes flaring, he gives me a jerky nod.

“You’re going to go slow, and take me inch by inch, so your body can adjust and I don’t tear something.”

His throat bobs. “Okay,” he whispers.

I pinch his cheeks together, pushing his lips out, at the same time I slide my other hand toward his crack. “Grab the lube, baby.” I nod to where the bottle rolled next to my hip. Releasing his face, I tell him, “And push up on your knees.”

He does as I say, releasing the headboard. His cock bobs inches from my face, so while he uncaps the lube, I lean forward, sucking that delectable head into my mouth.

His body shudders, stomach clenching. That pretty V leading down to his juicy cock standing out glaringly with his little thrust into my mouth.

Pulling off his cock, I remove my hand from his ass and hold it out for him. “Get my fingers all wet.”

His cheeks redden impossibly more, and I bite back a groan as he pours the lube directly onto my fingers.

Curling them so it doesn’t spill, I quickly bring them back around to his crease, and spread it around his hole. He’s still soft and pliant from before, so it takes hardly any effort at all to sink two then three fingers back inside him.

A guttural groan crawls up from deep within his chest. He grinds back on my fingers, urging them deeper.

“Yeah, I think you’re ready,” I say, easing them out.

I have him pump a little more lube into my palm than gesture for him to toss it. Reaching around him, I coat my dick, and give his tip one last kiss.

Holding my cock in one hand, I grip his waist in the other, and start guiding him back. He clenches my shoulders with bruising force when my crown bumps his crease.

I tap it a couple times, before dragging it back and forth over his hole, getting him used to me.

“A-are you nervous?” he whispers.

I frown, meeting his gaze.

“It’s your first time too,” he says, his jaw ticking from how tightly he holds himself.

My eyes widen when I realize what he means.

I don’t know why it didn’t even occur to me before, but he’s...right. It *is* my first time...with a man.

I give him a small smile, and shake my head. “No, sweetheart. I’m not. I trust you.”

Something seems to settle in his glassy brown eyes, his features softening, and he nods. “I trust you too.”

With that, he starts sitting back, and I suck in a breath, bracing myself, holding my cock right at his entrance as he starts to sink down.

My neck muscles strain—chest expanding with my trapped breath.

All I can do is hold still as Skyler slowly but surely eases back on my cock.

His arms tremble, fingers biting into my shoulders. But I hardly notice. All I feel is unbearable pressure, and the hottest heat I’ve ever goddamn felt in my life.

“*Christ,*” I hiss through my teeth.

Skyler bites down on his lip, eyes closed, brow furrowed in deep concentration.

The urge to lean forward, and pry his lip from his teeth with my own is strong, but I resist.

We don't do that.

We don't kiss.

As if by some unspoken agreement, it's the one line we know we can't cross.

Skyler takes a little bit more of me, his chest rising and falling in short, uneven pants. His ass sits against my knuckles—my fist around my base all that's keeping him from fully seating himself on my cock.

“Nolan,” he utters near-soundlessly.

Easing my hand away, he clenches around me, chest heaving, muscles straining.

I slip my fingers up his chest, curling my palm around his neck, and I bring his forehead to mine.

His lips part, and for a long moment we just breathe, sharing oxygen.

I smooth my other hand over his waist, massaging my thumb into his silky soft skin. “You feel so good,” I tell him, my voice breaking.

He blinks heavily back at me, and it feels like there's a boulder sitting on my chest.

Forcing a thick, rippling swallow, I murmur, “Okay?”

His face tightens and he nods. “Yeah. J-just...a lot. Don't...stop.”

Nodding, I slide my hand over to his cock, stroking him, teasing him. I swipe my thumb over his tip, smearing around his arousal.

“I won't. Take as long as you need. I'm not going anywhere,” I say thickly.

He sucks in a sharp breath, and his cock twitches, hardening to full-mast once more.

I hum, pressing my mouth over his jaw. Rubbing my nose in his cheek, I stroke my fingers down his shaft and murmur, “You like that? You’re so hard for me, baby. You’re taking my cock so well.”

“You’re inside me,” he murmurs in wonder.

“I am.”

He whimpers, his breaths quickening. Against my chin, his pulse hammers away at his skin. I drag my lips lower, so I can feel it flutter against my mouth.

“That’s it,” I murmur against his skin. Slowly, shakily, he relaxes, sinking down another thick inch. “God, you’re so tight. So hot. I’ve never felt anything like it.”

I feel his wince, and stroke his cock. His arm. His shoulder. I touch him all over, breathing encouragement into his neck.

His whole body trembles, and it’s taking everything in me not to thrust up inside him.

I tip my head back, peering up at him. His brow is wrinkled with obvious discomfort, and he’s baring his teeth, shaking his head.

*Shit.* Brushing my thumb over his brow, I start to say, “Hey \_\_\_”

“More?”

“What?”

“M-more. Move. Something,” he gasps. “*Please,*” he whines, squirming.

Growling, I wrap my hands under his ass, getting a good grip, and I give a little testing thrust just as he relaxes completely, allowing me to plunge the rest of the way inside him.

My mouth opens against his hot flesh in a silent gasp, and I freeze.

He freezes.

My hands are splayed wide around his clenched cheeks, flexing, unsure what to do.

I'm inside him—all the way—so deep, there's nowhere else for either of us to go.

He starts to tremble, and then a moan scrambles up from deep within his throat. I feel it, and then I hear it—filling the room.

Not a sound of protest, but a sound of agonized pleasure.

A sound that has a direct line to my throbbing balls.

*Jesus, this is going to be over fast.*

“Baby, I'm gonna move now,” I grit out.

“Please!” he whimpers loudly, fingers clawing at my hair, my shoulders, the bed, whatever he can reach.

Rather than let him ride me like I originally planned, I grip his ass, plant my feet on the bed, and fuck up into him, using his body like my very own personal cock sleeve.

“Nolan!” he shouts, slumping over me.

We're chest to chest, his cock sandwiched between us.

I start off with slow, shallow thrusts—his hole gripping me so tight, it's a miracle I can move at all.

Whimpers fill the air, intermingled with my harsh grunts and growled praises.

“So good, fuck, baby so good,” I mumble roughly, words spilling out unbidden.

Skyler's nails dig into my scalp, and his back arches as he starts rolling against my body, grinding his cock into my stomach. Pre-cum leaves a wet, sticky mess all over me, and fuck, if that isn't the hottest damn thing.

Slowly, but surely, Skyler starts fucking back on my cock, moving with me rather than just taking it. And as hot as that was, this is infinitely more sexy—feeling him writhe over me, gasping and pleading and taking what he needs from me.

My thrusts slow, and I grip his waist, peeling him off my chest.

He sits back, shoulders curved, chest damp and mottled pink from where my chest hair rubbed him raw.

I reach up, pinching a ruby-red nipple in my fingers, eliciting a sharp gasp.

“Fuck me, sweetheart. Ride my cock. Make yourself feel good.”

Moaning, he throws his head back, and grips my shoulder, swiveling his ass deliciously around my cock.

My chest heaves, choked groans clawing from my lips.

I bring my hand to my mouth and spit in my palm, and then clasp his hard, sticky cock, stroking him.

He shudders, whimpering, pleading, half-sobbing for release.

I twist at his base. “You gonna come for me? You gonna come on my cock?”

He nods jerkily, eyes screwed shut.

Wetting my lips, I bring my thumb up and suck it in my mouth, then smear it over his pebbled nipple.

“No!

“That’s it,” I growl, twisting his cock at the base at the same time I pinch his nipple. My balls draw up, and I shake my head, mash my teeth, and thrust up inside him. “Fuck, I’m close too. Come for me, sweetheart. Come all over me.”

He tenses, head thrown back so far, I can make out each straining tendon in his neck. His hole clenches, strangling my cock, and I just—

“FUCK!” I roar, slamming up deep inside him just as cum shoots from Skyler’s tip, arcing over my chest, hitting me in the chin.

My cock pulses inside him just as I tumble off the edge after him.



I'm barely aware of him flopping over me, his body quaking as more cum spills over my stomach. Fingers twisting in my hair. Whimpers and moans and pleas filling my ear.

I wrap my arms around him, and thrust up inside him once, twice, then a third time.

Hot pants pull along my neck. We're caked in sweat and cum, plastered together.

Reaching behind him, I ease my cock out.

He whimpers, and I hush him, quickly, removing the condom. I fumble to tie it off, and then I quickly shove two fingers in his stretched out hole.

He's so warm, so soft.

He sighs, and my swallow goes down like gravel.

With my free hand, I cup the back of his head, massaging my fingers in his hair.

"Are you okay?"

He hums, and a short, breathless laugh escapes me.

Pulling his head out from where he hides it in my neck, I lean back to meet his hooded eyes.

"Did I break you?"

His cheeks pink, and he gives his head a little shake.

Wetting his lips, he opens his mouth as if to finally say something, when his gaze drops to my chin. His eyes widen, and then a curious finger comes up, swiping at the wetness I forgot was there.

His brown eyes collide with mine, and I smirk.

Hunger flares his features, his eyes darkening.

*Jesus.*

Grabbing his hand, I guide his finger to his mouth, shoving the tip between his pouty, red lips. He's been chewing the hell out of them, and fuck, if my chest doesn't clench at the thought of sucking that pliant flesh in my mouth.

I want to soothe it with my tongue.

I want to taste him.

Instead, I watch as he tastes *himself*—lapping at his cum dripping from my finger like it's his favorite treat.

A deep-chested groan vibrates my chest, and I curl my fingers inside him.

He stiffens, eyes rounding.

“Sore?”

He swallows, ducking his head away from my finger. “Maybe a little. But I like it.”

My brows spike at that.

“It was weird at first,” he says slowly, softly, as if he’s testing out the words. “More pressure than anything, but I...I liked it. A lot. It felt...secure.”

And there goes that tightening in my chest again.

Forcing a swallow, I brush back some of his sweaty, messy hair.

He ducks his head even further, whispering in the space between our sticky chests. “Is that weird?”

Slipping my fingers free, I roll him onto his back and lean up over him.

I thumb his chin and peer down at those rich brown eyes, and I shake my head. “No. It’s not weird.”

He smiles thinly and looks away like maybe he doesn’t believe it.

“Hey. Sky, look at me.”

His throat works with a swallow, but finally he meets my gaze, wariness and something else I can’t make out flickering back at me.

“Nothing about what you want or need is weird,” I say gruffly.

That boulder in my chest turns jagged, scraping along my insides.

“You’re perfect. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. If they do, then they’re wrong, and you don’t need that kind of bullshit in your life.”

He coughs a wet laugh. “You...you can’t say stuff like that?”

I scowl. “Why not?”

“Well, for one, perfection doesn’t exist.”

I roll my eyes.

“And two...” This time, his words cut off, trailing pointedly.

A lump forms in my throat, and I avert my gaze somewhere over his head.

*Right.*

“So...was it okay for you?” he says, changing the subject.

I cut him a look as if to say, *What do you think?*

His mouth twists into a small smile and he looks away.

Scooting out from under him, I head for the bathroom and wet a washcloth with warm water.

Skyler’s curled up on side when I return, head pillowed on his arms. His gaze follows me as I crawl around him. Spreading his cheeks, I cast a quick, sweeping look over his hole, then press the warm rag over him.

He inhales sharply, tensing, but only for a moment, before sighing, all but sinking into the mattress.

Chuckling quietly, I say, “So, do you think this counts for Dr. Maddock?”

He stills.

Wide brown eyes dart to me.

I shrug, holding back a smirk.

Grabbing the pillow, he throws it at my face.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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SKYLER

“Great. Another cave.”

Nolan cuts me a funny look. “Didn’t see you complaining last time.”

“Last time, I was a little preoccupied. You know, by almost dying and all that.”

“And all that,” he mocks, but I don’t miss the flash of tightness in his eyes, as if he’s remembering. But he’s quick to shove it back. “Is that what I am to you?” he teases.

I give him a funny look. “You say it like it’s a bad thing.”

His brow knits. Then he nods. “Yeah, you’re right. I am all that.”

A bark of laughter escapes me, echoing off the surrounding rocks. Shaking my head, I can’t help but stare. Fireworks and warning bells shooting off in the back of my head, creating a complicated mess.

“What?”

I shrug. “I don’t know, you’re just...different.”

“Different?” he grunts.

“I mean, you’re still you, all grumpy and serious and *rawr*, me Tarzan, you Jane.”

His brow spikes. “Jane?” He looks me up and down. “I don’t see no Jane around here.” His voice lowers, gaze darkening. “Definitely didn’t see no Jane yesterday.”

My cheeks flush at the memory of him fucking me for the first time. “You get the point.”

He twists his lips, nodding.

After we got cleaned up yesterday, we heated up our breakfast and brought it out on his patio to eat. Afterward, we spent the day watching movies in his bed, just...hanging out. I was sore, as expected, so save for a quick exchange of blow

jobs before I had to go back to my room, it was the first time we really spent more than a few hours together *not* having sex.

Today, while still a little achy, I was hoping for a round two.

Instead, I found Nolan waiting for me outside his bungalow with a familiar backpack and a smirk.

As it would turn out, despite his jokes, he *was* serious yesterday when he said he thought he could help me with my assignment for therapy. But he's being frustratingly hush-hush about whatever it is he has planned.

Which brings us here...

"Anyway...as I was saying." I pause. Nerves threaten to steal what I have to say next. But I power on. "You just seem, I don't know..." I huff, shaking my head. "Lighter." *Dr. Maddock said the same thing about me...*

But I don't tell him that.

Frowning, I stare off in thought. A prickle of awareness scratching at the back of my mind. Now it's just all warning blares and *Alert, Alert, Alert*, rather than fireworks.

Knocking our shoulders together, Nolan pulls me from my thoughts. "It's all the orgasms. We're practically floating."

I chuckle, rubbing the back of my neck. "Yeah, probably." I hear the change in my tone even to my own ears.

Fortunately, Nolan either ignores it or doesn't notice.

"Come on," he says, brushing past me to lead the way.

Whereas last time, we had to crouch to enter through the wide, but low entrance, this time we have to turn sideways, but at least the ceiling is well above our heads.

"Is this safe?" I find myself whispering as I follow him inside.

"Yeah. See that green flag over there?" he says pointing to a ribbon flapping around a stick against the far wall. "It means someone inspected it and cleared it."

I frown, darting nervous glances around the narrow, almost tunnel-like structure. Definitely no room to lay down and get frisky in here.

*Pity.*

My ass clenches, throbbing, remembering I'm still likely out of commission, if Nolan has anything to say about it.

*Even more of a pity.*

Despite the ache, I can't wait for more.

*Maybe later...*

"Really? Who?" I say distractedly, reminding myself to focus.

"Me."

All thoughts of jumping his bones forgotten, I snap my head forward. I can barely make out his figure, it's so dark in here.

I think he shrugs. "I had a lot of time to kill and restless energy to burn when I first got here, so I explored much of the surrounding woods and caves," he explains.

There's a clicking, and then light. Turning toward me, he holds a plastic BIC lighter between us, the flame flickering, bathing the cave in dancing shadows. But at least I can see him now.

His phone never recovered, despite having soaked it for a couple days in some dry rice he managed to get from the kitchen staff. He hasn't seemed too put out about it at least, and reminded me he can just use the front desk to check in with Mel.

"Where'd you get that?" I wonder.

"From a guy."

I scowl. "What guy?"

He arches me a look. "Jealous?"

I know he's just teasing, but my skin flashes hot and I have to look away before he sees.

A throat clears, and then in my periphery I see him gesturing around him with his free hand. “It was kind of my thing back home. Did it as a kid, then as I got older. Had an uncle who was a park ranger, and he taught me all he knew about hiking safety. What to look for as far as structural integrity goes when exploring caves.”

He blows out a breath, cutting me a look. “You never know when you might get stranded and need to take shelter. Best to make sure you find somewhere not at risk of collapsing on you while you’re sleeping.”

My eyes widen as I process that.

“Here,” he says, waving the lighter over where there’s another opening. One leading into pitch black nothing.

I shake my head. “Nol...”

“It’s okay,” he says. Our gazes meet and he nods encouragingly. “Just trust me.”

*There’s that phrase again.*

Except it’s one thing when we’re naked, in the confines of his bungalow, and my body’s at his mercy.

It’s another out here in the open when I’m fully dressed, and no longer drowning in pleasure, desperate and willing to do just about anything.

“Sky, I wouldn’t take you here if it wasn’t safe,” he says in a grave tone that leaves no argument.

Swallowing thickly, I nod, and head toward the break in the walls.

This time, it’s definitely a tunnel. Nolan grips my shoulder, keeping me ahead of him. Remembering I actually brought my phone this time—at Nolan’s insistence, seeing as we should probably have one with us that works—I flip on the flashlight so we can see better.

I can feel his breaths on the back of my head, teasing down my neck and shoulder. It’s hot in here—muggy—the air stale. It’s a narrow fit, the walls brushing my shoulders every few feet.



“N-Nol—”

“Almost there,” he rushes out, giving me an encouraging squeeze. “I promise, it’ll be worth it.”

Chest on fire, I have to remind myself I can breathe. Nolan would never take me somewhere he didn’t think was safe—he just said so. He’d never risk it. I know this, I *know* this.

It’s funny though.

I never used to fear the dark, or confined places...

As we walk, my mind drifts back to a time when I was maybe four or five, when I ran away during a party my parents were throwing for their rich snobby friends.

Everyone kept looking at me, and asking my parents what was wrong with me when I wouldn’t talk or meet their gaze. Finally, they gave up, and I got what I wanted—I was invisible. Even my parents seemed to no longer care where I was or what I was doing.

So I left.

Walked right out the front door.

Found my way through the garden, and into the woods, and found a big hole in the tree, like something out of *Winnie the Pooh*.

It was dark, small, but quiet. And all mine.

I loved it.

I felt safe.

So I fell asleep there. Woke up hours later, with the moon high in the sky. Figuring my parents were looking for me, worried I’d be in trouble, I hiked my way back home. I got turned around a bit, but eventually I saw the strung-up fairy lights, and found my way back to the garden.

It didn’t even occur to me no one was yelling for me. Nobody was outside looking around frantically. No flashing red and blue lights like I’ve seen in the movies.

The door was locked, so I banged my fist on it. Over and over and over again until finally, my nanny and one of the cleaning staff—I didn't know her name—opening the door, gasping down at me.

*“Your parents said you went to bed!”* my nanny had blurted in a hush.

Rushing me inside, they fetched blankets and made me some hot chocolate.

I didn't realize I was shivering...

Frowning, I shake off the memory when there's a squeeze of my shoulders, drawing me back to the cave.

I haven't thought about that night in years. My parents never even knew I ran away from the party. Didn't even think to check to see if I was in my room, just assumed.

My chest aches, and I rub a fist over it.

“Look,” Nolan says softly. “We're almost there.”

Blinking up ahead, I see a faint light streaming in where the tunnel abruptly cuts off.

A few more steps, then a sharp turn, and—

*Oh. Wow.*

My eyes widen taking in the cavernous room. In the center, there's what looks to be a small pond glittering under the light coming from the hole in the ceiling a good twenty feet above.

Scattered around the space are mostly rocks and sticks, but a few random odds and ends too, like torches strewn about the ground. A lantern that looks to have been shattered. A couple plastic bottles and grocery bags.

Roots grow along the walls. There's some foliage, mostly where the sun hits.

“How deep is that?” I wonder, eyeing the still water.

“Not deep at all. Few inches maybe. I'm sure it gets deeper when it rains. Hell the whole place probably floods, but see that?”

I follow his finger to where he points at a jagged hollow space carved out in the wall.

“I’m thinking it drains out of there. Cool, huh? Like a hidden waterfall in the rocks.”

Nodding vaguely, I say, “Yeah, cool.”

And it is.

This is like something you’d see in a movie, like *Indiana Jones*. I half-expect to turn around and see a giant boulder rolling toward me.

“It’s not gonna rain today, right?” I say worriedly.

Nolan chuckles. “If it is, not anytime soon. We won’t stay long.” Leaving my side, he turns off his flashlight and makes his way toward the...well, puddle, I guess. His boots squelch and splash when he stomps toward the middle and throws his head back to gaze up at the sky peeking in from above.

Like always, he’s in his standard ripped, faded jeans and thin white tee. His tanned arms glisten with a fine sheen of sweat, making his tattoos look startlingly dark against his skin.

He’s pulled his hair back in a knot, but strands have slipped out hanging all around his face. Tucking them behind his ears, he tips his head back and inhales deeply.

And then he screams.

My eyes bug and I flinch, looking around, half-expecting animals or even the Black Diamond security to swarm on him. Not that I’ve *seen* many security personnel, save for that morning we were rescued, but they have to be around.

“Nolan!” I whisper harshly when his ragged shout fades, leaving only rippling echoes.

He glances over his shoulder, grinning cockily. Brow arched. “You gonna join me or what?”

I look around. “Join you in what?”

“Screaming. Obviously.”

“Why?”

He shrugs. “Why not? It’s good to let it out sometimes.”

Something squeezes in my chest, and I shake my head.

“Sky. Sweetheart. Come here.”

Sucking in my cheek, I slowly join him in the water. My sneakers instantly fill, flooding my socks, but I barely notice.

Nolan brushes my hair back, eyeing my face with a look I can’t quite decipher. I feel my pulse quicken, and I get the sudden urge to turn around, and bolt.

“You said your assignment is to do something you normally wouldn’t, out of fear of getting in trouble. Right?”

Frowning, I nod. *Where is he going with this?*

Coming behind me, he clutches my shoulders, bringing my back right against his chest. I sense him tip his head back, and then he does it again—screaming raggedly up into the cave, his voice booming, echoing over and over and over again.

I shiver in his arms. Tingles crawl up my spine.

“Come on,” he pants. “Do it. I know you want to. Let it out.”

He screams again, louder if possible. His voice breaks, pitches, but he doesn’t stop.

That weird feeling in my chest intensifies. I can’t explain it—can’t explain why I feel so...unsure all of a sudden. Scared, even.

Not of him. Never of him.

It’s something...else.

His hand presses against my chest. I can feel his heart thumping against my back.

“Scream, Skyler,” he orders softly, firmly, in that tone I’ve come to recognize. One that never fails to make me weak in the knees.

My jaw quivers and I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

Tears sting my eyes.

*Why...*

*Why is this so hard?*

He just wants me to scream. People scream all the time. Babies wail like it's nothing without a care in the world.

*Because you were never allowed to... a voice reminds me.*

Memories flash across my mind—all the times I was berated and stared at and locked in my room when I'd get overwhelmed. All the times I just wanted to let this thing inside me out, but I couldn't, not in any way that was acceptable.

*Words, Skyler, use your words.*

*You're acting like a child.*

*No one's going to take you seriously if you're throwing a fit. Get yourself under control.*

I seal my eyes shut, shaking my head, and Nolan's holding me tighter, shaking *me*.

I try to get away, but he doesn't let me. In my ear, he barks, "Scream, Sky! *Scream!*"

So I do.

It starts off, quiet, broken—a whine dragged out from somewhere deep inside me. My thoughts are loud. Too loud. Memory after memory barreling through me.

And the world seems brighter than it should be. Hot and cold at the same time. Everything becomes too much.

*I'm slipping...*

"That's it," he huffs hotly in my ear, breaths choppy. "Let it the fuck out."

My face bunches, neck straining. Teeth mashing as more guttural sounds rip up my throat, tearing me apart.

"Scream, Sky!"

And I explode.

He releases me, giving me a wide berth.

My throat burns, jaw aching with how loud, and forceful it tears out of me. Bouncing off the walls until it's a pulsing, resounding cacophony of sound, not unlike the crackling war of lightning and thunder.

I'm vaguely aware of Nolan's heavy steps fading, but he doesn't leave.

Head thrown back, hands fisted at my sides, I stop thinking—stop worrying—and I just...give in.

For the first time since I was a kid and didn't know better, I don't *try* to get myself under control. I don't hold back. I just do what Nolan said and let it all out in a fury of ragged, searing screams.

Gone is rational thought. Gone is worry that someone will hear me and come to investigate.

Gone is everything but this.

I scream and I scream and I scream until I'm gasping, stumbling back, falling on my ass, curled up, face buried in my knees. Next to me, I feel around, seeking...

There. A rock.

I chuck it across the cave.

Then I find more, scraping up anything I can find—sand, dirt, rocks, weeds—throwing it as hard as I can.

Again.

Again.

And again.

Until my arms hurt. My hands ache.

And then Nolan's there, gripping my wrists, kneeling in front of me. "Easy," he says.

Seething through my teeth, I glare at a spot on his chest.

"It's okay."

*But it's not.*

I yank my wrists free and fist my hands, covering my ears. Pressing, pressing, until there's a loud whooshing, and nothing else.

I'm vaguely aware of Nolan sitting back, pulling his knees up, mirroring me.

I hunch down deeper into myself, curling and flexing my toes in my sneakers to keep myself from rocking.

*This is so fucking embarrassing. He just wanted us to scream and let loose, and I can't even do that right.*

After a long, indeterminable amount of time—could be minutes, could be an hour—a denim-clad leg hooks around my ankles, tugging my knees away from my chest.

I realize I've stopped trembling, and sounds have started to filter in now that I'm no longer blocking my ears so tightly.

I blink a couple times, reorienting myself.

"Feel better?" Nolan murmurs after a moment.

I give a little nod, still avoiding his gaze. My cheeks are warm, but it no longer feels like someone's holding me over a fire.

Lowering my hands, I wring them together, flexing, and cracking my knuckles.

Knees bump against mine, and then fingers find my chin.

I shrug away, say, "No," but he's determined. Pushy. And for some reason, because it's *him*, it doesn't bother me.

Why? I have no idea. If it was anyone else...

*Not good.*

I snap my gaze up to his out of pure spite, and his widen.

"Why'd you do that?" I whisper harshly.

He frowns, shaking his head, clearly not sure what I mean.

I wave a hand at the surrounding cave, and shrug, unsure even how to clarify. *Why'd you make me scream?* just seems silly. Stupid. I know why he did, but I don't think he knew just how...well, triggering it would be for me.

*I didn't either...*

“I fucked up,” he says, searching my eyes. “Shit, Sky, I’m so sorry.”

I scrunch up my face and look away, staring aimlessly around the room. I don’t even know if that’s what it is—I don’t know how I feel, or rather how to explain it. The words just aren’t there, and it makes me want to punch something.

“I just thought...” He trails off, muttering curses under his breath. Then, more strongly, he says, “You’re so different when we’re in my bungalow. So free. But outside of it...It just got me thinking.”

My brow furrows, and I cock my head, curious. “Thinking about what?”

“Well, for one, given what you told me about your parents, and the schools you got sent to, I figured you never really got to...let go much. Be angry, without being punished for it.” He pauses meaningfully. “You’re so strung tight sometimes, like you’re...holding so much in, and I just wanted to give you a chance to finally let it out. *Without* repercussions.”

I nod. “Screaming.”

“Well, yeah. I mean, it’s a good start.” Again, he pauses. Sighing, he says softer this time, “It’s something I did growing up. My uncle and I. He’d take me hiking, and we’d find a cave, and just...scream. It felt good.”

I frown.

“I don’t know what just happened,” he says in a hush, his voice gentle, “but I’m listening, if you want to tell me. Or we can forget all about this stupid idea, and go do something else. I never meant to make it worse. I thought—”

Shaking my head, I finally turn, meeting his gaze head-on. “Screaming’s never really worked out well for me.”

He nods, which duh, he knows this.

My lips thin, and I study him more closely, debating how much I want to tell him.



“It didn’t just start with Canaan,” I say slowly, measuring each word carefully. “But Canaan...they made it worse.”

He frowns, nodding some more, telling me it’s okay, encouraging me to keep going.

So I take a big, deep breath, and start from the beginning.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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NOLAN

“It’s like there’s a storm inside me,” he says quietly, his voice forced.

His gaze pings to me, then away.

“Sometimes, it’s quiet,” he goes on. “Easy to tune out. But other times...” He blows out a breath and looks down at his hands, frowning at whatever he’s seeing. “Other times, it’s like I *become* the storm. It just.. it consumes me—the real me—and I’m...lost to it.”

My brow knits together at what he’s saying.

He sucks in his cheek, twisting his head to the side. “On the beach that day, I told you it’s like an itch, one I can’t scratch, and when I get like that...” He trails off.

“You erupt. And you can’t control it,” I whisper, remembering.

He nods. “Yeah. Sometimes it’s noises, like if there’s too much all going on at once, and it’s going in all different directions.”

I rear back slightly at that—at the way he words it.

He starts tapping his foot. “Sometimes it’s more of a feeling, like...like my feelings are a glass and it’s shattered, and I can’t catch all the pieces—I can’t contain them—so I just sort of...” He spreads his hands. “Boom.”

I nod, though I’m a little confused. But I let him speak, knowing, somehow, he’s never really had to explain it before.

Or maybe no one ever asked him to.

“When I was six, they thought it could be autism,” he says. Shrugging, he flits me a look I can’t place, “But I...passed or whatever, I don’t know. So then it was ADHD, which makes sense. It just...” He hangs his head, shaking it. “It didn’t account for *everything*, you know? And ADHD meds barely helped as far as the sensory issues go. Or if something didn’t

go as planned.” A beat passes, then, “I used to get really destructive, violent even. I’d...hurt myself too.”

My eyes widen, and I tip my head back, nodding, processing this.

“So then they moved on to mood disorders and behavior disorders and things like that. But, like I told you at the beach, it’s not an anxiety attack. I’m not...scared, or angry, or sad—well, I am, I do feel all of those things, but they’re not the source of it. And that’s what people don’t seem to understand. They think they know, and it’s so...so frustrating, because they refuse to listen. I just get so—”

“Overwhelmed,” I finish softly.

I lower my head to find him nodding. “Yeah. And it’s a physical thing too, not just mental. Like my thoughts...they genuinely *hurt* when they get that loud. And then it spreads, and it’s external stuff, too, that hurts, stuff that shouldn’t hurt. Someone’s voice will pitch in a way that feels like a knife scraping over my brain, my bones, my skin... Same when it gets too cold, or too hot, usually unexpectedly. When everything just gets too...much, it hurts me.”

“So, it’s like sensory overload?” I say.

He looks up at me, eyes widening like he’s relieved I got it, and he nods. “Exactly. But it’s also the unpredictability. Like if I know I’m going somewhere that is going to be loud and chaotic—or if I know something’s about to happen that will hurt, like getting a shot—it’s as if my brain prepares itself and puts up a wall making it bearable. I can turn it off. But if it comes out of nowhere... It’s like my body just glitches out.”

“And the screaming?” I wonder, frowning.

He shrugs. “Like you said, I was always punished for... well, feeling. Everyone always just wanted to fix me, and make it go away, so I just...I never felt like I was allowed to really let it out. And...” his voice trails off and he looks around the room at a loss. “I think it just triggered some stuff, more than anything. And the more anxious I feel, the worse my sensory issues become.”

*Well, shit.* Now I feel like an ass.

And then something occurs to me.

“Your injuries...What happened at the bridge...” My brow furrows, and I shake my head. “You were in pain.”

As if knowing where I’m going with this, he nods. “Physical pain is...different. It’s confusing, more than anything. I don’t really know how to explain it. What *should* hurt...doesn’t always.” He pauses, glancing at me as if to gauge whether or not I understand.

I nod, encouraging him to keep going.

I can’t say I *do* understand, but I don’t want him to stop talking. I want to understand this.

“Like, I still *feel* it,” he continues, “but I don’t always know where it’s coming from, or...or how to explain it...so that can be stressful. Sometimes it feels like it’s coming from everywhere all at once. Which is okay, if it’s bearable. Like... as long as it’s a steady, dull ache that doesn’t really change, I can sort of just...ignore it, you know?”

Again, I find myself nodding.

“It’s not like a noise I can turn off, or a food I can just throw out. It’s just...”—he waves a hand—“there.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

He ducks his head again, shrugging. “I guess.” He pauses. “That time I burnt myself...I didn’t understand. So I just kept...grabbing things nearby. A glass. A dish. The utensils by the stove.” He peeks up at me. “I-I didn’t know what else to do.”

I frown.

“That’s why Mother was so mad when she found me. She heard me screaming and breaking stuff while she was on an important phone call.”

I clench my hands into fists, remembering what he told me on the beach that day. “You were *hurt*.”

He blinks rapidly, lifting a shoulder. “Yeah, she saw that, eventually.” His gaze flits away.

*He was just a child...*

“I’m...better about that now, mostly.”

“Better about what?” I say tightly.

“Pain.”

*Jesus.*

“I-I-I just mean, I know where it’s coming from,” he quickly clarifies. “I know it’s the brain responding to a stimulus—a signal indicating something’s not right.” He nods strongly. “It calms me. Knowing what it is. Makes it easier to act like everyone else.”

My brows fly up at that.

He notices, winces, and brings his knees to a chest. But he doesn’t elaborate. And I don’t push him to.

I sit up a little straighter, and clear my throat before speaking. “You said it didn’t start with Canaan, but they made it worse.”

He starts nodding, and flashes me a look almost like he’s grateful for the subject change.

“I actually was doing pretty well before I went there. I was utilizing the coping skills I was taught, and working really hard to manage my...issues.”

I frown at that, not liking the sound of that. Something about all of this—how his problems were handled—it just... rubs me wrong. He was a kid for fuck’s sake.

Skyler doesn’t seem to notice my reaction, so he keeps going. “But then...an incident happened.” He winces and looks away again, fiddling with his fingers. “Ahead of my senior year, I begged my parents to let me go to a normal school.”

My eyes slide shut, and I shake my head, inwardly cursing the shit out of those assholes.

“And since it’d been years since I’d had a really bad outburst, they decided to give me a chance. We thought—*they* thought—I was fixed.”

*Jesus Christ, the more I learn, the more I hate those people.*

“I made it about two months, I think. Um, I didn’t exactly fit in, and...well, I was just way out of my depth. It was stressful, and I’d stopped taking my medication because I didn’t like how fuzzy it made my head. I couldn’t focus in class, and the classes were a lot harder there. I wanted to do well.”

Chewing the inside of my cheek, I glare up at some distant spot in the cave wall.

“Well, to make an already long story short, I snapped one day. Someone bumped into me—accidentally, I was told, but who knows? It’s not like it made a difference.” He sighs roughly and kicks his foot at the ground. “Their tray of food spilled all over me. It was...gross. There was just...” He wrinkles his nose, face bunching. “So much...” Shaking his head, he starts tapping his foot.

Reaching over, I clasp his knee.

He stills, and a moment later, his gaze swings to mine.

I nod, silently reassuring him I’m here, it’s okay.

“I broke the kid’s nose,” he says roughly. “I don’t even remember doing it. I just... snapped. Then I...proceeded to just sort of...” He waves a hand. “Destroy everything. Trays. Food. Tables. I-I don’t even remember.”

“The storm,” I whisper, remembering what he called it. I’m beginning to sense a pattern.

He meets my gaze and nods grimly. “Yes.”

Understanding moves through me, settling in my bones like lead. “So they kicked you out, and you got sent to Canaan.”

Another nod.

Scowling, I look away, eyes darting unseeingly around the room.

“It wasn’t that bad at first,” he says softly. “It was just like any other private boarding school, but it was more religious, so there was like mandatory church and stuff. But it wasn’t, like, that big of a deal.”

The more he speaks, the heavier I feel, just knowing it’s about to get a whole lot worse.

“And then they roomed me with Adam.”

I still.

“He was a grade below me, but we shared a couple electives together, and I didn’t really question it, because... people got reassigned rooms all the time. His old roommate left, so they bunked us together. And he was...nice... friendly...” His voice trails off, and when I glance over, I find him chewing his lip, his gaze staring far-off at something I can’t see. “He befriended me.”

My brows slam down on my eyes.

His jaw quivers, and if I’m not mistaken his eyes are glassier than they were a moment ago.

“I thought he liked me. He was always doing nice things for me, and waiting for me after my classes. He didn’t have any friends either, and it just...it didn’t occur to me to ask why.”

Pinching the bridge of my nose between my fingers, I remember what he said back when we first got together...

*“He just wasn’t who I thought he was, and it...it was shit after. After, okay? Not during.”*

“He tricked me. It was...all a set-up.”

Slowly, I lower my hand and look up.

Skyler’s rolling his lips together, working his jaw around, like he’s trying to keep the emotions at bay.

“Sky...”



“His dad—or step-dad, rather—was one of the pastors there. Head Pastor actually. And he-he had them take me down to the basement.” He gulps and glances at me. “There was... like...a whole other program happening down there. A school within a school.”

I shake my head. “You don’t have to talk about it.”

His eyes crease, his gaze growing distant. Hazy. “They put me in a dark room for...weeks, I think. Like a prison cell.”

*Jesus.*

His gaze dips to his hands. “And they’d come in and restrain me during what they called my treatments. They’d drug me so I was all...floppy and out of it while they prayed and said mean things and showed me montages of weird movies and just...”

I swallow hard.

He bunches his face. “It still wasn’t enough to block out the noise. If anything, the drugs amplified it somehow. It’s like they...like they knew how much it bothered me—hurt me—and were using it to break me down.”

Running my hand through my hair, I glare up at the ceiling. *What in the actual fuck?*

“There were speakers somewhere in the room, and they’d just blast these awful noises...” His voice grows distant, fading. “Piercing one second, then the next, prayers on an endless loop. And then there’d be this...buzzing...like a drill..” He winces, baring his teeth.

It’s almost as if his body is remembering too, and yeah, no I can’t have that.

Scooting forward, I grab his waist, and whirl his curled up form toward me. He nearly careens to the side, but quickly finds his balance.

I clutch his biceps, ducking my head, meeting his gaze over his knees. “You’re not there.”

His brown eyes glisten and he nods. “No. I’m not.”

Frowning deeply, I search his eyes.

“Are you...” he starts to say.

“Am I what?” I murmur.

Again, he gulps, and stares at my chest. “Are you gonna treat me differently now?”

I stare at him for a beat. “Do you want me to treat you differently?”

His eyes spring up to mine, and he quickly shakes his head.

“Then I won’t.”

His lips tighten, and emotion fractures his gaze. His eyes fall shut, shoulders slumping.

I release his arms to cup his cheeks. “But you have to tell me if it’s ever too much. If I’m hurting you, I need to know. I know it’s...different for you, but for me it makes no difference whether you can shut it off or not. I need to know.”

He blinks back at me, nodding in my palms.

I search his expression, unsure how to word my next question. “I just...I guess I don’t understand how even *this*”—I squeeze his face gently—“isn’t too much. Much less...” I let the implication hover between us.

*Sex.*

He never said touch hurts him, aside from pain of course, but still...when I think sensory overload, I think of *all* senses. And then I remember how he was with the fruit—even other foods, now that I’m thinking about it. I just figured he was picky, or too distracted.

So what are the exceptions here, touch and smell?

His brow furrows with a cute little frown and he shakes his head. “I don’t know. But...”

“But what?” I whisper.

His lip shivers, and he shrugs. “It’s, like, grounding. You touching me. And I...I’ve never had that before. No one’s

ever..." His eyes dart away again, and it hits me, spearing me right through the heart.

"No one's ever held you," I whisper.

"Not since before I could remember."

All these so-called storms he's had, and never, not once, did anyone think to just...comfort the kid. Hold him. Tell him it's okay.

Not even when he *was* hurt.

"Even my nanny from when I was little, before I got sent away, was afraid to," he says. "She saw how I'd react to others, like my parents and strangers. Mother would swat at my hand, or drag me behind her, or-or..." He trails off, glancing away, his jaw quivering against the heels of my palms. "I didn't like touch, but I didn't not want it...I just... They weren't doing it right."

I scoot myself closer, pulling up my knees to mirror him. Sliding my hands down to his neck, I hold him like I always do, firmly, almost roughly.

He sighs.

"It's like magic," he murmurs. "You touch me, and it all quiets. You hold me, and it all stops."

Tipping his head back, I lean over, giving him no choice but to look directly into my eyes.

I smile sadly. "You don't scare me," I tell him.

His expression stills. His eyes glazing over, nostrils flaring.

His mouth parts, and I...

*What would it be like to kiss him?* I wonder, my thoughts fracturing into nothing but the sudden need to taste him.

Kiss him.

Show him I care—that *someone* fucking cares.

For a moment, everything seemingly stops, time grinding to a halt. And in this space between seconds, all that exists are

the lips parted a mere hairsbreadth away from mine.

*Oh...*

*Oh shit.*

He sucks in a sharp breath, and his eyes drop to my mouth, then snap up to meet my gaze once more, flaring big and bright and—

He shakes his head. It's subtle, but it's enough. His eyes are pleading—scared—flashing with a mix of emotions.

*Don't hurt him. Don't hurt him.*

Growling, I roughly grip him by the hair and force his head down. I wrap my arms around him—our knees digging into each other—and I bury my lips in his thick brown hair.

Sealing my eyes shut, I inhale deeply. He smells of soap and sweat and sea salt.

He smells of Skyler.

*Sky, Sky, Sky...*

And here, all this time, I was worried about *him*.

No...

No, Skyler Sinclair doesn't scare me.

That much is true.

He *terrifies* me.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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NOLAN

“**T**oday, we’re going to talk about forgiveness.”

The chair next to me squeaks, and I glance over, meeting Skyler’s gaze.

It’s Friday again, another week gone by.

*Two to go...*

He flashes me a small, shaky smile, and I quirk a brow at him, wondering what that’s about. *Is he thinking the same thing I am? Is he realizing just how fast our time together is coming to an end?*

But he’s already looking away, giving Kevin his full-attention before I can try and get a better read on him.

“And I don’t mean forgiving those who’ve hurt us. That’s not something for me to decide, or something that even needs to be addressed here unless you’re comfortable sharing. What I want us to focus on today is self-forgiveness. How do we move forward from here? How do we let go of our past mistakes to better our chances of not relapsing when we’re back to our normal lives?”

My chest tightens at his words.

Kevin looks around the room, eyeing us all knowingly. “We’re the ones we have to live with, day in and day out,” he says gravely. “There’s no getting away from ourselves so long as we’re still breathing. And I don’t know about you, but it seems like an awful lot of time and life wasted, if we spend the rest of our days focused on something we can never take back.”

Around the room, a couple people nod. Brows furrow. Eyes redden.

“It’s also not fair to those we hurt along the way. The ones who paid the price of our mistakes,” he adds, adjusting his glasses. “Yes, some might feel differently, depending on the gravity and severity of the situation, but that’s grief talking.

Their anger is justified, and during that time, yes, they might want to punish us. And initially, yes, we can allow it.” His gaze flicks to mine again. “It wouldn’t be right if we didn’t. Feeling the remorse, holding ourselves accountable, suffering... It’s what makes us not only human, but shows we’re capable of healing. Changing. Being better.”

Next to me, a hand reaches out. Knuckles drag over the side of my thigh between our chairs.

“It’s why rock bottom is such a pivotal moment in recovery. You might know you have a problem for years—admitting it to ourselves is rarely the issue; we know we’re addicts well before we seek out help—but sadly, it’s oftentimes the case where it takes something horrible and life-shattering to give us the kick in the ass we need.” He chuckles tiredly at that.

Someone snuffles. I even feel my own throat squeezing with tears at what he’s saying.

“And it’s always when we least expect it. We let our guards down once, and that’s when it strikes. Addiction is... insidious. It’s a liar. It’s a trickster.” Kevin squints, looking around the circle. “And we’re not invincible to its charm, no matter how strong we think we are. No matter how far we think we’ve come. It will always be there, lying in wait. That’s just fact.”

My eyes slide shut.

Next to me, I hear a shuffle. Then feel pressure against my thigh.

*Skylar.*

“We can’t forget. We have to remember what we did. What led us to this very moment. The thing that haunts us most. But it doesn’t mean we can’t forgive ourselves. It doesn’t mean we have to live a life of penance, never allowing ourselves anything good again.” Kevin pauses meaningfully. “We deserve good things. Say it with me.”

I swallow, my voice coming out barely audible as the room fills with quiet, discordant murmurings. “We deserve good

things.”

The thigh pressed against mine presses into me harder, and I press right back. Prying my eyes open, I swivel my head, glancing over at Skyler.

I know he senses me watching him, but he stares pointedly down at his lap. His throat bobs, and his cheeks flush.

My vision blurs. Emotion searing the back of my eyes.

*I'm going to miss this.*

*Miss him.*

Clearing my throat, I divert my gaze and slouch lower in my chair. Between our thighs, I let my hand fall between us.

“We deserve grace,” Kevin says pointedly, and we all follow suit repeating the affirmation, more in-sync this time. Someone is outright crying, but I don't tear my gaze from Kevin. He nods, looking around the room, seemingly pleased—determined, like he's trying to infuse strength into us by mere words alone.

Fingers brush mine, and I inhale shakily, latching on, twisting my pinkie loosely with Skyler's.

If anyone looked closely enough, I'm sure they'd notice. But I can't find it in me to care. We haven't exactly made it a secret how close we've become in the last few weeks. We spend all our time together, with the exception of our individual therapies and the occasional Focus activity where we're randomly paired off with someone else.

Whether or not anyone suspects there's more than just friendship here...

Who knows?

Who cares?

The weeks are dwindling down. We only have two left. Fuck it. Fuck it all.

Kevin's gaze drifts around the room, taking in each face. “And we deserve love.”



Something crumbles in my chest at the same time the fingers curled around mine twitch, tightening. Or maybe it's mine that moved, twisting around his, before I can stop it.

My voice is gone this time as I mouth the words. And in the corner of my eye, Skyler's lips shiver as he fights to do the same.

We both know Kevin doesn't mean love in the romantic sense.

That's not at all what this is about.

*And yet...*

And yet.



AFTER GROUP, Skyler and I part ways with plans to meet for dinner over at the restaurant.

His morning therapy session got moved to the afternoon, so I take the chance to shower and freshen up back in my villa. We spent the morning doing an art therapy activity for Focus—Skyler's pick—and we didn't have a chance to clean ourselves up before group, so my arms are still covered in streaks of paint, thanks to Skyler's more...exuberant style.

Pretty sure he got more on us and the grass than the actual canvas.

But he smiled and laughed and seemed to enjoy the hell out of it, so it's not like I'm complaining.

It doesn't escape my notice how much happier he seems these days. Carefree. Especially since our talk in the cave.

It also doesn't escape my notice either how much lighter *I* am. I barely even recognize the man I've become.

You'd almost mistake us for a couple on our honeymoon, rather than two men who were strangers up until a few weeks ago, vacationing, rather than getting rehabilitated.

Sure, I've still got all my baggage and shit. But it doesn't feel so heavy these days. Where moving forward felt impossible mere weeks ago, there's now this odd sort of hopefulness I feel when I wake up every morning.

For the first time in...hell, *years*, now that I think about it...

I'm excited to wake up.

Excited to see what the day has in store.

Excited...

And also dreading the end.

Of course, as soon as I think that, I'm barreled by a wave of guilt.

*Abby.*

Climbing out of the shower, I grab a towel and scrub it over my wet hair. Outside the bathroom, the A/C hums, mingling with the muffled sounds coming from the TV. Before Skyler, I had no problem with the silence. Now, though, it just feels...empty.

Even when he's here and he's trying to be quiet—

Well, as quiet as he's capable of, which is basically impossible these days now that he seems to be...co-existing with the storm inside him, rather than shoving it down.

If he's not moaning and screaming in pleasure, or chattering away in between, he's fidgeting with something, knocking shit around. A human tornado, if there ever was one, leaving no spot untouched.

And fuck, if it doesn't bring a smile to my lips.

But when he's asleep...napping in my arms, breaths hot against my neck, curled around me like a koala...

I find it's...nice. Peaceful.

Like his mere presence acts as a sort of barrier, keeping the thoughts in my head at bay. They're there, sure. They always

are. He just...he makes it easier to bear them. See things clearly. Feel them without being suffocated.

Hell, even his quiet is loud, and if I never know silence again, I think I'll be okay with that.

Finding some clean clothes to put on, I putz around, cleaning up the mess left. I find one of Skyler's shirts and smirk, shaking my head. He doesn't even sleep here—he can't; curfew forbids it and I forbid him from breaking it and in fear it will somehow get back to his parents—and yet his belongings have somehow started to infiltrate my space.

A shirt here and there.

Boxers.

A belt.

His sneakers—those once pristine white Hermes now utterly destroyed by the elements.

Even his phone is here, along with the headphones I let him borrow, sitting quiet and practically unused on an end table. He recently got bumped up to Green, like me, which means he has more privileges, like being able to use his cell phone for more than just games and listening to music—he can call, text, and video chat now. Where before he had to resort to calling from the facility phones.

Well, that's if he had any calls to make.

I frown, staring at it.

Not a single missed call or text from his parents when it was unlocked.

He told me he uses it to listen to music—said it helps on his bad days—but otherwise he has no need for it. Rarely carries it on his person.

Walking over, I tap the screen. Nothing.

*Pieces of shit.*

You'd think they'd have at least tried to check in with him. Not once have they called the front desk asking for him. And

when I asked Skyler if he tried reaching out to them, he just stared at me.

Then again, that was before I knew all the shit they put him through. Now I can't really blame him. Hell, if he didn't have that stupid conservatorship to get out of first, I'd encourage him to cut ties completely. Leave this place, and never look back.

My chest tightens at the thought, and I swipe the screen, staring at the number icons. I don't know the passcode to unlock it. Which is probably for the best. So far, we've yet to bring up what happens when we leave here.

Do we want to keep in touch?

My thumb grazes over the numbers.

*That wasn't part of the deal.*

Pulling back, I watch the screen dim after a few seconds, and nod to myself.

We have two more weeks.

A lot can change in two weeks. For all I know, we'll have burned this out of our systems completely by then, if not sooner.

I scoff, turning away. *Fat chance that is.*

God, how quickly and hopelessly I've become addicted to this.

To *him*.

With each passing day—with each hot, heavy moment spent wringing pleasure from him like it's my damn job; with each new shared bit of info about the other...

I find myself falling deeper and deeper into Skyler Sinclair.

If I could spend the rest of my life curled around his legs, mouthful of the best and only cock I ever tasted, holding him to me, I don't think I'd ever crave a drink again.

Consider me cured. I found my new vice, and he's sweeter than the sweetest of bourbons.

It's a dangerous, reckless thought to have, but in weak moments like this, where it's just me and my thoughts, I let myself imagine, *What if?*

*What if we could have this every day?*

*What if we didn't have to say goodbye?*

For fuck's sake, we haven't even *kissed*.

And for good reason—clearly. If I'm this obsessed with his cock, I can't even imagine what tasting those pink, plush lips would do to me.

But the saddest part of all is...

I like *him*. Like I genuinely enjoy spending my days with him, exploring the island, doing ridiculous group activities with the others, sharing meals together...

Even group therapy. Just seeing him sitting there, knowing I'm not alone in this...

That I've never been alone in this.

It's as if those first few weeks without him never even happened.

There's only this. Only him. Only us.

His cock—his body—his touch...

None of it means anything without *him*.

*Fucking hell. I'm not even making sense anymore.*

Grabbing my boots, I angrily shove them on, frustrated with myself. This isn't what Skyler and I agreed to.

*Temporary. This was always going to be temporary. You're getting attached because it's easier than dealing with reality. Easier than craving a drink. That's all this is.*

At that thought, a new image invades my head. The guilt from earlier returning ten-fold, replacing all my anguish and confusion over Skyler.

*Abby.*

My daughter.

My greatest accomplishment, and the source of my most heartbreaking regret.

The reason I'm even here to begin with.

She was just under two years old last time I saw her. The day I fucked everything up. That was, what, four months ago now?

My gut feels hollow at the thought of all that I've missed. All the milestones I'll never get back. Is she walking now? She could barely stand on her own two feet last I saw her. A late bloomer, the doctor said, though she was already miles ahead in the talking department. Chattering away like she was making up for the babbles and seemingly endless nights of crying throughout the first year of her life.

Mostly, nonsense, but still. I'd be a liar if I said that wasn't the damn proudest moment of my life. The day she looked up at me with those chubby little fists, a full megawatt, gummy smile stretched across her tiny face, and she babbled, "Da-da, Da-da, Da-da."

