



INFIDELITY
Book Two

THE
Fishermen

C.P. HARRIS

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Fishermen

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The Fishermen (Infidelity #2)

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Author's Note

The Fishermen is book 2 in the Infidelity series. Themes include cheating (not between the MCs), possessive and jealous behavior, a twenty-year age gap, consensual non-consent, second chances, bi-awakening, hurt/comfort, and a scene involving exhibitionism. The Fishermen also deals with the off page death of a spouse. As always, I encourage readers to put their safety above their curiosity.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

Leland

Scanning a room for the man who'd piqued my curiosity wasn't easy while also balancing a tray of champagne filled flutes. Moving through the office space overlooking downtown Seattle, I did my best to smile as rich men in pricey suits measured their dicks. I tried to maintain a professional attitude, and do the job I'd been hired for, but what I really wanted to do was dump the contents of my tray over their three-figure haircuts and go hunt down the man I'd been low-key watching all night. The man everyone had either been watching or trying to get a piece of since he'd arrived.

Something cold hit my black dress shirt, soaking through the thin material and raising a hiss from me. "What a waste," a belligerent man said forlornly, holding an empty flute by its stem. The spilled bubbly quickly worked its way to my belt buckle. He grabbed another from my extended tray and stumbled away without so much as an apology.

I ground my teeth together and reminded myself that I needed the money from this gig to cover my half of the rent.

A tall, broad form moved past the reception area, exiting through the glass doors embossed with the Nexcom Global emblem, and suddenly all thoughts of toppled drinks and pretentious assholes were forgotten.

He bypassed the bank of elevators for the stairwell, and something told me he didn't decide he was in the mood to hike it down from the top floor of one of the tallest skyscrapers in the city. No, my gut instincts said he was going up.

Moving as fast as I could through the dense crowd of party-going pricks, I made it to the kitchen area sectioned off for the wait staff without another champagne shower or losing a toe under someone's expensive heel.

"Deb," I whispered urgently, hurrying over to where my best friend's sister sat texting on her phone. "I'm taking a break. I need you to cover for me." I rested my tray on the table, using the bar napkins stacked on it to pat my wet shirt.

"No way," she scoffed. "*My* break isn't even over yet."

"You owe me," I said, pointing to the name tag pinned to my shirt. Deb had gotten me the job last minute after someone else flaked on it. Even went as far as having the name tag filled out and waiting for me when I'd rushed off the service elevator with less than three seconds to spare.

I didn't understand why the catering company required us to wear them. In rooms like these, we were all called one of two names: hey and you. My favorite, though, was when they simply snapped their fingers to get our attention.

"Yeah, I kinda do owe you," she said, pretty proud of her handiwork. "But I'm on hors d'oeuvres duty tonight, not drinks."

"No one will notice," I said, jetting off before she could

reply.

There were two groups of people in Seattle: The calendar people, who clung strongly to their belief that we had four seasons, and those who believed we only had two—wet and dry. After living here all my life and experiencing midnight summers in the park that damn near required a goose-down jacket, and times where we had up to twenty straight days of rain, I was part of the wet and dry crew. So I was smart enough to know I needed a jacket before heading to the roof, but not smart enough to ride down to my car to get one. The wind bit into me immediately.

“You’re the young man who’s been watching me all night.”

Distracted by ensuring the empty bottle holding the door ajar was secure after I’d stepped onto the roof, I hadn’t noticed Mr. Dark and Broody until I was hit with his curtness from somewhere to my left.

“Shit, you scared the crap out of me,” I said, trying to catch my breath. I made a quick mental note: *Work on improving your stealth skills.*

This man intimidated people without even trying. I’d witnessed it downstairs, but even those who trembled in his presence wanted to be within his orbit. He was obviously someone important. He exuded too much power not to be, and that power was intoxicating. It had been what initially caught my attention.

Powerful and intimidating weren’t the attributes that made

him interesting to me, though. Beyond the authority and mystery lurked something familiar, something that kept my eyes glued to him all night. Because what could a man who seemingly had everything, have in common with someone who had nothing? I had to find out.

“Leelee Bear,” he said, his eyes narrowing on my name tag.

I’m gonna kill Deb.

I unclipped it, slipping it into my trouser pocket. “That was someone’s idea of a cruel joke. I’m Leland.”

He raised his narrowed stare to my face, his onyx eyes piercing and hot, providing warmth in the cold. *Fuck, he’s intense.*

“This is usually the part where you offer me your name,” I said, surprised my balls hadn’t shriveled up under his scrutiny.

“You don’t already know who I am?” he asked doubtfully, the chilly breeze ruffling the top of his jet-black hair. The patches of salt and pepper scruff riding his jawline shone white under the gleam of the moonlight.

I shrugged. “Why would I? I was told where to show up and when. Other than the check clearing, nothing else mattered.”

His eyes hardened; a tough feat considering they were already as resistant as stone. I waited out whatever battle he faced internally, meeting the fire in those polished orbs, hoping my unflinching response conveyed honesty.

“Franky,” he said, some of the tension around his jaw

easing. “Franky,” he repeated, as if trying the name on for size and realizing it not only fit, but that he liked it. It oddly felt like he’d given me more than a name. It felt like he’d given me a taste of his vulnerability without even realizing it. It didn’t taste half bad.

“See,” I said, “that wasn’t so hard.”

“No, it wasn’t, Mr. Bear.”

I scowled at the use of the fake last name Deb had made sure ended up on my name tag, and I could have sworn that earned me a tiny speck of a grin from him, but he’d shifted into the shadows of the roof again, so I couldn’t be sure.

Franky gave his back to the brick wall supporting the door, so I did the same. We were a good distance from the lip of the roof, but that didn’t hinder our view of the city. We were quiet for a while, content to take it all in.

“I’m afraid of heights,” I admitted, breaking our stretch of silence. Franky craned his head my way, but I kept my gaze forward. “I was thrown from a fourth-floor window when I was eight. Spent months in the hospital, then a rehabilitation center. I’ve still got a nasty looking scar on the back of my leg. A souvenir, I guess.”

“*Thrown?*” he asked.

“You heard right,” I said, heart pounding. I could still remember the feeling of free falling, of reaching for my would-be murderer as I plunged to the pavement. Could still paint the look of freedom—of fucking jubilee on her face

when she thought it'd be lights-out for me. I could still taste my tears as I laid on the curb, broken and still loving her.

“Who would do that to a child?” he demanded. I found his astonishment weirdly touching.

I turned to him then, hoping his expression of rage and disgust could erase *her* happy one from my memory. “My mother,” I said.

We breathed into the wind together, our pace syncing and easing after a few minutes, like we somehow had calmed each other without words.

“Are you always this candid with strangers?” he whispered.

“Never,” I whispered back, wondering if my tone had sounded as awed as his. Franky didn't apologize for something he didn't do, which was typically what people did after learning about someone's trauma. It was like a default setting in their brain or some shit.

Maybe his refusal to be sorry for me explained why I didn't regret telling him. I didn't wish I could take the words back and relock them in that place inside of me that I didn't allow anyone access to, even if I couldn't express why I'd told him in the first place.

“The trick is to look out, not down,” he said. “That's what helps me.”

Was he afraid of heights too? Were we just two idiots torturing ourselves for the hell of it? “So what are you doing

up here, Franky?”

He sighed, staring straight ahead again. “I thought maybe I’d look down, for once. Maybe doing one brave thing will lead to me doing another.”

“Like a domino effect.”

“Precisely,” he said. “And you?”

“Besides stalking some hot guy?” I joked. Franky glared at me in reprimand. “Sorry, I tend to flirt when nervous, or tired, or wired with energy, or angry, or simply breathing. Just ignore it—for the most part.”

“For the *most* part?” he asked. “And what about the non-most parts?”

“As long as my frank and beans are covered, we’re safe,” I deadpanned, and naturally his gaze moved downward before flicking back up to my face. “What? Are they not covered? Are they just hanging out shooting the breeze? Please tell me they’re covered,” I said in mock horror, and this time his grin was unmistakable.

“I don’t know why I’m up here. Maybe I came searching for a kindred spirit. Maybe I hoped I’d discover I was a daisy,” I said under my breath.

“A daisy?” His brows puckered in confusion.

I shook my head. “It’s nothing. Never mind.”

A bright and equally stupid idea hit me. “Let’s do this together,” I said. “Let’s look down together.”

“No,” he said resolutely, straightening and eyeing the partially open roof door. “This was a terrible idea, and I need to get back to the party.” Except Franky didn’t move. Getting back to the party seemed like the last thing he wanted to do.

“What’s everyone celebrating anyway?” I asked, hoping my question reminded him why he’d walked out on the celebration in the first place, hoping it would get him to stay.

“Nexcom has just acquired a company on target to become one of their largest competitors.”

“Sounds like a big deal,” I said, and he grunted, still watching the door. I twisted to face him, resting a shoulder against the wall. “So you work here? For Nexcom?” There were more people than offices downstairs, and Deb had mentioned there being an employee list as well as a guest list. I’d assumed maybe he was a special guest with the way everyone whispered from their corners while pointing toward him, or how some swarmed him like he was their hive. But maybe they were the guests.

“Something like that,” he said, evading the question, but at least he wasn’t eye-fucking the door anymore.

“Come on,” I said, holding my hand out to him and nudging my head toward the ledge. “What?” I asked in mock offense when he met my outstretched fingers with a raised brow.

“I don’t need my hand held,” he said sharply, anxiously spinning the wedding band I hadn’t noticed before. I wondered how many people in his life knew he had a tell. Probably not

many, if any. To the people downstairs he wasn't even a real person.

"I know," I said, because I doubted he would ever admit to needing help. I'd come looking for commonality and was finding it in spades. "But I do." Again, a truth I hadn't planned on spilling. Franky paused in the nervous rotating of his ring but said nothing.

"Things are less scary when holding hands," I said, wiggling my fingers. Franky shot me a skeptical look.

"All the iconic sad movies have hand holding scenes," I went on to explain. "Holding a dying loved one's hands as they transition. Holding a woman's hand as she gives birth to a twenty-pound baby," I exaggerated. "It's been proven by science."

"Science?" he asked without feeling.

"Science," I confirmed gravely.

Footsteps ascending the stairs on the other side of the door snagged our attention, and Franky backed up in time to miss the door hitting him in the face. The beer bottle holding it open rolled, bumping up against the toe of my shoe, and the man standing in the doorway reared away at seeing me there.

He took in my server's uniform and dismissed me. Franky appeared from behind the door, and even I shrank away from his murderous glare.

"Frank—"

“What can I do for you, Robert?” Franky asked curtly.

Robert’s gaze pinged between me and Franky. “Is this server bothering you?” he asked with a hint of disdain.

“His name is Mr. Bear,” Franky corrected, and I groaned inwardly. I’d have decked him if it hadn’t amused me a little to see an imposing man with a bad attitude say *Mr. Bear* with a straight face. “And someone is bothering me at the moment, but it isn’t him.”

Robert either sucked at reading the room—in our case the roof—or he was used to Franky’s hostility because he continued as if he hadn’t heard him. “You’re needed downstairs,” he said, suffering Franky’s staredown like a champ.

“I’ll be right there,” Franky gritted out. Robert offered a stiff nod before striding off. I caught the door and refixed the bottle.

“You’re mean,” I said, low enough to not travel through the cracked door and down the stairwell.

“Duly noted,” Franky said. He exhaled at the gloomy night sky. “This place brings out the worst in me.”

“What brings out the best in you?” I asked, earning myself a sardonic chuckle.

“When I find out, you’ll be the first to know.”

“So walk away from it,” I said, like it was the simplest thing to do. “If it makes you miserable, then walk away.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“People depend on me,” he said, and I remembered the wedding band. He had a family to take care of.

“Well, maybe you can take some time off to figure out what makes you happy, then work toward figuring out how to support your family by doing whatever that is.”

“Maybe,” he said, but I got the impression he was humoring me. He felt trapped. I knew because caged men recognized other caged men, even if our prisons were of a different kind.

Franky entered the stairwell, gesturing for me to hold the door so I didn’t get locked out when the bottle rolled again. I listened as he descended, thinking of something to do or say to prolong this moment, but there was nothing. Maybe a moment was all it was meant to be.

I peered toward the edge of the roof, remembering why we had been up there in the first place. A wave of sadness hit me as one thought filtered through my brain.

He left before getting a chance to be brave.

CHAPTER 2

Leland

The bed dipped behind me, and my roommate, Noon, was on me before the elbow I'd thrown connected with his ribcage. He chuckled, and I complained as he grabbed me up in a reverse bear-hug, planting kisses to the back of my head.

“Your reflexes are improving,” he said, as I fought off his inappropriate affection like I did most mornings.

“Are you... Are you *naked!*?” I asked when something fleshy and hard tapped at my spine.

“It's morning wood,” he said, and I felt his shrug. “Has nothing to do with you.”

“Why are you like this?” I groaned, wiggling out of his hold.

“Because I love you, which means I love to torture you.” He laughed, rolling away from me and deftly missing the headbutt aimed at his forehead.

“You keep this up and you're going to owe me a bed,” I warned. The name Mr. Bear fit Noon more aptly than it did me, and my cheap Ikea bed frame couldn't handle one more of his annoying morning wake-up hugs.

“Maybe if you'd actually listen to your alarm when it screams bad '80s music at you, I wouldn't need to resort to

extreme measures to get you up for work,” he said, getting to his feet.

I slapped at my alarm clock until it quieted down, then flipped to my back, peeling one eye open to scowl at the grizzly bear staring down at me. “Who lets you fuck them with that?” I asked, his erection taking up most of my view. I often joked that it was the size of a small human and would need to start contributing to the rent.

“You did,” he said with a snort, yanking the pillow from under my head and clobbering me with it.

“That was *one* time,” I said, snatching the pillow off my face and sitting up just as he disappeared into the hall. “And it wasn’t that big then!”

“Yeah it was,” he shot back. “And you loved it.”

I flopped down, scrubbing the sleep from my eyes. We’d fucked around with each other once in high school. Both curious and willing to be each other’s guinea pigs. It was a disastrous mistake we never repeated. We were much better off as friends.

“Get your ass up before I eat your breakfast,” he threatened from the kitchen.

I sniffed the air, fighting to get from under the tangle of sheets when the scent of bacon infiltrated my nostrils.

“What’s the special occasion?” I asked, snagging a plate from the cabinet over the sink and loading it with the eggs and

French toast sitting on the stove. Noon was still sans clothing, but at least the worst of his nudity was hidden under the cheap, Formica table.

I took the seat across from him, reaching for the bacon sitting in the center of the table.

“Has anyone ever told you how pretty your eyes are?” he asked, deflecting. “Seriously,” he said in response to my deadpan expression. “They’re like pools of caramel and gold. I think it’s from all the sun exposure—which by the way you should avoid. All that UV radiation isn’t good for you.”

“Not gonna happen,” I said. I loved being out in the sun. “And if you’ve resorted to flattery it must be serious, so spit it out.”

He leaned his forearms into the table. “I’m moving in with Stacey.”

It made perfect sense, and I couldn’t say I hadn’t seen it coming. Noon spent half his time at his girlfriend’s place anyway, and we both knew why he wasted any time here at all. I couldn’t afford the rent in this shithole on my own, and I wouldn’t accept his help if he didn’t live here at least part-time. I hated charity.

“I held off as long as I could, but I can’t keep helping with bills in two different places.”

“I get it,” I said, even as I lost my appetite. My most recent job had only been seasonal. I could cover this month’s rent—which was already a couple days late—with the extra money

I'd earned from the server gig Deb had gotten me last night. I'd need to scramble to find something else, and fast, or I'd be screwed come July.

"I'll still pay my half of the rent this month—"

"Absolutely not," I said, shaking my head and pushing my plate away. "Unless you're staying here for at least half the month, keep your money. I'll manage."

"Actually, I've already paid the rent in full. Yeah," he said as I glowered at him, "figured you wouldn't accept it willingly."

"Then why did you say you'd pay your half? As if you hadn't paid the whole damn thing already?" I didn't bother hiding my annoyance.

"Because I was hoping you wouldn't be an ass about it, then I could take your half, add another half, and get the following month paid too."

"You know that would never happen," I said.

"Yeah, well, a man can hope. Will you let me—"

"Fuck no. One month is bad enough. I'll have something lined up by then. I'm thinking about getting my bartender's license," I said with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. Noon would make us both sick worrying about me.

He sighed, standing to snag a business card off the counter.

"What's this?" I asked when he dropped it in front of me.

“It’s some ritzy art gallery downtown. Stacey knows one of the girls who works there. She got her to agree to take one of your paintings. It’s on a consignment basis, though. It’s the best the girl could do. Said the owner’s a prick.”

“No, thank you,” I said, sliding the card away. “My work isn’t good enough to hang in any gallery. Definitely not a ritzy one.”

“Figured you’d say that too, which is why I took the liberty of handing over one of your pieces. They’ll let you know if it sells. If it does, they may even commission more work from you.”

“Noon,” I grated out between my teeth. I knew exactly which gallery he was talking about. I’d walked past it several times, wondering if I’d ever be good enough to grace its walls. I wasn’t, and they’d probably stuck my painting in a supply closet the moment Stacey left.

“It’s not charity, Leland. If you won’t believe in your talent, I will. It costs you nothing. Just let it hang there and see what happens. I’m leaving my best friend to fend for himself, and it’s fucking killing me,” he said, his eyes growing misty. “I had to do something to help you.”

Noon’s leaving me started way before today. We’d been growing apart for some time now because he had big life plans, and I kept my plans to a bare minimum. He was outgrowing me, and his moving felt like the final nail in the building of our friendship’s coffin. It wasn’t that he acted like

he was too good for me, or that he'd never not be there if I needed him, but it felt almost cruel on my part to keep him at ground level with me just because I refused to grow with him.

But I knew he still loved me, and as threatening as he could appear, Noon was actually a big teddy bear, and I could never quite master being immune to his tears. I hauled my plate of food back in front of me. "Fine," I said, and Noon's huge paws were cupping my cheeks before I could get a proper eye roll in. He leaned over to plant a noisy kiss on my lips, causing me to drop eggs onto my lap.

"Thank you," he said, fake tears gone and walking away with an extra pep in his step and a smile in his voice.

I glared daggers at his back as I grumbled, "At least I won't have to put up with your saggy, naked ass anymore."

Noon tossed his head back laughing, flexing his muscular ass cheeks as he headed for the bathroom. "I love you too," he shouted back, his laughter resuming, the sound of it warming my heart until it vanished beneath the sound of running water.

Two weeks of off-the-books grunt work at a construction site left me with enough cash to get the rent paid up for the rest of the summer, especially since Noon had covered June, leaving me with the money I'd scraped together for my half.

I never paid rent early. Shit, I could rarely swing paying it on time, but I didn't trust myself not to do something stupid

like spend it on food or whatever else a human needed to survive, so I made my landlord's day by handing over the money order earlier that afternoon.

Back in the apartment, I propped myself against my headboard and recounted the measly pile of cash I had left, hoping I'd discover that I had, in fact, miscounted by at least a few hundred dollars in my favor the first ten times I'd counted.

"Nope," I said, blowing out a breath. It was just enough to pay for my bartending course. With any luck, I could complete the class in a few weeks and get work as a barback before September rolled around.

The tiny apartment felt empty without Noon. A different type of empty than the nights he didn't come home. This was permanent, and the emptiness in my heart reminded me that outside of him, I had no one. A reality I'd worked hard to maintain.

My gaze shifted to the rain pummeling my window. The gloominess of the day reminded me of Franky. Why had I shared so much with him?

"Are you always this candid with strangers?" he'd asked on that rooftop.

"Never," I'd said.

Yet I'd shared something with him so private and traumatizing that I often refused to allow myself to think about it. And now I racked my brain for a concrete answer to the question *why*. Had to be more than him handing over his name,

no matter how big that felt at the time. I could've given him a number of less intimate secrets in exchange, but I'd given him the one that mattered most. The one that shaped me.

Franky wasn't lacking in the darkness and stoicism department. Dark and stoic men had always been my weakness, running a close second to men who didn't give a shit about me—because if they didn't care, I didn't need to worry about them wanting to stay. No one got to stay.

But what I'd felt toward him hadn't been attraction, not the physical kind, anyway. And even if it were, the wedding band on his finger would've put an immediate stop to that.

He was living a life he didn't want—to some degree—but seemed helpless in finding a way out of it. Or maybe he did see a way out but was too afraid to seize it. Too afraid to fail, or maybe, I was projecting my own shit onto him. What did it matter anyway? We were from two different worlds, and the chances were slim that those worlds would ever collide again.

My phone rang, bringing me back to the present, and I followed the sound to the kitchen table. It continued to ring as I stared at the unknown number populating the screen, contemplating if I should answer. Did I owe anyone money? The utilities were paid up to the end of the month, so it shouldn't be a bill collector. I tapped the speaker phone function, listening before tentatively saying, "Hello?"

"Hello, am I speaking with Mr. Meadows?" The voice was haughty but masculine.

“Depends,” I answered, hesitant to confirm my identity. *Could* it be a creditor? “Who’s this?”

“This is Neil Sanders. I’m calling about *A Winter Meadow*,” he said.

Huh? I replied, then realized I’d said that in my head. “Come again,” I said aloud.

“*A Winter Meadow*,” he enunciated impatiently. “The painting hanging in my gallery, Mr. *Meadows*.”

I haven’t confirmed who I am yet, asshole, I wanted to say, but the words got jammed in my brain behind *A Winter Meadow* and *gallery*. I’d forgotten that Noon had confiscated one of my paintings for the gallery downtown. Mostly because I thought it was in a dark supply closet, or better yet, their alleyway dumpster. And I had no idea he’d given them *that* painting. Noon had named it *A Winter Meadow*. I simply called it the story of my sad fucking life.

“Mr. Meadows?”

“Ah, yeah, that’s me.”

“Your painting has sold. Normally, we would send payment by postal mail, but our client has requested to see more of your work.” He sounded more shocked than me. “I promised we could have a few options for him to review by this evening.” Now he sounded nervous, desperate even, as if he’d made a promise he wasn’t sure he could keep.

I lowered onto one of the kitchen chairs. *Holy shit*.

“Mr. Meadows,” Neil nearly growled this time, losing his snobby cool.

“Ah, yeah, still here. I can be there in an hour,” I said, jumping to my feet and charging for my bedroom closet.

“Good,” he said on a deep exhale. “See you in one hour. Bring your best.” And then the line went dead.

Bring my best? They were all crap to me. They weren’t aimless or pointless, because my art tended to depict whatever I was going through at the time, but that only meant something to me.

I dragged the wide chest from the closet, flipped open the lid, closed my eyes and grabbed whatever my hands touched first. My version of eeny-meeny-miny-moe. I didn’t let myself think about the options I ended up with. I sandwiched them between foam boards, wrapped them in a sheet to protect them from the rain, then ran for the door.

I waited at the front counter while Neil pranced toward a back office, bow-tie and glasses firmly in place.

He’d taken the two paintings off my hands as soon as I showed him my identification, explaining that I would be notified and expected to retrieve them promptly if his client wasn’t interested. His attitude implied he believed the sale of *A Winter Meadow* was a stroke of luck, and that lightning would not strike twice for me.

Neil couldn't ruin my mood, though. Not after being told I'd be paid a thousand bucks for what took me no more than a couple of hours to create. He'd better hope his client didn't come barging in here for a full refund after coming to his senses, because like hell he'd be getting that money back. If it meant he'd then hold hostage the junk I just handed over, then so be it.

Neil returned with my check. "I bid you farewell, Mr. Meadows."

Who the fuck bids farewells in this century?

I took that to mean *get the fuck out of my gallery*, but once his back was turned, I got lost amongst the other art enthusiasts losing themselves in the world of interpretation. Figuring out what an artist attempted to say with their work was half the fun, making a piece mean something specific for you rounded out the whole of the experience.

I didn't know how much time had passed as I made my way back down from the third floor, but I could've spent all night there, especially after stopping in front of the empty wall space with the title tag that read *A Winter Meadow* by Leland Meadows. I could have curled up and slept right below the space, making it my home, making it my little slice of hope.

It'd been stuck in the back section near the restrooms, but I didn't care. All the better. It meant the person who now owned it deserved it because they took the time to find it. They'd ventured to this dark, dank area in search of something more,

and they found me.

My steps were light and carefree as I made my way to the exit, tugging my umbrella from under my armpit in preparation of using it.

“I’ll take them both,” came a low, rumbling voice, halting my footsteps. It was full of command and take-charge energy, and if you paid close enough attention, you’d hear it was mostly bark with only a little bit of bite. I’d recognize that voice anywhere.

Neil stood in a lounge area off to the side, holding up my paintings for the inspection of a man in a maroon-colored suit.

The man’s muscular body towered over Neil, the single recessed light above haloing him and glinting off the graying strands along his hairline the way the moon had a couple weeks ago on our roof. *Our roof?* Where had that thought come from?

“Are you sure?” Neil asked, and Franky glared at him as if he didn’t appreciate being questioned on his decision. I winced, feeling sorry for anyone who had to weather that glower, even a prick like Neil.

Neil nodded repeatedly, backing away. “I’ll get them wrapped and ready to go, Mr. Kincaid,” he said wisely before scurrying off.

Franky’s serious nature brought out an urge in me to tease him, to bend over backward for the pleasure of seeing one of his almost-smiles. But more important than that was the

realization that *he'd* been the one to buy *A Winter Meadow* and the one buying my other pieces now. Was the universe on drugs?

“Franky?” I said, approaching him. He did a double take, a fleeting expression of shock dissipating to reveal his resting-indifference face, and I felt it was my duty to ruffle his feathers a bit. “So you wear your armor to buy art, too, huh? What I wouldn’t give to see you out of it.” I grinned when the corner of his lip twitched.

“Hello, Leelee Bear,” he said, and damn Deb and that stupid, childish name tag. My cheeks burned, because of course they did, and his eyes lit with victory. “What are you doing here?” he asked, thankfully not dragging out the shoe-on-the-other-foot routine. He didn’t strike me as the playful or gloating type anyway.

“One of my paintings sold. Three now, from the looks of it.” I nodded meaningfully toward the corridor Neil had flurried down.

“You’re Leland Meadows,” he said, and I had to admit it felt damn good that he hadn’t said it as if it should’ve been impossible. I’d gotten enough of that from Neil, and from myself.

“The one and only,” I said, feeling like a kid under his stare of appreciation.

Neil returned, steps slowing when he spotted me. “Mr. Meadows. You’re still here,” he said accusingly.

“Yeah, good thing too. Would’ve sucked to make a second trip down here in the rain. Although there isn’t much I wouldn’t do for two grand, weather be damned. Is it okay if I wait around for my payment?”

Neil blanched, and Franky’s jaw turned to stone. I suppose it wasn’t classy of me to discuss payment in front of a paying customer. No one ever blamed me for being classy, though.

“Two grand?” Franky asked Neil.

“Well, three if you count the first painting,” I said, but doing so had made matters worse.

“W-well, there is the, ah, c-commission rate to account for,” Neil stammered.

Franky’s expression went from suspicious to angry, even though his tone remained even. “Are you telling me you have an eighty-percent commission rate?” Franky asked, and my gaze bounced between the two of them as I worked on the math. He’d paid five-grand for my work? For *each* painting?

“Ah—” Neil started before Franky saved him the trouble of coming up with a lie.

“Who exactly are you cheating here, Mr. Sanders? Me, or Mr. Meadows?”

I got the impression neither option was good.

“Is that how you run your business, Mr. Sanders? With a lack of integrity?” Franky asked, dialing the growl up a notch.

“No, Mr. Kincaid. I assure you it was a simple

misunderstanding. I planned on rectifying it once I called him about the sale of the two additional pieces.”

“I haven’t purchased them *yet*,” Franky said, and the background muzak fell away, the soft footsteps of the other patrons touring the gallery melted away, too, and the air itself seemed to have deserted me as the moment boiled down to what Neil would say next.

I couldn’t blame Franky for wanting to abandon the deal, even though doing so would drastically affect me more than it would Neil. I’d been looking forward to eating something other than ramen and pineapple chunks for dinner.

“On behalf of the integrity of the gallery, and our long-standing relationship with you, I’ll rectify this error by paying Mr. Meadows in full. My commission fee and all.”

“*What?*” I asked, finally getting in on the fight. I could advance my rent for a full year with that.

“*Or open your art-bar,*” I imagined Noon saying. But I couldn’t do that because this was a chance occurrence, with a zero probability of it ever happening again. I was no artist, not really.

“Excuse me while I get your payment in order,” Neil said, ignoring my outburst.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I said to Franky once we were alone.

“You shouldn’t let anyone get away with giving you less

than you're worth," he said.

I lowered my eyes, not wanting him to see how much that meant to me, and collided with the empty spot on his finger where his wedding band had been. A sinking sensation gnawed at my gut, and I became consumed with needing to know if he was okay. "Franky—"

"Here you are, Mr. Meadows," Neil said, returning with my check. He didn't even look my way as he passed it off to me while addressing Franky. "Mr. Kincaid, your purchases have been left with your driver."

"Have a good day, Mr. Meadows," Franky said, shaking me free from my thoughts about his well-being. Neil was gone, and by the time I found my voice, Franky was halfway to the side entrance.

"Hey," I said, and he partially turned, waiting expectantly. "It's supposed to be sunny tomorrow. I hate wasting even a drop of sunlight."

There was a brief pause as Franky's gaze roamed my face and neck. "I can tell," he said. I clenched my umbrella with both hands to keep from touching my tanned cheeks.

"I'll be out attempting to be brave, if you happen to be looking for me."

"And why would I be looking for you, Mr. Meadows?"

"Is that what you're going to call me now that you know my full name?" I asked sedately.

“Maybe,” he said, equally as sedate, which made me smile.

“Maybe you’ll be looking for me because you’ll need more art.”

“So soon after today?” he asked.

“I have a feeling three Leland Meadows pieces won’t be enough,” I answered, folding my arms over my chest and nearly taking out an eye with my umbrella in the process.

“Oh really,” he said, fully facing me now.

“Really,” I confirmed with feigned gravity. His lips didn’t flutter with amusement, but his eyes danced for a split second. I took it as a win.

“And what act of bravery will you be performing, *Leland*?”

The way he stressed my name made it sound important. Was it wrong that I wanted to ask him to make me feel important again? “The state fair kicks off down by the pier tomorrow,” I said. “I’ll be tackling the Ferris wheel.”

He was silent for a few heartbeats, his expression blank. *Here’s our second chance to be brave!* I wanted to shout, but I fell back on flirtation instead.

“I mean, don’t let my charm and good looks persuade you. You need to want to do this for you.”

“Your charm and good looks?” he asked, and I pointed at him when he grinned, my own smile nearly breaking my face. *Gotcha.*

“Goodbye, Leland.”

“Goodbye,” I said to his retreating back, but I privately hoped this was somehow the first of many hellos.

CHAPTER 3

Franklin

“Mr. Kincaid?” my assistant called, poking her head into my office as I glanced up from the paperwork on my desk. “Sorry, I tried your phone, but it’s on do not disturb.”

“That’s usually what I do when not wanting to be disturbed, Patricia.” I instantly regretted taking my bad mood out on her. “I apologize. It’s been a trying morning. Did you need something?”

She smiled sympathetically. “Robert’s here insisting he speak with you.”

“Send him in,” I said, shuffling the papers together and sticking them in their folder. Patricia nodded, stepping back so Robert—Nexcom’s leading attorney, and my late father’s friend—could storm into my office. I pushed to my feet, preparing to meet his anger with a reality check.

“Tell me you aren’t serious,” he said, by way of greeting. “Tell me I heard you wrong in there.” He jutted a thumb over his shoulder to where the conference room resided beyond my door. “And why did I have to find out about this in a meeting with everyone else?”

“I’m very serious, and this is exactly why you found out the way you did,” I said, tone hard. Robert watched me create

Nexcom with my bare hands, guided me— not so willingly— through the merging and liquidation of my father’s business after his untimely passing, then he came to work for me. He was the closest thing to family I had left, and he tended to stick his nose into areas of the business that didn’t pertain to his role within it. Our shared history often left me having to remind him who was in charge.

“You can’t just take a summer off, Franklin. You don’t get to do that. Not without advanced notice and proper planning. With much of our cash flow tied up in the new acquisition, Nexcom is vulnerable right now.” Robert stopped on the other side of my desk. “We hit our lowest profit margins this past quarter, and we’re preparing to negotiate our second-biggest deal yet. Until those contracts are signed and the new partnerships made, you need to be as visible as possible. You can’t expect the company to stand if it’s missing one of its legs —”

“Then let it fall,” I cut in chillingly, not even sure I didn’t mean it. “I’ll be available for anything urgent, but short of our headquarters crumbling to the ground—”

“The building is shaking as we speak—”

“I expect you and Chris to handle things,” I continued over him.

“But—”

“Are you telling me that my lead attorney and CFO are incapable of tackling things while I’m away, Robert?” I asked,

leaning my palms on the desk. The move drew his gaze to my left hand and the absence of my wedding ring.

“What’s going on, Franklin?” he asked, temper cooling.

“I’m fine,” I said, sliding my hands into my trouser pockets.

“How’s Selene?” he asked next, the wrinkles at the corners of his gray eyes deepening further.

“The boys aren’t coming home this summer. Use this time to figure out what you want, Franklin, because we can’t live like this anymore.”

“I will, if you promise to do the same, because this goes both ways, Selene.”

Shaking my last conversation with my wife from my head, I took in the opulence of my office, the business awards lining the display case along the wall. I peered down at the suit I wore and thought about the hundred others like it lining my closet. I glared at my leather-bound planner resting on the end of my desk, packed to the brim with meeting reminders and business dinner engagements.

I resented them all, resented everything they represented, and most of all, I resented that even in my temporary reprieve from a life I wasn’t sure I wanted to live anymore, I couldn’t escape them completely.

“You know how to reach me, *if necessary*,” I said, scooping up my cell phone and ignoring his last question. The well-being of my wife wasn’t his business, and I didn’t know how

to answer it even if it was.

“Franklin,” he said as I reached the office door. I stopped with my hand on the handle. “I know the lines between us can often be blurred, and I know sometimes you look at me and see your father. You see his failings as a parent, and how much he and I are alike. But I do care about you, and I hope you know you can talk to me.”

Robert’s intentions were good, but he was of the same mindset as my father. It was what made them the best of friends. He wouldn’t understand what ate at me, and at the end of the day, we weren’t friends. At least not by choice. We’d inherited one another, and I was sick and tired of not having a choice.

“In some ways you’re like him too,” he whispered.

“He and I are *nothing* alike,” I said, pushing through the door because I couldn’t spend another minute in that office being suffocated by the weight of antiquated expectations, and because I knew if I’d turned to him, I would’ve been greeted with his pity and the realization that he was right.

Samuel waited near the curb for me, holding the back door of the SUV open. Wanting to put miles, instead of mere feet, between myself and Nexcom, I didn’t waste another second clearing the lobby’s revolving doors and sliding in.

We rode out of the city in silence until he pulled into the

driveway of the waterfront property I'd recently purchased. I stepped out, inhaling the scent of the Pacific Ocean, loving the way the light breeze ruffled my hair.

"Samuel," I called as he shut the rear door and prepared to climb into the driver's seat.

"Yes, Mr. Kincaid?" Samuel had been my father's driver; another person passed down to me—albeit a more welcome inheritance gift.

"Take the summer off. With pay," I added when his sage eyes widened in alarm.

"Are you sure?" he asked, his salt and pepper brows lowering.

"Yes, I'm sure. Enjoy your grandchildren this summer. Take your wife on that Italian vacation she's been not-so-subtly pestering you about. I'll be fine." Another invisible manacle fell from my wrists. How many more could I break free of? I wanted to rely on myself this summer. I wanted to drive, to walk, to ride the damn bus, and imagine my father turning over in his grave because of it.

Samuel scanned the two-story coastal home surrounded by evergreens on both sides, then swept his gaze along the tree-lined road we'd turned off of, probably noting how isolated I'd be out there. How alone I'd be. His forehead creased with further concern when he observed my ringless finger.

"I'll be fine," I stressed again when his expression shifted to one of indecision. "I swear it."

“Only if you promise to call me if you need me or if you need *anything*,” he demanded.

I squeezed his shoulder, and he rested a weathered palm on top of mine. “I promise.”

With a stiff nod, he got into the SUV, reversing out and pulling off with a wave.

I sighed and turned to the back of the house, which faced the winding road, leaving the front of the home to overlook the ocean and mountain view.

Entering from one of the side doors, I moved beyond the mudroom, through the open kitchen and into the living room, unlatching and sliding back the glass wall to let in the sea breeze and early morning sunlight.

I tore my blazer off, tossing it onto the white sofa, the only piece of furniture I had in the house. My tie went next, and I kicked out of my dress shoes like they were on fire.

Slowly circling in place, wondering what I should do next, my gaze bumped up against the painting perched on top of the mantel. *A Winter Meadow*.

It called to me, like it had that day in the gallery, and I went to it now, just as helpless as I had been then.

I’d gone there in search of something to spruce up the place. I didn’t have anything specific in mind, but I figured I’d know what I wanted once I saw it. I almost walked out empty handed after spending an hour unimpressed by the

unimaginative pieces hanging on the gallery walls.

But then I'd discovered a small, poorly lit alcove on my way to the restroom where *A Winter Meadow* hung crookedly, with a price tag that couldn't have been more insulting in comparison to what everything else in there was going for.

At the foot of the fireplace, I reached up to adjust the painting's positioning.

Withering wildflowers hung their heads in the vast, shadowy meadow. Fearsome storm clouds colored the grass beneath their stems gray. A spattering of trees was painted in the distance, their bare limbs cradling a light dusting of snow and their trunks curved as if folding under unseen pressure.

The portrait would have been depressing if not for the bright, yellow daisy drifting on the wind toward a sliver of sunlight visible through a tiny break in the bleak clouds.

What made the daisy so different? Why had it survived when everything else around it hadn't?

The other two paintings of Leland's that I'd purchased were beautiful too, but not quite as thought-provoking as this one, and I suddenly needed to know what drove him to create this. I wanted him to translate it for me, to explain its symbolism and how it related to him personally.

"*Maybe I hoped I'd discover I was a daisy,*" he'd said that night on the roof. I touched the corner of the framed canvas, now even more intrigued by him.

I suppose I should've been stunned to find out he was the man behind this magnificent work of art. I'd been more shocked about the coincidence of it being him more than anything, though, because I'd come to learn from our peculiar, shared experience a couple of weeks ago, that Leland was full of surprises—and that I shouldn't be surprised by any of them.

“Maybe you can take some time off to figure out what makes you happy, then work toward figuring out how to support your family by doing whatever that is,” he'd said, and I'd descended the roof thinking him idealistic and naive. Men like me didn't get to walk away, and I was too terrified to even dream of what walking away would look like if I could. Because as much as I believed that I hated my status, my privilege, and my grasp on power, there was also a large part of me that felt I'd be no one without it, and that I'd lose everyone if I let it all go.

But then, learning I was on the verge of losing everything and everyone anyway, left me with a sense of now-or-never.

“We haven't been happy for a very long time, because you haven't been happy for a very long time, Franklin. If ever.”

I screwed my eyes shut on the flashback, not wanting to recollect what she'd confessed after. Instead, I focused on what Leland's last words to me were.

“The state fair kicks off tomorrow. I'll be tackling the Ferris wheel.”

It wasn't even noon yet. I hadn't given his invite much

consideration yesterday, but now, after the morning meeting I'd had, and after ruminating over his art, I found that I wouldn't mind seeing him again, if only to pick his brain about *A Winter Meadow*.

I didn't know what time he'd arrive there, but he said he loved the sun, and it was at its peak around noon. It wasn't much to go by, but I had very little to lose.

Upstairs, I stripped out of what remained of my suit and legged into a pair of dark jeans before tugging a navy Henley over my head. The transformation from my usual attire made me think of something else Leland had said.

"So you wear your armor to buy art, too, huh? What I wouldn't give to see you out of it."

The comment had been purposely salacious, meant to fluster me, but it had got me thinking instead. If I wanted to experience something different, I'd have to start with shedding my armor.

I smoothed my hands down the cotton shirt, the change of clothes feeling refreshing, and I wondered how long I'd get to enjoy this before having to leave Franky behind and return to being Franklin Kincaid.

Deciding not to dwell on that, I shoved my wallet into my back pocket and made for the garage.

Exactly one hour later, I pulled into the graveled parking lot near the pier. Leland's main objective was the Ferris wheel, but it didn't hurt to keep an eye out for him on my way to that

side of the boardwalk, so I took off at a leisurely stroll in that direction while keeping an eye out for him elsewhere.

I'd never consumed food from a truck, or hot dogs boiled in the compartment of a metal cart, but the scents overwhelming the air made my stomach grumble, reminding me I hadn't yet eaten.

I narrowly avoided slamming into a running toddler holding an ice cream cone, her mother not far behind, and I winced when a man with a bullhorn in a dart throwing stall shouted for willing participants to "come on over."

It was a lot to take in, and I almost backtracked to the parking lot, but then straight ahead, a man as tall as me, with sun-kissed cropped hair and fists jammed into his hoodie pockets, caught my attention.

Leland stared up at the Ferris wheel in abject horror, his face drained of color. His jeans hugged his defined legs, proving he wasn't as slender as he'd appeared the last two times I'd seen him. His work slacks, and then the cargo pants he'd worn at the gallery, were a lot looser on his seemingly slim frame.

I skirted around the carnival ride, careful to keep out of sight until I stood behind him. "It won't bite," I said.

Startled, his shoulders bunched, then relaxed as they vibrated from a silent laugh. "What a shame," he responded in a seductive tone.

"Are you always this amorous?" I asked, as he turned to me. Begrudgingly, I did enjoy his devilry, although I'd never admit

to it.

“Always,” he said shamelessly, and I smiled, unable to help myself. Leland was light and fun, that much was evident, and I desperately needed some fun and levity in my life. Loosening up would just take some getting used to after having it drilled into my head since I was a child that showing enjoyment was equivalent to showing weakness. “*Fear garners respect,*” my father would say. Through his guidance I’d become a dismal boy.

“Couldn’t stay away from me, huh?” Leland said.

“Don’t make me regret my decision.”

“Always so testy. You look good without the armor,” he said, nodding with approval.

“Thanks.”

He nudged his head in the direction of the spinning wheel. “Are we ready to do this?”

“*We?*” I asked incredulously. “No, *we* are not ready to do anything.” I couldn’t even look up at it. I expected him to try and convince me, maybe even offer up a loaded retort. Instead I got his serious side, which aged him beautifully.

“Okay,” he said. “I understand.” His shoulders rose and fell with his deep breath. “Wait for me?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’ll wait right here for you.”

Leland whirled to face the Ferris wheel, only pausing for a heartbeat before moving with determination toward the short

line of people waiting for their turn to look death in the eye. Guilt poked at my chest. Hadn't he been there for me a few weeks ago in spite of his own fear? Hadn't he been willing to look over the edge with me?

"I was thrown out of a fourth-floor window when I was eight," he'd admitted when he didn't have to.

"Wait," I called out against my better judgment. Leland reached back without looking, wiggling his fingers. "You're such a child," I said as I caught up and took his hand, because *"things are less scary when holding hands."*

"I looked you up," Leland said. We'd survived the Ferris wheel, and while that had been more than enough adventure for me for one day, it had the opposite effect on him. If it moved fast and launched itself skyward, Leland tackled it while I stood back and watched with a mixture of admiration and nausea. "You're a pretty big deal. Why'd you tell me your name was Franky?"

"The woman who helped raise me used to call me Franky when no one was looking. My father hated the name, which of course caused me to favor it," I said, as we ambled toward the pier. Leland grinned, shaking his head at me. "What?" I asked.

"This might sound weird, because I hardly know you, but it's so *you* to refer to a nanny as 'the woman who helped raise me.'"

“Nanny feels too—”

“Privileged?”

“More like insulting to the person who shaped the most important part of me.” The part I desperately sought to recover now.

“Oh,” he said, all traces of humor replaced with something mirroring respect. “I mean, nanny *is* fewer words, though. I would’ve guessed that would appeal to you.”

“Normally it would, but Gloria deserves more than that, so I suffer through the pain of using more words than necessary for her,” I said with a feigned, agonized sigh.

“That also seems so like you,” Leland said, offering me a piece of cotton candy. I turned the soft, blue confection over in my hand before taking a small bite, then another, marveling at the way it quickly dissolved against my tongue. “You’ve never had cotton candy?” Leland said, aghast.

“No,” I said, stealing a bigger piece.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Forty-five,” I answered, and he didn’t even bat an eyelash. “And you?”

“Twenty-five.” A young couple vacated a bench up ahead that overlooked the water. Leland veered in that direction.

“So, do you have kids?” he asked.

“I thought you looked me up,” I said, settling down next to

him.

“Yeah, but there was a lot of information to sift through, and I’d rather paint than read. Plus, I figured it’d be cool to hear it from you.” He kicked his feet up on the pier railing, balling up the empty cotton candy bag and sticking it in his pocket.

“What if we never saw each other again?” I asked.

“I bookmarked the webpage in case of such an emergency,” he said, then pointed a finger at my lips. “That’s three smiles now.”

“The second one doesn’t count. There’s no such thing as *hearing* a smile.”

“You’re a sore-loser cheater,” he accused, and this time I skipped past the smile and settled into laughter. It was low and swift, but Leland’s breath caught and held anyway.

“Fine. Three smiles. I won’t make the fourth one easy for you.”

“At least you admitted there will be a fourth.”

“Only because you’re ridiculous, and apparently ridiculousness is hard to fight against when exhausted.”

“Tired already, grumpy old man? The sun hasn’t even set yet.”

“I’m not grumpy or old,” I grumbled, probably proving him right on the grumpy part.

We soaked in the cool air in companionable silence, neither

of us in a hurry to break it as our gazes chased the seagulls flying low over the still waters. I wasn't sure what it was about Leland, but I found him increasingly easy to talk to. Perhaps because he didn't know me, which made it possible for me to be whoever I wanted to be around him. It was much easier to change in front of someone who didn't know who you were before. Or in my case, who I'd been pretending to be. He didn't look at me and wonder where the old me went and when he'd be back. I was Franky, and we were both getting to know me.

"I have two sons. Cole and Jasper. Jasper's my stepson, but that's a technicality I often forget. They're away at college."

"You're married to Jasper's mother," he said.

"We're separated at the moment, but yes, we're still married." I rubbed the spot where my wedding band used to be, feeling the loss deep in my soul and the ache deep in my bones. Would I find my way back to her? An even scarier question was did I want to.

My chest constricted around the guilt I carried there. I was failing my family, and I didn't do it lightly, but I'd reached the brink of how much more I could tolerate failing myself.

Leland and I observed the water again, as somewhere behind us the roller coaster blasted down its wooden tracks, and the subsequent screams played background music to our thoughts.

"I'm losing my best friend," he said out of nowhere, closing

his big brown eyes and tipping his head back, his face bathing in the late afternoon sunlight. “I know saying that sounds random, but it’s not. His name is Noon, and we grew up in the same shitty neighborhood. He’s a freaking giant of a man who can cry at the drop of a hat. *Literally*,” he stressed. “You drop a hat and he’s crying.”

I smiled at his description of him, and Leland’s smile-radar must have pinged because his head snapped my way just in time to witness it. He didn’t call me out on it, though. Didn’t proclaim himself the winner. He simply returned the gesture before sweeping his gaze over the harbor again.

“He’s also inappropriately affectionate, and I *always* pretend to hate it. Anyway, he’s in love with his girlfriend,” he said drolly.

“Blasphemy,” I said, appalled on his behalf.

“I know, right?” He cut a glance at me and grinned. There was deep affection under the surface of flippancy. Hurt too, but it was clear he cared for Noon, and something like jealousy rolled through me. *What I wouldn’t give to have a friendship like that.* And on the heels of that thought I remembered that I *did* have a friendship like that once.

With Theo.

“We’ve lived together since we were old enough to work whatever crappy job we could get our hands on to hustle up rent money. He moved in with her the day after your office party, and I have a feeling that was only the first of many

moves that will take him farther away from me.”

“That can’t be easy,” I said, feeling his sadness like a thick layer of fog around us.

“He’s the only friend I have. I kind of make it a point to keep it that way.” He twisted to look at me then, his typical childish glee replaced with something soft like vulnerability. It made me curious about the sarcastic, flirtatious side of himself he so readily offered up. Was that merely to disguise the pain hidden underneath?

“I get the feeling you have even fewer friends than I do, Franky. Why else would you be here, with me, when you’re... when you’re *you*,” he said. “I have absolutely nothing to offer you, but if you’re in need of a friend, I may have an opening.”

“As someone who makes it a point to avoid friendships, why would you offer me one?” I asked, not only confused by his touching gesture, but by the warmth it infused inside of me. I doubted we could be friends. I had too much baggage, too much going on in my chaotic life, in my chaotic head. Not to mention I was old enough to be his father.

But he’d been the first person I met, so to speak, on this new journey of mine. And without Gloria and Theo, Leland was the only one who knew Franky, to some extent. I secretly wished I didn’t have to let that go, even though it was barely anything to hold on to to begin with.

I thought Leland would answer my question with sarcasm or any other defense mechanism he kept in his arsenal. Nothing

too heavy or too revealing. Instead, he kept his veil off, giving me something real, something I instantly connected to.

“Because you somehow feel different. A possible exception to my rule. And because I’m lonely,” he admitted softly, opening something in me and leaving me speechless.

CHAPTER 4

Leland

Easing off the gas, I strained to see the ocean beyond the densely packed trees blocking my view. I patted Betty on her dashboard, silently thanking the old Beetle for surviving the trip outside the city.

Last night on the pier, Franky asked if he could commission me to create a piece for him, and I'd easily agreed. He'd overpaid for the portraits he purchased from the gallery, and I'd seen this as an opportunity to right that wrong, because little did he know, I wouldn't be charging him a red cent. I had no clue at the time that my blank canvas would be his living room wall.

I pulled into the driveway, stopping in front of the first of three garages and whistling up at the house appreciatively. Cutting the engine, I slouched in my seat, reaching back to grip my headrest as I closed my eyes and breathed in the scent of ocean air drifting through my lowered window.

Serenity hummed through me, filtering out the unnecessary noise of life until all I could hear were the birds eagerly chirping from within the tall canopy of evergreens surrounding me. I'd need to make the most of this before getting back to the blaring car horns and thumping music I was subjected to at my apartment.

Fast approaching footfalls interrupted my moment of bliss, and through the rearview mirror I spotted Franky jogging up the drive. He stopped at the front passenger window.

“Have you been waiting long?” he asked, sweat traveling from his hairline and disappearing into the scruff overtaking his strong jaw. “I thought I’d be back from my morning run before you arrived.”

One could learn a lot by looking into Franky’s eyes. They were nuanced, and most times they did the talking for him. I wanted to become an expert at deciphering the meaning behind every shift. Like what it meant when they seemed to spark with life, or when they were dull, or round, or narrowed. They were shining like burnished brass now, full of excitement. Was he happy to see me? Did I want him to be?

“It’s fine. I just got here, and I’m early anyway.” I kept my gaze trained above his neck and off the broad expanse of chest area exposed below.

“Come in,” he said, using the running shirt tossed over his shoulder to wipe down his forehead. “I’ll make us breakfast before we get started.”

“You can cook?” I asked, quickly getting out of the car.

“I guess we’re about to find out.” He sounded uncertain as he moved toward the side of the house.

“Great, so I’ll either be your guinea pig, or your victim.”

“Or both,” Franky said, laughing, the sound a deep rumble

and more effervescent than his brief laugh on the pier last night. He was different today. More relaxed and less contemplative, and as much as I didn't want to assume the credit for that, it was hard not to, because I was different too, and it definitely had something to do with him.

“Wow,” I said, as we rounded the front of the house. Puget Sound was an inlet of the Pacific Ocean, and Franky's home had an amazing, unobstructed view of it. I'd passed other homes on my way up, but they were nothing more than specks in the distance from here.

The patio felt more like an extension of the interior with the way the glass wall opened up from end to end. At the far side, a set of stairs built into the home's rocky foundation led to a small dock and an anchored boat.

“It's peaceful here,” he said.

Pine ceiling fans hung from the exposed beams inside, and the white walls and matching washed-wood floors gave the home a nautical look. It was beautiful, and aside from a sofa and my painting, it was also unfurnished. “Did you just move in?”

“Yeah,” he said, bypassing the living room for the open kitchen. There wasn't a single stool around the marble island, and the breakfast nook was just a square, empty space.

“When's the rest of your furniture coming?” I asked, peering at the two Adirondack chairs surrounding the firepit on the patio. There was easily enough unused space out there for a

twenty-seat outdoor dining set.

“I didn’t order any more furniture,” he said, plucking a carton of eggs from the fridge.

“Do you at least have a bed?”

“I have a comfortable mattress,” he said absently, eyeing the eggs like they required a code to crack.

“Tell me you have a bowl for the eggs.” I chuckled, circling to his side of the island and opening cabinets until I struck gold.

“I’ve got cooking utensils, bathroom supplies, light bulbs, and even a canister of air freshener. I just don’t have much furniture.” He pressed his back into the counter behind him, crossing his legs at the ankle as I cracked six eggs into the porcelain bowl.

“Why not? Are you a minimalist or something?”

“No,” he said, unsure. I didn’t know him well, but I knew that tone was unlike him. I glanced over, waiting for him to give me more. “I’m going to make it all.”

“You’re going to do what?” I accepted the whisk he pulled from a drawer near his hip, mixing the eggs as he continued.

“You remember Gloria?”

“Your nan—” I caught myself. “The woman who helped raise you?”

“Yeah. Her husband was a carpenter. He did most of the

work on my family's estate. I'd sneak off and help him whenever my father wasn't around. And there were rare occasions when my father would allow me to spend the night with Gloria and her boys, and we'd get to build things in their garage all night." He smiled, but his pupils were dim. *Dim means sadness.* I made a mental note of it.

"Anyway," he said, grabbing the salt and pepper from the cabinet above him. "Thought I'd see if I still had it in me."

"Do you keep in touch with Gloria and her family?" I secretly hoped he had someone to call for help, because I had a feeling this project of his might end with a missing finger or three.

"No. My father abruptly let them go one day. He claimed it was because I'd outgrown my need for Gloria."

"But you knew better?" I asked.

"I usually hid the satisfaction I got from working with my hands really well. Maybe he saw me smiling one too many times after being with Gloria and her family. Who knows. But my father had plans for my future, and he eventually saw them as a distraction to those plans."

"What did your mother have to say about that?"

"I lost my mother at a young age, but she never had much interest in me. She was a socialite through and through. I used to pretend things would've ended up differently had she still been alive. Pretending eased the pain for a while. She'd hand-picked Gloria herself, though. I suppose I owe her for that."

I wanted to apologize, but I hated receiving apologies from those not at fault. They never felt genuine. How could they be when the issuer had nothing to be sorry for? And since Franky hadn't done that to me on the roof that night, I wouldn't do it to him now.

"Do you ever think about looking them up?" I asked.

"I'd planned to keep in touch with her eldest son, but they ended up moving and changing their numbers. I'm sure my father had something to do with that. He and I were from two different worlds, anyway." He shrugged. "It wouldn't have worked. Not at that time."

"We're from two different worlds," I pointed out, having thought the same thing not too long ago.

"That doesn't matter to me. It never did. The loss of my friendship with Theo was out of my control. We were young, and neither of us had the power then to change the outcome." Franky unhooked a frying pan from the pot rack hanging above the island and placed it on the stove.

Theo. He'd said the name like it pained him too. I thought about my friendship with Noon, and how it was slipping away from me. I understood Franky's pain completely.

"Looks like you'll make it out of here alive, after all," he said, handing me a pack of sausages from the fridge.

"Yeah," I replied wryly. "Funny how this all worked out."

"I'll make it up to you with lunch," he promised, but if he

couldn't get eggs right, what would be in store for us with lunch?

“Give me a few minutes to shower. Then we can eat before going over the mural.”

“Sounds good,” I said, turning the burner on under the pan as he exited the kitchen.

With breakfast cooked, and nowhere to sit and wait for Franky, I wandered into the living room, tilting my head curiously at the wall surrounding the fireplace. I peered out over the ocean before returning my gaze to the wall, instinctively knowing that Franky wanted me to paint a mural of the ocean, and that he wanted it done here.

The surface was smooth under my fingertips, and a rush of excitement coursed through me at the prospect of creating something so grand—which was strange considering I didn't believe I had the talent to pull off something this big. I'd need a ladder to get it done. The only painting I'd ever done on a ladder was when I'd slapped primer over the brown water stain on my kitchen ceiling.

Painting had started as an outlet for my anger. A school counselor had suggested it, and I kept at it because it worked, not because I thought I had what it took to be the next Picasso. But if Franky believed he could furnish this whole house with items he created with his bare hands, then maybe I could believe I had what it took to do this.

Noon had an enviable understanding of who he was and

where he was going in life. Always had. So I found it hard to trust his praise because he couldn't comprehend what it meant to be conflicted. To be afraid of anything.

It was easier with Franky because he seemed as lost as me. And sometimes, it was nice to have a little company as you found your way.

"I've been staring at that a lot since I bought it," Franky said, coming to stand beside me. I'd been so caught up in my thoughts, I hadn't realized I'd inched over to the mantel where my painting rested. "I'm curious about what you were trying to convey."

I pursed my lips, working out how to simplify the explanation of something so personally complex. "Did you know the daisy is one of the strongest flowers? They spread like wildfire and are hard to keep at bay."

"No," he said, eyes expanding below hiked brows.

"I kind of went down a daisy rabbit hole once. My elderly neighbor had once given me a single daisy as thanks for helping her upstairs with her groceries. She told me to change the water every few days and to enjoy it for the week or two that it would last. I used an empty beer bottle as a vase, and she ended up lasting a whole month."

"*She?*" he asked.

"Yeah, she gave off feminine energy. I named her too."

"Let me guess," he said. "Daisy?"

I smiled, and he shook his head with amusement. “The highlight of my day was racing home from my shitty temp job to see if she’d beat the odds again. She did every time. Well, until the last time. Still, Daisy was resilient. She wasn’t supposed to last that long outside of her environment, but she thrived despite the odds stacked against her.”

I paused, digging deeper, to that place inside me often left ignored and untouched, then got back to the meaning behind the painting. “This daisy has hope,” I said, pointing at the vibrant, floating wildflower. “It’s taking a chance on the unknown, while the rest of the meadow opts for the familiar, even if it will possibly kill them. They go through the winter cycle. They go dormant. A consequence of fear.” My explanation sounded childish and stupid to my own ears, and I braced for Franky’s laughter and judgment.

“And which one are you?” he asked, turning his body toward me. “The daisy, or the winter meadow?”

“Definitely the meadow,” I whispered with raw honesty, splitting my chest cavity open for Franky to have a peek inside. I never tried for anything more than what I had, because there was safety in the predictability of my mundane life. I’d rather die in the meadow not knowing that something better waited for me, than to reach for the stars only to come crashing down. No one else could hurt me in my meadow. I’d made it that way. I’d made it so nothing good lived there because everything good would eventually leave.

Franky and I were so close that I could feel the heat pouring from his gaze, and my heart crashed against my sternum like rough waves. Did he think I was weak? Had my answer reflected my age?

All my internal angst melted away when he smiled at me softly. “Me too,” he whispered back. “But maybe one day we can both be daisies.”

Warm and delicate, I added to my mental vault of his eyes. *Warm and delicate means he understands me.*

I worked until the sunlight faded and the night sky turned the ocean black. Until darkness cloaked the trees and the mountains beyond with its shadow. And then I chewed nervously at my thumbnail as I looked from the outline I’d completed on the wall, to the photos I’d snapped earlier of the view outside.

Franky’s litany of curses from out on the patio cut into my overthinking. He’d dropped his hammer again. It stopped being funny hours ago, though, and now I just felt bad for him. At least he hadn’t made any life-threatening mistakes while working the table saw.

His phone rang, and he fumbled through the copious pieces of scrap wood and tools scattered around to find it.

“Cole?” he asked, as if he was the last person he expected his kid to call.

I zipped into the hoodie I never left home without as a gust of ocean breeze blew inside. The air smelled of impending rain. I began straightening up my work area, preparing to call it a night and do the long drive back to the city. Within minutes I had everything situated, and I'd been about to send a goodnight text to Franky when his call ended.

He fell onto the edge of the unlit fire pit, his shoulders slumped like the world had fallen onto them. Before I could ask if everything was okay, he shot to his feet, grumbling about needing at least one thing to go right tonight. Franky hammered in the final nail on the table he'd been working on all day, then flipped it right side up onto all four legs, only to have it tilt to one side.

As if he couldn't trust his eyes, Franky rested his phone in the center of the table, and it slid to the left before nose diving to the ground. He lowered onto one of the Adirondack chairs this time, cradling his head with his palms.

Not wanting to leave him alone with his misery, I went to the fridge and grabbed the six-pack I'd brought in earlier when I'd gone to the car for my paint supplies.

I placed the beer in the empty seat next to Franky's, then picked through the scrap wood littered about until I found a piece that would fit perfectly under the defective leg of the table.

"Voila," I said, after setting the case of beer on the now leveled table. Franky didn't find me funny at all.

Sawdust caked his t-shirt and jeans, and his hair had been matted down by sweat. He looked exhausted, but I had a feeling it had more to do with his phone conversation than the slip ‘n slide table.

The string lights running overhead provided enough lighting to hang out on the patio, but I needed heat if I planned to keep his bad mood company out there. I worked out how to get the fire pit going and then fell onto the seat next to him.

Using my keys, I popped the cap off a cold bottle of Stella before gesturing for him to take it. Franky stared at it, debating whether or not to accept. He ended up reaching for it with a resigned sigh and a nod of thanks. I opened my own and took a healthy swig.

If talking was what Franky wanted to do, he’d have to make the first move. I was content to simply be there. To be whatever he needed from me at that moment.

“How’d you know this was my favorite?” he eventually asked, picking at the bottle’s label.

“That night on the roof you used an empty bottle to prop the door open.” I shrugged. “It could’ve been roof litter, especially since we were only serving the good stuff that night, but I took a gamble that it wasn’t.”

He grunted, his sour mood still lingering. “I keep the small fridge in my office stocked with it.”

Stella was my favorite as well, and it felt damn good—in a way it shouldn’t have—to know we had that in common too.

“Maybe I’m not cut out for this,” he said defeatedly, glaring at his botch job.

“It’s not so bad,” I said.

“It’s unusable,” he countered with a huff, wrapping his full lips around the mouth of the bottle before angling his head back.

“It’s eclectic,” I challenged, then winced when the leg gave out completely, breaking and taking the others down with it. Luckily it had tilted my way, and with cat-like reflexes, I swooped up the beer pack by its cardboard handle before it hit the ground. I whipped my head toward Franky, holding my breath, the beers clutched to my chest.

He cracked first, doubling over, shoulders shaking, and I sat unsure if he was laughing or crying.

“Are you... Are you laughing? Please tell me you’re laughing.” Because I needed to be certain before releasing the howl of laughter caged in my throat. And because his laugh from earlier didn’t hold a candle to this. *This* laugh was a building roll of thunder chocked full of perfect white teeth. *This* laugh invaded his whole body.

“Yes,” he managed to get out, body trembling, tears peppering the corners of his weary eyes.

“Oh.” I swallowed down my stalled amusement in favor of watching and enjoying the sound of his. I placed the remaining beers on the wide arm of the chair as he settled.

“It was either laugh or punch something,” he said, using the heel of his dusty palm to wipe his eyes. “Shit,” he hissed, blinking rapidly.

“Here, let me,” I said, using the end of my sleeve to wipe the dust away. “Better?”

“Yeah,” he said, blinking a few more times to be sure.

“It’s your first time trying in decades, maybe more. Give yourself a break and some credit. Watch a few videos online or sign up for a class,” I suggested.

His eyes brightened like a light bulb had flicked on in his brain. “Be right back.” He drained the rest of his beer, taking the empty bottle with him as he maneuvered around the fallen table to enter the house, returning minutes later carrying a large box.

“What’s that?” I asked, standing to haul the broken table out of the way so he could rest the box on the ground in front of his seat.

“An old box of junk I had stored. I came across it while searching for something else and brought it with me. I haven’t looked inside since... God, since Gloria left.” He tore the lid open, rummaging through its contents in search of something.

“What are you looking for?” I leaned forward to snoop inside.

“I took notes whenever I got the chance to help Paul,” he said distractedly. “And even when I wasn’t helping him, I’d

ask tons of questions and jot down his answers. Sometimes he'd even hold on to the book and add to it for me. It's gotta be in here somewhere."

I'd been about to ask if Paul was Gloria's husband when Franky snatched a tattered notebook out of the box in triumph. He flipped through the stiff, creaking pages, complaining about the faded ink.

"I think this can still be useful." He brought the book so close it practically touched his lashes as he tried to make out the aged penmanship. My curiosity detoured to the photo he hadn't noticed floating from between the book's pages to land gracefully near my foot. I scooted to the edge of my seat to pick it up, gaze flying over the image.

Franky was easy to spot. He lacked the pounds of muscle he had now, and his facial hair hadn't grown in yet, but he had that mad-at-the-world expression I'd come to know him for.

He sat on a freshly mowed lawn that seemed to roll on for miles behind him, his arms wrapped around his bent legs as he stared broodingly into the camera. A boy who looked no older than ten kneeled beside him holding an action figure, and a man and woman stood behind them, their arms linked, heads touching. *Maybe Gloria and Paul?*

What really caught my eye was the blonde boy standing off to the side like he'd opted out of being in the picture. Whoever snapped the photo had done a bad job of keeping him outside of the shot, though.

He seemed closer to Franky's age. Both in their mid-teens, if I had to guess.

I couldn't take my eyes off him, and as Franky shuffled through the pages of his notebook, clueless to the piece of his past I currently dissected, I racked my brain to understand why I couldn't turn away.

Eventually, I worked out what had captivated me about the seemingly innocent photo. It was the way he stared down at Franky when he thought no one was looking, unaware he'd be a part of the moment being captured. *Longing*. The pained look on his face was longing.

"Franky," I said. He stopped what he was doing when he saw the picture I held up. "Is this Theo?"

He took the photo from me, scanning it as if he'd never seen it before, or like he'd forgotten about its existence. "Yes," he said, sitting back slowly. I watched his eyes, watched the way they grew distant beneath his lashes, the way they seemed to shrink—or wither like the wildflowers in my meadow.

Regret.

"Why was he looking at you like that?"

"Like what?" he asked quietly, his finger tracing Theo.

"Like he misses you, when you're only a few feet away."

The corners of his mouth tipped downward, and his brows met in the middle. "This was taken after my father broke the news to us. By the time I'd gotten the film developed, they

were gone. I told myself he was upset. That he was hurt that we couldn't be friends anymore."

"You *told* yourself?" I asked, focusing on that part of his explanation, because what we told ourselves wasn't often the truth, and we knew it.

"We were young," he said. "What else could it have been?"

That's what I wanted to know. I didn't push, because I couldn't afford to be wrong, but if my suspicions about Theo were correct, could it also mean the longing went both ways?

I decided to let him in on something about myself I never hid, but that I hadn't outright told him yet. Maybe I could be a source of inspiration. Maybe there was nothing to inspire. Still, it felt like the time and the perfect opening.

"Would it surprise you, or bother you, to find out that I'm bi-sexual?" I asked, as we both gazed thoughtfully into the fire.

If Franky thought my questions were random, or if he felt the change in my energy, he didn't acknowledge it. "No, it wouldn't bother me. Would it surprise me?" he mused. "Well, you do have a tendency of being provocative, but flirtatious remarks meant to provoke a reaction wouldn't be cause to assume anything. So while I wouldn't be surprised, I'd never jump to conclusions about something as important as that."

As far as stances went, that was a damn good one, and it made me proud to know him. It made me want to know him better. "That was your son on the phone earlier, wasn't it?"

“My oldest. Cole.”

“Do they know you’re here?” I asked meaningfully, opening two more beers and passing one over to him.

“No, they have no idea that Selene and I have separated.”

Selene. A name made it more real. Made her an actual person.

“Why not?” I asked, swiveling my head his way. “They’re adults now, you don’t need to hide things from them.”

“They’re always your kids, Leland. And that primal instinct to protect them from emotional and physical pain never goes away. Especially when you’d be the one inflicting it,” he explained, but on that, I couldn’t relate. All my parents had ever done was hurt me, and so each word he uttered sounded foreign to my ears. My heart was another matter. My heart understood he was in agony, and it ached for him.

“I never fail to harm them anyway,” he added more to himself, staring off at something the eye couldn’t see. “Especially Cole.”

“Are you leaving your wife, Franky?”

“I don’t know,” he said honestly, twisting the beer bottle by its neck as the butt of it perched on his knee.

“You still love her,” I said.

“Yes,” he whispered like the sharing of a secret.

“You’re still *in* love with her,” I then ventured.

“I... I don’t know. If I am, it’s buried beneath the mess I’ve made of my life.”

“Then why not roll up your sleeves and dig through the rubble?” I asked.

He sucked in a deep breath, tipping his head to the sky as he considered his next words. “Sometimes it’s easier to start from scratch than to fix what’s broken. And sometimes it’s harder to be yourself, or to find yourself, with someone who has only ever known you as someone else,” he said. “I don’t expect you to understand—”

“She wants the version of the man she married. She sees you as a stranger who kidnapped her husband, and she wants him back,” I said.

He rolled his head in my direction, relief written all over him. “Yes,” he breathed. “I feel unfulfilled, and although I love her, and we’ve lived an amazing life, something’s missing. I fear it always has been, but it becomes harder to hide once your kids leave home, because then it’s just the two of you, no distractions, no more need to pretend. There’s no longer anyone other than yourselves to pretend for. To fight for.

“It starts with the little things like not showing up for something important because you’ve shown up a hundred times before, so this time is no big deal. And then there are the promises you forget to keep because something else was your number one priority that day. The canceled date nights, the

conversations you fake being present for... Then one day they're no longer spilling their secrets to you, no longer sharing their ambitions with you. You think you're grateful for the reprieve, until you find out someone else has filled the emotional void you left behind."

"She cheated on you?" I asked.

"She claims she stopped it before it got physical."

"And you believe her?"

"Yes. He was someone she could talk to because I had stopped listening. We tried therapy, but it didn't work. It didn't *fix* me."

"Maybe because you're not broken, Franky."

He nodded indulgently at the sentiment. "She doesn't blame me for her mistakes, but it doesn't mean that I am blameless. I owe it to her to figure myself out, and the only time in my life that I've ever felt whole was when I was with Theo and his family. When I wasn't Franklin Kincaid, heir to the Kincaid legacy. I was just a simple boy, doing honest work with honest people, and it felt good to be treated as such. So I'm trying to get back to that place, if only for a little while."

"What about your company?"

"I took some time off, although something tells me my time away will be a lot shorter than I'd hoped for," he said.

Our night on the roof came back to clobber me over my head. I'd suggested he take some time off to figure out what

he'd wanted to do. I hadn't known I was encouraging him to walk away from his life and marriage. "Is this partly my fault?" I asked, opening my arms to encompass the house behind us and the ocean ahead of us.

"Of course not." He forced a smile for reassurance. "My life was unraveling long before we met. If anything, your words were confirmation to my unspoken thoughts. I should be thanking you, really. Maybe finding myself will help me find my way back to Selene. Maybe I won't have to live with hurting our children after all. Perhaps it'll make me a better father, if it isn't already too late for that."

Someone so capable, so honest, so wise, and with more years of life experiences than me had no business looking at me as if I'd somehow saved him, as if I held all the answers. And I had no business wanting to hunt every answer down to every asked question—even the unasked ones lingering behind his eyes—and lay them right at his feet.

You know better than this, Leland.

"I should go," I said. Franky was two decades older than me, had adult kids, and his marital status was set to complicated. This had run-as-fast-as-you-can written all over it, and if I were smart, I'd tell him I couldn't finish the mural and cut my losses.

A heavy palm landed on my arm, stopping my escape, its warmth burning past the heavy fabric of my sweater to scorch my bare skin. "It's late, and it's a long drive back to the city,"

Franky said. “Why don’t you stay.”

“It’s not that late,” I said, hoping I didn’t sound as winded as I felt.

“Okay, so maybe I don’t want to be alone,” he confessed, and why did his confessions have to affect me the way they did? I would’ve made a terrible priest, because no way could I have ever handed Franky’s problems over to God. As it stood, I wanted to be the one to absolve them all.

