

Book Five of the Adrift Series

TRINITY **DUNN**

THE
STARS
that CALL
US HOME

*There was no past and no future... only the present...
And the present was filled with family that would forever be bonded
by the time that connected us.*



THE STARS
that CALL
US HOME

Book Five of the Adrift Series

TRINITY **DUNN**

Copyright

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Text copyright © 2022 Trinity Dunn All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.



THE ADRIFT SERIES BOOKS
(IN ORDER):

Book 1: More of Us to the West

Book 2: Feathers Floating Through Ember

Book 3: Remnants on the Tides of Time

Book 4: A Reflection of the Sky on the Sea

Book 5 : The Stars that Call us Home

Tools to get you caught up

Forgot something?

Here are a few tools to get you back in the story:

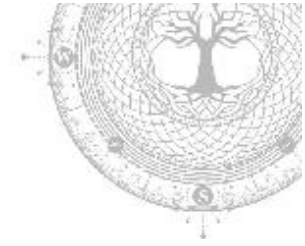
[Series Recap: trinitydunn.com/the-adrift-series-recap](http://trinitydunn.com/the-adrift-series-recap)

[Character Glossary: trinitydunn.com/character-glossary-the-adr](http://trinitydunn.com/character-glossary-the-adr)

*I dedicate this book to the Brandi's.
I didn't know how much I needed a hero until you both became mine.
Thank you.*



PART I
A promise for a different timeline



Chapter One

Alaina

I stood on the stern of Juan Josef's ship, gazing out at the still waters behind us as we sailed along the South American coastline. In the evenings, the gradient skies and untouched wilderness of land and sea created a contrast of orange tinted colors that brought me a profound sense of nostalgic tranquility in an otherwise chaotic world.

Jack, Cece, and Lilly had been the closest people in my life for the past two years, and living on the ship without them made every day more torturous than the last. My only reprieve was the twilight, and the memories it brought with it that made me feel connected to them.

I often wondered, as I stared up at that purpling sky, if they were out there in the colonies being similarly reminded of more peaceful evenings.

Was Cece reveling in the same childhood memories I was? Did the dwindling light remind her of our childhood the way it did me? Did it make her recall the scent of dirt baked into our sunburnt skin after a day spent playing, the beginnings of mosquito bites on our arms as our mother called us in for the night... Did it remind her of the feel of clean, sweet-smelling hair after the dirt had been washed away and the way the two of us would always curl up together on the sofa, attempting to stay awake past our allotted bedtime?

Did Jack look out at the disappearing sun and remember our evenings spent on the island? The heavy-limbed walk to camp after a long day of fishing, foraging, or building... sharing a meal around the campfire while wrapped up in each other's arms and listening to stories about life and love from the people we'd come to call family...

Would I see them again in this century or would I blink and find myself with them on some other pass through time?

Would the great climax to my personal journey through time have me staring up at some long-forgotten constellation while someone else swung the sword that would drag us back home? Or would I find my feet landed upon American soil, navigating through colonial Virginia in search of Bennet alongside them?

A single star flickered into existence as the sky darkened to allow it, and I again wondered if Jack was out there somewhere looking up at that same speck of light. Did he know by now that Juan Josef had foiled my separate plans to hunt a Perez ancestor? Had he even decoded my silly little message to know there was another plan to be foiled at all?

God, I hated not knowing what was happening on the other side of the continent that stood between us.

At my ankles, Luna let out a low growl, pulling me from my reverie just in time to hear the haunting echo of “Mrs. Perez” behind me, a jarring reminder of the reality I was loathed to accept.

All the evanescent warmth and solace the twilight had gifted me drained down through the very deck boards beneath my feet as Luna scurried off. The mere sound of that voice along with that awful name sent a shiver down my spine, working its way beneath the protective layer of my wool cloak to make the chill of the night ever more palpable.

Gathering my composure and a semblance of strength, I turned, my face betraying nothing of the turmoil within. “Mr. Bacallar.”

Daniel Bacallar, with his predatory gaze and shadowed expression, was an ever-present thorn in my side. When Juan Josef had escaped our custody, he’d found a new crew on a slave ship bound for the isthmus. Daniel and the men he brought with him had been promised a salary of no small means if they agreed to help Juan recover *his wife* and the ship she’d stolen.

It hadn’t been Daniel’s choice to serve Juan Josef. Rather, it was at the behest of Daniel’s brother and co-captain, Simón,

that he'd taken the job at all. Simón was easily motivated by the promise of money and did not hesitate in offering up his brother and the most vile portion of his crew when Juan promised him his own bit of gold for the inconvenience.

Since they had no individual aspirations to be in our employ, the men had very little loyalty to the ship's sole female occupant—even if she was believed to be the captain's wife. As the weeks dragged on and the nights grew colder, Daniel and his crew did very little to hide their mounting desires—stealing touches and staring at every opportunity they got. Much as I hated pretending to be *Mrs. Perez*, Juan was the single thing keeping me safe, and I relied heavily on his and Mr. Gil's close proximity to keep those touches from advancing into something more.

"I've not seen you in a few days, my dear." He glanced at the water behind me, a note of false concern in his voice. "What are you doing out here all alone? I pray you're not contemplating a jump from this height? I know you are not fond of your husband, but you needn't end your life when other arrangements might be made."

My chin held high, I motioned to the darkening sky. "I just wanted some fresh air."

He let out the breath of a laugh, the cool temperatures causing it to come out in a plume of mist. "It's rather cold for fresh air. Perhaps you are looking instead for some company to keep you warm? Have you reconsidered my offer? Are you playing *coy* with me, *mi rosa*?"

Daniel didn't like being subservient—that much had been evident from the start when he offered to aid me in escaping my presumed husband a second time. Although I'd turned down this offer, he continuously solicited me for information about the riches Juan claimed to have waiting for them in Virginia, no doubt trying to determine if I could deliver a paycheck just as easily with Juan out of the way. Why not have his cake and eat it too if such a thing were possible?

With blackened fingers, he reached out to adjust the clasp on my cloak, his hand lingering close enough to my face that I could smell the stench of piss and ale on his skin.

“As I’ve said on several occasions, Mr. Bacallar,” I said through my teeth, taking a step backward, “I am not interested. I’m sure you have somewhere else you need to be.”

He took a step forward, boxing me in against the ship’s railing. “And as *I’ve* said on several occasions, I have lots of places I *need* to be and only one place I *want* to be. You stole this ship and ran from your husband before. I can see in your eyes that you wish nothing more than to be that free again. Come, my love, let me help you. You and I could be free to go anywhere we wished. I would be gentle...”

I turned my face away to avoid the reek of his breath—to avoid that familiar look in his eyes I’d seen once before in a man who’d been overcome with similar loneliness. “For the last time, my husband and I have worked through our differences,” I managed. “I will not be running away and I have no desire to do so with someone like you.”

He stuck out his lower lip in a sarcastic pout. “Why must you always be so—”

His response was cut short by a commanding, “Might I ask what it is you think you’re doing with my *wife*?”

Juan Josef’s voice, which had once been the source of my nightmares, now made every taut muscle in my body relax. It was a peculiar thing that my enemy had become my single line of defense against a crew he, himself, had plagued upon me.

Just as he always did, Daniel shrank away. Juan was nearly twice his size, and, although Daniel lacked anything resembling intelligence, he was at least wise enough to know a fight of fists between the two of them would not end in his favor. The only strength he *presumed* to have over Juan was numbers, and he was presently without them—a conclusion I watched him come to as he glanced around the shadowy deck to find very few of his men close enough to come to his aid. “She seemed distraught, Captain. I was only making sure she would not jump.”

Juan’s gaze met mine for a moment, a single twitch of his lip exposing his underlying delight to be coming to my rescue—*yet again*—in such a way. “My wife is not the type of woman to

jump a ship to escape a bad marriage. She will end my life long before she ends her own. Isn't that right, *darling?*”

Narrowing my eyes at Juan, I crossed my arms over my chest. He knew how much I hated playing this role, and yet, he still took advantage of every opportunity to pull me into the act, tossing out little pet names and familiar gestures every chance he got. “I just wanted some air.”

Juan turned Daniel away with a hard grasp on the man's shoulder. “There you have it. You may return to the other men now and rest assured, *I will keep Mrs. Perez warm.*”

Daniel's spine stiffened, but he hurriedly made his way back to the quarterdeck, allowing me to release the exhale I'd been holding in throughout the interaction.

Spinning toward me, Juan propped his forearms against the rail with a chuckle. “Must you insist on coming up here alone to be repeatedly accosted by that vile man?”

I leaned similarly against the rail beside him to watch the last of the evening light dance across the ripples on the water. “The alternative is to stay locked up in my cabin and wait for you to escort me from one place to the next. You told me I'm not a prisoner on this ship and I refuse to become one to that man. The only thing that gives me any peace on this ship is witnessing the sun go down. I'm not going to let him or any other man aboard rob me of that.”

“I wouldn't mind escorting you, you know,” he said, his eyes moving fondly over the features on my face that resembled Gloria.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, I know. That is precisely why I insist on coming up here alone, thank you. I'm not sure what's worse, being ogled by him or being Mrs. Perez to you. Besides...” I motioned to the darkening deck where I could just see Mr. Gil lingering in the shadows of the mainsail. “I'm never truly alone, am I?”

“You'll be free of us soon enough,” he assured me, turning to lean back on his elbows and cross his ankles in front of him. His gaze followed Daniel, where he'd joined two of his men near the helm. “You're not exactly my favorite pretend wife

either, you know. It's very difficult to maintain an imposing image when you speak to me the way you do. That little prat, Bacallar, is just dying to get me out of the way. I've been listening in on his little rants among the other men. He's convinced he'd do just as well to receive his wages from you. You keep up that scowl when I'm nearby and he just might have the courage to make a move. Is it so impossible to feign affection around the crew? You and I have had moments alone where we've been able to at least be civil to one another."

"Civil?" I scoffed. "The only time you're ever *civil* is when you're begging me to drag my daughter back to this century after all this is over... or when you're droning on and on about Gloria's paintings or photos or any one of her many *redeeming* qualities."

With his eyes on the men, he shrugged. "If it were you... If it were Jack and you had the power to ensure he could be a part of your children's lives for years longer than he might otherwise, would you not do everything in your power to convince me he was worth saving?"

I wasn't entirely without a heart. If the roles had been reversed; if it was Jack that had died and Juan was the only one that could bring him back, there would be no extreme I wouldn't go to in order to see his life restored. For as much as Juan had terrorized me, there was a part of me that understood the desperation that had driven him to do so.

His deceased wife was a descendant of my daughter. Killing the Albrecht ancestor, as far as his theory went, would erase the altercation that had killed her and led him to the storm. It would bring her back to life, but only if I brought Cecelia back to live in this time to ancestor her.

I had given it a lot of thought during the month I'd spent on the ship. I didn't want to rob my daughter of the opportunities she might one day have in the 21st century, but I also didn't want to see Gloria's life lost.

Gloria was a fascinating woman, one I couldn't help but feel connected to after so much time spent learning about her. She was vibrant and full of life, and I had no desire to be the one to put that life out.

As a mother reading about the dangers of the 18th century regularly, however, the prospect of returning my children here was a hard pill to swallow. The future held so many more sureties that my children would live full and healthy lives.

I wondered if it had to be one way or the other. We had an understanding—albeit a cloudy one—of how the portal worked. We knew the coordinates and the times we could pass through. Could my family live in both worlds as time travelers?

Technically, we just needed Cecelia to be in a certain place in this century to meet her husband. Once that was done, there was nothing that said she and her descendants couldn't travel to and from this century. So long as there were rules to prevent them from meddling in history, rules to ensure they followed the lineage we'd line out for them, I couldn't imagine a more riveting future.

And thoughts of that riveting future for my children had become a sort of obsession in the month I'd spent away from my family. I frequently found myself lost in dreams of their potential adventures, imagining all the places they might go and all the things they might see. These dreams offered a glimmer of comfort during my separation from Jack, so I spent more and more time considering all the preparations that might need to be made for such a future to exist.

“Like I've said, Juan, I haven't ruled it out.” I turned to face him, shivering a little as the wind picked up and small flakes of snow dusted my eyelashes and cheeks. “I should get back. I'm sure Bruce has better things to do than watch my children sleep.”

“I'll escort you.” He offered his arm, which I, of course, scoffed at. Once again, his lip twitched. “Or I can have Daniel escort you if you'd prefer?”

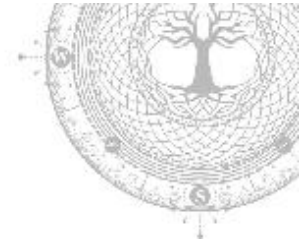
Groaning, I took the offered arm and pretended it wasn't repulsive as we passed Daniel on our way across the deck.

“If we encounter another ship on our route,” I whispered, “maybe we could trade a few crewmen. Daniel and his men are going to be trouble whether I pretend to like you or not. They're lonely, and loneliness can make men like them do some pretty awful things.”

He leaned in as we started down the stairwell. “I don’t disagree with you, but we are nearing Cape Horn, and this area is not known for being well-traveled. We likely won’t come upon another sailor until we are well into the warmer seas of the Atlantic. Until then, you’ve my word, I’ll not let anything happen to you.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. If the history books were correct, there was a strong possibility Captain Cook would be rounding Cape Horn around the time we would reach it in a few days. Part of me was planning to make my escape there, but would I be able to convince Captain Cook to escort us to Virginia? And if not? Did it matter where I went with the others out there hunting Bennet? I would wake up with them when it all was over, if Juan’s theory was correct, regardless of what direction I headed. I couldn’t very well stay on this ship. It would burn near Charleston.

And not a single person aboard knew that little fact outside of me and Bruce.



Chapter Two

Cecelia

Inside a small inlet, a single lantern flickered at the end of a wooden dock, its glow amid the blackened shadows of giant pines the only sign of life on the North Carolina coastline.

Just south of Port Bath, the dock served as one of Captain Navarro's check-in points with the rest of his rebel faction. Before we could move on to Chesapeake Bay and up the Potomac River toward Mt. Vernon, we needed to make sure the route was still safe. Our ship was loaded with supplies for the soon-to-be continental army, and Captain Navarro was meticulous when it came to security. We'd stopped twice already at similar rendezvous locations in both Georgia and South Carolina to ensure our safe passage.

It had never been a part of our plan to play any role in the coming war—be it in support of the patriots or the British—but Captain Navarro had been the best option for a ride to Virginia and we were therefore forced to pick a side.

With him as an ally, we were hoping to get information on Bennet from Washington's network of spies once we reached Mount Vernon. If we could find George Bennet before March, Juan and I might be able to find each other quickly *and* get everyone home in one piece... assuming everything went according to plan.

Standing between Juan and Dario at the railing, the rapidly approaching March deadline was ever-present in my mind as I watched the three rebels row toward our ship under a nearly moonless sky.

"Something feels wrong," Dario whispered—just as he did during both of our previous stops. "Those don't look like rebels to me. What if this is a trap?"

Juan sighed heavily. “Captain Navarro has made this trip several times before. There is no one way for a rebel to look. You are being paranoid... again.”

I tore my gaze away from the approaching men to smile up at my husband. He was always so calm and sure of himself, even when the world was littered with uncertainties. It was almost unhealthy, the way I admired him—the way I hung on his every word. I was completely obsessed with him, I knew, but I couldn’t help myself. The man made my heart race and quiet all within the same second, and sometimes I had to pinch myself just to be sure I hadn’t dreamt him.

Dario nudged my elbow with his as he squinted to get a better glimpse of our incoming guests. “Do you recognize any of those men from your history books?”

Returning my attention to the sloop, I could only make out the tops of the men’s cloaked heads from our vantage. I had to suppress the urge to laugh at the absurdity of his question, shaking my head as I leaned in. “No. Those books were mostly text. A few more important historical figures had portraits sprinkled throughout their pages, but even then, it’d be hard to recognize someone from a painting.”

Dario’s fingers tightened around the railing. “We can’t afford to be among Navarro’s men if he is caught with these weapons. The rebel cause is not *our* cause.”

Juan made a sound in his throat. “Aye, but we need the rebel intelligence. Unless you would prefer we abandon ship and network with the British to find Bennet instead? Surely, the British army would have no qualms about sharing an enlisted man’s whereabouts with two *Spaniard* men.”

Dario leaned forward to watch the sloop be hoisted up toward the deck. “I am not suggesting that.”

“Well, then, ease your nerves,” Juan ordered, moving his palm gently over my spine. “It is three men, not an army, that approaches. I’d hardly call that an ambush. Your paranoia will do nothing for our mission but mark you with an unfriendly countenance no man should wish to share secrets with.”

My gaze drifted down the railing to Captain Navarro, who stood with a welcoming smile as the sloop was raised and the three men stepped over.

Such a stark contrast he was to Dario. In our time together, he'd said very few words, but he emitted a general pleasantness that made him immediately likable. Dangerous as our mission was, he never once broke a sweat... not even now in the face of three men who seemed far more distraught than the others we'd encountered. Their somber expressions instilled a bit of paranoia in my own stomach.

"Colonel Howe!" Navarro beamed as the lead man lowered his hood. "I'd not expected you to join us this night!"

Colonel Howe...

I knew the name as one with historical reverence but couldn't quite place it. As this was the first time I'd ever had occasion to cross paths with someone from history, my feet moved on their own toward the encounter, curious to match the name to a description.

Tall and commanding, the colonel possessed an unmistakable air of authority over the men surrounding him. Absurd as it was, I squinted to make out any discernible features in the dark that might have been mimicked in a painting in one of those books.

"Captain Navarro," he said with a bow of his head, "I'm afraid my presence here does not come with good news. Your passage up the river is no longer safe. We've precious few hours to plan an alternative means of transfer."

"No longer safe?" Navarro asked, the slightest wrinkle between his brows serving as the only slip in his otherwise charming demeanor. "Pray, what has changed?"

"Fear," the colonel answered. "With the recent increase in conflicts farther north, the British are taking more extensive precautionary measures to prevent an uprising, particularly along the rivers. Even should you manage to skirt the tide surveyors around Norfolk and Yorktown, there's a naval blockade at the mouth of the Potomac River. All ships entering those waters are now subject to rigorous inspections where

they're apprehending individuals for merely *appearing* suspicious. We must reroute you if we're to have any chance at arming the northern provinces."

Captain Navarro massaged his chin. "A reroute, you say... As there is no alternative nautical course I might take, I must assume you mean to route over land? Forgive my directness in asking, sir, but would we not be subject to far more exhaustive inspections on the road?"

I inched closer to eavesdrop. Routing over land didn't sound like a timely venture, and I couldn't shake the sense of trepidation that this news would throw a wrench in our separate plans of finding Bennet before the storm in March.

The man beside Colonel Howe stepped forward, his soft Irish lilt a sweet song in comparison to the predominantly Spanish men I'd been surrounded by. "I've a plan, Captain." He bowed his head, loosening several dark hairs from the ribbon at the nape of his neck. "My cousins, Lord and Lady Carrol in Mount Clare, are hostin' a ball in honor of the queen's birthday. As are the Dunmores in Williamsburg and the Carters in Richmond. Many prominent families are plannin' celebrations of their own. As a merchant of some of the finest Spanish wine these colonies have e'er seen, should ye' encounter a patrol on the road, ye' can easily explain your cargo as deliveries for any such occasion nearby. Once we reach Richmond, I've no doubt Charles Carter can assist in providing us with a list of similar events to explain your northern route to Mt. Vernon."

Navarro glanced over his shoulder as if he could see the cargo below deck, taking a deep breath and shaking his head. "It's a fine idea, Aidan, but should a patrol wish to open my casks, it would not be difficult to find the weapons inside. I daresay I might have better luck with the tide surveyors."

Colonel Howe nodded. "In Yorktown and Norfolk where you are familiar, perhaps, but north of there? I think not."

"We've gold and plenty of it," Juan interjected beside me, his deep voice commanding the attention of all three men. "Could we not buy our safe passage through the river? It seems to me a larger risk to travel over land."

As if only realizing we'd all been standing there, Captain Navarro bowed his head. "My apologies. I have forgotten my manners. Colonel, these are my most esteemed guests, traveling north with me in search of a soldier by the name of Bennet. It is my honor to introduce you to Don Dario, Don Juan Josef and Doña Cecelia of Los Cerritos along with their friends..."

As introductions were made to the rest of our group, I raised a brow at Juan. This was the first time I'd ever heard our names said in such a way. He answered with a quick squeeze of my hand that said, *I'll tell you later.*

Hearing myself referred to as *Doña Cecelia* was exhilarating and yet unsettling for reasons I couldn't quite decipher.

"Don Juan," the captain continued, the irony of the nickname Terrence had frequently called him forcing me to tighten my jaw to prevent from laughing, "these are my good friends, Aidan Byrne, William Hooper, and Colonel Robert Howe."

Robert Howe... a jolt of recognition surged through me to diminish my amusement and pull my gaze once more to the colonel. I'd seen his name on the pages of one of the history books I'd been perusing a few short weeks ago. He'd played a major role in the defense of Charleston and the Siege of Savannah. He would soon become a leader in the Continental army and a staple in the formation of the nation as we knew it.

As his eyes met mine, my stomach danced, honored to share this fleeting intersection in time with such a man.

Colonel Howe frowned at Juan for a moment. "I am acquainted with your name, sir. Your father is *Marqués* Juan Josef Perez Hernandez of Los Cerritos, isn't that right?"

Juan nodded.

The colonel's chestnut brow raised as he inspected us long enough for Juan to stiffen. "And you plan to travel with the captain all the way to Mt. Vernon?"

Juan stood a little straighter. "Not if we should find word of our man along the way, Colonel. We intended to network with Washington's spies to seek out his location, but if we are being

rerouted, I cannot say the long trip north will serve us well. We are in a bit of a hurry.”

Colonel Howe pursed his lips. “Charles Carter, just outside Richmond, is a fellow supporter of the uprising and a member of the House of Burgesses. He would have access to military payroll rosters for all enlisted men in Virginia. If your soldier is in Virginia, his name and location would be upon one such roster. Captain Navarro can get by the tide surveyors in Yorktown without issue, then travel over land to Richmond. If we agree to give you access to these records, will you travel so far as Carter’s? Once there, we’ve more friends to assist us north.”

Juan furrowed his brow. “It depends on the risks, sir. What is your interest in us?”

The colonel smiled. “The sons of a great marquis might find themselves guests to a ball such as the one being hosted in Mount Clare... Don’t you think?”

Not waiting for an answer, he folded his hands behind his back and paced forward in thought. “And gentlemen such as yourselves would be expected to travel with an abundance of luggage en route to such an occasion... Luggage I could acquire within the hour, trunks and cases suitable for the transport of weapons.”

He turned back and glanced at the captain. “With the threat of bandits and natives on the road, it is not uncustomary for two parties to journey alongside one another if they share a similar destination. I very much doubt a British patrol would upend the personal belongings of gentlemen.”

“You are forgetting, Colonel,” Juan said, his words nearly as rigid as his spine, “that we are *Spaniard* men. British and Spanish relations are presently strained. My brother and I would only serve to make matters worse.”

“He is right,” Aidan agreed. “Gentlemen or not, the English trust the Spanish less than they trust the rebels.”

“What about me?” Maria asked, stepping forward despite Chris’s whispered attempts to coerce her to stay quiet. “Are relations between Great Britain and Parma strained?”

“Parma?” Colonel Howe echoed, squinting to see her in the darkness.

“No,” Chris hissed. “Maria, I told you, we’re not doing this again.”

“My name is Maria Amalia,” she continued, undeterred by Chris as she stepped into the lantern light. “I am not the Duchess of Parma, but I share her name and likeness and have been mistaken as her before. It’s been my understanding that very few—if any—Englishmen actually know what she looks like. Maybe I can help?”

“This is not our war,” Dario said, shaking his head. “We cannot afford to be wrapped up in this when we have a destination of our own to get to.”

“Sí, the very same destination Captain Navarro is heading in,” Maria retorted, snarling at Dario. “What else are we going to do, eh? Roam around asking strangers for information? We can’t afford to be delayed any more than we already are. Captain Cook and Captain Furneaux both believed I was the duchess before and they are respectable men. Why wouldn’t a few lowly patrolmen on the road believe the same? They wouldn’t upend the personal belongings of a duchess, would they?”

“No, they would not,” Colonel Howe said, twisting the idea around until his lips turned upward. “Such a story could work with the right preparations. You’ll need a wardrobe befitting of your title... That would be easy enough to acquire... Traveling among Spanish society such as these men would only serve to strengthen your claim... And if you came ashore in Yorktown, word would spread quickly of your presence in the colonies... Patrols would be expecting you.”

“No,” Chris insisted, setting his feet as he took a place in the light beside Maria. “It’s too big of a risk. If word spreads quickly and someone nearby actually did know the duchess well enough to recognize her as an imposter, she could be arrested, and then what?”

“I agree,” Dario grumbled. “We should use the gold in our possession to find another way.”

“If it’s only to get us to Richmond,” Maria said, “it can’t be that dangerous... and if the colonel thinks we could pull it off... it would be worth a try, wouldn’t it? To get to that roster?”

Colonel Howe smiled. “Madam, if you would be willing to take on such a role, I could bring aboard a few of my men and women to serve you. We could come up with a story to explain your travels. You’ll need to curb your accent and become familiar with certain mannerisms... study up on Latin and High Dutch in the event you should need to use them... We can outfit you with the proper entourage... You’ll need a lady-in-waiting, a maid, footmen, and a few guards... It would take work, but it could be done... and you would be helping to arm the whole of the northern colonies. Such a feat of bravery would not go unrecognized. We would be in your service for all your life.”

Maria spun to face Juan. “How long will it take to travel from Yorktown to Richmond?”

Sighing, Juan ran a hand over his hair. “A few days.”

“A few *days*?” she scoffed. “You are worried about only a few days? I pretended to be the duchess for well over a year. I can get through a few *days*.”

Chris groaned. “You pretended to be the duchess among sailors who have spent far more of their lives at sea than on land. This wouldn’t be the same. You could be putting yourself in real danger.”

I watched as Chris’s eyes ventured to her midsection, much as they always did. It broke my heart to see how much he wanted to protect the child she was destined to lose.

“So?” She crossed her arms over her chest. “We are in danger anyway if we do nothing. You have a better idea?”

When Chris couldn’t come up with anything short of an awkward *uh-ah-uh*, she turned back to Juan and the colonel. “I am not afraid if you aren’t. What do I need to do?”

“*If* we all agree to do this,” Captain Navarro cut in, his eyes moving from the colonel to Juan, “we must prepare for every possible mishap. I’ll not take a risk this significant without confidence in our abilities to pass as such. If word of the

duchess's arrival reaches Williamsburg before we do, the Dunmores might wish to receive her... What then?"

Colonel Howe scoffed and waved this off. "Lord Dunmore wouldn't know a duchess from one of his own servants. The man's an ignorant sycophant."

"That may be," Navarro countered, "but she'll still need to be able to hold her own should an invitation be extended to her that might place her in the company of society."

"No, no, no," Chris growled, pacing. "She won't need to hold her own because she's not doing this."

"That invitation would be extended to my family as well, would it not?" Juan asked, placing a hand on Chris's shoulder. "We could be there to steer conversation in such a way that she would not be required to hold her own."

Dario gaped at him. "You cannot be serious, brother. In agreeing to do this, we would be taking the full burden of the rebellion upon ourselves!"

"Only for a few days," Juan reminded him, "and then we shall be rewarded with a roster that will give us the precise location where we can find Bennet." His dark eyes moved to the colonel. "You are certain this roster will contain *every* enlisted officer in the whole of Virginia?"

"Yes, sir."

Juan looked down at me. "What do you think, *mi alma*?"

"Me?"

His shoulders softened and he smiled. "I can think of no one wiser to make such a decision. If you do not feel it is wise to make such an attempt, then we shall defer from it."

Chris met my eyes and shook his head while Maria nodded insistently.

"I... well..." I sighed. "Morning will be here soon, and no one has offered up a safer alternative. If it's only for a few days and if Colonel Howe feels confident we can all be prepared for any possible encounter with society or patrols... then I suppose it's worth a shot. We need Bennet's location—and soon. I can't imagine any quicker route than this roster."

“Very well then,” Juan said, meeting the colonel’s gaze once more. “What do we need to do?”



Within the next several hours, the ship was loaded with extravagant trunks, some filled with attire suitable for nobility and servants, others left empty to allow for weaponry to be transferred inside.

Chris disappeared with the colonel as the rest of us prepared for our new venture, no doubt pleading for any other alternative cover story.

Maria’s determination to contribute would not be so easily thwarted. Whatever argument Chris might’ve made against our new plan, he was eventually overruled, and plans went on despite him.

Our ship became host to several new guests. In addition to servants and footmen brought in to pose as our entourage, a gentleman named Adam Mason was brought aboard. As a member of society, he was familiar with many of the families we might encounter. He was to assist in coming up with our backstories as well as serving as Maria’s High Dutch tutor. He’d employed an Austrian governess for a time and knew enough basic pleasantries in the language the colonel was sure it would suffice in passing.

Colonel Howe assisted in the formation of our cover story, then waved us goodbye from the dock as we set sail just before dawn. For the next several days, we spent every waking hour rehearsing each of our various parts in the ruse, preparing for every possible encounter or interrogation.

We learned everything there was to know about Lord and Lady Dunmore in Williamsburg, as well as Lord and Lady Carroll farther north in Mount Clare. We knew where they were from, what families they were associated with—where those families were from and who had married into what families, creating our own distant familial connections to each should we be asked.

Maria spent countless hours stowed away with Adam practicing her High Dutch and curbing her accent. When she was given a break, Juan would then coach her in Latin. This proved a much easier lesson for her since it was so similar to Spanish and resulted in far fewer obscenities when she mispronounced something.

I sat in on these lessons as well, ever the more fascinated by my husband as he patiently gave them.

My attendance was not just for admiration though. As Juan's wife, I too would be expected to hold my own among members of society should we find ourselves extended an invitation we couldn't decline.

We all had to study up on etiquette and common topics of conversation: fashion, politics, art and music, small talk and mannerisms that would set us above the company...

Nobility carried themselves differently. They walked slower, stood taller, and did very little for themselves—including reaching for anything at all when a servant was in the vicinity. It was a bit ironic that the preparations to become someone who did so little were so very exhaustive.

Each night when my head hit the pillow, the weight of my body seemed heavier than the last.

As we got closer and closer to our destination, and the reality of what we were about to step into kicked in, my panic became more palpable.

For me, it wasn't my role as Doña Cecelia—a title I learned was the result of being the daughter-in-law of a marquis—or the acting or the people we might encounter that made me apprehensive. It was the location itself.

Yorktown had never been a part of our plan. Traveling directly to the place Juan's own ancestor, Juan Francisco, resided made me more nervous than anything.

Alaina had sent a coded letter to Jack instructing him to search for Juan Francisco instead of Bennet. While Juan's father had seen this coming and sent word ahead of us that would send Juan Francisco away, I was increasingly worried it might not

have made it in time. To kill Juan Francisco would wipe the entire Perez family off the map, including my husband.

If Jack so much as attempted to make a move, Juan would be forced to defend himself. And *that* could divide my family forever.

Mad as I'd been when I'd figured out my sister's little scheme, there was never any question in my mind that she and I would live our futures alongside one another.

She was always a part of my vision for my life, whether she was living in a house next door where I could scoop up my niece and nephew any time I wished, or sailing the world alongside me and Juan where we could teach her children about history and medicine and the wildlife we'd encounter.

There was no amount of wrong the two of us could deliver each other that would keep us divided. We could rip each other's hearts out, but, in the end, we'd always remain sisters. Our husbands, however, and the love we both had for them, could create a crack in our otherwise unbreakable foundation should they find themselves on opposing sides of a fight. That crack could shatter all visions of a future life lived beside one another... She would never forgive me if Jack lost his life at the hands of Juan, just as I wouldn't be able to forgive her if Juan lost his at the hands of Jack.

Lying in our dark little cabin, I'd been thinking about just that, praying to no one in particular that Jack was wise enough to abandon any thoughts of pursuing Juan Francisco, when I felt the ship suddenly slow.

We'd arrived in Yorktown... and however much we'd done in preparation of this moment, I wasn't ready... for any of it.

Beneath me, Juan let out a long exhale as he felt it too, his fingers working their way up my bare spine to draw lazy circles around each vertebrae.

"Will you tell me what worries you?" he asked softly.

Smiling that he could read me so easily in the utter darkness, I answered, "Only if you tell me first. Are you afraid?"

He pressed his lips against the top of my head and kept them there as his arm tightened around me. “It would be unreasonable for me not to be afraid when I’ve something so precious as you to lose.”

“Same,” I whispered, tracing the lines of his tattoo where I knew, even in the dark, they would be... at least, until we were moved to a timeline where he could never meet Elizabeth’s grandfather to have the lines inked upon him.

“Is that what worries you, *mi paloma*? Losing me?”

“*Jack* worries me,” I admitted, moving my fingers up the side of his throat to the stubble around his jaw. “Now that we’re going to be arriving in Yorktown, he’s just about the only thing that worries me.”

His chest moved beneath my cheek in a laugh. “I am not afraid of Jack.”

I frowned and raised up on my elbow as if I might be able to see his face. “Why not? If your ancestor didn’t receive your father’s letter, or if he *did* and chose not to leave, Jack could destroy everything we’re working to accomplish; he could take you from me with one quick swing of his sword, forcing me to wake up with no memory of you or this place in a life I want no part of. It’s unreasonable not to be afraid of him when we both have something this precious to lose.”

I couldn’t see his smile, but I heard it in his voice. “If you think I’ve not arranged to have eyes on Jack for the duration of our journey, then you know nothing of me at all. No one shall get anywhere near my forefather without my knowledge of their intention to do so. I can end Jack with a much quicker swing of my sword—let us both pray I never need to.”

His fingers found my face, moving over my brow and down to outline my lips. “That is not all you are afraid of. What else has you worried?”

I attempted to right my features and conceal the lingering concern on my face, but it was useless. He knew me better than that and would get his answer before allowing me out of this bed.

“The waiting,” I finally confessed, “after it’s all done. I know it’s redundant to keep talking about it, but now that we’re so close to finding out where Bennet is, there’s a very real possibility that any day now, we could find ourselves on another timeline. It’ll be as simple for me as waking up right here in your arms. The blink of an eye... I’ll feel exactly the way I do right now. The moment I see you, every instinct will be to wrap my arms around you and kiss you the way I do now... but fourteen years will have passed for you, and I worry you won’t recognize me; won’t remember this the same.”

He made a sound in his throat. “I’ve told you, no amount of time will change the way I feel about you. I will never forget. Fourteen years is nothing.”

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes, wondering what he’d look like at forty-three. Would he have the beginnings of the salt and pepper hair I’d seen on his father? Would those crinkles that formed in the corners of his eyes when he smiled set into the skin? Would I recognize him?

“Fourteen years,” I said softly. “It’s not nothing. I keep thinking about people I knew fourteen years ago; even people I loved... If one of them showed up in my life right now and wrapped their arms around me, however much I’d once loved them, it’d be... awkward. They’d be strangers.”

He smirked. “You’ve not spent fourteen years looking forward to only their reappearance. If you had, they’d not be strangers to you at all. I’ll not allow myself to forget, Cecelia. You will be with me every minute of every day I wait for you. And the moment you wrap your arms around me and kiss me the way you do now will make every second of that wait worth it.”

I swallowed the bit of burn from my throat, finding his hand and squeezing it in mine. “Even though I won’t be the one waiting, I already miss you as if I were, and I’m not ready for what comes next.”

“No one’s ever ready for what comes next.” He squeezed back. “But we’ll make do.”

I could hear the thunder of boots on the deck above our heads as our crew prepared to lower the anchor. “Couldn’t we

just lie right here in this bed for whatever time we have left and let the others hunt down Bennet for us?”

“You do know things will not change the moment we step foot on the shore? As I’ve no intention of letting you out of my sight, we’ve plenty of time still to spend with one another.”

I sighed. “Not like this, though. The minute we get off this ship, we’ll be moving toward the end. There’ll be no more lazy nights spent wrapped up in each other’s arms.”

He breathed out a laugh. “You and I have been moving toward that end the entire time we’ve been together, *mi alma*. This will not be our last quiet moment. I promise.”

I heard myself—my obnoxious levels of neediness and insecurity. It reminded me of high school, listening in on my sister’s late night phone conversations with her boyfriend as she wined about him not loving her enough. Jesus, was I turning into that? Is this what love did to people? Did it turn logical, well-rounded women into balls of vulnerability? No wonder I’d avoided so many relationships. This did not suit me at all. I’d never been so insecure in my life.

Collapsing against his chest with a groan, I let out a long, exasperated exhale. “I’m sorry. I’m being clingy and ridiculous, and it’s as new to me as it might be for you.”

His chest moved with a chuckle as his palm swept over my hair. “If you wish to spend the rest of our time right here, I’ll not move from this bed. You are free to be as *clingy and ridiculous* as you need be. Although...” In one quick move, I was on my back. “I’m quite hungry.” I could almost see the menacing grin spread across his lips as his fingers skated down my side. “And this spot here is rather tasty...”

“Don’t,” I warned through a smile, my muscles tensing in preparation of an attack.

I learned, during our nights alone, that behind the stoic and icy guard he kept up around others, Juan was extremely playful. The first time he’d moved his breath and teeth over my tooticklish ribs to prompt a squeal from me, it had become his favorite weapon—one he particularly enjoyed using when I was out-of-sorts.

“Don’t what?” he teased, not allowing me the time to respond before he pounced. My legs and arms pinned beneath him, he was too quick, and he found that spot between my ribs before I could even begin to try to outwit him. Despite my attempts not to let him unravel me, the movement of his mouth and the stubble of his beard against my overly sensitive side was too much to retain any level of sanity.

Exploding in a shriek of delightful anguish, I struggled to fight him, legs and arms wiggling to be freed as I was reduced to begging between giggles. My pleas only served to encourage him, and my abdomen burned from laughter, all bits of insecurity vanished; his mission accomplished.

“J-Joseph!” I squealed when I couldn’t take it a second longer. “Stop! I have to pee! I surrender!”

Chuckling behind closed lips, he coiled his large arms around me, ending his torment to rest his cheek against my stomach.

“Cecelia, you should—”

A knock on the door made us both jump. “Surveyors coming,” Dario said from the other side. “Get dressed.”

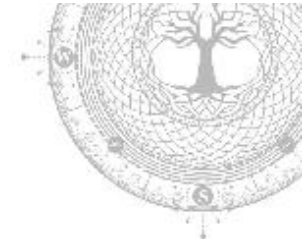
Juan’s grip on my abdomen tightened, all the playfulness disintegrating as his tone turned serious once more. “You are welcome to worry about all manner of things, but never about what I will feel when it is done. I will love you, and only you, for the rest of my life. I will not wait fourteen years with the knowledge you might doubt that. Tell me you understand?”

I nodded, inhaling his sweet almond scent as he raised to hover over me. Again, that calm surety of his eased my anxiety, and I couldn’t help but believe him. “I understand.”

He kissed me one last time, pressing his forehead against mine as he let out a long exhale. “Promise you’ll remain within my sight once we are on land? And if we are parted, promise to stay with my brother so I might find you once more?”

I grinned, sliding my fingers up through his hair. “Who’s the clingy one now? You make it sound like we’re walking into a lion’s den.”

He huffed. “Lions are far more predictable than the men in these colonies.”



Chapter Three

Alaina

Sitting in the center of my bed, I looked up from the laptop and the abundance of open history books spread out before me to chuckle at Cecelia where she babbled in the direction of Bruce.

While Zachary had picked up vowel sounds almost a month prior, Cecelia was just starting to chatter alongside him, and it warmed my heart to simply sit and admire my children for a moment.

I'd spent so much of my time lately imagining them both as adults—envisioning the adventures they'd have once I passed down a set of rules that gave them the freedom to travel time—I sometimes forgot to appreciate the little moments that made up their fleeting infancy.

The two of them were developing in two entirely different patterns. Zachary had been boisterous from the second he came out of the womb where Cecelia hadn't made much sound at first. That didn't mean she wasn't developing. Cecelia may have been a bit behind her brother when it came to vocalization, but she was lightyears ahead of him when it came to movement. She had mastered rolling and could even push herself up to sit.

It was an amusing and exhausting thing to witness my child becoming so determined. About a week prior, she'd been intent on reaching for my hairbrush and had persisted in her efforts to roll toward it until she was successful. Since then, I'd had to remove several things from her grabby little paws before she could get them to her mouth and was constantly catching her mid-roll before she could plummet off the bed. I could only imagine the running I might do once she started crawling.

Now that she was coming out of her shell and genuinely laughing, I couldn't help but beam with pride. What an amazing little creature she was already.

"She's definitely got your eyes," Bruce observed, pulling a blanket up over his face and lowering it for her to giggle wildly in response.

Zachary, who hadn't yet mastered rolling onto his back, propped himself up on his forearms to look over at the game of peekaboo causing all the raucous.

"She does," I said, moving a hand over the bits of copper hair on her head, "and the hair too. Poor girl."

"Poor girl?" he echoed, repeating the process for both of my children to explode into hysterics. "You're the one that'll have to brush it for the next decade or so!"

I chuckled. "Maybe we'll get lucky and it'll be stylish for girls to shave their heads in the future we return to."

Bruce ran his fingers through his own thin, wheat-colored hair where it had grown out to nearly his shoulders. "I'll tell you one thing, I can't wait to get home and cut mine. I don't know how you deal with so much hair on a day-to-day basis. It's too damn hot. I'm pretty sure the back of my neck is just permanently liquified at this point."

I snorted and returned my attention to the screen and the amateur research I'd been attempting to do in Cece's absence. In addition to planning out time traveling futures for my children, I'd also become inundated with conspiracy theories as I attempted to come up with answers around the storm that brought us here. The solar charger only gave me so much battery at a time, so I had to be quick to jot down my notes before I would have to return the computer to its charger on the window once more. "So these other locations—the Vile Vortices—Cece had a theory that they each might be time portals, but the different locations might work differently. Like the amount of time you're able to travel is different for each... I keep thinking about Johann's equation around the sun's location between the coordinates. I wonder if I could use that same math to figure out how each of these other vortices might work—if they indeed work the way Cece thought they did..."

Bruce craned his neck to get a glimpse of the chart on the screen. “Thinking about traveling to another century when we get out of this one?”

Laughing, I shook my head. “No, I’m just trying to make sense of things. It might be a coincidence that the rest of you landed in this century with me, but... Jack and I? There’s no way that it was just a stroke of fate that we landed in the very same century as our descendants so they could beg us to come back and ancestor them... There had to be some kind of interference—some kind of influence, not just on my side, but on Jack’s, Chris’s, and Juan Josef’s too.”