No warning.

No false start.

She said it like she knew who I was all along, and could finally tell me as much.

*God, I miss her.*

So much, it feels like I'm suffocating.

Which is why I've made a point to try and not dwell on what I can't change.

Heading up the path, I nod at a couple guys walking past, but they're deep in conversation and don't seem to notice me. It's still early evening, but thick clouds have rolled in, making it feel much later, casting the world in dull shades of gray.

Somewhere nearby, music's blasting—I don't recognize the song, but it's got a lulling, somber feel to it that gives an

air of homesickness. It's more a feeling, than a craving for a tangible place though.

Like I've...lost something, but can't remember what it is.

My mind travels to Skyler.

The time on his phone had read 4:50. We're supposed to meet at 5 in the restaurant. As much as I want to grab the food to go, tonight we agreed to try a sit-down meal in public like two civilized adults, and not the sex maniacs we've become.

*A date.*

I shake my head. No, nope, not a date. Just...a change in scenery. Something new to do. Incentive to actually eat our food while it's still hot before we lose our clothes for the remainder of the evening.

The path comes to an end, opening up into the gravel road. I glance both ways before jogging across, ensuring I don't get run over by one of the staff on their golf carts.

I'm a few minutes early, so I head for the side entrance instead to wait in the foyer by the elevator for Skyler.

"Hey, Nolan," a soft, feminine voice rings out.

Turning my head on instinct, my steps slow when I see Katlyn, one of the receptionists who minds the front desk, coming around the corner of the building.

I give her a nod. "Hey."

"Was just coming down to find you. You've got a phone call." She says with a smile, eyes twinkling with some unnamed emotion. I get the sudden feeling like she knows something I don't, and I feel my pulse quicken.

It's not the first time I've gotten a call at the front desk. With my phone out of commission, it's the only way for Mel to reach me. She offered to have a new cellphone shipped out to me, but at the time I was still so mad at her, and then even more mad when I asked if that meant I could finally talk to Abby—FaceTime her—and Mel changed the subject.

Pissed off, I told her to forget it—forget even calling—I’d see her when I got out.

That was two weeks ago.

Despite my wariness, I can’t help but feel a small niggle of hope.

Casting one last look at the side door, I debate just telling Katlyn to forget it—I’ll give her a ring tomorrow—when her next words stop me.

“I really think you’re going to want to take this one.”

My gaze swings to hers. “Is it…” My voice trails as worst-case scenarios flood my mind.

*Something happened. Something bad.*

I start shaking my head, panic surging forward, taking me off guard with how quick it steals my breath, but Katlyn’s eyes widen and she holds her hands up, quick to reassure me.

“It’s nothing bad. Promise.” With a sweep of her hand, she urges me to follow her, and I find my feet moving before my brain has a chance to catch up.

Just before we enter through the front doors, I pause, casting a look over my shoulder in the direction of where I was originally headed.

To Skyler.

My mouth thins, my chest growing uncomfortably tight.

*I’ll just meet him in the restaurant, as planned, when I’m done.*

*He’ll understand if I’m a little late.*

Katlyn leads me to the one of the private rooms they have reserved for phone calls with the outside world. “Just press 1 when you’re ready,” she instructs me, but I’m already nodding, because I know this.

Clearing my throat, I take a seat in the squeaky desk chair, scooting it up to where there’s a small corner desk. The door closes behind Katlyn, taking the noise from the hall with it.



Not that it was even that loud, but compared to this room, it's as if all the sound has been vacuumed out, leaving nothing but the sound of my shaky breaths.

I bring it up to my ears and blink a couple times.

I don't know why I'm so nervous. It's probably just Mel again. It'll be the same ol' song and dance, and I'll hang up, pretend it didn't happen, and go lose myself in Skyler instead.

In his smile.

In his shy, darting glances.

In his touch...

*I'll live in the moment, and pretend nothing else outside of us exists.*

My palms are sweating, my throat thick. I wipe my hand on my jeans and reach for the black handset, the coiled cord snaking across the table.

Lifting it to my ear, I hover my fingers over the dial pad as I'm greeted by a long dial-tone.

One second passes, then another, and another.

Squeezing my eyes, I brace myself.

*It's just a phone call...*

*Just get it over with.*

I shake my head, blow out a harsh breath, and press the 1 button, unable to shake the feeling that everything's about to change.

The line clicks, and I hear shuffling.

Then, a giggle.

And just like that, my entire earth crumbles into a million pieces with two syllables, spoken by the most precious sound to ever grace my ears.

“Da-da!”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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SKYLER

Nolan doesn't show.

Twenty minutes go by before I finally give up on waiting for him, and abandon our table for somebody else to use. Not that it's insanely busy tonight, seeing as most of the other patients just prefer to get their food made to go. At least that's been my experience in the relatively short time I've been here. I'm sure it varies depending on the types of people that come in.

Fine dining's never really been my thing anyway. Growing up, there was always this tense sort of pressure that would hang over the table anytime my parents dragged me out. As if I was a loose cannon that could go off at any moment, and break all the expensive dinnerware.

For once, though, I was looking forward to it. When Nolan asked me earlier, the first thing that ran through my head was that this is a date.

Of course I quickly squashed that notion.

We're in *rehab*. Something I'm forgetting more and more each day.

Not that I need to be in rehab, but when Dr. Maddock realized as much, and told me she'd see about getting me transferred into the mental health program to better fit my needs, I immediately shot her down. Nearly sent myself into a meltdown over it.

After she helped me work myself down, she dropped the subject and never brought it up again. She didn't ask *why* I was so insistent on staying in this program, and I couldn't very well tell her I didn't want to be separated from Nolan. But she respected my decision all the same.

Sure, if I *did* transfer over, we'd still be in the same vicinity. But we'd no longer share group, and while I'm more or less a fish out of water there, I've learned to sort of...adapt.

Relate their experiences to my own, but approach it through the lens of someone who isn't an addict.

Rehab is so much more than getting clean after all. It's about recovery. Recovering who you were, unearthing the person you were meant to be, and fighting to keep that version—your best version—in the driver's seat going forward.

There's nothing I'm not getting there that I'd be missing if I changed programs. My one-on-one therapy sessions make up for anything lacking, as far as I'm concerned. Plus, at this point, with only two more weeks to go, it'd be silly to basically have to start from scratch.

Shaking off my thoughts, I make my way outside, and head straight for Nolan's bungalow.

It's cloudy today, and with the sun falling, there's a weird sort of purplish glow streaked with orange over the island. It's not raining yet, but you can feel the moisture gathering in the air—taste the impending showers on your tongue.

*Maybe he fell asleep*, I consider inwardly, not too worried, though I do hasten my steps, hoping to get inside before the skies open up. It's not like he could've gone far, nor would he have stood me up like that unless it was for a good reason.

How I know this with utmost certainty, I'm not sure. But Nolan hasn't failed me yet. Why would he start now?

*Unless he changed his mind...*

I shake away the thought.

No. Nope. I refuse to even consider that. Because even if he did, he wouldn't just ghost me. He learned his lesson from that already. And now more than ever after our talk the other day, he knows how triggering it can be for me to be caught off guard or not explained what's going on when things *do* change.

While we never said it out loud, I'd like to think by mutual unspoken agreement that we would tell the other if we weren't feeling it anymore. I know I'd tell him, not that I see that changing...ever.

I wince, and forcibly shove that line of thinking away.

Regardless of my own messy feelings on the matter, Nolan's not like that, at least not for no good reason. He's not some fumbling teenager who can't make heads nor tails of his feelings. He's not messing with me like Adam did. I have to trust that.

Plus, it's different now than it was when he avoided me after that first time. We barely knew each other when this all first started. It was confusing and unexpected; of course he needed to get his head wrapped around it.

Things are different now. We're different. Closer.

It's like we've...I don't know, grown into our skin or something. We...changed. At least, I know I did.

I'm stronger.

Wiser.

More confident than I've ever been in my life.

More *me* than I've ever known myself to be.

He gave me that.

And I like to think I gave him a little something too. Made *him* better, just like he made me. And no, it's not just all the sex.

It's...more. So much more.

And while I doubt he's as far gone for me as I am for him, I can't see how his feelings would've changed so drastically in the last hour and a half since we separated after group, when he winked at me, told me he'd see me soon, and to—quote, un-quote—“Knock 'em dead,” before disappearing outside.

It just...It couldn't have.

The path veers off to the right, and through a break in the trees I spot his villa.

I frown, my steps slowing. It's dark.

*Because he fell asleep, duh.*

*Right*, I think, with a strong, reaffirming nod.

Shaking away the doubts trying to poke their way into my brain, I strengthen my strides and head for his front door. I knock a couple times, looking over my shoulder. Not that I care that much if someone sees—I'm sure people have already, with how much I come and go from this place.

A few seconds pass with no sounds coming from inside.

I knock a little harder, rocking from foot to foot. My breaths start to pick up, as if my body's trying to warn me of something.

*No, no, everything's okay.*

This time I pound on the door. I wince, silently berating myself for not having any patience. But I can feel that restlessness inside me brewing, and the doubts and worries getting louder, too loud to ignore.

*Okay...so he's not here.*

I peek through the window, finding a big enough gap in the curtain to make out some of the room.

It's dark. No sign of life.

Releasing a shaky breath, I step back, nodding to myself.

*It's okay. Maybe he went to go find me. Maybe we just... missed each other somehow.*

Turning on my heel, I jog up the little dock leading to the pathway. It's dark—hidden mostly in shadow. Someone will be coming around anytime now to light the tiki torches lining the graveled pathways.

I quickly make my way back to the main road, glancing around at everyone in sight, looking for a familiar jeans-and-work boots get-up. It's not like anyone else dresses like that around here.

Icy A/C blows over me when I enter through the main entrance. I head back for the restaurant and peek my head in, my pulse quickening when I can't find him.

*Okay...so he's not here.*

At the front desk, I ask if they saw Nolan anywhere. There's an unfamiliar man working, and he frowns, shaking his head. Even when I force out a quick description of him, he just winces and shrugs.

Nodding, I duck my head, mumble a thanks, and turn to head back outside.

A buzzing sparks at my fingertips, crawling up my hands. If I didn't know any better, I'd think there was a storm brewing, but no, it's just me. There might be rain on the horizon, but so far no lightning or thunder. Nothing but what's crackling inside me, heightening my senses to an overpowering degree.

It reminds me of that time Nolan asked if I was having a panic attack. I can see now why he thought that, why others in the past have thought that. I'm definitely feeling panicked this time around, though, so maybe they had a point all along.

It's all so very confusing.

I start to head back toward his bungalow, knowing there's a very unlikely chance he went up to my room. He's never been up there. He wouldn't even know where it is, unless he asked the staff.

*Maybe we just missed each other again.*

I cringe. Even to my own ears, my thoughts sound pitiful.

Just as I reach the fork where I'll make the turn back toward Nolan's place, something gives me pause, halting my steps.

There's a pull in my gut, lifting the little hairs on the back of my neck, guiding me down toward the tree-line. My breathing shallows, and my heart seems to slow, as all my attention hones in on the small break in the foliage.

I'm not sure *why* I just know he's down there in our cove. Call it instinct—a sixth sense—a built-in radar for anything *Nolan*...

Somehow, I just know that's where I'll find him.

The why of it doesn't even matter. I just need to find him.

I jog down the bank, batting away fronds. The water is relatively calm tonight, from the sounds of it lapping at the shore, despite the heavy rain clouds blotting out much of the sky.

Off in the distance, the bright orange sun hovers over the horizon.

It's eerie, the way it lights up the beach, painting flames over the sand.

Over Nolan's dark silhouette down by the water.

He's seated in the sand only a few feet away from where the low tide slips in and out. He's dressed in his jeans, as usual, but has traded his white tee for a solid black one.

My mouth dries, and the anxiety from moments ago returns with a vengeance, washing away any relief I've found from finally finding him.

*He wasn't sleeping.*

*He stood me up.*

I bunch my face, shaking my head, trying to hold off the static rushing to my head. My arms tremble. Chills break out across my skin.

I'm not...angry, but I am confused, and I don't like that. Not one bit.

Nolan cocks his head, his hair hanging loosely around his head, strands lifting and dancing on the gentle breeze blowing through. I suck in a breath, my feet rooted in place.

Like I knew he was down here, somehow, I just know he senses me too. Like there's a thread tying us together, keeping us on the same frequency, ensuring we're always in tune to the other whenever we're in each other's orbit.

He turns just his head, peeking over his hunched shoulders. From here, I can't make out his eyes, but I feel his gaze all the same, like hot coals raking over my chilled skin.

It usually feels good.

It doesn't right now.



Blowing out a breath, I force myself to stand to my full height, lifting my chin. I try and brace myself as I make my way down the beach to join him.

Nolan's gaze remains unflinching as it tracks my approach.

Coming to a stand next to him, I stare down at those dark, swirling green orbs streaked with gold from the fading sun. So distracted by the beauty that is this man, I can almost ignore the expression on his face.

“Sk—”

“Y-you didn't show for dinner,” I stutter out. Blinking rapidly, I turn my head toward the water, staring unseeingly into the far distance. My chest aches, making it hard to breathe.

I'm vaguely aware of my fingers tapping together a split-second before a familiar calloused hand encases mine, stilling them.

“I know,” he says in a gentle tone I don't like. “I'm sorry. I...I got a phone call. At the front desk.”

I frown, not understanding. “Then why...” My mouth dries, voice crackling, before fading completely.

Nolan tugs my hand, and I take a peek at his face. He smiles sadly up at me. “Have a seat, sweetheart.”

Emotion floods my throat, bringing a searing ache to my nose and eyes. Still, I can't look away. It hurts, but I refuse to look away.

*No. No I don't want to*, I think, but my voice won't work.

With another gentle tug of my hand, I find myself doing as he says, hardly aware of my body moving. Like someone else is in control, and I'm trapped inside, frozen, led only by his sad, knowing green eyes and grounding touch.

“It was Mel who called,” he tells me slowly after a long moment, as if he's measuring each word.

And for whatever reason, those five words have my brain switching gears, everything else—every other worry—

momentarily fading into the background.

“Is everything okay?” I blurt. “Is Abby—” My breath hitches. I don’t know why. I can’t explain it. I just know it’d kill me if something happened to his little girl, if only because of how much I know it would kill *him*.

“She’s fine,” he says deeply, a crease forming between his brows. He studies me closely, sweeping his gaze all over my face.

I force a swallow, and chew on the inside of my cheek to keep myself from fidgeting, or turning away.

Another small, sad smile creeps up his face, half hidden by his beard. “Actually, she’s the one who called me,” he says, a sad, choked laugh erupting from him. He shakes his head like he can’t believe it. “Well Mel dialed I’m sure, but still—I...I got to talk to her. I finally got to hear her voice.”

My eyes widen and for a second the pain in my chest is replaced by a whole other ache. A good ache, I think. My lip curves up. “Really?”

He nods, that little furrow between his eyes deepening. “Yeah...” he says faintly, his voice fading off. His gaze drops to my lips, a troubled look pinching his features. “Yeah.”

My grin starts to slip, that icky feeling rising to the surface once more, coating all the good feelings with a thick, black, tar-like substance. “Then...why do you look so sad?”

Shiny green eyes snap up to mine, holding me hostage. His jaw tightens, and he gives a little shake of his head, and I suck in a slow, measured breath that does little to tamper my anxiety. My heart’s racing, so loud and so fast he has to be able to hear it. Has to be able to see the way my pulse hammers against my neck.

“Nolan,” I whisper. “What is it?”

His throat bobs with his swallow. Then—

“I’m leaving.”

All I can do is stare at him.

“Mel said I could come home,” he says in a rush. “She... wants me to come home.” Whatever he must see on my face has him squeezing my hand in a bone-crushing vice, and he quickly shakes his head. “Not like that. For Abby, I mean. She said I can see her. That I don’t have to finish out—”

“When?” I say through numb lips.

His eyes tighten at the corners. “There’s a flight to the States in the morning. They said there’s a boat going out at first light to take me to the mainland so I can catch it in time.”

“T-tomorrow?”

*Less than twenty four hours.*

No...

Less than *twelve* hours, if he’s leaving at first light.

His hand squeezes mine, but I barely feel it.

I don’t feel...anything.

*This wasn’t part of the plan.*

*This isn’t how it was supposed to go.*

“But...” I start to say, turning to face forward. I stare blankly at the ocean, not taking anything in. “We...we have two more weeks,” I manage to utter. “We both have two more weeks.”

I sense him staring intently at my profile, but I can’t bring myself to look.

The horizon grows hazy—blurry.

In my periphery, I’m vaguely aware of him nodding. “They said I could cut it short. My therapist cleared it, I guess. Mel talked with them first, just to make sure I was...okay to leave. There’s... Skyler, there’s no need for me to stay longer than I...have to...” He hisses and looks away, muttering a curse under his breath.

My eyes sting, my jaw quivering. The sun is a smear of red-orange kissing the horizon. Nearly gone now, and he’ll be gone too, the next time I see the sun.

“Skyler, please look at me,” he says in a tight voice, tighter than I’ve ever heard it.

I feel my shoulders starting to swivel back and forth with a familiar rocking motion, and I shake my head, digging my toes in the earth, the sand slipping between my bare soles and my leather flip-flops.

A buzzing has filled my ears, mirroring the tingles spreading up my legs. This doesn’t feel like the typical meltdown though. This feels like something else, and my rocking picks up.

*I don’t like this.*

I squeeze my eyes shut and duck my head, wrapping my arms around my bent knees.

Maybe if I can squeeze into a small enough ball, I’ll wink out completely so he doesn’t have to witness this. As overwhelmed by emotion as I am, I’m still painfully aware of how immature I’m acting and I hate it.

*Later, I beg silently. Please just let me fall apart later when I’m alone.*

“Sweetheart,” Nolan whispers.

A hand reaches out, cupping the back of my head, but I don’t budge, pressing my forehead deeper against my knees. I sniff, my gaze searing as I glare at my thighs. *Just ride it out, breathe. Focus on the moment, not on what comes after.*

He blows out a sharp breath and bows his head to my shoulder.

For a while, we just stay like that. Breathing hotly, harshly.

My nostrils burn, my eyes burning with a fresh wave of tears.

Nolan sniffs, and says, “I can...I can stay. I can finish—”

“No,” I blurt, surprising both of us. Shaking my head, I work my jaw, and stare harder at my thighs. “No, you have to go,” I grit out.

“Sky...”

Sniffing, I reach back, grab his hand, and remove it from my head.

I tell myself to let go, but my fingers have other plans. They curl around his, fusing our palms together.

Nolan sits back at the same time I turn toward him.

Our gazes collide, and it hurts—*God*, does it hurt. He has to see how much it's hurting me.

Except, now that I'm looking at him, I see he too is hurting and wonder if maybe he feels it after all. Maybe I'm not alone in this for once.

"You need to go," I whisper, nodding for good measure.

He doesn't say anything.

"You get to see your daughter again," I somehow choke out, a wet smile pulling painfully at my lips. His face is completely blurred out by my tears, but I just smile harder, even though it's killing me. "You get to have your life back." *Everything he's been working toward...*

I was just a stepping stone. A pit stop. An escape.

I knew this all along.

*Then why...*

*Why...*

I shake my head, the thoughts thrashing around my head growing disjointed.

"Skyler, I don't—"

I shake my head. Clearing my throat, I force the words out, knowing I have to say this—and convincingly—or he'll never leave, and he needs to leave. I *need* him to leave.

"I'll be fine here," I say, dropping my gaze below his scruffy chin. If I have any hope of getting this out, I can't look into those eyes. "It's just...It's two more weeks. That's nothing. This was always going to come to an end. It just ended a little sooner than we expected, but...it's okay. It's

okay.” My voice cracks and I sniff. “You...you have to go. You wouldn’t be the man I lo—”

My voice hitches, my mouth gaping, fumbling.

Time stops.

Everything stops.

Frozen, all I can do is stare wide-eyed, unblinking at the base of his throat.

I don’t even think he’s breathing.

Pursing my lips, I say more slowly, steadily this time, “You wouldn’t be the man I *know* if you stayed.”

His chin quivers, and I peek up, my throat squeezing near-painfully when I find his eyes filling with tears.

There’s a flash of emotion in his eyes—something big and powerful and terrifying.

Everything in me stills.

The beach fades.

The entire *world* fades away, and it’s just us...marooned to this space where he exists and I exist and somehow we’ve found each other in the void.

“Don’t,” I whisper.

But it’s too late.

Nolan grabs my cheeks roughly, dives forward, and he slams his lips to mine.

“I’m sorry,” he chokes out hotly, wetly against my trembling lips. “I’m so-so sorry,” he murmurs, kissing me. Over and over and over again, he kisses me, and he apologizes, and then he kisses me some more.

And I’m frozen. For the first time in my life, I’m completely and utterly still, both outside...

And inside.

Hands cradle my face. They tremble. His entire body is shaking.

And he's....

*He's kissing me.*

*Nolan is kissing me.*

He pulls back, swiping his thumbs over my cheeks, cupping my face so gently, it's like he's afraid if he changes the pressure even the slightest bit, I'll shatter, and his gentle touch is the only thing keeping me together now that he's finally broken me.

Like he was always going to break me.

I knew it. He knew it.

And yet we risked it all anyway.

His tongue pokes out, wetting his lips. Lips I just felt against my own, with a tongue that just danced with mine.

Shaking his head, he stares back at me through a veil of tears. "I'm so, so fucking sorry."

And I just...crumble.

I'm gone.

I'm shoving him onto his back, crawling up on his chest, and I'm crushing my mouth to his in a searing, ferocious, world-upending kiss.

"Skyler," he breathes against me like nothing else exists, like no other name exists.

And for a moment, I pretend it's true.

For tonight, I'll pretend it's just us.

Me and my champion.

Me and my Tarzan.

United under a starless sky.

Our tongues collide, tangling.

Teeth gnash into plush, wet lips.

It's messy—hot—and there's sand and water splashing up around us. I didn't even notice the water slipping this far up

the beach.

The grit is embedded in Nolan's hair, embedded in my nails. We scrape and claw and paw at each other, massaging it into us, right along with our fervent touches, as if we could become one with this beach.

He growls from somewhere deep inside his chest—I feel it reverberate against my chest, the beast in him calling to the storm in me, and I growl right back, nipping his lip.

Strong hands clutch my back, then lower, squeezing my ass at the same time he thrusts up against me. We're both hard, grinding up against each other like we could find a way inside each other's bodies if we just dug deep enough. Hard enough.

“Skyler,” he rumbles against my lips.

“Nolan,” I seethe back, angry, so angry and confused and overwhelmed that he's doing this to me. He didn't have to kiss me. He's fucking *leaving* me. He never should've crossed that line. I said *no*. We had this rule for a reason.

And yet all I can do is kiss him harder—so hard our teeth knock and rip into our lips. So hard, my face has to be scratched raw from his beard.

But I can't stop.

I can't stop, because if I do, then it's all over, and I'll never have this again.

Forget the ocean—let me drown in him.

Engrave me in his bones.

Bury me in his veins.

Let me live as I died—as *his*.

“Inside,” he grits out, sitting up abruptly, pushing me up with him. His thick arms wrap around me, and he gives me no choice but to tip my head back as he drags his hot open mouth down my neck. “Need inside you.”

Nodding, I scour my nails along his back, pulling and twisting at his shirt.



He all but shoves me off him so he can stand, just so he can drag me up by the wrist. We're all teeth and claws as we collide.

His hand shoots out, clasping the back of my head, wrenching me back to his plush lips. He tastes of sand and sea salt and I bury my tongue between his lips, desperate and famished.

I lift up on my toes, dragging my cock up his.

*Clothes. There's too many clothes.*

*Need more.*

I'm not sure if I think or say it, but either way he gets the message, bending down, scooping me up around the ass with one muscular arm. My legs part, wrapping around him instinctually as I hoist myself up around his body. With one arm braced under my ass, he uses the other to keep a hand tethered to my hair, fingers digging painfully into my scalp.

And all I can think is—

*More.*

How he manages to get us to the bungalow, I have no idea. I don't stop tugging on his hair and sucking at his lips, arching and grinding up against his body. Nor does he stop growling and nipping at me as he carries me away from the beach.

The sun has all but fallen completely, bathing us in thick shadows only broken up by the now-lit tiki torches casting flickering light over our writhing forms.

I feel a drop of moisture hit my cheek. Then my arm.

It's starting to rain.

I kiss him harder.

No words are spoken when we reach his villa. Holding me in his arms, he manages to get the screen door open, then kicks it away from us with a smack of metal against wood.

Inside, he turns, shoving me up against a wall.

Something rattles and falls to the floor with a crash, but it might as well be happening in a different universe. All that exists right now are the hands ripping away my clothes, and the mouth crushing mine.

He has to put me down to remove my shorts, so I use the opportunity to toe off my flip-flops and he does the same once my bottoms are thrown somewhere. I reach for his shirt, shoving it up over his head, and he scrambles for mine before shrugging off his jeans and underwear in one go.

Finally, when I'm left in nothing but my black briefs and he's completely naked, his huge cock jutting out from between his legs, weeping at the tip, he grabs me by the waist once more and picks me up.

Hands clutch my ass, fingers digging, then ripping my underwear right down the middle. A thick, dry finger brushes against my hole and I clench, whimpering.

*More, I need more.*

A deep groan scrapes up from his throat, and then he's swinging us around and carrying me to the bed, tossing me on the mattress.

I scramble back, resting on my forearms, but he just grunts, reaching for me, grabbing me by the ankle, and dragging me to the foot of the bed. "Over."

Doing as he says, I roll onto my stomach and get onto all fours.

The bed sinks behind me.

My breaths come out choppy and uneven, and I wiggle my ass at him, uncaring how needy I look right now. He's not touching me, and I can't fucking stand it. Everything hurts—burns—and it's so loud, all so much, without him.

I squeeze my eyes shut, my body trembling, tears clinging to my lashes and streaking my cheeks.

Nolan kneels behind me, and drags a finger down my crack, pulling a thick, choked moan from my throat.

My underwear hangs in tatters around my thighs, but rather than rip them the rest of the way off, Nolan just skims his fingers between my legs, creeping them under the fabric to run the calloused pads over my balls.

A whine leaves my lips. "Please."

The word sounds so foreign to my ears. It might as well be in another language.

Groaning, he slides his hand to where my cock lays trapped. He squeezes me, stroking, sliding the cotton up and down over my shaft.

"Spread your cheeks for me, sweetheart." Despite the roughness in his touch, his voice is soft. Thick. On the verge of breaking.

Doing as he says, I let my chest and face fall to the bed. I reach behind myself, holding myself apart, baring my hole to him.

"That's it," he murmurs. "So pretty and needy for me." Bending down, he runs his nose down my crack, inhaling.

I squeeze my eyes shut, fighting a shudder.

"Hold 'em, baby," he murmurs against my hole, before giving it a little lick.

Choked moans pour from my lips and I shake my head, rubbing my cheek into the bedding. It's too much. It's all too much.

But he doesn't stop.

He doesn't take mercy on me.

He eats at me until I'm a boneless, quivering mess, pleading with him to fill me. Fuck me. Hurt me. Destroy me.

I'm not me anymore.

I'm *his*.

Nolan tightens his fingers around the base of my cock, just as he pushes his tongue at my entrance. The muscle softens, giving, caving around the tip.

*Oh fuck.*

“Nolan!” I shout. Tears spill from my eyes and I shake, biting and sucking at the sheets as he fucks my hole with shallow thrusts of his tongue.

Humming against my skin, he eases out, and spits right at my hole. His tongue’s then replaced with two thick fingers, circling my entrance.

“*Yesssss,*” I hiss, panting through my nose. I suck the sheet, wishing it was his skin—his cock—my neck tendons straining, eyes rolled back as he nudges a finger inside me, quickly followed by a second.

It stings, the pressure borderline unbearable, but I push back, bearing down, chasing the fullness only he can give me.

“Fuck, sweetheart. Easy,” he murmurs, holding me by the waist to keep me from fucking myself on his fingers. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

*But you are, you are, don’t you see? You’re killing me.*

“More, Nolan. More, *please,*” I babble incoherently, mouth smushed into the bed.

“Shh, shh, I know,” he says quietly, his voice raspy. He adds a third finger, working me open. “Almost there.”

Whimpering, I shake my head.

Leaning up over me, his hairy, sweat-slicked chest rubs my back. I shiver.

Peeling my eyes open into slits, I watch him grab the bottle of lube from the nightstand. Next to it, there’s a condom, and I see his fingers reach for it, but hesitate.

Swallowing, I shake my head against the mattress. “No condom,” I croak.

He turns his head, peeking at me through his hair. He breathes heavily, his eyes searching. “Sure?”

I nod. “I need to feel you.”

His face tightens and he nods.

Fisting the lube, he bends down, shoving my hair off my brow. He drops a kiss to my forehead. "Ready?"

*No. No I'm not ready.* But I just nod.

"Please," I rasp, closing my eyes.

Lips brush against my hairline. "Okay. Roll over."

I frown. We never fuck face to face, not since my first time, when he had me ride him.

He pulls back, nudging my hip, and I flop onto my back. My chest heats, an uncomfortable ache taking residence right at the base of my throat.

Nolan fits himself between my legs, kneeling. He drops the lube somewhere on the bed and grabs my thighs, pushing them up to my chest. His gaze is pained when it meets mine. "Hold them."

I nod and do as he says.

He wets his lips and looks down, taking in my flushed cock. My drawn up balls.

Bending down, he nuzzles my groin, inhaling and rubbing his scruff all over me like he's trying to embed his scent into me. Leave his mark.

Doesn't he already know, he's stuck here forever? Tattooed into every fiber of my being.

His tongue wraps around my tip, licking up the pre-cum. Moaning, he suckles just the head as he reaches down, grabbing the lube. He pulls off just long enough to squirt some lube on his fingers.

Then he's back, sucking my cock to the back of his throat, and shoving wet fingers inside me.

I suck in a sharp breath, hold it and stare at the ceiling. My nipples pebble, aching.

"Fuck, baby," Nolan whispers against the head of my cock. He gives it one last kiss and eases back, ducking his head to watch his fingers move in and out of me.

“Nolan,” I bite out tightly.

“I know. You’re being so good for me.”

He slips his fingers out of me, and pumps some more lube in his hand. This time he uses it to slather up his cock.

I release a shaky breath and swallow hard, tipping my chin down to peer at his hunched form between my legs. His shoulders bunch, abs clench, tattoos rippling across his broad chest. His cock so hard, it looks painful, flushed nearly purple at the head.

Scooting up, he presses right against the back of my thighs, and braces an arm against my calves, pushing me back so my ass is half-lifted off the bed. With his other hand, he guides his cock to my entrance.

“Breathe, sweetheart,” he says, flicking me a look just as he nudges my opening.

Nodding, I relax, letting out the gust of air I didn’t realize I was holding.

He presses a little deeper, pushing past that first ring of muscle. Whimpering, I release my thighs, grabbing for him instead.

“Nolan, please,” I practically sob, clawing for him.

He mutters a curse, and I can practically *feel* the restraint crackling over his skin.

“Fuck me,” I grit out harshly. “Please just fuck me.”

It starts off with a low growl that intensifies to a roar, and then whatever little scrap of control he was hanging onto?

It doesn’t just snap.

It disintegrates. As if it never was even there.

And he’s falling, falling...

Sinking deep inside me, right down to the hilt.

And I’m flying.

My mouth opens on a silent gasp, head thrown back, body arching.

Nolan buries his face in my neck. Fingers find mine, sliding them up near my head, pinning me there. Deep inside me, he gives a shallow thrust like he's trying to crawl deeper inside me.

*He's bare. Oh God, he's bare.*

*I have Nolan's cock inside me. No barrier. Just him. Me and him.*

Tears sting my eyes and I feel a sob climbing up my throat. My entire body buzzes with sensation—nerve-endings sparking. And it hurts. It feels so fucking good, it hurts. Feeling this full, knowing I'll never be this full again.

Not like this.

Somehow, I just know, in this moment, I'll never find this again.

Wrapping my arms around Nolan's back, I hug him to me, squeezing with all my strength until my ribs ache, my bones grind, and my lungs strain.

But I don't ease up, and Nolan just murmurs, "Sweetheart," in my ear, sadly, brokenly, like he knows too just how fucked we are.

*It isn't just me. It can't be.*

He pulls back, giving me no choice but to ease my grip on him. As if he senses where my thoughts went, he peers down at me with bloodshot eyes and nods.

I nod back.

And then we kiss.

We kiss and we kiss and we don't stop kissing.

Not when he starts moving, fucking me with slow, deep, toe-curling thrusts.

Not when he sits back, pulling me up with him, and we move together, chest to chest. Beating heart to beating heart.

Not when he roars into my mouth, spilling hotly inside me.

It's only when I shatter around him a second later, that I fall away from his lips with a sob, burying my face in his shoulder...

That we stop.



# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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NOLAN

I t's raining.

A breeze blows through, rattling the screen door, lifting the curtains surrounding the windows. A piece of paper flutters off the table, landing somewhere on the floor.

I blink over at the patio, realizing suddenly how very little time we spent out there. So much we didn't get a chance to do. So much we didn't get to savor.

Something tells me it would've never been enough.

A door creaking open draws my attention to the other side of the room.

Skyler steps out of the bathroom, running his hands through his messy dark hair. He's dressed now. Why he chose to grab his clothes and do it in the privacy of the bathroom, I have no idea. And I didn't ask. He didn't shower, but I did hear the faucet running.

Guilt spikes in my chest when I remember the way he pried himself off me, pushing to a shaky stand, and turned away, my cum dribbling down his thighs.

He wouldn't let me clean him—I tried. Tried to get him to stay in bed so I could at least do that much for him after making such a fucking mess of him. It'll be a miracle if he wakes up tomorrow without beard rash and scratches and hickeys all over his body.

Hell, even my own body aches in spots where his teeth and nails burrowed deep, and yet, if anything, I pray I wake up just as marked up as him. Just as broken and beat down as I feel right now.

Going home to Abby shouldn't feel like a death sentence, but it's kind of hard to feel like it's anything but right now when I feel so fucking hollow inside.

Don't get me wrong—I want to see my daughter. Hell, if it weren't for Skyler I'd be climbing the walls right now with

impatience.

I just...

I don't know how to say goodbye to him. I don't know how to reconcile this empty feeling with my relief.

*How the hell did this happen?*

"I should go," Skyler says in a flat tone, his gaze downturned, hands fisted at his sides.

The need to go over there and untangle his fingers and press them to my chest instead is strong, but I refrain. I've hurt him enough.

"You can stay," I say. "Fuck the rules. Sleep with me tonight."

He's shaking his head before I can even get the words fully out, and my heart breaks, knowing it's for the best when he says, "I can't."

Throat thick, I nod, even though he can't see me.

His bare feet pad across the floor toward the door, and before I can stop myself, I'm reaching out, grabbing his shoulders and pulling him in a tight, bone-crushing hug.

He tenses, but only for a moment, and then his lanky arms come around me with far more strength than I thought him capable of.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I bury my face in his neck, nearly sobbing at the scent wafting over me, knowing it'll be the last time I ever get a taste of this—sea salt and soap and Skyler and *mine*.

*It doesn't have to be...*

*Ask him for his number...*

*Make plans...*

All these thoughts pop off in my head—desires I'd give anything to make a reality.

But then they're quickly replaced by rebuttals.

*He's eighteen.*

*We live a whole half a country away from each other.*

*He still has to get out from under his parents.*

*I need to focus on Abby.*

*He's young... so young...it wouldn't be fair to him...*

I push him back gently, duck my head, and sweep my eyes over his features, ingraining them to memory...

Absorbing them, so I can remember...

Remember why it's so imperative we end this now, as planned, despite how much my heart protests.

*It was just a fling.*

*It was never meant to last.*

His lip shivers, still so swollen and red from our kisses, and I swipe my thumb over it in a gentle caress. "Did I hurt you? I was so rough and I—"

His lashes flutter shut and he shakes his head. "Don't," is all he utters. "I was just as rough with you."

My face creases with that and I shake my head. "But—"

His eyes fly open in a glare, one he aims right into my soul, flaying me. "Don't."

I stare at him, searching his eyes, but all I find is a silent plea for me to drop it.

And then he whispers, "Don't ruin it." His voice breaks, his chin quivering. "Don't take it back."

I frown, not quite sure I understand.

Pulling from my arms, he goes and finds his flip flops, slipping them on. He heads for the door, and I follow, right on his heels.

"I can walk you back," I say.

He shakes his head.

*Okay then.*

Outside, the rain is slanting down in buckets. We feel it even before we get outside, misting through the screen door.

There's a huge lump in my throat as I follow him out, watching the way the rain slams down on him once he leaves the protection of the overhang, drenching him immediately.

My hands open and close at my sides, and I'm at a loss. He's just... leaving. Storming off, just like how he entered my life, without so much as a glance back.

All I can do is stare after him walking away, wondering how this could possibly be it.

Seven steps.

That's how far he gets before he comes to a sudden stop.

My heart thuds heavily in my chest, and I feel tears springing to my eyes.

*Sweetheart...*

One second I'm standing there, just outside my door, and the next I'm striding forward into the pouring rain, and he's whirling around and rushing toward me.

We collide, arms tangling, hands on each other's cheeks, lips slamming together.

Rain mixes with our tears, making it easier to pretend this doesn't hurt so bad.

That this isn't killing me. Killing him.

He pulls back, easing to his heels. He blinks up at me through thick, wet lashes.

"It doesn't have to be goodbye," he says, his voice shaking like it took everything in him to say that. "We can see each other again."

*God, my fucking heart. He's killing me.*

I smile sadly, stroking his perfect face. "You're gonna make me a promise, okay?" I say loudly, ensuring he can hear me. "And then I'll make you one in return. How's that sound?"

His neck strains with a hard swallow, and he nods.

“I want you to take these last two weeks to become the strongest, best version of you, okay?”

His eyes redden impossibly more, tears and raindrops clinging to his thick black lashes. He nods jerkily.

“Dr. Maddock said she knows someone who can help you get out of the conservatorship, right?” I say, blinking rapidly against the rain, remembering what he told me last week. He was so excited, so fucking determined, when he shared with me how he learned that, with the backing of his therapists here, and some legal help from someone outside his parents’ circle, he might have a way out.

He nods. “Y-yeah.”

“Good. Do whatever it takes. Remember who you are.” I press a hand to his chest, over his heart. “You are *not* a liability. You’re not fucking broken. They failed *you*, not the other way around. Got it?”

He blinks hard and fast, nodding.

“Promise me, Skyler. Promise me you won’t let anything or anyone stop you. They have no ground to stand on here, and you know this. You *know* this,” I say fiercely, shaking him.

His face bunches and he nods.

It kills me, knowing I can’t stick around to help him with this battle. I mean, I could, but that would mean choosing him over Abby—*Abby*, my daughter, my flesh and blood, who so sweetly begged me to come home.

*Jesus fucking Christ, I hate this.*

Closing my eyes, I pinch the bridge of my nose.

*I can’t do this. I can’t just leave him, not knowing if he’ll be okay.*

*Who’s going to hold him when it gets too loud? Who’s going to still his fingers when he’s feeling stressed? Who’s—*

“Nolan, it’s okay,” Skyler says just loud enough to be heard over the rain, cutting into my spiraling thoughts. “I know.”

My hand drops, and I peel my eyes open to find him staring back at me knowingly.

He shakes his head. “Don’t...don’t even worry about all that.” His gaze sears into mine, and I see what he’s really saying. *Don’t worry about me.*

As if that’s fucking possible.

Still, the fact he’s reassuring me says a lot. For someone who claims to struggle with reading a room, he sure knows how to fucking read me.

“Promise me, Skyler,” I say roughly. “That I don’t have to worry about you.”

He tenses, and I bite my tongue, holding my breath. Images of cliffs and water and him lifeless on the surf flash behind my eyes.

Dark eyes lift to mine, breaking up the ripples of water in my head, and he nods. “I promise.”

My chest expands, rising with my inhale and I nod.

“I’ll be okay,” he says softly, but forcefully. “I don’t...feel that way anymore. Seriously. You *need* to go home to your kid. That’s what matters. I’m just...” He searches my eyes, before diverting his gaze to some point on my chest, like he can’t bring himself to look at me with his next words. “It’s not just me, right?” he rushes out thickly. “You...you feel this too.” *Not a question.*

I still, unsure what to say. To any of that.

I know what I *should* say—I know that I should lie, for his sake, but something stops me.

I can’t do that to him.

I can’t outright lie.

But I also can’t give him false hope that this could go anywhere. He’d never try to move on if that’s the case. He’d never let this go, and I...*God*, I need him to let go.

I need him to move on.

He deserves so much more than I have to offer, and one day he'll see that.

Wetting my lips, I search his face—his perfect, gorgeous face with those pretty lashes and full lips and high cheekbones. And I tell him, “Someday, you’re going to look back on this moment, and it won’t hurt so much.”

Something flickers in his gaze, his brow knitting.

“You’re gonna meet someone, someone kind and far less jaded than me, someone who’s probably closer to your own age...” I chuckle wetly, and he starts shaking his head.

I nod strongly. “And that man, whoever he may be... well, he’s gonna blow what you’re feeling right now out of the water.”

“Nolan...” he chokes out, his voice barely audible. Yet it slices me open all the same.

“You will,” I say definitively. “I *promise* you will.”

He stills, his eyes widening in realization.

*I’m so sorry, sweetheart. But this was always going to be goodbye.*

“I know it doesn’t feel like it right now, but your life is just beginning, Skyler,” I say forcefully. “It feels like the end of the world, but this—*this*”—I wave a hand around—“is a beginning. Not an ending for you. Not a last stop.

“You said it yourself. It’s a stepping stone. We are but a blip in time, and one day, you’ll look back on this and understand why it has to be this way.”

A tear spills over his lashes, and I reach up, palming his cheek, catching it with my thumb. More fall, faster than I can keep up, mingling with the rain.

“Fuck,” I choke out, bowing my head to his. “You beautiful, beautiful boy. You’re gonna break so many damn hearts, I just know it.”

I would know, seeing as mine is shattering as I speak.



“Because you’re not going to settle for the first one who hands theirs over. You’re not going to settle for just any guy who does the bare minimum of what you should’ve gotten all along.”

A sob crawls up from his chest and I wrap an arm around him, holding him. He’s shaking, and I know it has very little to do with the rain.

“Someone is going to come along and love you, storms and all.”

Fingers bite into my shoulders.

“And you don’t accept anything less than that. If they can’t love you at your worst, then they sure as fuck don’t deserve you at your best. Clichéd, I know, but it’s true. People like that don’t deserve a single, damn thought of yours.”

He leans back, forcing me to pull away from his head.

“And if I don’t? If it’s only ever you?”

I smile sadly. “I promise you, it won’t be.”

His face bunches, and I know that look. He’s angry, frustrated, and a small part of me dies right here and now knowing I’m acting no better than the people who’ve come before me—his parents, teachers, therapists—all the assholes who never listened to him, never took him seriously...

I *know* this.

And it kills me.

But I won’t take it back.

Because I’m not doing this for me, or because I don’t want to be with him.

I’m doing this for *him*.

Because he deserves the world, not a miserable addict almost double his age who nearly killed his own daughter.

He’s never even got to live yet, and all I’d be doing is trapping him in a life he didn’t choose. Not really. How could he when he’s experienced nothing else? Nothing better.

Before he can argue though, I simply bend down, pressing my lips to his.

Over his mouth, I repeat, “I promise.”

His swallow is pronounced and audible before he says, “I don’t believe you.”

“I know,” I say.

We kiss for another long moment, rain sheeting down on us, mingling with our tears.

Then we hug for what feels like hours, holding each other so hard, I wish I could say it was enough to fuse our bodies together.

But it’s not.

It can’t be.

Not now, and likely not ever.

When we finally pry ourselves apart, I cradle his cheeks and press a soft kiss to his forehead. “It’s time to go.”

He nods, eyes squeezed shut when I pull back.

I grab his shoulders, turning him away from me, and bend my mouth to his ear. “Don’t stop this time. Don’t look back. Only go forward.”

Pressing one last rough kiss to the side of his head, I give a nudge and let go, stepping back with long strides until I’m once again under the cover of the canopy.

It takes him a moment—a moment where he just stands there in the pouring rain, fingers tapping at his sides. I try to get my feet to work, to take me inside, to take the choice from him so he won’t be tempted to run back into my arms.

But I’m rooted to the spot.

I press my knuckles to my chest, rubbing the ache that’s formed there, but it’s no use. I know it won’t be going anywhere, not anytime soon.

If anything it only grows tighter when he starts walking away. With every new foot of distance between us, another

pang resounds in my chest. As if someone's taken a hammer and nails to my heart, securing it in place while it thrashes, agonized, desperate to tumble out and chase after the boy walking away from me.

*This is for the best.*

*He'll be okay.*

All these reminders do little to bolster my resolve, so all I can do is hope he'll be the stronger one—the one capable of walking away.

Skyler pauses at where the path breaks off, and I close my eyes.

“Don't,” I murmur under my breath. “Please don't.”

*I'll crumble if he comes back, I just know it.*

I don't know how long I stand there with my eyes squeezed shut and my knuckles buried in my chest. Long enough for the rain to dwindle down to a gentle sprinkle. Long enough for other sounds to invade the heavy cloud of our goodbye. Long enough for my heart to quiet and slump in defeat.

Leaves brushing.

Waves lapping at the distant rocks.

The low hum of a golf cart driving by beyond the trees.

I crack my eyes open, but I already know.

He's gone.

I felt it the second he walked away...

The second my heart gave up.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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SKYLER

I watch the sun rise across my ceiling—the shadows slinking away, gathering into the far corners of the room, where the light streaming in from the window can't reach.

It's been a long night...

And yet, all I have to do is close my eyes, and I'm back on that graveled walkway, kissing Nolan in the rain and listening to promises I know in my soul he won't be able to keep.

The pit in my chest sinks deeper, so deep, its claws anchor me to the bed. I didn't even bother to change last night. It's damp under me, where my clothes have soaked into the covers, and smells of must.

Of rain.

*Of Nolan.*

Turning my head, I stare directly into the golden sun peeking in from between the curtains. The burn feeds the ache weighing my bones down.

Somewhere, distantly, I hear an airhorn alerting to a boat's departure.

*First light.*

I sit up suddenly, my lungs heaving, mouth parted and neck straining.

I clutch my stomach, my chest—patting around, feeling for the gaping wounds that aren't there.

Jumping out of bed, I pull at the fabric of my shirt, looking around wildly. My vision blurs and I shake my head.

*No. Nonononono.*

*He can't leave me.*

*Not now. Not when I—*

Before I can think better of it, I throw my door open and run for the stairs, bypassing the elevators. I'm vaguely aware I'm barefoot. My flip flops must've slipped off at some point during the night. Or maybe I kicked them off. I don't know.

I hear a door open, and someone call out in concern. But it's just noise.

So much noise...

The echo of the airhorn the loudest of all, and the only thing I focus on in my mad, scrambled dash to get downstairs.

Air whistles in and out of my lungs—my heart racing so fast, it'll be a miracle if I get to him before it quits completely.

More voices call out, and there are eyes coming from seemingly everywhere. Workers mostly—has to be; it's too early for most of the patients to be up and about.

Electricity sizzles in my veins, making my movements feel too jerky and fast—like I'm glitching out. I can barely get my hand around the handle of the first Exit door I see.

It won't budge, and I shake it, gritted sounds of frustration crawling up from my throat.

Through my tears, I spot my bracelet, and shake my head, quickly lifting it to the reader.

It lights up green, and there's a soft gasp of air.

Blinding sunlight assaults my vision—my tears doing little to ward it off.

It's all too much right now, yet I don't run from it—I throw myself into it, stumbling onto the rough, jagged gravel, hardly able to breathe through the cloying aroma of flowers and sea salt barraging my senses.

The whooshing in my ears is deafening as I try to remember where the docks are, the ones I arrived at my first day here. Rooted in place, my arms swing out at my sides as I turn and look around, trying to catch my bearings.

But it's no use.

Everything's blurring together. A vortex of sight and sound. I'm not in the eye of the tornado—I *am* the tornado.

Something brushes my arm, and I don't think, I reach out, smacking the person. Shoving them off me.

And then I run.

More shouting follows me. A whistle sounds. But I barely even notice it. They're swept away as fast as they came, lost in the roar pressing in around me.

*It doesn't matter.*

*Nothing matters.*

A sob chokes out of me, and my feet fumble over the uneven terrain, kicking up pebbles and dirt.

Another hand grabs me, and I swing out, only for someone to catch me on my other side. They hold my arms away from me, and I'm shoved onto my knees.

I'm screaming. Choking. *Dying.*

*Their touch hurts.*

Everything hurts.

*Nolan. I need Nolan. He'll make them go away.*

Someone drops down in front of me, and then hands cup my cheeks.

"Skyler. Skyler. Look at me."

It's a woman's voice. Familiar. I frown, and blink rapidly, but I can't bring myself to meet her gaze. So instead I just squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head.

"Release him," she says firmly.

"But—"

"Let him go. You're hurting him."

"We're not."

"You are. Let. Him. Go."

*They won't listen. No one does.*

Except...

This time, they do.

And when I'm free, I don't make my escape. I fall forward in a heap, curling myself into a ball.

*Get up! Go after him!* I scream at myself, but it's no use. My body's no longer mine. I'm stuck.

*And he's gone.*

I know he is. I feel it in my bones—the absence of him.

It's not just one gaping hole. It's a network of carved out caverns spiderwebbed all across my body, where no blood or light can touch.

Bringing my shirt up to my mouth, I stuff so much fabric into my mouth, I gag. Covering my ears, I grit my teeth around my shirt, and I scream.

The heels of my palms dig into my ears with bruising force, and I shake my head like a rabid dog, drooling around my shirt.

Distantly, I'm aware—so terribly aware—of how humiliating this is. There are eyes on me coming from everywhere. I don't have to see to know they're there. Like this, I feel it all. Like knives scraping over my flesh, skinning me alive. Sharp teeth ripping at my brain like it's a piece of meat.

“Go. Get everyone out of here.”

“But Dr. Mad—”

“I have him. He'll be fine. You're all making it worse, trust me.”

Sobbing, I hold myself tighter.

Footsteps retreat, crunching over the gravel, slowly but surely fading away.

The eyes linger—but they don't feel close. *Windows*, I think.

“Skyler?” Dr. Maddock whispers.



Breathing shakily, I peel my eyes open, and look up through my lashes. I'm still sucking my shirt, and blocking my ears, but I meet her gaze.

Sympathy etches over her face, and more tears spill down my cheeks, soaking my shirt.

*I hate this. I'm better than this. Why is this happening?*

Dr. Maddock doesn't try to get me to talk. She sits, and she waits, and when the words finally come, she doesn't cast judgement. She doesn't pry.

She's just...there.

The damp, wrinkled fabric slips out of my mouth, saliva mingling with my tears.

"He's gone," I croak, sliding my hands down to my jaw... my neck.

I'm barely aware of Dr. Maddock angling closer.

Shaking my head, I squeeze my eyes shut, squeezing my neck like I could keep the truth in. But it's no use.

"He's gone."

And just like that, I fall forward, burying my face in my hands—gravel biting into my knuckles. I sink into the darkness, withdrawing to where nothing and no one can touch me.

He left me...just like everyone does.

"Why does no one ever want to keep me?" I choke out, my voice breaking off into heaving sobs. Finally giving voice to the question that's plagued me for my entire existence.

*So stupid. So, so stupid, to think this wouldn't end badly.*

This time, there's no storm—no flurry of chaos. I'm barely aware of Dr. Maddock talking. It doesn't matter. I just want to shrivel up here and die.

And I realize—

I didn't keep my promise to him either.

I'm not okay.

And I don't know if I ever will be.

*Nolan* made me okay...

*And now he's gone.*

And I am lost.

