



EVIE RAE
POPPY FLYNN

LOVING IN NUMBERS

Six

A Dark Romance

Evie Rae and Poppy Flynn

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Acknowledgements

Evie Rae

Poppy Flynn

Also By Evie

Also By Poppy

To late nights and early mornings...
may we find ourselves at the end of one and the beginning
of another.

PLAYLIST

PLAYLIST

Unholy * Hey Violet

Let's Fall in Love for the Night * FINNEAS

Butterflies * Kacey Musgraves

Bad Moon Rising * Satin Puppets, Nxghtshade

lovely (with Khalid) * Billie Eilish

everything I wanted * Billie Eilish

The Zephyr Song * Red Hot Chili Peppers

Dancing On My Own* Calum Scott

Sad Song * We the Kings, Elena Coats

The Cut That Always Bleeds* Conan Gray

Let Her Go * Passenger

Way Down We Go * Kaleo

Boxes * Goo Goo Dolls

Here On Out * Dave Matthews Band

Stubborn Love * The Lumineers

River * Bishop Briggs

All I Want * Kodaline

Don't Wanna Fight * Alabama Shakes

The Middle * Maren Morris, Zedd

Wish You the Best * Lewis Capaldi

You Have Stolen My Heart * Brian Fallon

Ain't Gonna Drown * Elle King

Sign of the Times * Harry Styles

Hell and High Water * Black Stone Cherry

Too Good at Goodbyes * Sam Smith

Chasing Pavements * Adele

Just Give Me a Reason * Pink

Demons * Imagine Dragons

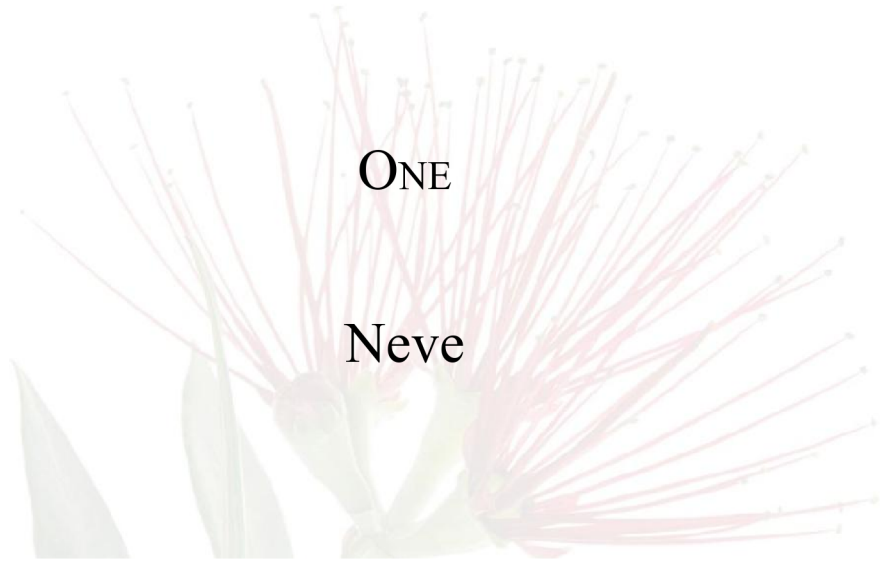
Everytime * Britney Spears

The Show * Lenka

When We Stand Together * Nickelback

He Ain't Heavy * The Hollies

Our Time Now * Plain White T's



ONE

Neve

Mood: You give me chills...

MY FIRST “REAL LIFE” date with Oliver after we started talking online is a long time in the making—two months, to be exact—but it’s well worth the wait. As I look around, I don’t think there could be a prettier place or a more beautiful evening for it.

We’re down at the dock, feet dangling above the deep cerulean water that laps gently at the pilings. The sun is melting into the ocean in a wash of orange and butter hues I’ll never grow tired of, and the evening air is filled with the muted rumble of thunder and the call of gulls.

It’s a typical late spring evening in the Keys.

If I wasn’t already in love, the utter perfection of this place would be pushing me closer in that direction, I feel certain. Everything is going so well...too well, the paranoid side of me worries. I’m not that girl—the magic-fueled Cinderella with the glass slipper that fits and the handsome prince—princes, rather—who save her from a life of drudgery.

Not that my life was ever really one of drudgery, but sometimes, when I’m relaxing by the salt water infinity pool with one of Remi’s cocktails or lazing in a hammock as I watch the sun set with Cope...somehow that’s what all of this feels like.

I don’t want it all to vanish at the stroke of midnight.

“What’s got that look on your face?” Oliver asks, leaning forward from his spot on the opposite side of the bento box between us to spear a bite of something resembling rice and ground chicken with a set of chopsticks.

The bento boxes Remi made for us are works of art. I study the contents of the one by my hip, my hand hovering over it as I ponder my selection and give myself time to come up with a response.

“I’m thinking I don’t know what any of this is, but it all looks incredible,” I finally murmur.

“Remi’s got skills,” he agrees. “I told him I wanted a picnic, and he ran with it. He told me this was a *koraku*, or picnic bento. It’s designed for sharing.”

“Usually when you hear bento, you think of those cute little plastic boxes you see in kids’ lunches.” I pluck something wrapped in seaweed from a squared compartment in the red fabric-wrapped wooden box. “Remi always kicks it up a notch.”

“Well.” Oliver twists to pick up the bottle of champagne chilling behind us and pours us each a glass. He hands mine to me before raising his in a toast. “Nothing but the best for our Neve.”

We hold our glasses still for a beat of time, our gazes tangling over the barely touching rims as we silently decide on our toast. In the end, we keep it simple. “To us,” Oliver says.

“To all of us,” I agree.

We drink.

This evening, while our first official date, is also a celebration. Earlier this week, the district attorney had determined Jesse was not at fault in the death of Wesley Terrell, the man responsible for the kidnapping of little Gwennie Brooks, and as such, he would not have to stand trial. We had all breathed a collective sigh of relief. Immediately after the event, it hadn't even occurred to me that there might be a problem. Jesse had so clearly acted in my defense and in defense of the child who had been abducted. That he might have to stand trial for the man's death was unthinkable.

And yet, that's the world we live in. One of blame and culpability where even defending yourself, your property, or others comes with reproof and condemnation

The feds searched Terrell's property, which was located on the edge of the Everglades. Nothing had been found except for the boat he originally took down to the Keys. It had been shattered by the reef.

This didn't make any of us feel especially better, didn't give any of us—particularly Oliver and me—the closure we had been looking for all these years.

If Terrell was taking Gwennie Brooks for the same reason he wanted me—to be a “Wendy” for the little boys he was abducting—where were the little boys? No evidence was found linking his property to any of the missing boys, a fact that unsettled all of us, Oscar most of all. He didn't like loose ends.

We had to accept it for what it was, though. We would likely never know the full truth of everything that had taken place—where Terrell had taken the boys, what had happened to them after the fact.

Dubbed the Lost Boys because they never came home, there were multiple theories of what may have happened to the missing children over the years, and none of them were pretty. The Glades made it far too easy to get rid of small bodies.

The champagne tastes sour suddenly, and I set my glass down on the dock with a dull clink.

“I have news.” Brushing the crumbs from his hands, Oliver turns and smiles at me.

“Oh, yeah?” I’m grateful for the reprieve from my own grim thoughts. “What’s that?”

“My agent called. *The Gray Hour* hit number two on the New York Times bestseller’s list.”

“That’s huge!” Pushing the bento box to the side, I climb into his lap and hug him. His arms go around my waist, keeping me from falling off his lap and into the water. “I am thrilled for you, Oliver.”

He nods, a smile of quiet satisfaction playing about his lips. “Not gonna lie; it feels good. It’s up there on the WSJ, too.” He leans back a little, so he can look me in the face. “I have a question for you.”

“Shoot.”

Carefully, Oliver draws his legs up onto the dock to sit cross-legged. I shift to straddle him, my legs draped around his waist. “So, I’ve gotten to this great point in my career where I can take some creative risks because it’s my name that is going to sell books.” The statement is oddly humble, matter-of-fact. It’s just a statement of how it is. “I’ve been thinking for a while now about doing that, and what it might look like, and when you came along, it all kind of gelled.”

“Me?”

He nods. “You ever hear of Stephen King and his ideal reader?”

I tilt my head. “I vaguely remember reading something about that...”

“He writes for one person, and one person only—his wife. His wife is his Ideal Reader.” Oliver pauses and strokes a line across my forehead with his finger while I eye him bemusedly. “I want you to be that for me.”

Why does it feel like he’s asking me to be so much more than a reader?

My tongue darts out to lick my suddenly dry lips. “That doesn’t sound so difficult. What do I need to do?”

His face grows closer and he presses a featherlight kiss to my mouth. “You have to be my biggest cheerleader, of course, and my harshest critic.” His arms tighten around me, pulling me closer against him. “You have to let me know you... intimately...because I have to fully understand my audience.”

“Is that so...” My voice is a thread of sound, punctuated by a longer, louder, more impatient roll of thunder. Lightning cracks against the water a second before the sky breaks, and rain begins to fall.

We hear it tit-tatting against the ocean’s surface seconds before it reaches us. We clamber to our feet, and I turn to grab the bento boxes and flee, but Oliver catches me by the arm and whips me back around to face him.

“Wha—?”

Surprise washes away with the streaming rain at the look of raw desire on his face. The bento boxes fall to the dock, rice scattering over my bare feet, as his arms close around me and his mouth descends to mine.

Suddenly the rain is forgotten; the storm around us insignificant against the one that burns inside us.

Our clothing follows the remnants of our picnic to the wooden platform with wet slaps of sound as we stumble with mouths connected, several feet away, hands fumbling to rid ourselves of everything that separates us from each other.

When we’re naked, Oliver drops to his knees before me, his long fingers curving around my bottom and holding me in place when I go to do the same. His tongue spears into me, provoking a gasp and instant weakness in my knees. He chuckles darkly against my core and continues suckling at my pussy.

My fingers grip his hair, hanging on for dear life as he devours me, and I turn my face towards the leaden sky so the pounding rain can cool my overheated body. When I can take no more, I sink to the decking, and he lets me go, following me down. He kisses me softly, and I taste myself on him.

Feeling him nudge against my core, I widen my legs and he pulls my knees up so he can thrust inside with a single stroke.

The wood is hard against my back and I'm pretty sure I just acquired several splinters in my butt. That's to deal with later, though; right now it's just sensation riding me hard.

The storm rolls over us at a slow, lumbering pace, with virtually no lightning. The rain is warm, the air is humid, and there's something achingly erotic about being out here, naked, exposed to the elements and each other while Oliver plunges inside me in hard, rhythmic strokes.

He threads his fingers through mine and traps them above my head, then leans on his elbows to dip his head to my breast and suck a tight, aching nipple into his mouth.

There's something wild about him today. There are depths beneath Oliver's slightly nerdy and introverted exterior that I don't think I've seen yet. Not when it comes to sex, anyway. I always get this feeling that he keeps himself tightly leashed like he's worried he might shock me or frighten me if he ever truly let go. But the truth is, I crave it. I want to experience everything this man has to offer.

Everything they all have to offer. I don't want to be treated like I'm made of glass.

“Oliver, fuck me hard,” I whisper, nipping at the tip of his ear.

His response is reflexive. He bites down sharply on my nipple, and I gasp and buck as the brief pain sends an explosion of wildfire through my veins, causing every nerve in my body to blaze.

He lifts his head, and his eyes capture mine for a long, intense moment. There’s something feral in him that I’ve never seen before, and I want to embrace every part of it.

“Be careful what you ask for, little girl,” he murmurs, his gaze never leaving my face.

“Or you’ll go all ‘big, bad wolf’ on me?” I’m goading him, I know, but I can’t help myself. I want everything between us to be real. And that means accepting all those rough edges that Oliver thinks he’s buried.

He plants a hard kiss on my mouth before pulling out. “Remember you wanted this,” he warns as he positions me onto my knees and brings his hand down on the fleshy swell of my ass with a loud slap.

Surprise has the air leaving my body on a breathy scream, and I barely have time to suck in another one before he smacks my other cheek. The rain saturating my skin makes the sensation sharp and stingy, but I relish each and every spank as Oliver continues.

I wasn’t expecting it. Not from Oliver. After the big bad wolf comment, I honestly would have expected him to lean

forward and bite my ass. This...it makes me feel alive in a potent kind of way and forces every stray thought from my head, leaving me with no choice but to let go completely.

“Look at that gorgeous ass, all pink from my handprints,” Oliver murmurs, almost to himself, trailing a fingertip across the heat he spanked into my flesh. “I almost expect the drops to start sizzling.”

He grabs the globes of my ass with both hands, reigniting that edge of pleasure-pain until I’m almost mindless, then he reaches underneath me and pinches my clit between his index and middle finger, squeezing tight. Just as it starts to feel like too much to bear, he lets go, the rush of sensation making me groan in reflex.

I don’t have time to assimilate the flood of feeling and decide whether I like it or not before he’s sliding one long finger inside my pussy. He’s perfectly positioned to swipe it over the bundle of nerves that form my g-spot, and the way he strokes has me thrusting back against him, desperate for more.

What the fu-dge is he doing to me—

“You like that, don’t you, dirty girl? You won’t believe the things I can do to your body.”

This dirty-talking version of Oliver is new to me, but holy hell, is it hot. “More,” I beg.

My whole body feels liquified like I’m forming a puddle of myself in the rain. He adds a second finger and the way they squelch as he pushes them inside me is positively lewd.

I can feel my stomach clench and coil like a spring that's being wound tight. I'm almost scared for it to let go because I already know it's going to be overwhelming.

But before I implode, Oliver pulls out his fingers, and conversely, that makes me mewl with discontent.

“Don't worry, dirty girl. I'm going to fuck you senseless and finish you off, but I want to feel you coming on my cock. I want to feel all those internal muscles squeezing down my length and milking me dry.”

He forces my butt higher and my shoulders lower, then drives his cock into me and starts pistoning in and out forcefully, bumping against my cervix with every pass and sending showers of glittering brilliance into my tummy and down my legs.

Everything I'm feeling is only magnified when he presses his thumb against my back hole and massages the puckered skin.

My thighs tremble as he presses through the tight ring of muscle, adding another layer of stimulation to my overwhelmed body.

Then he starts fucking me there, too, and with his free hand, he gathers my soaking wet hair like a rope and uses it for leverage.

I'm positively mindless.

Where did sweet, quiet Oliver go?

It's not something I have time to think about because everything is gathering inside me like a storm, one that's a thousand times fiercer than the one going on around us.

Just as the skies grumble overhead, my body explodes, my scream drowned out by the thunder as I come and come, my climax seeming to go on forever.

Oliver roars his own completion into the booming ether as he fucks me like a wild thing until we both collapse, stunned and spent onto the deck.

I roll onto my back and Oliver does the same, and we both lie there panting side by side, eyes glazed, trying to catch our breath as the rain pelts down on our slick and sated, naked bodies.

A chill runs through me, but not because it's cold.

It's because I've realized there's a darkness inside Oliver. It doesn't scare me; he isn't malicious or sadistic.

But I'm certain it harks of something more sinister in his childhood than he remembers.



Two

Oscar

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER DAMN report to file. They never get any more palatable.

Thunder rolls overhead, and I tilt my head as I listen to the low rumble and wonder if Oliver managed to pull off the picnic he was planning with Neve, or whether it's been ruined by the rain.

The past few weeks have been as close to perfect as any of us could have imagined. Sure, it's early days still, and we're all just finding our feet with this relationship, but so far, every indication is that this is it...she's the one, and this might actually fucking work, which is no small thing considering how many of us are involved.

Somehow Neve makes it easy. She's more than I ever could have hoped for, and I think all the guys feel the same, although none of us have discussed it.

We're not much for all that *discussing our feelings* shit.

I finish up the last of my paperwork and decide to call it a day. I don't want to risk sailing McQueen home in really bad weather if this storm picks up any more. It'll be rough enough as it is, but unless I want to spring for a hotel room in peak season Key West or sleep on the chair in my office, this is the reality of life in the Keys. It won't be the first time I've sailed in a storm.

I dig my car keys out of my pocket at the door to the precinct. The rain is lashing down, and I ready myself for a quick sprint to the car, mentally cursing the umbrella I left in the car. I rarely use it because they're more trouble than they're worth, but I might have actually used it today.

I catch sight of a figure in my peripheral vision as I run.. He's dressed in a hooded rain poncho—not unusual on a day like this. But what catches my attention is that he's heading straight for me like he has a purpose. Maybe I'm paranoid, but after recent events, I'm a little jumpier than usual.

I press the button on my key fob to unlock my car, but hesitate, something about the guy making the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

As soon as he's within reach, I grab him, slam him against the car, and wrench his arm behind his back in a half-nelson. I ignore the fact that my actions border on what could be construed as an assault on an innocent passer-by.

“Who the hell are you, and what do you want?” I demand, as the guy struggles against my hold.

“Fuck!” The epithet is fired at me in a voice that sounds vaguely familiar, although I’m not able to place it.

He pushes back against me, and I’m surprised at his strength, but all he does is drag his hood off so I can see his face.

“Beck Wilder.” I push away from him, none too gently. “Why the hell didn’t you just identify yourself instead of approaching me like that? I’m a fucking cop; how’d you expect me to react?”

His smile is cold and humorless as he shakes himself, water flying off his hood, and deliberately leans against my driver’s side door. “Because if I had, you’d have just ignored me and driven away.”

He’s not wrong. I don’t like what little I know of Wilder. He’s a jackass and a reporter, for a start, so his profession puts him low in my estimation before we even get into anything else.

“You’re right,” I agree. “So perhaps you should take the hint and get lost.”

Beck just watches me through narrowed eyes as the rain soaks both of us, plastering the hair to our heads, although I’m a damn sight worse since the poncho is protecting most of him from the worst of the downpour.

I exhale, loudly. “Get out of my way before I move you out of my way.”

“No. And I’d think twice before you try it. You might not manage quite as well as you expect.”

“What the fuck do you want, Wilder? This is a little excessive if you’re wanting a police statement for your blog or whatever the fuck it is you’re doing these days, even for you.”

A muscle clenches in his jaw repeatedly before he speaks, giving away his frustration. “I’ve been trying to contact you, but no one will forward my calls. I have information on the Lost Boys case.”

Shaking my head, I grab his arm to remove him out of my way. “No one’s forwarding your calls because there’s no reason. You’ll have to find another way to earn your meal ticket this week because that case has been closed. The perp is dead.”

He grabs my wrist, forcing me to let go of his arm, and I’m surprised by the latent strength I feel behind his tensed muscles.

We’re at a standoff.

“The man who was killed is *not* the man who took those boys.”

He spits the words with a vehemence that surprises me, but I still don’t trust him. “How the hell would you know something like that?”

“You know exactly how I know,” Beck says softly, his gaze unyielding, even with raindrops clinging to his lashes and dripping down his face.

I glance away. I know what he's referring to. I saw his file in reviewing the Lost Boys case. Years ago, he came forward as an 'escapee'—the only problem is that his story didn't jibe with what the police knew of the Lost Boys kidnapper.

Beck Wilder was all but reviled as a runaway and cast in the role of an attention-seeker, and it's hard for me to give credence to a word he says. Not when there were real victims out there like my brother and Neve's brother.

"You all think you're safe in your little island paradise, but you're not. The bastard who took those boys is still out there, and if all you're going to do is ignore the truth, then he's going to waltz in and just take what he wants from you. Fuck it! Perhaps I should just let him. It's not like you've ever done me any favors, so I don't know why I'm trying so hard to do one for you."

I narrow my eyes at him, considering his words. What *is* in this for him? Only one way to find out. "Why are you, then?"

He shrugs away from me, dropping my wrist and pushing past me. "When you finally decide to believe me, I might tell you," he throws over his shoulder as he briskly walks away, flipping the hood back over his head.

I stare after him, something about his words chilling me to the bone...although that could just as easily be the rain.

Climbing into my car, I run the entire interaction back through my mind as I watch to make sure he leaves. But the paranoia that's been dogging me for the past few weeks rears its ugly head again.

Because, if that monster is still out there, then there's one thing I'm absolutely certain of.

Neve is his prey.

THREE

Neve



Mood: Looks like we're in for nasty weather.

I AM GOING TO fall and break something.

It's gonna happen.

Getting myself dressed while talking to Caroline on the phone has been a time-honored tradition since our Chandler U days, one I've cheerfully carried over to my time on the island. Holding the phone to my ear with one hand, I hop on one strappy-heeled sandal as I work to squeeze my other foot into the other shoe. I stop and hover as I try to fasten the strap one-handed, tongue between my teeth while Caro prattles on.

"I'm not coordinated enough for this."

"What? What are you talking about? I asked for details. Lewd ones, specifically. Ones to assist me with living vicariously through you." Caroline stops for breath, but only for a second. "Help me; I'm poor."

I roll my eyes and stifle a giggle at the *Bridesmaids* reference. "I was talking about trying to get dressed and talk to you at the same time. I'm not coordinated enough to do it." Picking up my bottled water from the dresser, I take a swallow.

"Oh, but you're plenty coordinated enough for the things that count, like group sex."

Water spews everywhere.

“That’s it.” I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. “I’m out. I gotta go, Caro...talk to you later.”

“No! Don’t leave me—” Caroline’s voice sobers. “It really has been days since we talked.”

My shoe now firmly on my foot, I bend to peer under my bend. I haven’t seen Jamie Fraser all morning, now that I think about it. “That’s because I reopened the daycare, babe. Life just got a thousand times busier. Maybe you could come over for dinner or something one night? But no references to risqué details, I’m warning you right now—”

“You’re the one who told me the risqué details.”

She’s pouting. I can hear the pout in her voice, and I pause as I give up on searching for the cat and head for the door. I’m going to be late, but maybe I need to double and possibly triple-think this dinner invitation...all I need is her and Cope in the same room.

“Caroline. I was drunk. Repeat after me: I will not talk out of turn—”

She giggles. “Drunk on that dick.”

I sigh, and with one last look back, leave the door open. Jamie Fraser will return when he’s ready. “I’m hanging up now, Caroline. Bye. Love you.” Making kissy noises in response to her protests, I hang up and leave my suite, heading through the main room toward the terrace where I’m sure Remi has an amazing breakfast waiting.

We've settled into a comfortable routine in the last month. Five days out of every week, Remi prepares breakfast and supper. Weekend meals and lunches are generally left up to us individually unless we need something in particular, and then Remi, being Remi, is happy to play Fairy Godfather.

I go into work in the morning, boated in either by Jesse or Oscar, and return in the afternoon when the daycare closes to spend one evening of the week with each man, although we frequently make exceptions to that rule and play together. Sundays are Oscar's before he drills down into the grit of his work week. Mondays belong to Remi, and Tuesdays to Jesse. Wednesdays are Cope's, and Fridays are Oliver's. Thursdays and Saturdays, I spend with the group as a whole. There are no bedrooms big enough for all six of us, and the guys don't seem inclined to want to snuggle up to each other at night, but this way no one feels left out.

Things are busy, especially now that I'm back at work, but there are so many of us that the atmosphere on the island manages to remain relaxed and trouble-free. I don't have to worry about laundry or dinner or even feeding Jamie Fraser, and it just seems to work for us so beautifully that I'm kind of afraid to fully settle into it. I'm so happy; I'm worried about it being *too* good. I finally feel like I have everything I've ever wanted, everything that hidden part of myself ever longed for.

It can't possibly be real.

And there's something...

If I'm honest, I have the vaguest sense that there's something missing. I'm not certain what it is. Maybe it's simply that irrational fear that everything is too good, and I'm going to lose it. One thing I've learned through the years after Nicholas was taken is that fear carves a hole, makes it echo with its hollow ring.

I said something about it to Remi the other day because I don't know how to be quiet about such things.

"Go with it," he said, flipping the grilled cheese he was making for me.

I frowned. "What does that mean, exactly?"

He looked at me sideways, then nodded toward the plates sitting beside the stove. "Hand me one of those, please." He waited while I held the plates out, then dished our sandwiches up, and we carried our lunch over to the table beneath the window. "I mean, accept your feelings. Remain open to them, and deal with them."

I took a bite of the sandwich, moaning around the blend of cheeses and buttery bread that filled my mouth. "But...what if —"

He stopped me with a finger on my lips. "No. Don't worry about what-ifs. You need to make sure you are staying true to yourself and your feelings, first and foremost, and that you're not here trying to be something you're not just to please us. That's not what we want. Everything has happened really fast, under extreme circumstances, and that's never a good foundation for trying to establish anything lasting, right?"

Reluctantly, I nodded. I wanted to be romantic and disagree, but feelings were always heightened during intense situations. Maybe we needed to slow down a bit. Use the boring times to really gauge whether we felt the same as we did when the adrenaline was constantly pumping.

“Just take things as they come for a while and try not to put too much pressure on yourself. Okay?”

I stared at him, moisture filling my eyes. Words hovered on the tip of my tongue, words I might say to Caroline or any friend who was there for me, giving me good advice.

I love you.

The only thing was—I wasn't sure if I meant it in that way. As a friend.

A streak of orange catches my eye on the path beyond the terrace, and I walk farther to see Jamie Fraser bounding down the path. Laughing, I follow the quick glimpse I have of him, only to come across Jesse around the bend in the flagstone. I stop short, tilting my head as he pauses and bends down to pet the cat, oblivious of my presence.

Jesse likes to pretend he hates my cat, but I've never seen a man fall so hard and so fast. Jamie Fraser winds himself around the big man's ankles in feline ecstasy, his rumbling purrs loud enough to be heard ten feet away.

I cross my arms over my chest, deciding to mess with him. “You know, you really shouldn't let him outside.”

Jesse jumps. “Me? He's your cat.”

“You leave the door open, so he’ll follow you.”

“I do not!”

“He’s going to get fleas, and—”

“I got him a flea collar. He’ll be fine, won’t you, Big Guy?”
He bends and scoops Jamie Fraser up, rubbing him briskly beneath the chin. “He also needs some fish oil added to his diet, Neve. See these flakes? Dry skin.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I thought you hated cats?”

“Then take care of him, so I don’t have to.”

“Uh, huh.” I look at the cat. “That’s just dirt, by the way. He must have rolled in something.”

“Hmm.” Jesse sets the cat down and we turn to walk back toward the terrace. His hand creeps beneath my swishy skirt to stroke my bottom, and I give him a look of mock outrage. “Why, sir! How dare you!”

“It’s just too tempting.” He dips his head and kisses me. My lips cling to his for a moment, and then I giggle and slip away to run down the path. With a muffled curse, he gives chase.

“Hey! I don’t know where you’re going, but I want to come!”

Attracted by my shrieks of laughter, Cope bursts from his cottage and joins the chase. There’s no real contest. I can’t run in my heeled sandals and their legs are twice as long as mine. After a few strides, Jesse lifts me fireman-style over his

shoulder and stalks into the outdoor-dining area with Cope behind us, all of us heaving with laughter.

“Put me down,” I gasp, beating against his very fine ass with my fists, but all he does is slap my butt in return. “Mmm... maybe...”

Jesse’s body goes stiff, and even before he sets me carefully down, I become aware of a strange stillness in the atmosphere. The reason why becomes clear when I turn to see Oliver, Remi, and Oscar standing before us with looks of strain on their faces.

They exchange looks, and Remi steps forward.

“Neve...baby girl...”

“What?” Uneasiness is a hard lump in my stomach.

“There was a fire,” Oscar says. A line creases his forehead between his eyes, his normally full lips drawn tight and unsmiling. “The daycare burned down last night.”

My knees go soft, and I sag. Cope and Jesse, on either side of me, catch me beneath the arms and hold me up. Behind me, Oliver pulls a chair and pushes it behind my knees. “I don’t understand...how...”

Little Pilots is gone.



THE THING THAT BROUGHT me back to Key West, the thing I spent half my life dreaming about creating...it's nothing but smoke and ashes.

I stand on the fringes of the parking lot and stare, eyes burning with unshed tears. From the time I was old enough to begin planning for a future career, I had known what I wanted to do. I knew my future lay in caring for children, its path forged decisively the moment a stranger snatched my brother, and I could do nothing but watch.

For the symbol of that future to stand here smoking before me...it's almost more than I can stand.

The lot teems with activity as firefighters and police mill about, interviewing bystanders and doing whatever it is they do when someone's future lies in ruins.

Dramatic, maybe, but it's hard to get past the acrid stench of sulfur mixed with despair.

The windows are blown-out squares of ebony, blackened wood edging gaping maws into what were once classrooms and are now open to the sky. The parking lot is soaked from the thousands of gallons of water that were hosed in to battle the blaze. The office stands eerily intact, I supposed because the door had been closed. Everything else, the paper airplanes that hung from the ceiling, the cubbies, the cushions in the Quiet Room...all gone.

"Here. Drink this." Remi pushes a to-go cup of coffee into my hand and without overthinking it, I sip. It's one from home, his own brew, sweet and smooth, with a hint of hazelnut

and vanilla. He prepared it exactly the way I like it, three sweeteners and two creamers.

A sob strangles in my throat, and I turn my head away from my school. So much has changed since the day I met Oscar. Today, it feels like too much.

I just want to start walking.

A few feet away, he's talking to the insurance adjuster about what the lead investigator from the fire department told him a few hours ago—they're positive it's arson. It was too sloppy to be otherwise, and they were able to draw a quick conclusion.

It doesn't make sense. Who would target a daycare? And why mine, or did that even matter?

Most concerning of all, is the fear that maybe this has something to do with the other attacks, weeks ago, on the daycare. We had assumed the person responsible for those was dead, that it was the same culprit who had attempted to kidnap one of my students from school grounds.

But what if they weren't related, at all? What if there was some other reason someone had broken into my building, and had then stolen my laptop from my car? Is that much coincidence possible? That I'd be targeted by two different people?

A little voice niggles in my ear, taunting.

What if they are related? Because if there's no such thing as coincidence, as Oscar likes to insist, then isn't that even worse?

What if it's just not over?

“Neve.” With a start, I realize Remi is speaking. I raise my head and blink tears from the smoke away.

“Yes?”

“You okay?”

I'm fine. Everything's fine.

“Yes. I'm just going to take a walk, I think.” He starts to step forward with me, and I pause him with a hand on his arm and a smile that I'm sure doesn't quite manage to reach my eyes. “Sorry... I just need to be alone for a moment. I'll be fine.”

Remi nods, understanding as ever, and I walk away. I make a wide berth of all of the officers and firemen, working my way around the side toward the rear of the building, where a good chunk of the exterior wall still rises toward the sky in a mute middle finger to the arsonist.

We're still here, it says.

You didn't get all of us.

I'm pretty sure Oliver disappeared in this direction earlier. He doesn't have any fire experience, so he was probably just checking to see if there was anything to be scavenged. He's like all of us...he just wants to do something. Anything.

I feel helpless, and I see the same helplessness on the faces of each—

Oliver.

As I round the corner to the back of the structure, I see Oliver grappling with a stranger in a camouflage poncho, their movements brutal and efficient. The man is smaller and slight, but agile and strong.

“Oscar! Jesse! Guys—come help!” I hover between going for help and running to Oliver. His gaze flashes to me at the sound of my voice, his momentary distraction allowing the other man the break he needed to tear loose of his grip.

“Fuck! Get the hell out of here, Neve!”

In a second’s time, the man grabs a thin plank from the ground and whips it across Oliver’s face before fleeing in the opposite direction.

I run to him, mumbling a litany of curses beneath my breath, and for once, not caring, Remi and Oscar bearing down on me from behind. I slide to my knees beside him, pulling him into my lap.

He’s unconscious and blood pours from a wound across his forehead, slickening my fingers as I try without success to find and close the gaping flesh. “Oliver?” My fingers probe for a pulse, and I don’t know if it’s the blood or my own panic, but I can’t find it.

I look up as Oscar skids to the ground beside us.

“Help me.”



FOUR

Jesse

I LINGER OUTSIDE THE hospital entrance, not wanting to go back in. While the group of friends I call my family all rushed inside to wait together for word on Oliver's injuries, I find myself at a stalemate outside—unable or unwilling to be in there with them with the glaring lights and the loud beeping coming from various machines. The stillness of life-or-death hanging in the air makes for an uncomfortable atmosphere, especially coming on the heels of my own incarceration right here in this very hospital.

Serving as a reminder, my shoulder twinges, and I rub at it absently.

I take a walk around the weird-ass beach vibe hospital, which looks more like a high school than a medical facility. Maybe that's their way of trying to put people at ease. It doesn't work.

My career Navy parents moved around so much while I was growing up that I never stayed anywhere long enough to put

down roots and make the friends and connections necessary to be able to comfortably deal with these types of situations.

Being in the service myself didn't help. Sure, I heard of people I knew getting hurt on active duty, but none of those narratives happened directly to me, and they seemed distant and disconnected from my own life. The news was always passed on passively, usually after the fact. I've never had to sit and wait like this before.

Not even with Maria.

I need to be moving. Doing something. Not sitting and wondering what's happening.

Sipping at the godawful insta-machine coffee Remi bought everyone—his way of dealing with stuff is by trying to feed everyone—I try to clear my head of everything that's going on inside. But it's futile; I resent this wait for answers about Ollie's condition and the inevitable guessing game at what his recovery may be like.

It's excruciating.

Fuck, I hate hospitals.

This...the fire at the daycare...it all leaves a gut-wrenching uncertainty to settle in the pit of my stomach.

I knew it was all too good to be true.

I stop and stare at the patch of woods that starts beside the hospital and then stretches into the distance. Somewhere, on the other side of those trees, is the old ambulance garage where we saved the little girl who was abducted.

That's where I ended the Lost Boys killer and got shot in the process.

I hear a scuffling noise behind me and turn instinctively, muscles tensed, ready to fight. It's almost a reflex action, a trait from my military days, but with everything that's been going on, my senses are extra primed.

As it turns out, it's only Cope, carrying his own cup of coffee. Probably just as well, as I'd have likely scared the living daylights out of a random passer-by.

He raises his hands, cup and all, in a 'whoa' gesture.

"Jesus, Cope. Don't sneak up on people like that."

He rolls his eyes. "People aren't the problem, Jesse; that's all you."

Normally I'd have argued, if only for the hell of it. But not today. "Is there any news about Oliver yet?"

Cope purses his lips, then looks away before shaking his head. "No, he was taken for some tests, and they haven't brought him back yet. They keep talking about MRIs and CT scans; honestly, I don't even know what those are."

"So, has he woken up?"

"Not yet."

My eyebrows draw down. "Then why are you bugging me?"

Cope lets out an audible sigh. "I came out to check on you, asshole."

It's my turn to roll my eyes. "You'd have been better off spending your time checking on Oz. Pretty sure he needs it more than me. And who's taking care of Neve?"

He jams his hands on his hips and looks at me with a hint of belligerence. "You'd know all this if you were inside with the rest of us."

Pressing my lips together, I gaze off into the distance again. "That isn't how I handle things."

When I glance back at Cope, he's got an eyebrow raised. "It doesn't feel like you're handling any of this, Jess, and you're just making the others worry more because you've taken off. None of us need that on top of everything else."

A heartfelt groan escapes as I rub my free hand over my face. "Fine! I'll come back in, even if it's only to get you off my back."

We walk back towards the entrance. "Wait," I say, stopping by some bushes so I can dump my coffee out.

Cope laughs and dumps out his, too. "I thought you military guys loved bad coffee."

I snort. "Remi's fucking spoiled me. I don't want to drink coffee this bad unless I am at war."

The sun is hot, bordering on unbearable, as we cross the parking lot of the hospital. Spring in the Keys can be miserable with its heat and humidity, and I'm almost looking forward to the storms that will undoubtedly come rolling in soon. They at least match my mood.

Cope leads the way to a way-too-bright waiting room, painted yellow to promote a sense of false cheer to combat the hushed melancholy of those who sit here in uneasy suspense. This is where we've all been confined since there are too many of us to all be in Oliver's room at the same time. Cope tried his best to charm the front desk attendant, but she was firm, so only Oz and Neve are with him, leaving the rest of us to pace the waiting room. Everything about it annoys me. What the fuck is the difference between pacing in here and pacing outside?

A crime show plays silently on the television in the corner. Who the hell thought that was a good idea when we've just been in the middle of the real fucking thing?

And then there's Remi, handing out drinks to the complete fucking strangers sitting on the couches since the rest of us already have something. I roll my eyes and shove my hands in my pockets.

How do people do this?

Just wait?

The door opens, and we all spin around, anticipation hanging in the air.

Oscar enters the waiting room, and the group becomes rigid, alert. But it's the look on his face that unnerves me the most. Oz can be an ass. I can't talk because I know I'm the same, but he is at least a strong leader. Dependable. Constant.

Right now, the look of jittery unease on Oz's face makes me plant my butt in a chair as I wait for him to tell us whatever it is he's bracing himself for.

FIVE

Neve



Mood: Need a place to hide...

I LOOK DOWN AT my cell phone, my gaze fixed on the definition filling the small screen.

Subdural hematoma: occurs when a blood vessel in the space between the skull and the brain (the subdural space) is damaged. Blood escapes from the blood vessel, leading to the formation of a blood clot (a hematoma) that places pressure on the brain and damages it.

“It’s manageable,” Oliver’s doctor, Dylan Marlowe, is saying. “...but it is something that may need treatment for the next few weeks. We would like to keep him here for observation for a while.”

The physician delivered the diagnosis several minutes ago in such a matter-of-fact manner that it’s difficult to connect his words to Oliver.

My Oliver:

It’s as if he sees hematomas all the time. As if they’re commonplace, ordinary things, and maybe they are. Maybe it’s as he suggests, and nothing to worry about. Oscar stands a few feet distant and talks to him now, his arms crossed over his chest, his attention unwavering on him, like he’s soaking in every word. While here I am, my mind wandering off on some rabbit trail after he brought me in for moral support.

What the hell is wrong with me?

The MRI showed a hematoma.

It feels like a line delivered in a medical show. Not real. Something to look up on my phone, but not something that actually concerns me.

And yet it does. Oliver has a fucking *brain bleed*.

And you're cussing.

Yeah, well, not like I have a daycare to worry about slipping up and using bad language at anymore, do I? Maybe I'll just use all the dirty words from here on out. Fuck, shit, damn... fuck.

Turning to the window in the private room we were led to, I start to cry. I can't believe we're back here in this godforsaken hospital, just weeks after being here for Jesse. The universe is laughing somewhere while I'm standing here crying, biting the inside of my cheek to keep my sobs silent, to keep Oscar from hearing me.

He does, anyway.

When the doctor leaves, Oscar walks over and pulls me back against his chest. He doesn't say anything, a fact for which I'm grateful. Doesn't ask me if I'm okay. He just holds me, his chin pressed against my hair and his arms strong and warm around me.

A long while later, he pulls away, squeezing my shoulders briefly. "I need to tell the others what's going on. Wait here for Ollie?"

I nod, my senses tuned to the quiet click of the door as it closes behind him. I stand at the window for a few more

minutes before sighing and lowering myself into the polyvinyl recliner beside the window. Leaning my head back against its dusty blue surface, I stare at the ceiling and wait.

Tears pool at the inner corners of my eyes, and I close my eyes.

The sounds in the hallway outside the room—a gurney wheeling by, the chatter of nurses, a high-pitched beep—blend together into a barely discernible mix.

I can't breathe. I need my cat.

Panic swirls at the edges of my consciousness, blurring them, turning them black. What if he doesn't wake up? What if—

Stop it.

You can so breathe.

Do it, damn it.

I concentrate on the pounding of my own heart. Leaning forward in the chair, I lace my fingers tightly together and focus on that rhythm.

IN one-two-three-four.

OUT one-two-three-four.

Box it up.

Put the panic away.

“I hope I'm not interrupting any prayers, sacraments, or naps.”

Already in the grip of the highest level of anxiety, I jump a good six inches off the chair, my eyes flying open.

The voice, deep and fast-paced, the words tumbling over one another like creek water over rocks, startles me. After everything I've been through in the last few weeks, my body reacts faster than my brain. I'm out of the chair, putting it between me and the source of the voice faster than I should have been able to move.

It belongs to a man, lean and hungry-looking in that way of people who want something and plan to have it, standing before me with a deceptively open expression that I imagine is designed to put me at ease.

It does anything but.

“Who are you?” I stand tensely, waiting.

“Easy, speed demon. The sharpest thing I have on me is my pen.”

I continue to watch him warily. I don't think he's here to harm me, but something about him sets me on edge, nonetheless. Every nerve flared to life as soon as he entered the room and spoke, and I vibrate with awareness still. It's like the sensation of electricity in the air before a lightning strike. “I think you're in the wrong room.”

Without turning his clear, pale brown gaze from mine, he pulls a piece of gum from his pocket, unwraps it, and places it in his mouth. “Are you Neve Murray?”

“Who wants to know?”

“That’ll be a ‘yes.’ I’m in the right room, Snow.”

I frown. “Snow?”

“That’s what Neve means.”

“How the hell do you—” I close my eyes and hold up my hand, stopping myself. I don’t care how he randomly knows the meaning of my name. He’s weird. I need him gone. “You need to leave. There are only two visitors allowed, and when Oscar comes back, you’ll be one too many.”

“Oz trained most of the security officers here. If he really wants back in, no one is going to stop him.”

I narrow my eyes, irritated. “That’s not precisely the point, you know. The rule exists for the good of the patient.”

Whoever this guy is, he seems to know a great deal about Oscar, down to his nickname, and I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing. Regardless, he makes me nervous. The last time anyone made me nervous, it was Oliver and the guys.

I don’t need anyone else making me fidgety and on edge.

He seems to sense this, lifting his hands and backing away a step. “Well, the patient is not exactly here right now,” he says, pointing to the empty bed. “But if the two-visitor rule is such a concern for you, I will leave the very millisecond either of the Hunts come back.”

“How do you know so much about my family?”

He lifts a brow. “Family, eh? Let’s just say we have a shared history.” His expression darkens, and his gaze focuses past me, on something distant, unseeable.

A sudden wave of fear hits me.

A thrill of cognition makes my fingers curl into the back of the chair.

“Are you...” I can’t even finish the question. I’m not even sure if I could handle the reality of the answer, if it’s what I’m afraid it is.

He tilts his head at me. His lips part, and then he closes them again, as if uncertain how to respond. He looks at the floor and then at the empty bed.

“Answer me this. Do you really think this was a random crime? The arson or the attack on Oliver?”

It’s my turn to open and close my mouth. “No,” I finally admit, “I don’t know what’s going on, but I don’t believe in coincidence.”

The man stalks closer until he’s standing directly beside me, the chair nothing more than something else forming a barrier between me, him, and the wall. Holding my breath, I manage to stand my ground without shrinking back.

Instead, I lift my eyes as he crowds me behind the chair, letting them travel up his chest at my eye level, past the hollow of his throat, to the clear amber brown of his gaze.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

His eyes dip down and focus briefly on my mouth before he pulls them away.

“You need to watch your step,” he says, his voice low and urgent. I battle the urge to lick my suddenly dry lips, struggling to focus on what he’s saying. “Listen to me and listen good, Snow. The cops fucked up. The man your boys framed isn’t the Lost Boys killer. He’s still out—”

My heart gives a hard pang.

Nicholas. “Killer?”

After a second’s hesitation, he gives a single clipped nod. “I know you know this. Trust your gut, Snow—”

“Nobody framed anyone! I was there. That man took that little girl.”

He shrugs, a negligible lift of his shoulder. “Maybe framed is too strong a word. It’s not the end of the story, though, and that’s the truth. There’s either a copycat, or he was working with—”

“Hey!”