“Juan Josef?” he asked, pulling the blanket back up over his face at Zachary’s insistence he be entertained. “He was fleeing Richard Albrecht and happened upon that storm by chance.”

“Yes,” I agreed, grinning as my children burst once more into laughter when he popped his cheeky grin out from behind the blanket. “But what if someone was at the helm of Richard Albrecht’s boat leading him toward that very spot? And if that’s the case, killing Bennet won’t exactly do anything for us. Will it? Whoever it was would find some other way to lead him there, just like Chris and I still found a way onto that same airplane in our altered past.”

He frowned and glanced at the computer screen. “Well something has to work... Juan Jr. showed up in your sister’s past. That has to mean they never make it here... right? It has to mean all this will be undone?”

I traced the lines on the screen that ran over the different vortices. “Or... Juan Jr. used one of these other portals to move back to her past.”

Chewing his lower lip, his brow creased. “But that would mean... Anna...” He immediately shook the rest of this thought from his head and asked instead, “Can you remember what made *you* choose Tahiti as your honeymoon? Whoever coerced you into going there has to be connected to the other two, don’t you think?”

“I’ve been obsessing over just that,” I groaned, “but there’s no connection. It was the I.T. guy at work, Marcus, that first

turned me on to the idea of Bora Bora, but it was this fleeting mention of his honeymoon during one of our video calls that made me obsessed with it, and he had no way of knowing I'd actually take that story and dream of it nightly. He never brought it up after, and I didn't either. There was never any actual suggestion I go there, nor did he bring up specific dates I should travel there. Plus, there's the altered memories where Chris bought the very same tickets I did. Chris told me he bought them because he'd seen my search history on the computer and all my bookmarked travel sites referencing Bora Bora. He never had any interaction with Marcus. Jack never met anyone fitting the description either. And he was going to Bora Bora for his sister's wedding... I don't think someone would go so far as to marry his sister just to get us to the storm... would they?"

Bruce shrugged. "Hard to say what lengths a person might go to in order to ensure their own existence. What do we know about his sister's fiancé?"

"Very little," I sighed. "Jack's only ever interacted with him on a few occasions, but he appeared to be genuinely in love with Macy... And he can't remember the story of how they met. We just know they met in college. I wonder if Juan Jr. or Dario didn't have some kind of role in their meeting?" Again, I traced the lines on the screen. "If one of these storms moves only a decade or so, it wouldn't be hard to hop around and make the proper introductions and arrangements to ensure we'd both be on that airplane."

Abandoning his game of peekaboo, Bruce twisted his lips to the side and inspected the screen. "All this time, I've been so certain we'd get Anna back if we just got to Bennet... Juan showing up in Cece's past made me feel like it was a sure thing. And I'm sorry to say so, but it's hard to believe someone like Juan Jr. would lie to her about something so big. He really seems to care a great deal for your sister."

I raised a shoulder. "He cared a great deal for Gloria too... and I'm sure he loves his brother as much as I love Cece. There'd be no lie I wouldn't tell if I was attempting to save my whole family. You know?"

His frown deepened. “Well how do you determine the sun’s distance from the various coordinates to solidify your theory about those other vortices? We can’t exactly pull up a Google search to find out, can we? And without that, we can’t do Johann’s math.”

“No... but...” Closing the map, I opened up one of the folders inside the ‘*Conspiracy Theories*’ directory and repositioned myself so he could see the screen. “I’ve been thinking about these,” I said, opening up a list entitled ‘*Mandela Effects*’. “Apparently, while we’ve been away, this little conspiracy took over the internet. Don’t you find it odd that a bunch of people remember things one way when they happened another? Things that aren’t even that old to remember? What if it’s because someone is jumping through another much shorter time portal to alter more recent events?”

He smirked at the screen. “You really think someone jumped back in time simply to remove the Monopoly man’s monocle?”

I shrugged. “We remember Jack’s name being on that master’s log, but it’s not there anymore. Maybe this is no different. What if someone went through time to alter history as a means of leaving breadcrumbs for the rest of us? What if those breadcrumbs give us an idea as to how the storms work?” I slid one of the more general encyclopedias over and opened it up to a page I’d marked earlier. “The whole conspiracy started with Nelson Mandela. Tons of people remember him dying in prison during the 80s. Honestly, I’m too young to remember specifics, but I have this strange inclination that I learned about him as someone who’d died when I was in school. It says here he died in 2013, and that doesn’t seem right to me. If a time-traveler went to the 80s to change Nelson Mandela’s history and *I* remember him being referenced as dead when I was in school in the 90s, that has to mean that one of these storms moves twenty or thirty years backward... Don’t you think?”

His shoulders sank. “If it moves twenty or thirty years, that could place Juan Jr. at your sister’s campus...”

“Exactly.” I spun the computer back toward me. “Now, it’s very possible that I could be buying into a conspiracy that has no merit, so I was thinking... What if we prove it?”

He raised a brow. “Prove it? How?”

“What if we did something similar in this century?” I asked. “James Cook will be anchored in Tierra Del Fuego until some time in February so there’s time for us to catch up to him.” I brushed a hand over one of the history books. “What if we can change something that’s printed on these pages? What if we join him and make it so he discovers something sooner, or he discovers something that isn’t going to be discovered for a while still? What if we influence the name of one of the islands he’s going to name on this coming trip? Then, we could see if he makes it onto this list of Mandela effects... See if other people remember it differently?”

Bruce shook his head. “I’ve already told you we shouldn’t pursue Cook. To say nothing of the fact that he’s traveling in a different direction, there’s also the rather unpredictable and psychotic drug lord that might have a mind to use his arsenal of automatic weapons to shoot down anyone who stands in the way of you—changing far more of history than a logo in the process.”

I chewed my lower lip. “Well... what if we took Juan with us?”

He dropped the blanket and frowned at me. “Oh, Alaina, you can’t be serious? The man’s a psychopath and a murderer. Please tell me you’re not developing some kind of weird Stockholm Syndrome after—”

“No, no, I just mean,” my shoulders slumped, “if we told Juan about the fire... if we took him off the ship with us... maybe we wouldn’t have to worry about him retaliating or killing anyone. We could figure out how these storms work while the others hunt down Bennet—maybe even find a way to save Anna in the process?”

He pointed at an open book of old maps near his hip. “There are ports all along the Atlantic coast. We don’t need Captain Cook’s ship to escape the fire in Charleston. Once we get near Georgia, there are plenty of places we can escape to instead that’ll land us that much closer to the others and give us ample opportunity to alter some other bit of history to prove your theory. Let the sonofabitch and his filthy crew burn with

this ship.” He glanced at the walls around us and narrowed his eyes. “Good riddance.”

I wanted to argue with him; to plead with him to reconsider escaping to Captain Cook’s ship if only to save me the constant burden of having to look over my shoulder for a crewman with nefarious intentions. It wasn’t just evading the fire or proving my point that made me look forward to encountering James Cook. I was tired of being an attraction to these men.

Bruce couldn’t relate to the type of fear I had constantly embedded in the pit of my stomach every time I stepped out of the room. He was a man and he was living an entirely different experience. For me, I imagined being on the ship might’ve been comparable to stepping inside a high-security men’s prison in the modern era, one loaded with rapists and murderers who hadn’t seen a woman in years... a single officer—just as vile as the inmates—the only thing maintaining order while talks of a riot began to circulate in light of my presence.

It wasn’t just Daniel that made me uncomfortable. All his men were like predators circling, waiting for the right opportunity to pounce. I’d been “bumped into” more times than I could count on deck or in the halls just so one of the vile beasts could sneak in a grope or a sniff. I would brush it off and keep my head held high, but deep down, every touch reminded me all too well of what it was like to be pinned beneath someone and unable to stop them. Phil was nothing compared to what these men might be capable of. I needed an escape long before we reached Georgia.

I could see, though, in Bruce’s eyes, he wasn’t going to be deterred. Arguing would do no good because he was right... Seeking out the Resolution couldn’t help us in any way. We could inadvertently alter *important* events that might reshape the world as we knew it just to have a sense of safety or surety. That wouldn’t be fair. Part of me had known as much, but I’d still looked forward to it—had still clung to the hope that I might have a bit of peace before this was ended. My stomach sank as all promises of safety slowly slipped through my fingers.

I couldn’t leave this ship... and so I’d have to find a way to feel safe upon it.

Those thoughts encompassed my mind for hours as Bruce and I continued to debate the existence of the other portals and their connections to various Mandela effects.



With the babies at last asleep in the crib beside my bed and Bruce returned to the galley, I lay with my eyes on the door, waiting for Juan to come in and collapse on the sofa as my mind reeled.

With Bruce's help, I was able to link many of the Mandela effects to one of two decades: the 1980's or the 1930's. Because of our own memories of certain things appearing or occurring a certain way, we were able to determine that one of the portals might move somewhere between twenty and thirty years, and the other between seventy and eighty years. We knew the one we took went back two hundred, forty-four years, and the spot below it went forward the same amount. Assuming each of the ten vortices on the map was a similar pair, and assuming we were right in our estimates of time and travelers weren't using multiple portals to arrive in those decades, there were still two spots unaccounted for.

That is, if my ideas around the breadcrumbs and Cece's ideas around the vortices were even close to being on the right track. In the back of my mind, Anna's voice was constantly reminding me: "Conspiracy theories are appealing because they offer explanation for the unexplainable. It doesn't mean there's any truth to them."

The familiar jangle of Juan's keys pulled me from my mind, and I stood to pull on my robe, conspiracies and time travel all but forgotten as I prepared to secure my more long-term place on this ship.

He'd hardly closed the door behind him before I was on his heels. "I want a gun."

Inserting his key into the lock and paying no mind to my presence behind him, he clicked his tongue. "Why on earth would I give you a gun, Alaina?"

“For protection,” I insisted. “It would make me feel safer to know if these men tried something, I could defend myself and my children when you’re not around.”

Turning to face me, he rubbed his eyes. “There is never an instance when I am not *around*. Mr. Gil watches over you in my absence. None of these men will harm you or the children.”

“Please?”

His dark brows lifted and he inspected me for a long moment. “Has something happened?”

I shook my head. “I just don’t feel safe. It’s not like I’m going to use it against you.”

“I gave you a dagger,” he said, side-stepping me to shrug off his jacket and drape it over the back of a chair. “If I gave you a gun, it is far more likely that whoever you intend to use it against will take it from you before you can actually muster up the courage to shoot them. Can you imagine where we might be if we no longer have the advantage of modern weaponry over this crew?”

I recalled how easily Juan Jr. had disarmed me in the dining room when Dario had sent men to attack us. I’d been lucky Juan was on our side that day, but I’d also learned from that attack. I would take additional measures to ensure I could reach my gun even if I were pinned.

I sank down into one of the wingback chairs as he sat on the edge of the sofa to toe off his boots. “Are you really going to make me beg? You told me I was your guest and not your captive this time around. I’m telling you I don’t feel safe. There are plenty of pistols in your arsenal I could carry easily. What’s one little pistol compared to the plethora of rifles I know you’ve got hidden away somewhere?”

Letting his spine rest against the back of the couch, he scratched his beard. “Would you like me to kill Bacallar for you? I daresay I might enjoy it and it would put your mind at ease.”

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head. “And anger the rest of his men before we can get through Cape Horn? No. Besides, Daniel is not the only problem. The entire crew touches and

stares and is just waiting for the right opportunity to catch me off guard. A dagger will do nothing if three or four of them get it in their heads to corner me.”

“And a gun will?” He laughed and stretched his arms. “Have you ever actually fired a gun before?”

I recalled the weight of Chris’s pistol in my hands what felt like ages ago. While I luckily hadn’t had the courage then to pull the trigger, I’d still familiarized myself with it enough to know how.

“No, but I can’t imagine it requires much skill to hit a target that’s within a foot or two.”

He tilted his head to one side. “Where would you aim?”

“What?”

He stood suddenly, taking a step forward so I was boxed in against my chair. “Let’s say I was preparing to attack you right now. Where would you aim the gun before you pulled the trigger?”

“From this angle?” I asked, chewing the inside of my cheek. “I suppose I’d aim for the chest?”

“I’ve been shot in the chest before,” he reminded me, lingering there. “It takes some time before you fall... This close up, it’s quite messy too... There are two men coming in from behind me and the echo of the initial gunshot has attracted the attention of more. Your eyes, face, and fingers are likely covered in my blood and your ears are deafened by the blast. Hands are trembling... What do you do next?”

I blinked. “I push you away, aim at the closest one and fire at whatever I can hit... pray the shock of it keeps the rest back until you or Mr. Gil can get to us or I can crawl into one of your secret passageways without anyone seeing me or the babies.”

Chuckling, he spun on his heel and fell back down onto the sofa. “A dagger is quieter and just as efficient. A dagger will not expose the types of weapons I have on board to the rest of these men, therefore inciting a war for control over them between us. I am sorry, but you are not rational enough to have a gun, my dear.”

I hated what a chauvinist he could be. “What’s irrational about wanting to defend myself?”

He shook his head. “Honey, for as long as you have been alive, you have been smaller and weaker than the men who surround you. At any point in your life, this very circumstance could have arisen. I am assuming you did not walk around in the present day with a pistol strapped to your hip?”

“This is different,” I insisted. “I was never in a position to be surrounded by the *types* of men you’ve brought on board.”

He laughed at that. “You think men like this don’t exist in your world? You think there are not three or four or five of them walking past you on the street or in the grocery store on any given day having the same types of deviant thoughts? What would you have done in your world if three men cornered you?”

“I carried Mace on my keychain,” I said. “I would’ve sprayed them, screamed for help, and ran.”

“Mace?”

I nodded. “Pepper spray.”

“Right...” He massaged his chin. “I recall the term. I believe it was concocted with hot peppers and alcohol, if I’m not mistaken... There’s no shortage of either on board, and your Bruce could have some whipped up for you in the kitchens in no time. I’ve an old bottle of cologne that came through time with me that could serve as a container.”

“You really won’t give me a gun?”

He offered his best apologetic smile as he propped both his feet up on the sofa and adjusted his head against the arm. “It is no small thing to take a man’s life, Alaina. I’ll give you the means to protect yourself, but I won’t have fear make you a murderer or start a damn war.”

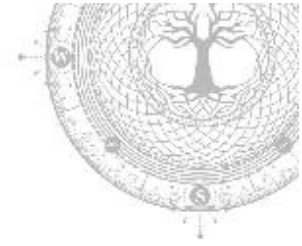
“Do you have any idea what it’s like to walk around knowing someone could attack you and your children at any moment?”

With one brow raised, he scoffed. “Do *I* have any idea what it’s like to walk around knowing someone could attack you

and your children? Did you forget what I did before I came here?”

Groaning, I pushed my fingers frustratedly through my hair. “And you had protection. I have two people that stand in the way of me. Two people who, should they be killed, will leave me with no way to keep my children safe—since you won’t tell me where you’ve hidden the guns. Pepper spray and a dagger will do nothing for me.”

He closed his eyes and crossed his ankles. “If you think Mr. Gil or myself are that easy to kill, you’ve not been paying attention. I am not giving you a gun, Alaina, and that’s that.”



Chapter Four

Chris

He thought he'd gotten used to 18th century attire after spending so much of his time with Captain Cook, but the ensemble he now wore was an entirely different experience.

Where the night air should've been refreshing in its coolness, he was instead suffocated by the layers of unbreathable fabric clinging to nearly every inch of his body.

He was posing, once again, as Maria's guard, but this time he had been thoroughly outfitted to play that part, with no detail left undone.

A deep navy blue coat, adorned with golden epaulets and brass buttons, cascaded down to his knees, only adding to the weight on his shoulders with all they were preparing to do.

The powdered wig atop his head was almost unbearable, seeming to have a mind of its own in the ways the fibers moved against his skin, itching and tickling his scalp relentlessly beneath the tricorne hat holding it there.

Beads of perspiration formed on his forehead to drip down the bridge of his nose and into his eyes. He couldn't recall ever having been this warm in his life.

It wasn't just the clothing that had him sweating like a pig. The fate of his family and the lives of those he had come to care for hung in the balance in just about every way they possibly could. It seemed a new threat was awaiting them at the turn of every corner—and this new plan was a disaster waiting to happen.

Standing beside Maria, who was dressed in similar stifling layers of cream and blue, the two of them watched as Captain

Navarro waited to receive the British tide surveyors that were approaching in a sloop from the Yorktown docks.

Despite his nervousness at what might transpire once the search of the ship began, his eyes could not be so easily pulled from Maria, and he found himself in awe of not only her appearance, but the fierceness with which she wore it.

She, too, had been outfitted with a far more heavy white wig, its curls pinned high and adorned with long cerulean ostrich feathers, but she showed no signs of the perspiration presently dripping into his eyes. Her gown, decorated with intricate lace and detailed embroidery, draped around her figure in a cascade of fabrics. Every detail, from the delicately painted fan in her gloved hand to the jewelry that sparkled around her neck and wrists, exuded an air of refined elegance.

But he knew, somewhere beneath all that refinery, her mind was racing. She'd be thinking, just as he was, about the swell in her belly hidden by her bodice and the two vials of Queen Ann's Lace she kept in her pockets that could kill the child growing there.

She didn't want to drink it—which is why she hadn't yet—but she felt obligated by their circumstances. To have the child and then change history so it couldn't exist would be far more tragic than to lose it before they could ever know it.

He was going to change those circumstances... assuming, that is, they made it past the ship's inspection without getting hanged.

The tide surveyors flooded the deck quickly, pulling his attention once more to Captain Navarro, who, despite having a ship loaded with rebel weaponry, seemed completely at ease.

He greeted the surveyors with friendly, familiar handshakes and gifted them each a bottle of Spain's finest sherry, calling each man by name and asking questions about their respective families and the state of Yorktown in his absence.

When the men surrounded him in conversation instead of rushing round to upend the ship, the stiffness in Chris's spine eased an inch, though his fingers remained secured tightly around the hilt of his sword.

After several minutes and much laughter among them, it became clear that the soldiers were less interested in examining the ship and far more excited to taste his latest batch of exotic wine, all of them practically salivating as Captain Navarro uncorked a bottle.

Pouring the burgundy liquid into several glasses laid out on the rail of the quarterdeck, Navarro raised his glass a few inches. “You’ll not find anything quite as sweet as this one, my friends. This batch is bound for Mount Clare. Like Lord Dunmore, Lord Carroll is hosting a ball in honor of the queen’s birthday in a few weeks. I’ve been bestowed the honor of *personally* delivering the wine and,” Captain Navarro grinned and motioned to Maria, “the infamous Duchess of Parma, Her Grace, Maria Amalia, a most welcome surprise for a passenger, who has unfortunately come down with a bit of seasickness and insists we journey overland from here.”

As Maria stepped forward, Chris stood on pins and needles. However much they’d prepared for their part, he was certain someone would recognize something off in her appearance and expose her for the imposter she was.

“Your Grace,” one of the soldiers breathed, removing his hat to bend hastily in a deep bow. “It is an honor.”

Maria, now a master of this particular disguise after more than a week of rigorous preparation, straightened her spine and offered him her hand to kiss.

A second soldier stepped forward to bend before her hand. “Does the duke also travel with you, Your Grace?” His eyes ventured to Chris, a question lingering in his expression.

The fact that these men didn’t know Chris from the Duke of Parma made his pulse settle a little more. At least she wouldn’t be exposed as an imposter *tonight*. But tonight would not be the last time the identity would be used and the road ahead was dangerous enough to her without that stupid title.

“No,” she answered, her practiced Austrian accent almost perfect. “I travel with my eldest daughter and my new and dearest friends, Don Dario and Don Juan of Los Cerritos, along with Juan’s most captivating wife, Doña Cecelia.”

“El Cazador?” a third soldier inquired, his dusty brown eyebrows darting up high on his forehead. “How are you acquainted with Don Juan, Your Grace?”

Maria smiled and motioned behind her where the rest of their party stood, dressed in various fine attire. “My daughter has had some trouble with her hearing. The duke sent us to Bath in the hopes the waters there might help. They did not. Doña Cecelia, however,” she took Cece’s hand to present her, “has done wonders for both of us in terms of our morale. Such a kind and delightful woman. I daresay her company was the most medicinal element in Bath. When she informed me of her coming trip to the colonies to explore the land here and attend the Carrolls’ ball, I could not bear the thought of being parted from her so soon, so I insisted on joining them, hoping the change in air might help my Caroline’s hearing return.” She grinned at Captain Navarro. “When Don Juan’s ship was unexpectedly decommissioned for repairs, Captain Navarro offered to escort us. I’d not traveled on a merchant ship before. While the captain has been a marvelous host, I do not believe I’ll be boarding another anytime soon. I’ve traveled over water a few times before, but never in a vessel so small. I hadn’t expected to become so ill.”

The soldiers ate up Maria’s every word, their eyes moving from her to Cece to Izzy as she recited the very thoroughly rehearsed lie. She really had a way of transforming into the role to make it believable. Where he might’ve otherwise been proud of her performance, he couldn’t help but hold his breath when she spoke, terrified one slip of a word or slouch in her posture or something so small as a too wide grin might lead her to the guillotine.

He didn’t know much about 18th century colonial retribution, but he was certain impersonating a duchess would lead to some kind of death sentence.

The soldier who’d led the conversation smiled. “It is my honor to welcome you all to Virginia then.” He glanced at Cece. “You’ll not be attending *Lord Dunmore’s* party then?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Cece recited. Her nearly white hair didn’t require a wig, but it was pinned up with ostrich feathers similarly and powdered in such a way she looked like she’d

been born to play the part. “Lady Carroll is a dear old family friend and she’s most anxiously expecting my arrival *before* the ball. I think she’s hoping to persuade my husband and I to relocate by giving us a tour of the countryside. We do intend to pay the palace a visit on our return, however. I’ve not met Lord Dunmore, but I’ve heard tales of Lady Dunmore’s greatness and I would be remiss to have lost an opportunity to experience it for myself.”

The soldier beamed at her. “You should know there is not a soldier among our ranks who is not adoring of the countess. She is the most graceful, beautiful, and well-respected woman in all of these colonies. I do not know the Carrolls, my Lady, but I daresay you would be in the presence of much finer company with Lady Dunmore.”

Cece grinned. “I will certainly let her know you all think so highly of her when I return to pay her a visit.”

The soldier glanced at Izzy where she stood watching the exchange, Lilly’s hands resting protectively on each of her small shoulders. “Such a long journey for a party of your size on this small ship. Surely, you are not planning to travel to the palace straight away? Have you proper lodging for the night?”

Captain Navarro raised his wine glass again and placed a hand on the officer’s shoulder. “I’d intended to arrive much earlier in the day than this. The wind was quite disagreeable and the lot of us are rather exhausted. I planned to send a few men to shore to secure rooms for my more distinguished guests while I arrange for proper transportation. Even were I not in such a fatigued state, word of Dunmore’s recent war with the Shawnee reached all the way to Spain, and I wouldn’t dare travel the road at night. Have you had many incidents since?”

“We secured a peace deal with the Shawnee war chief leading the charge a few months ago. It has been quiet here as a result. We’ve had a few small skirmishes farther south, but nothing that would be of concern for your larger party. There’s an ordinary just off the docks I believe to be empty. I’ll send my men around to secure it for you while I personally accompany you to the livery to ensure Her Grace and Her guests have proper travel accommodations. We can’t have such esteemed visitors travel by wagon, can we?”

“Officer Bailey, is it?” Juan Jr. asked, taking a step forward to offer a slight bow of his head.

The soldier, baffled to have been recognized by him, nodded nervously before lowering his head. “Aye, sir! I did not think you would know me after so many years!”

Juan didn’t return the smile, but stood over him, his tone as cold as one might expect from both a renowned killer and a gentleman. “I’ve been told a distant cousin of mine has been residing here for a time. Juan Francisco de la Bodega. Do you know him?”

“A-aye, My Lord, but I’m afraid you’ve only just missed him. He was called back to Spain on some urgent business. His ship sailed out a few days ago.”

Chris watched the edge of Juan’s lip curl with satisfaction. It was the first time he’d mentioned his own ancestor, and he saw Jack’s expression harden with it.

Unbeknownst to the rest of them—or at least so he and Jack thought—Alaina had sent Jack *secretly* in search of Juan Francisco, hoping to change history by eliminating Juan Josef’s ancestor instead of George Bennet. Much of a shock as it was to know they’d been found out, Chris was relieved their separate plan had been permanently foiled, even if Jack had agreed previously—though reluctantly—to defer from it. Chris had plans for them both that didn’t involve changing *anyone’s* history.

Maria was pregnant, and the life inside her belly was not worth less than Anna’s. Valiant as she was in wanting to save Anna’s life, he wasn’t going to let anyone take their child from them. That meant no one’s ancestor could be killed to change any of the events that had landed them right where they were. If anyone was going to die so they could go home safely, it would be their captors, Juan Josef and, if need be, his two sons.

For the past month, he and Jack had debated various ways they could prevent Bennet from dying, coming up with several schemes to outwit the Perez men. An opportunity fell unexpectedly into Chris’s lap the night Colonel Howe had come aboard the ship. Despite his opposition to Maria’s role as the duchess, the colonel’s promise to *‘be in debt to her for all his*

life had resonated, and he'd cashed in on that debt before Howe had returned to the dock.

The colonel had personally crafted a letter to send to Carter's ahead of them that would give Chris the advantage he needed: exclusive access to Bennet's name and location on that payroll roster. Once he had that information, Jack would tell the others he was going out in search of Charlotte and Chase Miller while actually seeking out Bennet to hide him and prevent him from ever stepping foot on the battlefield in Great Bridge. If Bennet couldn't be found, the Perez men would have to abandon their plans... And if they wouldn't abandon those plans, then he was prepared to force them... by whatever means necessary.

He just needed to find a messenger to take the letter to Charles Carter, one not connected in any way to Juan Jr. or Dario lest he be found out... A task that was easier said than done in a century where he knew no one at all.

"Oye," Maria hissed through her teeth, kicking his shin with her heel, "stop making that stupid face and escort me off this ship before they think you've lost your mind again."

Chris blinked from his daze to find the surveyors and much of their crew making their way toward the sloops.

The colonel had been right about docking in Yorktown. The men hadn't so much as ventured past the quarterdeck.

He cleared his throat and looped her arm through his. "Sorry."

She leaned in close as they followed behind Cece and Juan. "Where do you go when your mind wanders off like that? Are you feeling alright? Your brain, I mean... It's not acting up under that ugly wig?"

"My brain is fine," he assured her. "I'm just thinking about everything we're headed toward."

He hadn't told her about the things he and Jack had been planning. It wasn't that he didn't trust her to keep it a secret, but rather, that he wasn't prepared to disappoint her if it didn't work.

“Liar.” She narrowed her eyes as she looked up at him. “You are thinking about the baby. You are *always* thinking about this baby. How many times have I told you we can’t look forward to something that won’t exist?”

“That’s not what I’m thinking about.”

“No?” It amazed him that she could see straight through him when she glared in such a way that her eyes were nearly closed. “What else would you be thinking about that would have you looking like some abandoned puppy? You think I don’t feel your stupid hand slide over my belly at night when you think I’ve fallen asleep? I should’ve taken the medicine the minute we got on the ship like I originally planned.”

“Maybe I’m thinking about you. Sliding my hand over your stomach while you sleep is the only bit of contact you’ve allowed me. Maybe I just miss you.”

She smirked. “You are a terrible liar, mi amor. You and I both know it is not me you’re reaching for. Help me into this boat and shut up now.”

With a rebuttal she’d see right through caught in his throat, he quieted and stepped over the rail to raise his hands to her.

“Christ almighty,” Jim whispered beside him, tugging on the frilly lace collar buttoned up his throat, “both of yuns move a little faster, will ye? I cain’t hardly stand to wear this crap no longer. The next time one of yuns decides to give me an identity, it best be one with less clothes.”

Maria stepped over the rail and into his arms, hastily taking a seat beside Lilly and Izzy the moment her feet met the wooden floorboards.

Jim was already adjusting the ropes as Chris found his own seat beside Cece.

“You feeling alright?” she asked softly, her eyes venturing to the back of his head where the scars from his brain surgery were hidden beneath his wig.

“I’m fine.”

She laid a hand over his on his knee and stole a glance at Maria. “You know you can talk to me if you ever need someone

to listen. We're still family, you and me. We will be no matter what."

He imagined those words might come back to haunt him one day if Juan Jr. wouldn't abandon his plans to change history.... If he was forced to more extreme measures to prevent it... If she remembered all that he was about to do...

Shaking those thoughts from his head, he squeezed her hand gently as the sloop was lowered down. "Thanks, Cece. Really, I'm alright."

Cece leaned in closer. "This is going to work, you know." She grinned at Maria. "And it'll work because of how strong she is. We really did get lucky it was her that looks like the duchess. No one else could've done it."

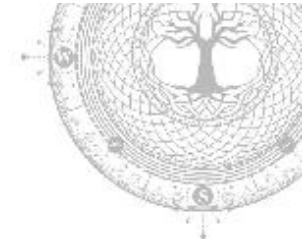
He sat back and let out a long sigh. "Luck will only get us so far before it runs out and she's exposed as an imposter. We might all end up hanged before this is over."

Cece patted his hand. "Williamsburg isn't that far and once we get past there, there's not much more than wilderness on the road to Carter's. She won't have to be the duchess much longer."

"Being the duchess is only one of about a million things that could harm her."

He stared at the dark shadows of the Virginia coast as they approached, envisioning all the things that could kill them beyond it. They'd been at sea almost the entire time they'd been in the 18th century. Land was dangerous. Land meant people they could bump into to alter events in the future. It meant thieves and natives and British and rebels... It meant Maria might drink that awful potion she carried in her pockets. Land meant he might fail to prevent their plan from happening and he'd lose a second child.

He prayed they could hold onto luck just a little while longer...



Chapter Five

Cecelia

Much like the two ships I'd been on, the inn, or rather, the *ordinary*, smelled of stale tobacco, soot, alcohol, piss, sweat, and wood, and I didn't mind it one bit. The floor beneath me wasn't swaying, and I was happy to be still for the first time since I'd jumped on Bud's yacht, inside a room I could actually stand up in.

The door had hardly closed behind me before I was pulling the pins that held my jacket in place, desperate to be released of the suffocating stays beneath it.

"Would you like me to help you with that, Doña Cecelia?"

I grinned as Juan's large arm slid around my waist and he rested his chin against the crook of my neck.

"Yes, please," I sighed. "You have no idea how long I've dreamt of having you naked in a room we both actually fit in."

He dragged his nose along the side of my throat. "Mmm. I've no wish to disappoint you, but I have some business I must tend to before you can *have me naked* in this room."

"Business?" I echoed, spinning to face him before he could pull the pin he was reaching for from my corset. "What kind of business could you possibly have when we've just arrived?"

"The secret kind," he teased, adjusting my glasses where they'd slid down my nose. "You'll be safe here until I can return."

Shaking my head, I laughed. "If *you* have secret business to attend to, then so does your wife. What kind of secret business? Where are we going?"

A dubious grin pulled at the corners of his lips to create a dimple in his right cheek. “*We* are not going anywhere. If I would have known I’d no longer have secrets of my own, perhaps I would’ve been a little less hasty to give you my name!”

Scoffing, I moved to punch his shoulder. My fist was caught mid-swing and I was spun around so quickly, my brain couldn’t fathom how I’d ended up with my spine pressed against his chest.

“So violent,” he breathed, attempting to subdue me with a trail of kisses from my throat to my shoulder. “Perhaps I should seek out more secret business if only to have you this ferocious more often. I like you this way.”

I squirmed uselessly in his arms. “Are you really not going to tell me where it is you’re running off to in the middle of the night? Less than an hour after coming to shore?”

“I considered telling you *before* you took a swing at me. Now,” he pulled me tighter against him so I could feel his arousal against my lower back, “I think I prefer you angry.”

“If I’d known you were going to be this obnoxious, maybe *I* wouldn’t have been so hasty to *take* your name. What happened to your whole ‘*lions are more predictable than men*’? You’re really going to leave me the very minute we’ve arrived? How long will you be gone?”

“No more than an hour.” His arms tightened around me and he rocked me to one side. “I would not leave you if I wasn’t sure you were safe. Shall I undress you before I go?”

I let out a grunt of a laugh. “Oh-ho no, you don’t get to have secrets *and* undress me. I’ll do it myself!”

He pressed a kiss against my temple. “Vicious little creature. You know, I found something of yours when I was packing up my things. I was planning to give it back to you, but now... perhaps I’ll just keep it for myself.”

“Something of mine?” I asked, giving up on my battle to overpower him and going limp in his grip. “What?”

Keeping one arm securely around my waist, he reached back with the other. “When you were sick, I found this on the floor in my room. It seemed valuable so I put it in my pocket, meaning to return it to you once you were well. I forgot I had it until I was packing our trunk and it fell out of my pocket.”

He coiled the arm back around me to present a black velvet box. “Look familiar?”

“Our earrings!” I gasped, taking the box and clutching it to my chest. “Do you have any idea how devastated I was thinking I’d lost them?”

“You never mentioned them before. If you had, I’d have remembered much sooner. *Our* earrings?”

“Me and A.J.’s.” Laughing, I opened the box and ran a finger over each of the four diamond studs. “These stupid earrings were the source of just about every fight we had as kids... When we got our ears pierced, mom gave us each a pair, and we used to fight over which earrings belonged to who—always thinking one set was better than the other, even though they’re identical. When her plane went missing and I moved into her house, I found both sets in her jewelry box. It didn’t feel right to wear a pair of them if she wasn’t wearing the other so I shoved them in my purse, thinking I’d let her pick which ones were hers once I found her. I thought I lost them on Bud’s yacht.”

He unwound his arms and watched with some amusement as I quickly fastened the first pair in my ears and moved to do the same with the second. “You wear both sets at once?”

I nodded. “It’s a trend in my time to have multiple piercings. Since you and I have both almost lost them, the safest place they can be is inside my ears. They mean quite a bit to us both and I would love to see the look on her face when she sees them again. I can wear my hair over them if you think they’ll stand out too much?”

“Lovely as they look on you,” he said, flashing his teeth, “covering them would be wise if you’ve no desire to explain yourself over and over.”

“That’s fine.” I turned toward him as I pushed the last one through my topmost piercing. “And speaking of explanations... I’m not that easy to distract with jewelry. Are you going to tell me where you’re going or not?”

He smiled wide enough again to create that dimple in his cheek and placed his hand on the doorknob. “No.”

Winking, he pulled the door open and added, “Get some rest, *mi paloma*. I have every intention of fighting about it upon my return. You and I haven’t had our first fight yet, and I’ve been looking forward to it since you mentioned it back in the isthmus.”

And then he was gone with a secret I wasn’t sure what to do with. I had never been a suspicious woman, but I couldn’t help the little bit of sting that lingered in my chest that he’d actually left me without even a clue as to what he was up to.

It wasn’t like him to be so enigmatic—at least, not with me.

Perhaps it was a lack of sleep that drove my feet toward the door, but I found myself with my ear pressed against it, listening for his heavy, booted steps to disappear down the stairs before I snuck out behind him.

It wasn’t a matter of jealousy or suspicion that made me follow; it was a genuine, unquenchable curiosity—or so I told myself all the way down the narrow corridor. Curiosity could be the *only* driving force behind my actions. To attribute any other motive would be preposterous, and I prided myself on being a woman of reason and composure, far from the type of ridiculous creature that might creep around in shadows after her husband for any other reason.

Easing down the stairs, I bent to sneak a glimpse into the barroom below to be sure Juan wasn’t there waiting to catch me spying.

Yes, we were still learning about one another, but he had to know I wasn’t the type of female that would simply remain in our room and wait for his return when he’d left with no explanation.

Feeling slightly more vilified by this thought, I hurried on noiseless feet the rest of the way down and crept toward the foyer. I'd intended to head straight out the door, but the smell of a particularly bitter brew of hops stopped me in my tracks.

A vision suddenly flooded my mind along with the stench... First, it was a pile of beer cans next to a kitchen sink I didn't recognize, the last remnants of their contents dripping in sticky little droplets on a butcher block counter... Then, I saw the same blue and silver can, half compressed by the squeeze of someone's hand, sitting on the edge of a frozen wooden dock.

It was a peculiar feeling to remember and not remember the sight at the same time. Had it been some far-off childhood memory that I'd long since suppressed? My grandmother had always been a drinker... Perhaps it was a memory of her attempting to surface?

I frowned at the sensations of rage and panic that swelled in my chest along with the images, but pushed them to the far recesses of my brain as the sound of Juan's voice outside forced my feet forward to the foyer window.

On the porch steps, I could see his large figure towering over the same British soldier he'd recognized on the ship. Their backs were to me, both their spines stiff as they exchanged muffled words I couldn't quite make out.

"Ay, lightnin' bug," Jim whispered as he somehow appeared directly behind me, making me jump out of my skin. "Who we spyin' on down here?"

"Juan," I answered breathlessly, motioning for him to move back from the window lest we be found out. "Did he say anything to you about having some kind of business with that man?"

Half crouched near the corner of the pane, I pulled the curtains back an inch to continue watching this lucrative encounter.

"Junior don't say much as it is," he said, plopping down on a wingback chair with what appeared to be a cup of coffee from God knew where, "specially not to me. Ye' think he's up to no

good? If so, I might could whoop his ass for ye' if ye' find me somebody to tie him up and knock him out first."

I stifled a laugh. "No, nothing like that. I'm just... curious."

"Curious, eh? Ye' looked downright scandalous jumpin' like 'at when I come walkin' up on ye'."

I diverted my attention long enough to give him a dubious raised brow. "If Lilly disappeared in the night on *secret business* she refused to tell you about, you wouldn't be right where I am watching her?"

"Sugar, I'd be outside in 'em bushes so I could hear every single word they's sayin', but I ain't never claimed to be of a sound mind. You, on the other hand—"

I shushed him, ducking down as the two men began to move. "They're going somewhere..."

Jim let out a groan as he took a final sip of his coffee. "And I'm guessin' ye' intend to follow 'em?"

"Well, I'm certainly not going to sit around here and *guess* what they're up to." I waited until they became nothing more than shadows on the road before I headed for the door.

"Oh, hold your horses just a dang minute." He grunted as he stood and stretched his spine. "Ye' 'bout as patient as a mosquito smackin' against a screen door. I'm comin' with ye', but everybody knows ye' don't sneak out the *front* door when you're spyin' on somebody. Ye' go out the back like a rational human being."



Jim and I hid in blackened alleyways, following Juan and the soldier as they walked in silence along mostly desolate cobblestone roads. Juan, an imposing figure in the darkness, commanded attention with his dark cloak billowing out behind him, further shrouding him in an air of mystery as he dwarfed his companion.

At this late hour, what little activity was to be found in Yorktown came in the form of drunkards hobbling out of various taverns. At the sight of his large shadow, they would straighten and take great efforts to avoid him, most of them staggering straight back into whatever establishment they'd spilled out of to prevent from hindering his purpose-driven stride.

Even shrouded in darkness, he appeared to be a man of power; one that was not to be interrupted, each step seeming like a beating for the cobblestone underfoot, so steadfast that the man beside him was working his legs with twice the effort just to keep up.

Observing him from afar was exhilarating. The knowledge that this imposing creature belonged to me intensified the already rapid thumping of my heart that came from sneaking around in the night.

“Ay,” Jim whispered close, pulling me back behind him as he pointed to a shadowy corner on the opposite side of the road. “We ain’t the only ones sneakin’ around tonight.”

I squinted to make out any bit of movement in the sheer blackness between buildings, my pulse quickening at the idea that anyone else might have a mind to spy on my husband.

“Who is it?” I breathed.

He was still and silent as he watched, apparently seeing more than my 18th century glasses could allow in the darkness. “Looks like Beanstalk by the shape of him.” He chuckled. “Wonder who *we* might find tailin’ us if we turnt back?”

I wasn’t nearly as amused by this as he was. “Why would Chris be following Juan? He’s never given him a reason to doubt him. He shouldn’t be out here at this hour. He could give us away or cause trouble if he runs into the wrong person.”

Even in the darkness, I could see Jim’s toothy grin as he patted my head. “Maybe he’s just *curious* too.”

Shifting my attention back to Juan, I held my breath as he and the soldier stopped in front of a group of small row houses at the end of the block. Juan was saying something and pointing toward a small brick home.

With a stiffened spine, the soldier meandered forward and knocked on the door while Juan waited patiently on the step just behind him.

A small orange glow illuminated the window upstairs, and my curiosity made me lean a little closer so I could attempt to see who might answer.

With my hindered vision, I could only make out a pale robe on the figure that greeted them.

“Well, don’t he seem right pissed?” Jim whispered.

He... It was a he. It’s not that I’d expected it to be a *her*, but the confirmation that Juan didn’t have some secret second life made my shoulders ease slightly.

The three of them stood at the threshold talking for a moment before the man opened the door wider to allow Juan and the soldier to step inside.

“Now, what do ye’ reckon he’s doin’ in there?”

I peered down each side of the road, then once more at the house where the lantern light moved away from the front windows. Hiking my skirts up to my knees, I hurried across the road and into the narrow space between houses to crouch in the bushes and catch my breath.

Jim caught up quickly, casting me a sidelong ‘*are you out of your mind*’ glare before I stood on my tiptoes to peek inside the window.

I was giddy with adrenaline. Hunting my husband was more of an adventure than I’d thought it’d be, and I squinted to catch sight of him beyond the lace curtains that hung in the window.

On the opposite side of the room, an elderly man sat down at what appeared to be a workbench. Juan folded his hands behind his back, turning so his profile was to me, as he and the soldier observed whatever the man was doing.

Even distorted by lace, Juan was stunning. He stood so much taller than the soldier, nearly a foot over the top of his head, but he wasn’t hindered by his size—much as the room seemed smaller with him in it. No, he seemed like he was born

larger than everyone else; like he'd come out of the womb with that straight spine, knowing he'd always see people from a certain angle but learning to do so without looking down at them.

It wasn't often I got to admire him when he was unaware. I appreciated the way his fingers drummed against each other behind his back, like a cat lazily moving its tail while it sized up its prey. I smiled to myself as I took in those long legs and thick calves where he moved to bend ever so slightly over whatever was happening on the bench.

He was painfully beautiful, and I couldn't wait to get him alone in my room.

In my room... where a good, *reasonable* wife would've been patiently waiting for his return... Where the Cecelia I'd once inhabited—the one who hadn't had her common sense ripped away by romance—would've remained safely in place.