## PART II

# CHAPTER THIRTY

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**THREE YEARS LATER**

NOLAN

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”

Our hushed murmurings fill the room as we close out the meeting.

Some people have their eyes closed, and their hands raised in prayer. Others like me who don't really believe in the religious mumbo jumbo stuff, just numbly recite the mantra that's been ingrained into us, taking solace for no other reason than it's a ritual at this point.

A conditioned response triggered by repetition.

My body relaxes, and my lungs expand with air that feels a little less weighed down.

I feel stronger.

*Like magic.*

My mouth kicks up in a rueful grin. And as if summoned by his memory, my gaze drifts across the room, seeking. Always seeking.

And yet, he's never there.

Of course he's not.

Today marks three years since I last saw him, and still, I catch myself looking over to share a grin when someone tells a joke, or see his reaction when Gary, our AA leader, says something profound.

The loneliness I feel when I remember it's just me here, treading these waters alone, is...gutting, to say the least.

Even after all this time, but especially this time of year.

Hell if I can explain it. Not that I really want to try. It just is what it is at this point.

A hand claps my shoulder, yanking me out of my head. I blink, looking around, realizing everyone's dispersed from the circle, except for me. I glance up at my friend and sponsor, Hal, and he arches a brow.

"Rise and shine, Princess."

Rolling my eyes, I shrug him off, pushing to a stand. "Wasn't sleeping."

"Just day dreamin'."

I stretch my arms above my head, twisting my back until I feel and hear a solid pop.

"Gettin' creaky in your old age," Hal jokes with a rusty laugh.

I shoot him an unimpressed look. He's got twenty years on my thirty-five. Waving him toward the doors, I say, "Had a roofing job this week. What's your excuse?"

He whistles low under his breath. "He's got jokes today."

Walking out into the hall, I spin to face him, spreading my hands. "What can I say? I woke up on the right side of the bed for once."

Hal grunts at that, fitting his baseball cap over his thick gray hair. "Yeah, and I got laid." He takes out a pack of Camels, slaps them against his palm, before pulling out two. He hesitates, and cuts me a questioning look. "Smoke?"

I shake my head, waving him off. Reaching into my coat pocket, I grab my tooth picks. "I quit."

"Right." He salutes me, and pops a smoke between his lips before shoving the rest back in his pocket. "Power to you," he mumbles.

It's been two weeks now since I quit the shit, ever since Abby came up to me one night, shaking me awake, and with those big, blue puppy eyes of hers and told me, "*Daddy, you're gonna die.*"

It was creepy, admittedly, seeing as it was after her bedtime, dark, and I'd been nodding off on the couch.

When I asked her what she meant, she pointed to the pack of smokes sitting under my wallet and keys on the coffee table.

Safe to say, I smoked my last one that night on my way home—tossed what was left in the trash. And then first thing the following morning, I drove to town, bought the patch and a surplus of toothpicks, and went to a meeting, knowing I'd need to up my quota now that I'm down another substitute.

It was after Black Diamond that I took up smoking again for the first time since my early twenties. After having spent weeks using another's body to fulfill the hole left by my addiction, I found myself craving a drink harder than ever.

As if Skyler provided a balm to addiction's nasty grip on me.

My therapist—the one I started seeing once I got back to Vermont—wasn't too surprised when I told him how bad off I was. Apparently it's common in the early days of sobriety to latch onto something new to fill the void. Logically, I knew this, but frankly, I didn't give two shits.

*He was more than that, I remember thinking.*

Still, if it wasn't for my relief over finally getting to see my baby girl, combined with the guilt I still carried like a badge of disgrace, and Mel's and her parents' hawk-eyed paranoia, I'm not sure I wouldn't have ended up drowning myself in a bottle.

Losing Skyler...

It was an ache I never prepared for.

A gaping wound I don't think I'll ever be free of.

My newest vice, and a solace all in one.

*You could've gone after him...*

Yeah, well, hindsight's a bitch.

But that was all then...

And now I've got toothpicks, a nail gun, and my grumpy ol' sponsor to keep me in line when all else fails.

Sticky, heavy heat smacks us upside the face when we push our way outside. Popping a toothpick between my teeth, I lift a hand, blocking out the glare bouncing off a nearby car. The humidity's been off the charts these last couple days, but they predict it'll break up some today when it finally rains. By the swell of gray clouds moving in from the distance, it's looking like we'll be getting relief sooner rather than later.

"Coffee?" Hal mumbles, cupping his hand around the end of his cigarette. He lights it, puffing pungent smoke in the air. "Sorry," he mutters, when a slight breeze blows it my way.

"Might as well get used to it." It's not like I'm not surrounded by it every day on the job.

He nods, pinching the cigarette before removing it from his mouth. Tipping his head back, he blows smoke up into the air.

We head down a couple blocks toward our favorite diner. Well, the only diner in downtown McKinley. Not that much makes up downtown, save for this single strip of road. McKinley is a fairly big town, spatially, but it's made up mostly of mountains and farmland and winding backroads that make it very sparsely populated.

The diner is bustling at this time of day, but we arrive just as a family of four vacate the booth closest to the door.

From the speakers, an old folksy song plays, clamoring with the chatter and clinging of dishware.

"Hi, boys," Tiff says, setting down a couple mugs. She pours out the coffee, smacking away at her gum. "Your usual?"

Hal grins up at her. "You know it."

When she turns away, I shake my head at him. "I don't want pie."

"Eat the fucking pie."

We have this argument just about every time. Hal's of the mindset that pie cures everything, and more often than not,



this is where we find ourselves after a meeting. “Pie or die,” he likes to remind me. Meaning it’s pie or booze.

“You’re still young enough to be able to work the weight off. Take advantage of that.” He pats his gut where it bulges over his pants. “One day, it won’t matter.”

Barking a short, quiet laugh, I say nothing to that.

Two plates of pie arrive, the apple scent wafting into my nose, and watering my mouth.

Tiff sets down a bowl of creamers, and says, “Just holler if you need me,” before shifting her attention to another table.

Grabbing a couple creamers, I rip them open, and pour them into my mug, swirling it with a spoon. Hal’s already digging into his pie.

“Three years, huh?” he says casually, stabbing his fork into the crust.

“Yup,” I murmur before blowing into my coffee and taking a small sip.

I’m not surprised he remembers. He’s my sponsor. It’s basically his job to remember when I’m bound to slip up. Especially seeing as he’s the only guy who knows why I get in such a funk this time of year.

Mel thinks it’s amusing how grumpy I get in the summer. Then again, I’ve never really enjoyed the heat, so it’s not like it’s that strange how miserable it makes me.

She has no idea that it’s so much more now, the summer heat a ghost I can’t shake, reminding me of white, sandy beaches and teal waters and golden sunsets. Sparkling chocolate eyes and pink cheeks and nails biting into my skin.

And when it rains...

Storms...

It’s like I’m thrown right back there, to the island. I can smell it—the electricity burning in the air, cloying with the salt and seaweed. Hear the rocky waves in the thunder rumbling through the mountainside. Feel...*him*.

It just about kills me every time.

Hal hums around a bite of apple pie. Swallowing, he says, “You gonna call your guy?” He means the private investigator.

Shaking my head, I say, “I don’t know. He checks every once in a while. Said he’d call me if anything ever came up.”

Hal nods. His gaze lifts to mine knowingly. “But he’s not dead.”

Working my jaw, I glance out the window. “Not on record.”

It’s been two years since Skyler disappeared seemingly without a trace.

He’s not on social media, and he’s got no friends that I know of who I could reach out to. All I’ve got to rely on now are obituaries listed online, and my PI’s assurance he’s not locked away somewhere, like his parents had threatened prior to Black Diamond.

Up until Skyler disappeared, I at least had the benefit of not regretting it. For his sake.

Now...

Now I don’t know what to think. How to feel. Other than I’m...fucking terrified something happened to him in these last couple years, and somehow it’s partially my fault.

*If I just told him how I felt...*

*If I gave him hope...*

“He probably just fell in love and ran off with the guy.”

Throat thick, I nod. “I hope so.”

Scoffing harshly, Hal stabs his fork into the little that’s left of his pie. Mine sits untouched.

“What?” I murmur.

He cuts me an unimpressed look. “You know what.”

I look away, staring blankly out the window. “Of course it would hurt,” I admit softly, “if he moved on.” This isn’t the

first time we've discussed this, though it has been a while. This time of year though...

It's as raw as if it just happened.

"But..." Hal says leadingly.

"You know what," I throw right back at him.

He grunts. "Stubborn, thick headed fool."

Snorting, I reach for my coffee, and take a big gulp now that it's cooled some.

"You know if you just trusted that his feelings for you were real and forever—"

Now I'm the one scoffing, leveling him an unimpressed look. "Forever? Really?"

He holds his hands up. "I'm just sayin'." *He's always just sayin'.*

Gritting my teeth, I stab my fork into the pie. The utensil creaks under my grip, and I shake my head. "No, no, you know what." Leaning forward, I hiss before I can think better of it, "He's a child. He doesn't know what he wants."

Hal's brown eyes widen and he rears back slowly. "Wow, okay. There's a lot to unpack there."

Glaring at him, I feel that familiar twinge of self-loathing slinking forward. Like black sludge, slipping through my body, mottling anything good.

*He was eighteen.*

*He was eighteen.*

*He was eighteen.*

But it doesn't matter how many times I tell myself that. On the island, in the heat of...us...it was easier to ignore. To will away the doubts, and fears, and reality of the situation.

In the diner, Hal's brows furrow as he searches my face. This is the first time I said it point-blank. The first time I let the icky, horrid feelings in me fly free. They've festered for so long...

“You know, Nol,” Hal says with an air of disappointment. “I’ve half a mind you *enjoy* believing you’re the predatory asshole you say you are.”

I stare at him.

“And since the guy’s not here to stand up for himself, I’m going to say it. You’re a dumbass, and you need to give people more fucking credit.” He gives me a knowing, arched look. “You’re so damn scared of being left in the dust, that you’re the one doing the leaving, and look where that’s got you.”

I swallow hard. “I have Abby.”

“Barely.”

I scowl. “I’m in her life.”

“Barely. You’re her babysitter, and you know it.” He huffs. “Come on, kid. You’re tiptoeing all over your life because of one mistake. There’s a fighter in you, and you’ve just squashed him away, all because what? You worry it’ll all get taken away from you again?”

Gritting my teeth, I look away, blinking rapidly. Again, this isn’t the first time we’ve had this discussion, but it’s usually only in relation to Abby. Not my feelings and failures when it comes to Skyler.

For a long moment, neither of us say a thing.

Then, he whispers, “That is it, isn’t it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I mutter.

“Fuck, Nolan. You’re not a bad guy. You’re not gonna get in trouble for pursuing a younger guy. He was eighteen.”

*And so, so fucking innocent.*

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I duck my head. “What if he hates me? What if I...what if I fucked him up beyond repair? What if he’s...lying dead in a ditch somewhere, and it’s not because I didn’t tell him how I feel or fight for him, but because he realized I-I—”

Hal kicks me in the shin, and I still.

When I glance up, I find him scowling. “You don’t know any of that. That’s your worst fears playing out for you, and calling all the shots.” He blows out a breath, shaking his head. “You have no idea what’s going on in his head, so stop living your life like you do.”

“But—”

“No buts. This is what you’re going to do, okay?” He leans forward, dropping the fork to clasp his hands on the edge of the table. “You’re going to call your therapist after this. You’re gonna tell him what you told me. He’ll probably have better advice for you than I ever could.”

I huff a quiet laugh, shaking my head. Hal’s blunt and brash at times—even a little rude—but it’s half the reason why I appreciate it. There’s no bullshitting.

And yeah, it doesn’t escape me that Skyler pretty much said the same thing about me once.

*He needed this kind of tough, honest love too...*

“You are gonna live your life—no, scratch that, you’re gonna work for the life you *want*. Not the one you currently have, because you aren’t happy with this one, and you know it. It’s been over three years. It’s time to move on.”

I nod, knowing he’s referring to what happened with Abby.

“And Skyler?” I whisper, unable to help myself.

He blows out a breath and shakes his head. “That’s out of your control. But what is in your control, is your role in your daughter’s life. Start with that maybe. And find something you enjoy for the sake of enjoying. Something for *you*. Something good to fill your cup for once, instead of overfilling it with shit.”

I cough, rubbing my chest. I appreciate him not telling me to move on from him. He knows it’s not always that easy. Hell, his wife died five years ago, and while he’ll joke about going on dates and getting laid, we both know he’s a long, long way’s away from that.

*“Some loves come and go,”* he’d told me once, rolling the gold band around his finger, gaze far-off in memory. *“And some sink their teeth into you. Never let up. Physically, they’re gone, but their ghost lives on in us.”*

Setting my fork down, I grab my coffee and take a big gulp, washing away the emotion. Just as Hal goes to open his mouth and say something, the bell rings above the door behind us, and I hear a familiar squeal.

“Daddy!”

Turning my head, I find a streak of brown curls gunning for me. My gaze lifts, colliding with Mel’s bright blue eyes just as Abby all but throws herself into the booth with me.

“Fancy seeing you here,” she says.

I press a kiss to Abby’s head, as she babbles on about what they’ve been up to today. I catch something about new shoes and doctor...

“Everything okay?” I ask, when Mel stops over, nodding and exchanging hellos with Hal.

“Yep, just her annual check-up.” She smiles down at our daughter, and says, “Come on, Abs. Daddy’s meeting with a friend right now. We’ll see them after we get some lunch in you.”

“But Mom, can’t we—”

Hal says nothing, but I feel him watching me, waiting for me to do something...like invite them to sit with us.

Throat thick, I force a smile down at my daughter. Her big green eyes peer up at me, and I brush her hair back off her face.

“I’ll see you after you’re done eating, okay?” I whisper.

Mel says nothing, and when Abby hugs me and our gazes connect once more, she smiles sadly back at me.

Maybe if it was any other day that I was sitting here, eating pie with Hal after a meeting, I’d be able to do it. But I’m a

mess today. I know I am. And while I can let Hal see all my ugly, I refuse to let my daughter be witness to it.

And I don't want Mel to think I'm slipping.

Because I'm *not*.

But she might not know that. My past mistakes still have us in its grip.

Abby blows a raspberry, but chirps, "Okay!" like it's nothing. She scampers off toward the counter, where Tiff sets out some crayons and a paper placemat.

Mel and I share one last look, and I nod, silently reassuring her it's okay. *I'm* okay.

She smiles tightly, and gives us a little wave, before turning to join our daughter.

Rubbing my forehead, I grab my coffee and upend the remaining contents down my throat.

I can sense Hal watching me—the disappointment rolling off him in waves.

But when I meet his gaze, all I find is reluctant understanding and a sad, knowing smile that creeps up his cheek, pulling at his weathered skin. He taps the side of his head and says. "Everything we want is in here. But we gotta work for it. Day by day."

"Day by day?" I repeat skeptically.

He spreads a hand "Second by second if you have to. Until you believe it."

"Believe what?"

"We deserve good things."

Everything in me grows eerily still, and a chill creeps over my neck.

Suddenly, I'm thrown back to a different time and place, and my eyes sting recalling hearing and reciting those same words. Remembering a hand clutching mine.

It was my last group therapy session at Black Diamond, and I didn't even know it. My last bit of normalcy with Skyler, before the rug was pulled out from under us.

In the diner, I fist my hand over the table until I feel my nails piercing my skin.

And quietly, I murmur an echo of what I couldn't voice last time, "And we deserve love."

Hal nods strongly and impales his fork into the last remaining piece of his pie, and points it at my untouched plate. "And it starts with pie."



# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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SKYLER

I t's a cloudy day, making it feel a lot later than mid-morning when I leave New York in the dust.

The winding road is empty, leaving nothing but me and the evergreens caging me in. And beyond them, rolling mountains spread out as far as the eye can see.

It's all rich green forest and black asphalt and gray skies, and when it starts drizzling, I can't help but feel a sense of peace wash over me when it hits me.

*I made it.*

Low rock music crackles from my speakers, the only sound save for the low whoosh and squeak of my windshield wipers, and rattling engine. I'm honestly surprised my car made it all this way, though not without a couple hiccups, which cost me a night in a hotel I really couldn't afford.

But that's a problem for Future Skyler.

It's not like I can take it back now.

My gaslight comes on with a quiet *beep*, and I reach for my phone in the cupholder. The car's old and not able to connect to Bluetooth, so I have to manually bring up Siri to ask for directions to the nearest gas station.

GPS reroutes, taking me on a slight detour toward a town called McKinley—an estimated five minutes away.

More cars appear on the road as I enter the town limits. A water tower overlooks the tiny valley town, warring for height with the mountains looming on each side of what appears to be the main strip, appropriately named Main Street.

I turn into the Sunoco on the corner, pulling up near the first empty pump I spot, my car grinding to a jolting stop. Wincing, I shake my head. I don't really know cars, but something tells me I'm not going to get much farther with this thing.

The air is surprisingly warm when I turn off my engine and climb out. Being so far north, I thought it would be cooler in the summer, but aside from the shade, it doesn't feel much different here in Vermont versus back home in Indiana.

*Not home anymore*, I remind myself.

Seeing as I only have cash, I have to go inside to pay for gas.

There's a few people in the small convenience store, and I find myself peeking a look at each one. No, Nolan doesn't live in this town—I don't think. His business is a little over a half hour away from here. Where he actually *lives*...I don't know.

But again—that's a problem for Future Skyler.

I still can't help but feel nervous now that I'm finally here.

All the doubts I've shoved back in my efforts to make this possible are now popping forth one at a time, faster and faster, until it's too much to keep up with—too much to drown out.

“Can I help you?”

Blinking, I look up to find I'm next in line, so I shake off the thoughts and numbly tell the guy what pump I'm on and hand him a twenty dollar bill, carefully avoiding his curious gaze. I assume they don't get a lot of tourists here. Or maybe it's just because of how cheap I'm being. But it's all I'm willing to spend right now.

Back outside, I quickly pump what I paid for.

A glance at the time shows it's a little after 12:30, and my stomach rumbles as if on cue.

Running through what I have left in my wallet, I decide to see if there's a McDonald's or something around.

But no such luck as the closest fast food chain is an hour away according to Google Maps.

Frowning, I search nearby restaurants—anything—debating if maybe I should just resort to going back in the convenience store for some snacks to get through.

A nearby diner pops up first, as well as what looks to be a bar named Lola's. Both are on this street, just a little way's up, so I tap on the directions for the diner, and once the GPS kicks on, and I've got the car started, I slowly roll my way back onto Main Street.

I pass through a couple lights, only having to stop for one.

There's no parking lot from what it looks like when I spot the diner up ahead on my left. There's no sign outside, save for big, black bold letters spelling RESTAURANT across the brick siding.

Turning onto the narrow side-street a building down from the diner, I slow to a crawl along the curb. A glance around shows no meters, and no signs telling me I can't park here, so I figure I'm safe. It's not like I plan to be here long. In and out, and I'll...make a game plan or something. With only a couple weeks left before my phone bill is due, I'll need to make some big decisions about where I go from here now that I'm, well, here.

In Vermont.

*He's so close*, I think, my chest aching at the thought, my pulse speeding up, my stomach fluttering with what feels like a thousand hummingbirds flitting around.

I kind of want to throw up.

Locking my car, I stuff my keys in my jeans pocket, and start making my way back toward where I passed the restaurant. My ratty black Chuck's I found at a thrift shop are so worn down, I can feel rocks slipping into the soles from where the asphalt chipped off in spots.

Having thought it'd be a little cooler up here, I had pulled on a long-sleeved, oversized gray Henley I'd also found thrifting. It's threadbare at this point, and a little too small on me, seeing as I bought this when I first moved out of my parents'.

But I wanted to save my nicer stuff for once I got settled.

I round the corner—*asphalt giving way to smooth concrete*. The diner is just up ahead, one building down.

A car drives by, windows open, music blasting. The bass vibrates over my skin, and I clench my fists at my sides, leveling my gaze down at the ground with intent focus.

*Please, please don't be busy*, I silently beg the universe. I doubt it will be, seeing as how quiet and quaint this town seems to be. Save for that car, it's almost eerie how empty it is. Like a ghost town.

A bell ringing has me jolting, and nearly tripping over my feet. I snap my head up, and I'm not sure why I come to a sudden stop, or why I suddenly feel the urge to duck and run.

Prickles of awareness dance across the back of my neck, feeling like little gnats nipping at me.

My heart roars to a thunder in my ears, slow and steady, but *loud*.

Mouth dry, all I can do is stand there, frozen and staring as a man—an achingly familiar man—steps out of the diner. Of the place I was just headed to.

I'd laugh at the irony of it all, if I could. But instead, it's taking everything in me to stay standing.

It's as if Fate knew once I got to Vermont, I'd start doubting and stalling and chickening out, so it thought to give me no choice and throw him right in front of me.

I can hardly believe it.

But it's him. It's *him*.

Nolan Dresden in the flesh, some twenty feet away from me and three years older and no less detrimental to my health.

Clearly, if the way my pulse is trying to leap out of my throat is anything to go by.

*Yep, definitely want to throw up now.*

But I kind of also want to cry. Sink to my knees. Rush him and hug him and smack him and kiss him and—

A woman steps out after him holding the hand of a little girl with brown curly hair down to her mid-back, wearing a pink and yellow dress, and polka dot rain boots.

I blink a couple times, shaking my head, not quite sure I'm seeing things right when the little girl reaches for Nolan's hand, and he looks down at her then up, and then the woman's leaning forward and he's pressing his lips to her cheek and—

*I don't understand.*

*I don't...*

He grins, his face half hidden in shadows, and the tug of his lip has something tugging loose in me—unraveling.

I stumble back a step.

He doesn't hear me, or see me. He's smiling and talking to the woman with blonde hair curled around her face.

As if from down a long, winding tunnel, I hear the little girl say, "Mommy!" loudly, before jumping in place, and twisting all about. Whatever else she says is lost—lost to that one word unraveling me from somewhere deep in my chest.

It's a wonder I don't crash to my knees, not with relief this time, but with realization.

*This, I think. This is the real reason why he didn't want to stay in touch.*

*This is why he was so adamant I'd move on, why he couldn't even give me an answer when I asked if he felt it too.*

*Because even if he did...*

*Even if he did feel what I felt, there was still something—someone—holding him back.*

I don't realize I'm walking backward, moving away from the scene playing out in front of me in what feels like slow-motion...

Not until that little girl skipping around between them stops suddenly, whipping her upper body around, gaze finding mine immediately almost like she always knew I was there.

She doesn't let go of her parents' hands, but she ducks her head, smiling shyly my way, and I feel something just sort of...crack open inside me, unleashing what feels like liquid

fire spreading through my veins, burning so hot, it momentarily numbs me.

*She has his smile.*

*She has his eyes.*

Save for her narrowed chin, and button nose, and long wild hair...if I had any doubt before this wasn't his daughter Abby, I don't anymore.

It's her.

And that's her mom, Mel.

Mel...Nolan's ex-wife.

*So he said...*

I shake my head and the little girl cocks her head. She looks like she's about to say something, so I whirl around, duck my head, and bolt back the way I came, disappearing as fast as I humanly can around the corner.

I'm barely aware of bypassing my car, unable to stomach the thought of sitting still right now. Though a part of me knows the quiet, small space would be good for me.

I need to decompress.

I need to process this.

*Maybe it's a misunderstanding?*

No, no, he kissed her cheek. Like he kissed mine. They're together with their daughter...

*Their daughter.*

*I'm an idiot.*

It's been so long since I've had an episode like this, thanks to the med cocktail I was put on after Black Diamond—a combination of Risperidone and Abilify to treat my emotional dysregulation, so when I do get overwhelmed and out of sorts, I can better get a grip over myself.

No, it's not perfect. I'm not cured. There is no cure.

But it's manageable—so much more manageable than it used to be, that it still pisses me off sometimes that it took *years* to finally get answers that were apparently there all along. Supports that were there all along. But the research—the science—the awareness was just...not, and I fell through the cracks.

And I'm far from the confused, lost boy I was that morning Nolan left the island.

*I have myself.*

I'm barely aware of where I'm going as I count my breaths and work my way through the coping mechanisms I learned so long ago. Ideally, I'd still be in therapy, but I save money where I can—where I have to.

*And soon you won't even have your meds...*

“Fuck,” I grit out, slamming my hands to my ears.

My steps quicken right along with my breaths, and I glance up, looking around, praying no one else is around. I'm in some back alleyway, and ahead there's a dumpster and a few cars parked diagonally in a row. Across from it, the back of a brick building. Above the solid, black door, *Lola's* is printed in thick red, retro script across a white oval sign. Next to it, along the red brick siding, there's a LED sign shaped like a mug, and resting against it another LED sign shaped like a girl with skinny heels and long wavy hair falling down her back.

I blink a couple times, my steps slowing.

*A drink. A drink sounds good.*

I don't really know where the thought comes from, seeing as I've yet to touch a drop of alcohol since the vodka I chased down with Xanax three years ago. I turned twenty-one a couple weeks ago, and I still haven't had a drink.

*What better time than now?*

Dropping my hands to my sides in fists, I stride toward the door, and throw it open.

It's the scent that hits me first when I enter—floral and sweet, like a perfume.



Then it's the dim lighting combined with the low, gritty rock music I register next, and for some reason that has me lifting my head, blinking as my eyes quickly adjust, finally snapping out of my daze.

*Oh shit.*

My eyes widen as they collide with the naked woman currently twirling around a pole in the middle of the stage jutting out across the center of the room.

It's barely after noon, so I'm not surprised to find only one customer from the looks of it—a middle-aged man with a mostly bald head, and full goatee. He's reclined back in a velvet arm chair, mere inches from the stage. The glass in his hand is empty, and he seems to be...slouching.

I cock my head. *Is he sleeping?*

The woman does some fancy flip trick, kicking her leg high up in the air before twisting, curling, and practically tumbling down the side of the pole. Somehow she manages to land on her feet and not her head.

Gulping, I dart my gaze around and start to back away.

"Oh hey there, hot stuff," a deep, drawling voice says from behind me.

Whirling around, I flinch back.

The guy reaches out to steady me, but I twist away, ensuring he doesn't.

His dark eyes widen and he holds up his hands in a mock-show of surrender just before I drop my gaze. "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

Blinking at the ground, I adjust the hold on my backpack and straighten to my full-height. I nod. "S'okay. I just...I think I'm in the wrong place."

I feel him watching me for a long moment, and I try not to bristle. "No, I think you'll find you're exactly where you should be." He pauses. "Don't mind, Zel. She's just practicing."

I frown, and cut a questioning look toward the guy passed out next to the stage.

“Oh, that’s just Raúl. He works security. It was a late night last night, so he’s just catching some Z’s before we open.”

“You’re not open?” Glancing at the door past him, I frown, trying to remember if the signs outside were even lit.

“Nope, but that’s okay. We keep the door open for this very reason.”

My gaze snaps back to his, before darting away once more. “What reason?”

But he doesn’t respond. Instead, I feel him drag his eyes down my body, giving me a slow once-over. A peek through my lashes shows him rolling his lip between his teeth. *Is...is he checking me out?* I wonder, feeling a weird prickle of unease along the back of my neck. *He called me hot stuff, so...*

Mouth drying, I say, “I...I was just coming in for a drink. I didn’t know it was a strip club. Or that you’re closed. I’ll just...” My voice trails off and I go to step around him, but he jumps directly in my path, hands raised again.

“Easy. We’re cool.”

I stare at his chest.

He hums.

Finally, I peek up to find him cocking his head, that flirty, almost predatory gleam from a second ago rapidly replaced with something far more...laid back. Reserved, maybe. His mouth tightens and he nods, as if confirming something for himself.

“Sorry,” he says quietly, lip ticking up ruefully, “I think we got off on the wrong foot here. I’m Micah. I bartend here.”

*Micah.*

It’s a unique name, but thankfully I know this one, only because I read a book once with a character of the same name.

*Hebrew origins,*

*He who is like God.*

He goes to reach his hand out, but must think better of it and instead waves for me to follow as he strides past me. “Come on, let’s get you that drink. You look like you could use it.”

Sending a forlorn look at the door, I consider just bolting.

“I promise we don’t bite,” he singsongs loudly.

“Unless you want us to!” a raspy female voice rings out above the music.

Turning, my gaze clashes with the woman’s on the stage, and for a moment I’m held captivated. She’s got her hand around the pole, and walks round it slowly, slinking in beat with the music. Her long strawberry-blonde hair flickers under the dim overhead light.

With her free hand, she gives me a little wave.

And for whatever reason, I find myself doing the same. I’ve clearly lost it. Nolan’s finally broken me once and for all. Three years of edging just for this.

She beams and proceeds to catapult herself up the pole.

Eyes wide, I turn toward the bar, slowly making my way over.

“So what’s your poison, cutie?” the guy—Micah—asks, grabbing two glasses.

“Um...beer?” I say, though it comes out more like a question. I flit my eyes up, warily meeting his gaze.

Micah makes a face, shaking his head. “How old are you? Probably should’a carded you first, huh?” He winks. “Don’t tell Lola.”

I glance over at the stage and Micah throws his head back with a laugh. “Nah, that’s Zelda. Lola’s the owner. She’s like seventy-five with a bad hip and pretty much lets us have free reign over the place.”

“He’s lying,” a deep voice says. The guy I thought was snoozing in the chair still has his eyes closed, but a hand raised

straight up in the air.

Micah chuckles. “Okay, fine, so Raúl’s basically in charge when she’s not around. Bad hip or not, that woman will fuck you up. Don’t cross her.” He grins. “So, cutie without a name, do I need to kick you out?”

I blink, trying to keep up. “N-no, I’m twenty-one.”

He arches a disbelieving brow.

My cheeks heat. “I turned twenty-one a couple weeks ago. I’ve never...” Glancing behind him, I take in the rows of bottles lit up purple.

“Ah,” he says. “Gotcha. We’ll start off easy then. Now take a seat and get comfortable. I promise we’re cool here.”

Shucking off my bag, I set it on the stool next to me and plop down, resting my sneakers on the rungs, hands clasped together on the bar.

I watch as Micah scoops ice into a metal canister, followed by what looks like vodka and another liquor bottle with an orange label. He seals a lid on it, and proceeds to shake it over his shoulder.

The music switches off, and I hear the quiet tapping of heels clicking across the stage, followed by murmuring.

Looking over my shoulder, I find the woman Micah referred to as Zelda hopping down from the stage. She grabs a ball of fabric from Raúl and proceeds to shake out the oversized black t-shirt before slipping it over her head.

“Here you go.”

I flinch, whipping forward. This time, Micah’s kind enough to not draw attention to it. He slides the glass to me, and I stare at the red and orange hued drink.

“What is it?”

“Sex on the Beach.”

My head jerks up at that. “What?”

He chuckles, shaking his head. “It’s the name of the cocktail. Now take a sip. Tell me if it’s too strong.” He brings a hand to his face, half-covering his mouth like he’s telling me a secret. “It’s not,” he whispers, winking. “But humor me.”

Biting back a small smile, I pull the drink to my lips and take a small sip.

It’s...sweet. Tastes like juice honestly. It’s really fucking cold though.

I take a bigger sip and this time I taste it. Scoffing, I pull it away, smacking my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

Micah sighs, yanking it away from me with a shake of his head. “Virgins.”

My face heats. “I’m not—”

He gives me a humored look and I slam my mouth together.

“Stop torturing the boy.” Zelda enters the back of the bar, finger-combing her hair as she wraps it up into a big, messy bun on top of her head. Leaning over the register, she plucks out a pack of smokes.

“But he’s so fun to tease,” Micah says, shooting me another wink. He pours my drink into an even bigger glass, then adds a mixture of orange and cranberry juice. Fortunately, he doesn’t add more ice.

Zelda plucks a cigarette out of the carton with her teeth and turns to Micah who has a pink BIC lighter raised and already lit. She puffs a couple times, blowing ripples of smoke across the bar. Lowering the lighter, Micah bends down, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

They must sense me staring, because they both look over at me with small, matching smiles.

“So who’s this?”

Micah shrugs. “Won’t give me his—”

“Sky,” I blurt.

Zelda's face lights up. She's pretty, with big blue eyes smattered with glitter and smudged eyeliner around the edges. I'd say she's probably in her late twenties, maybe early thirties. I'd clock Micah to be around the same age, though maybe a little older. He's gorgeous too, with black hair down to his shoulders, eyes made up not unlike hers.

"It's nice to meet you, Sky. Where you comin' from?" she says. There's an accent there I can't place. New York? Brooklyn maybe? Now that I think about it, Micah's is the same, though maybe not as strong.

"Indiana," I whisper, but keep my eyes trained on Micah.

My knee starts to bob, and I feel that familiar buzzing starting to fill my brain. My fingers flex around the glass, and I shakily bring it to my lips, taking a sip. It's just as sweet, if not sweeter, and still too cold. Where before it didn't bug me *too* much, it's now wreaking havoc on my taste buds.

Wincing, I set it down.

Micah says something, but I don't hear what it is. The buzzing has been replaced with static that drowns everything else out.

Knowing it'll only continue to get worse, I reach down and pull my phone from the side pocket on my bag. I go to unlock the screen, but I get nothing. It's dead.

I blink.

*How...*

Glancing up at the two faces watching me with concern, I say thickly, "My phone's dead."

Micah frowns, and Zelda looks to him, then me, and says, "I think I have a charger in the ba—"

"What's your name mean?" I rush out.

She stops, frozen, mouth parting.

My cheeks heat, and I force myself to sit taller, though I still avert my gaze. "I just...I have this thing. I kind of need to know what people's names mean when I meet them. I know

his, but I don't know yours." My chest aches at the words stumbling from my lips. I know how ridiculous I sound. How weird they probably think I am.

This hasn't happened in a long time. But with the new surroundings, having to interact with strangers, and the stress of what just happened...seeing Nolan for the first time in three years...only to have what was left of my heart ripped out of my chest.

I squeeze my eyes shut, digging my nails into my palms. It's just too much.

"I don't know," she whispers.

"Griselda," Micah says over her. Loudly. Firmly. "That's her full name."

I peek open an eye and meet his steady gaze. He just nods, almost like he...like he gets it, how important this is to me.

Swallowing thickly, I go to open my mouth and tell him that's not what I mean, when it hits me.

I actually *do* know what her name means. I just didn't realize it was a nickname.

The breath whooshes out of me, and I nod. "Patient. Meek."

Zelda huffs, while Micah just throws his head back and laughs.

For a second, I think he's laughing at me, but then he says, "Wow. Your parents really fucked up with that one."

She rolls her eyes, and I find myself biting back a small smile when I remember saying a similar thing about myself to Nolan once upon a time.

"I'll just add it to the list," she says. Her gaze cuts to mine, and I'm well aware of the fact I can now bear to stand meeting her head-on. She must sense it too, because she narrows her eyes, and nods. "We good now?"

She doesn't say it rudely—just bluntly—and for some reason, it reminds me of Nolan and the way he reacted

similarly to my little *quirk*. I bite back a rueful smile at the thought, and nod. “Yeah. S-sorry about that, it’s just—”

“Your thing.” She shrugs like it’s nothing. “We all got things.”

“Cheers to that,” Micah says.

I look between them, waiting for the punchline, but nothing comes. They’re really just...rolling with it.

Feeling like I can breathe a little easier, I grab my drink and take a sip. Still all the things it was before, but with the calmness and quiet in my head now, I find that’s it more than tolerable. Maybe even a little good.

Or that could just be the alcohol already working through my system.

*Careful...* a voice says.

It’s part of the reason I’ve stayed away from the stuff up until now. Every time I considered having a drink since turning twenty-one, all I could think about was Nolan, what he went through, and everything I learned back in Black Diamond when I was still following the rehab program.

Hearing all those stories...the regrets...how insidious it is...

Not going to lie—it turned me off big time.

Setting the glass down, I look up to find them watching me curiously. It’s a little nerve-wracking.

“What?” I say, running the back of my hand over my lips.

“Look, we don’t want to pry, but...are you in trouble?” Zelda asks gently.

Micah stares at me, arms crossed, brow furrowed. “We don’t get a lot of tourists up here, and we’re not on the way to any major city or anything. So unless you’re visiting someone, we’re going to assume you’re running from something.”

My eyes widen and I shake my head. “No, I’m not...I’m not running...” My voice fades, because in a sense, it does kind of feel like I am.



*I was running to him.*

The memory of seeing Nolan only moments before surges forward, spearing me right in the chest, like it's happening all over again. I suck in a sharp breath, and blink a couple times to try to keep the tears at bay.

*He was never gonna come for me.*

*I was just a distraction.*

*I was just a fling.*

Micah and Zelda share a troubled look, and I realize I have to give them something. It's clear they're drawing their own conclusions, and I'd much rather them have the truth. Something tells me they won't let me leave if they think I'm in any danger.

I don't know why I know this, but I just do. There's just this sort of...air of protectiveness. To both of them. Again, it reminds me of Nolan, and God, it hurts. Like someone reached into my chest, and squeezed my heart.

*Maybe it's a lie here too.*

*Maybe it's all lies.*

Shaking away the thoughts, I force myself to say, "I was here to see someone. An old...friend."

They stare at me for a beat, then Zelda says, "Ah," with a small pitying smile, while Micah just winces and shakes his head.

Fighting not to squirm, I shrug, and put on an air of nonchalance. "It is what it is. I guess I probably should've... called or emailed him first." I sigh, shaking my head, hearing how pathetic I sound even to my own ears. *Not that I had any way of contacting him...*

Well, that's not true. I could've contacted his business—Dresden Builds, LLC.

At least, I assume it's his business. He did mention once that he was a contractor and owned his own construction company.

But it felt...wrong, going that way about it.

*Would've saved you a whole bunch of money and time though, had you tried ...*

Micah nods, eyes filled with understanding like he's sensing where my thoughts went. "Sometimes we need to see it to believe it for ourselves. I take it the reunion didn't go well?"

Sucking in my cheeks, I shake my head. "He didn't even see me."

Zelda perks up at that, and I give her a small, tremulous smile. "He was with his wife and kid. Saw them coming out of a diner together. I bolted immediately." I shake my head. "I didn't come up here to destroy his life."

Her eyes go big and round. "He's married?"

I wince and rub a hand over the back of my head. "He told me he was divorced when we met. But..."

My mind flies back to that moment I saw him bend down and kiss the woman's cheek. Between them, standing to only waist-high, that little girl with the big green eyes staring back at me.

*Definitely Abby.*

"Maybe it wasn't his wife."

I open my mouth, close it, then try again. "Their daughter though..." I say, shaking my head. "I heard her call her Mommy, and she was holding both their hands. I don't see how it could've been anyone else."

Zelda flattens her mouth into a hard line, nodding.

Micah sighs roughly. "Yeah, sounds like it."

I shake my head. "Coming here was a mistake."

"Hey now," Micah says with an air of offense.

I open my mouth to apologize, and explain I meant Vermont in general, but he gives me a wink, telling me he's just messing with me.

I slink back at that, reach for my glass, and take another sip.

He narrows his eyes. “You still don’t like it.”

I shrug. “It’s not awful. Just too sweet. And cold.”

He nods and makes a grabby hand for it, but I shake my head, holding it to my chest. Zelda chuckles in between puffs of her cigarette, making sure to blow it away from us.

Frowning, I wonder if that’s legal.

Micah follows my gaze, and rolls his eyes. “Zel, babe, take it outside.”

She sighs dramatically. “You’re lucky I love you.” She gives me a little salute and leaves, disappearing through a door off to the side of the bar.

“Meek, my ass,” Micah says, chuckling.

Smirking around the rim of the glass, I swallow some more of the sharp, fruity drink. I can definitely taste the alcohol now.

“So what’s your plan now?” he asks, crossing his toned arms over the bar. He’s wearing a tight black short-sleeved shirt that showcases the tattoos covering both arms down from his fingers, up to where they disappear under his shirt, and poke out again above the collar before fading near his jawline.

I’ve no doubt he’s covered just about everywhere from the neck down.

He’s also pierced—his eyebrow, and when he pushes his hair back, I notice he’s got what looks like a safety pin through his cartilage.

“I don’t know,” I tell him honestly. “I didn’t really think this through.”

When the three year anniversary drew near, I could no longer stomach just waiting around. How I managed to make it as long as I did probably has less to do with my practically non-existent patience, and more to do with the fact it took me

three years to save up for not only a car, but still have enough to afford gas, meals, hotel rooms along the way...

Thing is, I only saved enough for a one-way trip.

Even now, there's no part of me that wants to go back to Indiana. I haven't spoken to my parents in over two years. I have no friends there—not really—nothing more than the acquaintances I made at the odd jobs I worked over the years, saving up for this trip.

But I only have sixty-five dollars left to my name now, because about seventy-five percent of the way through Pennsylvania, I got a flat—hit a massive pothole head on—and had to replace a tire. Which ended up putting me a whole day behind.

I saved on a room at least. Just pulled over at some park and slept in my car.

Still, it was something I didn't account for.

Just as I didn't account for Nolan getting back together with his ex.

*Or they never split to begin with, and he just lied...*

"I'm so stupid," I groan, dropping my head to the bar.

"Hey now, none of that. You followed your heart. That's more than a lot of people can say."

I peek up at Micah, giving him a flat, unamused look.

"Seriously," he says. "It was brave. Most people would not travel halfway across the country on a maybe."

"I had nothing to lose."

He nods, hearing what I'm not saying.

*All I had was him. Nolan. The hope that we'd somehow, one day, end up together.*

Emotions sears my throat and I squeeze my eyes shut, breathing against the ache pummeling my chest.

*This hurts so much.*

It hurts maybe more than our last night together. At least then, I had hope when we parted ways. I knew where I stood, or at least felt like I knew where I stood. I...hoped...hoped he'd realize he made a mistake, and he'd come find me.

But with each passing month, then year, he didn't reach out or come looking for me, I felt myself growing more frustrated—more restless.

*He never said he would*, a voice reminds me.

Yeah, okay, but he also never said he *wouldn't*.

I realize now that maybe, just maybe, he never actually anticipated reuniting with his ex—maybe they really were divorced and thought their marriage over, but then he saw her again, and the old feelings came flooding back. Maybe she forgave him, begged him to take her back, and he did... because she was his wife. His first love. The mother of his child.

That's what normal people do, right? People not like my parents who just see marriage as a business deal, and having children as a way to ensure the family legacy continues.

*So much for that...*

But people who fall in love and have kids because they want to? They fight like hell to stay together, to live long, happy lives raising their kids under one roof. It's, like, the whole point, isn't it? Why make so many movies and write so many books geared toward it, if it wasn't?

*Happily ever after...*

“Sky.”

I crack an eye open.

Micah tilts his head. “Do you have a place to stay?”

Shaking my head, I say, “I'll figure something out.” Sitting back, I clutch the end of the bar and look around, taking in the wide, empty, dimly lit club. “I've got my car and—”

“You can't sleep in a car.”

“It's nothin—”

“You’re not sleeping in a fucking car,” he says, surprisingly stern. As if he’s known me for more than just a few minutes. It’s...strange, but nice. It’s when people act wary of me, like they don’t know how to take me, that makes me uncomfortable. And the more uncomfortable I am, the harder it is to mask and try to act like everybody else.

Turning my attention back to him, I say, “I can’t exactly afford another hotel room.”

“Then stay with us.”

“Us?”

He nods. “Zel and I. We have an apartment a couple blocks away. There’s a spare room. It’s unfurnished right now, but we have an air mattress we can set up.”

I’m shaking my head before he’s even finished. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“I just told you, I don’t have any mo—”

He waves me off. “Don’t worry about that.”

“I’m not sponging off you,” I whisper.

“Then you’ll get a job. Hell, you can work here.”

I frown. “As a bartender?”

“No, as a stripper,” he deadpans.

I blink. “But I’m a guy.”

He coughs a laugh. Shaking his head, he says, “Yeah, and so are half the dancers here. We’re all about the variety here.” He smirks like he knows something I don’t.

“I can’t dance.”

“Dude, I was fucking with you.”

“Oh.”

Chuckling, he says, “You’re adorable.”

My cheeks flush, and that just makes him smile wider.

“Seriously, though,” he says after a moment. “Our servers come and go like dust in the wind. We’re always looking for help on weekends.” He pauses, tipping his head. “The uniform is a little skimpy, but you definitely have the body for it.”

Again, my cheeks betray me. Gritting my teeth, I nod. *I can do this. Why not? It’s better than working the front desk of a garage, pretending to know how cars work, and dealing with super macho men who treat me like shit.*

“Well don’t look so excited,” he says, cutting into my thoughts.

“It’s just temporary,” I mutter. “A few weeks. Month tops.”

He shrugs. “Sure.”

Pursing my lips, I nod. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Anytime, cutie.” He arches his pierced brow. “Now hand over that drink, so we can figure out something you actually like.”

Reluctantly, I slide it over, and watch him turn around.

My thoughts drift as he goes about making me something else.

There’s no way I can stay here a month, risking Nolan seeing me, but just as soon as the thought comes, others stop me.

I need to save money.

My car sucks.

I need to find a doctor to prescribe me more meds.

I need to be able to afford seeing the doctor *and* the meds.

I need to get my head straight.

*I need Nolan.*

*NO!* I inwardly shout at myself, slamming a steel door down on that line of thinking.

For two years, I’ve been on my own, making my way without any help from anyone. Now is not the time to turn into

a pathetic, lovesick, codependent fool, just because he's in such close proximity.

*I wanted to impress him.*

*Ugh! Listen to yourself.*

No, this was always about more than just him. It was about me too, about my promise to him, yes, but also a promise to myself.

I did what I set out to do—I got to Vermont, and I...

Well, I got my closure, as one-sided as it feels.

Sometimes that's just the way life is, and I need to suck it up and deal, even if it hurts. Even if it feels like I'm suddenly swimming against a current determined to pull me back and throw me against a jagged rock.

I just need to keep swimming.

Keep breathing.

Keep trying.

One month tops to plan and prepare, and then I'm out of here.

I just need to get through one month without seeing him. Because I meant what I said when I told Micah I didn't come here to destroy his life. I wouldn't do that to him. I'm not a homewrecker.

It's risky, staying here, but who knows if I'll find a better option than this—a job, a place to sleep, somewhere safe...

*One month. I can do this. And then I can start over...*

Again.

Nolan and I might be over, but my life isn't.

*It just feels like it is...*



# CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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**SIX MONTHS LATER**

## SKYLER

**S**ultry rock music plays from the speakers, filling the dimly lit room.

A single spotlight shines on the stage where a curvy woman dressed in nothing but a silver sequined thong hangs upside down from a pole, knee curved into her perky chest.

Her eyes are closed, face smooth of all expression. She looks peaceful swinging there with nothing but her ankle keeping her from crashing down head-first.

“Hey, Sky, table 2’s waving you down.”

Turning, I spare Micah a quick glance, following his little chin nod toward the other side of the room where a group of mostly women sit in one of the high-backed round booths reserved for parties.

Two of the girls wear white veils on their head. One is in a pink dress, the other black. The one in the black is currently sitting on the other’s lap and is waving at me, a grin spread across her face. By the flush of her cheeks, and the glimmer in her eyes I spot when I draw near, I know she’s got to be feeling pretty good.

“Hi, *Sky*,” she purrs. Giggles sound from around the table.

I stare down at my tablet. “What can I get you?”

“A blow job,” she says with all the seriousness in the world.

Her fiancé swats her arm, but she too is giggling.

“Excuse her,” the guy next to her drawls deeply. “She doesn’t get out often.”

In my periphery, I catch his wink, and my cheeks flame.

“Quinn, leave the boy alone,” the girl directly across from him says.

He rolls his eyes. “Just having a little fun.” I peek up through my lashes as he looks me up and down. He arches a brow. “Please tell me you dance too.”

I click my tongue, shaking my head. “No. Pretty sure that would be a liability for the club.”

He smiles like maybe he thinks I’m joking, but I’m not. “I too suffer from what the doctors call flat feet.”

I shrug. “I think mine are just too big.”

He smacks the table with a laugh, and I realize what I just said. *Ugh.*

“That-that’s not what I—” I slam my mouth shut. I can feel my face darkening even more. Shaking my head, I fist my hand at my side, clenching the tray in the other. Dressed in nothing but black bootie shorts and a red crop top that reads *Lola’s* in white retro script across my chest, I suddenly feel very, very naked.

*Get a grip. You’re working. It’s not real. You’re not you. You’re Sky.*

Blowing out a breath, I stand up straighter, lifting my chin, though I don’t meet his eye directly, or anyone else. “What can I get the rest of you?”

The guy—Quinn—chuckles knowingly around his straw, but fortunately he leaves it, and simply says, “Another vodka soda, please. Extra cherries.”

The others throw in their orders and I nod, spinning on my heel, and strut back to the bar like there isn’t a fire lit to my ass.

Micah’s laughing when I reach him. Shaking his head, he says, “You were floundering.”

“Shut up.”

“You should get his number.”

I scowl. “No.”

“No? He’s cute. Why not?” A beat passes. “Wait, was he being rude?” There’s an edge there now where there wasn’t

before, and I shake my head.

“No, he was just...flirting, I think. Harmless stuff. I just...”

“Fumbled.”

I huff. “As usual.”

“Well, if the way he’s still watching you means anything... I think he likes your fumbling.”

I level Micah with an unimpressed look, meeting his dark, nearly black eyes.

He spreads his hand and goes about making a martini, while I grab what I can from the cooler. “I’m just saying. He’s clearly interested.”

“Yeah, in my body,” I mutter.

“So?” He laughs quietly. “That’s not a bad thing. Have some fun for once. You’re twenty-one. Let loose a little.” He wags his brows and I roll my eyes, shaking my head.

I rattle off the other orders for him to make.

“You know, if I didn’t know better, I would think you’re still waiting for your sexy island man to show up and sweep you away.”

At the mention of Nolan, my chest tightens, and I shake my head. “I wish I never told you about that.”

He scoffs.

“And I’m not...waiting, not anymore.” *I’m not.*

“Good,” he chirps, sealing a metal shaker.

Turning to look over my shoulder, I’m not surprised when my gaze clashes into Quinn’s. He smiles and gives me a little wave before I quickly look away, and I feel something pull at my chest.

Not toward him, but away. Toward a man who’s clearly all but forgotten about me by now. It’s been three and a half years since Black Diamond, and he hasn’t made a single damn attempt since to reach out to me. Not that he said he would—

he made that very clear—but still. A part of me hoped. A part of me wished maybe he would've realized how wrong he was that last night.

*But now you know why he wasn't...*

I've known for six months now, and it still hasn't made it any easier.

The last hour passes by in a blur as I continue to make my rounds, smile, nod and go through the motions.

Normally, I enjoy my nights working here, but tonight I'm just not feeling it. I'm tired. If anything, Quinn's continued flirting—subtle and harmless though it may be—tired me out faster than usual.

All I want is a shower, some food, and to lay in bed and watch Netflix on my phone.

Not for the first time, I wonder why I'm even still here—working here, living here—a mere twenty minutes away from the man who stole my heart and never thought to give it back before returning to his old life.

I should've up and left this entire state the second I learned Nolan and I would never have a future.

*So much for not waiting around...*

# CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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NOLAN

“Nolan, hey,” a voice whispers.

*Waves crash in the distance, clashing with the rumbling thunder.*

*It's storming. Been storming all day. It never seems to stop here.*

*But that's not true...*

*Someone jostles my shoulder, and I frown. “Sky? What's —”*

*But it's empty in my arms. I look around and he's not there.*

*The beach is empty.*

*I'm alone...*

*All alone.*

*What—*

I sit up with a gasp.

Chest heaving, I blink a couple times, bringing Mel's living room into focus.

Last thing I remember, I sat down after putting Abby to sleep, and threw on a true crime documentary.

“Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you.”

Shaking away the last remnants of sleep, I comb back my hair and glance up to where Mel stands there in her black cocktail dress, heels dangling from her fingers.

“I fell asleep,” I say, my voice thick and guttural. My heart starts to race, and I jump to a stand, ready to bolt down the hall, when Mel grabs my arm.