The door crashes inward and against the wall. Oz fills the doorway, the look on his face one of rage.

Thankfully, it’s directed at the stranger.

He points at the guy next to me and jerks a thumb over his shoulder. “You. Out. Now.”

The man smirks at Oz and then sobers, directing his attention to me. “Think about what I said.”

For some reason, that seems to set Oz off. He grabs him by the shirt and slams him against the wall.

Whoever this guy is, he simply grins. “Come on, Hunt. You remember how this ended last time. Don’t make me kick your ass in front of your girl.”

I lift my hands and grip my hair, yanking on it. The pain helps, weirdly—it helps center me in this hellish day and keep me from completely losing my shit. “What the hell is happening right now—”

Oz glances over at me. “It’s nothing, angel face. This asshole is Beck Wilder, and he’s a reporter. We like to kick each other’s ass from time to time.” He grins at me, the expression that lights up his face faintly feral. “Keeps things interesting.”



SIX

Oscar

THIS IS WHAT YOU call a face-off. We're nose to nose, staring each other down, Wilder's breath hot on my skin.

A nurse peeks her head around the door, probably checking on the raised voices, and I relax and lower him to the ground, brushing him off roughly.

The last thing I need right now is to get thrown out of the hospital.

“Good choice, Hunt,” Beck says sarcastically.

Fuck, but this guy knows how to get under my skin. He saw the nurse, just like I did, and knows as well as I do that this is not the time or the place for a fight. But he always has to be the biggest ass in the room.

As I step back and the nurse retreats with a pointed warning look at both of us, Beck sticks his hand in his pocket and pulls out a business card. I'm tempted to knock it out of his fingers, but it's not me he offers it to, but Neve.

When I see his arm reaching toward her, I want to pull it from its socket and beat him to death with it, but I pull myself together. I have too much respect for women in general and Neve in particular to play the heavy and try to exert my own control over their free will. Though I can't pretend I don't feel a little irritated when she not only takes it but tucks it carefully away in her purse.

She's just being polite. She was raised down here in the south with the rest of us and was taught not to be rude, I'm sure.

"Think about what I said and call me," Beck says, miming putting a phone to his ear.

What the hell has he been saying to her?

Beck grins and shows me his middle finger before walking out of the room, stuffing his hands in his pockets like he doesn't have a care in the world.

I drag in a breath, attempting to get a handle on the rage I'm feeling, because I don't want to end up taking it out on Neve. She already looks like she expects me to lash out at her, but it's not her fault that Beck Wilder snuck in here. The idea puts an unexpected ache in my chest, and I rub at it as if it's a physical pain.

She's such a fucking sweetheart.

Shaking my head, I resolve to have some strong words with security about Beck sliding in. It could have been anyone, after all. My brother's just been attacked, and Neve's daycare

was destroyed, so the idea that it's so easy to get to either of them here doesn't sit right.

Beck probably heard about what happened to Oliver from a police scanner and then pieced everything together from there, but what if it had been someone else?

I put those thoughts aside and turn to Neve. "I'm sorry about the way I reacted. That was out of line. My only excuse is that I'm a little jumpy after what's happened, and Beck Wilder has no business here. He doesn't need to take all of this and sensationalize it for a story."

Neve purses her lips and nods, but she doesn't meet my eyes. That fucker said something that's gotten to her.

Bastard.

Wilder's been like a fucking cockroach lately—there every time I turn around. I won't stand for him doing that to Neve. Although, come to think of it, Beck has been borderline harassing me for the past two or three years. "Look, Wilder has this stupid theory that the man we caught isn't the Lost Boys Kidnapper."

Neve finally looks at me, giving a slow nod. "He told me the same thing."

"He's just digging for a story, Neve. One that isn't there." One that I don't want to be there.

"Do you think it's wise to just write him off, Oscar?" She chews on the side of her lip, obviously unsettled. "Oliver did

say that the guy's voice didn't sound right. And what does Beck Wilder have to gain from stirring stuff up?"

I drag my hands through my hair, frustrated, and pace a couple of steps. "A big story. A scoop. A paycheck. Come on, Neve, you know what these damn reporters are like. Besides, Ollie was just a little kid when all that happened; he could be remembering things wrongly."

I can tell by the look on Neve's face that she's not completely convinced, but I'm not sure if that's because of the things Beck has said to her or Oliver. I know one of my brother's biggest peeves is people discrediting his memories.

I run a tired hand over my face. It's been a stressful day, and the last thing I need to be worrying about is whether or not the press will push to have the Lost Boys case reopened.

As lead detective on a case as high profile and emotive as this one, being wrong about something as big as this could tank a lot more than just my career. It would mean my reputation. My personal and professional credibility. My ethics in general, because if I fuck up something like that, I didn't just screw up. I must have turned a blind eye, right?

If I'm wrong...

God, I can't even think about it.

Especially when my brother still isn't back from all the tests they're running.

Suddenly it all seems like too much, and a glance at Neve's pale, drawn face tells me she's feeling the same.

That's when I remember...

I pull out my wallet, rummaging through the slots, hoping to find a special card I was given.

Yes! There it is. It's not much to look at. A plain white rectangle of plastic with the hospital name written in bold, blue letters.

It's an access card. For use by police officers during emergencies.

There's a place I know where it's quiet and private, but if I use it, the security department will know... On the other hand, those fuckers owe me since they let Beck in here.

Decision made, I grab Neve's hand and pull her along behind me.

"Where are we going?" she asks as I swipe my way through doors that have private access, areas with big signs saying, 'authorized personnel only,' and elevators that state they're restricted but whose lights turn green when I press the card against the sensor.

Finally, we end up on the roof, where the sun is setting. The sky is ablaze with fingers of yellow and orange which reach into a sky the dusky rose shade of an overripe peach, flecked with small lavender clouds.

I lead Neve to a spot beyond the stairwell opening where I know there's a gap in the security feed, and then lean against the brick wall, pull her into my arms, and just hold her.

This. This is what I needed, and what she needed, as well. Contact. Privacy. Just a few goddamned minutes to reassure each other that Ollie's going to be okay, and we're going to be all right, too.

She sags against me, and I can feel her small frame quaking, the strain of the day relinquishing its hold. She's tried so hard to keep it all together.

I know how she feels. It's hard to be strong all the time.

My arms go around her, and I hold her tight, but I can't shake the feeling of foreboding that hangs over me.

SEVEN

Neve



Mood: I don't know what I'm supposed to do.

I FEEL LIKE MY entire life is falling apart.

Like there is some invisible puppeteer who has been pulling the strings all along, and now he's decided to cut them so that everything collapses around me and crumbles in the wake of my previous happiness.

Was it only this morning that my world was happy and whole?

It seems like forever ago. Like the earth has shifted on its axis and nothing will ever be the same again.

My head is whirling, but there are too many thoughts for me to focus on just one.

I've barely had time to come to terms with everything that's happened in the past few weeks. Finding the abducted girl, believing I was going to be shot by the Lost Boys kidnapper. Jesse getting shot while he struggled to protect us from the perpetrator, and the subsequent stress of waiting to find out if he would be charged for the guy's death.

I've barely had time to breathe a sigh of relief that it's all behind us.

And the hits keep on coming this morning. The daycare I built from scratch has been destroyed, burned to the ground by someone bent on destroying me. Oliver was hurt and there's this interminable wait to find out his condition. And now

there's this Beck Wilder character and his insistence that everything is not as it seems, that the Lost Boys case is not closed, and the man who abducted those boys is not the one who is dead.

I really don't know what to think about that. Maybe because everything inside me rebels against the thought of this not being finished.

The facts speak for themselves, though.

Regardless of anything else, there is one truth I can't wiggle around...one thing I keep coming back to.

Oliver was hurt because of me.

Because he was there, with me at my daycare, which someone deliberately set fire to.

Why?

To lure me out?

To lure Oliver out?

Hell, if I'm honest with myself, then even Jesse was injured because of me. Because he was protecting me.

I swipe angrily at the tears that insist on leaking from my eyes and groaning, press the heels of my hands into my eye sockets. All of this comes back to a single truth.

These guys have been thrown into danger because of me.

All of this is my fault.

None of them were involved until I came on the scene.

Well, Oscar was, I know. But that's not the same. That was in his capacity as a cop. That was his job.

The rest is trouble I've brought their way, and I just can't deal with that anymore. Not now the stakes have just been upped. Not with this new wave of destruction.

Because if it isn't over, all I'm doing is continuing to put them in danger, and that means there's only one thing I can do —

I have to leave.

I can't believe I'm even thinking it. It took me so long to settle into the thought of being theirs, to be comfortable with the understanding that we were a unit, a *family*...not just a series of open relationships okay with dating several people at once.

Once the idea takes shape, it takes root. I know beyond any doubt: I have to leave. It's the only thing I can do if I want to ensure their safety and keep them separate from my mess. And it doesn't have to be for forever...not if they accept my decision for the logic behind it, and don't let themselves be led by emotion.

My whole body shudders at the idea. Jesse's going to be furious. Oscar, too, probably.

Oscar feels the war waging beneath my skin and tightens his arms around me, and suddenly all I can think of that this could be the last time I feel this kind of love and security.

It might be the last time I have one of them hold me, protect me.

Love me.

Blindly, I lift my head and search out his lips.

I know this is neither the time nor the place, but I'm desperate.

Desperate for one last taste.

Oscar's mouth crushes down on mine, and I can taste his own desperation, though I know that comes from a different place. Worry about his brother. But maybe that means he needs to experience this reaffirmation just as much as I do.

I pull at his clothes, untucking his shirt and shoving my hands beneath so they can feast on his skin.

We devour each other, finally allowing all the pent-up emotions we've been harboring to come bursting out.

Oscar fists his fingers in my hair, his tongue tangling with mine, urgent, demanding.

I drag my nails down his back, and he rears against me, throwing his head back and groaning into the humid spring air.

I don't think. I don't want to. Instead, I take the opportunity to unbutton his fly.

"Neve..." His voice holds confusion as well as caution, and he makes a half-hearted attempt to stop me, but I evade him, and he doesn't try any harder.

I think I've shocked him, but he already has a semi, and when I curl my fingers around his cock and pump a couple of times, he grows and thickens against my hand and inhales an audible breath.

An urgency borne of despair rages through my soul. I know we're in a public space, but that just adds to the edge I'm feeling.

I'm already wet and ready for him and send up a prayer of thanks that I'm wearing a sundress. All I have to do is hitch it up and drop my panties to the ground, where I kick them free of my shoes.

I stand on tiptoes and urge him closer. These things always sound so simple when you read them in books. It's not that easy, but I'm determined to make it happen.

I lift one leg, and curl it around his thigh until I can feel his hard length nudging against my folds, and he obligingly hitches me up, using the brick wall behind us as a support.

Some adjusting, a hard push, and he's there. I grab hold of his buttocks and pull him fully toward me, then sigh as I feel him fill me.

"Neve..." he says again.

I'm feeling reckless. I don't want to hear words of reproof or admonition, so I cut him off.

"Fuck me, Oz," I demand, knowing he'll never deny me. "I need to feel...alive." It's not the whole truth, and maybe I'll

feel guilty later, but right now, this is everything I want and need.

Oscar's arms go around me, and he holds me tight, burying his face into my neck. His teeth sink into the fleshy curve where it joins my shoulder with a sharp nip that will leave a mark, and I know he's feeling the same darkness and desperation I am. Maybe mine has rubbed off on him.

His hips snap against mine, and I cry out. "Yesss..."

And that's it. He pistons into me, fucking me hard and fast against the wall like his life depends on it. I reach up and grip the edge of the step above us, holding on for dear life as he pounds me into the wall.

There's no tenderness and indulgence here. It's a raw and animalistic coupling. Sex at its most instinctual.

A reaffirmation of our base nature.

The position we're in, the close confines, every abrupt stroke of his cock drags against my clit, and it's not long before I feel my climax coiling within me.

Releasing the step to grab hold of Oscar's hair, none too gently I pull his head back and kiss him as the wave crashes over me. He tenses against me, his body going rigid, and I know he's found his own release.

For a long moment we just stay there, unmoving, catching our breath and holding each other tight.

I'm so conflicted right now, I wonder if he can feel my ambivalence.

He withdraws and tucks himself away, and I feel the stickiness of his seed as I find my panties on the ground and find a clean spot to wipe myself, then eye them dubiously before tucking them away in my purse. I'm not putting dirty underwear back on, as much as I hate going commando.

Oscar sends me a measuring look. "Not that I'm complaining, but what the hell was that?"

The sliver of shame that flits through my conscience has me closing my eyes against the question. "I love you."

Brushing past him, I head back the way we came, pausing when I reach the auto-locked passage. "We need to get back."



EIGHT

Oliver

I CAN HEAR A metallic sound. It's light and tinkling, coming and going with the breeze. It wakes me, and I open my eyes to the sight of childish drawings chalked onto the wooden ceiling above my head. There are stick figures fighting pirates, dinosaurs with sharp teeth, and even one-eyed aliens.

There's also a near-suffocating heat that makes me sweat through my clothes.

Childish laughter sounds, and I follow it with my eyes to the middle of the room, where three boys stand, grubby and barefoot, calling to me.

"Wake up, Slightly," one of the boys shouts. "It's almost time for breakfast!"

He has a dirty face and even dirtier feet. I know his name is 'Wish-Wash,' but I can't remember why.

And 'Slightly' is me. Except it's not. Not really. My name is Oliver. Oliver Hunt. I have a father and a brother, Oscar, or Oz for short. He's older than me and usually calls me Ollie...

well, he used to, in those days when we were together. I hold these facts close to my heart, repeating them often, in case I forget. Because every day the memories of them float further and further away on the ocean that surrounds this island, and if I lose them, I feel like I'll be losing myself.

I sigh and climb down from the wooden bunk. The one opposite to mine belongs to Nicky...otherwise known as Fins for his swimming skills. He's a fucking fish. He's younger than me, though not by much, maybe a year, but he's been here for longer.

It's hard to tell how much time passes since every day is the same, and there's no way of telling them apart. No school, no routine, no bath nights, no weekdays or weekends. Just an endless cycle of day in, day out...the only thing that ever changes is the weather...and sometimes the boys who live here.

Nicky and I try to scratch a mark every time we see the full moon, but I know we've missed a few.

I look at him as we both follow the other boys who are yelling, and running, and jumping about like the monkeys I saw at the zoo in the time before I came here. None of us see things like that now because we're not allowed free movement off this island.

His hair is too-long and tangled, his face dirty, and his feet bare. I know I look exactly the same.

We all do.

But I'm not as wild as the other boys, and neither is Nicky, although he joins in sometimes. I think it's all for show. You're better off if you blend in here.

We pass more cabins, which each have a homemade flag hanging from a pole. There's a crowing sound like a rooster, and more boys spill out, pushing and hollering, answering the rooster call that pushes us forward toward a building in the distance.

The ground is rough. Sticks and stones and pieces of shell crunch under my feet, but it doesn't hurt anymore. The skin is too tough now.

Nothing hurts anymore, in fact. Not until I remember my family and let myself think about how I don't belong here.

I don't call out like the others. I don't push. I just follow because bad things happen if you don't. Nicky knows this, too, and we walk quietly together, trying not to draw attention to ourselves.

When we get to the other building, there's an older boy there, wearing a costume made of fake autumn leaves in orange, yellow, and brown that overlap each other. We don't really have a fall here—it stays green year-round—and there are no stores or other inhabitants, so I don't know where he would have gotten the fake leaves. I push the stray thought away. It doesn't matter.

What matters is survival.

I look at the older boy and grin, raising my arm and cheering.

He is the wildest and the loudest of them all.

He is also the safest. Except for Nicky.



I FIND MYSELF STARING at a sterile white ceiling as my eyes flicker open. I think that's what it is, anyway. Everything is fuzzy, and the lights hurt my eyes. I try to blink away the pain, but it doesn't work. Things slowly start drifting into focus, though, and that's when I look around.

I'm surrounded by pale blue walls, various pieces of medical equipment, and an IV attached to my arm, which is hooked up to a bag labeled potassium.

A hospital, then?

I try to recall what brought me here, but trying to think just makes my head thump even more.

I'm just starting to wonder if there's a call button somewhere when the door opens, and Oz walks through it, followed by Neve.

"You're back," he says, cutting a sheepish glance at our girl.

"You're awake," Neve blurts out at the same time, and from the blush staining her cheeks, a look I've always adored on her right from the start, I can guess what they've been up to.

“You couldn’t have waited for me?” I ask with a grin, my voice slightly hoarse.

Neve hurries to my side without replying, fussing with the bed controls and my pillows so I can sit up easier. She fetches me a glass of water, which I sip gratefully. But I can’t help noticing that she seems unusually preoccupied.

Oz is quiet too, but that’s his way. He’s looking on with a grave expression, and I know he’s beating himself up inside for not keeping me safe. He’s always taken on way too much responsibility for my well-being. I’m an adult now, and I’m not his responsibility. I never have been.

“This wasn’t your fault,” I tell him, squinting my eyes against the harshness of the overhead lamps. Out of the corner of my eye, I can’t help but notice Neve’s flinch in response.

She flicks the lights off, turning on a different light behind the bed instead and adjusting the blinds so they’re only allowing the diffused evening sunlight to illuminate the room.

Oscar drops his head and blows out a breath. “I should have realized there was more to the fire than a simple accident. Checked it was safe before we all went traipsing over there. But why didn’t you call for help?”

I shake my head and then wince at the pain the movement causes. “Someone knocked me out. There wasn’t an opportunity to call for help.”

Neve frowns. “No, that’s not right. When I came around the side of the building, you were fighting with someone wearing

a poncho-thingie. It was my fault. My presence distracted you, and that's when you got hit."

"The only person to blame here is the person who did all this. Nobody else," I tell them both decisively. "And anyway, that's not how I remember it. I got hit, I know, but I never saw you, Neve."

Neve frowns. "You don't remember seeing me? You looked up—"

I shake my head slightly. I don't remember.

Oz purses his lips, and it's almost like I can see his thoughts ticking over in his mind. "Maybe you had already been struck before Neve came around the building," he says. "And the reason you didn't call out was because you were already dazed by the initial blow. You have two different contusions." He steps forward and touches my head lightly, once on the forehead and once on the side of my head.

Neve makes a small noise and I look up to see her hand pressed against her mouth. She shakes her head. "I didn't realize—" she says. "It makes sense. He was so much smaller than you. I remember being surprised that he was able to hold his own against you. He must have caught you off guard."

"From what the doctor says, I'm surprised you were even able to fight after he got you the first time," Oscar finishes.

I rub at my temple and let out a long, low groan as my head continues to pound. "I wish I knew. I don't remember the second hit, but God, do I feel it. What else did the doctor say?"

The two of them look at each other, and I immediately know I'm not going to like it.

Neve clears her throat, and although she looks my way, her gaze is off somewhere over my shoulder. "You have a subdural hematoma. I'm afraid you're probably going to be in the hospital for a little while, but don't worry. I'll visit as often as I'm allowed."

"*We* will all be visiting as much as we can," Oscar corrects, but from the look of anguish on Neve's face, I can already tell that something completely different is going on in her head.

She seems to wilt in front of us, sucking in and blowing out her breath like she's bracing herself to tackle something difficult, but it becomes so rapid she's in danger of hyperventilating.

"Neve..." I lean forward, trying to reach out, my every sense screaming that there's something seriously wrong. But it's a bad move because the sudden movement sends pain searing through my brain, and I fall back onto the pillows with an agonized cry. "Arghh!"

Neve looks horrified, as though she is somehow to blame. Her eyes are wide and turbulent, their usually clear green deepened to the color of a stormy sea.

Her face crumples, and she covers it with her hands. "Th-this is all my fault."

The words are muffled and hard to make out between her hands and her stuttering breath. "I feel like trouble is following

me. I'm bad for you guys."

She drops her hands, and her face is red and blotchy, her eyes full of tears. "I need... I need to get away from everything...before something worse happens."

Silence greets her words, Oz and I both stunned at what she's suggesting.

A monitor beeps and it's as though a storm breaks.

"Neve—" I start.

Oz interrupts, standing up. "Hold on here. You're going to take a little break, is that it? From...not everything. *Everyone*. You would really only be taking time away from us," my brother bites out. "Right? Leave us high and dry the moment things get a little tough?"

Neve's chin goes up.

"Oz..." I warn. Neve is clearly spooked. This isn't going to help.

He's not in the mood to listen, though. "Don't, Ollie. This is stupid. Some guy attacks you, and she's acting like it's all her fault."

"It is my fault!" Neve protests, her voice high and thready. Even if it's a copycat, this still comes down to me." She flattens her hand on her chest, her eyes fastening desperately on Oz. "You have to believe me, Oz, this is not what I want to do. It's what I have to do...what's best for everyone, safest for ___"

“You are fucking kidding me!” Oz curses and drags his fingers through his hair, but I’m completely lost. “I’m a fucking cop, Neve! Don’t talk to me about safety! You’re with us because it’s safest for you—”

“But it’s not fucking safest for you—”

“Why are you fucking cursing, goddammit?” Oz looks to be a breath away from picking her up and shaking her, but he keeps himself in check, balling his hands into fists and anchoring them on top of his skull.

“Because I don’t have a preschool anymore, goddammit!”

“Goddammit!”

My eyes ping from one to the other “What the hell am I missing?”

Oz shakes his head, lowering his hands and flexing his fingers. “It’s nothing. Fucking Beck Wilder got to her and filled her head with nonsense, and now she’s behaving like a damned idiot.”

“Don’t talk about her like that!”

My shout silences the room., but it’s not without repercussions, and the effort makes me dizzy.

I screw up my eyes and drag in a steady breath. I can hear Oz’s heavy, angry breathing and the fractured sobs Neve tries to stifle, and I try to inject a modicum of calm into the tense atmosphere of the room.

“It’s Neve’s choice, Oz,” I say quietly. “Staying or going... that’s always been Neve’s choice. And if I’m not mistaken... it’s not permanent.”

Maybe I’m in a heightened state of awareness right now, but it’s like there’s electricity arcing through the room. It feels unstable and dangerous.

“Is that what you really want?” Oz asks, his tone arctic. Jesus, where the hell is his sensitivity when we need it? This kind of attitude is *not* going to help.

Neve hesitates, and I relax slightly. We’ve been through too much together, the six of us, but in the past few weeks, everything has been wonderful. Better than wonderful.

There’s no way she’ll throw that away.

Her next three words are a whisper, but they still have the power to blow up the room. I gape at her, stunned, barely believing what I just heard.

“Yes, it is.”



NINE

Remi

THE MAN I'M SITTING next to laughs a little and looks down into the styrofoam cup in his hands before lifting it to his lips. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Calling him a 'man' is a bit of a stretch since he's significantly younger than me. Probably by more than a decade. He's little more than a kid.

He's looking notably worse for the wear, too, with a black eye, a busted lip, and other grazes and bruises on his face. Then again, I guess we *are* in a hospital.

He caught my eye because he can't seem to sit still. He's been fidgeting restlessly since he got here, pacing the length of the room steadily. That's why I brought him a drink. He's clearly agitated, and I understand just how he feels. He must be waiting to hear about someone like I am about Ollie.

I understand, of course, why Neve and Oz are the only ones who can be in the room with Ollie, but that leaves the rest of us to just sit here in the waiting room and twiddle our thumbs.

For once, I have no idea what to do with myself, and no idea how to help anyone else. Especially when Jesse disappeared on us and Cope went to find him, leaving me here on my own.

So, I struck up a conversation with this guy since he's been told to take a seat and wait. It felt natural to fall back on my hospitality background and get him a drink or something to help calm him a bit, which in turn led to the current conversation.

I give him a wry smile. "Try me," I say. "So many unbelievable things have happened recently that I doubt you could tell me anything as inconceivable as my own experiences. Besides, I could use a distraction right now."

He looks past me, out of the window, his eyes distant, like he's looking internally at his memories rather than anything in the here and now. I can see the shadows crossing his face.

"I wouldn't be so sure," he tells me. "I've been living on an island for years now. So many I can't even tell you how long...against my will. I got injured escaping."

Okay, so maybe I was wrong when I said nothing could shock me, because his revelation stuns me to silence.

Before I can collect myself and find the words I need to answer him, the emergency room doors burst open, banging against the wall, and Neve comes through, walking rapidly, her footsteps brisk on the hard-tiled floor.

She doesn't stop when she sees me, just looks and glances away with an expression I can't decipher.

I know something is wrong, though.

Very badly wrong.

I jump to my feet and take off after her. She hurries through the outer doors of the hospital just as Cope and Jesse are coming in from another walk, but she ignores them, too.

At least it's not just me. Although, I'm not sure if that makes it better or worse.

Fuck! Is it Oliver? I hesitate, wondering if I should go back and find out.

Jesse grabs her shoulders, and she jerks away. "What's going on?" he demands.

"Stop—" she says.

"Is it Oliver?" Cope asks, echoing my unspoken thoughts.

Neve starts to cry, and a shiver of apprehension has goosebumps breaking out over my skin despite the evening's heat.

"Give her some space, Jesse," I say quietly as I join the three of them. It's obvious something isn't right.

He doesn't look convinced, and I understand that he wants to put his arms around her and shield her from all the bad things life throws at us. I feel the same myself, but that's not what Neve wants right now.

"Let her go." We all look around in surprise at the terseness in Oz's voice. I've seen Oscar in a lot of moods, but never one

quite like this. He's one scary-looking motherfucker right now.

“What's going on?” I ask, wondering how bad the news must be for them both to be behaving so out of character.

When he answers, his gaze fixed on Neve, it's not what I expect, though.

Not even close.

“She's leaving us.”

“I'm not—“ Neve starts and stops. “It's not like that, and you know it,” she finishes quietly.

“Neve.” Jesse's voice is oddly quiet. “Don't do this.” He tugs her to him, burying her face in his chest with one big hand. She reaches up and grips his forearms with her hands, then pulls away, just far enough to pull his face down to hers until mere breath separates them.

I look away, unable to watch the raw emotion between them. I'm close enough to hear her whispered words, though. “This is not me leaving you, Jesse Russo.” I glance back to see her gaze gripping his in a fierce hold. “This is me loving you.” She turns to look at Cope. “And you.” Her voice breaks as she transfers her looks to me. “I love you, all of you. And I will be back.”

Nostrils flaring with restrained sobs, she strides swiftly away and rushes across the parking lot as we all stare after her in confused shock.

I can't even get my mind around what's just occurred. Instinct has me taking a step to follow her, and Cope along with me, but Oz grabs my arm.

"Leave her." He says it like it's an order, his stern military persona punching through his usually reasonable character, and I look at him in surprise.

I look from where Neve is hurrying away from us to each of the others.

Jesse's jaw is clenched, a tight and dark anger washing over his face. I don't know the reason for Neve's exit, but even with her declaration the chances of him forgiving her are slim.

Cope's eyes are wide and confused. He wears his heart on his sleeve, and his hurt is plain.

"What the fuck is going on?" I ask Oz. "Is it Oliver? Is he okay?" I can't imagine what else could have spooked her like this.

Oz turns a stony gaze away from Neve as she disappears out of sight. I can feel the chill of it like a storm cloud just covered the sun.

"Oliver will be fine," he says. "He'll just need to stay for a few days of observation. Neve..."

He pauses and looks over to where she last was, even though we can no longer see her. "She talked to that fucking reporter."

Jesse frowns. "Beck Wilder?" At least he's engaging in the conversation, which is more than I expected.

“The one and only,” Oz replies bitterly. “He’s filled her head with some bullshit about there still being a danger or some other crap, so now she thinks we’re safer without her. She thinks this is all her fault.”

Cope fists his hair in both his hands and swings around in the direction she disappeared. “The hell? She’s obviously not thinking straight. We need to go after her.”

I shake my head, even though a blend of sadness, anger, and understanding are stirring up inside me, each vying for supremacy. “We’ve told Neve from the beginning that she could leave at any time. We need to respect that now she’s chosen to,” I remind him.

Jesse scoffs. “She’s decided to leave an established relationship instead of letting us support her. Pretty much says it all, don’t you think? Why would you want to chase after someone who does that to you?”

Yeah, that’s more the response I expected from him. “What she’s doing comes from a place of love, Jesse. She thinks she’s protecting us.”

He snorts. “But she doesn’t trust us to protect *her*, clearly,” he retorts, so much sarcasm dripping from his voice that I already know even if Neve turned around and came back this very second, admitting she freaked out and had made a mistake, he probably wouldn’t accept it.

Accept her.

I don't even want to think about where that will leave us if we manage to get this mess sorted out.

“Well, we should follow her for the same reason—because we love her,” Cope argues. “With the daycare burned down, Oliver hurt, and Beck saying God knows what, she's obviously had a knee-jerk reaction and not thought things through. We need to set her straight.”

“Little bit patronizing, don't you think, Cope?” I ask. “If Neve thinks this is the best decision for herself, who are we to second guess her?”

“Yeah, fine time to start making her own decisions,” Jesse mutters under his breath. “What the hell is she going to do? Go back to her apartment?” He stares off into the direction she took, and inwardly I smile. For all his anger, I'd lay money that Jesse will be in front of her apartment tomorrow morning, if only to reassure himself that she's okay. Oz, too. That's just the way they're built.

“Yeah, well, you were the one who pushed her to do that, Jesse, and now she has. She's made her decision, and we all just have to live with it,” Oz yells before stomping away, back into the hospital and to Oliver.

“I feel so useless,” Cope gripes. “First the fire, then Oliver, now Neve. I wish there was something we could do.”

“Actually, maybe there is,” I tell him. “I was talking to a young guy in the waiting room, and he was telling me that he got injured escaping from an island where he'd been held.”

Cope sucks in an audible breath. “Are you fucking shitting me?”

“That’s what he said.” This will take all our minds off this whole clusterfuck, if nothing else.

“Don’t be so fucking gullible,” Jesse grouses. “More like he’s another damn reporter faking it to get a story since Neve and Oliver’s names have been all over the newspapers recently.”

“He doesn’t come across as a reporter, Jesse. Hear him out at least. It might be important.”

Cope rubs the back of his neck. “Besides, what if he’s telling the truth? If there’s even the slightest chance that he is, then we can’t just let that go. If the Lost Boys Kidnapper didn’t take his victims all the way to mainland Florida, then there could be an island somewhere, like the police always suspected. This guy might be able to help us find it because if the killer’s dead, then maybe the boys are escaping. If we can establish that, then not only can we help the boys and give Oliver some peace of mind, but we can help confirm to Neve that we got the right guy, so she’ll come back to us.”

He’s so damn hopeful that even Jesse doesn’t say anything to burst his bubble, merely looks at him with a weary expression. “Fine. I’ll go along with it...for now,” he says grudgingly.

The three of us make our way back to the waiting room to talk to the guy, and I’m thankful he’s still there.

“These are my friends, Jesse and Cope,” I say as we all sit down close to him. “I was telling them your story.”

“What’s your name, kid?” Jesse asks, his manner anything but friendly. “Tell us about yourself.”

The young man looks at us from one to the other before settling on Jesse. “My name is Spencer Wilton, and I’m nineteen years old.” He glances around, his expression peevish. “I’m here to see the doctor but I’ve been here forever.”

Jesse bites out a short laugh. “Bullshit. You look like you’re about twelve.” Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. Jesse’s never been the most diplomatic, and right now, he’s more riled up than usual.

But Spencer just laughs, although it’s devoid of humor. “Yeah, well, we weren’t encouraged to eat all our fruit and veggies on the island.”

Cope’s been tapping away on his phone, and now he holds it up to show an article that he’s just googled, about a Spencer Wilton being taken twelve years before when he had just turned seven. “The timeline fits, Jesse.”

Jesse shakes his head. “No. He’s too old. The kidnapper always took little kids. Why would he have had a nineteen-year-old hanging around? Even Ollie said they were all kids.”

“But he doesn’t look old,” Cope argues. “Maybe it’s their appearance that means something to the kidnapper, and besides, how likely is it that these boys are able to keep track

of birthdays? Even Oliver said he didn't know how long he'd been there until he got out and someone told him."

"I think we should take it to the authorities and let them decide," I say, seeing that this argument is going nowhere except around in circles.

It's the wrong thing to say. Spencer suddenly looks spooked, his fidgeting worsens, and I worry he's about to take off.

"No!" He's very vocal in his denial, and a few people turn to look at us. "I'm an adult. I don't have to do anything I don't want to. I just want to move on with my life."

"Too bad, kid," Jesse snaps. "You say you're an adult? Well, adults have responsibilities, and you have a responsibility toward any other boys who've been left behind."

We exchange a look and I see a truth he doesn't want to own up to simmering in his gaze. He might not say so outright, but it's as much about getting answers for Neve's peace of mind as it is about the kids.

"You're not the boss of me," Spencer declares, slumping down in the chair with his arms folded and sounding every inch the child he claims he isn't. It's pretty clear he's not going to agree to any of our reasoning, but equally, I don't want to let things go. Finding the truth seems too crucial for that.

Luckily, I have another idea. "Where are you going after you've seen the doctor?"

Spencer juts out his bottom lip in something just short of a pout, but it doesn't disguise the apprehension in his eyes. He

doesn't answer. Probably because he doesn't have any idea.

A harried-looking nurse comes in and calls Spencer's name, and he shoots up out of his chair like he's glad to get away from the brewing argument.

I gesture with my head for Cope to go with him. Christ knows how Spencer's paying for any of this if his story is true. Cope will see to it if the government doesn't, I suppose.

Once they're out of earshot, I turn to Jesse. "Why did you want him to go to the police? Was it really only about the kids, or do you have some hope that it'll help get Neve back?"

Jesse gives me a hard look. "I'm not crawling after a woman who made her choice. However, if I get a chance to prove her leaving was fucking stupid, I'll fucking do it."

An hour later, Oliver's been moved out of the ER and into a private room upstairs. Visiting hours are over, so we have no choice but to leave and come back tomorrow.

There's no sign of Spencer, and Cope says something about him being evaluated, but I don't really know what that means.

I can't help feeling like we just lost our biggest lead. Perhaps I can make some inquiries next time we're here.

Everyone's quiet on the way back home, each of us lost in our own thoughts and nobody inclined to talk.

We're all exhausted when we finally arrive, and the goodnights we exchange are barely more than grunts.

Everything feels flat without Neve.

It's by rote that I make my rounds as everyone retires for the night, and I double-check a couple of the doors.

When I'm done, I head for my own bed, but now I have nothing to distract me from the reality of Neve being gone. My finger hovers over an open text window. I'd like to message her...just to make sure she's okay.

Just to let her know I'm thinking of her.

I'd be a hypocrite to do so when it was me who made everyone give her space, though.

Wouldn't I?

I can't play both sides.

But what if she needs us to? What if she's waiting for us to reach out and tell her it's okay?

I toss and turn, unable to sleep, not knowing what to do for the best, and in the end, I give up and decide to go for a walk. I wander around without any particular destination in mind, but somehow—maybe predictably—I find myself outside Neve's room.

Maybe sleeping in her bed will make me feel better, closer to her. I make my way around the building, but something causes me to pause by the window.

Moonbeams stream through the open curtains, illuminating the room. There on Neve's bed lies Oz, his face revealed by the light of the full moon where he lies, staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

We're a fucking mess.



TEN

Neve

Mood: I had this dream...I got all I ever wanted.

I DON'T KNOW HOW long I've been walking.

One hour...two?

In deference to the hospital environment, I silenced my phone earlier and started walking without once looking at it. Honestly, I didn't want to look. It was easier not to see the notifications I was sure would be there. Walking away was hard enough without the addition of everyone's opinions on the matter—regardless of how justified they might be.

I might go as far as to say it's one of the hardest things I've ever experienced—right up there with losing Nicholas.

Now, though, my feet ache, and my phone is burning a hole in the pocket of my sundress, thumping against my thigh with every step I take. My thighs, which are chafing.

I want to call Caroline.

I need to call her, but if the guys aren't safe around me, my best friend won't be, either.

I don't think I've ever felt so fucking alone.

Fuck. Fuckity fuck fuck. I fight the impulse to curb my language. I don't have to worry about that anymore.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I plod on. Night is falling, and the evening sky is threatening rain. It's not even June, but it seems like the rainy season is already knocking at the door.

Speaking of which...where am I even going? Whose door am I going to knock on? A sense of hopelessness threatens to swamp me. Maybe I'm overreacting, but Beck Wilder's warning feels like something I need to take seriously.

I can't go to my apartment. If Beck is right, we have no way of knowing if it's a copycat or the real killer who took my laptop that day. Whoever it is would know where I live.

I don't have my car keys. Even though the window was repaired, my keys are back on the island with half of my other belongings, and the car is sitting at the marina with the guys' cars in the event that I ever need it.

I can't go to Caroline or the guys. What just happened with Oliver proves that the people who are close to me aren't safe.

Plus, the guys know where both Caroline and I live, and I don't want them hunting me down. Talking to me...trying to make me see reason. I need to go somewhere they're not going to think to look for me.

All of this leaves...

...exactly nowhere.

All I know is by the time I finally shuffle to a stop, I've worn blisters on both feet, and there is a low ache in my back I know won't be assuaged with anything other than a horizontal position.

I look around, exhausted and aware in some dim corner of my mind that I've wandered into familiar territory. The nearest street lamp is busted, but further down the road, I spy the

charred remains of Little Pilots, and beyond it, the distant glow of the airport over a line of trees.

I stumble forward, a choked sob riding in my throat. No one will look for me here. Why would they? It's insane. I can't believe I'm even considering it.

It'll be like I'm camping.

Yeah. Right.

Desperate times, desperate measures, though. Isn't that the saying?

In the daylight, the damage was bad. In the dark, it's devastating. So many hopes and dreams—not just mine, but those of my kids—had been sheltered and nurtured in this building. All of the colors, the tears, the laughter, the life...all of it burned away to cold, wet ash.

There are still partial walls, a masonry skeleton with black holes for windows housing the detritus of those dreams. Yellow crime scene tape serves to bar the curious from entering the gaping maw of the door.

I duck beneath the caution tape at the front entrance and walk in, debris crunching under my feet. The stench of sulfur and smoke is thick in the air, and I wrinkle my nose. At least the roof is mostly gone, letting a cool night breeze filter in and dissipate the scent somewhat.

The wall that once separated the main room from the Quiet Room is mostly gone, spears of random two-by-fours rising up

from the floor in no discernible pattern. The carpet squelches under my feet from the water from fire hoses.

To my right, my office still stands, the walls somehow intact but the ceiling open to the sky. Fire, that fickle bitch, didn't want it, it seems.

The door to the office is closed. Reaching out, I test the knob. It gives beneath my palm, turning easily.

I stand for a second as the door swings inward. I always lock the office.

Then again, I can't remember anyone locking it when they were investigating the fire. And we left in a hurry when things went tits up. So, maybe the fire crew just left it open. I suppose with the building being burned, there's no real need to lock it. With a shrug, I enter, close it behind me, and lock it. It's a flimsy barrier to the night, but it's something.

And no one will come after me here.

The office is pristine in comparison to the rest of the building. There are faint singe marks on the walls and doors, especially around the edges, letting me know how close the fire came to destroying this room, too, before it was beaten back.

I sit down in the chair behind my desk and spring up immediately. "Fuck." It's wet, the water from the hoses having come in from over the walls. Now my ass is wet. Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I look around.

The shadowy hulk of a tall metal cabinet rises up beside the desk. Cringing, I give it a shove until it falls with a loud crash to its side, and then roll it over so its undamaged, relatively dry backside faces up. Reaching into my desk drawer, I pull out a blanket I keep inside to stave off the A/C chill. It, too, escaped unscathed, the desk keeping it dry. I lie down on top of the cabinet and pull my knees up to my chest, then pull the blanket around me.

See. Just like camping.

There's no way I can do this for any length of time.

I can't believe I'm doing it now.

I miss my cat.

Somewhat settled, I finally muster up the nerve to look at my phone.

No missed calls and no messages.

Really?

I didn't want the guys to contact me, but seeing they didn't feels like a punch in the gut.

"Jeez! You can't have it both ways," I mutter to myself as I turn off my phone, my fingers physically aching with the need to curl into Jamie Fraser's fur.

But here in the darkness, alone, there's no one to see me cry, and that's something I can be thankful for.



BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

It's thundering.

Sometime later, I wake, still huddled into the blanket atop the metal storage cabinet. Gray dawn filters in from the open ceiling, stars still twinkling through cloud cover. I blink dully up at them, trying to still the trembles wracking my body and wondering how long I have before the rain hits.

I need to get somewhere before it starts.

One-one-thousand. Two-one-thousand. Three...

When Nicholas and I were little, my father taught us to count the seconds between thunder claps and flashes of lightning to determine how far distant a storm was. Five seconds was one mile. Fifteen was three miles.

After counting for a while, I realize there's no lightning. It's not a storm.

Someone's banging on the door to my office.

I lie very still, unsure what to do. It could be anyone outside that door. One of the guys is the most probable option, but it could also be a vagrant who saw me enter.

It could be...Him.

“Ms. Murray? It's Beck! From the hospital?”

Ugh. It's the other him.

Sitting up, I turn on my phone flashlight to better illuminate the space around me. A notification catches my eye as I do.

Wendy. Run, Wendy. I'll always find you.

Your friends can't hide you forever.

I cover my mouth with my hand to hold in my cry. God, no. I was right to leave.

“Neve. I can hear you in there.”

I swallow down my tears. “Give me a minute.”

I smooth a hand over my hair and adjust my clothes, then plod across the floor to open the door. I feel like death warmed over after sleeping on top of that cabinet—stiff and sore.

Beck Wilder is leaning against the frame. There is enough early morning light coming through the broken building to let me see him. His expression is alert and sober, and his gaze travels over me intently, cataloging each individual feature before moving to the next and then moving past me to my office. He goes still when he sees the blanket on top of the storage cabinet, and something dark flickers in his eyes.

I shift to block his view. “Can I help you?”

He sucks at the corner of his mouth for a moment before replying with false briskness. “Morning, Snow. Sorry to disturb you at your...home.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “How did you find me?”

“Well, I am a reporter.” He waits, eyebrow raised, but I don’t smile. “I have a good instinct for these things.”

I roll my eyes. “You mean you overheard some gossip at the hospital, tried to track me down at my apartment, didn’t find me, and came here.”

He glances around. “Which is actually kind of brilliant on my part because you being here is batshit crazy.”

Pursing my lips, I try to close the door. “Charming.”

Beck pushes his foot in the way. “Wait.”

I heave the most long-suffering sigh I can manage. “Look, I am seriously not in a mood—”

“Please, hear me out. Please. I get that all of this is crazy, but since you are obviously already in a crazy mood, what harm would it do to just listen to me?”

I huff and close the door anyway.

The door thuds—gently, not angrily, but a thud nonetheless. Beck’s voice travels through the door, the sound of it sending strange shivers down my spine. I blame it on the morning chill. “You need breakfast, Neve. You didn’t eat dinner last night—”

“How do you know what I ate last night?”

“I just do. How about we trade a warm breakfast for a few minutes of your time?”

I want to ignore him. Maybe I can just stay quiet until he gets bored and moves on.

“Neve.”

I walk a step away. Turn. Walk back. Stare at the door and the marks of ash for a full five seconds.

Then, drawing in a deep breath, I open the door.

“Throw in a phone charger and a way to take a shower, and we have a deal.”

Beck smiles, the look doing something to my insides.
“Deal.”