“Woman,” Jim hissed from the bushes, “are ye' lookin' to get us caught? He's gonna' see that bright blond head of hair poking up through the window. You cain't see nothin' anyway. Let me look.”

Sighing, I lowered down, guilt that should've hindered me far sooner finally finding its way into the pit of my stomach as I stood staring once more at the darkness around us.

I shouldn't have been sleuthing around in the 18th century as if there was no danger whatsoever in doing so. Moreover, I shouldn't have immediately taken his secret affairs and made them my own. I had never been the irrational type, and there was nothing rational about being where I was.

Yes, we'd exchanged vows, but that didn't make me his handler. We were still individuals with our own independent thoughts—so what if we had secrets of our own? We were entitled to them, weren't we?

My lack of relationship experience was turning me into a monster... an insecure and ridiculous monster.

“We should go back,” I croaked, the guilt working up into my throat to crack the words.

Jim was peering through the window, far more stealthy in his stance than I'd been. "Ye' ain't curious no more?"

I shook my head, even though he wasn't looking. "This was an irrational move on my part. I wasn't thinking."

With his face still an inch from the glass, he clicked his tongue and glanced down at me. "Ain't never met a woman—or a man, for that matter—that thinks clearly when they's secrets bein' kept from 'em. Hell, I'm right curious for ye'. I don't know if I can just walk away now and leave it all a mystery. I got to know what the hell they're doin' in there."

"A good wife wouldn't be out here... Hell, a *sane* person wouldn't be out here in the middle of the night in the 18th century. God knows what we could encounter. If he wanted me to know what he's doing in there, he would've told me."

Waving one hand dismissively, he turned to look back through the glass and frowned. "Now, Got dammit. I turnt my head for two seconds and the behemoth's disappeared on me."

I raised up to steal a final glimpse inside. Only the soldier and the old man remained at the workbench. Quelling the lingering urge to remain there until Juan returned, I lowered back down shamefully. "We should go get Chris and get back before he sees us. I don't want him to think I don't trust him."

A branch snapped underfoot a few yards away, forcing both Jim and I to jump and turn toward it. "You might have thought of that, *mi paloma*, before you chased after me."

Juan's voice was in good spirits, but my entire body turned warm with dread. I was a jerk. I was scum... I was one of those women who couldn't trust a man to merely take a breath without my knowledge of it. I shriveled inward, terrified he might see me for all the awfulness I saw in myself for having followed.

"Well, shit," Jim said, looking around as if he'd only just realized where we stood. "This ain't the privy at all, Sugar. Let's just... eh... be on our way."

Juan stepped closer, placing a large hand on my shoulder to keep me in place. "I shall handle my wife, Mr. Jackson. You might take the other one with you, though. You are all quite clumsy with your footing and not hard to identify. Particularly,"

he added with a raise of his brow, “when one of you is wearing noisy layers of skirts.”

Jim cleared his throat as he backed toward the road. “They really oughta put up some signs, ye’ know... All of us out here lookin’ for a spot to piss. I’ll grab Chris up for ye’ on my way back. Night y’all.”

Juan’s hand remained in place on my shoulder as Jim disappeared, and he squeezed gently once he was assured we were alone. “*You* are a—”

“I’m sorry,” I cut in breathlessly, spinning to face him where he was cast entirely in shadow. “I don’t know what I was thinking. This isn’t me. Please don’t think I’m a... a... well, whatever it is you’re thinking, don’t think it. This is not who I am. I *do* trust you. Very much. I’ve never had a real relationship before... and I don’t know what I’m doing... I think I’ve lost my mind a little and I’m so sorry.”

“What did you think you might find here?” I heard the amusement in his voice but couldn’t help but burn with embarrassment.

I shrugged, wringing my hands anxiously and hopping from toe to toe. “Nothing bad. I just... I don’t know... You and I have spent nearly every second together these past few months. A sudden secret made me feel oddly detached from you. I just wanted to know what it was is all. It’s not like I suspected you of anything sinister. This was stupid and immature of me. I’ve never done anything like this in my whole life.”

He leaned in close enough his breath skated over my eyelids and cheeks, the nearness of him instantly commanding my fidgeting to still. “I suppose I must accept that I shall never be able to surprise you then, eh?”

“You’re out here to surprise me?”

“Aye.” He turned to glance inside the window, the lantern light touching his pointed nose. “I thought I might do something nice for you before we set out on the road tomorrow. It wasn’t without additional ulterior motives, I’ll admit. This errand provided me a moment to inquire as to the whereabouts of

Bennet's company with an old acquaintance. Unfortunately, the sixty-third infantry does not yet exist as there's no war yet to be assigning infantry to. I suppose we'll have little in the way of answers until we reach this Carter fellow and can get a look at his rosters. Bennet doesn't seem to have many friends in this region."

"Oh." With my throat growing heavier, I managed, "Something *nice*?"

He pushed my glasses up where they'd again slid down my nose. "These spectacles don't fit you, dove. Your eyesight is only minimally improved by them and I cannot go on watching you squint and struggle to keep them on. Tomás retrieved what was left of your lenses from the road in Panama. It wasn't much, but it was enough..." He motioned to the window. "I've employed this man to replicate them as best he's able so you might have your vision while we travel. I daresay you might need it. Officer Bailey has agreed to remain here until they are ready. He'll deliver them to the ordinary before we depart in the morning."

My mouth hung open stupidly. "You've had my glasses with you this whole time?"

"I have," he answered, his fingers tracing the edge of my jaw with a featherlight touch. "There was not much to be done in the isthmus about your vision, but I knew I would find a proper oculist in the colonies. I'd hoped I might have a few hours of daylight so as not to impose on him in the middle of the night. As it stands, these will be the most expensive spectacles this century has ever seen."

My heart warmed. This man had done one kind thing after another for me. What on earth could I do for him in return to show the magnitude of adoration and appreciation I had all but spilling out of me? I didn't feel like I could ever live up to his kind of generosity, particularly not when I was rendered so dumb by my sudden insecurities. "You... you didn't have to do this for me."

"I'll not have your memory of me in this time be a blurry one, Cecelia, nor will I have you traipsing around the colonies unable to see the threats we might encounter. I know what I do

and do not have to do. This is something I *wanted* to do. Very much.”

I reached out to smooth my hands over his chest beneath his cloak. “And here I am sneaking around spying on you like some kind of jealous twat. Sometimes I think time bent itself to give me you, but then I can’t imagine what I’ve done that was so magnificent to deserve it. I’m so sorry for chasing after you.”

He covered my hands with his, letting out the breath of a laugh. “Then I must apologize for doing the same.”

“The same?”

He squeezed my fingers in his. “You did not think I would leave you to the lions without a set of eyes on my most beloved wife?” He motioned behind me. “Tomás is far more skilled at sneaking around undetected than you are. You really are terrible at it, by the way. I saw you the minute you stepped out that back door. I had a mind to turn round right then and there, but it was far too amusing to watch you attempt stealth in all these skirts.”

I collapsed into his chest and laughed. “What can I do to make this up to you?”

He bent forward to nip my ear. “You can let me take you back to our room and fight with you about it... without all these

skirts.”



Several hours later, as the first hints of dawn lightened the sky outside our window, I lay nestled once more in the crook of his arm, a warm ache settling between my legs from another night without sleep.

“How do you know Officer Bailey?” I asked.

“Mmm?”

I smiled at his sleepy response. “The soldier that escorted you last night. He said he was surprised you recognized him, and then the two of you seemed to be having a rather terse conversation before you left. How do you know him?”

“I stole his dog,” he answered as if this were nothing, his fingers casually stroking the hair at the top of my head.

“You *stole his dog*?” I repeated incredulously, raising up on my elbow to stare down at him. “Why on earth would you steal a man’s dog?”

He grinned. “It was years ago. I’d had too much to drink and found myself at a rather deplorable establishment playing cards with the man. I’d become convinced he cheated me, so I stole his dog as retribution.”

“What’d you do with the dog after you took it?”

He pushed the hair back from my face, adjusting his head a little so his dark locks splayed out on the pillow behind him. “You’ll remember Luna? I imagine she remains safely in the care of your sister. I hadn’t intended to keep her once I’d sobered, but when I saw how pleased the pup made Dario, I couldn’t bring myself to return her.”

I frowned at him for a long moment. “Well, did you apologize? And did you ask him if he’d actually cheated you to deserve it?”

He nodded with a grin. “He couldn’t remember. Apparently, he was just as inebriated as I was. He said he didn’t much care for the mutt as it was and I’d actually done him a favor. Our Luna chewed up nearly every piece of leather he owned.”

Chuckling, I collapsed back down against his skin. “You’re a very interesting man with a very interesting life.”

“I’m glad you think so for I could not bear to bore you.” He let out a wide yawn and scratched the top of my head. “I imagine Captain Navarro will be anxious to leave soon. Are you hungry?”

“Famished,” I yawned in response, “and a little anxious myself. What if the captain was right about Lord Dunmore? If he finds out we’re here and insists the Duchess of Parma and her party actually join him in the palace for a visit, wouldn’t she be expected to at least make an appearance before moving on? I mean... I don’t know much about societal customs in this

century, but it seems like an earl might be someone she'd be obligated to acknowledge."

He carefully pried me from his chest in order to sit up. "As the Royal Governor, Lord Dunmore should be occupied overseeing various land disputes at the courthouse this morning. He'll not be home when we pass through and will likely not find out the duchess had been in the vicinity until sometime this evening, long after we've ventured off. Even should we find ourselves forced to visit the palace, I'm far more concerned with the road to Richmond than I am Lord Dunmore."

"How long do you think it'll take to get there?"

He shrugged. "Depends on the carriages and the weight we put on those horses. Might take a day or two but far less than it would take for us to travel all the way to Mt. Vernon."

Adjusting the sheets as he climbed out of the bed, I sat up to admire his naked body where he stretched to his full height before reaching for his breeches. "It really is a shame to be so close to a man like George Washington and not be able to meet him. I was kinda looking forward to it. What do you think he's like?"

He chuckled. "I imagine he's much like any other man, wandering through life feeling foolish while outwardly giving the impression of one who has it all figured out."

I laughed at that. "Is that all there is to a man?"

Lazily tucking his shirt into his pants, he bent over the bed to kiss my forehead. "Aye. We're all merely fools pretending. I'll go collect your new spectacles and a bit of porridge if they've any ready. Can I trust you to remain here until I return or shall I find you lingering in my shadows again this morning?"

I snorted. "In the time it will take me to dress myself in those ridiculous clothes and chase after you, you'll already be back."

He smiled, sweeping a wisp of hair behind my ear. "At least you'll not be forced to suffocate beneath these blasted wigs. I'd hoped to never have the occasion to wear one again."

Straightening, he plucked up said wig from the bureau, snarling at its shimmering white curls before he smashed it over his dark hair.

Looking comical with his nearly black eyebrows furrowed beneath it, he slipped into his ivory waistcoat, scowling at my amusement as he fastened its buttons.

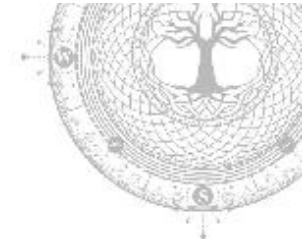
“Find something funny?”

I shook my head, admiring his wide shoulders when he forced the brocade jacket on over them. “Just appreciating the view of a man pretending to have it all figured out.”

He sat on the edge of the bed to pull on his stockings and boots. “I recall *appreciating* the view of your attire—or rather, lack thereof—the night you arrived on my ship.” He turned his head to meet my eyes, his own dark with mischief. “I shall have you far more frequently once we are returned to a time when I’ve so little clothing to remove from you.”

I bit my lower lip as those words elicited a reaction that reached all the way down between my legs.

Very much aware of my physical response to him, he patted my hip and chuckled as he stood. “But right now, I must see you fed.”



Chapter Six

Alaina

I woke up freezing. In the little bit of daylight that streamed in through the window, I could see my breath clouding in front of my face.

I blinked at it for a moment before I jumped from the bed to check on the twins where I'd left them asleep in the cradle under far warmer conditions.

Much to my relief, they'd been tucked in tightly beneath an additional layer of thick seal pelts, both of them warm to the touch and sleeping soundly.

Grabbing my robe from the foot of the bed, I tied it quickly around me before turning toward the sofa where I could just see Juan's booted feet propped up against the arm.

"You covered them," I said, shivering as I tiptoed to the seating area. "Thank you."

He sat up and offered me the thick pelt he'd been wrapped in, much to Luna's annoyance where she'd been tucked between his legs and the sofa's pillow. She yawned and wedged herself deeper into the gap between cushions as Juan's eyes met mine. "This whole mission is for nothing if your daughter dies of hypothermia before we can even get to Bennet."

I took the hide and draped it over my shoulders, basking in the immediate warmth it offered as I sank down into an armchair across from him. "I take it by the cold we're getting close to Cape Horn?"

"Aye." He tapped a book lying on the sofa beside him. "We'll talk about that in a moment. I've some questions I'd like you to answer before breakfast."

My voice caught in my throat as I noticed the yellow lined piece of paper sticking out of the top of the book. I was an idiot for not burning it... A big, stupid, careless idiot. I'd left it right there on my bed for anyone to see, flustered as I was by Juan's refusal to give me a gun.

With his eyes slightly narrowed at me, he pulled the tome onto his lap, opened it to its marker, and plucked the paper up near his face to scan the list Cece and I had made of all the possible places Jack could die in 1775. I'd been using the back of it to make notes about the various vortices and their possible connection to altered histories. "When were you going to tell me my ship is going to catch fire?" His gaze met mine. "*Were* you going to tell me at all? And does this have anything to do with your request for a gun?"

For a second, I considered playing dumb, but that wouldn't work with Juan. There was no sense in hiding what I knew. He always figured me out.

"My reasons for wanting a gun had nothing to do with that," I admitted. "And to be perfectly honest with you, I don't know if I would've told you about the fire. Some days I considered warning you. Others, I remembered what you did to Jack and Kyle and Anna—what you *would've* done if Jack had been on this ship when you boarded it—and I wondered if it might be best to let you burn. I hadn't decided yet which direction to take."

He lowered the paper and massaged his bearded chin. "How did you intend to avoid the fire yourself if you didn't tell me?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I was hoping an opportunity might present itself before we got anywhere near South Carolina. If it didn't, I planned to fill you in once we were closer so we could go to shore somewhere south of Charleston."

He drummed his fingers agitatedly over the book's open pages. "An opportunity? To escape with your children and leave me behind?"

With reddened cheeks, I nodded. "You can't pretend you wouldn't consider the same if the roles were reversed, Juan. You escaped once too."

“Aye, but I came back.” His stiffened shoulders eased as he relaxed his spine against the back of the sofa. “I do not trust many people, Alaina. I had good cause not to trust you after what I put you through, but I’d thought perhaps, over this past month, the two of us had grown to understand one another. I thought we might even become friends before this is through. You would really leave me to burn after everything?”

The two of us *had* shared moments of honesty, and I did understand him. Where he’d once looked at me with longing and cruelty, and I’d looked at him with pure hatred, we’d since settled into a sort of mutual civility. I wasn’t afraid or repulsed by him the way I’d once been. But... he still would’ve killed my husband and he’d enjoyed killing Anna. No matter his reasoning, that was something that was very difficult to look past.

With a raised brow, I bantered, “Would you *really* have killed Jack if he’d been on the ship when you took it back over?”

He looked down at his hand where he still held the paper. “You know the answer to that based on his changed ancestry chart. The two of us would not have made it to Virginia together on the same ship. He would not have remained dead. None of them will. What did you plan to do if I burned with the ship? Would you still pursue my mission to undo things?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “I don’t really have a choice *but* to pursue it if I want Anna back, do I? By your rationality, I suppose you wouldn’t have remained dead either.” I frowned, pulling the edges of the fur tighter around my body. “How do we actually know *Bennet* will remain dead? I mean... if we undo everything and make it so you can never arrive in the past... won’t we also make it so none of us can end up in Virginia to kill him when we do?”

He raised a shoulder, glancing at the paper where he’d laid it back over the open pages. “Mr. Gil says my Juan showed up in your sister’s memories. I have to believe that means we are successful in our endeavors. *Something* we do will work in the end, won’t it?”

I chewed my lower lip to prevent from exposing my theories about Juan Jr.'s appearance in the past and the other potential time portals. "I really wish he'd told her *what*, specifically, it was that ended up working."

"Perhaps he will," he offered, closing the book and tossing it back onto the sofa. "Maybe she will remember something new before we encounter Bennet that will guide our hands."

"And in the meantime?" I motioned to the book. "What do we do now that you know about the fire?"

He lazily traced the spine and furrowed his brow in thought. "I'll not risk any of us being trapped in a blaze. I suppose we'll have to find an alternative vessel to commandeer along our route."

Commandeer...

I'd somehow forgotten Juan had spent the bulk of his time in this century playing pirate. In my mind, we'd simply go to shore somewhere before Charleston to avoid a fiery death. I hadn't considered he'd have a mind to *steal* another ship.

Unbeknownst to Juan, Captain Cook's ship was likely to be the next vessel we'd encounter. Yes, Cook had far more soldiers than we had crew, but Juan had automatic rifles hidden somewhere in the walls that would easily tip the scales in his favor if he were desperate enough. It wouldn't matter to him that Captain Cook had important history yet to forge in the coming years. All that mattered to Juan was his own personal history. And that was a dangerous thing.

"You've another secret?"

I quickly adjusted my traitorous face. "No."

"You know of another ship, don't you? You mentioned something about exchanging crew yesterday..." He glanced again at the book. "You may have knowledge I don't after burying your nose in history these past weeks, but I've access to the same information you do. It would serve you better to simply share what you know than wait for me to find it."

For a moment, my brain scattered and jumbled as it sought out some kind of response. We couldn't steal Captain Cook's

ship. There was no telling what damage might be done to the future if we interfered with such an important journey. Even outside the role Cook played in mapping history, he sailed with a very large crew. Fragile as time was, we had no way of knowing if any of those men helped shape our existence in some way by being exactly where they were meant to be.

There was, however, another ship I *did* know of that might serve as a perfect alternative. With all the thought I'd given to time travel and its possibilities, I'd very nearly forgotten that the rest of my island family was on a slave ship that was possibly heading in our direction.

"Yes," I said, standing to collect the laptop from its solar charger near the window. "There is another ship. The Sofia Martina."

"The other slave vessel?" he scoffed, craning his neck to watch me. "Have you forgotten it was headed for the Orient? In the *opposite* direction?"

I plopped down on the sofa beside him and opened the laptop, hurriedly typing in Bertie's birthday and clicking on the master's log with Simón Bacallar's name on it. "If they're headed in the opposite direction, then how do you explain this name ending up on *our* master's log under the year 1775? It can't be a coincidence or some other Simón Bacallar when we sail with the man's own brother. There's no way that ship could go to the Orient and have its captain's name listed here all inside the same year. This has to mean their ship is following us, don't you think?"

"Your people are on that ship," he said slowly, frowning at the screen. "You do not believe they've gone to the storm?"

"*Terrence* is on that ship," I reminded him, "and I can't imagine he's sitting on his thumbs while he watches men and women fall victim to slavery. Perhaps my people have taken it over and are following... What if we anchored for a day or two just to see if they catch up? If, after a few days, we see no signs of them, then we continue on and seek out another."

'Hopefully,' I thought, 'long after Captain Cook has had a chance to sail away from Tierra Del Fuego.'

He combed through his salt and pepper beard. “Anchor here? In these frigid waters? And what would we do if you’re correct? Abandon my ship in the ice to travel for nearly a month on a disease-ridden slave vessel? With two babies?”

I shook my head. “There’s no reason to abandon this ship yet. If my people have taken over command as I suspect they have, we could travel alongside each other up the Atlantic, and we’d have a ship to escape to should a fire erupt on this one. Maybe when we get near Charleston, we board that one for a few days just to be safe.”

He seemed unconvinced. “And what will I tell the men when I command them to drop the anchor out here in the middle of nothing?”

“You’re smart,” I assured him, stroking his ego just enough to persuade him. “I’m sure you’ll think of something.”



By breakfast, Juan had indeed thought of something. It wasn’t difficult at all, given that we’d been navigating through ice, to inform the crew we needed to anchor long enough to repair damage done to the hull before sailing through far more tumultuous waters.

Juan sat silently at the head of the table sipping his tea as I fed the twins small bits of porridge, a difficult feat with them both balanced on my knees against the table.

Both had showed early signs they were ready to try soft foods, and while Cecelia had taken to it quickly, Zachary rather enjoyed spitting it out to let it ooze down his chin.

He wasn’t a fan of porridge, but he did like jam. After six or seven failed attempts to get a spoonful of oats to reach his belly, I gave up and scraped a bit of guava off my toast.

He gummed this happily, allowing me a chance to sip my now cold coffee.

“If your people are indeed to catch up with us,” Juan started, watching Zachary with some amusement, “mightn’t they

think they're on a rescue mission? What's to stop them from hauling me off into another prison cell or slicing my throat?"

"They're *my* people," I said, hurrying to offer Zachary another bite of guava before a tantrum ensued. "I won't let them."

"No?" He reached for the carafe and topped off my coffee, snarling at the liquid he never grew a taste for. "Why would I believe that when you've only just admitted you would've left me to burn with the ship?"

"I told you I hadn't decided yet. Besides, if we're not abandoning this ship, I imagine we'll still need its crew a while longer. We can't exactly sail through Cape Horn without them. I'm not going to let anyone kill you or lock you away when I'm reliant on you to keep these men from accosting me."

He glanced at the large picture window. "Something doesn't seem right about your theory. There were what, five of your people that boarded that ship? Make it eight or nine if some of the others joined them. They'd be wildly outnumbered by the slavers... Even if they freed every one of the slaves on board, with no weapons and no knowledge as to how to even sail a ship of that size, I can't imagine *how* they could've taken command."

"You saw the name on that log just as clearly as I did," I reminded him. "Do you have any other ideas for how it could end up there?"

He sat back and sipped his tea. "Simón certainly wouldn't abandon course of his own volition. There are far too many riches waiting for him in the Orient upon the delivery of his... cargo. You're right. It has to be that they were commandeered, but what if it wasn't *your* people who did so?"

"Who else would have a reason to pursue us?" I asked, a little disturbed that anyone else could've seized their ship.

Frowning, he looked down into his cup. "I do not know. There are two rifles missing from my inventory. Perhaps none of ours ever crossed the isthmus at all. Maybe it's my sons that took the Sofia Martina over?"

I saw a bit of hope wash over his eyes that he might be reunited with his most cherished son sooner than later.

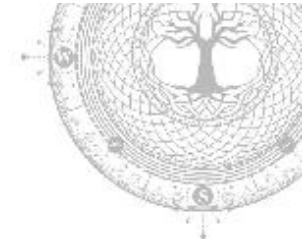
I was not so hopeful. Jack couldn't have known my plan to kill Juan's ancestor was so quickly thwarted. He would've insisted on crossing to get to the colonies first... As would Cece and Juan Jr. They were both anxious to seek out Bennet as soon as possible in order to secure their relationship.

But Juan did have a point. If the Sofia Martina was indeed appropriated, who was at the helm? Bud might have an idea as to how the ship worked, but they'd need a crew and the slavers wouldn't bend to their will.

Were the slaves sailing it? *Could* they?

I stole a glance out the window, wondering how long before we'd see the dark vessel approaching.

For reasons I couldn't explain, I felt a sense of dread creep up my spine.



Chapter Seven

Cecelia

Beer cans dripping on a sink, a few more half compressed and spilled out over a coffee table, one single can on the edge of a snowy dock... *That* dock... Someone was yelling... There was panic and anger just beyond me, but all I could see was that one partially squeezed beer can sitting on a snow-dusted deck board, death looming somewhere close by.

I gasped when I was shaken awake by the jostling of the carriage, relieved to find myself still seated beside Juan and nowhere near that nightmarish dock, my new, perfect glasses still secured over the bridge of my nose.

“What is it?” he whispered, running a hand over my spine. “Are you alright?”

I glanced at Maria and Chris where they’d dozed off across from us, their heads rested against each other and bobbing softly with the movement of the coach.

“Just... a very odd dream,” I assured him, even though I had a horrible feeling it was much more than that.

The dream and the scents from the night before that had invoked similar imagery felt too familiar. The dock, specifically, had brought on a heightened sense of anxiety I was certain I’d experienced once before.

Wrapping both arms around Juan’s as if one of us might disappear, I sat back and tried to remember a time and place those images fit. A dock... beer cans... panic... anger. Were my memories changing? Was that dock a part of Owen’s campground? Were these images from an old life I might get sucked back into by misstepping somewhere here? Was this a sign something was about to happen that would prevent Juan from showing up at that party to prevent my marriage to Owen?

My chest felt suddenly too tight at the notion, and I closed my eyes to focus on breathing. The dock lingered there behind my eyelids, and silencing my mind proved more challenging than usual.

Why were these images coming now? Had we deviated from a route we should've otherwise taken?

I touched the frames of my glasses. The first cloudy image had come when Juan slipped out in the night. Did that encounter have something to do with it? Would that soldier or the man who'd crafted the glasses interfere with our destiny in some way?

I glanced at Chris. Or had Chris done something when he pursued that would alter our course? What had happened after Juan discovered me? Did Chris simply return to the ordinary with Jim or had he unknowingly disrupted our fate by interacting with someone else?

Time was so very fragile. It would only take one chance encounter for everything to change.

Tightening my hold on Juan's arm, I took another deep breath. He'd promised me on several occasions there was nothing that could keep him from arriving at that party to prevent my marriage to Owen... Nothing, save death.

And now... was I remembering a life with Owen?

Did that mean he would die before he could get to me?

The next breath was audibly labored.

"Cecelia?" he whispered, his free palm sweeping over my forehead. "Can you breathe, dove?"

Nodding unconvincingly, I inhaled through my nose as proof, hugging his elbow to my chest as I exhaled shakily through my mouth.

With my eyes squeezed tightly shut, I felt him reach for the window, and within seconds, the cool breeze wafted over my cheeks.

"Oye," Maria uttered groggily, "what's wrong with her?"

“Panic attack,” Chris answered, his voice just as husky with sleep. “Don’t touch her. Do you need us to pull over, Cece?”

I shook my head.

No, we couldn’t pull over. I couldn’t let anything be stalled on my account; not when Juan’s life was dangling in the darkness of the unknown. What if something *I* did would kill him? Or worse... what if something I did would change his mind about coming for me at all? What if my spying started us on a downward spiral that would ultimately lead to his walking away from me?

He’d told me once of his first wife Elizabeth and how her need to control his every move had made him feel restless and suffocated by their marriage. Would I make him feel the same?

Was I getting these memories because I was on a course to ruin our relationship?

“She’s so pale,” Maria observed, fanning me uselessly. “We should do something, no?”

If I could’ve groaned, I would’ve.

There was nothing easy about being flung without warning into a sudden panic attack, least of all having witnesses to it. My rational mind knew all the ways to make the panic stop, but my body needed time to catch up. Having an audience made me panic *because* I was panicking, making it that much more difficult for my body and mind to realign themselves.

“Just let her breathe,” Chris answered, having experienced me in the throes of this type of attack several times before.

In through the nose, out through the mouth. The need to vomit was dancing around the back of my mouth, but my hands and feet weren’t tingling, so I hadn’t gone fully over the edge. I just needed to clear my mind and keep breathing. It would be over soon enough.

It was just a dream, nothing more.

In through the nose, out through the mouth...

I focused on Juan’s amaretto scent coming off the fabric of the arm I clung to, a far off hint of skunk on the breeze seeping

in through the window, and Maria's rose water shampoo that had otherwise filled the cabin.

"You're safe," Juan whispered against the top of my head. "I'm right here with you."

'Are you?' I thought, a picture of that snowy dock flashing through my mind despite my attempts to focus on reality. Was I fading into some other dimension? Was it possible that I could simply disappear? Implausible as that notion might've been a few short months ago, it seemed entirely feasible in light of all I'd learned since. If I could travel through a storm to the 18th century and completely forget a whole other life I'd lived, I could just as easily fade into that other life by making a single misstep here.

"Do you know what started it?" Chris asked as my next inhale came out strangled.

"She had a bad dream," Juan answered, pressing his lips to the crown of my head so I felt his own breath, steady and strong against my scalp.

"Respira, mi paloma," he said softly. "I have you."

Just a dream.

Stupid, broken brain. I felt the ridiculous tears sliding down my nose that always accompanied this kind of hyperventilation, and I battled to push away images of that dock so I could actually breathe.

Inhale... 2, 3, 4...

A blue and white label distorted by a squeeze of the can's middle, snowflakes resting around the mouth...

Exhale... 2, 3, 4...

Almonds and cherries and skunk and roses... Juan's deep breath in... and out...

Everyone was watching... my feet and hands had gone numb...

"A dream?" Chris asked somewhere far away. "About what?"

I hugged Juan's arm tighter as I inhaled with him once more.

"Oye, I don't know much about panic attacks," Maria spat, "but I don't think talking about whatever caused it is helpful, estúpido! Talk about something that'll actually calm her."

'Please, don't,' I thought as I exhaled.

Of course, Chris knew what to do after ten years of watching my sister calm me down, but for pride's sake, I hoped he would refrain from initiating it here.

There was a simple process called grounding my therapist had encouraged my family to do, where a person asks basic questions about the sufferer's physical surroundings as a means to clarify their thinking. Unfortunately, it required others to speak to me as if I were a two-year-old, sucking whatever dignity I had out with each of my answers. I knew no one inside the carriage would think less of me for it, but *I* thought less of me. I hated when I couldn't drag myself out of my own panic.

Inhale... 2, 3, 4...

What if it wasn't a dream at all? What if it was a warning?

Exhale... 2, 3, 4...

What if something I was about to do would make Juan abandon me? Was I being insecure or was the insecurity stemming from a misstep that would drag me into some other life I didn't want?

After two or three more struggled breaths, Chris finally resigned to assist and asked, "What color are your shoes, Cece?"

I fought this demeaning exercise for a moment, but it was impossible to right myself with three anxious spectators hovering so close to me and unrelenting what-ifs refusing to loosen their grip on my mind. My breathing was getting more erratic.

"Come on, Cece," Chris coaxed gently. "Let's just try it."

On the verge of vomiting, I opened one eye to peek down at the uncomfortable satin slippers. "Cream," I panted, opting not to elaborate on the multi-colored flowers embroidered into

their sides or the torturous wooden heels some evildoer thought was good for fashion.

“And how many windows are in this cabin?”

With tunneled vision, I focused on the space around me until I was able to utter, “six.”

God, this was humiliating.

Knowing Juan was watching and could actually feel my breaths coming easier with each idiotic answer ate away at what little pride I had left.

Perhaps *this* was the thing that would cause him not to come for me. I couldn't blame him if it was. Who wanted to deal with this every time their wife woke up from an odd dream?

For several minutes this exercise continued. Chris would ask an infantile question and I'd answer. I'd given the color of Maria's skirts, described the pattern engraved in Chris's brass coat buttons, counted the number of circles on the carpet's bordered edge, and surrendered what little remaining self respect I'd been holding onto in front of my new husband.

In the end, as it always did, the grounding worked, and I was able to slowly unfold to rejoin the three functional adults in reality once more.

Removing my glasses, I wiped my eyes and stared at a small piece of white feather that had come loose from Maria's cap to cling to the velvet on the door's interior.

There was no easy way to look at people after they'd witnessed me lose all control of my body. The act of acknowledging them itself could very well throw me into another attack, mortified as I was by it.

Juan squeezed my leg gently and said to us all, “I met Lord Dunmore once.”

I had loved him fiercely before that moment, but I loved him that much more after it. He'd known exactly how humiliated I was without so much as looking at my face, and he just... carried on... as if I hadn't fallen apart in front of him. In doing so, he commanded everyone else to carry on with him. It

might've been one of the most significant moments in our relationship yet.

“Oye, you didn’t think that was something worth mentioning sooner?” Maria scoffed, successfully deterred from my unraveling.

“It was a very brief encounter,” he said casually with another squeeze of my leg. “We’d anchored in St. Augustine to restock the ship. It was there, on the docks—he, setting out, I and my father, coming in—that we chanced upon one another. He commented on the fineness of our ship and conversed briefly about its history with my father. The whole endeavor lasted less than a few minutes. It was hardly worth mentioning as I doubt the man would recall it.”

“*You* remember it,” Maria argued. “Why wouldn’t he?”

Juan sighed. “I remember it because I dreamt of killing him for quite some time after.”

I looked up at him then, surprised. “Why?”

He gave me a small closed-lip smile meant to say ‘*welcome back*’ before he slipped back into his story. “He’s a rather ill-tempered man. His exchange with my father was cut short so that he could turn toward a sailor who hadn’t handled one of his trunks with the ‘*proper care*’ when he placed it in a sloop. The sailor was very nearly emaciated—obviously not strong enough for the weight of the trunk—and one side of it had crashed down on the boards a little heavily as he released it. I watched Dunmore strike that poor man several times with the butt of his musket until his face was unrecognizable. I’d only just lost Elizabeth and the children, and I had a mind to take the musket and deliver him the same justice. Were it not for my father’s intervention, I’m afraid Lord Dunmore would no longer have a place in history. I thought of that evening many times afterward... used the anger I felt then to guide my hand when we started hunting Albrechts a few months later.”

“Captain Navarro says he’s not a very well liked man among the people here,” Chris noted. “History might’ve been better off without him.”

“Ay,” Maria agreed. “Salvador says he murdered countless Shawnee, including women and children. Perhaps you should’ve killed the bastard.”

Chris frowned at her. “Who’s Salvador?”

“You know, the one with the mustache that’s not quite a mustache.”

He shook his head. “No clue who you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do. The handsome one that’s always hanging around the galley.”

Juan leaned in as the two of them became transfixed with Salvador’s physical description. “Will you tell me what happened to you when we are alone? What caused the panic so I might put your mind at ease?”

I nodded, and he caught my chin with a finger beneath it before I could look away. “You’ll not be ashamed with me.”

I glanced at Chris and Maria where they continued to debate the existence of Salvador, too engrossed in descriptors to notice the hushed conversation happening feet away.

Swallowing part of the lump in my throat, I croaked out, “I don’t want you to see me like that. It’s so humiliating.”

He shook his head once. “It matters not what you want. As your husband, I will see you all the same. I’ll not make many demands of you, *mi alma*, but this, I do require. You will never avoid my eye because you are too ashamed to meet it, nor will I ever look at you as anything less than the fearless woman I promised myself to. Understood?”

The lump expanded in my throat, but a smile pulled at the corners of my mouth as he swept his thumb over my bottom lip. “Understood.”



The journey to Williamsburg was a short one, and I was delighted for the fresh air when our carriage pulled up alongside a group of brick buildings on Main Street to let us out.

We needed supplies for our trip, and Izzy needed attire that would actually fit her if she was to pose as the daughter of a duchess.

Ahead of us, she held Lilly's hand and bounced excitedly, pointing at a window display that showcased several stunning dresses, one, in particular, fitted to a small, child-sized form.

We'd done our best to alter the fabrics we had, but this would be the first time she would wear something tailored for her size, and the girl was beyond excited to call something in this century her very own.

Jim, given plenty of gold coins, escorted them all inside while Chris and Jack, dressed as guards, stood watch outside. The rebels posing as her footmen remained at the carriages along with her new maid, Hitty, who we all had attempted to converse with over the past week but had gotten very little in the way of responses.

With the coming ball at the palace, the city's streets were rife with activity. Men and women in fine dress strolled from one storefront to another, enjoying the warm, sunny morning with no sense of urgency whatsoever. The large entourage surrounding our carriages and our more extravagant attire drew their eyes in our direction—all a part of Colonel Howe's plan... Within hours, word would spread that nobility was passing through, and whatever posts were out there on the road to Richmond would be expecting us. I stepped a little closer to Juan as I watched men and women slowly venture nearer to get a better glimpse of our party.

He stretched his legs for a moment before he led me into the building that sat beside the dressmaker's storefront.

I knew it was a general store, but I hadn't been prepared for just how *general* it was. All my senses were bombarded upon stepping inside. The scents of a vast array of spices burned my nostrils—the sweet and sharp aromas of cinnamon, pepper, and mustard all vying for my attention over the softer fragrances of lavender, rose, and almond from the soaps displayed neatly on a shelf near the entrance.

Overhead, dried plants hung on a line of twine, grouped together as sage, thyme, chamomile, bay leaves, and

peppermint. Wicker baskets in all shapes and sizes also hung from a thicker line farther inside, some with additional products inside them, some empty and offered for sale.

Behind the counter, there was an array of dinnerware, ointments, and jarred goods, no organizational thought put into the order with which these were laid out.

There was a display of women's hats and ribbons beside a shelf lined with farming tools, onions hanging from one basket, while one beside it overflowed with buttons and buckles.

I wasn't entirely sure where to start.

Juan, thankfully, did, and he escorted me to the counter where he gave the clerk a list that included quite a few non-perishables, soaps, stockings, needle-and-thread, starch—for powdering the blasted wigs—and coffee and sugar, much to my delight, since tea was presently a hard-to-acquire commodity.

While the clerk moved to fill our order, my gaze was pulled toward a shelf lined with peculiar looking toys. Smiling at the opportunity to settle my overly stimulated mind, I took a step closer to admire a set of tin soldiers, idly spinning a wooden top that was set out separately for that very purpose. I traced a finger over a set of hand-carved horses, and even made an attempt at a cup-and-ball game for a second. When I locked eyes with a doll sitting at the top of the display, however, I couldn't help myself reaching for it.

Its face and arms were made of wood, but the rest was stuffed and soft enough to hug. The wood was painted white with eyes a little too large and close together. Hair was formed from lace to curl out from beneath the sage and lavender bonnet she wore, a perfect match to the gown she was dressed in.

Izzy had been devastated when she'd left her stuffed animals behind on the old ship, and I could just imagine her delight at being gifted something to squeeze onto.

Juan's hands swept down my shoulders as he leaned over me. "A new dress *and* a new doll? I daresay we might spoil the poor girl."

I chuckled. "Isn't that what aunts and uncles are for?"

“Is that what we are then?”

I grinned, craning my neck to look up at him. “That’s what Lilly taught her to call us. I was thinking I might find her a book instead, but...” I waved at the small inventory of literature. “There’s not much written for children in this time.”

“A doll then,” he said, “and perhaps this...” He reached for the wooden cup-and-ball game. “It’s a long trip and I would very much like to see you attempt this again.”

I laughed. “I was never very good at games like that.”

He attempted it once, clumsily, and smirked. “I don’t believe *anyone* is good at this particular game.” He glanced around us for spectators before launching the ball back upward and missing it again. “Will you tell me what happened in the coach?”

My smile fell back downward and I moved my fingers over the lace on the doll’s skirts as I tried to find an explanation.

“To be honest, I’m not even sure what happened. Last night and this morning, I got these fuzzy images. They feel like a memory, but there’s no context to them. I started to panic that they might be glimpses of a life with Owen. There’s a dock in one of the images and A.J. told me we lived on a campground. I thought... well, maybe these glimpses might be a warning that you wouldn’t come to that party to prevent me from meeting Owen... I thought maybe I might fade away from this life to show up in that one. And then I started thinking of reasons you might not come... One being death... another being that I scared you away somehow.”

He stopped fiddling with the game to inspect my face, his brow wrinkled with concern.

“I mean,” I continued, “I’m not even certain that’s what it is. It could simply be a dream I’m overanalyzing. Alaina and Chris told me their changed memories came initially in the form of dreams. It might be that my subconscious is trying to recognize familiarity in what would’ve otherwise been dismissed as a nightmare. The side effects of time travel aren’t exactly easy to navigate or recognize. Add to that these odd

levels of insecurity I've developed overnight and I'm not sure what my brain's doing from one minute to the next."

"You said you experienced it last night as well? Why didn't you tell me?"

I blushed. "I didn't think much of it at first—dismissed the images as some weird hallucination brought on by a lack of sleep. It was only when I saw the same visions in the carriage that I began to panic." Slowly, I lifted my gaze to his. "I know how self-conscious it sounds, but what if this sudden loss of confidence isn't a result of my inexperience but is stemming instead from a real place—like my subconscious is warning me of things to come? What if some part of me already knows I'm about to do something to ruin this and it's attempting to cling to you?"

His lip twitched, almost a smile, but not quite. "You could stab me through the chest, Cecelia, and you would still not ruin this. I will come for you, I swear it."

"But I—"

Chris burst through the door, putting a prompt end to our conversation where he seethed in such a way I could've sworn there was steam coming out of his ears.

"How many times did I say we shouldn't use her?"

Juan, who the question was spat at, frowned in confusion as he turned toward him, the cup-and-ball game still held in one hand. "Pardon?"

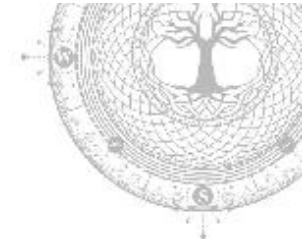
"Maria," he growled, lowering his voice but still delivering just as much venom in every word. "How many times did I say we should keep her and her likeness to the duchess out of it? While all of you insisted that no one would know her in the colonies... that we would be fine all the way to Carter's... that this was a foolproof plan!"

"What happened?" I asked, standing on my toes to attempt to see past his shoulder and out into the street.

"The goddamn Lady Dunmore is what happened! She was in that dress shop and overheard Maria introduce herself to the seamstress as the duchess. She said she'd been informed of her

coming arrival by a few men early this morning! Now we've all been invited for fucking tea at the palace... an invitation she *'must insist'* we accept."

He held a pointer finger dangerously close to Juan's nose. "I swear to God, Juan, if she's found out... if *anyone* lays a hand on her as a result, I don't care who you are or how good you might be with that sword of yours, I'll strangle you and that piece-of-shit captain to death for it."



Chapter Eight

Chris

He stood pacing outside the dress shop, the blood in his veins hotter than it'd ever been, as boxes and trunks were loaded onto the carriages behind him.

“What does she even talk about over tea?” he hissed at Juan where he stood leaning against one of the coaches' wheels.

“It generally starts with family and social connections. We're already well rehearsed on that in preparation of this very thing.”

“Then what?” Chris asked, spinning on his heel to pace the other direction.

“It's the upper class,” Juan grumbled. “They're not much deeper than a common mud puddle and they rather like to talk about themselves. I'll guide the conversation in a manner that offers them plenty of opportunity to boast about their own accomplishments and within the hour, we'll be back on our way. Believe me when I tell you society can spend far more than an hour gloating about themselves.”