“She's fine. I just checked on her,” she says gently. “She's fast asleep.” Then nodding to the end table next to the sofa, she says, “And the monitor's right there. The doors are all

locked.” Her knowing gaze meets mine, pinched, but also understanding. “It’s okay. It’s late. I told you you could—”

Shaking my head, I gently pry her hand off my arm and make my way down the hallway toward my daughter’s room.

I crack the door open, peek my head in, and find her exactly as Mel described. Curled up on her side, her stuffed black bear clutched to her chest, eyes closed, and back rising and falling steadily. From her nightstand, a projector hums white noise, rotating, casting an array of stars across the room. It’s currently set to blue, making it feel like we’re right up there in space.

Next to it, is the baby monitor I just can’t seem to part with, even though she’s five now. She doesn’t seem to care. If anything, when she sees me set it down next to her head on nights I watch her, she just crosses her arms and rolls her eyes in that overly dramatic way she does. Not budging until I tickle her, pretend to bite at her hands and feet, and she forgets.

Unable to help myself, I pad over to her princess bed, crouch down, and bring my fingers to her curly brown locks. Her mouth is parted adorably, lip sticking out, chunky cheeks slack. She doesn’t stir, but she’s breathing, and I feel the tension finally seep from my limbs. My heart rate and breathing slowing right along with it.

I lift the blanket up to her shoulders from where it started to slip, stand up, and start quietly backing away.

Just as I reach the door, closing it behind me, the colors shift over to violet.

Back down the hall, I find the living room empty, so I head for the kitchen where Mel’s currently brewing a pot of coffee.

“It’s late,” I murmur, smiling knowingly. Mel’s a coffee fiend if there ever was one. She could drink down the whole pot, and still crash as soon as her head hits the pillow.

She cuts me a look, ensuring I see her eyeroll. It’s a running joke we have that Abby got her attitude from her.



“You gonna stay?” she asks casually, grabbing the creamer from the fridge.

I pull two mugs down from the rack, setting them down next to the pot. It spits and steams as it percolates. “No, I’ll head out after this.”

“You know the couch is—”

“I know,” I tell her. “Thank you.”

Our eyes connect, and she gives me a small grin.

She offers every time, and every time I decline.

After I returned from Black Diamond, we immediately put our old house on the market. I didn’t even know she wasn’t staying there—she and Abby were living with her parents the entire time I was in rehab. And when I got out, they were kind enough to give me the guest house until I got back on my feet.

Now, more than three and half years after that near-tragic day, Mel’s got herself a really nice, modernized farmhouse in a good gated development with a bunch of other families with kids for Abby to play with as she gets older. No pool. No body of water anywhere in the vicinity.

And I’ve got my cabin in the woods on the outskirts of town.

Mel’s quiet as she goes about pouring out our coffees. I add a bit of creamer to mine, while she fixes hers up all fancy with creamer, flavored syrup, and a dash of cinnamon.

I take a seat at the island, fitting my big ass body on the too small bar stools. Seriously, they clearly have only one body type in mind when they make these things.

Usually Mel takes up the other one, but instead, she just turns around, resting against the counter to face me from the other side of the island.

Not thinking much of it, I bring my coffee to my lips, blow on it, and take as big a sip as I can of the piping hot liquid. The drive is only about twenty-minutes, but it’s after midnight, and if anything, that impromptu nap just made me more tired.

Swallowing, I take another pull from my mug, when Mel says, “So who’s Sky?”

Coughing, I all but spit my coffee all over the room.

Mel winces through a smile. “Sorry.”

*She’s totally not sorry.*

Clearing my throat, I punch my chest, trying not to choke. Fuck, that’s hot. My chest is on fire, and I shake my head, setting the mug down.

“How did you...” I start to say, my voice raspy.

Mel arches a brow. “You said her name when I woke you up on the couch.”

All I can do is stare.

“So. Who is she?”

My mouth opens to correct her, but something holds me back, locking the words in my throat.

Mel cocks her head, her blonde curls bobbing against her shoulder.

*Shit.* She’s not gonna drop this.

“Just, uh, someone I once knew,” I say numbly, feeling like there’s sand in my heart, weighing it down with each word uttered.

*Someone I knew.*

*Someone I fucking knew.*

Her eyes narrow thoughtfully. “From Black Diamond?”

My eyes widen.

She hums, small smile playing at her lips. “Ah. I see now. So she’s the one.”

My brows slam down in a frown, and I shake my head, not understanding. “The one?”

“The one who broke your heart.”

And everything just sort of grinds to a halt.

I stare at her, paralyzed by what to say.

“Come on, Nol. We’ve known each other since we were kids. You can’t hide anything from me.” She chuckles, and I feel something wilt inside me.

*Except I did...I am...*

Her smile wavers, her humor fading. “Nol, what is it?” A beat passes, and she gives a little shake of her head. “You know I’m not...mad, right? Or hurt. I mean, back then, when you first came home, and it was clear you were...mourning something, it stung a little.”

My jaw clenches, emotion rushing the back of my eyes.

“But it’s okay. Okay?”

Forcing a hard swallow, I nod. “I...I didn’t think you...”

“I told you. I know you.” She pauses. “As happy and relieved as you were to see Abby, I didn’t miss the way you looked when she *wasn’t* around. At first I did think it was... well, guilt.”

I nod. “It was.”

She frowns.

I wave a hand. “For everything. Abby. You.” A long beat passes. “Sky,” I croak.

*Fuck.*

Hearing Mel say his name is surreal to say the least. It’s like my life was torn into two—my world split between this life, the one with Mel and Abby, and the one I had briefly on the island with Skyler.

It didn’t always feel so taboo, the idea of Mel knowing about him.

When I first got out of rehab, I was so focused on doing whatever I needed to do to keep Abby in my life, that telling her was just not even an option. All I cared about was being able to see my daughter, and gaining Mel’s trust back so that I could *continue* seeing her.

But then, as more time passed by, and the memories from the island started to fade, and a new normal set in where I didn't reach for Skyler every time I woke up...

Well, I just didn't see the point in opening that can of worms. Not with anyone, except for my sponsor and therapist. It's just less...personal, with them.

The truth is, I have no idea how Mel would react to the fact that I not only...fuck, *fell* for another person, so quickly after we split...

But I fell for a *man*.

A man who happens to be fourteen years younger than me. Barely eighteen at the time.

Hell, just calling him a man feels...wrong, when he was still so young. Legal, yes, but *young*. And calling him a kid is just flat out sick, so yeah.

Clearly my head's still a bit of a fucking mess about that, though since my talk with Hal back in June, I've been trying to be a little more gentle with myself.

Still, though, if anything, the more time it's been since Black Diamond, the more guilty and ashamed I feel when I think about it.

So these days, I try to just...not.

I can't even fucking imagine what Mel would say, or do if I told her the truth about all this. No, I don't think she'd care if she knew I was bi. Logically, I know she wouldn't. But the age thing...

God, I can only imagine what her parents would say. What poison they'd feed into her mind to try to get me out of Abby's life once and for all. Because while Mel's forgiven me for what happened—as much as she's capable of—her parents...

They're a bit harder to read. Half the time I think they would've just preferred it had I gone the coward's way and abandoned Abby altogether, rather than fight to stay in her life. *Both* their lives.

“Nolan.”

I blink up at Mel.

“Breathe.”

Releasing a long gust of air, I hang my head, scrubbing my hands over the back of my neck, tugging at my hair. “Fuck.”

“She really messed you up, huh?” she says in a tone I can’t quite make out. She doesn’t sound upset though. Just curious, if anything.

*He*, I want to say. *He* really messed me up.

Though, really, if anyone messed up anyone here, it’s me.

Still, I don’t correct her. I’m not sure why.

*Yes you do.*

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to get over this...hurdle in my brain. I *know* she wouldn’t care. Not about him being a guy. I do. But logic has nothing on my fear.

Fear this will somehow be that final straw that rips my daughter away from me once and for all.

“It’s interesting.”

“What is?” I mutter.

“Here I thought maybe it was just a...rebound. A summer fling.”

I arch her a dry look. “Yeah, a cute fling in rehab.”

There’s that cringe-smile again. “Right. Sorry.”

I study her for a moment, considering how to put this. “It was supposed to be just a fling. Something to pass the time.” Even just hearing it out loud has a flood of guilt rising to the surface.

*He deserved so much better than that.*

She nods. “But it turned into more.”

“I guess. Yeah. Yeah, it did.”

Flashes of our last night together storm through my head. Kissing him...finally kissing him...losing myself into his

body, so deep, so powerfully, as if it was the first time all over again.

Because it was, in a sense.

While there was never really anything holding us back once we got going, it was almost as if whatever barrier we had pretended existed—keeping our feelings at bay—had shattered that night. All pretenses gone.

Skyler swept into my life like a hurricane.

I had plenty of warning.

Plenty of time to board up my walls and take shelter.

And yet when the storm finally hit, I realized how futile it was.

It was always coming for me.

He was always going to be my downfall.

And now I'm left with the wreckage, and a sky so blue, it makes me ache for storm clouds. For lightning and rain and bone-quaking winds.

I miss him.

I ache for him.

I'd do it all again. God smite me down, I'd do it all again.

"You got over me that fast," Mel says, intercepting my thoughts with the force of a rusty axe.

Shaking my head, I peer over at the woman I once thought I loved so fiercely. "Mel, I'm so—"

"No, no, it's..." She trails off, studying me more closely. Looking at me, really looking at me, like it's the first time she's really seeing me. "It was over a long time ago, wasn't it? Years before..."

*Before.*

Swallowing tightly, I nod.

"It wasn't just you."

I sit up a little straighter at that.

“I didn’t see it then—the distance. The... strain. I felt it, I think, but I wouldn’t let myself acknowledge it. I couldn’t. I wanted to love you like I loved you when we were kids.”

Eyes burning, I nod and whisper. “Me too.”

“But we grew up.”

“We did.”

“And not...not together.”

I slide my eyes shut.

“I was so lonely, and I didn’t even see it.”

“Me too,” I admit.

“Yeah, I see that too now.” She inhales deeply, then, “So why didn’t you go after her? Why didn’t you try to...make it work?”

*Him.*

Sniffing, I shrug. “I did.”

“What?”

“I mean, I tried,” I clarify vaguely, not feeling like rehashing all the details. Not when all that it’s left me with are more questions than answers, and a giant gaping pit in my stomach. Not when it’s a partial lie.

I didn’t go after him to make it work. I just hired a PI to basically check in periodically and keep tabs on him. Like a fucking stalker.

Still, not a very good stalker it would seem, seeing as Skyler all but disappeared without a trace around one year after Black Diamond.

A quiet moment passes, then, “I’m so sorry, Nolan.”

“It is what it is.”

“You don’t seem very happy about it.”

Realizing I’ve got my face bunched into a scowl, I groan, running my hands down my face. *Obviously, I’m not fucking happy about this.*

She chuckles knowingly. “Yeah, see, that right there. Not once have I *ever* gotten that look. Even back when we were dating, you were always so laid back. It was infuriating.”

I drop my hands to the counter with a light smack. “I’m sor—”

“I’m not saying it to be cruel, or for sympathy. I’m not mad. I promise. You know why?”

“Why?”

She tilts her head, lips twisted into a small smile. “Because I have Vance, and that’s exactly how he looks when another man comes near me.”

She laughs and I feel something loosen in my chest at the sound.

“I get it, Nolan,” she says slowly, sobering, ensuring I hear every syllable. “Trust me, I get it. I might’ve not when you first came back, had we had this conversation then when everything was still so raw, but now? Knowing what it’s like to be with a man who would burn down the whole world to keep me?” She smirks. “I get it.”

A hard lump forms in my throat, so I reach down for my coffee and take a sip. It’s cooled down some, so I throw down nearly half the mug in one go.

*Except I didn’t burn down the world for him, did I? I barely even lit a match.*

“See,” she says, pointing at me. “That right there tells me all I need to know. It doesn’t bother you in the least that I’ve moved on and found a man who loves me better than you ever could.”

I frown, peering up at her over the rim. “Did you...want it to?”

She scoffs. “God no. I’m *glad*. I worried at first.”

Nodding, I remember this. We only touched on it briefly when she revealed to me she was seeing someone. That was a few months ago. In fact, tonight was their three month



anniversary. Hence why I was called over to babysit while they went out to dinner and drinks after.

*If Abby could stay the night with me, she wouldn't have had to come home...*

But she knows this. I know this. It's the unspoken elephant in the room, the one we're not quite ready to address.

It's been a long, slow, few years, and we've finally got to the point where she trusts me to watch her alone well into the night. A newer development, one that arose not long after Hal's and my talk that day.

But still, Mel always comes home. And while I'm always invited to crash here, I never take her up on it.

What's the point? She's here now. I have my own bed, which is far more comfortable than that stiff monstrosity in the living room.

But aside from the couple times Mel brought her over to visit and see my new place now that it's furnished and safe, Abby doesn't come over. And definitely not without Mel there.

For one, I have a lake.

For another, it's my turf, and that means Mel can't control the environment as much as she can here. Not that I drink or plan on ever drinking again, but if I wanted to, in the privacy of my own home, I could. I'm more likely to slip there than here.

And while it stings...I also can't find it in me to disagree and fight her on it. That one mistake not only fucked up Mel's sense of security—her trust in me—but it fucked up my own trust in myself.

Doing things the way we've been doing...it's not ideal, but it's comfortable. It's safe. Abby's healthy and happy and I get to see her whenever I want, so why risk fucking that up.

I'm not ready. She's not ready. And that's okay.

But saying his name before, making it real, sharing the existence of him with another...

Seeing how happy Mel is with Vance.

“Fight for her.”

I blink up at her. “What?”

“Fight for Sky. If she means that much to you, why’d you give up so easily?” She shrugs, like it’s nothing. “So, what, you found out she moved on, and that was that?”

*Of course that’s what she thinks happened.*

I don’t bother correcting her. What’s the point? The outcome is still the same. Skyler is *gone*.

God, I really do hope he moved on. Found some guy, fell in love, and ran away. As much as it would kill me, out of all the possible scenarios, I can’t deny that’s not the best one.

*Is it though?*

“Does she even know how much she means to you?”

How in a matter of a single sentence, Mel manages to shed light on the regret that plagues me most—the one that keeps me up at night, eating at me with the vengeance of shark infested waters—is quite a feat.

*Maybe if he knew, he would’ve never disappeared on me...*

Mel’s wearing that same no-nonsense expression my five-year-old daughter gives me when I tell her it’s too cold for ice cream—raised brows, flattened mouth.

Chuckling wryly, I rub a fist over my aching chest. “What do you want me to say? I fucked up. I thought it was for the best.”

“Why?”

Chewing my cheek, I shake my head and throw out a hand. “Because...because Skyler deserves better. H— It’s complicated,” I choke out. “There’s a bit of an age difference, not to mention we live fourteen hours away from each other. And...and I can’t leave here, and I can’t very well—”

“Age difference?” Mel says with a smirk.

Groaning, I shake my head. “Of course you latched on to that.”

Wasn't it just minutes ago, I was regaling myself with all the reasons why I *can't* talk about how young Skyler was when we got together?

*Because she thinks she's a female.*

Wow. Okay. So...that's fucked.

“How old?”

I grunt. “Drop it.”

“What? No, tell me. Wait, is she older?” She mock-gasps. “Nolan, did you find yourself a sugar mamma and not tell me? Rude.”

Curling my lip up at her, I shake my head. “What? No. No, Sky's...not that. You got it backwards though. H—”

“Ooooh, she's younger,” she says teasingly, cutting me off just before I could slip.

Slamming my mouth together, all I can do is nod.

Narrowing her eyes, Mel says, “How much younger?”

I say nothing.

Her eyes widen. “That much? Oh God, please tell me she's *legal*.”

I scowl, but don't say anything.

“Nolan!”

“Yes. Yes. I'm not a fucking predator,” I growl.

Her eyes round at my outburst, and something seems to click in her head. “But you feel like one.”

I stare at her.

Male or female and anything in between, it's fucking the same. Yet, still it hits me—it's the guy thing. Why the fuck is it more accepted for an older man to be dating a younger female than if it were reversed, or even same sex?

Makes me sick thinking it, but I can't help but wonder now. Would it have bothered me as much if Skyler was a girl?

*Nope, just as messed up. But society...*

*Yeah, society would be a lot cooler about it.*

Swallowing thickly, I avert my gaze. "I should probably head out."

"Nolan..."

Standing, I bring my mug to the sink and dump out what's left. A hand grips my shoulder, halting me before I can get far. Turning me around, Mel looks up at me with a look I can't place.

"Is this why you didn't want to tell me? I mean, it kind of...stings. Trading me in for a newer model and— Oh my God, get that look off your face. I'm kidding."

"Not funny."

"No, I suppose it's not. Sorry, got a little self-conscious there for a second." Her nose wrinkles and she looks away.

"Mel, it wasn't like that," I whisper. "I didn't...seek this out. I didn't expect it to happen. It had nothing to do with you, and I know how that sounds, but it just...it happened. I don't know why, but it did. Sometimes it feels like it was all a fever dream, to be honest, and maybe...maybe that's how it should remain."

Nodding, she hums. A short, humorless laugh escapes her, and she cracks a small grin. "That's how it always goes, isn't it? Hits us over the head when we least expect it."

Remembering how she and Vance met—in a fender bender of all things—I guess I can see what she means. But Vance is our age. He's single and childless and is successful. There's nothing...forbidden or taboo to their relationship.

"So, eighteen, I'm guessing?" she says not unkindly.

Sucking in my cheek, I nod. Then tip a hand to the side. "Well, twenty-one now."

Her eyes brighten. “Well, she can drink now, so that’s something.” Her eyes widen, and she slaps a hand to her mouth. Shaking her head, the apologies practically pour from her blue eyes.

Laughing roughly, I shake my head, and pull her in for a hug. “You’re fine.”

“Ugh, you’d think as I get older, I’d learn not to put my foot in my mouth.”

“Mel, there’s nothing wrong with other people drinking.” Grabbing her shoulders, I push her back, holding her in front of me. “There’s just something wrong when people like *me* drink.”

Twisting her lips together, she nods.

Ever since what happened, she’s been far more cognizant about my relationship with alcohol, insofar as she won’t even keep a bottle of cooking sherry in the house, much less wine. And she loves wine. I know a part of it is because she’s afraid I’ll drink it. She admitted as much when I pointed it out.

But she also insisted it’s partially on her too. We were married, and she didn’t respect my sobriety. Not as much as she should have. I tried to tell her that my recovery—and my relapse—are on me and me alone, but she just shook her head, not having any of it.

*“I didn’t make you drink. But I was selfish. I didn’t even think about how difficult that could’ve been, being around it. Seeing me drink and have fun... I didn’t think how lonely that must’ve felt.”*

So ever since then, she doesn’t touch a drop of alcohol in front of me.

Hell, we’re so close right now, I can smell the mint from her toothpaste mixed with coffee on her breath, telling me she either brushed her teeth before waking me up, or hell, swigged mouthwash in the car.

And as much as I’ve told myself throughout the years that I didn’t need anyone to cater to my problems, treat me differently, you name it...I realize now how wrong I was. It’s

not a problem—it's a disease. At some point, it was no longer a choice for me.

Mel sees that now, just as I do, thanks to my relapse and time at Black Diamond.

We see how wrong we went about my recovery the first time.

Because it's not just *my* recovery.

It's hers too and everyone else who wants an active role in my life.

That's what a support system is.

It reminds me of something Skyler once said to me. We were lying in bed, naked, having just had sex, and talking about how lonely and isolating it is sometimes. How it feels like no one understands, not truly. Not when it's contrary to their own wants and needs.

*“Your addiction and my storms...people always want a quick fix—they want to make it go away, even if it means ignoring it. All because they don't want to have to feel bad about not wanting anything to do with it. It's about them, not about us. And we can take it or leave it.”*

I shake my head. Such wise words coming from someone so young.

*And there you go again... doing exactly what you promised him you wouldn't do.*

*But he's not here anymore...*

Wincing, I turn away, and grab my keys from the counter.

“Are you sure you don't want to stay the night?”

“I'm sure,” I tell Mel, casting a look over my shoulder as I head toward the foyer.

She follows, watching me as I slip on my jacket and shove my boots on.

“They're calling for a lot of snow tomorrow. You guys still going out?”

I nod, tugging a beanie over my head. “As if Cort was going to cancel their bachelor party for a little bit of snow.”

Mel laughs. “Tell him I said hi. Hudson too.”

Nodding, I think how ironic it is that I’ve still yet to come out as bi, when the guy I consider my best friend—a guy I’ve worked with since opening my business seven years ago—is getting married to another man in a few short weeks.

“And if it’s too much...” she says, dragging her words pointedly.

I give her a mock salute. “I’ll dip out. They know the score.”

Outside, snow flurries fall from the sky, and I tip my head back, seal my eyes shut.

Not for the first time, I wonder when this pain will fade. Will it ever?

Even if I go home tonight, and check Facebook or whatever, and miraculously find him...what would I even do? Go after him? Confess how empty I feel at the thought of going through the rest of my life without him?

Skyler’s still so young. His life has barely started. All I would do is drag him down, hold him back, just like I would’ve back then had I been selfish and asked him to wait for me like I wanted.

We worked on the island.

But out here, in the real world...

If we tried to make it last, he would’ve just grown to resent me.

Hell, for all I know he already does. He’s older now. He has to see how fucked it was for me to pursue a sexual relationship with someone so young and inexperienced.

*“Don’t regret this when it’s over. No matter what. I want this to be a good thing, Nolan...”*

I squeeze my eyes shut at the memory.

*“Please don’t ruin this.”*

His voice echoes, and I hate that it sounds more like my voice than his these days.

Sniffing, I rub my nose, climb into my truck, and turn on the engine.

*I’m trying, sweetheart. I am...*

I glance up at the rearview mirror, meeting my deadened green eyes.

Thing is...

I wouldn’t blame him in the least if *he* regretted it.

Ruined it.

Lit a match to what was and watched it burn.

It’s probably the least I deserve.

Pulling out my phone, I open my email app, and click on the drafts folder. I slide my thumb over the screen, my vision blurring with every *Dear Skyler* and *Dear Sky* and *Sweetheart* I see.

All my thoughts, regrets, and wishes gathered up in this little box, sitting there with nowhere to go.

I lock the screen, press my phone to my chest, and throw my head back against the seat.

*Why can’t I let you go?*

*Why don’t I want to?*



# CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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SKYLER

**D**espite the forecast for tonight, Lola's is packed.

Saturdays are our busiest day of the week, and this weekend is no different. If there's anything I've come to learn in my time in Vermont, it's that it takes a little more than a snow storm to uproot plans.

Not that I'm not unaccustomed to this. It snows a decent amount in southern Indiana. We're just not as careless about it there, I guess?

Here, though, there could be a foot of snow outside, and life goes on as normal.

Okay, so maybe it was just the way I was raised. I'm learning there are a lot of things I grew up thinking were normal that apparently aren't that common. Like the fact that the kids actually *play* in the snow here. They get all bundled up and go outside and make forts and snowmen and stuff while the parents shovel.

The *parents*...

*Shoveling*...

By *hand*.

Okay, so some use snowblowers, but still. It's the *parents*.

Not that I didn't know people lived like this, it's just...it was never how I experienced it, so I never gave it much thought. Figured it was one of those things glorified by Christmas movies.

To me, the snow was always just an inconvenience, one harped about by my parents and the weathermen droning on across the TV screen while the staff dealt with the winding driveway and sidewalks. Then it was the teachers and headmasters complaining, when they all but locked us up and forbade us from going outside until it practically melted.

And then there's that time I was thrown into that wilderness boot camp. The snow wasn't fun then. Not even just a mere inconvenience.

It was torture. Another tool to break us down.

But it's not like that here.

Here, it's either ignored—treated like nothing—or seen as fun.

And while it still leaves a sour taste in my mouth, remembering how awful it was, trekking through a snow-swept forest with too little clothes and men screaming horrible things at me...

I can't help but crave to know what it's like to be on the other side.

The door opens, blowing another wave of chilly air into the club. Shivering, I wrap my arms around myself, and make my way toward the other end of the bar, opposite of where the entrance is.

In nothing but my work-issued leather booty shorts and crop top, I'm far from dressed for this kind of weather.

Carlos—another bartender here—grins. “Cold?”

“No,” I mutter.

He and Micah share a look and laugh.

*Assholes.*

Despite being from a northern state, Indiana winters have got nothing on New England winters. And seeing as it's only mid-December, I've a feeling this is just the beginning of what is going to be a very long, dark, frigid few months.

Still, I can't find it in me to desire anything else. Not when I see and feel Nolan in every tree. Every mountain. Smell and taste him on every icy, pine-infused breeze.

Problematic? Very.

But I've long since given up on the pretense of caring.

“Oh, yum,” Carlos drawls. “Now this is my kind of bachelor party.”

Glancing at the doors, I find a group of good-looking men shrugging off their coats and making use of the rack we have there. They’re all tall, with broad, bulging shoulders. Flannels stretched out tightly across their wide chests, save for the guy wearing a black t-shirt reading *GROOM* in big, white bold letters across the front. On his buzzed dirty-blond hair, he wears a tiara.

More than half the guys have thick beards of varying lengths, and for whatever reason it has me searching their faces. There’s just something so...Nolan about a couple of them, what with the ripped jeans, work boots, and tattoos.

I find myself wondering, hoping...

“Ah, yours too, I see,” Carlos teases, yanking me from my thoughts.

“Shut up,” I murmur, feeling my cheeks heat when I realize they caught me staring. *Pathetic much?*

Micah barks a laugh, and Carlos makes an obnoxious cat noise, pretending to claw at me.

Rolling my eyes, I turn away from the door and head toward the table in the corner to see if they need refills.

Back at the bar, I wait for Micah to pour out a round of Cosmo’s.

The lights dim, the music switching over to a haunting bass rhythm that tells me Dana is taking the stage.

“Looks like it’s your lucky night, cutie,” Micah says, nodding behind me.

I follow his gaze over my shoulder to where the bachelor party has taken seats at a booth next to the stage. Right in the middle of my section.

*Great.*

Some of them gaze at the stage in rapture, while the others talk amongst themselves, seemingly indifferent to the half-

naked woman currently sauntering down the stage.

It's always hit or miss what you're going to get around here, with it being a queer strip club offering a little bit for anyone and everyone. It's extremely rare that we get a group of straight cis men though, so I can't imagine this would be the case now, or that these guys will be an issue.

Still, they're intimidating.

Well, except for the blond guy wearing a tiara.

"Here, I'll take these over," Micah says, stacking the shots around the table. "You go see what they want."

Nodding, I pull my shoulders back, lift my chin, and make my way around the stage to their table.

"...running late. Be here soon," I hear a guy finish saying, just as a couple swivel their heads toward me.

The blond in the tiara grins up at me, blue eyes sparkling. "Hi."

The guy next to him snorts and knocks his shoulder. "Hopeless."

Clearing my throat, I paste on a small smile, and force myself to relax. I don't know why these guys have got me so on edge—they're far from the first hyper-masculine clientele we've had.

"Shh, babe, I'm busy," the blond slurs, sinking into the guy next to him. Around his neck, metal dog tags hang from a chain, catching on the light.

The guy chuckles, stretching an arm around the blond's back, revealing the matching shirt reading *GROOM* peeking out from under his unbuttoned flannel. He blows out dark curls from his eyes, and reaching up, fixes his fiancé's crown when it starts to teeter. "Can we have a water for this one? He's a lightweight."

"Hey!"

"See what you get for pre-gaming."

The blond scoffs. "Just a couple shots."

“Yeah, of 151. Idiot,” he says lovingly.

“I’ll show you...”

“Anyway, ignore those two,” the man closest to me says gruffly. His beard is thick and long, reaching down to his chest. His shoulders are massive, practically bursting out of his blue and black checkered flannel.

He arches a pierced brow up at me. “Can we get a round of Switchbacks—”

The blond grunts, and the man speaking rolls his eyes.

“—and a rum and Coke for the Princess.”

Swallowing, I nod, and go to turn away when someone calls out, “Oh and the biggest glass of Diet Coke you can manage. No ice.”

“Sure thing,” I murmur, flashing them a small grin over my shoulder.

Releasing a sharp breath, I quickly make my way back to the bar and put in their orders with Micah.

“That bad?” he says, reading me clear as day.

I clench my teeth, shaking my head. “No.”

And it really wasn’t. I’m off the ball tonight, and I have no idea why. I just feel...jittery. On edge, more out of sorts than I’ve felt in a while.

The music picks up, and I hear a girl cheer.

In my periphery, Dana swings up onto the pole, leg stretching straight up making it look like she’s doing a split against the air. Her black hair gleams under the red lights, falling in a sleek sheet down her back as she twists, arches back, and wraps her legs around the pole, flipping herself upside down.

I’m vaguely aware of the door opening. A cold breeze blowing through, sending chills down the back of my neck and arms.

The music pulses in time with the lights, drowning out the crowd's murmurs.

I sense more than see Micah slide the tray my way, and I grab it, nodding a thanks, before turning back toward the bachelor party.

A newcomer has arrived. His back's currently to me as he talks to the guy on the end—the one with the blue and black button up and long beard. They all scoot, making room.

“Yeah, man. We got you. Here they are now,” I hear him say.

Someone whoops behind me, momentarily pulling my attention. It's always loud and a little overwhelming in here, but tonight I'm feeling it more than usual.

Deciding I'll step out back quick for some fresh air and quiet—something Micah, who's technically my boss being that he's the bar manager, has no problem with. He knows it gets to be too much for me sometimes.

I step around the guy currently hunching over to take a seat, and lower the tray to the table.

“Here you go,” I say, not looking at any of them. I can't. “If you need anything, I'm Sky. Just yell for me, and—”

There's a sharp intake of air.

Alarm bells go off in my head, and it's like lightning zaps through me. I flinch, my hand knocking over the drink closest to me. I barely notice—barely hear the exclaim of surprise coming from the men at my back as I whip toward the guy who just sat down.

I'm distantly aware of beer rushing over the table, dousing my hand.

Carlos magically appears with a rag, mumbling apologies. A hand grips my shoulder. Someone asks me if I'm okay. Carlos maybe?

But I only have eyes for the ones staring back at me, big and shocked and the greenest of greens I've ever seen.

As if being back here, in Vermont, infused life and color back into his eyes.

Or maybe I just forgot how vibrant they were.

Maybe I just didn't appreciate them as much back then.

My mouth is parted, frozen.

His lips move from within his neatly trimmed beard, tracing the edges of my name. *Skyler*.

Not Sky, like everyone here knows me as.

But Skyler.

I stumble back. "I'm sorry," I whisper, not even sure who I'm saying it to.

I can feel everyone staring at me—at us.

He must sense it too—he has to—yet he only has eyes for me. Big, confused, shocked eyes. Like he can't wrap his head around what he's seeing.

"Is there a problem over here?" Raúl says gruffly. I didn't notice his approach.

*Fuck. I'm making a scene.*

"No, I don't—"

"What just happ—"

"Bumped...accident—"

All these voices clamor. It's too much. I shake my head, and force words out. "My fault. Accident. Um, I need—" My voice hitches, throat squeezing.

Nolan's face is still frozen.

*I can't do this.*

Whirling around, I storm around the stage, making a beeline for the back rooms.

Micah's eyes are wide on me from behind the bar. The music's still playing, and in my periphery I notice Dana is still doing her routine, unfazed by what's going on the floor. I don't dare look at the other patrons to see if they're staring.



Micah opens his mouth to say something, but there's a clatter behind me—more rushed apologies, then heavy, quick footfalls—and his eyes snap to over my shoulder, widening.

Nolan draws near like a lion about to pounce on his prey. The little hairs all over my body are standing straight up. My breaths coming in and out choppy and rapid-fast.

Micah's gaze cuts to mine, round with worry, and all I can do is shake my head, tears burning the back of my eyes.

Ducking my head, I veer right, clench my fists at my sides, bolting for the swinging doors leading to the hallway where customers get their private shows.

Still hot on my heels, I'm not surprised when Raúl seems to step seemingly out of nowhere—I swear this guy can teleport—intercepting him as soon as I reach the door.

“Sir, I'm gonna have to ask you to—”

“Skyler,” Nolan chokes out.

I freeze, palm flat against the door, ready to push it open. My eyes slide shut. I can feel my body trembling.

Raúl's talking again, and I'm vaguely aware of the tension rising, feeding my own anxiety.

“...what's going on, but this area is for—”

“It's okay,” I rasp. Turning my head over my shoulder, I meet Raúl's gaze and quickly drop it to somewhere on his chest. “I know him. It's okay.”

Raúl says nothing, and I can practically feel Nolan's restraint about to snap.

So not thinking, I reach over, grabbing him by the forearm, and drag him over to me.

“We just need a moment,” I barely manage to force out.

Not waiting for Raúl to give his okay, I shove the door open, dragging a silent, tense Nolan with me down the short hall.

The door swings shut, closing out much of the music.

It's so quiet, I can hear my heart thundering in my ear, mingling with a low buzzing sound. Finding the first empty room, I all but shove Nolan inside, turn away, and close the door.

The second it clicks, he's on me, turning me around, hands clutching my face. Fingers digging, seeking, unable to hold still as he gives me no choice but to look up at him.

"Is it you? Is it really you?" His voice cracks.

Blinking rapidly, my jaw quivers and I try to nod.

His face bunches, and he shakes his head, green eyes shining. "Sky..."

His head falls forward, crashing down on my shoulder just as his big, muscular arms sweep me up into a crushing hug that practically lifts me off the ground. My arms trapped between our chests.

I squeeze my eyes shut, face buried in his neck. I inhale, breathing him in like it isn't killing me inside. He doesn't smell like the ocean anymore—he smells like pine and dirt and something sweeter. Muskier.

*Cologne*, I realize. Stronger than it ever was on the island.

It's familiar, but strange too. Like a dream hovering just on the edge of consciousness. And I find myself sinking into it, opening my mouth against his flesh like I could devour it, suck it into myself, and never forget again.

His hand stretches out across the back of my skull, holding me there. Against my shoulder, I feel him breathing—deep, shaky, shuddering breaths.

"How...how is this happening?" he says, his voice muffled. Pulling away, he brings his hands up to my face once more. "What are you doing here?"

Gulping, I open my mouth to speak, but nothing wants to come out.

"And what are you wearing?" he chokes out. He looks like he wants to smile—or laugh—but mostly he just looks baffled. Lost.

I try not to feel self-conscious, remembering how little I'm wearing right now. But it's hard. He's seen me naked plenty of times, but this...this is different.

Clearing my throat, I take a step back, all but prying myself from his hands.

Sliding against the wall, I force some much needed space between us and step around him.

Turning, he faces me with a look I can't quite place.

Clenching and releasing my hands at my sides, I look around the room, not really sure where to begin.

"Sky," he says.

"I should get back to work."

"Sky."

"What?" I ask, flicking my eyes to his, then away again.

A long beat passes. "How long have you been here? In Vermont."

My throat clicks with my hard swallow. I force myself to meet his gaze, and whisper, "Six months."

His eyes bulge, mouth dropping. "*What?*" he mouths.

I shrug.

His nose flares, eyes tightening. "You've been *twenty minutes* away from me...for six fucking months?" he practically growls.

A furrow forms between my brows. He's...angry. Definitely angry.

He shakes his head. Clutching the sides of his skull, he tips it back, staring up at the ceiling. "This is...unbelievable. I don't get it."

"Don't get what?" I find myself whispering.

He drops his hands and stares at me like he can't be sure I'm serious.

My mouth quivers and I cross my arms, lifting my chin.

Something in his gaze softens and he looks away, clearing his throat. “So you came all the way to Vermont. Moved to my town. And you never thought to come see me.”

I blink. *Oh.*

I open my mouth to tell him that I *did* in fact come here to see him—that was the whole point—when a rush of anger overcomes me, and I shake my head.

“No, no, you don’t get to do that. You don’t get to play the hurt card and put it all on me.”

His eyes flare with surprise. “Sky—”

I don’t know where this surge of confidence is coming from, but I’m not about to back down now.

“You had three *years*,” I tell him roughly, my voice cracking, “to come find me. To track me down. And you didn’t. If I didn’t come here—if we didn’t run into each other now—you never would have.”

Something shutters in his gaze. “Sky, I—”

“And I know why,” I rush out tightly, cutting him off before he can try to explain himself. “I get it now. I get why you never came for me, why you never told me if you returned my feelings. I get why you didn’t want to see where this could go. But none of that means you get to be mad at me for not telling you I was here. That’s not fair, Nolan.” Again, my voice breaks, this time on his name.

Frowning, he shakes his head. “Skyler, that’s not— Wait, back up, what do you mean you know why? What are you talking about?”

I look down at the floor and shrug. “You got back together with your ex. Or maybe you never actually divorced, I don’t know”

His eyes bulge. “What?”

Feeling my cheeks heat, I keep my gaze averted as I tell him. “I *did* come here to see you...I needed to know. Closure and all that, you know how it goes. You never...I just, I needed to see it for myself.” Tears sting my eyes, and I shake

my head, trying to keep my emotions at bay. “I thought maybe...” I trail off, my voice failing me.

“Skyler... what are you talking about? Mel and I are not together. We were divorced before you and I even got together. You know this.”

“But I saw you,” I whisper.

“What?”

“I saw you my first day here. I was going to grab lunch at that diner down the road, and...make a game plan, or psych myself up to go and find you. I found your business online, and the address. I was g-gonna find you. I don’t know, but there you were. Walking out of the restaurant I was headed to. Like you were...dropped right in front of me, a-a-and—”

Suddenly he’s there, clutching my shoulders, halting my rambling with a quietly rumbled, “Stop.”

I suck in a breath, nodding.

“Slow down. Take a breath. Where did you see me?”

Swallowing, I peek up through my lashes, finding him watching me with a deep, heavy-set frown that draws attention to the little wrinkles by his eyes. Those weren’t there last time.

It makes me wonder what else about him changed.

Wetting my lips, I say more steadily this time, “You were walking out. There was a woman with you. Blonde curly hair. And a little girl with brown hair, walking between you two.” A beat passes, and I smile sadly, shakily. “She looked my way—Abby. She saw me and waved.”

His eyes widen like it’s all finally starting to click together.

“She has your eyes. Your smile too.”

“Yeah, she does,” he says, his voice breaking.

I swallow thickly, forcing myself to go on. “You kissed her on the cheek. The woman, I mean. Even if it wasn’t...Mel...” I shake my head and look down, frowning. “Abby called her Mommy. I heard her. I—”

“It *was* Mel,” he cuts in quietly, nodding. “And yeah, I did kiss her on the cheek.” He blows out a breath and steps back, running his hands over his hair. “But Skyler...we’re not together. It’s not like that.”

I still. “You...you kissed her on the cheek. Like you kissed me...”

His eyes widen, and I get the feeling he’s understanding something I’m clearly missing.

“Skyler, we’re friends. Sometimes friends kiss each other on the cheek. Wasn’t on the mouth, right?”

I shake my head. “No, but... if you’re divorced...” I frown. *Shouldn’t they hate each other? I thought they didn’t get along?*

“We were over and divorced before I ever met you,” he says carefully. “But we’ve always been friends. Best friends. And, somehow, we managed to keep that part of our relationship intact.”

My mouth opens, closes, fumbling for words. “But...” I shake my head, not understanding. “So, it wasn’t because of her?”

His face slackens, mouth pulling down, and he shakes his head. He doesn’t have to ask what I mean. He just knows. “No.”

Throat thick, I suck in my cheek, nodding, my gaze drifting down. “Oh. I see.”

“Sky—”

There’s a knock on the door, and then Micah pokes his head in, a stern look in his eyes, one I’m well familiar with at this point.

I shake my head, turning to face him. “I’m fine.”

Behind me, I sense Nolan drawing near.

Micah’s gaze flits between us, lips turned down. But he nods. “Can this maybe wait? Another big group just came in.”

“Yeah, of course,” I mumble and start making my way out.  
“Sorry. I—”

Micah squeezes my arm when I pass, and I swear I hear a growl come from behind me. Micah must hear it too, because he arches a brow at the man behind me, before gently releasing me.

I’d roll my eyes, but even that feels like too much. Not that I’m overwhelmed at the moment, just exhausted.

“You good to keep working?” Micah whispers knowingly.

Still, despite his low tone, I know Nolan heard him, and is listening in, though fortunately he remains silent.

I nod. “Yeah. I’m tired, but I think I can handle it.” *So long as nothing else unforeseen happens...*

It doesn’t escape me that it’s only because Nolan’s here that I feel confident I can go back out there and be a functioning adult. Just knowing he’ll be there to step in if I start to lose my shit...

Well, it makes all the difference, and I hate that.

I’m not some damsel in distress. I’ve had most of my life to rely on myself, but especially these last three and a half years. That won’t suddenly change just because he’s back in my life, for however long that is, and in whatever capacity it ends up being.

*He could’ve come for me, but he didn’t...*

And here I thought him having moved on stung. Hell, it broke my heart.

But this?

This straight-up pulverizes whatever was left.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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NOLAN

When I return to the table, the conversation fizzles off into silence and everyone's heads swivel to me, openly staring.

"What?" I grunt, avoiding their wide, prying gazes as I gesture for Clyde to scoot over.

"What, he says," Cortland mutters, shaking his head.

His fiancé, and my best friend apart from Mel, tsks, shaking his head. "Something you want to share with the class, Nol?"

I throw Hudson my middle finger and reach for the glass in front of me, lifting it to my nose for a sniff.

"It's Diet. I tried it. Hand on my heart," Clyde says next to me, holding up a hand.

Nodding, I take a sip, sighing in relief when the bubbly soda hits my taste buds.

Not that I don't trust him—they—I know they've got my back, and I wouldn't risk going to a bar with anyone else. Hell, if it wasn't for this being Hudson and Cort's joint bachelor party, and the fact I'm one of the best men, I wouldn't have come out at all.

*Speaking of coming out...*

They're still watching me with varying expressions of shock, curiosity, and just straight up confusion.

Frank, another work buddy and mutual friend of Hudson's nods from across the table. "He's cute."

My vision turns red, and I lean across the table, snarling, "Back the fuck off."

His eyes widen, swimming with mirth.

Someone coughs in a poor attempt to mask a laugh.

"Damn, now I'm out five bucks," Cort mutters.

I whip my head around, gaping when I see Hudson making a show of wiggling his fingers, indicating for him to pay up.

Shaking my head, I say, “You made a bet? About what?”

Cort shrugs, slapping a twenty on his fiancé’s waiting palm. “We wanted to see how long it took before you cracked. I thought you’d hold out a little longer. Thanks for that.”

I stare.

“As adorable as he is, he’s not exactly my type,” Frank says, chuckling knowingly.

I grit my teeth, feeling heat creep up my neck.

And it’s at that exact moment, Skyler appears with a round of whiskey shots. He makes a point to look at anywhere *but* me while he sets the tray down and passes shots to everyone but me. “Sorry for earlier,” he murmurs, glancing at Clyde, before dropping his gaze once more.

The big brute next to me nods. If I didn’t know him as well as I do, I’d think he was pissed. But under that massive beard, I’ve no doubt he’s smiling. His eyes say it all.

“No problem, kid.”

*Fucking hell.*

Skyler freezes, glaring down at the table, his jaw ticking.

I blow out a harsh sigh and glare at my friend. His eyes widen, and he holds up a hand. “Shit, sorry. Touchy subject, I assume?”

Skyler mutters under his breath, “Not a kid,” and I roll my lips together, keeping from saying or doing something stupid.

*God, I’ve missed him.*

I still can’t believe he’s here.

*And he’s so mad at me...*

But not for the reasons I was anticipating. Him being here in Vermont proves as much.

“So, *Sky*,” Cort says, pulling me back to the present. He grins up at Skyler, showcasing that little dimple in his left

cheek. It's a smile I'm quite familiar with, and if Hudson's low groan is anything to go by, God help us. "Tell us. How do you know our grumpy lil No-No here?"

Skyler makes a face, and so do I, shaking my head at Cort. "No-No?" *What the fuck?*

But he just blinks up at Skyler with bleary drunk eyes, completely unfazed, waiting for a response. He looks fucking ridiculous with that plastic tiara on, but he lost a bet with Hudson apparently. *Another* bet. I swear it's like some weird foreplay they've got going on.

"Uh-um," Skyler stutters. His wide eyes flick to mine then away, like he can't help himself.

My mouth thins, and I shake my head, grumbling "Black Diamond, okay? We were in rehab together."

Hudson straightens, arm dropping from around his fiancé who's nodding, eyes wide. "Oh. Okay. Now I see," Cort says.

Clyde strokes his beard and Frank looks around the table, exchanging equally confused looks with a couple of the other guys in our party whose names I forget. They're old friends of Hudson and Cort's from high school. They all shrug, and turn toward the stage where another woman takes the stage, trading places with the guy who just finished up his routine.

"See what?" I say suspiciously, eyes narrowing.

Hudson and Cort share a quick glance, before my best friend says, "We had a feeling something went down."

"We just didn't know it was with another dude," Cort says oh so helpfully.

I stare at them.

"Welcome," Cort says grinning.

Clyde chuckles.

I glance at him, and he spreads his hands. "What? I don't fucking care who you like." Aside from Cort, Hudson, and well, me, the bachelor party is made up of all straight men, as

far as I know. Clyde included, who just celebrated his twenty-year anniversary with his wife.

Which is also why Frank's little comment before shouldn't've set me off.

Skyler shuffles awkwardly, and at his side, he starts to tap his fingers together. Not thinking, I reach out, clasping his hand with mine. He tenses, but he doesn't immediately rip away from me.

Clyde grunts, his gaze flicking from our hands to my face. Then he nods. "Up. Gotta piss." Not releasing Skyler's hand, I slide from the booth, letting him pass. He halts briefly, and reaches out clasping my shoulder.

He's a man of little words, but the gesture doesn't go unnoticed by me. It's his way of showing he's cool with this.

For whatever reason, this prompts the others—Frank and the two guys I don't really know—to get up as well, leaving just Hudson and Cort. I assume to give us privacy.

"I should probably..." Skyler says so quietly I have to strain to hear him. He pulls his hand from mine and goes to turn away, but I grab his shoulder.

"Hey."

Dipping his head, he turns just enough to peer up at me over his shoulder.

"Can we talk later? After close. I'll wait for you."

He blinks rapidly, gaze drifting downward.

My chest squeezes. "Please, Sky?" I sidle up next to him, ensuring my words are for him and him only. "I'll explain everything. I just... I don't want it to end like this."

*I don't want to ruin what was...*

His throat bobs with a swallow and he nods, still not meeting my gaze. "Later."

I watch him walk away, fists clenching at my sides when I see the wandering eyes from just about each table he passes, gazing up and down a body they have no right to gaze upon.

*Do you even hear yourself?*

Feeling eyes boring into the back of my head, I turn away from the assholes creeping on my— Goddamnit, on *Skylar*... he's not a piece of a fucking property, much less *mine*.

Still, try and convince my body of that.

This possessiveness he brings out in me... it's bone fucking deep, impossible to get a hold of, and seemingly more intense than ever after three and a half long years of just going through the motions. It's taking literally everything in me not to go over there and throw him over my shoulder like I used to, and get his sexy, half-naked ass away from here. Preferably back in my bed where he belongs.

*Impatient much? You're lucky he's even willing to talk.*

A low whistle reaches my ear just as I plop down in the booth with an angry huff.

Hudson's shaking his head. "Man, you're fucked."

I cut him a dry look.

"Seriously. I've never seen you like this."

Cort's nodding in agreement.

Shoving a hand through my hair, I say loud enough for them to hear me, "I don't know what's wrong with me."

"I know what's wrong with you."

I look up at a smirking Cort.

"You need to get laid."

Rolling my eyes, I grab my Diet Coke, sniffing again on reflex, before taking a hearty swig.

"I've been saying it for years—not to your face of course. I'd like to keep my pretty nose intact, thank you. But, seriously, I was worried."

"Worried I wasn't having sex?" I say dryly.

He scoffs, rolling his eyes. Fortunately, before he can spew more nonsense, Hudson steps in, cutting right to the chase. "We thought you were punishing yourself."

I stare at him.

“Because of what happened,” he clarifies, a somber mood filling the air. “That combined with the thought that maybe you were still hoping you’d work things out with Mel.”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Yeah, good on you for waiting ’til *after* you were divorced,” Cort slurs, raising his drink in cheers. Hudson slides him a glare, and his fiancé just pats his head, while I just blink at him.

*Seriously?*

Then again, I suppose if anyone has a right to make light of what went down, it’s Cort...seeing as it was Cort’s *sister* who Hudson married.

But that’s a whole other sad saga for another day.

I still don’t even know all the nitty gritty details, but given what’s public knowledge and from the little he told me, I know that Hudson’s far from the cheating asshole people in town like to think he is. And Cort is far from the conniving mistress he likes to joke he is.

Humor. It’s how we all cope with the fucked up shit.

Hudson flicks Cort in the head, and looks back to me, picking up where he left off. “I see that now. But we didn’t know what else to think, other than you must’ve either met someone while in rehab, or you were just...” He waves a hand.

“Martyring yourself,” Cort finishes softly, all traces of humor gone.

Hudson nods.

Staring between them, I don’t know what to say. They’re not exactly wrong. Not about the Mel thing—it was never about her. It was always about...Sky. And Abby. And what Sky deserves...which is what I *don’t* deserve.

*Why not?* a voice wonders.

I glance down at the table, not really seeing it.

“He seems nice,” Hudson says.

I nod, throat suddenly too thick to form words.

“And cute,” Cort says teasingly.

I cut him a glare and he pouts, turning to his fiancé. “Why the hell don’t you ever get jealous like that over me?”

Hudson snaps over his wide gaze, as if to say, *Are you serious?*

Cort smirks, eyes twinkling knowingly. “I bet if...”

“And that’s my cue to leave,” I mutter, standing and making my way over to the bar. The others from the bachelor party are gathered at the corner doing shots. Hudson and Cort join them as I head for the other end, not in the mood to feel tempted to drink.

Hell, if it wasn’t for Skyler, I probably would’ve already bounced.

A searching glance around the room shows Skyler chatting up with a table of girls in the back corner. I can’t help but notice how much more relaxed he looks now that he’s not facing off with my friends. He’s standing taller, looser, more like the Skyler I remember from the island.

The one who talked with his hands and couldn’t hold fucking still for the life of him.

He grins, ducking his head.

*Fuck, he’s adorable.*

Even now, three years older, broader, sharper, more filled out...he still carries this sort of...light to him. A youthfulness I don’t think he’ll ever fully shake.

But he’s different too. Like when he faced off with me back in the private rooms, calling me out for being mad, and for not coming to find him...

I saw the man in him that I only got glimpses of on the island. The man I knew he’d one day grow into.

He grew up in these last few years, and it makes me sad that I missed it.

“You’re gonna destroy that boy, aren’t you?” a voice says.

Turning, I come face to face with a guy inked all up and down his arms and all the way up to his neck. He’s got his black hair pulled back in a messy bun, and he arches a pierced brow at me.

“What?”

He jerks his chin past me. “You’re the one from the island, right?”

Mouth dry, I nod.

His jaw works. “You’re married?”

My eyes widen and I shake my head. “No. No, I...it was a misunderstanding.”

He narrows his gaze as if he’s not sure I’m telling the truth. I wave my hand, showing him my bare finger. Not that that really means anything, and by the dry, bemused look on his face, he agrees.

I huff and shake my head, at a loss as to what to say. I don’t even know who this guy is, but it’s clear he cares about Skyler. I saw the way he looked at him, then me, earlier when I all but stalked Skyler across the room. Blind to anything but him.

“I don’t know what your deal is, but I do know if you hurt a hair on that boy’s head, I will not hesitate to ensure you no longer have hands.”

Leveling his gaze, I process his words.

Finally, nodding, I reach out a hand. “I’d want nothing less.”

He glances down at my offered hand, teeth working a toothpick. Then, nodding, he gives me a quick, firm shake.