ELEVEN

Beck

SHE SLEPT IN A fucking burned out building rather than ask for help. Sweet Lord. I have my work cut out for me with this one.

I've cleared the first hurdle. That's something, at least. But as much as I want Neve Murray to believe me, I know it's going to be an uphill struggle since I've no doubt her men have already told her I don't know what I'm talking about.

Of course, they don't have all the facts, since they're a bunch of ignorant assholes who won't listen, either.

Besides, when has anyone ever believed me?

No! I refuse to walk that road—not again. That way lies madness.

The sky is heavy as we head out to my car. The rain never came yesterday; just as well, since again...Neve spent the night in a fucking burned out daycare without a goddamn roof.

I slant a look in her direction. "Sleep well?"

She rolls her eyes. “Excellent, thank you.”

The morning light is muted, but stray beams of sunlight are trying their best to break through the clouds, throwing spears of gold over the restless ocean and touching glittering tips to the waves.

Neve climbs in on the passenger side of my car and props her elbow on the open window while she supports her chin in her hand. She’s staring at the view over the water, but I don’t think she’s actually seeing any of it.

I take the opportunity to look at her while she’s distracted, and for a moment, I wish we’d met under different circumstances. Normal circumstances.

She’s classically beautiful, with clear green eyes and elegant features, but she’s leveraged her looks toward the unconventional with purple-tipped hair. It’s an intriguing combination. One that appeals to the part of me that’s never liked authority.

“Where are we going?” she asks, catching me checking her out.

She scowls at me, but I shrug it off with a grin. “I know a great place,” I tell her as I start the engine and put the car into drive. “It’s a bit touristy, but I’m in the mood for crepes.”

Neve sighs, and there’s a tinge of sadness to it. “Figures, it would be crepes.”

I’m not quite sure what that means, but it does make me wonder if she’s got something going with Remi Mariano. I

know from mutual friends in the service that the guy loves to cook and is damned good at it.

The thought leaves a hollow feeling in my gut, which isn't because I'm hungry.

We arrive at the crepe place, and the closest I can park is halfway down the street. It's busy now the tourist season is gearing up, and after Neve gets bumped a couple of times, I take her arm, steering us both through the crowd with ease.

"How do you do that?" Neve grumbles, but she doesn't pull away.

"Do what?"

"Have everyone smiling and moving out of your way."

I shrug. "You just smile and make eye contact. Be friendly. It's a lost art in this day and age; people appreciate it."

Well, people who are not police officers trying to dodge my questions, anyway, but I don't mention that. I have a feeling any reference to Oscar Hunt, however oblique, will have her clamming up on me.

A quick glance inside when we get to the crepe place shows it's packed, but we manage to snag an outdoor table that has just been vacated, and the rain looks like it will hold off for a little longer.

We sit, Neve checking the menu while I sit back and survey the street with its eclectic mixture of businessmen, native vacationers, and foreign tourists, until a harried-looking waitress comes to take our order.

“I’ll have a black coffee and a crepe suzette,” I say, giving her a smile that I hope will help make her day a little brighter.

“What is that?” Neve asks, looking at me from over the top of the menu, then flicking a glance at the waitress who is suddenly beaming, her bad mood forgotten.

“It’s a crepe coated with caramelized sugar and a sweet orange liqueur-flavored butter, then flambéed in Grand Marnier.”

“Mmmm...” her eyes glaze slightly, causing all sorts of inappropriate thoughts to fill my mind. But the spell is broken when her stomach rumbles, making me wonder how long it’s been since she last ate.

“I’ll have the same,” she says, her cheeks pinkening. “And I’d like a cappuccino with it, please.”

The waitress wanders off, seemingly in a better mood, and Neve watches her go before turning her attention to me. “So, what did you want to talk about?”

Showtime.

I’ve waited for someone to listen to my story for so long, but now I’m not sure if I’m ready.

“Okay, so first, I’d like you to keep an open mind and hear me out.”

Neve narrows her eyes. “Anyone who opens with a line like that obviously has no belief in themself.”

I purse my lips and look at her but decide to say no more. She's right. I shouldn't start off on the defensive. "Then, let me start by saying, I know who you are because of how closely I've been following this case."

She cocks her head to one side, a frown marring the smooth expanse of her forehead. "The recent child abduction?"

I shake my head, not taking my eyes off hers. "No, the entire Lost Boys case."

Her face pales, but she doesn't get the opportunity to say anything because the waitress returns with our food, giving me a wink as she sets mine down in front of me.

Neve sips at her coffee thoughtfully while I tuck in. "Why would you do that? Even as a reporter, it's a bit before your time, isn't it?"

I finish my mouthful and point my fork at her. "I'm glad you asked. And the reason is very simple. I was a Lost Boy, myself."

Neve jolts, her coffee sloshing over her fingers.

Okay, maybe I shouldn't have been quite so blunt.

She puts the mug down with a clatter, and I drop my fork and grab a handful of napkins, dabbing her hand.

"Did you burn yourself?" I lift her hand and inspect the red mark. Without thinking, I pull her fingers to my lips and drop a quick kiss on the reddened skin. "There. All better." The words emerge huskier than I intend.

She sucks in a breath and snatches her hand away, her eyes wide with confusion.

“I’m sorry... That was...” I shake my head a little, offer her my most charming smile. “Instinct.”

Now the furrow between her eyebrows is the only thing that’s stopping them from touching, and I can almost hear the gears turning in her mind.

“It’s fine.” She shakes her head. “No, I’ve read up on the case myself, especially since meeting Oliver. I’ve researched every survivor story I could find to see if I could discover more about what happened to my brother. I don’t remember seeing your name anywhere.”

I sigh and stare at my crepe, my appetite waning.

Second hurdle.

“That’s because I was never officially counted as one of the Lost Boys.”

Her frown deepens. “I don’t understand.”

“When I was ten years old, I was grabbed on my way home from school. I fought every step of the way. Screamed, yelled, bit, and lashed out anyway I could. No way I was going quietly.”

Neve’s quiet while I talk, playing with her food but not really eating.

“It was at the height of the search for the Lost Boys Kidnapper, or Hook as the newspapers dubbed him. There

were police everywhere, and I found out later that the marinas had all been closed. He was desperate at not being able to get off the island, so he took me to the basement of an abandoned building and then took his rage out on me.”

I look away, not wanting to think about everything that happened in that basement.

“Since he couldn’t get off the island with a kid, and he couldn’t risk letting me go, he simply blocked the door and left me there, so I never made it to wherever he held the rest of the kids he took.”

Neve bites her plump bottom lip, and I have the overwhelming urge to reach over and release the trapped flesh, but I know she’d find the gesture too much too soon, so I stop myself.

“So, what ended up happening to you?” she finally asks.

I stare off into the distance, trying not to remember the terror I felt trapped in that basement without any food and barely any water for so many days. “I must have been knocked out because the last thing I remember was having my wrists bound, but when I woke up, they were free. Perhaps he thought if I was discovered dead down there, it would look less suspicious if I wasn’t tied up. Like maybe I was just messing around and got trapped down there. I don’t know. All I know is that I was there for days, stuck, and he never came back for me. I yelled until my throat was raw, but no one heard. I hammered on the door, shoved it, kicked it. Nothing.”

I have to stop and take a sip of my coffee while I compose myself. I went through this when I was younger. With my dad. With the police. With counselors. I haven't spoken to anyone about it since.

“There was a bottle of water. I drank half of it the first day, not imagining I should ration it. And when it became clear no one was getting me out of there except me, I saved my strength for trying to break the door.”

I don't tell her that the fear of dying in that godforsaken place was so real it took on an entity of its own. That the lack of food and water added to my degenerative state of mind until I was a wreck.

“I finally did enough damage to the door that I managed to break a couple of the slats.” I don't mention that it was only possible because they were already half rotten or because I was slight enough to squeeze through the small gap. “I found an adult who took me to the police station, but...”

I have to swallow around the lump in my throat. “But they didn't believe my story,” I say hoarsely.

Her eyes narrow. “So, nobody else believed you, but I should?” she asks. “Why?”

“Because it's true!” The words burst out of me, and I lose my usual veneer of charm for a moment. My hands are fisted so tightly on the table between us that they're shaking, and the knuckles have turned white.

Neve notices and sits back a little, distancing herself, and I have to make a concerted effort to relax them. But conversely, it's my fury that seems to soften her and she blows out a breath.

“Okay. Why didn't anyone believe you?” she asks, by way of consolation.

I suck in a deep breath and shrug. “My dad did. He took photos of my injuries, but the police refused to take it any further, and my dad was ill—terminally ill—and he didn't have the strength to fight their decision the way he needed to.”

Neve studies my face but for once I can't tell what she's thinking. “And the police. Why did they react the way they did? If you'd been gone, what? A week? Why didn't they pursue it?”

I purse my lips, pick up my fork and take another bite of my crepe. It's probably delicious, but today it tastes like sawdust. “My mother had walked out on us a couple of years before. I'd been eight at the time, and I didn't really understand. I was upset about it and got into a lot of trouble at school. One day I'd just had enough, so I set out to try and find her. Because of all that, I was deemed a troublemaker and classified as a runaway. They told my father the details surrounding my disappearance didn't fit the rest of the abductions. I hadn't seen any other kids, I hadn't been taken off of Key West, and apparently, I was too old at ten years, even though I was a small kid and appeared younger.”

“That doesn’t sound unreasonable,” she points out. “What makes you sure it was the Lost Boys kidnapper?”

Picking up my coffee, I take a sip, but it’s more so I have something to do with my hands than because I want the drink. I look at Neve over the rim. “Because of the things he said,” I tell her with certainty. “About how he was going to take me to meet my brothers and how I’d be able to stay a child forever. I’ve been chasing the truth ever since.”

She takes a bite of her barely-touched food, and chews slowly, staring at the bustling passers-by without really seeing them, like she’s turning over what I’ve told her over in her mind. “Okay, so let’s agree that all that is true. What makes you think Wesley Terrell is a copycat? Oscar says that sort of thing is very rare.”

I nod in agreement, because he’s not wrong. “That’s true. But copycats are most likely to happen following highly publicized cases like this one. There’s even a theory in criminology where some experts suggest not naming killers because it turns them into a sort of fictional being that anyone with any type of nefarious intentions can latch onto. And let’s face it, this whole thing’s been turned into a goddamned fairy tale. Peter Pan, Hook, and The Lost Boys.”

She looks at me skeptically. “Maybe so, but that’s not really grounds to leap to that kind of conclusion.”

“You’re right. But the fact that Wesley Terrell wasn’t the guy who abducted me *is*.”

She straightens in her chair. “What? How do you know that?”

“I’m friends with the medical examiner, and he let me take a look at the body. I have to say, your boy did a number on him. Even beaten half to a pulp, though, I knew it wasn’t him.”

I wait for her to process that information, but the desire to know about the relationship she shares with the guys who live on Remi Mariano’s Island is strong, and I can’t stop myself from asking. “And speaking of Jesse Russo and the others, what’s the deal with you and them?”

Neve’s pretty green eyes chill, and I know I’ve hit on a sensitive spot.

“We are all consenting adults, so that is none of your business,” she says curtly.

Whoa! What’s she saying? That she’s in a relationship with all of them? Well...it’s more what she’s not saying, but...

I raise my hands to placate her. “Hey, I’m not judging. In fact, that sounds pretty awesome to me.”

The idea makes my gut twist, but it’s with something akin to envy, rather than anything else.

But I guess it’s probably best not to mention that in my paranoia I once convinced myself that Oscar Hunt and his group were the Lost Boys Kidnappers. The theory was short lived, of course. Even the most rudimentary research proved none of them were old enough to have been responsible for the disappearances twenty years ago.

Although, if Remi Mariano's parents had started it...

I shake off that train of thought and change the subject.

"Did you know that Oz's police commissioner was the original detective on this case? I went to see him, to ask him to reopen the investigation. But I suppose it's no wonder he doesn't want to hear about it. It'd make him look bad, after all."

The breakfast rush has subsided now, and the waitress comes back to see if we want anything else. She checks me out and gives me the kind of smile I recognize as a come-on, but for once, I'm not interested.

Besides, it's downright rude when I'm here with another woman. I wasn't flirting before, just trying to bring some cheer into her day, and there's no reason for her to think Neve's not my girlfriend, so I just ignore it and settle the bill.

Now, if Neve was to behave that way, it might be another matter.

Leaving the table, we make our way back to the car. "You know, you could get her number," Neve says. "Don't let me stop you."

"Now, why would I do that when I already have a beautiful woman with me?" I ask, and she blushes a pretty pink, a tiny smile pulling at her lips.

It doesn't stop her from changing the subject, though. "Look, Beck, I don't know if your theory is correct or not, but

with these new incidents, I *do* want to find out the truth, especially if it means I can safely go home again.”

When she says home, I wonder if she means her apartment or the island where she’s been staying. The thought that it might be the latter gives me a little pang, but I shake it off because we’ve just cleared the third hurdle.

So, I give her my most charming smile and say, “Great, and in the meantime, I know the perfect place for you to stay. It’ll be a distinct improvement over last night’s accommodations.”

If I can get to know her better in the process, that’ll just be a bonus, because for whatever reason, she’s not with them right now.

She’s with me.

TWELVE

Neve



Mood: He wants my hand to write on. A piece of my leg to bite on.

BECK'S 'PERFECT PLACE TO stay' ends up being his apartment downtown. I shoot him a sideways look as he pulls into the parking lot. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't his own home. The idea unsettles me. It's too close. We'll be right on top of each other. "What's this?"

"An apartment complex."

"I didn't mean literally."

He climbs out and walks around to open my door with a flourish, waving the convenience store bag that holds my new phone charger. "One, you should always say what you mean. Two, you should remember I got this for you."

I climb out and snatch the bag from his hand. "What does that have to do with the price of tea in China?"

He laughs. "Not a damn thing. I was just trying to change the subject."

He turns and jogs up the breezeway to a second-floor walk-up, and I follow, reluctance making my feet drag. I don't want to stay with him, but I don't see that I have many options.

A little smile curls my lips. I don't have to be pleasant, though, and I'm contrary enough to feel like pushing a bit. "I want to state for the record that I don't like you, and I don't want to stay with you," I tell him.

He's unfazed, tossing his keys into a ceramic dish on a small entry table. "Gee, thanks, Snow. It's the perfect cover, though, because no one would ever expect you to be here." He looks at me, his gaze catching and holding mine. "With me."

Without deigning to reply, I turn away from him and take in his place. It's small and unpretentious, painfully neat except for his desk area, where papers scatter the work surface. One wall is covered in a textbook crime study analysis, complete with tracks and strings leading from one point of interest to another to indicate connections. I move closer to get a better look. "Your leasing agent is going to hate you," I murmur, fascinated.

The Lost Boys kidnappings aren't a passing interest for Beck Wilder. They're an obsession, which makes sense, given his history.

I shiver a little and cross my arms over my chest. It's interesting how differently we all responded to our trauma. I took my inability to protect my brother and turned it into my life's work. Oscar did much the same, going into the military and then becoming a cop. Oliver became reclusive and cerebral, retreating to the security of his mind.

And Beck...he became obsessed with finding the person who had abducted him and made his life hell.

"She'll get over it," he mutters, edging me aside to pull the desk chair out. It's an obvious dismissal, and I take it, feeling strangely chastened.

"Shower?"

He jerks a thumb toward a doorway on the wall opposite the kitchen. “Through there. You can have the bedroom tonight. I’ll take the couch.”

“You don’t have—“

The smile he sends me is shark-like. “I’m a gentleman, Neve. You’ll sleep in my bed.”

I go to use his shower, pretending that statement doesn’t unnerve me.



THE NEXT MORNING, A pair of sweatpants and a tee shirt are laying across the neatly made bed when I emerge from the bathroom. I look around, eyes narrowed, but Beck must have slipped out as quietly as he arrived, and the door is closed to the other room. I dress, rolling up the waist of the too-big pants so they don’t fall off of me, and walk into the living room.

Beck is already at his desk, a cup of coffee at his elbow and his pillows and blankets from the night before stacked on the bed of the couch.

“Mornin,’ Snow,” he drawls without taking his eyes from his computer screen. “Coffee’s in the pot.”

“Thank you.”

I feel almost traitor-ish for thinking it, but there's something blessedly normal about walking into Beck's tiny kitchen and pouring myself a cup of coffee. Remi's breakfasts were incredible, but they were also events. I hadn't realized I was even missing simple coffee and quiet until just this minute.

Maybe I need to communicate that when I go back.

Halfway through the second mug I feel human, and maybe the tiniest bit ashamed of my attitude yesterday. "Thank you for the clothes." I glance down at myself. "I look ridiculous, but I appreciate it."

He looks up, the corners of his lips quirking up a bit.

"You look like a girl who crashed at someone's place after running away from a perfectly good island paradise and fleeing to a burned-out daycare."

"Well, there is that, I guess."

"We can go grab a few things from your place later if you want."

"That would be great." I push myself up to sit on the counter, melancholy assailing me. If only we could grab my cat as easily. I miss him, and without his calming presence, my anxiety is beating at the doors. I've gnawed my fingernails to stumps and after showering yesterday, found it impossible to settle in any one spot for longer than a few minutes at a time.

I'll probably end up driving Beck crazy, and he'll politely send me on my way.

Or maybe not so politely. He's really not a very polite man. I mean, he's quite charming when he wants to be, but he's also blunt.

“Would you stop jogging your leg?”

Case in point.

“Sure, yeah.”

I hop down and carry my coffee to the couch, where I sink down and turn the TV on and flip through the channels until I find the news.

“And in today's news, police are requesting anyone with any information regarding a recent fire at Little Pilot's Daycare to please—“

I must make some sound because Beck pulls the remote from my fingers and turns the TV off. “That's enough of that. C'mon.” He pulls me to my feet.

“Where are we going?”

I stumble after him, managing to set my coffee down and shove my feet into my shoes.

“To your apartment.”

Beck doesn't require directions to my apartment, confirming that he knows an uncomfortable amount about me. When we arrive, I watch as he makes no secret of looking with a sharp gaze into every passing breezeway and vehicle, ensuring there are no suspicious-appearing people about. “I think we're good, but make it quick,” he tells me.

I don't argue.

The door was repaired months ago and looks secure and unchanged since my last visit, if no longer a pretty shade of teal blue. I insert my key and push it open, swallowing down the lump that rises when Jamie Fraser doesn't come running.

Soon.

Dropping my keys onto the countertop, I move with purpose toward the bedroom. Best to get in and get out, as Beck said.

It shouldn't take long. In the past month, I've made a couple of trips already, and my clothes are beginning to whittle down to no more than the bare essentials. I pull a backpack from my closet and take it to my dresser and begin to stuff things inside—joggers, jeans, shorts, tees...anything I can think of.

My lease will be up soon. I'll need to make a decision about whether I'll be staying or leaving. Do I keep the apartment or let it go? Will I be on the island with the guys? My men, as I've grown used to thinking about them? Or will I be back here, starting from scratch?

The idea has me wiping a tear away with a surreptitious flick of my wrist. Beck is wandering around, picking stuff up to look at and then setting it back down. I'm not sure why, but I don't want him to see me crying.

He makes me feel tough...tougher than I am, maybe. I need that right now.

As if in echo to my thoughts, my phone pings a message notification and I lift it to see a message from Oliver.

Come see me. I need your sweet face. I need to know you're okay.

“What’s wrong?”

Shit. He noticed, anyway.

“Nothing.”

Beck comes up behind me as I stand by my dresser, head bent over its surface as I look for socks and underwear and after a brief hesitation, places both hands on my shoulders
“Snow?”

“I’m fine.”

“When a woman says she’s fine, she’s clearly not fine.”

I glare at him. “When a woman says she’s fine, she clearly means mind your business.”

He ignores me, his hands traversing the slope of my shoulders to cup my jaw and tilt my head a fraction toward him. My breath hitches with awareness, and I jerk out of his grip, breathing hard. “You can’t...that’s not...get away from me!”

I twist and shove, and he backs away.

“Sorry,” he apologizes, sounding anything but. “Misread the signals.”

“There were no signals.”

That pisses him off. I can see it in the tightening of his jaw, and for a moment I feel bad, because if I’m honest with

myself...maybe for a split second in time...just a single indrawn breath...there was a signal.

But no.

That would be insanity.

I have five beautiful, sweet men waiting for me.

At least... I hope they're still waiting for me.

I raise my chin. That was just my body, missing my men. "I need to go see Oliver," I say. "Will you take me?"

Beck looks at me steadily, then shakes his head and turns on his heel. As he walks out of my bedroom, he replies, his voice low. "Snow, I'm not sure yet what I wouldn't do."

"Thank you," I answer, deciding to ignore that. "But not today. Tomorrow, maybe. Or the next day. Let's work on this copycat thing first."

He turns and studies me thoughtfully, then gives a brief nod. "Whatever you like."



THIRTEEN

Beck

AS CRAMPED AS OUR new living arrangements are, and as much as Neve makes it clear she doesn't want to be here, she dives into my research with an enthusiasm that surprises me, poring over every article and every piece of evidence I've pulled together over the years.

I'd be lying if I said it didn't please me. Hell, just having her here pleases me, regardless of her wariness around me. I'm also hopeful that a fresh pair of eyes might see something I've missed.

"Damn. You're really into this shit," I comment as I watch her dig through another stack of testimonials from potential witnesses, her expression intent.

She looks up without moving her head and narrows her eyes at me. "I just want to get this over with and get out of here."

"Ouch." I slap a hand to my chest, mock-wounded. Her attitude actually does hurt. I like this girl. I even like what she and her men represent. I'm doing my best to help her.

I clench my jaw, then let out a breath to relax it. “No one’s keeping you here,” I remind her. Perhaps it would be best for my own sanity if she did leave. I might come across as a cocky asshole, but I’m only human.

“Sorry,” she says contritely, throwing me a look I can’t quite decipher. Is it my imagination, or is her attitude softening?

We work in relative harmony until well into the evening, only stopping for drinks and snacks, until I decide we need to eat properly. “Do you cook?” I ask her, poking around in my cupboard to see what I might be able to throw together.

She winces. “Does cereal count?”

I shrug. “Me neither, but I manage. How about tacos?”

She lets out a little moan. “I love tacos.” She’s almost drooling, and I know she’s thinking about food, but the way she moans has my cock perking up like it’s him she’s thinking about tasting.

I adjust myself behind the counter. Fuck.

Grandmas.

Baby puke.

Grandmas cleaning up baby puke.

She gets up and stretches her arms towards the ceiling, and the smooth, pale sliver of skin I’m treated to as her tee shirt rides up does nothing to help my predicament.

Grandmas doing taxes and babysitting crying and puking babies—

I turn and start gathering ingredients to give myself something to do.

“Do you want some help?” she asks, wandering up beside me.

“Sure,” I agree, even though I know it would be best if we kept our distance. She’s got five men...why the hell would she need another?

The thought doesn’t calm my libido the way I expect. In fact, if anything, the thought just turns me on even more.

Fuck my life.

We work well together. I brown the meat while Neve chops the vegetables before adding them to the pan. Then I turn my hand to making salsa while Neve tackles the guacamole.

We eat at the coffee table since the only other space in the room is covered with the papers we’ve been trawling through.

“Oh, my God!” Neve exclaims, her eyes watering as she samples the salsa. I taste it myself. “Okay, so I maybe went a bit heavy on the garlic,” I say with a shrug. “But don’t worry; it’s not like either of us is going to be kissing anyone.”

Her cheeks flush, and she looks away. I lift an eyebrow. Has she been thinking about kissing me?

My pulse leaps at the thought, but I know we’ve dived back into uncomfortable territory, so I tease her instead. “Besides, you can’t talk. I don’t think I’ve ever seen guacamole this lumpy. Did nobody ever teach you how to use a fork?”

It works. Neve laughs, the tinkling sound a welcome addition to my solitary home. “Okay, so we both suck,” she says with a lightness I’ve not seen from her until now.

I grin in return, but inwardly, I groan. I do *not* need to think about either of us sucking.

“This is nice,” she says, almost shyly. “I’ve been spoiled by Remi’s fantastic cooking, but I’ve actually enjoyed just making a regular meal.”

“Even if it was shitty?” I ask, collecting our empty dinner plates while Neve grabs the serving bowls. We’re standing close, but she doesn’t make any move to put distance between us.

“Especially because it was shitty,” she says with a smile.

I give her an exaggerated wink. “Just keeping it real.”

We’ve just taken our dishes back to the kitchen and cleaned up when the first bang shatters the peace and our newly-discovered camaraderie.

There’s a wedding celebration going on in the hotel down the block, and it sounds like they’ve just let off fireworks. But Neve gasps and dives for the floor, her arms going around her head and her entire body shaking.

I go to the ground with her, immediately recognizing her symptoms from the many friends I’ve seen with similar ones during my military tours.

“Neve, baby, look at me. It’s just fireworks,” I say quietly, reaching over to touch her shoulder first before calmly peeling

her arms from around her head as I position myself next to her.

She opens her eyes to look at me.

We're lying face to face, shoulder to shoulder, close enough for me to see the gold flecks in her startled green eyes and the way her pupils have blown.

"F-fireworks?" she repeats like she's struggling to make sense of what I'm saying.

I nod and lift a careful hand to push her hair away from her sweaty brow.

She looks confused and embarrassed. "I'm s-sorry. I don't know why I reacted that way."

"Probably because it sounded like gunfire, and you have a bit of PTSD from that shooting incident you were involved in," I tell her, rubbing the backs of my fingers up and down her arm in an effort to soothe her.

"Shit, just what I need, something else to worry about." She attempts to laugh it off, but she's still shaking, and her breath is coming far too fast.

"It's all right. Everyone has something."

"Oh, yeah?" Her eyes hold my gaze like emerald stick pins. "What's yours, then?"

A certain traumatized temptress, I think, but I don't say that. "Basements," I say instead. "Spiders."

A look passes over her face, and I know she gets it.

Tentatively, I put my closest arm around her in a loose hold, doing my best to comfort her without moving any closer. It's Neve that closes the distance, twisting into me and burying her face in my chest, clutching hold of my shirt in her fists as she fights to regain her composure.

"It'd probably be a good idea to get yourself checked out," I tell her when she finally moves to pull away. I let her go without further comment, holding out a hand to help her to her feet.

"So where were we?" she asks with fake brightness as she heads back to the table. I don't stop her because I'm not sure if it's the possibility of PTSD or the unexpected moment we just shared that she's running from. But I expect the PTSD figures highly in her decision to flee from everything.

Of course, she would latch on to one of the few things I don't want to dwell on, but right now, I'm helpless against her need to move on, so I answer the questions I'd rather not.

"This building you were trapped in, do you remember where it was? Is it still there? Did the police ever investigate it?"

I push my disquiet aside. I should have realized right then and there that my willingness to do so meant I was already falling for Neve Murray. "Yes, I remember," I tell her, flexing my fists. "And no, I have no idea if it's still there. But I doubt the authorities bothered with it, since they didn't believe me." I give a bitter laugh. "Which is ironic, since it would have proved what I said."

She looks at me sharply. “What do you mean?” she demands.

“I mean, I carved my initials and the date on the wall, along with a daily tally of the time I’d been there,” I tell her.

Her mouth drops open, and she stares at me, her previous discomfort forgotten, and I suppose my own is a small price to pay to see her distracted from her episode.

“Can we go there?”

Her words are like bullets in my head. She doesn’t know what she’s asking, but I’m not sure I can deny her anything. I tell myself it’s because I’ve spent so long searching for answers, and her input might help me find them, but I think it might just be her.

I nod, a single slow movement of my head. “I’ll take you there. Tomorrow.”

The following day, against my better judgment, we drive out to the location of the abandoned building Hook took me to. I might never have been back here, but I’ve stared at it as a pin on Google Maps for so long that I know the way by heart.

I’m not sure how I feel when I see it’s still there. I guess I thought it would be long gone, the evidence erased by time and man, taking my corroboration with it.

Now a ribbon of dread curls around my insides and tightens uncomfortably.

“This is it?” Neve asks, staring at what’s left of the building.

I press my lips together and give a curt nod. “It doesn’t look very safe.” The roof has fallen in, and only three of the four walls remain. The fourth is half rubble, victim to a hurricane years ago, it looks like.

Maybe I can talk her out of going in there.

She’s out of the car and on her way, though, and as much as I don’t want to be here, I can’t let her go in there by herself, so I open the driver’s door and follow her.

We approach the entrance to the basement, the steps leading down to which are clearly visible since the door hangs mostly off its hinges.

Neve looks back to where I’m rooted to the spot, staring at the dark, gaping hole that haunts my dreams.

“You can wait here if you like.”

It’s the first time she’s really acknowledged my feelings. I think she’s been trying to preserve my pride.

I shake my head, saying nothing, and Neve switches on the powerful industrial flashlight we brought with us and starts down, testing each step as she goes before putting her full weight on it..

I can do this. I hurry to follow her before I wimp out.

I’ve fought in war zones, for fuck’s sake. I can damn well do this.

When I finally get down there, Neve is training the flashlight's glow across the walls. I walk over and put my hand over hers, directing the beam to where I know my initials are.

She hurries over to look, and I stand there as the darkness and the heat, the dank smell of decay, and the shadows of ugly memories swirl around me like a living entity.

My throat is dry with remembered thirst, and I swallow painfully.

Neve backs away from the carving I made on the wall after snapping a picture with her phone and surveys the rest of the space in silence, her lips pursed.

Then she blinks and leans closer to the floor. "Is that... blood?" she asks, shining the flashlight at the large brown stain on the floor and the spatter of drips around it that give it away.

She's read the report I gave to the police, so she knows what happened here, even though we've never discussed it in person. And she's seen the photos my father took.

"Yes." My voice is hoarse, and she looks at me, horror twisting her features as she realizes it's mine.

She takes a step towards me, and her foot sends something skittering across the floor. She follows it with the light until an ancient, empty water bottle is illuminated in its beam.

I feel like I've been struck all over again. My wrists ache from the rope, and my tongue cleaves to the top of my mouth,

swollen from dehydration. There's a phantom pain in my temple, and I rub the scar that's still there, just at the edge of my hairline.

I can't take it anymore.

I have to get out of there.

Without a word, I bolt back up the steps, taking them two at a time, and smack both palms against the outer door. My welling panic doesn't start to recede until I burst out into the open and stand there, soaking up the warmth of the sun.

I stand there with my hands on hips and my head thrown back, oblivious to everything as I try to control my erratic breathing, until Neve's arms curl around me from behind, and she rests her cheek against my back.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "I was being thoughtless and selfish. I shouldn't have made you come here."

I can't help myself. I turn in her arms and cling to her, burying my head in the sweet-smelling fall of her hair while she strokes my back and comforts me.

"I'm so sorry," she repeats. "I can't...how could they not have believed you?" Those simple words bloom like a garden in my chest, loosening some of the ropes that have held me bound to the shadows of my past. I've waited so long for someone to believe me.

I could fall for this woman. Hard.

The thought has me stumbling back a step.

“I’ve taken photographs, but we need to get Oz to look into all this,” she says determinedly when my pulse has finally returned to normal and my breathing has evened out. “I can’t believe they didn’t even take the water bottle for evidence. It’s all just sitting there.”

I lift my head and snort out a humorless laugh. “Good luck with that. I’ve been trying to get someone to listen for years. Including Oscar Hunt.”

She must hear my bitterness because Neve unexpectedly lifts her hand to cup my cheek. “Leave that to me,” she says, and as much as my pulse races at her touch, her words are a reminder that no matter how I feel, she doesn’t belong to me.

FOURTEEN

Neve



Mood: I'm just a sad song

AS IT TURNED OUT, I didn't visit Oliver the next day. Or the one after that. I couldn't. Today marks the fourth day since I left the hospital, and as I stand here, waiting, I'm filled with nerves and dread and shame and annoyance with myself for not coming sooner. What if he's angry with me? What if he won't talk to me? What if—

“Snow. That door isn't going to open itself.” Beck whispers laconically.

I glare and wipe my palms on my thighs, then lift my hand to knock on Oliver's hospital door. What had they told him about my absence? How did they explain the lack of phone calls and texts?

“Come in,” Oliver's voice sounds.

I hesitate, my hand hovering above the doorknob. What if he's not alone? It took everything I had just to visit him.

Behind me, Beck gives me a little nudge. “Better to bite the bullet than choke on it, Snow.”

I open the door. “Stay out here, please.”

Oliver is sitting up in the bed, dressed in a pair of gray sweatpants that mold to every delicious line of his body and a white tee shirt. His gold-rimmed glasses perch on his face, and a notebook rests on his lap. He smiles, tentative and reserved, when I walk into his room. “Neve.”

It makes me want to cry. “Oliver, I’m so sorry.”

He regards me with watchful eyes, a note of melancholy in his expression. “Did you...are you...back?”

I cross the floor to sit at his hip on the bed, picking up one of his hands to wind my fingers around and trace designs on his palm. Without meeting his eyes, I shake my head. “He’s still out there.”

His hand clenches into a fist within my grip. “I see.”

I look up at that. “You’re angry at me. I thought you, of all people, would understand, Oliver. He almost killed you. He —”

“Shh. Shh.” One hand reaches up to twine into my hair. He tugs a little until our faces are close. “I do understand. I’m not angry with you, sweetheart. I just wish you trusted us enough to take care of you and ourselves at the same time.”

“I do trust you—”

“No. You don’t.” His smile is sad. “You’re too afraid he’ll win. You haven’t seen us in our former lives... We’re really kind of badassess.” He flexes his bicep, and I snort a half-laugh, half-sob that turns into a sigh.

Closing my eyes, I allow my forehead to rest against his for a second. “I’ll take your word for that.”

Before I can pull away, his lips take mine, seizing and holding in a kiss I can’t refuse. I sink into it for a second, allowing myself that brief moment of weakness. I want it. I

want him. More, I need it...need to know I'm not alone, that he—they—still want me.

But only for a moment.

All too quickly, I pull away, wiping one finger beneath my lip to keep the kiss close and standing abruptly.

“I have to go. Can you tell the others—” I break off, my gaze straying to the window beyond the bed.

“At least tell me where you're staying. That you're okay.”

“I'm fine. Tell them I'm fine, and I'll be back. I just need ...”

“Space,” Oliver finishes, the line of his mouth grim.

I nod once, a jerk of my head. “We just need to find this guy.”

“I'll be back soon.” I leave, closing the door softly behind me. Its quiet click sounds like so much more than the closing of a door. It sounds like good-bye.



OVER THE NEXT WEEK, Beck takes me to visit Oliver several times. So far, I've been lucky enough to avoid running into any of the other guys. It's not that I don't want to see them.

It's that I don't trust myself to see them and not go running back to them.

Oliver, I can take—in small, controlled doses, that is. I know he's safer in the hospital than anywhere else; the chances of our madman getting to him here with all of the natural security and people coming and going are relatively small. Oscar reamed out security for letting Beck get through, even, so I don't think that will happen again.

I keep my visits brief, trying to time them around when the others come to stay with him. He complains every time I leave that my visits are too short, but he lets me go, likely because he knows if he pushes, it'll be that much longer before I come back.

When I'm not visiting Oliver, I'm with Beck. We sort through years of leads and painstaking research, all of it pointing with painful blatancy to Beck's need to find his tormenter.

I get it.

The longer he remains free, the more I share in that resolve.

And the longer I'm around Beck, the more difficult I find it to understand that people—authority figures like Oscar—didn't believe him. I send him a sidelong look now as we both sit hunched over reams of paper on his coffee table. I don't understand how he went unbelieved both as a child, and now, as an adult.

There is another guy. The one we caught is a copycat.

Or he was a partner, the idea of which sends a shiver down my spine.

Beck makes a frustrated sound and flops against the back of the sofa, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. “I’m going blind,” he mutters.

I set the police report down that I’ve been reading over. It’s redacted, but I can pull enough from it to know it’s a different abductor, anyway. “It’s time for a break, anyway.” I stand. “Ready for our daily dose of hospital fun?”

He tips his head back against the couch and peers up at me. “Would you mind if I visited Oliver with you?”

“Huh?” Feigning deafness, I wander into the bedroom, looking for my shoes.

The idea makes me uneasy, in ways I don’t even want to think about. I walked away from the guys because I didn’t want to draw someone toward them that would hurt them to get to me. But in doing so, I walked toward someone who’s making me feel things I have no business feeling.

It pisses me off.

I don’t want Beck near Oliver, who’s one of the most quietly perceptive of all of my men. It would take Oliver two-point-three seconds to look at me, look at Beck, and know beyond all doubt that I’m struggling with my proximity to Beck.

And then things would get ugly—even though I have zero intention of following through on those feelings. Oliver would feel guilty that I’m having feels, even though that’s the last

thing he ought to be feeling. No. He ought to be angry. And betrayed. And—

“Snow?”

I whirl around to see Beck leaning in the doorway, eyes narrowed on me entirely too perceptibly. “What?”

“Hospital? Me...Oliver?”

“I’m not sure...”

“It’s just that I’ve been talking to this kid while you’ve been visiting, and I think I may have made a breakthrough.”

I stop and stare at him. “And you didn’t think to mention this before?” My tone is irritable because I feel betrayed. We’ve worked through all this together, and Beck’s been keeping secrets. What the hell?

We may not have known each other long, but the proximity means he’s learned to read me pretty well.

“I’m mentioning it now,” he replies carefully. “I didn’t want to get your hopes up, and to be honest, it’s been like pulling teeth trying to get information out of this kid. I still don’t know how much of his story is true and how much is pure fantasy, and that’s where Oliver comes in. I thought he might be able to provide a better perspective, having been in the same situation.”

I suck in a breath. “Okay. Yeah, whatever.”

Fucking pushover. I roll my eyes and push past Beck. I don’t know how the hell I’m going to explain the fact that I’ve

been basically shacking up with this guy after committing to the rest of them. It makes me look so fickle. Beck made it seem like the logical thing to do, and honestly, it probably was at the time, but Jesse and Oscar definitely won't see it that way. Jesse will be loudly furious, Oscar quietly angry. Cope, Oliver, and Remi will simply be hurt, a fact that makes an ache bloom dully in the region of my sternum.

And then, there's the very complicated fact that Beck has turned out to be someone I can't help but be getting kind of twisted up over.



OUTSIDE THE DOOR TO Oliver's room, I hesitate and touch Beck's arm. "Give me just a second."

Face inscrutable, Beck eases back against the wall, letting me enter on my own.

"Neve! Sweetheart—"

"Oliver. How are you feeling today?" I interrupt to give him a brief kiss, stroking his hair back from his forehead in an absent caress. He's happy to see me. He always is, regardless of how rushed my visits are. I'll have to be quicker than usual today since Beck wants to visit with him.

"Fine as always."

He pushes the tray table holding his computer aside, and I sit beside him on the bed at his hip, facing him. "It's good to

see you again.”

It looks like someone from the island—probably Remi, if I had to guess—brought Oliver more regular clothes to wear. He’s dressed in another comfortable-looking pair of gray sweatpants, but this time it’s a navy blue tee shirt that brings out the blue of his eyes. He looks entirely too healthy to even be here anymore. “How much longer do they think you’ll need to stay here?”

“I keep asking. I’ve considered discharging—”

An abrupt rap precedes the swing of the door, and I swing my head to see Jesse framed in the doorway with Remi.

Oh, no. Nonononono—

Before I can say anything, Beck is there, too.

Jesse turns to look at him, then at me and at what I am sure is a bitter look of guilt over my face. “What the fuck is this?”

Beck gives him a mocking wave, a grin spreading across his face when he growls.

Remi holds up a placating hand. “Hold up a minute—”

“Neve just came to visit,” Oliver supplies, frowning slightly at Beck.

“Why the fuck is he here?”

I have to get control of this and get control of it now. I lift my chin.

“We’ve been working on the case together—”

Jesse's eyes widen. "You've been doing what? You run the fuck away from us to go work on shit with this jackass? Are you fucking with me right now?"

"Neve, you don't need to listen to this," Beck interjects. He steps toward me and lays a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently.

I close my eyes, but I can feel three confused glances settle on the gesture, and I shrug his hand away.

After a moment of silence, Jesse clears his throat and continues, oddly subdued. "Oz has that covered. There's nothing that Beck can do that we can't."

"That's where you're wrong."

Beck, shut up. Please, for the love of God—

"Oh, fuck off—"

"Come on, now. Is fuck the only word in your vocabulary, Russo? Your go-to when you don't have a leg to stand on? There's someone here in this hospital that can back me up and provide information that corroborates my story. But you don't want to hear anything that might prove you wrong, do you?"

Jesse's eyes narrow. "What are you talking about?"

Beck's gaze shifts to Oliver, who's been observing silently. "What do you say, Hunt? Are you up for a little walk? I'll have you back before the nurse brings your next pudding cup."

"I don't think—" Remi starts to inject, but Oliver speaks, his voice cutting through the chaos like quiet steel.

“I’m going. Fuck this shit.”

With a muffled curse, Jesse stalks from the room. I reach for him as he walks past me, but he brushes me off. I watch as he strides away, swallowing down the impulse to chase after him.

I won’t be chasing anyone.

I don’t even know what I would say.

“Neve.”

Remi stands beside me, and I turn to look at him, part of me afraid of what I’ll see in his eyes. I sag in relief, wilting against him for an all-too-brief hug when all I find is love, and acceptance, and grace.

“I miss you,” he says.

“Oh, God. I miss you, too. All of you.” With a final lingering look, Remi turns to follow after Jesse.

“All right, kids. Follow me.”

Beck tugs at my ponytail, and I pull myself together, turning to take Oliver’s hand. He’s steady on his feet and determined to leave his room.

Oliver directs a serious look at Beck. “I would try to watch my mouth around Jesse. He is every bit as mean as he looks.”

Beck grins. “My favorite kind of toy.”



FIFTEEN

Oliver

I'VE LEARNED THROUGHOUT MY life to be grateful for the small things.

Today I'm grateful that I don't have to take this trip across the hospital in a patient gown with my ass on display, especially since the guy escorting us seems to be the type that would make a joke at my expense about that kind of situation.

I'm not sure where Beck Wilder is leading us, but we take the elevators into a different wing, and although I'm in a hospital I'm still conscious of the glances I get. I guess it's since I'm young and relatively fit looking, but Neve is pushing me in a wheelchair.

After a week or so—I've lost track—of lying in a hospital bed to recover from the brain bleed I sustained, walking even a few steps is both a relief and a chore. It feels good to get out of that bed and stretch my legs a little, even if that's only to climb in and out of the wheelchair, which I hate because it makes me feel like a damned cripple. I understand why it's necessary, though. Even though I finished my last IV around two in the

morning, I'm still not one hundred percent. Bright lights continue to hurt my eyes, and the lurch of the elevator makes me sick to my stomach.

Pride won't allow me to show just how bad I'm feeling in front of Beck Wilder, though, and Neve's already overanxious, so I don't want to worry her.

She's visited often, just like she promised, but I know she isn't going back home to the island afterward. Awareness of that has thrown up a barrier between us, so it's a subject I'm afraid to confront right now in case it makes things worse.

As much as I want her home and everyone together, I know she hasn't initiated any contact with the rest of the guys. But since she's still making these trips to the hospital, I don't want to upset her and stop her from coming.

We cross to a door that connects to what, according to the sign, is an assessment clinic, whatever that means. I'm about to ask Beck what we're doing when Dylan Marlowe, the doctor who's been in charge of my care, appears.

"Hey, Beck." The two of them shake hands, exchanging casual small talk, and it's obvious they're acquaintances. Not friends, though, I don't think, since Beck's smile doesn't seem to reach his eyes.