“There’s a mattress and clean sheets in the guest bedroom. Please, stay,” he begged, and begging had never sounded so good.

“Okay,” I whispered, even while knowing that *this* would be the moment I lived to regret.

The moment I stayed.

CHAPTER 5

Franklin

“So where’d your love of art come from?” Leland asked with his feet kicked up on the Jeep’s dash, his face pointed toward the beam of sunlight streaming in from his window. His car wouldn’t start that morning, so I insisted on covering the cost to have it towed and driving him to his apartment for a change of clothes. It was my fault anyway. If he hadn’t pushed its limits by driving so far outside the city, it’d probably still be functioning well enough to get him around.

“Selene, actually. She’s a big supporter of the arts. One leg of her charity is devoted to funding art programs in schools throughout the inner city and shining a spotlight on up-and-coming talent who may normally be overlooked.”

“Okay. How many times have you been in love?” he fired off next.

“No more questions until you agree to let me pay you for the mural,” I said. Leland had been rather inquisitive today. By my count, we were on question number fifty. I’d spoken more in the short time we’d known each other than I had all my life.

Keeping my eyes on the road, I felt around the center console for my sunglasses before slipping them on.

“Like I told you before,” he said, making a sound of

displeasure when the sun dipped behind a cluster of trees. “You overpaid for the other paintings. I’m not taking any more of your money.”

“And like I told *you*, I’d underpaid for them. Seattle is an expensive city. That money won’t get you far.” We’d spent the better part of the morning, in between his Spanish Inquisition, arguing over it.

“It’s already gone,” he said with a shrug. “Paid my rent for a full year.”

“You advanced your landlord? That wasn’t a good investment,” I said, trying my best not to come off as a chastising father.

“I know,” he said, and I waited for something more, but Leland kept his eyes closed and his face upturned in his reclined seat. I let it go. It wasn’t my job to lecture him about his life choices, especially when mine weren’t any better.

“Twice,” I said. “I’ve been in love twice.” I felt his gaze fan over me, and I risked looking at him before refocusing ahead. “Cole’s mother, Annabeth, was my first love. We met in college. Got married soon after, and she wanted to start a family right away.”

“And you didn’t?” he asked.

“I wanted to get Nexcom off the ground. I wanted to show my father I could make something of my own, something that could surpass the success of Kincaid Industries. I gave her what she wanted and ended up paying for it. She died during

childbirth.”

“That couldn’t have been easy,” he said.

“I threw myself into my work for years instead of dealing with it, and it was hard to not see Cole as a reminder. I loved him, but I can admit to avoiding him too. He’d had his own version of Gloria after his mother died.” I’d spent years wanting to be better than my father. He was a tyrant, thought he knew what was best for me, and cared more about work and upholding a certain image than he ever cared about me. But in the process of trying to be better than him, I ended up proving that in many ways, we were one and the same. I’d failed my son, and he still bore the scars to prove it.

“And then I met Selene—”

“And you saw your opportunity to give Cole a mother. Someone to take care of him in a way you weren’t capable of,” Leland said.

I couldn’t deny that Selene was an excellent mother. I couldn’t say that the way her eyes lit up when she spoke about her son the day we met didn’t factor into how quickly I eventually fell for her. Who knew how Cole’s life would’ve turned out if Selene and Jasper hadn’t walked into it when they had, but it wasn’t the only reason I’d married her, even if it was the driving force behind my decision to. “I loved Selene,” I said. “I *love* her.”

Leland gestured for me to turn right at the approaching stop sign and then instructed me to turn left at the fourth light up

ahead.

“Why the sudden curiosity with my love life? Wouldn’t you rather know why I’m afraid of heights?” I slowed at the next red light, able to now drag my stare to him for more than a split second.

“Oh, I’m sure it has something to do with a lack of control,” he said, guessing correctly and writing that topic off as completed.

“I don’t know. You’re so...” He struggled for the right word.

“Cold, distant, unfeeling...” I supplied, having heard those attributes used to describe me before.

“No,” he said, considering me. “And if anyone says that, then they haven’t been paying close enough attention. Maybe in most instances you’re a man of few words, and the words you do say can be sharp, but your eyes say a lot.”

He cocked his head, as if searching through his mental vocabulary for something to sum me up. “You’re formidable,” he decided. “I can see how that can be daunting and intense for someone who doesn’t get you. It makes me wonder what it’s like to be loved by you. If you’re different when in love.” He turned back to the sun just as the light turned green.

“I am different when in love,” I said, thinking long and hard. “Softer, maybe. But I don’t know if that’s by choice or out of fear.” That last part had been meant for me, as it wasn’t something I could even begin to explain, nor had the thought ever crossed my mind until then. Through the astonishment of

my reveal, a fire I'd known was there but had never tapped into before began raging inside of my core. It only ever simmered below the surface, as I tended to hold that piece of myself back when in love, even while making love. I was too afraid that whatever it was would consume me if I gave into it. Too afraid it would make me even more unlovable.

“What about you?” I asked, circumventing a follow-up question from him. “Ever been in love?” I drove two city blocks and Leland still hadn't answered. I had no intention of prompting him to. Just because discussions of love weren't a trigger for me, at least not when talking to him, didn't mean they weren't triggering for Leland. The person who should've loved him most did try to end his life, after all.

“My mother had an addictive personality,” he eventually said. “If she found something she liked: cake, candy, a particular brand of diet pills... You name it, she'd *gorge* herself on it until she became physically ill.” He dropped his feet to the Jeep's floorboard, then raised his seatback, putting an end to his relaxation. “Our neighbor had won a thousand bucks once on a scratch-off. Seemed like big money to me at the time. I would daydream about being old enough to buy a scratch-off. I had big plans for the money I would no doubt win. On my eighteenth birthday I won five dollars on my first try. I ended up blowing that month's rent in one hour. I just kept playing and playing and playing.” He hitched his elbow on his door, rubbing a finger over his top lip. “Noon had to come haul me out of that gas station convenience store by my

collar.”

I got to the fourth light and made the left, and he pointed for me to pull into a vacant parking spot in front of a rundown night club that hadn't yet opened for the day. I turned off the engine but didn't make a move to get out.

“The one thing she couldn't get enough of was love. She fell into it easily. Obsessed over it, lost jobs over it; the highs were so high, and the lows were fucking scary, Franky.” His eyes were so wide they trembled from the strain. I removed my sunglasses, needing to experience the full scope of what this recollection was doing to him.

“She'd dance with me in the rain after finding a new guy, completely euphoric. And she didn't hesitate to throw me from a fourth-floor window when he decided he'd had enough of her smart-mouthed kid.”

A loud crack echoed around us, and I looked down to see my glasses snapped in two, a piece in each fist.

“And that's only the half of it. Wanna know what my worst fear is, Franky? Ending up like my mother. So, no, I've never been in love. I've actively avoided it.”

I felt compelled to say something, but I'd never been good at saying the right thing in the face of someone else's pain. And when it came to my own pain, I'd shut down, go inward, and often stay there for way longer than what was acceptable for the people around me. But the deeper I allowed myself to sink, the harder it was to dig myself out of whatever hole I'd

plunged into. I'd been told it made me come off as frigid, indifferent. I didn't want to be either of those things right then.

Leland had already moved on to staring out of his window in thought by the time I reached over to uncurl the fist he had planted on his thigh. He turned back to me, brows drawn together in question. I squeezed my hand around his and said, "Everything's better when holding hands."

"I believe it's: 'Things are less scary when holding hands,'" he corrected.

"Same thing, smartass," I said, snagging a chuckle from him.

"Quit acting like you've never seen a crummy apartment building before," Leland muttered as he flipped through his set of keys. I'd already walked the length of the third-floor landing, examining the discolored paint on the patchy walls, peeling it back like a child, and then moving along to see what other trouble I could get into. "You've at least seen them in movies. Bad plumbing, the heat and hot water doesn't work half the time, and there's even the occasional mouse."

I got the impression he wasn't speaking in general, and that he was preparing me for what to expect once we got inside. He only had three keys on the ring, so we should've gained entry to his apartment already, yet he was flipping through them for the fourth time.

“Did you want me to wait in the car because you thought I would negatively judge your home?” I asked. He’d wasted five minutes trying to convince me that he didn’t need an escort upstairs.

“Maybe,” he said. “This isn’t exactly ‘estate’ standards.”

“This is the first time I’ve been over to a friend’s place. Well, the first time in around three decades. I’m excited,” I said.

He gave me an odd look. “You’ve never been to someone else’s home?”

“Sure. Family, business acquaintances, my investment broker...” I stopped there, but the list of people I’d had to sit at a dinner table with over the years and pretend my interest in being there went beyond *quid pro quo* was endless. “This is different. I actually *want* to be here.”

Leland finally inserted the correct key into the lock’s cylinder, appearing less anxious. “You first,” he said after pushing the door open, then bolted it again once we’d both made it into his narrow hallway.

“It’s really a one-bedroom,” he said, brushing past me to lead the way, “but the previous tenants put up a door, turning the living room into a second bedroom.”

We reached a fork in the short hall in no time. “Kitchen,” Leland said, pointing right. I eagerly stepped inside. The space couldn’t hold more than two people. Leland wore that odd look again.

“Um, and this is the bathroom,” he said, pointing to the door that stood ajar to his left. “Can’t get it to stay closed to save my life, but it’s not like my roommate had been modest to begin with.”

“Noon,” I said, remembering his best friend’s name.

“Yeah.”

I exited the kitchen to push the bathroom door open. A pedestal sink and mirror greeted me, the toilet and shower adjacent to it. Unlike the kitchen, only one person could fit in the bathroom at a time, unless one of them was in the shower. “What else?” I asked.

“You’re really getting a kick out of this, aren’t you?”

“Weren’t you excited to see my home?” I asked.

“Have you seen your home? This isn’t much in comparison.”

“I don’t need much,” I said. “I’ve lived a life of excess, and when I stop to think of my happiest moments, they aren’t the ones involving fancy cars, homes that could house a small country, and making million-dollar deals. Trust me, you could have all that and still feel empty.”

He nodded, regarding me with understanding, but in true Leland fashion, he said, “Still, it must be nice to wake up to that view every day.”

I laughed, unconsciously reaching out to brush a strand of hair off his forehead. The lump at Leland’s throat bobbed, and

I let my hand fall to my side. “Sorry,” I said, “if that crossed a boundary.”

“It’s fine,” he replied, his small smile putting me at ease.

He showed me to the makeshift bedroom that had belonged to Noon. A mattress was all that remained. Leland’s room contained a queen bed, a night stand, a closet, and a worn dresser that caught my interest. I trailed a hand over the ornate carvings in the wood. “It was my grandmother’s. Or at least that’s what Uncle No One said. He can’t always be trusted to tell the truth, though.”

“Uncle No One?” I asked.

“Yeah, he’s sort of a nomad. Disappears for years on end only to show up having reinvented himself. No one knows where he is, and no one knows who he’ll be when he shows back up. Hence, the moniker Uncle No One. It’s been a year since he last popped up, throwing pebbles at my window. He was doing private investigative work then. Without a license, I’m sure.”

I ogled the dresser one last time before moving on. “Where do you paint?”

“Right here,” he said, motioning to the small square of space we stood in. The only floor space free of furniture. “I set up the easel, sit at the foot of the bed, and paint.”

A commotion started in the apartment above us. We peered at the ceiling as cursing rang out.

“Ignore it,” he said. “They’ll fight for about an hour, then fuck for a few more. They’re getting started pretty early today, though. They’re usually night owls.”

“Doesn’t the noise keep you up?” I asked.

“No more than the loud music and drunken alleyway blow jobs from the hole-in-the-wall nightclub next door.”

Leland was resilient, I’d decided right then, and a newfound respect colored the lens I viewed him through. I wanted to know everything about him. All that he’d faced, survived, and even the things he hadn’t, because some things we never quite make it through. We merely learned how to walk through life while still living in our own hell. I didn’t think either of us noticed that our gazes were latched on to the other’s until something heavy hit the ceiling, snapping our connection in two. My stomach did a somersault, and there was suddenly not enough air in the tiny room for the both of us.

“I’m gonna grab a quick shower.” We switched spots so he could get a few items out of a drawer, then we shuffled, switching positions again so he could get to his closet. We went to great lengths not to come into direct contact with each other. Something was off; there was now an awkwardness that hadn’t been there five minutes ago.

“How long do you think they’ll have my car?” he asked, picking through a stack of folded shirts on the closet shelf. The mechanic shop offered pick-up and drop-off service, but we wouldn’t know how long it would take to fix the vehicle until

they diagnosed the problem. Leland had agreed to stay at my place in the meantime so he could continue his work on the mural.

“Bring enough clothes to last a few days. I have a laundry room in case it ends up being longer,” I said. *I hoped.*

He laid clothing on the bed, telling me to make myself at home as he left for the bathroom.

I exhaled a long string of air when the water came on, scrubbing my hands over my face. I felt jittery, like I was crawling out of my skin, and I worked my brain to sort out why.

I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, in need of something to wet my parched throat. When that didn't help the thirst, or the feeling of being suffocated, I decided fresh air was what I needed.

I'd been about to tap on the bathroom door and shout to Leland that I'd be waiting outside, but the door creaked part way open on its own. I thought perhaps he was on his way out, but the shower still ran, then I remembered he'd said he couldn't get it to stay closed.

Leland's wet back taunted me through the mirror, the muscles of it flexing with his movements. I held my breath, taking a step closer, seeing a little bit more of him.

He let out a moan, and something in me screamed to walk away, but instead I pressed forward.

He lowered his head, slapping one hand to the tiled wall to hold himself up as the other hand tugged wildly on his cock. I couldn't see it, but I knew.

My gaze roamed over the curve of his ass, even though it shouldn't have, even as guilt, confusion, shame, and *heat* percolated in my core.

Leland quickened his pace, and I backed away, disappointed in myself, and at a loss for what was happening inside of me.

He threw his head back, his body going rigid as he uttered something hoarsely, and I'd barely made it to the apartment's front door without choking on the knot settling in my throat.

By the time Leland jogged down the building's front steps, I'd worked out three different speeches for why we couldn't continue this friendship. Yet I allowed him to climb into the passenger seat and toss his duffle bag in the back. He smelled fresh, too clean for the dirty images now replaying in my mind.

All my speeches went out the window when he looked at me innocently, the sun striking his honey-brown eyes and turning them golden from that angle. "Ready?" he asked. I was positive he meant whether or not I was ready to leave, but my brain supplied other options.

Ready for more? Ready to confess why you really asked me to stay last night? Ready to admit why you'd asked the mechanics to take their time with my car?

I had a feeling every word he uttered moving forward would

have at least ten different translations to my over-analyzing brain.

I stifled a shudder as those pools of churning honey held me hypnotized. I should've said no, that I wasn't ready for any of it, especially as a familiar feeling warned me that I'd been here, in this exact predicament, before.

“Well?” Leland asked, his mouth kicking up into a slight grin. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” I breathed, my answer just as ambiguous as his question.

CHAPTER 6

Leland

“Unbelievable,” Franky hissed from the patio, and I froze with my paintbrush suspended in mid-air. It was hard to make out his form amidst the piles of debris and tools, but movement drew my eyes to where he crouched on the other side of the table saw.

“Was that a *good* unbelievable, or a bad one?” I asked, because he’d been in a bad mood ever since leaving my apartment a few days ago, and while I’d done my best to not take it personally by chalking it up to his numerous failed attempts at building something stable, it was kind of hard not to feel like my presence had been the thing ticking him off.

It wasn’t in what he said, but the opposite. As the master of quiet, his silence tended to be chillingly loud in its intensity, a red flag to my instincts, warning me to give him space.

Last night, I’d watched him stare into the still, black water beyond the dock from my bedroom window for over an hour before finding the courage to brave whatever had him so far inside his own head. After creeping up behind him and asking if he wanted me to leave, he’d turned on me, the action slow, making it apparent that he’d known I was there, even though it had taken me minutes to finally speak.

His eyes, the color of a starless night sky, had bored into me,

and I'd backed up a step as something resembling pain swirled through their dark depths. "No," he'd said, the low illumination of the dock lights throwing shadows along his tensed frame. "*The last thing I want is for you to leave.*"

Then why had it felt like leaving was what he'd *needed* from me?

"The good kind," he said from the patio, bringing me back to the here and now. I descended the ladder, discarding my brush into a mason jar on my way outside.

"A coffee table," I guessed, squatting next to him and running a palm over the top of it.

"Careful," he warned, gripping my wrist with more strength than was needed. "I haven't sanded it yet." Franky let one knee hit the ground, his other knee bumping into mine as he examined my hand for splinters. His touch lacked the delicate finesse of someone concerned, but his face twisted with concentration as he inspected my skin. I assumed he didn't realize his own brawn, or that he didn't believe he had to be gentle with me.

His warm breath hit my palm, and I instinctively curled my fingers as a metaphorical fist clamped around my heart.

"I'm fine," I said, or maybe panted, as he released me and got to his feet. Shit was getting weird really fast between us, and I quickly did the math on the last time I'd had sex. Was that the problem? Was the seclusion getting to my libido, which seemed to kick into gear whenever Franky looked at me

the way he did now, like he again didn't want me to leave, but needed me to go?

"It's a little too high," he said, sliding his hands into his back pockets, but not before I noticed them flex as if fighting against taking a hold of something. "My measurements of the legs were off, but at least it's level. Doesn't look like much now, but it'll come to life after it's sanded and varnished."

"You did it," I said, my smile growing until it ached, the weirdness from a second ago forgotten as it hit me that we wouldn't be adding another piece to the furniture graveyard that one of the garages had been turned into. He'd done it. "You fucking did it."

Franky dragged a thumb and forefinger down the corners of his mouth as he nodded coolly. "Yeah."

"For fuck's sake, Franky," I said, a touch exasperated but mostly amused. "Drop the cool-kid act and be flipping happy. You did it!" I attempted to lift him into the air, but he was all muscle and didn't budge. "Someone needs to hit the gym," I muttered, rubbing my lower back.

"Are you alright?" he asked, steadying me by my shoulders. "You can't pick me up, Leland."

"No shit. I got carried away in my excitement. What the hell are your bones made out of anyway? Bricks? I'll be fine," I said when his concern lingered tightly around the corners of his mouth. "You did it, Franky," I said again, getting us back to the victory at hand. We stared down at the table in a

moment of silence.

An earthquake erupted around Franky's lips until they parted and gave way to sound. He laughed without restraint, and I watched, reacquainting myself with this side of him after drowning in his tension for days.

I grinned like a loon as he shoved his hands through his thick hair, the gravity of what he'd accomplished finally hitting him.

"I did it," he said.

"Fuck yeah," I agreed, as the light in his eyes reignited. "You did it. You made something we can actually use."

"I've gotta make the island stools next, or maybe a dresser, or end tables for the living room," he said absently, ideas tripping over themselves in his head.

"Not so fast, Mr. Carpenter." I held up a hand. "First off, it's going to rain." And as if waiting for a proper introduction, steel-colored clouds swarmed the sky. "And secondly, we need to celebrate."

"I could always work in the garage." He rubbed at his cheek, transferring the grime on his hand to the smooth, freshly shaved surface. "I'm only kidding," he said when I scowled. "What do you suggest we do?"

"There's a cool jazz bar not too far from my place. Josephine's. Nothing fancy, but they have great beer on tap, a couple pool tables in the back, and if you bump your hip into

the jukebox the right way, it's free." It was also where I went when needing a quick, no-strings fuck in one of the single occupancy bathrooms. After having Franky's indelicate hands on me, I needed the rough handling of a man tonight. I wouldn't be picky, though. Something soft with great tits would do as well.

Franky scanned the twilight sky with mistrust. According to the weather forecast, we'd be getting a bad storm tonight.

"Or we could keep it local if you want. I just need a change of scenery. We both do," I said pointedly.

"No, Josephine's is fine," he said. "We'll be near your place if it gets too bad to drive back here, and besides, I feel terrible about how I've been acting."

"Oh, and you think taking me to my favorite bar will make up for it?" I asked.

"I'm hoping it will," he said, giving me sad puppy dog eyes without even trying to. Yeah, I needed to get laid, and fast.

We loaded his tools into the garage before separating to get ready.

My eye color came courtesy of my dead-beat dad, but I got my straight hair from my mother. It required styling when in between haircuts, or else it would stick out at odd angles until long enough to properly flop over my ears and forehead. Tonight, I gave myself a slicked-back do, finishing the look with faded tight jeans and a t-shirt purposely one size too small.

Franky waited at the bottom of the landing dressed similarly, except his outfit didn't scream bargain shop the way mine did. It didn't bother me, though. Not after he'd treated my apartment tour like the world's most hidden treasure. We were too alike to dwell on the superficial areas where we were different, because we were different in ways that didn't matter to either of us. "Great minds think alike," I said, in reference to our matching ensemble, and he agreed.

"Ready?" he said, then winced. "I mean, to go to the bar."

"What else would you have meant?" I asked with humor in my tone. I cleared the bottom step, which put me directly in front of him. Franky may have had me beat in the muscle department, but we were the same impressive height.

"Nothing, just didn't want to confuse you," he said, being weird again.

"My car or yours?" I asked. The mechanic had dropped Betty off earlier, finishing up with her sooner than anticipated.

"Mine," Franky growled, the possessiveness emanating from that one word felt out of place. Had he misheard my question? He seemed angry, which in turn raised my internal temperature. Now I not only wanted to be fucked, but I wanted the fucking fueled by rage. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

"Your car?" I asked, just to be sure we were on the same page before the heat in my core traveled southward.

"Yes, my car," he confirmed with a stiff smile.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Of course. With the weather being as bad as it is, it’s probably best we take my car. That’s all.”

“Makes sense. Betty isn’t known for her reliability,” I said, as he moved past me and toward the door leading to the garages.

We parked right outside Josephine’s doors, but neither of us had thought to bring an umbrella, and the storm was now in full swing. We hurried inside and over to the two unoccupied bar stools closest to the entrance, grabbing handfuls of napkins to dry off with.

Josephine’s had a good crowd for it being mid-week. I did a quick once-over for intimately familiar faces and came up short. I avoided repeats, but tonight I would’ve made an exception. Desperate times and all.

“So *questionably* raised by your Uncle No One after your mother ran off, and completely on your own—well, with Noon—by the time you were fifteen?” Franky asked, picking up the conversation we were having on the car ride into the city.

“Pretty much,” I said, ordering two Stellas. “My uncle isn’t built for a domesticated life, but he stuck around long enough to see me out of the hospital and turned over to him. Then he’d come and go—mostly go—with strict instructions to not answer the phone or open the door for anyone.” I slipped the

bartender my bank card before Franky could get his wallet out. “Keep the tab open,” I told him, ignoring Franky’s glower. While intimidation tactics may have worked for him in business, he didn’t scare me. I hid my smirk around the mouth of my pint glass.

“Noon and his mom lived next door to my uncle’s place. She hated my uncle, likely because he wouldn’t give her the time of day, but she made sure I had a hot meal every night. And she’d let me sleep over whenever he was gone for too long. She had a nasty drinking problem, though, so it didn’t take much to convince Noon to strike out with me. His sister Deb lived with her father.”

Franky sipped at his drink thoughtfully, probably thinking my life was one long, bad movie. I trailed his gaze toward the stage behind us where an older man sporting a fedora and dark shades worked on piecing his saxophone together.

“That’s Stan,” I said. “He comes in a few nights a week to serenade the crowd for tips.”

Stan sprinkled a few singles inside his open sax case to get the ball rolling.

“This place has character,” Franky said, staring at the pool tables in the back.

“Ever played before?” I asked.

“I’m probably not any good,” he said.

I finished my drink, licking the beer froth from my top lip.

“Let’s go,” I ordered. Stan belted out something jazzy, the sultry sounds of a tune I didn’t recognize following us to the rear of the bar. A few guys conversing near the available pool table moved off to the side with their drinks, allowing Franky and me access.

“Do you know what this is?” I held out one of the cue sticks I’d plucked from the mount on the wall.

“I said I’m probably not any good, doesn’t mean I don’t know what all the parts are.”

“So you know what all the parts are, you just don’t know what to do with them.” I winked, and his stare turned scolding. “Come on, you left yourself wide open for that joke.” I shoved a stick at him, leaning mine against the table so I could rack the balls. “I’ll take it easy on you in the first round. It’s every man for himself once you get the hang of it. Or at least once you get the rules down.”

“Should we play for something?” he asked, attempting to chalk the wrong end of his stick.

I took pity on him, finishing up with the balls and then turning his cue stick right side up. “Maybe let me give you a lesson first, then you can decide if you’re in the mood to lose the contents of your wallet to me.”

Franky’s eyes danced with delight, taking a good chunk of my breath away. He then smiled that big, once-in-a-blue-moon smile, robbing me of what little oxygen I had left. “Playing for money isn’t fun.”

“Because you have plenty of it,” I said.

“Will you even accept my money if you win?” he asked, brow cocked. How fucking well he knew me already.

“Probably not. I’m sure I still owe you fourteen grand for those paintings you bought as it is,” I muttered.

A server I’d never seen waiting tables at Josephine’s before laid a tumbler of brown liquor on the edge of the pool table before winking at me and biting her lower lip. It was a toss-up between what would spill first, her ample cleavage sitting atop her low-cut shirt or her messy, brown bun being held up by a single pen.

She strode away, hips dramatically swaying as she went, and I turned in the direction of the heat burning a hole in my cheek. Franky watched me with an unreadable expression, the smile I loved now gone.

“Uh,” I started stupidly, rubbing at the back of my neck. “I think she brought me someone else’s drink.”

“It’s yours,” he said, his voice unreadable too. “I ordered it before following you over here.”

“Where’s yours?” I asked.

“I’m the designated driver.” His lopsided grin returned, and the sick feeling of guilt after having been caught ogling her melted away, leaving behind confusion as to why I’d felt guilty in the first place.

“Oh, I see.”

“See what?” he said innocently.

“You’re banking on winning because I’ll be too drunk to keep my shit together.”

“Are you accusing me of playing dirty?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m doing.” I wet my tongue with the scotch, humming in appreciation. “How about we play for truths?” I blurted out.

“Truths,” Franky said flatly, as if waiting for the punchline.

“Yeah,” I said breezily. I wouldn’t be the one losing anyway. “Winner gets to ask three questions, nothing we’d readily admit to each other. It has to be something big, and the loser has to answer them truthfully.”

“Okay,” he said without pausing to think it over. That should’ve been the first sign that things weren’t as they seemed.

Feeling sorry for him, I declared the first game a practice round. Franky couldn’t get the hang of holding the pool stick, so I ended up coming in behind him more than once to guide him through the move of striking a ball.

The scent of sandalwood infiltrated my system every time I got close enough to inhale it from the back of his neck. I was wound tight, and thank goodness Franky was too preoccupied with learning the game to notice.

Between the drinks that kept coming, and the hot server—who introduced herself as Sam—delivering them, I was off my

A-game. Sam moved in closer with each drop off, brazenly brushing my arm with her breasts and tucking my cash tips between them. Franky watched intently each time, and my face sizzled at knowing he could see my body's reaction to her.

By the end of the night, I owed Franky three truths, and he owed me none.

“That’s considered cheating,” I said and frowned as Franky hung up our cue sticks. He not only knew how to play, he excelled at it. He’d pulled the oldest con known to man, and I’d fallen for it. “You said you didn’t know how to play.”

“I said I’m probably not any good. It’s been too many years to count since I shot pool. Who knew it was like riding a bike,” he said with a shrug.

“You bamboozled me and you know it,” I said sourly, but he simply chuckled. My palms grew damp as I asked, “So, what do you want to know?”

“I think I’ll save my questions for a later date,” he said tauntingly, setting my teeth on edge. I hadn’t expected to be the one on the literal losing end of the stick, and I wanted to get his questions over with before he had the luxury of time to come up with even better ones.

“Fine,” I said, the rush of booze lighting up my veins. “But just know the trust is gone now.”

Behind Franky, Sam moseyed toward the corridor leading to the restrooms, smiling coyly at me before disappearing down

the hall. "I'll close out the tab so we can leave," he said.

"*You'll* close it?" I asked, perplexed.

"Yeah, I had them move everything over to my card when you went to the bathroom," he said. *Of course he did.*

"Ah, I'll meet you up front. Scotch runs right through me," I said as airily as possible.

He took on that vacant stare again, the one I now hated because it said nothing while giving everything away. Something was bothering him. "Take your time," he said. "I'll wait in the car." He craned his head over his shoulder knowingly to where the restrooms lay beyond, then strolled off.

My stomach churned at seeing him go, and the alcohol did zilch to numb the guilt I still couldn't explain. Figuring, again, that it had everything to do with needing sex, I made it to the restroom and did what I always did with no emotions involved. Only this time, I didn't feel the rush of anticipation as I slid the condom down my length. This time I didn't appreciate the warmth of a soft mouth wrapping around my dick, and this time, after I spun her and held her steady by the hips, I wished it were me being slammed into from behind.

My orgasm fell flat and fizzled through me disappointingly, leaving me unsatisfied and hungry for more. Hungry for something new, for someone different. And for the first time ever, I felt dirty afterward.

I told myself fucking Sam was for the best, and I continued

to try and convince myself of it the whole silent, tense ride back to Franky's place. I repeated the mantra as I showered, attempting to scrub the last five minutes at Josephine's away.

It was for the best.

It was for the best.

It was for the best.

I kept at it as the rain pounded onto the skylight above the guest bed, and even when it stopped an hour later. Even when Franky's footfalls then passed my door, dragging me to the window where I knew I'd find him thinking at the ocean from the dock.

It was for the best.

It was for the best.

It was for the best.

Then why did it feel like a betrayal?

CHAPTER 7

Franklin

The wind had picked up markedly after the rain stopped, and so I made my way down to the dock to ensure the boat was securely moored. It helped that I couldn't sleep and needed something to do other than envisioning what took place in the bar restroom between Leland and Sam tonight.

Those thoughts shouldn't have been occupying my mind. I shouldn't have cared. So why did I?

Tightening the dock lines around the deck cleat, I reflected back on our night at Josephine's.

"How about we play for truths?" Leland had suggested.

I had every intention of letting him win. I was too jaded, or maybe too old to take pleasure in beating him. With Leland I wanted to have fun, not win, and besides, I owed it to him after how I'd been behaving.

But *truths*? I couldn't turn that down. Not that I believed he had many, or that he wouldn't share them if asked, but I wasn't sure I had the stomach to ask him the things I *really* wanted to know otherwise. Not without the game—and the rules he'd come up with—to hide behind.

I wasn't afraid, but I *was* confused, and to be honest, it was easy to forget how new we were to each other, and that there

were things I didn't have the right yet to know. Either way, the prize was too good to pass up.

I'd taken the coward's way out after winning, choosing to save my questions, instead of asking if I'd been imagining things when I'd heard him hoarsely moan my name as he got himself off in the shower that day in his apartment. My gut wasn't ready for that conversation.

I thought about asking him to leave, but then remembered how feral I became when he asked if we were taking my car or his tonight. I couldn't risk him not having a reason to return home with me if we'd driven Betty. If I'd taken a moment to think reasonably, I would've concluded that he had to come back, or else I would've been stranded. No, him leaving wasn't the answer.

The cool air nipped at my arms as I searched the ocean for answers. Answers to questions like why our conversations went well beyond the line that should've been drawn with us. Leland was here to do a job, not listen to my confessions. And yes, he'd extended his friendship to me, but it didn't explain why talking to him had felt easy from the start, and why our silences felt even easier. Was that normal? Did that just happen? Did two people meet and click that instantaneously?

It happened with you and Selene, I reminded myself. We'd met and married quickly, but I hadn't been this conflicted about it then, so why now? Maybe because there were other reasons at play, then, because marrying Selene had been just as

much about wanting her for Cole as it had been about wanting her for me. Maybe because the reasons why I shouldn't feel the way I do now hadn't applied to my situation with Selene. I was available when I met her, and I was unavailable now.

I rubbed at my forehead until it hurt, purposely redirecting my thoughts to the pain there so that I wouldn't have to face the answer to my question.

"You still love her," he'd said to me one night. I cursed the voice in my head for taking me back there.

"Yes," I hissed to myself, dropping my head into my hands. It was the same answer I'd given Leland that night, but I needed to hear myself say it again.

I loved Selene. But did I love my life with her? Was it enough? Why couldn't it be enough?

I was successful, I wanted for nothing materialistically, I had a loving, beautiful wife who had breathed fresh air into my life and my home at a time when I was still sinking from the loss of Cole's mother and my inability—or refusal—to be there for my child. A child Selene loved as if he were her own, right from the start. Why couldn't I be grateful for the life I had instead of wishing for something...*else*.

You're being selfish, I internally scolded myself. Plenty of people felt unfulfilled, had imperfect marriages, and hated their jobs. They didn't destroy everything and everyone around them just for a taste of something new. A taste of something they couldn't even name, something they weren't

sure they would even want once they had it.

The grass isn't always greener on the other side, Franklin, I reminded myself.

And my kids... I'd promised Jasper I would protect him and his mother, that I wouldn't hurt either of them the way his father had hurt them. And Cole and I already had an unaddressed, awkward relationship because of all the past mistakes I'd made. The things I didn't get right. I'd been distant the first half of his life. I put the growth of Nexcom first and turned a blind-eye to the guilt he harbored behind his mother dying so that he could live.

Things had only gotten marginally better between us these last twelve years thanks to Selene, but truth be told, I'd never stopped making mistakes with Cole. Jasper either. I still didn't believe I was a good parent, and I didn't have the courage to ask if they held anything against me, because if the answer was yes, it would need to be dealt with, and I wouldn't know where to start.

Selene symbolized the one good thing I ever did for Cole. Was I really contemplating destroying that?

I stopped those thoughts before they had time to stretch their arms and get comfortable. It was the fear talking, and I'd already decided to use this predetermined amount of time to sort out what I wanted. To decide if what I wanted included saving my marriage. To decide if the happiness of one man was worth the destruction of countless others.

“You have a right to change your mind about who you want to be in this world, Franky. To decide you’ve had enough of living a lie.” Leland had said those words to me on our ride to Josephine’s. Maybe if I repeated them enough I’d start to actually believe them.

My bones were suddenly too heavy for me to hold up, so I shuffled to the house, my bed calling my name.

In the living room, the box of old junk my notebook had been in peeked out from the corner of the sofa, and I padded over to it, catching my yawn in my hand.

Nostalgia trumping my exhaustion, I settled onto the couch, placing the box on the coffee table. I hadn’t gotten the chance to inspect everything buried inside of it. I’d been too preoccupied with digging up my old notes.

Reaching in, I withdrew my high school yearbook, flipping to the dog-eared page and huffing a tired laugh at the state of my hair back then. I remembered the photographer telling me to brush it back from my eyes, but it was my protective barrier. I was hiding, even back then.

I waded through the mementos that no longer made sense to me until my fingers brushed up against the photo with Gloria and her family. The one that included an unsuspecting Theo.

I hadn’t seen the picture since I was a teen, and now I found myself musing over it twice in a matter of weeks.

Theo hated taking pictures and had opted out of this one. I couldn’t recall who took the photo, maybe a groundsman, but

Theo ended up making an appearance in it anyway.

Memories of my friendship with him were pretty crisp when I let myself think about it. I'd been less fond of his brother, Clark. He was too young, and while he wanted to play with toys, Theo and I had wanted to build things.

My father blamed my disinterest in the family business on Gloria and her family, but it couldn't have been further from the truth. I came alive when with the Palmeros. Much like the way I came awake with Leland.

Leland...

I brought the photo closer, so close I could hear my breath beat across it. How had I not noticed this before?

The light hair, the straight nose, the hard strike of his brows, the fine delicateness of his cheekbones that almost made him pretty... Leland resembled Theo.

I gazed down at Theo, processing why Leland had felt familiar to me from the second we met. Their personalities couldn't have been further apart, though. Leland had a wry, wicked sense of humor, and while he didn't have a Rolodex full of friends, I would still classify him as extroverted. Theo was shy, preferred books over music, frowns over smiles, and liked to go unnoticed, hence his aversion to cameras. But they shared the ability to make me feel comfortable, safe, and understood.

Relief coursed through me. That had to be it. Leland called to the surface feelings I hadn't felt since I was fifteen, and I

hadn't recognized them for what they were. I'd been contorting myself into a pretzel trying to work out the acute reactions I'd been having toward him, not understanding where they were coming from and why they were coming on so fast. I'd been unknowingly living in a constant state of déjà vu, and it had been making me crazy, moodier than usual over the last few days.

He reminded me of Theo. That explained it.

Dropping the picture to the table, I stumbled to my feet, finally ready to get some sleep. I felt lighter than I had in days, regretful too. I hadn't been the best person to be around.

I stopped in front of Leland's door, pressing my ear to it when I thought I heard movement. I owed him an apology, but it would have to wait until morning.

Back in my room, I got undressed, checking the weather app before setting the phone on the nightstand and settling onto my stomach, arms tucked under my pillow.

Tomorrow's forecast: sunny with clear skies. Leland's favorite. I hated the heat, but I drifted off making plans, knowing tomorrow things would be different.

Leland entered the kitchen the next morning to me waving a dish towel under the blaring smoke detector. Breakfast was supposed to be a nice surprise, not a fire drill.

He sauntered in, eyes still heavy with sleep, wearing only a pair of boxer briefs. I waited for the inappropriate feelings to pour in, holding my breath for it, but there was nothing but fondness and sincere remorse for having woken him up that way.

“I thought we agreed you wouldn’t cook anymore,” he said, stretching his arms over his head.

“What’s wrong with my cooking? And when did we agree to that?”

His eyes widened, the last of his sleep gone. “Er, I guess I dreamt that,” he said while I rushed to turn off the smoking oven. I slid the pan of burnt biscuits onto the stove before slamming the oven door shut and coughing into the crease of my elbow.

The alarm abruptly stopped ringing, and I turned to see Leland hopping off the island with the smoke detector in his hand.

“What?” he asked, looking down at himself. I’d been staring too long at him.

“Nothing, it’s just...you’re lean, but not as lean as I initially thought you were.” Aside from the partial back view I’d gotten of him while he’d come with my name on his lips in the shower, I hadn’t seen him with barely any clothes on before. I’d been too distracted by my own presumed interest, and resulting paranoia, to take in much at the time.

I’d noticed his physique last night through his body-hugging

jeans and t-shirt, but this was different. Now every sinewy muscle down to his ankles was on display. I checked in with myself and still felt nothing inappropriate going on.

He inspected his slim but defined arms. “Yeah, well, my body type is something else I can blame my mother for.” He leaned a hip against the counter, picking through the bacon for the one piece I miraculously hadn’t torched. *Maybe I shouldn’t be cooking.*

“Do you have any pictures of her?” I got the plates and silverware set up on the island as we talked.

“No, but there’re photos of her online from her modeling days.”

“Your mother was a *model*?” I’d assumed she was a sociopathic, love-obsessed attempted murderer from the heartbreaking tidbits he’d shared. However, if he looked like her, then a model made sense.

“Yeah, before I came along and ‘ruined everything,’” he said around air quotes.

I glanced over at my phone, biting the inside of my cheek.

“Go ahead,” he said, taking a wooden spoon from the utensil jar on the way to the stove to dish up a helping of dry scrambled eggs. “Her name’s Willow Meadows.”

I gave in to my curiosity as he loaded our plates with overcooked waffles. “Wow,” I said, looking between Leland and the magazine spread I’d pulled up. She was young, maybe

eighteen, and aside from his eye color, Leland was the spitting image of her. “She’s beautiful.” Her pin-straight blond hair fell to her lower back, her moss-green eyes bright and innocent, her limbs long and dainty.

“Where is she now?” I asked delicately. I hoped she was rotting in a prison cell somewhere.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he answered, now sitting on the island, our food the only thing separating us. “It was touch and go for a while. I was banged up pretty badly. She was long gone by the time I came out of the coma. The official story was that I fell. I didn’t refute it.”

“Jesus, Leland,” I breathed. He’d propped a heel up on the island, leaning back into his palms. I’d opened my mouth to chastise him about having his feet where we ate, but the gnarled skin reaching toward his shin from the back of his calf stopped me.

I moved in close, standing between his legs to trace my fingers over the old wound.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore,” he whispered. “You don’t have to treat it like it does.”

“Of course it does,” I said. I wasn’t talking about the physical pain in his leg. Neither of us were. Without having to say it, we were discussing the ache in his heart, and that wound would hurt forever.

“You don’t have to pretend to be unaffected by what she did to you. Not with me,” I said, my fingers idly exploring the

webbed scar tissue. The way Leland spoke about his mother suggested the things she'd done were only her problem, not his.

I didn't care what any therapist said. The sins of our parents became our problems too, because we were left to find a way to deal with them, to get past them. My children included.

"Maybe I just like when you don't handle me with kid gloves," he said.

That wasn't it, or maybe that wasn't *only* it, but I dug my fingers into him anyway. His cheeks reddened and his cock shifted in his underwear.

I spun away, busying myself with cleaning up, although I hadn't even eaten yet.

"I, ah... I'm gonna go put some clothes on now that I don't need to run for my life. No more cooking. Ever," he called back unsteadily as he bolted from the kitchen.

He returned wearing sweats and a shirt, and we ate the salvageable parts of our breakfast.

"I could have the mural finished in a few weeks," he said. I covered my disappointment by adding our plates to the load in the dishwasher.

"Take your time," I said nonchalantly. "If you think you need to rush on my behalf, you don't."

"It's not you. I've got plans I need to get back to," he said. He'd moved to the edge of the living room, his eyes closed as

he soaked up the sun shining in from the patio.

“Sorry,” I said, meaning it. “I didn’t stop to think about what I may be keeping you from.”

“You’re not keeping me from anything,” he said serenely, the sun transporting him to his happy place. “I just have something I need to do in a few weeks. I could always fit both into my schedule if I have to.” He moved farther onto the patio-turned-construction zone, and I joined him.

“How about we take the day off?” I asked, running my thumb over the keys in my pocket.

“To do what?” he asked in a sun-drunk state. I bit back a laugh, jangling the keys to get his attention. Leland cracked an eye open.

“I haven’t taken the boat for a spin yet. It’ll be even sunnier on the water.”

“Hell, yeah,” he said, letting out a whoop and reaching for the keys. “Who needs work anyway?”

“I’ll grab the beer and sandwiches I made us,” I said, and his mouth opened in alarm.

“Look, I may not be the best cook—”

“‘Not the best’ implies you can still cook, and well...you can’t,” he said, as if breaking the news to me gently.

“It’s just bread and turkey. You can’t mess up bread and turkey,” I said.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” he said, missing out on my eye roll as he bounded for the stairs leading to the dock.

I hung back near the sun lounger on the stern, giving Leland time to soak in everything the mini yacht had to offer. Experiencing it through his eyes brought me a level of pleasure I hadn’t felt since I was a kid, way before I knew to expect this type of opulence from my life.

His hands scaled over the upholstery and siding of the boat as he moved beyond the wet-bar and deeper into the cockpit. More than once his gaze returned to the sunbed I stood beside.

“There’s a sunbathing area on the foredeck as well,” I told him, then chuckled when he dashed to the front of the boat. I unclipped my sunglasses from the collar of my shirt, slipping them on in preparation for the blast of sunlight awaiting me, then met him up front.

“I’m not gonna lie,” he said, already sprawled out on his back with his own shades on. “I was kind of hoping you’d one day invite me on board.”

“Why didn’t you ask?” I held on to the railing as the boat swayed mildly.

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s not easy for me to ask for things.”

“Why not?” I crouched along his supine body, giving in to

the urge to remove his shades. I wanted to hear his explanation, as well as see it play out in his eyes.

He squinted up at me, the yellow of the sun deepening the honey hue of his irises. “Because what if I ask and the answer is no?”

“What if?” I asked, always burning to understand him, to get more of the deeper parts of him. “What if the answer is no? What then?”

“Then I would *know* I couldn’t ask you for anything instead of assuming I couldn’t. I’d know I couldn’t rely on anyone but myself, instead of hoping that wasn’t the truth.”

As always, we were talking about more than this moment, more than this boat, and more than *us*. “Ask me for something,” I whispered. Leland laughed but quickly quieted when I didn’t join in. I hid his shades behind my back when he reached for them, my probing stare never leaving his. “Ask me for something that you’ve been wanting to ask me for but haven’t.”

His chest rose and fell rapidly as the seconds ticked by. I didn’t know what I was doing, what I hoped to accomplish, but like I always had after Leland opened a wound for me, I operated on instinct. “Let me drive your boat,” he settled on.

“No,” I said, and he turned away from me. “Only because you have no interest in driving it. You’d rather spend your time up here. I’m using one of the questions I won, Leland, and according to your rules, you have to give me honesty.

What do you really want to ask me right now?"

"I don't like this game," he bit out. While I'd seen brief glimpses of Leland's sadness, for the most part he hid behind humor and sexual provocation. Until now, I'd never seen him upset.

I considered him a while longer, determining it wasn't anger rippling off him. Leland was scared.

"You made the rules, now play by them," I said, refusing to let him off the hook.

A mischievous glint lit his eyes, rivaling the gleam of the sun, and I knew he'd resort to making light of whatever he planned on saying. He pillowed the back of his head with his hands. "Let me spend the rest of the summer here with you. After the mural is complete."

That took me by surprise. "I thought you had something to do once you finished."

"It's just a bartending course. My homebase could be here," he said, a little less sure. His breezy, I-couldn't-care-one-way-or-the-other facade crumbling under the suspense. "Maybe just a couple days out of the week. It's...sunnier here."

I didn't think highlighting how adorable that was would go over well, so I didn't. "No," I said, watching unfettered vulnerability crush him. He didn't have the strength needed to hide it. "I want you here every day. If you can do whatever it is you need to and make it back here—back home—then please, stay."

“O-okay,” he said, that sweet blush of his washing over his tanned skin.

“Wasn’t the possibility of getting what you wanted worth the risk of rejection?” I asked, returning his glasses to him. *Wasn’t I worth the risk?*

Leland stilled with his shades halfway on, his eyes searing into me over the rim of them. I hadn’t realized I’d said that last part out loud, but the way his mouth and stare softened said it mattered to him that I had.

“Yeah,” he said without clarifying which question he’d answered. Both, I hoped. “Can we get this show on the road now?”

“From fear of rejection to demanding,” I tsked. “Do you want a below deck tour first?”

“Nah. The view is much better from here,” he said significantly. He was once again hidden from me behind his tinted lenses, but his face was angled up at me. My breath quickened as I tried to work out the intention of his comment, but then his brows wiggled above his frames, and I huffed out a laugh.

“Your flirting is going to get you in trouble one of these days,” I said as I made my way to the rear of the boat, Leland’s laughter chasing me.

I unwound the dock lines from the cleat, going over a few things in my head as I got the boat ready for departure. Had Leland wanted me to invite him to stay when he’d mentioned

needing to leave once the mural was complete? Moving forward, I would be mindful of instances when he could be hinting for more instead of outright asking me for it.

I set off, steering us aimlessly and suffering from the helm as Leland first removed his shirt, then his pants in an attempt to achieve an even-bodied tan. At one point he took a nap on his stomach with his boxer briefs pulled below the meaty part of his ass cheeks. The elastic waistband pushed the round globes higher, making them appear plumper than they already were. He couldn't have known what type of view I'd have from here.

When I couldn't take it anymore, when I could no longer pretend that my budding attraction for him was some misplaced sentiment from a childhood friendship, I dropped anchor and left Leland sleeping while I took off to berate myself below deck.

Entering the small bedroom, I fell back on the bed, squeezing my eyes shut. Visions of long, sun-bronzed limbs assaulted me, and a blush so vibrant it reminded me of fresh cut watermelon on a summer day made my pulse thrum furiously.

Some force beyond me possessed my body, and before I knew it I had a spit-slicked fist wrapped around my cock, tugging and strangling it with a mix of lust and anger. I just needed to get this urgent need out of my system before facing him again. I didn't want it to feel good, but it did, which made

me angrier, which in turn made me harder. I'd never been a violent man, but someone needed to pay for how good it felt to touch myself to thoughts of him, and since it couldn't be Leland—could *never* be Leland—it had to be me.

My biceps flexed, and my hips juttred off the bed as I pumped my cock, needing to orgasm to prove that once done, I could then put this madness behind me.

Within seconds I'd come all over my hand to thoughts of Leland. I panted at the ceiling where Leland slept peacefully above, eyes still closed because I couldn't look down and face what I'd done.

Feeling around, I untucked one end of the sheet, speedily wiping my hands and groin area off before lifting my hips to right my pants again. My breathing evened out, and I began to drift off when a deep, sleep-filled voice startled me into a sitting position.

“Everything okay?” Leland asked from outside the bedroom door. How long had he been standing there? I began internally panicking, but he just stood there rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“Yeah,” I croaked through my dry throat. “Just needed a break from the sun.”

“Oh.” He smiled cutely as he held out his sun-painted arms. “I think I may have gone overboard.”

“You look good,” I said, clearing my throat.

“I do, don’t I?” he said roguishly, raising his arms to grip the molding above the door. The action made his chest expand and his muscles lengthen. “Ready for those *killer* sandwiches you made?”

“Very funny,” I said, standing and hoping all signs of what I’d done were gone. “I’ll have you know I won the national sandwich making contest four years in a row in high school.”

“Please tell me such a thing did not exist, and that if it did you weren’t uncool enough to participate.” He looked downright horrified.

“It didn’t. But if it was a thing, I would have won.”

Above deck, Leland and I polished off our sandwiches and a six-pack of beer while getting to know each other better.

“My favorite time of day is right before sunrise,” I said, after he’d shared that his favorite time of day was when the sun was at its highest, something I’d already figured out on my own. “Every morning I go down to the dock in my running gear, then head out before the day gets too hot.”

“I know,” Leland said. The beer had loosened him up, made him careless about how long he stared at me. Or maybe I was the one too loose, the one letting my imagination run wild.

“How?” I asked.

“I wake up early every morning to watch you drink tea on the dock as the sun breaks past the horizon,” he said. “I love how the sun looks when it rises around you, when it makes

room for you.”

What did that mean? I waited for him to laugh or for his teasing grin to make an appearance, but neither happened. I stared down at my three empty bottles on the table separating us, wondering if maybe I’d had too much to drink and was now starting to see things in his eyes that didn’t exist.

“Where did the time go?” I said, checking the time on my phone. We’d been talking for over five hours. “We should go. It’s getting late.”

“Yeah,” Leland agreed, exhaling and averting his gaze. We docked and went our separate ways for the night. The break was needed, even if my heart said it wasn’t welcomed.

The following morning, a mug of hot tea waited for me on the counter. It had a splash of milk and a hint of lemon in it, exactly how I preferred it. I watched the sunrise, resisting the urge to peer back at Leland’s window to see if I’d find him there. I didn’t need to anyway. I could feel him.

From that day on, I looked forward to Leland’s tea, and his company, even though it was from afar, even though I never gazed back to confirm it.

Then one morning there were two steaming mugs of tea, and a very bright-eyed Leland waiting for me. I accepted one of the mugs he held and led the way to the dock. We sipped in silence, eyes trained on the rising sun. He reached out a hand to me just as the first rays broke free.

“Scared?” I asked.

“Of the moment ending,” he said, trying unsuccessfully not to grin.

“You’re such a child,” I said, grinning in return. “An unoriginal one.” Unoriginal but effective. I wrapped my hand around his. He went back to bed after, and I set off for my morning run.

That went on for another week, and then one day, Leland waited in the kitchen with our tea and his own running gear on. We watched the sun rise, then ran five miles together. I’d had to cut my mileage in half to accommodate his poor endurance, but it was worth it. I’d learned a lot more about him during those runs, like how shamelessly he could beg when sweaty and exhausted. I’d learned that I loved to hear him beg, and I loved seeing him sweaty and exhausted.

The weeks rolled by, and the word “strangers” could no longer be used to describe us. Maybe not even the word “friends.” We were terrifyingly something more, at least to me we were. I couldn’t speak for Leland because his penchant for flirting made it difficult to know if the line was becoming blurred on his side too.

Guilt scorched my stomach like acid, and I thought about my marriage less and less during those weeks, which worsened the guilt.

I was in trouble, and my mood began to darken because of it.

CHAPTER 8

Leland

“Franky,” I called from the living room, but he kept sawing away out on the patio. I bit down on the wooden tip of my paintbrush to free my hands, wiping them off on my paint-splattered jeans before fishing my phone from my pocket to pause the music coming through the Bluetooth speaker. “Franky,” I tried again, pulling the brush free, but got nowhere. I needed his opinion on the shade of green used for the trees in the mural.

Franky wasn’t childish, so I knew he wasn’t outright ignoring me. He’d been in a funk for two days now, and when stuck inside his head, the outside world had no chance of getting in. He’d have to crawl out of his cave to meet me.

It took effort not to plummet into a black hole right along with him, because Franky was an all-consuming force. When he was happy, life couldn’t get any better than that moment for me, but when he was sullen, it felt like hanging on to the edge of something for dear life as a tornado ripped through. The highs and lows were equally dizzying and intoxicating.

I’d let him have his mood while I kept busy with the mural, but forty-eight hours was more than enough time to wallow in whatever had been bothering him, and I needed a second set of eyes.

I kicked my way through a small mountain of rubble and got between him and the sunlight he needed to see by. He jerked upward from where he knelt over what looked to be the beginnings of an end table, removing his protective goggles with splintered and calloused hands. Hands that had been soft and well-cared for when we'd first met.

“Hey,” he said out of breath, falling to his haunches as I hovered over him. Sweat glistened between the gray hairs at his temples, and also traveled down the pronounced veins along his chiseled forearms.

“Hey,” I parroted back, forgetting why I was standing there to begin with.

“Did you need something?” he prompted, expression fierce. And fuck the second pair of eyes I needed on the mural; it now became my mission to remove the stick lodged deep inside his ass.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’d like to paint you.”

“Okay,” he said confused. “Maybe later, after I’ve showered and changed—”

“No,” I said, interrupting him. “That’s not what I meant. Although, I would love to do that now that you mention it...”

“Leland, what are you rambling on about?” he asked, wiping the moisture from his forehead with the hem of his shirt. The move revealed his rock-hard abs and the salt and pepper hair trailing south below his navel.

Gripping my paintbrush like a pen or pencil, I made a squiggly motion inches from his face.

“Don’t,” he said gruffly, the word hitting hard like a mallet, which only further encouraged me.

“I’m sure that tone has gotten you far in business, but you don’t scare me, Franklin Kincaid. You barely even impress me.” I flourished a hand over the four *impressive* counter stools lined up and ready to be carried into the kitchen. He stared blankly at me.

“Are you *that* intent on being grouchy?” I asked, because if so, then maybe he *was* a child after all.

Franky sized me up and then I was on my back, a stack of boards toppling over as Franky straddled me, fighting to get my paintbrush from me.

Our laughter weakened us, making it impossible for either of us to maintain control over the brush. I fought to keep it cradled to my chest, and green paint smeared over the front of us both now.

“Let it go,” I demanded between peals of laughter.

“Not a chance,” he said, his thighs tightening at my hips.

Franky had the advantage of size and brute strength, but I had a few dirty tricks up my sleeve. I sacrificed one of my hands holding the brush’s handle to palm his cock through his dusty jeans. He reared back in shock, falling off of me and onto his ass with a grunt.

I scrambled to get on top of him, quickly drawing a green stripe across his nose and proclaiming myself the winner. We laughed through our inability to breathe, our chests heaving under the sweltering heat of the sun.

Our laughter faded, and I waited above him, the shape and shade of his eyes telling me he had something to say. “Jasper and Cole would like you,” he said.

Now wasn’t the time to make fun of him for being insanely random, so I rolled with it. “Introducing me to the family now?”

“Maybe.” His heavy palms rested on my thighs. “Why not?”

“I mean, I guess. But wouldn’t you need to tell them how we met? *Why* we met?” Jasper and Cole didn’t know their happy family wasn’t so happy after all. Franky turned away, teasing his bottom lip with his teeth.

“Is that what’s been bothering you? Are you thinking about telling them?”

“Jasper and Cole have been on my mind, but no, I’m not telling them anything. At least not now.”

“Have you been thinking about Selene too?” I wouldn’t blame him. I’d been thinking about her. I’d given in to my curiosity and searched images of her online. She was beautiful, and for some reason that had made my heart hurt. I wondered how she was using their time apart. Her actions, while wrong, had been partly a result of what he’d stopped giving her, and partly a result of her own personal crisis—I assumed. I

wondered if the balance of pain was evenly scaled because of it, or if he carried most of the load.

“Yes and no,” he said. I badly wanted to follow it up with why and why not, so I didn’t. A want that strong couldn’t be good.

“She’s their patron saint,” he said, looking at me again.

“So you think they’ll take her side?”

“Choosing her over me would be the easiest choice either of them would ever have to make. They’ll hate me for hurting her, then I’ll lose them. I’m not so sure I ever had them to begin with.”

Franky and I had done a lot of talking over the last couple weeks. We’d take the boat out on sunny days and speak for hours on the ocean. We’d sit by the firepit on cool nights, tossing back beers—or something stronger if the topic required complete oblivion to get through it. Franky’s central theme was guilt. He traveled through life bogged down by an abundance of it, and it all traced back to his parents’ neglect of him, then the loss of Gloria and her family. It may have originated there, but it had continued into how he saw himself as a husband and parent.

“It’s not too late to fix things with them. With your kids,” I clarified, refusing to examine why I felt a clarification was needed. Why I felt the need to leave Selene out of it.

“Maybe,” he said noncommittally.

“What else has been bothering you?” I brushed back the clump of hair sticking to his damp forehead. I had a need to comfort him, and I would’ve apologized for the intimate touch if he hadn’t closed his eyes to it, inhaling and exhaling in relief.

Franky blinked up at me sluggishly, his eyes hot and fierce, paralyzing me. He shook his head, ridding it of whatever thoughts had been boiling up inside him. I felt powerless to do anything but wait for his next words, or his next move.

“What *isn’t* bothering me,” he said bitterly, his eyes now devoid of anything good. I’d been holding myself up on my knees, but the sudden change in his demeanor jarred me, dropping me onto his lap where his hard cock waited.

Franky’s fingers dug into my legs, and the air exiting my lungs reversed direction.

I expected for one of us to freak out any second now, but the freak out never came. We were both too stunned to do anything but remain suspended in time. My dick responded to his, and without a direct order from my brain, my hips thrust forward, picking the worst time to go rogue.

“No,” Franky gritted out angrily, eyes flaring with panic as his fingers did damage to the tops of my thighs.

We staggered to our feet, straightening our clothes and clearing the lumps from our throats. *Would shit be extra weird now? Would he ask me to leave? What the fuck was that, Leland?*

“That one tilts, and it’s driving me crazy,” Franky said, flicking a hand at the stools, his voice pinched. “And that one’s too short, and the middle one is too tall.”

So we were pretending nothing happened. I could do that. I could *try* to do that. I prayed a silent prayer that when I opened my mouth to respond, I could manage more than a fucking sweet moan. “But the fourth one is perfect.” I inwardly patted myself on the back for sounding unfazed. “I know this because I tested it out this morning. Now all you’ve gotta do is make three more just like it. You’ve mastered it.”

He didn’t respond, the mask of pretense slipping as he paced a circle with his hands bracketing his hips. I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want another person tossing me out the window because they’d decided I’d become “too much.”

I was determined to show him that we could forget what happened and move on, determined to get an enthusiastic reply from him about his damn stools.

The paint on his nose had dried, but the end of my brush remained caked with paint. I pointed it at him threateningly. “Repeat after me,” I instructed. “I did it.”

“Leland—”

“Uh-uh,” I said, and he watched the bristles for sudden movements. “Say: I did it. Say: I didn’t know what the hell I was doing when I first started, but I didn’t give up and I’m the fucking man,” I said in one rush of words.

“I will not—”

“Say it!” I shouted, flaunting my weapon at him. “Say: I’m the fucking man, and I can overcome any fear and do anything I put my damn mind to.”

“Please don’t make me—okay, okay!” he said, holding his hands up in surrender as I swooped in. “I’m the man—”

“The *fucking* man,” I corrected.

“Must you swear so much?” he asked with a sigh. I flew my brush in closer. “I’m the fucking man, and I can overcome any fear, and do anything I put my damned mind to.” The corners of his eyes crinkled, and he brandished a grateful smile. Saying it had made him happy. I quickly added two green polka dots above the stripe on his nose, smiling when he frowned at me.

“See,” I whispered. “You’re a daisy after all.”

His grin was boyish and bashful as he whispered back, “So are you, Leelee Bear.”

CHAPTER 9

Franklin

Dumping my wet umbrella and shoes by the door, I walked briskly toward the stairs, not wanting to waste any more time in getting some medication into Leland's system. I halted with a foot on the first step, seeing a tightly coiled bundle on the couch.

Backtracking, I placed the bag containing chicken soup and cold meds on the coffee table so I could unbutton my suit jacket.

"Company still standing?" Leland asked, blanket to his neck.

"Sorry I had to leave you." I sat beside him, angling my body toward him so I could lean in and feel his forehead. "I'd been putting off going in for a couple weeks now. This meeting was unavoidable."

"We need you back, Franklin," Robert had implored. *"We lost the deal."*

"It's fine," Leland said, reeling me back from my wayward thoughts. "I told you it's just some stupid bug. I was tired of lying in bed all day, and I wanted to sit in front of the fire." He nudged his chin over my shoulder to the finished mural. "Isn't it fucking beautiful?"

The fire crackling in the hearth morphed it into something majestic. “Finally you see what I see. You’re talented, Leland,” I said. He’d never called any of his masterpieces beautiful before. Leland grinned his charming, lopsided grin.

He’d finished the mural a couple days ago, and I’d successfully built four functional counter stools. I’d let him convince me to dive fully clothed into the ocean in celebration—during a rainstorm, on the coolest summer day yet. As the one who’d raised two kids who loved to play in the rain no matter the sickly consequences, I should’ve known better. But Leland tended to make me feel like a kid again, or maybe even for the first time.

A cool draft caressed the collar of my shirt as the sound of rain meeting the ocean escalated.

“It’s hot,” Leland explained when my lips thinned. I’d left the doors and windows closed so he wouldn’t get any worse.

“But you’re swaddled like a baby,” I said, rubbing the furry blanket between my fingers.

“That’s because it’s also cold,” he said, shivering.

“It’s the fever.” I shook two tablets into my palm and handed him the half empty bottle of water sitting on the coffee table. “I’ll heat up your soup.”

Thankfully, it hadn’t gone cold, and within minutes I’d returned, balancing the hot soup and crackers on a tray. I instructed Leland to sit up before settling it onto his lap and encouraging him to eat when all he wanted to do was sleep. I

kept a watchful eye as he finished his soup and hydrated with water, and I continued to monitor his temperature until it broke. All the things I'd missed out on doing when Cole was a little boy. His nanny had taken care of the brunt of it.

"Thank you," Leland said, folding his feet under him. "You're good at this."

"At what?" I asked.

"Taking care of people."

"I'm not," I objected. "Not really." I stood, ready to run from his searching gaze.

Leland latched on to my wrist as I passed him, urging me to sit back down. "What makes you bad? Tell me, Franky. What do you think makes you so terrible?"

I sighed wearily, needing to know the answer myself. "I never held Cole when he was sick. Jasper either."

"But you would sit by their bedside while they slept. You would sneak into their rooms at night to make sure their fever broke," he said, repeating the details from a conversation we'd had days ago on our walk. It had started out as a morning run, but we'd been talking too much to maintain our fast pace.

"I didn't make it to the parent teacher meetings or show up to their equestrian lessons."

"But you were there for every competition, and you left an important business meeting to be there for Jasper on bring-your-dad-to-school day. He said you saved the day. You told

me he said that.” Leland’s warm hand cupped my chin, bringing my head up and my gaze to his. The flames made his light eyes nearly transparent, and if I looked hard enough, I could see right through them and into his soul. I didn’t want to look hard enough, though, because then I wouldn’t want to look away.

“So you weren’t the most nurturing parent, and you weren’t there for everything. You were building a company. Something to pass on to them. You were there when it mattered, and I’d bet my life they know that. Your brand of love isn’t perfect, but it’s still love, Franky.”

“You make it sound so noble, but the truth is far harsher than that. Any good I’ve ever done by them, Cole in particular, had been inspired by the good being done by someone else.”

“Selene?” he asked.

“It started with Annabeth,” I said, referencing Cole’s mother. “Had she lived, she would’ve been his primary caretaker. It was why I’d agreed to the pregnancy. I wasn’t just building a company, I was building something that would surpass what my father, and what his father, and *his* father before him had created. My life’s objective was to prove I could be better than him. I was heartbroken when Cole’s mother died, but secretly I was more resentful than anything. Sometimes I forgot what shade of blue his eyes were. That’s how many days would pass by before I went in search of him.” My pulse thudded in my throat, and I thought I might choke on

my shame.

“I fed myself the same lie you just offered me. That I was building something great, something he could one day have and be proud of. And when we did spend time together, Nexcom was all I would talk about, in the hopes that he would understand why he couldn’t have more of my time. In later years he became eager to discuss the day-to-day operations of the business, even working summers for me. But now I wonder if it was because he truly cared for the job, or because he thought that was the only way to connect with me. And that in itself is its own form of expectation, of pressure.”

Leland listened intently, his thumb absently brushing my chin.

“Yes, Selene ensured I was there for the big stuff, and yes, she made me want to do better, but at my core, I’m not better, Leland. I’m just like my father, and I don’t know how not to be,” I admitted.

“Even with Selene’s influence, I wasn’t an active participant in our life. I’d only ever been an observer. Standing back and watching them thrive, happy that I’d finally gotten something right when it came to Cole.” I ended my purge on a ragged breath, feeling drained but not fixed in any way.

“I don’t believe you,” he whispered. “You paint yourself to be a monster, but from what I know of Selene, she wouldn’t have fallen in love with a monster. There must be some good in you. I *know* there’s good in you. You just can’t seem to see

it.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, Leland. But you haven’t had the privilege of seeing me fall apart. I hope you never have to see what I’m truly capable of.” I dove into a black hole when Cole’s mother died. A hole I hadn’t had to slink back into in some time. One I never wanted to live in again.

“What aren’t you telling me?” he asked drowsily.

“You should be resting, not trying to solve puzzles—” My words died on my lips when he swooped in to plant a warm kiss on my forehead.

Leland snuggled back into the sofa cushions as if what he’d done was no big deal. He must have been sicker than we initially thought. “Better?” he asked around a yawn.

“Not even close,” I breathed.

“Speaking about influence, I think I’ve been under Noon’s for too long. He thinks a forehead kiss can cure anything.”

“So hand holding and forehead kisses,” I said with a lightness I didn’t feel.

“Hey, you like holding my hand.” Leland scooted lower and turned onto his side, resting his head on the sofa’s arm. He looked young and innocent, and I had to remind myself that he was only twenty-five, and I had to warn myself not to hurt him too.

“Sleep,” I said, standing.

Leland hummed. “It’s still early. I’ll take a quick nap while

you change.” He was snoring before I hit the top of the landing.

I took my time, knowing once I returned, Leland would wake up and pretend to be well enough to converse all night like we’d been doing lately. I showered, dressed in sweats and a tank, then perched at the end of my bed pondering what my next life choice would be, and who it would ruin.

It was well into the evening when I crept downstairs, the light of the fire guiding my way through the dark. As predicted, Leland stirred the moment I entered the room. He had a skill for feeling my approach, as if he were that in tune with me. To be fair, I could feel him advancing from a mile away too.

“How do you feel?” I asked, circling the couch and retaking my seat.

“Like a million bucks,” he said, the heavy bass of his voice deeper upon awakening.

“Liar,” I said, helping him untangle himself from the blanket so he could swing his feet to the floor. “Hungry?”

“No,” he said. His lips were red and puffy from either sleep or fever, and his hair needed to be brushed. He’d slipped out of his shirt at some point because it now lay damp with sweat on the floor, and he still seemed exhausted.

“Go back to sleep, Leland.”

“But—”

“I’m not going anywhere. I’ll sit right here until you wake up again. I’ll sit here all night if I have to.”

He flushed, looking adorable as he did so.

“I enjoy your company too,” I said. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about. Now sleep. That’s an order.”

“I kind of like it when you order me around.”

“I guess in sickness and in health applies to flirting too,” I said, and he chuckled as he hunkered down at the other end of the couch, stretching his long legs over mine.

“Now you’re trapped. I’ll know if you move.”

“I’m sure you’d know either way.” I kicked my feet up on the coffee table, preparing to shut my eyes for a beat as well, and between the light pattering of the rain, and the soothing sound of wood splintering in the fireplace, it didn’t take long for me to go under.

The howling of the wind jarred me from sleep sometime later. Rain pummeled the glass, as if begging to be let in, and the fire had burned down to pulsing embers, leaving the room stuck in limbo between light and dark.

I breathed deeply, stretching my neck from side to side before noticing Leland’s head on my thighs. He slept on his back with one foot on the floor and a hand jammed down the front of his cotton joggers. It scared me how much I wanted to be his hand.

Beads of sweat decorated his upper lip, and his bare

stomach rose and lowered with his even breaths. I hadn't known he was a wild sleeper, or perhaps the restlessness was a side effect of being sick.

I needed to move, to get the blood flowing in my numb limbs again, but I didn't want to wake him. I also needed to check the time, because he probably needed another dose of medicine if the heat working its way through my sweats was any indication.

A bad idea brought a tremor to my hands, and I fisted them, pressing them into the sofa cushions.

"...a forehead kiss can cure anything," he'd said earlier, and maybe there was something to it, because I did feel better after, if only marginally.

This is just to see how hot he is, I told myself, hearing it for the lie it was but proceeding without caution anyway.

My lips touched his fevered skin, and I swallowed down the pain I'd been lugging around for so long, feeling both a sense of freedom and the cold sensation of chains tightening around me.

That's enough! I shouted at myself when one second turned into two, then three, then eight. But it wasn't enough. Not when I'd been in a drought for so long.

Leland shifted in his sleep, and I recoiled guiltily as he mumbled incoherently before curling into a fetal position. I sent a sigh of relief and remorse into the room, then stiffened when his arm circled my waist, coming to rest in the arch at

the small of my back.

I peered down my chest at him, watching in horror as he blinked awake.

He licked his lips, turning away from my crotch area to gaze up at me, his eyes glassy and distant, as if he were still half asleep. “Franky?” he asked, voice raspy. The arm around me unwound, his hand traveling to feel around my face.

“I’m here,” I said. “Your fever’s back.”

He groaned, closing his eyes briefly before lifting them to half-mast. “Franky?”

I helped him into a sitting position, his hand sailing over my jaw, nose, and mouth, trying to make out my identity in the near darkness. My breaths were quick against his palm, his long fingers scorched the skin at my nose. I inhaled him like a drug, my cock hardening, getting high off of it. “Give your eyes a second to adjust,” I said, my tone desperate.

“*Franky.*” It wasn’t a question this time, and his delirium had been replaced with what sounded close to want.

What happened next happened too fast, a blur of movement, and I didn’t know who initiated it. I didn’t know who was to blame.

I hefted him up from under his arms, and he straddled me, tugging my head back by my hair before crashing his lips into mine. All thoughts, all feelings of uncertainty and guilt, were gone under the touch of his mouth, and under the weight of his

hard body against mine.

Our movements were frantic as we swallowed each other's moans, as the kiss turned sloppy and ear-splittingly loud. We were two dogs finally allowed off our leashes, and being caged had made us savage.

I slithered my hands into the back of his pants, kneading his hot ass cheeks as he ground himself on my heavy erection.

Hot. The word stabbed through the building lust, batting at my brain for entry. *Hot.*

I snatched my hands away as if I wasn't more than willing to be incinerated by Leland's fire. His waistband smacked against his lower back as a feeling of abandoning home washed over me.

He was sick, and likely unaware of what we were doing, and while a locked door had suddenly been thrown open in my heart and mind, I didn't want him unknowingly taking part in something so wrong, even if to me it felt like the first right thing I'd done in years.

"Leland, wait," I said, urging him away. He strained toward me with swollen, pursed lips, his eyes closed. He was tempting and hot—in more ways than one—and I almost faltered, almost hauled him back in to give him what we both wanted. What *I* wanted.

I held him by the hips and scooted to the edge of the sofa so I could stand. Leland took advantage of those few seconds by wrapping his arms tightly around my neck and blindly kissing

my face.

“*Leland*,” I groaned, unstrapping his arms before dumping him on his back and pinning them across his chest. “Wait.”