“Look,” he says, nodding somewhere behind me. He drops my hand to grab a glass. He waves it at me and I absently tell him a Diet Coke—no alcohol; I always make sure to clarify



that—before turning to where he nodded to, I find Skyler across the room, head cocked, eyes narrowed this way.

When he sees that I've caught him, he spins around, and I bite back a laugh.

“He's different with you,” the bartender says.

“What do you mean?” I say, accepting the drink. I sniff it and take a sip.

He shrugs, twisting the toothpick around between his teeth, and folds his arms over the bar. “It's taken me six months to get him to loosen up, and even then...” His gaze cuts to mine. “I heard you in the backroom before I interrupted.”

Nodding, I look down.

“He's just...freer with you. I don't know how to describe it.”

I nod some more, unsure what to say to that.

A customer calls him away, and I find myself taking a long pull of my drink, the last half hour or so replaying through my head on a loop.

I can't fucking believe he's here. Skyler's *here*.

In Vermont.

Minutes away from where I live.

For six fucking months, we've probably walked the same streets—not that I come downtown much, but still. He's *here*, and he's been here, and I run into him at a strip club of all fucking places.

Shaking my head, I frown, wondering how the hell this ended up being the place he decided to put roots. It's clear he's made friends here. Found a home of sorts.

Speaking of which...where the fuck has he been staying all this time?

Now that the shock of seeing him again is wearing off, all these questions are surging to the surface.

What's he been doing for the last three years, what happened at Black Diamond after I left, what happened with his parents, why did he disappear, what made him decide to bite the bullet and come find me all these years later...

I pull out my phone and glance at the time, a picture of Abby dressed like a princess warrior greeting me from my lock screen. *Two hours to go...*

Sighing, I dim the screen, and shove it back in my pocket.

I look over my shoulder, seeking him out once more. He's now at another table. It's empty, and he's collecting the abandoned glasses, setting them on his tray.

He must sense me staring, because he lifts his gaze, his movements stilling.

This time, he doesn't immediately break the connection, and it reminds me of that day so long ago, in our first shared group therapy session. When I looked across the room, after having ripped myself open for a bunch of strangers...

Only to find that I wasn't alone after all.

Like then, it rattles me to my core.

It's terrifying, but it's exhilarating too, like that feeling when you're repelling down the side of a mountain with nothing more than rope and carabiners keeping you from certain death.

That weightlessness...

It's here now, in my chest, freeing the pressure that's been there for so long I thought I'd never be free of it.

*He came for me.*

He's mad and he's hurt, and rightfully so...

And yet...

He's here.

*Still* here, six months later, despite thinking I'd moved on.

That has to mean something.

*I have to make it mean something.*

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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## SKYLER

**A**fter what feels like the longest two hours I've ever had to endure—and that's saying a lot—last call is announced and the final dancer—Zelda—finishes her routine, drawing the night to a close.

The club empties, and it doesn't escape me that at some point while I was distracted, Nolan disappeared. All night, I've felt his hot gaze tracking my every move, so when it's suddenly gone, I feel more exposed and vulnerable than I ever thought I'd feel.

I didn't realize how much I've missed being held hostage by his all-consuming attention. It makes me blind to any and everything but him. His gaze. His scent. His smell. His big, looming body standing guard, right where I need him to be. There to swoop in and save the day...save me from myself...

Maybe it's wrong, to crave to be possessed as much as I crave to be possessed by him.

But if it is...

Then I don't want to be right.

I want him to own me and take me and make me forget what it ever felt like to be alone. Empty. Adrift.

"You coming home tonight?" Micah asks me as we step out into the frigid night. The snow is falling heavily now, blanketing the world in glimmering white.

I open my mouth, looking around, unsure suddenly.

Nolan told me we'd talk after, but he disappeared about ten minutes to close.

Zelda chuckles, blowing out a stream of smoke up into the night. I follow to where she points her finger, only vaguely hearing her say, "Nope, definitely not."

Across the street, Nolan stands in front of a black monster of a pick-up truck, hands stuffed in his pockets. A denim

jacket lined with fur hanging loosely over his shoulders and down his sides. Over his long, tangled dark hair, he wears a navy beanie.

My mouth dries.

For a second, I'm sort of just struck stupid by the contrast of this scene compared to the first time I saw this man, storming across the beach in his thin white t-shirt and ripped jeans, barefoot and drenched with the rain coming down.

Micah sighs. "Ah, young love." Throwing an arm over Zelda's shoulder, he gives me a mock salute and turns away, leading them down Main toward their apartment.

Rolling my lips together, I wrap my bulky winter coat tighter around me and glance both ways down the street.

Nolan steps away from the truck, meeting me nearly halfway.

"Hi," he says, mouth quirked.

I chew the corner of my lip and manage to rasp a quiet, "Hi," back.

Glancing down, he frowns. "Where the fuck are your boots?"

I teeter from heel to heel, staring down at my red Chucks. "It's part of my uniform."

He sighs. "At least you put pants on," he mutters, shaking his head. "Come on, before you freeze your toes off." He pauses and cuts me a look. "Unless you'd rather follow in your own car?"

I shake my head. "No, my car's in the shop." *Again.*

At this rate, I should probably just admit defeat and start saving for a new one rather than keep pouring money into a lost cause.

"Are you...are you okay with coming to my place, or we could go somewhere more public?"

Swallowing, I consider my decision for all of two seconds before I blurt. "Your place."

My cheeks heat and I glare at some spot below his chin.

He coughs to hide his chuckle, but I hear it all the same. *Nice. Way to play hard to get. You're supposed to be mad, and hurt, and closed off.*

Leading me around the front of his truck, he opens the passenger door. He turns and frowns down at me, before brushing the snow out of my hair. "You need a hat in this kind of weather. Gloves too."

I roll my eyes before I can help it. There's just something about his gruff, almost begrudging concern that transports me right back to Black Diamond, and has me slipping back to who I was there.

"Don't roll your eyes at me. Winters up here are nothing to fuck with."

"Yes, sir," I say bitterly.

He narrows his eyes, and I suck my cheeks together.

"You're asking for it," he says huskily, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

I feel like I'm flying—my heart racing so fast, like it could carry me up into the air. Glancing up at him through my lashes, I find myself biting back softly, "Maybe I am."

His eyes flare. "Careful, sweetheart," he rumbles warningly.

I bite my lip and he groans.

Tipping his head back, he squeezes his eyes shut. "Talk. Talk, talk, talk."

Frowning, I make a face, ready to open my mouth and ask him what the hell that means, when he suddenly picks me up by the waist and all but chucks me in the passenger seat of his truck.

Slamming the door shut, he rounds the hood and angrily climbs behind the wheel, slamming his door too.

*Okaaaay then.*

Now he's mad too.

Perfect.

He shoves the key into the ignition, cranking on the engine. The radio comes to life, blasting some heavy rock song I don't recognize. He lowers the volume, and shifts into drive, easing the truck onto the road.

Neither of us say anything for a while. The silence is heavy, but not painful.

The windshield wipers move rhythmically across the glass, batting away the thick flakes falling faster and faster with each mile. As if the farther we get away from town, and deeper into the surrounding country we get, the heavier it falls.

I knead my hands together in my lap, bending and cracking my knuckles.

"Cold?" he says. Not waiting for a response, he reaches for the heat dial, turning it up.

"Thanks," I murmur.

Another grunt.

I turn my head to face the window, staring at the dark, swirling vortex of snow passing by.

"Are gloves another sensory thing?"

Brow knitting, I turn my head. "Huh?"

He shrugs a shoulder, not taking his eyes off the road. "You know. Like the fruit thing." My face flushes at the memory, and if I'm not mistaken he sinks a little lower in his seat. "You didn't really mention touch at the time—like textures and shit—so I wasn't sure."

"Oh, um, yeah," I say slowly, frowning as I try to find the right words to explain it. "Well, no, it depends, I guess. Sometimes I can't wear them at all. I don't like feeling like I can't use my hands. And then if my skin is dry, it feels all scratchy, and..." My voice fades, my cheeks heating.

"That makes sense."

I cut him a glance through the corner of my eye. “Yeah?”

He nods and flashes me a small smile. “Yeah.”

Rolling my lips together, I turn toward the window, watching the world blur past outside. It’s darker out here without anything but his headlights to show us where we’re going.

“So who were those people you walked out with? I know the one was the bartender—I never caught his name—and the girl was a dancer, right?”

I nod. “Micah and Zelda.”

“You close?”

“Yeah, I’ve been staying with them.”

He hums. “You’ll have to tell me how that all came about.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of funny how it happened,” I say softly, my brain traveling back to that pretty awful day. But at least one good thing came out of it.

“Do you...like it? Working there.”

I consider this for a moment before nodding. “Yeah. It’s... safe. Everyone’s so nice and welcoming. They don’t treat me any differently than they would anybody else.”

He’s silent for a long moment, then, “Is...is that something you’ve still struggled with? Being treated...differently?”

“No...not like how it used to be. But it’s still better here than it was back in Indiana. I feel more...me here. Like I can be me.”

For a moment, he doesn’t say anything. Then, “Can I ask what happened with your parents? After you got home from Black Diamond, I mean.”

Pinning my lip between my teeth, I nod. “Sure. I actually ended up staying at Black Diamond for another eight weeks after you left. It was the only way I could transfer to the mental health program, and I don’t know, I guess after you were gone, I just...I realized how much I was still sort of



running from. Stuff I never dealt with.” I pause. “Plus, I think it went a long way with getting my parents to back off a little.”

“That’s...that’s really good. I’m proud of you.”

Turning, I peek up at him through my hair. “Thanks. It was good for me. I’m glad I did it. I don’t know... I don’t know if I’d be here, if I didn’t.”

He stiffens at that and I quickly backtrack. “I mean in Vermont.”

“Oh,” he breathes, slumping. “Sorry, I thought—”

“I know. But don’t worry, it’s...it’s been a long time since I felt like that.”

He simply nods.

“Plus, I made you a promise.”

Wincing, he says, “Right.”

“And unlike you, I keep mine.”

His gaze snaps to mine, but I quickly look away, returning to our previous conversation.

“Anyway, to make a long story short, Dr. Maddock introduced me to that person she was talking about, the one familiar with what I’ve been through...and he referred me to a lawyer who works with individuals victimized by way of unnecessary conservatorships. Taught me some loopholes, and gave me some pointers on how to try and get my parents to dissolve it rather than have to try and fight them in court.”

“And?” he says, cutting me a quick look. He flicks the blinker, and veers right down a winding, narrow road. It’s snowing heavily, but he seems to have no issue seeing where he’s going.

“I got home, kept my head down, and bided my time.” I pause. “I...waited, I guess. I waited for you. Despite knowing you weren’t coming.”

I sense Nolan tense up.

“And eventually...I realized, it wasn’t up to you to save me. It never was. *I* had to save me. So, I used my allowance to get a car. I didn’t have my license at the time, but I was able to store it somewhere secure for the time being. And then I confronted my parents—told them if they didn’t release me, I’d go to the police about their dirty business dealings and then the press.”

“Wait. Did they?”

I shake my head. “Probably, they’re investors with way too much money coming in to be ethical, but still...it was just a bluff. One of those tips I got on the island. People that wealthy are almost always doing something dirty,” I say with a nod.

Nolan says nothing to that, but when I peek over, I find him gaping out the windshield in shock.

I clear my mouth. “Anyway, they backed off immediately. Surprisingly, but also...not, looking back on it. I think more than anything they just wanted to be free of me, and when I told them I didn’t even care about my trust fund...they just...” I wave a hand. “Let me go. Had me sign some papers, handing my fortune over. Basically...ensuring, legally, I was removed from the family officially and couldn’t do anything to tarnish their name and company. And then I...walked out. Never looked back.”

Nolan still doesn’t say anything for a long moment.

He eases on the gas, and makes a sharp right down what looks to be a driveway. In the distance, I see faint lights.

Slowing to a crawl, he parks in front of a rustic, two-story log cabin.

I inhale deeply, staring through the glass. Somehow, it’s exactly like what I pictured he’d live in, if only a little bigger. Lit up by nothing more than the headlights and the falling snow, it looks dark, but cozy. Aside from the house and where we park, all I see are tall, sweeping evergreens towering around us.

The only thing missing is some multi-colored string lights. I wonder why he doesn’t decorate, especially with having a

child and all. Even my house was decorated growing up, even if it was just for show.

Letting the engine idle, Nolan reaches for me, cupping my cheek and turning me away from the window to face him.

“When was this?” he says, before dropping his hand with a small wince, like he just realized what he did.

Ignoring that, I say, “About eight months after I got back from Black Diamond.”

His eyes glaze over like he’s trying to do the math, and then he slides them shut, nodding. “Okay. And you...you gave up your trust fund?” he says, reopening his eyes to peer back at me with some unidentifiable emotion.

I nod. “Yup.”

He stares at me, eyes tightening with visible distress.

I shrug, fighting not to look away this time. “It’s not like I had a choice.”

He cringes. “No, but—”

“I wanted a life, Nolan,” I say firmly. “And so long as I was kept under their thumb, I’d never be free. I’d never be here in Vermont. And while it...it hurts that you didn’t come, I —

His eyes crease with a wince and he shakes his head. “I did come for you.”

My face slackens. “What?” I say numbly.

His throat dips prominently. “Well, I...I checked on you.” He cringes.

“What?” I hiss.

His mouth thins and he shrugs, at a loss. “I hired a private investigator to just...make sure you got home safe. Make sure your parents didn’t send you away, like you said they might.”

I stare at him, unable to believe what I’m hearing.

“But then, about two years ago, I don’t know...I just—I wanted to make sure you were still okay. I was still...worried,

and missing you and—” My eyes redden, watching him frown down at his hands. “I had him follow up on you, just to make sure. But...he said you were gone. No trace of where you went. So I went to Indiana, and I—”

“Wait,” I say, holding up a hand, shaking my head. “You... you came for me? In Indiana?”

*I don't understand.*

*He missed me?*

*He wanted to make sure I was okay?*

He nods, balling his hand into a fist on his lap. His mouth thins before he says, “I just...I was so worried. I was terrified your parents did something. Sent you somewhere.”

My eyes widen, and he shoots me a bashful look.

“You aren't on socials,” he says gently. I shake my head, confirming as much. “So the next best thing was Google. God, I've probably checked for your obituary almost every day for two years now.”

Pain rockets through my chest. “Nolan...”

He gives me a little shake of his head and looks away. “Just like my PI said, you weren't there. Your mother said you were gone.”

I blink. Once. Twice. Then, “You met my mother?”

He nods, eyeing me warily. “She answered the door. Said she doesn't have a son, and slammed the door in my face.”

My eyes pop open wide.

And yeah, it hurts—to hear that my mother well and truly erased my existence from her life—but it also doesn't surprise me. She said this would be the case if I walked out of the family. If I disowned them, they'd disown me right back. What's fair is fair.

His brow furrows, watching me. “It took everything in me not to storm into that house to look for you.”

I'm shaking my head. “I wasn't there. She wasn't lying.”

“I called my guy back up, but like I said, he didn’t really have much he could go on to find you. All he could do was assure me you weren’t in the system, locked up somewhere.”

Tears sting my eyes, and I shake my head. “I had no idea. I didn’t even think...”

*I never fucking think.*

“But that was over two years ago, Sky,” he says. “And you said you’ve only been here for six months. Where were you?”

“Indiana,” I say simply. “It wasn’t exactly easy getting here. It took me two years to save up enough money to make the trip.” I cut him a long look. “All I had when I moved out was a car and a bag of clothes. I lived in my car while I worked as often as I could, saving up. Eventually winter hit, so I had to get a cheap motel room to live out of. So that put me behind a bit. And I just...I continued to save. But with no college degree, and—”

“You lived in your *car*?”

“Well, yeah. Where else was I going to sleep?”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he moans, slapping his hands to his face. “Why the fuck didn’t you track me down and call me? You found my business online. You should’ve called. Unlike you, I wasn’t off the map. If you couldn’t get here, I would’ve came for you.”

I say nothing to that.

Nolan lowers his hands. “Why, Skyler?”

“Why didn’t you come find me yourself?” I whisper, tears burning the back of my eyes. He explained this already, but it still doesn’t compute. It doesn’t make sense. “Why did you lie to me that night? We could’ve avoided all of this.”

His face breaks and he shakes his head. “Because I’m a fucking idiot.” Groaning, he turns toward the door and punches the side of his fist against the handle, and I flinch. “Fuck. I...I got all up in my head, Sky. This isn’t what I thought would happen. I don’t know what else to say. I was so...tunnel-visioned about getting Abby back, and getting

back into Mel's good graces so I could stay involved in their life. And...it took a while, okay? It took a long time for her to even leave me alone in a room with her."

Sucking in my cheek, I nod.

"And then...I guess it was just easier to believe I was doing what's best for you. I had to know you were okay, but I didn't want to confuse you more—I didn't want to interfere, and make things worse. You were so goddamn *young*, Skyler. You still are. I really thought you'd move on. I never expected you to come find me. I— Where are you going?"

Throwing open the door, I hop down into the snow. Thick, soft whiteness soaks immediately into my sneakers. My skinny jeans. But I hardly notice. Slamming the door shut behind me, I start stomping toward the woods.

Distantly, under the anger roaring in my veins, filling my ears, I hear Nolan turn off the truck and scramble out of the cab after me.

"Skyler!"

I whirl around, throwing my hands out. "What?" I shout.

He stumbles back a step, shock widening his glittering eyes.

"What more is there to say? I'll never be seen as anything but a helpless, impressionable kid to you. You've made that very clear." Shaking my head, I wrinkle up my nose, and cross my arms, looking away.

"But you were. You were a kid," he says tightly.

"No. I wasn't." My neck strains, tendons threatening to a snap. I stomp toward him and shove him in the chest.

"But you were," he whispers, agony shining bright from his eyes.

I shake my head. "I was eighteen."

He swallows thickly. "Barely. Eighteen is still a kid. A teenager."

I stare at him.

He stares back.

“So that’s it then?” I say roughly, hating the way my voice breaks. “You’re just gonna...never let it go. You’re just gonna let this guilt eat at you for the rest of your life, stripping you of anything good? And not just you, but me.”

He watches me, his scruffy jaw quivering.

“Because that’s what you did. What you’re doing now,” I tell him. “This isn’t just about you.” My face bunches, tears rushing to my eyes. “Yeah, I was eighteen. But I’m not anymore, and guess fucking what? You were wrong. You were so fucking wrong. And you wasted over *three* years.”

“Sky,” he breathes, reaching for me.

I bat him away and jab him in the chest with my finger, right above his heart. “You *promised*. And you lied. You said you wouldn’t regret it or ruin it. You promised me I’d forget. That I’d move on.” My teeth start chattering, and I can’t be sure if it’s from the cold or the storm igniting my senses. “But you lied. You broke your promise, just like I said you would, and now you’re tainting the memory too.”

His eyes water, and he’s shaking his head.

“I didn’t move on. I didn’t fucking forget. I’m still there.” I jab him again in the chest. “I’m still there and I never left!” I scream.

A single tear spills over his lashes, sliding down his cheek, disappearing into his beard.

“You took the choice away from me.”

He shakes his head, but in his eyes I see it. That’s exactly what he did.

“I trusted you. I trusted you to be different than everybody else.”

Dropping my hand, I try to spin around, but he doesn’t let me. He wraps his arms around me, burying his face in my neck.

“I’m sorry. You’re right. I’m so sorry.”

Sniffing, I shake my head, spilling tears into his thick coat. Arms crushed against my sides. “You can’t do that. I told you you can’t do that.”

“I remember.”

“But you forgot.”

He nods. “I just...I don’t feel like I deserve you. I don’t want you to resent me one day. It’d kill me.”

I slide my eyes shut. “You don’t know that. And it’s not for you to decide what’s best for me. You get that right? It was never up to you.”

He pulls back, and I peek up at him, meeting his reddened, tear-filled gaze.

“It’s a trigger for me, okay?” I whisper shakily, forcing the words out, knowing it needs to be said. “Treating me like I’m not capable of giving consent—like I’m not competent. It makes me feel small and-and stupid.”

His eyes widen, and he’s shaking his head. “Sky, no, that’s not—”

I nod. “People have treated me like that my whole life because I’m autistic. You get that right? Even when they didn’t know what it was, they’ve been stripping me of my autonomy my entire fucking life.”

His lips part, shivering. “Sky, I’m so—”

Lifting my chin, I level him with a fierce stare. “I won’t let anyone treat me like that again. Least of all you, because... Because you’re better than that. You’re not that person.” Wiggling my arms out from beneath his crushing hold, I cup his scruffy cheeks and lift up on my toes so we’re at eye-level. It’s intense, but not as intense or painful as the ache in my chest. “I won’t let you be, and I won’t let you ruin this or regret us, because no one else has ever looked at me the way you do. Touched me the way you do. Held me the way you do.”

His face bunches up, as does mine.



“No one’s ever listened to me and talked to me the way you do. So to try and take all that from me, and become just like all the others?” My fingers flex, blunt nails biting into his face. “It hurts like nothing else. So much, I can’t breathe. I could handle it coming from anyone else, but I can’t handle it coming from you. So please, Nolan, please just....” I choke on a sob. “Don’t...don’t...”

Nolan clutches my cheeks when my voice fails, bringing our lips together. Against my mouth, he says, “Okay. Okay.”

“You make me feel normal,” I finally choke out in a rush.

He ducks down, meeting me on my level, hands clenching my face. “You are normal. Skyler, fuck, you *are* normal. What are you...”

I sob, shaking my head.

“Baby,” he murmurs, wrapping me up in his arms. He picks me up, and I wrap my legs around him, burying my face in his shoulder. Carrying me toward the house, I’m vaguely aware of him shuffling me around to get the key in the door.

Heat blasts over us when we enter, the scent of pine and cedar washing over me. Nolan carries me a short ways, then sits down on what feels like a couch, with me in his lap.

Prying my head away from his shoulder, he cradles my cheeks, peering back at me through glassy green eyes. “I get it now.”

Jaw quivering, I nod. Tears streak down my face, and he uses his thumbs to brush them away.

“I wasn’t listening then. Not really. I didn’t...I didn’t know \_\_\_”

“That I’m autistic?” I say dryly.

He chokes out a laugh. “No, no, sweetheart. I mean, I didn’t know...I didn’t realize what it must’ve felt like for you...” He frowns. “I’m really fucking all this up, aren’t I?”

I sniff and shrug, which just makes him smile wetly.

“I’m very protective of you,” he says solemnly. “And it’s...it’s not because I don’t think you’re competent or capable of taking care of yourself and making your own decisions. And it’s not because I regret us. I just...”

“But it is that, Nolan,” I whisper. “It feels like that.”

He frowns.

I look down, watching my reddened, chilled fingers fiddle with his collar. “I love when you get all possessive of me and take care of me—I never had that, so it’s...nice. But there’s a fine line between taking care of me, and thinking you know what’s best for me.”

Inhaling deeply, he nods. “You’re right.”

“Unless it’s when we’re having sex. Then you do know best.”

He coughs out a surprised laugh.

My mouth twists into a small grin and I peer up through my lashes. “But outside of sex, you need to trust that I know what I want. I know what I can handle. I know who I am and...I know who I want to be with.”

He nods, face serious. He flits his gaze down. “And that’s...that’s still me? Even after everything?”

I reach forward, nudging his chin up. “I told you. I’m still there.” I press a hand over his heart, then mine. “I’m still there.”

If I try hard enough, I can still hear the waves. Still taste the salt on my tongue.

His brow creases, and I wonder if he can feel it too. The island... we didn’t fuse ourselves to the beach that night. No, we took a piece of it home with us.

“The question is, do you...do you still want me?” I ask, my voice trembling the slightest bit, betraying my nerves.

He scoffs, shaking his head. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Not to me.” I shrug. “I know what I feel. I know your body wants me. I know you...you struggle with that. And I

clearly don't always read things right—I mean, for six months I thought you were back together with your ex because you kissed her cheek.”

He smiles sadly.

“This is...this is more than just sex, isn't it?”

He nods. “Yeah. Yeah it's more.” He inhales deeply, then trails a thumb down my face. “It was always more. And I don't regret it. I just...I don't want to hurt you.”

“Then stop.”

His gaze is searing, reaching right into the deepest parts of me, deeper than is comfortable. But I'd weather this pain any day, so long as it means keeping him forever.

“Okay. I'll stop. I'll try.”

Chewing my lip, I nod. “And you...you know you don't just get my body, right?”

He frowns, confused.

“I mean, you get *me* too.” I glance down, playing with a thread on his jacket. “And as much as I wish I could say that I've fully matured in the last three years, there are some things that will never go away. Things you'll have to be okay with. It's one thing to not wanna be with me because you're trying to protect me—that's not allowed. But if I'm...too much...”

“Skyler.”

I glance up, and he peers back at me with a look I can't place. He's shaking his head, but I keep talking.

“I'm still impulsive. I have it under control most of the time—it's something I've worked really hard on in therapy. I had meds, but I ran out—”

“What?”

I wave him off, ignoring that so I don't lose my train of thought. He needs to hear this—he needs to know what he's signing up for. “But still, when the storms hit—when everything becomes too loud and too much, and I...I can no longer see reason, and I can only feel—”

Nolan presses a finger to my lips, hushing me.

“I want you, Skyler,” he says fiercely. “All of you.” He moves his finger away, but keeps it elevated, indicating for me to wait.

Frowning, I watch him, reach down in his pocket to bring out his phone. His throat bobs in a rare show of nerves—his cheeks above his scruff darkening.

So busy watching his face, I don't see what it is he's pulling up on his phone until he turns the screen and hands it to me with a softly uttered, “Look.”

I gently take the phone from him, cradling it in my hands.

At first, I'm not quite sure what it is I'm seeing.

*Dear Skyler...*

*Dear Sky...*

I run my thumb over the screen, scrolling through a myriad of different versions, all cut off after my name. “These are emails,” I whisper, clicking into one.

“I didn't exactly have anywhere to send them. My therapist said it might be good to start journaling, and well, it turned into this. They start around the time I lost track of where you were.”

My hand comes up to my mouth as I read, my eyes darting so fast over the screen as I try to eat up the words. Mostly written in a sort of stream of consciousness, with cut off phrases and senseless combinations of letters like he got frustrated and stabbed at the keyboard.

*Do you even know I've been looking for you?*

*I miss you.*

*Find me, sweetheart. Come to me. I beg you.*

*You weren't just a body for me to lose myself in those weeks we shared together.*

*You changed me. Irrevocably...*

Tears cloud my vision, stealing the words from me. I blink them away, feeling them slide down my cheeks. My hands shake, and it doesn't escape me how tense Nolan is.

My gaze snaps up to his. "You wrote to me."

He nods, green eyes shining back at me. "Look at how I sign off each one."

My brow pulls inward and I do as he says, scrolling to the bottom of the one I'm currently on. And everything in me stills.

"*Yours, storms and all,*" I whisper shakily. Again, my gaze whips up to his.

He nods, gesturing for me to keep going.

I press the back button and skip to another one. As much as I want to devour each and every word these little boxes contain, I can barely hold the phone steady, much less wrap my head around the fact he's *been writing to me*.

And every single one I click open, even the one at the very bottom—the first one, from two years ago—it signs off with some variation of that.

*Yours, still, storms and all.*

*Storms and all, always.*

*Yours always, storms and all.*

A sound half-sob, half-laugh scrapes out of me.

Hands clutch my cheek, swiping away the tears as he lifts my face. Green eyes meld to mine, and a smile teases his lips. "Remember what I told you that night?"

I nod, clutching the phone. *Of course I do.*

He leans forward, lowering his hands to my neck, and he presses his lips to mine. "My hurricane," he breathes.

I shiver, kissing him softly. "I've missed you," I whisper.

He opens his mouth against mine, prying my lips apart. "No more of that," he barely manages to growl, before sweeping his thick, hot tongue in my mouth.

Moaning, I drop the phone somewhere on the cushion next to us, and bring my fingers to his hair, shoving off his beanie.

He all but rips my coat off me next, throwing it on the floor. I have a harder time with his coat, so he picks me up and tosses me on the cushion next to him.

Ripping off his coat and shirt in one go, he turns to me, fingers tearing at his fly, when his gaze lands to mine and he freezes.

*Right.* I'm still wearing my Lola's crop top. That combined with black skinny jeans...

"Jesus," he mutters. "That outfit should be illegal."

I giggle and his gaze flies to mine. I bite my lip and he shakes his head, a wicked gleam sparking in his eyes.

"You really are asking for it."

I squirm, sliding down the couch, elongating my torso.

His eyes eat me up from head to toe, devouring every inch of exposed skin.

His fingers trace down my stomach. "Those weren't there before."

My cheeks heat, my stomach muscles clenching. I've got nowhere near as much definition as Nolan, but I'm definitely more toned than I was last time he saw me.

I lift an arm, flexing for him, showing off my bicep. "Not so skinny anymore."

He grunts, dropping to his knees. Leaning up, he bites at my bicep. "I don't know," he says, wrapping his arms around my middle. "Still a shrimp to me."

With a grunt, he heaves me over his shoulder, and pushes to a stand.

I gasp. "Nolan!"

He smacks my ass. "These jeans are criminal."

Grinning, hanging upside down, I reach for his ass. "This ass is criminal."

Chuckling he gives my butt a squeeze, and walks me down the hall. I try to take it all in, but honestly, the blood is sort of rushing to my head, making it hard to focus.

“Did you build this house?”

He grunts softly, stomping up a flight of stairs. “I did.”

“It’s nice.” And it is, from the little I’ve observed. It’s exactly what you’d imagine for a cozy cabin in the woods.

Nolan makes a sharp left and throws a door open. He doesn’t turn on the lights, but he doesn’t need to. As soon as he sets me on my feet, I turn my wide, awed gaze to the big bay windows overtaking the far wall. With the heavy snow raining down, it might as well be daytime out there.

It casts a soft butter-gray glow upon the room.

Emotion wells in me as I look around the space, breathing it in. The room has high-peaked ceilings. Dark wood rafters. In the middle, against the wall opposite the windows, a massive bed.

Like the rest of the house, it’s simple, clean, organized, with rich mahogany furniture. Navy and gray checkered curtains hang from each side of the window, matching the throw pillows on the bed.

Feeling Nolan watching me, I look over, finding him staring at me with an unreadable look on his face.

“I’m in your house,” I whisper.

He nods.

“In your room.”

He nods again.

I smile wetly, throat unbearably thick.

He pads over barefoot. I have no idea when he stripped off his socks and boots. He brings a hand up to my cheek, and I turn into it, sinking into his warm, familiar touch. A calloused thumb brushes over my lip, and I pull it into my mouth, sucking slowly.

Groaning, Nolan steps closer, right up against me. He's thick and rigid in his jeans, and I find myself wiggling my hips, the tightness in my jeans borderline painful.

As if reading my mind, he slides his thumb from my lips, dragging it down my chin in a wet stripe. I tip my head back, arching my chest up at him.

Fingers drop to my fly, popping open the button, knuckles skating down my hard-on through the denim as he drags down the zipper.

"Gonna have to peel these off you, aren't I?" he mumbles, pressing a hot open-mouthed kiss to my jaw.

I nod at the ceiling. "Better you than me."

He hums, nipping my skin. Shoving his fingers inside the denim, he starts tugging, and then hisses when the head of my cock taps his palm.

Pulling back, he glares at me. "Where the fuck's your underwear?"

Eyes wide, I say, "I can't exactly wear any with my leather shorts."

His teeth clamp together, eyes dark and wild.

I shrug, chewing my lip.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he drops to his knees and presses his face to my stomach with a groan.

Shuddering, I curl my toes into the rug. "Jealous?"

Tipping his head back, he digs his scruffy chin into my belly button, making me gasp. "You've no idea," he says, voice deeper than it was moments ago. He dips his head, licking at my cock as he starts tugging my jeans down over my hips.

"Fuck, I've missed this," he rumbles over my hot flesh, mouthing up my shaft. Sucking the tip into his mouth, he laps at the pre-cum weeping from my slit. Humming, he blinks up at me, cheeks hollowed.

I thrust in his mouth, seeking deeper.



Finally, he gets my jeans down around my ankles. Releasing my dick, he bends down, helping me kick off my shoes. I rest my hands on his wide shoulders, using him for balance as I lift one leg then the other so he can get my jeans and socks off.

Left in nothing but my Lola's crop top, my dick juts out obscenely, bobbing right at his scruffy face.

"God, look at you," he says, fisting my length. Pushing to a stand, he uses his other hand to clasp the back of my neck, fingers tugging at my thick hair, wrenching my head back. "Do you have any fucking idea how sexy you are to me?"

I shiver.

He shakes his head, huffing a breath like he still can't believe it—feeling this way for another guy. His earlier words play back to me, and I lick my lips, forcing the question out. "So, there hasn't been anyone..."

"No, no one since you. I...I tried."

I squeeze my eyes shut.

"I went to a bar—a gay bar, just to see. And, yeah, I can appreciate another male's body, but God, sweetheart, no one fucks me up like you do."

Gulping, I peer up at him through my thick lashes. "Same."

He growls through his teeth. "No one else has touched this?" he says, squeezing my length.

I give a little shake of my head. "No. Just you. Only you."

That's not true, and he knows this, but there's been no one else *since* him, and that's all that matters.

"No one else has kissed this perfect mouth?" he asks, leaning up to bite my bottom lip.

"No one."

Snarling, he bites down harder, sucking, gnawing until I'm sure my lip will split and bruise. I fuck up into his fist,

stomach muscles clenching, thighs pulsing with how tightly I curl my toes.

I'm a mess. Just like I always am with him. A weeping, flushed, pleading mess.

My fingers clench and flex at my sides, begging to touch him.

"C-can I?" I ask, my voice pitching.

"Can you what?"

"Touch you? Taste you?"

His chest vibrates against mine—bare and hot against my thin shirt. "Sweetheart, you never have to ask."

I blink up at the ceiling. "B-but I like when you tell me yes."

He sucks in a sharp breath, followed by a string of muttered curses. And then I'm lifted into his arms, swung around, and thrown on the bed, knocking a gasp from my lungs.

Nolan crawls up my body in all his rugged, hairy, masculine glory, and I'm a puddle of unfettered need, sinking into the sheets.

I was taught craving another man was a sin, but I see now how wrong they were. It's not the fact it's a man I desire so desperately, it's the intensity with which I claw and grab and reach for him that has them clutching their bibles.

I'd kick down the door to Hell itself to be with this man...

And that *terrifies* them.

It terrifies them that love could be so raw, so primal, so powerful—stronger than any prayer.

Hooking my legs around Nolan's thighs, I reach between us, finishing undoing his half-open fly. Together we shove down his jeans and boxer briefs, and then he's shoving my legs toward my chest, pushing me up onto my upper back, and burying his face between my cheeks, eating at my hole like a man starved.

I clutch and twist at the rumpled sheets, thrusting and rocking against his scratchy face.

His wicked tongue laps hotly at my hole, pushing, pushing, nudging at the ring of muscle until it gives, permitting him entry.

Moaning, pleading, I arch my head back into the bed, the tendons in my neck straining, protruding. Teeth mashed together.

Nolan pulls back, shoving his hand through his hair, pushing it back. Then he wipes the back of it across his mouth. Chest heaving, he looks up at me, and grins dangerously.

Walking on his knees, he gets his thighs shoved under my ass, and he rocks me back, keeping my hole at face level.

Blinking heavily, I watch through the narrow gap between my legs as he cups a hand to his mouth and spits, before dipping his fingers between my cheeks. My hole quivers against his digits, and I feel wetness enter me, just before a finger dips in.

I gasp, arching.

Planting his free hand on the bed next to my head, he leans over me, pressing my knees to my chest. “That’s it, sweetheart. Let’s get you nice and wet for me.”

Garbled gibberish spills from my lips in between reedy gasps and breathless whimpers.

He shoves his finger in deeper, twisting it almost punishingly. “You’re being so good for me. Such a good boy.”

“N-Nol,” I plead.

Leaning back, he bends his head and pushes a thick string of saliva from his lips, aiming it right at my hole where his finger pries me open.

Wetness drips inside me and my body jerks—my dick pulsing, weeping onto my chest.

“So sexy, sweetheart. The way you open for me.”

He thrusts a second finger inside me, deep into my channel. Spreading his spit around, he gets me nice and stretched for him.

Wrenching my head back, I dig into the pillow.

The pressure is unreal—bordering painful—but if anything the slight discomfort—the sting—has me sucking him in deeper. Thrusting and rocking and twisting against him. He doesn't try to hold me still.

“Nol, I'm gonna—” I shiver out, only for him to pull out, and reach up, squeezing my cock at the base.

“Uh-uh. Not yet. You can hold out longer than that.”

“But No—”

A hand smacks my ass and I gasp, arching, blinking wide at the peaked rafters.

“Too much?” he grits out through his teeth, like he's trying to restrain himself. I can feel the doubts starting to stack on his shoulders as he physically eases back.

Shaking my head, I drop my chin. Twisting my legs to the side, I meet his gaze. “No. No, don't stop.”

His eyes flare, jaw clenching visibly. And he nods. “Potato?”

I grin, a rusty laugh leaving my scoured lungs. “Potato.”

His lip ticks up and he nods, sweaty hair hanging around his face, clinging to his skin. He gives my hip a little pat. “Now roll over and get up on all fours—”

Bending down, he pinches my cheeks in his thick, rough fingers.

“—and stick that pretty little ass of yours out like a good boy.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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NOLAN

I'm a man possessed.

Ravaged and seized—every bone, muscle, fiber of my being infected by the ardent need to own this man.

This boy of mine.

My beacon in the dark.

Skyler flips onto his stomach, crawling up onto all fours. He's a sight to behold, with his pert ass pushed out, cock jutting out rigidly between his legs, wearing nothing but that sinful red crop top.

Wetting my lips, I shove my hair back behind my ears and creep over to my nightstand, digging out a bottle of lube.

Snow hits the skylights above the bed, casting flickering shadows over Skyler's writhing body, softening his sharp edges.

It's better than anything I could've ever imagined—having him here. In my house. My bed.

It's almost hard to believe he hasn't been here all along.

Kneeling onto the mattress, I scoot closer, smoothing a hand over one perfectly round cheek. His skin is silky smooth. Warm.

Pulling back, I bring my palm down, smacking his ass hard.

He yelps into a groan, thrusting that needy cock of his into the bed.

Red blotches form where I spanked him. Ass clenched, he wiggles, breathing heavily into the room. "Nol!" he whines.

"That's for earlier," I grit out. "Next time you better think twice about saying shit like you're not normal, or I'll spank your ass so red you won't be able to sit for a week."

Skyler's whole body shudders, clenching. *Well shit. Someone likes the idea of that.*

At the head of the bed, he rubs his cheek into the pillow, nodding, and I don't miss the wetness staining the pillow where he must've been biting and sucking on the fabric.

He did that a lot on the island. Mouthed and bit and sucked at whatever was near as I fucked him into oblivion. His fist. My chest. The sheets...

"Understood?" I say tightly, ensuring he knows I mean it. Talk about ripping my fucking heart apart.

Again, he nods, and manages to utter out a quiet, "Y-yes."

"Good boy."

He moans, and I smirk, brushing my fingers over his hot, flushed skin. "You're gonna have to relax some, if you want me in there, baby."

He wiggles his ass, chasing my fingers.

Kneeling behind him, I have him spread his legs, then cup his cheeks, spreading him there too so I can lick at his hole.

The upper half of his body collapses onto the bed, fingers twisting in the sheets. Face buried in a pillow, muffling a moan.

I rub my beard all over his crease, knowing just how much he loves when I do that. Nosing up his crack, I press kisses all along his lower back. Nip at the cleft of his ass. Squeeze and massage his cheeks. Suck and kiss his quivering hole until it gives way, and I'm able to thrust my tongue in there.

"Nolan, please," he groans, thrusting and squirming against my face, cock weeping onto the bed.

Sliding my hand between his legs, I cradle his balls, holding them while I give him a couple more licks.

Pulling back, I stroke his cock a couple times, wiping my face with my free hand.

"Ready for me?"

More nodding and moaning.

“I need words, sweetheart.”

“Yes!” he gasps.

“Yes what?” I say, releasing his cock and grabbing the lube.

“F-fuck me.”

“Fuck me, what?”

“Please!” he gasps into a yelp when I pump lube directly onto his hole. He jolts, hissing.

“Cold?” I murmur, setting the bottle on the bed.

“Umph.” His fingers are bone-white against the navy sheets.

Chuckling, I spread the slick around his pink hole, watching the way it flutters for me.

“So desperate for it...” I marvel, watching the way he swallows up my finger.

His back arches, spine rippling under his skin.

“So pretty the way you take me.”

I nudge a second finger inside him. Then a third. Slowly working him open so I can get my cock in there. He’s so tight. So goddamn deliciously hot inside.

Speaking of which...reaching down, I stroke myself. Twisting at the root, squeezing. It’s been so fucking long. It’s a miracle either of us have lasted this long. I know the second I’m inside him, we’ll both be done for.

Slipping my fingers free, I pump more lube in my palm and spread it over my cock. A glance up the bed shows Skyler peeking down at me, lips parted, dragging over the sheets.

Blowing the hair from my eyes, I say, “Roll over.”

Blinking heavily, he does what I say, flopping onto his back. His legs come up on instinct, hands slotting under his thighs, spreading himself open for me.



Humming in satisfaction, I toss the bottle of lube on the floor and scoot closer, lining the head of my cock up with his hole. Planting one hand on the bed, right next to his head, I nudge my crown at his opening, slowly, gently pushing myself in past that first ring of muscle.

“Breathe, baby. Relax.”

His taut face smooths over with his exhale, shoulders relaxing. Lowering myself to my forearm, I reach up, brushing his hair back with my fingers.

“God, you’re even more perfect than I remember.”

He bears down, letting me push deeper inside him.

Groaning, I bend down, dropping my sweaty head to his. Our heavy, hot breaths fill the room, skating over each other’s faces. I slide my other hand to his hip, holding him steady, muscles tense as I try not to just ram myself inside him.

The desire to take him hard and fast is strong, but the need to make this good for him is even stronger.

“Are you okay?” I whisper, brushing a feather-light thumb over a clenched eye.

He nods jerkily, jaw straining from how tightly he mashes his teeth together.

Wetting my lips, I lean up, pressing a soft kiss to the center of his forehead. Then to the bridge of his nose. Then his lips.

His lips part, and I thrust my tongue inside, owning him with my mouth.

We kiss and kiss, and slowly, gently, I ease my cock deeper, until I’m seated all the way in.

His body shudders, muscles rippling where there were never muscles before. I meant what I said before—he’s still so slight compared to me, something I think he secretly loves... me being able to throw him around and manhandle him...

But he’s definitely matured physically *and* emotionally in the last few years.

The Skyler I knew from the island would've never been able to unload on me like he did earlier. Not in a way that was articulate before he shut down and spun out of control, lost to the chaos of his head, like that time on the beach when we first started all of this.

Sure, he's just more comfortable with me now than he was then, even despite the time apart, but it's more than that. So much more.

There's so much I want to ask him—so many questions and gaps I need answered and filled from our time apart these last three years.

But right now...Right now, all I care about is *filling* him.

Losing myself in his body.

Giving myself to him in every way that I can—a way that goes beyond anything mere words could ever do justice.

Skyler starts squirming, writhing around my cock. He clenches, and I groan, digging my forehead into his, mouths pressed hotly together, barely even kissing. Just breathing.

“Nolan,” he whispers, wrapping his arms around my back, hooking his ankles around my ass. He thrusts up, whispering in a chant. “Nolan, Nolan, Nolan...”

I pull back, easing my cock almost all the way out of him.

And then I slam back in, eliciting a sharp gasp and ragged moan.

I bite his lip with a low, guttural growl, fucking him slow and languidly deep to start, before all too soon pounding him into the mattress, so gone—so blind with pleasure and need—I barely register anything but the feel of his tight channel and the scrape of his blunt nails along my back.

We're nothing more than sweat and teeth—hot, messy kisses and rippling bodies.

There's no telling where he ends and I begin. We're fused. In mind, body, and soul, and I'm gone. Lost. Shattering into a million pieces inside him.

Wetness soaks my stomach—my chest—telling me he came too. Hands free.

“Fffffuckkkk!” I roar, burying my face into the pillow next to his head.

He’s sobbing and pleading into my neck, sucking at my skin. Digging his teeth into my flesh until I’m certain he might actually break skin.

My ass clenches as I thrust once more inside him, as deep as I can get, spilling everything I have left.

There is no me anymore. Just the wreckage left in Skyler’s wake.

A husk.

A carcass stripped bare.

A hand flops over my head, fingers sliding heavily into my hair.

Releasing a shaky breath, I realize I’m likely crushing him, and go to pull away. But he just holds me tighter, silently begging me to stay.

So I do.

I stay until my cock softens inside him. Until the buzzing leaves my head, and the heat leaves my veins, and the weight leaves my chest.

Never in my life have I ever felt so simultaneously light and heavy. Like I could fly, if it wasn’t for the organ in my chest, the one anchored to the boy under me, the one petting my head, rubbing his nose into my neck, inhaling me like he’s just as gone for me as I am him.

And he is, isn’t he?

My throat thickens, recalling earlier...

And I realize how wrong I was to not go after him sooner. How wrong I was to give up so easily, all because I was so caught up on his age, and couldn’t possibly see how this beautiful, perfectly imperfect human could ever love someone as flawed and jaded as me.

It wasn't fair to him.

Easing back, I press one last kiss to his head, and reach around, prying his hands off me.

"Nol," he whines.

"Shh," I whisper. "Not going anywhere."

My cock slips out, sticky and flushed. Pressing his thighs to his chest, I bend down, inspecting his hole. "Did I hurt you?"

"N-no. Never. Felt good."

I smile softly at that, stroking a finger around his rim, catching my cum dribbling out.

Humming, I spread it into his skin, and he moans. His softened cock twitching where it rests heavily against his stomach.

"You're a mess," I murmur, devouring the sight of his flushed skin. His cum-smearred chest. His red, puckered hole clenches, seeking. And I collect the cum spilling out, gently pushing it back in.

Groaning, he throws an arm over his face, head thrown back.

Bending down, I lick at his spent cock. Then his flat stomach. Sucking him clean. I ruck up his shirt, kissing up his chest. I pull a rosy nipple into my mouth, bringing about a choked gasp from him.

Chuckling against his pec, I shake my head, rubbing my beard all over him just the way he likes.

Hands clutch the side of my face, forcing me up to his mouth.

"Kiss me," he breathes.

So I do.

"Nolan?"

"Yeah, Sky."

He blinks up at me, a soft, dazed sort of wonder peering back at me from those chocolate orbs.

“Is this real?”

Nodding, I turn my head, pressing a kiss to his palm. “Yeah,” I say against his flesh, nuzzling him. “It’s real.”

A hand clenches my ass, fingers biting my skin. I smile.

“Nolan?”

“Yes?” When I blink up at him, he’s scrunching his face, gaze straining down his chest.

“My shirt,” he mutters.

Pulling back, I look down, not surprised to find a string of cum streaked across the Lola’s logo.

Suppressing a smile, I peer up at him through my lashes.

“Do you think it’ll stain?” he whispers, horrified.

I cough, ducking my head.

His wide brown eyes dart to mine.

I shrug a shoulder. “Would it be so wrong if I said I hope so?”

His eyes bug out. “Nolan!” He slaps my arm, and I laugh.

He swats me again, so I grab him, rolling us, tickling and digging my fingers into his sides as he squirms and huffs and laughs.

Sitting up, I hold him in my lap, hands draped loosely around his lower back.

He grins down at me panting, fingers pushing the hair off my face.

I swallow thickly, my smile dimming.

“What?”

“I’m sorry.”

His eyes crease.

“I never should’ve doubted this—doubted *you*. I just...” I hold him tighter, bowing my head to his chest, just above his sternum. “Fuck, I think Hudson was right.”

“Huh?”

“The guy you met earlier.”

“The one with the tiara? He’s your best friend, right?”

Chuckling, I shake my head. “No, the one with the tiara was Cort. Hudson’s the other guy, but yeah, he’s my closest friend apart from Mel and Hal, my sponsor.”

I sense him nodding.

I blow out a breath. “Hell, even they called me out for it.”

He tenses. He’s quick to try and cover it up, but it’s too late. I caught it.

Tipping my head back, I frown. “You believe me when I tell you Mel and I are over, right? We’ve been over for years. Well before Black Diamond.” I pause, studying him. “Not that it makes any difference, but she moved on. She has a boyfriend. We’re over.”

His brow knits. “Does it bother you?”

“Not anymore.” My mouth ticks up and I lift a hand, stroking my thumb down his temple. “Not when I finally have you back. It only bothered me, because I hated that I didn’t have you.”

His throat bobs, eyes turning glassy.

“I’ve been feeling guilty for so long. What I did... Abby...”

He frowns. “You got her back though. Right?”

I nod. “I can see her. Watch her. I’m as involved as I can be.”

His frown deepens and he shakes his head. “You don’t share custody?”

I give a little shake of my head. “Mel’s not ready.”

“And you?” he says knowingly, eyes narrowed. I can see his wheels spinning.

My chest rises with my deep inhale before collapsing. “I don’t know. I’m...scared.”

Sympathy shines through his eyes.

“A lot of things scare me, it would seem,” I say, tugging on his hair. “I don’t know how to feel like I’m worthy of this. Of something good. I don’t know how not to feel like I’ll just let you down.”

He nods.

“It never had anything to do with you—” I slam my mouth shut, and shake my head. “No, that’s a lie. Your age was and is still a sensitive subject for me.”

Skyler glances down, brow furrowed. He chews his lip, clearly deep in thought about something.

“I’m sor—”

“It makes you feel dirty?”

My mouth opens, closes, then, “No. No, that’s the problem. It *never* felt dirty and wrong.”

He peeks up at me through his lashes, his expression wary and something else—something I can’t pinpoint. But I don’t think he’s mad. Curious, maybe.

I shrug a shoulder. “If it did, I never would have touched you. I would’ve stopped you that morning in the cave. I would’ve pushed you away, and...kept my distance. Never let you get close.”

Scoffing, I glance away, staring blankly at the snow falling outside. “Hell, I would’ve kept my distance since that first moment on the beach, the second you looked up at me with those big brown eyes and I just....” I purse my lips, shaking my head.

“You...you felt it even then?”

Shifting my focus to his once more, I nod. “I didn’t know what it was. But you...you captivated me, Sky. It’s like my

world stopped when you turned around, and looked at me for the first time. It stopped, and then it started again, and life just never looked or felt the same since.”

His eyes redden.

I smile sadly. “I told you. I was an idiot.”

He chuckles wetly, shaking his head. “Don’t say that again or I’ll spank you until you can’t walk.”

I grin, feeling lighter than ever. “Oh yeah? I’d like to see you try, sweetheart.”

Smirking, he leans forward, batting those pretty lashes at me.

Groaning, I clutch his cheeks, pulling his mouth to mine in a searing kiss.

“You never told me,” he whispers after our lips tire, the kiss slowing. “What Hudson and Mel were right about.”

“Oh. Yeah. Just what I was saying before, about how I’ve basically been...depriving myself of happiness, as a way to punish myself.”

He nods.

Blowing out a breath, I say, “But...I’m working on that. Okay?”

He chews the corner of his lip, nodding. “Okay.”

“Mel...” I wince. “She doesn’t know I’m bi.”

His eyes widen.

I shrug. “Up until tonight, no one knew. Except for you of course.”

“Oh.” A beat passes, then, “Why not?”

I swallow thickly, lifting a shoulder. “It just never felt like the right time. And...to be honest, talking about you...making it real...” My eyes crease when I look up at him, searching his face. “I’m very protective of you, Skyler—of this, I mean. My feelings. What we have here. And bringing you up, shining



light on those weeks we shared...revisiting the pain of leaving you..."

His eyes well, and he nods like he gets it.

"I know Mel probably won't care, that she'd support me. But...on the off-chance she *didn't*..."

"You worry she'll take Abby away from you."

All I can do is nod.