Maria seemed just as calm as Juan was about the whole endeavor, but he couldn't swallow the sinking sensation that this might all go terribly wrong. Her High Dutch wasn't good. What if someone there knew the language? Or what if they insisted on speaking exclusively in Latin? Or what if Maria forgot the name of a family member she was supposed to memorize and mispronounced it?

She was only confident because she'd managed to pull the wool over Captain Cook's eyes, but he was a man who'd spent his entire life at sea. He wasn't a part of society. These were the kinds of people who actively sought flaws in one another for

fun. The smallest slip could give her away as an imposter, and then what?

Would they hang her? Flog her? Line them all up to be shot in the street for masquerading as royalty?

“Chris,” Cece said gently, “it’ll be alright. We’ve all been practicing for this very thing.”

He ran a hand roughly through his hair, stealing a glance at the black carriage across the street where Lady Dunmore was preparing to return to the palace to wait for them. “I don’t like it. Couldn’t we just... ignore the invitation? There’s nothing written that says a duchess *has* to accept, is there? Doesn’t her title set her above the company?”

Juan shook his head. “That’s the royal governor’s wife, the highest ranking woman in these colonies. To have accepted the invitation and then jilt her would be a grave offense that might make Maria suspicious where she wouldn’t have been otherwise. We may well find ourselves being stopped before we can get away from Williamsburg to be questioned far more extensively than we would over tea. Calm down. You’re making a scene.”

Chris stopped his pacing and glanced again at the dark carriage.

“What if she’s already found fault in her? What if she saw her and recognized she wasn’t the duchess and is luring us all to the palace to place us under arrest?”

“Oye,” Maria grabbed his arm to stop his fidgeting, “she hasn’t. She was very kind to us all and didn’t seem to have a vicious bone in her body. You’re making this more than it is. We’ve all been practicing these roles and how to answer questions about ourselves for more than a week. We’ll be fine.” She motioned to the wig and feathered cap on her head. “We’re not dressed up like this so we can be ignored, *mi amor*.”

Lilly and Jim, *one of them* looking as worried as he was, stepped out of the dress shop, Izzy skipping happily between them in her new cream dress with blue ribbons and a matching bonnet.

Jim shook his head as he made eye contact with Chris. “I take it from your face, ye’ bout’ as happy about this as I am?”

He nodded. “This is my nightmare.”

“Y’ain’t gotta tell me that, buddy.” He narrowed his eyes at Lilly. “Yuns couldn’t just shut up, buy the dresses and get on with ye’ business. Ye’ had to stand there jackin’ yer jaws and now look where it’s got us.”

“Oh, hush.” Lilly waved a hand dismissively before adjusting her lace cap. “You forget I was a part of society for twenty-three years before our plane crashed. It can’t be much different in this time than it is in ours. We’ll be out of there in no time.”

He crossed his arms with a huff. “Don’t like tea, don’t want no damn tea. The hell am I gonna’ do at *tea*?”

“Actually,” Juan said, massaging his chin, “the two of you won’t have to join us. I won’t have the need for a valet during such a short visit, and we can tell Lady Dunmore the child was exhausted and remained behind with her governess.”

“We’re *all* exhausted,” Chris argued, motioning to Maria’s reddened eyes. “She can hardly keep herself awake as it is.”

“Fatigue will be useful in getting us swiftly out of there,” Juan assured him. “It will also be an excuse for any slips in etiquette.”

Maria groaned and motioned to the carriage door. “We will be fine. This is exactly what we’ve all been practicing for. One of you come and open this door for me so we don’t keep the *highest ranking woman in these colonies* waiting, eh? Let’s just get it over with so we can get on with our lives.”



Two footmen greeted them inside the palace gates, opening the carriage door to allow Juan and Dario to step out and assist Maria and Cece out of the coach. Jack and Chris hopped down from the driver’s bench to stand as dutiful servants awaiting their orders.

Lady Dunmore stood ahead of the entrance with a younger woman, a bright smile on her face when Maria's eyes met hers.

She wore a soft yellow gown, lined with intricate flowered embroidery, and in place of a wig, she'd applied powder to her copper hair, bits of its brilliance shining in the sunlight close to her scalp as she bowed before Maria.

"Your Grace," she said, a Scottish accent making her words come out in a gentle song, "t'is an honor to have you for tea. I've sent word for His Lordship to join us. He should be along any moment now."

Maria returned the curtsy with just as much poise as the countess, slipping seamlessly into her Austrian accent. "Lady Dunmore, it is *my* honor to have been invited. I must apologize if I am out of sorts. We haven't had much sleep these past few days after being at sea for so long."

"You may call me Charlotte," she said, extending both hands for Maria to take. "Having recently made the long journey myself, I know your fatigue all too well, my dear. You'll have nay judgment from me. I hardly knew my own name when I reached the shore. My apologies for detaining you when you are so weary, but you've no idea how few guests pass through these colonies that are worth receiving. I promise I'll not keep you long."

Still holding Maria's hands in hers, she glanced at the carriage. "Your daughter will not be joining us?"

Maria shook her head. "Unfortunately, no. She was far too tired to keep her wits about her and I wouldn't want to burden your governess with a cranky child."

"It would have been nay burden at all." She beamed at her. "My word, Your Grace, you are even more stunning than I've heard it told!"

Maria giggled sweetly, raising their joined hands to inspect the countess's appearance. "As are you, Lady Charlotte. The officers on the dock informed me that I would be in much better company with you than Lady Carroll." She leaned scandalously in. "I daresay I might agree. These men may have to pry me from you before the day is done. I must know where you've had

this dress made so I might have one of my own before I return to Parma!”

Chris’s shoulders eased for a moment at their light-hearted exchange, but they stiffened once more when the Lady presented her companion. “Your Grace, this is my dearest cousin, come to visit me all the way from Aboyne, Lady Mary Douglas Gordon.”

Lady Gordon bowed graciously, but it was the scrupulous look on her face that made Chris stiffen as she met Cece’s gaze. “You must be Doña Cecelia. My cousin mentioned you were an old family friend of the Carrolls. I know them well. Pray, what is your family name?”

Cece smiled sweetly and bowed her head, showing far more elegance than Lady Gordon in her practiced manners. “Lady Gordon. My family name is Stuart, from Wexford. My father hunted stag with the Carrolls every year.”

“Your Grace!” a thick Scottish voice called, turning everyone’s attention to a heavysset man hurrying in from near the stables. “Apologies for my late arrival!”

Approaching, he removed his tricorne hat, bowing his head before Maria to show hints of bright orange hair peeking out from beneath his powdered wig. “Welcome to our home.”

She offered a much more delicate tilt of her head. “Thank you, Lord Dunmore. I do apologize that I will not be able to stay for your ball. I’ve only just arrived and the whole town is talking of little else. It sounds like it is to be quite the celebration.”

Lord Dunmore returned his hat and smiled, his cheeks reddened from the exertion of his jog. “Perhaps you might be persuaded over tea. My wife can be quite convincing.” He turned to Juan. “Don Juan! We’ve met before, you and I, although I doubt you’ll recall.”

Juan inclined his head. “In St. Augustine. I recall it well.”

Lord Dunmore’s pudgy cheeks lifted with his surprised grin. “I could hardly forget that exquisite ship of your father’s. It was such a magnificent vessel, to be sure! I meant to ask him its

name but he left before I was able. It belonged to a king, did it not?"

"Aye," Dario said with a proud smile. "She belonged to King Phillip of Spain some time ago. The São Salvador was her name then, though my father has yet to rename her."

At this, Cece's posture slipped, and she grabbed hold of Juan's arm for support. Thankfully, all eyes moved to her so no one noticed Jack's almost identical reaction beside him.

Juan frowned, moving a palm over Cece's forehead. "Are you alright, my dear?"

She straightened quickly and smoothed her hands over her skirts with a deep breath. "I... I'm so sorry. I think I'm feeling a bit faint."

Chris had never seen Cece have two panic attacks in the same day, but by the sudden lack of color in her cheeks, he wondered if she was on the verge of another.

It was a bad idea to come here.

This plan and all its careful plotting was crumbling before it'd even gotten off the ground... just as he'd predicted it could.

"Let's get you both into the parlor," Lady Dunmore said without a hint of criticism as she curled Cece's arm in hers. "I was in much the same condition my first days on land after I made the trip. I could hardly stand on my feet at all without tipping over, accustomed as I'd become to the movement beneath them."

"Come, gentlemen." Lord Dunmore placed a sturdy hand on both Juan and Dario's shoulders. "Let us leave our ladies to tea and I'll show you the grounds. Do you hunt?"

He wasn't sure which was more concerning, the fact that Cece and Jack were falling apart or that Lord Dunmore was intent on separating Juan and Dario from Maria. They were supposed to direct conversation away from her... She couldn't hold her own without them... Could she?

"It's been some time since I've had the opportunity," Juan answered, allowing Lord Dunmore to turn them in the opposite direction despite his evident concern for Cece's condition. "I'm

versed in much more primitive hunting techniques from my time spent with the Paiute tribe. Dario is far more proficient with a long rifle than I am.”

He glanced over his shoulder at Chris. “Mind the horses and check in on Doña Cecelia once they’re watered. We’ll need to be on our way within the hour if we’re to make Lord Carroll’s ball.”

“Of course, sir,” Chris answered, all-too-aware of Jack’s impending meltdown beside him. He wasn’t entirely sure Jack had heard a single word spoken since whatever Juan said had set both him and Cecelia off.

His anxiety near its boiling point, he waited until both the women and the men had disappeared beyond earshot before he spun to face Jack. “What the hell was that about?”

“The ship’s name,” Jack managed through shaking breaths, “São Salvador. We have to go back.”

“Go back?”

Jack nodded, running a hand hard over his face as he stared off in the direction the men had headed. “Do you remember the research Cece and Alaina were doing when they thought I would die in this century? The ship that burst suddenly into flames just off the coast of Charleston in 1775? Its name was São Salvador. I have to get to them before that can happen.”

Chris’s heart sank in his chest. “How?”

Jack paced in front of the carriage, stopping to look up at Tomás where he still sat in the driver’s seat. “It took us, what? A little over a week and a half to sail from South Carolina here? It would’ve been less had we not stopped... Dario said they’ll be coming around Cape Horn right about now. There’s time for me to get to them before they can reach Charleston, isn’t there?”

Tomás nodded slowly, confused by the direction of conversation since he was unaware of their time traveling history. “I suppose you could, if you had the right vessel to take you there.”

Jack paced back toward Chris. “There were at least seven ships in the harbor when we came in.” He stopped, balancing

his thumbnail between his teeth as he thought. "I counted three British warships. Surely they can move fast enough to get me there. What if I said there was a ship coming from the south loaded with weaponry intended for the rebel cause... What if I explained that they'd taken my wife and children captive... Do you think I could persuade the British to take me to her? Desperate as they are to stop this war, wouldn't they be willing to pursue a threat like that?"

Chris frowned and shook his head. "You may very well *cause* the fire with such a story. Those warships didn't exactly stop to ask questions when they approached a potential enemy. They fired upon them. And given how much gunpowder is down in that hull..."

"No, you're right." Jack propped his fists on his hips and gazed down the trail toward Williamsburg. "There's gold on those carriages. I could pay a merchant to take me south. I should be able to catch up to them near Florida and warn them long before the fire can start."

Chris was torn between concern for Alaina and the babies and concern for Maria and his own child beyond the palace walls. Jack seemed intent to walk back to Yorktown that very moment, the rest of their plans be damned. And what the hell kind of suspicion would that raise if a servant suddenly abandoned his post? "What about Bennet?"

"To hell with Bennet," Jack spat. "I can't just leave my family on a ship I know is about to burn. I never should've left them in the first place."

Chris stepped forward to block the path out of the palace grounds, forcing Jack's eyes to meet his. "I doubt Juan and Dario are going to be as anxious to turn back when they've been plotting to kill the correct Albrecht ancestor for twenty years. What if, while we're out there trying to stop a fire, they find him and kill him? What about our plans to stop them?"

Jack's voice was eerily steady as he informed him, "I'm going to save my wife and children. The rest of you can do whatever you want. I can't—*won't*—allow them to burn."

"You can't just go marching off on your own," Chris insisted, setting his feet. "We have time still if they're in Cape

Horn. Let's just get through this tea and we'll all think of something once we're safely out of the way of the palace. Maybe we can talk them all into turning back, delay the hunt for Bennet altogether."

Taking a deep breath, Jack glanced back toward palace doors. "You're making the assumption they can get through this tea without exposing themselves. Did you see Cece? She looked like she was on the verge of hyperventilation. And Maria's accent slipped several times. This whole thing is a mess. I can't afford to be put on trial for colluding with imposters if things go badly in there."

"Neither can I," Chris assured him. "You and I need to think clearly now more than ever. We can't just go storming off on our own missions. There's too much at stake. We'd intended to get information out of whatever soldiers could be found here before we met Colonel Howe. If we can find out Bennet's location now, maybe we can pull off both rescue missions separately. Why don't you go and chat with the men at the gates while I listen in on whatever's happening in the parlor? Then, once we survive this fucking nightmare, we'll figure out who's going back for Alaina with you."

Reluctantly, Jack let his shoulders ease. "I can't help you if I do find out anything. You know I have to take care of my own."

Chris nodded. "As I have to take care of mine. We'll figure this out, I promise. Just... help me get through this next hour first."

At the bow of Jack's head, Chris spun on his heel and marched toward the palace doors.

With each step, he envisioned all the ways Alaina's ship might catch fire. He'd loved her so immensely once he would've run straight into those flames to see her safe. Much as a part of him wanted to do so now, that was Jack's job, and he had someone else to save from an entirely different fire. If Dario and Juan intended to continue on to Carter's, he couldn't very well let them go without him. There was too much waiting for him there should his message have made it, and he'd already chosen wrong on far too many occasions when faced with a

decision between Maria and Alaina. He would not make those same mistakes again.

The doorman allowed him straight inside and motioned to the parlor just to the left of the foyer. Close enough he could hear their voices, he took a post outside the door, one hand rested on the hilt of his sword.

“I remember when news of your engagement to the duke reached us,” Lady Dunmore was saying. “It was rumored that the betrothal did not come as happy news for you as you’d been expecting a proposal from Prince Charles instead. Forgive my forwardness in prying, but... has it gotten easier for you?”

This was far from the endless smalltalk he’d been expecting them to be wading through so early into the visit. The hopeful inflection in the woman’s voice made him think this question had little to do with the duchess’s wellbeing and more to do with her own marital affairs. Based on Juan’s recounting of his brief introduction to Lord Dunmore, he imagined any woman might find themselves unhappy in their marriage to such a man.

Luckily, Maria had rehearsed her response to these sorts of questions as well. Few things were really known about the Duchess of Parma aside from her unwillingness to marry the duke and this part of her story was easy to put together. “It would be impertinent to speak unkindly of a man so great as my husband or to acknowledge a union that never came to fruition. I will say only that the duke and I have established a good, strong partnership with one another and produced two children we couldn’t be more pleased with.”

“Is there love?” Lady Dunmore asked, the same desperate lilt appearing in her voice.

Maria laughed. “I know of very few—my dear friend Cecelia, excluded, of course—who have married for love and prospered in life as a result.”

“But you *were* in love with the prince,” the far less tactful Lady Gordon inquired. “I daresay that would’ve been a *very* prosperous union. Would it not?”

“I was not yet a woman then,” Maria mended. “I merely dreamt of love as a result of his flirtations. Had he asked for my hand instead, there is no certainty anything more would have flourished between us. Romanticizing about such things would be feckless when I’ve a husband far more deserving of my attention.”

At that, Lady Gordon diverted her interrogation to the woman she seemed far more interested in probing. “Tell me, Doña Cecelia, do you play an instrument?”

“I never developed an ear for it,” Cece answered cheerily. “My sister, however, is a proficient pianist. Were she born a male, I’m certain she’d be infamous for her ear.”

“Does your sister remain in Wexford?”

“No, she married several years before I did and now resides in Cumbria with her husband and their two children. You may know them, James and Mary Lowther?”

“I’ve heard of them, yes,” the woman said dismissively. “You’ve no children of your own?”

“No.” Cece remained patient, her words carefully thought out before she spoke them. “We did not marry for the sake of creating a family. Strange as it may sound, Juan and I are content to travel the world with one another. If children result from our union, we shall welcome them happily. If not, we will be just as satisfied with our lives.”

“That is very romantic,” Lady Dunmore swooned. “No wonder you could not bear to part from her, Your Grace. I could listen to such romance for days! Tell me, my dear, are you feeling quite well? You still seem so very pale.”

“After so long spent in the unforgiving sun, I wish that were true,” Cece bantered. “As it is, I fear my complexion might never recover from my time on the ship. And please don’t worry about my wellbeing. I’m only tired. I will sleep plenty once we arrive in Mount Clare.”

A man in uniform joined Chris in the foyer, interrupting his eavesdropping as he cleared his throat and addressed him in a hushed tone. “You serve as a guard in Parma, correct?”

Chris adjusted his spine and transformed into his practiced part. “No, sir. I am under Don Juan’s employ. I’ve been instructed to watch over Her Grace for as long as she travels with us.”

“You’ve not met Her Grace before then?” the man asked, his bushy brows creasing as he inspected Chris’s attire.

A familiar sinking feeling—reminiscent of his time spent playing this very part in Tahiti—crept up his chest as he shook his head. “No, sir. We first encountered her in Bath and she has journeyed with us since.”

This part of their narrative was Chris’s idea and served as a failsafe. If Maria were found out, he could feign ignorance and hope he would not be arrested alongside her if she were detained. His freedom would allow him an opportunity to try to free her should they find themselves in a worst-case scenario.

He raised his brows at the man. “Why do you ask?”

The man shrugged and peered into the parlor. “Seems a bit strange, don’t you think? For a woman of her position to travel so far without her husband? And to the colonies, no less.”

Chris smiled. “I’ve never known a member of society who did not seem a bit strange.”

The man nodded and laughed. “Neither have I, lad. Neither have I.” He took a much more casual stance then, leaning against the far wall, his gaze still lingering on the open doorway. “You’d do well to keep your eyes on your employer’s purse, nonetheless, during your travels.”

“You think she might be an imposter?” Chris asked, attempting to sound genuinely surprised by this.

Again, the man raised his shoulders. “Like I said, it is a peculiar thing for her to be here unaccompanied. I’m an old man though and could just as well be disillusioned by my more traditional views on marital customs. It’s no secret her marriage to the duke is an unhappy one on both accounts. Perhaps the duke sent her away so he could explore... more happy alternatives. I’ve heard of men doing such things these days.”

Chris nodded, faking suspicion as he glanced in the direction of the parlor. Spinning back, he bowed his head as an obedient servant would before a man who evidently outranked him. "I've not asked for your name, sir."

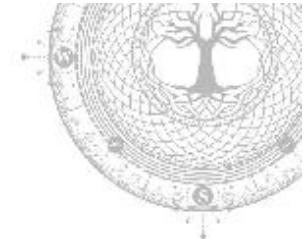
"Nor have I given it, my boy. Lord Charles Gordon. Forgive my interruption and my tardiness. I suppose His Lordship has taken your employer on a tour of the grounds while our wives exchange useless pleasantries?"

"Yes, my Lord," Chris said, keeping his head bent before him. "He mentioned something about hunting."

Lord Gordon sighed. "Doubtless he'll have them firing upon some poor beast in the yard and stall your journey that much further. I'll collect them straight away. You'll hardly make it to Mount Clare in time for your party as it is. Good day to you, Mr...?"

"Grace, my Lord. Christopher Grace."

He let out a soft chuckle. "Good day to you, then, Mr. Grace. You keep your eyes open, eh?"



Chapter Nine

Cecelia

It was a daunting task to play the role of nobility with my thoughts so centered around my sister and her children.

Over and over, I saw her ship go up in flames as I smiled in the face of the repugnant Lady Gordon's scrutiny.

I'd taken great efforts in my life to avoid people like her, the ones who took joy in ridiculing others. You could see it in her eyes, almost immediately, she wanted to make the people around her as insecure as she was—wanted some kind of drama that could bring excitement and a sense of importance to her otherwise boring life.

Having spent four years in a sorority, I knew the type well enough. Freshman year, I'd very nearly left the house because of two Mary-Gordon-type seniors who got a kick out of taunting what should've been their sisters. In the end, though, I'd felt sorry for them, and learned it was easy enough to skirt their unwanted harassment by giving them a platform to show off their self-appointed superiority.

Lady Gordon was no different.

The moment I'd asked her about her home in Aboyne, she'd taken the bait and began her gloating marathon, allowing me a moment to catch my breath and consider what needed to happen once we left the palace.

We needed to find George Bennet, but I couldn't very well do so with the knowledge my sister and her children might burn in a fire somewhere in the Atlantic.

It didn't matter that history would change. I wouldn't dare damn my sister to a set of memories where she'd watched her children be burned alive.

Then again, Jack wouldn't either. I'd seen his own reaction to the ship's name and I knew he'd be struggling with the same visions I was.

He would surely abandon whatever plans he had of his own in order to save her from the same torment. But what about me? Would it be enough to simply know he would go after her or would I need to see her safety for myself?

It was February 1st. I had been intent to find George Bennet before March so Juan would know exactly where to find us on the other timeline before the next storm.

The two of us had spent quite a bit of time planning out our reunion in the alternate reality we'd soon be returned to.

Assuming we found Bennet before the storm could return in March, it would only make sense that my group would wake up with their memories of this place while still in Tahiti if they'd never run into Juan's father.

Under the assumption that Chris and Maria would still be frightened into an early escape from the future by Terrence's investigation, we determined I *should* be in Tahiti with them waiting for the storm.

Juan would have plenty of time to figure out my movements before then, but since he needed to be in Tahiti to provide the boat that would take everyone home, I prayed nothing about my experience changed. I didn't want to wake without him.

If Juan and I left to save my sister, could we trust the others to see the task completed in time for such a reunion?

I knew Chris well enough to know he wouldn't pull the trigger on Bennet, not with the child growing in Maria's belly. If anything, I was becoming more convinced he'd take steps to prevent us from changing our history if he was able.

Jim had never fully accepted the morality of what we were setting out to do, and I couldn't imagine him or Lilly murdering a soul, even if they wanted Anna back.

Which left Dario...

Much as he was determined to be returned to a different life, I didn't think he had the mind to locate Bennet before March. Dario was a doer, not a thinker... and even with the payroll roster and an exact location, Dario's paranoia might hinder him when it came to seeking him out.

Juan was the single person who I knew could see the task done... and I couldn't bear the thought of being apart from him when we had so little time left to spend together before the fourteen year gap he'd wait through before that March reunion could happen.

"Doña Cecelia," Lady Dunmore said, snapping me out of my stupor to find her maid holding the teapot just over my cup, "would you care for some more tea?"

I blinked and smiled, then glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner. We'd somehow managed to play our parts for nearly an hour and would be on our way to safety soon enough. "No, thank you. My husband will likely be here any minute to rush us out the door. You know how men can be when they've a schedule they wish to stick to."

She smiled. "Aye. They are always in a hurry to get where they're going, then, just as hurried to get on with the trip back once they've arrived. I daresay the world would run at a much slower pace if a woman was allowed to dictate its schedule."

For a moment, this made me think of my frantic, hurried pace in the 21st century, rushing to finish a book or a paper, speeding to the clinic to open it in time, eating dinner on the car ride home so I'd have time to squeeze in a few more hours of study... Women had come so very far since the days of sitting quietly in a parlor while men handled business for us. We'd demanded our voices be heard and refused to go quiet. In doing so, we established ourselves as, not just equals among men, but pioneers, visionaries—leaders—across a previously male-dominated workforce. I so frequently forgot to sit back and simply appreciate the rewards of the world countless women before me had worked so hard to make sure I'd have. I couldn't remember the last time I'd sat still and enjoyed whatever company I was with without a million other thoughts of what I had to do next whirring through my brain.

Even now, my mind was spinning. I was thinking of Alaina and the ship and those awful images of a dock. Were they somehow connected?

“Shall we take a walk through the gardens then?” she asked. “Perhaps we will chance upon our hurried men while taking in a bit of fresh air.”

“I do not know how you can call them gardens, Charlotte,” Lady Gordon tittered, plucking up a lemon biscuit. “This place is far too small for a proper garden and I doubt Her Grace will be much impressed with what little gardens are available here. When will your other home be ready?”

Lady Dunmore blushed as she watched Maria for signs of judgment. “I know it is small for a palace. It was never intended to be our permanent residence, Your Grace. I hadn’t planned to bring the children here until construction on our estate in Warm Springs was completed.” She laughed nervously. “But when your husband requires you to join him, you do so... at the hurried pace he dictates on your behalf. My apologies it’s not so grand as what you’re likely accustomed to.”

Maria rose, prompting Lady Dunmore and myself to do so as well, the rustling of our too large skirts filling the parlor. “It is a lovely home and I would be delighted to see its gardens,” Maria assured her, raising her chin to look down her nose at Lady Gordon. “What is the size of a house when we all spend so much of our time in one or two of its rooms? It is not the house which makes a home, it is the host, and I find nothing about this palace lacking.”

Lady Dunmore smiled proudly, but before we could all turn toward the foyer, its archway was filled by our men, their boots coated with mud.

Everything in my body relaxed at the sight of them.

Juan held his hat under one arm, his wig slightly lopsided as he bowed his head. “My apologies, Lady Dunmore. You are too kind to have invited us into your home this day, and I am saddened to have to leave it so soon. Had we not accepted the Carroll’s invitation, I surely would insist on remaining in Williamsburg. I must repay you a visit when we’ve more time.

I'm anxious to join His Lordship on a hunt after seeing his impressive game pantry."

Lady Dunmore's smile was a sad one as she took Maria's hands in hers once more. "Oh, I do so wish you could stay, Your Grace. May I write to you at Mount Clare? Perhaps I might find an excuse to bring you back to us sooner. I may even be tempted to throw another ball in your honor if only to see you again that much sooner. It has been so lovely to host company such as yourselves."

"Of course," Maria beamed, leaning in to kiss each of her cheeks. "I will look forward to receiving your letter. Perhaps we can arrange for your seamstress to visit upon my return. I have grown bored with fashion in Parma and would love to have a few more exotic pieces from the colonies to show off at home."

"I will certainly arrange it, Your Grace!"

I waited my turn to be so kissed by both Lady Dunmore and Lady Gordon, and I let out a breath of relief when Juan at last took my arm in his.

"Are you alright?" he whispered as we moved toward the doorway.

"Not yet," I answered under my breath, counting my steps until we were once again outside in the sunlight.

While I'd been too preoccupied with concern for my sister to be worried about our acting skills during the visit, I realized the weight of it had been sitting heavily on my shoulders all the same, creating an ache in the center of my spine throughout the whole visit.

With the carriage in view, that ache eased a little. We'd made it safely through our first test.

Or so I thought.

A final round of embraces and goodbyes was being issued next to the coach when a man—Lord Gordon, I presumed by Lady Gordon's previous description of him—said something in High Dutch to Maria.

All of us stiffened as we watched her for a response.

“You speak High Dutch,” she answered with a surprised grin. “Where on earth did you learn my native tongue, Lord Gordon?”

With his dark brow raised dubiously, he answered her in the same language.

In my peripherals, I saw Chris’s fingers tighten around his sword.

I felt like I was caught in a vise, my entire body trapped in its grip and being squeezed slowly to death. There was nothing I could do but watch as the encounter either put an end to everything we were setting out to do or sent us on our way.

It seemed like a small eternity passed before Maria responded in the same language, smiling proudly as this seemed to satisfy the old imbecile.

“I do look forward to your return, Your Grace,” he said in English this time, stepping back to stand beside his wife. “Perhaps we *will* hold a ball to celebrate it.”



None of us spoke as the carriage moved us away from the palace. When the horses slowed, signaling we were a safe enough distance away from Williamsburg to rejoin the captain and our remaining party, we all finally looked at each other, surprised to find we were unscathed after all.

Exiting the coach and taking a deep breath of the pine trees surrounding us, I met Jack’s worried stare and was reminded again of Alaina’s predicament.

“Jesus Christ,” Chris hissed, jumping down from the driver’s box to pull Maria into his arms. “What the hell did he say to you?”

Maria shook her head. “I don’t know what the first part was, but the second was, *‘I learned during my time in Paris.’* So I answered with, *‘I do love to speak my own language. Perhaps I should visit Paris next.’* At least... I *hope* that’s what I said.”

“Never again,” Chris said, tightening his hold around her as he shouted at no one in particular. “You hear me? She will never be used as the duchess ever again. Navarro will have to come up with something else until we reach Carter’s.”

Maria didn’t fight his embrace, but tucked herself into it, her sunken posture making it seem like all the energy she had in her body had been depleted by our visit and she was just barely remaining conscious.

An odd knowingness fell over me for the second I stood there inspecting her—a familiar understanding of pregnancy fatigue—as if I’d experienced it once before and could recognize the weight of it in her stance.

“Well?” Jim hollered, hopping out of the second carriage to pull my mind back to the present predicament. “Yuns didn’t get hanged. That’s somethin’. What happened?”

“There’s no time to recount it,” Jack said, scanning the trail around us. “We have a problem.”

I nodded, forcing all thoughts of a remembered pregnancy far away. “We have to go back for Alaina.”

“Go back?” Jim scoffed, glancing past us toward the trail that led into Williamsburg. “And do that all over again?”

“Juan Josef’s ship’s name is São Salvador,” I said, then watched as Jim and Lilly slowly remembered why that was relevant.

“Shit,” they both said in unison.

Juan frowned at me. “This means something? The ship’s name?”

I nodded. “It’s going to catch fire near Charleston. I found it in one of our history books when I was trying to figure out how Jack might die.”

He frowned. “I recall you mentioning a ship fire, but you never told me its name. Would that you had and we might’ve done something differently.”

Something differently...

I thought back to the night of the party at Ohio State... Juan had specified that we *all* needed to get off the ship. He'd said '*What your sister is afraid of won't happen if you all get off the ship.*' I thought he'd been referring to Jack's death, but now I wondered if he wasn't referencing the fire. Was I getting memories of another life because we hadn't properly heeded his warning?

"What do we do now?" I asked, my mind spinning in every direction.

"I'm going to get them," Jack assured me, pulling the ancestry chart from his pocket and handing it to me. "Their dates haven't changed. That has to mean we'll stop it in time, right?"

"We should *all* go with him," Chris said, still holding onto Maria tightly. "We'll come back as a group to search for Bennet once we know everyone is safe."

Dario frowned. "Are you mad? We can't *all* go back when we're this close to finding Bennet! What if we can get to him long before any fire can erupt in the first place? No, we go on to Carter's as planned and we get that roster."

Jack shook his head. "You all can do what you want. I only ask for enough gold to buy my way onto a ship headed in that direction and a horse to get me to the docks. You don't need me for what you're doing." He motioned to the rebel footmen and maid occupying the third carriage. "You have plenty of people to serve as guards in my place."

Captain Navarro, whose wagons were stopped farther up the road was strolling down the trail in our direction. A decision needed to be made quickly.

"Take what you need then," Dario countered. "The rest of our plans should go unchanged. Any lives lost will be restored," he looked at Juan, his auburn brows high on his forehead, "that's what father said in his letter. Please, brother, we are too close to alter our course now. Whatever happens will be undone the very moment we find Bennet. The fire cannot harm them if we prevent them from ever being there. We cannot detour now. Not when we are this close."

Juan looked from me to Dario to Jack to Captain Navarro and back. “What do you want to do, dove?”

I chewed my lower lip. “If we go back for them, there’s no certainty we’ll find each other in March. But I’m not sure saving a few more months of searching for one another is worth my sister waking with memories of her children burning.”

“And what about him?” Juan asked, tilting his chin in the direction of Captain Navarro.

In my panic-ridden state, I’d forgotten about the weapons. If we all abandoned this plan, Navarro would have no cover story. He would be forced to travel miles and miles with carriages full of weaponry and no guests to account for them. What would happen to America’s history if such a successful weapons dealer were detained?

Did it matter if we changed it all?

Would anything we did matter?

Obviously, something would, if Juan was able to show up in my memories. By all reasonable logic, Bennet himself shouldn’t remain dead if Juan’s family had never traveled through the storm, but somehow he had for Juan to be a part of my past. This meant there was no certainty of what would and wouldn’t be undone by our actions.

Time, as far as any of us knew it, was unpredictable.

If we abandoned Navarro, might we wake up in a world where the rebels had lost the war?

“Dario could go with Jack,” Juan said to me when I gave no answer. “They could take Tomás and Gabriel. The rest of us could continue on our search with a copy of the ancestry chart so you would know your sister is safe.”

“I am not going anywhere,” Dario spat hatefully.

Juan ignored this, keeping his eyes on me as he lowered his voice to speak between us. “For all we know, she and my father have already discussed the fire and are taking measures themselves to escape it. I am confident, should you and I continue forward, we will be able to find Bennet before March. If we do, there’s no certainty your sister will even make it to

Charleston to be part of that fire. I do not have as much confidence in any other among us to see it done in time.”

Slowly, I nodded, stealing a glance at the ancestry chart and the unchanged dates beside each name. As long as I had that, I would know she was alright. And Juan was right. His father was a smart man and there were plenty of notes with that ship’s name on it left behind in our cabin. Perhaps they’d already come to the same realization we had. Maybe they weren’t even on the ship anymore and a rescue mission would only serve to hinder our cause.

Feeling slightly less panicked, I moved my attention to Chris. Sure, he had to still care about my sister after ten years of being married to her, but something told me his eagerness to have us all turn back had little to do with their past. He’d already lost a child, and I could tell by the way he clung to Maria, he was hoping not to lose another. I’d been right in my assumption he’d take steps to prevent what we were setting out to do.

Where I’d been worried about Jack altering our plans, I should’ve been far more concerned about what Chris might do instead. Perhaps he was the reason I was getting images of another life.

“Okay,” I whispered to Juan. “We’ll do it your way.”

With a kiss to my brow, Juan moved to debate with Dario about his role in the sudden changed course, and I turned to Chris. “I’m gonna make a handwritten copy of this ancestry chart like we did before to keep with us so we’ll know they’re safe. If you want to go with Jack, we won’t try to stop you.”

Chris still had a tight grip around Maria as he glanced beyond me to Juan and then Jack before letting out a long breath. “If you’re going to keep looking, you’ll need someone in the second carriage. We’ll have to stay with you.”

Of course, I thought, how else would he be able to stop us otherwise? How *would* he have stopped us if we had agreed to all join Jack?

I moved my attention to Lilly where she and Jim had joined our small circle to listen in. “What about you two?”

Lilly sighed and moved a hand over Izzy's hair where she held her new doll tightly against her chest. "Lainey is my best friend in the world, and as much as I would love to go riding off to her rescue, I can't very well take our Izzy back through Williamsburg and Yorktown now that she could be recognized as the duchess's daughter. *I* might end up hanged for kidnapping."

Jim winked at me and tapped the strap that held the automatic rifle hidden beneath his cloak. "Ain't nobody gettin' hanged if I got somethin' to say about it. These people won't know what hit 'em when I come out the woods lookin' like Rambo blastin' 'em redcoats to bits with this thing. Hell, I might even win this war 'for it starts!"

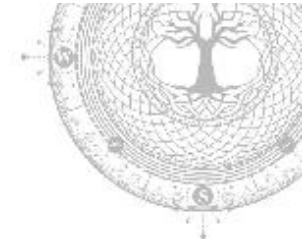
Lilly rolled her eyes. "You and that gun, I swear to God." Her gaze met mine. "If me and Iz weren't in the room with him at night, he'd be snuggled up beside it."

Jim snickered. "Ye' knew what I was long before ye' married me, Cupcake. You don't give a man from the south a gun like 'is and expect him not to get attached to it. Besides, you'll sure as shit be glad I have it if we find ourselves in a pickle we cain't get out of."

"Speaking of," Chris said, finally letting Maria out of his stranglehold, "I'm not entirely sure Lord Gordon isn't collecting evidence this very minute to make a case for Maria's arrest. We don't know what he said to her, and he was suspicious of her before we even arrived at the palace. We need to get her far away from here."

I glanced up the trail where Jack, Tomás, and Gabriel were already loading their separate horses. Dario was arguing adamantly against leaving, his face red where he and Juan stood toe to toe beyond them.

"I'll go make a copy of this chart now so we can be on our way."



Chapter Ten

Alaina

“There’s something I wish to show you now,” Juan said, leaning against the door to watch as I slid a fresh linen beneath Zachary’s bottom. “Where is your friend?”

“I haven’t seen Bruce all day,” I snarled, wrestling to keep Zachary’s legs still long enough for me to fold and pin the diaper while also keeping one eye on Cecelia as she rolled onto her back. “Whatever you want to show me will have to wait.”

“I didn’t ask where he was because I wanted a babysitter,” he snarked. “The babies should get accustomed to this too.”

Caught off guard by his reference to my children, I looked over at him, which proved a mistake as Zachary kicked his way out of the diaper. “Accustomed to what?”

Massaging his beard, he pushed off the door and meandered to the foot of the bed. “I’ve been thinking about this slave ship of yours. If its captain’s name is to end up on our master’s log of deaths, we must be prepared for a potentially hostile interaction. You and these babies need someplace to hide should we find *any* vessel approaching, at least until I know it is safe. Besides, I was too quick to dismiss you when you mentioned being afraid of this crew. I want to show you where the secret chamber is hidden so you may use it at your will.”

I shoved one leg out to prevent Cecelia from rolling off the bed and caught Zachary’s fist where he attempted to grab hold of the diaper. Juan let out a soft chuckle. “Would you like me to help you first?”

“No,” I snapped, folding the diaper with a renewed sense of determination to prove myself capable.

While the prospect of an extra set of hands might've been appealing considering Cecelia's newfound talent for rolling at superhuman speed, I didn't want *his* hands anywhere near my children. Whatever little bits of peace the two of us had made in our time together would not be enough for me to allow him to play a role in their upbringing, even one so small as helping me change a diaper.

Panting once I'd at last secured the pin, I adjusted Zachary's thicker, pelt-lined dress—one I'd haphazardly sewn after waking in the cold—and peered back up at Juan. “What do you mean, secret chamber? I poked around in those passageways several times after you escaped—we all did. No one ever found any *secret chambers*.”

He grinned. “I should hope not, my dear. King Phillip was a very strategic man. He wanted to travel the world privately and sleep peacefully while doing it. His chambers were constructed in such a way that even should his means of moving about the ship be discovered, he, himself, could remain hidden.”

I towed Cecelia back to the center of the bed beside her brother, much to her delight. She immediately rolled onto her back with an airy grunt, then onto her stomach again in the direction of the edge of the bed.

“Is it safe?” I asked, turning her back the opposite direction. “For the babies, I mean. When I went exploring your pathways, I could hardly breathe in there for the dampness. I don't want their little lungs getting full of mold.”

“It's safe,” he assured me. “You don't need to go into those passageways at all to get there. This bedroom served as his primary quarters and the hideaway was connected so he could easily slip into it should the need arise.”

I frowned up at him. “I turned this cabin over looking for secret compartments when you told me about the English gold—even more so after you took off. You're telling me I've spent all these months in this room and never found a whole separate part of it?”

His smirk enraged me. “Intelligent as you are, my dear, it surprised me that you never found it odd that I'd picked the finest quarters on the ship to house my captives in. I put you

here because its hideaway was the easiest spot to keep watch over you.”

My gaze darted around the room, searching for some odd ornament, lever, or slit in the walls I hadn't already tested.

His smirk remained in place as he backed menacingly away from the bed, past the sitting area to the large marble fireplace where a small fire burned beyond its swirling iron gate.

Placing a palm atop its shelf, he raised a brow.

“Searched that too,” I said, glowering at his amusement.

“Did you?” he asked, moving his fingers along the intricate compass and rope patterns engraved in the mantelpiece.

I'd meticulously felt around those carvings more times than I could count searching for any loose pieces that could serve as a lever or a dial.

Gliding his hand toward the heart of these carvings, his fingers danced over the stone shield nestled in its center—the coat of arms of the Spanish royal family. Reaching into his belt, he pulled out his dagger, guiding its blade to the bottom edge of the shield where a simple second of prying pushed the emblem outward.

“I daresay you did not search hard enough.”

Returning the blade to his waistband, he fished a skeleton key from his pocket and stuck it into the upper castle doorway of the shield. Grinning at me, he turned the key once, initiating a sequence of clicks down the wall, and I watched in awe as that giant marble fireplace, fire and all, slid to the left to expose a shadowy gap just wide enough for a person to slip through.

“You've got to be kidding me!” I blurted, pulling Cecelia up into one arm and awkwardly juggling Zachary into the other so I could hurry over to peek inside. “Do you have any idea how many times I tried this fireplace?”

“Thanks to Mr. Gil,” he said, disappearing into the shadows, “I actually do.”

I stood gaping as Juan lit the sconces inside, their soft flickering light swelling to illuminate the space and dance

across lavish velvet furnishings and tapestries. A bed large enough for a king occupied most of the chamber, its plush pillows and shimmering red linens making it seem almost salacious. There was room enough for a gold-trimmed settee, tufted and upholstered in a rich damask crimson fabric.

The space was decorated with thick red curtains which hung in pleated columns around cluttered floor-to-ceiling bookshelves.

The first thing I noticed on their surfaces was the gold—coins, candelabras, chalices, and jewelry overflowed from the various cubbies, glistening in the candlelight like some coveted hidden treasure in an Indiana Jones movie. This was the English gold he'd once stolen... and there was so much more of it than I'd ever imagined.

There was so much more of *everything* crammed into this tiny room than I could've imagined possible...

One entire column of shelving held the bulk of Juan's more modern inventory of weaponry—rifles, handguns, bullets, and magazines—kept concealed from the slaver crew and even me in case he ever needed to use them.

Some of the shelves were packed with what appeared to be personal relics brought through time from the 70's with him.

A silver wrist watch with a digital screen that had long since gone dead, a Polaroid camera, and a tower of eight-track tapes were displayed on a top shelf. Just below, a meticulously organized collection of bound and taped stacks of cash threatened to spill out onto the floor. On a shelf closer to eye level with the bed there were picture frames—a photo from Juan and Gloria's wedding in one, a family portrait with the twins and Juan Jr. in another, and an older photo of what I could only assume was Juan's father, a sepia tinted portrait of a face nearly identical to the man beside me.

Books were strewn throughout, some from this century, some paperback, their spines cracked with use so the distinct 70's font on the titles was warped and jagged. A set of snorkeling masks and fins served as a bookend to keep them upright.

“When you enter,” he said, motioning me to stand at the side of the bed beside him, “you pull this lever here to lock yourself in.”