“Why?” he asked, “Haven’t we waited long enough?” His words were slurred, a mixture of drowsiness and confusion, but my heart catapulted up my throat regardless.

I left him there, returning with a glass of water and two cold and fever pills, demanding he swallow them both down. I slid the empty glass onto the coffee table as I lowered shakily to the edge of the couch. My elbows dug into my knees as I cupped my hands over my tingling mouth. “You don’t know what you’re saying, *Leland*, and I’m a mess. I’ve got fires burning in every corner of my life, and the last thing I need to do is start another one.” Life was bigger than what I wanted, and until two minutes ago, I hadn’t been sure what that was. And now...

Leland’s soft snores cut into my speech. How much of it had he heard before losing consciousness? I sat there long enough for the glowing embers to die out on a whisper, then I spread the blanket over *Leland* before making my way upstairs.

I stopped at his open bedroom door, glancing behind me to make sure the coast was clear before quietly entering.

I’d given in and ordered bedroom furniture after realizing building a whole house’s worth on my own would take more time than I’d anticipated, especially with my re-learning curve.

I ran a shaky hand over the untidy bed, imagining him

tossing and turning, kicking himself free of the sheets in his sleep. I also imagined occupying the space next to him and being held in his strong arms the way he'd held on to me downstairs.

A wild sort of panic rocketed through me, and I took a seat on the soft mattress before I did something silly like fall over or run back to the living room and demand he hold me and never let go this time.

Feeling unmoored, I hugged one of his pillows to my chest for something to anchor me, bowing my head and unintentionally taking his scent into my body. My cock thickened again, and I groaned in agony, the feathered filling eating up the sound. *What the hell am I doing?*

It took all my might to rip the pillow away from me and not reach into my pants and strangle my erection between my fist.

“Damn it,” I bit out, feeling my temper rise. Why now? Why him? Why *me*?

You know why, Franklin.

I slammed the door on that voice while also slamming the pillow back onto the bed. Two sheets of pastel paper floated onto the floor. It was the type of paper Leland sketched on in between painting the mural. I thought back on what he'd said to me when I first discovered his hidden talent.

“I’m not all that good at sketching, but it relaxes me when I get too in my head about how crappy a painting is turning out. Sketching reminds me that there’s something I’m better at, so

then I go back to my painting with renewed confidence. It's a trick of the brain, really," he'd said.

At the end of every night, I'd find sheets of charcoal drawings scattered throughout the house. They were amazing, like everything else he'd done, and I secretly kept a few of them.

I picked up the sheet closest to me, turning it over and leaning closer to the bedside table to get a better look under the lamp light. The rough sketch depicted a man from behind. A *nude* man from behind.

He stood on a balcony, palms pressing into its railing, his head lowered, the ocean—expanding in the dark distance—spot lit by the moon.

I pursued the muscular planes of his back with a trembling finger, chasing the hard line of his spine down to the beauty mark atop his right butt cheek.

The second rendering was more explicit. Two men in bed, their faces hidden, leaving me to identify them using other means. The one from the first sketch hovered between the other one's spread thighs. I knew it was the same man because of the matching beauty mark. And I knew the man below him was Leland because of the scar marring the leg he had wrapped around...*my* lower back.

Storming from Leland's bedroom, I charged into mine, throwing my balcony doors wide and stepping into the warm rain. I held up the first drawing, now bunched in my fist,

staring between it and what I could see spread out in front of me.

The same ocean. The same moon.

I turned my back on the view, rain water sluicing down my body as my gaze landed on my open bedroom door. *He'd been watching me.*

Balling up the wet paper, I pressed into the railing, adopting the same pose in the sketch. Leland wasn't fevered and delirious when he drew this, not like he had been when we kissed tonight. And suddenly the mishap on the patio when we'd gotten aroused as he straddled me could no longer be ignored or summed up to our adrenaline pumping and my need for sex. This thing bubbling inside me wasn't one-sided.

I struggled to pinpoint the moment it had started for me. Had I known that I wanted him the instant he'd stepped on to that roof, refreshingly oblivious to who I was? Or had it begun when I took his hand before marching onto the Ferris wheel with him? Or perhaps when I watched him get off in his shower?

And when had it started for him? As his gaze stalked me all night at the office party? Had it begun with the very first flirtatious comment he'd directed at me?

Some missing part of me slid into place, making me whole while also tearing down the world around me.

A rash sort of recklessness came over me, and I warred with wanting to barge downstairs and take what I wanted—now

that I knew Leland wanted me back—and packing up his things and returning him safely to his apartment before the sun rose to shine its light on my indiscretions.

He didn't deserve me making a mess of his life, which was precisely what would happen if I laid another hand on him.

I sank to my haunches, still holding on to the balcony railing for support as the rain picked up in force, attempting to pound some sense into me. I thought of my wife.

“Use this time to figure out what you want, Franklin, because we can't live like this anymore.”

An insidious voice crooned romantically in my ear, whispering that Selene's words had granted me permission to cross every vile line I had in mind.

Bile cruised up my esophagus as I made a tough decision. I had to get as far away from Leland as possible before I gave in and pursued the thing that had haunted me ever since *then*. Ever since Theo. That voice had given me a terrible excuse to do it now, and I wasn't above using it.

CHAPTER 10

Leland

For once, the morning sun was the last thing I wanted to see after waking up on the sofa with a stiff neck. My mouth was dry, and the rest of my body felt clammy, but all that was forgotten by the sight of Franky dressed and sitting at the kitchen island. Not sitting, more like *waiting*.

“How are you feeling?” he asked with zero emotion.

“Better, I think. Hard to tell when every part of me needs a shower and sustenance.” I stretched, getting to my feet.

“I’d like to make sure you’re okay. My physician was able to fit you in this morning. After that, I think it’s best if you went back to your place. Now that the mural is complete.”

I’d been about to tell him I didn’t need to see a doctor, that I was fine, that I could stay, even though he was being weird. I’d already accepted that “weird” came with the territory when being Franky’s friend. I’d rather deal with his mercurial moods than not deal with him at all.

I couldn’t tell him that, though. Not when my packed duffle bag sat at the bottom of the stairs, sending a new round of sickness through me. *What the fuck?*

Flashes of last night assaulted me then, and my stomach rolled with anxious energy. I’d attacked him on the sofa

unprovoked, then basically admitted to wanting to do it all along.

“Franky,” I breathed, unsure of what to say next to make things right. He averted his gaze, something like embarrassment had lingered there, confusing me. I should’ve been the one embarrassed. I *was* embarrassed.

I swung back to my packed bag. *Fuck*. He’d had to go into the guest bedroom to pack up my stuff. He’d found my sketches.

“I can explain,” I said, surprised I could even form words through the marching band wreaking havoc on my frontal lobe.

“Not now. Get cleaned up and changed. We need to get going.”

“I don’t need a fucking doctor, Franky.” *I need to make this right.*

“It’s not up for debate, Leland. It’s my fault you’re sick. I need to know you’re okay before—” He stopped abruptly, but I finished it for him.

“Before you wash your hands of me?” Why did people find it so easy to get rid of me? To walk away? My father, my mother, my uncle, and even Noon.

“No,” he said, adamantly, as if he knew where my thoughts had gone. “You’ve done *nothing* wrong.”

“Then why?” I understood that I’d fucked up. He was

married, with grown children. *We* couldn't happen. Shouldn't happen. But I'd felt his hard cock under me as we tussled for my paintbrush that day on the patio. I'd smelled the musky scent of his cum in the cabin of his boat that one afternoon, and while I couldn't prove it had anything to do with me, my gut told me that him jerking off had *everything* to do with me.

"You have the bartending course I've been keeping you from, and I'll be going back into the office earlier than expected." He lifted his chin, displaying his authority and making it perfectly clear the decision had been made and wasn't up for discussion.

I wasn't dealing with the Franky I knew. He'd slipped back into his armor. Before me sat Franklin Kincaid.

"So that's it? You're locking this place up and returning to the colossal estate you love so much? Returning to the *job* you fucking love so much? Going back to your wife?" Sarcasm and anger oozed from me. And something else entirely. Something I had no right to feel. Something I didn't want to name.

"We're going to be late," he said, standing, the legs of his stool scraping against the kitchen floor.

"I said I don't need a damn doctor," I snapped, charging for my bag. "I'll shower at my place, and I can drive myself there."

"You come with me under your own steam, or I carry you there," he threatened. Any smidgen of warmth that had been

lurking below his increasingly frosty exterior had disappeared. He'd do it. He'd drag me there kicking and screaming if he had to.

"You're not paying the bill," I spat, matching his coldness. I grabbed up my bag and made my way to the bathroom.

Franky paced the small room we'd been confined to in the ER, his expression severe. I'd ended up refusing to see his fancy doctor after asking the billing coordinator for the cost of the visit. Franky's options were to make a scene trying to keep me there or take me to the hospital emergency room three blocks over where my bullshit state insurance would be happily accepted.

"I told you I was fine. You can leave now. I'll find a way back to your place to pick up my car." I'd been diagnosed with the common cold, which had been more fever and exhaustion than anything. Now we were waiting for the discharge papers.

"I'll wait," he said, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

My temper cooled as I noticed how tired he seemed. Had he gotten any sleep last night? "Franky—" The door swung open then, slamming the brakes on our conversation.

Noon stormed in, and I let out a string of muttered curses. Stacey worked in the ER. I hadn't seen her, so I'd been optimistic that I'd be in and out of here without Noon knowing.

Without a word, he tilted my head up by my chin, examining me as if he'd heard my face was broken.

"Stop overreacting," I mumbled around his grip, swatting his fussy hands away. "And isn't your girlfriend letting you know I was here against hospital policy or something?"

Noon hadn't spotted Franky over in the corner yet, but how he hadn't felt the sudden dip in the room's temperature was beyond me. I didn't need to see Franky's eyes to know he wasn't pleased. I just didn't know if it was the interruption of what I'd been about to say that had pissed him off or Noon specifically.

"Screw policy," Noon said. "She thought I was here to see you, though. I was actually surprising her with lunch."

"Is there anything she can do to speed up the discharge process? I'm ready to get home." *And forget this day, and every other day since meeting Franklin Kincaid, ever happened.*

"You're sick," he said. "I'm off for the next few days. You can stay with us until you're back on your feet."

"It's a fucking cold, Noon. A pitiful one at that. I have yet to even blow my nose."

"It's still early," he said. "Sometimes it takes a few days for all the symptoms to kick in."

Franky stepped forward then, startling Noon. "He'll be coming home with me."

After getting over his shock, and Franky's audacity, Noon turned his questioning stare on me. "Who the hell is this?"

"I'm Franklin Kincaid," Franky answered tersely, obviously not appreciating being dismissed by Noon.

Noon's chest puffed out as he faced Franky head-on. I jumped in before things could get out of hand. "Noon, this is Franky. A-ah friend. Franky, this is Noon."

"An, a-ah friend?" Noon asked, invisible quotation marks coating his words as he stared Franky down. "Must be something different than a regular friend, because I'm the only one of those you've got."

Franky glowered at him, and I narrowed my gaze at the back of my best friend's head.

"Stop being an ass, Noon."

"No, I'm just a protective friend defending you from some stranger who thinks you're leaving here with him."

"If you were such a great friend, instead of a neglectful one," Franky said, tone dripping with contempt, "you'd have known he's been living with me for weeks."

The testosterone levels rose, pushing at the ceiling, and although Noon had a few inches and more than a few pounds of muscle on Franky—which said a lot—Franky didn't fumble under the weight of Noon's formidability. If anything, he seemed ready to prove that size didn't matter.

"I've actually been trying to reach you for weeks now,"

Noon said, turning his guilt-ridden eyes on me. “You haven’t returned my texts or voicemail messages. I even stopped by the apartment this morning.”

“*Weeks?*” Franky asked. “Did you scour the city from top to bottom for him? Did you report him missing? Was an APB put out for him?” Franky asked, challenging Noon’s sudden concern. His tone went darker with each rhetorical question. “I’m terrified for him if you’re all he’s got. I haven’t known him for a fraction of the time you have, but I’d rain hell down on this city if even a day went by without hearing from him.”

I couldn’t deny that Franky had a point, even if I wasn’t clear on what drove it. I’d actually been the one trying to reach Noon, and not the other way around, but my texts and voicemail messages had gone unanswered. I’d checked in with Stacey, so I knew he was alive and well. “*We’ve just been busy,*” she’d said. He’d only just gotten back to me yesterday, but with being sick, I hadn’t gotten the chance to return his missed call.

“Franky,” I said. “Can you give us a few minutes?”

He nodded, reining in whatever it was he’d unleashed. “I’ll see about your discharge papers.”

Left alone with my best friend, I inched over so he could sit next to me. He snorted, pulling up a chair instead. No way could he have fit on the narrow gurney with me. The gesture was meant to be an olive branch.

“Why’d you lie?” I asked.

“I couldn’t give that asshole the pleasure of knowing he was right,” he said, gazing back at the door Franky exited through. “I’m sorry. I’ve been a shitty friend. I’ve just been—”

“Busy,” I cut in with. “I get it. You’ve always had big dreams, and I’ve always wanted to play it safe. We were bound to outgrow each other.” I smiled weakly. I’d tried to follow his lead after high school, even enrolling into community college alongside him. Didn’t last long. I would’ve eventually flunked out, if I hadn’t been kicked out first for fraternizing with the faculty.

“That isn’t what’s happening, Leland.”

“Isn’t it? I overheard you and Stacey talking a few nights before you moved out. I know about the big job offer she got in New York. She decided to accept it, didn’t she? And you’ve decided you’re going with her, right?”

Noon took my hand, looking ridiculous squeezed into the tiny hospital chair at my bedside. It groaned under his bulk. “That’s what I was calling to tell you. We’ve been getting things in order for the move. I would’ve told you sooner, but time got away from me.”

“You’re a bad liar,” I said.

“Alright, maybe I feel guilty about leaving, knowing you don’t have anyone else, but...”

“But you’ve gotta go,” I said, when he couldn’t.

“Yeah, I’ve gotta go.” He squeezed my hand tighter.

Noon glanced over at the closed door again, as if only just remembering about Franky. His eyes came back to mine with a million questions lingering behind them. I couldn't hold his stare.

“Am I wrong about you not having anyone else? Who is he?” he asked, and I blew a raspberry, dropping my head back on the pillow. I told him as little as I could but enough to satisfy his curiosity, ending things with Franky hiring me to paint a mural. I left out the part about him being one of the wealthiest businessmen alive. Those details meant nothing to me, so I opted out of mentioning it.

“You're into him,” he accused afterward.

“No, I'm not.”

“I've never seen you into anyone before.”

“Because I'm not,” I said.

“Is he single?” he asked, ignoring my denial.

“It's...complicated,” I said, giving up the act. I was tired of acting anyway, and this was Noon, he knew me better than anyone. *Almost* anyone.

“Please don't tell me he's married,” Noon begged.

“They're *separated*,” I stressed.

“Since when?” he asked, unconvinced.

“The start of summer.”

“Leland...” he warned.

“But things weren’t good between them prior to that,” I said defensively. “Doesn’t matter anyway. I finished the mural, and we don’t plan on seeing each other ever again.” God, it hurted to say it. Noon watched me doubtfully. “What?” I snapped.

He jabbed a finger at the door. “That didn’t look or sound like a man who plans on never seeing you again, Leland. I believe his exact words were ‘He’ll be coming home with me.’”

“He just feels guilty,” I said. *Always guilty*. “I’ll grab my car from his place once we leave here, and be back home before the sun goes down.”

“Your non-existent dating life has made you stupid,” Noon said with a snort. “That man isn’t guilty, he’s territorial. He saw my hands on you, and he nearly blew a blood vessel. He’s a married man, and he hardly knows you. He shouldn’t be that intense about you.” He’d lowered his voice to a concerned whisper. I didn’t point out that Franky knew me in ways he didn’t.

Was Noon onto something? I’d already convinced myself on the car ride from Franky’s house that anything I believed meant something more than it did had been a figment of my imagination.

A good defense attorney could call a medical professional to the witness stand to explain away the boner Franky popped out on the patio. It didn’t need to mean anything simply because I wanted it to. I’d sometimes get hard while thinking about food

whenever the wind blew the right way.

And him getting himself off on the boat didn't have to mean anything either. He'd likely gone from having regular sex to having to do without overnight. I'd jacked off for much less.

But the kiss... He'd kissed me back. *Hard*. There was no explaining that away, was there?

I'd been about to ask Noon what else he'd picked up from Franky's actions, but the man in question reappeared, entering without knocking like he owned the place.

Franky's stare darkened at the sight of Noon holding my hand. I slid my palm free, locking my spine against the shiver racing up it. "Someone will be by with your discharge papers shortly," he said tightly.

Noon rose from his chair, a mischievous glint to his eyes that only I could see. "Don't—" My warning hiss was sliced in half by his lips smashing onto mine. He gave me a loud, smacking kiss, smiling against my mouth as he held my head, then backed away before I could draw blood.

"Do you make a habit of touching him against his will?" Franky asked, deceptively cool as a cucumber.

"Oh, trust me," Noon whispered near Franky's ear as he moved toward the door, "he's willing." He'd all but told Franky we'd fucked, and then I went and confirmed it by blushing with mortification. The idiot even had the nerve to wink at me. *I'm gonna kill him.*

Franky's nostrils flared as he nailed me to the bed with his black, sinister stare.

Noon reached the door, stopping with a hand on the handle. "Leland," he said, all traces of humor swapped for misgivings. Made it hard to be upset with him. "Don't forget about the scratch-offs."

If I wasn't already struggling to contain my embarrassment, my face would've reheated, tipping Franky off to what Noon's comment implied. Franky knew about the scratch-off story, but luckily he was still boiling over Noon's previous innuendo to notice his latest insinuation.

Noon vanished, leaving me alone to weather the storm he'd caused. Maybe that was his point. If I hadn't seen what was right in front of me before, Noon had made sure nothing blinded me from it now.

"We need to talk," I said, done with denial and with fighting my feelings.

"I know," he replied, haggardly. "I know."

CHAPTER 11

Leland

The silence stretched to full capacity during the ride back to Franky's place. We'd made an unspoken agreement to keep our words to ourselves until we could share them uninterrupted and without distractions. Neither of us wanted to pour our hearts out as we sped along the highway.

Franky didn't waste any time getting comfortable for the approaching confrontation, yanking off his blazer and tie as soon as we walked through the door. It was like he'd thought putting it on in the first place could take him back to how things were before he'd decided to try his own happiness on for size, but it didn't work. Of course it didn't.

Ambling into the living room behind him, I idled near the sofa while he opened up the living room wall and breathed in the ocean air before lowering his chin to his chest.

"What was that back there?" I asked, taking the lead. "Between you and Noon."

"I was jealous," he said, stunning me. Not because I hadn't been teetering toward that conclusion, but because I'd expected it to take a round of shock therapy to get him to admit it. No, not admit it, because for the most part, Franky was an honest man. I'd expected it to take more prodding for him to *realize* it.

“I hated that he had the privilege of touching you in a way that I...” He faded off, leaving me to imagine how his sentence would have ended if he’d had the courage to complete it. *In a way that I don’t.*

“And then he wanted to take you from me. To care for you when I’d planned to basically dump you at the curb.” He grunted, then said under his breath, “No one takes anyone else from me.”

Anyone else? I thought curiously. I didn’t know where to go next, didn’t know if I should be apologizing or rejoicing. The atmosphere felt heavy and wrong, yet liberating and right. We weren’t pretending anymore. His answer had given us the freedom to be truthful, no matter how ugly the truth would be.

“Last night while in bed,” he began, as I stood there clutching the sofa back, wading through my mangled emotions. “I stared at the empty space next to me, wishing someone was there. That someone wasn’t my wife.” His pain was audible, screaming over his whispered words, and I wanted to rip myself from my spot and comfort him as he lifted his head to the churning storm clouds outside.

“I climaxed to the memory of a lean body, of someone who shouldn’t even be in my life, let alone my fantasies. That person wasn’t my wife, Leland. I experienced an orgasm so intense it felt like I’d exited my body, and it wasn’t Selene’s name I called to get me there.”

“What are you saying?” I asked, locking my knees when

they promised to buckle.

“I’m dying here, Leland,” he said gruffly. “Don’t finish me off by making me spell it out for you.”

But I needed him to spell it out, to write it out, to fucking *bleed* it out. This was too big to leave anything up for interpretation. Neither of us could be left guessing. Maybe he needed me to put myself on the line too. The way he had just done.

“I didn’t know it at the time, but I’ve wanted you since the day I laid eyes on you. That day on the roof, your fears called out to mine. You made me want to be brave before you’d ever said one word to me. That’s how much you affect me, Franky.”

Franky took the two steps needed to place him on the patio. I followed, more like chased him. I didn’t want him moving farther away from our current reality. Farther away from me.

“You scare me,” I admitted, closing in on him with purpose. “But I want to face you anyway, because you make me want to face everything that terrifies me. You’re married, and I... I’ve tried to care. I mean, I’ve tried to *still* care. But no matter how hard I try, your marriage doesn’t stop me from wishing I was in that empty space you spoke about, and it doesn’t stop me from blowing my load every fucking chance I get from just thinking about your sinful voice, or your dark moods, or the way you surprise even yourself when you laugh.” I sunk my fingers into his silky hair, feeling sympathy for the terror written across his face, but I pressed on anyway.

“You’re more than complicated. You’re a stick of fucking dynamite, Franky. Capable of blowing me to pieces, but I want you anyway.”

“I-I’m married,” he said, which came out as more of a reminder to himself.

“I don’t care,” I said, out of breath. “Not anymore. And maybe that makes me a bad person, but I want you too much to fucking care, Franky. You taught me to ask for what I want, even if the answer is no. I’m asking if I can have you, even if it’s only for a little while.”

“We can’t,” he said resolutely, spinning away from me, leaving my hands empty and my heart bruised. My first reaction was to retreat from his rejection, a turtle backing into its shell. It was a cold reminder of why I didn’t depend on anyone. I’d bled for him and was wounded deeply for my troubles. Then I remembered something he’d once told me.

“Wasn’t the possibility of getting what you wanted worth the risk of rejection?”

“Why can’t we?” I asked, allowing him the space he’d put between us. “You’re technically separated, and you said this summer was for figuring your shit out. How do you plan on doing that if you don’t actually figure your shit out?”

“I’m not sure an affair, which is exactly what this would be, constitutes as figuring *anything* out. If anything, it complicates things further, Leland.”

“She cheated first,” I said quickly, before I lost my nerve.

“Emotional cheating still qualifies as cheating.”

The sky rumbled, the ocean grew agitated, and birds abandoned their branches. Everything, including us, waited on a precipice, waited for what would happen next.

“I won’t use that as an excuse,” he said. “I refuse to. And besides, it isn’t even a good one.”

I disagreed, but because I wasn’t sure if my disagreement came from my core beliefs or because I wanted him, I didn’t challenge his point.

“What do you want, Franky?” This was no longer about us, about taking what we wanted. I cared about him, and I needed to know—needed *him* to know—what he wanted for not just this moment in time, but for his life. And maybe hearing it from him would help me decide what I wanted from my own life too. As it stood, I couldn’t see beyond wanting him.

“A new job?” I asked when he remained mute. “Not to have a job? Friends? Do you want to move to Alaska? How do you see the rest of your life playing out? At what point do you start living for yourself? Not for your revenge against the two people who brought you into this world or in penance for being an imperfect father and husband.” I walked around him, chasing his gaze. “Let yourself have this. Let yourself have me.”

“What do you want from me, Leland?” he asked breathlessly.

“The truth,” I said with a helpless shrug.

Franky took a deep breath, lacing his hands behind his neck before releasing one and palming the side of my throat with it. I closed my eyes, gripping his forearm and enjoying his touch in a way I'd never let myself do before.

“The truth is, I don't have the answers to any of those questions, Leelee Bear.” He'd called me that plenty of times in jest. This time he said it with a type of despair that left me unable to think. He said it like maybe it could be the one good, normal thing in all of this. “Truth is, the only time I'm not lost, the only time I have a clue about anything, is when I'm with you.” He squeezed my neck, making it difficult to breathe. Or maybe his confession had been what cut off my air supply.

“So you do know what you want,” I said.

“Yes,” he answered, as if that ugly truth had been torn out of him.

“Then fucking take it,” I dared before I could stop myself. If he'd been hoping I would talk some sense into him, he was wrong.

“Just because it's the truth doesn't mean we should act on it, because an even bigger truth is that this won't end well. I can't make you any promises. I will likely regret what comes next, and I'll likely hurt you beyond repair.”

“I. Want. You. Anyway.” I turned each word into a punch for maximum impact. *Don't forget the scratch-offs.* Noon's reminder worked its way into my resolution, but I was in a gambling mood, ready to risk it all, and I was done with

pretending otherwise. “Take what you want, Franky, and I promise I won’t ask for more.”

“I’m married,” he said, a warning, not a reminder this time.

“I promise,” I said again.

“Leland—”

“I *promise*, Franky.”

Thunder cracked overhead, stealing his attention, and I glared at the roaring sky, ready to curse the fucking gods judging us from beyond it.

“It’s not that simple,” he insisted.

“It *is* that simple. But you want to act like it’s not. You want to first turn yourself inside out for an eternity before you finally lay more than a hand on me, because in your mind it shouldn’t be such an easy thing to do.” My statement reminded him of the hold he had on me, and I slapped my palm to the back of his hand when his grip loosened on my neck, afraid I’d lose my mind—lose him—if he let go of me.

“You own a company you hate running, you have grown children you tiptoe around, and a wife who doesn’t really know you or understand your restlessness. What decent human being would risk all that for a chance to feel good, right? Not without first making himself sufficiently sick with wanting.” I wasn’t trying to pressure him. Wasn’t trying to be a bad influence either. I was merely telling him what he wanted to hear, what he *needed* to hear. We were working through every

objection out loud before falling into our selfishness.

I would've stood there all night daring fate to strike us down, would've risked being burned to cinders by one errant spark of lightning if it meant I'd end up in his bed. It should've shamed me to admit that, even if it was only to myself, but I had a metaphorical stack of scratch-offs in front of me now, and there was no turning back.

“You don't know what you're asking for,” he said, shouting to be heard over the rain that had given no warning before pouring down on us. I let him drag me inside as he complained about me already being sick.

“Maybe I don't,” I conceded. “But I know *you*. Your foul moods are equivalent to a fucking earthquake, and all I can do when you're experiencing one is hold on to something and grit my teeth until they pass. You're a category-5 shit-storm on a good day, Franky, but on a bad day? God, on a bad day, I wanna be the thing you take it all out on. When you feel good, I feel like I can take on the world or ignore it for one more second to be with you.

“I know you like a bottle of Stella right before dinner because it helps you unwind, making it easier to walk away from whatever you're hacking away at on the patio. I know you love your family, and that you wish you could be different for them. More nurturing, more present, and less regretful... But before you can be different for them, you need to be different for yourself.”

“Leland,” he said, cradling my face between his strong hands. “I didn’t know my being withdrawn affected you so much.”

“I love your darkness, Franky. And I would take being in the eye of your storm over being on the edge of it any day. You’ve been struggling with this, haven’t you? I know that now.”

“Leland,” he pleaded, eyes erratic, unable to choose a spot on my face to crash land on. He tapped his wet forehead against mine, then pulled away, looking over my rain-splattered clothing with a frown.

“I’m fine,” I said, holding back a sneeze. I let him pull my t-shirt off anyway. He dried my hair with it, effectively forcing us into an interlude.

“Who else knows you, Franky?” I asked, getting the conversation back on track. “Not who knows Franklin Kincaid, but who knows *you*.” I rubbed a hand over his heart, feeling it pitter-patter faster than a hummingbird’s wings.

“No one,” he said, shuddering from my touch. He glanced over to the photo on the coffee table. It had been there for a while now, but neither of us had mentioned it. “At least not anymore.”

I rewound my mental recorder, playing back something he’d said a little while ago.

“No one takes anyone else from me.”

Suddenly, I was both curious and jealous, and the hand on

his chest curled into a tight fist. Theo would have to wait until later, though, because right now it was about Franky and me.

“Please,” I begged, my lips approaching his. Franky cupped my cheeks, his arms shaking with the emotional strength it took to hold me back. “*Please.*”

“I’m not good for you.” His voice broke.

“I’ve been warned,” I whispered before he closed the gap. Our lips collided with an intensity that literally knocked me off my feet.

Franky steadied me with an arm banded around my waist, crushing me to him, our hard cocks thumping against each other. The kiss was feverish and messy, and several times we had to break apart to suck in air before diving back in again.

He tugged my hair like it had somehow offended him, and I squirmed my hands between us to rip open his dress shirt, sending the buttons flying everywhere. He stopped me before I could undo his belt buckle.

“I haven’t changed my mind,” he said, accurately reading my panicked expression.

“If you’re worried I’ll get you sick, it’s a little too late for that.”

He shook his head, his hands dropping to my shoulders. “It’s not that.”

“Then what?” I asked.

“Maybe we should take it slow.”

My first reaction was to be disappointed, maybe even scared that we'd both have a change of heart if we let this moment slip away. But I'd never taken anything slow, and he'd never done this before, and I surprisingly wanted to savor that. For once I didn't want to rush in so that I could just as quickly rush out.

"Okay," I agreed, kissing him again and peeling my lips away with tremendous effort. "Slow. But promise me that when we fuck, it'll be anything but slow."

"The antithesis of it," he swore, but I didn't miss the hard swallow he gave.

"You're going to be a natural, Franky," I swore in return before handing myself over to the kiss again.

We kissed until the rain stopped, until the moon replaced the blood-orange sun, and until the skin of our lips was raw to the touch and swollen.

We kissed our way to Franky's bed, where he released his full weight on top of me, uncaring about my inability to breathe as he explored the inside of my mouth with his greedy tongue.

Franky prodded, and swept, and licked every crevice, and I patiently let him, even as my balls tightened painfully inside my jeans.

He still wore his now buttonless shirt, providing easy access to his muscled chest and back, and my hands took advantage, roaming and squeezing and imagining how they would bunch

and release as he fucked into me.

“Top or bottom?” I asked during one of our rare breaks where we used the time apart to stare into each other’s eyes, expressions both excited and afraid. I knew better than to assume, even though my ass already knew what it wanted. It clenched around the emptiness as I waited in suspense for Franky’s answer. It was possible he didn’t know, and that would’ve been okay too.

“Top,” he said with a confidence at odds with his experience. “I have this need to be inside of you, Leland. I’ve always had that need.”

“*Fuck*, you’re making me wet, Franky.” I dug my heels into his lower back as my cockhead grew damp inside my boxers. Franky moaned from the assault against his dick and resumed our kiss, becoming consumed again.

“What about you?” he asked, chest heaving as he dragged in all the air around us, leaving me without.

“Bottom, Franky,” I breathed. “Fucking bottom.”

His eyes darkened as he held himself above me to take in the clothes covering my body with scorn. Franky’s scorching stare returned to mine, and I knew we were doing this. Fuck taking things slow, and inexperience be damned, we were doing this.

“There’s so much of you,” he said, already playing with my pebbled nipple through my thin shirt as our hips instinctively undulated against each other. “I don’t know what to do with

you...”

“Are you calling me chunky, Franky?” I teased in a raspy voice, arching up, pressing my pec to his teasing fingers.

“No, I just don’t know if what I’ve done in the past would work now.” He avoided directly mentioning his wife, but I wasn’t a fool. My lip curled with jealousy, which should’ve been the first sign that letting Franky touch me was a mistake, that going any further would be an even bigger one. “Everything in me wants to tear you apart, Leland. And I’m sorry,” he said, with a hard thrust between my spread legs, “but I don’t think I can hold back. Not after holding back for so long.” The haunted gleam in his eyes said his refrain went further back than the day we met, and a thrill rocked my whole body because I’d be his first, I’d be on the receiving end of everything pent up inside of him.

I gripped two handfuls of his hair, tugging until it hurt, until the pain sent his eyes rolling heavenward, until he understood what freedom really felt like, until those eyes became ravenous for it. “You couldn’t fuck this up if you tried, Franky. Do whatever you want to me. Be as rough and as selfish as you need to be.” I swallowed, lowering my tone as I voiced the thought I probably should have left inside my head. “Use my body in all the ways you felt like you couldn’t use hers.” I tugged his hair harder to distract him from the guilt leaking into his expression, and he moaned, lust hardening every angle of him until even his pitch-black eyes had turned to stone. The bed rocked, beating against the wall as his cock attempted to

cut through our layers of clothing to get at me.

“What if I hurt you, Leland?” His question held a double meaning, but I addressed the more pressing one, the one that would get his cock inside of me.

“My body can handle you, Franky. You don’t need to use caution with me. Never with me,” I whispered meaningfully.

That was all the permission he needed before ripping our clothes off in under sixty seconds.

“Christ,” he moaned, his gaze eating up the expanse of my naked body, the sight of my dripping dick. Franky scooped up the pearly bead dangling over the rim of my cockhead, eyeing it as if it were one of the seven wonders of the world.

He brought his finger to his nose for a sniff, seemingly swaying to one side from the scent’s potency before sucking his digit clean. The bedframe shook with his full-body tremor.

“Tell me you have lube,” I said, rolling my balls in one hand and teasingly stroking my cock with the other. “Tell me you needed it for all the nights you wanted me but had to make do with your hand instead.”

“Yes,” Franky breathed, reaching into the bedside drawer for the lube, then swore. “*Please* tell me you have condoms.”

“Fuck,” I hissed. “I’m all out.”

Franky swiped the tip of his tongue over his lips, closing his eyes as if tasting the remnants of my pre-cum there, and I knew this night couldn’t end like this.

“You can trust me, Franky,” I said, giving him all he needed to know with my intense stare.

“I do,” he said, giving me the same potent stare in return. “And you can trust me.”

“I do,” I said. “God, I fucking do.”

“Show me what to do to you,” he demanded.

I drizzled lube over our cocks before stroking his shaft. He shivered from his kneeling position. “Shit, Franky, you’re big.”

“So are you,” he said, thrusting into my hand.

“There’s big, and then there’s *this*,” I said, squeezing him, my fingers almost meeting around his girth. “This is... *Fuck*, your cock’s gonna do a number on me, baby.” My hole clenched around nothing, and I needed that problem rectified sooner rather than later.

“Come closer.” I encouraged him forward by his dick until he hovered over me, forearms braced on either side of me. Holding on to our twin erections required both of my hands, and Franky caught on quickly, pumping his hips, gliding the underside of his slick dick along the pulsing vein of mine.

I rocked with him, matching his excitement, unable to do anything but hold on to us as he grew bolder and less cautious above me.

“That’s right, Franky,” I crooned. I wanted to save the best for last. To show him the type of pleasure he never imagined he could achieve with nothing more than foreplay, then I

would give him my ass and send him skyrocketing into addiction.

He kissed me savagely, encasing my throat in one large palm, tightening his hold unconsciously as he bucked in and out of my excruciating grip. He'd leave bruises, for sure, and would possibly kill me in the process, but I didn't care, because what we were doing felt that good. What we were doing was worth dying for.

I let loose a strangled whimper when my lack of oxygen became too unbearable to hide. Franky released me, and I expected a string of apologies to follow, but he was too far gone in his lust-haze to spend a second on regret.

He sank his teeth into my shoulder, nearly breaking the skin, replacing one near-death pleasure with another. Our dicks slipped from my grasp as I cried out, but Franky kept bucking like a bull, his dick sawing a path through my pubic hair in search of my erection.

He dragged his teeth higher, and I lifted my chin, giving him room to tear my fucking throat out if he so pleased.

Franky's fingers scraped across my scalp as the digits bunched in my hair, and he sucked at my neck so hard I felt it in my asshole as if there was a direct line there. I needed to be fucked. I needed Franky's obscene cock inside me, pulverizing me.

He moved on to my earlobe, then my jawline, meanwhile he'd sealed off the space where my hands had held us together,

now rutting against my cock with such accuracy that my assistance was no longer needed.

Franky attacked every area on my body that he could manage to bite or bruise without sacrificing what we had going on down below.

“I’m sorry,” he panted, popping his mouth off my nipple. “But I *need* to hurt you.”

I got it. I understood from the feral glaze in his eyes, from the barbaric way he moved above me... Franky was now a changed man. His world would never look the same once we left this bed. Lies that he’d convinced himself were true would no longer be the easy pills to swallow. He’d just discovered his latest addiction, and he wanted to make me pay for it.

“Don’t ever fucking apologize while you’re fucking me, Franky.” My nipples burned to the third-degree, my throat was on fire, and I’d likely be bald by the time he was done with me. “Destroy me, Franky.” I turned my head the other way, presenting the other side of my neck in offering, and he didn’t waste a second before sealing his mouth over the unblemished skin.

We were drenched in each other’s sweat, the sheet simultaneously popped off all four corners of the mattress, and the nightstand wobbled. I shuddered at imagining what would happen when he eventually shoved inside of me.

Franky’s hair glistened, the dark strands swinging like a pendulum as he raced like a fucking horse toward his orgasm.

We were both so damn close to drowning each other in cum.

He dug his forehead into mine. "I'm close," he gritted out before stealing another tongue-battling kiss.

"Not yet. Not until your cock is inside of me, Franky. I *need* your cum inside of me," I panted, feeling my own climax tap at my lower spine. "Just the tip. For round one, just give me the tip, then jerk off while it's inside of me." I wanted to be tempted and teased. I wanted my hole ungrateful and hungry for more. And I wanted him crazed, his hold on reality gone. I wanted him violent and needing more than what the tip could offer us both.

"What do I need to do?" he asked, moaning as he fought back his orgasm.

"Sit up," I said.

Franky backed into a kneeling position, his face contorted with genuine torture as he gripped his drooling cock at the base. He needed to come. We both did.

"Lube your fingers," I said swiftly, hauling my knees to my ears as I continued to work my shaft.

Franky fumbled the bottle twice before popping the cap and making a mess in the process. "Slip one finger in, *slowly*, at first," I said, leisurely whipping my dick. "Fuck!" My head fell back and pressed into the pillow when one finger breached me. I hadn't had anal sex in a while. Franky would be a terrifyingly tight fit.

“That’s it,” I said, peering down my chest again, needing to see every centimeter of his thick fingers vanish inside my hole. “Another, then crook them.”

Franky did as told, adding another finger, sliding them in to the very last knuckle. “You’re so damn hot,” he said, showing his teeth, and now fucking his fist too.

Now four digits deep into me, my ass sucked on his hand while the pace of our jack-off session exceeded the speed necessary to keep our loads in their sacs.

Working on instinct, Franky crooked his fingers, tapping my gland until I fucking detonated. Keening, I called out his name, spurting cum until I’d left a fucking stream of it all over the front of my body.

“Leland,” Franky said between gritted teeth, still finger-pounding my nub, still painfully jacking his cock.

“Now,” I said, wringing every drop of cum from my dick. “Stick it in now, Franky.”

Franky fell over me again, leading just his cockhead into my snug entrance like we’d agreed. I hissed through the burn, my orgasm lengthening.

He pumped himself in short, punishing strokes, his crown swelling just beyond my hole before a river of warmth went barreling through me.

“Christ...*fuck*,” he spit out.

“That’s right,” I said, fully spent, head rolling to one side.

“Don’t pull out until you’re done, Franky.”

The hand holding his weight up slipped, taking him down, the air whooshing out of me as he fell onto my sticky chest, his cock breaching me more than halfway now. I cried out from the invasion.

Franky plunged all the way inside, shooting me higher up the bed until my head banged against the headboard. His mouth and throat moved as if he were gagging on his words. “So-sorry,” he said, even as he unapologetically kept plowing and fucking me full of his spunk.

I’d never felt so full, so overwhelmed, so fucking complete as I did with his dick fully sheathed in me. My hole spasmed, puckered like a set of lips, opening to accommodate every sinfully thick inch of him.

Franky secured the headboard with one hand, using it as leverage as he continued to roll into me, in complete denial that the sex was over. “More,” he said as his climax ebbed. “I need...more.”

“There’s plenty where that came from,” I said, completely and utterly annihilated.

Franky sat up, slipping wetly from me, gaze chained to my jizz-smearred chest, then lowering to his cock and balls, both stained with his own release. Next he stalked the helping of cum leaking from my ass to soak through the sheet.

I lowered my legs, my feet hitting the bed.

“Can I?” Franky asked, his tongue darting across his lips.

“I’d be mad if you didn’t,” I said, bearing down until a gush of cum erupted from my used hole.

Franky sucked me clean, slurping and moaning, mouth sealed over my asshole. His need to ingest cum was a physical thing, so intense that he hadn’t even stopped to consider whose cum he so eagerly gulped down.

Stretched out on his stomach and writhing, Franky ate from me indiscriminately, lapping and praising me as his palms split my cheeks apart. I gripped the backs of my thighs to make the deep dive easier on his tongue.

I circled my hips, watching him go to work on me. “I don’t think you got it all, Franky,” I said, taunting him to do something about it. He sent a middle finger straight into me, withdrawing and sucking the white off the thick digit before sending it back in for more.

Once satisfied that he’d digested it all, he crawled up my body, his tongue flattened to my skin, licking up the mess I’d made. He even got the drop under my chin, then retraced his steps, devoting all his attention to my nut sac and dick.

“Fuck, wait,” I hissed, my cock sensitive to the touch.

“No,” he growled, batting my hands off his hair. He buried his face in my groin, chuffing and smelling and kissing my short pubic hairs.

Franky’s knees spread wider on the mattress, and I savored

the sight of his ass tensing and releasing as he fucked the memory foam. In no time, my cock hardened again.

“Let me ride you, Franky. Let me show you how good I can make you feel.”

He rose to his hands and knees with interest in his eyes. His balls hung between his legs, his cock filling, aiming at my center like a loaded weapon. The burly crown stretched until it shone like a gem, the long, heavysset shaft veiny and darker than the rest of his body. Franky licked the creamy corners of his mouth.

“Say yes, Franky. Say you’ll let me fuck your cock,” I said with feigned bashfulness, undulating as he watched.

“Jesus, Leland.” Franky slid to his haunches, lifting and squeezing his pectorals as if he needed to be milked there too.

I clambered to my knees, suctioning my mouth over the perky nipple he fed to me, suckling enthusiastically as he roughly kneaded his other pec.

“Damn it, that feels good,” he whimpered, his cock thumping loudly against his lower abs as he humped the air. Franky held me by the back of the head, mouth slack, eyebrows shooting into the air in disbelief.

“I think you’ve found yourself a fetish, Franky,” I said when I was through. “I wonder how many more we’ll discover.” Our knees touched, our chests heaved, and our cocks stood tall as we took a split second to soak in the moment. Franky hadn’t let go of his pec yet, and my saliva glistened from the pert

nipple.

“I think so,” he said with wonder, quickly wrapping a hand around his base and quivering. I mopped up the clear fluid at his tip with my tongue.

His fingers grazed along his neck as he fixated on the handprints lining mine. I couldn't see them, but the sweet sting of my skin told me they were there. More pre-cum spit from his slit at the sight of them. “I've left marks on you,” he said.

I didn't answer. I was too busy fucking myself open on a hand drenched in lube. “Are you going to let me ride you, Franky? Are you going to let me ruin you?”

“Yes,” he said in a trance-like state as he absently fondled his balls.

I slapped his hand out of the way and squatted over his lap, then swallowed his dick with my hole. “Has it ever felt like this, Franky. Has someone ever wanted you this much?”

“No,” he breathed.

“This is my cock now,” I said, even though time would prove that to be a lie. For now it was the ultimate truth. “I'm the only one who fucks this dick from now on, do you hear me?” My thighs ached as I fucked him with exuberance. “We get to say and do what we want when we're like this, Franky. We can be whoever we want, live out all our fantasies when we're together like this.”

Franky dug his fingers into my hip, getting high off the

game, deciding to join in. “Your ass belongs to me, Leland,” he growled, the tip of his nose touching mine. “And so does your cock and your mouth. Your whole damn body is mine.” Franky’s palm whistled through the air, crashing against my ass and tugging a yelp from me. “Say it,” he snarled.

“No,” I said on a whimper, only to have him spank me harder next time. “Fuck!”

“Say it!” he shouted, fine droplets of saliva pelting my chin. I said nothing, fucking him with a stone-cold expression, causing him to get carried away.

“I can do this all night,” he said, hand cracking against the now raw flesh of my ass. I could no longer move. I sat on his dick, taking my punishment, sweat blinding me. “Say it,” he hissed.

“My-my body is yours, Franky.”

Franky took control then, force-fucking me on and off his erection. “I fuck this snug ass from here on out. No one else. And your cock gets no action unless it’s in my mouth or my hands.”

“Fuck,” I said shakily, the slapping sounds of my ass meeting his lap getting me off just as much as his threats. “You’re good at this, Franky.”

“This isn’t a game,” he said, ripping me off his cock and dumping me onto my back. I bounced on the mattress and then he was on me and in me again, manhandling my wrists above my head. “You fuck anyone else, or allow anyone to fuck you,

and you'll have to answer to me, Leland.”

I rolled us, planting my fists into the pillows next to his head, expertly riding his dick, purposely ruining him for anyone else. Our sweat mingled, the sound of our sex boisterous and slippery as his fingers slotted into the handprints at my hips. We were going to break the fucking bed.

“Who do you answer to, Franky?” I asked, anger taking over as my thrusts became more determined, more point driven. “Who else has handled your cock this good? Who else have you been able to fuck so thoroughly and with all your goddamn might, Franky?” I leaned over his mouth, licking across the seam. “You can't break me, Franky.” *At least not my body.*

The fucking turned animalistic, more so than it had already been, as if my final words were a challenge to him, and I braced myself against the headboard as he planted his feet flat on the bed and tore into me. All I could do was stay on my knees, hold on for dear life, and accept him as his cock charged in and out of me, slipping and catching on my rim.

Franky heaved up and wrapped his teeth around a nipple. I tossed my head back and cursed, my dick thrumming as it leaked against my belly. He stilled, biting and sucking my flesh as he unloaded inside me again, trembling and groaning around my beard-burned skin.

“Touch me, Franky,” I managed to get out. I was coming

before his fist had fully enclosed around me.

A few minutes of heavy breathing passed before I was on my back again with a wild-eyed Franky hungrily taking in my cum-splattered abs. “Hold on,” I said, as his head lowered. “Answer my question.”

“After,” he said, consumed by yet another found addiction.

“Now,” I ordered, holding him by the hair and fighting against his resistance, fighting harder when he stretched his tongue toward my navel.

Franky blinked, his cum-lust clearing, and my heart skipped a beat as I waited for him to say something. “For as long as this lasts, be it one night, one week, or several months... You’ll be the only one I have sex with, Leland.”

I chuckled inwardly at his use of the word *sex*. “So it’s only called *fucking* when you’re high on dick, huh?”

He swatted my outer thigh, hard enough to make me flinch, hard enough to make me swallow. He tongued me spotless, moaning during the process, then ordered, “Get on your hands and knees, Leelee Bear.”

He wanted me positioned like a dog, adjusting my limbs until I painted the picture he had in his mind. “This is how you should be,” he whispered, trailing a finger down my arched spine. “You’re beautiful like this.” He ate his cum from my hole again, complaining about there not being enough.

Franky didn’t give my ass a break all night. When his cock

couldn't keep up with the rest of him, and his tongue had had enough, he fingered me, watching me intently as he learned what angle and what pace pleased me the most.

He became a student on the subject of my desires. At times his exploration felt clinical, but that's what made it hot. I was his test subject, and I'd teach him all he wanted to know and then some.

We showered as the sun rose and then I filled the empty space in his bed. *I'm here now*, I wanted to say, *for however long this lasts*. My body was too fucked out, and my brain too tired to articulate anything.

Franky hesitated for a brief second before hauling me into his chest, stroking my hair as our breaths evened.

"I don't like Noon," he whispered.

"Why, because he's not afraid of you?" I asked, yawning. Noon didn't intimidate easily, if at all. That had to be an unwelcome change for Franky.

"No," he said, "I can respect him for that."

"Then why?" I knew the answer, but I needed him to say it, and not for clarity's sake. I needed to know he was jealous. I needed to know I wasn't the only one who was imperfect in that way.

"Because he's had you," he said, exhaustion weighing down his words.

"It was a long time ago, and it didn't mean anything."

“Say it again,” he said, the hand stroking my hair now twisting tightly in it.

“It didn’t mean anything,” I said, giving him what he needed, nestling into him further when his fingers relaxed and scratched at my scalp. I thought that was the end of it, the end of our night, until whispered words pulled me from the tugging hands of sleep.

“I know you prefer one great friend over many, because it lessens your chances of people hurting you. Of them leaving you. I know you also prefer one friend over none, because being completely alone reminds you of how lonely you are. I know deep down you believe in your artistic capabilities, but you do things like spend all your money prepaying your rent, because it gives you an excuse to not pursue your secret ambitions. I know you have one-night stands because you’re afraid of what falling in love will do to you. I should be petrified of hurting you, of being the one to prove you right, but I’m selfish, and I want you, Leland. Even if it’s just for a little while.”

I could hardly hear him past the pounding of his heart and the fevered screaming of mine. I tried to lift my head off his chest, but he held me there.

“And I know that what your mother did to you still haunts you. And not just because I can hear you cry out in your sleep for her sometimes. I know it because your beautiful soul, and your beautiful golden eyes, tell me every time the wall around

them opens up for me. And I know you never open either of those things for anyone. Maybe not even for Noon. I'm not even sure you know they're open for me."

We were quiet for a while, listening to the birds raise their voices outside.

"What are we doing, Leland?" Franky asked.

"I don't know," I admitted.

I knew what I thought we were doing, but I had a bad feeling that what I thought and what was fact were two totally different and complicated things.

What I did know, right then, was that Noon was wrong.
Franky does know me.

CHAPTER 12

Franklin

“I feel like shit on wheels,” Leland complained, blowing his nose. “Sorry for getting you sick.” His cold symptoms had fully developed. It started with a sneeze for me that morning and a hacking cough from him.

“It’s not your fault,” I said, pushing up in bed to recline against the headboard with him. “I knew you were sick when I kissed you.”

“Do you regret it?” he asked.

I thought his question over for as long as it took, not wanting to lie or give an answer that didn’t encompass the whole truth. “No, I don’t regret it. No matter how much I should.”

I plucked a Kleenex from the box on the nightstand just in time to catch my sneeze with it.

“Tell me about Theo,” Leland said. “That picture hasn’t left the coffee table in weeks. And I see you staring at it sometimes. He was more than a friend, wasn’t he?”

“No, he wasn’t. At least I’m not sure. I cared for him a lot, and at some point I did suspect that something had shifted between us, but I was young, figured I didn’t know myself or know what I was feeling. My father sent his family away

before we could figure anything out, and I'd never experienced those same feelings again." I shrugged.

"How did it start? When did things change between you two?"

I waited out Leland's coughing fit, using the time to think back on all the little things, the little signs I'd had from Theo. The ones I thought maybe I'd imagined. "I'd catch him watching me, and he'd blush before turning away. We used to race to our favorite pond on the property, holding hands. Nothing unusual for us. Then one day the way he held my hand changed. His hold on me became...protective, I suppose. Maybe proprietary is a better word.

"Gloria used to make these delicious hoagies for us to take to the pond. And homemade iced-tea. Theo and I would fight over the biggest piece, because she could never quite manage to cut it evenly. We grew older and closer, and one day Theo gave up the bigger half graciously, and continued to do so. And then one day, seeing him became an event. Something I had to shower and pick out the right outfit for." I shook my head at the memory. "He made my stomach flutter, but we were both still too young and too scared to examine why. And then he was gone, and so were the flutters."

"And you've never felt those flutters again?" Leland asked.

"Not for a long time," I admitted, staring into those gorgeous brown eyes of his as tiny waves rippled through my core. "Not until you."

Leland and I spent the next several days curled up together in bed, or recuperating on the sofa, and on one warm night, the boat. We picked over soup, drank a profuse amount of hot tea, and even attempted to kiss, but it either ended with Leland coughing until his ribs ached or me pulling away to sneeze. We were magnetic, and even through sickness, we craved one another.

We settled for holding each other through our fever-induced chills and taking turns hand feeding each other. I'd never felt so cared for before. Maybe because I could never afford to be sick, or maybe I'd simply never given anyone else the opportunity to, had never given myself permission to be vulnerable enough. Another thing to feel guilty for. I'd set everyone up for failure when it came to me.

I'd learned a lot during those days with Leland. I learned I could be a baby when sick so long as I didn't have the pressure of always needing to be the strong one. I learned I could be nurturing, and weak, and childlike when I could trust that the person I was with didn't need me to be a pillar for them.

My kids needed me to be strong, my wife needed me to be strong, and Nexcom did too. Leland just needed me to be me.

Leland and I shared a different kind of intimacy that week. One I was afraid to lose after only recently discovering how much I needed it. Being with him felt like thriving. It felt like progress after feeling stagnant for far too long.

My heart beat differently with him. It beat like I imagined it

was supposed to. Wild with excitement, then steady as it filled with peace. I never wanted it to end.

But how many people was I willing to hurt to hold on to my peace? That was the part I struggled with.

“Leelee Bear!” I called, rounding the patio from the side of the house. I yelled it again, amused as he cursed the day I was born.

“Is that how you treat the person who went through the trouble of making sure dinner was ready when you got home?” he said when I crossed through the open wall and into the kitchen. I didn’t spare a glance for the food. I enveloped him in a hug, kissing him passionately, showing him how much I missed him.

“Someone’s in a good mood,” he said.

“Yeah, I can finally breathe through both nostrils and my appetite’s back.”

“*And* because you haven’t been away from me for more than five minutes in a long time, so you missed me. Admit it,” he said, circling his arms around my back. We’d separated to run our individual errands. Leland needed more art supplies and to hand in paperwork for the bartending course he’d registered for, and I needed to put out another fire over at Nexcom.

Normally, the latter would have affected my mood negatively for the duration of the day, but seeing Betty haphazardly parked in the driveway, and knowing her owner waited inside for me, had inverted my frown.

“Should I be admitting that?” I asked. I’d told Leland I couldn’t make him any promises. I’d said I was no good for him and would likely hurt the both of us. He’d in turn said that he knew what he was getting himself into. He was the guy who didn’t commit, who didn’t allow himself to fall. I’d been counting on his boundaries to help me create my own, but here we were, two teen lovebirds, chirping and flying into each other at all hours of the day. It felt good, and somehow that felt bad. Like skydiving without a parachute.

“Sure,” he said, without a care in the world. “If we’re going to do this, let’s not be miserable while doing it or hold back in the process.”

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea, Leland.” I fondled the shell of his ear.

He nodded, his lips forming a hard line. “You’re right. Sorry. I’m as new to this as you are. It’s just, you’re my friend, too, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.” It made it hard to draw straight lines. Made it hard to know which of those squiggly lines shouldn’t be crossed, because even if we weren’t lovers now, I still would’ve missed my friend. “I don’t want to lose our friendship by trying to keep our distance as lovers. If that makes sense.”

“Makes just as much sense as all that sexy caveman shit you were spewing when I rode the fuck out of your cock,” he said, and I groaned, covering his mouth with my palm. He pulled at

my fingers, trying to free himself so he could embarrass me further. It seemed to be a new hobby of his.

Leland pinched my nose and smacked his other hand over my mouth, leaving me with no backup option for air supply. His eyes glowed with delight and anticipation of me waving the white flag first. I let him go, gasping for air once he released me as well.

His cheeks were rosy with joy, his shirt askew. *My* shirt askew. He'd taken to helping himself to my clothes now that he'd moved into my bedroom. They swam on his smaller frame, often drooping off one creamy, pale shoulder, calling my mouth to his exposed skin. I suspected that was why he wore them. I didn't complain.

"Laugh it up," I said, "because you'll regret every word when I get you back under me."

"And when will that be?" he asked huskily, flushing for a completely different reason now.

"Soon. Now. Immediately," I said, bringing his fingers back to my nose. Leland snatched his hand away, hiding it behind his back.

"Give me your hand back," I said.

"No," he replied, squirming as I fought for his hand and won. I uncurled his tight fist, inhaling noisily from the heel of his palm all the way to his finger tips, closing my eyes after getting a hit of the dark aroma. "I thought that's what I smelled."

His cock lengthened inside his shorts, but that didn't mean anything. At twenty-five, Leland became aroused whenever the wind blew, which happened a lot when living close to the ocean. Keeping up had never been an issue for me in the past, but Leland would definitely be a challenge to my stamina.

"What were you doing before I walked in here?" I crowded him into the island.

"Nothing," he answered, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

"It doesn't *smell* like nothing."

"Like I said, I cooked. There's a burger and fries waiting on the stove." He motioned his head over my shoulder.

"I'm not hungry for that." I flicked my tongue over his bottom lip, and he gave a hum of approval.

"You never know until you try it," he said. "I made a dipping sauce for the fries. It's thick and salty. Just the way you like it."

For the first time since arriving home, I took my eyes off him. The burger and fries were already plated, a clear portion cup containing a creamy, white sauce sat next to it.

"You should try it," Leland insisted, but I was already on my way over there.

I brought the portion cup to my nose, nearly drowning my nostrils in the heady cum in my impatience. "Jesus," I croaked, my salivary glands activating. I buried my tongue inside Leland's cum, the sounds coming from me inhuman. I scooped

up a mouthful and tilted my head back, feeling it slide like honey down my throat to pool in my belly.

Leland clicked his tongue. “If I were a different man, I’d say you had a problem.”

I was too deep into my new addiction to offer a retort, so I dipped a couple fries into the cum cup instead before shoving them all into my mouth. “Why does it taste so good?” I asked.

Leland shrugged. “Could be all the pineapple I eat. Should I be worried you’ll swap woodworking for cum eating as your new, favorite pastime?”

“That would be a valid concern,” I said. “I’ll be sure to keep the fridge stocked with pineapple.” I wanted to pin him down and suck my next meal from him. My cock throbbed painfully behind the confines of my clothing.

I fingered what was left in the cup, making sure I didn’t miss a drop. I wasn’t satisfied. It wasn’t enough. “I need a little more,” I said greedily, and Leland nodded, reading the question in my eyes. “Now?”

He nodded again, tugging the waistband of his shorts over his erection.

“You’re already so close,” I said, caging him in, our heads touching as we gazed at the fluid beading at his slit.

“Yeah,” he agreed, tucking the shirt hem between his chin and chest as he spread his pre-cum over his pretty, pink crown.

“Faster,” I ordered, nails scraping along the island’s edge.

“Fuck, you’re impatient,” Leland gritted as he worked the top half of his shaft. “Put a finger in me, Franky. The biggest one you got.” He yanked his shorts lower with his free hand, then spread his legs as far as he could with them now hovering around his knees. “I need something in my ass.”

Leland was the one doing all the work, but my heart pumped frantically.

“Spit on it,” he said, when I licked a stripe up my middle finger. “Make it dirty, Franky.”

“Damn it, Leland,” I swore, shutting my eyes briefly. I was dangerously close to unloading unassisted in my pants.

“Do it now,” he panted. I felt every bit the fumbling virgin, following Leland’s more experienced lead. “Don’t go slow. Do it like you’re taking what’s yours. I wanna feel it burn, Franky.”

My knuckles pressed against the warm skin of his inner thighs. I had my finger lodged deep inside him before he’d said my name. On fire now, and with a sense of entitlement, a sense of ownership over him, I wrapped a hand around his throat, forcing my way into his mouth and eating his cries. “Like that?” I asked, working his prostate and taking his mouth again. The way his ass sucked on my finger as he jerked himself off harder and faster was all the yes I needed.

His Adam’s apple bobbed below my palm, and feeling bold, I freed his neck to squeeze a thumb and forefinger between his jaw, forcing his mouth open and spitting straight into the back

of it. Leland came on a shout, and I gobbled that up too.

His cum dribbled down his chest to the nest of short curls at his groin. I fell to my knees, ferreting through his pubic hair for what fell there, then sweeping the flat of my tongue from his navel to his chest. There were a few cum smears on his fingers, and I got that too before unzipping my pants and hauling my cock out.

The rush of hot cum exploded up my shaft, and I came all over the island's white cabinets. Leland's spread legs played goalie post.

"Sharing is caring, Franky," Leland said as I tilted toward the streaks of cum with an open mouth.

I offered him a finger full, then selfishly ate the rest. "You greedy fucker," he said, pushing me to my back before falling on top of me. He kissed me with the intention of stealing the morsel I hadn't swallowed off my tongue yet. I held him tight, transferring what was left to him.

"You really do have a problem," he said, stroking my hair, staring into my eyes with an expression that should have scared me, an expression that probably would after this moment passed.

"Yeah, I do," I agreed, not sure we were talking about the same problem, because I was looking at mine.

CHAPTER 13

Leland

Outside of Noon slipping into bed with me when in the mood to piss me off, I'd spent my entire adult life actively avoiding sharing a bed with anyone, then Franky came along and made it so I couldn't sleep without him.

That should've terrified me—and most nights it did, but tonight when I woke up to his cold, empty side of the bed, I wanted nothing more than to have him returned to me, wanted nothing more than the feel of his broad back nestled into my chest, because big, bad, Franky had a thing for being the little spoon.

He'd said it was a new phenomenon he couldn't quite grasp. I said it was because he'd always had to be the one to protect, but here, safe with me, he now got to be the one protected. He kissed me breathless for that.

A cool breeze pebbled my skin beneath the thin sheet covering me. I rolled to my side, turning on the lamp to confirm the balcony doors were open. I knew where I'd find Franky.

I kicked out of the sheets, first snatching my t-shirt from the floor, but it'd been shredded beyond repair by Franky's urgent hands. I tried my underwear next, but he'd slammed me against the wall and tore a football sized hole into the back of

those so he could get his cock inside of me.

Franky hadn't kept his hands, or his dick, off or out of me ever since we were both well enough for him to do so. In the last forty-eight hours we'd done everything from hand jobs to blow jobs to finger fucking to fighting over cum.

He'd been more than familiar with the concept of sixty-nineing. It was obvious he'd had hands-on experience with it. I had to remind myself that being new to having sex with a man didn't mean Franky wasn't exceedingly proficient in the act of sex itself. He'd mastered the art of fucking, something that came with practice, a skill he'd had long before ever touching me.

Thinking about what that meant angered me in a way it shouldn't have, in a way I'd promised myself it wouldn't. But a fed ego kept the anger under control, and my ego fed off of knowing that although he'd without a doubt pleased others with his mastery, no one had ever truly pleased him. No one but me.

This will end, Leland. I'd begun mentally preparing myself for the end of this part of our relationship by repeating those words daily, and I did so now as I rounded the bed and exited the bedroom naked.

This will end, Leland.

The living room wall was partially open. We'd closed it before going to bed. Well, before Franky had rushed me up the stairs only to tear into me right outside the bedroom door.

“*We were so close,*” I’d said, face smashed against the drywall as he spit-shined his cock and launched it into me.

“*I couldn’t wait any longer,*” he’d said, his harsh breaths jabbing at my ear. He’d spun me around after, peeled my damaged underwear off and pitched one of my calves over his shoulder so he could fish his tongue inside my sticky hole.

He’d licked my cum from the inside of my underwear next, then ordered me onto the bed as he relaxed onto his knees, manipulating his cock, pleading for it to cooperate. “*I need you one more time.*”

“*Can’t keep up, old man?*” I’d taunted. That had done the trick.

Blinking out of those delicious memories, I folded my arms against the chill as I approached Franky near the dock.

He wore his black silk robe, the sash and lower half billowing behind him like a cape.

I hugged him from behind, and he exhaled deeply, melting into my touch. I took that to mean whatever was wrong with him, I’d made it better. I shot a warning down the line to my heart. *This will end, Leland.*

Franky pivoted to face me, jaw hardening in disapproval from my lack of clothing. “Do you *want* to get sick again?” he asked. “It’s freezing out here.”

“So keep me warm, then,” I said sweetly, kissing the patch of salt and pepper stubble on his cheek. I looped my arms

around his t-shirt clad back, and he wrapped the two ends of his robe around me.

“What’s wrong, Franky? Why’s your sexy ass out here instead of arched into my crotch as we sleep?” I groped his buns of steel.

“Jasper called. I didn’t want to wake you.”

“I’m not the lightest sleeper in the world. I’m pretty sure stepping into the hall would’ve been sufficient enough.”

“And then I came out here to think.”

“You and your ocean,” I said. Franky brought all his problems to the water. “It’s almost midnight, is everything okay?”

He grunted, kissing the wrinkles between my brows as his arms tightened around me. “He didn’t expect me to be asleep. I’m usually finishing up with work around this time.” Franky sounded torn up about that.

“Is that what’s got you so restless now?” I gently eased his bottom lip from the clutches of his teeth. “Are you feeling guilty about how much you worked?”

“There’s that, but... Forget it.” He shook his head. “It’s probably nothing, and I shouldn’t be talking to you about—” Franky quieted abruptly.

“Talking to me about what?” I asked. “Or about *who*?” I tried when he didn’t respond to my first question. “Is something wrong with Selene?”

Franky glanced over to the ocean again as if searching for solace. I wanted to be the one to give him that.

“Hey,” I said. “You’re talking to your friend now, not the man you’ve fucked twelve ways to Sunday all over this house. What’s wrong?”

“He said he spoke to his mother earlier, but only for a short while because she was exhausted.”

“Okay...” I said slowly, running his words back in case it was a riddle that my midnight-brain was too dense to solve.

“Selene is never exhausted, Leland. She thrives on the day-to-day, wants to make every minute count, and often needs to be bribed to sleep. If she was tired she would never readily admit to it.”

I swallowed hard, not expecting his undisguised reverence of her to hit me like a battering ram to the gut. *He loves her.* Of course he did. He’d never claimed otherwise, and just because he now enjoyed cock, didn’t mean he suddenly hated—

“And more importantly,” he said, putting a plug in my line of thinking. “She’s never too tired for them. She’d pin her eyelids to her forehead if it meant staying awake for them. Even if it was just to sit and watch them sleep. *Always.*”

“She sounds like an amazing mother,” I said. *An amazing wife too,* I thought resentfully.

“She is,” he said, clueless to the not-so-nice emotions swimming through me. “It’s got me concerned, but I don’t

know if I have a right to be.” Franky looked at me, looked *into* me like I was his crystal ball. Like I was his...*friend*.

I put my confusing feelings for Selene aside, reminding myself that *this* part of Franky’s and my relationship, the part that made it okay for our cocks to align the way they were now, would likely end.

I’d promised him—but mostly myself—that I could handle this affair for however long it lasted, that I wouldn’t push him for more or try to influence his decision about his marriage. They had history, they had kids, they had reputations to uphold, they had love. Him being the happiest he’s ever been when with me didn’t mean ending his marriage was a done deal.

I ignored the pesky voice that said my promise had been made before he touched me. That said I couldn’t have known his touch would feel like my missing piece.

Whether he left Selene or not had to be up to him, and him leaving didn’t mean he’d choose me. Did I even want to be chosen?

“Call her,” I said. “If not tonight, then in the morning. You have every right to be worried about her.”

He hugged me closer, pressing the side of his face into mine and whispering his thanks. He’d needed to hear that, needed to hear that he could still care for her, still love her. *And maybe even still want her*. My blunt nails dug into his back, causing him to eye me curiously. I dropped my gaze.

“Come, let me get you out of the cold.” He removed his robe and held it out for me to slip into it.

“Only if you promise to ditch all those clothes when we get inside,” I said, disguising my distress with flirtation. Nothing convinced Franky that I was okay quite like when I flirted with him.

“Promise,” he said. I now had a love-hate relationship with that word.

Franky led me inside by the hand before fisting and tugging his shirt over his head and removing his pajama bottoms. He wore nothing underneath, and it was a damn good thing because his cock was stiff enough to have busted a hole through the tight, fancy boxer briefs he typically wore.

He reclined along the length of the sofa, one foot flat on the floor and the other settling over the arm on the opposite side. This created a sliver of space between his thighs, which he gestured to. “Come lie with me.”

“This couch wasn’t made for the both of us,” I said, even as I let the robe drift off my shoulders to pool at my feet.

I dimmed the lights to something romantic and insinuating, then stopped at the arm of the sofa where his foot perched.

“I’m actually counting on that,” he said, holding an arm out for me. “Makes for a tighter squeeze.”

I ignored his outstretched hand until it fell. He grinned seductively, tucking both arms behind his head, more than

okay with me taking my time to drink him in. “Why do you have to be so fucking sexy?” I asked, disgusted by how much I wanted him at all times. It was tragic, really, because with every hour, with every fucking minute that passed, my craving for this man grew without limits.

“You sound torn up about it,” he said, chuckling. The rich, harmful-to-my-heart chuckle that made me think of more nights like this and an infinity of morning afters.

This will end, Leland.

I swirled a finger around the pad of one of his perfect toes, and his humor faded, replaced with a flash of warning in his eyes as he inched his foot away from my exploring hands. Franky was ticklish. I’d discovered that little nugget after a morning of breakfast in bed where I ate my French toast off his abs. There’d been a lot of clean up required. Syrup had gotten *everywhere*.

He’d gone red with the effort of not squirming away from my tongue as it swept over every part of him.

“I’m just glad I get to enjoy it before it’s gone, old man,” I teased.

“I’ll have you know my father had a six-pack until the very end.”

“Mmmm,” I hummed. “So sexiness is in the genes.”

“Stamina too,” he said, canting his hips, his ridiculously well-proportioned cock hard as steel. I enjoyed playful Franky.

To be honest, I enjoyed every shade of Franky I could get; the darker the better, though.

His body was a work of art, and the graying at his temples and beard only amplified his hotness. Made him distinguished. And he fucked like a zoo animal, like a beast trying to break out of its cage. Sometimes it felt like his goal was to snap me in two and leave me for dead on the side of the road—or bed.

My mouth watered as he laid there watching me watch him, his dick spasming as it stretched further. The tip of my hard cock grew wet. *Always wet for Franky.*

“I don’t want to fuck you, Leland,” Franky said with a barely-there grip on his aggression. “At least not yet. But you’re making it hard.”

“Yeah, *really* hard,” I said, wondering if tonight would be the night I managed to suck down more than half his dick without gagging on it—although gagging until I cried was half the fun.

“Get over here,” he said, silently laughing, his shoulders not the only thing shaking as a result.

“I give up my view if I lie down, though,” I complained, entranced by his strong, thick thighs and the light dusting of hair along his calf muscles.

“Ask yourself,” he said, readying his argument. “Do you want to watch the game from the sidelines or on the field?”

I was between his legs in a nanosecond, snuggling into him

and moaning as our cocks rubbed together.

“You’re so easy,” he said.

“Hey, no slut shaming,” I said, balancing my chin on his chest.

We were okay with letting our lust cool, although it never went cold. I idly sifted through the thin spattering of hair over his pecs, sucking his nipples at his request as he drew shapes along my back. For now we were content to let things unfold naturally moment to moment.

“Tell me more about your art-bar,” Franky said. He’d asked me the dreaded *where do you see yourself in five years* question yesterday, and because I was no closer to an answer now than I’d been when my school counselor had asked me the same thing at fifteen, I gave him the first thing I could think of, which was the art-bar, even though it would never happen.

I hadn’t turned the question on him, because I didn’t want to hear about all the great things he’d have going on in five years that didn’t include me.

This will end, Leland.

I should’ve known I’d only bought myself a reprieve, because Franky was determined to see the best in me, to see what great things awaited me, and he was good at tempting me to see and believe it too. He’d never let the mention of an impossible dream of mine skate by without making a concentrated effort to support it, and I did the same for him.

I'd put a listing on one of those marketplace sites for a few of his furniture pieces that were sitting in the garage. I'd done it behind his back, not wanting to discourage him if none of it sold.

"It sold!" I'd yelled a couple days ago, stampeding onto the patio and scaring Franky to death.

"Damn, it," he'd cursed, dropping the hinge he'd been screwing onto a wardrobe.

"It sold," I'd said again, calmer this time, shoving my phone, which displayed the listing, at his face.

"It sold?" he'd said, taking the device from me. *"Is that the chest from the garage?"*

"Yup. It sold in less than twenty-four hours."

"It sold," he'd said again, this time in a whisper.

"Earth to Leland," he said, snapping his fingers in front of my face, forcing me to leave my memories behind. "The art-bar," he prompted.

"Only if you tell me more about your storefront idea," I said.