He exhales slowly, tipping his head back to stare at the ceiling.

"Not only that," I whisper, "but it would...taint what we had. You and me."

He frowns, clearly not understanding.

"It already hurt, being away from you. The idea of someone condemning it on top of that...punishing me for it, making me feel bad for what I felt—for what I *feel* for you..." I shake my head.

"Nolan," he murmurs.

"Agony, shame, disgust...I don't want any of that to touch this."

He nods.

"Which is why I'm a fucking hypocrite, right?" Apparently only I'm the one allowed to ruin this.

"Maybe a little," he says bluntly. "But your fears...they're completely valid." He sweeps his gaze over my face, a look of concentration pulling his features taut. "The idea of someone twisting this into something bad?" He shakes his head, clearly at a loss for words

"Exactly."

"Which is why it hurts so much when you tell me this is wrong," he says quietly. "Aside from it being condescending—infantilizing even—it just...it feels like shit, Nolan. Like there's something wrong with *me*. Like I'm not good enough for you, or like you're...ashamed—

Wincing, I shake my head. “I deserve that.”

“So stop.”

I huff a short laugh. “Just like that?”

He levels me with a firm look. “Yeah. Because I won’t put up with it.”

I study him more closely. “You’re different.”

He shrugs. “Maybe a little.” He smiles ruefully. “I’m older now.”

A small, sad smile pulls at my mouth. “No...no, it’s more than that.”

His grin mirrors mine, and he nods, knowing exactly what I mean without having to spell it out.

“I hate that you lived in a car.”

He rolls his eyes. “It was only for about a month.”

Groaning, I slide my eyes shut. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

“Get over it.”

I bark out a short laugh at that.

He squirms, and when I open my eyes I find him scrunching up his face. “Can we maybe shower? It’s getting a little...” His nose wrinkles, and I laugh. Some things never change.

Back on the island, we probably took dozens of showers over the course of the time we spent together, save for the couple times I fucked him so hard, he crashed almost immediately. Even then, as soon as he woke up, he was dragging me into the bathroom.

Nodding, I help him off the bed. His knees wobble, and I smirk when his face reddens. He lowers his gaze, and I nudge his chin, forcing him to look up at me.

“You’re beautiful.”

His gaze darkens, glittering in the soft, natural gray light. “So are you, you know?”

I rub a hand over my beard and go to walk away, but he stops me, cupping my cheeks.

“You’re the sexiest person I’ve ever met.”

My brows arch.

He chews his lip.

*Fuckin’ hell.*

Grunting, I scoop him up, throwing him over my shoulder with a little smack to his butt. “And you’re trouble.”

Laughing, he swings upside down, fingers grabbing my ass.

I have a feeling it’s going to be a long, long night.

And if the big ass grin meeting me in the mirror is anything to go by...

I’d have it no other way.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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SKYLER

I wake up to a beam of light searing through my eyelids.  
Groaning, I roll my face into the pillow.

It smells like pine. Like soap. Like—

*Nolan.*

My head shoots up on a gasp, and I reach out, my heart sinking when I find the other side of the bed empty.

“Hey.”

Whipping around, I squint at the shadowed form approaching me, the bright white light coming in from the windows distorting his features.

Nolan drops down on the bed, reaching out to push my hair back. “Sorry if I woke you.”

I screw an eye shut, trying to will my vision to adjust. “Bright.”

“Oh shit. Sorry. Let me close the cur—”

“No, it’s fine,” I say, tugging him toward me. I bury my face in his stomach.

He sucks in a breath, his cock twitching against my arm where I wrap it around his waist. I duck my head, hiding my smile into his warm skin.

He’s still naked—we both are.

After our shower, we stumbled right back into bed, where he proceeded to suck me off and gently finger me until I shot my release down his throat.

He came again too, which surprised him more than me, I think. Jerking himself over my chest, he made sure to feed me his release rather than get me all dirtied up again.

“*Sleep,*” he ordered me after that, spooning me tightly from behind.

Within seconds, I was out.

I squirm, clenching my thighs together. My cock twitching, growing heavy.

“Morning to you too,” he murmurs roughly.

Nodding, I nuzzle his stomach, loving the faint scratch of hair—and the hard, rippling muscle. If I’m not mistaken, he’s even bigger now—harder. Remembering what he told me last night, how he built this house himself, I can see why. His muscles aren’t like mine, forged from a gym. His come from good ol’ hard labor.

“You know you’re like a cat when you sleep?”

Humming, I shake my head. “Cats aren’t cuddly.”

“Okay, my bad. A kitten.”

I lift a hand, making a so-so gesture.

A quiet laugh rumbles from his chest as he combs his fingers through the knots in my hair. It was still damp when we finally crashed, so I can’t imagine how wild it must look right now.

A glance up through my lashes shows me Nolan’s is equally tangled, curling messily all around his face, the ends brushing his shoulders.

I smile.

“What?”

“Tarzan.”

He coughs, and I swear his cheeks actually flush a bit behind his scruff.

Grinning, I sit up, throwing my leg around him so I’m sitting on his lap. His hands drop to my ass, holding me.

Wetting my lips, I throw my arms over his shoulders, and wiggle my ass on his cock.

Groaning, he bites his fingers into my flesh. “Three orgasms last night not enough?”

I bite my lip and shake my head.

Sighing, he drops his head to mine. Morning breath crosses my mind, but it fizzles out as fast as it came when he dives forward, kissing me. Growling into my mouth. Unlike me, he did brush his teeth.

“What am I gonna do with you?” he mutters.

“Everything.”

He chuckles faintly. “Come on,” he says, lifting me off his lap. “Food first.”

Dragging me over to his dresser, he grabs a clean white tee from the middle drawer and all but shoves it over my head.

He ruffles my hair and looks me up and down, nodding. “Good enough.”

“What about pants?” I call out when he heads for the hallway.

He pauses in the open doorway, cutting me a look over his shoulder. “As if we’re going to make it through breakfast.” His gaze dips and he swallows. “Fuck. I think I just made it worse.”



“NO FRUIT?” I say teasingly, when he hands me a plate of eggs.

He arches a brow and walks over to the fridge, pulling out a container of pineapple spears.

My eyes widen, and I wince, my already sore ass clenching at the thought of him doing a repeat of the strawberry. Pretty sure pineapple wouldn’t feel so good.

Nolan coughs, covering up a laugh. “Jesus, your face. These are to eat.”

“Oh.”

Shaking his head, he levels me with an amused look before turning to flip on the stove. Using the same pan he cooked my

bacon in, he lets it heat while he chops up the spears into bite-sized pieces.

Forking some more egg, I chew slowly, watching him curiously.

After a few minutes, he turns off the burner, and brings the pan over, scooping the pineapple onto my plate, steam wafting up into the air.

Sucking in my cheek, I stab a fork in it and bring it to my lips, blowing on it. I take a testing nibble, and sigh. Sweet, but not overly sweet. Definitely not sour, now that it's been grilled. Nor is it as chewy as it would be raw. It practically melts in my mouth.

“Good?” he murmurs.

I nod, swallowing the fruit. I smile. “Thanks.”

He smiles and pinches a piece for himself, grinning as he chews.

After a long moment, I find myself saying, “It's the unpredictability, you know? It's why a lot of kids—the picky eaters in particular—prefer junk food. Especially the store-bought, processed stuff. A chip is always a chip. A cookie a cookie. But a fruit can change—texture, sweetness, tartness...”

He's nodding, telling me he's listening.

I swallow, self-conscious suddenly. “I...didn't grow out of it. And it's not just food for me.”

He doesn't say anything, but I know he's paying close attention, giving me the space to find the words even though he already knows some of this.

“It can change at the drop of a hat. One second, I'm comfortable, and the next I'm crawling out of my skin because my shirt's suddenly chafing.”

“Like the gloves thing.”

I nod. “Usually the tighter the clothes fit, the less likely it is to bother me.”



He smirks. “So, like your Lola’s uniform. And those skinny jeans.”

“Exactly.”

He inhales deeply through his nose, and nods on his exhale.

“Growing up, no one ever tried to....accommodate my needs. They thought I was just being melodramatic or picky or...whatever. They didn’t see that it’s like...a physical thing for me. Not just my sensitivities to food and textures and clothes, but to, like...routines too and stuff.”

Nolan comes around the island and sits on the stool next to me. We turn toward each other, and he takes my hand, stilling my tapping.

He frowns down at my fingers clenching his. “Should I not...stop you when you do this? Stimming.”

My eyes widen.

He shrugs. “I may or may not have done some research.”

“When?”

He blows out a breath, a wary look creasing his eyes. “Three years ago. Abby’s one of those picky eaters.” He chuckles dryly. “I was looking up ways to combat it, and I...”

“Fell down the autism rabbit hole?”

He nods. “Yeah.” A beat passes. “It’s wild how different it is now. It’s so...vast.”

I shrug. “It’s a spectrum for a reason.”

“Yeah, I just...” He shakes his head with a frown.

“It’s okay if you...if you had other ideas of what it means to be autistic in your head. Even I did. That’s one thing we have in common, despite our age difference—we both grew up in a time where it was seen as this problem to be fixed. Like some incurable disease that cast shame on a family.”

He scowls. “I fucking hate your parents.”

Nodding, I say nothing to that. There isn't anything to say to justify what they did...or rather what they didn't do.

“While it is mostly on them, it's also on the professionals who misdiagnosed me. Not that...well, it's not *all* their fault. Did you know up until 2013, you couldn't even have a dual diagnosis of ADHD and autism?”

He frowns. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. They literally could not diagnose me with both, so seeing as I didn't meet the markers for autism, they assumed it was ADHD. But like I said that time in the cave, it only helped with so much, so then they thought it was other things, like mood disorders, behavior disorders...”

“And they shipped you off to reform schools.”

“Yup.”

He sighs roughly, shaking his head.

“I like when you grab my hand,” I tell him. “If anyone else did it, I'd probably punch them in the face.”

He laughs, but I stare at him, dead serious.

“I once punched a teacher in the face because my crayon broke while I was coloring.”

He stares at me, and I shrug.

“And I already told you the reason I ended up at Canaan.”

“You broke someone's nose...”

I nod. “My...meltdowns...they make me destructive. I know I don't look like I've got a lot of strength in me, but when I get like that...” I shrug, not knowing how to explain it.

He swallows, nodding. He already knows this. He's seen it.

“It really does feel like I'm being swept up in a storm, with nothing to ground me. But when you hold my hand? When you hold *me*? It's like something clicks inside me, and I feel... safe. Anchored. I know you've got me.”

“Is the stimming a sort of precursor to a meltdown?” he says, nodding to my fingers.

“Sometimes. Usually, that will come first. But I don’t always stim when I’m losing my shit. Sometimes I just stim to stim. I don’t even realize I do it half the time. Dr. Maddock and Dr. Healey—the therapist I saw in Indiana—they said it’s how I self-soothe. Not just for comfort when I’m stressed, but also when I need to focus. Like my body knows that struggling to stay on task, or stay calm, is a trigger for me...and it compensates without my even knowing it’s happening to prevent a meltdown.”

Nolan smiles. “Did you know all of this last time?”

I shake my head. “No, it was after you left. When I switched over to the mental health program. Dr. Maddock knew my history, but she...she waited for me to come to the conclusion on my own, and then helped me understand it better.

“It’s why I can talk about it more easily and in depth now. The things that trigger my meltdowns, what my meltdowns feel like, where my insecurities come from, what I need help with...” I pause, searching his face. “Like last night. Back on the island, I didn’t have the vocabulary to explain and rationalize all this, or tell you what you were doing wrong.”

He nods. “Yeah, I wondered that. I didn’t really notice back then. I just thought you were...guarded, I guess? Shy. I didn’t realize you just couldn’t explain.”

“A lot of people assume being or going non-verbal means not talking at all. But it just means we lose the ability to put words to what we’re feeling and experiencing. It’s all there in our heads, but we can’t get it out, and it’s really distressing. We shut down. Well, I do. Or I flip out, if I’m dealing with the sensory issues on top of that. Again, it’s a huge spectrum. I can really only speak for myself.”

“So this is something you’ve been...working on?”

“Yeah, I mean, I can’t exactly afford therapy right now, or the meds I was on.” I wince and look away. “But those extra eight weeks at Black Diamond helped a *lot*. Some people with autism, those who need more supports, they might never find all the words they need, if any. Some never do. But for me, it’s

like....” I wave a hand and meet Nolan’s gaze once more. “A light-switch was flipped on. For the first time in my life, things made sense. I suddenly didn’t feel like I was drowning anymore.”

His eyes redden at that, and I know what he’s thinking—remembering.

Despite that incident at the bridge having been an accident, I’m not surprised when he asks, “So your suicide attempt...”

I inhale deeply, and blow it out slowly. “I didn’t have the words. I felt trapped. Lonely. I didn’t feel like I had anyone out there. Like I was...banging at a glass wall, screaming for someone to just see me and let me out, but...” I shake my head and shrug. “No one came. No one could hear me. I was completely on my own.”

His jaw clenches and nods.

“But then you came along.” I smile and it’s a tremulous thing. I squeeze his hand, stroking my thumb over his rough knuckles. *God*, I love his hands. “You saw me and you listened and you just... You never looked away. Not now, not when you know everything that is...me. You still look at me like you always have. Talk to me like you always have. Though...” I narrow my eyes. “You are nicer now.”

He barks out a laugh.

Grinning, I say, “You’ve just always been you. No pretenses.”

He clicks his tongue, ducking his gaze. He nods, as if confirming something for himself. Then, “And that’s why it hurts you when I try to do what’s best for you. It sends mixed signals.”

I kick him in the shin and his gaze flies up to mine.

“Because it’s not what’s best for me. And you have to respect that. But, yes, exactly that.”

He stares at me, then finally, nods. “Fair. No more making decisions for you. Except during sex.” He winks.

“Promise? And for real this time?”

He sighs, looking away, green eyes darting unseeingly around the kitchen. “I promise to try.”

“No!—”

His gaze locks on mine. “I can’t just turn it off. So be patient, please? Call me out. Kick my shin. Throw sand at me.” He chuckles. “Just...give me a chance to be better. I promise I’ll work on it.”

I suck in my cheek, considering him. “I don’t always get intentions right,” I whisper. “I told you that. I learned that the hard way many times. Sometimes things get blurred in my head, and I miss the mark.”

He nods. “I’ll keep that in mind. I promise you I’ll always be honest and upfront. So if I am struggling, we’ll talk about it, and I’ll explain where I’m coming from. How about that?”

“I can live with that.”

“Good.”

“Good,” I chirp back.

“Since you’re so agreeable right now,” he teases, though if I’m not mistaken, there’s an edge to his tone. “Does that mean I get to pay for your therapy and meds? Because, I’m not going to lie, this is something that I’m going to be a bit of a pain in the ass about.”

Squeezing my knees together, I nod. “Well, technically, I do have more money saved now than I did when I got here.” I warily search his eyes. “I only stayed in McKinley because I ran out, and my car sucks. Once I thought you moved on, all I wanted was to get out of here. But...I couldn’t, and I ended up at Lola’s...”

Pain flashes across his face and he blows out a breath, nodding. “So you cut costs.”

“Yeah.”

“Baby, this is not something you sh—”

“I know. But I’m not insured, so it’s...really expensive. Even if I just got my script filled, the meds alone are pricey. It

would've set me back weeks, maybe months.”

He gives me a considering look. “Do you still plan on leaving?”

I glance away, crossing my arms, forcing him to let go of my hand. “I don't want to. And not just 'cause of you. I...I like it here. I like my friends. I like Lola's.”

In my periphery, he's nodding. “Well, that's good then. That you like it here. It'll make this a lot easier.”

Frowning, I blink. “Make what easier?”

“Making this work.”

I still.

Knuckles trail down my cheek, and I find myself meeting his soft, green gaze.

“I can't leave McKinley.”

I shake my head, and turn my body fully toward him, his hand sliding around to cup the back of my head. “Of course not,” I say. “Abby's here. Your business and home are here. I'd never ask you to leave.”

His mouth thins, half-disappearing under his thick brown scruff. His throat works with a hard swallow, and then he says, “I'm still an alcoholic.”

I frown. “I know that.”

He huffs a short laugh, and removes his hand from my head to rub the back of his. He glances down, wetting his lips.

*Shit. Did I not ask him how he was doing?*

He didn't drink last night, and he got his daughter back, so I just assumed...

“Sorry,” I blurt. “I'm really bad at this sometimes.”

He peeks up at me. “Bad at what?”

I cringe. “Talking. Or, rather...” I gesture between us. “The whole give and take thing. I tend to get stuck on one subject, and forget other things exist.”

His features soften with a small, gentle smile. His shoulders drop. “I see.”

My cheeks heat and I quickly shake my head. “It doesn’t mean I don’t care. Sometimes I just need a...prompt, you know?” I say, remembering what Dr. Maddock once told me.

*“You can ask for help, Skyler. It’s okay to need help, even if that help doesn’t look like everybody else’s.”*

“A prompt?”

“Yeah, to, like, change the channel,” I say with a short, awkward laugh. “There’s just...so many rules. Peopling is hard. Not always, but sometimes.”

He stifles a smile. “Right.”

“So...” I prod.

He blows out a breath. “So, I’m still in recovery. I’ve been sober for three and a half years.”

I smile. “Really?”

“Really, really.”

“I’m so proud of you.”

Emotion sears his eyes red and he nods. “Thank you.”

I chew the inside of my cheek, considering my next words. “Is it...hard? Not drinking? I never really asked you on the island.” I wince. “I mean, I’m sure it is. Hard. Sor—“

He squeezes my hand. “I have my good days and bad days. But it’s definitely...better this time around. It’s true what they say—a support system is everything.”

I nod. *It definitely is.*

“And I’ve found healthier ways to fill the void.”

I frown.

He looks down at our joined hands. “The thing is, I was so...consumed by what we had going on when we were on the island, that I kind of lost focus as to why I was there in the first place.”

I blink a couple times. “Sex, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

*Oh.*

“So combine that with all my guilt and shame over Abby and Mel....well, it didn’t leave much room for cravings. Not until I got home, and things settled down did it return with a vengeance.”

I’ve read about this. Addicts replacing one vice with another, especially in the early days of recovery. I guess I just assumed it’d be something like candy, or cookies, or... exercise.

Well, we *were* exercising.

“But that’s not all it was,” he adds quickly. “Us, I mean. Please know that. If anything, my feelings for you on the island—my growing attachment, my desire...” He shrugs with a rueful smile. “All it did was feed the beast. It gave it exactly what I craved. An escape of the best kind. One I never wanted to give up.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

He nods. “Could be. And that’s precisely why I have Hal now, and AA, and therapy. So that *this*”—he squeezes my hand—“and anything else that feels good, doesn’t turn into something toxic.” He pauses. “I’ve spent three and a half years missing you more than I’ve missed drinking. Three and a half years sacrificing happiness, all because I was scared I’d fuck it all up.”

My eyes burn.

“I’m tired, Sky.”

“I know,” I whisper.

“We deserve good things, right?”

I nod. “We do.”

A long moment passes where neither of us say anything, and I mentally play back all that he said.



“Hal?” I question softly.

“My sponsor.” Nolan arches a brow, his gaze glittering like he knows something I don’t. “He’s heard a lot about you.”

“He has?”

“Yep” He grunts. “And let’s just say, he’s been Team Skyler from the start.”

My eyes widen.

“He’s going to be thrilled about this. And most definitely going to be rubbing it in my face, telling me, ‘I told you so, kid.’” He smirks.

My mouth twitches. “He calls you kid?”

A nod.

Then, “Wait, rubbing in what?”

He coughs out a laugh, shaking his head. “Just that I’m a dumbass, and I was wrong, and...well, that’s pretty much it.” He shrugs. “He believed in us when I didn’t. Believed in *you*, when I was too caught up in my head.”

I bite my lip, and he narrows his eyes.

“Hal,” I blurt softly, straightening.

He tilts his head. “Do you know what it means?”

I nod. “It’s short for Henry.” This nickname I know. “It’s of German origin. Means ‘home leader’.”

He hums. “Interesting.”

I snort, shaking my head. “Not really. Though it was made famous by Shakespeare, so that’s kind of cool. It’s how I learned this one.”

“You like Shakespeare?”

“I like to read.”

He asks, bringing his other hand to cup our joined ones. “So many things I still don’t know about you...”

“Same,” I say softly. “I mean, about you. I know me.”

He smiles. “Well, I guess it’s a good thing we have more time now. No end date...” He trails off pointedly, dipping his gaze to our hands. He smooths his thumb over my knuckles. “That is, if you still want me? All of this. Staying here. My baggage...”

“Nolan, I want *you*,” I tell him fiercely.

He glances up at me.

“Mountains and all. I didn’t come to Vermont to make you leave. I came here to...to stay.”

His green eyes glimmer. “Mountains and all?”

I nod. “You being a father doesn’t change that. Neither does you being an alcoholic. You were always those things. But you were always so much more too. You still are. From where I’m sitting, nothing’s changed.”

His face tightens, and he reaches up, grabbing me by the back of the head. “God, I’m so happy you’re here,” he rumbles.

I grip his waist, just as he leans over, dropping his mouth to mine, only to pause at the last possible second.

“First thing’s first then,” he says.

“What?”

“We get you your meds.”

*Oh.*

I give as much of a nod as I can, my top lip brushing his.

“And then I’ve gotta tell Mel.”

My lips rise just as he crashes his mouth to mine.

“I’m never letting you go again,” he growls against me.

I bite his lip. “Never ever.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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NOLAN

“‘**Y**ou’re in a good mood today.”

Closing the oven door, I set the tray of cookies on top of the stove to cool.

I slide off the oven mitt, and turn to find Mel watching me curiously from the other side of the kitchen. She leans back against the counter, crossing her arms, eyes twinkling like she’s in on a secret.

I shrug. “It’s Christmas Eve.”

She hums, shaking her head. “You hate Christmas.”

I roll my eyes. “I do not.”

“You’re a Grinch.”

I shoot her a flat look and she smirks. “Seriously, Nol. Spill. Because if I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were finally getting *la-ai*—” she starts to sing-song when I slice a hand through the air, turning my wide gaze to the hall where tiny footsteps pad across the floor.

Mel snorts. “Oh relax, she has no idea what that even means.”

I slide her a glare just as Abby jumps into the kitchen with a growl, hands raised in claws, her bear cub hat tugged over her head, furry ears poking out.

Gasping, I grab my chest. “A bear! Hurry, Mel, get the hose.”

“Daddy,” Abby giggles, dropping her hands. “I’m a gremlin. Water’ll just make more of me. ‘member?” And she starts hopping around on her little feet, making popping sounds as she clenches at the air.

Fighting a laugh, I nod. “Right. How could I forget?”

Mel sighs in exasperation. “I can’t believe you let her watch that movie.”

Grabbing Abby by the waist, I throw her over my shoulder. She squeals, squirming, trying to climb down my back, so I twist her, setting her on my shoulders. “Come on, Mel, it’s a classic Christmas movie. I watched it every year with Pops growing up.”

Mel makes a face. “It’s terrifying.”

“How old were you when you first watched it?”

She opens her mouth, closes it, fumbling for words.

“Exactly,” I say, pointing at her.

“Daddy!”

“Yes, Abby?”

“It’s Gizmo.”

“Oh, right, my bad,” I say in a very serious tone. “Yes, Gizmo?”

Mel huffs, but there’s no mistaking the laugh she’s trying to hold back.

“Can I open my presents yet?” She tugs on my hair, so I tip my head back to look up at the cutest, sweetest, most innocent smile to ever grace my eyes.

*Little devil.*

“Well—” I start to cave, but Mel’s quick to sweep in and be the much-needed bad guy.

“No, Abby, not until after supper.”

She blinks, scrunching up her nose. “Can I have a cookie then? For com-pen-ation.”

I cough.

Mel shakes her head amused. She gives me a look. “Let me guess, you taught her that word.”

I nod solemnly. “Every child needs to know how to barter. It’s an important life skill.”

Shaking her head, she grabs a gingerbread cookie from one of the cooling racks, breaking it in half and taking a small bite.

“*Mommy*,” Abby whines, making grabby hands at her.

“Just testing it,” Mel replies teasingly, handing her the upper half of the little gingerbread man.

“For poison?” Abby says with all the seriousness in the world.

Mel makes a *what the hell* face, shooting me another look. “Really?”

I shrug. “Important life skills.”

A hand tugs my hair, getting crumbs all over me. “Life skills, Mommy.”

And while I’m mostly joking, it is true that I taught Abby to never take anything from a stranger. Food in particular, not without Mel or I trying it first.

Last year we learned she had a tree nut allergy when she broke out into hives and started coughing after helping her Nana make kolache. Fortunately, she didn’t take a bite—her picky eating habits a blessing in disguise—so we were able to get some Benadryl in her and get her over to the pediatrician before her symptoms worsened. They sent her home with some steroids to take for a couple days, and a script for an EpiPen.

Mel and I now carry one on us at all times, and there’s one in the kitchen here, as well as in the medicine cabinet upstairs. I have a couple in my house too, just in case, even though both houses as well as her grandparents’ are a nut-free zone.

While she’s old enough to know she can’t eat nuts, she’s not old enough to know to check the ingredients or allergy warnings on food labels, much less understand the bigger words, or just how “sick” she could get.

Nor does she know to ask if, say, someone leaves a tray of cookies out.

Not that she has to worry about that *here*, but better safe than sorry.

And while we’ve done our best to teach her to always ask first before sneaking a treat, she’s still a kid. Kids break rules.

And it's not like we can tell her she could die if she eats something she's not supposed to.

She's picky enough with food as it is. We don't need her *afraid* of eating completely.

So to say it hasn't been a little nerve-wracking now that she's in kindergarten is an understatement.

"Daddy, down," she says, bopping me on the head. More crumbs fly, and I realize Mel gave her the other half of the cookie.

Crouching down, I ease her off my shoulders, and give a little flick to one of the fuzzy ears curving up from her head.

"You gonna let me have a bite?"

She bunches her face, whipping the cookie out of my reach. "Get your own, slick!"

And then she's off, skipping out of the kitchen.

Mel snorts, and I shake my head.

*This kid.*

"So..." Mel says, grabbing the spatula from the plate to transfer the new batch of cookies onto the cooling rack.

"So what?" I say, shaking the crumbs out of my hair.

"Who is she?"

I freeze. Then, "I don't know what you're talking about."

From the living room, I hear the TV click on—or maybe Abby just turned up the volume. Christmas music filters into the kitchen, echoed horribly by my daughter's overdramatized attempt at singing along.

"Mhm," Mel says, clearly not having it.

Bypassing her for the fridge, I grab a water bottle, unscrew it and guzzle down nearly half the bottle.

"I told you to get yourself out there, so I don't know why you're being so cagey about it."

I sigh. “Newsflash, Mel. Not everything has to do with you.”

She whistles, and I tense, wincing. “Sorry, that came out —”

“No, no, you’re absolutely right.”

A long, quiet moment passes, where I feel her turn toward me, but I keep my gaze trained on the picture on the fridge. It’s one of all three of us, from right before Christmas four years ago—right before I relapsed, and everything went to shit.

I’ve got my arm around a beaming Mel. We’re crouched down, huddling around baby Abby. We’re smiling at the camera, but Abby’s beaming up at us.

Rubbing a hand over my chest, I look away.

It hurts...remembering that time. Not always, but sometimes.

But then I think of Skyler...realizing that if it didn’t all go to shit—that if I didn’t ruin everything—I never would’ve met him.

And that...

That’s a hard pill to swallow.

“I love this picture,” Mel whispers from behind me, startling me. I didn’t hear her approach.

Flinching, I jerk back, ramming my hip into the counter.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

I nod jerkily, and cut her a quick glance.

Her eyes skim over to the picture once more, lingering for a moment, before returning to me. Her brows furrow. “It was a happy time, Nolan. We don’t have to pretend it didn’t happen, just because bad times followed.”

Throat thick, I say, “I know. I’m working on it.”

And I am. Between my regular AA meetings once or twice a week, and my therapist that I see twice a month, I’m working on myself.



“Me too,” Mel says.

“And I...am. Seeing someone that is,” I say slowly, cautiously.

Her eyes widen, and I search them, digging for any hurt feelings, but I find none. Just happiness. And a million questions just waiting to spill out.

*Tell her, a voice urges. Just get it over with. It's not a big deal.*

And it isn't, is it?

But it could be...if she doesn't accept it. Accept me. Accept *us*.

“Nolan, what is it?” Her smile wavers, and she rears her head back, screwing an eye shut like she's bracing herself. “It's not Theresa, is it?” she mutters, referring to her best friend.

I make a face. “What? No.”

She breathes a sigh of relief. “Okay, good. For a second there, you scared me. That would just be too weird.”

“No kidding,” I say. “I can barely tolerate an hour with that woman.”

Mel smacks my arm with a gasp, “Rude.” But she's trying not to smile. She knows how much we've always clashed, and not in a good way. Mel often needs a break from her too.

Theresa's nice and all, but she's a little too...bubbly and optimistic sometimes.

“So if it's not my best friend, and I don't have a sister, who could it possibly be that put that look on your face?”

“What look?”

“The look Abby gets when I catch her doing something she's not supposed to.”

I make a face at that.

“Oh don't pout. Spill it.”

*Fucking hell.* I really didn't want to do this on Christmas Eve of all days, but I don't want to lie, and I've already lied by omission long enough. What difference does it make if I tell her on any ol' day of the year, or on a holiday?

The chips will fall where they fall, and I'll just have to deal.

*Please let her be okay with this.*

So, sliding my eyes closed, I nod, and begin to say, "Okay, so here's the thing. I—"

*Ding-dong!*

*Annnnd* I'm literally saved by the bell.

Abby squeals from the living room at the sound of the doorbell. "I'll get it!" she sing-songs loudly.

My eyes fly open, mirroring Mel's wide ones. All thoughts of me coming out to her forgotten, we both turn toward the arched doorway at the same time. "NO!"

Abby giggles loudly in that way that tells us she was just messing with us.

Mel slumps, and I roll my eyes. "I'll get it," I tell her, stepping around her.

It's Mel's parents, and chaos ensues from there. Abby screams, "Nana!" and runs over. Tim messes her hair, then reaches for my hand, wishing me a Merry Christmas, while Abby drags Vicky away who knows where.

"How's it going, Tim?" I say, clasping our joined hands.

He nods, eyes hard—cold even—as always, but his hand is warm and strong in mine. "Good, you?"

I release him, stepping back. "Good."

*But would it still be good if he knew...*

While we've come a long way since what happened three years ago, it's still a little tense at times. I can't blame them. They don't trust me, and for good fucking reason.

But Mel's been insistent from the start that we forgive and find a way to coexist. For Abby's sake. And secretly, I think, for Mel's too.

*"He's my best friend,"* I remember overhearing her tell her dad one night. She and Abby were still living in their house at the time, and I had just gotten back from rehab, and was still living in their guesthouse.

They were arguing in his study, and I happened to be passing by on my way to say goodnight to Abby.

I didn't mean to pause and eavesdrop, but Vicky was there too, in the hall, and spotted me, holding her finger to her lips. She nodded, gesturing to the door almost like she *wanted* me to hear what's going on.

*"I know this isn't what you imagined for us. But that's life. What happened, happened, and there's no going back."* A weighted moment passed, then, *"Daddy. He loves Abby. He loves me. It's different now, but I think...I think it could be stronger this way. I think we could all be stronger this way."*

At the time, I didn't understand what she meant.

Overcome with emotion I barely understood, I shook my head, and bypassed Vicky to go see my daughter. With her, at least things made sense. It's everything outside of her that didn't.

But that was back then, and this is now, and now I...

I get it.

We're stronger now.

All of us.

Bound by sheer determination and resilience to do what's best for Abby, we forged something most broken families never have the guts and grit to achieve.

It's not always easy. Resentments and bitterness and grief are obstacles that will never truly be gone. They fester, waiting for the perfect moment to remind us they're there.

But we power through. For Abby...and out of respect for what we've built here. Respect for each other...even when it feels begrudging at best.

And hell, even now, I still like to think my hard work these last few years paid off.

I don't think I'll ever not care about this man's opinion of me.

After I lost my Pops to a massive heart attack when I was only seventeen, he became a second dad to me of sorts. Vicky, a mom I never had, seeing as mine left when I was ten.

And despite his flaws—despite his cold, rigid exterior, and impossible expectations—through and through this man has been there for me. Paying for my treatment when I couldn't. Giving me a roof to live under.

Hell, both of them have never given up, and now that I'm older, and maybe a little wiser, I can't help but see that maybe...maybe it's not just because Mel pushed for it. Or because of our mutual love for Abby.

The only time these two somewhat faltered when it came to me...was when it came to Abby. And the question of my continued involvement in her life.

Inhaling deeply, I smile down as I watch him go join his wife and my daughter by the tree, only half-listening as Abby babbles away to her grandparents about all the presents she hopes Santa brings her.

Feeling eyes on me, I look over my shoulder, not surprised to find Mel watching on with that familiar glimmer in her blue eyes.

*Fuck, I don't want to lose this.*

But as the evening wears on, and we share in our usual Christmas Eve traditions, and we talk and laugh and play along with Abby's antics...

I can't help but feel like there's a giant hole where there wasn't before.

Sure, I've always missed Skyler.

But it's different now.

Now he's here, he's real—we're real—no longer just some momentary reprieve on a faraway island, exiled from a world we were convinced wanted no part of us.

*He never had this*, is all I can think, looking around this room—this family.

*My family.*

The only one I got.

*But he's my family too.*

“You okay?” Mel asks, from her seat next to me.

I force a smile and nod. “Yeah. Think I'm gonna head out in a few.”

Her brows arch, because she knows I usually sleep over on Christmas. It's the one night of the year, I break my rule. *For Abby.*

“I'll be back before she wakes up,” I tell her, hoping she's not mad.

But if the curious smile on her face is anything to go by, she's more intrigued than anything. “She's getting older, Nol. We'll be lucky if she waits for the sun this year.”

I sigh, nodding. “Here's to lots of coffee tomorrow.”

She lifts her glass of iced tea in a cheers.

Expecting this to be the moment she returns to our earlier conversation, I can't deny I'm grateful she seems to have forgotten—or at least, dropped it for the time being. Now, with her parents here, and with my earlier revelations...

I need some time to think. Prepare.

*I could lose this.*

Clearing my throat, I make the rounds, hugging and promising to see everyone bright and early. Mel's parents stay in the guest room on Christmas Eve, another tradition. In the morning, Tim will make chocolate chip pancakes, and Vicky

will rope Abby into dropping off cookies at the soup kitchen downtown once presents have been opened.

And then we spend the day watching movies, eating food, napping, and putting together all of Abby's toys for her to bounce around between until she crashes from all the sugar and excitement.

*It won't always be like this...you have to savor it...*

The drive across town takes twenty minutes.

It's started to snow—just flurries—and with the added multi-colored lights and foot of snow that hasn't melted from last week's storm, it's a picture-perfect Christmas Eve.

Lola's is dark, save for the single red LED *OPEN* sign posted in the window. Skyler said while technically they're closed tonight as far as the regular entertainment goes, they're open for anyone who doesn't have a place to celebrate the holiday.

The door creaks when it opens, and a wave of hot air rushes over me.

Wiping my boots on the mat by the door, I pull off my beanie, and shove it in my pocket. Running my fingers through my hair, I glance around the dimly lit room. In the far right corner, there's a tree covered in more tinsel than pine needles. Across the main bar, aluminum trays are laid out, filled with all sorts of food.

Oldies Christmas songs croon from the speakers, mingling with the clinking of glassware and laughter.

And it smells like cinnamon and pine—woody and familiar. Like home. Not my house, but like the one I grew up in with my dad and uncle.

Entering further into the bar, I notice there's got to be about a good couple dozen people here, some scattered in groups, others sitting by their lonesome. A few homeless people napping in the booths. One older woman looks to be dancing with herself, eyes glazed over with tears as if she's somewhere far, far away.

Emotion swells in my throat as I dart my gaze around, searching for a familiar face. One in particular.

There's a thud—then a giggle—a giggle I know intimately.

My gaze snaps toward the stage. It's designed in the shape of a T, with three poles—one in the middle, the main one, where the dancers do most of their routines. And two in back, that I'm pretty sure are only there for structural reinforcement.

One of which Skyler is currently gripping with his fist, while he stumbles around it in a circle.

*Oh boy.*

Micah notices me first and grins big and bright. Even before I reach them, I can already tell they're both drunk off their ass. And if not, they're well on their way.

“Like this?” Skyler says very seriously, thrusting his hip out.

*Jesus.*

In those tight black jeans he loves so much, and a green cable-knit sweater, he's far from what you'd typically find working the pole, but *goddamn*, if he isn't the sexiest stripper I've ever seen.

I sidle up right next to the stage. He's still facing away from me, so I meet Micah's gaze and wink. Skyler takes a step back, putting him well within reaching distance.

I hook my arm around his leg and tug.

He gasps, falling backward, plopping right into my arms.

Looking down at his wide, shocked expression, I smile softly. “Hi there.”

“Tarzan,” he breathes into a wide, breathless smile.

Choking on a laugh, I shake my head, bend down, and go to press my lips to his when he sneaks a hand between us, smacking it over my mouth.

My lips crash into his knuckles, my brows slamming down in a frown.

His gaze widens impossibly more as he murmurs. “I drank.”

I blink. *Oh.*

Obviously, I knew this—I knew it the second I saw him—but now I smell it too. Wafting off his skin.

His eyes redden, glimmering, and I don’t think it’s just because of the alcohol swimming through his veins. Pulling back, I set him on his feet, gripping his shoulders to balance him when he starts to teeter.

I’m vaguely aware of Micah walking away to give us some privacy.

Leveling Skyler with a fierce look, I say, “It’s okay.”

And it is. He’s twenty-one. He’s not an addict. I’d expect nothing less.

“I didn’t think I’d see you tonight,” he whispers. I have to strain to hear him over the music and chatter.

“I know. I’m not mad.”

Skyler stares hard at my chest, blinking with an intensity that tells me he’s starting to maybe spiral. It occurs to me I never asked if he could drink. Okay, that’s stupid. Of course he *can...*

But I never thought to question how it might make him feel.

I imagine it could go either way—exacerbate his sensory sensitivities, or numb him to them. And both are dangerous.

Call me selfish, but I hope it’s the latter for him. I hope it makes him *not* want to drink. Not just for my own sake, but his.

Still, that’s a concern for another time. He knows his limits, and if this is something he felt he could do, then I have to respect that.

“I missed you,” I admit, running my hand through his hair. It’s longer than it was back when we were on the island, curling thickly around his ears, at the nape of his neck. I kind



of love it. It's wild and untamed, and so perfectly him. "It didn't feel right being away."

He frowns. "But your daughter...it's Christmas. You should be with your family."

Curling my fingers under his chin, I lift his face away from my chest. His eyes dart to mine, then away, and something in me sinks.

"Sorry," he mutters, and I frown, about to ask him what for. But then his fingers grip my waist, squeezing, and I...well, I think I get it.

Nodding, I force a swallow and bend down, putting my lips right next to his ear. He doesn't need to look at me if it's too much right now. But I do need him to hear me.

"You're my family too."

He stills.

"And I love you."

If I didn't know any better, I'd think he didn't hear that second part at all. Not a single intake of air. Not a twitch. Nothing. The fingers latched around my waist might as well be a part of my clothes.

Concern overrides any hurt feelings, and I can't help but duck down and seek out his gaze. Or at least his expression. Something, anything to tell me I didn't just massively fuck shit up.

It's his lips that move first—shivering, like a leaf.

And then it's eyes blinking rapidly, those thick black lashes fluttering about like a butterfly's wings.

"You don't have to say anything back," I assure him in a deep hush. "I'm just telling you why I'm here. Why I couldn't stay there." I pause, searching his downturned face. "And maybe it feels too fast for you—"

He gives a rapid shake of his head and I have to suck back a chuckle, before forcing myself to go on.

“But I do,” I tell him simply. “I love you. And the idea of spending another Christmas without you, when you’re literally right across town? Yeah, no.” I pause. “And you being drunk doesn’t change that, okay?”

A moment passes where my words just sit heavily between us.

And then slowly, surely, his hand around my waist slides around my back. Both arms come around my middle, and he ducks his chin toward his chest, pressing his cheek right over my heart.

I fit my arms around him, holding him tight—so tight, I feel his muscles constrict, just like he likes it—and I bury my face in his messy hair.

He doesn’t smell like the ocean anymore.

But he still smells like mine.

And now that the words are out there—these feelings I’ve kept trapped in my heart, my bones, my skin...for *years*...

I realize there was never any choice.

I’m keeping this boy. This man. My hurricane.

For as long as he’ll have me, I’ll keep him.

I just need to figure out a way to keep them *both*.

# CHAPTER FORTY

---

SKYLER

I wake up on Christmas morning with a hot mouth wrapped around my cock.

Nolan's slithered his way down to the foot of the bed, where he has his strong, muscular arms wrapped around my legs, his face buried in my groin.

Humming sleepily, I thrust into his mouth, feeling myself grow thick against his tongue.

His groans vibrate around me, telling me he feels it too, and it spurs him to suck harder, until I'm filling his mouth so completely, it's a wonder he doesn't choke.

A hand palms my ass, holding me there, so I grind my hips, just basking in the sweltering heat enveloping me. Wetness dribbles down my balls and I shudder, turning my face into the pillow, mouthing and biting at the fabric.

This isn't the first time I've woken up like this, with him sucking me to hardness. He did it on the island too when we napped sometimes.

Of course, he asked me if it was okay first—to touch and suck me in my sleep.

I remember how flushed and out of sorts the question made me. So much so I struggled for a good minute before I could form an answer. Well, a verbal one. My body gave me away first, as usual, but still, he waited for me to find my words.

And the first thing I said wasn't a *Hell yes*, like my body practically screamed...

But *Why?*

And I remember how he fisted my length, leaned up and growled into my chin. "*Because I love this cock. Soft, hard, messy. You name it.*" Leaning back, he had wet his lips, and dropped those hooded eyes to my lips. "*What can I say? I wanna taste it and feel it in every way. And the idea of you*

*waking up to my mouth on you, feeling your silky skin strain and stretch as you harden against my tongue...*”

Nolan pulls off, the wet, messy sound of it filling the room obscenely, yanking me from the memory. He sighs roughly. “Fuck, I’ll never get over how hot that is.” He swipes his thumb over my crown, and then crawls up my body.

Turning my head, I open my mouth on instinct, and he slips his thumb in my mouth, smudging my pre-cum over my tongue.

His lips press to my forehead in a rough, messy kiss, and I feel the gentle flare of his nose—his soft pants. “That’s all mine, isn’t it? All for me.”

I nod, sucking the calloused tip of his thumb.

He pulls back and replaces it with his tongue, curling it around mine.

Our teeth knock, our lips bump.

It’s a messy, ugly kiss...

One that reminds me—

I pull back, smacking his shoulder at the same time I smack a hand over my mouth.

“Baby, you brushed your teeth...” He cranes his head to look over at the digital clock on his nightstand. “Not even three hours ago. And you brushed them three times.”

I blink. *Right. Because I drank.*

“And I brushed mine before sucking that pretty cock in my mouth. I know the rules.” He winks, and nudges me to roll over onto my stomach.

Another blink. Then, “Oh.”

So, as it would turn out, I do have one hard limit as far as sensory issues in the bedroom go. Well, one that I know of.

Now that we spend nights together, and get to wake up next to each other... Let’s just say morning breath is a no-go for me, as I’m sure it is for a lot of people.

It might just be a little more intense for someone like me.

Nolan's morning breath probably isn't even *that* bad...

But still. Yuck.

Thankfully, he didn't take it too personally when I all but shoved him off the bed that particular morning and ran into the bathroom to guzzle mouthwash—and I *hate* mouthwash, though he's since bought a more mild one.

He even laughed once he realized it wasn't *my* breath I was worried about, but *his* that grossed me out. He thought it was hilarious.

And I can't lie...

It was the perfect response to it. If he was offended or hurt, I don't know what I would've done.

I frown, when it occurs to me what he said, and I sit up, peering over his shoulder to where I'm greeted by a snowy, night sky out the window. It wouldn't be the first time he's woken me up in the middle of the night...

Or I, him.

"What time is it?" I say, my voice raspy and croaky from disuse.

I hear him pop open the lube cap and I wiggle my hips, grinding my cock into the sheets.

"Little after four," he says, pushing my thighs apart with his knees, settling himself behind me.

Wetness hits my crack, right at the cleft. I suck in a breath, and he chuckles wickedly. I start to push up on my knees, but he stops me. "No, just like this."

He spreads my legs wider, fingers massaging the lube into my hole. With his free hand, he reaches beneath me, splaying it against my stomach. Lifting me up just enough so he can get his fingers inside me more comfortably.

I bite the pillow, forcing myself to relax and let him in.

“That’s good, sweetheart,” he rumbles, slotting in a third finger.

He stretches me for a bit, with deep, languid thrusts.

Still fuzzy from sleep, my mind sort of just drifts, and it’s all sensation—all pressure—the best kind.

Sometimes it does get to be too much, and when it is, we just switch things around. I suck him off instead, or we just kiss. Only once so far did we actually have to stop completely. Whatever works for me in the moment. It’s something we did even on the island, before he even knew about my sensory issues.

He’d just read me, slow down, and change course.

“Ready?” he says.

I nod into the pillow.

Nolan lifts my hips a little higher, I sense him lay down next to me. He has to sort of roll me onto my side, against his chest, so he can get his cock in me this way. But once he’s in, and I’m no longer tensing, bracing, getting accustomed to his intrusion... he rolls me back on my front so I’m laying flat while he fucks me from behind.

He starts off slow and deep, eliciting quiet, whimpering moans from my lips. Leaning down, he bows his head into the pillow next to me, hands planted next to our heads.

“Feel good?” he breathes, nipping at my ear, grinding his dick into me.

I nod against the pillow, turning my head, so he can kiss me.

It’s sloppy—more tongue and choppy breaths and moans than anything.

Soon, his thrusts pick up, and his chest’s heaving against my back with exertion.

“C’mere,” he grunts, pulling off me suddenly. But he keeps his dick in me.

Sneaking an arm under my chest, he heaves me up off the mattress, pulling me back with him so we're both on our knees, my ass on his lap.

I arch my back, throwing my arm behind his head, and let my head fall back at the same time his falls forward into the crook of my neck.

Like that, we find our release, grinding and moving in sync, his hand fisting my cock, his dick buried deep in my ass, and his other hand wrapped lightly around my neck.

My moan shatters the quiet night, broken only by his deep-chest groans I feel reverberate down my spine.

When we're nothing more than heaving lungs and jelly limbs, he eases me off him, lowering me back to the mattress.

"Merry Christmas, baby," he rumbles into my ear.

Eyes closed, I hum in agreement.

He crawls down behind me, buries his face in my crease, licking up the mess he left. I shudder, my softening cock twitching, dripping into the sheets with little aftershocks.

"Nol," I whisper, reaching back blindly for his head. I dig my fingers in his scalp, tangle them in his hair.

He grunts, and then when he's satisfied he got it all, he finds his way back up to my mouth, kissing me with cum-stained lips that taste of both of us.

When it gets to be a little too much, I twist my head, and he bows his head to my shoulder, just breathing.

Wetting my lips, I blink a couple times, and glance at his downturned head. "Did...did you mean it?" I ask.

His shoulders tighten ever so faintly, and then he looks up, peering through a messy veil of hair. His eyes skim mine, almost like he's waiting for something. I try not to bristle.

"You remember?" he finally says.

I nod and glance away. "Sorry I clammed up. It just...it surprised me."



His hand cups my cheek. “Don’t be sorry. I told you—I wasn’t expecting anything in return.” A beat passes. “I just hope I didn’t make you too uncomfortable.”

Even before the words are fully out of his mouth, I’m shaking my head. “No. No...it’s...” I blow out a breath, then finally meet his gaze. “No one’s ever...”

His eyes widen, and his jaw tenses in that way I’ve come to recognize means he’s pissed...but not at me. It’s a look he had a lot at Black Diamond. At first, at me, but then...*for* me.

I suck my bottom lip in between my teeth, and Nolan makes a low, growly noise.

Suddenly his thumb’s there pulling it out, and then he leans up, pinning it with his own teeth. I stare wide-eyed back at him.

Releasing my flesh, he says, “Only I get to bite that. Got it?”

Gulping, I nod.

His lips twitch, and something seems to soften in his gaze, making him look sad all of a sudden. “I also woke you up because I have to go.”

My chest squeezes, but I force a brave face and nod. “I know. It’s Christmas morning. Abby needs her dad.”

His smile thins and he nods. “Thanks for understanding, sweetheart. Want me to take you back to your apartment, or...”

I swallow thickly, and shrug. “Yeah, that works.” Micah said he and Zel make pancakes and watch the Die Hard movies. *Tradition.*

One I’ve been invited in on.

Nolan’s gaze searches mine, and he rolls his lip under his teeth like he’s considering something. I’m just about to point out that if he’s the only one who can bite my lip, then I’m the only one who can bite his, when his next words halt me in my tracks.

“I’m going to tell her. This week. I almost did yesterday, and I just...” He shakes his head and sits up, running a hand through his dark, tangled hair.

I sit up too and bring my knees to my chest, facing him. “If it’s too soon—”

“No. No, it’s way overdue. At least before, I had the excuse that I wasn’t seeing anyone, but now...” He cuts me a wry look. “It’s not fair to you, or us.”

“I can...wait, if—”

He presses a finger over my lips, and arches a brow.

I roll my eyes.

“Brat,” he mutters affectionately, fighting a smile.

Lowering his hand, he tangles our fingers together, and rests them on his thigh. He stares at them for a long moment.

“I hate leaving you right now.”

“No!—”

“I don’t ever want to leave you on Christmas again,” he says roughly. “Or...any day really. Hell, I should just bring you with me, and say fuck it. We’ll see where the chips fall.”

My heart stutters at that. “Nolan, no.”

At my firm tone, his gaze snaps up to mine.

“Don’t potentially ruin Christmas for Abby.” His expression darkens, and I shrug. “You said it yourself—you don’t know how Mel will react. Not one hundred percent.”

“It’s not her I’m worried about.”

I frown. “Um, Abby?”

He shakes his head and drops his gaze. “My...in-laws. Ex-in-laws rather.”

*Oh.*

“Are...are they like...against being gay or something?”

He shrugs. “I don’t think so, but it’s one thing to be okay with the idea, and another...”

“To have it thrown in your face,” I say tightly.

He winces. “Sky, I’m—”

“You’re not telling them today, just because you feel bad about leaving me. I’ll be okay. It’s just Christmas.”

His face breaks at that and he shakes his head fiercely. His gaze levels up to mine and he says tightly, “It shouldn’t be *just* Christmas. God, and here Mel thinks I’m a Grinch.”

A chuckle escapes me at that, and some of his anger dims.

“It kills me that you never got to have like...any normalcy. These little things that I’ve basically taken for granted my whole life.”

I swallow and shrug. “Don’t do that. Please.”

His mouth tightens, and he says nothing.

“Next year,” I tell him strongly. “We’ll start fresh. It’s just...bad timing right now. We’ll get it right.”

He shakes his head, brow furrowed. “I don’t know whether to be grateful or mad at you right now.”

My face scrunches. “Mad?”

“For being so understanding about this.”

“If it helps, the idea of Mel not being okay with this scares me. And now to add your ex-in-laws into the mix...” I tip my head side to side. “Yeah, I’m okay with waiting a few days.”  
*Or forever.*

It’s not that I particularly like being a secret...

But it does have its perks, what with so very few people being in on it. It’s like we’re in a bubble, where no one can touch us. Taint us—taint this. It reminds me of our time together on the island. Where it was just us against the world. It felt safe.

While I’ve come a long way since Canaan with accepting myself, and being out—even more so since working at Lola’s—it’s not like the trauma of what I’ve been through doesn’t still live inside me.

It changed me, and not always in ways that are obvious.