He reached to the right of the opening we’d come through to engage a wooden lever. I watched in fascination as a series of brass gears and pulleys began to spin and the fireplace slid closed, making the small room seem that much smaller.

“The flue,” he informed me, tracing a finger over a thick pipe set in the marble, “was built with a collapsable bit of piping inside to allow for the entire structure to slide even when a fire is burning.”

He admired the piping for a moment before he touched the lever again. “The door opens the same way it closes. Just push the lever in the opposite direction and it’ll engage. Sometimes it gets stuck and you have to push a little harder.”

“So this is where you spied on us?” I asked, lowering Zachary onto the bed to relieve my arms of the weight of one of them. “You can hear everything that goes on in there from here?”

He motioned to a horn shaped iron bell to the left of the network of gears and pulleys. “Amplified by this little contraption so you can pick up even the faintest whisper. If there’s trouble, you’ll know.”

I bounced Cecelia gently as she began to squawk, evidently jealous of her brother’s newfound freedom and anxious to join him. “What about the other way around? If one of these babies starts to cry, wouldn’t someone on the outside be able to hear it?”

His expression softened as he peered down at her pudgy little arms where she was attempting to reach for the bed. “These walls were constructed with thicker wood. The curtains and shelving were designed to help with noise reduction, but you’re right, it’s not entirely soundproof. A baby’s cry might be heard.” He turned to scan a line of shelves, bracing his hands on his hips. “I could construct something—a sort of crib, perhaps—while we wait to see if this ship of yours is indeed pursuing. Books can act as a sound barrier, so can straw and velvet... We’ve no shortage of supplies to work with...”

Thinking out loud, he ran his fingers over the settee. “I can use this for a base... Bring in a bit more bedding from my sons’ rooms... Perhaps I might use a few of the spare hull planks to create a frame and a lid... I’ll get started on it when we’re done here and test it tonight. Okay?”

His eyebrows were lifted with genuine concern and he seemed... so *normal* just then... like any other decent human. It was so hard to imagine that this same man, mere months ago, had strung my husband up from the rafters and killed one of my best friends. The person before me—the human who would go to such lengths to keep my children safe—didn’t seem capable of it.

It felt like I had to consciously remind myself of who he was capable of becoming more and more often lest I forget... lest I indeed develop some kind of odd Stockholm Syndrome.

I cleared my throat and transferred Cecelia to the opposite hip, bouncing more steadily to calm her mounting agitation. “Do you want me to help collect materials or sew something?”

“Not now,” he said, running his finger over one of the bed posts. “There’s a bit more I need you to see.”

He started to step around the bed but paused and glanced back over his shoulder. “After I’m done showing this to you, the only key that exists to that fireplace will be yours. There’s an emergency exit should things get so bad you need to abandon the ship. Can I trust you not to use this against me?”

I snorted. “And where on earth would I go without you, Juan? With two babies in a century I don’t know anything about?”

He pursed his lips as he examined me for a long moment, then, evidently accepting this as answer enough, moved forward and motioned me to follow. “Just here,” he said, kneeling to show a hinged ladder built into the floorboards, “there’s a hook to release the locking mechanism. Make sure you stand clear of the access door before you unhook it. The door will collapse and the ladder will slide down into a much smaller space closer to sea level. There’s a two-man sloop inside the chamber there and a hatch large enough to push it out of. It’s a bit of a jump down, but a manageable one.”

I stared at him for quite some time. “That’s how you got out the first time? How you were able to get onto the yacht without anyone seeing you?”

“Aye.” He stood, undeterred by the question, and removed a heavy book on the far shelf, presenting a small metal latch that’d been hidden inside the nook behind it. “This,” he squeezed the small lever and a series of clicks tapped their way down the length of the case, “will take you into the passageways that run through every floor of the ship—including the one I escaped through.” With a light touch of his palm, a line of shelves pushed outward on a hinge to reveal the blackened corridor beyond. “It doesn’t open from the other side, so if you intend to go that way and come back, do *not* close it behind you. Mr. Gil and I will use a special knock if you’re in here and we need to get to you.”

The weight of what we were preparing for hit me all of a sudden. I sat down hard on the bed and stared at the shelves around me while he pulled the doorway closed and replaced the book.

In all the time I’d spent pondering Simón’s name on that master’s log, I’d never once considered it might not be a sign of something good.

If anything, the entry had filled me with a sort of selfish hope that part of my group had never gone to the storm at all, and I might soon be surrounded by people I loved and trusted. How I longed for someone like Magna or Bud to wrap their arms around me and give me a single moment to fall apart—to give me just a second to let down this mask I’d been wearing and feel safe in their embrace to be weak.

To think I might instead end up locked in this small space with my children while a far more malevolent group invaded the ship left my stomach twisted in knots.

Juan’s paranoia was not misplaced. My people didn’t know how to sail one of those ships well enough to take it over... nor did they have the means to overpower an armed slaver crew. Fetia was pregnant, Bud and Phil were injured, Magna was too gentle... Kyle and Terrence might attempt to take over the ship, but the two of them couldn’t win on their own.

Dread slithered its way over my spine.

What if they had already attempted such a thing?

What if they'd already lost?

Were they even alive out there or had I sent them to their deaths when I'd encouraged them to go home?

Had I sentenced myself and my children as well in offering up the slave ship instead of Captain Cook? Would our death dates change on that ancestry chart the minute the slave vessel appeared in our wake?

I stared dazedly at the automatic rifles where they were neatly arranged on the far shelves. If there was trouble, did I have it in me to actually fire one of those guns? Was Juan right about me being too irrational to have a gun?

Perhaps I was too irrational to make any decisions at all. It seemed like every time I had an idea, the world around me crumbled that much more because of it. Maybe *I* was the problem.

Juan's gaze followed mine to the weaponry and he fished out a small bottle from his jacket pocket. "I am putting a lot of trust in you, Alaina, and trust is a very hard thing for me to give. Please do not make me regret this."

He tossed the bottle to me and I laughed at the little cologne dispenser I could only assume was now filled with pepper spray. Tracing the swirling embroidery on the blanket beneath me, I sighed. "I have no plans to shoot you *or* jump off the ship without you, Juan. I kinda need you to stay alive so I can get to my family. To be honest, I'm actually afraid you might die before I do. Simón's name is written on that chart in your son's handwriting, not yours. What do you think that means?"

He sat down on the settee. "You think I have not taken that very thing into account? If my Juan made it across the isthmus and is indeed headed for Bennet in Virginia, he would have no reason to return to this ship to make that entry before the deed is done. And so, if he is not aboard the Sofia Martina, I think the name might be a message you and I purposely left behind.

Insurance perhaps... kind of like one of your Mandela effect conspiracies.”

I tilted my head to one side and gaped at him. I hadn't shown him that bit of research...

“What? You think Mr. Gil and I can watch over you all hours of the day and night and *not* know all about your little conspiracy theories?” He waved a hand at the shelf closest to the door and the brown leather briefcase sitting atop it. “I brought the master's log in here a few days ago and locked it inside a case that only *I* know the combination to. As long as that case is in our possession and nothing about the photo on your computer is changed, then it has to mean that *you and I* will remain alive to take that master's log to my son before he can reach Bennet. Don't you think?”

My swirling emotions turned into complete delirium and I burst into an awkward laugh that had no real amusement to it. “How do you always have everything figured out? Do you have any idea how infuriating it is to watch every single thing I've ever attempted to plan for fall apart while you coast through life defeating every challenge it throws at you?”

The edge of his mouth curled upward. “That's a bit dramatic, even for you, don't you think?”

I shook my head. “It's not dramatic. It's true. Nothing I've ever prepared for has gone to plan. My first marriage, I'd *planned* for a child that I lost and then watched my marriage fall apart because of it... I *planned* to save that marriage by going on a honeymoon in Bora Bora, but my airplane crashed into the ocean before we could even arrive. I planned to build a ship to get off that little island and a storm took it when it was near completion. Hell, I *planned* to kill you, and here I sit, alone in this little room with you instead of out there with the people I love most in this world. Maybe it's dramatic of me to notice, but I can't help but feel like fate is a bit cruel when it comes to me... particularly when I look around at this room and the person I'm stuck in it with.”

He handed me the large iron key to the fireplace and shrugged. “I know I've not been a kind man to you, but I'm not all bad. You have to know by now, despite our past, I would do

anything to see you and your children safe. Perhaps, if you shared some of your plans with me, I could help you overcome some of those challenges too...”

“Doubtful,” I grumbled. “It’s far more likely I’d drag down your track-record of victories to sink you with me... My decision making skills have proved to be more awful than I ever could’ve imagined. I can ruin just about anything by offering my opinions.”

He snorted. “Well, now you’re definitely being dramatic. And I don’t believe that’s true at all. I really think you’re onto something with these *‘breadcrumbs’* and their relation to the other spots along the equator. Though, I do think you’re wrong about my Juan’s use of one when he visited your sister.”

Shaking my head, I held Cecelia a little tighter. “You agreed not to spy on me and my children when I agreed to travel with you. Is it really so hard for you to allow me even a smidge of privacy? I would’ve shared my theories with you at some point if you’d given me the chance.”

“You only share your ideas with me when they fail or they’ve been exposed in some way. I can’t help but spy on you, my dear, if for no other reason than to keep you safe from yourself. You’re very intuitive when it comes to connecting the dots to put together a clear picture, but your inherent propensity to react immediately to that picture is why your plans fail so often. I could help you.”

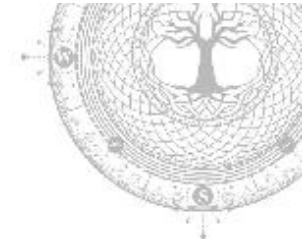
Defensive as I wanted to be right then, it would only serve to prove him right. Instead of arguing, I let out a long concentrated exhale and met his eyes. “Alright then, I’ll bite. If you really think I’m onto something here, what makes you so sure Juan didn’t use another time portal to visit my sister?”

“Because I watched that video of them just as you did,” he said, “and I know my son. He would not lie to a woman he loves, even if it were to save his family.”

I shook my head. “That’s the thing, though, he technically didn’t lie. He didn’t mention Bennet when he visited her... As a matter of fact, he never told her how he came to be in her past at all. He gave her the warning that we all needed to get off the ship, kissed her, and then he left. We just made the assumption

that it was a result of your Bennet plan being successful that placed him there at all, but he could've used a different portal to arrive there... It actually surprises me that Cece never considered the same possibility.”

Again, he motioned to the suitcase near the door. “If he wrote the name, then we shall encounter him before this is over. When we do, your sister shall no doubt be right there beside him, and her memory of that night with Juan will need to change before anyone lays a hand on George Bennet. Heartless as you believe me to be, I will not kill a man for no reason. I need to know, with absolute certainty, that killing Richard Albrecht’s ancestor will have the exact outcome we’ve all been counting on before I allow it. I need to know exactly how my son ended up in her past and he’ll need to adjust his message to your sister in order for me to move forward with confidence. You may think I simply coast through life defeating challenges, but I only do so because I spend a great deal of my time considering the potential challenges that lie ahead of me and planning ways I might overcome them. We’ll have our answers soon enough, and we’ll both be ready for whatever course we might need to take once we obtain them. If there are indeed additional portals that can move us through time differently, we’ll know precisely how they work if he ends up using one... And if the Bennet plan is not the right one, then I will use whichever portal I need to in order to save both your friend and my wife. I swear it.”



Chapter Eleven

Cecelia

Just as we'd done once before on the ship, I made an exact copy of the ancestry chart stemming from Alaina and Jack's names.

I sat half inside and half outside the carriage with the papers atop my legs, Jack leaning against the wheel beside me to watch me scratch down the detailed lineage.

"Did you know?" he asked timidly, spinning Alaina's necklace between his fingers. "About Juan Francisco, I mean?"

"I did," I answered, not looking up from my task. "I watched every episode of *Fairview Nights* alongside my sister and saw her coded message right away. Not that I needed it in order to foil your little plan. Juan Josef knew it'd be a possibility and sent a letter ahead before we ever arrived in Panama."

"Are you angry with her?"

I stopped writing to look up at him then. Where I'd expected an actor to defend his own name first, he instead thought exclusively of how my knowledge of their plan might affect my sister's relationship with me. It caught me by surprise.

I'd known he loved her—had seen it during our time together on Juan's ship—but I hadn't had the opportunity to really speak to him directly about it.

It wasn't for a lack of trying on his part. He'd made multiple attempts to engage with me on our way from Panama to Virginia, but I'd given him the cold shoulder. It was hard for me to look at him and not be reminded of that hidden message and what they could've taken from me had they actually been successful.

“I was angry with her at first,” I admitted. “Maybe there’s a part of me that still is a little. I think a lot about what could’ve happened if we hadn’t figured you out first. It terrifies me that she could’ve taken away my happiness so easily just to keep hers.” I shrugged and looked down at the paper once more. “But, that’s how A.J.’s always been. When she loves someone, she loves with everything she’s got... so much so, she forgets about the rest of us. Can’t really stay mad at her for being herself... Can I?”

Jack shook his head and glanced over his shoulder where Juan and Dario were still arguing near the coach. “She sent that letter in a panic, Cece, thinking it was the only way out. And I knew she would never forgive me for what it would’ve done to you if I’d actually gone through with it. I gave up on that plan weeks ago because I know my wife, and I know she wouldn’t have wanted it if she’d had the time to think it through. Your sister doesn’t forget anybody, least of all you. She’s probably worried sick out there and praying I never saw that message at all.”

Huffing with disbelief, I scribbled down another name.

He laughed. “She loves you very much, you know. I’ve seen it myself. When we were on that island, we would spend hours upon hours talking, just the two of us. Most of those hours, she talked about you.”

“About me?” I croaked, looking up once more at his familiar blue gaze. Hard as it was to look at him and not be reminded of their plan to ruin my life, it was just as hard to look at his eyes and not see some memory of her in them.

How many nights had I curled up in her bed with that poster of him watching over us while we talked into the wee hours of the morning? How many times had we blown off our teenage plans to sit beside that poster and binge watch a season of *Fairview Nights* in our pajamas? Despite our differences, I’d always looked at her as my best friend... It was strange that I never considered she might think of me as the same.

He knelt down before my legs. “She told me you were the most important person in her life. No matter what she was going through, you were always there for her... Even in the timeline

that had you hundreds of miles apart, it was *you* she ran to when she was falling apart because she knew only you could put her back together.”

“That worked both ways, you know.” I jotted down another name on the paper so he couldn’t see me tear up so easily. “She was the only person I could ever count on to fix me when I was broken.”

Surrendering to one of the thousands of memories vying to be rehashed with someone else who knew and loved her, I lowered the pen. “There was this guy I was seeing once, Greg... eh... well, not exactly seeing... it’s a long story... but when I went to her in tears for something he’d done,” I chuckled, “well, she marched down to my clinic—where I’d hired Greg’s company to repaint the back offices—and dumped a whole gallon of white primer over his head.”

Laughing, I shook my head and wiped my eyes, remembering her outrage when I’d told her Greg was married and had been lying to me for months. “She and I stayed there until morning cleaning up the mess she’d made in doing so. By the time we were finished, I was more angry about the permanent stain the paint left on my wood floors than I was about Greg.”

Jack laughed alongside me. “She’s not the most rational thinker when someone she loves is threatened. Is she?”

“No,” I agreed, “she really isn’t.”

He laid his hand over mine on the paper. “Which is exactly why I couldn’t have acted on that letter, Cece. She wasn’t thinking clearly. Honestly, neither was I when I received that message. Juan Josef will always have an interest in our daughter, and when you think of all the ways he could try to snatch her up in the coming years, it’s hard to make decisions that are anything but reactionary. I’ll find a way to handle Juan Josef that doesn’t involve his ancestor.”

“You swear?”

He nodded. “There was more to that letter than her coded message, you know. She also asked me to watch over you, and I wouldn’t exactly be doing a good job of it if I failed to notice

how happy his son makes you. Plenty of fathers protect their children without resorting to the murder of entire generations. Juan Jr. will be safe from me, I promise.”

My pen remained frozen on the paper as I really looked at him for the first time, noticing the way his eyes softened at the mere mention of her... the way his hands shook with concern for her safety, anxious as he was to get to her. It really did warm my heart to witness the way he loved her.

“You know,” I said fondly, “my mother and I used to worry that she was too cold... The way she stays bottled up and doesn’t let people all the way in... The way she lives in her head and doesn’t vocalize whatever’s going on in there... We worried a lot when she was with Chris that she’d never really open up to him the way she should. Or that she’d stay bottled up too long and he’d give up on her. But with you... God, I was so opposed to her moving on from Chris at first... but then I watched the two of you together, and I’ve never seen her be more herself with another person—not even me. You have no idea how relieved it makes me feel to see you recognize the person she is underneath it all... to know you love her even if she is a bit cold.”

He sat back on his heels with a far off grin. “Between the two of us, *I* was the cold one. She saw right through it though—maybe because she was cold too—and she had this way of drawing us both out of our shells, little bits at a time... right from the start.”

He sighed. “And my God, to have someone like her see the real me—not the person I played on t.v.—and actually like what she saw, it made me feel like I was worth something for the first time in my life. She’s this chaotically beautiful person... all the way down to her soul... She’s not perfect and she knows it, and she makes a debacle out of just about everything she touches—working herself up into a panic over the smallest things—but it’s those kinds of flaws that make her real. And to me, real is perfect. I can’t ever imagine a day will come when I don’t love her more for that... when I won’t want to keep knowing more about her... keep waking up beside her.”

“Chaotically beautiful,” I echoed, scribbling another name on the chart as those two words conjured a perfect image of her

in my mind: a mess of stunning curls draped over her pillow, that lean body sprawled across her bed, and her mouth hung open in a heavy snore that might've shaken the house around us. I chuckled. "Speaking of flaws, I'm guessing, since you were stuck on a raft together, you knew about the snoring pretty quickly? It didn't bother you?"

"Oh, she snored on the plane less than five minutes after take off... after, of course, she nearly broke my fingers. But, God help me, I can hardly sleep without the sound of it now."

I hummed happily in agreement. "When we were kids, I used to get scared and crawl in her bed at night. I swear the girl was born incapable of sleeping with her mouth closed... She snored even as a child, but the sound of it was comforting. It made me feel safe. Even now, I can't sleep without some kind of noise in the background."

His smile slowly melted away. "I don't think I'll ever sleep again if I don't get to them in time. Even if we change it all back... For either of us to live on remembering something like that..."

I pointed to their names on the ancestry chart, untouched by the coming fire. "You'll get there. This is proof of it. If I thought there was any chance that this fire could harm them, I'd be riding off alongside you. You're going to stop it, I know it."

Jotting down the last name—Dario's—I handed his copy back to him, holding his gaze for a long moment. "Before you do, though, can I ask you something and use the fact that I'm your sister now to get a preferential answer from you?"

He folded his chart up and tucked it into his jacket pocket, holding a hand over the fabric as if his family were tucked safely inside with it. "Anything."

"I've been getting glimpses of my other life... vague memories that haven't yet painted a clear picture. I think they have something to do with Chris... maybe some kind of interference he's planning that would prevent me from being right where I am. So... my question is... Am I right to be suspicious?"

Balancing his elbows on his knees, he looked down at Alaina's necklace cradled in his palms, turning it so the little fibers sparkled in the sunlight while he considered how to answer. "Can I ask you a favor first?"

"Anything."

He flexed his fingers as he paused in thought. "If you're correct about the timelines and Juan and Dario really do return to 1999 the minute we kill Bennet... Do you truly believe they'll come to Tahiti to wait for our memories to catch up? You don't think, after so long, they might forget about us?"

"Of course they'll come. They, too, have an interest in what happens here. Even had Juan and I not married, Cecelia would be important enough that they'd return to ensure she is safe."

I watched his chest move in a deep breath. "Will you promise me they'll make it so no one but Magna can be in Alaina's room the day she gives birth to my babies? If Anna's there..." He closed his eyes. "Cecelia was breech... and Anna had been preparing for an emergency cesarean. If Anna'd been in that room... Alaina might not..." He let this trail off and shook his head. "I can't lose her, Cece. I can't risk losing any of them. It's hard to know there's a chance anything about that day could go differently."

I reached out to cup his cheek. "Jack, I've already made Juan promise *me* as much. You cannot think I would plan to change things and not account for everyone who might be affected by it. Nothing about that day will come out any differently, I promise you that. He and Dario will be there, and Anna will be nowhere near that house when A.J. goes into labor."

His eyes watered a little, but he blinked the moisture away and glanced back to where Chris was deep in conversation with Jim. "Chris won't be so easily persuaded to go on with this plan. Who could blame him after he's already lost a child? If I were you, I would give him a reason bigger than Anna to want to change our past for himself. Every day that baby grows inside her, he gets a little more desperate—a little more hopeful for a future where he gets to father that child. He wants to find

Bennet before you do... so he can hide him—save him—by whatever means necessary.”

Whatever means necessary.

Jack stood and turned to look down the trail, and my mind ventured to a snow covered dock and a beer can.

Could I stop the memories from coming if I prevented Chris from interfering? God, I hoped so...



After hugs were issued and goodbyes said, we watched as Jack, Tomás, and Gabriel rode back toward Williamsburg.

Dario could not be persuaded to abandon the search after so many years hunting the wrong men. He mounted one of the white stallions to ride ahead down the trail, putting a prompt end to his heated debate with Juan regarding his role in the events to come.

With heavy hearts and eyelids, we all piled back into our carriages—Juan and I into one, Chris, Maria, Jim, Lilly, and Izzy taking the second, while the rest of the rebels remained in the third.

While it made me nervous to have Chris out of my sight, I was relieved to be alone with Juan for the time it would take to reach Carter’s. I was too tightly wound after both our encounter with the Dunmores and my conversation with Jack to keep a brave face in front of anyone else.

The moment our carriage began to move, I collapsed against Juan to bury my face in the solace of his chest.

“How the hell have you been able to manage this for more than twenty years? We’ve hardly been on land for more than a few hours and I’m already falling apart.”

He curled forward to lay a kiss on the back of my head. “Now you’ll understand why I preferred to spend so much of my time at sea. Does this mean you’ll not wish to return to this time one day to live alongside your sister? If so, tell me now so I can adjust the plans I intend to make for us.”

I sat up, brushing the white dust from his jacket that my powdered hair had left behind. “No. Of course not. Gloria and Dario’s lives are far more important than my theatrics. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I’m just tired. Of course, I want to come back with you someday. I’ll get used to it.”

He chuckled. “I should hope you’ll never need get used to *this*. Life is far simpler outside these cities. And significantly simpler on the west coast. I will find a place for us both here and in the future where we need never engage with high society again.”

I smirked. “Good. It’s exhausting to pretend. I’ve never been good at lying to people.”

He grinned, sitting back to observe me. “You’ve no need to pretend, Cecelia. You *are* my wife and the Doña to my estate. You wear it well...” His gaze slid down the length of me and back. “Very well.”

Unpinning my hat, I scratched wildly at my powdered scalp. “I’m only your *Doña* until we find Bennet. After this is all over, you’d better not be a Lord or a Don or whatever other title might make us have to interact with those kinds of circles ever again. I don’t care if you acquire all the gold in California, I want a quiet, no-name husband living in the backwoods somewhere where no one would dare come visit.”

He touched the ancestry chart folded in my lap. “I imagine your young niece shall dictate where your no-name husband will end up building our home. Do we know where exactly in Connecticut she’ll be meeting this George Davis fellow that becomes her husband?”

“According to Chris’s research,” I said, closing my eyes as I dug my nails in harder, every inch of my head tingling with an itch, “they lived in Stafford. I’m guessing she meets him there, though I’m not entirely sure. What I do know is that,” I cleared my throat and opened up the ancestry chart with one hand, moving my fingers over George Davis’s parentage, “his father’s name is Cornelius and his mother’s name is *Mehetabel* Bartlett... Doubt she’d be hard to find with a name like that, eh?”

“Mehetabel?” He frowned in thought for a moment. “It’s from the old testament. Mehetabel was the wife of one of the kings in Edom. Might be more common than you think... particularly among the Quakers.”

I raised my brows and abandoned my scratching to gape at him. “I didn’t realize you were so familiar with the Bible...”

He smiled. “It’s a rather fascinating book, *mi alma*, particularly when you’re a boy who’s been sucked through time with little else to read aside from a book of magic tricks.”

Tilting his head to one side, his brow twitched as he inspected me. “Do you think less of me for it?”

“No,” I said quickly, “not at all. I’m impressed by it. I tried to read it a few times when I was younger, but I could never get past the so-and-so begot so-and-so begot so-and-so part.”

He laughed heartily. “And so you gave up on it entirely? You, a woman I’ve watched read entire encyclopedias front to back looking for one specific answer?”

I shrugged. “It’s a pretty thought, God... I wanted to believe in it once. I just never could quite grab on. When we were young, my sister and I would go to church every so often with my aunt and uncle. A.J. would sing at the top of her lungs and the songs would bring her to tears. I never felt it the way she did... It was just a building to me... the Bible was just words on paper... I didn’t feel the magic in it. You know?”

“There must be some kind of magic if we ended up here. Don’t you think?”

“Here, on earth? Or here, in the 18th century?”

The dimple appeared in his cheek. “Both.”

I folded up the ancestry chart and smoothed down the folds of my skirts. “I’ve learned that, with enough research, all magic can be explained. When this is over, I have every intention of burying my nose in as many books as I possibly can in an attempt to figure out how that storm works.”

He rested his head against the side wall, his head bobbling with the cart’s movement as he smiled down at me. “I expected nothing less from my brilliant wife. You look exhausted,

Cecelia. Why don't you lie back and get some rest? We've a long way before we arrive at Carter's home."

After having only an hour of sleep in two days, I was beyond fatigued, but I was also terrified of the memories that might find me in dream if I nodded off.

I'd remembered the sensation of being pregnant... How long before I remembered what came after?

"I'm not as tired as I look," I lied, unpinning my jacket and toeing off my shoes. "I'd much rather be awake with you. How was your visit with Dunmore? What'd you talk about? Did that Lord Gordon fellow join you?"

"I'd not seen Lord Gordon until he came to collect us in the end. He mentioned he'd been delayed getting a letter out in town. The visit was otherwise uneventful on my part. Dunmore showed us his hounds and his collection of long rifles, then spoke endlessly about himself as I suspected he would." He extended an arm out in invitation. "Your eyes are just barely remaining open. Come and lie back."

"I can't," I confessed, groaning. "I'm afraid of what I might remember if another one of those dreams shows up. It's one thing to get an image here and there, but what if I start to remember my daughter? A.J. made it sound like she was my whole world in that life. I can't very well afford to fall asleep and wake up with some kind of attachment to a life I want no part of."

He tilted his head to one side. "You said before it was unclear if they were simply dreams or memories. Have you had another?"

Chewing the inside of my cheek, I sat up straighter. "For a fleeting moment, I remembered being pregnant. And I think I know what's causing it. I've had this sneaking suspicion for a while now that Chris is going to try to stop us. About ten minutes ago, Jack confirmed I've been right to be suspicious, and now I'm wondering if I'm seeing glimpses of my other life because there's a chance he might be successful. If I can prevent him from interfering with Bennet, maybe I can stop the memories too."

His dark brows furrowed as he pulled off his wig and tossed it haphazardly onto the far bench. “Why would Chris wish to stop us?”

Staring down at my fingers, I struggled with answering this. Maria hadn’t mentioned the pregnancy to anyone else and it didn’t seem like my place to give her away, so I offered up another potential motivation instead. “He had brain surgery on the timeline we’re planning to change. My best guess is that he’s afraid something about that could go differently. Jack says he wants to try to find Bennet before we can so he can attempt to hide him.”

He leaned forward to glance out the window, breathing out an unconcerned huff that fogged the glass. “He can’t hide him from us forever. He has to know that. Bennet would never truly be safe—nor would his children—so long as my family and I are alive to hunt them. He wouldn’t be able to stop us by simply hiding the man.”

“Exactly,” I said, squeezing my palms together. “What if I’m seeing visions of another life because,” I swallowed, “you’re not alive to intervene? What if Chris resorts to more extreme measures to stop us?”

He sat back and stared at me for a long moment. “Do you truly believe I’d be bested by Chris should he have a mind to make an attempt on my life? Or yours?”

“He’s smarter than you give him credit for,” I assured him. “And he wouldn’t let honor get in the way if he was desperate. He’d catch you off guard... He’d catch us *all* off guard.”

Again, he peered out the small window at the rattling world outside it. The indifference in his expression melted into a solemn disquiet. The two of them had spent a great deal of their time on the ship sparring and talking. He’d grown to like Chris quite a bit—might’ve even considered him a friend—and I could see he was struggling with this as much as I was.

He ran a hand over his hair, loosening a few dark strands from their ribbon to drape over his cheek. Sitting back to gaze down at me, his shoulders sank. “Would you have me put an end to it now... before such an attempt might be made?”

My head was shaking long before I'd given my answer. Chris was still my brother and I knew exactly what Juan *putting an end to it* might mean. Much as I didn't want to face any new memories or risk being unsuccessful, I wasn't ready to resort to the types of measures Juan would take to stop them. I'd try just about anything before it came to that. "No."

"It would be undone," he reminded me, raising one dark brow.

"No," I said again. "I'll... think of something..."

"*Mi alma*," he extended his arm to me once more, "you'll not think of anything in your present state. Come and rest your eyes. He'll not kill me today and you cannot go forever without sleeping. I cannot bear to see you like this any longer."

When I made no move to lean in—terrified to remember a daughter that might feel too real—he tugged me gently into his side. "I swear to you, no one will stop me from the life I intend to have with you, so whatever you encounter in sleep can be nothing more than dreams."

"You don't understand," I grumbled against his chest. "I want this life with you, but I've seen the way a child can change everything a person once wanted... the attachment and love that develops inside that bond that would make you go to all kinds of extremes to protect them. If I remember a daughter—if I remember that bond—I'm so afraid of what it might do to us... It would be unreasonable for me not to be afraid when I've something so precious as you to lose."

He wound his arms around me, whispering against the top of my head, "You give me no choice." His fingers slowly walked their way beneath the layers of my skirts. "I suppose I'll have to offer you something else to occupy your thoughts so there can be no doubt of who you'll dream of. I'll not have you fight sleep any longer."

My gaze danced nervously from one window to the next where anyone riding outside could find themselves a voyeur to Juan's unabashed exploration beneath my dress. "Joseph," I hissed, adjusting the fabrics to hide what he was up to, "it's broad daylight and anyone could see..."

In one quick move, he pulled me partially into his lap and snaked his arm around the back of my legs so it was hidden from view between me and the seat.

“See what?” he teased, his sage eyes moving over my face in the same tantalizing manner his fingers were dancing over my inner thigh. “A man holding his tired wife in his arms? A man who would do just about anything to ease her weary mind, including... this?”

Whatever words might’ve come from me in response were caught in the inhale of my gasp as his thumb swiped slowly over my center. All thoughts of another life—of any life—drifted far far away so there was only that wonderful ache he’d created inside me.

His lip twitched mischievously. “Still wish for me to stop?”

“You are a wicked... wicked man,” was all I could utter on my exhale, my entire body stiffening as he did it again... and again.

He held my cheek in his free hand, examining every inch of my face as he drew torturous little circles that forced any lingering worry to melt away from my shoulders. “I am the wicked one, you say? You are the one taking joy in my wickedness. Shall I stop?”

Biting my lip, I shook my head and let myself be lost in the hypnosis of his touch.

It was such a strange thing to have only just discovered what it was to be truly pleased by a man at my age. When it came to being physical with another, I’d been so very naive and inexperienced prior to meeting Juan.

I’d had boyfriends here and there throughout high school and college, but they were short-lived and I’d never felt right about giving myself over to them.

I’d lost my virginity in my mid-twenties to Greg, a man with a whole hidden life I was unaware of; a man who’d convinced me he loved me just so he could take me to bed.

He’d never once *played* with me, had never taken joy in watching himself please me... Whatever foreplay he’d given

was done for the sake of necessity to see his own desires sufficed. Once it was done, he was gone, and I spent many dark nights catering to myself after he'd left, thinking that was normal behavior.

Deep down, I think I knew it wasn't, but I'd never expected just how much more there was to sex than necessity.

Juan was... so much more. For as agile and skilled as he was with a sword, he was far more in his element in the bedroom. He knew all the right places to touch and taste—knew when to give more, when to soften his caress or embolden it. Perhaps there was some magic to this world after all because no amount of research could explain the things he could command my body to do.

Every move of his fingers was a response to some signal I gave him, each stroke like a note in a songbook my body wrote to be played exclusively by him, working me up and up toward its earth-shattering crescendo.

He watched as I grew more heated in his grip, his hold on my cheek keeping me at a distance despite my attempts to bring my lips to his. His own pleasure seeped out in a smile when his fingers slid inside and my bones turned to both liquid and stone at the same time.

Again, I attempted to kiss him, but he shook his head. "I've not seen you like this in the daytime, Cecelia. I would much prefer to watch."

I shuddered around him as he pressed in deeper, all my muscles taut and trembling with both the effort of remaining in my rapture a little longer and with the daunting task of doing so quietly.

Juan seemed to be very much aware of these struggles, and he moved his fingers at such a pace I was certain he was actively striving for my defeat.

"I could come apart just looking at you," he whispered, his eyes moving across my face and down to the swell of my breasts where they were heaving with every labored breath. "The way your skin flushes when I do this..."

I did make a sound then as his thumb and fingers worked in tandem, both inside and out, each separate gesture pulling what little remained of my conscious mind toward that blissful state of delirium he intended for me. The sound was not loud enough to be heard outside the carriage, something between a whimper and a moan, but it was just loud enough that he was encouraged to drag it out of me again... and again...

His lashes lowered as he watched my hips rise and fall of their own accord, selfishly indulging in every second of his wickedness.

“I could die right here with you in my hands and know I’d truly lived.”

Needing something to grab onto, I wound my fingers into fists in his shirt as he brought me up and up to the very edge of my undoing.

“To make you tremble like this,” he continued, his gaze returning to mine as I breathed audibly through my teeth, “I was a fool to think myself a man before I’d touched you.”

Whatever he did next sent my body into a weightless tingling static, the only piece of me left whole was the growing pulse where his skin met mine. Spinning dizzily up and up and up to that quaking peak, I cried out in relief when wave after wave of release sent me free-falling over its edge, back down into a boneless state of utter tranquility.

“But now,” he continued, softening his caress until it was nothing more than his fingertips coaxing me gently toward sleep, “to see you come to pieces and know such a feat was done by my hands... *mi paloma*, it makes a man feel like more than simply a man. It fills me with such a magnitude of accomplishment and power, I’m convinced there would be no beast formidable enough to ever scathe me.”

Slowly regaining a sense of my body as it softened against him, I pulled his lips at last to mine, tasting every part of his mouth in my gluttonously over-satiated state.

“If any beast should make an attempt,” I whispered, pressing my forehead against his, “I will destroy them with *my* own hands. Nobody’s taking you from me. Not Jack or Chris or

even time, itself. I will go through that storm forward and backward as many times as I need to in order to have this life with you. History be damned.”

“And there is my fearless wife.” Chuckling softly, he combed the hair back from my face and let out a long exhale against my cheek. “Go to sleep now, my dove. There is nothing to be afraid of. Whatever dreams may come, we will be together when they are done. No matter what it takes.”

Humming happily, I adjusted myself in his arms and closed my eyes. “I love you.”

He pulled out the pins that somehow still remained in my hair and scratched my scalp. “I will never tire of hearing you say those words.”

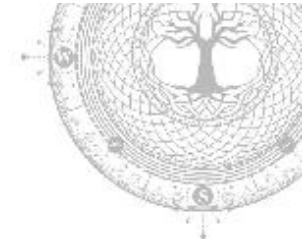
I smiled and relaxed onto my side, resting my cheek against his lap. “I’ll never tire of saying them.”

“You’re a good woman, Cecelia,” he whispered. “You know that?”

“Mmm?” I hummed sleepily.

“I know about the babe,” he said softly. “When you asked my brother to ensure Chris and Maria make it to Albuquerque, I began to seek a reason for it. It is not hard to notice the swelling in her abdomen when you are searching for it. It is kind of you, what you’re attempting to do for them... even when they would take everything from you to keep it for themselves.”

I yawned and curled my arm around his knee as he resumed the gentle scratching against my scalp. “It’s not kind, Joseph. Asking your brother to encourage the conception of a child *I’ll* take from them in my endeavor to keep you for myself is the only decent thing to do. I could not live with my conscience if I didn’t try.”



Chapter Twelve

Alaina

As promised, Juan constructed a small soundproof crib for the babies inside the secret chamber. It was lined with several layers of books, straw, and velvet. That night, when Zachary got tired and cranky, we tested its ability to filter out his cries, Juan on one side of the fireplace, me and the children on the other. It worked for the most part. Anyone not listening specifically for a child's cry wouldn't recognize the little bit of noise that did seep out as such.

To be safe, I'd chosen to spend the night inside with the babies to get them accustomed to being inside the crib, and the following morning, I brought them back to it after breakfast.

I wanted to spend as much time in there as possible so they were comfortable should we ever need to use it in an emergency.

And an emergency separate of the potentially approaching slave vessel might've been brewing among our crew. Sitting idle on the water left them with very little to keep their minds occupied. The touches and predatory gazes had been amplified by their inactivity, and just passing through the halls felt like a dangerous feat. Turmoil was stewing among them and it wouldn't take long before it boiled over.

With me safely hidden away for a few hours, Juan and Mr. Gil were free to snoop around and get a better read on the crew's mental state. They took to the passageways to listen in on private conversations while I attempted to keep my mind occupied in my little sanctuary.

The babies happily chattered in their new crib and I thumbed through a worn paperback Juan had refrained from

using in its construction entitled, “The Golden Key of El Dorado.”

As I began reading, I was surprised to find it was a fiction about an explorer named Alexander Drake who’d stumbled upon a map to the fabled city of El Dorado in Colombia—a mythical place rumored to be overflowing with unimaginable riches. Lying across the bed, I became quickly enraptured in the jungle adventure written on its pages, and was only pulled away by the sound of the door to my room as it was opened abruptly.

Unable to see, I slowly slid out of the bed to press my ear against the door.

“Where the devil is she?” a man whose voice I didn’t recognize grumbled, his tone laced with frustration and the heavy slur of too much alcohol.

My heart instantly leapt up into my throat.

“I don’t know,” another replied, “she’s not on deck or in the dining room with her guard. Where else could she be?”

“She can’t have vanished into thin air,” a third man sneered. “She’ll have to be in one of the rooms nearby. Spread out and see if you can find her while those two are occupied. I’ve an itch I intend to see scratched before the day is through and I’ll not waste the opportunity to have her while she is left unguarded. Tired of watching her meander about and tease us day in and day out. I’ll wait here in case she comes back. Eh?”

“And what if that husband of hers comes round instead?”

“Bah!” the man spat. “I am not afraid of him. Danny thinks we could make far more than what he’s paying us if we take the ship for ourselves and sell it to the English in the colonies.” He hiccuped loudly. “Think of the wealth we might gain by selling off that pretty wife of his too. I know quite a few men that would pay a hefty coin for a face like that... once we’re done with her, of course.”

While they cackled grossly, I glanced at the guns on the shelf beside me, considering pulling the lever over my head and firing upon all three of the vile bastards. Of course, I wouldn’t, but the thought itself was gratifying enough to calm the racing of my heart for a moment.

It angered me more than it frightened me that I'd been so right about the men's intentions. I'd known this was something they might do the moment I was left alone, and here they were validating all my paranoia less than a day after expressing my concerns to Juan.

I listened as two sets of footsteps moved out into the hall and one moved around the room.

The man inside the room's steps were shuffled a bit—staggered as if he'd been drinking all night and morning. “There's a girl,” he chuckled, rehearsing to himself as he paced. “Did you send away your men because you were hoping for someone more fun to join you? I'll not hurt you... much.”

Sitting back, I let my head fall against the side of the mattress, wishing Jack was there beside me.

I hadn't allowed myself to miss him—hadn't given myself a single second to mourn his absence because I knew it would unravel what little strength I'd been holding onto.

I couldn't help it now, though. With three drunken slavers hunting for me and unknown perils potentially approaching, I longed for his presence more than ever—for his strength so I didn't need to hold onto mine. What I wouldn't give for even a second of the solace his arms could offer.

“I want to go home,” I whispered to myself, letting a single teardrop slide down my cheek as I conjured Jack's face in my mind.

It was strange what fear could put into perspective; how little the small things in life mattered. Home was no longer a place near Chicago where my family resided. It wasn't a time or a familiar space or even an everyday routine. It was all of my people in a place where we were safe and unharmed.

Home was my sister's happiness and Chris's health. It was Jim and Lilly bickering playfully while sneaking sweet whispers in the night. Home was the way Kyle would look at Fetia or Magna's deep throaty laughter forcing everyone around her to smile in response. It was Jack talking in a sweet voice to the twins and Bud's life lessons, Bruce's joy as we all tasted a meal he'd slaved over and Anna's silent pride as she witnessed him

feeling it. It was Maria's batted eyelashes and Izzy's widened eyes as she read about Huckleberry Finn.

Home was them—*all of them*—and I didn't care what time we ended up in, so long as we ended up in it together, all of us unscarred by whatever it took to get there.

I clung to the hope that my ideas around the various portals and Juan's use of one to show up in Cece's past were nothing more than anxiety. I needed the surety I'd once had that his appearance in her past meant this would work... needed to know, with certainty, I could have that home once more.

"Please, God," I whispered, squeezing my palms together as my intruder continued to pace the room beside me, "take us home."



A soft rap on the shelving behind me pulled me out of a strange sort of hypnosis. I'd been staring at the horn, waiting for signs the man who'd come into my room had left it when I heard the two quick knocks, followed by three more. It was the signal Juan had told me he and Mr. Gil would use when they took to the passageways.

Blinking back into consciousness and rising up from the floor, I hurried to the far shelves to pull the lever, unsure just how long I'd sat there in a state of brainless haze.

I found Bruce on the other side of the shelves with Mr. Gil.

"There is something the captain wishes for you to see," Mr. Gil informed me, ushering Bruce inside to marvel at the room. "Mr. Dietrich shall remain here with your children."

My gaze met Bruce's and he waved me off, spinning to take in the secret chamber. "I don't mind watching them. We'll be fine." He chuckled as he ran a finger over the bed post. "How many times have we gone down those tunnels and never found this here? This is amazing."

"There's some guava here," I said, motioning to a plate I'd brought in with me and massaging my aching back for having spent far too long on the unforgiving floorboards. "If they get

hungry, it should be enough to tide them over until..." I turned to Mr. Gil. "How long will this take?"