"Deal," he said, pinching my cheek when I frowned up at him. Should've known he'd be willing to do anything to get me talking. "I'd love to open a small shop where I would sell custom pieces, where no two would be the same. I don't want to go into the business of mass production. I want to make items people will cherish for years to come and hand down to

their children because they know something like it could never be bought again. I don't want a factory full of machines and people bringing my ideas to life, watering them down and cheapening the quality. I want to build it all myself," he said. "I want my work to have integrity."

"What's stopping you?" I asked. "Do it."

"Yeah, I could see the headlines now," he said, his hands smoothing over my shoulders. "Franklin Kincaid walks away from Nexcom to sell chairs."

"You could start the company up under a different name. A pseudonym," I suggested.

"I may not be recognizable by the average person walking along the street, but Franklin Kincaid venturing into a new sector of the business world would not go unnoticed, no matter what name I used. Someone like me doesn't get to just vanish. The vultures would hunt me down, and the press would make me their next meal. Everyone would know."

"Would that be so bad?"

He smoothed his knuckles along my cheek, one side of his frown ticking up into a weighted grin. "Maybe not, Leelee Bear."

The nickname didn't even upset me anymore. Not when he stared at me like that while saying it. I'd rather use my energy in holding on to the feelings his indulgent gaze stirred in me. *Because this will...* Oh, fuck it. I couldn't finish the habitual mantra. Not now, not when all I wanted to do was capture this

moment to memory, to charcoal-pencil-and-paper it.

“Where are you going?” Franky asked as I rushed for the stairs. “We still need to discuss the art-bar!”

“That can wait until later. Don’t move a muscle!” I jogged into the guest bedroom—which I’d converted into my art supply room—and grabbed my easel, a pad of sketch paper, a pack of charcoal pencils, and lube before charging back downstairs.

“I thought I told you not to move,” I said, scolding him. He sat upright now, hair mussed, cock lazing over his thigh. “Actually, I like that position better.”

“What in the world are you doing?” he asked, confused but highly amused as I moved the coffee table over and set up my work station.

“I’m going to sketch you. Now stay still.”

“An after-midnight sketch,” he said in bewilderment. “One thing you’re not is predictable, Mr. Bear.”

And there goes that look again, the one that made my heart dance and my brain shake its head at my stupidity. “Just don’t move.”

I refused to turn the lights all the way up and kill the vibe, so I’d mostly need to go on instinct not sight. I didn’t care, I just needed to get him down on paper right this second.

I got lost in my task, and only came up for air when Franky’s complaint reached my ears.

“What are you doing over there?” he asked, shifting restlessly.

“I’m sketching you,” I said faintly, my hand flying over the paper.

“You haven’t looked my way in the last thirty minutes. If you’re sketching me by memory, at least let me move my arm. It’s falling asleep.”

“Don’t be a baby,” I said. “And your hands are resting on your thighs, how can they be numb?”

“Maybe they’re not numb, but they are lonely.” His admission had the quality of a shrug. Like his words were no big deal, merely a statement of fact.

How could he possibly see himself as distant and cold? Or *only* distant and cold, because I definitely understood firsthand that he could be both of those things without apology. But he was *this* too. He was giving, supportive, humble, and he saw the best in me. Being with Franky was equivalent to floating on air, and I’d become addicted to the high.

Could it be that I brought this out of him? I shut the door on those assumptions. They would lead me nowhere.

“Done,” I said, dropping my pencil on the easel’s ledge and dusting my hands off. I did initially need Franky to sit still to get the job done, but my direction for the sketch had changed without my permission. Seemed my heart had a mind of its own.

My body warmed with shyness at knowing in a few seconds he'd see what I'd created.

“Well,” Franky said. “Are you going to show me?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“On if you want me to show you, or *show* you,” I said.

“Aren't they one in the same?” he asked.

“No,” I said, stalling, running my clammy hands up and down my bare thighs. It was always like this when showing my work, and I was sure every artist could relate. But this was different. This was *more*.

“It's late, sweetheart. I don't have the brainpower to translate that,” he said.

Why am I being annoying about this? He'd seen my work before, and he was more than fluent in all my filthy ways. This was just both of those things combined. Art and filth.

With the pad of paper in hand, I moved to stand between his knees, holding it out to him. I had to gesture twice for him to take it before he snapped his gaze away from my rising cock.

There was a reason I hadn't needed to look at Franky as I sketched. The only thing visible on him in the drawing were his sturdy legs and the large, calloused hands he used to spread my ass cheeks as I rode him on the sofa.

I'd sketched myself from behind, the hard lines of my spine

and traps prominent, feet flat on the cushions along his hips. I'd drawn one hand securely fastened to the back of the couch, the other behind me, braced on his right kneecap.

Franky's cum spilled from me, drenching his scrotum and inner thighs, and with my head blissfully thrown back on my neck as I lowered onto his colossal cock, it was clear that I was in heaven.

Franky set the sketch aside. It tumbled off the sofa and onto the floor as he scooted lower, his legs falling open to make room for his balls and erection, his feet spreading wider in preparation of gaining the leverage needed to fuck me as hard as the picture had implied.

"I showed you," I said, vocal cords overtaken by horniness.

"Now *show* me," he ordered, finally understanding the two weren't one and the same.

I lubed our cocks up for longer than needed, stretching out the torture, then gave him a view of my ass as I turned and bent over to open myself up. I quivered when he informed me with authority that his face had second dibs on my hole. His cock would breach me first.

Facing him again I settled onto him, and he gathered my ass cheeks in his hands, his first couple fingers resting along my exposed cleft, as we recreated the sketch.

I rose up and down, pushing through the balls of my feet, curling my toes into the cushions, as my cock clobbered my stomach repeatedly.

“Look at us, Franky,” I whispered, short of breath and already sweaty.

Franky’s gaze fell to where his cock disappeared inside my hole, only to reappear, and then disappear again like a fucking magic trick.

He began to fuck me harder then, his dick giving my ass a delicious beating, as if the visual of our connection had angered him. Maybe it reminded him that he’d made me no promises, and that this would all be temporary. Or maybe those reasons were projections of my own thoughts. Regardless of where his anger stemmed from, I took it. I’d always take his rage. I’d always welcome more.

“Hear the beautiful music we make when we fuck?” I asked crudely. I would make him remember this. I would engrain this sound into every fiber of his being. Any time he heard the slapping of water, the slippery, squelching sound of slickness, the hard smacking of sweaty skin colliding with sweaty skin, of wetness personified, he would think of me. I would be his ocean, and he would fucking yearn for me.

I fucked him ruthlessly, accepted every hard upward thrust with a wicked smile, which lit a match to his rage. I dug my nails into his knee as I fought to stay seated on this wild ride.

“You c-can’t hurt me, Franky. I-I told you I can t-take you,” I stammered, finding it hard to fuck, breathe, and talk at the same time. “Told you I can handle your big cock.”

“Jesus, Leland. Your mouth.” He hit my sweet spot, and I let

out a symphony of moans.

“You like it when I talk shit, don’t you? Like it even better when I let you ruin me, right, Franky?”

“Yes,” he hissed. “I want to hurt you for making me feel this way.”

“Hurt me, Franky. And next round, rip me off your cock when I’m so close to the edge that the loss of your dick makes me cry. And then stuff my mouth with it. Pump my throat with so much cum that I gag on it. And don’t stop pumping, not even when I fight to get away.”

“I’m coming,” he gritted out. I slapped both hands to the sofa back, circling my hips and pounding onto his lap. I’d have bruises by sun up.

“Make sure it’s enough to drown your balls, Franky,” I panted. “Just like in the sketch.”

“Ughhh!” he shouted, neck snapping back as he violently bridged into me one last time, nearly cleaving me in half, holding me down on the weapon he called a cock as his cum shot into me.

My own dick jerked without direction, painting us white. “Fuck, Franky,” I breathed as my cum flew between us.

Our cocks twitched and eventually sputtered to a stop as I continued to grind on him. I ran my hand through the puddle of cum on my stomach, feeding it to Franky and sitting patiently as he held my wrist so he could suck every finger

clean, even getting around my cuticles.

“What are we doing here, Leland?” he asked through a shredded voice, sinking a possessive hand into the wet hair at my nape. The rough touch felt like a stacked claim, like ownership. Like an answer to his question. Those feelings were too dangerous to have.

“I was hoping you knew,” I said.

Franky’s eyes went from confused to angry again, and a hand cracked against my ass cheek hard enough to send me forward, screaming out from the jarring pain. Only his hold on my hair kept me steady, and I struggled to read the sudden change in him. Struggled to comprehend what had brought about uncompromising and unfeeling Franky. It was his version of a wall, I told myself, because I knew him that much.

“You know what I want,” he said in a monotone voice.

I popped off his cock, hissing from the vast emptiness left behind, then crawled onto the coffee table, assuming the position. I almost lost my balance when Franky knelt behind me and yanked me onto his face, eating my ass like it wasn’t connected to my body. Like he didn’t need to be careful or caring at all.

Even in this he could do no wrong, because while I enjoyed it when he touched me like I was more precious than all the stars in the sky, I *loved* when he treated my body like a soul didn’t exist within it. Like my heart wasn’t included.

I stared at my sublime reflection in the glass wall, mouth

parted to release shallow breaths, eyes brimming with moisture as my cock thickened, filling to the brim with blood.

Franky and I were driving nowhere fast, and at some point, we were going to crash and burn. It scared the shit out of me, but not enough for me to smash on the brakes. Not enough to make me stop.

Once done, Franky hauled me up and off the table by my throat, the scent of sweet musk sighing over my lips as he spoke dangerously close to me. “Why do I need you again after just having you?”

“The feeling is mutual,” I whimpered, trembling through my need for him. Franky screwed his eyes shut, his frustration tickled my skin, the ache in his heart reached for the ache in mine. When he opened his eyes again they were blank. He’d won the battle in the fight for distance. *Lucky him.*

“You’re going to tell me no,” he said, voice chilling. “And I’m going to take you anyway. Do you hear me?”

“Fuck. Yes. Loud and clear.”

“Do you want me?” he asked, testing me.

“No.”

“Do you want my cock, right now, Leland?”

I peered down at his intimidating dick covered in drying cum. “No,” I said adamantly, backing away only to be ensnared by him again.

“Too bad.”

Franky fucked me across the cold, hard floor like we were nothing more than strangers, and I'd lost count of how many times he'd interrupted my sleep to demand I hand over my body.

Each time he fucked me, the foreboding sense that things were coming to an end grew like weeds in the pit of my stomach, expanding until every corner of me had been touched and poisoned by it. Yet I didn't want him to stop, and after each time, I prayed there would be another. Another chance for me to say no, another chance for him to use my body anyway. And as the sensation grew, so did my hunger for him, until my mind and my body were at an impasse, both wanting different things and refusing to bend. My body would win, though, because that was where my heart resided, and my body would always follow my heart.

He didn't say a word to me, only took and expected me to accept it. I'd died and gone to sexual nirvana.

As the next thirty nights passed, we grew closer in a way we didn't know how to prevent. It mostly went unacknowledged, by either of us, and I often wondered if Franky had his own mantra, similar to mine, that he chanted daily inside his head.

We were locked away from the rest of civilization here on the ocean, and without any outside interruption—aside from the stress of what waited for us out in the world—it was easy to pretend we'd never have to actually face it. Too easy. And the more we fucked, which turned out to be always, the more

blinded I became to the line separating our friendship from our friends-with-benefits-ship.

Franklin Kincaid was highly flawed, uncivilized, possessive, and entitled when it came to me and my body, but he was also good, and I'd go down fighting anyone who believed differently.

I wasn't the only one forgetting about the promises he didn't make and the regrets he assured me he'd have. Forgetting wouldn't make the inevitable go away, though. Forgetting would only make us kick ourselves harder when the end finally hit us in the face, because we'd tell ourselves we should've known better, we'd ask ourselves: *how could I have been so stupid?*

We'd make love during the day, or something similar to it, something not as soft, because we weren't the tender types. Not when chasing orgasms and inner demons.

At night, though... At night our fucking became a history lesson in decadent violence as it became clear with the setting of the sun that we'd used up another day. Time moved way too fast for us.

It was never too much, but sometimes my body didn't agree. And that was okay, because even when he couldn't outright fuck me, there were always other things he came up with to do to me.

I'd let sleep drag me by the ankle into its black cave only after Franky was done having his way with me. It would end

with him breathing “enough” into the room, and then placing us on our sides and guiding my mouth to one of his taut nipples. The sucking soothed us both, lulled us both to sleep.

And every night, without fail, one recurring thought chased me into the void: *This will end, Leland*. And following behind that came a new realization: *But not before he breaks you*.

CHAPTER 14

Leland

Selene Kincaid mingled with the attendees all vying for her attention. I maintained a healthy distance, huddling in a corner of the art museum, stalking her every move.

I'd become increasingly curious about her over the last four weeks, and so after overhearing the follow-up conversation between Franky and Jasper, where Franky assured him that his mother's exhaustion was simply a result of long hours spent preparing for the annual Save the Arts charity event she spearheaded, I did the one thing I shouldn't have. I submitted a piece for the auction portion of the event, and it got accepted. It was either come as a participating artist or sell a kidney to pay the cost of admission.

Maybe it was all the nights Franky and I had spent on his boat cuddling under the moon as we exchanged childhood traumas. Maybe it was the way he trusted me with his tortured soul, trusted that I could endure it. It could've even been the way he clamped his arms around me when I whispered that summer was almost over as I rode him in front of a roaring fire. Maybe it was simply the Willow Meadows in me, but I had to get a glimpse of the person who probably thought they knew Franky better than me.

The harder I fell for him, the more I needed to convince

myself that she wasn't right for him. I needed to uncover her flaws to justify my role in our affair, to justify not wanting it to end.

I spent my spare time plugging her name into every search engine under the sun, getting familiar with her philanthropic work, reading every journalistic write-up ever done on her, and obsessively scanning her images. I'd blamed filters, Botox, and corneal pigmentation for her unnatural beauty. I mean, eyes that vibrant shade of green didn't actually exist, right?

I'd wanted to hurl my phone at the wall every time. My jealousy would turn to anger, and sometimes I'd operate under the steam of both emotions, and then I'd fuck Franky because I needed to remind him of what she couldn't give him. I needed to remind myself of how much he wanted me, of how good I made him feel, and that I was the better choice because I was built tough and could take him on at his worst.

Technically, her body was equipped with all the orifices a cock could ever need, giving her yet another advantage over me. But I'd seen and experienced the lawless side of Franky, and there was no way that at one-hundred and thirty-pounds soaking wet, and five-feet seven-inches in considerable heels, could she handle Franklin Kincaid unchecked.

At least that was what I told myself as my thighs ached from riding his dick repeatedly, as my body burned in all the places he'd attacked with his hands and teeth, and as he rage-fucked

my throat raw. I told myself that whenever I bullied my way onto his lap, ignoring his bad temper and sinking onto his mountainous shaft as he swore to me that “*Now isn't a good time, Leland.*” It didn't matter whether or not he was in the right headspace; his cock never lied, and it always wanted me. And I told myself that now as my nails bit into my palms after getting my first in-person look at her. *She can't handle him.*

I'd missed the registration deadline for the bartending course that started last month. Nothing could've torn me from Franky, and he'd been too distracted with me to remember anything about it until it was too late. He'd made sure I signed up for September's class, though, even sending me off this morning with a good-luck-on-your-first-day fuck.

I'd pushed Betty to her limits, racing to my apartment to change into the one decent suit I owned and still make it to the museum on time.

I smoothed my expression and plucked a flute of champagne from a passing server's tray, then slunk deeper into my corner to watch her smile and make small talk with everyone she came in contact with, shaking hands and offering her thanks to them for attending.

It didn't matter if it was a man in a designer suit, one of the museum curators, or a young, disadvantaged artist whose piece had been selected to hang on the walls for the day. Selene greeted them all with the same warmth, the same respect, and never once appeared as if she'd rather be doing

anything but speaking with them.

“Excuse me,” I said, apologizing to an older woman after stepping into the crowd and startling her. I circled the roped off floor designated for the event, sticking close to the perimeter of the room as I trailed Selene from afar, the classical music playing overhead too atmospheric to drown out the sound of my speeding heart.

I faked being absorbed by the nearby painting of an apple tree when she stopped in front of the painting I’d submitted as if compelled to, placing a hand over her sternum as she moved in closer to it.

The online images of her didn’t do her beauty justice. She was petite, but her weight filled in her lush curves, which the lacy, body-hugging emerald dress she wore did nothing to disguise.

Her ashen hair sat high in an intricate bun fastened with a rose-gold clip, stray strands fell and curled past her nape to brush against the pale skin of her upper back. I felt inferior to her already, and I hadn’t even heard her speak yet.

I hadn’t planned on making actual contact with her. I only needed to get close enough to point out her faults, to prove the internet and Franky wrong about her, both things I’d convinced myself I could do from across the room.

But there was something magnetic about her, so without thinking I allowed myself to be pulled into her orbit. I put my game face on and slithered over to the vacant spot on her left.

Selene studied my painting, wringing her hands now, not even noticing she had company. I wondered what she thought about it, wondered what about it had her so preoccupied.

It was just an abstract painting of a white dove caring for an abandoned baby blue jay. Nothing special. Nothing a toddler with some finger paint couldn't manage.

"I know what you're thinking," I whispered. Selene peered up at me, and I noticed that she *did* look tired around the eyes, but it didn't steal anything away from her beauty. If anything, it added something delicate to her regalness. It softened her confidence to something more approachable.

"Do you, now?" she asked, not missing a beat, her voice wrapping me up in a warm hug.

"You were wondering how something like this made it through those doors, and now you're asking yourself what a young, hot stud like me is doing in a place like this."

Selene's girlish laugh was all sunlight and wind chimes, and I was disappointed when it came to an end on an extended sigh. "Well, you're certainly entertaining," she said. Her smile didn't reach her eyes, but it didn't feel personal, she seemed to have a lot on her mind. Of course she did. Her kids were hundreds of miles away, and her husband had decided he wasn't sure he wanted to hold on to their life together. *Of course* she was tired, and unbeknownst to her, I was adding to her exhaustion.

"I was actually thinking about how much this reminded me

of my son, Cole.”

“Does he look like a bird?” I joked, filled with a need to make her laugh again, if only to erase some of my guilt.

“Good heavens, no,” she said. “My children are gorgeous—and I’m not just saying that because I’m their mother either.” She pointed at me in reprimand as if knowing those would be my next words. I held my hands up in mock innocence.

“Cole’s technically my stepson,” she said, focusing thoughtfully on the painting again, “which is why this piece connects with me the way it does. He’s my baby-blue.”

The dove hadn’t given birth to the blue jay, but due to a number of possible circumstances, she’d decided to care for him like he was her own.

Her vulnerability took me by surprise, and I wondered if she only seemed unguarded to me because I had the advantage of knowing so much about her. Selene brought her fatigued gaze back over to me, and even managed a soothing smile. Suddenly, my plans to poke holes in the theory that she was a saint felt like an impossible task, and a mission I no longer wanted.

I began thinking of polite ways to end our conversation before she could say or do something else absolutely perfect to make me question my recent life choices.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Noon Waters,” I said, not wanting to lie to her. Well, it was

a lie, but it matched the lie I told to get in here, and it matched the name on the silver plaque below my painting. And for a reason I couldn't explain, I wanted her to know it was me who had made her feel good for even a second.

Her eyes broadened along with her smile. "It's you," she said, and I shifted uncomfortably under the respect in her tone. "I can't tell you how tempted I am to remove this from the auction block and keep it for myself."

"You may still get a shot at it. I doubt anyone will bid. It took me less than a few hours to make it. Nothing crafted without effort and angst can be worth much, right?"

Selene stared at me, stared *through* me, seeing past my blasé ramblings. "You're talented, Mr. Waters. But I think you already know that, or at least you're beginning to suspect you are," she whispered conspiratorially. "I think you like to be reminded of your talent because every reminder fills your cup and takes you one step closer to never needing anyone's validation again, and to believing you deserve what you *truly* want from life."

"Philanthropist *and* mind reader," I said. "Impressive."

"No. I'm just a mother. And a fellow cup holder," she said with a wink.

She was right. If I could convince myself that I wasn't any good, then I had an excuse for not doing something with my gift. It became harder and harder to keep up the charade every day. Especially with someone as validating as Franky in my

life.

“What you’re doing here is amazing,” I said, adding some validation to her cup, returning the favor. “Not enough people in your position care about getting art programs funded for the underserved.”

She didn’t say anything to that, but her blush and the awakening of her tired eyes was thank you enough. Her assistant, I assumed, interrupted us, letting Selene know in a hushed tone that she was urgently needed. Selene nodded to me before allowing herself to be whisked away.

My painting did end up selling, and under the rules of entry, a portion of the sale went to me. I donated my half to the cause, leaving a note on the check for Selene.

Dear, Selene... Use this to fill more cups.

I drove back to my place to think and change out of my suit, and ended up falling asleep with a killer migraine. I woke up in the dark, disoriented, and to the sound of pounding on my apartment door.

I felt around the bed for my phone, cursing at the insane number of missed calls from Franky.

“Coming!” I shouted over the knocking. I flipped on the hall light, shielding my eyes as they adjusted to the brightness.

“Are you alright?” Franky asked before the door had fully

opened. Rain water dripped from the ends of his hair, leaving dark circles on the shoulders of his white shirt. “I’ve been calling you.”

“Yeah, didn’t you get my text?” I asked, still waiting for my brain fog to clear.

Franky moved into the apartment while I locked the door. “You said you weren’t feeling well and were going to take a nap.”

I leaned against the wall opposite him in the hall. “I had a headache. I just woke up.” It wasn’t a big deal. I didn’t get why he was so panicky.

“Leland,” Franky said. “That was *ten* hours ago. It’s after one in the morning. I thought I’d find you passed out on the floor or something.”

“*What?*” Seeing his missed calls had distracted me from my purpose of searching for my phone in the first place. I’d wanted to know the time. Franky wasn’t pleased, and his fear for me came off as annoyance. “Sorry, I um... It was a brutal headache.”

“Did you take anything for it? How are you feeling now?” Less than two feet separated us in the narrow hall, and Franky cut that distance in half, stepping into me and sinking his hands into my hair. He meticulously examined my expression for signs that I wasn’t okay.

“I’m good,” I said, but my assurance didn’t loosen the tightness of his lips. I wanted to talk to him. I wanted to tell

him we couldn't do this anymore. It had been the plan I'd formulated before diving into a ten-hour coma. But when Franky touched me, the way he touched me now, every plan I ever had for myself changed.

"Franky," I breathed as he kissed along my forehead and cheekbones. I flattened my palms against his chest with the intention of pushing him away but balled his shirt between my fists instead.

"I was so worried," he said, kissing my closed eyelids, then kissing lower, and lower.

You need to make a choice, I wanted to say, but his mouth brought mine to silence.

This isn't right. It never has been, I wanted to say next, but his tongue got in the way.

I know we said no promises, and I know I swore to myself that I wouldn't fall in love with you, but we both know things have changed. That everything is changing. I said none of that, though.

I wanted to shout for him to stop kissing me like he'd rather die than to tear his lips away from me. To stop touching me like he wanted to rip my skin away to get to the important parts of me. To stop making me believe that I'm something more than what I am when he gazed at me.

But saying any of that would've required the ability to breathe, and right then, my every breath belonged to him.

“Franky,” I said quickly as he yanked at the drawstring of my sweats, loosening the baggy waistband so his hand could dive in. He pretended not to hear me, recapturing my mouth, forcing my head and spine flat against the wall at my back as he tried to kiss me right through the plaster.

I unclenched my fists and shoved at his chest, sending him to his side of the hall, but he launched himself at me with a snarl, shredding my t-shirt between his hands.

Franky slammed the front of his body along mine, hands tightening in my hair until my scalp sizzled, the fabric of his jeans rough on my exposed cock. I pulled at the back of his shirt, tugging until the thin cotton ripped, then swallowed huge gulps of air when he ceased the attack on my lips to tackle my neck.

This was bigger than him being worried about me. Bigger than me feeling empathy for his wife. This was Franky knowing exactly what I’d been about to say and making sure I remained voiceless because of it. This was him understanding that my headache started from a pain in my heart. This was terror and agony on both sides, denial and selfish need.

Franky let me go long enough to get rid of the scraps of shirt clinging to him, and I took the reprieve to dart for the bedroom. He grabbed my arm, swinging me around until we’d switched places. The impact on my back punched the air from my lungs.

He pinned me to the wall by my neck, his lips pulling away

from his teeth in warning as he wrangled his jeans open one-handed. His cock spilled lewdly from the opening, fully inflating as my sweats pooled at my ankles.

“Stop fighting me,” he said, catching my hand before it connected with his cheek. He forced his hips into mine, smashing our bare cocks together.

“Shit,” I moaned from the impact of his heat and then we were both fighting to get each other’s pants out of the way.

We were frenzied but focused, determined to get what we were after. The only noise came from our joint panting and the slap of my palms against the wall when Franky roughly spun me away from him and pulled my hips back.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I heaved at the wall, my lips brushing up against paint. I couldn’t think, I could barely see; all I could do was feel, and it all felt like too much.

In a flurry of movement, Franky spit into his palm and kicked my legs wide before catapulting right through me, sending me to my toes on a shout of pain mixed with undeniable pleasure.

He fucked me like the clock was winding down, like the world was coming to an end and he’d be damned if it did so without him claiming me thoroughly one last time.

I welcomed it, loved it even. Because for once I had someone in my life who was torn up by the possibility of losing me, and I relished in the way it felt to see him fight to hold on to me, even if he only fought in the physical sense.

Franky's thrusts were too swift to keep count, the power he put behind the fucking comparable to being hit by a freight train. He interlaced our hands above my head as he cursed God and praised my cock-taking abilities less than an inch away from my ear. "Fucking you feels like freedom, Leland." Franky got to be all he could be with me, and I got to reap the benefits of his liberation.

"I need to come, Franky," I said brokenly as my bones rattled beneath my skin. He wasted no time in reaching a hand around to take care of me.

I came, roaring his name, streaks of cum sprinting down the wall.

Franky's rhythm increased, shaking me like a ragdoll as he chased down his own release. Too soon he stiffened, his orgasm kicking through me as his heart quaked against my back. I pinched my eyelids shut, recording to memory the sensation of his cum filling me as I internally begged the moisture cresting behind my eyes to return to wherever the fuck it came from.

He rubbed his forehead against the back of my skull, still coming, still holding me to the tips of my toes.

"No," Franky breathed, pressing his hips in tighter when his softening cock began to slide from my hole. A traitorous tear rolled down my cheek.

He kissed my sweaty neck, then licked his way down my spine, kneading my ass hard enough to bruise as his tongue

lashed around in my opening.

Cleanup tended to take longer than the time it took to make the mess, because Franky left nothing on the table. He was arrogantly dirty, his hunger never satisfied, and had a bottomless pit of an appetite.

I gave myself over to it, fucking his face as my tears and sweat created a salty stream down the front of my body.

Once finished with me, Franky used his tongue as a sponge to collect my cum off the wall, then stood and snaked his arms around me, kissing along my jaw from behind.

“Franky?” My voice quaked.

“Yeah,” he said into my skin.

I thought about everyone involved, everyone who'd be affected by our affair if it got out. I thought about Selene and how tired she seemed, how unfair this was to her, and how not being able to hate her meant I had to hate myself more.

I should sacrifice myself and end this now, because one broken heart was better than many. I knew that. I understood it. But maybe they wouldn't work out anyway, because Franky had been on the hunt for something more long before I'd entered the picture. Bottom line, he was unhappy with his life before he'd met me. Still, it didn't mean I needed to take part in the breaking of a family.

I thought about all of this as he suffocated me with his arms, waiting with a held breath for me to answer him.

I thought about all of that and more. I thought about the type of man I wanted to be, and how much fuller my cup was today than it had been yesterday, and how Selene had done more mothering of me in those few minutes of conversation than my own mother ever had.

Was I better than this? Did I *want* to be better than this? I did. I *did* want that.

But I wanted Franky even more.

“Leave her,” I whispered.

CHAPTER 15

Franklin

The leather chair squeaked under my weight but Leland didn't stir. I alternated between staring into the night-shadowed ocean through the open balcony doors and gazing at Leland as he slept peacefully in my bed.

Staring at him for too long caused my mind to jumble, and a glance into the water's vastness provided a reset; it brought clarity to a complicated situation.

"We'll talk later. Let me get you home." Those were the words I'd said to him after taking him with an edge sharpened by fear, and after he'd asked me to leave my wife for him. They were the last words spoken by either of us for the remainder of the night—or rather early morning.

I tilted my head back, downing half of my beer in an effort to forget how he'd dejectedly stared out of the passenger side window as we rode through the desolate streets to get here. Then—without any suggestive commentary or sneaky tactics meant to tempt me into taking him again—he allowed me to bathe and towel us off before tucking him into bed.

I'd been up ever since, and with the sunrise not too far off, I figured I might as well stay up to watch it.

I'd been too aggressive with him, which wasn't unusual, and

neither was my reasoning for behaving that way. But I had to stop taking my issues out on him, out on his body, no matter how much he swore it was precisely what he wanted. It wasn't the aggression that bothered me, but the motive behind it.

Saying I panicked when I couldn't get a hold of him earlier would've been minimalizing the emotion. After fearing that maybe he was alone and unconscious, I then feared that he'd simply had his fill of me. That he'd had a sudden attack of conscience and no longer wanted to be a participant in the wrong we were doing.

As much as he would've had the right to walk away from this, and as much as he *should* have walked away from this, I wasn't ready to let him go. So I'd demonstrated that in the only way it seemed I could these days, by unleashing my cock on him. On the maturity scale, it ranked decently low.

Rolling my head on my neck, I released a silent sigh as the tension eased a little, watching as the beer bottle's condensation spilled across my bare knee, cooling my warm skin.

Rustling came from the bed, and I snapped my eyes open to find Leland sitting up, the sheet pooling in his lap as he reached over to click on the lamp. He blinked slowly, eyes hooded with exhaustion, even with all the hours in total he'd spent sleeping.

He was young and cute with his hair tousled and lips sleep-swollen. Seeing him like this, one would never know how...

accommodating that adorable pink mouth of his could be. A perfect match to his adorable pink hole.

Leland wiped the sleep from his eyes before taking in the room, as if trying to remember how he'd gotten here. He wet his lips, his breathing quickening as his gaze flashed up and down my naked body.

I finished my beer before setting the empty bottle on the floor near the others. "Now we talk," I said before lust got the best of either of us.

"Okay," he said, even as his slightly curved cock tented the sheet. I discreetly pressed a palm along my own burgeoning erection, ordering it to stand down.

"I thought you were done with me," I said, jumping right into the heart of things. "When I couldn't get a hold of you..." I shook my head, unable to finish.

"How did that make you feel, Franky?"

"Relieved, mostly, at first. I thought it left me with only one option. Taking the coward's way out." *Going back to my life.* "But after that thought came an intense ache. I wasn't ready to let you go."

"Yet," he said, a muscle in his jaw feathering. "You weren't ready to let me go *yet.*"

He wanted a promise I still couldn't give him, a renegotiation of our terms. He wanted me to break apart my family for him, but he didn't understand that while he had

everything to gain in me doing so, I had everything to lose.

“Where do you see yourself in five years, Leland?”

“Not this again,” he said, annoyed.

“Answer me.”

“I already did.”

“Yes, the art-bar, which I still know nothing about. I need a broader answer to the question.”

“You know I hate that question—”

“Answer it anyway,” I insisted.

“What does that have to do with any of this? With right now?”

“I can’t afford to only account for right now,” I said.

“You’re acting like you were happy. Like life was a fucking dream before I came along and made things complicated. You were searching, Franky. Searching for—” He clamped his mouth shut before saying *me*, but it was there between us anyway.

“You were searching for...something. You were unhappy when we met on that roof. You left your home to move in here. You took a sabbatical from your job. Hell, from your fucking life!” His voice rose an octave. “But now you’re looking at me as if somehow your misery is my fault.”

“It’s not your fault, Leland. But if you want me to make a permanent decision that will inflict maximum damage to those

I care about, you better damn well know that you'll want me long after the excitement and newness of this has ended," I said with equal passion. "Because good sex—life-altering sex even—can only take a relationship so far."

"I don't know, Franky," he said unconvinced. "It kind of sounds like you're blaming me."

"I'm not," I swore. "I'm not blaming you for the condition of my life, but do you understand why leaving Selene, why risking a further divide between myself and my kids isn't something I can take lightly?"

"Are you saying that if at some point down the road we don't work out you would regret walking away from your marriage? Because your decision to leave shouldn't just be dependent on me. You aren't happy with her. Not anymore."

That was only partially true. It was myself that I'd been most discontent with. The type of ostentatious life I'd been living, the type of unfulfilling work I'd been doing, the type of father I'd been...

And yes, I'd been missing the kind of human connection I'd found with Leland, but to say I would have ultimately walked away from it all would've been a lie. Outside of taking some time away, I hadn't known what I planned on doing. Not in the long run.

"I know it feels like we've known each other forever, but in terms of actual time it hasn't been that long. Not nearly long enough to base a rash decision on."

“So, what, you need more time to fuck me in private and keep Selene in limbo before you can be sure that I’m worth the risk? Is a year long enough? Two?” he asked. “I don’t get it. You were planning on walking away from her before I got here. Weren’t you?” Leland asked, his eyes rounding with childish hope. I wanted to race over and take him into my arms.

“Probably not,” I said gently. “I would’ve liked to believe I would have, but ultimately, I don’t think I would’ve found the courage to. Because I don’t think I would have discovered what it was I needed to make me whole if I hadn’t discovered you. And I doubt I’ll ever find another you, Leland.” I loved building things with my bare hands, but doing so alone in that house for the summer wouldn’t have been enough of a catalyst to make me uproot my life. It wouldn’t have been the thing that left me feeling full. “There’s no one else like you, Leland.”

“Not even Theo?” he whispered.

“Not even Theo,” I whispered back.

His mouth and jaw softened, as if he’d finally understood where I was coming from. This wasn’t as simple as me finding someone else if he and I didn’t work out. There *was* no one else. The feelings I had for him were solely based on, and reserved for, him. What I’d been missing was him.

I’d said I would enjoy this for as long as I could. Until the end of summer, which was barreling down on us swiftly. But

now we were dreaming up the possibility of more, and it terrified me.

I loved Selene, and I could walk away from Leland now and go back to my old life and find some measure of peace because I'd know that other than him there was nothing else out there in the world for me. But I couldn't break their hearts for anything less than forever with him.

“So tell me, please, Leland. Where do you see yourself in five years?”

Leland regarded me as if I were the biggest idiot he'd ever come across before whispering, “Somewhere still wanting you.”

My breath hitched, and I rose to my feet, kicking the bottles over and sending them rolling in opposing directions. “Are you sure?” I asked from the foot of the bed, a death-grip on one of the spiked posts.

“Positive,” he said, scooting backward and watching me warily. I didn't need a mirror to know my gaze had darkened, and I didn't need to look down to know my cock was ready to pound into something.

“I'm not an easy man to deal with,” I warned him, planting a knee on the bed.

“Tell me something I don't know,” he said.

“I'm not an easy man to love.”

“Loving you will be worth the fight it will take to do so,

Franky.”

We tussled for control of the sheet, and I easily tore it away from his white-knuckled grip before catching him by the ankle and dragging him to the end of the bed. Leland’s legs went around me, and I lifted him into my arms, holding him up by the soft globes of his ass.

“I’m stubborn, and selfish, and can get in my own way, and I sometimes show that I care by doing things that prove the opposite.” I nibbled at his lips as he scraped his nails along my scalp.

“How many times do I have to say that I’m not afraid of you? When will you finally believe me, Franky?”

“Maybe after you’ve loved me through my worst, Leelee Bear.”

“Bring it on.”

“I’m going to make love to you this time,” I said, as something like a purr climbed the walls of his throat.

“Just promise me I’ll still feel you tomorrow,” he said, inhaling my kisses.

Grabbing the lube off my nightstand, I got us ready, then lifted him by his ass cheeks before sinking him onto my shaft. “Slow down,” I whispered into his mouth when he began bouncing on my cock. He stopped, letting me take the reins, and I moved him up and down effortlessly as I walked us onto the balcony, shifting my hungry kisses to soft pecks across his

nose and mouth.

“Franky,” he said on a groan when I settled his ass onto the railing and dipped him back a fraction to thrust in and out painfully slow. Not once did he flinch from the vulnerable position I’d placed him in. I held him steadfastly, both arms slung across his back as he interlaced his hands behind my neck, trusting me not to let him fall.

I’d had every intention of watching the sun rise over his shoulders, but all I could do was watch the heavy emotion building behind his bright irises.

I strung the love making out for as long as I could, eventually carrying him to bed before finishing inside of him and then massaging my cum into his skin after drinking every drop of his.

Afterward, Leland hugged me from behind, inhaling and breathing into my sweaty nape.

“This will take some time,” I said, yawning and closing my eyes. Me leaving Selene wouldn’t be an overnight thing. It would need to be done right. I needed him to know that.

“Just don’t change your mind, Franky.” His arms eventually grew slack, his breathing evening.

Falling asleep should’ve been the easiest thing for me to do by then. I’d officially been up for twenty-four hours, and I’d fucked well beyond my limits for the day when running on no sleep, little food, and inadequate hydration. But Leland’s plea was a strong wind blowing the fog of slumber away.

I held on to his arms tighter, focusing on his soft snores pelting my neck, and ignored my phone, which now vibrated with an incoming text.

Sleep eventually took mercy on me, but I woke up feeling unrested and wondering how long I'd been out for. I reached for my phone to check the time, seeing the text message waiting for me. It was time stamped three hours ago, and the name on the locked screen read: **Selene.**

I swiped up, fingers folding tightly around the device as the five-word message sank deep into my bones, sending a chill through me.

Selene: *The boys are coming home.*

CHAPTER 16

Franklin

I was on my third cup of hot tea by the time Leland trudged downstairs. I couldn't shake the cold dread clinging to my bones.

"You're going to crash at some point today," he said from the hall beyond the kitchen.

I entered from the patio, sliding my mug onto the kitchen counter, waiting as he advanced on me. His sweats hung low, revealing the trimmed hairs between the deep V at his hips, and his cock tapped against the gray fabric with every step. "Good afternoon," I said, placing a chaste kiss along his smooth jaw.

He smiled boyishly, then grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

"And you're going to be climbing the walls all night," I said. "Between the hours you spent asleep at your apartment last night and then again once we got home, there's no way you'll be finding rest tonight."

"I'm sure you can manage to put me to bed," he said, his brows dancing as he stepped into my space again.

"Is sex all you think about?" I asked.

"No, it's not," he said seriously. "But I love having sex with

you. And to be honest, I guess I feel like I have something to prove.”

“And what’s that?” I asked.

“That I’m a great lover. A *better* lover than most. That I can keep you satisfied. I don’t want you wanting for anything—or anyone—else,” he said.

“You don’t have anything to prove,” I assured him.

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re not the one trying to steal a married man. You get to just sit back and reap the benefits of my insecurities,” he said.

“Leland... That’s not—”

“I don’t have money or a fancy education. I can’t give you more children, and I have zero prospects, but I can take your cock like a champ, Franky. So let me,” he ended with a plea.

He’d rendered me mute. Leland and I were relatively truthful with each other, but this went beyond that, brutally so. Even after our talk last night, he still doubted me, doubted my commitment to him, and it also seemed he doubted his ability to hold on to me by means outside of sex. It made what I had to tell him all the more difficult.

“You’re my listening ear, Leland. You’re the friend I never knew I needed. You stroke my passion, yes, but we are about more than just sex.”

“I know,” he said, exhaling and combing a hand through his hair. “Between yesterday, then last night, and the early hours

of the morning... It was a lot. I think I'm still coming down."

"What happened yesterday? Did something go wrong in class?" In all the mayhem, I hadn't even gotten to ask him how his first day went.

"It was fine," he said, a little too quickly.

"You'll have to tell me all about it later. Right now, I need to tell you something."

"Sounds like I'm not going to like it," he said, cocking a hip against the counter. The move jostled his already loose waistband, sending it lower, revealing a sliver of tanned skin at the root of his shaft.

I meant what I'd said to him a few minutes ago. Our relationship wasn't based solely on sex, but Leland was a sexual creature. Every move he made suggested something, every look he gave dripped with desire, and almost every word uttered had a double meaning that could be tied back to fucking, or being fucked, or something equally as charged and orgasmic. He was vivacious in the bedroom, or on the floor, or forced up against a wall. His sexual energy knew no bounds.

"Let's have a seat in the living room." I chose the sofa. Leland chose to stand in a corner on the opposite side of the room, probably not trusting himself to be near me until he knew what was going on.

"What is it, Franky?"

"Selene texted me this morning. The boys are visiting in a

few days—”

“The *men* you mean, right?” he said, cutting my sentence off at the knees.

“*Cole* and *Jasper* will be visiting,” I tried again. “It’s suppose to be a surprise—”

“For your birthday,” he said before I could, his impatience and agitation now a third entity in the room. This would be a fight.

“Yes,” I confirmed. “But given our current situation, she thought it would be best to make me aware of it now.”

“So what’s the plan?” he asked, folding his arms. “Will you ask Selene for a divorce before they get here? At least by then you two can present a united front when breaking it to them.”

“You know that’s not what’s going to happen,” I said with as much sensitivity and care as I could, but my own agitation began to rise to the occasion. He was being unreasonable, and his tone suggested he didn’t give a damn.

“Why not? She’ll use this time to try and get you back. She’ll realize she still wants you.”

“You can’t expect me to blindside her with this news and then expect me to crush my children all in a matter of *days*. Do you even care about what this will do to them?”

“Of course I care. I don’t want them to hate me, Franky,” he whispered, and it struck me that I had more than one battle ahead of me. Not only would I have to walk away from my

marriage, and destroy my kids and beg for their forgiveness in the process, but I'd then need to introduce them to the man I set their world on fire for, and hope that we could all...get along.

“You'll change your mind,” Leland continued, shaking his head manically, inspiring my own mania. This new realization made things more complicated, and I was losing my grip on the situation. “Regardless of what was said last night, if you go home and pretend everything is perfect, you'll change your mind. You'll reminisce about the good times over dinner. You'll miss the parts of your life that weren't so bad. You'll wonder if you can make things work with her, wonder if you owe it to your sons to give your marriage one last chance. You'll forget about me, Franky. I know you will.”

“No, I won't. None of that is true. But I need more time,” I said, suddenly more conflicted than I'd ever been, and by the look of his wild gaze, my feelings had translated through my words.

I could almost hear his heart tearing in two, and it felt like someone had taken a sledgehammer to my chest. I couldn't think past the ache.

“They'll be gone in a few days, and I'll be back here with you. We'll make a plan then,” I said, trying to appease him, wanting to remove the look of pain from his eyes, also needing to buy myself some time to consider how we would all work as a blended family. “I'm not unsure about you, Leland. You

have my word on that.”

“Will you fuck her?”

“What?” I asked.

“Will you *fuck* her, Franky?!” His voice thundered through the lower level of the house, and I breathed, summoning every ounce of patience I could dredge up instead of showing him whose anger was boss. “I mean, you’re fucking me bareback, so I think I have a right to know.”

“No. I don’t plan on having sex with her. Jesus, Leland.” I jumped to my feet.

“So no sex, then. Let’s see...” He gripped his chin in thought. “What about kissing? Holding hands? Sleeping in the same bed? How exactly does this whole playing house thing work, Franklin?” he bit out like I was obtuse. His questions stunned me. I hadn’t thought that far ahead.

“You still love her. How could you not? She’s perf—” He stopped himself, leaving me curious.

“She’s what?” I asked, lowering my voice.

“Nothing,” he said, dragging his hands down his face. “Just don’t do this.”

I exhaled, sitting again and motioning to the spot next to me, trying to get a handle on the conversation. “Have a seat, please,” I said.

“Tell me you aren’t going to do this first,” he said, a defiant fire igniting behind his golden brown eyes. I said nothing. He

wouldn't have liked my answer anyway.

“On second thought,” he said, “maybe you should do this. We've been cooped up here all summer. I could use a breather, some fresh air. Maybe I'll meet up with Noon. It's been a while since we hung out. Maybe I'll even hit up Josephine's,” he said threateningly. He couldn't get his way, so the next best thing was to play on my possessiveness.

I prowled over to him, taking his face between my hands, the heel of my palms pressing against the stubborn jut of his chin. Jealousy flared from some place deep within me, cramping my gut and raising the volume on the sudden silence overtaking the room. “Don't do something you'll regret. I'm warning you, Leland.”

“Don't threaten me with a good time, Franky,” he said, not even blinking under the strength of my fierce stare. If anything, the threat of facing my anger seemed to embolden him further. “Don't worry, I'll wear a rubber—”

I shut his mouth for him, holding it closed as he tried to wriggle from my hands. “I'm a powerful man, Leland. I hold more influence than you can ever imagine. Don't make me ruin someone's life all because you're in the mood to test me,” I whispered maliciously, the air pumping through his nostrils hot against my face as I drew in closer to him. “Don't play games you can't win.”

Leland had experience with my mercurialness, and his body had long ago adapted to receiving me in anger. But up until

then, he'd only known me as Franky.

Franklin Kincaid would call in all favors owed to dismantle the life of anyone who laid a hand on Leland. Franklin Kincaid would buy out Josephine's just to have the pleasure of setting it afire and watching it burn.

“What is it you want? Hmm?” I asked, one palm moving to clamp around his nape, the other freeing his mouth to choke his words off at his throat. “What do you win by sending me into a jealous rage? Is your goal for me to fuck you? Spank you until I break skin? Do you need me to make it so you can't sit, let alone ride a cock or fuck a pussy while I'm gone?” I snapped crudely, beyond thinking before I spoke. “What I'm about to say next is unfair of me. I know this.” I increased the pressure on his windpipe before continuing. “I don't want anyone else's hands on you, and I'm afraid of what I might be capable of to ensure that doesn't happen.” I'd backed us deep into his corner, my shoes bumping up against his bare feet. His cheeks were rosy, his eyes screaming bloody murder, but I didn't care. “Don't push me, Leland. You end things between us before you push me that far.”

If there was one thing Leland excelled at, it was antagonizing me—for good or bad—and never backing down. I took a firmer hold around his throat, and he glared at me defiantly, welcoming the suffocation, as if he didn't need to breathe, as if my jealousy would sustain him.

A small part of my brain still operating on reason

understood that I needed to let him go, even though I knew without question I wouldn't like his reply. I was right, and I regretted freeing him instantly.

"I'll do whoever the fuck I want, unless you give me a reason not to," he said angrily. "You don't own me. Now back the fuck off."

I didn't back off. I crowded him into the wall, afraid that while I was off pretending my life hadn't changed, he'd be out falling into the arms of someone who deserved him. That fear prevented me from seeing straight.

"Franky," Leland said, shoving at my chest.

"Take it back," I said, unmovable. "You take it back right now."

"Say you won't leave me here to go be with her, and I'll tell you anything you want to hear."

I bared my teeth at him but couldn't get my mouth to spill the words he wanted to hear.

"That's what I thought." Leland ducked to slip under my outstretched arms caging him to the wall, but I was faster. Slamming him back in place, I took his mouth in a savage kiss, leaving him with no choice but to take it or risk losing the chunk of hair I held him by.

"Take it back," I snarled.

"No," he breathed, uselessly pushing at me.

"I've never had to deal with you according to your age,

Leland. Don't make me start now."

"Says the grown man fucking someone other than his wife."

Checkmate. I released him, stumbling back from the blow of his spiteful words.

"I-I'm sorry, Franky," Leland said, reaching for me. "I didn't mean—"

I held a hand up, stopping him. "I think we need a breather. Some time apart," I said.

"Won't we already be getting that when you leave?" he replied.

"I'm going to work on the patio—"

"It's about to rain—"

"Then in the garage!" I shouted. "We need space. We'll talk later." And because he still hadn't taken his threats back, and because I was five seconds away from taking him over my knee, I turned and vanished into the garage before he could issue another reply.

CHAPTER 17

Leland

Hunkered down inside the guest room, I spent the rest of the day taking my frustrations out on a blank canvas. I'd considered going to my place, but the very idea of leaving him, after learning he'd soon be leaving me, hurt like a stab to the chest.

For once I welcomed the afternoon storm clouds and then the early evening rain as I purged my emotions via paintbrush.

I could've lied to myself and said that the version of Franky I'd left downstairs wasn't real, that it didn't exist outside of our heated argument, but I didn't want to. Because whoever that man was—Franky, Franklin, or someone else entirely—having him promise to make the life of anyone who touched me a living hell, felt good. Too good to question or regret, and I hadn't been an angel either.

I'd pushed him because I needed him scared, just as scared as me, because maybe if his terror reflected my own, he wouldn't leave me to go be with *her*.

Shoving him over the edge meant I didn't have to fall headfirst alone, and it confirmed, more than words ever could, how much he wanted me. Yeah, it was an unhealthy way of thinking, but I owned it. I didn't give a shit.

More than anything, I'd wanted him to know how it felt to feel like I was slipping from his grasp, because I damn sure felt like he was slipping through mine.

Stepping off my milkcrate, which doubled as a step stool and paint supply holder, I shuffled to the bedroom door to take in the full scope of my painting, squinting up at the seven-foot canvas. It was chaotic, dark, and the biggest piece I'd ever created.

I added a few finishing touches to the bottom, then dumped the brush next to the others in the jar of murky water and began kneading the headache building behind my forehead.

"Fuck." I pulled my hands away, remembering they were covered in black and blue paint, which now meant my face was too.

The storm kicked up outside my open window. Rainwater screamed as it made impact with the earth and ocean, and the growl of thunder competed with the growling of my stomach. In my stubborn determination to avoid Franky, to not be the one to seek him out first, I hadn't eaten all day.

My forearms were also covered in paint, and the stench bubbling up from my armpits nearly knocked me to my ass. Food would need to wait until after I'd showered.

After thirty minutes of standing under the hot spray, hunger pangs cut into me, and I began to sway on my feet. I held myself open a little while longer, letting the water wash over and soothe the place Franky had claimed so completely last

night. Despite what I'd said in the heat of the moment, Franky did own me, and he always would.

I finished up, snagging a towel off the floating shelf and haphazardly drying off as I trudged into the bedroom. My nerves elbowed their way in, forcefully overtaking hunger's space as I quickly dressed and then descended the stairs.

Banging came from the side door leading to the garages, which was where Franky worked whenever bad weather ran him from the patio. I spread my palms over the door, needing but refusing to cross over the threshold and go to him. If we only had a few more days together, we should be making the most of it, not spending time on separate ends of the house, but I wanted to be the one pursued. I wanted him to feed into my insecurities by showing me what I already knew. I wanted him to show me that he cared.

We'd dealt with each other's crankiness before but never had we been so *angry* with each other. Never had we done and said things with the sole purpose of inflicting pain.

I'd started it, the hurling of hurtful words part. All he'd done was tell me the truth about his plans at the first opportunity he could, even if that truth stung.

The hammering in the garage stopped, and the hammering in my chest picked up. I'd bet ten scratch-offs that if I opened the door, I'd find him shirtless and grimy, staring my way with that look he often got when waiting for me to turn a corner and enter a room. A mix of raptorial hunger and hard affection.

Like he missed me and wanted me badly enough to not take his time or be nice about it.

My world freeze-framed as I pictured Franky cocking an ear in my direction, sensing me.

Footsteps pounded beyond the slab of wood, closing the distance to the door. Not wanting to be caught lurking there when it swung open, I hurried on light feet to the kitchen.

Franky wrenched the door wide like it weighed a ton, probably hoping to catch me in the act of missing him.

I lined the cold cuts and condiments I'd taken out of the fridge along the island, pretending I didn't see him watching me from the end of the short hallway that separated the garage from the kitchen.

The heavy thud of his work boots hitting the hardwood floor vibrated up my bare feet, past my thighs and beyond. Franky's mammoth shadow crossed the kitchen entryway before he did, and I kept my head down, slapping turkey and cheese onto two pieces of bread and then working on slicing the tomatoes.

He relaxed into the trim of the archway, his hands going into his front pockets. I stole a glance at him, regretting it when the longing seeping from his eyes made me want to open my body to him, welcoming him home.

I took a few bites of my sandwich, not tasting anything, but it gave me something to do other than wait mutely for him to make a move.

He moved behind me to the fridge. The door opened and shut, followed by the sound of a cap being popped and a thick throat working to get a bottle of Stella down. I took a third bite, my appetite now gone—at least for the sandwich—but I forced it down anyway.

A second pop, chased by a continuous gulp before the bottle slammed down onto the counter.

Franky breezed in behind me, smelling like a hard day's work and beer. "You missed a spot," he said, wiping behind my ear and then showing me his paint-coated thumb.

"Thanks," I said, the ends of the bread crumbling in my clenched hands.

"I'm sorry," he said, holding on to the island at either side of my hips and rolling his nose through my hair. "I don't want to fight with you." He backed up enough to let me turn around, then connected his forehead to mine. We stayed like that for a while.

"If you need to sleep in the same room with her, you don't sleep in her bed." I couldn't bring myself to say *their* bed. "If you need someone to talk to, you call me. *I'm* who you go to for comfort, Franky." I continued with my list of demands, asking for what I wanted even if the answer would be no. "If you need something to let your frustrations out on, if you need someone to fuck, you come find me in the middle of the night. I'm your secret keeper, your shoulder to lean on, your ocean when there isn't one, and my ass is your goddamn punching

bag. Do you hear me?" I asked, thumping a fist against his chest.

"Yes," he said, kissing me. "Yes."

"I need you," I said, needing to feel possessed by him after our fight. "Fuck, Franky, I need you."

Franky picked me up, my legs latching around him as he carried me through the kitchen and into the pouring rain. We kissed like mad men as he carefully maneuvered the stairs leading to the dock with me in his arms.

We were soaked by the time we reached the boat's cabin, bumping our heads on the low ceiling as we peeled out of our clothes while trying to remain glued to each other.

I rode him as he perched at the edge of the big bed, my palm flattened to the ceiling in the confined space. We didn't talk, just fucked and stared into each other's eyes, living in the moment.

Franky flipped me onto my back, and the boat began to rock. Could have been the heavy wind, the heavy rain, or the heavy impact of his thrusts shoving me to the top of the bed.

My stomach dipped, and I couldn't say if I was seasick or love-sick, but I didn't care.

We eventually switched positions again, causing him to lose the suction he had on my neck. He sat up, chewing into my shoulder as I whipped my ass up and down his cock.

"No one will want to touch you when I'm through with

you,” he said, clamping his mouth over my nipple next.

“Fuck,” I hissed, the vein along my bouncing shaft throbbing. “Two can play that game, Franky.” I raked my nails down his back, drawing blood.

“Ugh!” he bit out, throwing his head back before pinning me to the mattress again. He shook his hair from his face, sweat raining down on me as he grunted, hauling my lower body onto his lap and hitting my sweet spot with deep jabs of his cock.

“Not my face,” he said. “Anywhere but my face.”

I clawed into his chest next. Lines of crimson formed, running parallel down to his midsection.

We took turns damaging one another as the heat rose in the windowless room and the scent of sex hovered on the verge of suffocating us.

By the time we were through, the sheets were ruined and we were hard pressed to find an area on our bodies not stained red. The cabin itself would need to be hosed down.

“I’d like to use my second truth,” Franky whispered after we’d limped back to the house, showered, and collapsed into his bed. He’d already used one of the truths he’d won after hustling me in a game of pool. I’d forgotten I still owed him two more. He could ask me anything, and I’d have to answer honestly. My heart lurched up my throat as I waited.

Franky shifted me off his chest so he could see me clearly,

wincing as doing so agitated his bruises. “When you promised you wouldn’t ask me for more, did you already know you would?” He was asking about the day we left the emergency room. The day he said he couldn’t make me any promises. The day I’d promised I would never ask him to. Yet here we were...

“Yes,” I said truthfully. “Did you go into this knowing I’d break my promise?”

“Yes,” he whispered. “I knew, but I wanted you anyway. It was the worst of the many selfish acts I’ve committed since meeting you. One of many selfish acts I’d committed *against* you. I’m scared it won’t be my last, Leland. You deserve better than me.”

“Just come back to me, Franky,” I said, wiping the tears from the corners of his eyes. “Just come back to me.”

CHAPTER 18

Leland

It'd officially been twenty-four hours since Franky went home to his family, and to say I wasn't handling it well was a fucking understatement. Especially since he hadn't called, texted, or sent a freaking carrier pigeon with a message letting me know he was okay. Letting me know *we* were okay.

Did they hug for the sake of their kids? Did they hold hands at the dinner table while laughing at some random Christmas memory? Did she ask him for help getting the zipper down on her dress before bed? The oldest fucking trick in the book. And did he fall for it? *Willingly?*

My phone vibrated on my thigh, and I nearly sent my whole body up in flames, fumbling my lit Marlboro to answer it. It was only Noon. "I'm out front," I said. "Just walk around the side of the house." I hung up and went back to staring into the fire pit.

He'd called earlier saying he wanted to see me before leaving for New York. I'd invited him over instead of risking Franky showing up and me not being here. There was also a petty part of me that wanted to upset Franky by having Noon in his home, even if he ended up never knowing about it.

"Cigarettes," Noon said, stepping onto the patio. "Must be serious."

I had quit the habit five years ago after having been lectured to death by him. “You could say that.” I took a drag.

“Smoking and self-loathing,” he mused, picking up on my tone. “A dangerous mix.” Noon leaned in to kiss the top of my head, then rearranged the chair next to me so it faced me, then took a seat. “So this is where you’ve been spending your time,” he said, checking out the interior of the house, then surfing his gaze over the ocean. “Nice view.”

“Yeah,” I agreed absently, checking my phone again.

“You look terrible, Leland. What’s going on?” Leave it to Noon to poke the elephant. I was in rough shape. I didn’t have the energy needed to lie, plus I needed an outside perspective, even if his point of view would be too honest for me to digest without a fight.

I dragged in another lungful of nicotine. “He’s going to leave his wife for me—and before you accuse me of breaking up their marriage,” I rushed in to add defensively, “she cheated on him first, and they both agreed they could use some time apart to figure shit out. He wasn’t happy in the first place, but I make him happy now.”

“Okay,” Noon said, cool as a fucking cucumber. “Go on.”

“We agreed we would give us a shot. He wants to be with me,” I emphasized.

“Uh-huh,” Noon said.

I snuffed out the cigarette on the small dish I’d been using

as an ashtray. “His sons are in town from college. They don’t know their parents’ marriage is on the rocks, and Franky doesn’t plan on telling them. At least not yet. But he will soon.”

“Because he’s going to leave her for you,” Noon said helpfully.

“That’s what I said,” I snapped, then breathed deeply. “Sorry. Anyway, he went back home.” I swallowed down the bile rising at the use of the word *home*. “It’s just for a few days. Then he’ll be back, and we’ll come up with a plan to break the news to everyone.”

Noon kept quiet, and I gestured annoyingly at him to say something.

“Oh, I can speak now?”

“Yes, you asshole,” I gritted out. Noon smiled a sad smile, like he didn’t take pleasure in what he was about to say to me.

“You two are living in a vacuum right now. Have you ever considered what being attached to Franklin Kincaid will mean? Yeah, I know who he is,” he said when I gaped at him. “He bumped into Stacey that day at the hospital. Demanded a rush be put on your discharge papers. He dropped his name. I’m pretty sure he gave his attorney’s name as well.”

“That last part’s a lie,” I said. Franky would have given his name—if asked. But he wasn’t some pretentious asshole waving his power around and threatening hospital staff with lawsuits if he didn’t get his way.

“Point is,” Noon went on. “You’ll be the man who broke up a powerful family. His wife is revered. They’ll dig into your past, they’ll say you’re with him for his money—”

“I’m not,” I said indignantly.

“The truth won’t matter, Leland. Not to the vultures. They’ll say he’s going through a midlife crisis, that he’s old enough to be your father. They’ll say you’re young enough to have played in the sandbox with his kids...”

“That last one’s a stretch,” I huffed. Cole and I were a few years apart in age, and Jasper was even younger than Cole.

“His kids will be embarrassed by it all. They’ll be pissed, and they likely won’t accept you. It’ll affect his business, the thing he’s worked half his life to build—”

“He doesn’t care about Nexcom. He wants to make furniture,” I said weakly, and for the first time it sounded stupid to my own ears.

“Furniture. I see,” Noon said. “So you’ll be the guy who made him turn his back on his family’s legacy to what, build coffee tables? How long before he resents you? They’ll label you as his downfall. And once you two step back into the real world, who will you become in the face of the force that is Franklin Kincaid, one of the wealthiest men in the world? Leland the bartender?” It wasn’t said with cruel intentions, but I flinched away from it anyway.

“Look,” he said, taking pity on me. “I’m not saying he doesn’t want to leave her. I can list a million reasons why

you're the better option without even knowing her, but reality will kick in, and he'll see that he has too much to lose. He'll see this fantasy you've both been living for what it is, and he won't choose you. They rarely ever do."

"Franky and I are different," I said, my voice pitched low.

"The exception to the rule?" he asked. "I sure hope so, Leland. For your sake, I really do."

"You've always had your shit together, Noon. Even when we were busting our asses to make rent, hopping from one dead-end job to another. You knew our way of life was only temporary for you. I don't understand how it feels to be sure of myself, and you don't get how it feels to be unsure of anything. Franky and I are different because we are the same." It was that simple, and I'd never felt more certain of something than I did that singular fact. While Noon was shooting forward, Franky and I were scrambling to get our feet under us.

Movement over my shoulder pulled my attention away, and I was on my feet and short of breath in one second flat. "Franky." I sighed, gripping the back of my seat for support.

From the shadows of the living room, Franky approached the patio wearing an all-black suit, his dress shoes clicking ominously against the floor.

Noon stood as well, nodding at Franky's hard stare. "Franklin," Noon said, addressing Franky by his given name.

"Good to see you again, Noon," Franky replied, accepting

Noon's extended hand. He managed to sound like he meant it.

"Just thought I'd stop by and keep Leland company. Can't feel good being left alone in this big house," Noon said, being irritatingly antagonizing.

"How nice of you," Franky said, stepping into my side and kissing me passionately. He settled a possessive hand on my lower back. "But I'm here now."

"I'll walk you out, Noon," I said, before the pissing contest flooded the place.

We took the shortcut through the house, and I caught him by the arm when we got to his truck. "Hey, sorry we didn't get to catch up. When are you leaving?"

"In a couple days," he said. "I wanted to see you sooner—"

"I'm sure you've been busy with packing and stuff," I said, giving him an out. To be fair, I'd been so caught up in Franky that I hadn't noticed Noon's absence.

"Yeah, I have been," he said, giving me a grateful smile. He dropped his voice to a near whisper. "If he wants you, he'll find a way to choose you no matter what. Remember that. Okay?"

Words failed me, so I nodded.

"I'll be calling you next week," he said, climbing into the cab of his truck and starting up the engine. "Pick up the phone, or I'll fly back and tell your boyfriend how you *really* like it." He wiggled his eyebrows at me and peeled off before I could

slug him through the open window. I watched his taillights fade around the bend before heading back inside.

“New habit?” Franky asked, holding up my Marlboro pack.

“Old one. I just had a couple.”

He turned the pack upside down to demonstrate that it was empty. “Looks like you eviscerated it.” He kissed me again when I got within range. “Tastes like it too.”

“How much time do we have?” I asked, sliding his jacket off his shoulders, letting it fall to the ground.

“A few hours. Maybe more.”

“Are we really going to spend a moment of it discussing nicotine?”

“I’d rather not,” he said, brushing my hair back. “You look tired.”

“I’m worried more than anything,” I admitted.

“Come, let me take care of you.”

Franky ran a hot bath while I patiently waited. “Arms up,” he said, removing my shirt. He angled my head up and over to get a good look at the saucer-sized hickey above my collarbone, and then checked the one on my bicep. That one looked closer to a bite than a bruise.

He pinched the waistband of my jeans and underwear, tugging them low on my hip. The fingerprints there were subtle, not like the matching set on my wrists.

He slipped his hand around to my back, feeling for the teeth indentation below my shoulders, smoothing his fingers over it apologetically and shutting his eyes. We'd torn into each other pretty badly the night before he left.

"I allowed my emotions to get the better of me," he said, kneeling in front of me and kissing my belly. "I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't be," I whispered above him, running my fingers through his hair.

"No?" he asked, pained.

"Not for the reasons you're sorry for. Marks don't mean you've hurt me, Franky. I've always bruised easily. I love it when your lips are on me, when your teeth sink into me, and when your hands are too firm," I said. "Rough sex is my favorite. Rough sex with you is my favorite. And I more than returned the favor."

"That you did," he said, smiling against my ribcage.

"Take off your clothes," I said.

"You want to see your handiwork?"

"All of it."

Franky dipped a finger into the water to check the temperature, then turned the valve off before getting rid of his clothes. He was a thing of fucking beauty surrounded by candlelight. His dark edges sharper, the hard planes of his body menacing.

I grazed my fingers over the vicious claw marks already

scabbing over on his chest, then lower to the ones on his burly thighs. “They’re sexy,” I said, his cock swaying slightly as it thickened.

“Oh no you don’t,” he said, peeling my fingers off his cock. “This is about you.”

“But it’s your birthday,” I complained, gawking at the network of veins below his succulent tip.

“Which means we get to do whatever I want.” On his knees again, he unbuttoned my jeans and peeled them down, stopping as my tight, lace briefs came into view. “What’s this?” he asked, hauling my pants farther down.

“A birthday gift,” I said as he skimmed his nose up and down the front pouch holding my dick hostage.

“I love lace,” he said, now mouthing my caged bulge. I’d learned that tidbit of information from an interview Selene had done where she’d jokingly mentioned that her penchant for wearing the delicate fabric was due to her husband’s appreciation for it. She’d sported a fitted lace jumpsuit on the cover of the independent magazine.

Franky tore the front of the underwear away, his tongue out and waiting to catch my chubbing cock as it fell free from the gaping hole.

“Fuck, Franky,” I groaned, unable to breathe past the hot steam stifling the air.

Franky released my cock with a pop, falling to his heels, one

hand on the tub's ledge, the other strong-arming the base of his erection. "Get in," he ordered, barely holding on to his sanity.

I legged out of my jeans and the shredded underwear, then submerged myself into the hot water with a hiss when my bruises protested. The pain faded away within minutes. "You're going to have to take care of that first if you expect me to relax while being bathed." I gestured between my legs to where my cock saluted below the water as Franky reached for the bath sponge and soap.

"Maybe I want you to suffer," he said, even while reaching below the surface to take care of me. I got comfortable, bending my legs until my knees rose above the water and then letting them fall to the sides of the tub.

"How long are you going to keep me in suspense?" I asked, undulating as he worked me at a leisurely pace. "How was the reunion?"

"I was happy to see the boys," he said. "Although, how I felt on the inside about their return didn't translate well on the outside. I mostly stood back as they fawned over their mother."

"You're too hard on yourself. You think they don't know you? They love you anyway." Knowing Franky, he greeted them with a handshake-hug and said something like "welcome home" with a stony expression. "I mean, they did fly in for it."

"Yeah," he said with a hint of a loving smile for his sons. He didn't apply enough pressure to bring me over, just enough to

mellow me, to make me feel drugged as we spoke.

“And Selene?” I whispered.

He didn't waste time pretending that I was asking about her well-being. “She was respectful of where we still are with things. I haven't changed my mind. I'll find the right time to tell her.”

“Did you get to open my birthday gift?” I asked, fingers digging into the edges of the porcelain tub as Franky tightened his fist.

“I excused myself to the kitchen with my slice of birthday cake and added the extra frosting you provided me with.”

“A-all of it on o-one piece of c-cake?” I stuttered, body blistering with beads of sweat as my orgasm took shape. I'd managed to jerk off a couple times, filling a portion cup with my cum before he'd left.

“All of it,” he stressed, water splashing as he jerked me off.

The back of my head cracked against the tub as I came on a silent scream, tremors overtaking my body.

Franky stalked the streaks of cum floating along the water's surface, his gaze entranced.

“Eat it,” I breathed.

“This night isn't supposed to be for me,” he said roughly.

“I like knowing that I can give you something she can't.”

“It's not a competition,” he said.

“Feels like it.”

He ripped his attention away from my drifting seed. “I can’t breathe when I’m not with you, Leland. My heart doesn’t beat the same. It took being without you for a day to realize I’ve taken being here with you for granted. I couldn’t wait until the house was quiet, until everyone had fallen asleep, so that I could race back to you. No one can compete with you. *No one.*”

Franky took one last regretful look at my bathwater as I digested his heartfelt speech, trying not to let my conversation with Noon worm its way in.

He’s choosing me. I recited those three words in my head, making them my new mantra, as Franky washed my body and my hair. I recited them as he toweled me off before taking me to bed, and even as we fell asleep, our bodies connected at every point.

No sooner had we drifted off, Franky startled awake, checking the time.

“I have to go,” he said, slipping his arm from under my head.

“Wait,” I said groggily, pushing him onto the mattress and sitting astride him.

“I can’t, Leland. I’ve already stayed too long.”

“I’ll be quick,” I promised, kissing and licking his lips as I readied us. I fucked him with long, slow strokes, only

punching my hips down when close to his base, wanting to make sure my ass wasn't spared an inch of him. We came together, eating each other's moans, and although he was impatient to leave, he couldn't resist staying a little while longer when I pressed my open mouth to his nipple. I hollowed out my cheeks, sucking on the pert bead and then showing love to the other one.

"That's enough," he said as I reached between us to palm his semi-hard erection. "I have to go."

I sat up abruptly, stuffing my hole with his cock before he was fully erect.

"Leland," he said sharply, but with half of him already inside, and me working my hips to get him hard enough to allow for me to swallow the rest, the battle had already been won in my favor.

"Don't," he said weakly, trying to pluck me off of him. I dug my knees into his sides, bouncing on and off his dick with purpose as I gripped the headboard.

Franky remained still, irritation burning through his eyes as he stubbornly fought against his natural instinct to cooperate with the fucking, as he fought to not give me what I wanted.

"Mmmm," he eventually groaned against his will. That and the twitch of his cheek were the only signs that he was flesh and bone and not made out of pure stone.

It was unfair of me to put him in this position. If he was caught sneaking back into the house, he'd have to come up

with an explanation for where he'd been. *Should be easy enough to manage*, I thought as I continued to fuck him through his anger.

“Stop,” he breathed, his order less convincing than the last one, especially after his body began to move punishingly beneath me.

I leaned over him, riding the fuck out of his dick as I whispered threateningly, “Not until you come. Not until I milk you dry. Not until you're mine.”

The first two demands were easily fulfilled, and I collapsed on top of Franky afterward, falling asleep before the cum had cooled. I vaguely remembered him planting a kiss on my forehead and complaining about there being no time for cleanup before it was lights-out for me completely.

The next time I woke up I was alone, reaching for my phone to read the incoming text that had woken me up in the first place. Fear clamped around my heart and throat as I stared at the screen, realizing I'd forgotten to account for something. I'd forgotten to account for the day I met *her*.

I read the text one more time and then eventually a fourth, knowing I would need to do something about this, knowing it could potentially ruin everything.

Selene: *How about a hot lunch and a filled cup?*

CHAPTER 19

Franklin

I was in the mood to break something, and since Leland wouldn't be home from his bartending course for at least another hour, I'd have to find something else to take my frustrations out on.

Pulling into the driveway, I tapped the remote attached to the visor, opening all three garage doors simultaneously. One I used as a work area, the center garage stored my functional pieces that Leland had convinced me to sell, and the third served as a graveyard for my failed attempts.

I'd spent the last three days wearing my wedding band, and showing up to Nexcom—to Robert's delight—as if the past few months hadn't happened. I'd even had to bring Samuel out of summer retirement for a few days to chauffeur me around. Luckily he wasn't still in Italy.

The boys were now on their way back to Massachusetts, and removing the ring felt like the first truthful thing I'd done in days.

I dropped it in the cup holder before exiting the Jeep and rolling up my sleeves as I entered the graveyard. I skipped over the heavy tool options lining the cabinets along the back wall, choosing the metal bat leaning in the corner instead. A saw or drill wouldn't help with the type of aggression I needed

to work out. I needed to beat on something.

By the time Leland arrived, grinding Betty to a screeching halt, I no longer needed that evening workout session I had planned. God only knew where my shirt had disappeared to, probably under all the rubble hiding the floor, and even my eyeballs felt drenched with sweat.

“What’s got you Hulking out?” he asked, kicking a slab of wood out of his way to get to me. He’d left his car running and the door open, and the worry lines creasing his forehead betrayed the easy attitude his question implied.