It shows up often when I least expect it, stealing my voice, maybe even stealing my air. It merges with the storms, creating a tornado out of a thunderstorm when I least expect it.

Nolan squeezes my hand, and nods. “Okay. A few days then. Mel’s already figured out that I’m seeing someone, so—”

“And she’s not...mad, or-or—” I interrupt, stuttering through my words.

“No. No, she’s happy for me.”

I stare at his chin. “Really?” I say quietly.

He cocks his head.

Then, reaching up, he rakes his fingers through my hair, shoving it back to clasp a hand around my skull. But he doesn’t force me to meet his gaze, which has a small smile twitching along my lips. He just holds my head there, cradling it like it’s something precious. Like he can’t not touch me.

*He gets me.*

It’s something I’ve noticed in the last couple weeks since we reunited—the way he respects my need for...space, autonomy, whatever you want to call it...

And he meets me on my level, without making a big deal of it.

He’s still pushy, and assertive—still *Nolan*—but he’s far more cognizant of the little things now, and rather than give up and cast me off like so many others before him, he just rolls with it. He knows when to push, and when to back off.

Perhaps it’s just because we’re more comfortable with each other now. And he knows better now. He knows I’m not avoiding his gaze to be rude, or because I’m hiding anything or being dodgy.

And I know I can look away if it’s too much for me without worrying that I’m hurting his feelings or being weird.

And that lack of pressure to conform and impress is...nice. I’ve never felt so free to just...not care and be me before. I

don't have to be *on*.

“Does it bother you that I'm close with her?” he asks softly, pulling me from my thoughts.

I blink a couple times, considering my answer. “No...no, I don't think so,” I tell him honestly. “She has a boyfriend, so that helps. And you have me...” I don't know why it sounds like a question, by the time my voice trails off.

Nolan chuckles. “You wound me. Of course you have me. I love you, remember?”

I'm about to gnaw on my lip, but stop myself at the last second. Instead I reach out, and draw hearts on his thigh, some of the tightness in my chest easing when his breath catches, and his softened cock twitches near my fingers.

I smile faintly. “I guess it's more so that I want her to... like me,” I admit, my voice finishing out small and barely audible.

“Sky, she's gonna love you. You're really fucking hard not to love, trust me,” he says gruffly.

My eyes sting, and I shrug, digging my nail into his skin. “Yeah, but you share a kid. And what if I'm...no good for her? Like, what if I'm a bad role model in her life?” I shake my head, and his fingers add pressure to my scalp in a way that's comforting. “Mel won't like me too much then.” *You might not either*, I think, but refrain from saying out loud.

“Sweetheart,” he says in a low, impassioned voice, “that's not possible.”

“You don't know that,” I whisper fervently.

“And I told you once, you're not the villain you make yourself out to be. You couldn't hurt a fly.”

I make a face. “That's a lie and you know it.”

The hand still resting on his lap lifts, but pauses, hovering in mid-air like maybe he was about to nudge my chin up to force me to look at him. So I grab his wrist and bring it to my face, showing him it's okay. As much as I love how respectful

he is, I don't want him to start second-guessing things, and going against his nature.

It reminds me too much of my parents.

*Don't give up on me. Don't cast me off.*

Sighing, he moves both hands to my jaw, lifting my head.

Our gazes brush for a long, powerful beat, and then he closes his reddened eyes, leans forward, and presses a kiss to my forehead.

Against my hairline, he says, "You'd never hurt Abby. That much I'm certain of. Out of all the things I'm worried about, you being bad for Abby is not one of them. It doesn't even come close to making the list."

Jaw working, I nod.

"And if it makes any difference, I haven't even met Mel's boyfriend yet. Neither has Abby. And he's been around for three months. He hasn't met her parents yet either."

My eyes widen. *Three months?*

He shakes his head against mine, sensing my thoughts. "Mel had to know first, if he's gonna be around long-term. That's why. We're not about to have a revolving door of people coming in and out of Abby's life, not when she's so young and it could confuse her."

"Oh."

I feel his lips rise against my skin. "I love you, Sky. Sounds pretty long-term to me."

Relaxing, I scoot closer, burying my face in his neck.

His hand slides back around my head, holding me there. I inhale deeply.

"I'm not letting you go," he says. "For anything. I'll make this work. Whatever it takes."

*But what if she makes you choose?* The question sits on the tip of my tongue, held back only by sheer fear of what the answer would be.

*Because you already know what his choice would be, a voice reminds me sadly.*

Squeezing my eyes shut, I wrap my arms around Nolan's middle, sliding my cheek down to where his heart thumps strong and steadily.

*I love you, I think.*

Over and over again, I say it in my head, testing the strange words out. Wishing I could say them out loud.

But maybe it's better this way, keeping them locked inside.

Should the worst come to pass after all...

It'd be much easier to walk away, without leaving those three words dragging, echoing in my wake—a noose around both our necks.

# CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

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NOLAN

I t's Sunday evening, three days after Christmas, and Skyler and I are snuggled up on my couch watching *Gremlins*.

A fire crackles from the hearth, flames igniting the room in a flickering warm glow, our only source of light aside from the flat screen mounted to the wall.

"I can't believe you've never seen this movie," I rumble. We're laying on our sides, with my back to the cushions as I spoon Skyler from behind. I've got one arm around his waist, hand splayed across his smooth stomach under his shirt, and the other propped up around his head so I can see the screen.

"I can't believe you showed this to your five-year-old," he says, and a glance down at his profile shows him making a horrified face at what he's seeing on-screen.

Chuckling, I bury my face in his neck, nuzzling him. He practically purrs, rubbing his cheek into my forearm.

*Goddamn, he kills me.*

My hand slides lower, spreading wide, wide enough for my fingertips to creep under the band of his boxer briefs.

His breath shallows, and his body stiffens ever-so-faintly.

I hide a smile in his skin, and clear my throat, forcing myself to stay on topic. "Jesus, first Mel, now you. Is it really that bad?"

Skyler clears his throat when my finger wanders deeper, brushing over his pubes. His dick doesn't touch my hand, but I feel the disturbance in his underwear all the same, the fabric shifting, tightening.

"N-no, guess not. Could be worse."

*I guess I probably shouldn't tell him I watched Hellraiser with her last week...*

The original, obviously.

What can I say? My Pops raised me on the good stuff. And it would seem my daughter's caught the bug for it too. I block her eyes and ears of course when it gets too bloody and violent, or just all around inappropriate. I'm not completely negligent.

But the girl loves the jump scares and creepy make-up. It's her favorite thing.

I hum. "If it helps, she hasn't had any nightmares." In my head, I hear Mel sing-songing, "*Ye-e-et.*"

"Well, that's good," Skyler says.

"Though Mel did text me last night that she caught her in the bathroom giving Gizmo a bath in the sink."

Skyler barks a laugh. "Well at least she didn't feed it after midnight."

"Something tells me that's next on her list," I say dryly.

Yeah, Santa brought my daughter a hamster this year. The North Pole was fresh out of Mogwai. Or at least, that's what we told Abby when she couldn't seem to make sense of the furry little guy in his cage.

Still, she was happy with her knock-off, and called him Gizmo, because of course.

It's a while before either of us speak again. Skyler gets lost in the movie, while I get lost in him, stroking his skin, teasing his cock, kissing his neck. I never take it any further, and he tries to act like what I'm doing isn't getting to him.

When the credits roll, I reach for my phone on the end table. It's a little after six.

"Come on," I say, tapping his hip, and nudging him off the couch. "Let's eat something. Pasta, okay? I've got spaghetti and I think penne. Preference?"

He tugs down the shirt. It's mine, and one of my bigger ones, so it's baggy and loose on him, hanging down to mid-thigh. "Penne's good," he says.

We make our way to the kitchen, and divide and conquer like we've done it a million times before. He grabs ingredients from the fridge and pantry, while I get pots and pans out and start the stove. Only two weeks with him, where he's slept here every night, and we've already fell into a sort of effortless domesticity as if we've been living together for years.

"Garlic bread?" I ask, brushing past him for the freezer. "It's the frozen kind. Sorry." It's just myself here, so I mainly live off non-perishables and frozen foods.

He shakes his head. "That's perfect."

Nodding, I grab it and sit it on the counter to thaw. The directions say to leave frozen until the oven's pre-heated, but I've always found it to get crispy too quick that way, and I like my garlic bread on the softer side.

I cut Skyler a look, wondering what he prefers. He's frowning down at a couple jars of sauce, like maybe he's trying to decide which one he wants to go with.

Approaching him from behind, I dip my chin to his shoulder, and follow his gaze.

"Let's go with the plain one," I say. "That way, we can add seasonings and taste-test as it cooks."

Nodding, he hands it to me and reaches up to set the other back in the cabinet.

His shirt—*my* shirt—rides up, exposing his black boxer briefs that fit to him like a second skin. Groaning, I cup his firm, yet plush cheeks, fanning my thumbs over the top where his back dips.

He sucks in a quiet breath.

I bite his shoulder, curling my fingers in the fabric, shoving it up around him so they're more like the tiny little briefs he wears sometimes. He squirms, and turns in the tight space between my chest and the counter. My hands grip his waist and his arms loop around my neck, and he arches into me. His half-hard cock trapped between us, rubbing against my own growing need hidden behind thin gray lounge pants and nothing else.

“Hi,” he says, lifting up to kiss me.

I grin against his mouth, my chest expanding, warmth filling my veins.

He’s been doing this a lot more recently—initiating kisses. Touches—particularly, since I confessed I loved him last week.

No, he hasn’t said it back, but he doesn’t need to. It’s written in every fleck of glittering brown in his eyes, every little curl to his lips, every sigh against my chest when he presses his cheek there.

*“It’s soothing. The whooshing sound,”* he’d told me one night, completely of his own volition. *“It’s why I dove into the water that time. I needed the heavy kind of silence.”*

I asked him if he had noise-cancelling headphones—I’ve read they could help—and he said he used to, but they were old and eventually gave out, and he couldn’t afford to buy new ones—not the kind that actually work at least.

He has a new pair coming early next week. Would’ve been here sooner, if not for all the holiday insanity going on right now.

His lips sort of just sit against mine, lingering, then a curious tongue pokes out. I meet him with mine immediately, groaning into his sweet, shy mouth as I cup the back of his head, and take over, unable to help myself.

Skyler grabs my shoulders, biting his nails into my skin. Chills race down my arms, my chest, pebbling my nipples.

I never realized until he started getting more comfortable making the first move, how one-sided it sort of was, as far as kissing goes at least. And I don’t mean that in a bad way—I really don’t mind taking the lead.

The way he gasps, almost as if he’s still surprised, just like that first time I kissed him...

The way he melts, like he’s helpless to do anything but sink into my touch...

Fuck, if it all doesn't just make me want to pound on my chest, and throw him over my shoulder, and mess him up until my scent is as entwined in him as his own.

He makes an animal of me, and he knows it.

Distantly, I'm aware of my phone ringing, and I realize I left it in the living room.

We slow the kiss, our chests rising and falling unevenly plastered against each other. Pulling back, he wets his lips, and flutters those lashes up at me.

“You gonna get that?”

I shrug, raking my fingers through his hair, brushing it off his face. “It's probably just spam.”

He's hard as a rock against me—as am I—but for the moment we ignore it, separating, and going about what we originally set out to do.

Not even a minute later, my phone starts ringing again.

I frown.

“Maybe it's Mel,” Skyler whispers.

Nodding, I give him a little kiss on the cheek and a smack on his ass, and quickly make my way to the living room before whoever it is hangs up.

No one ever calls me, not unless it's the middle of a weekday when I'm technically on the clock. Even Mel and Hudson usually stick to just texting. My in-laws are probably the only exception, but that's only when they're watching Abby and can't get in touch with Mel if they have a question or whatever.

But Abby's with Mel tonight.

In fact, they're out to dinner right now with Vance. It's Abby's first time meeting Mel's boyfriend officially, something we agreed upon a couple weeks ago when Mel told me how serious it was getting.

Fast? Maybe. It's only been three months.

But I fell in love with Skyler in a matter of weeks, so who am I to judge?

The phone rings and vibrates against the hard wood of the table.

My concern only grows when I see it is in fact Mel, her name and the goofy ass picture of her sticking her tongue out flashing across the screen. I don't even remember her setting that up. Definitely wasn't me.

Scrambling for the answer button, I quickly raise it to my ear. "Mel? What's—"

"Nolan," her voice breaks, pitching high like she's sobbing—or hyperventilating.

I'm barely aware of the couch catching my ass when I stumble back. I hear a thud—the remote falling to the floor, smacking off the wood where the rug stops.

Mel's talking in my ear, and somewhere inside me, I'm registering her words—

*Anaphylactic shock.*

*Restaurant.*

*Vance.*

*Dessert.*

*Ambulance.*

"She couldn't breathe—sh-she was blue—I c-can't, I c-can't—" She's crying, and I can barely make sense of her as I try to piece it all together. "I forgot. I didn't th-think, I..."

Her voice fades, replaced by a thumping, whooshing noise that makes me think of Skyler and what it feels like to put his ear to my chest.

He said it's soothing, but I'm not finding it very soothing right now.

*I don't...understand.*

"Is she alive?" I hear myself whisper.

Footsteps sound as if from a great distance, though they're literally right there, carrying a body toward me. Skyler drops down in front of me, sinking onto his knees between my spread legs.

Mel sniffs. "Y-yeah, but—"

"Where?"

She rattles off the hospital in town, and I mutter something along the lines of we'll be right there, before hanging up.

I jump to a sudden stand, looking around, needing—

"Nolan."

"I—"

Hands clutch my cheeks, forcing my head down.

Big, worried brown eyes collide with mine, and it's as if someone took claws to my chest and yanked—like my heart's a stuffed bear being snatched up in one of those crane vendor machines—and suddenly I can breathe again, and it hurts, *fuck* does it hurt.

My chest heaves, and I feel like I'm going to throw up.

"Where do we need to go?" Skyler says.

"Hospital."

"Will you be able to give me directions as I drive, or do I need to plug it into the GPS?"

"I can dr—"

"I'm driving."

My gaze flies to his at his hard tone. His mouth is thinned out into a white, bloodless line, his eyes round with worry and something else I can't name—something I'm too afraid to acknowledge.

"She said she's alive," I whisper.

He inhales deeply, nodding. "Then focus on that."

Forcing a hard swallow, I nod.

He glances around, and then gives me a little shove. “Sit there, and I’ll get our clothes.”

I do as he says, dropping my face in my hands.

His footsteps grow faint, and I squeeze my eyes shut, digging the heels of my palms in my cheeks.

*Please. Please let her be okay.*



# CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

---

SKYLER

Nolan's flying out of the passenger door before I can so much as finish shifting into park. The truck jolts and I suck in a sharp breath, quickly turning off the engine, before scrambling out after him.

By some stroke of luck—or the fact it's a Sunday night, in a small town—parking was a non-issue. I even managed to find a cluster of empty spots near the ER entrance, ensuring I had enough room to squeeze this beast in without clipping anyone or anything in my haste.

Thank whoever might be watching over us right now, that his truck's an automatic, or there's no way I would've been able to drive him here. Still, it was not easy. It's like driving a tank.

The sliding glass doors open for Nolan just as I catch up to him, a cacophony of sound assaulting my ears—chatter, footsteps, beeping, an intercom clicking on.

I cup my ears briefly, shaking my head.

*Focus.*

Nolan's head swings around, and then he's on the move, all but charging through a group of people, some of whom are dressed in street clothes, and others in blue scrubs.

Keeping my gaze lasered in on Nolan's back, I mutter shaky apologies and *excuse me's* as we pass by, feeling the raking stares, the curious fleeting glances.

It's not even *that* busy, but it's a new place for me—new and unexpected—and it's tripping me up. I don't know any of these people. I can't keep up with all the new sounds.

Not to mention the anxiety coursing through my veins. I don't even know Abby—not really—but I feel Nolan's terror as if it was my own. My body quakes from it; my stomach clenching around hollow nothingness. It feels like neither of us

have shared a breath since the one we shared between our lips in his kitchen.

Somehow, in his shocked state, he was able to remember to turn off the oven. I sure didn't. All I could focus on was getting him to the hospital.

"Mel!" he calls out, pulling me from my head. His steps quicken, and I hurry to keep up, my head downturned. The floor seems to pulse with each step I take, mingling with the noise in my ears.

The vinyl gives way to thin burgundy carpet flecked with beige.

"I'm s-so sorry," I hear a female voice choke out.

"What happened?"

At the sound of Nolan's voice, I glance up, watching through my lashes as he grabs the shoulders of a woman I've only seen from a distance until now.

Her blond hair is pulled back in some kind of twist, save for a couple strands that have slipped free and now curl around her flushed, tear-streaked face. Mascara drips and smudges around her eyes, but her red lipstick remains untouched.

She's shaking her head, neck tendons jutting out above the square collar of her dress from trying to get her crying under control. But it's no use. "I forgot to tell him," she says in a small, barely there voice. A sob rips out of her, hands wringing anxiously against her chest. "I f-forgot to tell him. How the fuck did I forget?"

Nolan doesn't say anything.

Movement from behind her draws my attention to the man sitting in one of the chairs against the wall. He's equally as dressed up as Mel. He must be the boyfriend. *Vance*.

He slumps forward, elbows to his knees, and scrubs his hands down his face.

I flash back to the picture Nolan sent me earlier, one of Abby grinning up into the camera, brown hair curled all around her head, a big gap where her front teeth should be.

She was wearing a black and white checkered dress, with a black headband and slip-ons to match.

Mel texted it to him with the caption: **Ready for her close-up**

Tonight was a big deal—the night she introduced her daughter to her boyfriend for the first time. They had dinner reservations at a place called La Amor not far from where Lola’s is. I’ve seen it when driving by—dimly lit with candles in the windows. An Italian flag jutting out from next to the wooden door, rippling in the wind.

*“She’s allergic to nuts,”* he’d told me in the car, his voice faint as he drew aimless pictures with his finger on the window. *“Mel said something about anaphylactic shock. She couldn’t breathe.”*

*“But she said she was okay, right? You said—”*

*“She said she was alive.”*

Never in the time that I’ve known Nolan, have I ever seen him so distraught yet so...hollow—so blank and matter of fact. As if his voice was coming from somewhere else, somewhere where the body couldn’t touch.

He shook and trembled, but his voice remained steady. His eyes reddened and his chest heaved with choppy, crackling breaths, but his eyes remained distant. His lips parted loosely.

Fisting my hands at my sides, I try to focus on what Mel’s saying, blocking out the noise seemingly coming in from all sides. It’s so much worse tonight—like someone threw my head in a blender—and I know it’s because I’m stressed. I didn’t have time to prepare. I didn’t know we’d be coming here, to a place like this.

I know all these things, yet it does little to settle the storm slowly brewing in the back of my mind.

*Not now. Please not now.*

I just started taking my meds again, but if tonight’s proving anything, it’s that my body’s still adjusting. That, or they no longer work like they should. The pharmacist said it could take

weeks for them to take full effect, since I'd been off them for so many months.

Even then...

It's not a cure. There will never be a cure for this.

*I just need to suck it up.*

"...to the bathroom quick." Shaking away my thoughts, I tune into what Mel's saying. "She was fine. They were fine, talking and laughing. The-the server came around with the dessert tray I guess. N-not a menu. S-so th-they took what they wanted off the c-cart, and s-she grabbed—"

"Is she okay?" Nolan cuts in gruffly, intercepting her stuttered rambling.

"There was shouting," she sobs, bringing her hands to her mouth. "When I left the b-bathroom. Sh-she was on the f-floor, and b-blu—"

"Melody," he barks, shaking her.

From my vantage point, I see her eyes widen over his shoulder, and she lowers hands to her sides, nodding. "Yes. She's f-fine. I'm s-sorry. I just— I can't b-believe I—"

*She's panicking, I realize.*

Then I remember another time, another place—

A bridge.

The ocean.

A cave.

Shaking so much, I thought I was coming out of my skin...

*Adrenaline crash.*

Vance pushes up from his seat and approaches her, bringing her into his chest. His eyes are red when they dart to Nolan, then me, reminding me I'm...here.

My gaze drops, my vision growing out of focus.

"We used the EpiPen. The paramedics arrived and made sure she was stable before transferring her here."

I hear what they're saying as if it's coming from down a long, winding tunnel.

"Where is she? Can I see her?" Nolan rushes out, his voice breaking.

I feel something in my own chest crack too at the sound. My fingers twitch at my side, clenching into my palms. The urge to grab him and press my nose to his back is there—right there—like a word sitting on the tip of your tongue.

But I'm trapped in my head. My body won't cooperate. It just keeps...stalling in place.

"The nurse said to wait here. Mel came here with her in the ambulance. I-I don't know why they wouldn't let us back, but —"

"I'll go see if there's...been any update, or anything," Nolan utters quietly, turning, and brushing past me.

I gulp, suddenly feeling very, very alone, and very, very out of place.

Feeling eyes on me, I peek up to find Mel staring at me like she just noticed I'm here—Nolan didn't come alone—and something in me sinks.

*I should've stayed in the car. What was I thinking coming inside?*

But it didn't even occur to me *not* to. I wanted to be here for Nolan. And if the way he gripped my hand the whole way here told me anything, he wanted me with him too. It probably didn't even cross his mind—it sure as hell didn't cross mine.

Mel cocks her head curiously, nose and eyes red from tears, but her panic seemingly forgotten, at least for the moment. "Who are you?" she asks, her voice raw from crying.

Vance rubs her shoulders, and presses a kiss to her head, staring somewhere far-off over her head.

It takes longer than it should to get my voice to work, but Mel doesn't seem to notice or mind. She just watches me with a look I can't place.

*Mel. Short for Melody.*

*Greek origin.*

*Music.*

*An easy one.*

“Um, I’m...I’m Skyler,” I finally manage, my voice coming out quiet and throaty. And then words rush out before I can stop them. “A f-friend of Nolan’s.”

Her mouth parts, eyes widening, and I drop my gaze, staring at some unfocused spot below her chest.

I feel her watching me for a long moment, and it takes everything in me to hold still.

*This...this wasn't how it was supposed to go.*

*Please don't ask for details.*

“You’re Sky?” she says slowly.

I still, every restless nerve in me just sparking to a grinding stop.

I’m frozen.

*She...she knows who I am?*

I’m vaguely aware of heavy footfalls drawing near, more certain at first, but then growing softer and more spread out. How I know they belong to Nolan, I have no idea, but there’s a comfortable familiarity in the rhythm his work boots produce that has some of the noise thrashing around my brain quieting.

“Mel...” he says warily.

“This is Sky?” she says, and something clunks in my chest.

Nolan says nothing, and all I can do is stare blankly ahead.

“I thought Sky was a woman.”

I flinch, and I hear a muttered curse.

“Nolan, why didn’t you—”

“I can explain.”

“Excuse me, Abigail’s family?” a man’s voice cuts in from somewhere nearby.

Mel rushes away, and I glance up to find Nolan doing the same, joining her over where the doctor waits by the doors blocking off the waiting room from where I imagine Abby is.

They talk for a moment, their voices too hushed and too far away to decipher, before they disappear through the swinging doors.

A gasp punches through me like I’ve been holding my breath. Blinking rapidly, I try to wrap my head around what just happened.

Vance blows out a breath, and a glance over shows him scrubbing his palms down his face. He mutters something under his breath, shaking his head, before dropping down in a chair.

Somewhere nearby, there’s a sort of scratching sound that has me wincing. My heart grows louder, thudding heavily in my ears, intermingling with the other sounds now filtering in. Like before, but more intense now that Nolan’s no longer here.

Now that I have this new information to process.

My anxiety spikes, feeding the storm brewing.

“Are you okay?”

I blink and look up to find tired, reddened eyes looking back at me.

I quickly look away.

*Vance...*

I don’t know this one. I meant to look it up, after Nolan told me about him, but I...I forgot.

I feel his dark, weighted gaze drifting down to where my fingers tap furiously against each other at my sides.

Bile rushes up my throat, and it’s so loud, I feel like my head’s going to burst.

“I...I have to go,” I mutter, blinking hard at the floor.



In my head, a voice is shouting at me. *What are you doing?! Don't leave now.*

*But I have to...*

*I can't be here.*

I sense Vance snap his head up, his mouth opening to say something, but I stop him before he can.

“H-here,” I stutter, shakily reaching into my pocket for Nolan’s keys. I all but throw them at him. “T-tell him...sorry.”

I don’t wait around for a response, though I’m vaguely aware of him calling out “Hey!” But it’s quickly swept up in the competing sounds.

The ER blurs around me, colors and movement seeming to pulse in and out of my vision in time with the noise grating on my ears.

My breaths pick up and I’m near-hyperventilating by the time I blow my way through the sliding glass doors.

A sob works its way up my throat, my body buzzing with energy. Self-hatred like nothing I’ve ever felt before surges to the surface, adding even more fuel to the fire, awakening old doubts and fears and frustrations.

I’m barely aware of the sidewalk blurring under me as it gives way to pavement, then grass, then more sidewalk. Stoplights flicker over the snow piled up around me, casting it in reds, greens, and yellows.

A sound half-sob, half-shout tears out of me and I shake my head, clenching my hands together so tightly, I feel something wet, like maybe my nails dug in too hard.

I tune into that sensation—that brief sting. The slickness of what I imagine is blood, or maybe just sweat.

Either way, I focus on that, counting each step it takes me away from the hospital.

Away from Nolan.

*I'm so, so sorry, Nolan...*

# CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

---

NOLAN

“I can’t believe I let this happen.”

At the sound of Melody’s voice, I lift my gaze up from where my daughter sleeps peacefully in a hospital bed, my fingers stilled in her hair. “Mel...it was an accident.”

Her face bunches and she shakes her head, crossing her arms more tightly over her chest.

“Melody,” I whisper, my voice breaking. “She’s okay.”

But still, she stands there at the corner of the bed, refusing to budge. Like she’s afraid to draw any closer.

Apparently, Abby’s heart rate spiked in the ambulance, something Mel was too distraught to process at the time in order to tell us. That’s why they took her back alone to be checked out...just in case. With her being so young, and this being the first time she was ever injected with Epinephrine, they just wanted to rule out any underlying conditions.

But tests came back good, and according to what the doctor told us when he brought us back a few minutes ago, the irregular, increased heart rate is to be expected, as are other side effects like dizziness and nausea among other things.

They put her on oxygen for a bit just as a precaution, and gave her some antihistamines as well as a mild sedative, which is why she’s knocked out cold right now.

Her skin is red and blotchy in areas, but she’s breathing on her own—no wheeze or rasp to be heard—and the heart monitor is beeping steadily, so the doctor says she should be good for discharge by morning. They just want to keep her overnight for observation, seeing as she’s so young and her reaction was so severe.

*And to think, this could easily happen again...*

“I don’t know how I forgot to tell him.”

I shake my head. “It just didn’t come up. It’s not like he was making cookies or something to bring over. It was just...” I shrug. “Shitty luck.”

“No, no I don’t believe that. If someone’s going to be in her life, they need to know from the start. It should’ve been the first thing I started with.”

I cough a little at that, and flit my eyes up to meet her gaze. “Hello, she’s allergic to nuts. Oh, by the way her name’s Abby.”

She tries to scowl, but a short laugh escapes.

And then she’s crying.

*Shit.*

Pressing one last kiss to Abby’s head, I push up off the floor, my knees protesting from kneeling on the hard vinyl flooring. I round the bed, and take Mel’s shoulders in my hands, bringing her in for a hug.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“But it was,” she chokes out, burying a sob in my chest.

My eyes fall shut. “It was an oversight. An accident.”

“And she could’ve died!” she wails, her voice muffled by my shirt.

I still, and a second later she does too, as if we’re both remembering this is not the first time we got so fucking lucky.

Sniffing, Mel pulls back, tipping her head back. Watery blue eyes meet mine. “I’m so sorry.”

I frown. “Mel—”

“I punished you for so long...” She shakes her head. “And— and look what happened. On *my* watch.” Her face scrunches, breaking. “I told myself she was safer with me.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Mel,” I grit out, shaking my head. “That was completely different, and you know it. That *was* me being neglectful. I was drunk.”

“And how is this not me being neglectful?” she says sharply, but still keeping her voice hushed enough so as not to disturb Abby. Not that anything would probably wake her right now.

Taking a step back, she brings her fingers to her lips like she’s praying.

“Mel...” I say gently.

“I’m so scared.”

“I know. Me too.”

“I feel like I-I don’t deserve to be around her, like-like I can’t be trusted.”

Staring at her solemnly, all I can do is nod. What the hell can I even say to that, when it’s exactly how I’ve felt for the last four years?

The circumstances that led to this are leagues away from the ones that led her to almost drowning in a pool when she was one years old. But what does it really matter, when the outcome would be the same either way?

An outcome I can’t even fucking fathom to consider.

“Did I ever tell you how fucking grateful I am to share a child with you?”

Her eyes widen, glassy, and so, so blue.

I smile ruefully. “What you did—the hoops you made me go through—after what happened, what I did...” I shake my head. “I didn’t...see it then, but I do now. I was unfair to you. So angry and resentful, that I...I couldn’t see how *right* you were. How strong you had to be.”

Her mouth tightens, jaw quivering. Fresh tears cling to her lashes.

“I’m sorry if I never said that before, but I’m saying it now.” I search her face. “You put our daughter first. You’ve always put her first. And not every parent could say the same. Not every parent could do what you had to do.”

Her eyes fall shut, a single tear skating down her cheek.

I approach her, and press a kiss to her forehead. “There is no one I trust more with our child than you.”

“E-even now?”

“Even now.”

We move apart and she nods, casting our sleeping daughter a long, pained look. “Oh God, Vance...I should...”

*Jesus. Skylar. I just left him out there.*

Now that things have calmed down, it’s all rushing forward.

“I’ll go get him,” I say quickly, turning for the door.

“Wait.”

Falling back on my heel, I suck in my cheeks, nodding, bracing for what’s coming.

I hear the clicking of her heels draw near, and then a hand brushing my shoulder, nudging me to turn around.

She searches my face with a look I can’t place. She’s confused, but there’s something else there too, some emotion that escapes me.

“You could’ve told me,” she says.

Throat thick, I nod. Somehow I manage to get out, “I was going to. This week.”

She frowns, nodding.

Wetting my lips, I look down at the ground, unsure what to say.

“You know I love and support you, right? No matter what.”

Sniffing, I nod. “Y-yeah, I just...” I shrug, words failing me.

“Did you think I’d take Abby from you?”

I still.

“Nolan,” she sighs. And then she’s hugging me, squeezing me tight. “God, I’m so sorry.”

I slowly wrap my arms around her. “You did nothing wrong. I just—”

“But I did,” she says simply. Then, pushing me back, she levels her gaze with mine. “I made you feel like your role in our daughter’s life is conditional.”

“But...it is, isn’t it?”

She stares at me for a long beat, so long I start to worry.

Finally, she nods, and says, “If tonight taught me anything, it’s that any parent’s role is somewhat conditional.” She glances over at Abby, her gaze growing distant. “But only when it comes to the safety and well-being of our daughter.”

She turns back to me, arching a brow. “Your sexuality is not a threat to our child.”

I still.

“Your drinking was, but you don’t do that anymore.” She searches my eyes. “Tonight was preventable. I fucked up.”

“Mel,” I say softly.

“Tell me something,” she says, tilting her head curiously. “If I *did* have a problem with this, and I was the kind of awful person who’d make you choose—him or her—what would you do?”

My eyes widen.

*Is she serious?*

“Mel...”

“Humor me.”

Clenching down on my molars, my eyes flaring at the thought, I say tightly, “I’d take you to court.” I pause meaningfully. “Not for sole custody. I’d never take her away from you, unless you gave me reason to. But I’d fight with everything I have to be able to stay in her life, and I’d never stop fighting. I’d give my land up, my business...”

Tears shimmer in her eyes and she smiles.

“But not him,” I choke out. “I choose them both.”

“Good,” she chirps. Then she shoves my shoulder, “Now get out of here. He looked like he was about to stroke out when he realized I knew who he was.”

My eyes widen, and it hits me like a stack of bricks.

*Fuck.*

“Make sure you send Vance back!” she whisper yells after me. I wave a hand, acknowledging I heard her.

Out in the waiting room, I dart my gaze around, looking for that familiar dark mop of hair.

“Hey,” Vance breathes, rushing to my side. “Is she okay? I’m so fucking sorry, man. I don’t—”

“Do you know where Skyler is?” I say, worry springing to the forefront. Now that Abby’s out of the woods, and my head’s clear, I can hear the warning bells blaring in the back of my head.

*I left him alone out here.*

*Alone and confused and overwhelmed...*

“Um, the kid you were—”

“Not a kid,” I mumble reflexively. “But yeah, did he say where he’d be waiting for me?”

I hear a jingle, and then my keys appear in my line of sight. I whip my head toward Vance.

He winces, shrugging. “He didn’t say where he was going. He seemed upset. He bolted before I could try and get him to sit down and wait.”

Everything in me just sinks, my shoulders wilting.

*Sweetheart...*

Slapping my hands to my face, I growl out a string of curses. Shoving my hair back, I blink up at the overhead lights until I see spots.

Vance shuffles nervously. He’s still holding my keys.

Ripping them from his hand, I say, “Tell Mel I’ll be back. She wants you back there.” I start to head for the doors when I



pause, turn around, and meet Vance's wide, reddened gaze.

"I'm sorry we're meeting like this."

He nods jerkily.

I consider saying more, but my need to find Skyler is a siren's call I can't resist.

Striding out the doors without another backward glance, I pull out my phone from my back pocket and try calling him.

No answer.

"Goddamnit, Sky," I mutter, throwing the driver door open, and hopping up behind the wheel.

I consider for all of two seconds where he could be. Lola's is closest, but it's a Sunday night, so they're locked up. The apartment he hasn't slept in in weeks is just a couple blocks down from there.

It's freezing tonight, and a glance at the cup holders show his gloves there.

Groaning, I squeeze the wheel until my fingers turn numb.

Quiet music intermingled with static filters from the speakers, mingling with the revving of the engine as I floor the gas.

I couldn't have been back in Abby's room for more than twenty minutes. If that. Remembering my daughter, sleeping peacefully in a hospital bed, has a momentary rush of guilt rising to the surface.

"She's okay," I say out loud. "Mel's with her. She's sleeping. There's nothing I can do for her." I nod, sweeping my gaze over the sidewalks stretched out on either side of the road. "Come on, Sky. Where are you?"

I try not to beat myself up for leaving him like that in the waiting room, but *fuck*, if I don't feel like a piece of shit right now. He must've been so confused. I completely forgot about the fact Mel would immediately pick up on who he is once he said his name.

But I wasn't thinking.

I wasn't fucking thinking.

*He has to understand...*

I wince, because something tells me that's not the problem. I know he'd never expect me to drop everything for him, my daughter especially.

If anything, that's probably why he left—because he didn't want me to have to face that choice when he realized how overwhelmed he was getting.

*Well, too bad sweetheart. I choose both of you.*

*And I'm never letting you out of my sight again.*

# CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

---

NOLAN

I bang my fist on the door, muttering under my breath, “Come on, come on, come—”

It flies open to reveal Micah glaring at me. “What did you do?”

“Is he here?” I growl out, making to push past him, when a hand slams against my chest, keeping me back.

My eyes widen.

“Depends. What did you do?”

I glare back at him, my chest heaving.

*Fucking Christ I don't need this shit right now.*

Before I can deck him and shove my way through, I quickly remind myself he's just protecting Skyler. If he knew what really happened, I sincerely doubt he'd be giving me a hard time right now.

“Micah,” I say carefully, not breaking his gaze. “It's not what you think.”

He arches a disbelieving brow, and I feel my throat grow thick, making swallowing impossible. All I can do is shake my head, my eyes burning.

“Please,” I utter brokenly. “He needs me.”

He stares at me for a moment longer, and I'm not sure what he sees reflected back, but whatever it is has him frowning in concern and easing back, holding the door open to let me in.

“He's in his room,” he says.

Zelda's sitting on the couch, eyes wide, pillow tucked against her chest. “What's going on?”

I shake my head, ignoring her as I head in the direction Micah points. “Last room on the right.”

The floor creaks in several spots under my heavy, quick strides. From the living room, the TV hums with soft chatter. Or maybe that's Micah and Zelda talking. I don't know, or care. Either way it's fucking concerning, because not a single sound can be heard from behind the door I stop at.

My hand grips the doorknob, and I hesitate before turning it. Knocking softly, I say just loud enough for him, I hope, to hear me. "Sweetheart, it's me. Can I come in?"

Nothing.

Not a single sound or sign of life.

For the second time in a matter of hours, I feel the floor crumble out from under me, blinding fear surging forward.

The door's unlocked, which is good, because if it wasn't, I was breaking it down.

I gently ease the door open, eyes wide, bracing myself for whatever I might find.

The first thing I notice is how clean it is.

How empty.

The second is how empty it is even of *him*.

I step into the room, looking every which way around the small, square room. Save for an air mattress covered in rumpled sheets, a nightstand with a small lamp, and a dresser across the room, it's practically bare. Unlived in.

I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this.

Even in just the few weeks Skyler's been all but living with me, he's been a human tornado. Not a total slob, but he makes his presence known by leaving clothes strewn about. Books he picked up then set down in another place. Trinkets he randomly grabbed and played with before growing bored and leaving them on the nearest surface.

He fidgets. It's what he does. He did it in my bungalow on the island, and he does it in my home now.

But here...

This room he's been living in for six months...

A soft sound, almost like a whimper, followed by a dull, repetitive thudding reaches my ear and I snap my head around, gaze homing in on the closet across the room. The sliding doors are shut, save for where it's cracked open just an inch, if that, revealing just blackness beyond.

*Skyler...*

Closing his bedroom door, I gently make my way across the room.

All those times Skyler spoke about these episodes he has, he's always made them seem so destructive. Like he really was a tornado blowing through, destroying any and everything in his path.

A heavy, sort of calmness falls upon me as I sink to my knees. Pressing my hand against the closet door, I hesitate only a beat, and then I carefully ease it open.

"Sky," I breathe.

Curled up in a ball amongst a mess of clothes and hangers, with his hands clenched over his ears, face buried in his knees, he rocks back and forth, hitting the wall with quiet thuds.

I scoot as close as I can get, but there's no way this thing can fit two grown men. His frame is slight compared to mine, but he's still tall and lanky, taking up much of the space despite how small he's trying to be right now.

My hands move before I can think better of it, and I reach for him, only for him to bat me away before returning his hands to his ears.

I freeze, my heart sinking somewhere in my stomach.

Tears sting the back of my eyes as his rocking picks up, and his hands clench his head so tightly, his knuckles whiten.

I look around, taking in the clothes he must've pulled from the rack.

*Is this why he's in here? So he doesn't break anything?*

The thought has my chest cracking wide open, and I'm shaking my head.

*No, nope, I don't like this.*

He's trying to contain it. That's evident now.

And I fucking hate it.

"Skyler," I whisper, and he shakes his head.

I hear a shaky, guttural, "G-go," and my eyes fall shut.

"Never," I tell him. And I remember what he revealed to me that time in the cave, how he told me how no one ever held him—how scared they were to touch him when he got like this.

*"Are you gonna treat me differently now?"* he asked me.

*"Do you want me to treat you differently?"*

He'd shook his head.

That conversation converges with other conversations, other moments—like the one on the beach, after he kicked sand at me then dove into the water. When I grabbed him, held him, and he said, "Tighter."

I think back on everything I read about meltdowns and sensory overload and how pressure helps. A grounding, firm touch.

*"It's like magic. You touch me, and it all quiets. You hold me, and it all stops."*

My eyes fly open, and with a renewed sense of purpose, I say, "I'm going to hold you now." And then I crawl into the closet with him. My head bashes on the wall, and a hand swats me. A foot kicks the door. It's a tight squeeze, but I make it work, paying the struggle very little mind.

Wrapping my arms around him, I pin his arms where they're at. He's got one hand still fisted over his ear, and the other, curled against his chest, trapped by my arm. He fights me, panting, and yet as soon as I've got a good grip on him, and it's clear he's going nowhere...

He stops.

He slumps.

And he presses the ear not covered against my chest, right over my heart, and sighs.

Pressing my cheek over his head, I murmur, “I’ve got you. It’s okay.”

He trembles, and I feel his mouth open. He sucks my shirt into his mouth, muffling a scream.

Glaring up at the ceiling, I make a promise to myself to never let this happen again. Hell, I might be handling this all fucking wrong, but doing nothing at all isn’t an option.

Fuck this shit.

If he needs to break shit and scream and let it all out, then I’ll make sure he has a safe place to do it. Seeing him like this—feeling him turn it all inward...

It’s fucking painful.

*God*, no wonder why he’d hurt himself instead. He felt like he had no other choice—take it out on himself, or take it out on everyone in sight.

I press a soft kiss to his hair, breathing him in.

“I’m so sorry, Sky,” I say thickly.

He shakes his head, and I smile sadly.

He tries to say something, and when he can’t get whatever words they are out, he slams his fist against his ear.

“Hey!” I bark.

He stills.

As much as I want to pin his other hand down, I remember what he said Canaan did to him. It might seem quiet in here to me, but for him, who knows what he’s hearing right now. I won’t be another person to take away his coping mechanisms, so long as he doesn’t hurt himself.

“You don’t need to do that,” I say roughly. “I’m not going anywhere.” I pause. “Can you hear me? Just nod or tap your



foot or something.”

He nods.

Blowing out a breath, I nod back. “Good. As I was saying, I’m not going anywhere. Talk when you’re ready. For now, I’m just going to hold you, and we’re going to sit here until it passes. Okay?”

A beat passes, then another nod.

I stroke his arm, rub my cheek over his hair. I’m not sure how long we sit in silence, but I feel my mind drifting, my eyes growing heavy. Eventually, I must nod off, because I’m shaken awake, and there’s a pair of glittering brown eyes framed in the prettiest black lashes I’ve ever seen peering back at me.

If not for the dimly lit lamp shining light in from behind him, I wouldn’t be able to see a damn thing.

“Hey,” I say roughly, cupping his cheek. “Sorry I passed out.”

He twists his lips together, and shakes his head. “It’s okay.”

My brows lift gently at the sound of his voice.

“Is Abby okay?” he rasps. A frown burrows deep between his eyes and he shakes his head. “I mean, I assume she is, or you wouldn’t be he—”

I press my finger to his lips and nod. “She’s okay. Sleeping. They’re keeping her overnight for observation. Mel and Vance are with her.”

He swallows with an audible click, and nods. “G-good. I was worried.”

Lowering my hand, I give him a small smile. “Can we go sit on your bed or something? It’s a little cramped in here.”

I can’t tell for certain, but I’m positive his cheeks redden when he nods. “Y-yeah, sorry about this.” He scoots back, pushing to a shaky stand, and I follow, wincing at the way my joints pop and crack.

“Don’t be sorry,” I tell him, twisting my back, and stretching my arms over my head. Then, striding up to him, I cradle his cheeks, tilting his head back. His gaze meets mine before drifting off unfocused. “You did what you needed to do.”

He gulps again, nodding. Fingers find my arms, blunt nails digging into my biceps through my sweater, reminding me I came here without my coat. It must be in Abby’s hospital room.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles, still not meeting my eye. “I hate that you f-felt like you had to come here.”

Scowling, I pinch his side, and he yelps, rearing back, eyes clashing with mine.

“None of that,” I tell him harshly. “If anything, I hate that you felt *you* had to come here.”

His mouth thins at that.

“Come here,” I say, grabbing his hand, and guiding him toward the bed.

Well, air mattress.

He winces when I sit next to him, and the whole thing just sort of sags to the floor under our weight.

“You’re done sleeping here,” I say.

He shoots me a glare, and I bite back a smile.

“You’re not forcing me to move in with you just because I don’t have a real bed.”

I cock my head. “No, I’m forcing you to move in with me because I love you.”

He gapes at me and I arch a brow, waiting for him to deny me.

This time, there are no shadows to mask the flush creeping over his cheeks.

“You like that,” I say.

“I can do what I want.”

I bark out a laugh, and he glares at me.

“Baby?”

“Yeah,” he says grumpily. It’s fucking adorable.

“I’m sorry about what happened with Mel.”

He stills, and his gaze grows kind of unfocused, eyes darting around, blinking like he’s trying to re-orient himself.

“Sorry, I just needed to get that out there. I want to explain.” I pause, waiting for him to nod, giving me the go-ahead.

“First off, I’m sorry I left you in the dust like that.”

He tenses, but before he can try and refute that, I add, “Obviously, the situation warranted it, but still. We’ll have a plan in place for the next time something unexpected comes up.” My voice turns thick at the thought.

But that’s life—shit happens. And while some of us can roll with the punches, some need a little more padding in place to break the fall. It is what it is. No, it can’t account for everything, but even just having a loose game plan in place can make or break it. For his sake, *and* mine.

I’m dealing with it okay right now, but I know once everything settles, and I’m certain Skyler’s okay, it’s going to hit me.

My daughter could’ve died tonight.

*Again.*

I slam my eyes shut, and have to focus on just breathing for a couple seconds.

A hand squeezes mine, and I nod.

“No!...”

“It’s okay.” Clearing my throat, I reopen my eyes to find his gaze focused intently on mine. I give him a shaky smile, and turn my focus back on the conversation. “I fucked up by not telling you Mel knew who you were. She only knew a name, and that Sky was someone I met and fell in love with

while in rehab. I—” My breath hitches and I wince. “I should’ve corrected her when she assumed you were a woman. But like I told you, I wasn’t out, and you weren’t back in my life at that point...so I took the easy way out.”

His lips tighten faintly at the corners, but he nods. “I get that.”

“It honestly didn’t even cross my mind to tell you about it, because I’d planned on telling her everything this week.”

He nods, and the knot in my chest loosens. “I know. I believe you.”

“I know it was likely a combination of everything going on, but I know that didn’t help matters, so I’m sorry.”

Skyler drops his gaze, and he says, “It was just a lot. All at once. And I didn’t have a chance to prepare.”

“Hey,” I say softly, curling two fingers under his chin, lifting his face. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“I wanted to be there for you,” he says in a rush. “I feel so selfish right now. Like...like the whole time I walked here, all I could think was how selfish I was being, so I just...I kept—”

I bow my head to his, and his voice hitches, breaking off.

A part of me wants to tell him never to walk across town alone again, but I know exactly how that’ll come off, and the last thing I want to do right now is make him feel even less capable.

So for once, I manage to shove my overprotective urges to the background, and focus on what matters right here and now.

“You told me once, that you can’t control it. Right?”

A beat then, “Y-yeah.”

“So how can you possibly be selfish, when it’s out of your hands?”

He says nothing to that, and I sigh. “Sweetheart.”

“I just...” Fingers come up to my shirt, twisting the fabric over my chest. “I just didn’t want to lose my shit there, in front

of you, and your family, and the hospital. I didn't want to make it about me. It was about Abby."

I nod against his head. I already figured as much.

"I get that, and hell, if anything it just makes me that much more in love with you."

He stills.

Pulling back, I cock my head, and run a thumb over his cheekbone. "You'd never ask me to put you before my daughter."

He scowls as if the mere idea offends him, and I find a smile creeping up my cheek.

"Instead you tried to take yourself out of the equation, so I wouldn't have to choose." I pause, ensuring he's hearing me. "I'm pretty sure that right there cancels out any inclinations of selfishness."

He frowns, shaking his head. "But you're here. You came after me."

"Well obviously."

"You should be with your daughter. Not worried about me. I—"

This time, I shut him up by kissing him.

He stiffens at first, but is quick to melt against me, his lips parting, granting my tongue entry.

It's a slow, lazy kiss, with soft glancing touches of our tongues, and gentle brushes of our lips.

When we pull back, we're breathing heavily, but evenly.

"You did what you had to do," I tell him. "You got out of what felt like an unsafe situation. You found a quiet place to go to ride it out. Right? You told me that's what you're supposed to do if you have no other choice."

He nods.

"I just hate that...well, I feel like I could've prevented this."

He smiles sadly. “You can’t always prevent them.”

“No, but it doesn’t mean I can’t take accountability where I should,” I tell him firmly. “If I just...communicated better. Was honest with Mel *and* you...”

“It caught me off guard,” he admits. “Her knowing who I was, but...”

I nod. “I fucked up. I should’ve told you.”

“I was just... I was afraid she’d want me gone.” His gaze drops to my chin, and his cheeks darken. “Especially if I lost my shit there.”

“Ah.” I nod. “That’s...that’s very valid.”

His features tighten.

“But guess what?”

“What?”

I shrug. “She doesn’t want you gone.”

He stills.

“And, even if she did...” I let the words trail pointedly, and I wait.

Finally, he chances a peek up at me through his lashes.

Emotion sears my eyes when I cradle his face in my palms once more.

His nostrils flare, his full, pretty lips thinning.

*God, he’s beautiful.*

“It would change nothing,” I say simply.

He blinks.

“I told her as much. If anyone has a problem with it, then fuck them. You’re mine, sweetheart, and if it means raising Hell to keep what’s mine, then Hell on Earth it’ll be.”

“Abby,” he mouths, her name slipping out soundlessly.

A brow climbs up toward my hairline. “Who said I can’t fight to keep you both? As far as I’m concerned, there is no

choice here. And I told Mel as much. I will do whatever it fucking takes to keep you both. Because you're *both* my entire world. And no one's getting in the way of that."

His gaze sears into mine, his chin quivering against my fingers.

"Without you, I am a lesser man. Barely even human. I'd be the same if I lost her. I just..." I frown. "I hope you're okay with that. With sharing this space in my heart."

Skyler wets his lips, nodding. "You're a package deal. I've known that from the start."

Eyes burning, I nod.

"If anything..." he says, his voice shaking. He pauses to gulp, his cheeks so red, I feel the warmth in my fingertips. A hand cups up, fingers encircling my wrist, like he's ensuring I'm not going anywhere.

I shake my head, not understanding what's got him so nervous all of a sudden. "Sky—"

"I love you."

I freeze. My eyes widen.

His widen too, and his lips fumble for a second, like he can't be certain he said those three words.

With the hand not anchored to his face, I press it over his chest. "Breathe."

And he does.

And then he's telling me, "I wouldn't love you as much, I don't think, if you didn't love her as much as you do."

Emotion swells my throat, and I nod, remembering that time he almost slipped on the beach when he said something similar.

"I love you, Nolan," he says quietly, with all the graveness in the world, like it's something terminal.

And it is, isn't it?

A love like ours.

It's the kind you die for. The kind you die *with*. The kind that... Well, hell, makes me believe there's a place for us in the afterlife, a place where we can still be together, for all of eternity.

Whether it's in the heavens, or the night sky, or deep, deep in the ocean where no one's ever been...

It doesn't matter where, so long as he never leaves my side.

"Well, that's a relief," I say, smiling. "Seeing as you're moving in with me and all."

He huffs, and gives me a shove, ducking his bashful gaze.

Grabbing him, I pull him into a fierce hug.

"Do you think she'll like me? Abby, I mean?" he whispers into my neck.

I nod. "I think she's going to love you."

Eyes burning, he says, "And if I love her?"

My hold on him constricts. "Then she'll be the luckiest girl in the world."



# CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

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**THREE MONTHS LATER**

SKYLER

“...**A**nd they all lived happily ever after.”

I wait for Abby to call me out for skipping to the end, but she doesn't, so this time she must be well and truly asleep.

She already got me twice tonight with her faking. A new game of hers to get more stories out of us. If we skip to the end, she makes us start a new one.

Okay, so technically, she can't make us actually *do* anything. But what can I say? She's cute, and she knows it, so she's weaponized it. It doesn't help that Nolan's made a master manipulator out of her. Of the most adorable variety, of course.

I can't even imagine what she puts her kindergarten teacher through. But from what Nolan said, she's an angel for pretty much everyone but him, Mel, and me.

My chest warms at the thought.

Flipping on her nightlight, I turn off the lamp, bathing the room in a sea of purple stars.

I fix her blanket and stare at her for a moment—this little girl who was only a name a few months ago—a name and a smile on the man I love's face—and now one of the two most important people in my life.