"Ms. Murray." He gives Neve a nod and a onceover that has my hackles rising. "Oliver, good to see you're looking a little better."

"Thanks, doc," I say with a tight smile.

Doctor Marlowe accompanies us through the door and leads us into the clinic.

Where the hell are we being taken?

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't unsettled by this latest turn of events.

Finally, Dylan stops at the nurse's station and tells the duty nurse that Beck and the rest of us are free to visit.

But visit who, though?

Doctor Marlowe raises his hand as he takes his leave, and Beck takes us to a common room where patients are involved in various activities. Presumably, for whatever assessments they're here to take.

The person we approach is a young man who looks barely more than a kid, although I assume he must be at least eighteen, since this does not appear to be any sort of pediatric unit.

He's sitting in a corner by himself, gazing out of the window, and as we get closer, Beck reaches into his bag and pulls out a bag of candy.

"I almost got the peanut kind by accident," he says by way of a greeting. "That would not have been good."

The young man turns, recognition dawning as he sees Beck and putting a smile on his gaunt face. He jumps up and all but snatches the candy.

Beck gives him a one-armed hug, but as they pull apart, the man spots us and looks nervously from Neve to me before tucking his head and looking at the floor.

“These are my friends, Neve and Oliver,” he explains as the young man shuffles back a few steps. “Guys, this is Spencer Wilton.”

The name gets my attention, and it doesn’t escape my notice that Neve recognizes it, too.

Spencer Wilton. The poor kid was seven or eight when his father rented a boat and the two of them went out fishing for the day.

Only, they never came back.

It was all over the news— Islanders were called on to look for them for days on end, which is why I remember it.

It took two weeks for rescue personnel to find the empty boat, and although there was blood in it that was eventually matched to his father, it was always assumed that they fell overboard and drowned.

I’m still not sure why Beck’s brought us here, though. What significance does this young man have to anything that’s happened lately, and more to the point, why did Neve recognize the name?

It makes me wonder exactly how much time she’s been spending with Beck.

We each take a seat near Spencer, who’s looking a bit banged up with some recent grazes and lacerations which have

obviously been treated since he got here. And while it's clear that my and Neve's presences have made him anxious, Beck puts him at ease by making small talk, asking about random things that have happened since the last time they met.

I have to admit, it's a side to Beck Wilder that surprises me. Maybe he's not a complete asshole after all.

And by the way Neve's reacting, it seems like she appreciates Beck, too.

It makes me watch them closely, consideringly. I don't believe she would have moved on already. She's been too comfortable visiting, holding my hand, and giving me warm, sweet goodbye kisses, but there's definitely something there.

I've no idea how Oz and the rest of the guys will react to that.

I'm pulled away from my perusal of Beck and Neve when the conversation turns to an island Spencer says he was taken to.

The news makes me jolt upright, my focus now completely on this young, clearly tormented man, because the news never mentioned that the boy on the boat had been abducted by the Lost Boys Kidnapper.

I glance at Neve, and although I can see the depth of empathy she carries for this psychologically damaged man, she's clearly not as surprised as I am, implying that she's obviously been working with Beck to an extent that the rest of

us weren't aware. Fuck! Is that where she's been staying? Cope has told me he doesn't think she's at her apartment.

“Spencer, Oliver here was also taken to that island, and he managed to escape just like you,” Beck tells him gently.

For a while, Spencer just stares at me until I feel vaguely uncomfortable. Neve picks up on my discomfort because she takes my hand in hers, earning a guarded look from Beck. If I'm not mistaken, the reporter has fallen for her. I can't even blame him since I fell for Neve so quickly myself.

Still, there's a lot to unpack right there.

Oblivious to the undercurrent, Spencer fidgets with his hands like he's washing them. “Is that true?” he finally whispers.

I nod solemnly and decide to take the initiative, even though I can't be certain how any of this is going to play out. It's obvious Spencer is considerably more traumatized by his experience than I was.

I look to Beck for guidance, and he gives me the barest of nods. “I was taken from the Key West Shipwreck Museum when I was eight, and I was held on the island for two years. How about you?”

Spencer starts to rock backward and forward and goes back to staring blindly out of the window. Just when I think it's all been too much for him, he starts to talk.

“We'd just moved to the Keys after my mom died in a car accident,” he says haltingly, his voice taking on a childlike

quality. “Dad decided we should take a fishing trip, and we had a great time together, even though Dad didn’t really know what he was doing and struggled with the lines. It didn’t matter, though. We had plenty of food and drink and a life vest each, and we even went swimming. I’d heard there were alligators, but Dad said it was safe...”

He trails off, and my heart goes out to him. His was obviously a father who was trying to spoil the grief out of his son when everything took a turn for the worse.

I glance at Neve, who’s chewing on her lip. We both know there are other predators in the Keys. Ones of the human variety. Spencer obviously learned that the hard way.

“Another boat approached us, and the man in it said he was almost out of gas and didn’t think he’d be able to make it back to shore. Dad didn’t know how to help him, but the man said that he could show him. One minute they were talking, and the next, there was a horrible *thunk*, and the man bashed my dad in the head with the fishing box.”

Spencer’s rocking increases, and he sucks in a breath before he carries on. In some ways, he sounds like he’s reciting the words by rote, as if he’s gone over them again and again, if only in his head. “The man—his name was Hook—wasn’t out of gas at all. He was a bad man. He towed our boat with his own, and I sat there with my dad, wondering if he was going to get help, but too scared to ask.”

He’s quiet for a long time like he doesn’t want to say whatever comes next. I open my mouth to speak, but Beck

stops me with a small shake of his head, and eventually, Spencer continues.

“We sailed for a while until we got to the island, and then my dad started to wake up. I thought everything was going to be okay, but Hook hit him again. And again. And again. He didn’t wake up after that.”

Spencer’s expression is tortured but also strangely detached. My heart breaks for him and the terrible things he witnessed. At least my dad was still there for me when I finally escaped, even if the drink had taken its toll on him. This poor kid has no one.

“There were other boys on the island, and they lived in cabins with bunk beds. There was an older boy who dressed in a costume made of leaves. The boys called him Pan, but it was Hook who was in charge.”

I suck in a sharp breath, remembering the strange dream I had about the boy called Wish-Wash.

“Slightly,” I murmur, and Beck, Neve, and Spencer all turn to look at me. “They used to call me Slightly.”

Neve squeezes my hand. I look at her, and she has tears in her eyes, but despite everything, all I feel right now is vindication. I was right all these years, and all the while, people—therapists—told me the things I remembered weren’t true. That my memories were flawed. That my mind was blocking out certain events because they were too traumatic.

Dissociative amnesia.

But I was right all along. I was right, and I never pushed it.

Sudden guilt washes over me like a tsunami, and I bury my face in my hands with a pained groan. How many children could I have saved if I had just pushed the issue?

I've let them down.

I've let Spencer down. He might never even have been taken if only I'd insisted. If I'd managed to get someone to believe me.

To listen.

I've...

No!

There's a fine line between remaining unaffected and falling into full-blown hysteria. It's like balancing on a knife-edge and never being quite sure which way you'll fall. You might cut yourself, no matter which side you drop.

I've spent a lifetime making sure I'm nowhere near that edge and prided myself on it.

"Beck was a Lost Boy, too," Spencer says, startling me with this new revelation. "Hook took him, but he never got to the island, so nobody believed him."

I whip my head around to look at Beck who's staring blankly at the table.

So many things make sense now, the puzzle pieces slipping into place. But while I've talked myself out of the guilt that threatened to overwhelm me because I know there was nothing

I could do about it—no more than I already tried, anyway—I do feel a pang of real guilt for not giving Beck the time of day on those occasions when he’s tried to reach out. For dismissing him without hearing his story.

That’s almost inexcusable because I know better than anyone what it’s like not to be believed, but I didn’t extend him the same courtesy I raged about others not giving me.

At that very second, he looks up, and I catch his eye. A poignant moment of kinship passes between us that I know will bind us forever.

It’s obvious that Beck has heard this story before, and now I understand why he brought us here.

I’m truly grateful.

Neve gives a small snuffle, then wipes her eyes and nose on a tissue Beck produces.

Thank you, I mouth. For bringing me here, for looking after Neve...for all of it. He gives a small nod in reply.

“Spencer, I wonder if you remember a boy named Nicholas?” Neve asks tentatively. “He would have been about twelve or thirteen when you were there.”

I open my mouth to remind her that Nicky disappeared while I was still on the island myself, but I don’t blame her for trying to find out more. For asking if anyone else can shed light on her brother’s plight.

Spencer’s reply is a surprise, though.

“I knew a boy called Nicky. He was a bit older than me. He had green eyes.” The shock reverberates when he refers to Nicholas with the same pet name I used to call him, accurately describing his most startling feature. That fact is not lost on Neve, but I’m still reeling from the fact that wherever Nicky disappeared to, he didn’t escape the island.

“He was a good boy. I was on the island just over a week when Nicky came to talk to me. He said he was leaving and wanted to take me with him. He said that the others would fight him because they believed everything Pan and Hook told them, but I was still new, and I hadn’t been brainwashed by them yet.”

Neve’s expression is full of hope as she hangs on to Spencer’s every word, but I have a deep sense of foreboding.

I glance at Beck, who looks puzzled. I don’t think he’s aware of this part of the story, or at least not its significance to Nicholas Murray.

“Nicky and I snuck down to the dock to steal the boat my dad had rented, but I was scared, and I argued with Nicky. I could still see the blood in the bottom of the boat. My dad’s blood. And I remembered what Hook did to him. I didn’t want that to happen to Nicky. I didn’t want Hook to be mad. I didn’t want Pan to have to fight Hook to protect him. I was too loud, and suddenly we heard *the crew* coming through the trees.”

Spencer’s body language changes, his expression becoming one of haunted terror. Until this point, I’ve wondered if it helps him to think about it like it happened to someone else, and not

him. Like it's just a story. Because despite his agitation, that's how it appears.

Now, though, his back is ramrod straight, and his breath is sawing in and out so hard that we can see his chest heaving.

I want to tell him he doesn't have to continue, but at the same time, I'm desperate to hear what he has to say, and I know Neve is, too.

“Nicky started the engine and told me to get in and get going as soon as he untied it from the dock. But by the time he loosened the rope, there wasn't enough time for him to get back to the boat before *the crew* was on him. He yelled at me to go, and then he ran. He managed to shake them off, and the last I saw, Nicky had disappeared into the trees, *the crew* right behind him.”

Neve makes a tormented sound and we look over to see fresh tears streaming down her face. Beck's expression is pained.

“Neve—“

Fist to her mouth, she shakes her head violently at him. He clamps his lips closed. He cares about her; that much is obvious. It's clear he never realized the impact this part of the story would have on her.

Spencer is rocking back and forth now, anguish holding him tightly in its grip. “It's all my fault,” he says. “I was too loud, too slow. I should have waited for him. I didn't know how to drive the boat and there was a sand bank. The boat hit it while

I was standing, looking for Nicky, and I fell overboard. The boat went on without me. And that's when Pan swam out and pulled me back to shore."

He's silent for a moment before he whispers, "I never saw Nicky again. It's all my fault."

"No," Neve chokes out. "You were just a little boy. None of this is your fault. It's not the fault of any of the boys. Not even Pan. They were all just kids dealing with a really evil man."

"But I—"

"No. I run a daycare, Spencer. I look after kids every day, so I know what I'm talking about."

She's saying it to give credibility to her words, to absolve Spencer and help him heal, but the words have the opposite effect, and Spencer suddenly leaps up and grabs her, dragging a cry of pained surprise from her lips.

Beck and I both jump up, trying to pry Spencer's fingers from around Neve's arm, but he's holding her fast, his fingers digging into her flesh, and us pulling is only making him grip her tighter.

He seems to have completely lost his grasp on reality.

"Nurse!" Beck leaps to his feet. "I need a nurse over here!"

Spencer is muttering to himself.

"It all makes sense now. You must be our Wendy. We've been looking for Wendy for so long."

He starts to wail. He's beside himself now. "I didn't want to grow up. I tried not to. You need to tell Hook I didn't mean to grow up. I tried to stay a wild boy, but I couldn't help it."

Doctor Marlowe and a couple of nurses rush into the room to separate Neve and Spencer, who fights them, repeating over and over that *she's their Wendy* until finally, the doctor calls for a sedative to calm him down.

That has a curious effect on Spencer. He immediately lets Neve go and sinks back into his seat, his palms out in front of him to ward everyone off.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. This is not right. I've been on that island for years. It's become all I've ever known, and I was just overwhelmed for a moment. I'm fine now, I promise."

As soon as she's free, Neve turns and runs from the room, smashing her hand down on the button that unlocks the automatic doors, her level of hysteria almost equal to Spencer's.

I try to follow, but all the commotion is making my head pound, and the effort I've expended, jumping up and grappling with Spencer when I'm still shaky on my feet, is all too much for me.

I grab Beck's arm. He's white as a sheet and as disturbed as the rest of us, but right now, he's the only one who can help. "Take care of her," I urge him. "Please. She needs you. We both need you."

A wave of dizziness overcomes me, and I lean against the wall and slide to the floor. Beck looks torn and tries to help, but I shake my head. “Go after her. Make sure she’s not alone. I’ll be fine.”

I’m in a hospital, after all.

I watch Beck leave, while Spencer is pulled to one side by Doctor Marlowe. Then a nurse comes to help me back into my wheelchair before calling for an orderly to wheel me back to my room.

As Beck jogs out of sight, I wonder how I’m going to explain to the others that both Neve and I have found a new member of our family.

But I don’t have time to consider that before Spencer breaks away from Doctor Marlowe and also sprints for the exit.

“Um... shouldn’t you stop him?” I ask the doctor.

Marlowe sighs. “This is a hospital, not a prison. While we encouraged Spencer to be assessed because of his ordeal, that was purely voluntary because he doesn’t have health insurance, and this is a free clinic. It’s not our place to keep him here.”

Damnit. As sorry as I feel for the guy, I’m glad Beck’s gone after Neve. I don’t want Spencer anywhere near her.

What a clusterfuck of epic proportions.

SIXTEEN

Neve



Mood: Tell me...do we get what we deserve?

COUNT TO TEN AND breathe.

One...two...three... My sandals rap a staccato counterpoint on the tile floor to each breath in and each breath out as I pace rapidly down the hall.

He let me walk in there and listen to that—

My fist clenches at my hip, and I walk faster, conscious of Beck behind me somewhere, following. He knew Spencer's story. He had to have known about Nicholas. How long had he held onto that tidbit of information? Withheld it from me? To let it be thrown in my face like that...it's unconscionable.

My nerves are fried. I sprint through the hospital corridors, not even sure if I'm heading the right way, tension pulling like a shark on a ten-pound test.

I'm about to fucking snap.

I need out of this building. I need air. I need to scream. To hit something.

I need...something.

My knees threaten to buckle, and I force myself to keep going. Oh, God, Nicholas. Fuck. Poor, darling Nicky. He was always so sweet. If what Spencer says is true, all those years on the island didn't change him one iota. He was sweet until the end.

The fucking end.

They caught him. Judging by Spencer's age, Nicholas has been dead for a long time. The yellow hospital walls fade to a boat, a little boy's terrified face as it drifts away...and then the crashing frenzy of tropical brush, of boyish terror, of Hook's howling crew. I wrap my arms around myself, a sob catching in my throat, and walk faster. There is no way he survived that.

I mean, I guess I could convince myself that it's possible. That he somehow swam to safety, past the natural reefs that surround these islands, but that would just be...foolish.

Eventually, I pass through a door that leads into the main lobby, my gaze skittering around the bright area as my breath saws wildly in my chest. I can't seem to gain control—

My chest eases when I spot the exit, and I finally escape into the bright sunshine and fresh air. I take off at a sprint, away from the hospital, away from all the dreadful truths inside, as if I can outrun the demons that are chasing me. I make it a few hundred yards when a hand lands on my biceps, swinging me around. "Neve—"

Beck.

"Let go of me." I speak quietly between clenched teeth and panting breaths. If I open my mouth, I'll scream. It's as simple and as complicated as that.

"I don't think so." Beck ignores me, hauling me against his chest. I struggle for all of five seconds before I go completely

limp, sagging against him with a harsh wail. “You knew,” I manage. “You fucking knew.”

He lets me cry without speaking another word, one hand warm and steady on the back of my head and the other on the base of my spine, a soothing weight. It’s exactly what I need, and I cry until no tears remain, until I’m as dry as the Sahara, and I lift my head to look at him.

Something passes between us.

Something almost as dangerous as this grief swirling in my chest, making it heavy and achy.

His gaze searches mine, and his lips part—on a question? a breath?—at the same time, I inhale, and I forcibly make myself push away from him, out of the circle of his arms.

They’re too tempting.

When he speaks, his voice is gruff. “I just want you to know that I didn’t know Spencer knew Nicholas. I would never have ambushed you like that. Spencer said that another boy tried to help him escape, but he never said his name. He just called him Fins. I’m sorry for that, Neve.”

“You didn’t know?”

“I swear, I didn’t. It’s not long since Spencer escaped. He’s only been here a few days. I only had a couple of opportunities to speak to him before I took you and Oliver to meet him, and he wasn’t always forthcoming.”

I feel my shoulders sag with relief. I don’t know why it means so much that he didn’t do that to me, but it does. It hurt

nearly as much to think he had withheld that sort of knowledge as it did to learn how Nicky had died.

I don't want to think about why.

"We need to talk about the whole Wendy thing later. Once everything settles a bit. I need to understand that a bit more."

I nod. "We'll talk about it later."

He pulls me rapidly towards his car, opens the passenger door, settles me inside, and fastens my seat belt. I close my eyes, trying to block everything out. It's nice to let go for a few minutes and let him take care of me. Too nice.

My eyes still closed, I feel his hand cover mine, his fingers curling around and twining through my own where it rests upon my thigh. "Nicholas died a fucking hero, Snow. I've seen heroes in my days in the military, but those were grown-ass men. Nicky was a kid. He had to have been an incredible person."

Tears clog my throat, and all I can manage is a nod.

"Mourn for him but be proud while you're at it. He was strong enough to never let himself believe in that fantasy they were peddling to control him, and that's more than I can say for most grown adults." He clears his throat, waiting while that sinks in. "What do you need, Snow?"

I open my eyes briefly. "I think I need to go home."

"To the apartment?"

“For now.” I look out the window. “But after that you’re taking me back to the island. It’s time I stopped running.”



SEVENTEEN

Remi

ARE YOU OKAY, BABY girl? Sorry I left like that. Jesse needed me.

I had followed Jesse out of the hospital because it seemed like the best option at the time, but he's refusing to answer his phone, and now I'm stuck searching for his ass. Even my endless patience is beginning to wear thin.

I miss you, Neve. WE miss you. We need you to come home.

If I'm going to have to wait on Jesse, I'm at least going to use the time to say all the things I would have said to Neve if I'd had more time with her. I'd leave the asshole and go back home, except for the fact that we came here on his boat, and he's got the damn keys.

Nothing's the same without you.

I've already circled the building and made a quick run down to the dock to check the boat's still moored in case the bastard took off without me.

It is.

So now I'm back at the hospital to see if there's any sign of him again.

I've just pulled the door open and decided to go in to see if maybe he returned to Oliver's room when a blur of color barrels straight into me, forcing me backward.

I stumble, but my hold on the door handle prevents me from going down. Which is more than I can say for the other guy.

I'm pissed after running around after Jesse and tempted to yell, but that's never been my way, so instead, I take a step back and go help the kid who's fallen on his ass.

To my surprise, it's the guy we were talking to in the waiting room the day Oliver was brought in.

"Spencer, right? Are you okay?" I ask, helping him up.

His eyes are wide and just a little wild, and he looks around like he's trying to find something... or someone.

Or hide from them.

His chest is heaving, and I don't think it's just from his mad dash out of the hospital.

"I'm sorry," he pants. "It all got to be too much in there. I'm not used to being cooped up in a building with so many people around."

"You've been at the hospital all this time?" I ask in surprise.

"Doctor Marlowe wanted me to have some assessment or something since I've been gone so long."

Makes sense—I guess they put him on the psychiatric floor. Who knows what kind of damage has been done to the poor kid, both psychological and physiological since he's obviously malnourished and nowhere near the height or weight he should be for someone of his age. I wonder if Cope's been footing the bill. I'll have to ask.

“So, what are you doing now?”

He deflates in front of my eyes, everything inside him withering as the enormity of his situation seems to dawn on him.

“I don't know,” he says in a small voice that holds all the fear and dread of a defenseless child.

In many ways, regardless of his age, that's what Spencer is. Alone and scared and thrown into a world that he hasn't known for over a decade. How the hell is he supposed to function?

Just as I'm mulling things over, Jesse finally reappears. He looks slightly more stoic now but still a lot angry.

“Let's move,” he snaps as if I haven't been waiting around for him for the last hour.

I look at Spencer who looks lost and alone and far too much like an abandoned kid for my liking.

“I have somewhere you can stay if you like,” I tell him.

Jesse's head whips around in surprise, and he lets out a growl. “What the fuck, Remi. I'm not up for that. We don't know this kid from Adam.”

I stand my ground. “Yeah, well, it’s my place and my choice.”

As we start to leave with Spencer in tow, Jesse continues making his protests heard. “Seriously, Remi, you’re picking up strays now?”

“Well, I picked up you lot, didn’t I?” I retort, most of my patience used up.

He looks like he wants to say more, but he’s too drained after the stuff with Neve to push it, and I’m still hoping Spencer will change his mind about helping us. I want him close if he does. Hopefully, if he comes to trust us, he’ll be more amenable.

The trip back to the resort is uncomfortable, to say the least. Jesse’s anger at Neve and Beck has been exacerbated by Spencer’s presence. And for his own part, Spencer’s mood swings between sulking—which appears to be his default setting—and abject terror.

For the first time, I wonder if I’ve done the wrong thing, bringing him back to the island. I have a feeling it’s going to be like having a snotty teenager living with us. But I guess that’s what being a Lost Boy has done to him. He’s never been allowed to grow up.

“This is ridiculous, for the record,” Jesse mutters as we pull up to the dock.

“Yeah, well...for Oliver’s sake—and Nicholas’s, even though we never knew him—I kind of feel like it’s the least

we can do,” I tell him and leave him to tie the boat off.

Inside, I dig out clean linens and show Spencer to a free cabin, giving him instructions for breakfast.

It’s by rote that I make my rounds as everyone retires for the night, and I double-check everything. I lock some of the doors that are normally left unlocked because Jesse’s right; we don’t know anything about Spencer, and I don’t want him to steal one of the boats and take off in the night. So I lock all the keys in the safe and send a message to the group chat so the guys know where to find them.

I still believe Spencer Wilton holds all the answers. I just hope I’ve done the right thing bringing him here.



EIGHTEEN

Cope

BABY.

Pretty baby.

I can't stop thinking about you. Thinking about that day in the gazebo, specifically.

Well. About the pool, too, if I'm honest.

You're so fucking hot.

I miss you.

We all miss you.

Please come back.

I love you, Neve.

A message notification comes through, interrupting my early morning string of Neve-bombing, and I swipe to read.

Huh. That's interesting.

Scratching my head, I stare down at the group chat, nonplussed. Apparently, Remi brought Spencer Wilton back to

the island last night and installed him in a bedroom. He sent a text letting us know the kid was here, and also that ‘just to be safe’ he locked up the boat keys and a few other things in the safe, should we need anything.

I’m not certain how I feel about that.

This has been my home for a long time, and it’s always just been us...until Neve.

But while we welcomed her with open arms and everything else, Spencer Wilton is an entirely different animal.

I mean...I understand, kind of, why Remi felt the need to bring him back with him. He’s a big softie, our Remi.

But if he felt the need to lock shit up? I’m not so sure this is going to work out.

Neve blended with the dynamics of our different personalities so easily that it was hardly an adjustment. I enjoyed finding fun in my days, and Neve’s willingness to join in challenged me to find new experiences for us all to share and help bind us together.

I wonder if my hesitation here is so much because I don’t know and trust the kid or if it’s because Spencer is another man. Because he’s really just a kid, and not someone interested in Neve, I can’t say unequivocally. I’m not jealous of him. All I know is that things feel uncomfortable all of a sudden.

But this is Remi’s island, and while I may make the majority financial contribution to its upkeep, along with

Oliver, who is not here right now, I'm not in a position to object. Not yet, anyway.

I will do so if I feel the need, but right now, all I can do is respect Remi's need to help his fellow man and try to adjust.

And if I'm honest, I think maybe it's not so much the kid's presence as it is Neve's absence that's hitting me the hardest. It's been close to a week, and every day that passes seems like a day that she drifts further and further away.

Waking up without her here is not an experience I wanted to have.

I wander over to the restaurant after closing and locking my door, at a loss with what else to do, but the entire place is dark. There are no inviting food smells. No coffee in the carafe. No one is sitting around getting their day started. It's been like that since she left, though. I don't know why I thought today would be different.

I hover in front of the Keurig, debating whether or not to make a cup of the instant shit. With most of the guys here on the island coming from military backgrounds, a strong brew in the morning is more the sign of a new day than the sun coming up. The fact that it's gone is more significant than even I am willing to admit.

It's like Remi sees no reason to try to hold us together anymore.

I can't face it, so I leave the restaurant and take the path back toward the cabins where I encounter Jesse, shirtless and

sweaty, on his morning jog.

It's a sight Neve would have appreciated...had she been here.

I raise my hand to greet him as he slows to pass me. "Have you seen the others?" I ask, wondering if he knows what's going on with them all.

He's wearing earbuds, and I can hear some kind of clashing, frenetic music blaring; he's playing it so loudly. For a moment, I think he's going to ignore me and carry on, but he stops, removing his earbuds and jogging on the spot, so I repeat the question.

He shrugs like it means nothing to him. "They're probably all moping around like sad sacks because things happened just like I predicted. If everybody had listened to me, we'd all have been better off."

I frown and shake my head. Jesse's been steeped in anger from the day Neve left, but Remi told me they'd bumped into her with Beck Wilder at the hospital yesterday. I don't know what that means, but Jesse has been even worse ever since. "You know Neve didn't leave because she didn't want us, Jesse. She did it to keep us safe. Out of love."

"Yeah? And perhaps you're just too damn slow to figure shit out. We were here for her, Cope, but when the going got tough, she up and left. And to add insult to injury, she ran to another fucking man! There's no hope of a lasting relationship if she doesn't believe in the whole 'for better or for worse' thing. That means we're better off without her."

“No! You’re wrong.” Anger surges through me at his words, and although I’ve never been the physical type, I move to shove him. Jesse easily evades me, of course, sliding his earbuds back in and continuing his run.

I shove my hands in my pockets and continue down the path, trying not to dwell on Jesse’s words because I don’t want him to be right. But even as I push them away, I can’t avoid the truth that even if Neve does decide to return, it might be too late for the six of us. If Jesse’s already made up his mind, then there’s no way he’ll be easily talked around. It was hard enough to get him on board in the first place, so where would that leave the rest of us?

I walk aimlessly and inadvertently find myself at Neve’s door, where I find Remi asleep in a chair. Fuck, he must really be hurting if this is where he spent the night.

“Hey, are you okay?” I ask awkwardly as he blinks up at me.

Remi rubs his sleepy eyes and looks around before standing and stretching, letting out a groan from sleeping in such an awkward position.

I reach out and squeeze his shoulder. “We’ll get through this. She’ll come back soon; you’ll see,” I tell him, though it feels odd because it’s normally Remi who does the comforting.

“So, what’s for breakfast?” I ask, as much to change the subject and lighten the heaviness of the atmosphere that hangs over us all as because I’m still starving.

Remi shrugs. "I guess everyone can just have cereal."

I cock my head to the side and stare at him. "Do we even have cereal?"

He shrugs. "I really don't know. I forgot to get groceries this week."

Shit.

"Where's Spencer?" I ask, trying again. He looks at me blankly and I pinch the bridge of my nose. What the hell is happening? Since Remi insisted the kid come here, surely he feels some sense of responsibility for him? I feel like I've been dropped down into fucking Wonderland.

Before he can answer, Oscar opens the door of Neve's room, resolving my silent query as to why Remi didn't just use her bed.

"He's probably somewhere stealing our shit or planning our deaths. Let's get a move on and find him," Oz answers me as he pulls on his jacket and starts walking toward the restaurant. I guess he's another who isn't too happy about Remi's stray.

"I don't suppose you've heard from Neve, have you?" I ask hopefully. Oz slides me a frosty glare and ignores the question.

I'll assume that's a no, then. He wouldn't be in such a mood if he'd heard from her.

We find Spencer sitting at the family table outside the restaurant, and as we walk up, Jesse jogs in from the opposite

direction and starts stretching against one of the wooden posts that support the roof.

“Jeez, no one wants to see you doing all that shit, “ Oz grumbles, scowling.

Jesse smirks. “You don’t want to see it because in ten years, you are going to be a donut roll while I’m still going to look exactly like this.”

Spencer opens his mouth to say something, but Oz cuts him off with a look before he launches his inquisition. “In case you didn’t know, I’m Oscar Hunt, the lead detective of the Lost Boys case, so while the name Spencer Wilton is not new to me, you, however, are. Because first off, Spencer Wilton was not listed as a Lost Boy, and second, his hair was...”

“Blond,” Spencer interrupts, apparently willing to play Oz at his own game. “And I was for a long time. My hair got darker as I got older.” He tugs at his scruffy, overlong locks. “But there’s still some blond there.”

“Go ahead, Oz. Run your fingers through the kid’s hair,” Jesse snarks, and I laugh despite myself, earning a sharp glare from Oscar.

“What about your parents? Can you describe them?”

Spencer’s eyes go wide and troubled as he looks at Oz. “I can vaguely remember their faces but not much else. After my mom died, I lived with my dad until...”

“What about your house?”

“I...” the kid shakes his head, his eyes screwed up like he’s trying to remember, but Oz is relentless.

“What about the car they drove, your friends, neighbors, other family members?”

Spencer’s mouth opens and closes helplessly, and it’s clear he’s becoming agitated.

“Cool it, Oz,” I tell him. “This isn’t helping anything.”

Oz throws me a furious look. “Cool it?” he snaps. “If what this kid says is true, he escaped from a guy who’s still out there. Hook is still out there, yes?” he asks, turning back to Spencer, who looks pale and confused.

“Um, I think? I don’t know! He lived in the big house, and we lived in our bunk houses.”

“When did you last see him?”

“I don’t—“

Oz doesn’t even give Spencer the opportunity to respond.

“How did you get off the island?”

“The boats were—“

“Why did he keep you for so long?”

“Oz, please. The kid was seven when he was taken!” Remi shakes off his funk to throw his opinion into the barrage of questions Oscar is launching at Spencer like missiles.

Oz’s reply is icy. “I don’t believe him!”

“Oliver would have,” I say quietly into the lull.

There's a moment of silence, and they all turn to look at me.

I shuffle uncomfortably. If it's not a number on a computer, they rarely ever invite my opinion on anything. "Come on, guys, look at this logically," I implore, trying to appeal to their better natures. "Everything Spencer has said lines up with what Oliver has told us over the years."

Oz opens his mouth to argue, but for once, I don't give him the chance to disagree. "Look, I know the therapists have said Oliver may have created false memories in order to deal with the trauma, but what if that's not the case? However you feel about that, I think we need to explore the possibility because here is another person saying exactly the same thing."

I can see Remi considering the likelihood, but neither Jesse nor Oz look convinced, so I pull out the big guns. "Neve listened to Oliver; that's why he connected to her. Maybe we need to take a page from her book, too, and listen again with a more open mind."

Oz sighs and sits at the table directly across from Spencer.

"All right," he grits out. "Let's hear it from the beginning."

NINETEEN

Neve



Mood: is it okay if I call you mine?

IT'S BEEN TWO DAYS. Beck brought me back to his apartment, and although I told him I wanted to go home, I put off doing so immediately. I needed time.

I think I'm ready, though.

The messages from Remi and Cope bolstered my certainty that I need to be back on the island. Although Jesse and Oscar might take some work, I'm confident that Cope, Remi, and Oliver, at least, still love me.

I miss it, and I miss them, and I've realized how stupid I was to run out on them on the spur of the moment without thinking things through rationally.

Not that I regret my time with Beck. So many pieces of the jigsaw have come together since I've worked through his painstaking documentation on the Lost Boys case. I even reread the details he has on Spencer. I'd recognized the name at the hospital, but until we spoke to Spencer himself, the story was never there, and nobody but Beck had bothered to link Spencer Wilton with the Lost Boys kidnapping.

Beck has been meticulous. He flagged that Spencer fit the M.O. and had added him to the list of potential victims, as well as others that the police have never officially cited as targets because he's looking at it from a different perspective with different objectives.

I can't help but wonder how much Oz could learn if he spoke to Beck, listened to his story, and checked through all the details he's amassed.

After hearing about Nicholas, I desperately need that closure. This new knowledge is eating away at me. Just as it must have done with Beck when no one would listen to him.

The difference is, I have an advantage. I can go straight to the lead investigator...if he'll talk to me.

I guess I might have blown that opportunity, too.

I dig in my backpack and pull out my two phones.

One, my old phone, used to be the one I used for everything. After I moved out to the island, Oscar gave me a new phone, trying to save me from the harassing texts I was getting. After Terrell was killed, I went back to using the old phone for business and the newer one for personal calls, mainly for just our group.

Lately, I haven't needed either for much of anything. I stare at my old phone. I don't exactly have a business anymore. Unlocking the phone, I hand it to Beck.

"Call Cope for me?"

I start pacing the tiny confines of Beck's living area, sensing Beck watching me. I thought about calling Remi, but he would go all therapist on me. I don't know if I can handle that this soon. Not yet.

And it can't be Jesse or Oscar. They're not going to take too kindly to Beck, and...yeah. Beck needs to come with me

because I need answers. And with the guys not being too happy with me and my actions, I need his moral support.

So, it has to be Cope. He'll be confused, but he won't question my decisions. The corners of my mouth lift as I think about seeing him. He'll crack a joke and leer at my ass and open his arms for a hug, but he won't try to analyze my pain or question Beck's presence. He's the right choice.

Beck makes the call. He laughs over something, and I grind my teeth. They're already bonding, for chrissake.

Listening to him speak to Cope from a few feet away gives me a surreal feeling—although everything feels surreal right now. The bright, tropical sunlight feels like a lie. There is so much darkness here. So much pain. How dare this place continue to be such a fucking paradise when Nicholas died how he did?

Beck hangs up and hands back my phone. “Cope said to meet him at the Key West City Marina.”

I close my eyes and take in a breath. “That's the one.”

“All right, then. Let's go.” We head out to Beck's car, and I'm a bundle of nerves at the thought of going home. Is it still my home? What sort of reception will I get? I can guess, but some of my thoughts are not good.

They make me nervous.

Reaching across my lap, Beck buckles the seatbelt I forgot while I was in my own head, then puts the car in drive.

We don't have to wait long at the docks before Cope arrives. Seeing him unleashes so many emotions that I can't quite identify them all individually at once. Guilt. Joy. Nervousness.

Regardless, I find myself running to him, and he opens his arms in time for me to throw myself at him. He catches me, his hug warm and safe and strong and so secure.

He's home. One part of it, anyway.

"God, I'm so glad to see you," he says, his face buried in my hair. I nod, incapable of speech. "I called Oz," he continues. If he feels me stiffen, he doesn't remark on it. The last time I saw Oscar was in the hospital. He was angry with me, cold and quietly furious over the way I was leaving. "He's going to meet us."

I pull away, rolling my lips inward. "Guess there's no time like the present to meet that head-on, is there?"

Cope ruffles my hair. "You'll be fine, baby girl."

Beck offers a hand and a smile to Cope. "Hey, there."

Cope looks at him, his own smile wary, before shaking his hand.

Beck nods toward our ride. "Nice boat. Who's Sharon? Old flame?"

"Nah. I'm much more attached to what I have now. All of us are." Cope's gaze is unwavering.

Beck tips his chin up in recognition of the poorly concealed message. "I hear ya."

“I doubt you do. But you will.”

I roll my eyes. “Jesus, Cope. Beck’s been helping me. I don’t know what I would have done without him.”

“You would have been with us, and you would have been just fine.” Cope stops himself and holds up his hands. “No. Scratch that. Sorry—not going there.” He looks at Beck. “I appreciate you stepping in. You have my thanks. You have my respect. The island is Neve’s home, and even though it’s not only my decision, if Neve wants you there, as far as I’m concerned, you’re welcome there.”

A small frown touches the place between Beck’s eyes. “Thank you.”

We climb into the boat, Cope and Beck briefly hesitating over who’s going to help me in before I take matters into my own hands and hop lightly in on my own.

I mean...if they’re going to be irritating about things.

When we arrive at the island, only Remi is at the dock. I had kind of figured that Oscar wouldn’t beat us here since he had to finish up at work first, but I have to admit that Jesse’s pointed absence hurts. I understand why. My actions hurt them, and the hell of it is...if I could go back, I’m not certain I would have handled anything any differently. At the time, the most logical thing to do was to separate myself from the men I loved.

Love. The idea stops me in my tracks as I step onto the dock. It’s as natural as breathing and as foreign as Amsterdam.

I don't think I've said the words—not in any real sense, anyway. I said it to Jesse at the hospital, but I was leaving, and he was angry, so I'm not sure that counts.

I need to rectify that, and soon.

They need to know how I feel about them, each and every individual one of them, even if they don't feel the same about me.

Nervous suddenly, I make my gaze meet Remi's.

He hugs me. It's one of those good hugs. The firm, enveloping kind of hug that leaves nothing wanting. The embrace almost makes me cry again.

Pulling back, he gives me a long, steadying look before bending to kiss me lightly. "Welcome home, brat."

My breath releases in a strangled laugh, and we begin to walk up the slight incline to the house, Remi and Cope on either side of me, and Beck falling in behind us.

It's strange how an island that once felt so foreign now calls to my heart as its home. The familiarity of the path to the restaurant, lined with its powderpuff trees and swaying palms, is a balm that begins to instantly ease my troubled heart. Cope and Remi's hands, reaching over every minute or so to touch my shoulder or waist, are bittersweet reminders of other things I missed.

On the terrace, Remi clasps his hands together. He seems almost nervous. "You guys take a seat. I have dinner going, so

I'll just...ah...be a few minutes, and then we'll eat and talk. Sound good?"

"Sure, man," Beck says, pulling out a chair.

"That's Oliver's chair."

Another voice sounds from the far end of the terrace, and we look over to see another person making his way toward us. I frown and look at Cope in question.

What the hell is this?

"Ah...Neve, this is Spencer. Spencer, meet Neve. We met him at the hospital and invited him to come home with us when he was going through a rough patch—"

The sense of joy and growing peace I had felt upon coming home ices over. Being out of touch with the guys, I never told them about what happened with Spencer in the hospital. And it seems like Oliver didn't either.

Cope is still talking, but I stare at the young man who turned my life upside down, completely mute. I wipe my hair from my face, uneasy. "I..."

Cope continues, picking up on my tension. "It's a long story, and there's a lot to figure out, but we'll do all of that together. As a family."

It's Beck who picks up on my unease and puts himself between me and Spencer while he assesses the situation, but before either he or I can say anything either to or about Spencer, another voice comes from the walkway behind us.

“Yes,” I look up to find Jesse standing there, his gimlet gaze on Beck. “It looks like we have a great deal to discuss, and moving forward, decisions will be made together or not at all.”

Suddenly, this isn't the happy homecoming I imagined. Especially when Spencer walks past me while Beck is distracted and whispers, “*Wendy...*”



TWENTY

Oscar

SITTING AT MY DESK at the precinct as I leaf through the paperwork that clutters my desk, I'm surprised to find I've caught up with most of it.

The biggest was a carjacking in one of the tourist districts, which was quick to close. We caught the guy, booked him, and the trial has already been scheduled. It was a cut-and-dry sort of case, nothing that really required a lot of investigation.

The inactivity makes me feel restless, so I've spent a ton of time on smaller cases, ones that my street teams were perfectly capable of handling. Hell, I've even completed documents that other officers could have filled out, despite my loathing for paperwork.

I don't need a therapist to tell me I need the distraction. The island isn't the same without Neve, and I hardly even want to be there. I need to stay at work and keep busy, keep my mind off where she is, whether she's safe... *who she's with*, since Jesse and Remi bumped into her at the hospital a few days ago with Beck-Fucking-Wilder, and Oliver's been strangely

reticent about what occurred after they left, saying he'll tell us when he gets home.

I don't want to think about whether she's moving on with her life, but that's the thought that keeps flashing up in my mind. Even though I know I've not done anything to encourage her to come back.

None of us have discussed it, but I think maybe Cope and Remi have broken radio silence with Neve. For me, though, I need her to come back of her own free will—to choose *us*.

So, I work.

Besides, it's not like I can turn work off when I get home. Spencer Wilton's presence there is a constant reminder of more things I don't want to think about.

But I have to, and his file is in front of me now.

Twelve years ago, Spencer Wilton and his father disappeared during a fishing trip, and although he fit the single father M.O. of the Lost Boys Kidnapper, the case was always considered a drowning since neither of them were proficient sailors.

The age lines up, even though Spencer looks younger than nineteen, and the file photograph of the then seven-year-old boy could very well be this guy who claims to be Spencer if his hair had darkened with age.

I've even checked with the pediatrician the department sometimes uses, and she tells me malnutrition can cause a failure to thrive, which might explain Spencer's small frame

and childlike appearance. And he's only nineteen, after all, not very much more than a child, but there are still things that don't add up. Things I want to look into even though I'm reluctant to dig up the entire Lost Boys case again.

Of course, we could establish Spencer is who he says he is fairly easily with a DNA test since we have blood testing on file from a sample from the abandoned boat, but my gut tells me he won't go for it. He's adamant that he wants to leave the past behind and move on with his life. And, by law, he's an adult, so he doesn't have to do anything he doesn't want to.

Yet he still wants us to believe him.

Yeah, something definitely isn't adding up there.

I sigh and rub my hands over my face. Somehow, I need to convince Spencer to come in and make an official statement. But first, I need to get out from under this rock where the selfish part of me is hiding because I just want all this to be over and I need to convince the captain that the case needs to be reopened.

Steeling myself, I get up, grab Spencer's file, and knock on Captain Johnson's open office door before I can talk myself out of it.

He doesn't look up from whatever he's doing but motions me to come in. I close the door behind me, shutting out the noise of the bullpen. I want some privacy for this conversation.

“What can I do for you, Oz?” he asks, eyeing the door. “Got something on your mind?”

“I think we need to reopen the Lost Boys case,” I tell him with a sigh. “I’ve got some new intel that suggests Wesley Terrell might have been a copycat.”

Captain Johnson rests his elbows on the desk and steepl his hands. “Oz, you know as well as I do how rare copycats are.”

“I do,” I agree. “But that doesn’t mean they don’t exist. And maybe he’s not a copycat but an accomplice, but there are still too many loose ends with this case that haven’t been tied up.”

Johnson grimaces. “You wanna tell me what you’ve got? You know I’m going to have to run this past the commissioner. He’s lapping up the publicity about how this high-profile case that spans two decades has finally been closed because the department never gave up on it. There’ll have to be something big to convince him; you know that as well as I do.”

I drag my fingers through my hair and let out a growl. The commissioner’s a fucking bureaucrat who’s more interested in appearances and positive statistics than the truth. “It should be about reasonable doubt,” I mutter under my breath.