“Don’t worry, your ass isn’t in trouble—pun intended,” I said, figuring he probably thought my mood would transfer over to him. It was quite the opposite. Seeing him had made everything better.

“That’s a shame. My ass likes your brand of trouble.” His concern retreated, although there was still something anxious about his expression.

“I’ve missed you,” I said around a sigh, because maybe he needed some reassurance, and because it was true. I let go of the bat as Leland admired the corded muscles along my forearm. They tended to be more pronounced after heavy exertion.

“I wasn’t expecting *that*,” he said, “but I’ll take it. So, what did I miss?” He waved hand at all the destruction.

“Well,” I said, dropping a kiss to his lips. “I was told that I needed to ‘get my head out of the clouds’ as I prepared to

leave Nexcom's headquarters earlier. I was informed that I don't get to lead a normal life because too many people depend on me, and the success of my company, to feed their families. My future grandchildren are depending on me. My great-grandchildren are depending on me..." I made a so-on and so-on motion with my hand. "You get the idea."

Leland snorted. "Robert?"

I wasn't sure I'd nailed my imitation of Robert, as hyperbole wasn't my style, but Leland guessed it after having only met the man once. "His last-resort was to guilt me with Cole."

"How so?" Leland asked. We'd moved beyond the construction zone I'd created and now stood near his car.

"Cole came into the office with me one day. Sat behind my desk, spun around in my chair. He wants this," I said, squinting against the sunlight. "Robert said the least I could do was preserve it for him."

"Cole's interested in running the company?"

"Looks like it. This wasn't the first sign either. I used to think his interest in Nexcom might've come from pressure on my part throughout the years. I'd always told myself it was the one area where my father and I differed, but I could see now that while my brand of pressure may have been more subtle, it was nonetheless pressure. Nexcom was the only thing we shared, really. I'd thought maybe that connection had translated to him as pressure to be my successor. But his interest seems genuine."

“So you’re going back full-time?” Leland asked.

“It’s not like I planned on faking my death and skipping town. I just thought I could play a lesser role. Bring someone on as acting CEO perhaps.” I shrugged. “But the market is volatile right now. The economy isn’t doing well, and the tech industry is feeling it. Nexcom has seen some losses. I need to be visible. I need to do this for Cole.”

“So then you go back,” he said. “But you fight to still find time for *you*.”

“Yeah,” I said, lips thinning. Summer was coming to an end, and the real world waited at autumn’s front door. The days were whizzing by too fast, as Leland once eloquently put it. “But not right now. Not today. Today I want to get reacquainted with you.”

“What do you want to do?” Leland asked, already bouncing on his feet.

“I want to take you to dinner.”

“Like dinner outside this house, dinner?” he asked.

“Yes.” I chuckled. “Didn’t you forbid me from ever touching the stove again?”

“Yeah, but is it okay for us to be out together?”

Aside from that night at Josephine’s, we’d never gone farther than the ocean together. And we were just friends then, and on the wrong side of town, chances were slim we’d run into anyone who knew me or knew of me. It was sort of an

unspoken agreement to be discreet after we'd altered the dynamics of our relationship. It'd be impossible for us to keep our hands off each other while in public, and anyone with the slightest bit of intelligence would pick up on the fact that we were more than friends. Going out hadn't been worth the hassle or the risk. Besides, we'd had everything we needed right here, with each other. But I missed him, and I wanted to do something different tonight.

"I'll rent something out if I have to," I said, rubbing my nose against his. "But first, let's go for a swim." I had him in a fireman's hold and jogging around the side of the house before he could warn me not to do something stupid like jump into the ocean. I at least placed him on his feet at the dock to strip him first as his laughter rustled the tree tops.

We played beneath the water like children, splashing and chasing one another, laughing until it hurt. We didn't make it to dinner that night, choosing to stay home where we didn't need to hold back our affection, where we could make love undisturbed and without restraint.

We spent the next three days patching up our bubble, locking the outside world out, and taking each other in.

With Leland's help, I painted my first portrait, and with my guidance he made a questionable stool to replace his milk crate. And I *almost* got him to cough up more details on his mysterious art-bar. Leland was determined to make me work for it.

Every night I got to rip him out of something lacy. One night in particular, Leland wore a lace catsuit that came with a built in opening at the front and back. I did my best to keep that one intact but was unable to do more than let my erection fall through my open zipper before taking him on the patio.

We shared baths, we shared our bodies, and we made plans. I couldn't wait to get our life started.

That all changed on day four.

CHAPTER 20

Leland

The shrill ringing of Franky's cell phone woke us up with a start. The digital clock read two in the morning.

"Hello?" Franky said into the phone, voice alert considering the time. Then again, a call at this hour could only mean an emergency. Franky sucked in a sharp breath. "I'm on my way." Throwing the sheet off, he hurried into the closet. I did the same.

"What's wrong?" I asked as Franky tore clothes off their hangers. "Are Cole and Jasper—"

"Selene's been rushed to the hospital. I have to go."

"I'll go with you," I said, already moving to the other side of the closet where I kept my things.

"You can't," he said, stopping me. I'd never seen him so afraid, so anxious, and I didn't want to cost him more precious seconds by debating all the ways I could've been there for him without being in the way, and without being seen. I would've stood in the pouring rain outside the hospital doors if I had to.

"Okay," I said. "I'll be here if you need me." I wanted to ask for details. Details he probably didn't have given the short duration of the call. Instead, I fell back as he put his shirt on inside out, then followed him to his car.

“I’ll call or text as soon as I can,” he said, kissing me with trembling lips. He was pulling off before I could kiss him back. I sent up a silent prayer that whatever had happened, Selene would be okay.

Going back to sleep was out of the question, so I alternated between pacing a hole in the living room floor and chewing my nails down as I blankly watched the sun rise through the closed living room wall.

I debated calling the hospital, but I knew I wouldn’t get any answers over the phone. I just wanted her to be okay. For everyone’s sake, including my own, she needed to be okay.

Day transitioned into night again, and I still hadn’t heard from Franky. I didn’t want to call him in case Cole and Jasper were around, or potentially other family members. I didn’t want to add to his stress, but my own stress levels had reached dangerous heights.

I gave in at the eighteen-hour mark and phoned the hospital. All they would tell me was that only family was being allowed in at this time, but at least that meant she was alive.

She’d been tired, I remembered Franky telling me once, and I’d seen it with my own eyes. *Could that be related to this?*

My phone vibrated, skidding across the coffee table, and I lurched forward from the sofa to grab it.

Franky: *She’s awake and stable. I’ll be here for a couple more hours, until she falls asleep, then I’ll stop by.*

Leland: *Take all the time you need. I'll be here.*

I hit send on my reply, my exhaustion crippling me now that I knew she'd be okay. He'd said he would stop by, meaning he wouldn't be staying, but I'd expected that. Knowing I'd get to lay eyes on him, hug him, breathe him in and give him some strength to deal with whatever lay ahead, was enough.

I managed to eat something for the first time that day, then showered before crumbling wet and naked onto our bed.

The clap of thunder jerked me from sleep four hours later, way beyond the time Franky said he'd be here. Lightning lit up the room, revealing Franky's foreboding shape as he watched me from a dark corner in the room. "Shit, Franky," I hissed, scurrying to the headboard. How long had he been standing there?

"Put some clothes on and meet me downstairs," he said as he started for the bedroom door. The smell of scotch lingered moments after his footsteps had receded down the hall.

Entering the kitchen, I tightened the string on my sweats, stopping at the uncapped bottle of brown liquor on the kitchen island. It was full last night. A little more than half now remained.

Another clap of thunder rang out, followed by two bolts of lightning that illuminated Franky's stern profile as he peered through the glass wall and toward the ocean.

"Hey," I said softly, padding over to him. Franky sidestepped my touch, glaring at me with harsh accusations in

his eyes. Had something changed since our text exchange? “Is Selene—”

“She’s fine. For now,” he amended. “That could change as early as tomorrow or as late as next year, or the year after.” His voice echoed with hysteria, and he worked to calm himself down. “She has dilated cardiomyopathy. It’s a heart condition. There are things that can be done in the short term, but she’ll need a new heart to survive it. And maybe not even then.”

“Franky,” I whispered, reaching up to touch his face. Franky laced his hands around my wrists before forcing my hands to my sides. He backed away until he’d reached the fireplace, as if he didn’t trust himself to be near me. I stood there as rain crashed against the wall, heart throbbing.

“Why were you nervous when you came home the other day?”

“The other day?” I asked, confused. There seemed to be multiple things going on here at once, and I was the only one left out of the loop on any of it. I thought over his question, as he didn’t seem to be in the mood to repeat himself or offer any assistance in jogging my memory. I hadn’t left the house in days, not since... *Fuck*. Not since the day he’d taken a bat to the furniture in one of the garages. Two days after I’d woken up to a text from Selene. My gaze fell away from him.

“Not ready to share yet?” he asked, his anger tugging at its leash. “Fine, I’ll go first.”

I counted each of the three deep breaths he took before he

spoke again.

“Selene called her assistant. She wasn’t feeling well and needed her help in getting to the hospital. She didn’t want to risk driving but didn’t think it was serious enough to warrant an ambulance.” The drop in his voice, signaling rage, felt directed at himself. Either he was upset she hadn’t thought she could call him, or he felt guilty that she’d had to face this alone. Probably both.

“She collapsed during their brief conversation. Tricia acted quickly. Calling for help as she sped over to the estate. The paramedics had to administer CPR.” He paused there, shoving his hands in his front pockets to hide the way they trembled. My fingertips scratched against the glass at my back in search of something to hold on to, since it was clear that something wouldn’t be him.

“I spent the next several hours, as she lay in a hospital bed unconscious, searching for answers. Raging at every nurse and doctor who couldn’t give me a straight one, and firing Selene’s assistant for keeping her secrets from me.” His nostrils flared savagely as he fought for control over himself, and I fought to stay on my feet.

“I didn’t know whether or not to call my sons, because I didn’t know what news I’d be delivering to them, and instinctively I knew that had she wanted them to know something was wrong with her, they would have already known. So I waited, and it was the hardest decision I ever had

to make. Every hour she remained asleep, and those machines hooked up to her continued to beep, I thought I may lose my mind. Her cardiologist finally showed up, shedding light on the situation.”

I wanted to comfort him, to say fuck it, fuck his anger, fuck what he was leading up to, fuck my fear of the outcome. I wanted to run to him and hold him, and beg him to forgive me. “Franky, please—”

“She eventually opened her eyes, and the first thing she said to me was under no circumstances should I tell the boys about any of this. We went over her diagnosis with her doctors and came up with a treatment plan, but there was a somber note in the room as we all understood what she’d need in the long term. With nothing left to do but sit and worry, Selene decided she’d distract me with frivolous conversation, and the more I encouraged her to rest and not worry about me, the more she worried, and the more she talked.”

I couldn’t stop my tears from brewing as his pain pricked at me from across the room. His beautiful eyes pivoted from hurt, to sorrow, to guilt, to helplessness. But mostly there was anger, and he needed somewhere to put it. He always did. I braced myself for the inevitable impact of it.

“I was going to tell you,” I said in a small voice.

“How convenient,” he sneered, and I closed my eyes, turning my head away from him. “Imagine my surprise when she told me about a young, charismatic artist she met at her

last charity event, and how much she'd love to have his work headline her next For the Arts fundraiser."

I swallowed past my dry throat and took a step toward him.

"No!" he shouted, sending me back into the glass. "Don't come near me."

"Let me explain," I begged.

"I didn't even have the strength to feign interest in what the hell she was going on about. I was too consumed with the shock of nearly losing her, too consumed with the fear of possibly losing her still. But then she whispered his name. *Noon Waters*. And that got my attention."

"Franky—"

"How odd, I thought, that there were two people out there with the same, uncommon name. First and last. So I asked her for a description. She smiled and said jokingly from her hospital bed, 'Sunshine on legs,' and I knew she was talking about *you*."

Selene may have said it as a joke, as a means to distract him, but Franky said it like it was a weakness he wished he no longer had, and the first fissure cracked down the center of my heart, because he would use this to end us.

"She's still waiting for you to get back to her," he gritted out.

I'd never responded to her text, hadn't given much thought to how my meeting her under false pretenses would come back

to bite me until I'd received her message. We'd one day meet. One day, Franky would need to introduce me to her, because she would be a part of his life in some way forever, and she'd know. She'd remember me.

I'd somehow thought he'd already known when I showed up to find him demolishing shit in the garage. But he didn't know, and we then spent the next several days refamiliarizing ourselves with each other, being obscenely obsessed with one another, and I willfully forgot.

"Don't use this as an excuse to walk away," I pleaded, each word a struggle to utter past the lump swelling at the back of my throat.

"An *excuse*?" he asked, appalled. "You lied to me! That was the day..." He stopped to add a few things up in his head. "The charity event happened on the first day of your course. Did you even attend?"

"You're scared—"

"Answer me!" he roared, face turning red. The patio chair scraped across the floor as the howling wind picked up, the sound only audible because of the sudden break in the continuous cracks of thunder. It was like Franky's outburst had made even the storm hold its breath.

"No," I admitted, panic churning in my stomach. "I didn't plan on approaching her. My feelings for you were changing, and I got curious. I knew I didn't want our affair to end yet, but I didn't know we would end up together. I didn't know that

I would ask you to leave her for me. I didn't think it through, but what I did isn't some impeachable offense, Franky. It was a mistake. We can get past this," I said, my legs taking me to him.

Franky held a hand out to stop me, his feet carrying him away until the coffee table and sofa separated us. He was running from me, and my heart couldn't take it. My lungs were forgetting how to function without him already.

"What the fuck is happening here?" I asked, staring into his red-rimmed eyes. His hair looked as if it'd been run over, like he'd been cruelly tugging at it, and his scruff had sprouted into a small beard since I last saw him. The stress had aged him too. He seemed frail, and I didn't miss the way he pressed his palms into the sofa back for support. Had he gotten a wink of sleep?

"I bet you're thrilled about this, aren't you?" he asked. "Things would be so much easier for you if she were gone." He couldn't have hurt me more if he'd punched me with a brass-knuckled fist.

"Don't pretend you don't know me enough to know I'd never wish for that."

"But I don't know you, Leland," he said, his voice trembling as he retreated a step in response to my one step advancement.

He's running from me. And then another realization infiltrated my mind. *He's pushing me away.*

"Don't do this." A rogue tear dripped onto my cheek.

Franky dropped his gaze to it, shuddering through an expelled breath, and backed into the hall until his spine met the wooden balusters. “You came here to hurt me. Why, Franky?”

The light from the upstairs hall trickled down the staircase, spotlighting his wet eyes, and whereas he’d been operating on pure rage and pain before, he now looked lost. “I need you to hate me,” he whispered.

“Don’t you know that I love you too much to ever hate you?” I’d never said the words out loud before. Maybe a part of me was always afraid I’d scare him off, like maybe our foundation wasn’t strong enough to handle a bombshell like love. But I’d said it with every look, every kiss, and every single touch. And it had been reciprocated. I’d felt it whenever I was beneath his capable hands, whenever pinned by his body and unforgiving cock. I felt it with every tortuous and possessive claim he’d made on me, and even through his most unpleasant moods. I couldn’t hate him if I tried.

I took advantage of the momentary distraction my admission bought me. I scaled the coffee table, leaped onto the sofa, then jumped off the back of it. I had his face in the palms of my hands before he could move a muscle in the opposite direction.

Franky sagged in on himself, like my hands on him were both the last thing he needed and the only thing that could save him. He couldn’t pretend anymore, not when we were like this. “You can’t love me,” he said.

“Why not?” I asked, kissing his tears away.

“Because... I can’t leave her now.” The words were ripped from deep inside him, and they cut open some place deep inside of me.

“You mean now, like right now, right? Because I wouldn’t expect you to. Fuck, she almost *died*, Franky. I don’t expect you to storm her hospital room with divorce papers. Is that what this is about? We’ll make it work. You said there’s a treatment plan in place. We’ll wait until she’s stronger. Until she can handle the news. M-maybe w-we’ll tell the boys first?” I rambled on.

My panic rose at the look of guilt and pity in his eyes, and I used all my strength to keep his head still as he moved it slowly in the gesture of no in my hands. “Yes,” I breathed. “Yes. I can wait for you. We can even take care of her together. *Please.*”

He stood taller, holding my face in his hands in return, my naivety reflected in his sorrowful eyes.

“Don’t say it. If you aren’t going to say the right thing, then don’t say anything,” I ordered, yanking at the collar of his shirt. Franky didn’t say anything, which said it all. Two excruciating heartbeats turned into ten, and I couldn’t stand it anymore. “Say something!” I yelled, shaking him.

“What do you want me to say, Leland?” He brushed a thumb under my damp eyes.

“I want you to say we’ll find a way to make it work. I want you to say it’ll be hard, and it will take longer than we thought,

but nothing will tear us apart. Because if you want me, Franky..." I stopped to swallow down a sob. "If you want me, you'll find a way to choose me, no matter what." I skimmed my fingers along his brows, his lips, and his chin. Wanting to kiss him, to remind him of how good we were together. Of how worth the fight we were. The upstairs light flickered as another round of furious thunder and lightning battled for dominance over the booming of our hearts, and volts of electricity sizzled across the points of our skin that touched. "We can be a secret. For however long it takes. Just...*please*, choose me."

"Can't you see how selfish of me that would be, Leland?"

"No," I said determinedly. "Because all I can see is how terrified you are. Choosing me doesn't mean you don't love her, or that you can't be there for her. It just means you love me enough to fight for me. No matter what it takes."

"Noon was right. Everything he said to you on the patio that night was true. We were in way over our heads to begin with." He'd heard our conversation that night, I realized, and he'd said nothing until now. "The odds weren't in our favor from the start."

"Fuck the odds," I said, refusing to let him run through excuse after excuse as to why we couldn't be. "I'd face down anything to be with you. Now *please* do the same for me."

His fingers curled tightly in my hair, and I slapped my hands on top of his, as if I could siphon some of his pain into me,

proving that I could carry some of the burden if he'd only let me.

“You could never be my priority. Your needs would come last to hers, if I could even tend to your needs at all. You would get the scraps of my time. I'll make promises I won't be able to keep. You'll live in a constant state of waiting for me. She's *dying*,” he said, agonized. “They won't say it, but she is. And my heart is broken because of it. Every time I see you, I'll be looking for something to ease the pain, something to dump my pain on, something I can rage against. You would be getting the worst parts of me every time, because I'll need to give her my best. It will slowly eat away at you, and you'll eventually hate me.”

“You don't scare me. Your darkness doesn't scare me, Franky. How many times do I have to prove that I can handle you?”

“You shouldn't have to,” he said angrily, trying to shake some sense into me. “You shouldn't have to handle me. You deserve better than that.”

“I don't want better! I want *you*. I'll take your fucking scraps without complaint if it means one day I get to have more. If it means that sometime in this lifetime I'll get to have the good parts of you again.” I smashed my mouth against his. If he wouldn't listen to my heartfelt words, I'd show him in the only other way I knew how—with my body.

“Stop it,” he snarled, wrestling me away from him. He

turned for the side door, and I grabbed him by the back of his shirt.

“Fight!” I yelled. “Fight for us!”

Franky swung around and hauled me into his chest with a painful grasp on my wrists. “Can’t you see I’m doing the right thing here?! Can’t you see how much this is killing me?!” The volume of his voice reached a fevered pitch, and in the midst of me trying to break free of his hold, my fist connected with his upper lip, slitting it wide open. Whatever sliver of restraint he’d managed to cling to, immediately evaporated.

I didn’t back away as he wiped his lip, staring at his bloody digits as his breathing accelerated. And I didn’t flinch when his blank gaze flicked to mine.

“Do your fucking worst,” I said resolutely.

Franky crashed into me, sending us barreling over the sofa back and onto the floor, wedged in by the coffee table. My shoulder collided with the sharp, wooden edge of it, and Franky shoved it out of our way. It screeched across the floorboards, knocking into an end table and pitching the porcelain lamp to the ground. Chunks of its shattered pieces skidded over to us as Franky forced his way between my thighs.

I could’ve made things easy for him, but he needed this. *We* needed this.

His rage grew as we tussled, pouring from his eye sockets like twin beams of light, and I’d knowingly stepped in the way

of it.

Franky kissed me like he hated me, tasting of tears, blood, and scotch, and I struggled to get free of the attack as all three flavors watered my tongue.

He broke the kiss, his palm clamping around my throat as his gaze flitted around the living room in search of something. I bucked against him, but he just sank his hips deeper into me, lightly humping my erection.

“Get off of me,” I croaked, trying to peel his fingers off me. I followed his stare to the bottle of lube lying amongst the lamp’s wreckage. It must have fallen off the end table as well.

A war waged within his vibrating body. He needed to get the lube, but he didn’t want to risk me getting free. “Stay put,” he warned, but I flipped onto my front and scurried on all fours toward the stairs as soon as he’d hefted himself off of me.

I’d gotten half way up before he’d caught up to me, grabbing one leg of my sweats and tugging. My chest met the hard tread, and I held tight to the one above me as he attempted to drag me back down.

I kicked out, breaking free of his hold, and managed to crawl up a couple more steps before his hands were on me again. Franky dragged my pants down by the waistband, and I crawled right out of them, continuing up the landing as he tumbled backward, meeting the bottom step with a groan and a curse.

The air whooshed out of me as he grappled me from behind,

using his strength to his advantage, sending me front first to the floor and then straddling me.

“Yield,” he gritted out, subduing me with an arm to the back of my neck as the sound of his zipper lowering rang out.

“That isn’t what you want, Franky,” I said, clenching my ass shut against the cool lube hitting it, forcing him to peel one cheek aside before fitting his crown inside of me. He wanted a fight, someone to rain pain down on, and I wanted to show him that that someone would always, willingly, be me.

I dug my fingers and toes into the floorboards, gaining an inch of forward momentum, causing his cockhead to slip from my opening.

“Damn it,” he spat as he repositioned his legs so they were between mine, then used his knees to push mine higher, situating me in a frogged position before fully seating his cock in my vulnerable hole.

“Fuck,” I moaned, smacking a palm against the wooden floor as he took off, thrusting faster than the lightning still jetting wildly across the sky.

Franky didn’t fuck me with caution, didn’t once stop to care about his size, about my limits, about whether or not I had any. He used and abused my hole, throwing his weight into me and driving us down the hallway without restraint.

The fucking wasn’t romantic. It was archaic, barbaric, graceless, and inconsiderate. All we were missing was the club needed to hit me over the head with and the cave for him to

drag me into.

He was giving me a taste, an example, using this as a teachable moment for what he'd have to offer me moving forward. What he didn't understand was that I'd take it, because I loved him enough to, because *something* was a fuck ton better than nothing. "Let me have it, Franky. Give me your pain, your anger, your fight... I can take it."

Franky pulled my head off the floor by my hair, my lower back arching enough to keep my cock from scraping against the hard surface as he delivered brutal thrust after thrust, deeper and deeper, propelling us down the long hall.

Franky was a carnivore who wouldn't be satisfied until my bones were bare, until I paid for him falling in love with me to begin with.

"I love you, Franky," I said, biting my lip to still the quivering. His groan sounded wounded, and I wondered if the wetness hitting my ear was sweat, blood, or more of the moisture I'd seen behind his eyes downstairs.

This felt like goodbye, like him saying this was all he could give me, and like me falling apart, never to be whole again.

Franky reared back, taking me with him and slinging his arms across my chest, crushing me against him as he shoved his dick in and out of me.

"Let me see you," I said, edging toward orgasm. "I need to see you."

He reluctantly let go of me, and I popped off his cock, turned to him, then lowered back onto his dick.

Franky tried to hide his face in my neck as we began to move again, but I fought to hold his gaze to me. “Touch me,” I cried, the jagged pieces of my heart stabbing at my breastbone. Franky blinked, the last of his unshed tears falling before he wrapped his fingers around my cock.

“I’ll be here,” I said, riding him hard. “I’ll be here waiting for you. You need a few days to think. I know that, but I’ll be here when you’re ready.” I slammed down on his cock one last time, my vision blurring as thick strings of cum spurted into the air like confetti, bathing his knuckles and lower abdomen white.

Franky spasmed as he came, dropping his forehead to mine as he filled my hole to the point of overflowing.

The cold claws of reality crept in, and he spread me out on the floor so he could heave to his feet and zip himself back into his pants. He hadn’t even cleaned me first, which I’d come to need after we fucked because it reminded me that he cared. The reverent ritual had also become a sort of apology in my eyes, one I didn’t know I needed until now.

“Franky,” I said, and had to say it again to gain sound. He looked away in shame.

I knew better than to get mixed up with Franklin Kincaid, but I hadn’t cared about the risks because every fiber of my being wanted him. I should’ve cared, because I could feel

every snap, every break of something vital happening inside of me as he stumbled along the wall toward the stairs, moving farther and farther away from me. “I’ll never be the same, Franky,” I promised, giving in to the pain and devastation contorting my body. “Please don’t fucking break me.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. And then he was gone.

I waited for him for nineteen whole days, with nothing to nourish me but fleeting hope. I waited, and he never came.

He never chose me.

CHAPTER 21

Leland

Two Months Later

Neil Sanders was the last guy I wanted to see again, but since we had history, my chances of getting him to buy another piece from me would be greater than if I'd gone to a gallery where I'd be an unknown. I needed cash, and he could smell it on me, and the disdainful curl to his top lip said he wouldn't make this easy.

"Five hundred," he said.

"One thousand," I countered, holding on to the edge of the large canvas with a death grip. It was my last connection to Franky. I could've brought any other painting here, but I'd chosen this one for that specific reason, and now I thought I might be sick if I let go of it.

"Six hundred," he said with finality, taking pleasure in having the upper hand.

I only needed money for gas, food, and a few other essentials until I could get work. The bartending school had taken pity on me, crediting me for the course I hadn't completed, and waving the registration fee for December's class. So I didn't need funds for that.

There'd been an influx of cash into my account a few weeks

after Franky walked out on me, way more money than the mural was worth. Knowing Franky, the extra was to compensate for his guilt. I'd had every dime returned to fucking sender immediately. Money couldn't fix what he'd broken.

"Sold," I said dejectedly, my tone matching my overall appearance.

"Great. I'll get the paperwork drawn up," Neil said, scurrying off and leaving me to mourn in peace.

I'd created this painting the day Franky and I fought after he'd told me Cole and Jasper were coming into town for a few days. It had been a form of release then, but I'd quickly decided I wanted it to be a gift. I'd worked tirelessly to perfect it, barring Franky from the guest room where I kept it hidden from him. He'd never get to see it now. Never get to see himself through my eyes.

Neil cleared his throat, startling me. "Change of heart?" he asked, and I released my tight grip on it, stepping several feet away.

"No," I said, the word cutting into the rough edges of my heart.

I signed the contract and collected my check, rushing out into the misty afternoon air before the ink had fully dried. I wasn't any closer to knowing how to live without Franky than I had been the night he left me naked and hurting on the hall floor pleading for him to take mercy on me. Pleading for him

to not break me.

I'd left voicemail messages that went unreturned, sent text messages that went unanswered, and during my lowest point, I waited for him one morning outside of Nexcom's headquarters, but he hadn't shown up.

I'd spent weeks occupying the home we shared for the summer, weeks of fucking weeping in front of the fireplace, praying he'd come back to me, praying that he was okay. I'd become a desperate man, and when I looked in the mirror, it was my mother who stared back at me tauntingly.

Sometimes I would sleep on the ocean, curled into a fetal position in the boat's cabin, remembering the nights he'd make love to me with a vengeance in the tiny space. The nights he'd explode inside of me, then place his mouth over my hole before hollowing his cheeks and extracting what he'd just poured into me. Franky was selfish in that way too. Always demanding I return what he gave to me.

I used booze to mask and numb the pain I'd suffered from the loss of his warmth, the loss of his belief in me, and the loss of his uncompromising force when wanting and needing me. It literally hurt to breathe during that time, but as the days passed by in a blur, it hurt a little less to hate him. The hate became the thing that would sustain me.

He'd changed his number around week four, and so I began writing him letters. Some were angry, requiring a whole note pad to complete. Some letters were short and sweet, containing

a simple *I love you, Franky*.

Then there were the tear-soaked letters that included some of our best memories, like when I'd hold him against my chest as he slept, snoring softly into my neck, dampening the skin there.

Or that time I'd thrown my legs over the arms of the chair on the patio, stuffing my cum into my hole after jerking off less than two feet away from him. He'd refused to fuck me, saying my body needed a break after the night he'd had with it, so I'd taken my time, getting myself off as the most wicked things spilled from my mouth in an effort to tempt him into taking me.

"Enough," he'd said defeatedly, but I continued sawing my fingers in and out of my hole as he watched helplessly. Franky was no match for my games, especially not when cum was involved.

I'd agreed to stop, dropping my feet to the floor, but the damage had already been done. Franky strong-armed his way between my legs, licking and swirling his tongue around the nail-beds and cuticles of my cum-drenched fingers before tackling the web of skin between the digits.

I then spread myself out on the patio table, lifting my legs and pulling my cheeks apart as he fought with his desires. *"Well, are you going to kneel there and pretend you don't want the rest of this clogging up your throat?"* I'd asked. I bore down as he rimmed me through his annoyance, he even got the

dried stains on the underside of my shaft before standing and wrangling me to my knees.

“Why do I get the feeling you like seeing me this way,” he’d said, speaking past a tired tongue, his scruff and nostrils shiny and wet.

“What way?” I’d asked, as he angrily undid his pants, his cock springing into the air.

“On the brink. Like...” He’d faded off, in search of the right words.

“Like you’d do anything to have me?” I’d said. *“Like the only way for you to cope with wanting me is by taking it all out on me? Your anger, your lust, your guilt... Your sadness too?”*

“Yes,” he’d said, seemingly shocked at how in tune I was with him. I could feel the rage in him boiling because of it, boiling because he was about to prove me right, and there was nothing he could do about it.

“You’re a tortured soul, Franky, but I can handle it. When no one else can, I can handle you,” I’d promised him.

“Your hole may not be ready for me,” he said, words garbled like he’d been eating rocks, not cum. *“But your mouth seems to be functioning just fine.”* He’d fucked my throat then, coming shortly after on a rabid snarl.

I reminded him of all that in my letter, even spilling my cum onto one of them, hoping my scent would win me his change of heart. I never mailed them, though. I’d tossed them all into

the fire.

There was one letter I'd actually sealed and stamped, intending on forwarding it to him, but I ended up shredding it with hands and teeth before dumping the bits into the trash. That was the day I'd left our sacred place for good.

I'd gone back to my apartment, where in between religiously jerking off to dreams or nightmares of Franky, I found time to have a mini breakdown after receiving a text from Noon. Things were going well in New York.

With Noon gone, and now Franky, I was the one thing I feared more than anything. I was alone. I'd been thrown out of a window again.

The mist grew to an impatient drizzle, shaking me from my thoughts. I moved to the side, allowing a couple to hurry out of the rain and into the gallery as I breathed through my heart palpitations, as I went over what I needed to do next.

I needed to seal myself off, make myself immune to this type of pain, immune to the feelings of others. There was only one way to do that. I had to find it in me to not care about anything.

Three hours later, I found myself at a seedy gay bar across town, strategically drinking the hard stuff in hopes that it would take half the money needed to get wasted to the point of unconsciousness than it would have had I been guzzling beer.

"Can I buy you a drink?" a guy asked nervously, taking up the empty stool next to mine.

I paused with my drink to my lips, side-eying the tan line where his wedding band should be. “They’re all the same,” I slurred, huffing a laugh before downing my drink. “You can buy the next two.” I rolled my eyes at his eager expression. “Well, what are you waiting for?”

His green eyes sought out the bartender, flagging him down from the other end of the bar. “He’ll have another—”

“No. This is the cheap shit.” I slid my empty tumbler away from me. “I’ll take a round of the best you’ve got,” I said directly to the bartender. “And make it a double.” Seconds later I had another drink in my hand and was already asking for more.

“So, what’s your name?” he asked, inexperience written all over him. His sandy brown hair had been combed to precision, and his plaid shirt had been buttoned up to his neck. A little too preppy for me. Too nice, and too...*smiley*. The only time Franky showed that much teeth was when they were tearing into my skin. This guy was nothing like what I preferred, which made him perfect for me.

He sipped his beer, looking around as if his spouse might charge in at any minute, and I mentally stabbed the voice telling me this wasn’t right, that this was how I ended up here in the first place.

Things would be different from here on out, because I’d promised myself I wouldn’t give a fuck anymore. What this guy had going on outside of the hot fuck I intended to get

wasn't my problem.

"How about we skip the small talk and get down to why we're both here tonight," I said.

"Ah, okay," he said, seemingly waiting for me to be the one to do something. I'd have to get used to being treated like what happened next was up to me.

"Have you never picked up a random dude for a one night-stand before?"

"No," he admitted, sighing and shaking his leg under the bar top. "I don't normally do stuff like this, but life right now—"

"Rule number one," I said, interrupting his sad song. I couldn't care less why he was here. I wasn't the moral police. "Keep your problems to yourself. It's better that way, and I don't give a fuck about anyone's problems anymore." I winced through the burn of my shot going down and then promptly ordered another. "Add that one to his tab too," I informed the bartender before returning my attention to preppy-boy.

"Rule number two: no names. And rule number three: no repeats. You got a condom?" I asked.

"Yes."

I nodded to the bartender, then chugged my last shot. "Good. Let's go." I staggered toward the restroom, feeling drunk enough to not feel anything, drunk enough to ignore the warning signs of an impending mistake. I wanted Franky gone. I wanted his scent off my skin, wanted his imprint removed

from my heart and mind, and I wanted every space in and on my body that had been reserved for his cock only to now be open for walk-ins. I wanted someone— many someones—to fuck him out of my system.

I wanted that guilty, shameful feeling that came with giving away something that belonged to someone else. I wanted there to be no going back for me, just like there had been no looking back for him. I wanted that flimsy string holding what remained of me together to break. I wanted to be the old me— someone who never got too attached—and a mix of someone new, someone stripped of all compassion. I wanted to be walled in where nothing or no one could ever hurt me again.

The bathroom had seen better days, and from the drying streaks on the stall door, we weren't the first to use it for unintended purposes.

“Don't take your time with me,” I whispered, fingers trembling against my belt buckle. “Pretend I'm not even human.”

“Okay,” he said easily, all traces of the shy guy at the bar gone now that he was seconds away from having what he'd come here for. The sound of the condom wrapper being torn open hit my ear, and true to his word, he worried only about getting himself off.

He fucked me as I gripped the top of the rattling stall door, focusing on the place inside me that still clung to hope, focusing for the sole purpose of obliterating it.

He pawed at my hips, but his hold lacked the proprietorship that Franky's contained. His dick rocketed in and out of me at a fast clip, but it lacked the punishing edge that drove each and every one of Franky's devastating thrusts. Our bodies clapped together, but absent was the thunderous crack that filled the air and nearly deafened me whenever Franky crashed into me.

And preppy-boy was a man of many words, prattling on about how good I felt, how hard he was going to come, and how he planned on ruining me with this one, sad fuck.

Franky was a man of few words, a man who could ruin me with one look, a man who could make me come with the promise of a single touch, a man who could make hate sex feel like the greatest expression of love ever known.

I grew dizzy as a vortex of emotion gained momentum in my core, aiming for that final thing tethering me to the man I'd been with Franky. The internal snap came with the shedding of tears, cleansing me of love as the first of many strangers to come finished inside of me.

Next came numbness. I couldn't even feel myself silently crying anymore. Couldn't feel the organ I assumed was still beating within my chest. Couldn't even feel myself orgasm as he reached around to jack me off, adding more white streaks to the collection on the door.

It was over. I was done. I would never be hurt by anyone ever again. It was all wrong, but it was everything I needed.

PART TWO

CHAPTER 22

Franklin

Two Years Later

Josephine's had gone through a renovation since the first and last time I'd walked through its doors with Leland. They now served dinner and had added dimly lit alcoves with high-backed booth seating, providing an area for patrons to have a more intimate and private experience.

I was there because I could no longer sit in the home where my wife had died mere days ago. I couldn't stomach the way I'd emotionally shut my children out, leaving their grief to fend for itself as I hid away like a coward. I needed to be someplace where I could disappear, where I wouldn't matter. Someplace that felt closer to the version of me I hadn't seen for some time.

Those were the numerous reasons I'd given myself for being at Josephine's. I hoped to God they weren't actually excuses.

"Ready to order?" my waitress asked, interrupting my self-flagellation.

I quickly perused the menu. "I'll just have a Stella."

"Sorry, but this area is reserved for diners," she said.

"Add an order of fries, then." The mention of fries, coupled

with the nostalgia of this place and everything that came after it, made my chest hurt in a way it hadn't in two years, compounding the pain that had already made a home there. I gripped the small bundle of bar napkins on the table, feeling the tissue tear beneath my hands, beneath my agony.

Left alone, I slipped Selene's last journal entry from my inside pocket, unfolding the sheet of paper and smoothing out the edges. It went into detail about Cole and Jasper's intimate relationship, something I knew nothing about, another complication I didn't need, one I didn't know how to address.

It didn't help that if my suspicions were correct, it meant this secret played a role in Selene collapsing and taking her final breath inside Jasper's bedroom. A vivid imagination wasn't required to paint a picture of what she'd likely walked in on. I'd seen it written all over Cole's and Jasper's faces when I pulled up to the house that night to find her being loaded into a waiting ambulance. I hadn't understood their identical expressions of culpability until later finding her journal.

The entry ended with her needing to make things right with Jasper after making him promise he'd end things. A promise she'd extracted on my behalf, because she didn't want the news to break my heart. If only I'd been just as mindful with her heart throughout our last years.

I couldn't help but also believe she was afraid the revelation would cause me to cast Jasper aside. With her gone, we were

the only family he had left, and she probably assumed a transgression this big would've rocked an already fragile foundation.

A part of me blamed them both for what happened to their mother. The irrational part of me that didn't want to carry the burden of blame alone. It was easier to make it through the day if I could direct some of the rage swimming inside me onto someone else, a nasty habit of mine, which of course made my guilt that much worse.

I'd been about to start on my second beer, my fries going cold and untouched, when a familiar sensation prickled at my spine, stiffening it.

"How many times I gotta tell you, you don't shit where you eat, Leland," a stern voice said in a paternal tone. The mention of Leland's name sent my world spinning. I hadn't dared to speak it since I'd abandoned him to his heartbreak. I hadn't even deserved to dream of it.

There was a pause, in which I wrapped my head around the fact that he was here and that I was so close to being discovered by him. Thankfully, my seat back reached beyond the top of my head, hiding me from the face on the other side of the booth, although I felt the heat of his gaze burning through the wood.

"And how many times do I have to tell you it's called taking a cock, Johnny. Not shitting," Leland eventually said. I flinched from his brashness, from his crude delivery, and

maybe even from the act he'd confessed to itself. I badly wanted to stand, to peer over the top of the seat to see if his sweet face had hardened the way his tone had implied. Words delivered like that couldn't have come from anything with a trace of softness inside of it.

"And besides, I'm not on the clock yet," he said to Johnny, letting me know he worked there.

"You are now," Johnny said. "Get behind the bar, Leland." Johnny may have been at his wits' end, but there was fondness under the exasperation too. "And cover up that hickey, will ya? One of these days I'm going to make good on my promise and fire you," he grumbled.

He'd been fucked and branded by someone other than me, and I shouldn't have given a damn. Not now, not with everything I had going on in my life, not ever again. I shouldn't have been there, yet, I had to see him now that I was. I prepared myself for what I might see before peeking my head out of the booth.

Leland was busy wiping down the bar. He wore a fitted thermal with the sleeves tugged up to his elbows, and he hadn't done anything to hide the bruise from the view of customers as Johnny had requested. He'd need a turtleneck to hide something of that size anyway. Instead, he wore it proudly, a scarlet letter he paraded around without shame.

Leland didn't exude the impishness I'd come to know him for during our time together. His eyes weren't as soft around

the edges, and the boyish smile that had always teased below the surface of his lips no longer existed. He'd hardened.

He was still handsome, more so now, if that were possible. But he no longer reminded me of sunshine. Leland was a cyclone of pain. I'd tarnished him.

Maybe this was what I'd come here for. To hopefully see him and be reminded that nothing good ever came from me getting too close to anyone. First Theo, then Annabeth, then Cole, then Jasper and Selene. And now Leland. I was better off in my mental isolation, trapped inside myself where I couldn't hurt anyone but myself. Where the hurt I'd already inflicted paled in comparison to what I could do if I made myself available to those who needed me most.

I stuck around long enough to witness him hit on every paying customer who sat at his bar. I didn't bother waiting for the bill. Instead I dropped enough cash on the table to cover my tab and gratuity, then gnashed my teeth as his flirtatious laughter followed me into the cool night air. A laugh that held a dark edge that hadn't been there before.

Selene smiled at me from the picture frame atop the armoire as I tore at my tie, adjusting it for the tenth time.

"How am I supposed to get through this day?" I asked, closing my eyes on her. We had an hour to be at the church. An hour before well-meaning people joined us in saying our

goodbyes. An hour before the plethora of apologies began rolling in. An hour before we were forced to smile and offer gratitude for their sympathy, when all I wanted to do was lock myself away and forget that one of the most important people in my life was now gone.

An urgent knock sounded on the bedroom door before Cole barged in, breathing raggedly.

“Cole?” I said, spinning away from the mirror. We’d all been sitting in our separate corners, licking our wounds these last couple weeks since her death. I knew what guilt looked like, knew the awkward energy it exuded, knew the gazes it made one unable to hold. Cole and Jasper felt guilty, and their guilt caused them to avoid me, and mine caused me to let them, so I was surprised to see him here now. “What’s wrong —”

“Jasper’s leaving. He won’t even stay for the funeral. You have to do something. Talk to him. *Please.*”

“Did he say why he’s leaving?”

“Just... Just that he needs time away.” He folded his arms defensively. Lying had never come easy to Cole. He was a man who spoke plainly, but he lied to me now, or at the very least only gave me a half-truth.

The right move would’ve been to assuage his distress. I should’ve told him that I would do whatever it took to keep what remained of our family intact. That would’ve been the fatherly thing to do. I couldn’t form the words he needed to

hear, though, because I was in no condition to keep anything together. And a part of me approved of his and Jasper's separation. A big part of me. Most of me.

"Everyone copes in their own way," I said, unable to hold his stare. "If he wants to leave, there's nothing we can do about it."

He blanched, stumbling back as if I'd struck him with an open fist. "But he's your son," he whispered, cutting out what remained of my heart.

"I know," I said. What I knew and what I felt resided on two different planes. "But forcing him to stay may not be what's best for him."

Cole battled with indecision, likely knowing that if he wanted more from me, he'd need to offer me more. He wouldn't, though, because then we'd have to deal with why we'd lost Selene just hours before being notified that she'd made it to the top of the donor list. We'd have to deal with the fact that he and Jasper had grown from stepbrothers to lovers practically under my nose.

There was a sense of betrayal that came with that knowledge, but it also further highlighted my inadequacies as a parent. How had I not known? How had I not seen it before, when *all* I could do was see it now. There was no escaping the way they looked at each other.

"So...so you're just going to let him go?"

God, his watery blue eyes bore into me the way mine had

beseeked my father after learning I'd lost Gloria and Theo. I swung around, giving his pain my back, but its reflection gaped at me through the mirror anyway. "Some time apart could be good," I said. My father had said something similar to me. "I'm sure he'll return."

"I can't lose him too," he said. "She would want you to fight for him."

"So now you're the expert on what my wife would want?" I snapped, pivoting to him again. He was right, of course, which was what set me off.

Cole's cheeks were now hollow, and his suit hung loose on his frame. Peering down at how my own suit swam on me told me I wasn't faring so well either.

"No, I'm not. Had I been..." His anguish cut him off. "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," I said.

"But I do." He chuckled self-deprecatingly, blinking up at the ceiling.

I squeezed my eyes shut. *Don't say it. Don't make me face this now. Not now, and maybe not ever.*

"You loved her, and now she's gone. And I get to be sorry about that." Cole chewed his lip while I swam in the ocean cresting behind his blue eyes. Physically we were so close, yet we were millions of miles apart.

Too many secrets and lies separated us, and not just his. I'd

offered them my fair share, even if most were by omission. I'd partaken in withholding Selene's diagnosis from them until we no longer could, and even now neither of them knew about our marital crisis. We'd fed them a fantasy, and I continued to feed those fantasies with my silence in Selene's absence.

I knew what haunted Jasper and Cole, what kept them awake at night, and I could have made it all better with a few well-placed words of comfort, instead I began withdrawing from them even more because I was angry. So damned angry.

"Why can't I ever do right by you?" I'd had no intention of giving voice to that thought, but nothing seemed to be functioning properly. Not my heart, nor my brain. Both organs were filled with so much of everything that this one thing had found its way out.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said, getting back to my tie.

"What is it you think we needed from you that you didn't give?" he asked, deciding not to let it go.

"Everything," I breathed, feeling the world crumble around me with that admission. It'd been the most honest thing I'd ever said to him. The most vulnerable I'd ever been with the people who should have, but never did, get all of me. Why was it so hard? Why was it *still* so hard?

We were all so broken, I realized right then, but I couldn't be the one to fix us. I wasn't strong enough, or brave enough, to do that. Not since *him*. I was capable of very little without

him.

An incoming text shattered whatever spell we were under. “Samuel is waiting outside for us,” I said, flinging aside my uncooperative necktie.

“I’ll meet you in the car,” he said, and I nodded. Cole stopped on the threshold of the bedroom, glancing back at me, then into the hall again, seemingly torn between saying more and letting it go.

“You’re there when it matters most,” he said.

“No, I’m not,” I replied, self-disappointment using my insides to sharpen its talons. Because it mattered now, and I couldn’t get past my own deficiencies, my own discomfort, and my own guilt to do anything about it.

I wanted to punch something, preferably myself, but I tucked the need into its tiny compartment, right next to everything else I wasn’t ready to face.

We made it through the funeral services and sped home at Cole’s insistence. He was out of the SUV before Samuel had pulled to a full stop outside the estate doors. I took my time going inside, in no rush to see him dash from room to room in search of something that wasn’t there.

All signs of Jasper were gone.

Jasper didn’t wait around to say goodbye, and I hadn’t hunted him down before leaving for the funeral to tell him that I loved him. That no matter what, I loved him with all of me,

even if I'd never been the best at showing it.

Selene's worst fears had come true. Her son had no one, and I threw myself into my work, determined to make my life as miserable as it could be as penance for my shortcomings.

"You're a tortured soul, Franky," Leland had once said. Now I wondered if I'd ever had a soul to begin with.

CHAPTER 23

Leland

“You’re late,” Johnny griped as I hurried behind the bar. Betty wouldn’t start this morning, so I’d had to take two buses over to Josephine’s to start my evening shift. I used to live within walking distance, but my apartment had become another reminder of Franky, so I moved once my lease was up.

Josephine’s was packed for a Tuesday, and Johnny didn’t seem pleased to have to work drink orders. He could be cantankerous, but he had a soft spot for me. Probably because I was the only one who allowed him to work them like a war horse without complaint. He was too cheap to hire more staff, and I needed the added distraction, so it worked out well for the both of us.

“Take it easy on me, Johnny. I’ve been working doubles for weeks. I got four hours of sleep last night, and my car broke down this morning.”

“According to my calculations, you had more than enough time to get a full eight hours of sleep, which means you decided to do something *else* with that time,” he said, his graying brows raised. “Hopefully that at least means my customers are safe from you for the next twenty-four hours.” Johnny hobbled away, and I hustled to get the bottleneck of orders filled.

I slept around—safely. It was the only way I could make it through the day. The only sleeping aid that worked, and the only time I felt in control of my emotions because I didn't have any while fucking. I was completely numb, and it was difficult to hold on to that illusion when not.

But contrary to Johnny's penchant for overexaggerating, I only fucked customers who were passing through, and only when I was desperate. I left the regulars alone. That was a hassle I didn't need.

I'd been counting bills and inserting them into their correct slot in the cash register when someone tapped the bar top behind me. "What can I get you?" I asked, focusing on my task.

"Gin. Neat."

"Coming right up," I called over my shoulder, slamming the drawer closed. I reached for the bottle of Sapphire on the top shelf and poured two-fingers into a tumbler. "Here you—" The glass slipped from my hand, crashing and splintering at my feet as the rest of my words lodged themselves in my throat, refusing to budge.

A carbon copy of Franky perched on the stool in front of me, only he was over two decades younger, and his eyes were blue instead of a blazing onyx. *Cole*.

He peered behind him, as if my hard glare couldn't possibly be directed at him. "Are you okay?"

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

“*Excuse me?*” He looked out of place on this side of town, and now that my initial shock had worn off, I noticed the dark circles under his eyes and how unnaturally pronounced his cheek bones were.

“Your expensive suit tells me that you could literally go anywhere in this city to grab a drink, so why are you here of all places?”

Molly, the barback, came over with a broom and dustpan, cleaning up the glass shards as the other customers waited impatiently for me to pull it together. I thanked her, then asked if she could take a few orders from my side of the bar as I dealt with Cole. I stepped aside so she could drop a bar towel onto the puddle of gin.

“Do all drink requests come with an interrogation? And is your employer aware that you profile and discriminate against paying customers?” he asked, hackles rising, ready to lay waste to me for insinuating he couldn’t be wherever the hell he wanted to. And he didn’t have to raise his voice to do it either. I’d heard him clearly over the music and buzz of conversation around us.

I searched the bar for Franky as Cole waited for my comeback. What the fuck was happening?

“Are you alone?”

“Are you high?” he countered.

“H-how did you find this place? You’re not from around here.”

“And the insults keep coming,” he said acerbically. “Will telling you get me a drink?”

“Yes,” I said, my body going cold.

“If you must know, I didn’t want to attract attention to myself tonight. I found one of your bar napkins in my father’s SUV and took it as a sign. Now can I get that drink? And make it a double.”

So Franky *had* been here that night. I hadn’t seen him, but I’d felt him. There was an electrical charge that zinged through whatever room he occupied. A raising of neck hairs and a quiet, but unmistakable, call of everyone’s attention that he wasn’t even aware he possessed. Or maybe he knew but saw acknowledging it as being beneath him.

I’d searched high and low for the source of it after finishing up with a quick fuck in the restroom, but I’d come up empty. Except... Except the booth in the far-right corner in the back. The only place I hadn’t looked because Johnny had cornered me.

“If you were looking for a place to go unnoticed,” I started, getting back to my current panic attack, “you should’ve left the Rolex at home.” My fear made me cruel, or maybe I had the years of not giving a fuck to thank for that.

“Thanks for the tip,” he snipped. His shoulders slumped as he massaged his forehead. Whatever zap of energy he’d gained from my inappropriateness was now gone, replaced by a sadness tangible enough to mold with my hands. “I’ll have that

gin now. And keep them coming.”

If Franky had been here, did that mean... No, it couldn't mean *that*. Could it?

“This might sound strange,” I started cautiously, “but did something happen to you? Or to someone important to you?”

“Christ, does therapy come as a side, too, in this place?”

“No, it doesn't,” I said, backing away, the raw grief in his eyes giving me my answer. “Your drink's coming right up.” Selene's son sat in front of me, devastated by the loss of her, and I had to bite into my cheek to make myself not care. *It isn't your problem, Leland.*

I made his drink and then begged Molly to switch ends of the bar with me as an extra precaution, because I refused to fucking give a damn.

I worked the rest of the night on autopilot, doing my best not to notice him move through the stages of inebriation. It was kind of hard not to once his cheek met the bar top, though.

“Good night,” Molly said sympathetically, flipping over the open sign on her way out. It was my shit luck that I had to close up, and so I was stuck, alone in Josephine's, with a shit-faced Cole.

I rinsed the last martini glass in the bar sink, then ambled over to where he now slouched over his empty glass.

“Do you have a driver waiting outside?”

“My mother, and my best friend. He was the love of my

life,” he slurred.

“Come again?”

“Earlier,” he said, struggling to raise his head to me. “You asked me if something happened to someone important to me. My mother died, and the only man I’ll ever love left me because of it.”

The second half of his confession didn’t make any sense. Probably the gin talking. It didn’t matter. It wasn’t my problem. “Maybe there’s someone you can call—”

“We killed her, and my father doesn’t even know it.”

Don’t do it. Don’t fucking care, Leland.

“He loved her,” he went on belligerently, “and we took her away from him—”

“So why don’t you go home and tell him all of this? I’m sure you two can work it out, be there for each other.” Even now I couldn’t take hearing about how much Franky loved her. I’d need a hard fucking and a bottle of Jameson to knock me unconscious tonight.

He huffed, tossing back the imaginary contents of his glass, scowling at its emptiness before shoving it aside. “Are you always this blunt and abrasive?”

“Yep.”

“Maybe that’s what I need. I have no one else, and those that are paid to care...” He trailed off pensively. “They’ll just tell me what I want to hear. I could never tell them the truth

anyway.”

I barely caught that last part.

“Look, I’m sure you didn’t kill her. Either way, I’m not the person you should be tell—”

“Isn’t that part of your job description? To listen to me?” He swayed before catching himself. “I fell in love with my stepbrother, and that secret killed our mother,” he confessed in a hushed voice.

“What?” I gasped. That couldn’t be right. “Does your father know?”

“No. He could never. We’ve broken his heart enough. He lov—”

“Yeah, I know. He loved her.” I sighed. “Look, I’ll get you an Uber home.” I strode to the opposite side of the bar where I had my cell phone charging, glancing back in time to see Cole steady himself again. He’d almost fallen off his stool this time. In his state, he was liable to be mugged and dumped at the curb rather than driven all the way home.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, the events of the day weighing on me. I could ride in the Uber with him, then have it take me home, but the chance of running into Franky was too great, even at this late hour.

I cursed this fucking night, my life, and the whole Kincaid clan. I’d worked non-stop for two years to be done with all things Franky. Turned myself inside out until I wasn’t even

recognizable to myself. I'd built so many walls around me that not even sunlight could get in, only to find myself faced with our shared past again.

"I have no one else."

Cole's saddened voice echoed through my head again. He didn't have me either. We were strangers, even if we sort of weren't, and if he knew the truth about me and his father, the truth that would surely blow the lid off the false image he had about his family, he wouldn't want anything to do with me.

But Selene had been kind to me once. She'd mothered me, filled my cup when all the while I'd been sleeping with her husband. I owed it to her to make sure her son made it through the night unharmed. I could do that, but that would be it.

"Up you go," I said, after cutting the lights off and setting the alarm.

Outside, I nearly buckled under Cole's dead weight as I lowered him into our waiting Uber, and again thirty minutes later when having to help him out of it.

My elevator picked the perfect night to be on the fritz, and by the time I got Cole up the four flights and into my apartment, I was in need of a lung transplant.

I let him fall face down onto my bed while I wheezed obnoxiously, folding over and gripping my knees.

Massaging my lower back, I considered what to do next. My studio apartment consisted of one large room with an attached

kitchenette. I'd have to knock down a few walls to expand my bathroom if Cole needed to use it.

Cole's phone rang from an inside pocket, and I backed away, instincts telling me it was Franky. I could almost feel him in the room now.

The backs of my knees met my futon, and I collapsed onto it as the ringing stopped and then picked up again. He was probably worried. Well, too fucking bad. I'd done my good deed for the night. I wasn't looking for extra credit.

Next came a ping, probably a text or voicemail notification. I ignored it, kept ignoring it, and also ignored the following six times it rang.

My anxiety heightened during the following fifteen or so minutes of silence, because then thoughts of Franky tracking Cole's location and showing up here needed my brain.

"Fuck." I lunged toward the bed as the phone blared again, patting down Cole's pockets with my clammy hands. I retook my seat at the edge of the futon, the call going to voicemail again as I stared at the word "Dad" until the tiny seed of terror blocking my throat sprouted into a golf ball.

I answered it on the first ring the next time, bringing it to my ear and scanning Cole for any signs that he may be lucid.

"Cole?" Franky's cutting voice demanded through the line. His angry and worried voice still sounded the same, and I envisioned him scowling and pacing with the phone pressed to his ear.

His voice was sex and booze and scratch-offs. All things I'd had an obsession with at some point in my life. The former two still plagued me. I closed my eyes, sitting back and accepting that all the hard work I'd done to cut myself off from any feelings for him had been in vain. Franklin Kincaid still got to me. I didn't have to let him know that, though.

"No. It's me." I waited for his breathing to escalate, waited for him to say my name, waited for anything that would indicate that hearing my voice did *something* to him. *Anything*. Good or bad. I got nothing, which shouldn't have hurt me as much as it did because nothing was what I'd already had.

"He showed up at Josephine's," I said, saving him the trouble of working out why I had Cole's phone. The rest came out in a tumble. "He got pretty hammered, so I brought him back to my place to sleep it off. He said he found a bar napkin in your car. That's how he ended up there." At least this time he offered me a sigh. I searched my memories for what a sigh slipping from Franky's lips meant and came up with a number of possibilities. One being his sigh of apology after unceremoniously doing whatever the fuck he wanted with my body—I immediately derailed that train of thought.

"You were there," I said angrily into the silence. "This is your fault." Had he stayed away instead of pointlessly seeking me out, my world wouldn't be turning itself upside down right now.

"I didn't know you worked there," he whispered.

“It doesn’t matter,” I hissed, looking over at Cole again and lowering my tone. “You left me broken on the floor dripping your cum.” I took pleasure in the audible wince that pulled from him. It was vulgarity at its finest, said with a heartlessness I wished I could also feel.

“You had no right to show up in any space you knew meant something to me.” I exhaled a shaky breath. “And now what am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to do with him?”

“He needs someone,” he said. “Please, take care of him.”

“I’m no good for anyone—” The line went dead, and I caught myself before hurling the phone across the room, remembering that it belonged to Cole.

My chest heaved as Cole snored. I’d let him sleep it off, then put him out before the sun came up.

I strode over to the fridge, cracking open the bottle of Jameson I kept on top of it and taking a healthy swig. I let the Irish whiskey flow freely down my throat, hoping it would somehow burn my heart to ashes on the way down.

I wouldn’t get any sleep tonight, and more than ever I needed a hot body on top of me. I’d have even settled for being inside something soft and warm, although my mood called for something hard and unforgiving intent on making an example out of me.

Punching the pillow I’d snagged from the bed into submission, I spread out on the futon fully clothed.

“I’m not an easy man to love.”

Franky’s words from a time that felt both ancient and recent unfurled in my mind.

I craned my head around to stare at Cole. Knowing what he could expect from his father had me for once feeling sorry for someone other than myself. Franky shutting down, icing his son out wasn’t my problem, though. Who Cole had or didn’t have to help him through this rough time *wasn’t* my problem.

Don’t do it, Leland. Don’t. Fucking. Care...

CHAPTER 24

Leland

In dire need of washing the scent of sex and alcohol off of me, I bypassed the small cluster of people waiting for the janky elevator and opted for the stairs instead. My ascent slowed to a full stop after spotting Cole sitting on the top step of my landing.

He'd shown up to Josephine's four nights in a row now. Even had a favorite seat in the back where he ordered gin by the bottle, then spent the night drowning his troubles away.

I mostly ignored him, except when I couldn't, which was all the damn time.

"Stalking me now?" I asked, too tired to pack the question with venom. I'd worked two shifts and managed to squeeze in a threesome. I was dead on my feet. Exactly what I needed to be to get some shut-eye tonight.

"I came to return your shirt, and to apologize for being sick all over your bathroom floor the other morning." He got to his feet, holding out the laundered t-shirt I'd lent him. It'd been too small for him, but I hadn't the heart or the time to tell him he'd have looked less indecent shirtless.

"That's nice of you," I said, taking the last few steps, "but you've seen me more than once since that morning. You

could've returned this to me any one of those times. At my job. So why are you really here?"

"You know who I am." It wasn't a question, but I debated answering in the negative anyway.

"Yes." I took the shirt and stepped around him, flipping through my keyring as he followed me down the hall.

"What did I say to you that first night at the bar?"

"Nothing I'm interested in repeating, if that's what you're worried about."

One of my neighbors walked off the elevator, greeting us before disappearing inside her apartment.

Alone again, Cole returned to the reason for his visit. "No one can—"

"Your secret's safe with me, Cole," I said with a tight smile, eager to get this over with. I inserted my key into the lock, halting at his hushed thank you. It said more than it should have, meant more than him being appreciative of my discretion. It said he thought I was a good guy. It said that he could use one of those in his life right now.

I faced him, wholly unprepared to be hit with the hemorrhaging of his pain. Franky would've never given just anyone the pleasure of seeing him come apart. My armor suffered a crack, because as much as I wanted to put fifty feet of security between myself and Cole, I couldn't help feeling sympathetic.

At twenty-four, Cole was still young, we both were. But I understood his pain. I knew what his heartache felt like. I knew the texture of it, the stench it gave off, and I knew how impossible it was to navigate its constant fluctuations, the unpredictable agony of it all.

We'd both been abandoned by a Kincaid. In his case there were three; Selene, Jasper, and his father.

Losing my hold on Noon had been part of the reason I'd been drawn to Franky, so I could relate to Cole's need to latch on to something as he fell from his cliff. It just couldn't be me.

With his good looks and wealth, Cole could've had a whole mob of friends if he wanted to. What the hell made me so damn appealing?

"You must think I'm pathetic," he said.

"You lost your mother and stepbrother, who you also happen to be in love with, all in the same week. No, Cole. I don't think you're pathetic. I think you're justified. But we don't know each other, yet you stare at me like you want something from me." *Like I even have anything to give.*

He fidgeted with his misbuttoned shirt, and he was in bad need of a shave. "I have nothing," he whispered.

"Yeah," I whispered back. "Welcome to the club."

I showed up to work Monday after taking a rare but much-

needed day off. I'd been pushing my body to its limit—in more ways than one. I'd just clocked in and been about to take my first order when my gaze smacked up against the back of Cole's head. He sat at his preferred table again, fighting to hold his head up. I gripped the edge of the bar as my blood ran hot.

“Molly,” I called out as she settled her purse over her shoulder. Her shift ended when I showed up to relieve her. “Cover me for a couple hours. I'll pay you double.”

There were houses, and then there were estates, and Franky's home fell under the second category.

The wrought iron gates parted for me and Betty to enter, and I rocketed down the cedar-lined driveway, vaguely catching a glimpse of a pond and what looked to be horse stables in the distance.

After what felt like miles, a palatial home surrounded by rose bushes appeared out of thin air. Franky waited at the front door for me, hands deep in his pockets.

The house was beautiful but overstated. It wasn't Franky's style. There was no ocean here. Where did he go to think?

I was too jittery to still be upset about Cole. Too overcome with an emotion I thought I'd fucked and drank out of my system.

Circling the fountain, I came to a stop, cutting the engine and getting out before I lost my nerve too. “Are you normally the welcoming committee?”

“When the person at my door is you? Yes,” he said, eyes sunken but as keen and appraising as ever. “Come in.”

The contemporary living room had a woman’s touch and lacked any of Franky’s creations. I wondered if that would change with time or if he’d continue to live in a shrine to Selene, much like he’d admitted to doing when Annabeth died.

Franky stopped at the open french doors overlooking the side garden, which offered an immaculate view of the setting sun. I took advantage of having his back to me, noting how every posterior muscle that had once expanded outward, now appeared concave. He was grieving, and I needed to check some of my righteousness at the door before proceeding.

“It’s good to see you,” he said hesitantly, so unlike himself. “Hard but good.” He turned to me, and those rich, obsidian eyes that had been unreadable on his doorstep now screamed at me, sending me back a step.

They brushed over me as if they were hungry for the sight of me. They begged for me to understand *everything*, and although bone dry, they cried out for something I couldn’t give. For something I knew to my marrow he wouldn’t have accepted anyway. He was alone, and if he’d given in to his nature of making a home for his guilt, that meant he wanted it that way.

I laid an extra mental layer of bricks, building another wall in front of the three already stacked there. I couldn't let him break me again. I couldn't let him see that I was broken already.

"Cole keeps showing up at Josephine's," I said. Franky nodded as if he'd suspected this.

"The two people he depended on the most are gone," he said. "He needs time—"

"He needs more than time," I snapped, then softened my tone to something more sympathetic to his pain. "He needs his father."

"I can't be there for him," he said.

"You're all he has left," I stressed, stepping around the loveseat and moving closer to where he stood with his back straight.

"I can't," he said, adopting a glacial façade as if that would make me back down.

"Why not?" I asked, but he was unwilling to answer. "Why not, Franky?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"He's your son. You have to—"

"I can't."

"Yes, you can."

"Leland—"

“You have to—”

“I can’t!” he yelled, his overgrown hair flopping onto his forehead. “I am *incapable*.” The confession had been torn from him, and he sagged against the door at his back as if he’d used up whatever reserve of strength he’d been holding on to, or pretending he had in the first place, to admit it.

Had I been anyone else, he would’ve fought to the death to remain stoic and on his feet. I hated how good it felt to know he could still be weak in front of me, despised how much I wanted to shoulder his weight, how much I wanted to take him into my arms and relieve his excruciating pain.

“It can’t be me,” he whispered.

I tilted my head, narrowing my gaze. “Do... Do you *know*?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“About Jasper, and about Selene?” I specified, needing to be sure we were talking about the same thing.

“Yes, and yes,” he said. “I can’t be what he needs me to be. And he needs you more than I do,” he said meaningfully, and I had to feel around internally to make sure my guards were still up. They were, and he’d seen beyond them anyway.

As if a trap door hiding my dirty secret had opened up in my mind, it suddenly occurred to me that I didn’t want to commit to a friendship—or a commiseration—with Cole, because if Franky was going to come for me, I didn’t want the added

complication of befriending his son in our way. I understood Franky would need time. I wasn't completely heartless or insensitive to his situation. But even now, I wanted him to choose me.

What I'd been doing these last couple years, who I'd had to turn myself into... It wasn't to toughen me up, to make me immune to the pain, immune to *him*. I'd simply done what was necessary to get by, to survive in hopes that one day he would come for me.

"You're just like your father," I said, lashing out, embarrassed that he'd seen through me. "I used to tell you that wasn't true, but it is. This is what you do, right? You can't connect with your kids because of your own issues, so you find someone who can give them what you lack."

"That isn't true," he said.

"Oh no? So you're not *gifting* me to him now? Like you gifted him Selene?" I was sorry the minute I'd said it. It needed to be said, but it didn't mean I wasn't sorry it hurt him. Regardless of how I felt, he was hurting enough, his pain was real.

Franky flinched as if the verbal strike had physically touched him.

"Isn't that what your father did with Gloria?" I asked softly. "Allowed Gloria and her family to raise you so that he wouldn't have to be bothered with facing you, only removing them when it got in the way of his life plans for you? And then

what? He avoided you until the day he died.”

“It isn’t the same,” he said, but I could see he was considering it.

“Except it is the same, Franky. At the very least it’s eerily, fucking similar.” I couldn’t be his therapist. Not when some would say I needed one of my own. He’d need to come to his own conclusions in his own time. If ever. “Believe what you want to believe,” I said, resigned. “I’ve gotta get out of here.”

“You need him too,” he said quickly as I marched from the living room.

“What I need is you!” I swung around and roared, trembling from head to toe. Every vein in my body pulsed, my head throbbed, and the sound of the final piece of my heart fracturing filled my ears.

“I know,” he said sadly. A hand twitched at his side, and my sick, traitorous heart hoped it was because he was fighting the need to reach for me. “But I can’t be what you need either.”

I pivoted on my feet and kept moving, my shoes squeaking on the marble floor. I would not let him see me break down.

“Just one,” he whispered, his voice trailing me into the foyer. “Just one, Leelee Bear.”

Franky’s parting words bounced around Betty’s interior as I punched at the steering wheel. They forced me to go back in time, forced me to remember how much he knew me.

“I know you prefer one great friend over many, because it

lessens your chances of people hurting you. Of leaving you. I know you also prefer one friend over none, because being completely alone reminds you of how lonely you are.”

I started the car and peeled off, ignoring the figure at the front door getting smaller in my rear view.

Monday nights were the slowest at Josephine’s, so with the place relatively empty, Cole stuck out like a sore thumb. Not that he wouldn’t have anyway. He had money written all over him, and he had the same I-own-the-place vibe that his father gave off. Even in his current drunken state.

I paid Molly like I promised and then sent her on her way.

Cole had made his way to the bar during the time I was gone. I lined up four shot glasses, filling his two with that fuck-awful gin he loved, and mine with whiskey—the good stuff. Johnny could be pissed about it later. He’d probably dock me for it too.

Cole didn’t need prompting. He chugged the shots and gestured for a refill.

“You really want to know why I keep coming back here?” he asked, his words heavy and slow. “I’m here because maybe this is where he likes to be. My father,” he added on, as if I didn’t already know. “Maybe he’ll come find me here.”

“He won’t,” I said, bursting his bubble of hope.

“You’re mean.”

“Then get out,” I deadpanned, to which he chuckled.

“I think I’ll stay, because maybe deep down, you’re not as mean as you pretend to be. Maybe, you’re not mean at all.”

“That’s a whole lot of fucking maybes,” I said, nodding to the only other customer in the place as he made his exit.

Cole sighed, a waft of gin-infused breath knocking me in the face. “I don’t blame him for not coming. My father,” he said again. “There isn’t much I do blame him for. Well, not since he brought Selene and Jasper into my life.”

“Maybe you should tell him that,” I suggested, already on my fourth shot.

“Look who’s got a case of the maybes now,” he said, tilting to one side. “Oh! You can smile!” he exclaimed a little too loudly for how close we were.

“Don’t get used to it,” I said, finding it harder to wear my angry mask when all I wanted to do was wallow in my self-pity.

“Is jazz the only thing that jukebox plays?”

“What do you want to hear?” I dug inside the tip jar for some coins.

“Claude Debussy,” he said. Franky did mention once that Cole was a classically-trained pianist.

“You’re on the wrong side of town,” I said, the coins pelting

the bottom of the jar as I tossed them back in.

I moved us on to water next, because I wouldn't be accompanying him to the hospital for alcohol poisoning. We drank in silence, both lost in our own thoughts and problems that, unknowingly to him, ran parallel to one another. Some probably met in a head-on collision.

"Have you ever been crushed by the one person you would've done anything for or given anything to?" Cole asked, leaning his forearms into the bar top.

"Yes," I answered.

"How did you handle it?"

"I let it change me," I said.

"Did it help? Did it make it hurt any less?"

"I thought it did, but fooling yourself has an expiration date." The bell above the door chimed, and I left Cole to think that over while I mixed two vodka tonics for the ladies who had entered.

"Do you plan on coming back?" I asked, returning and refilling his water.

"Would that be weird?"

"No weirder than it already has been." I pushed the business card Johnny had wasted on me toward him.

"Dr. Mulligan?" He read with a furrowed brow. "A therapist? Where did you get this from?"

“I keep a stack under the bar for crybabies like you.” We chuckled, and I had to admit, it felt good. “Don’t be like me, Cole. Get yourself some help.”

Cole came in every day after that, eventually drinking less, and in due time our conversations moved past the irreparable condition of his life.

Things unfolded naturally between us, and soon, our interactions went beyond Josephine’s doors. Later on, our topics of discussion didn’t include much mention of his father at all.

The guilt I carried for the secrets I had to keep never went away, but I over-compensated by being more of a friend to him than I’d ever allow him to be to me. I told myself the scales were evenly balanced that way, no matter how much my inability to accept anything from him annoyed him.

Slowly, parts of my old self returned. And because Cole avoided Franky as much as possible due to his own guilt behind Selene’s passing, it made it easy for me to avoid him too.

There were occasions where Cole would try to drag me to some fancy Nexcom function, now that he’d begun working for the company, but those were simple enough to get out of.

I indulged his obsession with attending boring medical conferences, and he supported my need to be in the sun, although he complained the whole time we had to do something outdoorsy.

I still fucked a lot, way more than what was psychologically healthy. But a man had to do what he had to do to sleep, because no matter how much progress I made, there were some things about me that couldn't be fixed. Some things that could only be fixed by Franky.

Cole's friendship ended up being the life raft I needed. Franky had gotten it wrong. I didn't need just one friend. I specifically needed Cole.

CHAPTER 25

Franklin

Four Years Later

Three raps sounded at my home office door, and I locked away the dog-eared photo of Leland I'd been staring at all morning before calling for whoever waited to come in.

Cole entered, his long-legged gait eating up the carpet as he strode for the seat across from my desk. The sunlight streaming through the windows glinted off his cufflinks.