“Night, Abby girl,” I whisper.

And I swear I hear a sleepy, “Night, Sky boy.”

Grinning to myself, I tiptoe out of her room.

In the hallway, I've just about clicked the door shut, when hands grip my waist, and a gasp escapes me.

“Shh,” he says, sliding a hand over my mouth.

Nodding, I finish sealing the door closed, and then he's spinning me around and pushing me up against the wall.

His lips slam to mine in a heated kiss, and I reach around him, grabbing his ass, holding him to me.

Groaning into my mouth, he sucks on my bottom lip. “She asleep?”

“Y-yeah,” I mumble. And if she isn’t, she will be any second.

“Good. I wanna take you somewhere.”

Frowning, I rear back away from his mouth. “What? We can’t leave.”

He pinches my chin and pecks me once more on the lips. “We’re not going far,” he says, stepping back and grabbing my hand. He leads me toward the stairs. “And I have the baby monitor. Plus, we’ve got the security system. The second there’s a disturbance, my phone will go off.”

I shake my head, fighting a smile as he leads me downstairs toward the foyer.

It’s been one month now since Abby had her first sleepover here at Nolan’s cabin, something that’s been a long time coming. Nolan was nervous, of course. I don’t even think he slept the first couple times she stayed here.

But slowly, surely, he seems to be getting used to what it feels like to be a parent again, not just a glorified babysitter.

It probably helps that he got a new, ridiculously expensive security system installed a couple weeks ago. One we tested several times with me slipping out of the house, or him pretending to break in.

I watch curiously as Nolan grabs our coats from the hall closet.

“Where are you taking me?” I say, slipping mine on.

He shrugs into his, leaving it unzipped. “It’s a surprise.”

We head for the front door and slip on our boots. With it being late March, it’s far less brittle out than it was. Much of the snow we got during last month’s storm has even melted,

but it's still thick and slushy in spots, so our boots are a must if we're going to be out walking.

With it being winter, I've yet to see much of the property yet, save for a couple hikes here and there on milder days.

"Is that okay?" he says suddenly.

I meet his gaze questioningly.

"Do you need to know?"

*Oh.*

I shake my head. "No...no, I trust you."

He flashes me a small smile, nods, and opens the door.

He was right in that he wasn't taking me far. Just off to where the driveway ends, there's a narrow path, one I've seen before, but haven't gone down yet.

Our boots crunch softly against the ground on the path, the only sound to be heard out here.

I imagine what it must be like in the summer, with birds and crickets chirping from within the trees. Either way, it's peaceful.

There's a break in the trees just a few feet away. It's a surprisingly clear night, with the moon and stars on full display, doubled by their reflection in the glittering black water appearing behind Nolan. Still frozen in spots, with snow creeping in around the sides. But there's no doubt as to what it is.

I smile. "A lake?"

In my periphery, Nolan nods. He extends a hand, his face silvery where the shadows don't touch.

I take his hand, and follow him down the small path leading to a wide, wooden dock. It's still mostly covered in snow, mottled in spots where it's seeped through the cracks in the wood.

Around us and the lake, pine trees form a sort of protective barrier, thick and green, with the exception of where heavy

snow has clung on.

“It’s yours?” I find myself whispering, unable to tear my eyes away.

“Yep. It was my uncle’s land. He passed away a couple years after my dad did, and he left it to me.”

I nod, vaguely remembering him telling me this once.

“I was waiting for the water to thaw before I brought you down here. It’s even more gorgeous in the summer.”

“I bet,” I whisper.

“This dock?” he says, tapping his foot on the wood. “I built it when I came back from Black Diamond.”

I still.

And then, finally, I look at him. And he takes that moment to grab my shoulders, turning me so I face him fully.

“I wanted to go after you,” he says, and my eyes widen. “The second I got back, held Abby in my arms, and glanced over my shoulder to find Mel standing there...I knew.”

I shake my head. We already went over this, and I forgave him and—

“I knew you were it for me. But I didn’t think I deserved you. I didn’t think you could ever...” His voice trails off, seemingly failing him.

My throat thickens, and something tells me his does too, by the way his throat bobs with his swallow.

“Nolan,” I whisper, tears rushing to my eyes. *I know this already. Why is he bringing it up?*

I feel so heavy suddenly. Not in a bad way, necessarily, but in a way I’ve never felt before. Like...like I’m sinking through the earth, on the verge of somehow falling into a new world—a universe—one there will never be any coming back from.

And here I thought I’d already fallen as far as I could fall.

He smiles wetly, and shakes his head. “What’s done is done. But this? This dock?” He spreads out an arm. “The

whole time I built it, I thought of you. I pictured you... standing here, just like this. With those big brown eyes that never fail to suck me in and break me down, destroying me and humbling me and lighting me up all at the same time.”

I suck in my cheeks, and it takes everything in me not to look away.

I don't want to.

I don't wanna miss a second of this moment, of what he looks like, gazing back at me in a way no one's ever gazed back at me. Like he sees me—all of me—storms and all.

“And I pictured Abby coming here. Visiting us. Maybe staying a few days.” His eyes redden, and a sob scrapes from my throat. “I know you're young. Too young to be a parent, but I don't just see right now when I look in your eyes, I see forever. I see the day you step into that role, as seamlessly and effortlessly as you stole my heart. Though with far less pushback from her, I'd imagine.”

I'm shaking—trembling—vibrating out of my skin.

He steps forward, cupping my cheeks, and he bows his head to mine. “Close your eyes. I'll close mine too,” he whispers in a ragged hush.

So I do, and the air punches out of me, and he's holding me, keeping me standing.

“I saw it that day on the cliffs. On our hike. When you stood on that bridge, and looked over your shoulder, and smiled.”

“Nolan,” I choke out.

“They say your life flashes before you when you die, but that day, it was the thought of losing you, that had all the what if's and what could be's flashing across my mind. I didn't understand it then. I just knew I couldn't lose you. It was imperative I didn't lose you.”

Sniffing, I nod against him.

“I don't know how I ever let you walk away that night we said goodbye,” he says, his voice breaking, the sound of it

fluttering over my lips. “And while I know we needed to go through all that to get here, just know that I don’t plan to ever let you walk away from me again. Not unless you ask me to.”

“Never,” I whisper.

“I want that future with you. The one I saw that day. All the things I imagined. And I know you’re young—”

I grumble and he chuckles.

“—and it’s maybe too fast, seeing as we haven’t even been together officially that long—”

Blindly, I cup his scruffy cheeks, halting him mid-sentence.

“Out with it,” I whisper.

He swallows—I feel it—and then I hear the words, somehow, before he even says them.

“Marry me.”

My eyes open, but his are still closed, so I take the moment to stare at him—just like I did all those years ago when he stopped me that day on the beach. Just like I did in that room where we sat around a circle and shared all our regrets and hopes for the future. Just like I’ve done so many times when he either didn’t know I was looking, or when he pretended not to notice.

I bite my lip, wondering how this could possibly be my real life right now.

“Sky,” he whispers against my mouth, groaning when he feels my teeth there, pinning my flesh.

“It was that day on the beach, I knew,” I tell him quickly, and he stills. I don’t even think he’s breathing. “When you stopped me from walking up that cliff, and I turned around, and—” My voice cuts off, stolen by the emotions barreling through me.

His lashes twitch, but he keeps them closed, almost like he knows I need them closed in order to get this out there. He needs to hear this.

“I thought Canaan broke me,” I whisper. “It’s probably why I was so...determined to *live* and experience everything the second I thought I had a chance with you. I don’t even think I realized back then how scared I was that I’d never have this. Because of what they did. Not that I believed in what they were saying, necessarily, but I worried...I worried it still had some impact on me, you know? Like I...like I wouldn’t be able to feel attraction again or let myself be with a man, or be able to even stomach a man touching me without fearing for my soul or feeling sick to my stomach.”

His jaw tenses, but he doesn’t interrupt.

“But then I saw you. That day on the beach.” I give my head a little shake. “And it was like you reached into that cold, dark place—the eye of all my storms combined—and grabbed me. Pulled me out. Suddenly, I was alive again. Suddenly, I could see and feel again, and for once in my life it *felt good*. It hurt, but it hurt so good.”

A tear squeezes out from between his lashes.

“And I was...addicted, I think. It’s why I kept staring at you,” I say, a rusty laugh escaping me. “It felt like...like maybe you were the key all along. The key to everything, and I couldn’t look away. I couldn’t stay away. I just...I *wanted*. And I never stopped.”

He makes a small, choked sound in the back of his throat, his strong, calloused hands coming up to clutch my cheeks.

“I don’t know how I got so lucky finding someone like you,” I tell him in a broken hush, my gaze sweeping over every inch of his perfect face. “Sometimes, I worry that maybe it’s not real—that I’m still in that pitch-black basement, and this is like some fantasy world I created to escape what was happening.”

Nolan sucks in a shaky breath, and rocks his head side to side. “It’s real, it’s real.”

Peering up through my lashes, I gaze at the star-speckled sky, and for a moment I let myself remember it all, like a



movie playing out in my head, scenes from the past woven into scenes of the present.

That day—the day we met—seeing his tattoo for the first time, and feeling my heart skip a beat.

*The night sky.*

“*It’s finally finished,*” he’d told me last week, when he pulled off his shirt to show me the newly added lightning bolts spiderwebbing across his chest, woven in with the clouds and stars.

And his daughter’s birthday, cradled by the cracks of light, like it’s all somehow connected. The universe that his life revolves around, mapped out on his skin, as apart of him as the bonds that ground him to this earth.

“*For you,*” he said, as he dragged my finger down the path of one of the bolts, right to where his heart thumped heavily from behind his ribcage.

“*For me?*”

He nodded. “*You’re what I’ve been waiting for all along. The missing piece. The lightning that lit up my world.*”

And then it’s another stormy day flashing through my brain, but this time I’m alone, fighting a losing battle with a current determined to keep me under.

I’m drowning, lost, and devastated it ended before it could even begin, not even knowing then what I know now. And in my fading thoughts, I remember thinking of that very same tattoo, and praying I could find my Heaven there.

Millions of moments, all blurring together...

Limbs tangled.

Lips brushing.

Groans and gasps into the air.

“*I love you,*” he tells me under the glow of Christmas lights, and I nod, because I know. I feel it in the thunder that pumps my blood. The buzzing that bites at my fingertips.

His love for me...

His undeniable, unfaltering devotion to me.

*He owns me... storms and all.*

I gasp, and come back to earth “Nolan, open your eyes,” I tell him strongly.

Green, glimmering eyes fly open, colliding with mine, and I’m flying—soaring. Definitely way too close to the sun, but it’s okay.

It’s okay.

We can burn together.

“Yes,” I say, my voice cracking. I’m smiling so hard, I can’t see through my tears. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

His breath hitches, and his big, strong arms come around me, lifting me up off my feet. He spins us around, the snowy dock crunching beneath our feet.

He uses one hand to grab my jaw, leaving the other arm braced around my lower back, and he crushes my lips down to his in a searing kiss.

“Mountains and all,” I vow softly against his mouth.

Growling, he nips my lip, vowing right back, “Storms and all.”

# EPILOGUE

**FIVE YEARS LATER**

NOLAN

I t's a sunny, cloudless day, with a sky so blue, it's hard to believe they're calling for heavy rain later this evening.

There's even a chance for thunderstorms, something that has my pulse racing, and a smile teasing my lips.

"What's that look?"

I glance over at Hudson, before returning my gaze to the grill. It's Memorial Day, which just so happened to fall on my husband's birthday this year, so we threw a giant barbecue together at our place to celebrate both.

"What look?" I say, flipping a burger.

"The look that tells me you're thinking naughty things while cooking my food."

I roll my eyes. "I swear you sound more and more like Cort every day."

"It's the best friend effect."

"You mean husband effect?"

He knocks my shoulder with his. "Aw, you jealous? Don't worry, you're still my best platonic friend."

I shake my head, and he chuckles, bringing a bottle of Dr. Pepper up to his lips. I insisted people could drink today—it's a cookout for fuck's sake, and there's only one alcoholic here that I know of, being that Hal couldn't make it—but Skyler, Mel, *and* Abby wouldn't hear of it.

I'd feel bad, if I didn't secretly feel so grateful. Maybe it makes me selfish, but if there's one thing that relapsing, and over eight new years of sobriety taught me, it's that people in this country rely a little too fucking heavily on the stuff.

And society feeds into it, without a fuck in the world. Stores, sporting events, the media...

I don't know why I didn't notice that my first time sober, but maybe it's because I was still too wrapped up in my own struggles to see just how much of a chokehold the industry has on society as a whole. They don't make it fucking easy to take drinking as seriously as it should be taken.

But then again, maybe I'm just a conspirator in my old age.

*You're barely even forty*, I hear Skyler saying all exasperated in my head. Hal's raspy chuckle not far behind.

He couldn't be here today, though we did invite him. He's off fishing with *his* sponsor for the holiday weekend.

Closing the grill to let the meat smoke for a while, I grab a water from the cooler, and Hudson and I head over to the stone wall dividing the patio from the yard.

Rock music filters out from the outdoor speakers, mingling with the chatter amongst the adults, and the screaming and laughter coming from the kids.

If someone told me eight years ago, that one day I'd be hosting a get-together at my cabin in the woods, with all my loved ones present, including my ex-wife, the daughter I'd worried I may never see again, my ex-in-laws, and my *husband*...

I would've thought they'd been dropped on their head.

"*Sky*," Abby growls, dragging the word out from where she stands frozen in the middle of the yard, water gushing down her face, plastering her long hair to her skin.

Hudson chuckles. "Now he's gonna get it."

I nod, bringing the water to my lips. "He's fucked."

Abby's eyes are squeezed shut, her hands fisted at her sides. So she doesn't see Skyler come up behind her with another water balloon, identical to the one he just broke over her head except that it's blue instead of green.

My brows fly up, wondering what the hell he's doing. He says something I can't make out from here, but whatever it is

has her knuckling the water from her eyes and turning to look up at him.

He hands her the jiggly balloon, shrugs, and kneels down.

I'm about to call out to remind him of his headphones, but he's two steps ahead of me. They're nowhere in sight. Usually he has them draped around his neck, so they're readily available when he needs them. He must've set them somewhere before he joined in on the water balloon fight.

"Jesus fuc-dge, CORT!" Hudson yells out suddenly. "Stop waterboarding our child."

Stifling a laugh with my fist, I shake my head as my best friend leaves my side to go wrangle in his husband. Though, knowing their spitfire of a five-year-old daughter, she asked to be hosed down.

*Training*, she'd call it. A little soldier in the making, just like her dad.

I sip my water, watching Abby and Skyler.

It seems like they're in a very serious discussion, with Skyler kneeling on the grass, nodding up at Abby, though his gaze is somewhat lowered and unfocused.

Her back's mostly to me, so I can't make out her face, but she's teetering from foot to foot, clearly hesitant about something.

I cock my head, curious.

"What are they doing?" Mel says, sidling up next to me, her baby bump the first thing I see in my periphery. She and Vance are due in just a few short months.

"No idea," I say softly, screwing the cap back on my bottle.

"Nolan?"

Turning my upper body, I find Mel's mom standing there with a toddler hiding his face in her neck. "He's asking for his daddy."

“Come here, little monkey,” I say, setting the water bottle over on the stone wall, before taking my two-year-old son from his grandma’s arms. Everett reaches for me immediately, hooking his little arms around my neck, curling his legs up around my back, and squeezing me so hard, it brings a frown to my face.

“What’s going on, buddy?” I say, adjusting my hold on him. But he just burrows closer. I glance at my watch—just after two. He’s overdue for a nap. Honestly, I’m surprised he lasted this long. He’s not the most social of creatures, even at just two years old. He gets drained quickly. Much quicker than his big sister ever did around that age.

Mel ruffles his messy dark hair, and he rolls his head on my shoulder, blinking sleepily up at her.

I rub his back, and bounce him a little, knowing he likes that.

Mel’s and my gazes connect over his head, and she smiles. I smile back.

When she offered to be a surrogate for us a few years ago, Skyler and I had not even discussed babies at that point, other than agreeing we wanted to have one. Some day. Preferably *after* Skyler got his degree.

She and Vance had been married a little over a year at that point—it was a quick engagement, but not as quick as mine and Skyler’s—and while they’d planned to have kids of their own, they weren’t too picky as to when.

Obviously, neither Skyler or I wanted to interfere with their plans. Hell, we never even considered asking her to carry our baby. In fact, going the surrogacy route was not even on the table at that point. I figured we’d adopt, if we wanted to give Abby a sibling.

But once Mel offered, it was like...I don’t know, a door opened to a room that we didn’t even think to check.

Skyler immediately jumped on the idea, much to my surprise...and wariness...gushing about little Nolan’s crawling around.

As for me...

I glance down at the cute face craning to look at me, those big brown eyes of his spearing me right in the chest. *So serious*, I think, taking in his furrowed little brow.

*He looks so much like his daddy.*

He looks somewhere off behind me, and I rub circles on his back, redirecting my attention to the lawn.

Skyler plops down on his ass and crosses his legs. Despite it being warm out, he's in black jeans, and a loose gray v-neck. But he's barefoot, grass and dirt staining his bare feet. He nods, and Abby holds the giant blue water balloon over his head.

My eyes widen, and Mel chuckles. "Ah, payback I see."

*Payback he asked for.*

Now I get why they were so deep into conversation. Abby's nothing if not intensely considerate of his sensory issues. When she was younger, she was more curious than anything, asking questions—*What about this? Does this hurt? How about this?*

Now at eleven years old, she just worries she'll hurt him in some way.

It's funny, because if I tiptoed around him as much as she did, he wouldn't hesitate to smack me upside the head. Or on the ass. He likes doing that. He likes it even better when I retaliate.

And if anyone else outside our family treated him like glass, he'd scowl and stew about it all day.

But Abby...

I don't know. I don't always understand their relationship. It's very uniquely theirs, that sometimes I can't help but feel envious. Not always, but sometimes. It's so much more than a father-daughter bond. They're best friends in every way.

I fear what will happen as she gets older, and stumbles into her teenage years.



He values this relationship so much, and when she inevitably grows up, pulling away...

Hell, it's gonna kill me too. But Skyler...

Adjusting to going from part-time parent slash friend to a little girl, then to a full-time parent of a colicky newborn, who is now a toddler...

I can't deny that it hasn't been challenging as hell at times.

Between the long, sleepless nights, plans shifting at the drop of a hat, temper tantrums and just the general unpredictability that comes with raising a kid...

All of that in between going to school part-time to get his Bachelor's in Art Therapy.

He no longer works at Lola's, at least. One less thing on his plate. He's still close with Micah and Zelda though, who are currently on the other side of the yard chucking water balloons at each other in close range.

We stop by the strip club every Christmas Eve, after dinner with our family. It's tradition. We bring food and gifts, and we spend time dancing and catching up with what Skyler calls our extended family.

No, this life we live doesn't come without its challenges and setbacks, as is the case for everyone. Skyler just so happens to feel and experience these things far more intensely than some people. It just is what it is, and it in no way cancels out how I feel. I can be flexible...usually.

He rarely can. Especially when it's two A.M., and you have a baby screaming his head off, and it's been days since we got a good night's sleep.

For anybody, that shit's hard—it takes some superhuman level strength and resilience to get through those early parenting days.

And Skyler is no less superhuman, just because he needs a little more support in place—people to help him when he needs to take a step back before he's overwhelmed to the point that it's a danger to him and others.

He just needs to tap out sooner than most would, and that's okay.

If there's anything I've learned in these last few years loving him and sharing a life with him, it's that life often makes a lot more sense when we're working with what we've got, than trying to force ourselves to align with the so-called status quo.

It doesn't mean sacrificing my own needs, when we're just meeting on middle ground instead. The more I pause, listen, and accommodate his needs, the more he's capable of accommodating mine. It just so happens he often needs more accommodations than I do.

And if for some reason he *can't* be there for me in the way *I* need...

I have Hal to fall back on. AA. Therapy.

There's no right or wrong way to live this life we've got. Our journey from Point A to Point B is just a little more twisty and turny than some others. He was thrown into expert mode without warning or preparation, and it's up to those of us who love him to help guide his way, and hold him when the earth shakes. To remind him he's not alone in this, even if my challenges are different from his.

At the end of the day, our love for each other is more powerful than any storm that sweeps through. Our love for our son, our daughter, and this little family of ours could weather anything.

Because he doesn't just have me at his side, but Mel too, and even her parents who—while shocked to find out I was in love with a man—still opened their arms to him—and us—without missing a single beat.

We're all just doing the best we can, relying on each other when we need to, rather than trying to do it all alone.

We can either keep swimming, or we drown, and if there's one thing you can be certain of when it comes to Skyler and me, it's that we don't stop kickin' even when our lungs are

screaming and our heads are pounding and it feels like all hope is lost.

We don't quit.

A smile edges up my lips as I watch Abby squeeze the balloon over his head. It pops, and water gushes over his head, plastering his chocolate curls to his face and neck.

His shoulders stiffen, and I narrow my eyes, wondering what he might do—what's going through his head.

Abby rocks back on her heels like she's bracing herself.

He jumps to a stand suddenly, and I tense, preparing to hand Everett over and go intervene. He'd never hurt her. He'd just bolt for the house, and I'd be right there with him to help calm him down.

But he just leans over Abby, and shakes his head out like a dog, bringing a loud squeal from her mouth.

“SKYLER!”

Mel whistles low under her breath. “Full-named him.”

I grin, my chest shaking quietly with a laugh. No, Abby doesn't call him Dad, but only because she's always loved calling him Sky.

“*Some daddies are called Dad, and some are called Sky,*” is what she told me once. He and I had just gotten married, six months after we got engaged. Later, I'd asked Skyler if that bothered him, and he told me, “*No. I'm still her dad. She said so.*”

Simple as fucking that.

She doesn't call Vance Dad either, for the record. She calls him Van. But ask that girl about her parents, and she'll tell you she has three dads and a mom.

Everett twists his head to try and see what's going on. “Ab,” he says.

Cupping his head, I nod, turning to angle my body so we can both look. I point at Skyler. “Look what your daddy's

doing. He's being silly." He's now hugging Abby, shaking his head all over.

"Daddy puppy."

My lips rise. "That's right," I whisper, scratching his head. He nudges into my hand, and my chest clenches. "Daddy's acting like a puppy."

It's not often Everett says more than a single word at a time, particularly when there's people around. He's still so young yet, so we're not too worried—nor are his doctors. He's just a quiet kid. Timid too, especially around strangers. But even around his family at times too.

And that's perfectly okay. He'll come around on his own time.

And if he happens to be autistic too, so what? It's far from a death sentence. Risking autism is far preferable—in my opinion, at least—to risking passing down addiction. Something I was worried about when we discussed whose sperm we would use.

*"I don't want them to suffer like I did,"* Skyler told me.

And I assured him, *"They won't. They'll have us. We'll give them everything you should have had."*

In the yard, Skyler releases Abby, and smooths his wet hair back. He still wears it long enough that it can be tucked behind his ears, curling just above where his neck meets his shoulders.

At twenty-six now, my man is as sexy as he's ever been, if not more so. More angular, but no less soft in his features. There's almost a sort of gracefulness to him now, that wasn't there when he was younger. He's still loud in his quiet, but there's a command to his chaos that wasn't present when we first met, or even a few years ago. He's grown into himself, and fuck, if it isn't a damn sight to see.

He's beautiful.

Everett wiggles in my hold, and I glance down at our son to find him making grabby hands toward Skyler, who's started

making his way over.

His brown gaze meets mine, before flitting to the boy in my arms, and his lips rise, his eyes sparkling.

*This*, I think, remembering what I told Skyler on the dock so many years ago when I proposed.

The future I saw that stormy day on the cliffs, watching the angry water devour it...

*This is what I saw.*

He climbs over the wall, and scoops our squirmy son up, and blows a raspberry into his belly. Drawing out the quietest, most adorable baby giggle ever.

Skyler looks up at me through his inky black lashes, and the power of this moment seizes my lungs, stalling my heart.

“You’re staring,” he whispers, dropping his gaze as Everett burrows in his neck, just like he did me mere minutes ago.

Wrapping an arm around Skyler’s back, ignoring the water seeping through his shirt and dripping down his hot skin, I pull him toward my body, our son tucked securely between our hearts.

“You stared first,” I whisper against his ear.

He shivers, and I feel his cheek flame against mine, hot even through my beard.

*Some things never change.*

Gangly arms come around our waists, and I glance down at my daughter’s sparkling blue eyes.

I give her a wink, and she squeezes us tighter.

My gaze lifts, finding Mel watching us with reddened eyes.

She shrugs, and rolls her eyes, fighting a rueful smile.

Wrong or right—messy that it is—I know as well as she does that we wouldn’t trade a single, goddamn second of what led us here.

Because we’re here.

All of us.  
Happy and whole.  
No longer exiled...  
But *loved*.



SKYLER

Lightning flashes faintly from beyond the pine trees surrounding the lake.

While sunset is still an hour away, it feels much later with the thick gray storm clouds rolling in, creeping toward the blue horizon pressing against my back.

“Boom,” Everett whispers from where he sits in my lap with his back to my chest, his pudgy legs curled up to his chest.

As if summoned, thunder rumbles quietly from the distance, and he giggles in that soft, shy way of his.

Chuckling quietly, I rub my cheek over his hair. “Boom.”

The lake stretches out before us dark and still. Nolan’s back at the house with Mel, Vance, and her parents, finishing cleaning up. I was going to stay and help—despite everyone’s insistence that the birthday boy doesn’t lift a hand today—but then Everett woke up from his nap, earlier than expected. He was cranky, so I brought him out here to have a bottle and just chill for a bit away from everyone.

The party had ended, and almost everyone had gone home, but that kind of energy clings to a place. I’m pretty drained too.

*But so worth it.*

Ever since Nolan and I officially got together, he’s made it his mission in life to give me everything I never got to experience before. Like birthday parties that don’t include tuxes and ballgowns, and expensive catering and stringed quartets.

Those birthday parties were never about *me*—just about doing what’s expected. I was actually grateful to not have to deal with them as I got older, and they stopped bringing me home for my birthdays.

But with Nolan...our family...we celebrate these things—these moments, as small or fleeting as they may be—because we genuinely want to. Not to impress anyone, or to check off a box. But because that’s what a real family is—it’s cooking out on the grill, and having water balloon fights in the yard, and feeling like you finally have a place to call *home*.

A place that will unflinchingly catch you when you fall, and shelter you from any wreckage that may befall you when the world comes crashing down.

A branch snaps, and footsteps sound from nearby. Without looking, I already know it’s him. It’s more than just the heavy rhythm of his boots hitting the earth. It’s a shift in the air, as tangible as lightning, lifting the little hairs on the back of my neck and along my arms.

Craning my head, I watch my sexy as sin husband hop down onto the dock. He shoves some wayward strands of hair out of his face, and tightens the little knot at the base of his neck.

He threatened to cut it all off last year, and I may have threatened to divorce him. He thought that was hilarious. “*As if I’d ever let you go,*” he’d said. “*I’ll be gray well before you, and I’ll still hobble my way to the ends of the earth for you.*”

“Hi,” I say, resting my cheek on our son’s head.

Nolan strides over, dropping a firm kiss to my head, then Everett’s. “How are my two favorite guys?”

“Better now.”

He smiles knowingly, gazing affectionately at our son who’s currently pretending to hide in my chest.

“And my favorite girl?” I ask.

“She left with Clyde and Mary,” he grumbles, and I roll my lips together. She and their daughter, Cass, are best friends, and they’ve been plotting all day to have a sleepover tonight. I told her she had my vote, but she needed the others’ too.

“*But yours weighs more ’cause it’s your birthday,*” she’d said pouting.



Guess she had nothing to worry about, seeing as she got her way.

“Did you vote no?” I ask.

Nolan rolls his eyes. “No, I voted yes.” He cuts me a knowing look. “It means I get you to myself tonight once we get this little guy asleep.” He scratches at Everett’s belly, bringing a cute squeal from his lips.

I bite my lip, and Nolan’s gaze flashes to mine, flaring.

My cheeks heat, but I don’t break the contact.

Grunting, he turns toward the water, running another hand through his hair. His wedding band glints, catching on a ray of light coming from somewhere behind me. It’s simple and gold, identical to mine.

A long moment passes before he speaks again.

“Parker called,” he says quietly, as if afraid to disturb the peace out here.

My eyes widen, and I sit a little taller. Nolan’s expression is calm, so I know it can’t be anything bad, but...

“Canaan Academy has been seized by the authorities. They raided it this morning. All students have been released to their families.”

A stillness overtakes me.

He pulls out his cell phone, and taps a few times on the screen, before turning it toward me. It’s a news article.

“It was posted a couple hours ago, and it’s already circling the major news sites.” Nolan pauses. “They’re calling you guys the Canaan Five.”

My jaw quivers, and I sniff, shaking my head. “It’s happening.”

He nods, reaching up to push a lock of dark hair behind my ear. “Yeah, sweetheart, it’s really happening.”

Everett babbles, almost like he’s trying to mimic what his daddy’s saying to assure me.

I smile, choking on a sob. Looking down, I shake my head.

*It's finally happening.*

Two years ago, I got a call from an unknown number with a Burdyn, Indiana area code.

To this day, I still don't know how Parker Chastain found me. But when he revealed why he was contacting me...

Well, I can't say I was happy about it. Not at first. Not for a while.

As I would come to find out, Parker transferred to Canaan Academy—willingly—almost a year after I had left, all in an effort to avenge his late brother and take them down from the inside out. His brother, who shared a similar fate to me...but wasn't as fortunate enough to walk away from it.

Given that Parker was just a teenager at the time, he didn't get too far with his plan.

But that was years ago—and now Parker was a grown man.

At first, I wanted no part of whatever he was trying to do. But he was insistent on at least meeting up and hearing him out. *"I have an in,"* he'd said.

*"Why me?"* I remember asking, seeing as I was far from the first or last victim of the Pastors at Canaan. There's likely hundreds who've suffered at their hands since they opened in 1976. And I wasn't even there when Parker attended, so it just felt...odd that he sought me out, especially when I was nowhere even in the vicinity.

Turns out there was a reason he wanted to chat with me specifically...

On the dock, a gust of wind blows through, tousling our hair and bringing a welcomed chill to my skin. "Adam?" I question softly.

"Parker said he's...coping as well as to be expected," Nolan says, somewhat stiffly.

To this day, Nolan still struggles to forgive the guy who befriended and tricked me when I was seventeen, leading me to months of hell at the abusive hands of Pastor Gabriel and his minions.

It was a cold, winter day two years ago when I was supposed to meet with Parker for the first time to hear him out, to see if I wanted any part in this—to see if I felt like I could handle it.

He made the trip up to Vermont, much to my relief. Going back to Indiana was not on my list of things I ever wanted to do. It'd been about six years at that point since I left, and I never looked back.

I still haven't, and I don't think I ever will.

I can remember that day clearly—the moment vividly.

Walking into that diner. Heading for the back corner booth where Parker told me he was sitting...

Halting in place when I noticed he didn't come alone.

I barely gave the unfamiliar guy with short brown hair and pierced ears a second of my attention. I only had eyes for the guy seated next to him. The one with wavy black hair tinged purple and striking blue eyes and hunched narrow shoulders.

*Adam.*

To say I reacted poorly to that little sneak attack would be an understatement. And I'm pretty sure the only reason Nolan, who I insisted join me that day, didn't punch either of them in the face was because he was too busy dealing with me.

We left immediately.

It took several days of Parker calling and texting me, and Nolan threatening to get a restraining order, before I finally just...cracked, in a sense. All thanks to a couple messages from an unknown number from the same area code as Parker's.

**Sorry won't ever be enough. I'll never forgive myself for what I put you and the others through. I wish I could say it was because I didn't have a choice, but that's not**

**true. But this is bigger than me...bigger than us. I'm trying to make this right in the only way I can. For you and the others... But mostly for him. - A**

And then a second one came in, dropping my heart somewhere in my stomach.

**I love him. And I need those assholes to pay for what they've done. Please.**

*Parker*, I realized immediately who he was talking about. He loves Parker. He's not...he wasn't straight, and just doing his step-father's bidding to weed us out. He was *one of us*.

He *is* one of us.

And just like that, it hit me—

*Adam was a victim too.*

All this time, I didn't see that—couldn't—and while it will never excuse what he did, it did allow me to give them another chance to explain...

To hear Adam's perspective, and to give mine, as painful as it was for all of us.

*We were just kids.*

Since then, in a mutual effort to take this school down, Adam and I have slowly begun to mend things as we worked alongside his boyfriend and two other guys Parker befriended during his time there.

We'll never be the friends I thought we were before he lured me into Pastor Gabriel's trap. And sometimes, it is hard to remember he's not the enemy. Mentally, I can rationalize it, especially knowing what I do now.

But on a physical level...

It's not always possible.

But regardless of my individual trauma that comes up sometimes, we do care for each other. In a way that only those who've been through shared trauma can be. All five of us.

My lip rises ruefully. *The Canaan Five.*

“And Pastor Gabriel?” I say, returning to the conversation.  
“The others?”

Nolan replies, “Parker said they seem to be keeping a low profile right now. It’s only a matter of time before arrest warrants go out.” He arches me a brow. “They’re fucked, and they know it.”

Throat thick, all I can do is nod. My fingers buzz, but not in a bad way. It’s just...a lot. This...relief washing over me. It’s a feeling I’ve experienced before, of course, but it’s foreign in its intensity. I’m almost afraid to believe it’s real, that this is finally happening.

It’s been a long two years building this case with the lawyers Parker hired. Having to relive what happened—recount my story—it’s been hard. Can’t deny that.

But I have Nolan. And Mel, who’s become a close friend over the years. And I have therapy.

“It’s thanks to him, you know,” I say softly.

He knows I mean Adam.

If it wasn’t for him turning on his step-father and the other pastors—whistleblowing on everything he saw and knew about that the rest of us didn’t...

Well, I don’t think we’ve could’ve pulled this off.

Nolan’s jaw tightens and he nods. “It’s thanks to all of you. But I know what you’re saying, and I’m trying.”

“Do you think me weak for forgiving him?”

He’s already shaking his head well before I get the question fully out. It’s not the first time I’ve asked this, and like always he’s firm in his response.

“Absolutely not. If anything, it’s the opposite. It takes a lot more strength to forgive, than to hold onto hate.”

I play with Everett’s hair as he makes another *boom* sound. *The storm’s getting closer. We’ll need to head inside.*

“But you don’t hate him,” I say knowingly.

He shakes his head. “I hate the situation. I hate the people who failed you both. I hate the system....because all those failures led to you getting hurt.”

I smile thinly, nodding. “I hate it too.”

Our eyes meet, dancing over one another’s.

Inhaling deeply, I tip my head back just as the first drop of rain hits my cheek. “This is just the beginning, isn’t it?”

He nods. “Yeah, sounds like.” He shrugs a shoulder, and stands, reaching down for Everett. “But you’ve got this. *We’ve* got this. The hardest part is over. Now, you get justice.”

Everett giggles when Nolan lifts him high in the air, his pudgy legs kicking.

Smiling up at him, I nod. “The world’s a better place now that it’s been shut down.”

“Exactly.”

*And hopefully it leads to more schools like that getting shut down...*

*More stringent laws in place...*

Lightning flashes across the sky with a crack, and the three of us seem to freeze, holding our breaths collectively. It’s gotten darker, and more drops start falling.

“Ooooh,” Everett murmurs.

“Whatcha think, bud? Time to head in?” Nolan says, ruffling his hair.

Everett reaches for the sky and screams, “*BOOM!*” at the top of his lungs.

My eyes widen, and I flinch, hunching down, not having expected that.

Nolan hoists him up against his side, and looks over his shoulder at me. “Ears, baby.”

Rolling my eyes, I don’t bother masking my smile as I unwrap the headphones from around my neck, and slide them

over my head. While it's starting to rain, they're supposed to be waterproof, so long as they're not submerged.

Nolan winks at me once I've got my ears fully covered, then turns to the lake, throws his head back and screams.

My iPod is in my pocket, but I don't bother turning it on. I don't want to drown them out—I just want to make it bearable.

I can see Everett clapping—hear his muffled high-pitched giggles and screams as if I'm listening from underwater. Standing up, I sidle up next to Nolan, and join them, screaming up into the Heavens.

A hand cups my shoulder, squeezing, and I look over at Nolan.

My husband.

The love of my life.

*How the hell did I get so lucky?*

Everett's nodding, face bunched as he makes grabby hands at the rain. It's starting to come down faster, harder, splashing his round cheeks. It's difficult to say whether he's more nervous or excited by the wide-eyed wonder on his face—a common dilemma he often seems to face.

And still, quiet and timid as he is sometimes, nothing holds him back when he's got his mind set on something.

It's very fitting, given his name.

*Everett.*

*Old English origin.*

*Brave boar, or less literally, fierce warrior.*

Not that the meanings of names always align with a person's character—though it does make it far easier for me when it does—but I do like to think it sets a good precedent. Gives us something to strive to.

Nolan *is* and always will be my champion after all. The man who never fails to charge into the war raging on in my

head, and sweep me off my feet.

And I am the scholar, tasked with weaving our history, asking questions, and shedding light on things hidden and misunderstood.

Because if there's anything my twenty-six years taught me, it's that I firmly believe there is magic to be found in the details—in the little things we often overlook. The fibers woven into all the big moments that shape us into who we are.

We just need to open ourselves to it—see the bigger picture, beyond all the awfulness that would try so hard to drown us, and blot out all the good.

I like to think that one day, perhaps future settlers will find our story, hidden in a cave. A tapestry strung up along the wall for curious, introspective eyes to gaze upon.

And you'll see this scene, just one of countless many depicted. The one where I'm standing on a dock with my soulmate at my side, and our perfect son in his arms. A storm pressing down from above, clamoring with our silent, immortalized screams.

A scene that wouldn't exist if it weren't for each and every single frayed and snapped thread that went into the stitching of this moment.

Perhaps, you'll care enough to wonder where we are now—what happened to our souls once we've moved on from this plane.

Well, it's not in the stars you'll find us.

Not Nolan and me.

Our story lives on in the lightning, forever painting the night sky violet.

**THE END**



## SOME OF NOLAN'S LETTERS

*Dear Skyler,*

*You'll likely never see this letter—or rather, email—seeing as even if I felt brave enough to send it, I couldn't. I don't know where you are. I don't even know if you're alive, which is a terrifying thought. But my therapist said writing to you might help, so...*

*Do you even know I've been looking for you?*

*I check for your obituary almost every night before I go to sleep. Even now, after six months have passed since you disappeared. That's morbid, right? But it's a ritual at this point. I have a lot of those, it would seem. Like my AA meetings and sitting outside when it storms, imagining it's you watching over me from wherever you are.*

*I miss you. Even now, almost two years later.*

*I don't know if I'll ever stop missing you...*

*Wondering what could've been had things been different.*

*Wondering if I had just trusted you, maybe things could've turned out differently.*

*I hope wherever you are, you're happy. And as much as it would kill me, I hope I didn't lie when I promised you that you'd move on. If only just because the thought of you out there alone with no one to hold you when everything gets too loud...well, that's Hell on Earth.*

*So I try not to imagine that reality.*

*Instead, I imagine you smiling. I imagine you're loved, and that you know you're loved.*

*Because I love you, and you have no idea. And that might be my greatest regret yet.*

*There's so much I want to tell you, and yeah I could fill your ears—or in this case, it would be your eyes, since you'd be reading this, not listening to me...*

*Anyway, there's so much I could update you on, which is what I planned originally.*

*I could tell you about Abby, and how she's four now, and how I get to see her every day if I want. I could tell you that I'm still terrified to be left alone with her, but I'm working on it. And so is Mel...*

*She's scared too I think.*

*I could tell you about my sponsor Hal, who for the record, is on your side. He gives me shit anytime you come up. Says I was an idiot when I let you go.*

*And I can't really argue that can I? Not when I'm here, typing into a void, when maybe if I handled this differently and just...trusted you, I'd have you here to tell these things to. Things I wouldn't even need to tell you, because you would've been here living them with me.*

*God, sweetheart, I hate this. Not knowing.*

*Where did you go?*

*Why did you disappear?*

*For a while I had hope that you were coming for me. I did, and I felt selfish for it, but God, I hoped.*

*But it's two years now since I saw you, and a whole year since you disappeared, and...*

*Well, I'm here. I'm here and I just...I need a sign, baby. I need a sign that you're out there somewhere.*

*I'm losing my fucking mind.*

*I haven't touched a drop of alcohol, but sometimes I really want to, and this time it's not because I'm happy and think I'm in control. But because I don't want to feel this ache anymore.*

*It's a dull ache. Not sharp like it was the night I let you walk away from me.*

*Or like the morning I got onto that boat, and turned around, wishing you were there to either stop me or come with me.*

*It's just this deep, endless throbbing that never goes away.*

*I paused, you know? I hesitated that morning on the docks. I almost didn't get on the boat. But I knew what you would want—I knew what I needed to do.*

*I had to be the parent you never had.*

*And that fucking breaks my heart.*

*If it wasn't for Abby, please know, nothing else could've ripped me away. I wish I told you that. How much I struggled with that choice, a choice I never want to face again.*

*Because when I lay in bed at night and see the stars shining in through the window, I wish for both of you.*

*Yours, storms and all,*

*Nolan*



*Sky,*

*It's been one whole year since you've disappeared, and sometimes it feels so wrong to miss you like I do. Like I don't deserve the right, because if I just handled this differently, maybe you would've reached out to me if you were in trouble, instead of...*

*Well, I don't know. Whatever it is you're doing.*

*For all I know you're living your best life right now, happy and adored by someone who isn't me. And if you are, I just*

*wish I knew so I could try to let you go, once and for all.*

*I went to a gay bar last night. I've been lonely, and I figured maybe I could just lose myself in someone else. I've tried picking up women here and there this last year, but that didn't work out, so I figured I'd try with a man.*

*But that didn't work out well either.*

*I just keep looking for you in the couple guys I chatted with.*

*Maybe it's because of this...the fact I still worry so much about you.*

*I should just delete these.*

*Hell, delete you from my memory.*

*As if I could...*

*Still, it would be easier I think, if I knew you were okay. That's what plagues me most at this point. I just want to know you're okay. I want to slap my past self upside the head for not taking you up on your offer to stay in touch.*

*Past me was an idiot.*

*So I don't know, maybe I'm not the one in need of a sign. Maybe it's you. Maybe if I put enough intent into this letter, it'll somehow find you—this ache in me—you'll know I need you. Like magic, right?*

*Because I do. I do need you.*

*Find me, sweetheart. Come to me. I beg you.*

*If you do, I'll never let you go again.*

*And if you don't want me...*

*Just show me some sign of life. Get a Facebook for fuck's sake, I don't know.*

*I'm just...*

*I'm lost here.*

*Yours, still, storms and all,*

*Nolan*



*Skylar,*

*Abby turned five today. And it made me realize, you'll be twenty-one soon...*

*Three whole fucking years since Black Diamond, and here I am, still missing you.*

*Not that I'm surprised. I knew the second you walked away how fucked I was.*

*I told myself after last time that I was done writing to you. I guess in a sense, it's become a journal for me. Not that I update it regularly, but only when the mood strikes, and I find myself itching to tell you things. Itching to feel close to you in the only way I can.*

*It's storming tonight—the first storm of the summer—so I suppose it's fitting that I'm thinking of you and missing you tonight more than I have in a while.*

*Not that I'm not always missing you, sweetheart. It feels like a lie and a betrayal all wrapped into one if I pretend like I'm not dying with my need to see you the second I let myself feel it.*

*But it's gotten easier over the years to ignore it. Shove it aside. Focus on other things, like Abby, and my job, and the house I built...*

*I built a cabin, baby. I think you'd love it. It's no bungalow on the beach, but there's a lake, and a dock, and it would be ours, all ours...*

*Sometimes I still worry you hate me. That I'm just another monster from your childhood. I know you'd yell at me for that, but that was inexperienced, eighteen-year-old you. I don't know who you are now, and I suppose I worry that with time and maturity, my biggest fears would come to fruition.*

*If you did hate me, I'd understand.*

*To this day, I can't explain how you crawled your way under my skin. It shouldn't've happened, but it did.*

*It did, and nothing short of you physically ripping my heart out would remove you.*

*I might no longer be the champion in your story, but I hope you know that you'll always be the champion in mine. Sometimes I look back on everything, and wonder if I'd still be here, sober and present in my daughter's life, if it wasn't for you.*

*You weren't just a body for me to lose myself in those weeks we shared together.*

*You changed me. Irrevocably.*

*It's because of you, I know how important the little things are—the efforts we take for granted from people. Just doing the work—going to AA meetings, checking in with my therapist, putting my daughter's needs first above all else...*

*It all amounts to something. Even if we're so lost in the nitty gritty of it we can't see it.*

*So thank you for that. For seeing through all my heavy, ugly guilt, and showing me the light.*

*I hate to think that maybe that was the whole point of this, and that our story truly is over. That that was the purpose of finding you.*

*Then again, maybe realizing that is all the closure I need.*

*At this point, I don't even know anymore if I'm just in love with a memory...*

*Or the boy who would probably just be a stranger to me now. The boy who is now a man and might see me as the villain in their story.*

*So I think I'm going to stop writing you. At least, I'm going to try. It doesn't feel like I'm writing to you so much anymore, as I am a ghost, and that doesn't sit well with me.*

*God, I hope you're not a ghost.*

*If you are, feel free to haunt me.*

*Then again, you already are...*

*Storms and all, always,*

*Nolan*

## EXILED BONUS SCENE

Skyler's birthday is far from over where we leave off. Curious to see how they celebrate later that night when they're finally alone again?

**[Claim your FREE bonus scene now by signing up for Jessie Walker's newsletter.](#)**



## NEED MORE?

There are thirteen stories in this collection from thirteen authors. If you would like to spend more time at Black Diamond, you can find the rest of the series on Amazon [here](#).

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## AFTERWORD

This book was written in a whirlwind—I'm talking, a 140K first draft written in a little over a month.

If you know me, you *know* I hate deadlines. I don't do well with pressure, and rules/restrictions make me itchy. I'm very much a mood writer, and too much “noise” can stifle my creativity.

So, yeah, being a part of a collaborative project like this was challenging to say the least. It was way out of my comfort zone, testing me as a writer and author in many ways.

But I'm so glad I did it, even when it felt hopeless. Because this story would've never come to fruition, had I not signed up for this project. And I love this story. I love these characters. And the idea of *Exiled* not existing is just straight up *sad*.

Multi-author series are hard work. It takes a lot of dedication and patience to put something like this together as seamlessly as possible, all while ensuring you get thirteen unique stories of varying tastes.

So yeah, it was a challenge, but we had so much fun with it. And I couldn't be more grateful for this opportunity working with so many amazing authors. Many of which I'm so happy to call my friends, who worked just as damn hard to bring you these books. So, to the Unlucky 13—we pulled it off! <3

Now as far as all things *Exiled* go...

Nolan and Skyler surprised me in all the best ways.

When I went into this book, I didn't know quite what I was getting into. As is the case with most books, but especially this one.

I write what comes instinctually to me—stories that fill my brain, begging to be told. Characters that are just \*there\* waiting for their turn to talk.

That wasn't the case this time. At least, not until I started writing, and getting to know these characters—characters who didn't even exist until I sat down to brainstorm this book.

I didn't set out to have Skyler be autistic, for one. It's something that developed and revealed itself organically. It was definitely a challenge, insofar as I wanted to ensure I could do his character justice. As someone who was diagnosed with ADHD in their late teens and shares a LOT of traits with Skyler, I wanted to give a voice to others who might've "slipped through the cracks." In whatever way that may have been.

I learned a lot about myself writing his character, doing the research, getting in his head... building off my own struggles, and putting words to things I once cast off, because I didn't know what it was...

At the end of the day, though, his story is still uniquely his. And autism is a *vast* spectrum. So while I do hope he resonates with at least a few people, be it directly or indirectly, please remember that everyone's story—everyone's journey—is different. Skyler in no way represents the "whole." Autism presents itself differently in everyone. This is just his story. Just as mine is mine, and yours is yours.

As for Nolan...

Well, what can I say? He's not without his flaws, but when that man goes all in, he goes *in*.

His love for Skyler—how he shows he cares, the way he never stops fighting to be better, how he accommodates Skyler's needs while simultaneously pushing him past his comfort zone, never treating him less than (well, once he gets his foot out of his ass, that is)....

It's nothing if not enviable. He is goals. Not just as a partner, but as a support system for Skyler to fall back on. And writing him was cathartic to say the least. A little heartbreaking too. We need more Nolan's in the world, and that's just fact.

As far as his addiction struggles go, again—everyone's journey is different. One thing I really wanted to show here is how easy it is to relapse. How insidious and, even, anticlimactic it can be. While many “slip” when they're stressed, or when life's hard and feeling hopeless...one thing I don't think is talked about nearly enough, is how easy it is to slip when things are going *well*.

Especially when it comes to alcohol.

I wanted this book to mostly be focused on his recovery post-relapse, to really showcase and explore that perspective. Coming back from a relapse is hard. Starting over is hard. Mentally, in this case, more than physically.

On a lighter note, here's a fun random fact—I totally took Nolan and Abby's shared love for horror movies from my own life. My dad and I go see just about every scary movie that comes out in theaters. And, yeah, when I was little, we watched *Hellraiser* together. I was three, maybe? He covered my eyes if things got too gory or inappropriate, so *relax*. I love that stuff, always have, and despite writing some messed up stuff sometimes, I turned out alright.

And like so many other 90s babies that I knew, I grew up watching *Gremlins* under the impression it was a *kid's* movie. Apparently, it's one of the movies that led to the addition of a “PG-13” rating. How bout that?

Anyway....now that I've rambled on long enough, I'll leave you with this:

Yes, Hudson and Cort are going to get a book. Yes, Adam and Parker are going to get a book. Each one will be a standalone as well. They've been in “queue” for some time now, and decided this book would be the one to introduce themselves before they scurry back to the end of the line.

What can I say? I just can't help myself but tie my little universe together where I can.

With that being said...

It's time to go back to home base.

See ya on the flip side.

XOXO

JESSIE

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First off, I want to thank my amazing readers. You know who you are. Whether you discovered me through the *Lost Boys* or *Little Bird Lost*... Your love for my words and the stories I put out into the world, never fails to stun me. And your patience, understanding, and unflinching support as I dance between series and projects... It's everything. It's what gets me through on the days I wonder what the hell I'm doing. Thanks for giving my chaotic, artist brain a safe space to go with wherever my muse takes me. I love you all.

To Ben, for bearing with me these last three months while I worked twelve-hour days writing, editing, and just all the things. Thanks for listening to me vent and rant, and being totally cool about having dinner at 10:00 at night.

My betas/alphas/cheerleaders—Nat, Kayla, Tasha, and Amy. Your helpful input and feedback, and enthusiasm for my work means the world to me. This book would've still been a hot mess if it wasn't for you.

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My ARC team, the Misfits, and all those who signed up early for a chance to read early. Thank you for your honest

reviews. I know it was a BUSY month for you guys this time around, so thanks for carving time for my baby.

Lastly, to those of you who are new to my work. THANK YOU. I appreciate you giving my words a chance, and I hope you loved it. One of my favorite parts of this job, is finding new readers who enjoy my work. It feels like one endless growing family, and I just can't believe this is my life sometimes. So if you're a fan...come join us: [The Black Sheep | Jessie Walker's Reader Group](#)

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessie Walker is an indie author based out of Scranton, Pennsylvania, where she lives with her long-time partner and fur-spawn. Drawn to all things dark and twisted, nitty and gritty, she likes to pretend she's not the hopeless romantic at heart that she is. When she's not drudging away at a keyboard, there's a very good chance you'll find her vegged out on her couch, listening to sad '90s grunge, and dreamin' up all the ways she can make the voices in her head suffer (just so she could put them back together again). She has a BS in Psychology, and will diagnose you.





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