"Not long at all," Mr. Gil assured me.

Remembering why I'd been on the floor in the first place, I looked back at the gears and pulleys separating the secret room from the main one and lowered my voice. "You'll need to stay quiet. There's a man in there."

Mr. Gil shook his head and smiled, an expression that was completely out of place on his normally morose features. "Not anymore. Come."

Suddenly aware of the rifle strapped to Mr. Gil's back and the pistol at his hip, I wondered just what had happened and what exactly Juan Josef intended to show me.

Following Mr. Gil down into the shadowy passageway, I felt an odd sense of trepidation. I didn't want my presence aboard to start a war, particularly while we were sitting idle on the ship. We didn't know what might befall us when and if the slave vessel caught up. We might still need this crew.

Ducking under windows and climbing up the stairs, we stood in a narrow space looking through the boards that lined the stairwell at the top deck. Cece had stood here once, looking through the very same boards as she came up with a plan to get off the ship. Mustering up a part of her strength, I peered through the wood to the scene unfolding feet away.

Juan Josef stood with the russet hair of a lanky man in his grip, addressing the crew that surrounded him. "I have been patient with you to this point, but this, I cannot abide. I will sail this ship on my own before I allow any of you to place your hands on my wife. Let it be known that any man who so much as speaks to her without my permission from this day on shall be flogged within inches of his life."

With a firm tug on the man's hair, Juan forced him closer. "I've no desire to make enemies among you. I know, too well, what a sailor's loneliness feels like, and while I cannot offer reprieve for your heartaches, I can offer riches that will afford you as many women as you could wish for upon our arrival in the colonies. Any man that touches my wife or so much as seeks

her out with the intention to do so from this day onward shall be executed.”

A low grumble of disapproval wafted through the crew.

“But,” Juan continued, his fingers still wound tightly in the man’s locks, “that man’s wages shall be given to whosoever exposed him in the act. If any of you catches another plotting to touch my wife, you’ve my permission to strike that man down and collect his wages for yourself.”

In an instant, Juan’s sword found its mark, piercing the belly of the drunkard in his grasp with ruthless speed and precision. Withdrawing his blade, he let the man collapse to writhe and gasp for air on the deck boards while he repositioned his stance for a potential rebellion.

Beside me, Mr. Gil pulled the rifle from his shoulder.

Instead of turning their anger toward Juan, the promise of additional pay seemed to ignite discord among the crew, and accusations quickly spread throughout their ranks as their forgotten comrade choked and spit in a growing pool of blood at Juan’s feet.

“Jory knocked into her on purpose yesterday just to put a hand on her breast, sir!” one man shouted.

“You’re a bloody liar!” the man I supposed was Jory growled, launching himself upon his accuser to wrestle wildly on the floorboards.

More accusations were spat, louder and louder, all their voices blending into incoherent pandemonium that seemed to erupt at once. Fists flew through the air, connecting with jaws and ribs, angry shouts and curses bouncing off the wooden planks before they were replaced by the thuds of bodies colliding.

Two larger crewmen grappled fiercely, their reddened faces twisted in rage as they grunted and strained to overpower each other. When one of the giants fell, it sent splinters flying from the railing, the whole section threatening to collapse and send both overboard.

Nearby, a group of men formed a circle, exchanging blows with reckless abandon, none of them caring where their fists landed so long as they landed somewhere fleshy and preferably with a resulting *'crack'*. Sweat glistened on their foreheads, mixing with the traces of blood that spotted their faces, but every one of them wore a maddening grin that told me they'd been itching for such turmoil to ignite for some time.

The men had been growing restless for weeks... And instead of turning their idle minds to devious thoughts of me, the promise of money offered them a new fantasy to salivate over.

Standing proud at the center of the maelstrom was Juan Josef, a knowing smile upon his lips as his eyes ventured to the boards Mr. Gil and I were hidden behind. He raised a brow as if to say, *'You're welcome'* before moving his focus back to the riot he'd incited. Maybe he'd done this for me, but he was undoubtedly relishing in the chaos he'd provoked, a delighted ringmaster standing tall amidst his frenzied circus.

It was only when a crew member, perched high in the crow's nest above, shouted out, "Ship off the port bow!" that the brawling came to an abrupt halt. Men froze in their places, some entangled in headlocks and some pinned to the railing or boards, all their eyes moving in sync towards the source of the call. Utter silence settled over them, broken only by the distant creaking of the ship or splash of water from falling remnants of the damaged railing.

I couldn't see what was approaching from the stairwell, but I knew it was the Sofia Martina. We were too far south for it to be anyone else.

"You should go back," Mr. Gil whispered, "until we know it is safe."

I shook my head. "If it's my people commanding that ship, I should be right here when they come aboard in case they intend to go to war with Juan. I don't want any more fights breaking out on my account."

"If it's not them," he said, "you'll go straight down and wait for us to retrieve you. Understood?"

“Understood.”



The air in the confined passageway seemed to grow thicker and thicker as I held my breath, willing for just a glimpse of the approaching ship that might reassure me my people would soon be joining me.

A murmur of excitement rippled through the air, their hushed voices carrying fragments of conversation, snippets of dialogue that hinted at the imminent arrival of the other vessel.

“It is them,” one of the men said, pointing out toward a spot I couldn’t see. “Look at the figurehead! That’s the Sofia!”

My heart tripled its beating at the confirmation, and I became increasingly anxious to know exactly who would be joining us. The anticipation and the lack of air in the cramped space nearly brought me to my knees.

Could it be Jack? Could I dare to hope they weren’t actually in the colonies but here, boarding my ship this very moment?

Before I could finalize this thought, amid the buzz of the crew’s chatter and the creaking of the second ship being hooked in, Juan’s voice called out, friendly in its greeting, “Alonso, my old friend! I’d not expected to find *you* sailing up behind me!”

In response, Alonso, with a distinct Spanish accent, replied, his voice tinged with similar delight from farther away, “Juan, you old dog! It is good to see you again! I have brought back a few of your crew with me!”

A few of your crew... Who??? And who the hell was Alonso?

I strained to hear whatever was occurring. There was a thud of something—wood planks, I assumed—and the clomp of several footsteps indicating perhaps a few men had boarded our ship. A wall of bodies stood in front of the stairwell preventing me from seeing even a hint of whoever might’ve joined us. A deep and commanding voice, however, broke through the noise

suddenly, close enough I was certain its familiar owner was just on the other side of the stairwell. “Where is she?”

It was Kyle, unmistakable and unafraid, and my knees did shake then as a torrent of emotions swept through my entire body.

Kyle...

I hadn't realized just how deeply I'd missed the sound of his voice until I heard it.

I wanted to bolt out of the stairwell and wrap both arms around him. I wanted to collapse against him and sob for hours with relief... But Mr. Gil placed a hand on my shoulder to prevent me from reaching for the hatch.

“She's here,” Juan assured him. “Safe and well and anxious for a familiar face. I will take you to her in a moment, dear boy, but first... What on earth brings you all the way down here, Alonso?”

“Ah!” Alonso blurted, his voice indicating that he, too, had come aboard from the other ship. “I'm searching for my sons. They've been missing since you passed through and I was hoping they might've joined you. It was very strange for them to leave so suddenly without any word and I'm quite troubled by it.”

“Troubled indeed,” Juan mused. “Enough that you should commandeer a slave vessel to chase after me?”

Alonso laughed darkly. “You are a father, old friend, and you know there is no limit to what I might do for my sons if I think they might be in trouble.”

Juan grunted. “Well, I am sorry for your long journey, but your sons are not with me nor have I encountered them since we last met. Perhaps they traveled instead with my boys from Portobelo?”

“Your boys left from Portobelo?” Alonso echoed, concern heavy in his tone. “Have you an idea where they might be headed?”

“I'm to meet them in the colonies,” Juan informed him, his voice still jubilant and showing no signs of anxiety. “I would be

honored if you joined me. You and I haven't been at sea together in some years and I daresay your company would be much preferred over the present crew I am surrounded by."

As if the mention of the crew breathed life into him, Daniel Bacallar roared, "Where the hell is the cargo? And what have you done with my brother?"

"A most distasteful business you and your brother run," Alonso clucked. "I'm afraid I had no room for both your passengers *and* my crew. I imagine, by now, your *cargo* has found a place among the other cimarróns in the isthmus. As for your brother, he wasn't as keen on abandoning the ship as the other passengers were. My dear new friend, Mr. Haywood, has seen to it that your brother was kept quite as comfortable as the men and women who once occupied the hold. Haven't you, Mr. Haywood?"

I braced a shaking hand on the wall as I heard Terrence's voice. "Oh, he's quite peaceful down there. Would you like to join him?"

"Actually," Juan cut in, "I need a strong crew yet to get us through the horn in this weather. I'm short-handed as it is. How many men did you bring with you, old friend?"

Alonso made a sound in his throat. "Enough for two ships. I wasn't sure what I might find when I set out on this journey. ¿Por qué? Are you thinking we could have some fun along the way? I noticed Mr. Haywood has one of your most infamous rifles. I imagine that means you have more?"

Juan laughed. "Indeed I do, and I would be delighted to share them with you if you decided to join us. For your men, the offer of English gold is still running for any crewman who thinks he can outwit me in finding it, and I'd be happy to add to whatever wages you've promised them for their troubles in adjusting to a new ship. I could use the second vessel up the east coast. I'm afraid I took some damage on the trip down and another ship could prove valuable in the event we start to take on too much water."

"As I've already come this far," Alonso answered, "I can't see any sense in turning back. Hopefully, I am only being

paranoid and I'll find my sons alongside yours, searching for a bit of trouble like they did when they were boys."

"Oh, I'm sure of it," Juan tittered. "Now, while we're speaking of trouble, what do you say we find a bit of it ourselves? Like *we* once did when we were younger men? If you've a crew to replace the present one, I've been dreaming of the types of fun I might have the day I can be rid of these vile slavers."

Mr. Gil leaned into my side. "I have seen their idea of trouble before. Alonso and Juan are about to unleash the devil himself upon this slaver crew. He's got two rifles under his jacket. Go down and wait for me to signal you."

"But Kyle... the others," I said, envisioning my people caught in the middle of rapid gunfire.

"They will be safe and I will bring them to you as soon as I'm able. Go now. You cannot be up here when I step out on that deck."

"Fetia!" Juan shouted happily. "My word, you grow more beautiful every day! Who is this little creature in your arms?"

"Where's Alaina?" Kyle insisted.

Juan clicked his tongue. "She is in the very same room you last occupied. Take your woman and child down there and rest for a bit while Alonso and I *prepare* for the rest of our journey."

"Bud!" Kyle called out, loosening another surge of elated anticipation through me. "Take dad and Magna below deck. We'll go down and check on her then report back when it's safe."

"Be careful," Bud answered, and I nearly fell over with the comfort his voice instantly instilled in me.

Unable to contain my excitement, I spun on my heel and raced back down the corridor toward the secret chamber. Down two sets of stairs, I ducked under windows and slithered around corners until I was back inside the small room with Bruce.

"They're here," I said, grinning as I grabbed a rifle from the shelf. "Kyle and Bud and Terrence and all of them! They're here!"

With a wide smile, Bruce stood up from the bed and chuckled. “And you intend to shoot them?”

I plucked a magazine off the same shelf and handed both to Bruce. “This is just a precaution. I believe Juan is gonna’ start picking off some of the slavers now that we’ve got replacements. Just... I don’t know... hang on to this in case we need it!”

Quickly, I moved to the pulley system and yanked the lever to engage the fireplace, spinning back to gather both babies against each hip before I hurried out into the room to nearly collide with Kyle.

He caught me with his good arm and spun me into a hug, both babies wiggling happily between us. “Jesus Christ,” he breathed, squeezing me with the strength of a grown man. “We’ve been worried sick about you.”

“Me?” I scoffed, blinking uselessly against the tears that had filled my eyes. Kyle was hugging me, and the familiar scent of him—the familiar shape of him—had me falling apart instantly. “What the hell are you still doing here? And—”

Whatever I was about to say was lost as I caught sight of Fetia and the tiny little creature bundled up in her arms.

“Here,” Kyle said, reaching for Zachary. “Let me get a look at yours while you get a look at mine.” He grunted as he positioned him against his ribs. “How does he weigh so much already?”

Bruce was at my other arm, pulling Cecelia out of my grip. “Yours...” I laughed and sobbed as I moved closer.

“We named him Matavi since he was conceived in Matavi Bay,” Kyle said, following me to Fetia’s side to look down at him. “I thought we’d call him Matt for short so no one teases him in the future... Matty when it’s just us. You think that’s an okay name?”

I smiled as Fetia placed him in my arms and I rocked him gently, my eyes dripping fat tears down both cheeks. Matty... The name conjured a similar memory of holding my niece, Maddy, in my arms years ago at a hospital in Minnesota. Here I

was, just as proud of an aunt, rocking my nephew with a similar nickname. “I think it’s perfect. He’s perfect.”

Kyle bounced Zachary with a chuckle. “Who would’ve thought when that airplane fell from the sky that this is where we’d all end up? With these perfect little humans?”

I sniffled as I turned to really look at Kyle. His cheeks had thinned where his body had filled out. Towering over me and nearly as tall as Jack, he was hardly the same boy that’d come through that storm. And to look at our circumstances and see such positivity... God, I’d needed that while I’d been sinking in my own sense of defeat. “Look at you!” I beamed, blinking tears from my eyes. “You’re twice the size you were the last time I saw you. What the hell have you been doing?”

He grinned. “Sailing a ship is hard work!”

“You’ve been sailing the ship?” I asked, dabbing uselessly at my eyes.

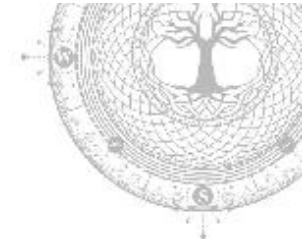
He nodded proudly. “Me and a few others. I learned a thing or two from Juan and Dario during my time on this one. Alonso was really impressed.”

“Alonso,” I echoed, handing Matty back to Fetia. “Who is this Alonso person?”

“Alonso Ruiz,” he said. “He said he needed to catch up to Juan Josef right away and we said we’d been with him before and knew where he was headed. He agreed to let us sail with him so we could find you. His other sons went missing I guess.”

“*Other* sons?” I asked.

“Yeah.” He spun a circle much to the delight of Zachary. “Two of his sons came with us, Jacinto—you’ll love him, he’s a lot like Jack—and a younger one who’s a little slow but kinda’ funny, Benito. We all call him Benny.”



Chapter Thirteen

Chris

With the carriage rattling to and fro around them, Chris stared dazedly at Izzy's tiny form where the soft blue light of early morning made the white fabrics she was dressed in seem to glow. She'd fallen asleep in Jim's arms, still clutching the ball-and-cup game she'd spent the entire day and night prior attempting to master.

None of them were sure just how old she was, but she couldn't have been more than six or seven, and he'd never seen a child so resilient.

He wondered if a child of his own might have that same kind of immovable determination that drove Izzy to learn to read lips and books, master complex cognitive games, or develop her own language of hand signals.

How easily he could lose any chance at ever finding out.

He glanced at Maria where she stared out the window beside him, a small silent silhouette of navy against the blue morning seeping into the cabin around her.

In the hours that followed her visit to the palace, she'd barely spoken more than a word or two.

While Chris, Jim, and Lilly had fallen into various bits of small talk throughout the day and evening, she'd pretended to sleep, even opting to remain in the carriage each time they stopped to water the horses and stretch their legs.

Maria was not the quiet type. Even when she'd given him the silent treatment in Panama, there'd been nothing silent about it. Her mannerisms and facial expressions remained boisterous even when she was quiet.

But now, there was a sense of defeat emitting from her. Where she'd spent the past several months keeping him at arm's length, she didn't so much as scoff at his forearm where he'd kept it draped over her legs. There were no snide comments about what parts of her his eyes lingered on or snarky Spanish insults meant to make him think she was unamused by any given thing he'd said.

Maria was... missing. And he felt that loss nearly as much as he feared he would've had she been arrested at the palace.

All night he'd remained just on the edge of sleep thinking about that single unknown line of High Dutch. The words bounced over and over across his subconscious like a bad song stuck in his head.

'Gij zijt een bedrieger, nietwaar.'

He'd asked Adam Mason what it meant, but the man was only vaguely familiar with the language and couldn't give him an answer. It could've meant *'You look lovely today'* or *'I'm going to have you executed'* for all he knew of the language. The way Lord Gordon had looked at her when he said it, though, with that dark, bloodthirsty smirk on his sun wrinkled skin, made Chris feel the translation was likely something more resemblant of the latter, and he loathed himself for ever allowing her to be put in that position.

That loathing caused something inside him to snap back into place... something he hadn't realized had been missing since they'd gone back through the storm.

For months, he'd walked around as someone he couldn't recognize himself in. Perhaps it was the surgery or the memories or the ridiculous plan they'd somehow gotten roped into, but somewhere along the line, he'd lost his sense of pride.

He'd never been the type of man to beg or sulk or step down to allow lesser men to make decisions on his behalf.

He'd been someone who took control of a situation; someone who commanded the respect of others.

Der Mutige would've never allowed Maria to be used as a pawn in someone else's purpose; he would've done just about anything to ensure nothing in this world could ever beat her

down to such a defeated and silent state. He'd have insisted—*no, demanded*—they give up on this maddening plan to murder Bennet and go home through the storm like rational human beings... He'd have fought tirelessly to get them there instead of hiding in the shadows to search for a way around them.

He tightened his grip on Maria's knee and kept it that way as his sense of pride built back up, piece by piece, inside him, erasing all traces of the coward he'd allowed to embody him for far too long. He wasn't going to hide anymore. He'd get Bennet's location and put an end to all of it.

Just as the birds began to sing their songs to celebrate the arrival of sunlight, the carriage slowed, and everyone sat a little straighter as they woke from their half-sleeps, anxious to have finally arrived at a destination.

They were all exhausted, and for as much as Chris was determined to move past the Bennet plan, he was also looking forward to lying in a bed and righting his mind and body before doing so. Nearly twenty-four hours of non-stop jostling had made him far too weak and sluggish to actually do anything with his renewed sense of pride.

When the coach door opened, Chris stepped out first to gaze upon the sprawling three-story home they'd arrived at, and all his aching bones and mental fatigue seemed to momentarily fade far into the background.

Having spent his whole life building houses alongside his father, he couldn't help but feel his father's sense of awe seep into his veins at the sight of such an immaculate piece of construction.

Nestled amidst sprawling grounds and towering oak trees, the house was built in a Georgian style, boasting walls of red brick adorned with textured white trim boards. It had a large two-story portico as a focal point at the central entrance, framed by a pair of elongated rectangular windows on either side. Above, the hipped roof rested upon an entablature embellished with intricate dentil moldings. Every inch of the house seemed to showcase the builder's attention to detail. Dormers punctuated the roofline and two large brick chimneys rose from the left and right sides of the apex.

It was stunning.

He could almost hear his father's voice marveling at each finite detail and explaining some elaborate reason for the ivory pedestal in the center and the overturned pineapple it cradled.

On a crisp morning breeze, he caught a whiff of the river that sat beyond the house, a delicate medley of fresh water, fish, and the subtle earthy undertones of lush and muddy riverbanks.

While it was a cool February morning, the scents reminded him of summer—of his bare feet sinking into a thick clay lakeshore, a sunburn tickling his nose and cheeks, and the carefree indulgence of a boy temporarily liberated from the constraints of a school schedule.

Again, his father's image came to him, his boots sunk into that same clay shore, a tackle box in one hand and a fishing pole in the other. Mike Grace had two great passions in life: architecture and a quiet fishing spot. This place would've been his dream.

Or... maybe not...

His initial sense of awe melted away to an overwhelming feeling of anguish as he noticed the surrounding support buildings and an enslaved woman who carried a large basket of laundry from the house toward one of them.

Dressed in simple garments, she moved with a sort of quiet dignity, her head held high with a soft smile as she hummed to herself—hints of her baritone faintly kissing his ears on the breeze.

Watching her move across the yard, Chris was reminded of the haunting iron hatch on the slave ship in Panama, and he felt the weight of history bear suddenly down upon him once more, bringing with it all the ache and fatigue that'd been silenced upon arrival.

His heart almost too heavy for his bones, he was struck by the stark contrast between the house and the lives lived within its shadows. It was a painful reminder that behind the facade of grandeur, places like this were sustained by countless human lives that could never find beauty in it.

With a fresh set of eyes, he peered out to the fields beyond the structure and saw the mass of laborers he hadn't initially noticed there. Their backs were bent under the morning sun, and they moved in synchronized rhythm, a silent ballet of practiced precision and unending sacrifice.

"I see your companions share in my conflict," a man said loudly.

Blinking, he turned to find the rest of his group standing with a slightly podgy fellow who was observing Chris and Jim where they'd both been taking in the tragic scenery with similar expressions of disapproval.

"It is an abhorrent practice, I'm afraid," the man continued, his eyes moving to the fields beyond them. "I'd never thought to find myself any part of it, but," he let out a long and melancholy sigh as his gaze returned to them, "I inherited the estate and all the harsh realities that came with sustaining it. I do my best to treat them all in a way I might hope to be treated should I have been born to similar circumstance."

Juan cleared his throat and straightened his spine. "Chris, this is our host, Charles Carter. Mr. Carter, these are my dear friends, Christopher and Maria Grace, Lillian and James Jackson, and their daughter, Isobel."

Right... Chris thought, straightening his shoulders. He had business to tend to. Before he could rest his heavy head, he needed to figure out if Colonel Howe's letter had beat them here.

"Welcome to my home," Charles said with a bow of his head, the sunlight catching the gray hairs that seemed to be overrunning his once dark locks. "You all must be exhausted. I've had rooms prepared for you upstairs. Shall I call for breakfast or would you prefer to rest a while?"

"Rest," Lilly yawned, then, catching herself, she adjusted her spine. "I'm sorry. I think I'm too tired to even know my manners! Thank you, Mr. Carter."

"It is my honor," he said, the wrinkles around his lips deepening with his grin. "And do not trouble yourself with manners in this home, my dear. I am too old to keep up with

them anyway. Come,” he turned toward the house, “I’ll show you to your rooms and we can have more proper introductions over dinner when you’re all rested.”

Taking Maria’s hand, Chris followed, pausing only long enough for Charles to greet a tall, dark-skinned man who’d been standing on the porch steps waiting to receive them. “Henry, take care of the horses and have Randal help with the luggage. Will you?”

“Yes, sir,” Henry said, flashing his teeth in the type of contagious smile that made Chris’s own lips curl upward.

“Just the blue trunks,” Captain Navarro added. “We won’t be needing the rest.”

“Certainly, sir.”

Charles placed a companionable squeeze on Henry’s shoulder as he climbed the last step, uttering, “Thank you,” beneath his breath before he let go.

The exchange was so brief, Chris wouldn’t have even noticed had he not been standing just behind them. The interaction made his gaze linger on Henry far longer than what might’ve been considered polite.

Unlike the slaves they’d encountered on the trail in Panama, the weight of oppression wasn’t apparent on Henry. If he hadn’t known they were in the 18th century, he might’ve even assumed the two men were friends.

Henry had a genuinely positive demeanor about him, and Chris didn’t see the physical effects of harsh servitude he’d seen in Panama—his clothes were clean, his body nourished, and he lacked the scars of extended abuse that marked nearly every man, woman, and child he’d crossed paths with on that trail.

While the appearance of health and happiness didn’t make Henry’s plight any less heartbreaking, it did make Chris slightly less apprehensive about staying in such a house.

When he’d looked upon those fields, he could feel nothing but hatred for the type of man who could claim ownership over the human lives working there. He’d been prepared to put up some kind of fight on their behalf, mad as he was to witness

such a thing. But liberation wasn't that simple, and Chris would accomplish nothing if he made an attempt. Charles seemed just as perturbed by the reality of slavery as Chris was—bound to it by his inheritance. Freeing these men and women from a man like Charles might land them in the hands of someone far worse—someone who actually fit the harsh profile of a slave owner.

He had business to tend to anyway... Once he got Bennet's name, he'd figure out whatever he needed to know about Carter... perhaps share a secret or two with the enslaved people here that might lead them to freedom.

"Mr. Grace," Henry said gently, raising a brow, "are you alright, sir?"

Realizing, in his fatigued state, he'd been standing there staring at the poor man, he cleared his throat and diverted his eyes. "Yes. Sorry. I'm just... very tired. I didn't mean to stare."

Henry let out a deep, throaty laugh. "I'm no stranger to staring, sir. Go ahead inside and get some rest."

Cheeks on fire, he hurried through the front door.

As he caught up to the others in the main hall, he realized he knew this particular house for its one very distinct architectural feature. To the left of the entryway, a carved walnut "floating" staircase defied gravity as it climbed upward for three stories, seemingly without any visible means of support. He couldn't help but be awestruck once more at seeing it in person, remembering his father showing him photos and explaining how it was the only one of its kind in all of America. It truly was a marvel in architecture.

Falling into step behind the rest of the group as they began their ascension, it almost seemed like vandalism to have his dirty boots on such a significant piece of history. Every step felt like an act of sacrilege.

He glanced at Maria where she took the steps alongside him, oblivious to the treasure beneath her feet and lost somewhere in that silent sadness radiating from her.

The scenery and its grandeur faded into static. He was vaguely aware that they'd reached the landing and Charles was opening doors for each member of their group, but it was

background noise to her deafening quiet. He couldn't take his eyes off her, his own heart breaking as he searched for just a hint of the vibrance that normally radiated from her.

Maria was far too enthralling to be so still. He had to fix this. He'd gone too long without fixing it—particularly when it never should've been broken to begin with.

“Mr. And Mrs. Grace,” Charles said, pulling him out of his mind as he placed a hand on a large walnut door. “Here you are. I'll have Randal leave your things just here in the hall.”

With a gentle push, the door swung open, revealing a sanctuary of comfort. The bedroom, adorned with tasteful furnishings and delicate accents, enveloped him in an atmosphere of tranquility he was sure could provide the perfect backdrop to mending all he'd broken with Maria.

Sunlight poured through the windows, casting a warm glow upon the room, as if nature itself sought to embrace those who yearned for solace within its walls.

“Thank you, Mr. Carter,” he said, noticing Maria made no move to examine the room, but instead stood staring off into space. “I look forward to joining you and Mrs. Carter for dinner.”

Charles smiled, leaning in to lower his voice. “A friend of yours arrived yesterday with your letter. Given your wife's role in our mission, I was more than delighted to be of service to you.” Reaching into his front jacket pocket, he pulled out a small folded parchment. “The name you asked for, sir... you've my thanks and my continuous support for your assistance in arming the north. No one else in your party shall find the same.”

Everything inside Chris relaxed as he took the paper. He'd taken a risk in Yorktown when he'd snuck out to follow Juan... a risk that was now proving well worth the reward.

“What *will* they find?” Chris asked, the hand holding the letter frozen between them.

Mr. Carter smirked. “They shall find *a* George Bennet... but not the one you seek.” His gaze darted to Maria and back. “Curious as I have been to know the discretions this man has been accused of that have created such a rift within your party, I

can see, by your wife's exhaustive state, now is not the time to ask questions. My thanks again for all you've done to arm the rebels. Do get some rest. I look forward to conversing more with you both once you've gotten some sleep."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter," he said, attempting not to choke up with his relief. "You have no idea what this means to me."

"Do call me Charles." He grinned. "And it is nothing. Until later then."

When the door closed behind Charles, Chris spun round and wound his arms around Maria, some part of him devastated when she didn't fight to push him away. He wanted to share what was on that paper with her; to show her what he'd done to save their family—to watch her sadness melt away once he told her she wouldn't have to let go of their child.

"Maria," he whispered, pressing his lips against her brow, "let me fix this. Talk to me, please."

It took her several deep breaths before she responded, and her response was so fragile, the words had hardly been audible. "I could've gotten us all killed back there. Me... you... Izzy... All of us. I should have listened to you when you told me not to play this part."

He nuzzled her ear, hoping to coax some frustrated Spanish obscenity out of her as he teased, "Come again? I couldn't have heard you right. You should've listened to *who*?"

When no obscenity or violence resulted, he sighed and tightened his hold on her. "You were perfect back there and if anyone could've gotten us killed, it was me. We never should've ended up here in the first place. This is on me for spending the last few months being a jackass. I should've been spending that time fighting like hell to get all of us back to the storm so you could never be put in this position at all." His fingers curled around the paper in his hands. "I'm fixing that now. I have—"

"That man saw right through me, Kreese." Her breath hitched and she pressed into his embrace. "Gordon... I saw it in his eyes when he looked at me. And you know what I thought? I thought of what a relief it would be if I just confessed and he killed me right there in front of that carriage. I wouldn't have to

keep going like this... I wouldn't have to pretend to be alright. I wouldn't have to drink that stupid potion. This life would just fade far far away and I could wake up in another where no one could ever take my memories away from me again. God, I wanted that kind of relief... wanted this to just be over so badly... and it almost got us all killed.”

He pressed his cheek against the top of her head and rocked her gently. “Don't talk like that.”

“Why not?” Even this question, which normally should've been loaded with her venomous bite, came out lackluster... like in that craving for death she'd somehow squandered away all the life she'd once held inside her.

“We didn't endure that island and Cook and the arctic and Juan Josef and Panama just to give up now. That's not who you are, just like it's not who I am to have let things get so bad that you could want to. Neither of us has been the same since we went through the storm and I'm changing that. You tell me what your life needs to look like and I'll give it to you. To hell with anyone who stands in my way.”

She pulled back to look at him, her eyes vacant and devastated. “I want to wake up, Kreesse, in another life. I want to forget this place and everything that's happened here. Can you give me that?”

He slowly shook his head. “Maria, I have the means to stop them now. We can go home the right way. You don't ever need to take that potion or let go of our child. We don't have to wake up in any other life now. Baby, I can fix this.”

“You are not hearing me.” She placed a hand on his chest. “I don't want *this* life. I want a new one... one where memories of this place are some far off dream I can hardly remember. I want to be held in your arms and feel the way I did before... without forever being reminded I was your second choice. I want to start a family that's not derived from you being too out of your mind on meds and alcohol to even know who was lying beneath you. I want a life where this,” she placed a hand over her abdomen, “is not the only reason you reach for me at night; where this,” she smoothed her fingers gently over her belly, “is a gift instead of a curse... where wanting her doesn't come at the

cost of losing everyone else I love. You can stand there and call me *baby* and hold me in your arms all you want, but this life has stolen all the joy out of it. I told you in Tahiti that I would put everything I had into loving you, and I did. If I cannot feel the joy in it, there is nothing worth living for. So I'll tell you what my life needs to look like, Kreese. The complete opposite of this one, because it's harder and harder to keep waking up and willing myself to live without meaning. Give me that. Okay?"

He stared down at her for a long moment, unsure what to say in the face of such heavy despair. He couldn't fathom Maria, of all people, just giving in like this. It wasn't like her not to put up a fight. And just as he was about to say as much, his memory stepped in.

'Pregnancy depression is perfectly normal,' Cece had said to him on the phone one night when he'd been ready to pull his hair out over Alaina's bizarre mood swings. 'Her hormones are going all over the place and she's uncomfortable. She probably just needs to sleep.'

He hadn't seen Maria sleep in days...

He glanced at the bed with its soft linens and plump pillows. He couldn't imagine anyone lying upon such a thing and not waking entirely refreshed. Was it just hormones and a lack of sleep that made her so shattered? Would a few hours of rest change her perspective and restore her to the rambunctious woman he knew so well or would she wake just as anguished?

Her words were a plague he couldn't bear to let infect whatever dreams she might have. Sleep might lessen the effects of her hormones, but it wouldn't fix the things he'd left broken.

He'd been spending far too much time plotting to save her and the child inside her that he failed to notice he'd given her nothing worth saving. He couldn't let her remain in this half-suicidal state of mind.

Tucking Bennet's information into his pocket, he moved both hands up and down her arms and softened his tone. "What I've put you through here is unforgivable. I know that. I've said enough sorries for a lifetime and I know they'll never be able to undo the hurt I caused you. Killing yourself won't undo it either. Neither will killing Bennet. You'll still wake up with two sets of

memories, just like I did, and like me, you'll feel the reality of them both equally—whether you want them both or not. I intend to put an end to this, but if you want to kill Bennet and wake up in another life, I'll do that for you instead. Whatever you want, Maria, I'll give you. I'll give up on all my scheming if you tell me to. Hell, if you can't get past this and decide you want a life without me once all this is done, I'll give you that too. But that is the only way I let you go. If you intend to end this any other way, you're going to have to kill me first cause I can't go on living in any life where you don't."

He covered her hand where she still held it over her stomach. "I knew damn well who it was beneath me when I made this, Maria. It was the same beautiful, headstrong, and fearsome woman I fell in love with in the *only* set of memories that matter. She wouldn't give up like this... not for anything or anyone."

"You think that cheesy bullshit you spew is going to change how I feel?" she asked, a hint of her spunk appearing as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"I think you're tired," he said gently, sliding a hand over her hair to cup her cheek. "And I think your hormones are all out of whack. And while I don't believe for a second that negates any of the things you feel, I do think it's hindering your judgment as to what you need to do about them. Lie with me for a while and rest. If you still feel this way by the time we wake up then I'll at least have had a chance to hold you in my arms one final time before you kill me."

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "My hormones? You think this is my hormones? Do you stand in a mirror when you are alone and practice saying stupid crap you know will piss me off?"

He grinned. "Is it working?"

She swatted his hand away from her face. "No."

"No?" He followed as she moved toward the standing mirror, meeting her eyes in the reflection as he began unpinning her hair. "Do you want to just go ahead and kill me now? You won't have to listen to any more of my stupid crap."

“Don’t tempt me, superman. *My hormones are out of whack and my judgment is hindered.*”

When he pulled the last pin, a cascade of dark waves tumbled down over her shoulders and breasts. She let out a long relieved groan and leaned back against him as he massaged her head. “I know it seems like it, but I’m not crazy.”

“Yes, you are,” he teased, “that’s what I love about you.”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s not what I mean, estúpido. I mean... This isn’t just hormones. This sadness... it feels like it’s consuming me. I can’t beat it. Everything feels wrong... and no matter what I do, I can’t right it.”

He stopped massaging and met her gaze in the mirror once more. “Can I ask you something?”

A tinge of her cynicism seeped out as she raised a questioning eyebrow. “What?”

“Do you hate me?”

Shaking her head, she sighed. “No, I don’t hate you. Hate would be much easier.”

“Will you let me try something then?”

Her face transformed into the very distinct Maria scowl he’d come to know and love. “I’m not having sex with you if that’s what you’re thinking. I feel awful enough about myself for the last time I opened my legs to you.”

He pulled his fingers from her hair to run them over her shoulders. “That’s not what I was going to suggest.”

“What do you want then, superman?”

Tucking his chin into the crook of her neck, he smiled. “When was the last time you let me just kiss you?”

The scowl returned in her reflection and she shrugged him away. “Ay dios mío, get the hell out of here! You don’t know how to kiss a woman without it leading to sex and you know it. ¡Me estas volviendo loca! I am crazy enough as it is. I cannot deal with your craziness too.”

“I can kiss a woman without sex,” he scoffed, genuinely offended at the implication he couldn’t.

“No, you can’t. The minute your stupid mouth starts moving, your little pinga takes over for your brain and then I end up on the shit end of things.” She slid the gloves off her hands and tossed them on the bureau. “Idiot man with your idiot ideas and your idiot cock that makes you even more of an idiot! Get the hell away from me with your nonsense. I can’t deal with you right now.”

“I miss kissing you,” he said, grabbing her hand and meeting her eyes in the mirror. “Is that so terrible? And, you can call me arrogant for saying so, but I think you miss kissing me too. I thought maybe it might be worth a shot to try something different to pull us both out of our depression. I’ve kissed you plenty of times before without it leading to sex.”

“Oh, you have, have you?” she barked, spinning round to face him with her fists on her hips. “Name one time, one *single* time you kissed me without sex following it and I’ll let your arrogant ass *try it*. But don’t you dare tell me about that awful kiss on the airplane when your mind was on her. That doesn’t count.”

“The house in Tahiti the day I left with Oro,” he said quickly, tilting her chin up toward him and moistening his lips.

Her dark brows shot upward. “Only because we were interrupted! If John hadn’t come banging on that door to collect you, you know damn well where we would’ve been.”

“You didn’t give me specifics. You just wanted one example and I gave it. A deal’s a deal. Pucker up, asshole.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You are so stupid, you know that? How do you think a kiss is gonna’ fix any—”

He caught the last half of that question between their lips. He was tired of talking... Tired of everything that wasn’t the feel of her lips against his. Winding his arms around her, he felt his own tension melt away the minute her mouth responded.

Kissing her made him feel like a damned god—it always had. How had he ever let himself forget that? How had he spent so long pining for someone who never made him feel like even half the man she did? The shape of her mouth, the soft warmth

of her parting lips, and that heavenly taste of her sigh... he couldn't imagine having gone so long without this.

She tilted back to invite him to taste deeper, grabbed on to him like she needed the leverage, and indulged herself like she'd been starving without him, pulling him closer and closer, as if asking for the very thing she'd just told him she didn't want.

Pulling back an inch, he pressed his forehead against hers and smirked. "Liar."

"Eh?" she breathed, her hands still twisted tightly in his shirt.

"You're getting plenty of joy out of this."

"Hormones," she answered, bringing his lips to hers for one final taste before pushing him away and spinning back to face the mirror. "Untie me."

Frowning at her reflection, he pulled the knot loose on her stays. "I wasn't finished."

"Of course not," she said smartly, running her fingertips over her lips. "If I'd let you finish, we'd be in that bed. You don't know any other way to end a kiss."

"That's not my fault." He tugged the laces a little rougher than he'd intended. "It's you who doesn't know how to kiss without the invitation."

She gaped at his reflection. "You are so full of yourself. You know that? You think I was actually inviting you for more while you were tasting the back of my throat?"

He nodded, tossing the stays on the floor without breaking her gaze. "You were practically begging me for it."

"Oye, don't you dare look at me like that. I let you have your little kiss and I am done with you now. Obviously, whatever you were *trying* didn't work."

"That so?" He said this against the exposed skin at her throat, and he watched her reflection as she tilted her head ever so slightly to tempt him closer.

"Yes," she said unconvincingly. "That's so."

“You know what I think?” He coiled his arm around her and dragged his nose along the side of her neck. “I think you’re just as miserable as I am without this. And I think you know I would never hurt you again but you feel like you owe it to me to keep me in this constant state of torture as payment for everything I’ve put you through. I deserve every second of your wrath, and I’ll continue to take it if you insist... but I think it’s torturing you just as much as it’s torturing me. Maybe more...”

Leaning her head to one side with a soft hum, she reached up to curl her fingers in his hair, encouraging him to move his mouth over her skin. “You know what I think?” she whispered.

Under her guiding grip, he tasted a sweet, salty trail up to her ear. “What do you think?”

Her hold on his hair tightened enough to be painful and her voice shifted from a gentle purr to a deadly growl. “I think you have not even begun to suffer the wrath you deserve from me. I think I am miserable because you made me feel like I meant nothing after you impregnated me, and now you hover over me like I’m some sacred vessel for your blessed golden sperm... talking nonsense about how I am beautiful and fearsome like you didn’t just toss me into the dirt two months ago. ¡Vete pa’ carajo with your bullshit! I think you are the cockiest sonofabitch I have ever met in my life if you believe the source of my sadness has anything to do with denying you a chance to slither back into my bed; if you think kissing me is going to make right all the hell you have dragged me through. And I think you had better think real hard about what you say next about my hormones if you don’t actually want me to take you up on that offer to kill you.”

Hormones were definitely a dangerous thing, he decided... but, as he eased away from her grip, the sight of her standing there seething gave him more joy than the kiss had. Anger was good. Anger was far better than the emptiness that’d been in its place when they’d entered the room... far more predictable too.

With a half-smile, he unsheathed his sword and tossed it on the floor at her feet with a clang. “Go on and do it then.”

“What?”

He crossed his arms in front of him and raised a daring brow. “You heard me. Do it.”

Her eyes darted down to her feet. “You give an angry, pregnant woman a sword and you think I won’t stab you right through your stupid chest with it? And I am the crazy one?”

“I think I’m right and you’re too stubborn to admit it. I think we both love each other and this whole grudge of yours is driving us both crazy. I don’t think you’ll do a damn thing with that sword. Matter of fact,” he yawned and stretched, “I think I could go lie down and sleep just fine knowing you have it.”

With a smirk befitting of the cockiest sonofabitch she’d ever met in her life, he toed off his boots and shrugged out of his jacket, winking at her before he turned round to climb into bed.

Rolling onto his back, he folded his hands behind his head and closed his eyes.

For several minutes, she didn’t move. Tired as he was, he very nearly fell asleep just waiting for the sound of her feet on the wooden floorboards... And *that* would’ve been crazy. Maria wouldn’t kill him, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t inflict real damage in the enraged, hormonal, and sleep-depraved state she was in.

At long last, he heard those padded steps moving toward the bed, and he felt the mattress dip as she crawled in beside him. “Estúpido hijo de puta,” she muttered as she lay down and rolled to face away from him.

He dared not move, but the grin widened across his cheeks.

“Shut up, you stupid asshole,” she grumbled. “I can feel you over there smiling. What the hell was on that paper Charles gave you?”

“George Bennet’s real location,” he said, still smiling.

She was silent for a good long while before she spat hatefully, “Are you going to put your arm over me or not?”

Turning to wrap both arms tightly around her, he kissed the back of her head. “I love you.”

She sighed and relaxed against him. “I know that. And it’s making me into a lunatic. What are you going to do with that

location?”

“What do you want me to do with it, Maria?”

She took a deep breath, the tension in her body melting away as she slid her hand over his to interlace their fingers. “I don’t know... I keep telling myself I am too crazy to be a mother; I’m too unstable, too broken to give a child any chance at a normal life.” She sniffled. “Every day I think about Anna; I think about what a warm and loving person she was, and how selfish it would be to rob her son of such a wonderful mother just to have a child I would no doubt ruin with my craziness... It’s not right to want this baby, mi amor... I *know* that... But, for as much as I know how wrong it is, it’s still breaking me to pieces to think I’ll have to let go of it. It’s not the hormones making me crazy. It’s guilt. Whether I tell you to save Anna or to save our baby, the guilt that will come with either decision already feels too heavy to live with.”