He poured himself into the seat, resting an ankle over his knee. "Thought I'd stop by to make sure you weren't having second thoughts," he said, getting straight to the reason for his visit.

"It's a little too late for that now," I said. "The staff is already getting things in order for the celebration tonight, and the florists will be arriving any minute." I'd be announcing the changing-of-the-guard tonight. As of tomorrow morning, Nexcom would officially belong to Cole.

He'd worked hard for it, and I could no longer pretend to stomach my role in the company. A role I hadn't played well in the last year or so. Behind the scenes, Cole had been responsible for Nexcom's boost of success with his passion and fresh ideas. At this stage, I was nothing more than a

figurehead.

“Until the papers are signed, it’s never too late. And sometimes, not even then. You taught me that,” he said. Cole was a far cry from the man who’d lost everything less than a handful of years ago. He reminded me of myself, but due to Selene and Jasper’s influence, he was softer in areas that my losing Gloria and her family had hardened in me.

“No second thoughts,” I promised, and he nodded once, the corners of his mouth relaxing now that he knew this conversation wouldn’t end in a war.

Cole cleared his throat. “Full disclosure. I intend to move our headquarters to New York. It’ll be my first order of business—in tandem with the acquisition of several competing tech companies.”

I gripped the pen I held tightly as I digested the bombshell he just unloaded on me. “That’s not what’s best for my company. Not now. I won’t sanction the move.”

“Nexcom will no longer be your company,” he reminded me gently, and I eased into my seatback, loosening my grip on the pen.

“Is this so you can be closer to Jasper?” I asked and then thought: *Or farther away from me?*

We never discussed Jasper. There wasn’t much we did discuss outside of business, but Jasper had most definitely been the elephant in any room Cole and I were in together, along with all the other secrets we held on to.

“It’s a good business move,” he said. “But I’d be lying if I said Jasper had nothing to do with it. I miss him, and maybe enough time has passed where we can at least be friendly with each other.”

I’d kept tabs on Jasper throughout the years, and I assumed Cole had done so as well. If that were the case, he was well aware that Jasper had recently gotten married. If that news had hurt Cole, he hadn’t shown it. Not to me anyway.

“I didn’t have to tell you this now, but I didn’t want you to feel tricked or blindsided by the news once the final documents were signed.”

I steepled my fingers in front of me as I riffled through my incoming thoughts and concerns, deciding to address the one that held superiority over the others. “And what about Leland? You two have become inseparable.”

“How do you know that?” he asked, his brows pursed.

As far as Cole knew, Leland and I had only met once when he’d accompanied Cole to an office party Robert had organized in honor of Cole’s first big promotion. Cole had briefly introduced us, but seemed more than happy to leave things at that. He’d protectively remained at his friend’s side, likely aware of his discomfort, probably assuming it stemmed from Leland feeling out of place. Leland and I knew the truth, though. It had to have taken a lot for him to agree to attend, knowing I’d be there, and he’d actively avoided direct eye contact with me the entire night.

“You’re never home.” I motioned around us as if my home was his. “And you two are friends. I just assumed that when you aren’t working, you’re with him.”

“I haven’t lived here since...” His words receded, but yet they were somehow still there between us. My home hadn’t been his since Selene died and Jasper left. And although I lived there—if it could be called living—it hadn’t been mine since then either.

“This hasn’t been my home for a long time,” he said instead.

“You’re right. I’m making assumptions about a relationship I know nothing about.” I began drumming my fingers anxiously on my desk.

“Are you okay?” he asked, angling his head at me.

“I’m fine,” I said, hoping he hadn’t gotten too distracted and forgotten about my question. I needed to know about Leland.

“There’s nothing for Leland here. I’m hoping I can convince him to leave,” he said.

“Do you think he’ll go?” I did my best to sound disinterested. Going so far as to sign a document that didn’t require my signature.

“Possibly.” He shrugged as if that possibility wasn’t important to me. “He’s got an old friend there and nothing tying him here. I’m hoping the idea of reconnecting with Noon will sell him on the idea of moving.”

Hearing Noon’s name set my jealousy afire, but I kept an

even expression.

“You should rethink this. Our shares may already be headed for a slide once tonight’s announcement goes public. Then you want to add something as big as a cross-country move? This could frighten investors, who, by the way, are already leery of you taking the reins.”

“Which is exactly why it’s the best plan. I need to separate what this company used to be from what it will be. I need to separate it from *you*. I’m decisive, shrewd, and everyone needs to know I’m not afraid to take charge and take chances. I think you know this.”

It made sense when phrased that way, but of all my vital organs, my heart held the least sensibility. It was one thing to not have the best relationship with my son, and to not have a relationship at all with Leland. It was an entirely different story to lose all traces of them.

“What about the hundreds of employees this will affect?” I asked.

“I’ve considered everything,” he said. “Trust me to know what I’m doing.”

I’d ambled over to the window to put some distance between myself and Cole’s expectant stare. It reflected back at me through the pane anyway. I nodded, and the strain around his eyes smoothed away.

“Will Leland be coming tonight?” I couldn’t help but to ask, even if it ran the risk of Cole’s suspicion.

“Took some arm pulling, but yes. Although I’ll be lucky if I can get him to stay long enough for cake.” Done with talks of his best friend, he moved on. “What are your retirement plans?”

“I try not to think that far into the future.”

“Well, that future will be here come morning.”

I hummed in answer. I had no clue what my next steps would be.

“You could always come along,” he said with care. “We could talk to Jasper together. Try and reclaim what family we have left.”

I wondered if he was being polite or genuine. Likely the latter, since unlike me, he’d been doing the work needed to find some measure of healing. If his secrets weren’t also Jasper’s, I was sure Cole would have confessed them to me by now, but he’d never do that without Jasper’s explicit permission.

“Maybe,” I said, unwilling to commit.

“Yeah, maybe,” Cole parroted back, as if he’d expected as much.

Leland did show up later that night, issuing me an awkward greeting before vanishing to the outskirts of the backyard. He seemed content to remain there watching the other guests

mingle and dance under the chandeliered tent.

Every so often Cole would tear himself away from someone important to the future of Nexcom to check on him, while I lurked, pretending not to notice every move he didn't make. Lurking had become a vice where Leland was concerned.

At one point their exchange turned heated, and Cole gestured for Leland to follow him along the path to the south gardens. I sat my drink down and excused myself from a discussion I had no interest in, trailing Cole and Leland from behind the tall row of hedges.

The band continued to play, but the music thinned the farther away they walked, and I strained to hear their conversation over the chirping of crickets and katydids. My own footsteps crunching the grass reverberated in my ears, and I gave up on getting closer for fear of being caught.

"I'm not accepting any handouts," Leland said.

"You're the most stubborn person I know. Actually, my father might have you beat. It wouldn't be a handout. I'd be paying you," Cole said.

"Do I look like I could be anyone's executive assistant?"

"And you think you look like a *bartender*? Have you seen your cheekbones?"

"This ends now if you plan on making fun of my devastatingly handsome looks," Leland said, sounding more like the man I'd known before I went and destroyed

everything good inside of him.

I was envious of Cole. Jealous that he got to be the one to breathe life back into Leland, that he was the one to experience and laugh at his outlandishness.

Cole took his time with his amusement, laughing until it seemed to hurt, and although I felt unrightfully possessive of Leland's humor, it felt good to hear my son happy.

"You're chewing on your bottom lip, that means you're thinking about it," Cole said.

I knew all too well how Leland teased his lip with his teeth. I'd had to rescue it from his sharp incisors many times. Blood would collect right under the soft flesh if he'd been at it long enough, turning the blush pink beds crimson. I'd sometimes save it from him only to break the skin myself to get a little taste of what pooled beneath it.

"You'll never build enough capital for your bar if you stay here. You're living hand-to-mouth, Leland," he said softly. "And since you won't let me invest the seed money, at least allow me to do this. I wouldn't be paying you any more than the position is already offering. If you won't do it for me, then do it for yourself. For once, do something for yourself. For your future."

I ground the heel of my palm into the ache at the center of my chest as Cole continued with his persuasion. It hurt to know Leland had shared his dream with someone else when he'd held it so close to the vest with me. I'd thought I would

one day earn the details of his art-bar. From the size, to the color scheme, to the pieces he'd choose to display on its walls. Pestering him about it had become a game of mine. I used to live for the excitement of wondering if *this* would be the time he actually answered my questions. If *this* would be the time he felt safe enough to. But I hadn't earned hearing about it from his own beautiful lips. I hadn't fought hard enough to earn anything.

"I don't know, Cole," Leland said, but there was no fight left in his tone. Cole would win this. "This is my home."

"Is it?" Cole challenged. "What's keeping you here? I'm the only friend you have in this city."

Leland's silence terrified me, and as if scenting blood in the water, Cole charged forward.

"Come to New York and you'll get to reconnect with Noon. Besides, you've already gone through every man in Seattle who would have you—and don't even get me started on the women. It's time to diversify your dickfolio," he said.

"Well, why the hell didn't you lead with *that*?" Leland quipped, pulling a guffaw from Cole. I, on the other hand, didn't find it funny at all. I ground down on my back teeth, went in search of Robert as Leland continued on with his amorous tirade.

"Franklin!" Robert called from the chocolate fountain as I weaved through the crowd to get to him. "Where's Cole? We should probably do the toast."

“Follow me,” I said cavalierly, entering the back of the house and moving purposely down corridors until I’d reached my office.

“What’s going on?” Robert asked from close behind me.

“Close the door behind you,” I instructed before pacing pensively.

“Talk to me, Franklin. Where’s Cole? Did something happen —”

“It’s too soon,” I said. “Cole taking over. It’s too soon.”

“With all due respect, Franklin, he’s got more of a stomach for this than you. Don’t let your cold feet get in the way of your better judgment. His ideas are fresh and honorable. Don’t underestimate him. Not *now*,” he said, flicking a hand toward the celebration happening outside.

“I’m not, but did you know he’s planning on uprooting our headquarters to New York?” I hissed, feeling my tether to Leland pulling tight as a bow. The panic was all encompassing and resounding throughout my body.

“*New York*? He’ll lose half the staff if he does that,” he said in a whisper, drawing in closer.

“He says he’s got a plan in place to prevent that, but maybe he’s in over his head.”

Robert dragged a tired hand down his mouth, pushing his suit jacket aside to brace his other hand on his hip. “He’s going to hate you for this,”

“I know,” I said wearily. “But it’s only temporary. I just need more time.” The last part was said under my breath.

“More time for what, exactly?” Robert asked, his sharp ears never missing a thing.

“More time to let go,” I admitted, Robert and I no longer speaking about the same thing. “Just a little more time. He’ll understand.”

“He’ll understand what?” Cole asked from the doorway. Apparently, Robert had left the door ajar.

“I’ll leave you two to talk,” Robert said, head down as he exited.

Cole drew in closer, looking back at the door Robert had dashed through, then back to me questioningly.

“Let’s sit,” I said, motioning for the lounge area.

“No,” he said. “I think I’ll stand for this.”

CHAPTER 26

Leland

“He *what?*” I exploded up from the garden bench. I’d been hiding out here while Cole had gone to investigate when the announcement would be made, no doubt picking up on my itch to be anywhere but here but wanting me to at least stay for the most important part.

“He rescinded the deal. He’s no longer turning Nexcom over to me.” Other than the pulsing muscle in his cheek, Cole exuded restraint. “He swears it’s only temporary. The projections and the actuals didn’t align the way he’d hoped this quarter. He said we’ll revisit things at the end of the next quarter.”

“What the fuck does that even mean?” I asked, losing my cool enough for the both of us. Cole had been working so hard for this. His dream of improving the artificial heart had been the main thing driving him these last few years, and he needed the power of Nexcom behind him to do it.

“It means he’s full of shit and I should’ve seen this coming.”

“But you said he was okay with things. You said as early as this morning he seemed okay with things.”

“He did. I don’t know what changed.” Cole exhaled, taking up the seat I’d vacated. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll build my own

damn company, and it'll rival his."

How achingly familiar that sounded. It was what Franklin had done to his own father. Were the Kincaid's doomed to perpetually repeat history?

"It'll take too long to grow it to where you need it to be," I said, hoping to steer him away from those thoughts. "Maybe it is just for a few more months. You've waited this long, right?"

He didn't answer, and I didn't blame him. There was a whole fucking ball happening behind us in honor of Cole taking up the mantle. This had to be equally disappointing and embarrassing for him. Franky was a lot of things, but this seemed too cruel even for him, and he hated running Nexcom. *So why would he...* A terrifying thought came to me. "Did you tell him about New York?" I asked and then hesitantly added, "Did you tell him that I may go with you?"

"Yeah," he said, eyes shrinking to tiny slits. "You think he did this because of the move?" He didn't even stop to think that this could be because of me. Of course he wouldn't, because he trusted me and had no clue how many lies were wedged between us.

"No," I said, failing to hide the danger in my tone. Cole was too preoccupied with his frustration to notice. "Where is he?"

"I don't know. Somewhere inside, I'm guessing. Or maybe he went to walk the grounds. He said something about needing to think."

I immediately knew where I'd find him. "Will you be alright

if I leave for a couple hours? I promise I'll come back.”

“You don't have to,” he said, standing again. “I know this isn't your crowd. I'm going to get out of here, myself. I'll walk with you to valet.”

Less than an hour later I pulled into the driveway of the waterfront home I'd shared with Franky for a summer. Seemed like forever ago and yesterday at the same damn time. Nostalgia triggered the nausea flipping around in my gut, but overriding it was the near-debilitating anger singing through my veins.

I entered through the unlocked side door, my careful footsteps carrying me to the living room. Ambient light drifted in from the open patio wall, providing enough illumination to see what was in front of me.

The cool night breeze ruffled the edges of the dust covers draped over the furniture, and a hint of stale air lingered inside the home. I wondered how long it had gone unused.

Perking my ears, I listened for movement upstairs but nothing came, or at least nothing loud enough to be heard over the warning bells going off in my head. I'd been about to leave—about to run, actually—thinking I'd gotten it all wrong, hoping I had. Hoping my worst dream and favorite fucking nightmare wasn't somewhere in that ghost town of a house where no one else knew to find me.

My escape came to a screeching stop when my gaze bumped up against the painting leaning in a corner.

Something misfired in my brain, because where it had never taken effort to walk before, I now had to inwardly shout orders at myself to move.

I squatted in front of the forty-by-forty canvas, scanning the kaleidoscope of amber and green filling the sunflower field. It was one of my first paintings ever, and I'd sold it during the lowest point in my life.

My breath quickened, and I swiveled in my stooped position, taking in everything around me covered by white sheets. I began tearing them all away, revealing painting after painting, all done by me and sold over the course of the last four years to the art gallery downtown.

Only one remained hidden now. It loomed at the foot of the mantel, taller and wider than the others. The humming in my head intensified the closer I got to it, and I tore the sheet away before I lost the nerve to.

The unveiled painting depicted Franky as storm clouds. The fingers of smoke wrapped around my ankles and wrists, tugging them wide, reaching and sliding through my partially exposed cleft to smother my cock. My back arched off the bed of dark clouds in ecstasy as the gray tendrils snaked around my neck in the sunless sky.

The painting was provocative, for sure, but I'd kept my face in shadow, which made it more of a discussion piece, something left up to interpretation, rather than something pornographic.

I trailed a finger over the rough canvas. First over the bolt of lightning arcing across the sky and then the more menacing clouds charging my way—signaling an even deeper and darker degree of brutality approaching. It illustrated our relationship better than any photograph ever could.

I'd titled this one *His Storm*, because Franky was the storm, and I was at the center of it. And because I'd naively believed that the storm had belonged to me.

I could still remember the heartbreaking day I'd handed it over to Neil for a measly six-hundred bucks. Bit by bit I'd had to sell off every piece I owned just to make ends meet.

"This is how you see me," Franky said from somewhere behind me. I'd felt him enter the room, same as I always did, but I was paralyzed to do anything about it.

"This is who you are," I whispered. "You're a storm that intoxicates and then destroys everything in your path. Why is this here? Why are any of them here?"

"I issued strict instructions to the gallery after purchasing my very first Leland Meadows piece. They were to contact me immediately if anything else of yours came through their doors."

I spun around, anger escalating to unfiltered rage. Franky waited for it less than a dozen feet away, dressed in all black, his matching eyes devouring me. "I don't get you. I used to think I understood you better than you understood yourself, but I was wrong."

“Yes, you were, because you can’t know a man who doesn’t know himself.”

“Bullshit,” I called. “You knew who you were, and for a split second you were brave enough to be that person. You used to be a man who said what he felt and felt what he meant. You were warmth through your coldness, and light through even your darkest moments. You used to be a man who wanted to be better, even if you didn’t know how to be. And now you fucking relish in the worse parts of you. In the *scared* parts of you. You’ve let the little boy in you run rampant. You’ve spoiled him. You’ve let him indulge in his own pity for so long that you no longer know what it means to *try*,” I ended, shaking my fists at him, pleading for *something*.

Per usual, I didn’t know how to be near this man and not be honest with him. I hadn’t cracked the code on locking my shit up tight and faking indifference. No matter how many years passed, no matter how many beds I hopped, no matter how many times I told myself I was over it, one second of staring into his eyes as he stripped me bare with his gaze, and my lies went tumbling down.

And my honesty didn’t only extend to pointing out his flaws, because reading Franky his rights was akin to holding a mirror up to my own imperfections. My own weaknesses. Many things that I accused him of could be said about myself. We were both little more than monsters in our own way.

“Whatever good there was in me is gone now,” was all he

said. It was like beating my head against a brick wall and not expecting to bleed.

“Give it to him,” I said, skipping straight to my reason for being alone in a room with him. Comparing who this man was now with who he used to be would only lead me to trouble. Would only aid in making me remember the good. He already had the advantage by me being there surrounded by the walls he’d once thrown me up against, standing on the floors he’d eaten me out on, breathing in the ocean he’d take me sailing on before drowning me in his sweat and cum.

And the look in his eyes, and the way his posture dipped forward, said he would take any opportunity he saw to personally remind me of it all.

“Now’s not the right time,” he replied coolly.

A harsh and humorless laugh bubbled up in me, and I scrubbed my hands over my face. “You don’t even want it, Franky. I’m sure if it weren’t for Cole wanting it you would’ve sold it off to the highest bidder a long time ago. So why did you dangle everything he’s been working toward in front of him, only to snatch it away tonight?”

“That’s not—”

“Why!?” My voice echoed through the hollow shrine of the past we stood in, putting an end to the lie he’d been about to deliver with ease. “You wanted me to be there for him. You thought I needed someone to be there for me. Well, you got what you wanted, and now I want you to tell me why you

fucked over the only person left in my life who means something to me,” I seethed.

He took a step toward me under the guise of shifting on his feet. My heart pressed against my spine in search of a way out, in search of a place to hide. I had to remind myself not to be afraid of him, remind myself that fear shouldn't feel this good.

“What’s the matter, Franky? Cat got your tongue?”

“You wouldn't understand,” he said. He'd said those words to me before, but this time I understood quite fucking well.

“I'll do you one better,” I challenged. “Fuck understanding. I *know* why you did it, because it's the same reason I've been so resistant to Cole's pleas for me to go with him. You found out I'd be leaving, and you panicked, because even though we're not together, and even though we never will be, there's something about us being intertwined in the sick, passive way that we are that keeps that insidious spark of hope alive. It burns away at our core until we can taste the acidic burn of it at the backs of our throats, and the thought of snuffing out that flame completely feels deadly. It feels like dying.”

Franky released a trembling breath as my words hit the bullseye.

“You think I don't know that you sometimes watch me?” I asked. “That on occasion, you lurk outside my window, just behind the wide bark of the elm tree in the park, and you watch me.”

“You...” he started but couldn't finish.

“Yes, I know, because no matter how much time evaporates, I can’t stop fucking *feeling* you. And I know some part of you hoped I knew, because maybe that would mean I haven’t let go of you either, right?”

Franky didn’t answer, but the roll of the knot at the center of his throat said enough.

“I bet Friday and Saturday nights are the hardest for you to bear. Isn’t that right, Franky?” Those were the nights reserved for relapses. The nights when after a full business week of celibacy, I failed at being better. I’d binge, making up for lost time, catching up on the sleep I’d lost while thinking I could change. My front door was a revolving one, and it didn’t turn away anyone who wanted to enter it. Franky never hung around for the show, but *knowing* had to have eaten him alive.

“No,” he said, shocking me. “Sunday nights are always the hardest. That’s when you close your curtains to me, but it’s the *why* of it that breaks my heart, Leland.”

It took a herculean effort not to show my surprise or vulnerability. Sundays were reserved for my shame. They were my reset days. The day of the week when Cole’s influence led me to believe I could do better, that I could try again. Sunday was also the day I attempted to paint, but my hands shook so badly I could never manage to pick up the brush. I’d shut him out because I refused to let Franky know that without him I couldn’t find it in me to be a daisy. But he knew anyway, and it fucking hurt like hell.

“What do you want from me?” he asked.

“Me? Nothing.” That wouldn’t have been the truth a few hours ago, but now it had to be. What he’d selfishly done tonight changed everything, and I needed to find a way to walk out that door and mean it when I said I was done with him. I needed it to not just be true on the surface where it was easy to believe when miles away from him. I needed it to be true beneath the lies I told myself and beneath the pain I soothed with sex and booze. “Cole is another story. You’re going to step down graciously, exactly as planned—”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

“I won’t.” He said it like he meant it too.

“Franky, so help me God—”

“You’re not the only one I stand to lose!” The sudden panic and rage seeping into his voice jarred me, and it took a dozen heartbeats to formulate a reply.

“Then fight for him. Why won’t you fight for him?” I threw my hands up, letting them fall and slap at my sides.

Franky peered out over the ocean, and I *hated* that I knew he needed a moment to collect himself. I hated that I allowed him that moment, because I knew I wouldn’t get anywhere otherwise. I didn’t want to know him anymore. I didn’t want to love him anymore.

“Do you know what happens when you try to be something

you're not?" he asked. "It doesn't stick. I can turn on the television, or search the internet, or open a book to learn what it means to be a great father, but it wouldn't matter because no matter how good my intentions are, I can't be anyone other than *my* father. Any moments in the past where I'd gotten it right were driven by guilt, not desire. Or by the person in my life thinking I could be a better man, and me wanting that to be true. Left to my own devices, I can't get it right."

"Cole doesn't see it that way. He doesn't think you're perfect, but he doesn't think you're a lost cause either. Why don't you get that?"

"Because he can't see into my heart and mind. Only I can, so only I know that any measure of good he sees in me is a lie."

"That isn't how he sees it," I repeated.

"Probably because my neglect made it easier for him to get away with having an intimate relationship with his stepbrother. Have you ever thought of that?"

"I... No." *I hadn't.*

"Of course you didn't. And did you ever stop to think that maybe the reason he doesn't see me as all that bad is because his judgment is clouded by the guilt of killing their mother!" He sucked in a sharp breath, eyes wild. He hadn't meant to say that.

"You don't believe that," I whispered, again hating how vehemently I knew that.

“I’ve had to,” he said. “It’s the only way I can get up in the morning. The only way I can survive this.”

“But you’re not surviving, Franky. Have you ever thought about just asking them? About having an honest conversation and asking your kids how they truly feel about you?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head.

“Why not?”

Franky stared at me with disappointment laced with terror, like the answer to my question should’ve been obvious. “Because what if they tell me the truth?” And to him there was only one version of the truth. *His*. The reality of Cole and Jasper hating him was much scarier than the thought of it.

“I’m amazed at how well you juggle being both utterly selfish and self-sacrificing,” I said. “You think if you’re unhappy, then that means you’re paying for everything you’ve ever done wrong, but really, you’re just compounding your sins. Your suffering isn’t a gift, Franky. What you’re doing isn’t okay just because you’re not happy while doing it.”

Once again I found myself reflecting on our conversations from the past, on some of the obscure things he’d said, most of them making sense now.

“You’re definitely a tortured soul, Franky, but you aren’t that bad,” I’d said after he apologized for waking me up with rough sex, penalizing me for some unwanted emotion he woke up feeling.

“You haven’t had to suffer through one of my dark hours,” he’d replied grimly.

I’d waved it off, thinking it was just Franky being broody as always, thinking I had seen how dark it could get with him. This was different. Tonight was more. It went deeper than wanting to live a simple life, deeper than wanting to be a more present father, deeper than realizing he was in love with me.

Franky’s problem with his kids was only a small slice of what haunted him. Beneath his bed resided the ghosts of Gloria, Theo, Paul, his mother, his father, and Selene. They completed the fucking torture cake he loved to lick the icing off of.

I couldn’t help him, though, and he wouldn’t let me even if I could. Finally, the voice in my head screamed for me to exercise some self-preservation, and I swallowed, my next words spoken through a voice filled with resignation. “Give him the company.”

“Will you stay if I do? Will you convince him to stay?”

“No,” I said. “We’re both getting as far away from you as possible.”

“Then I won’t do it,” he said, brazenly moving toward me.

“Stop.” I raised a palm, warning him not to say another word or to take another step closer. He listened, but his stance spoke volumes. His halt was nothing more than a pause of what he believed was the inevitable.

“Don’t leave, Leland.”

“Why not? So we can spend the next however many years pining in silence? So we can stay stagnant, dwelling on what can’t be? I waited for you. God, I’m *still* waiting for you.” I shook my head, a sudden wave of grief threatening to do me in. “You once asked me where I saw myself in five years. Do you remember that?” I asked.

Franky dropped his stare to his shoes, but not before nodding once.

“My answer is sadly still the same.” I closed my eyes, going back to that night.

“*Where do you see yourself in five years, Leland?*” he’d asked.

“*Somewhere still wanting you,*” I’d answered.

I opened my eyes, the memory of that night floating away from me. “After tonight, my answer won’t be the same. It can’t be. I can’t do this anymore.”

“Leaving you was the right decision,” he said, “no matter how much it hurt me to do it.” Franky stalked forward, his strides conveying that he had nothing to lose. “How I left you is another matter—”

“Stop it, damnit—”

“I’ll never forgive myself for it,” he pressed on, his words a jumbled snarl. This wasn’t a profession of love or regret, it was an accusation, it was Franky exercising his fury the only

way he knew how, it was him arrogantly thinking that after all of this time, he could punish me for how he felt, for his inability to control it.

“Not another fucking step, Franky,” I warned with rising apprehension. He was so close I could count the gray hairs scaling his jawline.

“I’ve never stopped wanting you,” he sneered. “Why can’t I stop wanting you?”

“Don’t you lay a fucking hand on me.” My hiss clashed with his scream as my back met the wall. His hands, ready to lacerate anything in their way, froze near the buttons of my shirt. “This isn’t our summer of love, Franky. Those days are over. You touching me now without my explicit consent will not be the turn on it once used to be. I won’t be *yielding* to you this time.”

I couldn’t imagine what him fucking me right then would’ve been like. From the look of crippling desperation on his face it would’ve taken a stretcher to wheel me out of there afterward or a search party to find my scattered remains after he was done tearing me apart.

“I won’t be the thing you release your self-hate on. Not anymore. I’ve already endured you rage-fucking me and then leaving me in a heap to recover alone. Once was more than enough. And more importantly,” I said, driving him back with my intensity, “you don’t want me. Not if it means hurting Cole in the process, even though no one hurts him quite like you do.”

And isn't that some tragic, fucking irony.”

His eyes widened at my venomous outburst, but he kept his hands to himself and kept backing away long after I'd stopped moving.

“Give him the company or I'll tell him *everything*,” I threatened before walking away from him for the last time.

CHAPTER 27

Franklin

Months of living out my retirement off the grid had caught up with me. I'd moved to the insignificant town of Lockwood, South Carolina, where Bertha successfully delivering her calf was considered front page news, and where Nexcom and Franklin Kincaid didn't exist. Being far removed from everyone and everything came with its perks, but also a substantial emotional cost. I was lonely. Even more lonely than I'd already been before.

I was tired, too, and felt every bit my age as I hauled my weary body beyond the lake cabin walls to the quaint coffee shop less than a quarter mile down the road. The bell chimes hanging above the door tolled as I entered.

“Well, if it isn't the town's favorite Debbie Downer.”

I peered over my shoulder, then back to the elderly man wiping his hands on his apron behind the counter.

“Yeah, I'm talking to you,” he confirmed. “You're not usually in here this early. We're barely open for the day.”

I couldn't sleep and had started my trek here before the sun had fully risen.

“I know what you want,” he said as I'd been about to order my usual. “You're the only person I know who orders tea in a

coffee shop.”

“It’s on the menu,” I said.

“Because we’re nice people, but no one actually orders it. Take your favorite seat with the view of the lake, and I’ll bring it right over.”

Did I have a favorite seat? And if so, how did he know? I could only vaguely recall ever seeing him here before. Definitely not enough for him to know what my usual or favorite anything was. Without thinking, I headed for the booth I always sat in—answering my own question—but then thought better of proving him right and took a different seat instead. I scowled as he laughed while working on my order.

“Lexie will be pissed that she missed you,” he said, dropping off a steaming mug of coffee and standing there expectantly with his arms crossed. “Go on. Try something new.”

“Lexie?” I asked, since it seemed keeping my head down and flying below the radar wasn’t in the cards for me today. I wasn’t much of a coffee drinker, but I sniffed the contents of my mug, appreciating the toasty scent of hazelnut.

“She’s the young lady who always manages to draw the tall straw in the fight to serve your table.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah, they all want to serve the town hermit.” His chuckle made his facial wrinkles more pronounced. I chose not to join

in on the fun, especially when it was at my expense. He sobered and cocked his head at me. “Son, you moved to a friendly town, but you aren’t all that friendly, now are you?”

“Then why are they all fighting to serve me?” I asked, stirring sugar into the coffee I hadn’t asked for.

“Ha! Aside from your looks? I’m guessing it’s because you tip well. Lexie was able to clear her light bill with the hefty tip you left her a couple days ago. Maybe today I’ll earn enough for that fancy car I’ve been wanting.”

“Don’t count on it,” I said, taking my first delicious sip and stubbornly withholding a groan.

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t hurt to dream. I suppose when you’re deficient in one area, you try to make up for it in other ways. But think of how much money you’d save if you just smiled instead of leaving your whole bank account on the table.” His laughter followed him as he limped back behind the counter.

I wanted to tell him it did hurt to dream, but that would have required me to speak, something I tried to do little of.

“I suppose when you’re deficient in one area, you try to make up for it in other ways.”

I mulled over that and the other flashbacks it conjured up.

“You can’t connect with them because of your own issues, so you find someone who can give them what you lack.”

“That isn’t true.”

“Oh no? So you’re not gifting me to him? Like you gifted

him Selene?”

The next sip wasn't taken carefully, and so it scorched the inside of my mouth. At least it took my mind off of the more severe pain overtaking me. That was until another memory of Leland telling me what I didn't want to hear infiltrated my mind.

“You think that if you're unhappy, then that means you're paying for everything you've ever done wrong. Your suffering isn't a gift, Franky.”

Leland's voice continued to berate me and then my father's voice took a turn.

“Franklin, I'd like you to meet Gloria. She'll be taking care of you from now on.”

I needed a distraction from the noise in my head, and since this seat didn't offer a view of the lake, that left me with only one other option. “What's your name?” I asked. The old man and I were the only ones there, so even though my gaze hadn't moved from my coffee, he knew I had to be talking to him.

“Joe,” he said. “Same as it was when I introduced myself to you on your first day here. Same as it says on my name tag. If the one syllable is too hard for you to retain, you can always look up at the name on the sign outside. Or the logo on the mugs and napkins.” It was obvious he found me amusing, and through my grouchiness I found it in me to be slightly embarrassed.

“I thought Joe stood for coffee,” I said.

“Are you being funny?” Joe leaned into the counter. “I can’t tell past the frown you’re wearing.”

“If I buy you a car, will you leave me alone?” I asked.

“Hey, you’re the one who asked for my name.”

I grinned tiredly. “That I did.”

“Your place is the one tucked between the cluster of red maples.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Is there anything you don’t know?”

“Someone as good looking as you showing up in a small town draws attention. But small town or not, I suspect the only place you can truly hide that face of yours is on the moon. At least that’s what Lexie says.” He vibrated with laughter, rocking and holding his stomach as if his intestines would fall out otherwise.

I rolled my eyes, then stared down at the tea he traveled back to my table with. It was too light to be my usual order.

“It’s my specialty. Just made it up on the fly, actually, but don’t ask me to tell you what’s in it.” He mimed zipping his lips shut. I took a sip and couldn’t resist the full body shudder from absolute delight if I wanted to. “I said don’t ask,” he warned, pointing a scolding finger at me. It was missing its tip.

“Old war wound,” he said after catching me staring at the partially amputated digit. “That and the bad hip—and don’t you dare apologize for it.”

“I wasn’t planning to,” I said. “Yes, it’s my place.” Other

than the coffee shop being so close, the home was secluded, which I preferred. Neighbors tended to want to talk.

“Right on the lake,” Joe said. “Much better view of it than what you get from that seat over there,” he said, motioning toward the back. “Your *favorite* seat. Have you done any fishing yet?”

“No.”

He hummed thoughtfully. “Smallmouth bass are my favorite. Absolutely scrumptious. But they’re shy. Takes time and patience to catch ’em, but you’d be surprised at how much quality thinking you can get done while you wait, and you look like a man who could use some high-quality thinking.”

A middle-aged woman shouldered through the door, arms overflowing with files, her glasses askew. She grumbled a hello before falling into a booth closest to the door.

“Who’s that?” I asked, since Joe seemed to know everything.

“That’s Beatrice, the town shrink. Be right with you, B!” he said before getting back to me. “Uh, what was I saying?”

“High-quality thinking,” I prompted. “I didn’t realize there was low-quality thinking.”

“Oh yes,” he assured me. “There’s low-quality, bad-quality, and good-quality too. You won’t find what you came here for if you don’t get some good-quality thinking in. Maybe high-quality talking too,” he said, dipping his head toward Beatrice

pointedly before ambling off to take her order.

I stayed at the coffee shop longer than I normally did, ordering another round of Joe's specialty. An hour later I had a paper bag filled with Joe's homemade crumb cake, driving directions to Henry's Sporting Goods store, and strict instructions on which fishing instruments to buy.

"Guess I'll put anything I catch on ice and bring it to you," I said.

"Nah, you enjoy it. The wife has me on a strict diet of fruits and vegetables for the foreseeable future."

"I don't eat fish," I admitted. Something else that reminded me of Leland. Something else we had in common.

"Well, then, that means keeping the fish won't serve you," Joe said, patting me on the shoulder. "Catch and release. And maybe the fish won't be the only thing you let go of, because holding on to things that don't serve you is just bad for the soul."

By day five I'd concluded that Joe was a quack who knew nothing about fishing or thinking. I hadn't caught anything, and the only thoughts that ran through my mind involved flying back to Seattle and chaining Leland up in my wine cellar to stop him from leaving.

He and Cole were heavy into their plans to move Nexcom

when I left. Stock prices were up, and Cole had been labeled “the king of business.” I had to go. I couldn’t take it anymore.

Not that I wasn’t happy for my son, because with all my faults and warped ways of demonstrating it, his happiness was important to me. But with every financial news update, and with every congratulatory praise aimed at him, he grew more confident in his decision to leave.

“To hell with this,” I muttered. I’d been about to call it a day when my fishing rod jerked in my loose grasp, nearly causing me to tip overboard. Carefully getting to my feet, I reeled in my line.

I quickly set the flailing fish into the pail of water near my foot, holding it on its back and covering the head and eyes—the way Joe had instructed—before removing the barbless hook.

I crouched over the aluminum pail, winded and feeling accomplished. The fish swam, adjusting to its new environment, or maybe trying to find a way out of it. It didn’t huddle in a corner, licking its wounds and giving up. Not like I did.

Digging my phone from my pocket, I did a search for smallmouth bass. The scales on my fish were so silver they almost appeared white in the light of the sun, nothing like the blotchy fish on my screen.

“This has to be for something,” I said to the fish. “My being here has to be for something.” I gazed at the water surrounding

me and then to the cabin in the distance. I couldn't stay here forever, but I couldn't go back the same.

“Catch and release. And maybe the fish won't be the only thing you let go of, because holding on to things that don't serve you is just bad for the soul.”

I contemplated Joe's parting words from last week and got an idea. I needed to make the inconvenience I'd caused the fish worth something. Maybe if I could let go of something, *give* something to the fish, he could carry it away for me.

There was so much to weed through in my mind. So many lies and negative thoughts rushing forward to act as tribute, and yet so many clung to my brain's synapses as if I wouldn't be able to survive without them.

I reached in and randomly plucked one. This was a practice session, after all, and with any luck they'd all get a chance to swim.

“Cole and Jasper can't possibly love me,” I whispered. Everything in me fought against letting that one go. *Start smaller*, my internal voice said. *Keep that one*, it said next, *that one is true*.

Grabbing both ends of the pail, I upturned it over the side of the boat before I lost the nerve. Within seconds the fish was gone, taking my lie with it. Joe didn't tell me how terrifying letting go would be. He forgot to mention that my thought would reach back for me, begging to be saved, and that I would want to latch on and pull it back into the safe confines

of my mind where it would find comfort.

I felt naked without that one untruth, and the others rallied together, getting creative, trying to fill the void left behind.

Maybe they do love you, but that doesn't mean they like you.

Right behind that thought came one so vile and believable that it sent me to my knees.

Or maybe they love you out of guilt, because they believe they had a hand in the death of their mother, the death of your wife, the wife you failed, the wife they think you would never hurt. The wife who was your only saving grace with them.

Out of breath, I hurried to grab my fishing pole. I needed another fish. I needed to let more of this poison go before it absorbed the tiny speck of space I'd freed up.

Your father hired someone else to love you because he couldn't. Because you were unlovable.

That one got to me the most, and my hands shook with the force it took to maintain my hold on my rod. My father had only barely tolerated me when my mother was alive, and she'd allowed his neglect of me, had even participated in it. My purpose was to serve the legacy. My worth came from my name, which is why for so long—even now—I battled with giving up what came with the name Kincaid in exchange for what I truly wanted out of life. And if I wasn't lovable for *me*, for Franky, then I had no right loving anyone else or allowing anyone else to love me in return.

Gloria and her family leaving without looking back was proof of that. Finding, and then losing, the one person who'd ever made me feel that I could be the man I wanted to be was also proof of it. *Leland*.

I loved Selene, but I loved Leland more. I'd wanted Selene, but *never* with the bone-aching ferocity I experienced when wanting Leland. I was distraught by the loss of my wife, but what damaged me most was still wanting him even while grieving for her. All of that had been more proof of how unlovable I was, and how little I deserved love.

The sun dipped, and my mind grew tired from all the mental gymnastics required to keep the naysaying voices under my control, instead of being under theirs. And just when I'd been about to call it a night, when leaning against the floodgates became too much, my line tugged again.

I fished for days, for weeks. *Months*. I fished until I ran out of my own lies and began taking requests from Joe or using my time on the water for simple reflection.

During one of those reflective moments, I realized that for so long I lived with the delusion that my unresolved problems were manageable, but in actuality the compartments I'd kept them in just hadn't been full yet. By the time Selene died they were bursting at the seams, then spilling over the edges until I was standing knee-deep in the mess I'd made.

In some ways, I felt entitled to my pain. It was mine. I owned it. It was my excuse to barely exist, and without my

baggage, who was I? Without it, I had nothing.

As the months passed, I understood that trauma was a cancer of a different kind. It ate away at everything good, and it blocked any attempts made at refueling my life with additional good. I'd been more than willing to let it eat me alive before, but now I wanted to starve it. More importantly, I wanted to take my time in doing so. This wasn't a race, because races could be lost, and I didn't want to have to run this one ever again.

While my lake was helpful, I needed to use every tool at my disposal to heal, to do it right, because I wanted my new way of thinking to stick. I'd one day return to the real world to face the consequences of my actions head-on, and I needed to be mentally strong enough for the job.

Eventually, the summer heat made it harder to sit out on the lake all day, and so I began spending more time at Joe's, and gazing at it thoughtfully through the window near my favorite seat. I could've done that from the cabin, but doing it from Joe's came with an ulterior motive. I got to study Beatrice.

"Are you sure she's even licensed?" I asked Joe, who took to sitting across from me and droning on incessantly whenever business was slow.

He twisted around to eye the eclectic therapist, who I learned paid him rent for the isolated corner she occupied and saw patients there twice a week. She picked the two slowest mornings, and to be fair, everyone left her table seeming

lighter and looking happier than when they'd come. It was odd, but no more than she was.

"She's the best," Joe said proudly. Beatrice also happened to be his niece. "Hey, have I steered you wrong yet?" he said at my look of apprehension.

"No, you haven't," I admitted reluctantly. His green eyes danced as he left me alone so he could greet an incoming customer. I sighed, the long and suffering kind, before heading over to Beatrice who read last Sunday's newspaper over the rim of her colorful glasses. I could've seen anyone, could've afforded the best, but I was discovering that the best didn't always come from the places you'd expect them to.

"Do you have room in your schedule for a new patient?" I asked. Beatrice folded her paper neatly before tucking it into the corner and offering me a quirky smile that somehow eased some of my hesitancy.

That first session I said nothing, and she didn't push me for more. By the third I'd given her something she already had: my name. But the sixth appointment I'd given her the one thing I wanted. *Leland*.

I gave her little pieces of my past every time after, and some days the vulnerability of it all became near unbearable to sit through. On those days it felt like I'd walked out of Joe's without a stitch of clothing on, like the whole world could see every ugly part of me.

Still, as the season rolled by, I found myself eager to get to

our weekly, unconventional sessions, and once the early morning air cooled with the return of fall, I combined thoughtful fishing with my talks with Beatrice.

I couldn't stay locked away there forever, though. I had to get back home and make things right. I had to fight for what remained of my family.

"Leaving already?" Joe asked as I entered the coffee shop.

"How did you know?"

"You've got a sorry look on your face. More sorry than usual. And because it's been a long time coming," he said.

"I need to catch my son before he permanently leaves for New York, and the tea is abysmal here," I joked half-heartedly.

Joe fidgeted with the espresso machine as he spoke. "Well, good riddance. No more of you drinking up all my specialty and hogging up Beatrice's time. I sure won't miss your grumpiness at all. Not one bit. And maybe now Sarah can stop drooling over your tight behind whenever you stop by the house." Sarah was his wife, and she said she only drooled to make him jealous.

My shoulders shook, although my laughter didn't feel joyous. I'd miss him too. "Does that mean you and Sarah won't house sit for me while I'm gone?" I dangled the cabin keys in front of me. "I mean, there'll be nothing but reminders of me there. I'm sure it'll be hard—"

"Give me those," Joe said, snatching the keys from me and

smiling at my dumbfounded expression. Who knew he could move so fast. “My platoon didn’t call me Speedy for nothing,” he said. “Don’t let the limp and crow’s-feet fool ya.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” I said.

“You come back soon, you hear? I don’t want Sarah getting spoiled living in all that house. It’ll only make dragging her home harder.”

I had no intentions of returning, at least not for more than a quick visit, and by tomorrow, Joe and Sarah would get the deed with their name on it by certified mail. Their home wasn’t equipped for Sarah’s wheelchair, and between that and Joe’s bad hip, they hadn’t seen the upstairs of their home in years. They’d had to turn their tiny den into their bedroom. I’d started on the accommodations for her months ago, knowing I would be leaving my home to them.

“Enjoy it,” I said, and he nodded, clearing the emotion from his throat before squeezing my shoulder.

“Get out of here before you change your mind. I’ve already got plans for that patio of yours.”

“Already?” I asked. “You haven’t had the keys for a full two minutes.”

“Speedy doesn’t just apply to the way I move. I think fast, too, you know.”

In many ways Joe had been like a father to me during my time in Lockwood, even keeping me company on the lake

some days. All my valuable lessons started with him, and mostly by example, by the way he lived his life.

If I had to choose the most valuable of them all, though, it would be that reaching in and grabbing hold of the pain wasn't the problem, hanging on to it once you did was what killed you slowly.

Catch and release.

CHAPTER 28

Franklin

Even before Selene's passing, the estate had become a symbol of pain for me. From the years that Cole and I drifted through its halls in a fog of grief as he grew into a young man under the primary care of others, to the eventual neglect of my marriage, then my race to save my wife, to learning that saving her was out of my hands.

In the most recent years I'd welcomed that pain. I relished in the guilt and the reminders that came with not leaving this place. With not starting over.

This home was now a stranger to me, and I dropped my bags in the foyer, knowing that if I went any farther I'd run the risk of me reverting back to who I was before Lockwood. The bad voices were already tapping at my ear.

I sent a text off to Cole.

Franklin: *I just got back, are you available for dinner?*

His response came immediately.

Cole: *We left for New York ahead of schedule. I got an invite to Jasper's surprise birthday celebration, and I couldn't pass it up. I forgot to mention it to you. Things have been hectic.*

Franklin: *I take it Jasper doesn't know you're coming?*

Three dots appeared and vanished several times before he

settled on a reply.

Cole: *No.*

Another text came behind that one.

Cole: *I hope your time away helped. Sorry I missed you.*

Franklin: *I hope so too, and no need to apologize.*

I didn't know what else to say, so I left it at that. He was gone, and I had no business being hurt or upset about it, but I was anyway, and it was on me to deal with it.

Outside of business-related matters, Cole and I hadn't spoken as often as we probably should have while I was gone, so I was excited to get back to him, to maybe spend a few days together before he left, to perhaps see Leland too.

I'd had it all planned out in my head. We'd grab a bite to eat, I'd apologize, we'd have a good cry, and my son and I would promise to work on our relationship. I had to remind myself that fixing things wouldn't happen on my timeline. If Cole and Jasper decided to let me in, and if by some miracle Leland decided to let me in too, it would need to be on their terms and when they were ready.

My phone vibrated with another text.

Cole: *You can always join us.*

Franklin: *I think one Kincaid showing up to a party he doesn't even know about is more than enough. But thank you.*

I smiled distantly, hitting send and choosing to feel grateful

for the invite instead of over-thinking whether or not it was genuine. Negative thinking would get me nowhere.

Jasper was a married man now, and the stepbrother he'd once had an intimate relationship with was on his way to re-insert himself into his life. Adding myself to that flame right now would only burn the whole damn house down. I'd give them a little time—but not too much.

Invigorated with hope, I scooped my bags up and left the house I no longer recognized for the one I'd spent some of my happiest days in.

Arriving at the waterfront house, I stuffed the speeding ticket I received on my mad dash here into the glovebox before entering the home. *Our* home.

I went through every room, tearing away the dust covers and opening windows and balcony doors, breathing life into the place again. I ogled Leland's mural before moving on to *A Winter Meadow*, still perched atop the mantel, still capable of bringing me to my knees with its beauty and the remorse it stirred in me.

"Maybe one day we can both be daisies."

I'd told him that once and then I'd turned around and made the feat impossible.

"Catch and release," I reminded myself.

Sliding open the glass wall, I stepped onto the patio, inhaling the scent of ocean water just beyond and squinting at

the setting sun. Soon the moon would be high, bringing with it memories of the countless times I'd made love to Leland right under its light.

Will he ever forgive me? I asked myself. He had every right not to, and for so long I reveled in the idea that he never would.

My last stop was the garages where my other love awaited me. I swiped a hand over the chest of drawers I never finished, wiping the dust from my fingers onto the leg of my pants as I moved over to the table saw.

What's he doing right now? Without permission, my mind had reserved every other second for thoughts of Leland. I gave up on fighting it long ago.

It occurred to me then, that today was Sunday, and I was hit with something I'd confessed to Leland the last night we were here together.

"Sunday nights are always the hardest. That's when you close your curtains to me, but it's the why of it that breaks my heart, Leland."

With a burst of energy and inspiration, I began hauling everything onto the patio.

Maybe it wasn't too late for us, and even if it was, maybe I could give Leland back some of what he'd lost because of me.

I changed into something more comfortable, slid my goggles down, and began working on my most important

project yet. By my rough calculations it would take me a little more than a month to finish if I worked around the clock.

Just in time to make it to New York for Christmas.

CHAPTER 29

Leland

Babysitting my beer on my cold-as-fuck fire escape, I listened for the click of my apartment door letting me know that the two strangers I'd let in my bed tonight had dressed and left me to beat myself up without an audience.

Every day was a struggle. Living in a new city, doing a job I hated but was surprisingly good at, and still fucking every chance I got for less than a moment's peace.

It didn't help that my window now faced a brick wall belonging to an apartment building more dilapidated than my own, instead of a park and a peeping Tom I loved to hate.

"Leland!"

Cole. Always showing up when I needed him, but because of the lies I had to keep, the ones that would follow me to my grave, I could never lean on him. He could never *know*.

I dropped my chin to my chest, taking repeated deep breaths and letting the mask of the man my best friend knew slide over my face. This version of me was all I could give him.

"I'm here," I said, entering my kitchen through the window and then slamming it shut on the frosty night air.

"You move fast," he said, looking back at the front door, then over to me. Like any professional addict, my first order of

business was to get the lay of the land, to know where to go for my supply, except my drug of choice was distraction in the form of sex.

“So you think I’m a slut,” I said, shit-eating grin in place. If Cole sensed a problem with me he’d pounce and then I’d have to spend the night deflecting or outright refusing to tell him what was wrong with me. “What else is new?”

“I don’t think you’re a slut. I think you’re in pain, but you won’t tell me why.” His gaze became probing, the atmosphere suddenly heavy. I turned the topic to him, lightening things up with a joke that teetered too close to the truth.

“Ready to wreck a marriage?” I asked, sucking down my beer.

“I respect Jasper’s vows.” The lie rolled smoothly off his tongue as if rehearsed a thousand times in preparation for the showdown he’d be facing at his stepbrother’s surprise birthday party tonight. “I’m just hoping for a place in his life.”

Cole would never not want his stepbrother, and not a day went by since he learned Jasper had tied the knot that Cole didn’t drift off during a conversation, or a business call, or a meeting, with thoughts of him. If he had a chance to slip into Jasper’s bed and his heart, Cole would snatch it up without a second thought for Jasper’s husband. I knew the feeling.

I wanted him to be happy. For him, I wanted to believe that true love could win no matter what. I tried never to let my own cynicism get in the way, so I let him have his slice of denial

without any interruptions from me.

“Okay,” I said. “Are you nervous about tonight?”

“It’s been six years since I’ve last seen him. I’m eager, not nervous.”

Cole resembled his father to an uncomfortable degree, and sometimes, especially in moments where his confidence and strength rivaled that of a god, it was almost too much to bear. I averted my gaze to the folder he tapped against his suited leg.

“What’s that?” I gestured with my bottle to the folder. Cole handed it over. Confused, I set my drink on the kitchen counter and accepted it. A sticky note with a hand-drawn smiley face clung to the first page of the paperwork inside.

“It’s perfect,” Cole said when I gaped up at him. I’d rewritten the damn mission statement at least twenty-times on account of him. He’d wanted to help in some way with the process of me opening up my own bar, and since I refused to accept money from him that I hadn’t earned, I figured allowing him to look over my mission statement was harmless enough. That was until he picked it apart—repeatedly.

“You think so?” I asked absently, looking over a few harmless notes he’d left in the margins. Hard to believe I’d gone from daydreaming about owning a bar with a gallery space reserved for art—the creating and selling of it—to now considering a possible chain of them. Well, minus the art part. My dream had been downgraded to just a bar, and lucky for me, Cole didn’t have a clue.

“Yeah,” he said, voice dripping with pride.

“You could have emailed this to me, you know,” I said, holding it up.

He shrugged. “I needed a reason to check in on you.” Cole worried about me. Worried about the neighborhood I lived in, worried about how much sex I had, worried about how I was adjusting to the move. I hated his worry because I didn’t deserve it, and so I refused to feed into it.

“I’m fine. I had a little night-cap, and now I’m ready for bed.” We both understood the beer bottle on the counter wasn’t the night-cap I referred to. “Go,” I said, motioning for him to leave.

“Okay, fine, I’m going, but call me if you need anything.”

I pushed him out the door without promising him anything. Cole would be the last person I called if I needed something. I had to save all my unused favors for if—or when—the day ever came that I needed his forgiveness.

Weaving my way through the teeming bar, I kept my eyes peeled for Noon. I’d been back and forth to New York many times in preparation for the move, but each visit had been short, every minute accounted for, crammed with meetings and a list of things to do. A month of being here permanently and things were finally starting to normalize. Reconnecting with Noon hadn’t been possible until now.

He wasn't hard to spot. Even seated, his head rose above the fray. My heart danced wildly as I approached his table. *Fuck*, I missed him.

Noon pushed to his feet, his laughter infectious, and I let mine break free as I prepared to be crushed to him.

“Get over here, you idiot,” he said, grabbing me up into one of his rib-breaking hugs.

We placed our order and jumped right into conversation, as if only days had passed and not years. Noon wasn't the type to leave room for awkwardness. His guards were always down, and with overbearing affection, he broke through any wall that stood in his way.

“So,” he said, gesturing around the bar he'd suggested we meet up at. “Will it work?”

I'd mentioned my plans to him during our brief phone conversation, and he'd mentioned that he knew someone wanting to sell their building and the bar attached to it.

The bar's location was my main concern. Regardless of my looks, I wasn't a glitzy, cosmopolitan-drinking kind of guy. I wanted my business to reflect who I was at my core. I wanted to open my doors to the construction-working father of two who had just enough money after payday to grab a few beers on tap with the crew. I wanted struggling artists. Locals. And *maybe* the occasional bar fight to keep things interesting.

The East Village provided all of that, and I couldn't have asked for a better neighborhood than Alphabet City.

“It’s perfect,” I said over the music. Worn and rustic, which aligned with the look I was going for. It would require minimal work, from what little I could see through the dim lighting. Maybe a fresh coat of paint in a few places and a complete renovation of the bar area itself.

“That door over there leads to a huge open space the size of this room. Maybe bigger. You could knock this wall down and open the place up some more. Do your art exhibits and sip-n-paints back there.”

“Yeah,” I said, “eventually.” I’d need to first figure out how to paint again. I fisted my hands under the table to keep the tremors under control. They tended to take over on Sundays. “For now it’ll just be a bar.”

Our waitress delivered our drinks, giving us both a minute to collect ourselves after the initial euphoria of seeing each other again. We sipped and nodded to the music as I scoped out the place a bit more.

“Most of the people who frequent here are residents of the area. Steve’s on a first name basis with damn near everyone.” Steve was the guy selling the place.

“Exactly what I’m looking for,” I said. Loyal customers who felt like family. They would be the ones to keep the place in business.

“What made you decide to finally do it?” Noon asked, then looked around as if envisioning the place being mine.

“Age and maturity, I guess.”

“That simple, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said.

Noon leaned forward, moving his tumbler out of the way of his forearms. “Leland, this is me you’re talking to. Outside of making enough to keep the lights on, the man I knew had no plans for the future. You’ve changed, and while age and maturity is a damn good answer, I want the truth.”

Noon had never been one for small talk, bullshit, or beating around the bush. And it had been so long since I didn’t have to pretend I was okay, that not doing so now took a momentary retraining of my brain.

“Honestly? Sheer exhaustion. I was so fucking tired of thinking I was outrunning something when actually I was merely running in place. My life and my emotions had become one big fucking Groundhog Day. Living a lie isn’t easy, yet I continue to fucking live it,” I said, giving no context for my statement and surely confusing the fuck out of him. “Truth is, I’m scared I don’t know what I’m doing here, but I have to do *something*. And I’m almost positive I’ll fail. What do I know about operating a business? So you see, I haven’t changed at all.” Felt good to say it, felt good to drop the playboy persona for one goddamn second and actually let someone in.

Noon considered me for a beat. “Let’s tackle the second half of your rant first. What if you had a crystal ball that showed you the future, and it showed that you would absolutely, unequivocally fail at this. Would you try anyway?”

Leave it to Noon to simplify shit and carve out all the extra stuff clouding my vision. “Yeah, I would.” Because my only other alternative was to continue to age into a bitter old man, and I couldn’t go on being pissed at Franky for not being better if I couldn’t manage to be better myself. Plus, I had a feeling Cole wouldn’t have let me get away with my previous retirement plan of being a sex-addicted drunk.

“So see, you have changed. The old Leland would’ve tucked-tail and taken the first job offering a barely livable wage.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said dryly. Noon raised his glass, and I clinked mine to his.

Two drinks later and a shared basket of fries, and Noon decided to touch on the one topic I could’ve done without. The man responsible for the first portion of my mini, emotional purge.

“Whatever happened with Franklin?”

“Let’s see,” I started. “He left me for his wife—who later died,” I added delicately. “I turned into someone you wouldn’t have recognized, then later became best friends with his son Cole, who took over the company, hired me as his executive assistant, and moved me here to New York. And in some ways I’m still not the person you once knew.”

Noon slowly lowered his glass.

“Oh! I forgot to mention the kicker. Cole has no idea I once had an affair with his father, or that said fucked-up father and

saintly stepmother's marriage wasn't the picture of perfection."

"Oh," Noon said, for once at a loss for words.

"Oh indeed."

Noon considered his drink, twisting the glass between his hands, before swallowing it down with a grimace. "So, let me guess. You haven't been in a serious relationship since. I'd take it a step further and say you don't do casual relationships either."

"Maybe we should revisit the part where you said I changed, because obviously I haven't if you still know that much about me."

"You don't like to be hurt."

"Does anyone?" I challenged.

"No, but hurt looks different on you. You refused to stare out of a window after what your mother did to you."

"Could you blame me?"

"Not the first few years, no. But how long would you have held on to that phobia had I not started that trash can fire in my bedroom, then woke you up by screaming fire, and insisting the only way out was through the window? And you've never gotten over your fear of heights."

Franky had actually helped me with the latter fear, but I kept that to myself. "I still can't believe you did that. You could've burned the whole damn house down."

“Point is, you nurture your pain like it’s something you gave birth to, and you already had a no-love policy before falling for Franklin. Afraid you’d end up like your mother.”

I *had* ended up like my mother. Obsessed and unable to see life without Franky in it. “No, I don’t do serious or casual relationships,” I said. “And the world’s a better place because of it. Now, can we please move on to lighter topics, like maybe why your shirt’s two sizes too small for you?”

We laughed and reminisced until Stacey called him home.

“Is it past your curfew?” I asked as he ended his call with his wife.

“She can’t sleep without me,” Noon said. Good to know I wasn’t the only one who suffered from insomnia when the man I loved wasn’t in the bed next to me.

“I’ll pay the bill,” I said.

“No way. You’ve got a building to pay for,” Noon said, fetching his wallet and flagging down our server. “Which side of town are you heading to? We can share a cab.”

“Nah, I’m not ready to go home yet.”

Noon checked the time and then eyed me questioningly.

“I, ah, need to stop and grab something to help me sleep,” I said, and something in my expression must have tipped him off, because his confusion was then replaced by something so soft it made me turn away.

It was late, and I could’ve saved myself some time by taking

the redhead at the bar up on the offer in his eyes, but if these people were regulars, and if by some miracle I could secure a loan large enough to take over this place, I had no intention of shitting where I ate. *Johnny would be proud.*

Noon and I slipped our coats on and hugged goodbye outside.

“Do you think you have room in your arsenal for *two* friends?” he asked, backing toward the curb where his cab idled.

“Yeah, I think I can manage two,” I said.

“See,” he said, his eyes twinkling under the street light. “You have changed.”

“Not in the ways that matter,” I mumbled to myself. I waited for his taxi to pull off before making my way to the nightclub I’d passed on my way there.

Stumbling into my apartment a couple of hours later, I had just enough strength to peel out of my clothes before tumbling face-first onto my bed. The scent of sex and cigarettes surrounded me. It ended up being one of the best night’s sleep I’d had in a while.

The next few weeks were a blur of getting things in order for the purchase of the bar, working for Cole, and trying my best to be there for him as he navigated his ever-changing intentions for his relationship with Jasper.

I’d found my rhythm. I knew how much sex I needed per

week to get the bare minimum hours of sleep every night. I knew how hard I had to work at being a good friend to keep my guilt under control. And I'd even come to terms with the fact that I may never hold a paintbrush ever again. Things were going great, and then *he* showed up. And then everything changed.

PART THREE

CHAPTER 30

Leland

Seven Months Later

Not only did I have my Christmas holiday ruined when Franky decided to show up in town, but I also had my whole life thrown off its axis when he decided to stay. Indefinitely.

After the new year, I spent months focusing on the purchase of the building that housed the bar, then the renovations of it because there was more to be done than I'd initially thought.

As soon as the loan had been secured, and I was sure that I could stay afloat for a few months unemployed, I handed Cole my resignation. I needed to direct all my attention into getting the place up and running, or so I'd told him.

Cole understood from the beginning that my working for him would be temporary. A means to get me to my dreams, so there were no hard feelings on that front. He did, however, have a problem with how little access to me he got afterward. Avoidance had become my main objective, and so I'd kept myself too busy for everyone.

It wasn't as hard as one would think, because Cole had eventually won Jasper, and with Jasper's now ex-husband out of the picture, he and Cole had begun making up for lost time.

A few months of needing to stay afloat turned into six,

because nobody told me that contractors sometimes lied, and that nothing would work according to plan.

I refused to tell Cole, because he would've offered me another job or outright transferred me the cash, so I'd been living off my credit cards instead, which was why I should've been at my bar waiting for the electrician to show up to fix a wiring issue that threatened to delay my grand opening, and not across town riding the elevator up to Cole's penthouse.

He'd made it clear in his message that if I didn't come to him for this meeting, then *they'd* come to me, and I couldn't have Franky in my space, tainting it with our tumultuous past.

The elevator doors parted silently, revealing Cole's expansive marble foyer. I ran a nervous hand through my hair, preparing myself for the lecture I'd for sure receive from him, while also preparing to be cut open by the sight of his father.

Cole's booming voice came from the living room, where I assumed he was speaking with his *other* best man. Per his text, he wanted to meet in person to go over details for the big day. He and Jasper were getting married.

"There he is," Cole drawled, glaring at me from the sofa. I bit back my snarky reply because I deserved his bad attitude. What I didn't deserve was to be hit with the overwhelming emotions that came from seeing the man sitting in the armchair across from him. I'd never get over him. I'd accepted that. Didn't mean I had to like it or put myself in situations where those feelings crippled me.

Franky gracefully unfolded from his seat, which, for me, happened in slow motion as my brain took its time recording every moving part of him. “Hello, Leland.” The deep rumble of his voice sent my toes curling in my shoes. He was still the type of man who preferred *hello* over *hi*.

Such a fucking gentleman.

His dark eyes widened and his lips twitched.

Fuck. I’d muttered that out loud. Cole, seemingly too upset with me to have heard, dug into me before my embarrassment could set it.

“Where the hell have you been? I didn’t realize the end of our working relationship meant the end of our friendship, too, Leland.”

“Have you always been this dramatic?” I asked, hitting back. His annoyance melted away, a slice of hurt taking its place. “I’m sorry. Of course we’re still friends. I’ve just been busy getting the bar ready for tonight’s grand opening.”

“I’ve been offering to help. Jasper and I both have. You don’t have to do this alone,” Cole reminded me.

“But I want to,” I said abruptly, my anxiety elevating the longer Franky and I were in such close proximity to each other.

“Doesn’t explain why I haven’t seen or heard from you since my birthday party nearly a month ago.” His pale blue eyes implored me to help him understand, to tell him what he

did wrong. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him the truth—or at least part of it. That I couldn't be around his father because when he watched me as if walking away from me all those years ago had been the biggest mistake of his life, it threatened to re-open old wounds I'd fought hard to keep barely scabbed over.

I chanced a glance over at Franky, and he didn't even have the decency to turn away, to pretend he wasn't staring at me in a way that said he was ready to lay the truth at Cole's feet right then and there if it meant he could have me.

Caught up in the darkness of his gaze, I hadn't heard Cole call out to me until it was too late. Until he'd gotten to his feet as well, his narrowed stare shooting between me and my kryptonite.

"Is *he* the problem?" he asked, pointing to Franky. They were a lot more similar now. A result of the quality time spent rebuilding their relationship. Franky had a refinement that Cole missed out on, though. Probably because Jasper had shown up at the right time in Cole's life, softening some of his hard edges. Franky would always seem out of place in certain environments, even though he was humble at heart. Cole tended to blend in better, expensive clothes and all.

"Is that why you've been missing in action?" Cole went on to ask. "Do you think he's taking your place? Or is it that he makes you nervous?"

"No," I said at the same time his father told him to not be

ridiculous.

Franky's eyes remained glued to me, and Cole's stare thinned further, bouncing between his father's rapt attention of me and the blush I could feel warming my cheeks.

Franky used to have the best poker face in town, but he seemed incapable of closing himself off now, and whereas he didn't seem to care, I was terrified it would get us caught.

I cut between them, skirting around the coffee table to take a seat on the couch next to where Cole stood. "I'll be around more often," I promised. "Now, can we discuss the ball and chain Jasper's about to lasso around your ankle? I've gotta be out of here soon if I plan on opening tonight."

An hour later, I had my list of wedding responsibilities, and Cole walked me to the elevator while Franky stayed behind. "Hey, this friendship works both ways," he whispered. "Let me be there for you."

Not for the first time, I wanted to tell him what haunted me, but what haunted me would break us apart. It would also screw up whatever progress he and Jasper had made with Franky. "I know, and I will. I could actually use help with the bar tonight," I said, extending an olive branch.

"Sure," he said, shrugging, as if a recently minted billionaire taking drink orders and working for tips was no big deal. "And if you need more help, I'm sure my father can—"

"No," I said in unison with Franky as he crossed into the foyer.

“I have a few furniture pieces I need to finish up at home,” he said. He must have been in the middle of that before coming here. His tight, worn jeans and even tighter white t-shirt were both smeared with varnish and paint. One wrong move and his whole ensemble would’ve ripped away from his hard body, and it pissed me off that I wanted to see that happen.

“He’s doing physical labor now,” Cole said, snorting his disbelief. Franky affectionately rolled his sexy midnight eyes at him. How many nights under the stars had my own eyes rolled to the back of my head as he took his time with me? I had to get the fuck out of there. “Says he’s finally living his truth,” Cole continued, oblivious to my momentary lapse into ancient history. There was confusion in his tone but obvious approval too. After all they’d been through, Cole was happy for his father.

I turned my back to them, pounding at the elevator call button and rushing on before the doors had fully opened.

Cole shot his arm out, preventing them from closing me in.

“You two might as well ride down together,” he said.

Fuck it to hell, I groaned inwardly.

“I’ll catch it when it comes back,” Franky said. Was he determined to get a rise out of Cole’s brows?

“Get on,” I said meaningfully, willing to do anything to avoid Cole’s probing.

Franky considered me a moment, then clapped Cole on the back before slipping in next to me.

We rode a few floors down in silence, his scent choking me, his size practically forcing me into the side wall of the cabin. The phrase “better with age” was invented for him. He was too potent, too distinguished, too fucking handsome for his own damned good, and when he swiveled his head my way as if he’d read my thoughts, the last of my resolve snapped like a twig.

“You’ve got to stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” he asked in that new infuriatingly innocent, yet challenging way of his. He was daring me without even knowing it.

I didn’t know where the hell he’d dumped his baggage since that night I left him standing in the living room of our summer home with an ultimatum, but he needed to go back and collect it because new-Franky did not work well with the current-Leland. Current-Leland was braced for a fight, but this new and improved version of him left me with nothing to fight against.

“Like you want to fucking eat me alive,” I gritted out.

“Leland,” he said, like a plea for me to give him an opportunity to explain, an opportunity that I’d been denying him since he’d touched down in my new city.

“Don’t,” I hissed into the confined space. “Too much time has passed. You don’t get to be different. You don’t get to go

off on some spiritual journey, or whatever the fuck you did, and then expect me to suddenly fall into your arms because you've now changed. I have the right to not want you. I *don't* want you, Franky." The lie tasted bitter on my tongue. "Respect that."

"I've been trying to make amends," he said softly, the ongoing plea in his tone getting to me. "But you've rejected all my calls and ignored my text messages." He'd been wise enough not to show up to my place uninvited, though. Proving he'd learned the meaning of boundaries since I'd last had the privilege of experiencing him.

"I apologize for the strain my presence has caused on your friendship with Cole. I never wanted that," he said.

"I know you didn't," I whispered, staring straight ahead at our twin expressions of sadness reflected in the mirrored doors. "But it happened anyway, and now Cole is going to figure out the truth if you can't control your emotions."

"Would that be so bad?" he asked.

"For fuck's sake, Franky," I said exasperated. "*Now* you're ready to risk it all? Do you know how long I waited to hear those words? It's too late. I'm different now too, and not in a good way. And you're his father. He'll forgive you. I won't be so lucky." I was too jaded, too hardened in too many ways to even entertain him. He didn't get to lay waste to me, to forfeit so much of our time, then have a sudden awakening and expect me to jump on board.

There was a time I could have possibly forgiven him for what did and didn't happen between us before Selene had died. Time offered clarity on how impossible our situation was, even if that time had done nothing to repair the trauma endured. But everything *after*? All the years I'd spent waiting on him while continuing to destroy myself in the process, giving myself away as if my body meant nothing to me, creating new addictions that never quite trumped my addiction to him... All the yesterdays I spent wanting him to offer me what he dangled so temptingly now... *That* I wasn't sure I could ever forgive him for, and I honestly never expected to be put in a position where I'd have to.

Not to mention what he'd done to his own son. I'd felt every hurt he'd inflicted on Cole, and all I could do was stand by and silently relate to him.

No, it didn't matter what my fucked-up heart wanted. I didn't know how to trust Franky, or how to let go of *everything*. And I didn't think he deserved the effort it would've taken for me to try.

The elevator chimed as we reached the ground floor, and with a pounding heart and an ache at its center, I gunned for the lobby's revolving doors before Franky could convince me to change my mind.

Other than handing out fliers in the area to establish myself as

the new owner, I hadn't done much advertising for the grand opening. I'd rather gain popularity organically, and I hoped to hang on to the regulars. They'd need to get used to a new bar name, a semi-new look, and a new sheriff in town, but that feeling of being home when they walked through those doors wouldn't change.

Cole showed up—dressed in a three-piece suit. I shook my head good naturedly before running down the basics of mixing drinks, even providing him with a little cheat sheet in case he got stuck while I was off checking on food orders or mingling with customers.

The menu was simple: fries, sliders, wings—basically, the shit I liked to snack on while boozing.

“What's with the bar name?” Cole asked as I took one last pride-filled look around before I unlocked the front door.

“It means something to me,” I said vaguely.

“Maybe one day you'll deem me worthy enough to share,” Cole replied tightly before stalking off. I'd have to deal with the state of our friendship sooner rather than later.

I propped the door open with a rubber stopper, letting the warm summer breeze in, before selecting an upbeat song on the jukebox. Then I waited for the magic to happen.

“Jesus, Leland,” Cole said hours later over the cacophony of conversations. “I think we're in danger of exceeding maximum occupancy.” He smiled from ear to ear.

“I know, isn’t that great?” I popped a cap on a bottle of beer and then slid it into a waiting customer’s hand.

Drinks flowed, music played, pool balls were pocketed, and by the end of the night we’d run out of wings.

Cole pushed through the kitchen’s swing door, lifting the flip-up countertop to sidle up next to me behind the bar. “Dishes are clean, trash has been taken out, and I told the guys they could leave. Anything else you need help with before I go?”

“Nah, I’m good,” I said, finishing up with the liquor inventory. “It’s almost midnight. Go home to your jealous fiancé.” Jasper and I were cool. He’d long gotten over the times I’d purposely made it seem that Cole and I were more than what we were. But they were both possessive and twisted as fuck. Didn’t take much to get their hackles up where the other was concerned.

“What’s behind the locked door?” Cole asked as he shrugged into his blazer. I followed his gaze to the bolted door near the jukebox.

“Just extra stock space,” I said.

“You’ve already got enough space for that. How big is it back there? Maybe you can expand the bar. From the looks of it, you could use the extra square footage.”

“Not that big,” I lied.

“Okay,” he said, noticing the lone person finishing their

drink at a table in the back. “Need me to close out his tab? Rush him along?”

“You could barely rinse a glass without fumbling it, and now you wanna take a stab at the register? No, thanks, rich boy. I got it from here.”

“Fuck you.” He chuckled.

“Thanks for your help,” I said seriously. “I know I don’t accept it often—”

“Try never,” he cut in wryly.

“Hey, I let you give me a job, didn’t I?”

“That’s different. We both got something out of that.”

“Well, I let you help me tonight, and I’m trying to thank you, but you’re ruining it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, rounding the bar and heading for the front door. “You’re welcome,” he called back.