The captain just quirks an eyebrow and waits. After all, it doesn’t really matter what I think. Only what I can prove or disprove.

“Okay, first, there’s the fact that he took a girl. That’s never been his M.O.” I keep quiet about Neve’s revelation that she

almost got snatched along with her brother. I need to build a case, not weaken it.

“Then, there’s the arson at Neve Murray’s Little Pilot’s daycare and the connected assault on Oliver. Two people who have ties to the original case with subsequent attacks on both suggests an unfinished agenda. That’s beyond coincidence to me.”

Johnson grunts in response. I know damn well he doesn’t believe in coincidence any more than I do, but I also know he’s looking at concrete occurrences to persuade the commissioner. If they can be passed off in any other way, they’re not concrete. “I’ll need more than that,” he tells me bluntly.

Well, that’s fine, because I have more.

“Okay, how about this? The day Oliver was taken to hospital there was a young man there claiming to be Spencer Wilton.” I pause to give him time to take that in. “He says he recently escaped from an island where he was held for over a decade.”

The captain sits up and leans forward over his desk. “You get a statement from him?” he asks, jotting something on the pad in front of him.

I wince. “It’s off the record,” I admit. “I still have to get him to come into the precinct for an official interview. I’m sure you can appreciate that he’s pretty spooked.”

Johnson taps his pen against the notepad. “That doesn’t mean Wesley Terrell wasn’t the real Hook. It just means that his death has allowed these kids the opportunity to escape.”

I nod my head. “You’re right. Which means there might still be other kids out there, perhaps ones who are stranded, and we need to find them before they run out of resources. Surely that alone has to be grounds to reopen the case.”

I can see he’s still of two minds considering how the commissioner will view all this. A search for survivors doesn’t necessarily mean reopening the case. But Oliver called me yesterday, telling me about another Lost Boys survivor who saw Terrell’s body and is convinced that he isn’t Hook. He didn’t want to go into details on the phone, and I need to play this carefully because of the way Spencer Wilton’s mental state will be perceived. Although Ollie didn’t give names, he swears he has this information on good authority, and while I’m not completely convinced Spencer is a credible source, who else could it be? So, I’m winging it here... Oliver better damn well come through.

I clear my throat. “There’s more. There’s another Lost Boy survivor. A witness who claims Wesley Terrell is not Hook.”

“Well, hell...” Captain Johnson leans back in his chair and throws his pen onto his desk. “Why didn’t you lead with that? Who is this guy?”

“It’s unfolding fast—”

He narrows his eyes. “It’s not your brother, is it? He’s always said he can’t give a description of the perp. And there

was nothing in his statement after Terrell was killed except that the voice was wrong.”

I point a finger at the captain. “And that there should have been a damn red flag. But no, this is a third party, and currently, he doesn’t want to be named, obviously, since by all accounts, there’s a killer still on the loose who may well target anyone who can identify him.”

Captain Johnson closes his eyes and massages his temples with one hand while he picks up the phone with the other and presses the interdepartmental communication line to call the commissioner. It’s obviously not a call he’s looking forward to.

I can’t tell much about how it’s going from the monosyllabic responses the captain is giving after stating the facts I’ve presented and his carefully blank expression but when he hangs up, he says, “The commissioner’s on his way down.”

I groan. The man’s an ass, a politician more than a policeman even though he rose up through the ranks. If he’s coming down instead of calling me up, it means he’s going to argue the point.

Ten minutes later, police commissioner Richard Williams lumbers through the bullpen, silencing the officers and appears in Captain Johnson’s doorway with a scowl on his face.

One that’s directed at me.

“What the hell is this nonsense about reopening the Lost Boys case,” he demands, taking a step inside and slamming the door behind him.

“Sir, I have evidence...”

“You have nothing!” he bellows. “What are you trying to do, Hunt? Ensure the good citizens of the Keys have absolutely no confidence in their police department? Especially with a case like this that involves their children. Can you imagine the pandemonium if we turn round and tell them we got it wrong?”

“With all due respect, sir, the M.O...”

“Serial kidnappers evolve, Hunt; that’s police work 101. You know damn well that taking a girl could have been part of an evolution. And if you want to spout M.O.s, then Spencer Wilton even being alive at nineteen is also outside of how this kidnapper worked. No bodies have ever been found, and the one escapee we know about was certainly not that old when he managed to do so.”

“But, sir, without finding the island, we’ll never know how long those boys were kept.”

“Hunt, your own brother said there were no boys on that island older than twelve. Are you calling him a liar?”

“No, of course not, but...”

“Exactly. For the first time in over twenty years, the people of the Keys can sleep in peace, knowing their kids are safe. And it’s going to stay that way.”

Of course, the commissioner wants to keep the case closed. This case was the biggest failure of his career, and he's been out there chatting up the media, putting a nice spin on everything that makes him look good.

“You have got to be kidding me. We need to find out if Spencer Wilton can take us back to this island in case there are other survivors.”

“You can't coerce him into taking action he doesn't want to take, Hunt. I've already been apprised that the man—who may or may *not* be Spencer Wilton—doesn't want to be involved.”

“I can bring him in for withholding evidence,” I argue, getting desperate.

“No, you can't, because you're off the case.”

“What?” I recoil in shock. “What grounds do you have for that?”

He passes me a slip of paper that I hadn't noticed he was carrying, and I scan it before anger wells up inside me and bursts out in a string of curses. “You have got to be fucking kidding me. This is bullshit. I was never informed of any investigation into this matter,” I say, balling the paper up in my fist.

He takes a step back. His words are calm, but there's a smug glint in his eyes that has my hackles rising. “You were invited to give your side and didn't turn up, so the case was decided in your absence.”

“This is a fucking setup,” I yell, fury making me unguarded in my response. “I didn’t know about any of this.”

“The paper trail says different,” he states, his voice full of stone-cold warning. “And I suggest you don’t add insubordination to your misdemeanors.”

“I’ll fight it.”

“You can fight it all you want, but right now, you’re suspended on grounds of endangering civilians by knowingly putting them in the line of fire after taking them into the Conch Marina, and you need to leave. Immediately.”

“Why, you...”

I don’t finish. Williams narrows his eyes at me and gets in a final chilling threat. “You’re already walking on thin ice, Hunt. You wouldn’t want the reopening of the Lost Boys case to trigger a fresh investigation into the actions of your friend, Jesse Russo, would you? A closer look might prompt a verdict of homicide after the way Wesley Terrell was attacked.”

I stare at Commissioner Williams for a long, horrified moment. My breath sticks in my chest when I see he’s deadly serious.

Without another word, I slam my gun and badge onto the desk. I glance at Captain Johnson, who looks almost as shocked as I am, before I walk out of the office to grab my things.

Every one of my senses is screaming at me that there’s something fucking screwed up going on here.

I'm tempted to stay back and speak to the captain because I'm damn sure he didn't see this coming, either, which is another red flag. But that fucking asshole, Williams, has sicced security on me, ensuring that I don't leave with anything I shouldn't.

There's one silver lining to this clusterfuck of a day, though. As I leave the precinct, I get a text from Cope.

Neve is coming home.

My mood, which has wavered between fury because my job's on the line and my friend has been threatened and joy that Neve has returned, takes a dive when I get back to see first Spencer and then Beck-Fucking-Wilder.

What the hell is that asshole doing here? How did he find his way into our sanctuary?

I thunder towards him, my fists clenching.

Give me a reason. Just one word is all I need today.

Hell, I might just punch him, regardless. It might make me feel better.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demand as I approach him.

Beck turns to look at me, but it's Jesse who speaks first. “Haven't you heard? This is Neve's new boy toy,” he snarks.

Beck's unruffled by Jesse's hostility. “She hasn't done me the honor,” he replies. “But thank you for elevating me to a rival. I'll take it.”

“I’ll be elevating you to the pearly gates if you keep talking like that,” Jesse growls, and I’m about to add my own two cents worth when Neve steps in before I can say anything.

“Stop it, all of you,” she snaps, and I’m surprised at the vehemence in her voice.

I’m also surprised at the way she aligns herself with Beck. She moves just a fraction closer to him, subtly placing herself between him and us, but not obviously so. I’m not even sure she realizes she’s doing it.

What the actual fuck?

I narrow my eyes. “There are things you should know about Wilder before you go choosing sides,” I tell her stiffly. “Like how he was a frequent runaway as a kid and how, during one of his little jaunts, he tried to get out of trouble by claiming that the Lost Boys Kidnapper took him. Like how he became a drug addict and was always breaking into places to feed his habit, and how he finally got caught when he was seventeen for robbing a convenience store and would have gone to fucking prison if he hadn’t chosen the military. He’s no better than a criminal.”

“Look, just because sweet Ollie didn’t have any outward trauma to show for his past doesn’t mean we were all that lucky,” Beck spits. But my eyes are on Neve.

If I’d thought any of this was going to sway her, boy, was I wrong.

If anything, it has the opposite effect.

She steps even closer to Beck, her expression blazing with fury and her eyes colder than I have ever seen them before.

Wilder is trembling with rage, and I want to grab Neve and pull her away from him to somewhere safe.

But to my complete dismay, she slips her hand into his, and it's just as much of a shock to see his anger visibly subside at her touch.

Fuuuuck!

“I’ve already heard all the stories, Oscar Hunt,” she says, and I know she’s mad because she uses my full name. “What’s more, *I* took the time to truly listen, too, and then I checked out the evidence for myself. Something I would have expected the police to do. And you... I would have expected you, *especially*, to have taken the time to listen to Beck’s version of events and get the truth straight from the horse’s mouth rather than relying on second-hand rhetoric because I believe Beck, and I think you would too if you weren’t too pig-headed to listen.”

I stand there, stunned, not knowing quite what to say or do.

There’s a lot going on suddenly. A lot of people telling me to believe, to trust. But I can see this is important to Neve, and since I’ve listened to Spencer, I guess I owe Beck the same courtesy.

Besides, I need to know what he’s been filling Neve’s head with.

Not that I think she's easily taken in, but the guy's a pretty smooth-talker from what I've seen, and the only way I can defend against that is to know what I'm up against.

Before we delve any further into all that, Remi comes to serve our evening meal. Since it's the first time he's cooked properly since Neve left, I don't want to ruin things, so instead of sliding into what will surely end up as an argument, we all dig into a traditional Moroccan dish of lamb tagine served with couscous.

We all compliment Remi and begin eating, with the exception of Spencer, who's staring at it like he's never seen such food before. Maybe he hasn't, if his story is true. A sudden hush falls when Beck speaks.

"Mmm...this is delicious. So close. A remarkable effort, Remi. I like it."

My jaw drops. No one ever criticizes Remi's food because there is never anything to criticize. Aside from Jesse being an asshole and being pissy about it not being manly enough a time or two, it's never happened before.

Beck seems to realize something is amiss, but after looking around at all the stunned faces, all he does is shrug. "I just mean...traditionally, this is a dish made with preserved lemons. It's a subtle difference, but the fresh lemon tastes different."

Remi looks momentarily gobsmacked but recovers himself quickly. "We'll have to talk recipes sometime," he says smoothly.

Beck shakes his head. “Oh, no. Neve will tell you my cooking is not much. I tend to be heavy-handed with the ingredients.”

He winks at Neve, and she ducks her head and gives a little giggle that has all the men looking between the two of them with a mixed range of expressions that vary between surprise and a growing awareness that there’s a rapport between Neve and Beck that none of us expected.

Beck turns his attention back to Remi. “I’m just saying so because I’ve had the authentic dish in Morocco. But this is an excellent interpretation.”

For a moment, there’s absolute silence. Then Jesse, of all people, bursts out laughing. And it’s not just a small, embarrassed kind of chuckle to cover a faux pas. Oh, no, this is a roaring belly laugh that shakes the table.

Beck smiles back at Jesse and tips his glass at him, and Jesse returns the gesture.

Neve smiles and rubs Remi’s arm affectionately, and Remi shakes his head and allows a small smile to tip his lips up. Hell, I think he might actually have appreciated Beck’s honesty.

Cope is wide-eyed, like he didn’t quite catch all the undertones of the conversation, and Spencer just prods and pouts at his food like he wishes it was chicken nuggets.

And me? I just watch it all play out and wonder what the hell has happened to my home.

TWENTY-ONE

Neve



Mood: The opposite of love's indifference.

JESSE'S UNCHARACTERISTIC LAUGHTER PROMPTS the rest of us to laugh, but after a moment it dies away to an uneasy silence. Cope stands, claps his hands together in a brisk movement, and nods at everyone.

“And on that note, I think the dishes are calling my name. How 'bout no one kill or fuck anybody while I'm cleaning up, um-kay?”

“Right.” Oscar rises as Cope leaves, motioning to Spencer and making me wonder if Oz has picked up on the weird fascination the kid seems to have with me. “You mind if I have a word?”

Spencer stands. “Okay.”

“Oscar, wait.” My chair pushes across the stone terrace with a screech as I stand, too. I've been figuratively sitting on my hands all through dinner, annoyed with the way Oscar spoke to Beck and at the idea that this was how Beck had been treated all these years—both as a child after he had been abducted and as an adult when he had tried to make things right. I understand that he wasn't exactly a poster child for good behavior, but that just made him an even better candidate for a criminal to prey on. Who would believe him? Help him? Champion him?

“I really think you owe it to Beck to listen to his side of things,” I say now, somewhat stiffly.

Oscar's gaze flickers from me to Beck as Beck tugs at me to sit back down. "It's fine, Snow. You don't need to defend me. I'm used to it."

"Tomorrow." Oscar points a finger at Beck, cutting him off, then levels an inscrutable look at me. His tone is slightly more conciliatory when he continues. "I'll talk to him tomorrow. I promise."

He leaves before I can reply.

The three of us remaining—Remi, Beck, and I—look at each other. My gaze falls to the table before Remi's patient stare. It's been that way since I stepped off the boat. He has questions. I have no answers. Not yet, anyway.

Jesse and Oscar...they have things they want to know, too. They're so mad they can't bring themselves to ask the questions burning away beneath the surface. Instead, they've layered them over with an ice that burns. The coldness bothers me. I can't blame them, especially considering how I ran away and shut them out, but I'm at a loss as to how to fix it.

Jesse's anger isn't as cold as Oscar's, blazing forth from his pale blue eyes with a distinct lack of restraint, whereas Oscar keeps his cool and shuttered. Several times during supper, I caught him watching me when he didn't think I saw. I hurt him, and his only defense is to cover that hurt with rage.

I take in a deep breath and let it out. I guess I'll just have to chip away at them both.

Remi rises. “Let’s find you a place to sleep for the night,” he tells Beck.

He leaves unspoken the rest of the sentence, “so you don’t have to make the trip back tonight.” He’s polite with Beck, but I recognize it for what it is—the customer-service kind of courtesy he perfected over years of working for his family’s business.

The pleasant expression.

The smile that stops just short of reaching his eyes.

The carefully chosen words that say everything they need to, and nothing more.

It makes my heart sick.

With us following along behind, Remi walks toward the door that leads into the inner part of the once-resort, where the lobby-turned-great room and my suite of rooms are located. The chime of a text interrupts him mid-stride.

A little smile touches his lips, and he waves the phone. “It’s Oliver saying he is ready to come home, thank you very much. He plans to talk to Doctor Marlowe about getting him released. He’s done.”

“Oh, that’s great news. I know he’s sick of being there.”

Remi leads Beck to a room on the opposite side of the common area from mine. I can’t help but wonder if it’s on purpose—if he’s playing dad and trying to keep us separate. I want to tell him it’s not necessary, that I don’t feel that way about Beck, and I wouldn’t do that to them, anyway, but the

words stifle in my throat, and in the end, I simply hover uncertainly in the doorway, waiting.

“I didn’t know you were coming,” he’s telling Beck. “So, the room hasn’t been used in a while; I’m sorry. It should be okay, though. There are towels through here...poolside...and I’ll get you some fresh linens and such tomorrow.”

His words are stiff. It’s like he knows he’s being half-ass, but he’s just not willing to go all the way until he has to. Until Beck is *in*. Accepted. Until then, he’s *out*.

Beck’s expression is hard to read as he glances around the room. He offers a polite smile. “I’ve slept in some pretty shit places, brother. This is the Ritz by comparison, and I’m grateful for the hospitality.”

Remi rubs the back of his neck. It’s obvious, to me, at least, that he feels out of sorts at being an ungracious host. Finally, he mutters “good night” and walks out, brushing past me as he leaves the room.

Beck’s eyes catch mine from across the room, an odd tension hanging between us. “Night, Snow.”

Several things become clear in that instant. Our hug earlier was more than me just needing physical contact. I needed him—Beck—specifically. I needed him because he was this whole complicated mess who, at his core, wanted the same thing I did: the right answers. Beck didn’t accept half-truths. If it weren’t for his willingness to delve into uncomfortable territory, I would never have known about Nicholas, and as painful as it is, I’m grateful for that.

I needed him then, and I need him now. I want to feel his arms around me again. There's this passion and energy within him that I can't help but admire, respect, and want.

But I'm not going there. It would be a slap in the face to my men. Instead, I nod at him and utter a quiet thank you as I back out of the room, closing the door softly between us.

Remi's waiting, and we walk across the great room to my suite. I'm silent, not knowing what to say. Of all people, Remi wouldn't judge anything that came out of my mouth, but I'm tired of feeling like an emotional mess in the middle of this wreck of a week, so I just keep my mouth shut. Remi's quiet, too, seeming to understand, maybe.

When we open the door, I flick on the light to find everything spotless. There's no dust. A stack of fresh towels sits on the neatly made bed, a basket of folded laundry beside it. Even Jamie Fraser's litter box is fresh. Jamie Fraser comes running up, meowing and twining frantically around my ankles. I bend to pick him up, tears pricking my eyes before flowing freely down my cheeks.

"Oh, cat..." I breathe, burying my face in his fur. He winds his paws around either side of my neck, butting his face into the crook of my shoulder and neck and licking his rough tongue furiously at my skin. I cry harder. "I'm so sorry."

When we arrived, we went straight to dinner. I bypassed greeting Jamie Fraser in favor of settling things with the human males, but now I wish I had come straight here, hugged my feline friend, and given us the soothing we both needed.

Jamie Fraser is a special animal—all oranges are, honestly—one closely attuned to his human's emotions and comings and goings. He would have taken my abrupt absence hard. "I'm sorry," I whisper again, kissing his head.

A throat clears, and I realize that Remi still stands in the doorway. Wiping my cheeks, I put Jamie Fraser back on the floor.

"I didn't know when...you were coming back, but I wanted to be ready. I wanted your home to be ready."

"I'm here now," I whisper.

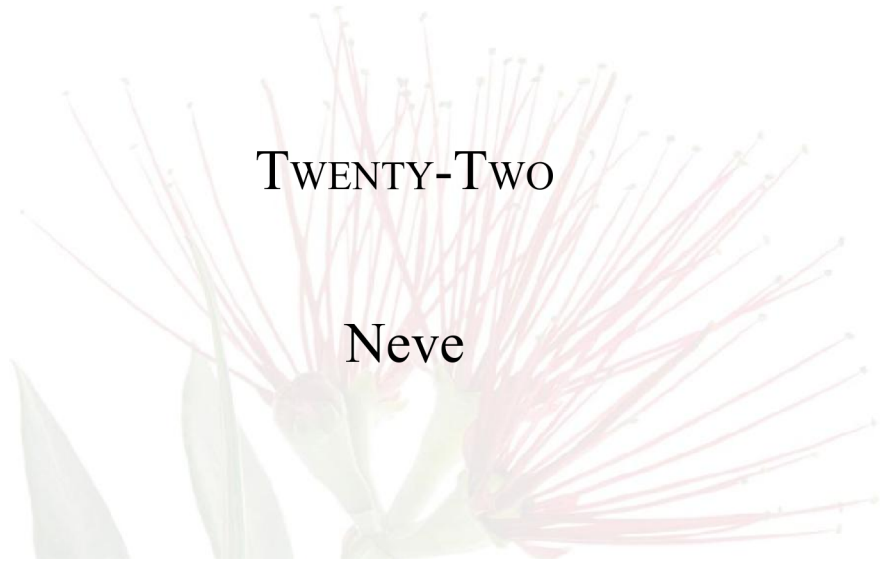
He licks his lips. "Yes. You're here now." The expression on his face—stern and solemn and with the barest edge of anger—has goosebumps rising on my forearms.

"Remi?"

"Come here, baby girl."

TWENTY-TWO

Neve



Mood: Like a river.

“COME HERE, BABY GIRL.”

The words send a frisson of excitement mixed with nervousness down my spine.

I walk over to where Remi stands with his hands in his pockets. My relationship with him has always been slightly different from that of the others since he's not big on the group sex aspect of the relationship we all share. In many ways, that makes the connection I have with him a little contrary. Shared and yet singular. It's why I know I can go to him now without guile or guilt that I'm leaving the others out.

When I'm within a few steps, he opens his arms to me, and I slip into them, grateful for the unquestioning acceptance I know will be there.

I cherish his embrace, soaking up his strength, support, and affection. Something I've missed so badly these past two weeks. Something I've craved.

I lift my head from the comfort of his chest, and his lips descend on mine, hard and filled with unmistakable want, but it's tempered...strained by something. I pull back and raise my eyes to his.

His expression is a troubled mix of desire and regret.

“Talk to me,” I encourage, touching my fingers to his stubbled jaw.

His hands rise to squeeze my shoulders, and I'm suddenly aware of how rigidly he stands. "I'm absolutely *furious* with you," he finally says.

Pain lances through my chest. "I'm sorry," I whisper. "I know I handled things badly."

What else can I say?

The knowledge that placid, compassionate Remi is so angry, and yet still so understanding twists me up inside. His admission makes me realize how much damage I've done to the most sensitive of my men.

"I don't know what else I can say or do to make it right," I admit. "But I want to work things out. I never left because I don't love you, Remi." I say the words that I vowed to do a better job of confessing than my brief statement in the hospital parking lot. "I left because I do. I love you."

He inhales a sharp breath and bands his arms tight around my waist, burying his face in the crook of my neck. "I love you, too."

So many things bloom in my chest at that moment, but I know it's not that simple.

"I sense a 'but' there," I say, leaning back to look at him.

His jaw is tight, and there's a strain around his eyes. "I'll get over it," he says stoically.

"I don't want you to 'get over it.' Tell me what I can do to make it better."

Remi stares at me for a moment, and I get lost in his soft gray eyes. He opens his mouth to speak, then closes it again and looks away with a short shake of his head. “I’ll work through it.”

I know there’s more and that he doesn’t want to say it, but that’s not what I want from our relationship.

“Remi, that’s not how this works. When we fuck up, we make it right.” His chest rises and falls, and his brow pinches with uncertainty. “Tell me,” I insist. “If it’s not something I’m comfortable with, then—“

“What I want is to do is spank your ass for acting like you did,” he interrupts.

For a second I’m shocked into silence. Something tells me he doesn’t mean an erotic spanking.

Something else tells me I’ll get off on it, anyway.

“You want to spank me?” He nods, a single brisk jerk of his chin. I lift my own. “Do it.” A dark thrill races down my spine, ending in my pussy. I *want* this.

“I’m not talking about a sexy spanking, Neve,” he grits out, impaling me with eyes that have turned the color of storm clouds.

“I know that,” I whisper, never flinching from his gaze.

Remi studies me for a moment, then appears to come to some decision. He steps away, and for a moment, I think he’s changed his mind. The disappointment I feel is startling.

But then he says, “Very well. Strip.”

Three little words, and I feel like I’ve been hit by a lightning bolt.

And they were even *those* three little words.

Remi stalks away, grabbing my bedside chair and moving it to the middle of the room. Then he strips off his leather belt, pulling it out of the loops on his pants with a strangely seductive *swoosh* of sound before he drops it on the bed. Finally, he sits down, spreading his legs wide and dropping his hands to rest lightly on powerful thighs as he watches me impassively and yet with a depth of emotion impossible to mine.

My mouth is dry, and I can’t take my eyes off the growing bulge between his legs as I begin to undress, my movements clumsy as my coordination deserts me. I feel slightly off-kilter because as I’m stripping for him—and a femme fatale I am not—he simply sits and watches without speaking, fully clothed.

I can tell that it’s turning him on, but aside from his tongue darting out for a quick lick of his bottom lip, his expression yields nothing.

And that turns me on.

When I’m done, I force my hands to my sides, quelling the unexpected urge to cover myself. This is Remi, after all, and he’s seen me naked many times.

His expression is inscrutable when he pats his thigh. “Lay over my knee,” he commands, and I scurry to obey, my pulse

kicking up a notch.

It's not as easy as it seems in kinky romance novels. I struggle to find my balance and scrabble at the floor with my fingertips to try and help my stability.

Then Remi widens his stance and places one big hand on the small of my back to steady me, and I manage to relax slightly. Well, until he rubs circles on my butt with his other hand, anyway. Then the reality of what I've agreed to hits, and I stiffen again.

“Do you understand why I need to spank you, baby?” Remi murmurs, his palm stroking circles into my ass.

I nod.

“I need the words.”

“Because I ran.” His palm lifts and then lands, hard, a fraction of a second later. I gasp a shocked curse.

His hand lifts again. “And?”

“I...didn't—“ It crashes down. “Ow! Motherfucker! Talk! I didn't talk to you—”

His hand lifts and lowers, again, and again, striking a new spot each time until I'm wriggling around trying to avoid the spansks.

My ass feels like it's on fire when he stops, and I go limp over his thighs, relieved. That's when I hear the distinctive clatter of the belt buckle as he reaches to pick it up, and my eyes widen.

I try to turn, so I can look, but Remi stops me with a hand between my shoulder blades. “That was your warmup,” he says as he folds the belt into his hand. “Now it’s time for six of the best.”

Oh, my God!

I’m still in my head when the first strike lands, so I’m not at all ready for it. I scream and kick my legs, but Remi just skilfully restrains them between his own and lands another thrash.

My scream is thready this time, and I duck my head, curling around Remi’s thighs and clasping my arms around his calf.

“I told you this wouldn’t be a sexy spanking,” he mutters. “Do you want me to stop?”

Everything is still, a sob strangling in my throat and begging for release. I shake my head, refusing to cry. “No. Don’t stop.”

The belt swings down. With the third crack, I feel tears prickling at the back of my eyes and screw them closed, my entire face scrunched up.

The fourth, and my breathing fractures. It’s coming in sobbing pants and thin mewls while my skin burns and my ass throbs. He lands each thrash in a completely different location, avoiding layering one strike atop another. My brain whirls, telling me that his proficiency means he’s done this before, and jealousy streaks through me.

Never again. If he’s going to be doing this, then it’ll damn well be with me, not anybody else.

The fifth, and I'm crying openly now, vaguely concerned that Beck might be able to hear all this and decide to investigate. Don't know how I feel about that.

With the sixth and final swat, everything inside me ruptures. All the pain and guilt and pent-up emotion I've been carrying for weeks erupts, spewing from me like a boil that's just been lanced. All the poison is purged, and I burst into heavy, guttural sobs that shake my whole body.

Afterward, it's as though all the heavy ties holding me to earth have been released. Remi's hand strokes my hair, down the curve of my spine, lightly over the hot flesh of my buttocks, and lower, over the lips of my sex. He plays with me, drawing his fingers through my labia before pushing them and up to circle my clit, and I shudder, surprised to realize I'm wet.

I float, vaguely aware of Remi dropping the belt to the floor, flipping me up in one smooth movement, and depositing me on the bed.

I watch, eyes heavy-lidded, as he strips himself of his shoes and clothes in a few swift motions.

"Turn over," he demands. "Draw your knees up and show me your pussy."

I scramble to do as he says, and moments later he's pushing his rock-hard cock inside me.

I cry out in pleasure, welcoming the intrusion. I've missed my men so much.

“This is for me,” he grunts, pounding into me without reservation. “But I won’t forbid you to come.”

Well, thank God for that because I don’t think I have any choice in the matter. My climax is already building low in my abdomen, coiling and tightening until my thighs shake and everything inside me explodes for a second time, though for very different reasons.

It’s no less cathartic, though.

A couple more thrusts, and Remi bellows his release before collapsing on top of me, sweaty and panting.

We lay there catching our breath until Remi pulls away and orders me to stay put.

I’m not sure I could move, anyway.

He disappears into the bathroom and returns with a damp cloth that he cleans me up with and a small tube of cream. “Arnica,” he says, spreading it gently on my throbbing behind.

Then he climbs into my bed, pulls me in close to him, and wraps me in a hug, kissing my hair and being generally sweet like he didn’t just beat my ass.

Like I hadn’t just loved it.

We’re both kind of weird, I guess.

I snuggle up, lying on my side so my butt isn’t pressed against the mattress with my head on his shoulder and one leg

tangled between his, and at this moment, everything is at peace in my world.

I never knew punishment sex was a thing...or maybe this was make up sex. But either way, I freaking love it.

Remi and I are back on track. I can only hope it will be as easy with the others.

TWENTY-THREE

Neve



Mood: Don't wanna fight no more.

THE BUZZING OF MY cell phone against the wood of the nightstand wakes me the next morning. I roll over, hissing at the residual sting in my butt and dislodging the weight of Remi's arm from my waist to peer with sleepy eyes at both devices. It's my personal phone...the island one.

I hit the speaker button.

“Lo?”

“MY ACOLYTE OF VIOLET GORDON-
WOODHOUSE!!!”

The voice is entirely too loud, and I grab for the phone, fumbling with the volume. “What...?”

“Acolyte? Who am I kidding? The student has surpassed the master! We bow to you, o' tamer of six dicks.”

Caroline. Way too loud, way too early.

Beside me, Remi snorts. He rolls into me sleepily and offers his arm. I snuggle against his chest, keeping my eyes closed and groggily attempting to follow Caroline's conversation.

I'd rather hang up and go back to sleep, but I suppose she is my best friend.

“Caroline, what time is it?”

“Hell if I know. Like, six. I don't know. I've turned over a new leaf! I heard that a good sleep cycle is better for your skin. It's worth a try, right? But back to your six dicks—“

“What are you even talking about? Last I checked, it’s just me and five guys. And that’s more than enough, trust me.”

“Stop playing coy with me, Murray. Cope told me everything.”

My eyes shoot open, and my body stiffens. Peripherally, I’m aware of Remi lifting his head to look at me. We’re both suddenly wide awake.

“Cope? How did you—?”

“We both went looking for you at your apartment and bumped into each other. We had a good feelings sesh. He tried a straw cigarette, and then we exchanged numbers to help each other keep an eye out for you. He didn’t have much information for a long time. That boy sends A LOT of memes.”

They had been looking for me.

I try to speak through the lump in my throat, but she beats me to it, rolling right over anything I might have replied with.

“He told me last night that you brought some reporter guy to the island and how the guy is ex-military and might fight Oscar, and WHEN ARE YOU INVITING ME OVER?!”

“Oh, my God! Only one of those is even kind of true!” I stare at the ceiling, struggling to count. “Okay, two.” This is a disaster. I grab on to the only part of her statement that I can come close to dealing with at the moment. “We have a lot going on right now, Caro. It’s not...safe. Maybe once things settle down.”

“Girl, you have six guys; things are never going to settle down. Let me remind you that Violet Gordon-Woodhouse only had four; you beat our goddess by TWO.”

I can hear the capital letters in everything she says and groan.

“Beck and I are not anything,” I respond fiercely. Maybe too fiercely. Beside me, Remi is very still. I have the phone on speaker because I don’t want there to be any secrets. I want him to hear my conversations, my responses to things.

Well, now he’s heard every ounce of just how hard I’m struggling with the Beck thing. How my mind says *fuck that*, but other, more base parts of me are saying something else altogether.

“Hmm.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Just...hmm.”

“Caroline, I swear to all that’s holy—“

“I just think the lady doth protest a bit too much, you know?”

The way Caroline knows me is eerie. I had thought about Beck entirely too much, but I was not about to confess that to Caroline. Not when I was still working out those feelings myself and certainly not when I was lying in bed next to Remi. So, I remain silent.

“Neve?”

Remi strokes a finger over my knuckles, the gesture encouraging. I glance at him and find his expression relaxed, devoid of anything resembling jealousy or resentment.

Drawing in a deep breath, I look up at the ceiling.

“He’s nice,” I say.

Caroline snorts.

“Stop it! I’m really fucking confused here.”

“What are you confused about?” Remi’s voice is gentle.

“Because I have everything I ever wanted,” I say. “But he pushes me—“ I shake my head. “I can’t explain it.”

And I can’t. There’s nothing lacking in any of my five guys. To consider that idea is ludicrous. I have everything I need with them and more. Beck is something else—an energy shot on a day when I’m already feeling pretty good—but if it were taken away, its loss would resonate keenly.

It makes no sense.

I just remember thinking, that moment in the hospital room when my eyes met his, that this was what it was like to feel the kiss of lightning. That buzz, electric and terrifying. I would never be the same.

And there is no way that I should even be thinking about things like this when there is so much going on, so much to settle. Although to be fair, if it wasn’t for Beck, nothing would be going on. It was he who took the time to find out the truth in the stories. It was he who really wanted to make things

right. He who needed to be sure things changed, that there would be no more little boys and girls abducted by a madman.

At the end of the day, isn't that what I always wanted? Peace and the promise of safety for myself? For all the little kids I taught? For my little slice of humanity?

I've never been brave enough to follow the breadcrumbs. Never been vocal enough about my own experiences.

But Beck was.

Despite every roadblock in his way.

Remi strokes a piece of hair behind my ear. "Sometimes there don't need to be words."

"God, y'all are killing me. Which one is that? It's Remi, isn't it? Neve—I have to go, babe. Gotta get ready for work. Can we meet for drinks soon?"

I think about everything that's happened in the last week and resolve tightens my spine. I am done letting this psycho steal my life. "We'll figure something out."

We hang up, and for a second, the room is quiet, Caroline's theory about my feelings for Beck and my half-admission haunting the air between us. Then we both speak at once.

"Remi, I—"

"Neve, it's—"

We both stop, and Remi sits, the sheet falling to puddle around his waist. I sit, too. "I'm sorry," I begin, but he holds up a hand, stopping me.

“No. There’s nothing to be sorry for, and we’re not doing that. I’m not going to tell you it’s okay, that you can just add him to our family—“

“It’s not like that! We’ve never talked about things like that, or even kissed each other, or...or—“

“But there’s something there, right?”

His eyes challenge mine, and it’s all I can do to hold his gaze. “I don’t fucking know, okay?”

“Yes. It’s okay.” He reaches out to place a hand on either shoulder. “We just need to talk about things as a family. As a unit. We’re not just a string of individual open relationships that we’ll be adding extras to, right?”

I nod furiously. “Yes. Right.”

He leans forward and kisses me softly, drawing my lower lip between his teeth. “I think you mean ‘yes, sir.’”

“Remi?”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”



THERE’S NO GOING BACK to sleep after Caroline’s call. After a shower—which may or may not have included getting

dirty just so we could get clean again—we head for breakfast. Since I absconded with Remi last night and he failed to leave early this morning, everyone is on their own for food this morning.

I make smoochie noises to Jamie Fraser as we walk through the great room/lobby toward the dining room, as I haven't seen him since last night, but he appears to have vanished.

Remi clears his throat. "He's probably with Jesse."

"Jesse?"

"Well. When you didn't come home, Fraser moved to Jesse's cabin."

"Fraser?"

"It's what most of us guys started calling him. Jamie Fraser was too long."

"Ahh. I'll stick with Jamie Fraser, thank you."

"Suit yourself, baby girl."

I wink at him. "I intend to."

Through the tall windows of the great room, I catch a glimpse of Jesse in the distance, doing his morning run on the beach. He's thigh-deep in the surf, churning his powerful legs against the sea. He is a beastly, beautiful thing, and I pause for a moment to watch him with something akin to melancholy. "I guess Jamie Fraser would be at his place since he's out there." Remi nods. "Any advice for rectifying that situation?" I tear my gaze from him and continue toward the dining room.

Remi shrugs a little. “Be honest with him.” As we enter the restaurant, he kisses my forehead and goes on into the kitchen. “Take a seat. I’ll fix you something.”

Several of the others are here but spaced out rather than seated together as they usually were when I was here before. Cope sits at the green booth, his laptop open before him. He peers intently at the screen, presumably checking his stocks.

Oscar is at a nearby table, on his laptop, as well.

Spencer sits alone at a corner table. He looks up as Remi and I enter, his eyes following Remi first and then fastening on me.

I draw in a deep breath. What a lovely room to walk into. Everyone seems so...thrilled.

Jesse was in the ocean, and Oliver is still in the hospital, completing the count. Where’s Beck?

Aside from Spencer, who is just...weird, Cope is the first to notice Remi and I entering the room. He closes his laptop and stands, beckoning me. “Neve.” He smiles but seems curiously subdued. “Good morning.”

Out of habit, I turn my cheek up for a kiss, and he doesn’t hesitate, but instead of kissing my cheek, he turns my head slightly and kisses me full on the mouth.

His easy acceptance makes me want to cry.

“How’s Oliver this morning?” I ask the question of the room in general, sliding into the booth.

It's Oscar who answers, closing his laptop and giving me the full brunt of his attention. "Doctor Marlowe is running a few more scans this morning, just to dot the I's and cross the T's, but I expect they'll release him today." His voice is matter-of-fact. Borderline cold, even.

"Jesus, Oz—"

I stammer out my response. "Th-that's great news!"

"Spencer, leave the room, please. The grown-ups need to talk."

"I'm an adult."

Oscar rubs a hand across his forehead, and for the first time, I notice how weary he looks.

"Noooo, dude, you're not," Cope says. Rising, he grabs Spencer by the arm and half-drags him from the room, leaving me alone with Oscar. "C'mon, let's go jet ski."

"You're still angry with me," I start.

I'm torn between apologizing and defending myself.

"You're damn straight I'm angry with you."

My spine stiffens. "You know I had no choice."

"You always had a choice, Neve. You could leave the island any time you wanted to. I respect that. We all respect that."

"It doesn't seem like—"

"Baby, I love you, but I'm not done."

He loves me?

“I understand why you left. There was a time I might even have done the same thing if I had been in your situation. The thing that bothers me is that we had just talked about being a family. You know what being a family means? Your troubles are my troubles. Doesn’t matter how shitty they are. Doesn’t matter how dangerous they get. You don’t get to skip off when shit gets bad. You need to give us a chance to deal with it— together.”

He stops, walks a few steps away, and pauses. I’m still stuck on *I love you* and speechless. I think my mouth is hanging open when he turns back around, his hand half-raised. “You have no fucking idea the things we would do for you. The lengths we’d go to.”

“I—“ I don’t know what to say. “I love you, too!”

“Then why are you crying?” he demands.

Shit. I rub at my face. “I don’t know!”

Striding to me, Oscar pulls me to a standing position and takes my face between his hands, then presses his mouth to mine in a deep, possessive kiss. “No more crying,” he mutters, pulling back after a minute. “What’s this shit with Beck Wilder?”

I shake my head. “I honestly don’t know. He’s been there for me. He’s helped me. He’s raised more questions than he’s answered.”

“Are you involved with him?”

“No! Oscar, I wouldn’t do that to you, or any of the others.”

“But you’re attracted to him.”

This time my answer doesn’t come as readily. “I...I don’t know. Yes. I think.”

He closes his eyes and tips his face back to the ceiling. “God. Fucking. Damn it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Any fucking body but him.”

“I didn’t mean—“

“I know. We’re going to have to talk to the guys about this.”

“Oscar. There’s seriously nothing...I mean, I haven’t even talked to Beck about this. We’re so much a non-thing; he would probably die laughing if I broached the topic.”

“I can assure you, the last thing he would do is laugh. I can also promise you that I’ll probably punch him now and then if given the opportunity, so it might be fun having him around.”

Looking into his eyes, the only absolute I see is that he’s perfectly serious.

“I think we should table this discussion for now. Do you forgive me, Oscar?”

He slides his arms around me and pulls me in tight. “Nothing to forgive. Now, if you don’t mind, it’s been entirely too long since I’ve had my hands on you.”

With a wicked crook to his lips, he tugs me out the door and in the direction of his cottage. I follow, feeling lighter than I

have in days, the shadow of my hunter for once banished by
the morning's sun.



TWENTY-FOUR

Jesse

A STORM IS BREWING in the distance. I can feel it in the air, in a way that makes my skin prickle in anticipation of the rain and wind.

I've been keeping mostly to myself. Beck's here. He can deal with the kid.

Neve, too. I'm sure she'd prefer that.

As far as Spencer is concerned, I'm honestly good with it. While Oscar and I have been trying to piece together the kid's story so we can figure out how much of it's true and, if so, where the island is located, there's a limit to the patience I have when it comes to dealing with him.

It's clear he's been away from the world for a while, but while I have sympathy for him, he's sulky and temperamental and a brat. It's difficult to extract any viable information from him, which only makes me suspicious, and I know Oz has his own reservations. At the end of the day, there is only so much hand-holding I'm prepared to do before I need to take a run to

stop myself from just intimidating the answers we need out of the little fucker.

He says he wants help, but he refuses to help himself. That just pisses me off, so it's better all around if I leave it to the others, and I have to admit that Beck is far better at getting answers than me.

As for the rest of it, well... I'm better off not thinking about that.

I pick up the bag of cat food that has somehow crept into my kitchen cabinets and walk out to the porch to refill Fraser's food dish.

It's still full.

Again.

I heave a frustrated sigh and set the bag down on the counter, staring out through the window. I haven't seen the damned cat since Neve came back, and obviously, it makes sense that he went back to her since he's her damn cat, but it grates that he didn't bother to say goodbye before leaving.

What the fuck am I saying?

He's a fucking cat.

I'm not even a fucking cat person. Nope. Not me. I'm a 'responsibility' person, that's all. Pet owners need to be responsible. That's why I felt the need to step up when Neve took off. Someone had to make sure Fraser was okay.

We'll just ignore the part of me that misses the weight of him on my feet at night. That's just sharing body heat.

And the part of me that would like to know where he is, right now...that's just the hyper-vigilant almost-parent part of me.

Fraser is an *orange* cat, after all. I did some reading on them, and apparently, ginger cats are the crazy, dumb, *Jackass* breed of feline. He could be somewhere being stupid and reckless.

Yes, checking on that cat—or at least his actual owner—is what any responsible person would do. There's a storm coming, after all, and cats don't like water. Or so I've heard.

The grumbling of the storm sounds closer as I go in search of Neve, and I find her in her suite, closing the windows in anticipation of the rain and wind.

She bites her plump bottom lip and gives me an uncertain look from beneath her lashes. She knows I'm mad, but she still has that pleading expression about her that's begging me to revoke my attitude.

I harden my heart. I just can't right now. It all hurts too much. She ran out on us and then came back with another guy in tow. It's all far too reminiscent of Maria for me to just shove it aside like the others have done.

“You know it's common courtesy to let the person who's been taking care of your pet know when you take them back,”

I say instead. “Then again, you didn’t exactly think of making arrangements for his care when you walked out on him.”

“Jesse, please, I...”

I hold up my hand. I don’t want to hear her excuses.

“No! I just came to confirm you have the cat before the storm breaks.”

Neve frowns and looks out of the window. “No, I don’t.”

We don’t actually make any verbal agreement to go look for the cat together. It just kind of happens.

Neve’s carrying a harness and a leash in case Jamie Fraser is spooked by the thunder, but I’m just frustrated. I want to keep an emotional distance, but to do that I need physical distance, too, because I’m so pathetically weak, and despite everything, I still want her.