He squeezed her hand in his and inhaled her rose-scented hair. “Maria, you don’t have anything to feel guilty for. Whatever guilt might come, let it be mine to carry. If you want to keep this baby, I will do everything in my power to be the type of man you need me to be. If you are unstable, I will hold us together, just as you held us together when I lost my mind. Our child will know nothing but love because I will give every ounce of it I have to both of you, just as I know you will give every ounce you have to us. Tell me what to do with Bennet, and I’ll bear whatever weight comes with that decision in order to give you the life you want.”

Her fingers tightened against his and she pulled their joined hands up to her lips. “What if... Well... You said I will wake up with both sets of memories regardless of what happens here, but that’s not true. Is it? Cece forgot a whole other life because Juan interfered in it... What if we could forget ours too?”

All the warmth he’d felt holding her disintegrated, and a chill crept up his spine. “W-What are you saying? You want to forget... all of it?”

Her shoulder shrugged against his chest. “Your life would be much easier without me in it. If I hadn’t been here, you wouldn’t have those scars on your back... hell, you wouldn’t

have even turned back to miss the raft when that airplane crashed in the first place. There'd be no more fighting, no more guilt for memories you had no control over. We certainly wouldn't be in here turning ourselves into villains... And you wouldn't be missing a child I can't give you... We'd just... be better, maybe, than the people we've become together."

"No," he said decidedly, raising up on his elbow and turning her so he could stare down into her caramel eyes. "Look at me, Maria. I love you and you love me and I'd rather be a miserable asshole in this life—would rather spend every day of this life fighting with you than to ever live in one where I don't know you at all. Forgetting you will never be an option; it will never make me someone better. You are everything to me... You hear me? Not the child inside you, but *you*, Maria, are everything. I can live with the pain of losing a baby, I've done it before, but I can't—*won't*—live without you. Tell me you hear me?"

"Ay," she sighed, "I hear you, superman. It was just a thought..."

"An *idiot* thought," he growled, "you idiot woman. Jesus, you ripped the heart right out of my chest with this. I can't deal with those kinds of thoughts. Not from you. Not ever. We can either pursue Bennet or prevent it. Those are our options and nothing else. We're not forgetting each other, dammit."

She laid her palm against his cheek and nodded. "I'm sorry."

He'd already been preparing to go another round, his mouth open to argue for another several hours after calling her an idiot, but he promptly closed it and tilted his head to one side, caught entirely off guard by the apology. "You're what?"

She lifted a brow. "I said I'm *sorry*."

He stared stupidly down at her as she moved her fingers over the side of his jaw. "I... eh... you're sorry? That's it? You're not going to sneak around my back and ask Juan Jr. or Dario to prevent you from getting on that airplane the minute I'm not looking?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm not."

He frowned at her while she continued to trace the lines of his face. “Are you lying just to get me to stop arguing with you?”

“No.” Twisting her lips to the side, she glanced at the window and let out a long breath. “What happened with Gordon scared me. I’ve been sad before, but I’ve never been defeated. I let this stupid depression sink me. It was stupid of me to think there was ever an easy way out of this sadness, especially when I’ve lived this life where nothing has ever been easy. We’ll get through it the hard way... just like everything else.” Her eyes met his again as she resumed her exploration of his face. “This man right here... the one who tells me when I’m being an idiot? The man who is not afraid to yell at me when I yell at him? This is the person I love... I don’t know where you went for so long, but I’m glad it’s you that’ll be going through the hard part with me.”

Closing his eyes, he kissed her palm as it swept over his lips. “Does that mean you want to stop the Bennet plan or pursue it?”

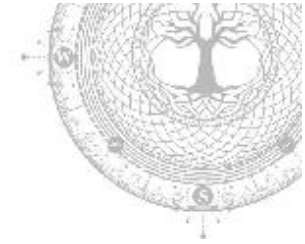
She shook her head. “I don’t know that answer yet... I think I’m gonna need a minute to pull myself back together before I can decide something so big. Is that okay?”

“Of course it is,” he whispered. “Whatever you need, baby, I’m right here.”

She offered a half-smile as her gaze moved to his lips. “Maybe you should try to kiss me again... and maybe, this time, you don’t stop in the middle to say stupid things?”

He combed the dark hair away from her face and ran his thumb over her lips. “If that’s what you want,” he grinned, “I suppose I could give it another shot... idiot.”

“You are so cheesy,” she whispered, stopping him just before his lips reached hers, “and if you call me an idiot again tonight, I will rip off your balls and suffocate you with them while you sleep.”



Chapter Fourteen

Alaina

As it turned out, Juan and Alonso's ideas of trouble were far less violent than Mr. Gil had eluded to. Instead of unleashing a shower of bullets on the crew, they and Terrence, along with the rest of Alonso's men, had ushered the slavers into the hold on the Sofia Martina where they then chained them up similarly to how they'd once chained the slaves that occupied it.

When men started to venture down in search of the infamous stolen English gold Juan liked to tempt his crewmen with to keep their minds occupied, Kyle and I decided it was safe enough to head up and get a peek of such a satisfying delivery of karma.

We watched while Juan Josef dragged a kicking and screaming Daniel Bacallar across the top deck by his hair, a smirk embedded across his features as he tossed him down into the hold.

"So... you and Juan," Kyle said beside me, "you're serious about making peace with that man? After everything?"

"He's obnoxious," I admitted, "and full of himself, and violent as all hell, but he's not a threat to us anymore. He just wants to go home... much like we all do. And I don't want any more fighting to erupt between us that will prevent us from getting there in one piece. He's always been two steps ahead of us with that mind of his, so why not use it to our advantage to make sure we get home?"

"Home," he echoed, "and you think we're going to get there with this Bennet plan?"

I shrugged. "Honestly, the more time I spend looking through the research downstairs, the less confident I feel about anything I was once sure of. There hasn't been much to do in

your absence but skim through the files on that laptop, and there's some wild theories mixed in that have my mind reeling."

He shielded his eyes to watch the other deck where Terrence appeared from a stairwell, an automatic rifle slung over his shoulder and beads of sweat forming on his bald head despite the cool air. "So, we're just gonna' sail up to Virginia with Juan like we're all old friends? I'm pretty sure Terrence is just playing nice until Juan's guard is down and will chain him up with the others the first chance he gets."

I shook my head. "There's no reason for that. Like I said, he's not a threat to us now. If he returns to the 90's with his memories like he should, then he'd become a much bigger threat to our younger selves if we were to wage war on him again. Let's just get to Virginia without incident. And speaking of incidents..." I glanced around us to make sure no one was close enough to overhear. "Do you remember that ship fire Cece found in the history books?"

Kyle furrowed his brow in thought and eventually nodded. "Vaguely. It was near Charleston, right?"

"Yes," I said, "and it's *this* ship... That's why we need the Sofia Martina to sail alongside us. Once we get up in the warmer waters again, I don't want to take any chances. You and I should take our babies and stay on the other boat until we reach Virginia."

"That's assuming we'll even get anywhere near Charleston before the others get their hands on Bennet."

"The others couldn't possibly kill Bennet before we reach them," I said.

"How do you know?"

I smiled and waved as I caught sight of Bud's bright white hair where he appeared on the other deck. "Because Simón Bacallar's name is going to be written on *our* ship's master log... in *Juan Jr.*'s handwriting."

Kyle scratched at his short beard while I watched Magna and Phil ascend the stairs behind Bud, all three of them working their way to the plank that connected the two vessels.

“You think they’re in some kind of trouble?” Kyle asked. “I mean... they *have* to be in America by now... so what would cause that kind of hold up? If they’re in Virginia and Bennet is too, you’d think a month would be plenty of time to find him. Wouldn’t you?”

I raised a shoulder. “It’s not as simple as a Google search. I imagine finding someone in this time might be a bit like finding a needle in a haystack.” My eyes locked with Phil’s as he shakily put a foot on the plank. “Are we alright bringing him on this ship?”

He turned his attention to his father, his nose twitching a little. “He’s not a threat either. What happened on that other island—with the Nikora, I mean—it did something to him. Changed him... I wouldn’t go so far as to say I trust him, but I will say he’s not the same person he was before he went there. What they did to him—torturing him and keeping him imprisoned like they did—it scared him in a more... *religious* sort of way. I think he’s afraid for his soul and I truly believe he is doing whatever he can to repent, not because he’s suddenly this good man, but because he’s afraid of an afterlife that might resemble that same torture. Saving himself is far more important to him now than anything else. For my own soul, I’ve decided to help him get home... But if you don’t feel comfortable... I can make sure he stays over there?”

“No,” I said flippantly, watching as Phil crawled across the plank on his hands and knees, his eyes wide with terror when he looked down at the water beneath him. “Surprisingly enough, I’m not afraid of him anymore.” I smirked as his own trembling nearly sent him off the plank before he caught himself and lowered onto his belly to drag his body the rest of the way. “Not even a little.”

That was true. A deep, purple scar stretched across his right cheek where Juan had once stabbed him through it, several of his fingers were missing from the Nikora, and he’d lost so much weight, he was hardly recognizable. This was not the same person who’d pinned me down on that island, and I wouldn’t let his image haunt me for even a day longer.

“I’ll keep him as far away from you as possible,” Kyle promised, running his hand over my back.

“That’s alright,” I said, keeping my gaze on Phil as he rolled awkwardly onto the deck to allow Bud, Terrence, and Magna to walk over the plank as if it were nothing. “This might sound strange, but I think I need to talk to your father at some point... just to put some closure to the whole thing.”

“I felt the same way,” he said. “You tell me when and if you want to have that conversation, and I’ll be right there beside you when you do. Okay?”

Nodding, I let all thoughts of Phil slip far into the recesses of my mind as Bud approached, grinning in such a way that every line in his face seemed to deepen with the size of it.

He looked stronger than I’d ever seen him. His arms and chest were even more broad and defined beneath his faded ivory shirt. His white beard had grown out several inches, and his skin had darkened beneath the sun.

“Alaina,” he said, spreading those familiar arms, “you really didn’t think we’d abandon you. Did you?”

I collapsed into him, his embrace instantly rendering me a blubbering, sniffing mess. I hadn’t felt truly safe in so long that my knees threatened to give out with the sudden asylum his presence gave me.

“My sweet girl,” he cooed, petting my hair, “we’ve got you now.”

Instantly, Magna was behind me, wrapping her giant arms around us both so I was sandwiched between them, and I might’ve collapsed with the relief of it had they both not been holding me upright.

“We’ve got some stories to tell you,” she whispered, kissing the top of my head. “I take it you met our little Matty?”

“Yes,” I managed around the enormous brick in my throat, resting my cheek against Bud’s shoulder as I refused to let go. “Did you deliver him too?”

“I did,” Magna answered, stepping back to laugh. “Oh, but he was far more stubborn than yours. It took him nearly sixteen hours to come say hello.”

“Sixteen hours?” I straightened and wiped my eyes, spinning to look at Kyle. “Fetia must be some kind of superhuman.”

Kyle grinned. “You couldn’t convince me that woman’s just a regular old human being. She hardly made a sound.”

I looked up through tear-filled eyes at Terrence where he’d taken a spot beside Kyle. “Didn’t I tell you to take them all home?”

He flashed his perfect teeth at me. “You don’t know me all that well, honey. If you did, you’d know there was no way in hell I was leaving without the rest of you.”

“Won’t your wife be worried?”

“Jazz is no ordinary woman either,” he assured me, a fondness settling over his features as he said her name. “She knows I’ll come back once I’ve found everyone I set out to search for. And I mean to come back with *everyone*.”

Kyle stood a little taller. “Terrence is planning a trip to Philadelphia to search for Charlotte and Chase Miller. Some of Alonso’s men have agreed to escort him there.”

Terrence beamed. “Just a few sailors I’ve become friends with. I tell ya, when those slavers showed up with all those men and women in chains, I knew there was no way that ship was pulling out of that harbor.” He tucked a thumb beneath the strap of his rifle. “I had every intention of opening fire on every last slave driver on board, but Alonso and his sons beat me to it.”

I stole a glance at the opposite deck where Juan and an older man I could only assume was Alonso stood laughing over the metal grate housing their new prisoners. “Why was he so sure he’d find the rest of his sons with us?”

Terrence peered over his shoulder and back, lowering his voice so he couldn’t be overheard. “I like Alonso just fine, but between you and me, I don’t think his sons are missing at all. I’ve overheard him and Jacinto a few times refer to those boys in the past-tense, and if I’ve learned anything as a detective, that’s a clear indicator they know they’re dead. I’m guessing their deaths might somehow be tied to one of Juan’s sons. When Alonso came aboard, he demanded to know where Juan and

Dario were... seemed angry. We all knew Juan and Dario went across, but to buy them time, we told him they likely left with their father... offered to travel with him in search of you since we knew where this ship was heading.”

I swallowed and looked again at the opposite deck. Juan and Alonso were exchanging friendly smiles as they conversed comfortably. “If that’s true... do you think we’ll make it to Virginia without incident?”

Terrence followed my gaze and slowly nodded. “I know a thing or two about criminals and the way their minds work. Alonso isn’t the sort of man to give away his motives. He’ll buddy up to Juan all the way until his sons are standing right in front of him, and then he’ll unleash whatever vengeance there is to be had on all of them.”

Maybe I had developed some sort of Stockholm Syndrome because, as I stood there staring at the two men, I couldn’t help but feel a bit defensive of Juan Josef.

Bud squeezed my shoulder, a wrinkle of concern forming between his brows as he recognized my trepidation. “We’ll let them get us to our destination in one piece, then we’ll make sure they’re both locked up somewhere where they can’t do any harm to Juan or Dario... or anyone else, for that matter.”



Within hours, we were moving once more, and I sat at the dining room table with Bud and Magna on each side of me, both of them with one of my children in their arms. Across from us, Kyle and Fetia sat cooing over Matty. Terrence and Bruce were huddled in conversation at the far end, Phil keeping his head down on one side of Kyle, and Juan took his usual spot at the head of the table.

There were three unoccupied seats reserved for our new guests, and I couldn’t help the racing of my heart as Alonso and his two sons entered the room.

Close up, Alonso had the look one might expect of an actual pirate. Where Juan was a stickler about his tidy appearance, Alonso seemed to be the polar opposite. His sun

darkened skin was covered with deep set wrinkles that gave him the appearance of an almost permanent scowl. His hair had twisted into mangy dreadlocks that were a dull gray beneath his faded and stained tricorne hat. His thick brows had a downward crease embedded in them, and there was something about his posture that made me think he was a much more conniving individual than your everyday pirate.

Entering the room at his heels were his two sons. One stood tall and, although he had a firm jaw and a furrowed brow that made him, at first glance, seem ominous, he had kind eyes—lighter and with a youthful spark. I assumed he was Jacinto. Where his father didn't seem overly concerned with personal hygiene or outward appearance, Jacinto's hair was pulled back neatly and his apparel, though faded, was unblemished and orderly.

The second son, Benny, I presumed, was much more like his father in terms of his gnarly hair and filthy clothing. In place of the other two's scowls, his expression was a far off and happy one with a smile that revealed blackened teeth. When his gaze found me, however, that smile promptly disappeared and his eyes went suddenly wide.

“¡Bruja!” he shouted, pointing at me as he stumbled back toward the door in a panic. “¡Es la bruja! ¡La Bruja!”

I frowned at him. I didn't know much Spanish, but I knew *'bruja'* meant *witch* and I was taken aback by the accusation from a complete stranger.

“I'm—I'm so sorry,” I said, raising my palms. “I'm not sure who he thinks I am, but I've never seen him before.”

“Enough Benito,” Alonso said, flicking a dismissive wrist before he turned to address me. “Forgive me, my dear. My youngest son is a bit of a simpleton. He means nothing by it.”

Benny shook his head slowly, his fear-ridden eyes remaining glued to me. “¡Es la bruja!” He insisted. “She changed her hair!”

Juan, who'd been watching the exchange while casually sipping his wine, sat forward. “What do you mean, she *changed her hair*?”

Alonso groaned. “Pay him no mind, old friend. He’s a fool—he’s always been a fool.”

Still gaping at me, Benny nodded rapidly. “¡Pelo blanco! The hair was white!”

White hair? My stomach twisted into a knot. “Is he talking about Cece? Did something happen to my sister?”

Alonso sighed and rolled his eyes as he pulled out his chair. “I wouldn’t give any merit to his words, madam. I’m afraid he’s lost what little bit of mind he once had.” He spat something hateful in Spanish that sent Benny scurrying right back out the doors. “My apologies to you all. I should not have been so naive to presume he would act in a respectable manner tonight.”

Alonso and Jacinto each settled into their seats, both of them slightly stiffer for the outburst. I, too, was made stiff by it, particularly after my previous conversation with Terrence around Alonso’s possible motives for pursuing us. If Alonso’s sons were really dead, did my sister have some part in it? Was she safe or had one of them hurt her?

“Rest easy,” Alonso said, evidently reading my mind. “My son is ill. He meant nothing by it. If we all attempted to find meaning in the words that seep from his mouth at any given moment, we’d be driven just as mad as he is.”

Juan cleared his throat and set his wineglass down on the table with a clank before picking up his utensils. I knew Juan well enough to know nothing went unnoticed, and Benny’s sudden outburst had likely sent all the gears in his suspicious mind spinning at once. Alonso might’ve been conniving, but Juan was too smart to be outwitted so easily. If I had to guess, I imagined he already surmised more than even Terrence had in that small interaction. “I’d not realized he had gotten so bad these past few years. Would that there was some way I might help.”

Cutting a slab of pork, Alonso held his fork over his plate and smiled. “There was never much that could be done. Oh, but your boys did try... Do you recall the way they used to protect him when they were young?”

Juan chuckled. “Aye. No one could pick on little Benny if my Juan was around.” He turned to Jacinto. “I believe he broke your arm over it once, if I’m not mistaken?”

Jacinto frowned down at his plate. “That was Adrián.”

Juan’s grin widened. “Ah, that’s right. You and Adrián were always so hard on poor Benny when you were boys. Always smacking him around and calling him names.”

Alonso spoke through a mouthful of pork. “Benito didn’t need to be coddled. He needed to be ready for a harsh world—needed to know how to fight, not hide behind his brothers.” His focus shifted to Kyle where he had Matty pressed against his shoulder. “Let that be a lesson to you, kid. You can’t be soft. Boys need to be raised to become men. If you coddle them, they’ll grow up to be cowards.”

“Not true,” Phil said, refusing to look up from his dinner to make eye contact with anyone at the table. “You go too hard on them, you’ll turn them into something far worse than cowards.”

“That what happened to you?” I blurted out before I had a mind to think better of it.

Everyone’s attention landed on me except Phil’s. While my cheeks reddened, he turned his fork idly in his potatoes and nodded. “That is *precisely* what happened to me.”

Before I could think of some way out of the conversation I’d initiated, Juan let out an unamused chuckle. “I’ll not claim to be a saint, Mr. Ramsey, not by any measure of the word, but my father never coddled me and I have never once forced myself on a woman. A father might assist in molding a man, but it is ultimately the man that chooses to become what he is.” Juan patted my hand where I’d been holding my knife tightly to one side of my plate. “If you don’t wish to dine with him, I can have him escorted out.”

I shook my head and let my muscles relax. “It’s fine.”

Alonso, with a fresh mouth full of food, moved his attention to me. “It’s *you* he got ahold of then, eh?” He lazily pointed the edge of his fork between me and Juan. “You two sharing a bed then? Is that why his face is all... smashed up?”

“No,” Juan said sternly. “She is the sister to my son’s wife and therefore she is family. Her husband travels with my sons and I intend to see her safely returned to him.” He glared at Phil. “Untouched by any man aboard my ship.”

Alonso wiped his mouth and smirked as he inspected Phil. “Should’ve known better than to assume the two of you were together since this one’s still breathing. You’ll not have any trouble from my men, I promise you that. Would you have me take him aboard the Sofia after dinner?”

Straightening my spine, I shook my head again, exhausted of being looked at like I was some powerless damsel that couldn’t even fight off the waste of a human across from me. “That won’t be necessary.” I raised my chin proudly. “He did not *get ahold* of me, nor will he. I am not afraid of *him*. Now, I didn’t mean to steer conversation in this direction, and I’d really prefer it if we could talk about something a bit more tasteful over dinner.”

“Indeed,” Juan said, raising his wineglass. “We’ve more important things to discuss anyway. We are moving toward the horn and we’ll all need to be prepared for rough waters come morning. Jacinto, have you sailed it before?”

Jacinto’s eyes had been on me when the question was asked and he very slowly moved them away to meet Juan’s gaze. “No, sir, but my men have, and I am prepared to work alongside them to see us all safely delivered to the other side. I’ve heard it’s not so bad this time of year?”

Juan sipped his wine and peered out the large window. “Normally, the winter months are the safest, yes. The seasons are reversed down here and the temperatures are warmest between November and March. This year, however, the cold has set in far earlier than I’ve ever seen it. The ice shouldn’t be forming for another month or two, and yet, it’s there. I’m afraid we’re in for a rather rough ride.” He turned to me. “We’ll want to secure all the children so they are not injured by the ship’s movement.”

I nodded, glancing at Kyle where he masterfully held Matty against one shoulder with his prosthetic and stroked his back with his good hand. “How?”

He shifted his focus to Kyle and Fetia. “I shall empty one of the smaller cabins of everything not bolted down. We’ll fashion a sort of harness for each of you that will keep you from falling about with the babies.”

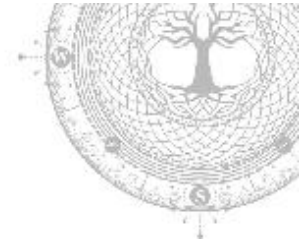
A sneer spread quickly over Alonso’s face. “Your slavers will have quite a time chained together down in that hull, eh?”

Juan chuckled. “I daresay they might find themselves humbled by it.”

As Alonso, Juan, and Jacinto discussed their plans for securing the ships for the storm, my mind drifted back to the bizarre encounter with Benito.

Alonso’s sons were missing—possibly dead if Terrence was as good of a detective as I assumed. What did Cece’s likeness have to do with it? I thought of Kyle’s earlier words. They had to be in America, and if they didn’t find George Bennet within the month, could it be because they’d encountered some kind of trouble? Had Juan Jr. retaliated for something Alonso’s sons might’ve done to Cece? Was she hurt? Or... worse, had she ever even made it across the isthmus at all?

I needed to talk to Benny... needed to know what he saw... as soon as possible.



Chapter Fifteen

Cecelia

It was the sun lightening my closed eyelids that woke me from the deepest sleep I'd ever been in.

Yawning, I stretched my arms and legs, basking in the softness of the bedding for a second longer. It felt like ages since I'd been truly comfortable.

Realizing none of my dreams had been plagued by new memories, I smiled and let my eyes open, blinking heavily at the daylight that danced in brilliant beams across the room from the large dormer windows that lined it.

“Morning, mistress,” a woman said, making me startle and sit up suddenly to search for Juan. Where I'd expected to find his giant form looking over me, I found instead a young woman standing near the wardrobe with a stunning ebony complexion and the brightest brown eyes I'd ever looked upon. Hair hidden beneath a tightly wrapped sage fabric, she wore a cotton dress, dotted with a floral pattern that made it seem both pink and cream at the same time.

Shaking my head of its sleepy fog, I squinted at the bright blue sky beyond the window. “I'm sorry, did you say *morning*? I missed dinner?”

She laughed as she spun round to fish a stack of garments out of the wardrobe. “You missed a whole lot more than dinner. You slept the whole day away. I've come to dress you for breakfast. You must be starving by now.”

Stomach grumbling in response, I tossed aside my blankets, standing and stretching my arms once more. “Did you happen to see where my husband went?”

She nodded, rustling through a drawer in the vanity. “He and Mr. Carter rode out early this morning. They mentioned something to Henry about going to look at a military roster. Promised they’d be back in time for breakfast, though, so we had best get you ready before they return.”

Relieved that one of us was at least being useful while I slept entire days away, I let my shoulders relax. Drowsily staring at the woman across from me, I became suddenly conscious of where I was, realizing she was not inside my room of her own volition. “I’m sorry. What’s your name?”

“Frances,” she said, adding a pair of stockings and ribbon to her growing pile of garments. “Everyone calls me Fanny.”

I smiled at her reflection in the vanity mirror, trying to figure out how to navigate this odd predicament. I couldn’t very well let an enslaved woman dress me simply because her oppressor had required it of her. “Mine’s Cecelia, but everybody calls me Cece. You really don’t need to do all that. I can dress myself.”

“No need to be dressed just yet.” She didn’t look up as she organized the stack of garments neatly atop a small table and reached back into the wardrobe to fish out a light robe. “Here,” she held the arms out for me, “put this on before your bath gets cold.”

“My bath?” I asked, glancing at the pitcher and basin on the bureau I’d been prepared to use.

“Yes, mistress,” she said, shaking the garment impatiently. “Mrs. Carter had it drawn for you. She said you might need it after so much time in bed.”

Those bright brown eyes ventured up to my hair and she chuckled. “I suppose she was right about that. Come on then. You’ll be right back in that bed with a cold if you wait much longer.”

I turned to slide my arms into each of the robe’s sleeves, laughing when Fanny grumbled under her breath, “All that beautiful hair and I’ll never understand why you weigh it down with so much starch it stands still on its own.”

Tying the robe, I turned to face her and leaned scandalously in. “Me neither. It itches like hell and makes us all look ridiculous.”

Her brows shot upward with surprise and she laughed heartily. “It might be best if you refrain from saying as much to Mrs. Carter at breakfast. The poor girl’s spent the whole morning doing her best to change her hair color to match yours—she’s had the whole household gathering up every bit of starch we have.”

I chuckled at Fanny’s evident passion for gab, but then my lips turned downward as I remembered who Mrs. Carter was to her. “Is she nice to you?”

“Mrs. Carter?” Fanny scoffed, grinning. “Oh, yes, mistress. She’s very nice—young, but kind. She’s been so excited to host company like yourselves. I can’t say I’ve ever seen her so anxious to make a good impression.”

“Are you happy here?” I blurted out. “I mean... If you weren’t... I mean... Is there anything I can do for you? To help?”

“Help?” Her brow furrowed and she flapped an arm out toward the door. “You can *help* by letting me get you into a tub! I’m happy as a clam, but you won’t be if you end up washing in cold water *and* eating cold breakfast!”

Laughing nervously, I let her lead me out of the room and down the hall a few steps where she opened a door and a heavenly lavender steam rolled out around us.

“I’ll be right here waiting for you when you’re done, mistress.”

“*Cece*,” I corrected.

She bowed her head once in acknowledgement but dared not say my name. Instead, she nudged me gently inside and closed the door behind me, grumbling to herself about cold water.

Suddenly surrounded in the soft candlelit hues of pastel wallpaper, my eyes moved to the freestanding copper tub in the center of the room where gentle wisps of steam rose from its

surface. The sheen of its polished surface acted as a mirror to the glow emanating from the room's sconces and the massive crackling fireplace it sat adjacent to. Plush looking towels and an array of various soaps and oils were placed on a decorative tray at the side of the tub, their scents filling the air with a hint of indulgence.

I squeezed my palms together and glanced back at the door. It didn't seem fair for someone like me to be so surrounded by luxury while someone like Fanny stood outside the door.

Growing up in the 21st century, I never could've imagined I'd find myself face to face with an enslaved person. As I stood there staring at the steamy water with all my knowledge of slavery's tragic history, my gut told me I needed to *do* something.

But what could I do?

I could offer to let Fanny have the bath, but I knew, just from our brief interaction, it would only serve to annoy her.

In a gesture of solidarity, I could refuse to step foot inside it, claiming that if she didn't have access to such luxury then neither would I... but that'd only waste the time someone had spent dragging the water up here to fill it... and it would likely annoy her even more.

Sighing, I slid the robe off my shoulders and shimmied out of my shift, hoisting one leg over to test the water.

Groaning with guilt-laden relief as the heat melted away the weight of the trip, I sank down all the way, holding my breath as I submerged to let the world muffle in my ears.

For a second, I thought of Jasmine, who had been one of my closest friends for nearly seventeen years... While our difference in race had never served as a barrier between us, it was something we talked about often—disparities I hadn't experienced and racist undertones I would've never picked up on had she not been there to point them out. I wondered what she would think of me for being right where I was, for knowing all the things I knew, and doing nothing to change things.

Opening my eyes to stare up through the distorted water at the candlelight dancing on the ceiling, I reminded myself I

couldn't change things—not really.

We were going to undo everything. I would never be here to take this bath. Nothing I did for anyone on this timeline would follow me to the alternate one I was destined for and so I couldn't let myself be deterred by the plight of others, however tragic they might be. Bennet was my focus—my *only* focus—finding him was the single thing that would have a lasting effect. Everything else would need to be a promise for a different timeline.

And right there beneath the water, I promised that upon my return to this century, I would come back to Richmond and give Fanny some of that California gold... enough that she'd never find herself on the wrong side of that door again.



Dressed in a pale blue polonaise gown that Lilly had purchased on my behalf in Williamsburg, I shuffled noisily down the peculiar staircase, making a conscious effort not to tumble to my death in the process.

Fanny had helped me get dressed in the torturous dress, despite my insistence she didn't have to, and then, using a ceramic rod she'd heated over the fire, she'd curled my hair into perfect little spirals, pinning it partially up.

I'd refused to add starch, nearly white as my hair was already, and hoped Mrs. Carter wasn't too put off by the little bit of yellow in my natural strands. Powdering one's hair seemed like far too much effort for breakfast.

It wasn't that I didn't appreciate being fashionable. I was a bit of a fashion snob in my modern life and was accustomed to being uncomfortable. Dressing a certain way and buying certain things—out of character as it seemed for my choice in career—made up for a lack of relationships. Instead of drooling over some man at a bar in my spare time, I would salivate over a handbag or a pair of shoes. Where a man could toy with my heart, a bag or shoes were reliable, and there was something wildly rewarding about having the means to purchase them, hard as I'd worked to earn my title and salary.

This fashion, however, was taking quite a bit to get accustomed to. It wasn't the gathered and draped skirts that worried me or the bizarre floating construction that made the steps feel like they were moving beneath my slippers. It was the bodice and stomacher of the dress squeezing the oxygen from my lungs in such a way I was sure I might pass out mid-step and roll down the endless stairs to break every bone in my body. This type of fashionable was far more dangerous than an expensive handbag in the 21st century.

Feeling victorious when I reached the final step and remained alive to tell about it, I moved toward the sounds of voices on the far side of the house.

Stepping into the main dining room to have my senses overwhelmed with the aroma of coffee and warm bread, I smiled at its chattering occupants as the morning sunlight streamed in through the tall windows to cast them in a soft warm glow.

Mr. Carter sat at the head of the table, leaning forward to give his full attention to Juan and Dario's hushed conversation on his left.

His much younger wife sat to his right doing the same with Lilly. While she'd been successful at turning her hair white, it hardly looked good in the way the powder clung in globs to her thin hair. The poor thing did give it her best try though and I commended her for having the patience to sit through it, dark as I could tell her hair was naturally. I noticed she was sitting back far enough to allow room for her sizable pregnant belly, and she somehow managed to maintain a sense of poise where she listened intently to a story Lilly was sharing.

The servants, dressed in a russet colored livery, moved gracefully around the table, serving the morning repast with friendly smiles that seemed unfitting to their circumstances.

Again, I had to consciously remind myself of the timeline I would be returned to and made yet another promise to come back with a means to help them in some way—a means to make some kind of difference, however big or small, that could ease the guilt that came from being here and having to turn a cheek to their circumstance.

As my feet hit the carpet, Mr. Carter's gaze swept toward me, and he stood, prompting the entire table to quiet and do so as well, their happy chatter replaced with the groaning of chairs and the clatter of discarded silverware.

The sudden stillness and the heaviness of their stares made me feel uncomfortably conspicuous. Clearing my throat, I managed a subtle bow of my head. "Good morning. My apologies for having slept so long. I could hardly bear to pull myself out of such a comfortable bed."

Mrs. Carter beamed nearly as brightly as the sunlight framing her. "Good morning, Doña Cecelia! Do not apologize for being weary after so long a journey. I am just glad to see you are rested at last."

"Indeed," Mr. Carter echoed. "It is good to see the color returned to your cheeks."

The Carters stared at me for a long moment, as did the rest of the table's occupants. Jim was still holding a biscuit in his mouth, frozen mid-chew and waiting for his opportunity to sit. Maria was smiling uncomfortably, likely suffocating in her similar polonaise gown. When my eyes landed on Juan, his lip lifted in a partial smirk as he tilted his head ever so slightly toward the open seat across from him.

Right...

Technically my title as his wife and heiress to his father's estate outranked most of them, which meant they were obliged to stand until I took my seat. I'd forgotten we still had roles to play even if Maria wasn't playing hers.

I moved to the chair across from Juan, nestled between Lilly and Maria, and I let out a long sigh of relief as the entire table sat down alongside me.

Breakfast was littered before me in an abundance of options. A platter of scrambled eggs emitted a tantalizing aroma, while a succulent ham sat carved into perfect slices, waiting to be savored. Bowls of fresh fruit, including apples, pears, and berries added a vibrant touch of color to the table, and freshly baked breads and jams were scattered within reach of every seat. My stomach grumbled with anticipation.

I'd hardly taken a full breath before a silver tray was placed before me.

"Please do help yourself to some hot biscuits and honey," Mrs. Carter said, her eyes alight with eagerness as she peered over at the tray's contents. "The honey is harvested from our own hives, and this batch is simply delightful."

"I would love to, thank you," I said, and chewed the inside of my cheek as the servant placed a biscuit drizzled in the golden sweetness on my plate for me. Another replaced him with a carafe in his hand, and I was beyond elated when he poured its contents into a teacup near my plate.

Coffee...

"I'm sure you've heard about the tea shortage," Mrs. Carter remarked, looking at my cup a little nervously. "If we'd known sooner we'd be having company, we would have saved some for the occasion."

Waiting until I'd swallowed the rather large bite I'd taken of the biscuit, I offered her my warmest smile. "It's no trouble at all, Mrs. Carter. I actually prefer coffee in the mornings."

"Oh, do call me Ann!" A tinge of her young excitement spilled out in her raised voice and Mr. Carter gave her an unamused lift of his brow before leaning back toward Juan and Dario to continue their conversation.

She took a deep breath and adjusted her spine to better reflect the picture of perfect grace she likely thought we might be accustomed to.

With just as conscious of an effort, I attempted not to bend forward and shovel every bit of food into my mouth as it was being placed on my plate. I hadn't realized just how hungry I'd been and the wait to pick up my fork was torture.

At long last, I lifted the first bite of pork to my lips, and Ann's eyes met mine once more.

"I've been told you traveled to the colonies from a visit to Europe. During your time there, did you have any occasion to attend the opera?"

With my mouth full, I shook my head and let Lilly answer for me. I hadn't realized we were still using the European cover story, and I wasn't sure how to answer. Thankfully, Lilly did. "Unfortunately, we didn't have the time. Oh, but I have heard tales of the theaters in Paris and London and was devastated that our journey did not allow us the opportunity to partake in such a grand experience."

I suppressed a smile with another gluttonous mouthful of eggs. Out of all of us, Lilly was by far the best at playing this part. Given her position in society, I supposed it was no surprise. It seemed that, when it came to the refined manners of the upper class, not much had changed with time.

Ann swooned. "The mere thought of the opulent opera houses, the resplendent costumes, and the magnificent voices echoing through those hallowed halls fills me with such longing to experience it myself. Just last month, a traveling theater company made its way to our dear Richmond, and they presented a performance that left me enthralled. I know it is far from the same, but during one particular scene, the troupe treated us to a delightful musical interlude, and although it was not a full opera, the melodies enchanted me. It made me yearn for the day when I might witness an actual opera, and I've thought of little else since. I dream of it, even..."

Listening intently, I dared several more bites of ham and eggs before I might be inclined to contribute to the conversation.

"The leading lady, Miss Isabella Sinclair," she continued, placing a hand over her chest as if the name conjured Miss Sinclair in the flesh somewhere behind my head, "her voice was so hauntingly beautiful and brilliant it brought tears to my eyes. It has remained with me every day since, and I—"

She stopped short and frowned as Henry walked into the room holding a tray with a folded parchment on its surface.

"My apologies for the interruption. There's an urgent letter from Williamsburg, sir."

He moved to the head of the table and bent between Juan and Mr. Carter to speak in a hushed voice.

I watched in slight trepidation as Juan's brow furrowed and he took the letter into his own hands, inspecting its wax seal for a long moment before opening it.

A quiet fell over the table as his eyes moved over its contents.

When he lowered the paper, he pushed back from the table and stood, a worried crease embedded between his brows. The rest of the table stood with him—as it was only proper—and his gaze met mine, a heaviness to it that told me whatever he'd read would not be beneficial to our coming journey. “Forgive me, Mr. and Mrs. Carter, but I must excuse myself and my wife for a moment. Please do carry on without us.”

“Of course,” Mr. Carter breathed, attempting to hide his evident curiosity as his focus danced between us. “I do hope the news is not too troubling?”

Juan bowed his head. “Not troubling at all. Excuse us.”

He strode out of the dining room and I followed his hurried pace all the way out to the front porch steps.

“What happened?”

He handed me the papers. “We've a decision to make.”

Frowning, I unfolded the two pieces of parchment to reveal one as a letter and the other a piece of a news clipping. I scanned the intricate looping cursive of the letter first, noticing the signature of ‘*Dunmore*’ at the bottom before I focused on his actual message.

Don Juan,

With a heavy heart, I take up my pen to convey unto you a matter of grave concern which has come to my attention. I beseech your indulgence, for I trust that you shall perceive this epistle not as a reproach upon your noble character, but as a solemn revelation. In this regard, I find solace in the knowledge that my own esteemed wife and I have been similarly deceived, thus rendering us kin in our unwitting gullibility.

Enclosed herewith, I tender an article of utmost significance, which found its way into the Gazette only this week. Courtesy of Lord Gordon who, in his astute manner,

retrieved it expeditiously following your departure, herein lies an irrefutable truth that shall cast a shadow of doubt upon the authenticity of your newfound companion's claims of noble lineage. For verily, it would defy the laws of time and space if the Duchess of Parma were indeed present on both your ship and in Parma simultaneously. I fear the woman who accompanies you may have cunningly exploited your benevolent nature for her own nefarious purposes.

In presenting this information, I regretfully assume the role of a bearer of unwelcome tidings, a duty I discharge with utmost regret. May you find solace in the knowledge that my intentions are born out of a sincere desire to safeguard your honor and wellbeing.

Yours faithfully,

DUNMORE'

With shaking hands, I moved to the news clipping, the bold title reading, 'Royal Concerns'.

'Amidst the grandeur and jubilation that followed the ascension of Marie Antoinette to the revered position of Queen of France, a sense of trepidation has been quietly stirring in the hearts of her loyal subjects. It is not the lack of pomp or the splendor of her coronation that has caught their attention, but rather the anxious whispers that echo through the halls of power regarding the Queen's inability to fulfill one of her most crucial duties—the production of an heir to the throne.

The absence of an heir, an heir to whom the nation can entrust its future, has caused consternation to ripple across Europe. The Queen's seeming inability to conceive has set tongues wagging and ink flowing as the country waits with bated breath for a secure line of succession that can withstand the tests of time.

Even Queen Marie Antoinette's own family has expressed their growing concern. In addition to correspondence from her dear mother, the esteemed Empress Maria Theresa, reports have reached our shores of an influx of letters pouring in from Parma, penned by the Duchess Maria Amalia, herself, who holds her sister's predicament close to her heart and insists the Queen take more fervent efforts to conceive. One such letter

written in December was said to have offered the young Queen a rather lecherous registry of instruction detailing the acts required for a successful conception, further fanning rumors that the royal marriage has yet to be consummated.'

I lowered the parchment and stared up at Juan. "This doesn't necessarily mean she's in any immediate trouble, right?"

He slowly shook his head. "She was invited into the man's home and visited with his wife. He'd take this as a direct offense and might have additional correspondence being sent out to Richmond demanding her arrest. He obviously is aware of our presence here..."

"So, we should leave," I said, glancing back toward the house. "Right away."

"Or..." His eyes were sullen when they met mine.

"Or what?"

"She would not be executed... If the two of them were to be detained... we'd not have to worry about either of them attempting to stop us."

I was shaking my head before I'd even fully processed what he was suggesting. "No. We can't do that."

"Why not?" he asked, running a hand over his jaw. "I know it sounds cruel, but the best thing for them might be to spend a few weeks in a jail cell. Think about it, *mi alma*. If they continue on with us... if they attempt to interfere... you know what I must do to prevent it. If they are arrested, however, they would not even make it to their trial before you and I will have reached Bennet. I know where he is."

"But, she's preg—wait... you found him? He was on the roster?"

He nodded. "Chesapeake. He's working as a customs officer on the river there. If we wouldn't have rerouted, we might've run straight into him. You and I could leave right now on horseback and see this done long before March."

Despite that little voice in my head arguing all the reasons why I should listen to him—Bennet was my only focus, after all—I couldn't willingly allow Maria and Chris to be arrested...

Even if I knew it would be undone. Even if I knew their arrest would keep them safe. Even if I knew it was the most logical thing to do... They would remember I'd done it to them... and so would I.

“We can't.”

Sighing, his stance softened. “Then we'll need to set out on the road straight away. Navarro was able to procure one new carriage, but he needs the other two to proceed north with our replacements. We'll only be able to take one coach with us.”

I nodded. “I don't mind riding horseback.”

He motioned to the letter still in my hand. “I know it pains you to be dishonest, but that article can do nothing but agitate Chris further if we tell him of it. He'll blame us for having encouraged her to take on the identity.”

I pursed my lips and inspected the handwriting once more. “What will we tell him was in the letter instead?”

He smiled down at me. “A letter from Juan Francisco de la Bodega informing me of his return to Virginia?”

I took a deep breath as I contemplated it. “That might work, but do you think it's wise to keep Chris in the dark? What if Dunmore, himself, is riding toward this place right now to see justice done?”

“Dunmore will be far too preoccupied with his ball to ride out and arrest an identity thief personally. He'll likely send Gordon. She will be safe once we are a distance away from Richmond. Anyone pursuing will assume we're headed north, not south.”

With guilt expanding in my throat, I nodded. “How long will it take to get to Chesapeake?”

He massaged the back of his neck as he turned to look out at the trail ahead. “It would be faster by boat, but as we've none available to us at the moment, we'll have to travel by road. With the carriage, it will take a few a days... more if we encounter bad weather.”

I blinked the moisture from my eyes as the weight of the morning sank in. We knew where Bennet was and, in only a few

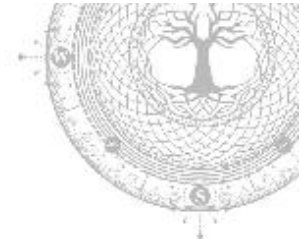
short days, I might wake up to find a husband who hadn't seen me in fourteen years.