“Love you!” I shouted as the door closed behind him.

Owning the building meant I got to make the apartment above the bar mine, so I cashed the final patron out, locked the place up, and was home in no time. I’d thought about hitting up a club and dragging someone back to my bed, but for once I was determined to get to sleep on my own. It happened rather quickly once I gave myself permission to imagine oceans and daisies and nights in front of a fire. When I gave myself permission to mourn the fact that the person I most wanted to share my success with that night, hadn’t been there.

CHAPTER 31

Franklin

He'd named his bar The Daisy. I stood back on the curb, choking on my admiration of him as I reread the two words scrawled across the black awning in white block letters. It was simple, like its owner, yet said so much.

Inside, business was slow, but it was early. With no sign of Leland, Cole, or Jasper, I took the opportunity to explore the place. My exploration ended at a locked door in the back. This was supposed to be an art-bar, but so far all I'd seen was...bar.

“What are you doing here, Franky?”

I pivoted toward the voice that kept me up at night. Leland waited for an answer just outside the kitchen, hints of it revealed by the swinging door still flapping back and forth. *God*. He was even more gorgeous now than when I'd last seen him a week ago at Cole's place. Golden brown eyes, framed by thick lashes, glistening under the sun rays bursting in through the windows.

“I'm meeting Cole and Jasper here to go over wedding details with you. They're probably stuck in traffic, or they would've been here by now.” I scrunched my brows together, peering outside. Cole's text had said to be there by noon, and I'd purposely arrived late to ensure I didn't arrive first. I went as far as walking there from home instead of riding the train,

which added an extra forty-minutes to my commute.

Of course I *wanted* to be the first one here. I'd have given anything for a moment alone with Leland, for a chance to simply talk to him, or listen to him rage at me, or suffer through his ignoring me. But what he needed from me overrode what I wanted from him, even if what he needed wasn't me.

Leland pulled his phone from his back pocket at the same time I opened my text conversation with Cole.

"Oh," I said, feeling foolish.

"Yeah, you're a day early," he confirmed.

"Right," I said. *What now, Franklin?* "Mind if I stay for a drink?"

"You've got your pick of high-end bars on the upper east side. Why slum it down here at my crummy bar?"

"You know where I live?"

"Cole may have mentioned it." The long column of his neck reddened. A tell that he wasn't being completely honest. Had he looked me up? My heart raced at the thought, and I silently warned it not to get ahead of itself.

"What can I say? I like obscurity." I shrugged, sinking my hands into the front pockets of my jeans. "And this place is far from crummy. It's..." I scanned the rustic bar again with its understated style. "It's you."

"You? Obscure?" Leland snorted, ignoring my last comment

—and its implication that I knew him. I took his heading around the bar as a good sign, though. “The thing is, you stick out like a sore thumb, Franky.” He turned to pass through the raised counter flap, putting the bar top between us.

“Thank you, I think?” I said, straddling one of the stools and setting my baseball cap next to me. I combed my fingers through my flattened hair.

He chuckled at my confusion. The sound was light, carefree, and at odds with the heaviness that normally surrounded us. “That was definitely not a compliment,” he said.

The corners of my mouth tipped up. I missed the way he used to give me a hard time. My smile seemed to trigger his anger, because his lips thinned and he whirled away from me to grab a beer glass.

“Stella?” he asked, already tugging the lever on the tap before I could confirm.

“You know me well,” I said, my mouth working before my brain.

“Do I?” he asked, setting my drink on top of a bar napkin. “Because one word comes to mind when I think of you, Franky. Whiplash.”

I walked right into that one. “Leland—”

“Don’t tell me that I know you. It’s insulting.” The door opened, and a young couple strolled in holding hands. I’d forgotten where we were. Hadn’t even noticed when the man

sitting at the other end of the bar when I'd arrived had left.

Leland hustled down to pick up the cash he'd left behind, then made small talk with the newcomers before making their drinks. The woman asked him a question I couldn't hear, and Leland smiled, pointing past me to the jukebox in the back. With nothing left to do, he hesitantly returned to me.

"I thought you wanted to open an art-bar," I said, steering the conversation to what I hoped was lighter territory. Granted, I'd never gotten much from him personally about the art-bar, but the name had given some indication to what he'd wanted this place to encompass, and with not one bit of art in sight, I knew this wasn't it.

"That was another time, Franky. A lot has changed since then." His words were loaded, and I sighed. Seemed there was no getting anywhere with him. Any direction I took, whether it was being upfront about my feelings, apologizing to no end, beating around the bush, giving him his space...none of it mattered or got me anywhere.

Maybe humor was the way in. Leland had always enjoyed a good laugh, especially at my expense. "If you're not too busy, I've got a bare wall that could use—"

"You're kidding me, right? Wild horses couldn't drag me through your front doors, Franky."

"What about regular horses?" I'd thought my bright idea had backfired, but eventually he returned my grin, tugging his bar towel off his shoulder.

“What is this, Franky? What are you doing here?” He wasn’t asking that in the literal sense, because we’d already established why I’d shown up there. He was speaking more in the grand scheme of things.

“I’m trying to earn your forgiveness. Please let me.”

“Is that all you want?” he challenged.

“It’s more than what I deserve,” I said, because the truth would’ve set us back five minutes, and I couldn’t afford to lose any progress.

His top teeth toyed with his bottom lip. “I don’t know how to do this with you, Franky, but I need to try for Cole. I just... I don’t know *how*. I don’t think I can.”

“What can I do to fix things?” I asked, hearing the desperation in my tone.

“*Fix* things?” he exclaimed, turning heads at the end of the bar. I’d said the wrong thing, but to be fair, anything could’ve been the wrong thing. That was how built-up anger and resentment worked.

Leland took a deep breath before continuing with a lowered tone. “You think you can show up and wave a magic wand to make *years* of pain go away? You think you can show up as a brand-new man, ready to cleanse his sins, and I’m supposed to do what? Go along with it? Break my friend’s heart? Take you back? Do you know what I’ve done to myself since that summer?” He stared down at his body in horror.

“I...” I didn’t know what to say. Anything I said would be wrong. “Would you have preferred it if I hadn’t come to New York?”

He screwed his eyes shut, as if he didn’t want to admit what he would say next. “Cole and Jasper needed you. *They* need you. I’m happy they have you. I just don’t know where that leaves me, because seeing you only hurts, and I can’t pretend where you’re concerned. Cole will eventually know enough to ask the right questions—and don’t you dare say we should tell him the truth, because that is not something you get to decide on your own.”

He was right. If it were up to me, Cole and Jasper would know everything, but the truth wasn’t mine alone to tell. It was why Cole had never told me the truth about Selene’s death or his intimate relationship with Jasper. He hadn’t had the okay from Jasper to do so.

“Okay,” I said. “Maybe for now we can coordinate. Work as a team to lessen the instances when all four of us need to be together.”

“How?” he asked skeptically. “There’s the wedding, and your son is hellbent on us being one big, happy family.”

It was true. I’d received more invites for Saturday barbeques and Sunday family dinners than I could count. I’d had to talk Cole out of starting up a group text. “We’ll figure it out.” It was the least I could do for him.

Leland was flagged down for a refill, and I pushed up from

my stool to catch his arm as he made to walk away. “But let me make myself clear,” I said. “The moment you tell me you’re ready, we tell him. I won’t hesitate, Leland. I won’t make the mistake of not choosing you again.”

He backed away slowly, his eyes watching me distrustfully. He spun toward his customers, and I fell to my seat, downing my now-warm beer in one continuous gulp.

The woman giggled above the music, and her boyfriend tossed an arm over her shoulder, smiling sappily down at her as Leland poured their drinks. He handed them off, then disappeared into the back.

The front door creaked open, and a few more people staggered in, taking seats at various high-top tables. One guy, there by himself, sat a few stools down from me. Average height, deep-set blue eyes, good looking enough. He drummed his fingers on the bar and craned his head around in search of something or someone.

Leland returned, his gloomy expression evaporating at the sight of the young man. “Alex,” he said, with a familiarity that made my stomach knot. “Back already?”

“What can I say? You make the best Old Fashioned in town.” Alex ended his not-so-subtle flirtation with a wink. He couldn’t have been older than twenty, and looked more like the frozen margarita type, I thought pettily.

“Nah,” Leland said, turning to reach the bourbon off the top shelf while *Alex* checked out his tight backside. “That would

be my mixologist, Marrison. She works the night shifts. You should stop by in the evening sometime.”

“Do you work the night shifts too?” Alex asked a little too eagerly.

“Yeah, I do,” Leland said. “I’ll be here all day every day until we work out the kinks.” He joked with Alex for a few minutes before finally sauntering back over to me.

“Things are starting to pick up,” he said, a clear hint for me to leave. “Your drink is on the house.”

I nodded, standing to fetch my wallet from my back pocket to pay for my drink anyway as he exited the bar area to take orders from the other customers chatting patiently at their tables.

I pushed my hair back and slipped my hat back on, heading for the door.

Stopping at Alex’s shoulder, I looked behind me to confirm Leland was out of earshot. “Alex, right?”

He startled, swiveling his stool until he faced me. I took pleasure in the neck ache he’d have come morning for having to strain to gaze up at me. “Ah, yeah. Do I know you?”

“I’m a friend of Leland’s,” I said, which cleared his leeriness away. “You live around here?”

“Oh, no. I’m a student at Cooper Union. Finishing my undergrad this summer. It’s not too far from here. I came in for the grand opening with a friend. Been here four times since,”

he said sheepishly. “Drinks are good. Food too.”

“I do hope that’s the only thing you’re coming in here for, because *he* isn’t on the menu.” I traveled my stare to Leland, who made polite conversation with the folks at a nearby table, and Alex followed. I stepped in closer, forcing his back into the bar. “Cooper Union, right?” I didn’t wait for him to answer. “Education is important, and I’m in search of new philanthropic opportunities. Maybe I’ll swing by there some time.” I crowded him in further, adding a hint of threat to my whisper. “Perhaps I’ll run into you when I do.”

“Th-that would be great,” he said in a shrill tone.

“Enjoy your drink, Alex,” I said before exiting. Some things about me may have changed, but some would always remain the same. Leland was mine.

CHAPTER 32

Leland

Ambient music played below the din of hushed conversation in the restaurant. The hostess led me to the corner table where Cole already waited, scowling down at his phone.

“Your father would have stood for me,” I said dryly, hesitating before taking the seat across from him. I’d considered taking the one next to him—the one reserved for Jasper, if only so I wouldn’t have to sit next to Franky and be subjected to feeling his heat. But then I’d be stuck facing him, stuck watching him, and stuck with him watching me. I didn’t know which fate was worse.

Cole chuckled, setting his phone on the table. “Is *that* what it’ll take to get you to come around? Standing for you? Wish I would’ve known sooner. Maybe I’ll even throw in a curtsy next time.”

I laughed in return, a sharp pain poking me in the heart. I missed him. Missed *this*. Our easy banter. “I’m here now, aren’t I?” I asked. “Even though fancy places make me itch.” I tugged at the collar of my button up. My back was to the front of the French restaurant, and I glanced toward the entrance. “Where is everyone?”

“They’ll be here soon. We’re early,” Cole said.

“I see.” He’d given me an earlier arrival time so we could speak alone.

“Jasper tells me I’m overbearing where you’re concerned. Too needy—”

“Are you sure that’s not his jealousy talking?” I asked with a grin.

“Is it?” he asked, the tealight candle at the center of the table throwing shadows across his big baby blues. “I think I have been coming on too strong lately, but we were thick as thieves back in Seattle. You were there for me when no one else was, not even my father.” He pressed his forearms into the table. “You’ve always been a private person. I get that. I don’t like it, but I get it. But something’s changed. Ever since Jasper and I got back together...” He trailed off, as if not wanting to think his relationship had caused a rift in our friendship. “I just don’t want you to think I don’t have room in my life for you both.”

“I know that, Cole. I love that you finally got your happily ever after. And I love Jasper. Trust me, what’s going on with me has nothing to do with you.” The lie was out before I could comprehend the dishonesty in my words. What I was dealing with had everything to do with him, just not in the way he thought.

“If I come around more often will you promise to stop pretending you’re into all of this wedding planning crap?” I said, lightening the mood.

“Is it obvious that I’m using it as an excuse to connect with

you?”

“As obvious as the boner that springs in your pants whenever Jasper enters a room.” We laughed, raising eyebrows, and damn it felt good. I had to find a way to make this work, even if that meant finding a way to coexist with Franky.

Our server came by with a bread basket and a carafe of water, upturning our glasses and filling them before nodding and striding off.

“So what time will the two of them be getting here?” I discreetly checked my watch. I had less than an hour before Noon’s rescue text would come in. It would’ve been nice to at least get through an appetizer before ditching my entrée.

“Jasper’s finishing up with a client, but his office is a short walk from here. My father’s date ended twenty minutes ago, so he should be here soon—”

“*Date?*” I asked, voice loud and cracking unintentionally on the word. My jealousy made me forget where I was and who I was speaking with. “I mean, isn’t he too old to be dating?” I said calmly, as if I didn’t care much but wanted to make conversation.

“I’m fifty-three and virile,” Franky’s steel voice corrected me from behind, causing me to sputter the sip of water I’d just taken. I went rigid as he slid onto the chair next to me.

“I could have done without hearing that,” Cole complained while I shook out my folded cloth napkin to dry my mouth and

the front of my shirt.

“And it wasn’t a date,” Franklin said to his son, then to me he said, “It was a business meeting.”

Cole scoffed. “Does he know that?”

He. I didn’t have the good sense needed to maintain the pretense of not giving a fuck. “Who’s *he*?” I asked Franky. He wore navy slacks with a matching collared shirt, and he smelled like heaven and sin. Yeah, sitting next to him was not the brightest of ideas, especially when it meant I couldn’t hide my reaction to him from Cole.

“My neighbor owns a chain of furniture stores throughout the city. I met with him and his partner to discuss possibly working on a line for them.”

We were brought menus, and Cole perused his, informing us he’d be ordering for Jasper to get the ball rolling on dinner.

“Partner?” I asked, hoping that meant what I thought it did.

“*Business* partner,” Franklin clarified, and my stomach filled with lead.

“So he’s available, then?” My mouth refused to shut up.

“Very,” Cole said. “And you should see the way he looks at my father.”

Our server returned to pour water for Franky, and I unclenched my jaw and turned to Cole. Thankfully, he was still busy scanning the food options.

“You should put him out of his misery,” he said absently to his father. “Tell him you’re straight.”

“But I’m not,” Franky said, pausing to take an audible gulp of water. “Straight. I’m not straight.”

There was a brief pause in which Cole dropped the menu too close to the candle, nearly setting it on fire as he stared at his father open-mouthed. “Oh,” he said.

“Is there a problem with that?” Franky asked in his usual self-assured way, but I didn’t miss how his hand trembled as he lowered his glass. Admitting this to Cole wasn’t a simple thing for him.

“No,” Cole said, slightly offended. “Of course not. I just... This is the first I’m hearing of this.” He also appeared hurt, I realized. He was probably wondering when this revelation occurred, and depending on when, how it fit into Franky’s marriage to Selene.

“We’ll talk later,” Franky said to him.

Cole’s phone vibrated, breaking up the awkwardness. “It’s Jasper. Excuse me,” he said, before leaving the table.

“Are you trying to make me jealous?” I snapped, our bodies twisting until we faced each other. I should’ve been asking for details on what their talk would entail, but Franky wouldn’t tell Cole about us without the go-ahead from me, so instead I focused my attention on the neighbor I didn’t know but secretly wanted to murder anyway.

“No. Jealousy isn’t the road I want to take to your forgiveness, Leland,” he said sincerely, which made me feel even more embarrassed and idiotic, because I’d been provoked when it wasn’t even his intention to provoke me. I’d shown him exactly how much I still cared.

A surge of grief overflowed in me, because I knew right then that I would have to give up Cole. I couldn’t coexist in his world with his father. If this little exchange proved anything, it was that Franky would one day move on, and that there would be a line of eligible people waiting for that to happen, and I’d have to watch someone get the best parts of him. The parts I still dreamed about having.

Since landing in New York, Franky had been watchful, patient, and tentative when addressing me, even if most of those communications came through ignored text and voicemail messages. He’d treated me like a man who was sorry would, and like he didn’t want to make my life any harder than it needed to be. And maybe I’d taken that for granted. Enjoyed it, even. How long would he wait for me, though? I swallowed around the realization that I wanted him to, that I saw his pining as some sort of punishment he needed to endure. What would happen, though, when he decided he no longer deserved my punishment?

“Your furniture will be in someone else’s store?” I asked. “It’ll be mass-produced.” That was the opposite of what he’d once dreamed of. He’d wanted a quaint store that doubled as his workshop. He’d wanted to make and sell one-of-a-kind

pieces and be home in time for dinner. A simple life, he'd called it.

"I think this is better for me. I'd have more time to create if I didn't also have to run the operation on my own."

"No," I whispered. "That's not why you're doing it." But before I could further call him on his bullshit, I remembered that I'd also tailored my dreams to make room for my fears. The Daisy was just a bar with no art involved. I guess we were both doomed to live and die in the winter meadow.

My face prickled from where his gaze currently touched it. My heart pounded a staccato rhythm for the beauty of him. We'd gotten so close that our tongues could reach out and touch if they wanted to, so close I could feel the breeze fanning from his long lashes, so close that one twitch of either of our hands and they'd be entwined from where they rested on the table.

"Please, Leland."

The sight and sound of Franky begging would never cease to make me feel both honored and unworthy. A man like him shouldn't have to beg, yet he did so for me.

"What if you lose them? What if choosing me ends up being the worst decision you ever make, Franky? What if we tell them the truth and we fall apart? Who we are now might not work well together. I don't even know you anymore. I don't even know me," I whispered shakily.

"I—" He was interrupted by Cole and Jasper swooning over

each other as they strode hand in hand to our table.

“I-I have to go,” I said.

“No,” Franky said quickly. “Let me. If you need to be away from me right now, let me be the one to leave. Cole misses you.”

Cole and Jasper were on us before I could reply, and Franky plastered on a smile as he stood to hug his stepson.

We ordered our food and drinks, and while the three of them chatted, I plucked a chunk of bread from the basket, tearing and eating tiny pieces at a time for something to do.

It was a whole hour later when Noon’s tardy text pinged through my phone. “I, ah, gotta go,” I said, standing and waving my phone in the air. “I’ve got a...thing.”

“Can’t your booty call wait another hour?” Jasper said, ribbing me playfully as he leaned into Cole.

“A gentleman never keeps a lady waiting,” I said. “Or a man, for that matter.” A sour taste filled my mouth when Franky’s silverware clattered to his plate. He wiped the corners of his mouth with his napkin but didn’t look at me.

“What’s your week look like, Cole?” I asked, hoping if I made an effort to get a guys’ night on the calendar that he’d let me slip out now without a fight.

“I’m free Wednesday evening,” he said.

“Okay. Wednesdays are slow. I should be able to get away from the bar early. Pencil me in.”

We said our goodbyes, and I didn't release my held breath until I'd escaped into the muggy night air. I stopped at the corner of the busy intersection, spinning around to face the direction I'd come from, fighting against the urge to go back and collect the other piece of my soul.

I backed up a step, and then two, and then a few more. Car horns blared and pedestrians screamed for me to look out, but I didn't take my eyes off the restaurant that still held the other half of my heart. Not until headlights blinded me, not until the sound of tires screeching deafened me. Not until a delivery van barreled down on me. Not until it was too late.

CHAPTER 33

Franklin

Seeing Noon's hands on Leland didn't inspire thoughts of violence the way it used to, but that didn't mean I was okay with it.

"Should you be touching him?" I asked, returning to Leland's hospital room with a hot cup of tea. "You might be unknowingly causing him pain." I counted the seconds it took Noon to remove his lips from Leland's forehead. If anyone's forehead kisses were going to make Leland feel better, it would be mine.

"As opposed to *knowingly* causing him pain?" he asked, his pointed jab perfectly aimed at my heart.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Cole asked in defense of me from where he stood at the foot of Leland's bed. We were all on edge thanks to the argument he and Leland had been having before I'd decided to take a break from it to grab some tea.

"Enough," Leland said. "I think I'd know if he was causing me pain."

The vehicle he'd been struck by, mercifully, wasn't going fast enough to cause any real damage. He'd suffered a few minor scrapes and bruises, and a fractured arm and leg.

Nothing that a few weeks or so recuperating couldn't fix. They'd kept him a couple nights for observation—something he was well enough to complain about during every waking hour.

“As I was saying,” Cole began.

“No,” Leland said. “My answer is still no.”

“You heard the doctor,” Cole said. “Your dominant arm has a fracture, and you've suffered a complex break in your left leg. Between the splint and cast, you'll need round the clock assistance for at least the next four weeks. His words, not mine.” Cole jabbed a finger toward the door, to where Leland's doctor was making his rounds somewhere on the other side of it.

“I don't need you to take care of me,” Leland said, sending my son into a tailspin.

“You're so damn stubborn,” Cole exclaimed, but Leland's obstinance was unshakable.

“You can stay with us,” Noon said.

“No,” I said sharply, and everyone's head snapped to me. I breathed through my irrational jealousy before giving a rational answer. “Noon's got a new job and a wife. He doesn't have the bandwidth to help you in the way you'll need. And Cole has a company to run and a wedding to plan.”

“This is more important—” Cole tried, but I made a downward motion with my hand to calm him.

“I know, but pausing your life to take care of him isn’t necessary. Not when I’m retired and wouldn’t need to sacrifice anything to do it. He can stay with me until he’s back on his feet.”

“You shouldn’t have to—”

“I want to,” I assured Cole. “If he’s important to you, that makes him important to me.” I hated that I had to pretend I was doing my son a favor. I would take care of Leland because I wanted to. Because I loved him.

“I’ll hire a nurse,” Leland said, setting Cole’s rage on edge. Frustration and worry guided Cole, and I was sure Leland understood that.

“Brilliant idea,” Cole said dryly, “and I’ll pay for it, because we both know you can’t afford to right now.”

“No,” Leland barked, cursing when his splinted arm hindered his movements.

“Are you alright?” I asked Leland while resting a hand on Cole’s shoulder, silently asking him to take it easy.

“I’m fine,” he said, dropping his head to his pillow. “I won’t take your money, Cole.”

“Then you’re stuck with one of us,” Cole seethed, pressing his palms into the footboard and leaning in, all while subtly looking Leland over to make sure he was okay.

“Fine,” Leland bit out, eyes flicking over all of us. “I’ll stay with Franky—” He stopped short. He’d never called me by

that name in front of anyone. No one else knew of its importance. “I mean Franklin. I’ll stay with Franklin *until* I’m able to manage on my own.”

“Until a medical professional says you can manage on your own,” Cole warned.

Noon whistled low and slow. “I wouldn’t want to be on his bad side,” he murmured, watching the stare down happening between Leland and Cole. Cole didn’t back down until Leland agreed. And then we spent the next few hours convincing him that between Cole, Noon, Jasper, and the other staffers, The Daisy wouldn’t fall into ruin while he spent the next few weeks recovering.

That evening he was discharged, and I was helping him out of my truck in front of my townhome. The wheelchair seemed excessive, but he couldn’t hop around on one leg all day, and with only one good arm, he couldn’t operate crutches.

“I’m not getting on that,” Leland said, glaring at the wheelchair lift hooked to the side of the porch stairs. I’d fully expected him to be difficult about this.

“I can always carry you up,” I said, gripping the handles of his chair as he debated his options.

“Are you sure that thing is even secure?”

I chuckled, wheeling him onto the ramp and securing him in before ascending the steps slowly to keep pace with him.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” he said when we entered the

foyer to an identical lift attached to the staircase straight ahead.

“My offer from outside still stands,” I said, to which he craned his head around to scowl up at me.

“Why do I even need to go up there? And when did you even have time to do all of this?” he grumbled as I rolled him onto the second lift, careful not to hurt his injured leg.

“That’s where the bedrooms and showers are, and Stacey called in a few favors,” I said. “You can take the primary bedroom. Its size can accommodate the chair, and the bathroom shower is bigger too. Cole dropped your clothes and toiletries off earlier. Everything you need is here.”

“Where will you sleep?” he asked as we entered my bedroom.

“In the room across the hall.”

Using the chair’s joystick, Leland spun toward the bathroom. He didn’t compensate enough for his extended leg and ended up nailing the chest of drawers with it. “Damn it!”

“Let me help—”

“No,” he gritted out. “I need to be able to do something for myself.” It took him five minutes of working up a good sweat, but he finally got the chair through the bathroom door.

“You thought of everything.” He scanned the wall-to-wall shower and the medical-grade bench inside of it. “You’ll need to help me with more than just making a sandwich,” he said

with trepidation. “Fuck. I didn’t think this through.”

“I won’t make this uncomfortable for you,” I said, trying to reassure him.

“You’ll have to see me naked, Franky. You’ll have to strip me naked, and likely help me shower and do...other things,” he said, chest rising and falling rapidly. “How will that not be uncomfortable?” He had a point.

“I’ll do as little or as much as you need me to, and we’ll come up with ways that you can help yourself. Your arm splint should be off in a few weeks, a month at the most. You’ll gain more mobility and independence,” I said, but he couldn’t see beyond that bench.

“What do you want to do first?” I asked, blocking his view of the shower. “I can make you that sandwich you were just talking about. Won’t require fire to make it.”

Leland huffed at my bad cooking joke, then blushed down at the tiled floor. “I need to wash the hospital scent off of me.”

“Okay,” I said decisively. If I wanted him to be at ease with what came next, I had to pretend that showering him was no big deal. I’d need to keep things clinical. “Give me one second.”

I returned wearing swim trunks and a tank, then helped him up and against the wall so I could remove his clothes. I didn’t linger in any spots, and I made sure my fingers didn’t graze any areas considered private.

“Not yet,” he said, breathing rapidly and clutching the waistband of his boxer briefs with his good hand.

“I’ll set you down, then get the scissors. You can shower with them on, and I’ll cut them away once you’re ready.” I lowered him onto the bench, slipped on the waterproof cast protectors, then got the showerheads going while I rushed for the scissors.

By the time I’d returned, Leland had already gone through the bench’s caddy for the sponge and soap, and had begun lathering up his chest.

I waited at the threshold of the bathroom, allowing him any amount of independence he could achieve. His chest area was all he could manage, especially since he didn’t have the use of his dominant arm. I pushed off the doorjamb and hurried in when he nearly tipped over. “I’ve got you,” I said, holding the sponge under the spray of water until it was sufficiently wet, then scrubbing him down as gently as possible without also making him feel fragile.

I soaped up his back, his good arm and good leg, counting every healing scar and bruise he’d sustained from the accident. Bruises and scars I hadn’t created physically, but emotionally, I was responsible for them all, and I planned on atoning for every last one of them.

“Tilt your head back a little,” I said, turning on the handheld showerhead and removing it from its mount on the stone wall. I held it over his hair, rinsing the suds away.

I was soaked from head to toe. Maneuvering around the bench had put me directly under the fall of water, and if we stayed in there any longer, we'd both turn into prunes. I'd stalled as long as I could.

With the scissors in hand, I crouched and began cutting the boxer briefs upward from the leg.

Leland's stomach went taut, and the volume of his anxious panting rose above the sound of both running showerheads. "Fuck. Wait," he said, but it was too late. I'd already cut high enough for his erection to pop free. He quickly released the punishing grip he had on the side of the bench to desperately tug the wet flap of cotton over his cock.

I bit into my tongue, needing the physical pain to consume me before my arousal could. I stood, unintentionally lining up the junction between my hips with his gaze, and thankfully I hadn't been erect.

"I've got it from here," he said, closing his eyes. He was already flushed from the steam, but the color had deepened. He was embarrassed.

"I won't go far," I told him.

"I said I've got it."

I backed away, grabbing a towel from one of the shelves and drying off as best I could before leaving him alone. I waited out of sight but close enough so I could be there if he needed me. Water dripped down my legs to pool on the floor at my feet, and I wrapped the towel tighter around me.

First came a breathless whimper and then shortly after, a bottle crashed to the shower floor, likely the bodywash, followed by a string of curses. I charged in to find Leland sliding down the bench, his one-handed hold on the side not helping him, especially not once the bench began to teeter to the side.

“Jesus,” I hissed, dropping the towel and rushing in to help him. I righted his seat and lifted him up by the armpits. A speck of blood had seeped through the shallow cut above his brow. I dabbed it away. “Are you okay?” I asked, looking him over and noticing what could have been a drop of cum in his pubic hairs. My eyes then went to the droplets working their way like sludge toward the drain.

“I don’t like you seeing me like this,” he panted. He seemed more ashamed than embarrassed, and I noted the way his shoulders hunched forward. “I must be a real turn on, huh?” He laughed darkly.

I switched the water temperature from hot to cold, to relieve some of the oppressive heat stifling us, while turning his words over in my head. Had my body’s reaction—or non-reaction—been the cause of his humiliation? I’d thought I was doing the right thing, but maybe now, more than ever, Leland needed to know he was still desirable. He needed to know he was seen as whole, full of vitality, and not a man made up of broken flesh and bone. Leland needed to know he was still capable of capturing my attention, even if he had no plans of doing anything with it once he had it.

“I’d had to nearly cut my tongue in half to keep my lust under control,” I said, and even now the taste of copper swam between my teeth.

“Oh yeah?” he asked with feigned indifference, examining the waterproof covering protecting his splint.

“It took extreme pain to not react to you, Leland. I promised not to make you uncomfortable, but I imagine that while you’re living here, my nights will end with me bringing myself to climax with the taste of your name on my lips. And even the nights that you aren’t here.”

Nothing about Leland’s situation was sexy to me. Not his pain nor the bruises I hadn’t inflicted with my own tongue, hands, and teeth. I could have lost him. Stepping outside of that restaurant for air and seeing the activity of people and first responders at the corner was like seeing my own life flash before my eyes. My priority now was seeing him back on his feet and, hopefully, earning his forgiveness. That didn’t mean I wasn’t still attracted to him; it just meant my attraction wasn’t my main focus. But what he needed now was the red-hot part of me that saw him and instantly wanted to tear him apart and swallow his cries, so I gave it to him. I’d give him any and everything.

“God, Leland. If I could slam you against that wall and take you right now, I would. I would fuck you for all the years I hadn’t been able to. For all the years I loved you and wasted that love on my pain. I would fuck you until you couldn’t see

straight.”

He looked at me then, his expression probing, as if he thought maybe it was my pity for him talking. I unloosened the string of my trunks, then kicked out of them while keeping my eyes trained on him. “This is for you, Leland,” I whispered, holding on to my erection. “This is *because* of you.”

Leland licked his lips. “It’s still so big,” he said in fascination, then his eyes widened as if he hadn’t meant that for my ears.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” I asked around a huff of amusement.

“I heard it shrinks with old age.” He shrugged, and the mood felt lighter already.

“You’re going to pay for all these old-man jokes,” I warned, shaking a finger at him. A devilish smirk played around his lips, one I hadn’t seen in years. “Let’s get out of here,” I said, leaving my erection to be dealt with later.

“What’s that?” he asked, lifting one end of my now transparent tank when I bent to help him up.

“It’s a daisy,” I said as his fingers brushed along the tattoo taking over my flank, making me shiver. “You have one too.” An identical wildflower graced his upper back; its petals reached up and around the mound of his right shoulder. I’d noticed it while undressing him but hadn’t wanted to say or do anything to make bath time more awkward than it needed to be.

“What’s your story?” he asked.

“One lonely night stroll home from Cole’s place,” I said, “I came across a tattoo shop with flowers in the window. Seemed serendipitous. Do I even want to know your story?” I asked.

“Probably not.”

“Tell me anyway,” I whispered. I’d suffer through whatever it was, so long as he was telling me things.

“I got it after one of many lonely fuck sessions,” he said, and I tried but failed at hiding my flinch. I’d never adjust to hearing him speak about having sex with someone other than me. “I just...needed something to hold on to that night. Something to help remind me that I could be more.”

“You are more,” I said. “You’re everything, Leland.”

Leland closed his eyes, and I didn’t comment on the look of contentment overtaking his face. I was sure it would have only angered him if I pointed out that I’d made him feel better.

Once dried and dressed, we moved to the kitchen, where we waited for the sandwich and soup order I’d placed to be delivered. I’d been kidding when I said I’d make it myself.

Leland managed to feed himself the sandwich with his left hand but nearly gave himself third degree burns with the soup.

“What were you doing in the middle of on-coming traffic, Leland?” I asked, blowing a spoonful of soup before bringing it to his parted lips.

“Resisting the urge to run back to you,” he admitted, as if

the earlier shower ordeal, and the accident itself, left him too tired to lie or pretend.

“I hope this taught you to never resist. Open up,” I cooed, spoon already reloaded with noodles and broth. Leland frowned but did as told.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Immensely.”

He chewed slowly, swallowing before speaking again. “You have the painting I made for you hanging in your bedroom,” he said, accepting another helping of soup.

“*His Storm*,” I said, voicing the title of it.

“What did Cole and Jasper say about it?”

“They haven’t been in the bedroom since I hung it there.”

“They’ll eventually see it. What will you say when they ask why my watermark is on it?”

“I’ll tell them the truth.”

“Which is?” He shook his head, refusing to eat more until I answered.

“That the man I love created it for me. That it depicts the passion we once shared. The darkness of that passion.”

Leland shoved the spoon away, not even wincing when the broth fell on his pant leg. “You can’t tell them *that*.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re not together, Franky. And I never said we would be. You’ll ruin everything for nothing.”

I set the carton of soup aside and gripped the armrests of his chair when he tried to drive away. “Listen to me, Leland. Stop looking at this in terms of what you and I will be to each other, and start thinking about what you need to be free of the secrets and lies holding you prisoner. It’s a burden, and it’s killing you. It’s killing me too.”

Leland tried to stand, then yelled in frustration at his inability to easily move. I let the armrests go, allowing him to back up a few feet, giving him the breathing room he needed. He nibbled at his lip in thought, scanning the countertops and cabinets. “You say you love me,” he whispered. “But I don’t even know you anymore.” He’d said as much in the restaurant.

“Brown is still my favorite color. Specifically the shade of brown that shines like burnished honey in the sunlight. Like now,” I said as the afternoon sun shone through the kitchen window to light up his honey-gold eyes.

“I no longer prefer to work by the water. It distracts me, slows me down because I’m constantly drawn to it, and the view causes me to get lost in my thoughts. I prefer to get my work done first and then reward myself by taking a stroll along the river.”

“With a bottle of Stella?” he asked hopefully, as if he needed something about me to be as it used to be.

“Yes, because some things will never change,” I said. “I

made a friend. He's sometimes more of the father I never had than a friend, but I care about him, and his sage advice helped me a lot. His name is Joe."

"Just Joe?" Leland asked.

"Yeah, like coffee," I said. "I'm still capable of being jealous of anyone who thinks they have a claim on you, and I still find it hard to be a decent father to Cole and Jasper, but I'm trying to be better at everything."

"Would it be easier between the three of you if you could tell them the truth?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, but I would never do that unless you were ready to."

Leland gnawed on his bottom lip again before asking if I'd gotten any better at cooking.

"I can successfully boil an egg and build a meatless salad," I said, to which we both laughed.

We ended up taking our conversation to the sofa, where I spent hours sharing my new self with him and confirming which areas of me would forever be unchanged.

For the most part, the conversation went well and felt good. But there were moments when something innocuous would set him off. When a joke didn't land the way it should have, and instead triggered his anger toward me.

I took his hostility in stride, because at least it meant he was talking to me, at least it meant he was unleashing everything he'd kept bottled up for so long. And every time I became

afraid that he'd wheel himself out my front door and never look back, I'd tell myself this was progress, that I was one step closer to having the other half of my heart back, and he was one step closer to accepting the other half of his.

I told myself that, one day, our half hearts would meet in the middle. One day, our hearts would join and be whole.

CHAPTER 34

Leland

“So your knees are shot,” I said, tilting my head back so I could soak up the sun.

“I said I quit running. I never said my knees were shot,” Franky said distractedly from the shady side of the backyard.

“Same thing,” I said.

He stopped hammering. “My knees are fine. I’d just rather reserve what I have left of them for...other activities,” he settled on.

I snapped my head up. “*Other* activities? Have there been *other* activities, Franky?”

“Leland, I didn’t mean to upset you—”

“Then fucking answer me,” I insisted, but he watched me like I was a wild animal instead. “Actually, don’t answer that.” I wheeled for the open patio doors leading into the house, but Franky got in my path. It was either roll over him or stop, so I kept going.

“Damn it, Leland.” He grabbed the arms of my chair while avoiding my casted leg. His face was now inches from mine, and we were breathing as if we’d run miles or fucked for days.

“Get out of my way,” I said.

“No. Not this time. You’ve been running from me all week. We’re okay one second, laughing even, and then you give me the finger, or a derisive curled lip, or nothing at all before you bolt on me. I understand why, and I can handle it, but just this once, don’t run. Talk to me instead.”

He was right. This whole week had been dedicated to taking one step forward and two steps back, and we were likely to continue experiencing setbacks. I didn’t know how to let go of the past for more than a few minutes at a time. Any and everything triggered me.

Discussions about a film he watched during our time apart would upset me because had he not been so selfish for so long, we could’ve watched it for the first time together. Mentions of travel made a veil of red fall over my vision because we could have seen those parts of the world together. And his recollections of nights gazing into a fire made me wonder who he’d been flame gazing with.

Asking was out of the question, because knowing he’d found sanctuary inside anyone but me would’ve sent us all the way back to ground zero. But not knowing did that anyway. More importantly, I was jealous and resentful that he’d grown, that he was able to do so without me, and that in the areas where I needed to be changed the most, I was still the same. I wouldn’t be able to appreciate that he was in a better place until I was in a better place too.

“I know what upset you, and I can even come up with the

reason why, but I want to hear it from you,” he said.

Why did he have to be so close to me? I could see the grime caked into the sweat along his neck. The debris from his hard day at work trapped between the strands of his hair. I could smell the scent that made him the perfect man for me. The scent of exertion and need.

“I was your first,” I started. “It shouldn’t mean that much to me, but it does. It did. And you were so fucked-up for so long that I assumed I’d be your last too. I thought it would be impossible for you to feel your way through the dark to someone else, especially when I was right there in the dark with you. *Waiting* for you. Why didn’t you just say the right things to make us better? Why didn’t you come to me?”

“I was depressed, Leland. I thought I was doing the right thing by everyone. I had it wrong, and I’m so sorry.” He knelt in front of me now, the sun cascading across his remorse.

“Did it mean something to you? Did *they* mean something to you? Did you...enjoy it?”

“*Never*. And I always regretted it afterward.”

“Do you promise?” I asked, needing him to swear it. Needing to know that no one had satisfied him, because *no one* else had satisfied me. Not since him.

“I swear it.”

I inclined my chin, absorbing the love in his stare. “Did you get down on your knees for them? Is that the real reason

they're shot?" I asked, the corner of my mouth curving upward.

Franky laughed, tossing his head back and letting his amusement pour out of him in relief. My heart shifted. It felt like waking up to a nice stretch after a good night's sleep. It felt like something had been repaired. "I kneel for no one but you, Leland. No one."

The resulting silence said too much, so I changed the subject. "Won't Lucas be here soon?" I asked. Lucas was his neighbor with the crush who Cole spoke about. He actually lived around the block. His backyard faced Franky's, though. He'd popped his head over the planked fence separating their yards yesterday to double check that they were still on for their meeting about the furniture line today. Franky had introduced me as his eldest son's friend who he was helping out after an unfortunate accident. Lucas had seemed relieved that I was nothing more than a temporary inconvenience for Franky. I'd bristled at Franky's description, though, not appreciating being drilled down to an inconsequential friend of the damn family.

"If you want me to claim you, Leland, just say the word," Franky had said.

I'd wanted to say the word. I'd wanted to say the word in every damn language and dialect known to man, even the ones that had long gone extinct. But I'd chosen the language of silence instead.

"Yeah," Franky said, putting a pin in my thoughts of

yesterday. “I should get cleaned up.”

“He wants to have sex with you, you know.”

“I know,” Franky said, rubbing the back of his neck. “But he’s professional. He’d never say or do anything to hurt this deal.”

“Just making sure you can see what’s right in front of you. That you haven’t gone senile in your old age.”

“Believe me,” he said, “I see *exactly* what’s in front of me. Everything else, including Lucas, is merely background noise.” With that he was gone, dashing into the house and up the steps to shower and change.

I let Lucas in like a good boy, even managing a nod of hello before escorting him to the backyard to wait for Franky. He busied himself on his laptop while I returned to my patch of sunshine and contemplated him.

“How much can you see from your place?” I asked, staring up at his windows. From the top level he’d easily be able to see into Franky’s backyard, and he’d most definitely have a perfect view into his curtainless bedroom. The bedroom Franky helped to dress and undress me in daily.

Lucas stopped punching the keys to gaze over at me. He was closer to Franky’s age than I was. A decade younger than Franky at most. The gap wasn’t substantial enough to be considered scandalous, though. He had that going for him.

“I can see enough,” he said. The pity in his tone prickled.

He probably viewed me as the poor disabled guy who needed his best friend's daddy to take care of him. Probably thought of me as a burden to Franky. Yet I was the one getting naked for Franky every night. The one being stripped naked *by* Franky every night. The one being waited on hand and foot by him, bathed by him. Adored by him. *You hold the power, Leland.*

“You want him,” I said.

Lucas shifted uncomfortably, staring into the house, checking if the coast was clear. “It doesn't matter,” he said, not wasting either of our time with denial. “We're going into business together.”

“That's a stretch. You're working on one line together. What are you hoping for after?”

They weren't compatible. They had the same disposition, gave off the same pheromones of aggression. Franky liked an imbalance of power in the bedroom. He wanted to conquer. Wolves didn't want to eat other wolves, they wanted to feast on lambs.

“Should we be having this conversation?” he asked.

“Why not?”

He cocked his head as if trying to figure me out. Likely wondering if I played a bigger role in Franky's life than the half-truth he'd been fed. He was curious, that much was clear in the way he'd watched me a moment ago when he thought I wasn't paying attention. He may have been professional

enough to not mix business with pleasure, but business would be over soon, and I knew a hungry vulture when I saw one.

“What’s the deal with you two?” he asked.

“Like he said, I’m his son’s friend.” I had to be careful not to let my ego get in the way of good sense. At the moment I was just Cole’s best friend, and I knew he’d already come into contact with Cole and Jasper and likely would again. I couldn’t afford to screw everything up because I wanted to prove to Lucas, and to myself, that he could never get Franky. Didn’t mean I couldn’t bluff my fucking ass off, though.

“So,” I nudged. “What are you hoping for in the future?”

“A date might be nice, for starters.”

“Yeah, a date is a nice appetizer, for sure. But what about the entrée?”

Lucas cleared his throat. “He should be down any minute now, and I’ve gotta get this presentation set up,” he said, going back to his laptop.

“You strike me as a top,” I said, not giving a fuck about his excuse for being here. “And two tops don’t make a bottom.”

He closed his laptop, a thin smile on his thin lips. I didn’t give a damn about his annoyance. “Look, I don’t know if you’re bored or—”

“Or,” I said. “If bored is my only other option, then what I am definitely falls under the category of *or*.”

I mentally ran down a list of what could’ve slipped from his

mouth after the word *or*.

Or if you want him...

Or if he's yours...

Or if you don't want to see him with anyone else...

I could've gone on for days. *Yeah, definitely an or. A fucking capital OR.*

"Maybe he's open to trying something new," Lucas said, a fire lighting behind his gray eyes. He made pushing all his buttons too easy. "Maybe he just needs to find the right person."

"And you're the right person?"

"Maybe."

"You can't teach an old dog new tricks, Lucas. Franklin Kincaid is not riding anyone's cock. That's one hole of his that a dick won't see any action in," I said breezily, examining my nails.

"Maybe I'll be the one to compromise."

"And what do you know about taking a cock? About breathing through the stretch, grinding your teeth against the burn, all while bearing down and telling yourself you were built to take all of him."

"*Him?*" he asked, as if he'd caught me.

"Generally speaking." I fluttered my one good hand.

"Sex isn't all about penetration," he said. "You're still

young. I wouldn't expect you to understand that.”

At this stage in the game it wasn't even about Franky anymore. At least not for Lucas. Now it was about riling me up in return, taking some of his power back. I laughed dryly. “Oh, he'll definitely want to penetrate you. Over and over and over again. And I hope you like pain with your pleasure, because whether or not it's his hand crushing your windpipe as he uses your hole as a cum dumpster, or his teeth at your jugular, or his nails scraping along your beard-burned skin, you won't walk away from the fucking looking the same way you did when you marched into it.”

“And how do you know all of this, ‘son's best friend?’” he parroted with a hint of mockery.

“As the son's best friend, I've seen and heard all sorts of things throughout the years,” I said nonchalantly.

“I bet you have,” he said.

“Sorry I took so long,” Franky said to Lucas, but his long gait ate up the distance to me. “Is Cole still coming to pick you up?” he asked.

“No, I texted him not to after you headed upstairs to shower.”

“I thought you wanted to lay eyes on The Daisy?”

“I'm much more interested in the business of furniture tonight,” I said as Lucas assessed our exchange.

“Alright,” Franky said. “Hungry? Thirsty?”

“I’m good for now, but maybe after your meeting you can feed me before bathing me.”

Franky gazed down on me in displeasure. All week I hadn’t let him do either of those things without a fuss, and now I was offering him my obedience. “Be nice,” he murmured for my ears only.

“Too late,” I whispered back. “I’ll be right inside where I can hear *everything*,” I said for Lucas to hear, rolling away from them with an unhidden smirk.

I ended up feeding myself, to Franky’s disapproval, but there was no getting around my needing help in the shower.

“Did I ruin your deal with Lucas?” I asked as he soaped up my feet.

“Are you the reason something urgent suddenly came up?” he asked.

“Maybe,” I said.

He hummed as if he’d suspected as much. “I’m sure it’s fine. I don’t need the contract, though, Leland. I’ll be able to put food on the table regardless. It was just something to do, I suppose.”

“You know, for someone whose knees are shredded, you sure have spent a lot of time on them this week,” I said.

“Keep it up,” he threatened. “I’m keeping score, you know.” He pushed to his feet, rinsing the washcloth clean before adding more body wash to it and handing it out for me to take.

Franky now only washed the areas I couldn't get to, respecting my boundaries as much as possible. He'd ditched the ridiculous swimming trunks around day four, and my bath time had become *our* bath time. He'd stand under the showerhead and clean himself off, back turned to me as I took care of my more exciting parts.

He gestured for me to take the washcloth again, and my breaths became too thick to release. I struggled to articulate my thoughts, eventually managing to string three words together. "You do it," I said, my cock rising below the hand towel spread over it.

Without making a big deal out of my request, Franky got down to one knee again, peeling away the hand towel. My cock sprung up from its nest of curls, and Franky held it by the crown while he soaped up the shaft. My stomach flexed involuntarily, and I couldn't hold back my hiss of pleasure.

"Are you okay?" Franky asked, the shower water beating at his back.

"Yes, just... Don't...stop," I gritted out.

"Can you scoot to the edge?" he asked. I managed with his help, and once my balls were no longer confined by the bench, he turned his attention there.

"What do you want, Leland? There's no room here for guessing games." He wanted to know if I was looking to be cleaned or looking for more.

"More," I said, hips undulating. I wanted to grab hold of his

hand and wrap it around my dick, but one hand was trapped in a damn splint, and the other couldn't give up the hold it had on the bench.

Franky took his time fisting my cock and the obscene sounds of soap squirting around and through his fingers made my balls tighten.

"Don't play with it, Franky," I whispered. "I need to come." Now that his hands were on me I realized that everyone that had touched me during our time apart were poor excuses for the real thing. No one played my body the way Franky did. No one had ever controlled my body's responses like he had. And he reminded me of that with only a teasing grip that would drive me insane before it drove me to orgasm.

"You need *me* to make you come," he said, fingers gliding along the raised veins of my arched cock. We both knew I could have gotten myself off, but I'd asked him to do it. *Needed* him to do it. We weren't at the point where I could admit that out loud, though.

"Jack me like you mean it, or..." My words were gobbled up by an extended moan.

"Or what?" Franky asked, easing up on the pressure again. His cock was hard and intimidating, but it was like he didn't even notice because his predatory gaze stayed hyper fixated on me.

"More," I demanded in frustration as he swiped a thumb over my wet tip. "Harder. F-faster, Franky."

“You forgot to say please,” he whispered, enjoying my misery.

“Please, damn it,” I whimpered. “*Please.*”

It was like my begging flipped a switch in his head, reminding him that this should be simple, that he shouldn't be enjoying it, that it didn't mean anything. Franky immediately began pumping my dick at a fast clip from root to tip. My body seized up instantly, and within seconds I came on a shout, my vision blackening around the edges as my orgasm didn't seem to want to let go of me.

I would've slithered to the shower floor if Franky hadn't held me up, and I crash-landed back on earth to catch his hot stare on the soapy cum sliding down his hand and my inner thighs.

“Franky,” I said raggedly. He snapped out of his haze and hurried to wash his hand off before carefully rinsing me down with the handheld showerhead.

His own cock was ready to burst, the plum-colored head shiny and wet. Franky ignored it, getting us out of the shower and dressed for bed. We were silent throughout the routine, and he refused to even sneak a glance at me.

Fuck. I'd been selfish. I wasn't ready for more, yet I'd asked him to negotiate the line drawn to give me exactly that anyway.

“Text or call me if you need me,” he said, when all I'd had to do before was whisper his name and he'd come running

from across the hall. Kind of hard to do that now since he'd closed the bedroom door behind him, and seconds later I heard the guest bedroom door close too.

I woke up hours later to the feeling of Franky being gone. I couldn't get back to sleep, not even after I felt him return home in the wee hours of the morning. I spent the next couple weeks waking up all hours of the night to that void but hadn't found the courage to question him about it. Too afraid to learn why. Too afraid to learn he had somewhere—or someone—else to go to for release when he couldn't release on me. Too afraid I'd want to do something about it.

CHAPTER 35

Leland

“That’s enough,” Franky said, as I tugged once more on the resistance band. “You heard the doctor. Light stretching—”

“Twice a day,” I finished for him, using my good forearm to wipe the sweat from my brow. “I know.”

“Are you in that much of a rush to get out of here?” he asked, setting his dumbbells onto the rack. I’d finally gotten the splint off. The leg cast would take longer, and unfortunately that meant I still needed some assistance since my arm wasn’t strong enough to work crutches.

“I have to get back to The Daisy, and don’t think I haven’t noticed you all doing everything in your power to keep me out of there.” Cole or Noon would either pop over or call daily with updates on the bar, but I’d only gotten to go there a handful of times.

“We just want you to put your recovery first, and to trust that the people who care about you have everything under control,” he said, moving around his home gym, putting everything back in its place.

“It’s still a baby, and I’m the owner. I need to be there.”

“You check the balance sheets every night. You know it’s doing well. Better than well,” he said, and I grunted in

response.

“You hate that it’s doing well without you, don’t you?” he asked, settling onto the workout bench adjacent to me.

“Yes,” I said, staring straight ahead. His question implied more than he intended it to, and so had my answer. “It means I’m not crucial to its survival. It means I’m not special at all. The Daisy doesn’t need me, but I damn sure need it.” I looked at him then, and sure enough, he saw me.

“That isn’t true, and you know it.”

I faced forward again. The blank wall held more appeal than the honesty in his eyes. I was in a rare mood, somewhere between apathy and feeling so much that it hurt to breathe.

“You’ve been pensive this past week. More so than usual. What else is on your mind, Leland?”

Where the hell he constantly disappeared to late at night was on my mind. Also on my mind was why he returned every morning, right before sun up, bone tired and in need of an urgent shower. But after the hand job fiasco the last time we’d showered together, I swore to myself I wouldn’t do anything to lead him on ever again, and giving him the impression that I cared about where he might be, and who he might be with, most definitely fell under the leading-on category. It said *I want you*. It said *I give a fuck*. And I did want him, and I absolutely gave a fuck.

I had to be certain that what I wanted was what I could let myself have, though. There was still the big matter of trust.

There was still Cole and Jasper to contend with, and although we'd made some strides toward forgiveness over the weeks, there was still that last bit of resentment I couldn't quite kick.

"Just thinking about all the bad choices I've made throughout the years," I said, which was true. There were multiple things occupying my mind. He could have that one. "All the relationships I may have sabotaged."

"Why'd you do it?" he asked, the scent of his sweat prickling my nose and making my mouth water.

"I want to say I don't know, but that'd be a lie." I hadn't purposely sought out unavailable people, but I didn't exactly have my hookups fill out a questionnaire on their relationship status either. Don't-ask-don't-tell was my motto, and in the instances where it was blatantly obvious, instances when they didn't even have the decency to remove their wedding rings or make up some excuse to get their boyfriend out the club doors before fucking me in the bathroom... Well, I'd told myself if it wasn't me, it would have been someone else.

"The truth is, I saw it as proof that I was wanted. That I was worthy, and special, and so goddamned irresistible that everyone would want to risk it all to have me. For a moment, someone wanted me more than they wanted their next breath. In my mind it made you wrong for not wanting me. It made everyone who ever mattered wrong for not wanting me. And some part of me also relished in causing harm, because I felt harmed." I exhaled deeper than I ever had, feeling a small

vacancy open up in my soul for having admitted that out loud, for essentially getting rid of it.

“I’m sorry,” Franky whispered.

It wasn’t an empty gesture, because Franky didn’t do those, but I understood something just then, and so I said, “You don’t need to be sorry anymore, Franky. What I did was on me. It’s about time I own my shit. Let me have this.”

“Okay,” he said.

We were at the tail end of August, which meant summer was winding down, and the sweat on my body, mingled with the cool breeze flowing in from the open window, made me shiver. “I’m gonna head up and take a hot shower,” I said.

Franky didn’t ask if I needed help. I’d been showering alone since the night my cock exploded all over his fist. It had taken me twice the time at first, but now with the splint removed, bathing myself moved from impossible to a minor annoyance.

“I’ll do the same,” he said, standing. “I was thinking about walking along the pier. Maybe grabbing some dinner while I’m down there. Feel like joining me?”

“Sure,” I said, then leaned forward to whisper, “right after we swing by the bar.”

From the moment we arrived at The Daisy, I’d done nothing but get in the way. It wasn’t wheelchair friendly I realized, and

made a mental note to do something about that. I'd hopped around on my one good leg until it cramped, almost taking me to the floor if it weren't for Cole catching me. I took the hint and allowed Franky to get us the hell out of there.

We hung out by the pier where I watched Franky get lost in his thoughts, still one of my favorite pastimes. Then we grabbed tacos and Stellas from a food truck before spending the next two hours eating and chatting at one of the seaport's outdoor eating spaces overlooking the water.

"You're kidding me?" Franky said, setting his beer down on the bistro table we sat at.

"Nope. Noon literally swept him off his feet." We laughed as I went over the first time Noon and Cole met. Cole and I had been hanging out at my apartment when Noon stopped by. Cole opened the door for him, and instead of exchanging pleasantries, Noon picked him up and spun him around before landing a kiss to his cheek and thanking him for dragging my sorry ass to New York.

"I would've loved to see my son's face," Franky said.

"I tried to get them to recreate it, but Cole was too stunned to cooperate."

Franky still had a smile on his lips as he brought his beer bottle to them. "I never got to thank you for being there for Cole," he said.

"You act like I had a choice in the matter," I said, lashing out. The atmosphere instantly shifted, moving from light to

heavy. I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I’m sorry... I—”

“Are you tired?” Franky asked.

“Ah...” *Was I tired?* I’d just fucked up a perfectly great moment, and in the middle of my apology he wanted to know if I was tired? “No, I’m not, but Franky—”

“Don’t apologize for going through your process, Leland. You once told me that you could handle me at my worst. Let me return the favor.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Now, come on. I want to take you somewhere.”

“And leave your precious water?” I asked.

Franky came behind me to grip the handles of my chair, leaning in to whisper as he moved us farther away from the sun setting over the river. “There’s more water to be found,” he said, making me equally curious and excited for our next stop.

“Coney Island?” I said, as I hopped out of the passenger seat and into my waiting chair. The seaside amusement park overlooked the Atlantic Ocean and was nestled within a residential area in the southern part of Brooklyn. There were roller coasters, bumper cars, carnival lights, and games. And the scents that assailed me from the many greasy food stalls made me forget we’d already eaten not too long ago.

“I can’t count how many times I’ve been here since they opened for the season,” Franky said as I followed him deeper into the park. “It’s the best at night. When the boardwalk is lit up and the beach is empty of everything except the sound of crashing waves.”

“Do you still come here? At night?” I added. Maybe this was where he’d been disappearing to. Maybe I’d been stressing myself out for nothing.

“No,” he said. “Not since before the accident.”

“Right,” I mumbled under my breath. I felt the switch in my mood coming on, but this was the first time in forever that I’d been so excited about something, and I didn’t want to ruin it with another outburst, so when Franky stopped to buy a spool of cotton candy and then offered me a piece, I stuffed my jealousy into a mental drawer to be dealt with later.

“What brings you all the way out here when you’ve got a perfectly toxic river closer to home?” I asked, which bought me a laugh from him.

“I think you know,” he said, stopping to gaze down at me.

I did know. It was the same reason I was beyond happy to be there with him now. “The Seattle state fair,” I said.

“This place reminds me of the day we became friends,” he said. “I come here and life suddenly feels simple. Easy. Like it was between us that day.” Franky shut his eyes, a shy smile tugging at his mouth, as if the images of that memorable day were floating around on the inside of his eyelids. Things were

so simple then. We hardly knew each other, yet we'd faced a fear together, and that had somehow bonded us in a way.

The amusement park wasn't overly crowded, but kids and teens whizzed by us as they raced to the next exhilarating ride and experience.

"So what do you do when you come here?" I asked, ripping off another chunk of his cotton candy, trying not to care that his lips were now adorably blue. "Besides thinking on the beach."

"I get on that," he said, pointing to the Ferris wheel straight ahead.

"The Ferris wheel?" I asked, my blood pumping faster at the idea. I hadn't been on one since our day at the fair, and even though I wouldn't say I was terrified of heights anymore, I still had a healthy respect for higher altitudes.

"Keeps me focused on my goal," he said. "Keeps me focused on *you*."

"We almost shit our pants up there," I said, my voice a bit breathy from his intensity.

"Care to do it again?" he asked, studying the wheel and then staring daringly down at me. He held his hand out to me when I stayed quiet with indecision, because things were less scary when holding hands, even if that *thing* was revisiting the era when my feelings for him began to unknowingly take shape.

"Shitting my pants has never sounded so good," I said,

closing my hand around his.

The ride operator was nice enough to keep an eye on my chair while we took a spin on the wheel. Franky and I sat across from each other as we climbed higher, the wind blowing our hair as we gripped the sides of the cart and smiled through our anxiety.

“It never gets easier,” Franky said. “But it’s always worth it in the end.”

I yelped when the cart swayed, and Franky had the nerve to laugh at me.

“Shall we pretend?” he asked, and I cocked a confused brow at him. “I still remember every word.”

I got it then. He wanted to recreate our first ride on the Ferris wheel. “I remember too,” I confessed.

Franky shut his eyes, and I wasted a few seconds to admire how handsome he was. To admire the additional gray hairs along his jaw and the strands of white mixed into his thick, jet-black hair.

“It doesn’t count if you don’t open both eyes,” I said, and Franky cracked one eye open, just like before.

“Both eyes,” I said. Franky opened them both, even managing the same look of exasperation he had that day, before raising his gaze to the night clouds.

“Now look down,” I said, in the tone used to convince babies to take their first step.

“If I have to look down, then so do you,” he said, and I swallowed on cue.

“We do it together,” I replied. “We’re in this together.”

“You don’t even know me,” he whispered. “And I don’t know you.”

“Makes sense,” I said with a shrug. “Because *I* don’t even know me. Not really. And I’m betting that you don’t even know you.”

Franky paused. The exact same pause he’d given me then, except this time his eyes said that he knew me. They said that I knew him too. “You’re stalling,” he said.

“No, you’re stalling,” I shot back.

“The ride’s almost over, Mr. Bear.” And it was. We’d already gone around several times. It was now or never, but I couldn’t get my mouth to form my next line. I wasn’t the same flirtatious guy looking to get a rise out of the grumpy older man. I’d since been hurt by that older man, and I was scared that he would know that this time the words actually meant something to me, that this time they would be the truth.

“The ride’s almost over, Mr. Bear,” Franky said again, nudging me to keep it going.

I licked my lips. “What if I don’t want it to end?” I asked. Franky’s smile gleamed with hope but he managed to stay on script. Managed to keep us from veering off memory lane.

He daggered me with the same unimpressed look that

shouted he was over my antics, when I was only getting warmed up. “Enough talking. Should we see what we’re made of?”

“Hell yeah,” I said. “Let’s do it.” With a synchronized deep breath, we squeezed hands and looked down.

Franky and I played games and ate funnel cake on the boardwalk until the amusement park closed and we were forced to leave. We talked the whole drive back to the city, and our conversation didn’t end when we got home. It didn’t end when he said goodnight from our bedroom doors, yet didn’t move. It still hadn’t ended when I dragged myself over to the bed and relaxed against the headboard before patting the spot next to me. It didn’t end until my head drowsily hit his shoulder, until I vaguely registered that I still wore my outside clothes, until he kissed the top of my head, running his fingers through my hair, lulling me to sleep.

CHAPTER 36

Leland

I woke up hours later alone and more upset than I'd been all the previous nights Franky had vanished. Not only had he left the house, but he'd left my side to do it, and that somehow felt much worse. Worse because at some point during the night, we'd gotten tangled up together, which meant that whatever he was getting out there, was powerful enough to tempt him away from my fucking arms.

I'd searched the place from top to bottom, knowing I wouldn't find him, and then I waited in the dark shadows of the living room for him to come home.

Franky didn't creep in until the hazy orange hue signaling dawn coated the sky, and by then my anger and my jealousy had skyrocketed from something hot and boiling, to an icy-cold whisper.

"Where do you go when you leave me here alone at night?" I asked, tone deceptively calm.

Franky swung around with a hand to his chest. "Jesus, Leland," he said breathlessly. "You scared the crap out of me. What are you doing up so early?"

Slower, and with more force this time, I repeated, "Where do you go when you leave me here alone at night?"

“I didn’t realize you noticed I was gone,” he said, his breath evening out.

“Is it a shock that I still can’t sleep without you?” I asked, disgusted with myself. I’d gotten the best sleep I’d had in years there with him—prior to his nightly disappearing act. “Do you really think the best way to win me over is to sneak out for quickies at odd hours of the fucking night?” The living room brightened in degrees as the sun rose higher and higher. With more light to see by, I could make out how disheveled he looked. “Must have been a great fuck,” I spat acerbically.

“That’s not what this is,” he said, moving closer to the sofa.

“So, what, you expect me to believe you’ve been slinking off to the East River to get some thinking done?”

“It’s not that either,” he said, lowering onto an armchair, nothing but an ottoman separating us.

“I’m leaving here today. I’m leaving *now*,” I amended, “And you’re not going to fucking fight me on it.”

“Leland—”

“Or talk me out of it, so save your breath.” I pushed up and hopped over to the stairs.

“Alright,” he said, catching me off guard. I hadn’t expected him to give in so easily. I leaned against the banister, out of breath from my journey there. “I’ll let you go without a fight, but only if you let me take you somewhere first.”

“Fuck you,” I spat. I’d allowed him to take me somewhere

last night, and that nostalgic ride on the Ferris wheel had robbed me of my guards and my good fucking sense. I wouldn't be going anywhere with him again.

Franklin prowled over, an expression I hadn't seen since our summer on the ocean falling over his face. "You come with me now, or you stay here. Those are your only options, Leland."

Thirty minutes later our Uber driver came to a stop in front of The Daisy. "What the hell are we doing here?" I asked. Franky didn't answer. He got the wheelchair from the trunk and dropped the brake as I hobbled over and fell into it.

Next, he unlocked the bar door and held it open, motioning for me to go in and then following behind me.

"Why are we here, Franky?" I tried again, but he simply strode for the door at the back of the bar, flipping through the spare set of keys I distinctly remember giving to Noon out of necessity after the accident. My original set had a daisy keychain on it. Those were with Cole.

"Come on," he said, waiting until I rolled in to switch the lights on.

The expansive room had been painted white. It had been a dull gray the last time I'd entered it. Art hung on the tall walls. *My* art hung on the tall walls. Every piece that Franky had gotten his hands on.

Strategically placed track lighting haloed them and their title plaques. The art work itself had been encased in what appeared to be handcrafted wood frames. I sucked in a sharp

breath, raising a trembling hand to trace the hand-carved daisies that had been carefully etched into them before being varnished in bronze.

Wooden folding chairs were situated in a semi-circle in the center of the room, the birchwood seat backs and legs all bore the same deep grooves of daisies as the frames did. The easels in front of them were a thing of beauty, too, their holders containing pine and cedar stemmed paintbrushes bearing daisies of their own. More of them, too many to count, lined the glass supply cabinet in the corner. Round brushes, flat brushes, fan brushes... All intricately lined with the wildflower.

How long had it taken him to do this?

I made my way onto the small stage where I would instruct classes from, settling onto the swivel stool with Franky's assistance.

My easel was majestic. Larger and grander than the others, so it could be seen by my future crowd of pupils, and to set me apart from everyone else. My brush bristles were made from Kolinsky Sable, which had to have cost him a small fortune.

It was everything I'd wanted. Everything I'd hoped for but knew I would never have, down to every last detail, every last petal. But I'd never told him. I'd always been too chicken-shit to speak this into existence, and I knew if I told Franky, he wouldn't have rested until it happened, and so I'd made a game out of him finding out, knowing he never would because

I'd never be brave enough to tell him. So how...

“How did you—” The sound of something crinkling shut me up. Franky pulled a weathered, taped together sheet of paper from his pocket, unfolding the square carefully before reading its contents out loud.

Thank God I was seated, because I knew exactly what he held, could remember the day I wrote it, the day I cried over it and then ripped it into a million tiny pieces before tossing it in the trash and leaving our summer home alone and broken-hearted. It was the only letter that hadn't met its death by cremation.

He'd found it and put it together again, the same way he'd been putting me together ever since the accident.

“Dear, Franky,” he started. “Fine, you win. I'll tell you about my imaginary plans for my imaginary art-bar.” Franky looked up from the letter when I laughed. I wrote that letter many moons ago, but if I closed my eyes, I could still see which paragraph had held my tears and which corner of the page had felt the grip of my desperation.

He went on to describe the white walls and spotlights, and how the most important thing was that there was enough space to not only hang my art but everyone else's, because no matter who walked through that door, we'd all be in this together.

I laughed again when he got to the part about the chairs.

“None of that fancy high-back shit,” he read. “I want to keep it simple. Mostly, I want something easily storable so that

the space can be multi-functional. I want them to feel like they're home.” Franky paused to gaze up at me, a shy question written on his face.

“Mission accomplished,” I answered around a rush of emotion. The backs of my eyes stung with it.

He nodded and pressed on. “I want to work with schools and disenfranchised kids. I want to host charity events there, and I want the community to feel as if they're a part of it all. And I want daisies, Franky. Daisies everywhere so I'll never forget to be brave ever again.”

Franky cleared his throat. I wasn't the only one overcome by the moment, by how symbolic it was, by how long it took us to get here.

“And lastly,” he continued. “I need a sign. A literal and figurative sign. Something that'll hang on the wall of my art-bar and at the back of my mind at all times. What should it say, Franky? I've got a few ideas, but I haven't settled on one yet. I'll give you a few options I've had bouncing around in my head, and I want you to choose. You get to choose because this dream will be as much yours as it is mine. I want you to help me craft it with your bare hands. I want you to help me make my dreams come true. Will you do that for me, Franky? I know you will, so you get to choose. Surprise me.”

He looked at me through damp eyes before reading the letter's closing, as if he'd read it so many times it was now etched onto his brain. “Love, Leelee Bear.”

“Fuck, I was young,” I said, downplaying the written thoughts of my twenty-five-year-old self because this moment was too much to shoulder. Too big to experience. And because somewhere in that art studio was a sign made up of words he’d chosen, and I was afraid seeing it would obliterate the final wall protecting my heart from him. Afraid to learn that wall had been obliterated a long time ago.

“You were beautiful,” he said. “You still are.”

I blew out a shaky breath as the sight of him grew blurry. I wanted desperately to blink away my tears, but my eyes were too full of them for that now. One blink and they would stream down my cheeks.

“Turn around, Leland,” he said hoarsely.

“I can’t,” I said.

“Be brave, Leelee Bear.”

So I did. I stood and carefully twisted to the wall behind my stool, lifting my chin to read the elegant letters carved into the sign hanging high above. “Maybe one day we can both be daisies,” I said, tears tumbling down. It was my favorite of the three options I’d given him in the letter, because not only was it something he’d said to me before, it was my way of begging him to choose me. My way of reminding him that we had plans to be great together.

It still spoke to us, but now it would also speak directly to every person who’d step foot into this room. It said *you and I are in this together. No matter who else is in this space, it’s just*

you and me. It said I'm just as scared as you, but together we could all be daisies.

Franky cupped my cheeks, wiping away the wetness there.

“When did you have time to do all of this?” I asked.

“I worked around the clock on it before coming to New York. I'd intended it to be a Christmas gift but quickly realized you wouldn't have been receptive to it. So I waited, which gave me time to add more pieces.”

“Thank you,” I said with every part of me.

“You're more than welcome, Leland.”

I gripped his wrists, rubbing circles along the undersides as we stared into each other. “I haven't painted in years. I might not know how to anymore.”

“So you'll practice. Every day and every night, with me by your side, you'll remember how,” he said.

“Okay,” I said, then his expression turned conflicted. “What is it?”

“I want to call in my last truth.”

“Your what?” I asked.

“I once beat you in a game of pool, and my prize was three truths. I got to ask three questions, and you'd have to tell me the truth. I still have one left.”

I licked my lips nervously. No matter what he asked, I'd have to give him unfiltered honesty. “How long have you

been waiting to say that?”

“*Years*,” he said, voice trembling under the weight of that one word and the wasted time it conveyed.

“I’m pretty sure we’ve passed the expiration date on that,” I said, and he chuckled. “Ask me anyway.” I steadied myself for whatever would come next.

“Where do you see yourself in five years, Leland?”

I groaned. “Not this question again.”

“Answer me, *please*,” he said seriously, his eyes roaming my face anxiously. I placed a palm over his chest, feeling his frantic heartbeat under my fingertips.

“Why stop there?” I asked. “Why not half a century?”

“How about several millennia?” he whispered.

“I think I like the sound of infinity more,” I whispered back.

“Where do you see yourself in this lifetime, and every lifetime after, Leelee Bear?”

I swooped in impossibly close, holding his face and his gaze the way he held mine, and I gave him the same answer I’d given him all those years ago. I gave him the truth.

“Somewhere still wanting you, Franky.”

CHAPTER 37

Franklin

In the time it had taken me to grab my phone from upstairs, and our beer refills from the fridge, Leland had ambled from the patio armchairs we'd been enjoying our nightly conversation from, to the easel he'd set up over on his favorite side of the backyard. It was the area least protected by tree foliage, so it received the best sunlight during the day. It was also the section of yard space I'd chosen for the garden, for that same reason.

I rested our Stellas on the short table in front of our chairs before coming up behind him to drop a kiss along the column of his neck. "You're cold," I said, running my hands up and down the gooseflesh along his arms. As if to punctuate the sudden dip in temperature, a faint breeze snuffed out the flames of several of the lanterns surrounding us.

"Which means you're not," he said, craning his head toward me.

"I admit this weather agrees with me, but we can take your easel and our drinks inside."

He turned back to his current project. "I get more done out here."

It'd been a couple weeks since he picked up a paintbrush,

and my walls would be eternally grateful for the work he'd blessed them with in that time. He'd had a few false starts, and more than a few confidence-shaking moments, but Leland had always been a natural, painting was in his blood, and it came back to him relatively easily. Now he couldn't stop. I couldn't even get him down to The Daisy, when before I'd had to get creative with my distractions to keep him from attempting to work shifts at the flourishing bar.

“Will you at least allow me to keep you warm?” I asked, already heading for the fold-up chair I kept perched against the fence for those spur-of-the-moment requests that I sit so he could paint me.

“No way,” he said as I opened it behind him, preparing to sit and wrap him up in my arms. “I get nothing done when you touch me.”