Should I have seen this coming? I was always more reserved than the rest of the guys, but I convinced myself Neve was different, so once I accepted her, I was all in.

Now I feel betrayed all over again.

I would have died for this woman.

Killed for her.

Shit, I did kill for her.

I put my life, my heart, and my freedom on the line for her, and she just walked away.

How am I supposed to get over that?

The resentment I feel is like a wall that surrounds me. I can't see over the top of it, and I have no idea how to get to the other side.

Suddenly the brooding clouds above us, which reflect my mood pretty accurately, burst, and the heavens open, drenching us both within seconds.

The rain plasters her tee shirt to her skin, and her nipples peak against the wet fabric, their outline dusky against the pale color. I stifle a groan, her lack of bra turning me hard in seconds.

Fucking traitorous cock. Doesn't he know we're morally opposed?

I try to surreptitiously adjust myself, but Neve notices, her gaze lingering heavily on me. "It doesn't mean anything," I snap in response. "Stupid fucking thing just can't see past a pretty face and perky pair of tits to the traitor beneath."

She sucks in a breath, and I know I've hurt her, but I don't care. I feel this insane need to lash out. To inflict the same pain that's been rained down on me. I never got to let it out with Maria. She was gone, and all that anger and resentment ended up being turned inward.

"Jesse, I'm sorry, okay? But I came back again. Doesn't that mean anything?"

I stop right there in the middle of the path with the rain pouring down on us and look at her in disbelief. "Seriously?"

Are you for real? You want me to just forgive and forget like nothing ever happened?

Anger washes her cheekbones with two spots of brilliant pink. “Yes! I was gone less than two weeks,” she flings back at me then turns to walk away. “And I had a good fucking reason! I’d have been away longer if I’d taken a vacation.”

“What, and that’s supposed to make it all okay?” I demand, striding across the wet flagstone to catch up with her, my feet slapping through the puddles and splashing angry droplets up my legs.

She whirls around, throwing her arms in the air. “No! It’s supposed to mean that I freaked out. It’s supposed to mean that I was terrified something was going to happen to the rest of you like it did to Oliver. It’s supposed to mean that in that moment I made a snap decision because I honestly, truly believed you were better off without me, since I was bringing all this trouble to your door.” She sucks in a breath and says more quietly, “It’s supposed to mean that I love you too much to risk something happening to you because of me.”

“This is all Beck-Fucking-Wilder’s fault,” I say, stubbornly ignoring the words that make my heart sing. “Filling your head with all this nonsense.”

“It’s not *nonsense!*“ she exclaims, her delicate features twisting with a hurt that I think has more to do with me ignoring her last statement, than because I refuted Wilder’s story. “How can it be Beck’s fault for pointing out the truth?”

How can you blame him for trying to do the right thing and warn us that the danger isn't over?

“He just wants to get into your panties!”

“Well, perhaps I should let him since you don't want the job anymore!”

The rain stops as suddenly as it started, and our two final shots in this sortie are fired into the stillness that ensues. They reverberate around us, angry grenades waiting to blow us both to bitter pieces.

Maybe that's why we both stop and stare at each other in silence, not daring to move.

A second goes by, then two, then three.

Then, without thought, I grab her biceps and push her back against a tree, pushing my rock-hard cock against her softness.

“Don't ever say that I don't want you,” I grit out. “Does this feel like I don't want you?”

I grind against her, and she quivers in my arms. “You know my story, and you know why I'm pissed at you. I'm not a walking Hallmark card, but I'm pretty sure you know what the fuck I'm about. So, you should know I can't just turn my feelings on and off that easily. If it was anyone else but you, I wouldn't even bother trying.”

Tears tremble on her lashes, warring with the raindrops that still cling there. “I know that, Jesse,” she says, bringing her palm up to cup my cheek. “But I can't be some pathetic little

princess who just cowers while her men fight her battles. And I defy you to tell me that you wouldn't have done exactly the same if you thought you posed a threat to me."

"That's different," I tell her, frustrated because she's right. If I thought for a second my presence posed a danger to her, then damn straight I would remove myself from the picture.

"Why is it different? Do I not have the right to protect you, too?"

"We don't need protecting, Neve."

She presses her lips together, her expression mutinous. "So, that means I shouldn't try? What sort of person would that make me, Jesse, if I do all the taking and none of the giving? Is that really what you want from a life partner? Just some lifelike doll who sits still and looks pretty?"

She looks away, tears overflowing and running down her cheeks to join the rain. "Because if it is, then perhaps you're right, and I'm not the woman for you."

Ah, fuck!

I close my eyes and lean my forehead against hers, all the fight draining out of me as she forces me to see it from her perspective. Just like that, I'm done.

Instead of replying, I pull her close, and as soon as I do everything that was upside down in my world seems to right itself.

I've never had a relationship where my woman was willing to put me first, even if that meant making hard choices. Even

if that meant walking away to keep me safe from harm.

Her selflessness unmans me. Putting herself out there to try and save us...I shake my head. However misplaced her intentions, she did what she did out of love, and finally, I whisper the words back. "I love you, Neve, and that's why this fucking hurts so much."

When I open my eyes and look into hers, she's wearing a tremulous smile, and I see my own love reflected back at me.

Grabbing her hands, I push her arms above her head, tip my head to the side, and find her mouth, taking my fill of her like I'm a starving man, oblivious to the rain that has started pouring again.

The leash is still dangling from her fingers, and I'm tempted to pluck it from her hand, wrap it around her wrists, and take her right here against this tree.

Unfortunately, the sight of it also reminds me that Jamie Fraser is missing and the rumbling thunder of another storm front is rolling closer.

"Cock blocked by a damn cat," I whisper, pushing my dick against her with a groan. "What the fuck have you done to me, witch?"

She grins, takes the leash, and starts walking.

We've covered the entire island, walking hand in hand, and are soaked to the skin by the time we give up and head back to the restaurant to see if any of the other guys have seen him.

And that's where we find him, sitting at a table while Cope feeds him bits of shredded chicken.

“What the fuck, Cope,” I yell. “We've been all over looking for that damned cat; why the hell didn't you say something?”

Cope just shrugs. “Hey, whatever's going on between you two, it wasn't fair for Fraser here to be caught in the middle, so he chose to come to Uncle Cope's house.”

Neve is staring, and I'm not surprised. “You put him in a poncho?” she asks, her voice tinged with disbelief as she looks at how her cat is dressed in a waterproof yellow cat slicker reminiscent of the one that bear wears in the British cartoon.

Paddington. That's it.

“Yeah. It's *raining*,” Cope replies with a *duh* in his voice, as if we're both stupid.

Before we can say any more, Remi walks in with his phone against his ear. When he finishes the call, he's all smiles. “Oliver has finally been released. Doctor Marlowe has agreed that he can come home as long as we allow him to bring him home personally and get him re-checked after the trip across to make sure nothing is ‘jogged loose.’ His words.”

“Surely that's not common procedure,” Neve says with a frown.

“Not at all. He just recognizes that it's been a long stay, he said, but would feel more comfortable from a medical standpoint if he ensures there's no re-bleed after the jouncing about after being on the boat.”

“That makes sense, I suppose. I’m thankful he’s willing to do that.”

The news has all of us breathing a sigh of relief.

Surely things have got to start getting back to normal now.



TWENTY-FIVE

Oliver

FINALLY, I CAN GO home!

As I pack the few belongings I've accrued, I feel like I've been in this damn hospital for so much longer than a couple of weeks. I'm obviously not the professional, but I really do think I could have been discharged days ago. I feel absolutely fine.

I stuff a tee shirt in the bag, followed more carefully by my laptop. If the good doctor wasn't such a nice guy who really does seem to have my best interests at heart, one might think he was exaggerating my condition in order to pad the insurance billing.

My lips twitch. Not that they would ever do such a thing.

It's irrelevant now, anyway. I've managed to talk Doctor Marlowe into letting me go home, and although he had his reservations, he's agreed on the proviso that he accompany me there and check me over at the other end to make sure the trip hasn't instigated a re-bleed.

“Ready to go?” Marlowe pops his head in the door and I nod.

“One hundred percent.” Picking up my bag, I follow him out. Letting him escort me and give me one final check is a small price to pay.

Especially since so much has happened. There have been so many changes since I’ve been gone, and I’ve mostly been out of the loop here at the hospital while everyone else is figuring things out.

Getting home has never been more important.

I’ve managed to keep up with a lot of it throughout the brief visits and the group chat, and I’d really like to speak to Spencer some more since he’s a fellow survivor. I’m glad Remi has taken him under his wing. The kid’s had a tough time, but after what happened with Neve, I’m kinda glad she hasn’t been on the island with him. Maybe that’s another reason Doctor Marlowe insisted on taking me back to the island himself. It’s not inconceivable that he wants to check on Spencer. I imagine he feels responsible for what happened.

We make our way to the parking lot and to the docks, our conversation limited to dull, ordinary topics. What I’ll be doing once I’m back home. What I suppose my friends are up to. Neve’s visits.

He’s curious about her. I dodge the subject by keeping my replies brief and my attention turned outward, away from the man driving the vehicle.

I'm anxious to see her in a setting outside of this damned hospital, more than anyone. I know things are changing, and I know it won't be easy. I also know it's probably easier for me than the rest of the guys. Beck and I have forged something of a bond because of our past experiences and because of Neve. But there are six people in this relationship, and whether anyone realizes it yet—now possibly seven.

There's a serious conversation that needs to happen there, and I know it'll be up to me to instigate it because I'm pretty sure Neve never will. After the way the guys have reacted to her attempts at 'saving' them, I'm sure she'll feel far too vulnerable to even consider mentioning adding to our family.

Even a regular relationship with two people is hard enough to maintain. I wonder what chance we have of making this work with so many egos involved.

We drive out to the private dock close to the hospital where Marlowe keeps his private boat moored. He gets me settled in a passenger seat while he stows the equipment he needs to re-check me and then climbs behind the wheel to steer the boat toward the island.

Although we cut smoothly through the water, I feel a little nauseous, and while I'm not going to admit that, part of me is grateful for the fact that I'm with a doctor. Maybe I'm not quite as healed as I thought I was.

"Do you make house calls often," I ask over the roar of wind and wave, trying to get my mind off the swelling need to vomit.

“Eh,” he replies, handling the controls with an experienced ease and lifting one to make a so-so motion. “More frequently than you would imagine, actually. It makes so much sense when we’re having to deal with incidents when the patient cannot travel.”

I smile and agree. He makes a good point and is clearly dedicated to his job, going the extra mile like this.

“So, you’re one of the Lost Boys yourself,” Doctor Marlowe comments as we glide through the relatively still waters that surround the many islands of the Keys.

“I am,” I say with a nod, feeling odd talking about it with a relative stranger. Although, I suppose it makes sense for him to be curious after having both Spencer and myself under his care recently, in addition to everything in the news about Wesley Terrell.

“I met Beck Wilder a couple of years ago in the emergency room,” he volunteers. “He was obsessed with finding connections to the Lost Boys Kidnapper from twenty years ago. He always wanted to know if anyone who fitted that description was brought in, so he visited regularly. Have you had much to do with him before now? Is he a friend?”

“No.” I shake my head. I can’t quite put my finger on why, but I feel like I’m being pumped for information, and I don’t like it. “Until that day in the hospital, I’d never spoken to him before, face to face.”

“Really? I’m surprised. I would have thought Beck would have been interested to know about your experience.”

I shrug noncommittally and choose not to mention the times Beck has tried to reach out in the past. “I’m pretty reclusive so I’m not an easy person to contact.”

Marlowe nods absently. “Of course, they call the Lost Boys suspect a killer, but that’s never been confirmed. No bodies have ever shown up. Just like it’s never been confirmed that it’s just one person rather than a group,” he comments. “You really don’t remember anything?”

A frisson of unease has the hair on the back of my neck standing up. He knows a damn lot for someone who just claims a passing interest, and I’ve never shared—beyond official reports—my memories of that time...or lack of them.

I give myself a shake. I’m starting to see shadows everywhere I look. That information is probably just on my medical records. “No,” I tell him honestly, forcing myself to relax. “Nothing useful, anyway.”

“Of course, Beck Wilder didn’t experience anything close to what you experienced, but he still feels an obligation and the need to do something about it.”

“I can understand that,” I confess, a familiar guilt rising within me. “I often feel I should have done more.”

Doctor Marlowe looks away from the steering to glance at me. “We can only do what we are capable of doing. I learned that lesson as a corpsman.”

I blink in surprise. “You were in the Navy?”

He gives a short nod and a laugh. “I was. Served as a medic.”

We arrive at the dock, and Doctor Marlowe jumps off the boat first, meeting Beck, whose presence takes me by surprise, and shaking his hand while Remi and Cope help me out and onto dry land.

But before I can question Beck’s presence, I see her.

Neve.

She’s back.

The other conversations fade away, and there is only her. I want to run to her, lift her off her feet, and carry her to my room.

Sadly, that’s not even close to possible, so instead, I walk toward her, pull her into a tight embrace, and rest my forehead against hers. I allow all the stress and strain to flow out of me as I breathe in her sweet daisy and vanilla perfume and feel the rightness of her in my arms.

“I’m so glad you’re finally home,” she says huskily, and I can hear the raw emotion in her voice.

Something clenches in my chest when she says ‘home,’ and I have to ask. “And what about you, Neve? Are you home, too?”

She looks at me steadily with her guileless green eyes. “I hope so,” she whispers, her breath warm against my mouth. “I’ve been trying hard to make things up to the guys.”

“And Beck?”

The question has more meaning between the two of us, but Neve simply looks away, her smile fading, and shakes her head. “I don’t know,” is all she says, and I’m unsure how to interpret that.

“Oscar wants everyone in the restaurant,” she says, taking a step away and turning to walk back up the incline, slipping her hand into mine.

I follow willingly. I’m slightly surprised my brother wasn’t at the dock to meet me, but I’m sure he has his reasons.

When we arrive, he crosses the room, giving me a bro hug, before he turns and shakes hands with Doctor Marlowe, but his expression is shuttered, and I can tell he has a lot on his mind.

Has Spencer been able to give them some answers? I know the guys have been questioning him.

“Do you need to take off, Doctor Marlowe?” Oz asks politely. “I know your time is precious.”

“Please, call me Dylan,” Marlowe replies. “I’ve finished my shift for today, and I’m off tomorrow. But I do need to check Oliver over before I leave, and I’d prefer to give him a chance to regain his equilibrium after the trip so I don’t have to insist he goes back to the hospital.” He chuckles and lounges casually against a table, looking perfectly at home. “And I’d like to check on Spencer, too.”

Oz looks uncomfortable, and I know it's because he wants to start discussing everything they've learned from Spencer and what the plan of attack should be. He already admitted he's only been putting it off until I was safely home.

"That's very good of you, Dylan." It's Remi who responds.

"Well, Oliver pretty much begged me to get him out of there, even though he probably should have stayed a couple more days." Marlowe laughs. "I actually thought he was going to bribe me at one point."

I smile and relax because he's right. Plus, Marlowe was trained by the Marines, which makes him one of the good guys, and he obviously has an interest in the case. Enough to want to help out both Spencer and me. I guess that's a natural thing for a doctor, no matter how much of a motley crowd we have here.

With the exception of Jesse, we all take seats at the table, and Remi brings out a cafetière of coffee big enough for everyone, then goes back to fetch a soft drink for Spencer after he pulls a face at it.

When everyone's settled, Oscar stands at the bar with his laptop and starts explaining what they've discovered from Spencer and the plan they've devised.

"Okay, this is where the island is located," he starts, pointing at a map on the screen with a pen.

"How certain are you of that," Beck asks, leaning forward so he can get a better view of the surrounding area. "There are

a lot of islands clustered around there, and they all look pretty similar.” He shoots a glance at Spencer, who’s sitting in the corner away from us all, looking bored. He isn’t really paying much attention. “How sure can we be that Spencer can accurately pinpoint the location?”

It’s a valid question, but Oz looks pissed. But I can’t work out whether my brother is irritated because there’s a grain of truth there or because it’s Beck who’s questioning him.

“It’s not been without its difficulties,” Oz admits. “A lot of this we’ve had to do by discussing landmarks, distance, approximate size, and things of that nature. But this is our best guess with the information we have.”

“So, when are we going to make a move?” I ask, excited to finally be doing something.

Neve and Doctor Marlowe turn to look at me with expressions of concern, and Oz narrows his eyes.

“Oliver, you really aren’t well enough to go on this kind of excursion,” Dylan comments, and my brother points his index finger at me.

“What the doc says,” he repeats in his Marine sergeant nonsense voice.

Neve slips her hand into mine and squeezes. “You know they’re right, Oliver,” she murmurs. “I’ve been so worried about you. I can’t go through that again.”

“Same goes for you, Neve,” I tell her, and the chorus of agreement from the other guys makes her look up in surprise

before she opens her mouth to argue.

“Nope,” Jesse says before she speaks a word. “Don’t even think about it. We have no idea how dangerous this could be. Even taking Cope is a risk...”

“Hey!” Cope protests, but Jesse talks over him.

“He, at least, knows how to shoot a gun.”

“Besides, we need you to stay here and look after Ollie,” Remi soothes.

I want to argue that I don’t need fucking babysitting, but if it keeps Neve out of danger, then I’ll take one for the team, no matter how much I hate being sidelined.

And they’re probably right. Who knows what we’ll find on that island. I know enough about combat situations to realize I could be a liability.

Damn, that grates, though.

“Since we’re unfamiliar with the water around it, I think we should go in the morning,” Remi offers, always the voice of reason.

“Our boats all have sonar,” Jesse disagrees. “We’ll be able to tell if we’re close to scraping on anything.”

He’s obviously eager to get started.

Oz nods. “A night maneuver would give us an advantage, but I’d still be worried about the boats. It would be a disaster if we lost one of them. Our technology might tell us what’s

underwater, but it can't account for any tidal flow that could knock us into those objects."

"Besides," Remi adds. "There's no advantage to be had on the island itself. We'd be going in blind against people who know it like the back of their hands."

"What about the police, Oz?" asks Cope. "Are you going to organize backup?"

Oscar clenches his jaw and then his fists, and his eyes turn flinty. He's quiet for a moment before he says, "No. Commissioner Williams refused to re-evaluate the evidence. He says I have nothing new, and on top of that, I've been suspended for endangering civilians after taking you guys into the Conch Marina."

A blanket of silence settles over us all as we digest this latest piece of information.

Oddly, it's Beck who speaks up. "Oz, you're risking your career even further if you do this while you're suspended. Perhaps you should sit this out, too."

Nobody argues the point. We all know it's true.

Oz stares off into the distance, but in the end, he shakes his head. "Then, so be it," he says with an air of resignation. "I know this is risky, but it's also personal. There could be other boys trapped out there. If Terrell was a copycat or even an accomplice, then our kids are still in danger of being taken. And if the commissioner refuses to take the best opportunity

we've ever had to end this, then I'll accept the consequences for attempting to do it myself."

I suddenly wish Doctor Marlowe wasn't here, or that we'd waited to discuss this. Probably the fewer people who know about what we're planning, the better.

"Spencer says there are eight boys on the island and, presumably the man in charge, Hook, if we're agreed that Terrell is a copycat," Oz continues.

"Or some kind of partner," Beck comments. "Spencer says he thought there were other adults involved."

Oz nods. "Either way, we owe it to those boys to try and get them back to their families."

Remi shakes his head. "How can the commissioner just overlook that kind of evidence?" he asks, his expression as shocked and puzzled as the rest of us.

"Ah, I think I might know the reason for that." All eyes turn to Doctor Marlowe when he speaks. "The hospital was asked for a clinical evaluation of Spencer's circumstances, and it was impossible to overlook his emotional breakdown when he spoke to Neve. I imagine it's likely the powers that be decided his mental health wasn't conducive to him providing rational evidence."

There are several shocked comments, and it occurs to me that not all the guys know what happened during our conversation with Spencer at the hospital.

While Marlowe relates these details, Jesse pushes off from his casual lounge against the bar to walk over and help himself to coffee. “Great, so does that mean we’ll be fighting off a bunch of kids?” he asks flippantly.

He doesn’t mean it; the whole play is just a diversionary tactic so he can position himself between Neve and Spencer, who’s still sitting sulkily in the corner. But Jesse’s body language is on high alert as he silently places himself between them like a physical barrier.

The conversation dies as each of us sits there, deliberating everything that’s been said and considering the consequences.

Finally, Oz stands and closes his laptop. “Thanks for returning Oliver to us,” he tells Doctor Marlowe. “Has enough time lapsed for you to finish up those checks? We’ve taken up a lot of your time.”

Dylan checks his watch and stands. “Close enough,” he agrees. “I don’t want to chance being caught in bad weather on the way home, at any rate.”

As if it heard him, a flash of lightning splits the air, lighting up the sky, and the smell of ozone is strong. The rumble of thunder that follows close behind signals that the storm is virtually on top of us, and as soon as I think it, the clouds burst, and the sounds of a torrential downpour can be heard hammering against the roof.

We all look up, even though there’s nothing to see.

“Damn,” Dylan curses, looking out of the window at the storm-darkened sky as another bolt of lightning highlights the way the palms bend beneath the pressure of the sudden squall.

“No worries,” Remi says kindly as Dylan extracts a blood pressure cuff from his bag and straps it around my arm. “We have plenty of space. You’re welcome to spend the night and go back to the main island in the morning.”

As soon as Doctor Marlowe pronounces me fit and healthy—within the confines of my current medical situation—the group breaks up, and Remi disappears with Dylan to organize a room for him.

Things feel odd now that I’m here, and I’m suddenly at a loss of what to do with myself.

So much has changed, and it almost feels like the resort is open again with three new people here, which is weird because Neve didn’t make the place feel crowded at all. Her coming here flowed so naturally that no one gave it a second thought.

This is different. There are strangers here, something that has never happened before. This may be an island, and previously a resort, but now it’s just our home. It makes me feel vaguely uncomfortable, especially since I don’t know any of them well enough to trust them explicitly.

Of course, Dylan being here is totally accidental, nothing more than an unfortunate set of circumstances. I’m comfortable with Beck, probably more so than the others. And Oz seems confident in what Spencer is saying. I understand his

drive to work things out so we can put it behind us. I want to do the same.

Still...

Neve produces a large, black umbrella, then comes up and offers me her arm. "May I walk you home, kind sir?" she asks playfully, making herself sound like an old-fashioned southern gentleman rather than a nursemaid intent on checking on me, and I appreciate that.

In my cabin she bustles around, turning down the bed, making sure I have a glass of water and my pain meds on my nightstand.

I could have done it all for myself, but it's nice to be looked after by someone whose only motive is to care for me.

I hang up my jacket and slip off my shoes, then walk over to Neve and take her in my arms. "I've been aching to be with you. It's the only thought that kept me from going crazy while I was in the hospital, so when I didn't know if you were going to be here when I came home, it was agony."

"I'm sorry," she whispers, and I can see true remorse in her eyes, which means far more than any words.

I sip at her lips before shaking my head. "Don't be too hard on yourself; I understand. Really, I do. It's not the first time I've felt like my own role in this whole situation adversely affects the guys. Especially now that Oz's job is on the line, and Remi feels obligated to open up his private sanctuary to the likes of Spencer, probably against his better judgment. But

both of them did what they did for me. Went that extra mile because of what happened in my past, and now they're paying the price for those actions. Oz with his job, and Remi from opening up his home to so many strangers.”

I taste her lips again, deepening the kiss this time before I reluctantly lift my head and carry on talking since I know I don't have the stamina to follow through, so all I'm doing is teasing us both.

“Guys like Oscar and Jesse are protectors. That's how they're made, and that's what they do. So they can't fully understand how all of this feels to us when the protection they give naturally makes us feel guilty for placing them in danger.”

Neve nods and pulls her two phones out of her pocket. The one Oscar gave her and her old phone, which she stares at. “I still keep expecting to see a text for Wendy,” she whispers. “My head is so messed up. I mean, if Wesley Terrell wasn't Hook, then why did Spencer call me Wendy, and how would Terrell have known the significance?”

She has a point. There are things I don't understand myself; it's become clear this mystery isn't at an end.

She purses her lips and rubs her finger over the screen until it lights up. “So, then I wonder if it wasn't him who sent the messages but Hook himself. But why? Nothing makes any sense. If Terrell wasn't Hook, what would he want with me? He wouldn't know about my involvement in this. He wouldn't know I was almost taken all those years ago. I'm just a family

member, like so many other family members who were left behind.”

A huge shudder slides through her. “And if Hook is still out there, does that mean he’ll try and take me again? Will I ever be able to go anywhere without looking over my shoulder? Without wondering if someone’s coming for me and if one of you will get hurt in the process?”

“Don’t talk like that,” I tell her, cupping her shoulders and holding her so I can look into her eyes. “No one is going to take you, and if they try, then you should know by now that nothing in this world will stop us from finding you.”

I place a reassuring kiss on her upturned lips, but there’s steel in my voice when I straighten and tell her, without a moment of doubt...

“And nothing will save them, either.”

TWENTY-SIX

Neve



Mood: I feel you in me.

EVERY PART OF ME yearns to *be with* Oliver—be with him in naked ways, in biblical ways, in ways that reestablish us as lovers and more than friends—but the way that he grips my arm as we enter his room tells me that he isn't quite a hundred percent yet. So, I tamp down my desire and instead content myself with literally fluffing the pillows on his bed and getting him tucked in for the night.

We talk for a while, but his words start to slur, and he gets groggy fast, so I leave him to sleep with a smile and a kiss on his forehead.

Outside his cottage, the evening sun has just dipped beneath the ocean's horizon, painting the night in shades of indigo and cotton candy hues.

I'm not anything close to approaching sleepy. I'm suddenly glad to be back here on the island, back where I can walk down to the beach if that's what I want to do or get an ice cream cone without worrying that someone is going to burn my house down or break in and snatch me. I was so foolish to run from these jackasses.

Smiling, I head for the kitchen. Ice cream actually sounds really good right about now.

Halfway down the path, I run into Spencer and Beck. They're strolling along, Beck with his hands shoved deep in

his pockets and a small frown dividing his forehead as he listens to something Spencer is saying.

When they see me, Spencer falls quiet, his gaze immediately darting from my face to my feet to his feet to the trees and back. As charming as Beck is, Spencer is awkward. He's like a child who has never been part of any grown-up events and is now struggling to figure out what the rules of social engagement are.

Although he's kind of annoying, I find myself feeling sorry for him. I think it's the childcare worker within me, that barely concealed maternal warrior instinct that's drawn to the neglected and bullied, the frightened and the lost. I need to put my unease about the Wendy thing behind us because none of that is his fault. He's been brainwashed and indoctrinated. Fed a lifetime of lies and fantasy.

"How are you doing, Spencer?" I ask, bending a little to encourage him to meet my eyes. "Are you settling in okay?"

"I...um. Yeah."

"Okay. Well, I'm here if you'd ever like someone to talk to. And Jamie Fraser—that's my cat—he makes a great snuggle buddy for naps and such."

"Okay."

Beck scratches his cheek, just beside his mouth. "Ah, Spencer, I think it's getting close to your bedtime, bud. Why don't you go ahead and turn in? We'll see you in the morning."

“Okay. But it’s not my bedtime.”

I raise an eyebrow as he wanders down the path, the fingers of one hand brushing against the foliage as he goes. “He’s going to need more help than we can give him, I’m pretty certain.”

Beck shrugs. “Maybe. He might start to make some huge advances fairly swiftly, being around you guys. I’m pretty sure you’re the first female he’s had any sort of conversation with in years.”

“You’re probably right.”

We begin to walk toward my original destination, the kitchen. “After tomorrow,” Beck muses, “there will be no more kids like Spencer. It’s all going to be over.”

His voice is filled with barely suppressed excitement. He’s not afraid of tomorrow, of any potential failures or hidden dangers. He wants it over with. Years upon years of work will be realized tomorrow.

And every bit of it—every late night and dead end and interview with someone who rejected his truth—it was because it was the right thing to do.

“I envy you, you know.”

He looks at me, startled. “What do you mean?”

“I feel selfish, but I wish I was going tomorrow. I feel like I need to. For me. For Nicholas.”

“I wouldn’t call that selfish. Brave maybe, but not selfish.”

It's my turn to shrug. "It's selfish because I know I'm better off here. I'm not a distraction. I won't inadvertently get in the way."

"Mm. You know, when I met you, you were a crying mess in a hospital chair. I'd seen you before, at a distance. Once when something happened at the daycare...another time when the arsonist hit it...but I hadn't actually met you until the hospital."

"Okay?" I'm not sure where he's going with this.

"But I didn't *know* you until after I found you in that burned-out daycare." He stops us on the path and turns me to face him, his palms warm on my biceps. "I'm telling you this so you know that I know you when I say this. I'm betting you feel kind of useless because all of these guys are rising up to protect you and want to keep you safe, but you gotta realize... when the chips are down, you're right here. Willing to do the same for them."

He drops his hands and starts walking again. "That's what I told Oz, anyway."

I trot to catch up with him, and his steps slow. It's never taken so long to walk from one of the cottages to the main building, but I think both of us are intentionally walking slowly, trying to drag it out so we can talk. "You and Oz were talking about me?"

"Why does that surprise you? These guys are obsessed with you."

“Then why are you discussing me?”

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, I don’t think I’ll be taking that bait. But back to my point. You can’t worry about the whole staying behind thing. You’re in a relationship, a family unit. Sometimes you’re going to be the one helping your family, and sometimes they’ll be the ones helping you. You just have to deal with it.”

“It feels very one-sided, that’s all.”

He rolls his eyes. “After you literally left them to do the same damn thing?”

“That’s not—”

“Mm. That’s because you have this idea in your head that these guys put you on this island and set you up to provide for and take care of and protect you, but you have no idea what you are doing for them.”

“That’s just it! I’m not doing a damn thing except eating what Remi cooks, and—”

He grins at me, egging me on to say it.

Fucking them.

I press my lips tightly together.

“Go on, Snow.”

“Shut up.”

He takes mercy on me, his gaze softening. “There is something about you that makes them want to be better people, makes them want to *do* something about things that are

wrong. These guys have been here for a bit, but tomorrow they are going to that damn island to end this, and that's because of you. I didn't get it at first, but I understand now. You are the reason for all of this.”

“You get it now?”

“Yeah, Neve. I really do get it.” He pauses, his gaze shifting to look elsewhere. I see his throat bob as he swallows, and his eyes come back to rest on me for a moment, one that makes my eyebrows draw together. “You...part of me lives in that hospital room, Snow. In that first moment I really saw you.”

Up ahead, the arched entrance to the terrace beckons, the bougainvillea and vinery trailing over it illuminated by the string lights hung around all of the outdoor areas. From inside, I can hear someone's laughter and the clink of glassware.

Out here, though, it's dead quiet.

Beck's hand brushes mine. Just his finger, really, a light stroke against the back of my hand. A pinky. It's a feather where touches are concerned, the kind of thing that would go unnoticed in public—or would be completely innocent even if it were noticed.

I go up in flames.



TAP. TAP. TAP.

The sound of rain penetrates my sleep. Rain hitting the metal roof of my grandparents' home in Texas, dribbling and tinkling its way to the gutters and further, to the ground beside my window.

I never had any problems sleeping through the rain; it was one of my favorite parts of visiting my grandparents. The initial sound usually stirred me awake, but I would snuggle deeper into the blankets and fall back asleep, seduced by the white noise.

Nicholas never could, though, especially if there was any thunder or lightning. I brace myself with a drowsy half-smile, waiting for his voice.

It never comes.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

My eyes pop open, and I'm in bed, but I'm not in Texas. I'm not a little girl. I'm a grown woman. On an island. And that warmth in my bed is Jamie Fraser. He must have shown up at some point.

The rain must have triggered a memory of Texas.

Unsettled by my subconscious journey back to a happier time, I know the rain won't be soothing me back to sleep anytime soon. I get up, grabbing one of the two phones from beside the bed out of nothing more than habit, and swipe the screen to open it as I pad to the bathroom.

It's dumb. The world is sleeping, or ought to be. But on the off chance someone else is an insomniac, we can entertain

each other while I pee.

Naturally, I'm the only weirdo awake at three A.M., though. With a sigh, I shove the phone into the waistband of my leggings, wash my hands, then leave the bathroom. I'll watch a little TV—

Dylan Marlowe stands beside my bed, my other phone in his hand. I'm awake enough that I understand in a moment of crystalline integrity how completely this man fooled us. Every sense screams a warning, the hair standing up on the back of my neck, my body freezing, and my throat closing as I try to speak. "Doctor Marlowe. Wh-what are you doing?"

"I checked on Oliver," he says.

"Okay." I edge toward the door—or at least, I try to. Marlowe moves in counterpoint with me, not-so-subtly blocking my access to it. I swallow, or try to, anyway. "Is everything okay?"

"He's saying some strange things."

Even though I know—*I know*—it's a ruse, and not even a convincing one, my heart stutters in my chest at the thought there might be something wrong with Oliver. I keep my voice calm, though, when I reply. "What kinds of things?"

"That's just it. I think I know him well enough to say they're strange. But maybe they're completely ordinary. Maybe someone he's close to would know for certain?"

I almost laugh. Then I catch a glimpse of something shiny in his hand, and a chill sweeps over me. "What is that?"

He looks at his hand, opening it just enough for me to see a syringe. “I just need your opinion. This is to help him sleep.”

Me. That’s to help me sleep.

He drops my phone on the bed. “You won’t need this.”

I don’t try to play along any longer. I faint right, toward the bathroom, and then break left when he moves with me. He’s too fast, though, anticipating my movements and reaching me within a couple of long strides. A big hand closes over my mouth; an arm wraps around me and clamps me to him firmly.

The cat yowls and flees as he flings me down to the bed, and I feel the bite of the needle as it pierces the skin of my neck.

And then I don’t feel anything at all.



TWENTY-SEVEN

Jesse

JAMIE FRASER WAKES ME up, batting his paws against my face.

Ever since I became the responsible cat person, I've ensured a window is always open for him.

I push him away, but the damn cat is insistent.

When I stir enough to realize that this is not Jamie Fraser's normal behavior, I get up to see what he wants. Maybe his water bowl is dry or something.

A glance shows that it's full, and I curse the cat as he starts scratching insistently at the door, begging to go out.

"You have got to be kidding me," I mutter to the damn animal. "You couldn't just go back out the window the way you came in?"

Sighing, I pull the door and wait for Jamie Fraser to run through, but to my surprise, he winds around my feet, patting at my legs and meowing before heading for the door and

looking to see what I'm doing before meowing some more, then coming back and doing it all again.

I've never seen anything like it.

I remember Neve saying that Jamie Fraser is a service animal. Does that mean he's like a guide dog? Does he raise the alarm if there's a problem? Can a cat be trained to do that?

I'm ashamed to say I have no idea, but I don't want to chance it.

All I'm wearing is my boxer-briefs, and I glance back for a moment, wondering if I should get dressed. On the other hand, if there's an emergency, it's probably more important that I check it out immediately, so I slip my feet into my trainers and head outside with Jamie Fraser, who seems happy to trot ahead of me now that I'm following him.

"I don't know what you want, but there had better be a good reason for this," I grumble at the cat as he heads towards the docks, meowing all the time in a plaintive way I've never heard.

When we get to the dock, it takes me a moment to realize Marlowe's boat is gone.

"Doc probably got called to the hospital or something," I tell him, then I roll my eyes. "Jeez, what am I saying? I'm talking to a damn cat. You better hope there's no one awake to see this."

I turn to go back to my cabin, but Jamie Fraser is frantic. He starts weaving between my legs again, so I have to be careful

where I place my feet in case I step on him. It's almost like he's trying to guide me somewhere.

“Ah, come on, you dumb orange. I need to sleep. We've got a big day tomorrow.”

He runs to Neve's room in the main house, and I pause at seeing her door ajar. I would think she would close it with strangers staying over, but maybe, like me, she did it to allow Jamie Fraser free access, so I push it all the way open.

I'll just let him in and...be sure.

As I do so, something crunches underneath and stops the door from swinging open freely. A frisson of anxiety trickles down my spine, and I shove the door fully open and flick on the overhead light. The bed beyond is empty, the covers tossed about.

The lamp smashed on the floor.

Neve.

Jamie Fraser pounces on the bed, hair raised. I take a second to touch his head—*good fucking cat*—then turn and sprint out the door. I run from porch-to-porch, banging on each door. “Wake up, ladies! Roll call!”

While I'm waiting, I dash back to my own cabin and don a pair of gray joggers and a tee shirt.

I rush back out when I hear doors opening, and bodies come stumbling out, some bleary eyed, others more alert.

Oscar strides over to me, and I can see he's hyperaware. Shit like this is beyond the norm. He knows there's a problem.

"What is going on?" Oz asks as we gather together, waiting for the stragglers.

"Marlowe's boat is gone, and there's shit broken on the floor in Neve's room. Has anyone seen her?"

"Neve?"

"Fuck."

Everyone starts calling her name, looking around as if she might appear out of the darkness. Cabins, bedrooms, and communal areas are checked, but there's no sign of her.

"Where's Spencer?" Cope suddenly asks when we all meet back at the restaurant after doing a circuit of the entire island. That's when we realize he's missing, too. His room is empty, just like Marlowe's.

Oz stalks off to Neve's room, and we all gather outside while he looks around, checking the door and the damage.

"Definitely shows signs of a struggle," he finally tells us. "But it looks like she opened the door to someone or never locked it since there's no sign of any damage."

Dylan's is the only boat missing, so wherever Neve and Spencer are, that's how they were taken off the island.

"I checked Spencer's room," Cope says. "I'm no expert, but it looks like he went of his own free will since not only is there

no sign of an altercation, but the few belongings he had are also missing.”

“What the actual fuck is going on here?” The words leave my mouth on an impotent roar. I want to fucking kill someone, but there’s no one here to take my anger out on.

Except...

My gaze narrows on Beck. He’s the other stranger around here, and he was the one who introduced Neve to Spencer when Spencer had the meltdown and was convinced she was his Wendy.

Rage floods through my veins, leaving me feeling feral. And as the fury overtakes me, I stride towards the only unknown in this group, my fists tightening as a rush of adrenaline throws me into fight mode.

To my shock, Remi gets there first.

He runs from out of nowhere and slams into Beck, pushing him against the restaurant wall so his head whacks against it with a sickening thunk. He’s obviously had the same thought process as me.

“What the hell did you do? You planned this! You sick fuck!”

At first, I don’t respond because it’s such a shock that calm, reserved Remi is the first one to snap.

“What the fuck?” Beck’s words are muffled as he fights back and gets out of Remi’s grip, but a side punch from Cope sends him to the ground.

I want him dead, and I have absolutely no reservations about kicking a guy while he's down.

There's a tussle and some grappling, accompanied by a couple of groans.

But as Beck, who is surprisingly fit, and probably only went down because Cope got in a lucky shot, springs back to his feet, it's Oliver who astonishes everyone by standing in front of him, effectively protecting Wilder from the rabid animals we've become because none of us are going to risk putting Oliver back in the hospital by manhandling him to get to Beck.

"If he has something to do with this, he dies for it," I snarl, laying a hand on Ollie's shoulder to encourage him to get out of the way.

"Not yet, he doesn't," Oscar yells. "He's the only lead we have!"

Beck is panting, blood running down his chin from a busted lip, and Cope and Remi are bouncing on their toes like a couple of boxers looking for a chance to land another blow.

"Get a hold of yourselves," Oliver roars, shocking us all even further.

What is it with the quiet ones tonight?

"Jesus Christ, you're an embarrassment," Oliver continues, his voice only lowered by a couple of decibels. "Since when did you turn into a bunch of vigilantes who strike first and ask questions later?"

"But Neve..." Cope starts.

“Would have your fucking balls for pulling a stunt like this, and you know it, so start thinking about how fucking mad she’s going to be with you before you start getting out of control again.”

Cope and Remi take a step back, but they’re still wound tight. We all are. But Oliver’s right. We need to let the man speak.

“So, what do you have to say for yourself?” Oz demands, his expression daring Beck to say one wrong thing.

“You’re a bunch of fucking numbnuts,” Beck fires back, pressing the back of his hand to his bleeding lip. “I’ve been alone with Neve for the past two weeks. Where the hell did you think she was staying?”

There’s a chorus of grumbles and curses.

“If I was working with Hook, I wouldn’t have brought her back here where you Jarheads could gang up on me.”

I’m tempted to correct him and say that I was actually in the Navy but now isn’t the time.

“Plus, it was Remi who brought Spencer here. And it was because of Ollie that Marlowe invited himself here. I had nothing to do with it. You fucking dumbasses.”

Oz rubs his hands over his face. “Okay, we all need to calm down. We need to get her back, not kill each other in the process.”

“Too damn right!” Beck spits. “That fucking psychopath has her, and here you dumbasses are doing playground shit.

Wasting time when we should be trying to work out where she is.”

Remi points at Beck, “Fine. I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt for now, but if I find out that you had even the slightest thing to do with this, you are a dead man.”

Beck straightens and glares back at him, then the rest of us. “If something happens to her because you lot are too busy pointing your fucking finger at the wrong people, you’re all dead.”

There’s silence for several seconds as it occurs to us all that Beck Wilder has just staked his own claim on Neve. If any of us were in any doubt about his feelings before now, we’re not anymore.

Remi and Cope take a step closer, both of them bristling, and Oliver throws his hands out to keep them back. Not only is he defending Beck, but neither does he seem surprised by any of these revelations. It’s then I’m reminded that Neve was visiting him nearly every day. Days that she was apparently staying with Beck. And on at least one of those days, Beck went along with her because I saw him there.

That’s when it hits me. Oliver and Beck bonded sometime during that period. Became friends.

I can’t even unpack that right now. I don’t have enough time to get my head around this latest revelation and what it means for all of us.

But I do know it'll tear each and every one of us apart if we act out of turn. So, while it isn't every day that I'm the one who breaks up the fighting, I lay a quiet hand on Remi's shoulder, giving him a silent shake of my head until he backs off.

As soon as he does, Cope follows suit.

Nobody says a word, but it's like the night lets out a silent sigh of relief as the fraught tension of the past few minutes leeches away.

It's Oz who breaks the silence. "We need to follow them. They must have gone to the island."

"Hey, lawman, I don't want to tell you how to do your job, but I guarantee that Spencer kid gave you the wrong island. We have no fucking idea where they took her," Beck points out.

A barrage of curses let rip as we all realize the truth of his words.

"We can figure it out, though," Cope intervenes.

"Don't wait for an intro, man. Just tell us." I don't mean to snap, but the thought of Neve being spirited off to an island that no one's been able to find for the past twenty-plus years has me wound tighter than a duck's ass.

"If she has the phone Oz gave her, we could track it. There was only one in her room—the one she owned before she came to us. It's possible she has the other on her somewhere, right?" Cope's voice is filled with a kind of desperate hope.

“She’s a smart girl, our Neve. We’re all on the same plan, and our phones automatically came with the tracking app.”

“Would that work if they’re on the water,” Remi asks, scratching his head.

“Cell service can work ten to fifteen miles offshore, and there are multiple towers on the main island,” I reply, but as a cop, Oz knows this as well as I do, and he’s already got his laptop open, so he can pull up the tracker on a bigger screen.

I start to pace, aware of every second ticking by on the ridiculous tiki clock on the dining room wall, each and every one of them sounding loudly like some bizarre portent of doom. I want to smash the damn thing, but apparently violence doesn’t solve anything.

I’m not convinced about that right now.

“Hallelujah,” Oz crows, and we all crowd him, except for Remi, who’s gone to fetch a large, paper map.

The app shows a dot close to an island, one of the islands Spencer ruled out right at the start. Figures.

Looks like Beck was right.

Remi locates it on the map he has spread out on the table, and we plot a route, feeding it into our navigation systems while Oz reels off instructions for us all.

Three boats, three teams.

We all fall into the rhythm of our formal training, grabbing guns, checking ammo, stocking flares, a medical kit, and night

vision goggles, among other things before striding toward the dock like we're going into battle.

I guess we are.

The most important battle of our lives.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Neve



Mood: My blood is growing cold.

I WAKE UP IN a bed, conscious of a blinding headache and a terrible case of cottonmouth. I blink slowly up at a rough wooden ceiling in the dim light, trying to get my bearings. Not just a bed...a room. Wooden beams crisscross overhead, and I turn my head slowly to see what looks to be a plywood wall. Childish drawings cover its surface, fluttering in a breeze coming from somewhere.

I try to swallow past the dryness in my mouth, but there's only cotton. My neck is stiff, pain emanating from the spot where—

Shit. Oh, shit. From where Dylan Marlowe stabbed me with that needle.

Moving slowly, I sit up and look around at my surroundings.

Reaching out a hand that shakes a bit, whether from fear or the dregs of whatever Marlowe drugged me with, I don't know. I touch the nearest crayon sketch. The drawings were obviously done by children and depict a similar theme—a girl playing with or tending to a group of boys. Reading to them. Tucking one in a bed. Cooking at a stove.

The girl has purple hair.

“They made those for you, Wendy.”

I whip around, regretting it immediately when the pain in my head flares to life. Spencer stands in the doorway,

wearing...leaves? Yes. He's wearing an outfit sewn of fabric leaves in autumn hues, overlapping in such a way that I cannot quite tell what the fabric is shaped like underneath.

"Wendy?" I touch my temple, wishing the pain in my head wasn't quite so intense. "What...Spencer...what is going... why?"

I fumble with what to say, which question to ask first. I'm not sure it really matters. Obviously, he's not altogether *there*.

And when someone's not fully sane, my mind whispers, *how do you fight?* When you can't reason...can't use logic...when they're bigger than you and stronger than you...what the hell do you do then? I tamp down the rising panic. It won't do me any good.

Wait.

Be patient.

"Spencer's not my real name," Spencer says now.

"Oh. Okay. What is your real name?"

"I don't remember." He flutters around the small cabin, which features two sets of plain but sturdy-looking bunk beds with thin, serviceable coverlets on them, picking up the flat pillow at the end of each and setting it back down. "I'm sorry for my trick, Wendy."

"Your trick?"

"I had to get you here."

I nod slowly, even though I have only the faintest idea what he's talking about. "You mean pretending like you had escaped?"

"Uh-huh. I feel bad for the day I hit Ollie with the board. He's just so big! And strong! He's a grown-up, Wendy. I couldn't fight him and win without cheating. I hope you can forgive me."

"I..." My head throbs and the room spins. Closing my eyes, I press my fingers to my forehead.

"I don't like cheating, but I had to."

"Spencer—"

"I told you. I'm not Spencer. My name is Pan, Peter Pan. And you're Wendy, don't you see? You're our mother."

Oh, God. He's completely delusional. Moving at the speed of a snail, I ease myself from the bed. Staying there makes me feel vulnerable, and if nothing else, I need to decrease my susceptibility...so I can increase my chances of survival.

"I'm not your mother. You realize that, right, Spencer?"

Spencer flings the pillow he was fiddling with to the floor, and I hop back a step. "Do NOT call me that. I am Pan. You are Wendy. Those are the rules. Neverland doesn't have any rules except those ones. I am Pan. You are Wendy. He won't like it if we don't follow those rules. I am Pan, and I protect the Lost Boys from Hook. You are Wendy; you are our mother."

“Okay.” I hold up my hands, placating. Arguing... reasoning...trying to convince him is out. He put Oliver in the hospital, so I don’t want to push him too far. His outfit doesn’t suggest that he could be hiding a weapon, but I have no idea what is on the other side of that door.

“Who is ‘he’?”

He doesn’t answer, instead walking over to the small window cut high in the wall and peering out.

I try again. “All of those men that you left on the other island...Oliver and Oscar and Jesse and the others...you know that they’ll be coming for me, right? They won’t be happy with you, Spen—Pan.”

He turns around, a little smile playing around his mouth. He doesn’t look nineteen, he never really did, but now, more than ever, he looks closer to a mischievous twelve or thirteen. “It doesn’t matter. No one leaves without Hook giving the okey-dokey.”

Who is this freaking Hook? Is that Doctor Marlowe? I want to ask, but I’m not ready to see him again, if that’s who he is. I need a plan.

Spencer smiles and claps his hands together. “Come on! It’s time for you to meet the Lost Boys!”

Dread pumps through me as Spencer—Pan—takes my hand and leads me through a door into another room in the bunkhouse. An open door reveals another bedroom, this one with a single bed. The blankets are strewn about, and the floor

is littered with random objects—rocks, tree limbs, a steel pipe, a doll.

“That’s my room,” he tells me, pulling me onward to a door that leads to the outdoors.

Outside, I squint against the sunlight, my head feeling like it might crack open after the dimness of the interior. Once my eyes adjust, I scan about. A large house stands a hundred or so yards away, several stories high and contemporary in aspect, all glinting glass and steel framed angles shining in the sun. I take a step toward it.

“No, no, no.” Spencer-Pan blocks me with an arm to my chest. “That’s where Hook lives. You don’t want to go there.” Holding a finger to his lips, he makes a shushing sound, then skips ahead, motioning me to follow.

I frown. ‘Pan’ is a completely different character from Spencer. Instead of walking with a hunched-over, pseudo-defensive posture, he literally bounces when he moves. He is childish, energetic...almost mischievous. Looking at him like this, I find myself echoing the same thoughts the others had when they first met him—there’s no way he’s nineteen years old. Spencer Wilton’s file said that he was, though, so he must simply be delayed developmentally.

Spencer-Pan springs ahead, and I can make out the shapes of small cabins forming in the trees. We reach a clearing where eight cabins, four on each side facing each other, line a white crushed shell path. Cans with strings attached stretch between narrow cabin windows. Some of the walls have been painted

and further decorated with crayons. A wooden toy sword lies on the path. The sight of it reminds me that Oliver was once here... and Nicholas.

Spencer-Pan cups his hands around his mouth and emits a piercing “Awoooooo!”

“My God.” My breath catches on the last word on a sharp inhale as boys run out of their cabins, filthy little urchins with matted hair and bare chests, remnants of shorts and pants hanging onto bony hips by literal threads. I count a dozen, but I’m not sure and start over...they don’t stand still long enough for me to count properly.

Painted faces. Dirty faces. One has candy in his hand. They are loud and wild and *so excited* to meet me, every one of them chattering a mile a minute.

They don’t seem to notice the tears streaming down my face.

They yell their names.

Spurgle. Tootles. Nibs. Curly. They can’t be their given names. They’re all so strange and silly...I can’t keep them straight. *Slightly.* Isn’t that what Oliver said he was called? Hook must have given them names when he brought them here.

Dear God...how long have they been here?

They pull at my pajamas, trying to drag me in different directions. One boy, four or five years old if I had to guess, stomps his foot and announces that he doesn’t need a mother.

Another speaks quickly, but no one can understand him.

“That’s Tongue-Tie,”

Spencer-Pan volunteers. “He always talks like that.”

I cock my head, studying him. Surely, he knows...no. He doesn’t. It’s unfathomable...these boys literally have no concept of any world other than their own. “That’s because he is speaking Spanish,” I say gently.

“What’s Spanish?”

“It’s a language the people of a different country and culture speak. There are many different languages in our world.”

“Oh.” Spencer-Pan whistles, a shrill, eerie sound, and all of the boys immediately calm. “Okay, boys. I told you I’d get you a mother, didn’t I? This is her. Be nice to her. I can’t do it on my own. I’ll take care of Hook, and Wendy here’ll take care of you. Just like the story.”

I smile, the gesture awkward-feeling on my face. This entire situation is surreal. Just like the story, indeed. This boy-man is delusional. He needs help. And these children...I need to get them back—

A bell chimes, and the boys’ demeanors suddenly change. Wildness and joy are replaced with panic and fear. “To the cabins!” Pan orders. As I watch, he shimmies up a nearby tree, hoarsely whispering down to me. “Hook left his house. Get inside a cabin!”

Earlier, I half-wanted to meet the mysterious Hook, whom I suspect is Dylan Marlowe. I wanted to have words with him,

the monster who brought me here, brought Nicholas here, conceivably... except he's not old enough, is he. It doesn't matter. After seeing all of this, I'm not sure I'm ready for that.

I'm not sure I'll ever be ready.

I run, darting into one of the cabins and huddling next to one of the bunks.

The boys with me are visibly terrified. One whimpers, the same defiant one from earlier who had no need of a mother. I open my arms, and without hesitation, he cradles against me. Another tucks in against my other side, and another curls into my lap. I hold them close, softly humming. It's barely a breath of sound, but it's enough. They fall silent.

I look around me at the same rough plywood walls as in Spencer-Pan's cabin. There are more drawings, these accompanied by names and carvings.

I almost lose it when I see in blocky letters, NICKY.

It was Hook's 'crew,' I remember, who got Nicholas.

I can't help but wonder what happened to them and if that same crew is going to get me.



TWENTY-NINE

Remi

MY CALMING AND RELAXATION techniques won't work. Not this time. Not in this situation.

The ride to the island is agony. Everything is taking too long. Every second that goes by feels like a second too late.

Oz gave everyone brief instructions, but there wasn't time for anything more, and we were all impatient to move.

Oscar and Oliver will be landing on the west part of the island. Cope and Beck to the east, and Jesse and I to the north. The satellite pictures we managed to find showed the dock was to the south, so we're avoiding that.

I have no idea what to expect, and Jesse's not exactly Mr. Chatty when it comes to situations like this. He's brooding right now, which doesn't help matters.

We reach the island after an almost completely silent trip over, but as we approach, we notice a thick pipe in the water.

Jesse turns off the engine and lets the current bring us in. After he weighs anchor, he leans over the side of the boat to

study the pipe.

“They have a reverse osmosis machine somewhere here. He is making his own fresh water. What kind of serial kidnapping psychopath puts this much effort into a place like this?”

I give a dry laugh. “The kind that expects no one to check an island that isn’t registered as having fresh water, I imagine.”

Jesse grunts and unpacks our firearms. Dawn is lighting the sky now, casting fingers of pink and orange into the rose gold of a seemingly perfect day, so we don’t need the night vision goggles.

As we start to make our way through the trees, listening as we go, we hear a bell chime in the distance.

“What do you think that means?” A shiver of apprehension snakes its way down my spine. “Do you think they’re onto us?”

“Let’s not borrow trouble,” Jesse grunts as he picks his way through the undergrowth but a few minutes later, we hear the snarling and baying of a sizable pack of dogs. The sound makes my gut fold in on itself.

There’s no way that pack of beasts is friendly.

“What the fuck do we do now?” I ask as the terrifying howls pierce the early promise of the morning.

“Pick up the pace,” Jesse whisper-shouts. “We need to get to Neve.”

We start running. The frenzied barking is coming from the inner island to our left, while the ocean is on our right. The sound of waves crashing against the cliffs here make it hard to tell if they're getting closer or if they're tearing after the others.

A large concrete building looms ahead of us, and Jesse heads in that direction to see if it will offer us some cover. We've almost made it when a dog bursts through the trees and latches onto Jesse's arm.

Thankfully, Jesse's a big man, and it only takes a shake to throw it off but it still did damage. Jesse's blood splatters against me as we continue to run.

I chance a look back, expecting another attack, but the dog doesn't strike again. Instead, it just stands there but keeps on baying.

"Fuck!" Jesse yells between breaths, a hand clamped around his forearm. "That's the retriever! That means there are bigger, slower dogs coming. And trust me, we don't want them to catch us."

Thankfully, we're getting close to the building. I can hear a humming coming from it, but I don't stop to consider the significance since half a dozen other dogs come crashing through the trees, slavering like they're either half-starved or solely bred to fight. I have no idea what breed they are, but they look damn vicious, and I don't doubt the pair of us look like nice juicy bones, and that's probably how we'll end up if they catch us.

There's not even a chance we could pick them off with our weapons. There are too many. They'd be on us before we even got off a shot each.

I raise my gun anyway as Jesse skids to a halt beside the door of the building.

It's open, thank God, and we pile in, slamming the door closed just as the pack catches up to us.

This building vibrates with noise. No wonder it wasn't locked; no one in their right mind would come in here. It's full of what I assume to be reverse osmosis generators; without hearing protection, these things will do damage.

We both slam our hands over our ears, but it does little to dull the roar, and I wonder if we wouldn't have been better off taking our chances with the dogs who are now throwing themselves at the door.

It's impossible to voice a plan because of the incessant noise but as the early morning sunlight comes streaming through the windows, I notice a pair of double doors on the other side of the room which must be the machinery entrance.

I nudge Jesse with my elbow and nod my head toward it. Jesse nods to show he's seen it, so I lower one of my hands and mime running with my fingers, then point to the door and slam my hand against the wall.

Jesse seems to get it. At least, I hope he does.

He points to me and then himself with a questioning look on his face.

Who is the runner?

I'm not sure it really matters. It's a gamble either way. We both risk getting ripped to shreds. But while Jesse jogs every day, I'm lighter and leaner, and I can sprint faster, so that makes me the bait. I point to myself and the rear door, and Jesse nods before he runs to the other side of the room.

I check this other door isn't secured before glancing back at Jesse. It's tall and unwieldy, but it looks like I can open one and keep the other secure, since there's a bolt holding it closed which doesn't affect it. We look at each other, a moment of understanding passing between us, then I nod, and we both open our doors.

The dogs stream into the room. Most come through Jesse's door, the way we came in, which is what we were banking on, but to my surprise, a couple surge through mine, too. I guess this hunting pack has brains as well as brawn, but it means I don't get out as quickly as I'd planned. Luckily, the noise makes them falter for a moment. That's all the time I need to get a head start.

A glance over my shoulder tells me the sight of me running has refocused their senses, and I catch sight of Jesse frantically waving and shouting—God knows what—but there's neither the time nor opportunity to work it out, so I turn around, ready to flat-out sprint, unable to hear how close they are since all I can hear is those godawful machines.

Just as I turn to slam the door shut, trapping them inside, one of the big dogs lunges against it, knocking me down. Its

powerful jaws sink into my calf, and I can't help the agonizing yell that's ripped from my throat. It's all I can do to keep the door partially closed, bracing my good leg against it so the others can't get through while I attempt to kick it off.

Not a moment too soon, Jesse runs around from the other side of the building, kicks the dog off of me and slams the door closed as soon as I lurch backward, dragging my leg out of the way.

We both lay on the ground, panting wildly, me cradling my damaged leg while Jesse confirms that each of the doors are shut and all the dogs are inside.

For a moment, I feel bad for them; the noise in there is terrible.

"Fuck..." I say, throwing my arm over my face.

"They've been bred to kill," Jesse tells me, knowing my soft spot for animals. "It was always going to be them or us."

I know he's right. Look at what they've done to us already.

Jesse shrugs out of his backpack and unpacks the medical kit, cleaning the puncture wounds in my leg with a sterile, antibacterial swab before he dresses them, and then I do the same to his arm. If there's anyone else out here, animal or human, the last thing we need to do is leave them a blood trail.

When we're done, Jesse helps me up, and we continue our journey into the heart of the island.

"So, I'm guessing that was Hook's 'crew,'" Jesse comments once we've both regained our equilibrium.

I remember what Spencer told Neve about her brother. “Oh, God. Nicholas...”

Jesse throws me a sharp look. “Don’t think about that now. We need to think about what’s ahead.”

I nod. “Right.”

God, I hope she never realizes.

“And not a word of it to Neve.”

He’s obviously thinking the same thing.

I blow out a breath and nod grimly, knowing I have no choice but to brush that knowledge aside so it doesn’t distract me from the reason we’re here. “Let’s find out what else is fucked up about this godforsaken island.”

THIRTY

Neve



Mood: Welcome to the final show.

I DON'T KNOW HOW long I'm in the cabin. Long enough for Spencer-Pan to come down from the tree and call the boys outside for something to eat.

We emerge, the boys matter-of-factly, as though this is a common occurrence. Me, a bit more warily. Nothing makes sense. If Dylan is Hook, wouldn't he want to see me? He brought me here. Why am I hiding from him? Why is this strange sense of doom hanging over me and everyone else?

And I'm hungry.

I'm shaking from it, in fact.

I watch as Spencer-Pan stands beside a dirty canvas backpack and pulls out sandwiches, one after another. They're unwrapped, bits of bread and meat crumbling off as he hands each off to an eager child. They grab excitedly for them, tearing at them in their haste, and I can't help but wonder if they got breakfast this morning or if they'll get an evening meal later.

Their hipbones suggest no.

Spencer-Pan holds a sandwich out to me, and I eye it with frustrated longing, my gaze darting between it, the filthy bag, and the hungry faces of the boys intent on their own meals.

I can't. They need it more than I do.

“I’m not hungry.” He shrugs, biting into the sandwich himself.

For several minutes there’s nothing but the sound of wind in the treetops and children eating with noisy enthusiasm. My stomach growls, and Spencer-Pan smirks. I walk a few feet away, my eyes hot with unshed tears as I try to peer through the trees and scan the horizon.

We’re on an island; that much I know. Where the island is located relative to anything else, I have no idea. It has to be a fair distance away from Key West or any of the more populated islands, as searches were conducted over the years, and nothing was found.

I can see a few little makeshift huts through the trees, but many of them look derelict and overgrown. Certainly, they’re not being maintained. But despite that, the place has the air of a defunct summer camp, just as Oliver always maintained. I know it could never have been such a thing though, or there would have been records. People would have known of its existence, and it would have been investigated.

Even now, I’m not sure how all this infrastructure could have been overlooked.

I look up into the canopy of green. The trees are dense, which is probably why nothing was ever found with the aerial searches—

Dogs.

Dogs are barking in the distance. Not at all close, but loud enough for me to hear them. It's not like the sound of a dog barking at a neighbor; it's the bay of a pack on the hunt.

“Sp...Pan, what is that? The sound of the dogs, I mean?”

“That's Hook's crew. They're as mean as he is. Don't worry about them, though...they're not allowed to come here. So, they won't.” He finishes the last bite of his sandwich and brushes off his fingers, then hops lightly onto a log. He poses, posturing with one leg flexed before him and one arm gripping onto a branch above him in an attempt to display his muscularity. With an effort, I keep my expression neutral. “They know I'm here to protect everyone.”

Then what he revealed registers. Hook's crew. That's who... Nicky.

Oh, God.

Again, I struggle to keep my expression impassive, but this time for an entirely different reason.

“Are they...hunting something?”

Someone?

One of the boys? Was anyone missing? One of my family? Were they here?

Hope clutches in my throat and sinks like a stone when Spencer-Pan shrugs. “Don't know. Could be.”

I want to shake him. Instead, I ball my hand into a fist and then, very deliberately, one finger at a time, flatten it out

across my stomach. “I want to go back to my room and lie down for a bit, please.”

“Oh. It’s not time for that. Wild boys don’t need to worry about beds and sleep.”

Deep breaths. Count to ten.

“I’m not a wild boy, though. I’m their mother, right? And moms need naps sometimes.”

Spencer-Pan tilts his head, assessing. “Is that true?”

I manage a smile, holding back imminent tears. “Of course, it’s true. Mothers don’t lie.”

Spencer-Pan hops down from the log. “Wild Boys! Go back to your cabins until I return.” He sends me a conspiratorial look. “Hook is on the move. It isn’t safe. Come along.”

Spencer-Pan leads the way, skipping and occasionally looking back with a smile. It’s unnerving. I’m relieved to escape into the relative privacy of the bedroom I was assigned to, understanding now that it’s mine and mine alone, despite the extra bunk beds. Perhaps at one time, they belonged to other children.

Now it’s just me and Spencer-Pan in the other room.

I wait until after I hear my childish captor leave the building and stand on tiptoe to watch him skip out of sight from the window set high in the wall. When he’s gone, I try the door. Locked, as I suspected it would be. I waste no time shoving the bed against the section of wall with the window and use the old-fashioned hand crank to open it. It’s a depressingly

tight squeeze, but I manage to shimmy out and fall to the ground below with a painful thud, landing on my shoulder and my hip.

I lie there for too many minutes, biting my lip against the pained cries that want to emerge, until I finally gather the will to stand and start limping my way to Hook's house.

I'm not sure what my plan is. It feels both reckless and logical to confront the man. Maybe he doesn't even know I'm here? I don't know.

All I do know is that I have to do something.

The walk is uneventful, the path of crushed shells lined with thick vegetation and shaded overhead by palms and other trees. In the distance the boys play with muted vigor, their yells reminding me of petty squabbles with Nicholas we used to have—high-pitched and shrieky. Grimly, I put one foot in front of the other, ignoring the twinge in my hip.

How long have they been missing?

Not for one day longer, if I can help it.

The house looms before me, strangely modern for this odd island. A set of broad, white stone steps leads up to an opaque glass door trimmed in black metal. I look around cautiously before emerging from the copse of trees. All is still.

Drawing in a steadying breath, I move forward.

“Wendy! Wendy, you're a naughty mother! Shame on you.” Spencer-Pan bursts from the underbrush, catching me just as my hand settles on the ornate metal doorknob and pulling me

back. His gaze darts about. “You cannot go in there. I told you already—the man in there is dangerous. You must allow me to protect you.”

“Peter, my dear boy, now don’t frighten the girl. Hello, Wendy. At last, we meet.”

The voice, high-pitched and soft, comes from the opposite direction. I turn to see an older man standing at the bottom of the white steps leading up to the door. He regards me with open curiosity, and I return the favor.

This is him. The man who abducted my brother. The man who tried to take me. He’s nothing to look at, not really. Pale hair sweeps back from ruddy skin and comes to a neat point at his chin in a beard reminiscent of Colonel Sanders from Kentucky Fried Chicken.

He looks like freaking Santa Claus, except his eyes don’t twinkle. They’re hard as stone, and cold like a reptile’s.

I stiffen my spine.

“Hello, you motherfucker.”

“Tsk, tsk. Language, Wendy. That’s no way to speak in front of the boys.”

Suddenly, I wished I had cussed every day of my life like the proverbial sailor. That I hadn’t tried so hard to be so good. “You know, I’ve learned something. Even good moms say bad words. So fuck, fuck, fuckity fuck you,” I say, smiling. His mouth hardens.

He is dressed as a gentleman—proper and formal in a suit and tie. There is a calmness to him that is *too calm*. His voice doesn't sound American, but it doesn't exactly sound English, either. There is a hint of one of the romance languages in his voice, but he speaks too well to nail down his exact first language.

I don't care, anyway. He's scum. Less than nothing.

“Peter, open the door. Let's go inside.”

Spencer-Pan stares at the floor again and shuffles forward to do as he was bid. He reminds me of Spencer again. Just like that, the mischief and wildness are snuffed out of him.

Hook walks ahead of us, leading me through rooms of soaring glass and polished wood and metal. It's modern and gleaming with cleanliness, and anger burns bright within me at the thought of the relative squalor the boys in the woods live in.

We end up in an office, where he seats himself behind a desk and motions to a leather chair. “Sit.”

I tip my chin up and cross my arms defiantly over my chest. “I'll stand.”

“You're being very rude. Sit.” His voice never increases in volume but grows colder by degrees.

I sit. “Was it not rude of you to bring me here against my will?”

He strokes a lined hand over a beard going white with age, pale eyes studying me intently. “Yes, well, I'm afraid that was

a necessary evil. We have a similar goal—to provide for the children in the best possible way.”

I scoff. “I fail to understand how kidnapping small children, sticking them in rudimentary plywood cabins, and feeding them sandwiches once per day from a dirty backpack is providing for them in the best possible way?”

“You merely lack vision.”

“How about you open my eyes?”

He leans forward over his desk, his gaze pinning me in place. “I intend to.”

I don’t dare look away. “I’m listening.”

“This is the short version, so pay attention. The world we live in is a wicked one. Depraved. Parents are distracted from the precious work they’re given and shunt their children off to be raised by electronic babysitters and the world at large. Boys, especially, are at risk. They’re growing up too fast. Too hard. Especially those without a mother. The magic of being a child slips away overnight and is just...gone.”

As he speaks, Hook’s gaze grows far away. He’s in another place. Another time.

“I know because that was me when I was a young man. My own dear mother passed away when I was a boy, and my father was never there. He was so caught up in his own affairs he didn’t have time to be a father. I raised myself.”

“So...” I frown at him, confused. “You take them away from their fathers and make them parent themselves? How

does that help them retain the magic of childhood?”

He rubs at his forehead. “You don’t understand.”

“Obviously.”

“They’re Wild Boys here. They have a sort of father figure in Peter, but he’s not an authoritarian. He’s more of a leader. They get to play and explore and adventure and have the perfect childhood. They can go to bed when they want. Take baths when they want. Brush their teeth when they want—“

I shudder. “You are delusional.”

His fist hammers the desk, and I jump in my seat. “I understand there are gaps, but that’s where you fit in. Surely you can see where I’m coming from. I want to give boys like me the opportunity to be children again. You will be their mother, Wendy. You will make sure they have everything they need that I haven’t thought about.”

“I have a question.” *And I have to tread carefully.*

“Ask.”

“What about the children from years ago? The ones who have grown up but are never seen again?” My voice thins and threatens to break, but I keep going. “Where are they?”

A nerve twitches in Hook’s eyelid. “It’s better this way. Our world forces children to grow up far too fast, but they get to be children here longer, as children were intended to be. Their perfect childhoods make up for their lost adulthoods.”

“Their lost adulthoods.”

He doesn't respond immediately. After a moment, he glances at the surface of his desk, picking up a pen and tapping it against its neat surface. "Sometimes I keep boys. The island is a lot to maintain." The pen stops tapping. "I don't like to do that, though. It doesn't usually work out very well."

I stare, my mouth dry.

"I understand your feelings—"

"Do you?"

"If all of them make it through the day, I know you will appreciate what I'm doing here."

"Make it through the day?"

"Yes, dear Wendy. There are some bad men in Neverland today. Speaking of which—" Hook claps his hands together. "Peter, my boy!" Spencer-Pan perks up from where he's been silently listening. Hook places a gun in his hands.

"Now, you take this, Peter, and, if any of those ruffians come through that door, I want you to shoot her."



THIRTY-ONE

Oscar

AS WE APPROACH THE west side of the island, my apprehension about bringing Oliver along kicks up a gear. I'd have cheerfully left him at home, but we couldn't waste time trying to convince Ollie to stay.

He's also an adult. I know he's perfectly capable of making his own decisions, but he's not thinking logically right now.

I guess none of us are with Neve gone.

So, all I can do is watch out for him, and hopefully, he won't be too pissed that I plan to keep a close eye on him.

He hasn't been out of the hospital for a full twenty-four hours yet, after all, and from all accounts, should still be there. It sickens me to realize that Dylan fucking Marlowe engineered his release in order to gain access to our island...to Neve. And I'm angry with myself that I was so focused on Beck that I lost sight of the true villain.

We coast up to a sandy cove that was visible from the rather blurry satellite footage we were able to pull up before we left,

but there's no telling the exact layout of the island since so much of it is wooded, and the images we found weren't clear enough.

Grabbing our supplies and weapons, we head out through the trees, which start as soon as we clear the small patch of sand, but it's not long before we come across a large clearing, which is filled with a huge array of solar panels.

"You have gotta be fucking kidding me," Oliver exclaims as we both look around. "How could anyone have missed this?"

As we work our way around the solar farm, we can hear what can only be described as a pack of wild dogs in the distance. Although as vicious and feral as they sound, I doubt they're wild... which makes them all the more dangerous because they'll have been trained to kill. They're obviously the island's guardians.

There's a rustling close by, and my concern immediately goes out to my brother. "I hope you're ready to fucking run."

I look back, but I can't see the distance to the cove through the trees. "Or at least climb a tree. If that's the dogs, we might at least be able to pick them off one by one if we have a height advantage."

Oliver and I start backing up toward the tree line so we're not trapped out in the open, but we both stop short when Commissioner Williams bursts out of the forest.

"Hunt! What the hell are you doing here?" he asks, frowning between me and my brother.

“Just wondering the same thing about you,” I toss back at him, trying to peer through the heavily wooded brush to see if there’s anyone with him.

“I, ah, felt an obligation to the case, so I decided to check out your concerns. I have other officers fanning out across the island, but I’m waiting for a rendezvous with the SWAT team. I’m about to meet up with them. You can come with me.”

I gesture towards the center of the island, which is the approximate direction I assume Neve to be held. “Actually, sir, we need to...”

“It wasn’t a request, Hunt,” Williams snaps. “You’re not authorized to be here, and I will not have you getting in the way of an official police operation.”

I exhale silently and raise both my palms to placate him. “Sorry, sir. We just came here looking for... Oliver’s girlfriend.” I take care with how I refer to Neve. Not because I’m concerned about jeopardizing my tattered career by the conflict of interest in being found dating someone involved in a case, but because I know Neve wouldn’t appreciate a stranger knowing about her special relationship with the five of us. “The tracker on her phone shows she’s close by. We think the Spencer kid brought her out here.”

“Whatever,” the commissioner barks. “I won’t have your presence disorienting my officers, so whatever else happens, right now, you come with me so they know you and your brother are here, and they can put a face to you without mistaking you both for one of the perps.”

I grind my teeth, irritated by the delay as well as Williams' attitude. But he has a point. I don't want any of the guys to be arrested, or worse, gunned down by friendly fire, so I go along with him, letting the commissioner talk as we walk along a narrow track between the trees.

But the gears in my head are spinning. I studied the satellite to pick out the best places for us to land, and although it was blurry, I don't recall seeing anywhere that could serve as a rendezvous point in the direction we were heading, which is up a steep incline.

And then there's the coincidence. Exactly the kind I don't believe in.

My gut is telling me there's something wrong, but I can't work out what that might be, so I'm at a distinct disadvantage.

"They should be just up ahead," Williams says as we're relegated to walking single file when the track narrows. I squint through the trees, hoping to see someone from the department I trust because Commissioner Williams ain't it.

A heavy thump startles me, and I spin around to find a gun directly in my face.

On the ground behind Williams lies Oliver's prone form. There's blood running down his temple, and my gaze falls to more of Oliver's blood, where it decorates the butt of the commissioner's weapon.

"You son of a bitch!" I snarl as he gestures to me to raise my hands.

“You should have left all of this alone, Hunt. As far as the world knew, the case was solved, and everyone would have been happy with that. None of this ever had to happen, but you just had to go sticking your nose into stuff.”

I’d have liked to point out that trouble came looking for us, not vice-versa, starting with the fire at the daycare, but now isn’t the time.

I stare at my brother, my breath constricting in my chest. Oliver isn’t moving. He doesn’t even seem like he’s breathing.

He looks dead.

“Reach down carefully with one hand and throw your weapons on the ground,” Williams demands, pointing his own gun at my shoulder holster.

“Fuck you!” I spit, my brain still racing to catch up with what might have happened to Oliver. He’s just out of the hospital after a brain bleed. What the hell will another blow do to him?

Guilt floods me that I haven’t taken care of him like I always promised I would, and I’m so lost in my fears that the commissioner loses patience and fires at my feet.

I jump back before hurriedly following his instructions.

Conscience clearly isn’t something in this bastard’s inventory.

“Now turn around and continue through those trees,” Williams orders, the muzzle of his gun planted directly between my shoulder blades.

We arrive at the supposed rendezvous spot, which turns out to be a small cliff that overlooks the ocean.

He pushes me to stand near the edge of the cliff, which is obviously the roof of a cave because when the tide comes in, the water below gets sucked into a lethal-looking riptide which forms a deadly whirlpool.

“You wanted answers, Hunt, and now you’ve got them. All of the missing Lost Boys are down there. Well, their bodies are, anyway. But you insisted on finding them, and now you will. You’ll be right down there with them.”

My mind is racing. Thoughts of Ollie, Neve, poor little Nicholas. The rest of the guys and the pack of dogs we heard earlier.

Fuck! I should have put aside my pride and contacted Captain Johnson when Neve disappeared. Got a proper search team to come out here. But who’s to say the result wouldn’t have been the same, or maybe worse, if Williams had been tipped off even sooner?

“What are you doing?” I ask him, at a loss to understand.
“Why would you be a part of this?”

His answer horrifies me. “Do you really think I didn’t find this place years ago when it was still my case?”

“What?”

“I realized the same thing you probably have by now, Hunt. This guy has money. Do you know how hard it is to live in a fucking paradise like the Keys while these rich assholes make

you investigate who put a stray soda bottle in their garbage? That's when I decided some of that money should come my way."

That's when it hits me. The commissioner has been sabotaging the case for years. So many things make sense.

Beck, as a potential witness who could identify Hook not being believed.

The poor quality of the satellite images of this island.

The complete absence of any visible evidence of the solar farm.

And the biggie, the one that should have tipped me off sooner—the fact that this island was listed as being cleared on the search list.

"You fucking asshole," I bellow. "You could have saved these kids! My brother...Nicholas Murray...Spencer... Every one of them put through hell just so you could line your pockets? What sort of a monster are you?"

"A rich one," he cackles, waving his gun at me. "And one who's going to protect that wealth by getting rid of you."

"I'll fucking jump before I give you the pleasure of shooting me," I tell him, stepping closer to the edge.

But as I look behind me at the sharp rocks and dangerous surf that I can't see a happy way out of, there's a suppressed *thwap*, and the commissioner cries out. I whip my head around to find Oliver, alive and well with my gun in his hand, the silencer attached. He must have picked it up from where

Williams made me drop it. The commissioner clutches his leg, blood spreading from between his fingers.

Williams still has his own weapon, and from where he's slumped on the ground, he takes aim at Oliver, who is weaving and unsteady after his ordeal.

I don't think; I just act, kicking the gun out of his hand and forcing him into the dirt as he scrambles to get it back.

I grab hold of him by his shirt, pull back my fist, and punch him in the face.

Once is all it takes, and the flabby, out-of-shape asshole is unconscious.

I stare at him, my chest heaving, as Oliver staggers over and falls to his knees beside me.

I want to pound Williams to a pulp. I want to throw him over the edge. I'd like to watch the ocean suck him into that cave with all the Lost Boys he sent to their grave by his own greed and dereliction of duty, but I don't want their final resting place soiled with his presence.

"Don't do it, Oz," Ollie wheezes, guessing my thoughts. "He's not worth it. Far better for him to live out that shame in prison for the rest of his life. That'll be double the punishment. You know exactly how crooked cops are treated in lockup."

He's right. And besides, I'm one of those cops who *does* have some fucking morals. I've been trained to believe in the system, and even though it is sometimes corrupt, us good guys have to stick together, or all we're left with is anarchy.

I huff out a breath and climb to my feet, shrugging out of the backpack I'm carrying and digging out the rope I added as a precaution. Then slicing a couple of lengths off, I secure Williams' hands behind his back, as well as binding his ankles before tying him to a tree, just to be doubly safe.

Then I dig out my phone, pleased to see it has service and put in a call to Chief Johnson. I'm busy filling him in when the sound of retching captures my attention, and I find Oliver puking into some bushes, knocked into sickness by the blow to the head.

"You'll need to send medical aid, as well," I tell the chief. "We already have a couple of casualties, and we haven't found the kids yet."

I hang up and turn to Oliver. "Will you be able to carry on?"

He takes a swig of water from a bottle that was attached to my pack. "I have to," he says, and I know there's no point talking him out of it, so instead, I sit him down for a few minutes under the guise of treating his head wound.

I've just helped him up, and he's struggling to walk beside me when the silence is shattered by gunshots.

And not just one or two.

Oh no, a damn fuck-ton of gunshots that sound like war just broke out on this island.



THIRTY-TWO

Cope

THE TREES ARE THICKER than we expected on the east side of the island.

When we landed, we could see the top of a building that looked kind of like some kind of a watchtower or lighthouse, so that was the direction we were heading.

“Am I the only one who’s worried we might get spotted from that huge lookout tower?” I ask Beck, even though I’m equally worried about not reaching Neve. Then again, if they see us, we’ll never get to her, so I think it’s a valid concern.

“Yes,” Beck replies shortly. He’s walking beside me, already bloodied from the fight on the island. Guilt is still eating at me about that.

“Look, I’m sorry about...”

Beck cuts off my apology. “We can hold hands and paint rainbows later. We are on duty now.”

Fucking military guys. I’m surrounded by them. What did I do to deserve that?

“Look, we’re invisible right now, okay? The tree canopy will shield us while we’re in here,” he says by way of consolation.

He’s right about that. It is impossible to move without a twig snapping, but that just makes me nervous, too. I’m not cut out for this shit. I don’t have the same training as the rest of them. My party tricks include wowing people with my incredible knowledge of the function of extraneous cutlery at dinner parties and an uncanny sixth sense about the vagaries of the stock exchange, neither of which are much use in situations like this.

We see the tree line ahead of us and realize we’re closing in on a clearing that leads to the main house, so I stop short of revealing myself to whoever might be watching.

“Do you think one of us should scout ahead?” I ask, turning to Beck.

He doesn’t get to answer because a single shot rings out, and Beck falls to the ground.

Shit!

I dive for cover while Beck groans beside me. He’s holding his neck, and there’s blood pouring from between his fingers. Another shot rings out as I attempt to crawl over on my belly to look at the wound, so I stop to fire back, buying us some time.

“Jesus fucking Christ! I should have taken my father’s advice and stuck to running the company,” I mutter, as I do my

best to staunch the bleeding with the tattered edge of Beck's tee shirt so I can assess the damage.

“What, and miss all this fun? Don't be a dumbass,” Beck wheezes, his face contorted as he makes jokes to cover the pain. Now there's something I understand, and I'll be damned if I don't realize I like this guy.

Not that this is the time for life revelations.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I realize the bullet has just grazed the soft tissue between Beck's neck and shoulder. Thank God it's nothing worse.

Still, this is bad enough, and a quick peek reveals a figure crouched low and scanning the tree line.

It won't be long before he decides to come and investigate a little closer, so I fire another shot in his general direction to put him off.

I rip Beck's shirt, wincing at the noise, even though it's probably too soft for our attacker to hear. The seams hold, so I whip out my utility knife to finish it off.

Yeah, living with a bunch of military grunts rubs off.

I'm just tying the strip around Beck's upper shoulder, hastily padding it with another section of folded fabric to staunch the flow of blood and hopefully avoid getting dirt in it when a voice calls out.

“Which one of you is that? Two of you? I'm a little rusty with this shit. I think there were two, but now there may only be one.”

It's Dylan's voice.

Frigid anger sizzles through me. This man preyed on our goodwill, then betrayed us all. I hold up my hand in front of Beck's face and ask him a silent question to see how he is.

Thumbs up or thumbs down.

He's pale, but his eyes are still alert. Alert and furious. But even though he's clearly in pain, the makeshift bandage I've fashioned seems tight enough to stop the bleeding.

He gives me the thumbs up and starts crawling away through the underbrush on his stomach.

"You got the extra. I think we can forgive that." I respond to Dylan as Beck disappears from sight.

I take a chance and begin to stand, but another gunshot has me ducking and rolling before firing back in a hurry. "Come on, man. Don't do this. We just want our girl."

There is a long pause, and I think he's on the move. I don't dare look, but I cock my head, trying to work out the direction.

"You know there's no way any of you can leave this island," Dylan shouts.

Yeah. That's not exactly a surprise. Every single one of us is a liability to these people now that we've identified the island and a few of the players.

Of course, it's not the first time I've been considered a liability, but I didn't stand for it then, and I won't stand for it now.

People underestimate that about me.

My father did, and I have no doubt Doctor Dylan fucking Marlowe will too. He doesn't know me. He just knows the official version that casts me as a poor, little, disinherited rich boy.

I listen to the voice. I can guess the general direction of it, but I know that's why Dylan is talking to me too. He's trying to use my voice to work out my position without me needing to stand up. He's counting on being a better shot than I am.

Taking a risk against a stocks and shares guy who's a bit of a joker.

I guess it's a decent bet on paper. Especially since I've been shooting blindly at him rather than actually aiming.

"Little kids, man? That is fucking low."

I lick my lips and rub my hand on my pants since it's still slick with Beck's blood, and I'm going to need to use it properly in a moment.

"Hook saw promise in me years ago. He saw what I could be more than anyone else did. I would have become a product of the system. Hook made me into a doctor."

What the fuck?

"But little kids, man."

"I make sure that their ends are peaceful. It's better than the lives they would have led."

“Not sure Oliver would agree with you there. How do you justify that?”

He’s quiet for a moment, and I curse. This is a game of cat and mouse, but I need him to keep talking.

“Oliver was before my time. I make sure the choices are better now.”

Sick fuck.

“And you use your access to medical records, right?”

“That and social media. Parents do post way too much online.”

I’ve got him. He’s ahead... About eight degrees from straight ahead. The last two replies seemed closer.

Dylan may have figured out my position, too, and I brace myself. It has to be now, even if Beck isn’t ready.

I fire a bullet wide into the forest in an attempt to distract him before I jump out. And there’s Dylan just a few feet away. We both fire, and we both miss. But Dylan misses because he’s hit from his right, where Beck is leaning against a tree with his gun raised. And I miss because Beck’s bullet causes Dylan to fall.

It’s just a glancing wound to his arm, though.

Everything happens in a split second, although it seems like slow motion. Dylan is already turning his weapon on Beck, who looks like he’s flagging.

I've just discharged my last bullet, and there's no time to reload. Instead, I grab the utility knife and pray my aim is as good as it used to be.

I don't hesitate.

Marlowe stiffens, his body seizing, his expression morphing into one of shock as his mouth falls open and his eyes drop to the knife protruding from his chest before they rise to meet mine.

"Never underestimate the underdog," I say as his eyes glaze over, and he crumples to the ground in front of us, staring sightlessly at the endless blue Florida sky.

"Nice throw," Beck comments as he stumbles towards me. We meet at Dylan's body, his blood puddling darkly beneath him.

Beck grimaces and grits his teeth. He begins kicking Dylan's body in a sad, desperate sort of rage.

I pull him away, but he surprises me when he straightens and says. "He needed to be roughed up a bit. Just wish I had the chance to do it while he was alive."

I stop and glance back at the body, realization hitting me.

I just killed a man.

"That was unfortunate," Beck says. It's him pulling me along now. "Especially the way he fell onto your knife during the struggle."

I look at him for a long moment, surprised he has my back, and nod at him in appreciation.

Yeah, this guy is one of us.

We make it the rest of the way to the house without any further incident, and just as we get there, Oz and a fucking dreadful-looking Oliver appear out of the trees.

We pause, waiting for them to catch up, and as they do, Remi and Jesse show up, too, both of them looking more than a little worse for wear.

It's been a bloody, deadly journey to get here, but we've all survived.

And Neve is inside.

THIRTY-THREE

Neve



Mood: Walking through hell and high water.

GUNSHOTS.

I lose track of how many. I don't know the outcome. We sit in this ridiculous office in silence, Hook bent over something at his desk, giving the impression of work as he writes with an absurdly large quill pen.

I watch him scratch the nib across the surface of what I suspect is genuine linen paper, annoyed by the way he appears to be ignoring the sound of gunfire with an enviable serenity. Surely, he's not that calm.