“A jacket, then?” I'd been overly needy and protective of him since the art studio reveal. I took offense whenever the night air ruffled his hair, or when the afternoon sun threatened to burn him alive.

He didn't seem to mind. It went unsaid that we were making up for lost time. Things were still tenuous between us, which played a part in how I'd been behaving. The past hadn't miraculously disappeared as if it never existed. There were still occasions when he stared at me like he was unsure or like he was certain but scared.

Cole and Jasper learning the truth continued to sit wedged

between us too, but Leland wanted me, and he could admit to it now, admit that he wanted to try. It was more than enough. More than I deserved.

Cole and Jasper had been by for dinner last night, and pretending there was nothing but friendship going on between us, when there was plenty more going on, had been easier than when we'd had to pretend to be one step above strangers.

“No need,” Leland said, interrupting my musings. “I’m done for the night.”

“And what’s this?” I asked, lowering into my chair anyway and resting my chin on his shoulder. Leland didn’t do abstract much, but he was equally as good at it.

“I don’t know yet,” he said, angling his head at the canvas. “I let my hand lead instead of my head. I’ll come up with a name for it eventually.”

I ran my nose up and down the crease behind his ear, breathing him in. “Have I been touching you too much?” I whispered in a love-induced haze, getting high off the scent of him.

“Too much?” He chuckled, the sound reverberating along his skin. “Franky, all I dream about is getting this boot off my leg so I can fuck the shit out of your cock. No, it’s never too much.” He’d gotten the cast removed earlier that day. The boot was a hindrance, but he’d gained his independence back. I wouldn’t touch him in *that* way, though, until he was fully healed.

“Always so tasteful,” I quipped, brushing my lips against his cool skin.

“Hey, decorum has always been your department, and it’s such a fucking turn-on when you lose all traces of it.” He tilted his head to give me better access. “Fuck, Franky. Look at what you’re doing to me,” he breathed. My eyes moved to his lap where his cock had tented the soft fabric of his sweats, and where a pin-sized wet spot had graduated to the size of a dime right before my eyes. “Always making me wet, Franky.”

I backed off, and he whimpered. “There are a few ways I can take care of that for you, but you can’t tempt me into hurting you. I won’t fuck you until you can take it.”

He twisted around. “The doctor said the boot can be removed in a week,” he said.

“He said one to two weeks, Leland.”

“Can we fucking think positively?” he asked, pent-up lust agitating him.

“One week. But then you’ve got to rehab the leg. You haven’t used it in a while.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. How long, then?”

My laughter rumbled up from my chest. “By my estimate, and according to the way I want to handle you, at least five weeks.”

“What if I work out with you daily to strengthen my leg? What if I don’t complain while doing it?”

“Then maybe four weeks.”

“That’s it? Just one week shaved off?” he asked petulantly.

“You have to ease your way into an intensive workout, Leland.”

“Fine. But I’m sending you a calendar invite for four weeks from today. If I’m not ready by then, I’ll saw the fucking leg off and ride your cock with a bloody stump.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less,” I said, grinning and shaking my head at him. We’d made up for all the lost kisses throughout the years, and my hands had become intimately reacquainted with his body, but I wouldn’t cross that final boundary until I was sure I could do so without restraint, because I had a strong feeling I would lose all of it once inside of him.

“Franky,” he began, still staring back at me. “I don’t want anything between us when the time comes. I’m always safe. You can still trust me.”

“I know,” I said, brushing the backs of my fingers down his cheeks. “And I hope you know that you can still trust me.”

“In this I do,” he said. Neither of us addressed the clarification of his trust in me. I knew I still had work to do.

Leland yawned, his lust forgotten for now.

“You’re tired,” I said.

“I’m fine. It’s still early, and I’m not ready for the night to end.” He sought out the patio where our beers were waiting for

us. “How about I shower all of this paint off of me and change into something warmer, and you get the fire table going?”

I agreed, removing the protective lid from the concrete table as he entered the house. The doorbell rang minutes later, and I wondered who it could be as I made my way inside the house.

“Lucas?” I questioned in greeting.

“From the look on your face, I’m guessing you forgot about our meeting,” he said, and I flipped through my mental calendar in search of an evening meeting I may have scheduled with him.

“Come in,” I said, coming up blank but not wanting to leave him on the doorstep while I figured it out. With my sole focus being Leland, it was highly likely that I’d dropped the ball on this. It was late, but not late enough, and with him being my neighbor, our meetings tended to be less formal and fluid.

He took Leland’s unoccupied seat, pushing his beer bottle aside to lay out a folder.

“Lucas,” I said delicately, as he’d been about to withdraw his schematics. I’d never been the type to tiptoe around a deal, and I wouldn’t start now, so I got straight to the point. “I’ve decided to go into business for myself. I apologize for wasting your time, but it’s something I’ve been thinking about for a while, and I’ve finally decided to act on it.”

Lucas gazed at the unopened beer bottles, as if only now noticing them, and then glanced over his shoulder into the house. He sighed, falling back in his seat. Lucas was

handsome in a rugged sort of way. He came from a good family and had inherited the business after his father passed away some years ago. He would never speak to my soul the way Leland did, though, and in the bedroom, he wouldn't be as malleable beneath my hands as Leland was. Lucas and I may have been similar on a surface level, but Leland and I were the same on a cellular level.

“Does this have anything to do with the jealous ward you've been charged with taking care of?” A playful, albeit disappointed, smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“He's not as young as he looks,” I said, but I was sure he knew that. “And what do you mean by jealous?”

“Didn't he tell you? He all but told me that your cock was a wrecking ball, and that my ass wasn't built to withstand it. Can't remember if that was before or after he insinuated that sex with you was an experience akin to violence,” he said, and my brows leapt up my forehead. “Good violence, I assumed. I got the impression that brutality was his foreplay. And yours,” he added.

“Well, I can't say that I'm sorry for his behavior...” I started, wondering what I *could* say instead.

“No,” Lucas said, with a knowing grin. “You look too pleased to be sorry.”

Lucas assured me all was forgiven, and I asked for his discretion. He wasn't friends with Cole and Jasper, but my sons were friendly with him whenever they stopped by while

Lucas and I were speaking across our yards, and Cole had sat through a few of our meetings at the house before. It would've been easy for Lucas to slip up and say something that Leland and I weren't ready to share.

Leland returned bundled up and sporting a scowl.

"Sorry, did I take your seat?" Lucas asked, but he made no move to relinquish it. In fact, he crossed an ankle over one knee and settled in further. At this point, he was toying with Leland good naturedly, but since Leland hadn't heard our conversation, he still viewed Lucas as a threat and clearly didn't take kindly to him infringing on his territory.

Lucas didn't know Leland the way I did, though. Leland would always win at games like these.

With a saccharine smile that didn't reach his hostile gaze, Leland planted his ass in my lap, bracing his hands on my spread thighs and explicitly undulating onto my cock. "No," he said. "This is my big, fat seat right here."

I groaned, subduing his hips and peering around him to see Lucas coughing into his fist to hide his laugh. "Leland," I said tightly. "I just finished telling Lucas that I'll have to back out of our deal."

"You did?" He wheeled around to look at me. That took some pressure off my cock as he was now mostly seated on my thigh. "Does that mean...?" He ended his question there, perhaps needing me to say the words.

"It means a quaint shop, custom pieces, local customers, and

coming home to you at the end of my work day.” Something about what I’d said scared him. I could see it in his eyes, but he kissed me long and hard before I could sort it out. We kissed like our lives were on the line, like if we stopped, we’d both die. I’d forgotten all about Lucas, and when we looked up, he was already gone.

“You’re giving me that look, Franky,” he said, scratching at my stubble.

“What look?” I asked, falling deeper in love with every curve of his face.

“The *I want you to suck my tits* look.”

I never knew I was capable of laughing as much as I did when with him. He was my sickness and my remedy. “Maybe I do,” I said, capturing his bottom lip between my teeth.

“Well, then whip ’em out, baby.” He sat straighter, giving me room to slip out of my t-shirt, and then I helped him down to one knee while he shot his booted leg out to the side.

“Are you comfortable like this? We can go upstairs—”

“I’m fine. Don’t baby me when we’re like this,” he said.

I cradled the back of his head, bringing his mouth to my right pec, to my most sensitive nipple. “God, Leland,” I breathed, tugging one-handed at the button of my jeans.

He nibbled and sucked as we both struggled to get our erections clear of our pants. I couldn’t reach his cock from this angle, so we settled for jerking ourselves off.

He popped off of my nipple to spit on my cock and then lick a stripe up the palm he used to work his own before plastering his mouth to my chest again. The faster he pumped his shaft, the harder he sucked on my tight bud, and the closer I got to erupting all over us both.

Once close to orgasming, I yanked him to my mouth by his hair, forcing my tongue between his lips as our arms shook with the speed used to bring us over the edge. Within seconds we were coming and swallowing each other's groans and then fighting about how I selfishly ate all of the spilled cum.

"I'm making up for lost time," I said, licking my fingers clean.

"Four weeks," he said, typing something into his phone. My own phone pinged with a calendar invite.

"Four weeks," I agreed, hitting accept.

The next morning Leland was already dressed by the time I got out of the shower. "Where are you going?" I asked, tightening the towel around my hips.

"I told you. I'm going to be at The Daisy full-time now." He patted his pockets down and scanned the bedroom we now shared. I plucked his phone off the dresser and walked it over to him.

"I know, but it's barely sunup, and I get the impression you

wanted to be gone before I got out of the bathroom.” I held his chin, my gaze imploring him to talk to me.

“What gave it away?” he asked dryly.

“The disheveled hair, but mostly the t-shirt you’re wearing backward. What’s going on?”

Leland pulled me in by the hips and rolled his forehead along mine. “I don’t know. Sometimes things are fine and I’m hopeful. Then out of nowhere this nauseating feeling of terror comes over me. I can mostly talk myself down from it, but sometimes I just need space to breathe.”

“Are you having second thoughts about us?” I asked. We’d agreed to try again, and I’d conceded to doing so without telling Cole and Jasper the truth—for now. Leland had said it was because he wanted a moment where the two of us could reconnect and be happy before throwing the four of our lives into turmoil with our confession. I understood where his hesitancy truly came from. He thought he’d lose me again once the truth was revealed. In this he still didn’t trust me.

“No second thoughts,” he said. “How about you?”

“I’ve never been more sure about anything,” I swore, but it did nothing to erase the tension in his body. My words wouldn’t do, and I vowed right then to stop using them. I’d have to prove myself to him through actions.

He moved to playing with the short hairs at my nape, closing his eyes, and therefore completely taken off guard by my kiss. I wordlessly conveyed what I would no longer

verbally say, hoping to lessen his doubts, begging for him to take reassurance from it, for him to believe that I needed him more than I needed my next breath. I poured everything into the kiss, and his eyes burned brighter once we separated.

“Are you still coming tonight?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Leland had revamped the bar’s website to now include the art portion of it. He’d be hosting his first sip-n-paint. I happily volunteered to handle the art studio’s food and drink orders while his head bartender and other staffers took care of the front.

“Okay. Cole will be making an appearance,” he said, a reminder that we couldn’t touch, ogle, or say anything too inappropriate to each other.

“I’ll be on my best behavior,” I promised.

He left, and I watched the clock all day, counting down the hours, minutes, and seconds until I saw him again, even giving in and making my way to The Daisy a whole hour earlier than planned.

Leland worried that the noise from the bar would interrupt the art session happening in the back, but the volume didn’t travel too terribly, and what did, seemed to elevate the experience—rather than diminish it—by creating an easy-going atmosphere for the first-time artists.

I did the job I was hired for, only screwing up one order, and

I made sure to treat Leland as if he were my son's best friend, and not the best thing that ever happened to me.

When it was safe to, I found a corner and gave in to my urge to drop the facade and watch with pride as Leland shined brightly. And he didn't only instruct from his raised platform. He came into the crowd, providing individual attention and offering tips and tricks. He'd picked something simple tonight. A single daisy floating in a cloudless blue sky.

I caught up with him once Cole left a couple of hours before closing. "You did great tonight," I said, taking up a stool at the bar. Leland practically preened as he refilled the napkin dispenser.

"It was amazing," he said. "And I heard back from the art school a few blocks over. They're willing to partner with me in some way. We just need to hash out what that would look like."

"You're unstoppable," I said, both of us forgetting the no staring rule. A customer tapped the bar top to get Leland's attention. "Go ahead. I'll wait here and then help you close up once the night is over."

"You don't have to. I might as well start sleeping in my own place again. Traveling downstairs versus across town will be less of a hassle now that I'll be here every day. And we can't exactly explain away my staying with you now that I can get around on my own." His tone may have given the impression that he meant everything he'd just said, but his big brown eyes

pleaded for me to stay. They begged me to demand he come home to me. I wouldn't, though, because that wasn't the key to passing this test, and there would be a series of other tests tomorrow, and the tomorrow after that, so I committed to acing them all, starting with this one. Leland wanted a more meaningful gesture. He wanted me to work for him. To work for *us*.

“Okay,” I said. “Call me tomorrow?”

“Yeah, of course,” he said, offering me a tight smile.

I couldn't kiss him goodnight, so I settled for nodding before slipping through the door. I crossed the street, finding a lamppost to lean up against before pulling up the Uber app on my phone.

A little under two hours later, Leland and the remaining staff exited the bar and bid each other goodnight as he locked up before turning to the steel door leading up to his apartment. He stared at it as if he didn't recognize it, as if he hated that he'd have to walk through it. I typed out a quick text and hit send.

Franklin: *Look across the street.*

At this hour, the streets were deathly silent, so I heard the ping sound off in his pocket. He dug around for his phone, his head whipping toward me as soon as he read the message. I sent him another one.

Franklin: *Come home with me.*

Leland read it, biting his bottom lip.

Franklin: *We've got three minutes before the Uber driver leaves us.*

He peered toward the black SUV idling two buildings down. Truth was, he'd been there a while now. I'd paid him handsomely to wait as long as it would take. Leland tapped away at his phone, and mine vibrated in my hand.

Leland: *You mean three minutes before you both leave me, don't you?*

Franklin: *I'm not going anywhere without you, Leland. Never again. You either come with me or I stay here with you.*

He didn't make a move, and I eventually headed for the Uber. I told the driver he could go after tipping him extra, and I turned back in time to see Leland slipping through his apartment building door. "Leland!" I called, and he whirled around, surprise splashed over his face as he took in the retreating taillights of the Uber.

"I thought you decided to go," he said.

In terms of actually fighting for him, this could be considered a minor scuffle. It didn't do much to prove my intentions in the long run, but he needed it, so I didn't question it. Anything he needed I would willingly give.

"Nothing could make me go, Leland. *Nothing.*"

He brushed a thumb over my lips, and I bit down on it gently. "I can't believe you waited out here all of this time for me."

“You’re worth the wait. Now, do I get to see your place?” I asked, backing him into the hallway, mindful of his booted leg.

“Yes,” he said.

“Do I get to spend the night too?” I asked, shutting us into the hall.

“Yes,” he said as breathlessly as the first time.

I leaned in to whisper my next question directly into his ear.

“Did I pass the test?”

“A-fucking-plus,” he whispered back.

CHAPTER 38

Leland

Every test, every game of mine that Franky played and won equated to a tiny shot of dopamine. He never took the opportunity to remind me that we were adults, to remind me that asking him to get out of bed to grab me a glass of water simply to prove he loved me should've been reserved for teens and their lovesick angst.

Franky was unwavering in the weeks leading up to *the* night. And I didn't know why I needed him to do half those things. Or maybe I did. I'd gone without the source of his love for so long, and I already knew what having it snatched away again would do to me, and so I needed constant reminding that it was still there, that today his love was as sharp as it had been yesterday, and the day before. Hell, an hour before. And maybe if he didn't tire of me, maybe if he could give me what I needed no matter how immature and silly those things were, then maybe he could give me the big, mature, not-so-silly thing when the time came.

It all made sense in my head. Said out loud was another matter, but give anyone a dash of fear, a spark of hope, and recollections of a failed love affair in the past, and they might do the same.

I hadn't lied when I said I'd be somewhere still loving him

in the next lifetime. I hadn't lied the first time I'd said it either. I would *always* want him, and I now knew that no matter how much I prepared myself for him, no matter how much hindsight I now had, and no matter how much more my own life had to offer me, Franky still had the power to break me because there was no protecting oneself from the type of love we shared. You went all in, guards down, hearts exposed for the taking.

No task fulfilled, or metaphorical scrimmages won, or grand gestures made by Franky would prepare either of us for the ultimate test to our relationship. I had to believe we would survive anything, and that would require my complete and utter blind trust in him, and I was ten steps closer to surrendering my sight than I had been weeks ago. But whatever happened later, I wouldn't regret tonight.

The calendar alarm went off, the piercing sound setting off the tripwire connected to my nerves. I silenced it on my way to the full-length mirror. The black catsuit I wore didn't have an opening at the ass like the one I'd worn for Franky years ago had, but it just meant he'd have to tear it open to get to me.

My cock and balls hung through the front beautifully, though, and the diamond cutout at the chest area showed off my muscular cleavage. I'd never been more grateful for the grueling workout sessions with Franky. I flexed my pectorals, pinched my pink nipples through the lace fabric and watched as my dick stiffened and curved upward in response. With nothing left to do, I went in search of Franky.

We'd stayed apart for most of the day to build anticipation, then a couple of hours ago I received a text from him with strict instructions to remain upstairs until it was time, and that he'd left a bowl of pineapple slices for me outside the bedroom door. I used those hours to prepare my body, my heart, and my mind for tonight.

My heart rate leveled up with every spare bedroom and bathroom that came up empty. I'd even checked the walk-in closets. I knew he wasn't upstairs. I would've felt him there, but I needed more time before I completely handed myself over to him.

With a deathgrip on the banister, I took my time descending the stairs, noting how eerily dark and quiet the first floor was. Half way down, cool air hit my bare toes, telling me the patio doors were open. Maybe he was waiting in the backyard.

My breath faltered when I rounded the bottom step. Aside from an unobstructed path leading to the back of the house, every available surface and square inch of floor space had been swallowed up by daisies and glass-encased pillar candles.

I moved slowly down the aisle lit by candlelight, passing the open kitchen that now resembled a flower shop. The candles wrapped around the living room, caging me into a circle of love. It felt ritualistic, and I was more than ready to offer my body up as the sacrifice.

I stopped behind the sofa, needing something to hold on to while I absorbed everything Franky had done to make this

night special. Directly ahead of me, the patio doors stood open, and candles flowed well beyond it to where flower pots stuffed with daisies overwhelmed the backyard. He'd created our very own greenhouse. That was what it felt like. From the coffee table, to the mantel, to the kitchen island and counters... There were daisies *everywhere*.

No, not a greenhouse, I realized. Franky had created a meadow. One where everything thrived. One filled to the brim with courage.

"There you are, Mr. Meadows," Franky crooned seductively from somewhere behind me. I spun around, hand to my heart. I'd forgotten all about him.

"Franky," I breathed, but then lost all train of thought at seeing him naked and leaning with arms crossed against the front door. He'd been watching me.

He pushed off the door, his confident stride languidly eating up the path toward me as the candle flames worked their magic along his chiseled body and obsidian eyes. "Lace," he said, or more like hissed. "I love lace."

"I know," I said, the words shivering.

"I love lace on you," he clarified. I knew that too. And *fuck*, his cock was already hard and weeping, his crown tapping the top of his navel as he stalked closer.

"This is beautiful," I said as he took his time getting to me. "No music?" I needed something to drown out the frantic drumming of my heart.

“No. All I want to hear are your rough pants and your hoarse shouts for more...or less.”

“More. Always more, Franky. Even when I beg you for less.”

Franky hummed his pleasure at hearing that.

“But where are you going to fuck me?” I asked. There wasn't an available patch of space large enough for him to lose his control on.

“Right where you stand, for starters,” he said, and I eyed the back of the sofa I now gripped from behind.

“Oh,” I said, swallowing.

“Are you nervous?” he asked, reaching me and securing my neck between his hands.

“Not nervous. I just need you everywhere, right now, and I can't decide which of those places needs you the most.” My mouth watered for him, my fingers tingled with the need to touch him, my cock throbbed for his hand, and my hole clenched for something of his to hold on to. His dick, his hand, his tongue... It didn't care, so long as something belonging to him was inside of it.

“Don't worry, you'll have been touched by all of me before the night is over.” And as if to punctuate his point, he drew in closer, so close our bare cocks bumped heads.

“Are you going to be nice about it?” I asked, slightly pulsing up and down so our dicks rubbed.

“No, Leland,” he said regretfully, his thumb stroking the pounding vein at my neck. “I’m afraid not.”

Contrary to his apologetic words, he kissed me softly then, as if to say this was all the gentleness he could offer me until this unspoken, ceremonial reclaiming was over with.

Franky broke the kiss, then slid a hand through the chest opening of the catsuit, squeezing my plump pectorals as I leaned into the rough handling, feeding him more of my flesh.

I played with the clear fluid at the tip of his cock while he tugged at my nipple. His own hickey-bearing nipples beaded and begged for my lips. I plunged my sticky finger into my mouth, groaning when the salty flavor hit the back of my tongue.

Franky reached between the daisies on the sideboard behind him for a bottle of lube, squirting it messily over his cock before forcing my hand on him.

His patience didn’t last long, and within seconds my back was to his chest and I was shoved over the couch, one knee positioned on the back of it as Franky kicked my standing leg wide.

I panted hard, disoriented, and pushed up onto my hands as Franky fisted my ass cheeks through the lace, spreading and lifting and closing them repeatedly while he swore this wouldn’t be quick.

I blew my hair from my face and looked straight ahead, stiffening when I thought I saw movement through the cracks

in the fence. I narrowed my eyes. It was a good distance away, but there was something... There it went again, a flash of white where there had been darkness, a t-shirt maybe, as if he'd moved over a plank to get a better view. *Lucas*.

Lace ripping away from my lower body jerked me back into the moment with Franky. I dug my hands between the cushions to white-knuckle the front of the sofa frame.

I relaxed my elbows, lowering my chest to give Lucas an unhindered view of Franky spanking my opening with his slicked, meaty cock. Lube splashed onto my skin with every heavy beat he delivered, and my hole shook under the weight of it.

“You’re going to pay for giving this away,” he said, voice thick and gravelly.

“Make me pay, Franky,” I said on a loud moan.

“No one else but me gets in here ever again.”

“No one,” I swore, gaze fixed on our voyeur while Franky remained clueless about him. “Can you give me everything I need, Franky?” I asked, antagonizing him.

“Watch me,” he said threateningly, fingers poised at my entrance.

“Don’t waste time on easing me open. I took care of that already. Just send your cock all the way in—” My words snapped away on a shout of surprise as Franky buried himself to the hilt, holding my waist to keep me from careening

headfirst into the daisies lining the floor in front of the sofa. *Fuck*, he was huge.

He held me so firmly, I thought my bones might shift under his hands, and he took off at a pace so blindingly fast it felt like the world had begun spinning around us. “Did any of them fuck you like this, Leland?” he asked. “Did any of them make you feel like you were splintering apart?”

I tried to form words but the overwhelming pleasure got in the way.

“Answer me!”

“No!” I screamed.

“Your hole is mine to take, to use, to abuse, whenever the fuck I so please,” he snarled, and my teeth clamped so hard together I thought for sure they’d shatter.

“My hole, my body, my *everything*,” I managed to get out, “is all yours.” Already I needed to come, and with the friction of the sofa pillows and the lace covering my stomach, I thought I just might.

“Think you can handle this?” I asked, way above a whisper, my gaze laser focused on the backyard fence.

“I know I can,” Franky said, unaware that my question wasn’t directed at him.

Now that I’d been sufficiently opened, my hole intimately reacquainted with its puppet master, I began to rock against him as best I could.

Franky pulled out abruptly, landing an open-handed blow to my ass. I cried out from the sudden emptiness and sting of pain.

“Don’t fucking move, Leland. Your only job is to take this.” He hauled me up by the front of my throat before loading my ass with his dick once more.

“Fuck,” I croaked, my fingers digging at his pulsating hand as I fought for air.

“You don’t need to breathe,” he hissed in my ear, his sweat soaking through my skin. “All you need is me, and all you need to focus on is the fucking I’m giving you.”

My hitched knee dug into the sofa back, and Franky moaned as he fucked in and out of me unrepentantly. His fingers at my throat didn’t relent until his teeth had sunk into my shoulder, swapping one suffocating pleasure-pain for another.

The daisies in front of us went toppling down as the sofa screeched forward along the floor, and all I could do was hope the candles didn’t tip over to join in on the fire already burning me up from the inside out.

“Wait,” I begged convincingly, now taking his teeth and his cock and the fingers attempting to bury themselves inside my hip bone. “Franky, stop,” I shouted loud enough to be heard beyond a backyard and through a planked fence.

Franky popped his mouth off the scorching bruise he’d cemented into my skin. “It’s too late for that, Leland,” he said, still fucking me, not even making an effort to slow down, not

even trying to see if he were capable of following my direct order.

I smiled triumphantly as Lucas backed away, as Franky's breath punched at my ear, and as pearls of sweat decorated my upper lip. Lucas's back door slammed shut, but Franky was too consumed with the tight grip my hole had on his dick to notice. Now that we were alone, I dropped my chin, pointlessly voicing how I really felt.

"Don't stop," I said around a strangled moan as he artfully located my bundle of nerves. "Don't you fucking dare."

I didn't tell him I was coming before I came. I didn't want him to stop me. I didn't want him to warn me of what would happen if I did. I reached behind me and tangled my hands in his hair as my cum shot into the air.

"Dammit it. Squeeze yourself at the base," Franky ordered, plunging deeper and deeper. It was too late, my orgasm was in mid eruption, and there was no clogging up this fountain now.

Franky turned me toward him urgently, lifting me and launching back into me as I circled his hips with my legs. My cock rocked with aftershocks as he marched us down the aisle of candles to the front door.

"Easy, Franky," I panted, his swift movements working my overstimulated body.

He slammed my back against the door, clamped a hand over my complaining mouth, and growled, "*My* hole, remember?" and then he did the opposite of easy; he fucked me hard, his

feet sliding on the floor as he shoved into me until he came.

“Tell me... Oh *God*.” He moaned. “Tell me you feel it, Leland. Tell me you feel my cum marking you, branding you as mine.”

With his hand still covering my mouth, all I could do was nod wildly as my nails dug into his shoulder blades.

“Good,” he breathed, circling his hips and standing on his toes, as if he wanted to climb inside of me. “Good.”

He let my feet hit the ground, then overpowered me to the floor. With the top of my head pressed to the door, and my knees folded to my temples, I could do nothing as he tongue-fucked his cum from my hole and into his hungry mouth. He moaned and slurped and shouted orders for me to shut up and stay still when I squirmed beneath the onslaught of his ravenous tongue.

“Let’s go to bed,” he said with one final lick up my cleft. It was clear he didn’t mean to get a good night’s sleep.

“I-I can’t,” I said from my puddle of sweat and bones on the floor.

“You don’t get a say in this,” he said, his body heaving above me, lips swollen and scented with cum. “Not tonight.” His muscular thighs put tree trunks to shame, and the thin layer of softness covering his abs only made him appear stronger, wilder, like something birthed in the wilderness. He scooped me up, tossing me over his shoulder before making his way upstairs.

It was a while before he was hard again, but he took that time to blow me to my second and third climax for the night, and to brand my body with his mark.

By the time he instructed me to hold on to the headboard as he entered me from behind, I couldn't even say what day it was.

"There's still some in there," he said, amazed, exiting and reentering my hole, the sound of slickness sending electric currents racing along my body. "I thought I got it all." And then his mouth was at the apex of my thighs again as he sucked deep breaths in through his mouth, retrieving what he'd accidentally left behind downstairs.

All night he situated me how he wanted me. He spread his weight over me without a care for how I would get enough oxygen to live through this. He molded my orgasms into what he wanted them to be. Tempered, earth shattering, or somewhere in between. He'd once promised me I would pay for the old man jokes, and he'd kept his word. Except in the past he'd treated my body as something that never belonged to me through a lens of anger and pain, and this time he'd done it all with reverence and love. *Always* love.

Cum handprints left a trail on the wall above the headboard, and tatters of black lace hung from the bed posts. Speckles of dried blood from our combined wounds covered the sheets, and my ass was raw from beard burn, and now the glorious spanking he was giving me.

“My hole!” he shouted with every grueling blow.

“Your hole,” I agreed laboriously, body taxed but still backing onto his massive cock and into his cruel palm.

“I love you,” he said, landing strike after strike. “*God*, I love you, Leland.”

“Then don’t stop making me pay,” I said gutturally, loving his unmerciful torture.

The festivities didn’t end when the sun broke through the clouds. And not after he’d fucked his full length to the back of my throat, making me gag and cry. Not even after he’d then wiped my tears while demanding I ride him hard until we came. It ended when we were both too spent to see straight, and when the inside of my ass and his belly were too full to consume another drop of his seed.

I lost the battle to sleep in our final sexual position, straddling his hips, my chest on top of his from where I’d fallen forward after fucking his cock like I’d been trying to escape something, like only the speed and force of his dick could save me.

I woke up groggy, in need of at least ten more hours of sleep, and still sprawled over Franky on the half of the mattress still on the bed frame.

Franky snored softly beneath me, and for the life of me I couldn’t understand why I was awake. I turned to the bedroom doorway and suddenly knew what had woken me up. The two figures, with matching expressions of betrayal, looming there.

“What. The. Fuck,” Cole whispered.

CHAPTER 39

Franklin

Leland and I showered and dressed separately—at his insistence—before meeting Cole and Jasper downstairs. The candles had burned out, but the place still resembled a botanical garden. Nothing like the crime scene upstairs.

Cole stopped his pacing of the foyer to scrutinize his friend, gaze narrowing on the bruises surrounding his neck. Leland drew his collar up self-consciously.

Jasper stood protectively next to his fiancé, his anger reserved and calculating compared to Cole's. From the look on Cole's face, his anger was a thing that couldn't think or reason. His mind would likely be too clouded by it to see past the obvious.

Of the two, Jasper's quiet rage was the one to be frightened of. It saw far more than Cole's did.

“Did you take advantage of him while he was in your care?” Cole's question for me sounded more like an accusation. “Did you?” he snapped, a strand of hair slipping out of place.

“He wouldn't—” Leland interjected, but paused when I rested a hand on his forearm, a silent request that he let me handle this. Cole didn't miss the gesture, and some of his anger gave way to confusion.

“I would never take advantage of him, Cole.”

“Well, then maybe he’s the one taking advantage of you,” he said, then turned his attention to Leland. “So you’re fucking my father now? Is the whole of Manhattan not enough for you? Do you not have *any* boundaries or self-control?”

Leland flinched from the insults hurled at him, and I had to remember that Cole was my son when everything in me screamed to physically defend Leland’s honor.

I looked at Leland, and written across his face was everything he believed he was about to lose and have a hand in destroying. I’d never seen him so terrified before. Not even when I’d walked out on him all those years ago.

“How long has this been going on?” Jasper asked, leveling a shrewd stare at me.

“Isn’t it obvious,” Cole said. “They barely knew each other. It had to have started after the accident.”

“No,” Jasper said. “This feels...older. It’s always been this way between you two.”

“Maybe we should all have a seat and talk this out more rationally,” I tried.

“Have a seat where?” Cole asked, motioning around us. “You’ve turned this place into a fucking conservatory.”

“Alright, well, give us a couple of hours and we’ll come to you.” My heartbeat threatened to strangle me, and I couldn’t bring myself to meet Jasper’s burning gaze. He’d see it all if I

did. He'd see the truth, and I didn't want to have to deliver, or confirm, it like this.

Cole continued with his litany of questions as if he hadn't heard me. Thankfully, it seemed he was too upset to have heard Jasper either. While Leland attempted to calm him, I swallowed and chanced a glance at Jasper. He watched me like I was a puzzle piece he was trying to make fit, and I saw the terrifying moment it did.

"This goes further back than the accident, doesn't it?" Jasper asked, and that snagged Cole's interest.

"We don't have to do this now," I said, unable to do anything to staunch the guilt in my tone. "Let's go to our separate corners, cool off, and meet again with clearer heads. You'll be more receptive then."

But Jasper was a dog who now had his bone, and he had no plans on relinquishing it. "It's been right in front of us," he said. "The way you two stare at each other when you think no one's looking. The tension has been there since Franklin showed up for Christmas," he said to Cole, then angled his head at Leland. "And then you pulled away... Did this start while you were both in Seattle? After you and Cole met?"

I inched closer to Leland until our shoulders tapped. Cole tracked the movement.

"No," Leland answered cautiously. "Not...then."

"Not then," Cole whispered, seemingly digging through his memory bank for something that would timestamp my

relationship with Leland.

“That bar napkin I found in your car the day of Selene’s funeral,” he said, pointing a finger at me. “That’s what led me to Josephine’s...” He faded off in thought, then approached us looking downright murderous and sneered, “How long have you two known each other?”

“*Eight years?*” Jasper repeated, and what little color he had, drained from his face. His green eyes were wide and desperate.

“What about Selene?” Cole asked, lacing his hand with Jasper’s, forming a united front.

“We were separated when Leland and I—”

“Separated!?” Cole shouted. “Wh-what the fuck is going on here? Has our whole life been a goddamn lie?”

“Cole, let me explain,” I said, but he’d already pivoted for the front door. “Jasper, please—” I tried, but he tugged his arm away from me, shaking his head in disbelief before following Cole.

“Let’s talk about this,” I said to both of their backs while Leland watched with hunched shoulders.

“Not now,” Cole said. “I can’t stand the sight of either of you right now.” And with that, they were gone, the door slamming in their wake.

“This will all work out,” I said to Leland. “But know that no matter what, I *will* choose you. Do you hear me?” I asked when he remained despondent.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said. “If you can fix the relationship with your kids, then do it.” And exactly as Cole and Jasper had just done, he turned and walked away.

Another test, I thought. One I would pass with flying colors, because Leland was worth everything I potentially stood to lose, and I wouldn’t sacrifice our happiness ever again.

Neither Cole or Jasper would take our calls, and we’d been removed from the approved visitors’ list at their residence. Didn’t take a genius to deduce that we wouldn’t be welcomed at their places of employment either.

I’d told Leland we’d give them a few days to cool off, but then a few days turned into a week, and by week two, Leland had gone from trying unsuccessfully to end things between us, to being virtually catatonic. I’d had to convince him not to cancel the intimate art auction he already had planned at The Daisy for the following week.

With my help it went well, and he’d donated half the proceeds to the art department of a local middle school, and as previously planned, the balance went to Selene’s charity, which Jasper now spearheaded. The final straw came when Jasper returned the check to Leland in pieces.

“Where are you going?” Leland asked with underlying panic. Didn’t matter how I answered, his tension wouldn’t ease until I returned. It’d been the same anytime I left his sight.

“I’m going to see Cole. I don’t care if I have to fight through a line of hotel security, I’m not leaving until I see him.”

“Okay,” he said resigned, settling back into the sofa, the spot he’d been watching the sun from all day. I slid my jacket on and left, knowing nothing I said would make him feel better. Only my son could do that.

After a near scuffle in the hotel lobby, and several threats of having the police called on me, Cole relented and allowed me up to the penthouse. I charged off the elevator, aiming straight for the living room, where I knew I’d find him brooding over his piano.

I slowed at seeing him, my temper simmering as the face that looked so much like mine stared back at me haggardly. “Cole,” I said with a sigh. He shoved to his feet and moved to the sofa. I took the seat across from him.

“Are you alone?” I asked.

“Yes. Jasper went into the office today.”

“How’re the wedding plans?” I asked as both an icebreaker and a stall tactic. They’d put them on hold after Leland’s accident and had only begun talking about it again the week Leland and I were literally caught with our pants down. Cole remained stubbornly silent.

“I’ve missed you both,” I said. “And Leland’s been beside himself. None of this is his fault. It’s been my fault since the day I met him.”

“Since the day you met him,” he said bitterly. “And what day was that, exactly? The day you abandoned your sick wife?”

“I didn’t know she was sick at the time. We’d separated months before I found out.”

Cole laughed without humor. “You think calling it a separation doesn’t make you an adulterer? Were there legal documents signed to give credence to this *separation*?” he asked.

The question was hypocritical of him, seeing that Daniel and Jasper were not only married but still sleeping in the same bed with each other when he and Cole’s affair began. But this was Selene we were talking about. This was their mother, and I understood that this was different for them.

“No,” I said. Selene and I hadn’t gone through the proper legal channels to make our separation official, and while implied that I needed to do whatever was needed to be sure of the direction I wanted our marriage to go in, my freedom to have sex with others hadn’t been explicitly stated by either of us. And even if I’d been able to wave a legal document at Cole, signed and stamped by attorneys and court officials, a separation didn’t mean a severing of our vows. We’d have technically still been married. And in their hearts, in all our

hearts, that meant I'd had an affair. "But I don't want you or your brother believing I would have walked out on her knowing she was ill."

Cole leaned forward at that. "Is that the reason you went back to her? Because you found out she was sick?"

"That wasn't the only reason," I said honestly.

"Did you love her?"

"Yes, of course, I did. I *still* love her, Cole."

"But you love Leland more," he said, shocked, as if in all of this he hadn't once stopped to consider that Leland and I were in love. That we were more than maybe past fuck buddies revisiting old times. "What about everything you told Jasper when you showed up here?"

I'd given Jasper what he deserved. Liberation from his grief. And after everything I hadn't done right after his mother's death, I owed him that, by any means necessary.

"You helped him get over his guilt and grief by sharing your own pain surrounding her death. Had everything you said to him been a lie?"

"It wasn't a lie," I stressed, "but the whole truth was much more complicated than what I had a right to disclose at the time. You, of all people, should understand that."

The wrinkles lining his forehead cleared, and I exhaled, seeing it as a sign that he was now listening with the intent to understand, instead of to blame.

“I have a million more questions now than I did before you arrived, but even if I were willing to sit through your answers, Jasper won’t. His forgiveness won’t come easy.”

Cole loved Selene deeply, but Jasper’s bond with his mother went deeper than Cole’s ever could. Jasper and Selene were all each other had for a good while before we were married. They’d been through tough times together. She was his mother *and* his best friend. And not only did I make him a promise to always do right by her, I’d also been instrumental in Jasper forgiving himself for the part he believed he played in her death. His sense of betrayal wasn’t necessarily bigger than Cole’s but definitely different. And while Cole tended to stand up and fight when things went wrong, Jasper had a nasty habit of running away.

“He’ll follow your lead,” I said. “If you can get past this, then perhaps so can he.”

“So you want me to beg on your behalf?” he scoffed.

“No, but can you at least get us in the same room?”

“I’m still not sure either of you deserve forgiveness. I may be able to understand why you hadn’t told us sooner, but I can’t promise to ever understand how you two got started in the first place. And do you plan to keep this *thing* going between you two?” He couldn’t even bring himself to call it what it was.

“I love you, Cole, but you and Jasper aren’t children anymore.” Something I wished I had learned a long time ago.

“I no longer have to lie to protect you, no longer have to pretend my marriage was something it wasn’t in order to maintain your sense of stability or to ensure that you like me. And I don’t have to surrender my happiness to please you. Not anymore.” I was sure I’d answered at least half of his unasked questions with that proclamation alone. Cole sat back, his hard features softening.

“Is that what you thought you needed to do?”

“Yes,” I said truthfully. “Will it destroy a part of me to lose you and Jasper? Yes, it will. Will I miss you every second and never stop fighting to have you both back in my life? Absolutely. Will I give up the only person who has known every ugly part of me and loved me anyway? No, I won’t. If you make me choose, Cole, my choice will be Leland.” When it became evident by the following silence that our conversation was over, I nodded and stood to leave.

“Dad,” Cole called as I reached the archway of the living room. I kept my back to him, letting that three-letter word wash over me, perhaps for the last time. It hurt to even consider never hearing it ever again. “You’re choosing him, and I understand why, because I’ll forever choose Jasper above all things. I owe you for him, and having him made everything that happened before him worth it. And if it’s any consolation, we were too in love to be concerned with what you weren’t giving us. What you gave was more than enough, because we got everything else we needed from each other. I’ll talk to him for you. I’ll see what I can do.”

“I love you,” I said raggedly, letting myself believe his words, letting them sink in and work their magic on my heart.

“I love you too,” he said back.

Leland waited on the staircase for me, his duffle bag packed and on his lap. He took the last few steps down and met me in the foyer, speaking before I had a chance to. “I’ve given it a lot of thought,” he said. “Your relationship with Cole and Jasper trumps your relationship with me. I get that. And I won’t hold the choice you obviously had to make against you —”

I placed a finger over his lips. “Shut up, Leland.” I took his duffle bag and marched up the stairs and into the closet where I began unpacking it for him.

“Franky, what are you doing?”

“Top or bottom drawer?” I asked, holding up his t-shirts. “We never did sort those details out. If we choose according to our bedroom preferences, that would mean you get the bottom.” My joke only seemed to baffle him more.

“I’m not staying here. I’m breaking up with you because I won’t survive you breaking up with me again.”

I let the shirts fall from my hands and grabbed his face between my palms. “I chose you, Leland. I will always choose you, no matter what.”

“You’ll resent me,” he whispered, bottom lip quivering.

“Never,” I vowed. “You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. Nothing is worth anything without you.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, his hands and eyes restless on my chest and face.

“I’m positive.” I kissed the corners of his trembling lips before giving in to my need to taste him. I explored his mouth with my tongue, taking my time while taking his breath and giving him mine. I reluctantly pulled away, returning his shy smile with a brazen smile of my own. “Did I pass the final test?”

He chuckled, eyes closing as if in prayer before reopening on a silent Amen. “Yes,” he said. “You passed them all.”

“Now, while you are my greatest reward, I still think I deserve a prize for passing. What have I earned?”

“Whatever you want. Just name it.”

“Trust,” I said easily. “I want you to finally trust me, Leelee Bear.”

“I will. From now until forever, I will,” he promised.

CHAPTER 40

Leland

The weatherman predicted rain all week, but what we got was a monsoon. It affected business, but I kept The Daisy open because it gave me something to do other than mourn my friendship with Cole. It had been two weeks since Franky had stormed his place. Jasper still hadn't warmed up to the idea of forgiving him, but he and Cole had been able to reconcile since then. I, on the other hand, still hadn't heard a peep from my friend.

I got lost in the rain spilling down outside as Franky began bussing the table of a departing party of three. He'd been here helping me as much as possible. Help I didn't need, but I understood that he was concerned for me, so I let him hover.

"Watching the door won't make him appear," Franky said from across the room as he loaded the plates and cutlery into the bus bin.

"I know," I said, shaking my head as if that small action might shake off the funk I'd been in. I turned to the liquor shelves behind the bar and began the menial task of making sure all labels faced forward. I dragged out the process and was able to distract myself for ten whole minutes.

I'd just made up my mind to close up for the day when the brass bells above the door chimed. I finished with the last

bottle and spun around. “Welcome to... *Cole*,” I said with an exhale. He dumped his umbrella in the metal pail at the door, brushed the droplets of rain from his suit, then wordlessly took up a seat at the bar.

I got to work on his usual. Two fingers of gin and an order of fries with extra mayo. He hadn’t asked for it, but I hoped he’d feel obligated to stay and finish it. I’d have done anything to keep him in that seat.

“Your fries will be out in a minute.” I brandished a nervous smile, but he just squeezed his tumbler between his hands and watched me thoughtfully. In the background, Franky stood still as a statue, probably wondering if this would be a reconciliation or a fight. Cole hadn’t given him a hint on where things stood between us. When Franky had pried, Cole simply said he would find me when he was ready to.

It was one thing for him to find out his father was more imperfect than he’d already known, but another to learn that his best friend had been a complete stranger. I’d helped him through the most challenging time of his life, and he hadn’t even known that I’d played a vital role in the ugliest, hidden part of it. I’d betrayed him, and it had to have cut deep.

“Did you really get that scar on your leg from falling off of a dirt bike?” Cole asked. I couldn’t read him, and I didn’t know if honesty was the fastest way to get through to his heart or if it was the quickest way to send him running for the door. I wrung the bar towel between my hands.

“No,” I said, choosing honesty. “My mother threw me from an apartment window when I was eight.”

Cole averted his gaze, as if he didn’t want me to see the pain there, as if he hadn’t counted on my breaking through his icy exterior so soon.

“Why did you think you had to hide that from me?”

“It wasn’t you, Cole. There are things about me I don’t share with anyone, not even myself,” I said. I’d shared it with Franky, and Noon had known, too, but it was one of the things I’d put back in its box after Franky broke my heart. Telling Cole would’ve meant acknowledging the trauma all over again, and I’d had more than enough trauma to deal with at the time. But I’d more than willingly open that sealed box now if it meant earning his trust again.

“Who are you?” he asked aching, and I had to grip the edge of the bar to keep from crumbling around the truth of it. “I feel like I could spend years sifting through all the lies and never crack the surface of who you really are.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, which of course would never be enough. He’d thought I was someone he could trust, and now he was likely going over everything I’d ever said to him, questioning fact from fiction. It had to be hard knowing you were the only one keeping it real the whole time, because even when I was forced to give him a deeper piece of me, that piece had always been watered down. “Not everything was a lie—”

“But it wasn’t the whole truth,” he said.

“No. It wasn’t. It couldn’t be.”

“And you were so good at keeping the heat off yourself, at giving me just enough, or barely enough, before turning things back to me, before being there for me. Our friendship has always been built around what you could do for me, Leland. Can’t you see how unfair that is?”

“I’ve always known it was unfair, Cole.” My inability to let him be there for me in any shape or form constantly got in the way of our friendship.

“It was mostly my guilt and the secrets I had to keep that held me back,” I said. “How could I let you help me through a bad day, when that bad day was caused by memories of your father? How could I tell you my heart was in a constant state of pain, when that pain had been caused by Franklin Kincaid?” I didn’t gaze over Cole’s head to see if my words had hurt Franky, but I knew he’d want me to tell the truth, no matter how brutal. “I couldn’t tell you,” I said. “So I’d lie or change the subject. That doesn’t mean our time spent laughing wasn’t real, or that I don’t value or need you in my life. It just meant I had to give you more than what I could accept from you. And that meant giving you less of me. I needed you to know when the time came that I was in this for you, not for what you could do for me or for access to your father. I was in this friendship for you, Cole”

“One thing I’ve been certain of all these years, though,” Cole started, “is that you’d been hurt by love. That’s what

drew me to you, but you'd never confirm nor deny. My father was the one who hurt you," he said.

"Yes." I didn't care that it wasn't a question, it was the truth, and that was all Cole would get from me from here on out.

"And I'm guessing he *didn't* renovate the back for you at a discounted rate?" Cole looked toward the art studio.

"No, that was another lie," I admitted. "He did it for free. He did it out of love."

"Love," he whispered, as if he still couldn't wrap his head around it. "What's your mother's name?"

"Willow," I said, even though it wasn't easy to. I hadn't spoken it in years. I'd kept her in a dungeon located in the recesses of my mind where she'd been easy to ignore because all my mental focus went toward getting over Franky. Something else I'd failed at.

"Willow Meadows," he whispered. "Pretty name."

My throat shrunk in on itself at the mention of her full name. I could hear the gate of her dungeon creak open, and could feel the binding keeping that box shut loosen at the corners.

"The name doesn't match the woman," I said blithely.

"No more of that," he said sharply, drawing me up a peg. "No more pretending you're okay, or that you don't care about what you've been through. No more."

I hadn't realized I'd done that, and right on the heels of

swearing that I'd be honest with him too. Old habits were hard to break. "It stops now," I confirmed.

Cole sipped his drink, letting the burn run its course before firing off another question. Felt like we were speed dating, except I was the only one on the receiving end of the get-to-know-you phase. There wasn't a stone left unturned with Cole. He'd given me all of him from the start, and what he hadn't handed over to me, he'd left unguarded for me to draw my own conclusions.

"What's your favorite color?" he settled on.

"Colors on the first date?" I joked. I'd never lied to Cole about anything as pointless as favorite colors or favorite foods or movies... The question was more symbolic than anything. We were starting from scratch. Building from the ground up.

I glanced beyond Cole to Franky, who smiled encouragingly at me with admiration and love bursting from his pupils. "Black," I said, and Franky grinned knowingly, his ebony eyes pleased with my answer.

"What are you most afraid of?" Cole asked.

I relaxed against the bar, getting into the rhythm of our exchange, enjoying it even. "It used to be heights and windows. Now my worst fear is losing your friendship, Cole. Or if I've already lost it, never getting it back."

He let that sink in a bit, taking his time to mull things over. "I get to know you now," he said, lighting the wick of hope, voice bogged down with emotion.

“Yes,” I said eagerly.

“No more evasion, no more lies,” he warned, and I promised it all ended here.

“I have so much to tell you,” I said, pushing through the glee squeezing my heart.

“Can’t wait to hear it all,” he said, before adding sarcastically over his shoulder, “You can breathe now, Dad.” He’d known his father was there the whole time.

Franky dropped the bin to the table and hustled over, ruffling Cole’s hair and leaning over the bar to meet me for a kiss.

“That’s gonna take some getting used to,” Cole said, nose wrinkled. We laughed, hugged, kissed, and fought over Cole’s fries. We talked with a freedom we never had before. We talked with no barriers and no secrets between any of us. It felt healing, like a breath of fresh air, but there was one thing still missing, one person we all needed to make this family complete.

“Jasper and I decided to have a small ceremony at the house,” Cole said. He and Jasper had a beautiful, sprawling home outside of the city, where they spent weekends and any other spare time they got. “We never wanted anything big anyway.”

No, that had all been for me. A way for him to pull me back in after I’d pushed him away.

“And I’m paying for your tux,” he said, brow raised, daring me to turn down his kindness. Tuxes weren’t cheap, and The Daisy was doing well, but I was still on a tight budget.

“Fine,” I said, and he scarfed down a fry, smiling victoriously. “But I don’t like charity. That much about me is accurate.”

“But you feel bad for all that you’ve done, and so you’re going to let me help you with this, and with whatever else you may need help with, for all the times you wouldn’t let me help you in the past. Isn’t that right?” he asked, and I scowled at his laughing father.

“Within reason,” I gritted out.

“Great, because I’d like to invest in The Daisy. We’ve got other locations to open up, after all.”

I groaned, tossing a limp fry at his smug face.

“Am I still invited to the wedding?” Franky asked.

“Of course you are,” Cole said. “Jasper will come around. Give him a little more time.”

“I’ll give him as long as it takes,” Franky said.

I closed the bar up and took Franky to my place. It was my turn to be strong for him, so I pulled back the curtains in my bedroom, undressed us, and held him under the blankets as we watched the rain come down.

“You heard, Cole,” I said, after an hour went by and Franky hadn’t said a word. “Jasper will come around. And we’ve got

Cole on our side now. Jasper will listen to him.”

“I hope you’re right,” Franky said, and I tightened my arms around him.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea,” I said, shooting up, laying on the enthusiasm extra thick.

Franky rolled to his back, staring at me like I’d sprouted two heads. “Is this idea an attempt to get my mind off Jasper?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t a good idea.”

He pushed up to lean against the headboard. “Okay, what’s the idea?”

“Getting your business up and running won’t be an overnight thing, but what if we can do something that’s more immediate? Get the buzz going before business even begins?” I’d climbed to my knees in my intensity, hoping my genuine excitement would be contagious.

“I’m listening,” Franky said, in the even tone of a party pooper.

“There’s an event space a couple blocks up. A storefront. Street level. Why don’t we rent it out and do a furniture pop-up shop.”

“A pop-up shop,” he said slowly, brows pinched.

“Yes. You’ve got all that inventory in your basement, and I’m sure you have everything you made in Seattle in storage somewhere. More than enough custom pieces to draw a crowd for a few days and still have plenty left to get things rolling

when you officially open Kincaid Wood.”

“Kincaid Wood?” he said, cracking his first smile.

I shrugged. “It was the first thing that popped into my head. Didn’t help that your wood is actually on display right now,” I added, and Franky’s gaze dropped to where the blanket stopped below his hips. He barked out a hearty laugh then, and my heart unclenched.

Franky sobered and reached for me. I let him pull me onto his chest. “Thank you,” he said, kissing my nose.

“For what?”

“For being ridiculous just to see me smile.”

“Okay, it did start out as a way to brighten your mood, but it is a good idea. What’s stopping us? Give me one reason why we shouldn’t do it? We could even invite Cole and Jasper.” Bringing up Jasper again was a gamble, but I decided to bank on Franky being positive about him showing up, versus him sliding back into a funk at the mere mention of his name.

He thought about it for a while, sifting a hand through my hair as I waited. “Kincaid Wood,” he repeated again. “It does have a nice ring to it.”

“Is that a yes?” I asked, tickling his ribcage.

“Not if you keep that up,” he admonished, tensing under my moving fingers.

“Yes!” I said, jumping up and dashing for the living room.

“Do we have to get started on it now?” he complained as I returned with my laptop.

“The sooner we start, the sooner you reunite with Jasper. He knows how important this dream of yours is. He’ll show up for you, Franky.” I settled down next to him in the bed, waiting for his response.

“Okay. Let’s do it,” he said.

“Perfect.” I began typing furiously, creating a list of things to do. “We could pay for social media ads, create a website, and get Cole to make a few calls. Kincaid Wood will be huge —”

Franky slammed my laptop closed and silenced my eager rambling with a kiss. “How about we just spread the word locally?”

I’d been about to argue, but he dropped another kiss to my mouth, then whispered a reminder. “A simple life, Leelee Bear.”

I smiled against his warm lips. “A simple life,” I repeated.

A week later we had the event space rented, the furniture transported, and the doors opened on the first Kincaid Wood pop-up shop.

We’d kept promotion to the bare minimum. We asked neighboring businesses to hang the flyers in their windows, and we handed out flyers with drinks at The Daisy.

The locals came out in droves, and by day four we even had

some out-of-towners. Word-of-mouth was spreading fast, and Franky's wish for a simple life might not end up being so simple after all. Furniture was figuratively flying off the shelf, and his list of requested commissions was as long as my arm.

"This is unbelievable," Noon said, as two strapping men hauled a cherry wood chest of drawers into a U-Haul out front.

"I know," I said, watching Franky talk prices and care instructions with customers.

"He isn't so bad, you know," Noon said.

"Is that how you really feel, or are you just high off the fifty-percent discount you got on that dining set?" I asked. Noon clapped me on the back as he chuckled.

"Nah, he's good to you. Good *for* you. He found a way to choose you no matter what, and as your friend, that's all I could ask for." Noon had visited me at Franky's house several times while I'd been recovering there, and since he knew about our past, Franky never felt the need to shield his feelings for me around him, even before I began returning those feelings. Noon also clandestinely shared his copy of the bar keys with Franky so that he could work on surprising me with the art studio. He'd witnessed Franky atone for his mistakes, so if he said he thought Franky was good for me, I knew he meant it.

The front door opened again, and again Franky snapped his head in that direction, his chest caving in when it wasn't Jasper's face that greeted him. He went back to helping

customers.

“Jasper still isn’t talking to him?” Noon asked.

“No. And today’s the last day. I thought for sure he’d show up.” Didn’t help that Cole’s return flight from a last-minute business trip was delayed, causing him to not be here. He was bummed he couldn’t make the grand opening, but he assured us he’d be here today. One son’s support would’ve been better than none.

“There’s still time,” he said.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I responded, but my tone lacked optimism.

“Alright, I gotta go.” Noon dragged me into his chest for a hug. “Call you tomorrow.” He waved to Franky on his way to the door.

Evening rolled around, and the last customer said their goodbyes. The only thing left was a coffee table and a few chairs. I handed Franky a Stella, and we took a seat, drinking in silence.

I didn’t know what to say, especially when I knew nothing would make him feel better. Only one person could do that. I’d been about to lock up for the night when a familiar face walked nervously through the door. Franky hopped to his feet, and so did I.

“Jasper,” he whispered.

“Franklin,” he said, his long, blond hair wavy and wild. He

looked just like Selene.

“I’ll leave you two alone—”

“Stay,” Jasper said to me. “You’re a part of all of this, so stay. Please.” He gestured for us to sit, then came over, removing his satchel and taking up the empty seat across from us.

Franky and I set our beers aside, then I held his shaky hand for support. He gave me a grateful squeeze.

Jasper dug a stack of photos from his bag, then began quietly laying them out one by one along the coffee table. I glanced at Franky for clarity, and he shrugged, confirming his own confusion.

The first photo was of a kid wearing a tattered shirt and shoes with barely any rubber left around the soles.

“This is me one year before you came into our lives,” Jasper said, his finger on the picture. A row of homes was in the background, some abandoned and some just run-down. None of them looked up to code to live in, though. “This was where we lived at one point,” he said.

The next photo was of Selene. She was scarily thinner than what was classified as petite, but she held a birthday cake and wore a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “My father was supposed to pick me up from school on my birthday. He promised me ice cream cake. He never showed up. My mother spent every dime she had on this cake to make up for it, even though that meant we wouldn’t have food for the next week or

so. Not until she got paid again.”

Franky squeezed my hand tighter, but otherwise he kept quiet, letting Jasper have the floor.

“And this photo,” Jasper said, “was taken at a shelter we’d had to stay at for a while when Mom couldn’t afford the rent increase.” Jasper slept curled up on a cot in a tiny room. A thin jacket had been thrown over him in place of a blanket. “It was cold, and there were more displaced families than resources,” he said. “Mom gave me her jacket while she went without.”

The next photo showed Jasper and Selene having a picnic in a rose garden. She’d gained some weight, and Jasper’s eyes were no longer a dull green. They were both smiling into the camera, so unlike their expressions in the other photos. “This was a month after moving in with you,” Jasper said, his breathing going shallow.

“And this,” Jasper said, moving on to a photo of Franky sitting at his bedside while he slept. “This was you sneaking into my room to sit with me while I slept. I’d been sick.”

“Do you remember this day?” he asked Franky, pointing to a photo of him sitting astride a horse and dressed head to toe in equestrian gear.

“Th-that’s the day you won your first medal.” Franky picked up the photo, bringing it in close. “I was there that day. I was there for that,” he said, as if he’d forgotten all about it.

“Yeah, you were,” Jasper said hoarsely.

“You’d wanted me to come to your practice lesson the day before, but I couldn’t make it,” Franky said.

“Funny,” Jasper said. “When I think back on winning my first race, *this* is the day I think about. The day you were there.”

Franky nodded, blinking back tears. He picked up the next photo and chuckled. “Christmas morning. You’d snuck down to open your gifts while we were asleep, but this year your mother didn’t label them, thinking it would stop you. Instead, you opened all the gifts under the tree. She was so upset. She’d worked hard wrapping all these herself. She’d wanted me to help, but I had business to take care of at Nexcom,” he said, sounding a little dejected about it.

“Wanna know what I remember?” Jasper asked.

“Yes,” Franky said like it was a plea.

“You’d had extra gifts hidden around the house—granted you hadn’t wrapped them or shopped for them yourself, but you were prepared for my Christmas mischief, and your gifts came in handy. Everyone had something to open on Christmas morning.”

“You were a Christmas menace,” Franky said playfully.

“And once again, you saved the day.”

Jasper pointed to the next photo, no longer explaining, because by now we understood the meaning behind all of this. There were photos of Franky at Cole’s piano recitals, photos of

him at their graduations, and even pictures of him and Selene during happier times. Seeing a shot of them hugging would've sent me into a jealous spiral in the past, but not anymore. I would welcome fond memories of her, welcome getting to know her through their eyes, welcome comforting Franky during bouts of sadness because she was gone. That was what families did for each other.

Franky applied pressure to my hand once more, his silent way of letting me know he was okay, before letting go. He scooped up photo after photo, adding commentary for some, while simply smiling down at others.

“What do you see when you look at these photos?” Jasper asked Franky. “Do you see the bigger picture they make?”

Franky dried his eyes with the hem of his shirt, then looked at them all again. “There was a time when all I'd see were the ones that were missing. A time when I would think for every single photo here, there were at least ten others that would show the truth. Show the times I hadn't shown up for you all, the times you weren't my priority, the efforts I hadn't made.”

“But now?” I said, chiming in. “What do you see now, Franky?”

“Now I see that I wasn't perfect, but I wasn't all bad either.” He caught his sob in his hand.

“That's what we all see, Franky,” I said, scooting my chair closer to him and gripping his nape. “That's what we all are. Imperfectly perfect.” I wanted to kiss him, to hug him, to

whisper all the words to make his tears recede, but this was their moment, and so I fell into the background again.

“I understand you in a way that Cole doesn’t,” Jasper said, sniffing through his own emotions before running down the list of things that made him and Franky similar. “I was married—unhappily so. I married Daniel for reasons other than love. I had an extramarital affair and then for a short time I gave up the man I loved for my marriage.” Jasper looked to me then, to the man Franky had given up for his own marriage. “Cole swears it doesn’t make me a bad person, though.”

“It doesn’t,” Franky said vehemently, his unconditional love on full display.

“Thanks,” Jasper whispered thickly, as if he’d needed that validation from Franky. “I looked at all these pictures and realized that you aren’t a bad person either. You *saved* us. You gave me and my mother a life we wouldn’t have had without you. You gave me Cole. Things happen. I know that. And as much as I loved her, I needed to accept that things—good and bad—were allowed to happen to her too. To the both of you.”

Franky completely broke then, giving sound to his pain and his happiness. They both did, and seeing them stand and meet to cry into each other’s arms made me break too.

Franky needed this. No matter how evolved he’d become throughout the years, there had been a cap on that evolution, a ceiling he couldn’t break through because of our secrets and lies. He was free now. We all were. And we’d grow even

stronger because of it.

“I made it!” Cole said, bursting through the doors out of breath. “I made it.” He scanned over all the wet faces in the room, including mine, and took in Jasper and his father hugging. “You came,” he said to Jasper, rushing over to join in on the hug.

Jasper and I exchanged a look over Franky’s trembling shoulder. I gave him a nod of thanks, and he gave me one in return before reaching out for me. I was out of my chair so fast it toppled back in my wake.

We eventually separated, laughing at how much of a mess we were. Eyes red, shirts drenched in tears. But we were laughing because we were happy too.

“Sorry I missed it, Dad,” Cole said, peering around the bare space. “Looks like it was a hit, though.”

“I’m sorry too,” Jasper said. “Sorry it took me so long to come around.”

Franky felt around his pockets for his phone, instructing us all to gather in close for a selfie. “It’s okay,” he said, “because when I think back on this time, *this* is the moment that I’m going to remember.” He held up his phone, held up the photo of his family. “This is the moment that will matter.”

EPILOGUE

Leland

The nightmares involving my mother returned with a vengeance after Cole's round of twenty-one questions at the bar, and they had only gotten increasingly more frequent ever since Franky and Jasper made amends a few weeks ago. It was as if my brain was bored now that I had zero distractions, and it wanted to remind me that not everything in my life was perfect, and wouldn't be until I'd dealt with *this*.

I'd wake up nightly to shrill screams, then quickly realize the feral sounds were coming from me. Franky would towel me down, clearing the sweat away from the night-terrors attempting to drown me.

The dreams were always the same. Me free falling-toward the pavement, but before I hit the ground I'd be back at the windowsill again, being *pushed* again. It was a never-ending cycle of terror, and I'd reverted to not being able to get too close to a window that wasn't on ground level. I wasn't new to the nightmare, but it'd been a while.

The exhaustion was killing me. The dreams would hit within minutes of me falling asleep and then I'd be too terrified to go back to bed. Even Franky's eyes were bloodshot and heavy, because he never let me suffer awake alone.

Last night Franky asked if I'd be willing to talk to someone.

Someone other than him. I told him I'd talk to a damn wall if it meant making this go away.

By sunrise we each held a one-way ticket in our hand and were rushing to catch our flight.

Lockwood, South Carolina in the fall felt more like the final weeks of spring leading up to summer elsewhere. No wonder Franky had instructed me to pack light. He wouldn't tell me much, just that this was where he'd learned how to be happy. The place that contained a few of the most important people in his life.

I rolled the window down, letting the breeze have fun with my hair as we took the scenic route from the airport. It was peaceful here. Green and lush, and quiet and homey.

We pulled onto a rocky backroad that opened up to the most beautiful lake I'd ever seen. "Makes sense why you loved it here," I said to Franky, stepping out of the car, only now noticing the one-story cabin. As grand as the home was, the water was the real showstopper.

We reached the screen door and Franky knocked. The front door had been left open, so we could see inside. No one approached from within. "Are you sure they're home?" I asked. Before he could respond, an elderly man with a cane appeared. Joe, I presumed. His confusion shifted to a pleasantly surprised smile.

"Well, look at this," he said, then shouted to someone we couldn't see. "Sarah! Look who's here." He managed two

steps in our direction before a wheelchair came barreling past him, nearly knocking him over if it weren't for the nearby wall.

Franky opened the screen door, stepping inside just as Sarah—Joe's wife, according to what Franky had told me—came to a stop and threw her arms up at Franky, demanding a hug.

“How long you plan on being here?” Joe griped as he caught up to us in the entryway. He rubbed the hip he'd knocked into the wall when Sarah had zipped by him.

Franky chuckled, ending his hug with Sarah. “Don't worry, not long enough to ruin your marriage.”

“She loves me more than you, you know?” he muttered, as if we all couldn't hear.

“Oh,” Franky said, playing along, “I hear she can't even stand me.”

We all laughed, Sarah included, who then granted Joe the kiss he'd bent down for and then took over the massaging of his hip. I'd never seen Franky this easy, this playful, this... *him*. Whatever magic this place possessed, I wanted it to work some on me.

“Oh! You brought a friend,” Joe said, his eyes crinkling at the corners. I stepped from behind Franky and said hello, bending to accept an embrace from Sarah.

“Why didn't you tell me you were coming?” Joe asked, tone reprimanding. “And how *dare* you give me this beautiful

house that I can no longer live without. It's too late to take it back, you know?" He'd said all of this in a rush, each question flowing right into the next, the last one ended with a finger pointed at Franky. It was clear these two cared for each other, and that Joe was happy to see him.

"I don't want the house back," Franky said, but Joe and Sarah's adoring expressions said that he didn't have to. They would have given it back or welcomed him to live there with them, without question.

"So," Joe said to Franky, getting back to the topic of me. "Is this the young man you worked so hard on that lake for?"

"Yes," Franky answered, simply kissing the spot above my brow where it creased in confusion.

"That's nice," Joe said, his grin bouncing between the both of us. "Well, stay as long as you like. We've got plenty of room here."

"That won't be necessary," Franky said. "We'll stay in the guest house, if that's okay with you? Better view of the lake."

"In other words, he's a screamer," Joe said, then complained when Sarah backhanded his thigh in disapproval. I hid my smirk behind my hand, and Franky ushered me out, letting Joe and Sarah know we'd be around for dinner.

"Oh, where can I find Beatrice these days?" Franky called back.

"She's in the office today. Give her a call. She'd love to hear

from you,” Joe said.

We collected our bags from the trunk and trekked to the guest house where we made ourselves at home for the next few weeks.

We spent our mornings watching the sun rise and taking long walks before stopping into Joe’s Coffee Shop for his specialty tea. It was called The Sourpuss. Named after Franky, and item number one on the menu.

In the afternoons we planted daisies around the property and took the boat out on the lake. Evenings were reserved for dinners with Joe and Sarah or sessions with Beatrice, and our nights were dedicated to making love.

I hadn’t even scratched the surface yet with Beatrice, and some nights the dreams returned with an intensity that made me feel like they were mocking me and the progress I’d thought I made. Still, I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t understand how Franky ever had. Everything felt right in the world here. It felt like we were in our *own* little world here.

“I’m not ready to leave,” I whispered as Franky moved between my legs. He’d been taking me gently lately, per my request. Thrusting in and out of me at an agonizingly slow pace as I touched and memorized the sharp planes of his body. I was in my soft season, he’d said to me once. The season where I made love to remember, instead of fucking to forget.

“Then we won’t,” he said, kissing me with one forearm pressed into the mattress near my head while his other hand

swept delicately along my collarbone. I crossed my ankles at his lower back, enjoying the feel of his cock diving in and out of me at a speed that said we had hours, days, *years* until this needed to end.

“What about the bar?” I asked, panting into his mouth as he kissed me again and again.

“It’s running like a well-oiled machine,” he said, pausing to groan my name. “You hired a manager, and you’ve got a great team of employees working there. And you know Cole isn’t going to let anything go wrong while we’re gone.”

I flipped him to his back, the move creating a breeze that blew out the flame of one of the candles surrounding the platform bed. Franky was gorgeous beneath me, with the light of the moon hitting him through the open balcony doors. “One more week,” I said, my orgasm stretching its arms as Franky’s hand hugged my erection. One week wouldn’t be enough. The little boy in me had been repressed for too long, had suffered one too many atrocities, and with all the good the town of Lockwood had brought to my life, my nightmares, when they came, still threatened to break me.

“Two weeks,” he countered, jacking me off as I played with his nipples.

“Three,” I breathed, deciding we only lived once, and that I wanted to do it here, with him inside of me and the lake bearing witness to it.

“One...month,” he countered, then groaned, stilling and

filling me with his spunk.

“Yes,” I hissed, letting my head fall back as I rocked my hips back and forth until I came.

Franky removed all traces of cum from our bodies, rubbing his belly and licking his lips once done. We lay facing each other on our sides, petting and massaging exposed skin.

“I think I want to find my mother,” I whispered, as if saying it too loud would somehow conjure her up.

“Did Beatrice suggest that?”

“Not in so many words, but it’s time. I need to resolve this part of my life. I need to know why. I need to know what made her that way. Maybe then the nightmares will stop.” For once I was beginning to question what her past must have been like for her to have turned out the way she had. We were all a sum of our experiences and trauma, and I wondered about the horrors she must have faced for her to do what she did to me. “I might not find her.”

“We will,” Franky promised.

“She might not even be alive.”

“Then we’ll deal with that too,” he said, refusing to let me wallow in pessimism.

The rising sun stole our attention away from each other, and we watched it climb over the water, as if it were the first time it had ever accomplished something so impressive.

I sighed, dragging my nails through his chest hairs. “Did

coming here even make sense if we can't stay long enough for me to make headway with Beatrice? I know we can't stay a month. Or three weeks. Or even two," I said, convinced it had been the racing orgasms talking.

"We can do whatever we want. Whatever you need, Leland."

"What about Cole and Jasper?" I asked, resting my chin on his chest when he shifted to his back. "Don't you miss them?" They'd gotten married soon after Jasper and Franky made amends, and they'd only recently gotten back from their honeymoon before we left, so we hadn't gotten to spend a lot of time with them.

"Yes, but you're my priority now. Choosing you means I go where you go. It means what makes you happy brings me unmeasurable joy. You come first, Leelee Bear."

"Will I never outrun that damn name?" I asked, smiling up at him.

"You know," Franky said, stroking my hair as his gaze grew distant. "Now that I think about it, as boys, Jasper used to refer to Cole as Coley-bear."

"Great," I said, pressing my mouth to his skin. "So I'm part of the cub-club now."

Franky laughed briefly, then turned earnest. "Seriously," he said. "We can stay."

"What if it takes years to resolve all the childhood shit I've

kept bottled up? There's the dead-beat dad shit to unpack too. What if I talk to Beatrice until I'm blue in the face, and still a few nights of peaceful sleep here and there is all I'll ever get?" I knew I was being negative and impatient, but I didn't want to resort to narcotics to get a decent eight hours of sleep, and I knew that was where I was headed. "What if nothing works, Franky?"

Franky looked out onto the water again, as if my answer waited there. "Then we'll try something else."

"Like what?" I asked.

"We'll fish," Franky said simply and shrugged.

My laugh rumbled through his chest where my lips were still pressed against him. "So we'll be fishermen? *That's* what will cure me?"

"Yeah, why not?" he said, smiling at me. "It'll be the cure for all the bad things life will throw at us, because there will be plenty. Nothing is ever perfect, Leland. But we can choose how we deal with it."

"And we're going to choose fishing?" I asked to be sure. "When life tosses us a curveball, we're going to go fishing."

"Yes," he said.

"What will we do with them? We don't even like fish," I pointed out, even while the thought sent my heart crashing against its cage with a joy so potent it left me breathless. So long as I was with him I would do and try anything, because

he made me believe anything was possible.

He hauled me higher up so he could look deeply into my eyes, the place where he would forever find all the love I held for him. “It’s okay,” he said, one corner of his mouth lifting. “I’ll teach you how to catch and release.”

The End

[Bonus Scene: Leland & Franklin one year later](#)

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