And who uses an effing quill pen anymore? What a douchebag.

Spencer-Pan sits far too close to me, twiddling the gun in his hands with nervous fingers.

Without looking up, Hook drawls a laconic command. "The safety is off, my boy. Best not to toy with it."

Spencer-Pan stills.

"How can you just sit there—" I start. The door crashes inward, startling me into jumping up from the chair reflexively. "Oscar! Jess—" My voice dissolves into a sob.

Spencer-Pan shrieks and covers his ears, then recovers and waves the gun in my direction. Hook looks up from his papers

but doesn't flinch. "Peter, dear boy, let's not be entirely useless."

Spencer-Pan quickly shuffles behind me and grips me around the shoulders, pressing the gun into the fleshy part of my arm. His grip is awkward and I'm pretty sure I can break free with no trouble, but I don't trust that he won't shoot me by accident, so I remain still.

The sight of the guys both thrills and horrifies me. They're scuffed and bruised; Oliver and Beck covered in blood, Jesse with several hastily placed gauze dressings, and Remi limping badly.

Jesse looks me over carefully from across the room. "You okay, sweetheart?"

I nod. "I'm okay."

"Oh, bloody hell. I told you to shoot her, not hide behind her, Peter." Hook's voice is irritable. He places his quill in the inkwell and looks over the rim of his glasses at the men, some of whom have their guns leveled on him, the others of whom have them pointed at Spencer-Pan.

It's a seemingly easy-in, easy-out kind of situation. Hook and Spencer-Pan are outnumbered two-to-one, even if they are armed. I think the only thing keeping my guys from shooting them immediately is the risk of me being injured or killed and the potential, possibly, for being able to finally take Hook in.

That's huge.

Especially when Hook's gaze comes to rest on Oliver leaning on Cope and faintly gray. "Hello there, Ollie. You're looking rather the worse for the wear. Gentlemen, there's no need for violence."

Oscar snarls. "Keep his name out of your mouth, old man."

Oliver breaks in with a sideways look at his brother and a hasty laugh, the sound humorless. "You didn't have that opinion when you sent your posse after us."

"Am I to be held responsible for the actions of others? Come now, we're all grown men here, with minds of our own." His gaze grows distant. "More's the pity. There's something to be said for the innocence of childhood, don't you think?"

Oscar snarls again, and this time the sound is echoed by Beck. Jesse thrusts his arm out, preventing him from leaping forward.

"He's playing games with you, Oz. There's no point talking to him."

"But I wish to talk, sir. So, we shall talk." He spreads his fingertips on the desktop, his gaze lingering by turns on each of the guys. Measuring. Weighing. Then he sits. "Twenty years ago, I made Commissioner Williams an offer he couldn't refuse. Lifetime financial support. Political clout to assist in escalating his position. Anything he wanted. All he had to do was look the other way." He turns his attention to Oscar. "He's the reason the case was never solved, but I'm sure you figured that out by now."

Oscar gives a minuscule nod, the tiny motion saying clearly what words don't. Fuck you.

Hook's lips twist. "Yes, well. I'm assuming he's no longer with us."

"Oh, he's still breathing, and he'll make it as long as medical aid arrives in time to deal with the gunshot wound to his leg and providing there aren't any more dogs that might consider him a tasty morsel since he's tied to a tree and can't exactly elude them."

Hook's nostrils flare. "Congratulations, gentlemen. I'm offering you the same deal I offered Williams. Money. Support. Whatever else you need."

Jesse tilts his head. "And what do you want from us?"

Hook hones in on him as if he's discovered the weak link in the chain. "Just your silence. And the girl, of course. We need our Wendy. I can assure you that she'll be perfectly safe. Well cared for."

Silence fills the room. I hold my breath. Are they actually considering this? I mean...I did leave...

"Fuck you, man!"

"You have lost your mind!"

The exclamations come from Beck and Oz simultaneously and are quickly echoed in varying degrees by the others. The breath I was holding whooshes out of me.

“Can you guys please just shoot him and get this over with,” I whisper. I feel feral right now. Like I’ve become as wild and unprincipled as the children Hook has left to fend for themselves. I want to see him pay for what he’s done. For what he unleashed on my brother, for what he would have done to Oliver.

Remi sends me a sympathetic look. “Hang in there, baby. We’re waiting for backup to arrive because we want him in jail for a good, long time.”

“You want him to pay for what he did to Nicholas, right?” Oliver never takes his gaze off Hook, but I feel his attention.

I close my eyes; the gun Spencer-Pan holds against me is a dull chill against my skin. “You’re right.”

Hook shakes his head. “You’re making a mistake. Backup won’t be coming, and my men will take care of you long before you have an opportunity to do anything to me.” He presses a button I hadn’t seen yet on his desk and relaxes back into his chair. “They’ll be here soon.”

Cope snorts. “I’m sure they would be if they weren’t all dead or detained.”

“You’re lying.” Hook presses the button again. When nothing happens, he walks to the window and peers out, clearly agitated. “What have you done?”

The atmosphere in the room is changing. Since the men arrived, it’s been a pot set to come to a painfully slow boil...a pop of anger here, a bit of truth there. Things are escalating

rapidly now, though, visible in Oz's locked jaw and the determined expressions on everyone's faces. Jesse, in particular, is tensing, readying himself to spring.

One thought crystallizes suddenly.

I don't want Spencer-Pan to be hurt. There's something... he's a child. I don't know how I know it, but I do. He's been twisted, warped, confused by all of this, and he'll need a crazy amount of therapy...but I don't want him harmed.

"Spencer," I start.

He glared at me. "I'm not Spencer."

"You are, though. You're not Peter Pan; he's a character from a story. He's made up."

"I am Pan!" He spins me around, so my back is to the guys, and I'm facing him. Spittle flies in my face when he screams again, "I'm not Spencer!"

From the corner of my eye, I see Hook smile. He wants this, I realize. He wants me to escalate this unstable child; he wants him to shoot me. If, when the outside world came to the island, it forced Pan to become a killer, it would do nothing so much as prove Hook's crazy theory, and justify everything he believes.

His Neverland would have purpose, as skewed as it is.

"What're you doing, baby girl?" Oscar mutters.

Sunlight comes through a window to the side of Spencer-Pan, and I can see the peach fuzz of stubble on his cheek.

Peach fuzz.

“You aren’t Spencer Wilton,” I say, lifting my hand to place a palm against his cheek. “He was Pan before you.”

Spencer...Peter...whoever he is, doesn’t answer. He just watches me.

“He played with you. He protected you. He loved you. And, you loved him, didn’t you?”

When he answers, his voice is deeper, breaking on only a few words with the rasp of puberty. “Spencer grew up. Grown-ups can’t stay in Neverland.” His gaze slides in Hook’s direction and then resolutely back to me, and I understand.

“Except him. He lives here. He took Spencer from you, and you are scared. Because he is going to take you soon.”

“She’s lying, Peter.”

Hook’s voice has an edge of nerves I haven’t heard yet.

I like it.

“You know I’m not lying, though, don’t you? Because he took someone else before Spencer, didn’t he?”

Spencer-Pan turns very deliberately and shoots Hook, who topples with a shriek of pain from his chair onto the floor.

“Shit,” someone says.

“Fuck,” someone else replies.

Oscar goes to nudge Hook with the toe of his boot. “He’ll live to see prison,” he mutters. “Unfortunately for him.”

Afterward, this man child who has been forced to be so many things that he is not, crumples to the floor, silent sobs wracking his thin frame. I go with him as someone tugs the gun from his unresisting hand, and I wrap my arms around him, pulling him to me and letting him cry.

Just like I used to do with Nicholas.



THIRTY-FOUR

Neve

TWO WEEKS LATER

Mood: Too good at goodbyes.

The stage lights are hot, and I squint, unable to see anything beyond their glare. A bead of sweat gathers on my upper lip, and I wipe it with my index finger, hoping the gesture is inconspicuous.

We're here in the New York studio for an interview with a prime-time news show, one I've watched many evenings before on my TV with a bag of chips or a plate of cookies. Oliver's agent all but demanded he do the interview, and the studio requested that Oscar, Beck, and I all be in attendance, as well.

To say I'm nervous would be an understatement.

The anchor—Katie, she said to call her—sits across from us. She glances down at the notes in her lap, then over at me, sending me a reassuring smile.

I fidget with my skirt, sliding my damp palms over my thighs. Up. Down. Up—

“Hey.”

Oliver reaches over and grabs my hand, echoing Katie's smile. “You're fine. We're fine. Try to relax... This will all be over with soon.”

I nod, but I'm not so sure. I can't remember a time when my life hasn't been haunted by the specter of the Lost Boys kidnapper.

The Lost Boys Killer, I mean.

His name was changed after everything came out a couple of weeks ago when we stumbled out of that house into a sunshine that seemed like a cruel kind of joke after everything all of us had been through.

Even now, weeks after D-Day—what we refer to as that final day of discovery, doom, and death—everything still seems to revolve around Hook.

I wish I could have shot him a few times, although I guess it is a poetic sort of justice that Spencer is the one who did so.

Everything still echoes from the fallout.

Like Spencer...who is really a fourteen-year-old boy named Adam Hughes.

Oscar used every resource at his disposal to identify him as a child who disappeared ten years earlier. Reunited with his family, with the help of a psychiatrist, Adam has begun the process of reversing years of very skillful psychological manipulation and abuse.

“Thinking some deep thoughts over there.”

Beck’s quiet rumble intrudes, and I glance over with a small shrug. “Just all the stuff we’re dealing with as a result of this madness. You know. Spencer—damn it. I mean, Adam and everything he’ll be facing. Oz going back to work. With a commendation, no less.” Beck nods. “Everything I have to do to get the daycare back on line.”

He frowns a little. “Such as?”

“Rebuild, obviously. But the hiring of the crews is huge. I hired Shelby to run the day-to-day operations so I can stay on the island and oversee things from a distance.”

“Yeah, Cope told me you and he were talking about the possibility of opening a satellite, maybe more, in the future.”

For the first time in days, I feel a spark of excitement. “He’s so good at investing and business management. And I want to concentrate on special needs and at-risk children. We just need to work out the infrastructure for how to do it.”

Beck’s eyes are soft as they rest on my face, even if his smile is a bit tight around the edges. “You’ll be really amazing at that. Really, really incredible.”

A blush heats my face, and I look down. “Thank you.”

“Other than all that...everything okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Just trying to get through all these damned interviews, I add silently, swinging my feet and glancing around the studio.

Beck sits on my left, with Oliver to my right and Oscar on his other side.

The other guys are beyond the glow of the lights, even though I can’t see them. I’m surrounded by my men—protected and safe and loved—while most of them still carry the vestiges of the battles they went through to get to me.

And yet I still feel ...flat.

What the hell is wrong with me?

With her gracious smile, Katie begins the interview in the midst of my confusion, looking into the camera lens with the poise of a professional. “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for being with us tonight. We have with us four of the survivors of the Lost Boys Killer, a story that recently put the Florida Keys in the limelight.” She turns her gaze on us, Oliver in particular. “First, thank you for being here. You’re a bestselling author, a former Marine sniper, and one of the few escaped Lost Boys. Let’s start at the beginning.”

Oliver leans forward a bit in his chair, his palm warm on my knee, and the truth bursts warm and vital over me like a summertime rain shower.

This sense of flatness I feel...it’s because Beck is on the outside, and every part of me demands that he be let in. I love him just as surely as I do the others, and I’m grieving his loss as if he were no longer here.

Because it’s not my decision.

“Neve? I understand this is how you guys met? The Lost Boys kidnapper attempted to abduct a child from your daycare? Tell me about that.”

“Yes... Lucius Gancio engineered a kidnapping attempt at my daycare facility. We thwarted it, thankfully, but that was how I met Oscar, and later, Oliver.” I exchange small, private smiles in turn with both men. “We later discovered that neither the daycare nor I were randomly chosen. My brother had been abducted by the same man as a child, and an attempt—“

My voice breaks, and although I've practiced this a thousand times, repeated it to the police already a hundred times, I have to stop and compose myself.

”—he attempted to take me, as well, but I managed to get away. He wanted me to be his Wendy, a mother figure of sorts for his Wild Boys, just like the children's story, only unimaginably darker. He took my brother, and I escaped...and the guilt for that has eaten at me my entire life.”

Katie's voice is soft with compassion when she replies. “It's unreal to think about, but I'm sure this guy is glad you did escape.” She points a finger at Oliver.

Oliver nods. “No question.”

“And it wasn't until recently that you learned of your brother's fate, correct?”

“Yes. Through Beck.”

Katie's attention sharpens on Beck. “Beck Wilder. Your part in this story is equal parts fascinating, tragic, and wrenching. You were a Lost Boy, as well, is that right?”

His mouth tight, Beck explains his connection, as well as the brief, horrifying glimpse we had of my brother's fate when he introduced us to the boy we thought was Spencer Wilton. He takes my hand as he does, holding it while I sob. Oliver holds the other.

We tell every bit of the grim story that brought and held us together, avoiding the part about being in a polyamorous relationship for the sake of Oliver and Oscar's careers. For the

sake of public scrutiny, we agreed ahead of time that I would simply be Oliver's girlfriend.

Katie asks about Wesley Terrell, the man formerly identified as the Lost Boys kidnapper and shot just a couple of months earlier.

"We thought the nightmare was over," Oscar says. "We had our man dead to rights. There was no question of his guilt. What we didn't know is that there was a helluva lot more beneath the surface. Terrell was nothing more than one of Gancio's men—a 'crew' who did all the dirty work as Gancio got older—kidnapping the children, holding them as they did with Beck—although back then it was Gancio himself, which is one of the reasons we knew Terrell wasn't 'Hook'—until they could transport them, bringing them to the island... getting rid of them after a certain amount of time had passed. In most cases the Crew was composed of boys who had grown to adulthood under Gancio's tutelage and had been groomed especially for their tasks."

"Wow." Katie shakes her head. "Doctor Dylan Marlowe was one of these crew members?"

"Yes. There weren't many, from what we can tell. Perhaps two or three. Commissioner Williams pushed our department to put a bow on things and close the case—a decades-old case—in a matter of days. When I pushed back, I was suspended. Long story short, Williams had been taking bribes from Gancio for years in return for making sure the island was never found."

His voice drips disgust.

“And Williams is now incarcerated and awaiting trial for his involvement?”

“Yes. He’ll stand trial and be heard by a proper judge and jury, just like Gancio. He’ll be given a chance to plead his case, they both will, and unlike the children they took, they’ll get a fair hearing.”

Katie clears her throat and looks down at her notes. “Fair enough. I’m no expert, but I’d say he’s going to get what’s coming to him. So, uh...what’s next for everyone?”

Oliver looks at me. “We shut the book on this twisted fucking fairy tale and finally get to live happily ever after.”

Beck’s thigh nudges mine the barest amount. “Yes,” he adds. I feel his gaze touch me and then drift away. “I’ll be leaving the area, myself. Taking a job outside Florida in an effort just to leave it all behind.” He pauses. “There comes a time when you need to move on.”

Katie nods and redirects, and I sit in stunned silence.

There comes a time when you need to move on.

Oliver’s hand squeezes mine, but I can’t look at him. I can’t do anything but pray I look normal as I work on keeping it together.



I CAN'T REMEMBER THE last time I stayed in a hotel. We plan to spend a few days here in New York before flying back home to the Keys...do a little sightseeing...eat a lot of food. I might even make the guys take me to Macy's and torture them by making them all sit in the dressing room while I try on outfit after outfit.

I'll have to see what Caroline thinks of that idea.

This hotel—the Bowery—is nicer than any one I've seen. A big step up from the make-your-own malted waffle bars in the mornings, for sure. We have a suite, with several bedrooms branching off of a central gathering room.

The boys are in that central room now, waiting on room service, while I snuggle into the comfort of Oliver's embrace in one of the bedrooms. The TV provides a low background hum of white noise, and I can feel my eyelids drooping ever lower.

It's so cozy.

So peaceful.

Everything I ever wanted.

Except it's not, though, is it? And this isn't the kind of 'I didn't get the flavor ice cream I wanted' disappointment I'm thinking of.

It's so much bigger.

Because Beck isn't here. He's not part of this, and he's already returned to the Keys. He's been gone longer than that,

of course. He returned to his tiny apartment as soon as the police arrived on Hook's island, and we were cleared to leave.

The vague depression I've felt for the past week or two floods back in full force. Seeing him for the interview has brought everything to crystal clear clarity.

I miss him.

"Whatcha thinking?" Oliver asks.

I let out a sharp laugh. "You really don't want to know."

He frowns and pokes my biceps. "I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want to know." There's a brief pause. "You look depressed."

"I'm not depressed."

Lies.

He stares at me. Waiting.

"Okay. I'm just...kind of sad."

"This is about Beck, isn't it?"

I should have known I could never hide anything from him. I press the heels of my palms into my eye sockets and groan. "I think I felt—feel—something for him, Oliver. And I'm sorry about that. I'm trying not to."

"Neve—"

"No." I cut him off. I don't want to argue about this. "I've just never been any good at lying to myself. I'll get over it, though."

Rolling over, I close my eyes.

And if that isn't lying to myself, I don't know what is.



THIRTY-FIVE

Beck

IT'S OVER.

With the interview in New York over, everything I've battled with for the better part of two decades has finally come to head.

The things that shaped my life, my personality, my obsessions—both good and bad—have come to a close.

The singular event that threw me off the rails and sent me spiraling into an abyss of drugs, addiction, and petty crime—albeit with some help from corrupt officials—has been tied up with a pretty bow.

And the little bit of paradise I found out there on a tiny island with Jesse, Oliver, and sweet Neve has come to an end, too. I guess it never truly started, no matter what connection I felt. I'm sure Remi, probably Cope, and definitely Oz are glad I'm gone, so I was only ever batting three for three there, anyway.

Neve was never really mine.

The island was never going to be my home.

The guys were never more than comrades in arms, united over a common cause.

I knew that. I was just playing make believe for a while, but it was short lived, like the Lost Boy I never really was.

Now Neve has her guys, the guys have Neve, and I have...

Nothing.

I don't even have a cause anymore.

That just about sums me up—a rebel without a cause.

Pathetic.

Oliver and Jesse kept me in the loop regarding all the new information Oz has been sharing with them. He's been reinstated now that the truth about Commissioner Williams has come to light, and it's been proven that in addition to his own corruption, the asshole was just trying to throw Oscar under the bus to stop the case from being re-investigated.

You'd think I'd have a sense of closure after finding the holy grail I've sought after for most of my adult life, but all I feel is empty.

Like the life has been sucked out of me.

I'm not normally prone to being melancholy. I truly believed that when I finally received the recognition that I had indeed been taken by Hook, and the vindication I sought to clear myself of the blame I had endured, that I'd feel absolved

from my past. Renewed. Ready to embrace the rest of my life after putting the past behind me.

But it's nothing but a hollow victory.

I miss her, goddammit.

Fuck! I miss *all* of them. Even asshole Oscar Hunt who has always had a hard-on for me and not the good kind. Not that I swing that way.

For a few short days I had everything in life I could ever hope for.

People around me, but not just any people. People I respected, who I thought I could build lasting relationships with.

I guess I already have in many respects.

I share a strong bond with both Neve and Oliver. Jesse and I get along, the two of us alike in a lot of ways. Even Cope has sent me a couple of WhatsApp messages...although they do tend to be ridiculous memes which mostly feature cats.

They make me smile, at any rate.

And they make me miss that I'm not enjoying the banter in person.

Damn, I really am pathetic.

I look around my sad excuse of an apartment now I'm back from the Big Apple. It's never been anywhere except a place to rest my head at the end of the day. As I gather together all the documents I've amassed over the years so the police can

use them to tie up all the loose ends, I can't help noticing how empty this place is. It's just a shell. There's nothing of me in here.

But worse, after the time Neve spent here, all I can see is her.

She's everywhere.

She's in my kitchen, helping me make tacos.

She's at my desk, poring over my paperwork.

She's in my bed.

Even though I never got to share it with her, I can still smell her intoxicating daisy and vanilla scent.

It's driving me crazy... and I love her.

Goddammit, life must fucking hate me. How many more times is it going to screw me over and leave me wrecked?

I'm not sure I can stay here any longer because, for the first time in my life, I want more. I've never liked being alone, but until now, I've assuaged that part of me with the bustle of the newsroom, and when I was forced to be on my own, I distracted myself with the Lost Boys case.

But it's not enough anymore. The case is closed. I got my absolution, and it hasn't satisfied me in the way I always expected.

I want a home and a family. Hell, even more than that, I want the kind of bromance Oliver and Jesse share with the others, although I know there's not much chance of finding

that special kind of poly connection twice in a lifetime. Once is rare enough.

The sigh that huffs through the uncomfortable silence that encapsulates my living space reeks of defeat. God, I need to pull myself together. I've turned my life around before; I can do it again... just as soon as I find the motivation.

Good thing I've had years of experience being 'less than.' It's fine, though, I know how to handle it. Just paste on a smile and fake it until you make it, as the pundits say.

Yeah. It's time for a change of pace. Maybe Las Vegas. That's the twenty-four/seven kind of place that won't let me stop long enough to think of her. Bright lights. Big city. Gambling. I bet there are tons of scams and fraudulent schemes for me to investigate there.

Despite the friendship Oliver and the others have offered, there's no way I can be around them and not be jealous of all the one thing they have that I don't. The one thing that I crave.

I don't want to be that kid outside the candy store, staring through the window at what I can't have. The envy would only eat away at any potential friendship until it soured it completely. Better to make a clean break and leave it all in the might-have-been category.

I place all the documents into a large paper file box, and I'm digging around in my desk drawer for the couple of memory sticks that hold back-ups of all the digital information, my healing shoulder twinging a little, when there's a heavy knock on the door.

That'll be Oz, calling to relieve me of the last remnants of
the only life I've ever known.

Stiffening my spine, I go to open the door.



THIRTY-SIX

Neve

THE ISLAND, ONE WEEK later

Mood: Your love's the one love.

“Ugh.”

“What’s wrong?” Caroline peers through the camera where I have her on FaceTime, trying to see the reason for my sudden grumpiness. The jigsaw puzzle I’m working on is spread out on the table between me and the phone, and I gesture.

“I cannot, for the life of me, find this one blinking missing piece. I’ve been trying to put this thing together now for the past four days, and I keep coming back to this one section…”

“Oh.” She dismisses it. “It’ll show up. Where is everyone?”

I look around at the pool area, lit by string lights and tiki torches. Closer to the house, where I’m sitting, there is stronger pendant lighting. “Cope and Remi are in the pool.” I wink when Cope hears his name and glances up with a ready leer. “Oscar is working. Jesse’s off doing something with his turtles at Tortuga, but he’s supposed to be back tonight—“

“And Oliver?”

“I think he’s slipping some extra writing in. He listens to his muse.”

“I understand. So, basically, everything is back to normal.”

The words send a pang through me. She’ll never know that, though, and she’ll never know why because I’ll never speak of it.

I can't.

My fingers trace the unfinished puzzle. Where the hell is that piece?

"Yes," I tell Caroline. "Everything's finally back to normal."

I take a sip of the margarita Remi made for me earlier. It's delicious, cool and tangy and... "I think this needs more tequila," I mutter. I hold the glass up, about to tease Remi, when Caroline cuts me off.

"You're full of shit."

"What?" I set the glass down.

"Can't find the puzzle piece. Needs more tequila. You're as blind as Helen Keller, babe, if you can't see that what's missing isn't a damn puzzle piece or a bit of alcohol."

"I don't know—"

"Puh-leeze don't finish that sentence. There *is* a missing piece, but it's not from a freaking jigsaw puzzle."

I pinch my lips closed.

"Neve?" Oliver stands half-in, half-out the door at my back. "Can you come here for a sec? I need your help with something." He gives a little wave. "Hey, Caroline. Sorry to interrupt."

She smiles. "Ain't no big thing. Talk to you later, Nevee."

"Oh...well. Okay. Let's talk later, okay? You'll have to tell me about those stepbrothers of yours, and that house, and..." I

trail off. I haven't been the best of friends lately. Caroline's father died and I didn't even go to the funeral.

"It's all right, Neve." On the screen, Caro smiles. Her eyes are shielded by sunglasses but I can tell her attention is caught by something. "We'll talk later. Mwuh."

"Mwuh."

I stand, and behind me, Remi and Cope climb out of the pool and start toweling off. We follow Oliver through the lodge, the great room, and outside again, where he leads us down the flagstone path that leads to each of the cottages.

He must be taking me to his cottage.

But no...we pass right by it.

And then by Cope's...and Remi's. I turn and give them a questioning look, but Cope just raises an eyebrow, and Remi winks.

Oliver finally stops before a cottage that's not in use and, without looking at me, he opens the door.

Jesse's inside, and Oz. With enigmatic smiles, they part to reveal Beck standing just behind them.

I suck in a breath and cover my mouth with my hand as tears prick at my eyes. I'm barely conscious of them leaving, Oscar dropping a heavy hand on my shoulder and squeezing gently as he passes, and Jesse kissing the top of my head. There's only the wild thud of my heart, the man standing before me, and the recognition that...they did this.

For me.

For us.

Then Beck takes the two steps that separate us and scoops me up against him. He holds me tightly for a long, long minute, our hearts fluttering wildly beneath our clothing, and then pulls back to stare into my face, his gaze searching mine.

“There will be words later,” he vows. “But for now...I’ve wanted to touch you for so long. Just let me touch you, Snow.”

I nod wordlessly.

Beck’s lips crash into mine, and everything in my world suddenly feels right. It’s like the sun has come out from behind a cloud. Like the storm has cleared but washed everything, so it’s brand new, and the flowers have all suddenly bloomed.

My heart is full, but it’s not just because of Beck. It’s because of Oliver, Oz, Jesse, Cope, and Remi, too, and what they’ve done to make this happen.

I never would have asked, no matter what it cost me. The five of them have done so much for me; there was no way I could betray their kindness, generosity, and love with that kind of demand.

The fact that they worked it out for themselves and made it happen shows just how clearly they see me.

Just how much they’ll do for me.

Just how much they love me.

And I know they won't have come to this decision lightly. Like Remi once said, we're not just a string of relationships that we can simply tack another one onto. We're a family, and that means they—all five of them—must have decided they can accept Beck as part of that family.

That might seem like a feat in itself, given their differences, but it won't really be so hard. Underneath his often-antagonistic exterior, Beck Wilder is a sweetie, though he'd probably never admit it.

His fingers delve into my hair as his lips slant across mine, and I don't think anymore.

Instead, I burrow my fingers beneath the hem of his tee shirt, eager to feel his warm skin and hard muscle.

Beck obviously feels the same because his hands go wandering underneath the short, flippy skirt of my sundress until he has a palmful of my lace-covered butt, which he squeezes before using his grip to haul me against him, so I'm in no doubt whatsoever about how turned-on he is.

His tongue tangles with mine, and he devours me like he's a starving man who's suddenly found sustenance. He doesn't stop until we're both gasping for breath, until all of my oxygen has been kissed into stardust and lightning.

When he finally lifts his head, he takes a step away from me as if it's painful to do so, and his expression twists. "Are you sure about this, Neve?" He watches me soberly. "The guys have offered to give me a home here on the island with all of you—if that's what you want. But I know they kept this as a

surprise. So, before we take things any further, I need to know that this is forever. That you're absolutely certain. Because I can't start and then stop—“

“I wouldn't be doing this if I wasn't absolutely certain,” I murmur, fisting the front of his shirt and pulling him back to me.

His breath explodes out of him, and he kisses me again, but this time he's pulling at my clothes and his own like he's frantic to get us both naked.

I can get on board with that.

There's no finesse or sensual undressing. A button comes ping-ponging off Beck's shirt as he rips it over his head without undoing them, then the shirt goes flying across the room where he flings it. My sundress lands in a heap on the floor, which I almost trip over in my haste to push my panties off because I'm still wearing my sandals.

Beck doesn't wait. He scoops me up off the floor and carries me to the bed, following me down, and then his hands and mouth are everywhere. Nipping, suckling, plucking, stroking. I am reduced to a whimpering puddle of need.

He kisses me deeply before his lips cruise along my jaw to the area behind my ear, which makes me shiver. Then he nibbles down my neck using his teeth and his tongue to drive me wild.

His mouth whispers across my collarbone then down between the valley of my breasts, which he cups in his palms,

holding them like they're his bounty while he draws first one nipple into his mouth, worshiping it with his tongue and teeth, before he moves to the other.

I arch against him and thread my fingers through his hair, little whimpers of pleasure dripping from my lips.

He eventually heads south, kissing his way over the sensitive skin of my stomach, following with his fingertips until he finally reaches my core.

His hands push my thighs apart, and for a moment, he just stares at me—right there—before he lets out a groan and ducks his head, swiping the flat of his tongue down my slit in one long lick from bottom to top until his tongue is swirling around my clit and I'm arching off the bed.

He parts my labia with his thumbs and fucks me with his tongue until I'm writhing and pleading for more, and Beck's in danger of being scalped; I'm tugging at his hair so hard.

"Oh, God, please, Beck..." I beg. "I need you to fuck me!"

He draws a skillful finger down my slit, slicking it with my wetness before he presses it inside of me.

"Like this?" he asks wickedly, pushing in and out.

"Nooo..."

He draws back and adds another finger, pumping them inside once, twice, while I circle my hips in frustration.

"Like this, then?"

Damn tease.

“I want your cock!” I demand.

Beck just chuckles, then pulls his fingers out completely and sucks first one, then the other into his mouth. “Mmm, you taste divine,” he tells me with a mischievous glint in his eye and a lopsided grin on his handsome face.

“Now, Beck, please,” I implore, elongating the last word.

My body feels like it’s on fire. One that only he can put out.

“Be careful what you wish for, Snow. I’m just trying to get you ready for me.”

I might have laughed at his blatant swagger, but I’m worried he might be telling the truth. I can feel the hard ridge of his dick pressing against my leg, and it feels huge. And not to brag, but lately I have been gifted with some experience with men who are exceedingly well-endowed.

His biceps flex as he pushes to his knees, and I make the most of eye fucking his sexy, toned body. The man is ripped. Kind of like Jesse, but in a different way. Jesse has bulk and hard muscle, but Beck is sleek like a big cat, all lean, high-definition.

My mouth waters. I want to lick him all over.

Since I can’t keep my fingers to myself, I draw them down his steely eight-pack abs, watching in fascination as my touch makes the muscles in his abdomen jump while he unbuttons his pants.

There’s a thrill in knowing I can do that to him.

He's commando underneath. I shouldn't be surprised by that, but my breath is stolen when his magnificent cock is finally freed.

"What is that?" I ask faintly, staring at the metalwork in the tip of his corona.

Beck smirks and kicks off the last of his clothing, leaving him gloriously naked. "That is called a Prince Albert, and baby, it's going to drive you wild."

If I wasn't so wet and wanting, I might have balked, but Beck just treats it like an everyday occurrence—and I guess to him it is.

He covers me with all those beautiful muscles, taking my mouth and kissing me again, slow and deep this time, and I've almost forgotten about his unexpected piercing until I feel it nudging against my entrance.

A sliver of apprehension trickles through me, but it's chased by a far deeper thrill at the idea of this new experience.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Beck whispers, his sweet side showing as he rubs his nose against mine.

I stare up at him, our gazes meeting and holding. "I'm ready," I tell him, my senses firing in anticipation.

He eases carefully inside me. From the first instant, I can feel the difference. Nerves I never knew I had flare to life inside my channel, and Beck groans, his eyes screwed closed, as my muscles clench around him.

“Fuck!” The epithet ricochets off his tongue. “I’m going to go off quicker than a teenager getting to home base on prom night.”

I laugh and relax, which I guess was Beck’s intention. “Were you actually ever in that position?” I tease, running my fingers down to cup his tight glutes.

“Nope, but I can imagine...”

He sinks all the way in and then does some practiced circular move with his hips that has me gasping as his piercing tickles deep inside. Now it’s my turn to swear.

This man is undoing me.

After sex with five guys, often in multiples, I didn’t think anything could surprise me anymore.

I was wrong.

He pulls back, and the jewelry he’s wearing through his piercing titillates so many hidden places.

Beck picks up the pace, but gone is the wild tumult of before; now he’s just concentrating on driving me wild with his cock.

It doesn’t take much.

A maelstrom of sensation traps me in its grip, and all I can do is surrender to the thrills coursing through my body, coiling tightly around every part of my awareness. I hook my legs around his hips, the heels of the sandals I never kicked off digging into the back of his thighs, and I hold on for dear life.

It's almost too much. Everything is so...extra. Like Beck himself.

Whatever that Prince Albert is doing to me, it's also doing to him. His face is tense, and he clenches his teeth in an effort to slow things down for both of us, but it's not going to work for much longer.

I throw my head back in ecstasy, and Beck's hands span my waist as he holds me steady and thrusts deeply.

The sensation is indescribable.

Everything inside me draws taut, like a spring that's been over-tightened, until it finally bursts.

My climax hits me like a Mack truck, stealing my breath and sending me flying as I scream loud and long until my throat is raw, and I need to suck in more breath before I pass out.

Beck is right there with me every step of the way. His own orgasm grips him and contorts his face in a rictus of pleasure until we both collapse, panting and sweaty and too overwhelmed to even speak.

I've just started to doze in the circle of Beck's arms when there's a tap on the door, and Cope's voice shouts, "Can we come back now?"

Beside me, Beck groans and rubs his free hand over his face, the other arm hugging me closer, but I just chuckle. "This is what you've let yourself in for. I hope you realize that."

He kisses the tip of my nose. "It's worth it for you."

“You love ’em, really,” I quip.

Beck smiles. “Yeah, I do. Well, except maybe Oz...”

I smack his chest and call out to the others. “The door’s open.” Well, I assume it is since both of us were in too much of a daze to lock it.

A second later, the rest of the guys pile in, including Remi. Somehow, I manage to feel strangely shy, lying here naked with Beck.

It lasts all of two seconds before Cope, utterly uninhibited, strips off and dives onto the bed with us.

The rest of them stand there with curious expressions, and it occurs to me that perhaps I was screaming pretty loudly, and they’re wondering what that was all about.

Beck obviously picks up on the same thing because he gives me a wicked wink, drops a brief kiss on my swollen lips, and pulls back the light sheet we’re covered with before hopping out of the bed and heading for the bathroom to clean up.

“Hey! No one wants to see your dangly bits, Romeo. Fuck,” grouses Jesse.

“You sure about that, Casanova?” Beck asks, sauntering across the room. Stopping in full view of all the guys, he threads his fingers behind his head like something in a *Magic Mike* movie and swings his penis so the metalwork glints in the bright sunlight that streams through the windows.

I cover my mouth with my hand to hide my grin.

This guy!

He's certainly going to keep this lot on their toes.

Eyes widen, mouths fall open, and every eye in the room is glued to Beck's cock, which is decorated with a sexy ring that has several freely-moving balls threaded through it.

"And the word 'cocky' takes on entirely new meaning," says Oliver with a wide grin, slapping Beck on the back.

"He has supplemental balls," Jesse deadpans.

"I think he likes to be led around by his dick," Oz snarks, but Beck just quirks an eyebrow at him, not even slightly offended.

"I'm sure you could hear how much the lady loved it." He bats the retort back with an exaggerated wink, and I feel my cheeks turning pink as the men tear their eyes away from Beck's junk to stare at me.

"I am totally taking your ass while Beck is inside you. I want to try me some of that."

Everyone blinks at Jesse. It's an unmentioned fact that the guys can feel each other through the thin membrane that separates those spaces, but nobody ever talks about it.

The fact that it's Jesse, of all people, who does now, is mind-boggling.

"What?" he demands, looking at our stunned faces. He narrows his eyes at the guys. "If any of you try telling me you're not thinking exactly the same thing, I'll know you're

lying.” His gaze stops on Remi. “Well, maybe with the exception of Remi,” he concedes.

There are a couple of coughs and sputters, but interestingly enough, nobody argues.

Remi shrugs. “Oh, I don’t know; I might be up for the experience.”

Oh-Em-Gee! I want to rush over and hug him because I know what a big thing this is for him, but the guys all feign nonchalance, and I know the best way to deal with his admission is not to make a fuss. But inside, I’m bursting with happiness. The thought of having all my six guys together, that Remi is finally comfortable being a part of that instead of lingering on the periphery, fills the final tiny place left inside me I never even realized was empty.

“Watch it, Remi, you’ll be holding hands with Jesse while the two of you get your dicks pierced if you’re not careful,” Oz ribs light-heartedly, as Remi comes over and drops several butterfly kisses on my lips before diving more deeply.

“You’re pleased,” he murmurs, and I nod shyly, knowing he’s talking about the group sex thing.

“Come on, let’s take this outside where there’s a little more room for all seven of us to play,” Cope suggests as Beck returns from the bathroom, and I climb off Beck’s bed to freshen up myself.

It takes a while since every single one of my men stops me on the way for a kiss and to trail their fingers suggestively

down my body which is already ramping up, ready for round two with all of them.

I finally shoo them toward the pool, and they slowly filter out while I clean up.

The doors are all open, and I can hear Cope and Jesse discussing whether they need their dicks pierced.

And Oz is still ribbing Beck. “Hey, are you sure you can handle carrying around all that metal, or should we attach a bunch of helium balloons to your dick to help you?”

Oliver and Remi join in the teasing, and Beck slots seamlessly into place with the other five guys like he’s always been a part of this family.

When I leave the cottage, I hang back and watch my men, all six of them. The lightness and the banter make it feel like the shadows that stalked the Keys for the past two decades have finally been lifted.

All the pieces of the jigsaw have been slotted together. We’ve each had our absolution; we’ve all come to terms with our past. Now the future is bright, and it’s time for our own happy ever after, right here in our own private slice of paradise.



THE END!

Or is it??

We couldn't stop, guys. We couldn't leave Caroline hanging. She so desperately needed her own Violet Gordon-Woodhouse moment, don't you think?

Keep reading for a short epilogue that gives you a sneak peek into what that might look like. It's a dark mash up of wicked stepbrothers (Cinderella) meet sexy prince (Snow White) and there's a surprise waiting that

you will not want to miss.

WE PROMISE.

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Caroline

I HANG UP THE call with Neve and stare out over the private beach of the home my father left to me a few months ago. It sounds like my friend is living the life she's always dreamed of—if she'd get her head out of her ass where Beck is concerned, that is.

Although I have an idea her guys have a plan to fix that.

A sigh escapes me, and I lean back in the padded glider I'm sitting in, bringing my bottle of cider beer to my lips.

It sure would be nice if I had a few Prince Charmings of my own to offset my wicked stepbrother, Levi. My expression sours and not because of the beer. There he is now, coming in from his evening surf with his friend Beau.

They're such assholes. I can't stand that they're even here, but I don't have a lot of choice where Levi is concerned. It's kind of a mess.

Dad left his Key West property to me along with basically all of his worldly possessions, with the stipulation that my stepbrothers be permitted use of the various properties as they needed in good faith. He left them a small inheritance as well—a reasonable amount considering they became his stepchildren as adults—but it was a bit of a sting considering he left absolutely nothing to their mother. After he found his second wife and my stepbrothers' mother cheating on him, he

promptly disinherited her. Everything happened only a few short months before he died suddenly of a heart attack.

Levi, the surfer eternal, has plagued me with his presence in the Key West house ever since the funeral. He can't even do so on his own but has his good friend Sir Beauregard Obnoxious along with him. In the past month, they've hidden all of my cider beer, made a practice of making farting noises whenever I walk in a room, and tied all my tampon strings together so they were useless when I got my period.

I'm kind of done with them.

And yet I can't help but watch as Levi comes up from the ocean, flipping his wet, dark blond hair back from his face... ocean water running in salty rivulets down his tan skin...

Gah! What the hell is wrong with me?!

I don't stop watching, though.

He and Beau come to stand just in front of the patio where I'm sitting, dropping their surfboards in the sand. They exchange grins. "Enjoying the view?"

I feel an annoyed pinch between my eyes and adjust my sunglasses. "Enjoying the sunset," I correct. "Or trying to. You're blocking my view."

He leans against the frame of the outdoor shower as Beau steps inside and rinses. "Pfft. You watch me all the time, princess. Admit it. You want me."

I roll my eyes behind my glasses. "You are so completely delusional."

Beau steps out of the shower, running his tongue across his lower lip. “And you are so completely—“

“Please do not finish that sentence, fuckwit.” I hold up my hand and he stops, thankfully.

Shaking his head with a smirk, Levi steps into the shower. “It’s okay. I know all you really want is a good look at what’s been making the ladies scream at night.”

I huff a laugh, lowering my glasses so he can see the derision in my gaze. “Oh. You mean your micro penis?”

He laughs out loud at this, Beau joining him, and before I can say another word, I catch a glimpse of his bare ass through the open door of the outdoor shower as he drops his swim trunks. Then he turns around and steps out in front of me, and holy baby Jesus, my stepbrother most definitely does not have a micro penis.

“That’s definitely not a micro penis,” I squeak.

“Why the hell are you flashing your junk for all of Key West to get a look at?” An irritated male voice asks.

Levi peers around me and waves. “Hey, Kil.”

I’m still riveted on Levi’s dick. “It’s big enough for all of Key West to see,” I murmur...then I realize Kylian is here and whip around, glaring. Kylian has never been nice to me. Neither of them have. They’re like their mother—evil. “Why are you here?”

He gives me his best wicked leer. “To make you miserable, of course, stepsister dear. Wherever shall I begin?”

“With leaving! There’s no room for you. It’s a full house. You have to leave.”

“Hm. I can take care of that easily enough. You.” He points at Beau.

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Leave.”

“But—“

“It’s not a discussion. Tell your friend goodbye, Levi.”

“Bye, Beau. It’s been gnarly.”

“Fuck.”

Beau wanders off to gather his possessions and leave my house. I glare at Kylian. “Why are you here, for real?” Kylian doesn’t simply show up at the Key West beach house. He lives and works in New York, so he’s here for a reason. I just need to figure out why.

He studies me impassively for a moment, his expression impossible to read. Then he shrugs and bends to pick up the overnight bag at his feet. “I told you. I’m here to make your life hell. Mom wants the house.” He turns and walks toward the staircase that leads upstairs to the bedrooms. “We’ll get started in the morning.”

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EVIE RAE

Evie Rae is a multi-genre author, writing contemporary and new adult romance under E.R. Whyte, reverse harem romance under Evie Rae, and women's fiction romance under Elle Rae Whyte. Although it would no doubt make life easier to simply choose a genre, she loves romance in all its forms too much to ever do that.

She's a simple girl at heart, living in a teeny-tiny Virginia town and spending her time finding herself, catering to various fur babies, and indulging her reading, writing, and photography habits. She loves being alone, bananas foster, and Pepsi.

Whyte worked as a high school English teacher for around a decade before she decided she really wanted more time to devote to her family and other fun stuff. Now she thinks up new ways to make tacos on Tuesday, explores the Marvel universe with childish enthusiasm, and spends entirely too much time on the computer.

Life is good.

POPPY FLYNN

Poppy Flynn was born in Buckinghamshire, UK and moved to Wales at eight years old with parents who wanted to live the ‘self-sufficiency’ lifestyle.

Today she still lives in rural Wales and is married with six children.

Poppy’s love of reading and writing stemmed from her parents’ encouragement and the fact that they didn’t have a television in the house.

“When you’re surrounded by fields, cows and sheep, no neighbours, no TV and the closest tiny village is four miles away, there’s a certain limit to your options, but with books your adventures and your horizons are endless.”

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