Sliding my hand into his, I followed his gaze out to the trail ahead. "Let's hope for just a little bit of bad weather then. Eh?"



PART II

There's always another life



Chapter Sixteen

Alaina

With so much to do in preparation of the rough waters we sailed toward, every able-bodied person aboard both vessels found themselves swept up in the rush to secure the ships and their contents.

Objects were tied down or reinforced with spare deck boards nailed across them, doors and windows were fortified similarly, spare sails prepared, sloops and cutters bolted down, bedrooms stripped bare, and valuables stowed away.

In the mad dash that ensued, I hadn't the opportunity to seek out Benny after dinner to solicit him for answers to any of the thousands of questions whirring through my mind.

I was told he'd been carted off to the Sofia Martina before I'd even left the dining room, and that only heightened my suspicion around whatever he'd seen that had caused his reaction at dinner.

Juan didn't show any signs of mistrust toward our new guests, but I knew him well enough to know Benny's peculiar outburst had embedded reservations in him as well.

Anxious as I was to get him alone and discuss his thoughts on their sudden appearance, there'd been no time. Fetia and I were hauled down to a small interior cabin with our babies. The single bed inside was bolted to the wall and two harnesses had been fashioned out of rope and bedsheets that we hoped would keep us and our children in place while the ship was jostled around.

As soon as the waves began to rock us, she and I took our places in the bed, the babies tied to our torsos, and we clung to each other as those waves almost immediately became unbearable.

I hadn't given Cape Horn the credit it was due, despite all Juan's dire warnings about how treacherous it would be. Naively, I'd thought crossing oceans would be nothing compared to falling out of the sky in a commercial airplane and enduring the waves the storm had created afterward in only a small life raft.

I had been so very wrong.

If Captain Cook were indeed in the vicinity, there would've never been an opportunity to get close to him, violent as the waters were.

The ship pitched and rolled, climbing the waves and teetering down them at almost ninety-degree angles, causing my stomach to sway in sync with my body, moving rapidly to and from my throat and threatening to spill out every bite of dinner I'd taken the night before.

I'd never been prone to seasickness, but moisture gathered at the back of my mouth and remained there with each wave that lifted and dropped us.

All three babies contested against the movement as well, Zachary making sure his cries were heard over the other two.

Hugging both my arms around them, I did my best to comfort my two, a difficult feat when my own heart was beating out of my chest in rhythm with theirs to prove me the liar.

The ship creaked and crackled around us as if it was struggling to keep itself together, and we heard the water rush over the top deck every time we dipped downward, followed by the gushing splash as it spilled over the sides when we were lifted once more.

While there was no window to see out of our cabin, I was certain the waves lifting us had to be as tall as skyscrapers, and the winds stronger than the strongest hurricanes ever recorded. Juan's once mighty and massive ship was reduced to nothing more than a small twig, utterly overpowered by the forces of nature that commanded it.

Fetia and I were utterly silent, but there was nothing silent about the collision of the two oceans outside. Powerful swells crashed against us, their thunderous roars shaking the entire

vessel while the howling wind added a sort of melody to the hellish cacophony surrounding us. The ship's creaks and groans added percussion to the tumultuous clatter, and the ear-piercing cries of the babies cut through the clamor like a knife to my heart, only serving to intensify my mounting terror. I suppressed my desire to cry alongside them, clinging tightly to Fetia in the hopes her strength might rub off just enough for me to soothe them.

No rollercoaster in the world could've readied my body for the speed with which we were propelled downward, gravity threatening to snap the harnesses securing us to the bed each time we surged over a wave's crest.

I prayed silently, over and over, that God would grant us both the strength to hold on to the harnesses and our children, that He'd keep us all safe and unharmed, and that the rest of our family was being watched over wherever they were.

As if a much more malevolent force had heard my prayers and was intent on making a mockery of them, a deafening roar filled the air, overpowering even the thunder of the crashing waves. The ship trembled beneath us as some monstrous force surged, building up its power in such a way that the entire vessel quivered with anticipation.

My heart pounding in my chest, I could sense the swell approaching, its unseen enormity looming closer, and for a moment, time seemed to stand still. Stomach caught somewhere between my feet and my throat, I tightened my hold on both babies, certain whatever this monster was would swallow us whole and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

I'd come all this way—had been ripped through time to survive the island, the boar, Phil, the Nikora, childbirth, and Juan Josef just to die right here in this place between the oceans.

Adopting Cece's optimism, I promised myself and the babies we'd be okay if death found us... Looking down at their little faces, I assured them we'd wake up somewhere else and this monster would be nothing more than a bad dream. Juan had promised me he'd take to the time portals if he needed to in order to save Anna and his wife... I had to cling to that promise... had to presume that same vow would apply to me

and my children. We would join Anna and wait for our lives to be restored.

Over and over I tried to convince myself of just that, until the world began moving once more. With a violent force, the watery beast collided with the ship, engulfing the deck above in a torrent that seeped through the boards over our heads to splash cool water over our faces and bodies.

Frozen by fear and the cold damp fabrics around me, I waited for the ship to break into pieces, and the panic took over. My breathing became erratic, my children screamed in my icy grip, and I was lost in my helplessness to do anything about it.

We were going to die...

Beside me, Fetia moved her palm over Matty's head and began to sing ever so softly.

Hyperventilating, I had no idea how she was able to sing at all, but I held my babies tighter and closed my eyes, letting the gentle melody cut through every other sound to ease my racing pulse.

I'd heard Fetia sing before to my children, but never quite like this. While her normal song was upbeat and cheerful, this one was slow and emotional, sang in a deeper baritone that vibrated all the way through me.

The babies, too, settled with it, and while I had no clue what the words were, there was a sense of meaning in the way she sang them... a knowingness that the song was about something much bigger than us... something divine.

Kyle was right. Fetia definitely wasn't an ordinary human. Our entire existence was seconds away from being ripped apart, and the notes poured effortlessly out of her as if she were lying perfectly still under a sunny sky.

She rested her cheek against the top of my head and sang a little louder, those rich, deep, and drawn-out notes setting a more even cadence to my breathing.

The sounds she made, particularly when she reached for higher notes that dipped seamlessly back down, moving from words to hums to dreamy ah's that danced on a gentle vibrato,

was maybe the most beautiful melody I'd ever heard. Everything in me relaxed with it—even the movement of the oceans outside seemed to mold to the rise and fall of her notes, making it seem as if the seas were simply rocking us along to her song.

I smiled to myself as I remembered the way Kyle had once stood defiant in our objection to his relationship with her, stating, “You don't always need words to know a person.”

I hadn't seen it at the time, but he'd been so very right—at least when it came to knowing Fetia. Everything she was seemed to radiate off her. She was almost otherworldly in the ways she was good—kind, peaceful, curious about the world, and with a calm and child-like outlook that inspired a person to be better. We'd all joked on several occasions that the girl was perfect, and the more time I spent with her, the more I became convinced she actually was.

Bizarre as it was to be strapped to a bed with the ocean swallowing us whole, I felt entirely safe so long as she was beside me. God couldn't possibly let something so wonderful as her be lost in this water.

Opening my eyes, I glanced down at Matty where he was curled up against her chest, his eyes closed and his tiny fist rested near his lips, lulled similarly into a peaceful trance by her song. How lucky he was to have such a mother. I couldn't imagine she'd be anything less than perfect at raising him into a good man.

In my own arms, Zachary and Cecelia had grown heavier, both of them blinking through bleary eyes, attempting to remain awake to stare up at her just a little longer before they were dragged to sleep too.

I wondered if there was something about Tahitian culture that made the women so naturally maternal. Granted, the only Tahitian women I'd ever known were Fetia and Magna, but both of them emanated motherliness in a way I'd never experienced before.

It wasn't that there was a lack of tenderness in my own mother. Sofia McCreary loved her children fiercely—showered us with all the love she had inside her—but to everyone else,

she exuded cynicism instead of optimism, and had inadvertently made her children pessimists in the example she set. I'd always considered it better to be pessimistic than gullible, but I wondered if I had missed out on the magic I'd witnessed from Fetia and Magna as a result of my apprehensions about the people around me.

With parents at the top of my mind, I couldn't help but think of Fetia's father. He'd been with us since we were captured, but I hadn't seen him come off the other ship and I suddenly felt guilty for only just noticing his absence.

I waited until she'd finished her song to ask, "Where is your father?"

"He go home," she said softly once the boat tilted back upward to face another wave. "To my mother."

"What about you?" I asked, keeping my voice barely above a whisper so as not to disturb our recently entranced children. "Won't you miss them if you go with us?"

Adjusting her cheek against the top of my head, she sighed. "They make me and so they always with me." Her fingers swept over Matty's back. "I make him so I always with him now... and his children... and their children too... Home inside you always and you always home inside them. It not matter where. Home all around me."

I grinned at her ability to be so profound, further embodying her as the picture of perfection. "Have you and Kyle talked about where you'll live when you get to the future?"

I felt her nod against my head. "Kyle want stay close to you. He say good for Matavi have friend. He say good for us have friend too. That good thing for you and Jack?"

"Yes," I laughed, despite the downward trajectory of the ship, "it's a *very* good thing for me and Jack. I don't think I could bear it to be without either of you. Could hardly stand being on this ship without you for the month we were apart."

"Good." She lifted her head from mine. "I ask question now?"

Turning a little to meet her stunning brown eyes, I smiled. Just looking at her made the turbulence outside seem nonexistent. “Of course.”

“My English better, but poor. Magna help. You have book in big room. You show me how...eh...” she moved her finger in the air as if painting letters in front of her. “I want have words for future. Have mind for future. You show me how... book, I mean?”

“You want me to teach you to read?” I asked incredulously.

“Yes. I learn better if see word, no?”

Sighing, I thought of Bertie and how quickly she’d been able to teach Izzy to read and write without any sound. What I wouldn’t give to have that kind of skill to offer Fetia. I was humbled that she wanted me to teach her at all, and wondered if she’d come to regret it when I actually attempted it to expose myself as an awful teacher.

“Of course,” I answered, taking a deep breath as the ship rode up the side of another wave. “I’d be happy to.”

Chewing my lower lip, I adjusted my grip on the babies, considering, for the first time we might actually make it through the Horn. “When you were sailing here, did you spend much time with Benny?”

She lifted a brow. “You afraid for name he call you, yes?”

I nodded. “I think maybe something happened with Cece—she looks a lot like me—and I thought maybe, since you have this way of making people comfortable, he might’ve mentioned something to you.”

She shook her head. “You afraid he hurt her?”

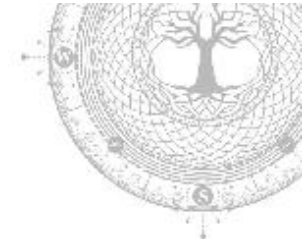
I closed my eyes as the ship was hurled down another massive swell. “I hope not, but the way he reacted has me worried someone might’ve.”

“You show me words to ask and I ask him. Okay?”

My stomach was once again flung up into my throat. “You... you don’t have to do that. I don’t want you caught up in whatever they’re up to.”

She frowned at me and I'd never seen a frown more beautiful in all my life. "I want help. You teach me words to ask."

Slowly, I nodded as my stomach was returned to its normal position. "Thank you."



Chapter Seventeen

Cecelia

I stood combing my fingers over the muzzle of my stunning Pacer horse as our supplies were loaded onto the carriage and mules behind me in a hurry.

Pacer horses had gone extinct some time in the 20th century, and I was transfixed to have my hands upon her. She was absolutely beautiful. Her velvety snout was warm and smooth beneath my palm, her eyes gleaming with a spirited sparkle, and her sleek and unspotted chestnut coat, radiating a rich reddish-brown hue, shimmered under the sun's golden rays.

Closing my eyes as she pressed into my touch, I sighed and let the sound of her steady breathing set a pace for my own.

From the moment I'd stepped onto Bud's yacht, my feet had been swept out from beneath me and I'd been launched up into an endless dizzying whirlwind.

In as soon as a few days, it could all be over and I could find my feet on solid ground once more.

I needed to get my wits about me—needed to figure out where these memories and this sudden insecurity had stemmed from and prepare myself for whatever life I might be returned to.

What if I showed up in a life with Owen? And what if I remembered my life with Juan when I did?

Hiding from the memories wouldn't do any good. Even if I didn't want a life with Owen, I needed to be ready for one, and I couldn't go on dismissing the images and feelings that were coming in as a warning. I needed to embrace them—explore them—and figure out what I needed to do next.

With one hand on the horse's muzzle, I forced my memory to conjure up the boy who'd once stood beside me on that sidewalk all those years ago at Ohio State.

I could almost see his irises, familiar enough that I knew they were more amber than blue, and his light brown hair styled to look messy but done so with thought... I could remember the squared jawline that gave him a distinctly Irish appearance... and as his likeness came suddenly to life, I was no longer imagining him standing outside that sorority house, but lying instead in a hospital bed with an oxygen mask over his nose, those amber eyes looking helplessly up at mine where I was bent over him.

Again, that beer can flashed through my memory where I'd found it on the dock, and I knew it was his and part of the reason he was lying in that bed.

Where I'd expected my memories of another husband—one A.J. had insisted I'd been crazy about—to be fond ones, I instead found my heart heavy with hatred for the man staring back at me.

The sadness in his expression angered me where it should've sparked empathy.

One line danced around my subconscious over and over: *'You did this to her.'*

Try as I might to bring clarity to that scene, I could get nothing more, and slowly the world around me cut through—the fluorescent hospital lights replaced by the sunlight on my closed eyelids, the sting of alcohol and bleach in my nostrils overridden by the more earthy scents of the horse beside me. I could hear Juan and Jim conversing in the distance, and I let go of my grip on the memory to peer back out over the yard at them.

The heaviness of hatred fizzled away to allow my entire heart to be lightened once more with his warmth.

I didn't know what kind of life I'd lived in that timeline that had made me so bitter, but I knew I couldn't let whatever memories I had left of this one be tainted by any lingering insecurities.

I would live every second appreciating this life while I had it, and whether I woke up in Tahiti with Juan or in that hospital with Owen, I would make sure that this timeline was far too spectacular to ever be forgotten.

Smiling, I began to move toward him, but was stopped in my tracks when both he and Jim pointed out toward the road at the large cloud of dust indicating a group of riders approaching.

Remembering the morning's letter from Lord Dunmore, I backed up to the porch in a panic and grabbed hold of Chris's arm. "Where's Maria?"

"Inside," he muttered, his attention fixed on the same scene.

"Hide her," I ordered, noticing the distinct navy uniform of Lord Charles Gordon riding at the head of the group. "Take Lilly and Izzy too."

Chris stood frozen on the step beside me, his green eyes wide with horror as he identified Gordon as well. "Didn't I tell you—"

I pushed him. "Go! Now! We don't have time for that! Hide them before they see her! You can be pissed at the rest of us later!"

Chris rushed through the screen door as I moved toward the end of the drive to stand between Juan and Jim.

"I told Chris to hide her with Lilly and Iz," I whispered just before the men reached us.

"I'll handle them," Juan muttered back, straightening his spine and resting his palm on the hilt of his sword as the horses came to a halt in front of us.

"Good morning, Lord Gordon," he beamed with a bow of his head. "I did not expect to see you again so soon, although I can hardly pretend to be ignorant of your reasons for joining us."

Lord Gordon swung a leg over the horse and dismounted quickly. "You've received Lord Dunmore's letter then?"

"Aye," Juan said, "most grave news indeed and I must offer my sincerest apologies to both you and Lord Dunmore for

having burdened you with such a matter. His letter arrived during breakfast and I was only just on my way to seek her out to question its verity. I'd hoped she could explain the inconsistencies you've uncovered and relieve me of the shame I feel for being associated with such an accusation. She did not join us this morning nor was she in her quarters when I sent a servant to retrieve her. I'm afraid the governess and child are missing as well, and their disappearance only serves to support this troubling claim. I am quite concerned she might've fled in the night. God only knows what she could've stolen from us if she did."

I could feel Jim's glare on us both. We hadn't told a soul about the letter or the accusation...

"Stolen, indeed," Lord Gordon huffed. "That is why I've come, personally. Lady Gordon is missing a most coveted piece of jewelry after the encounter. She must be quite the pickpocket to have been able to extract such a valuable piece without anyone's notice of it."

I frowned. "She didn't *steal* anything from the palace..."

Lord Gordon's scowl melted into a soft apology. "Oh, my dear Doña Cecelia, I understand it must be difficult to believe such a claim after so much time spent traveling with her, but I'm afraid you have been fooled."

I shook my head. "She didn't steal anything and your evidence is far from conclusive. I read your article. News travels slow across the water and it's very possible that journalist got the dates wrong. We can't assume the worst based solely on that. It would be unfair not to give her the benefit of the doubt." I looked up at Juan. "She didn't seem like an imposter to me."

Juan smiled and laid a hand on my shoulder as he met Lord Gordon's gaze. "She's a soft heart, my wife. What will become of the duchess—or... whoever she is—if she is apprehended? Surely, you would not risk punishing the *actual* Duchess of Parma if she is indeed who she claims to be?"

Lord Gordon turned to the half-dozen men who'd ridden up alongside him. "Search the grounds for signs of her, lads. She can't have gone far."

He spun back to us as his cavalry headed in all directions. “Dunmore wants her apprehended until her identity can be verified. He’ll not take the risk of an imposter running rampant with so many members of society gathering for his ball. Unfortunately, it is a rather exhaustive business to prove guilt when the identity she has stolen is so far from our shores. Indeed, we cannot take such a risk as to imprison a member of the royal family—even if *some of us* are entirely convinced it is a ruse. She’ll be held in a comfortable environment at Westover until we’ve sufficient evidence to put her on trial.”

“Westover?” I asked.

Lord Gordon nodded. “Aye. It’s a plantation not far from here. As the Byrd’s are not currently occupying the home, she will be placed in custody there, a setting more befitting of her social status—if she is miraculously who she claims to be—with several of my men to keep an eye on her.”

“What about her daughter?” Jim asked, his eyes still narrowed at me and Juan.

“Mr. And Mrs. Carter are fine, good people and I’m sure the child would be safe among their own children here until we can rectify this situation. I’ve no interest in anyone but the—Ah! There is our duchess now!”

Much to my horror, I turned in the direction of his gaze to find Maria was being escorted by two soldiers from the laundry side of the house, Fanny following behind them with a confused expression on her face.

“Shit,” Jim muttered under his breath.

“I found her conversing with the servants in the wash house, My Lord,” one of the men called out, pushing her forward rather brutishly. “A duchess,” he snickered, “consorting with the help!”

Despite being detained, Maria’s fiery spirit was unwavering as she spat one hateful Spanish obscenity after the next while digging in her heels against the dirt pathway. Two men twice her size seemed to be having a difficult time just getting her across the lawn.

“Hey!” Chris shouted, barreling out the door and down the steps. “Get your hands off her! What the hell are you doing?”

Juan cleared his throat, his palm still casually rested on the hilt of his sword. “I’ve not yet informed Mr. Grace of your findings, sir. I’m afraid he takes his role as her guard rather seriously.”

This statement was accentuated when Chris caught up, jerked one of the men back and landed a punch right across his nose.

My mind was reeling. I wasn’t sure whose lead to take, Juan’s or Chris’s. Logic told me to remain calm and allow the arrest to happen. She’d be kept comfortable and it would take weeks before she’d ever stand trial. We could be on a totally different timeline long before that trial could begin. Emotion, however, said otherwise. Maria was pregnant and in a fragile state of mind. How could I let her be taken into custody when she needed us most? And Chris would fall apart without her. Could I really stand aside and let it happen?

I could tell by Juan’s stance that’s precisely what he intended to do—it’s what he’d wanted. With Maria in jail and Chris racing to Westover after her, we’d have no one to stand in our way. We could ride toward Chesapeake without any further conflict.

It was logical but cold and I struggled to find my place between the two.

Maria’s voice, still unleashing a barrage of insults, became muffled when one of the officers decided to simply hoist her up over his shoulder.

As Chris wrestled on the ground with a second man in an attempt to get to her, I noticed Jim’s expression struggling with his own part... He had one of the rifles hidden away beneath his cloak... If he used it now, we could easily thwart seven men, but the ride to Chesapeake would be a dangerous one. I wasn’t sure he’d put Izzy or Lilly in that kind of peril. I wasn’t sure I wanted him to.

“Let’s say you’re right,” Jim said, tearing his gaze from Chris to meet Lord Gordon’s eyes and transition into his strange

English accent. “Say she is an imposter. The woman would have to be quite desperate to put on an act like that. She might’ve lost whatever family she had to take care of her and that girl. Perhaps she was just doing what she could to keep them both fed. From what I’ve seen, she’s not a bad person. There must be *something* we can work out here. I imagine you’ll need us as witnesses and we’ve all got other places to be.”

Lord Gordon raised a brow. “Are you attempting to bribe me, Mr...?”

“Jackson,” he said, sucking his teeth as he glanced over his shoulder at Maria where her hands were being tied in front of her. “We’ve got gold to make up for whatever you’ve lost, isn’t that right *Don Juan*?”

Juan frowned as he considered it for a breath. “We do.”

Jim nodded. “Now, we’ve got a party to get to and so do you. Lord Dunmore won’t have to worry about her taking advantage of any of his guests if we keep her with us. We could bring her back when we’ve finished with our business to stand trial then. It’ll take longer than that for you to verify her identity anyway.”

“She stole from *my wife*, Mr. Jackson,” Lord Gordon growled, his eyes darkening with a sort of sinister excitement. “I’m afraid even her short-lived freedom cannot be purchased with so many prominent families celebrating the queen’s birthday. I’ll see her locked away before any other household can fall victim to her thievery. You’ve time to attend your party before her trial.”

“She didn’t *steal* anything,” I insisted. “I was with her the whole time and I would’ve noticed if she took something.”

Again, Lord Gordon’s eyes softened with pity when they met mine and that enraged me. “You are a kind woman, Doña Cecelia, and likely have never encountered such a deviant. Someone like her can rob you in broad daylight by simply bumping into you.”

“You don’t understand—”

“What should we do with him?” one of the four men dragging Chris toward us panted.

Momentarily silenced, I observed the busted lips, swollen eyes, and disheveled appearances of all four arresting officers where they struggled to keep their hold on him. Chris really did put up one hell of a fight.

Lord Gordon hid his amusement at the same sight, particularly as he took in the backwards white wig barely staying in place on one of the men. “Let him go, lad. He was only doing his job.” He did grin then as he met Chris’s glare. “I warned you, son, that she might be an imposter. Turns out I was right.”

Chris jerked loose of the men and stood huffing as they all backed several steps away from him. “What evidence do you have against her?”

“Enough to arrest her,” he answered, crossing his arms over his midsection and tilting his head to the side. “You know, it was *you* that gave her away to begin with... The way you watched her... I knew almost instantly that you’d shared a bed with the woman and that made me suspicious enough to investigate. Come now, Mr. Grace, you can’t have expected the *actual* Duchess of Parma to lie with you. You knew what she was long before I did. Didn’t you?”

Chris’s fingers were balled into fists, and the words came out through his teeth. “What evidence do you have against her?”

“Gij zijt een bedrieger, nietwaar,” Lord Gordon said smartly. “Do you know what that means, Mr. Grace?”

He shook his head.

Lord Gordon inclined his head in the direction of the wagon the officers were shoving Maria into. “Nor does she.”

Juan, stone-faced and calm, took a step between them and focused on Chris, keeping his voice as neutral as his expression. “They haven’t enough evidence to put her on trial yet. She will be kept comfortable for the next several weeks.”

Chris’s chest heaved beneath his crumpled shirt. “Where?”

“Westover,” Juan answered, “which is not far from here at all. We will return to serve as witnesses in her trial *after* the Carroll’s ball. No harm shall come to her in our absence.”

The undertone there was, *'We'll kill Bennet and none of this will matter at all,'* but Chris didn't care about the undertone.

His mouth fell open. "You intend to leave her? Are you mad?"

"There is nothing that can be done," Juan assured him. "You will be reunited with her soon enough."

Chris turned to Jim, his eyes wild with rage. "Where is it?"

Obviously referring to the rifle Jim was never far away from, Jim held up a hand and glanced toward the house. "Now, let's just think this through for a minute before we go and do somethin' irrational."

"Where is it?!" Chris demanded. "There's nothing to think through. If she was one of yours—"

"Ay now," Jim spat, officially abandoning his English accent in the face of anger. "Don't ye' dare throw out words like *'one of yours'* and presume she ain't included in it. You two are just as much *one of ours* as anybody else out here with us. Ye' hear me? Now, I ain't sayin' we gonna' do nothin', I'm just sayin' we orta' think about what it is we're gonna' do before we do it." His eyes ventured back to Lord Gordon where he was mounting his horse. "Westover, ye' said? And what if one of us wants to go with her?"

Lord Gordon gathered his horse's reins and raised a brow. "Forgive me, Mr. Jackson, but I hardly think your comrade would travel there to simply provide company to the woman. Westover will serve as her jail cell and she will be treated as a prisoner until either her guilt or her innocence can be proven. Prisoners do not have regular visitors. Nor will she. Good day to you all." He turned his horse toward the wagon and the men panting outside it. "Let us be on our way, lads. I've a ball to attend and no wish to spend more than a day in the country."

"We're going to Westover," Chris growled beside me as the men mounted their horses and led them back toward the trail. "Right now."

Juan clasped his hands behind his back and faced him with a steely glare and a set jaw. "You may go to Westover if you

wish, Mr. Grace, and no one will stop you. *We* are going to Chesapeake to end this once and for all.”

My throat expanded as I watched Chris’s fingers tighten around the helm of his sword.

Before I could step in, Jim’s arm was slung over his shoulders. “Ye’ ain’t goin’ alone.” His gray eyes met mine for a second, brimming with disappointment and exhaustion that forced me to look away. “We don’t leave none of our own behind. Ye’ got that? I’m comin’ to Westover with you and we’ll get our lil’ firecracker back. The rest of ‘em be damned.”



With the departure of Lord Gordon and his officers, Mr. and Mrs. Carter ventured out onto the drive with Lilly and Izzy, all of them demanding to know what had just transpired.

I stared off at the river as they were filled in, unable to shake the feel of Jim’s disappointment from my skin.

‘The rest of ‘em be damned,’ he’d said, and I couldn’t let go of those words... couldn’t subdue the feelings of guilt that accompanied them. Going to Chesapeake was the logical move, but it didn’t feel right to abandon someone I’d grown so close to.

In a strange trance-like state, my mind went from Jim’s words to my own remembered voice as the guilt sent me right back beneath the fluorescent lights of Owen’s hospital room.

‘You did this to her!’ I’d shouted over a beeping machine behind him. *‘She could’ve died in that water! She could still die here and it will be because of you! How many times have I begged you to stop drinking? How many times have you told me it wasn’t an issue? Look at me. I will never forgive you for this. Never.’*

His eyes were barely open, but I knew he’d heard me. I *needed* him to hear me so that if he died in that hospital bed, he would die knowing what he’d done to our daughter.

Our daughter... who I couldn’t envision but who I knew was lying in a room down the hall in the same ICU fighting to

stay alive... fighting to stay alive because her father chose to drink himself too stupid to realize our daughter was on the thin ice that day.

Our daughter... who'd fallen through the ice... whose heart had stopped beating... whose face I could not conjure but who I knew was holding on by a thread a few doors down.

Blinking back into reality, I laid a shaking palm on my horse's muzzle and attempted to right my breathing.

"Hey," Lilly said gently, her hand gliding over my spine. "You alright?"

Straightening with a deep breath, I nodded, and the world around me came back into focus once more. Juan, Chris, Dario, and Jim were having a rather heated and loud debate as to what to do next while Mr. and Mrs. Carter stood observing confusedly.

"I..." I swallowed the thickness in my throat, debating what was more important, the memories or the defense of my new husband. In light of Jim's words, I chose the latter. "If... If we don't go to Chesapeake—"

She shook her head and placed her hand in mine. "Cece, you don't need to explain your reasoning to me. I'm not going after her, either."

I frowned. "You're not?"

She sighed, glancing over her shoulder at Izzy where she was showing her cup and ball game to one of the Carter boys. "I can't put Iz in any more danger than I already have. Mrs. Carter offered to let us stay here and I think it's best. Who knows what kind of trouble we might get into out there if I drag her along, you know? Jimmy and Chris will go after Maria, and me and Iz will see you all when we wake up in Tahiti."

I managed a half smile. "Here's to hoping."

She moved closer, a wrinkle forming between her brows. "I knew something else was wrong with you. You've been weird since we got off that ship. What's going on?"

Letting my shoulders relax, I surrendered to revisit the memory still churning inside me, desperate to be acknowledged

lest it boil over into another panic attack. “You and A.J. were close on the island... Did she ever mention my husband to you? The one in the old life?”

“Owen?” she asked. “She spoke quite a bit about him when you were unconscious. What do you want to know?”

“Was he an alcoholic?”

Inspecting my face worriedly, she slowly shook her head. “She didn’t say anything about that... Why? Are you remembering him?”

I shrugged. “I’m getting little glimpses of *something* but it’s chaotic and random—a piece here and there, but I can’t quite make sense of it. God, I wish A.J. was here to tell me if I’m remembering my old life or if my paranoia about returning to it is forcing my mind to play tricks on me.”

She looked over her shoulder at the ongoing argument, then back at me. “Why don’t you tell me what pieces you *do* remember and I’ll tell you if it lines up with anything she’s told me?”

Mindlessly moving my palm over the horse’s mane for support, I confessed, “It all started in Yorktown. I got this image of a frozen dock and a beer can... Then I got little flashes of memories here and there. From what I can make sense of the glimpses I’ve been given, there was some kind of accident. Did Alaina mention anything about my daughter falling through the ice and ending up in the hospital?”

She didn’t need to speak to confirm I had been living a real memory. Her face said it all. That hospital room was real—the dock was real. So were the beer cans and the dread... Maybe I *was* fading slowly back into that life...

“Did she die?” I asked before she could answer.

She shook her head. “No. Lainey said she came out that much stronger for it.”

I let out a relieved exhale. I wasn’t sure why the thought of my daughter’s death on the ice had felt so heavy. I didn’t even know her... Couldn’t envision her face or recall the name... yet, it’d been eating away at me all the same.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I felt death in the first memory... Maybe Owen? He was in the hospital too. Did he die there?”

“No,” she said slowly, recounting whatever my sister had told her in her mind before answering. “Both Owen and Maddy went to the hospital, but they both recovered and you all went home together.”

Maddy...

Madison Pearl Koch...

I knew my daughter’s name. How much longer before I remembered her face? Her mannerisms? Her personality?

My grip on the horse’s mane tightened. “What does it mean that I keep remembering a life I shouldn’t know at all? What if something we did or are about to do will prevent us from being successful? If we never reach Bennet, Juan can’t be there to interfere in my life. What if we’re on the wrong path?”

“We don’t know how this time stuff works,” she assured me, petting my horse’s shoulder as she took a step closer. “You lived two lives, honey. Maybe there’s something about being in the past that’s jogged memories of both. We don’t know that that’s not possible. It doesn’t necessarily mean things are going to fall through. You, of all people, know better than to assume the worst. You’ve always been the one who can see the light at the end of the tunnel, and I refuse to let you fall victim to the same dramatic thinking as me and your sister. If you don’t have hope, where does that leave the rest of us?”

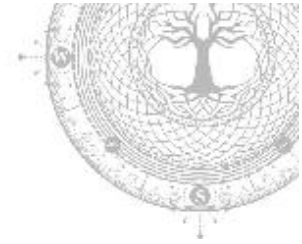
Rubbing my face hard, I nodded. “You’re right... I just...”

“You don’t want to remember your daughter and have to choose between two lives?”

I kicked at the dirt beneath my feet. “Something like that. And that’s assuming I even have a choice in the matter. What if I forget everything that happened here?”

“Then I’ll be there to remind you,” she said, smiling. “So will Alaina and Maria and everyone else who’s witnessed how amazing you two are together. You and Juan have done plenty of planning for how you’ll save our asses on the other timeline to make sure nothing goes wrong. Don’t think we won’t do the

same for the two of you if anything about your own experiences change.”



Chapter Eighteen

Chris

Mounted atop his horse, Chris waited impatiently as Jim and Lilly exchanged a very drawn out goodbye.

He didn't want to rush them, given that they were the only ones who seemed to be in his corner, but every second they spent standing still was another second Maria could be harmed by the men who'd taken her into custody.

Knowing she was now captive to Lord Gordon and likely enduring any wonder of hell made him want to hurt someone—made him want to wrap his fingers around something with a pulse and squeeze until there was no more anger left inside him.

He'd very nearly done just that to Juan Jr. before he'd ridden off with Cece and Dario toward Chesapeake.

It was best that they were all separated. His anger was like an infection, sitting heavily in his chest and throat and spreading by the minute throughout his body. He wasn't sure he could've looked upon Juan and Dario's faces for a second longer without resorting to violence. His hands shook where he held the reins tightly, and his entire body was rigid with it.

How many times had he insisted they refrain from using the duchess's identity? How many times had he warned them all that this very thing could happen?

It enraged him that Juan and Cece had shrugged off her arrest so easily—that they'd been so certain of her safety as a prisoner.

After spending so much time with Captain Cook, he'd gotten a glimpse into the minds of men in this century. Men in this era didn't see a person when they looked upon a woman like Maria, but rather, they saw an object to be exploited. It

didn't matter if there was doubt around her identity. If she was away from him and surrounded by those kinds of men, she was in real danger.

Juan should've known as much after growing up in this time.

Then again, was Juan really all that different from his father? Sure, he lacked the desire for brutality Juan Josef radiated, but he still was adamant about undoing his whole life to erase his own mistakes—to be forgiven for those mistakes and reunited with Cece in a life he deemed more worthy. Why should he expect a man so self-driven to care if Maria had a memory of being accosted?

Did any one of them actually stop to consider anyone but themselves in this mess? Had he, himself, considered anyone but himself in his own plans for Bennet? Was there even a right side to stand on or were they all being selfish in their own desires?

He glanced down at Lilly and Jim where they were clinging to each other and whispering softly to one another. Maybe they were the only ones without an agenda of their own... And, as such, he was suddenly anxious to get Jim's opinion on everything.

From the stables beyond the house, a flash of movement caught his eye and he managed a smile when he saw Henry's massive figure riding up on an auburn stallion.

"Mr. Grace," he said in his rich baritone as he came to a stop alongside him, "if you're going after your wife at Westover, I imagine you'll need someone who knows the grounds."

Chris glanced past him at Mr. and Mrs. Carter. They stood near the front door observing Lilly and Jim where Jim was finally moving closer to his own horse. "Are you sure that's okay? I mean... Mr. Carter... he won't mind?"

He made a noise in his throat, not quite a laugh, but amusement nonetheless. "Mr. Carter suggested it, sir, as Mrs. Grace was only masquerading as nobility to support the rebel cause. I want to help you, and you can't very well march up to the front door and demand her release."

Heart warmed at the reference to Maria as Mrs. Grace, his fingers loosened their death grip on the reins. “You have a better idea?”

Henry nodded, flashing his teeth in a wide smile. “I used to work for the Byrds, sir. Near the river, there’s an underground tunnel that leads to and from the icehouse. It was built to escape the natives should they lay siege upon the house. We’ll enter the grounds through there, and if we can find a way to get her outside undetected, we’ll escape through it as well.”

While this seemed to be a much better plan than strolling up to the front door with Jim’s automatic rifle and firing until he reached whatever room she was held in, it still didn’t account for just *how* they’d get her outside.

“There’s a house slave there that should have access to her,” Henry continued, evidently reading Chris’s thoughts. “I’m certain she will assist us if she’s able. We’ll need to wait until dark, and it will not come without its costs if there is an altercation. If we do this, she’ll be hunted for far worse crimes than the one she’s been charged with. As will you... You will not be able to return here. In fact, you’ll need to leave Virginia straight away. Are you prepared for this?”

Chris nodded. He would leave Virginia soon enough... once he’d gotten to the *right* George Bennet in Norfolk and hidden him.

“Yuns ready?” Jim asked, eyeing Henry as he guided his horse to the opposite side of Chris’s. “You comin’ with us, bud?”

“He’s leading the way,” Chris informed him. “He says there are tunnels beneath the property to get us in.”

Jim adjusted the strap holding the rifle across his back beneath his cloak and pursed his lips as he inspected Henry thoroughly. “Ye’ sure ye’ wanna’ get caught up in this? If they’s a fight... we ain’t exactly plannin’ to stand down.”

Henry’s eyes sparkled at that. “I’ve got plenty of scars on my back from the overseers at Westover. If there’s a fight, Mr. Jackson, I am very much looking forward to being a part of it.” He pulled back his jacket to reveal a sword and a pistol strapped

to his hip along with what appeared to be a whip. His gaze ventured back to Mr. Carter for a second and the two of them exchanged knowing smiles.

With a twitch of his lip, Jim took the reins. "Alright then, boss. Lead the way and let's go see what kind of hell we can stir up."

As Henry guided his horse out onto the trail ahead of them, Chris couldn't help but notice the way Jim looked back over his shoulder at Lilly and Izzy, his expression pulled downward with an intense sorrow he'd never seen on him before.

"You don't have to come," Chris said, directing his mare to follow. "If you wanted to stay with them... I wouldn't blame you. I can take the rifle."

Jim tore his gaze away and straightened. "*I'd* blame me. It ain't right to leave no one behind, even if we're settin' out to put the clock back. I won't have none of ours come out with memories of bein' tortured or abandoned. I ain't no kind of man to leave ye' now."

Chris stared ahead as they navigated beneath the cover of trees and up a more narrow dirt trail, Jim's words stirring up a conflict he couldn't help but broach. He respected Jim immensely, and he intended to share his plans with him, but he needed to verify that the man he'd be exposing himself to matched the one he considered him to be in his mind. "Can I ask you something?"

Jim raised a brow as he met his eyes, then let his shoulders sink as he seemed to see the quandary on Chris's features. "Aw, hell... Go on and ask it. Lordt knows I been waitin' for ye' to."

Taking a very deep breath, Chris watched the ground in front of them. "She wasn't that hard to find... June... You don't seem like the type of man who'd just give up that easily on searching, particularly when you knew she was pregnant. Why did you?"

Jim sighed. "There ain't a day that's gone by since that plane fell that I haven't asked myself that same question. At first, I's just mad, ye' know. I give up everything I had to buy that rig and go to work to support her and that child. And I kept

thinkin' she'd come back like she always did. But I shoulda' looked for her when she didn't... shoulda' looked for *him*. Instead, I kept on doin' what I was doin', kept on waitin' for her, and the longer I did, the more that anger turned into somethin' more sour... Started drinkin' myself stupid because of it. And then I thought, well, shit, I ain't no different than my daddy was. Sure, I was makin' a livin' for 'em, but my daddy made a living to support me and my momma and we didn't never want the summbitch to come home. His truck would pull in the drive, and we'd both get to shakin', wonderin' if he'd come in hollerin' and drunk or if he'd just pass out somewheres. I didn't want to be that to nobody. So, I just kept on..."

He stared ahead as he expertly guided his horse along the path. "After a few years of it, I come home for a spell, and my momma was sick... had this oxygen tank on her and couldn't hardly get up and down. She never said so, but it was me that made her sick. See, she'd been lookin' for 'em all that time I's out on the road. Even got ahold of one of June's uncles up in Ida. He told her June didn't want nothin' from me and to stop lookin' for someone who didn't want to be found. It broke my momma's heart... literally. She got congestive heart failure. I had all this money saved from drivin' my rig, and I offered to pay for the best doctors in the world to fix her up, but she wouldn't take a dime... Said I needed to get right with God and take care of my own with that money."

He shook his head. "I spent every day beside her watchin' her get worse. We'd stay up late sometimes talkin' about all the places she wished she coulda' seen and how short life really was. She made me see what I'd been missin' goin' so long without knowin' my child. I started really lookin' for June then... I thought, if I cain't give my momma all them places she never saw, maybe I could at least give her a grandchild to love on for a bit. But she died before I could track 'em down."

He watched Jim's chest move heavily. "Wouldn't ye' know it, I won the lottery just a few weeks after her funeral. And I thought, I'll go see some of them places momma wanted to see, and when I get back, I'll give every penny I got to June and my child. It's what my momma' woulda' wanted. Never imagined I'd end up where I am now. If I could go back and do it all over,

knowin' I'd still be right here in the end, I'd do everything different."

Chris looked down at his gloved hands and nodded. "Wouldn't we all? I feel like, the older I get, the more time I spend wishing I could go back and do just about everything differently."

Jim made a sound in his throat. "Life's a bitch like 'at. One minute you're young, dumb, and thinkin' ye' know everything there is to know, and the next, you're old enough to know, but ye' ain't able to do a damn thing about all the dumb shit ye' already done."

Chris huffed in agreement. "You know we lost our daughter, right?"

Jim nodded, graciously avoiding his eye. "She mentioned it once, but didn't say much else. I know she's got a condition and I reckon that's what caused it?"

"I thought I was okay... after," he said. "But it destroyed everything that was ever good inside me. I hadn't realized how much I wanted to be a father until I saw that pregnancy test. I wanted it more than I ever wanted anything—let it consume me so entirely, I forgot there was ever any chance the baby might not make it. If I could go back... God, I would do so many things different." He looked up the trail as Henry led them around a bend. "But, even with the knowledge of what I did wrong then, I think I'm making all the same mistakes over again now."

Jim looked at him then, his thick brows raised high on his forehead. "Makin' exactly what kinds of mistakes all over again?"

He'd often wondered if Jim knew about the pregnancy. Lilly wasn't one to stay quiet, and he couldn't imagine she was very good at keeping such a secret from Jim, of all people. The fact that he seemed genuinely oblivious to it was a testament to the kind of friend she'd become to Maria.

"Maria's pregnant," he admitted with a long relieved exhale to have said it out loud. "If we kill Bennet, the baby dies with him. Things wouldn't have happened the same way on an

altered timeline... and I can't let anything about that night change... even to save Anna... even if Maria wants it otherwise. I can't go through that again—can't let Maria go through it if I have the means to prevent it.”

“Aw hell,” Jim said under his breath. “Why didn't ye' say nothin', Beanstalk? All of us was at that table when we agreed to send you to the future to get the names. And all of us gave our words we wouldn't move forward with this plan unless every single one of us was on board with it. We coulda' talked this through.”

Chris shook his head. “I would've been overruled. Besides, by the time we realized she was pregnant, it was too late. We were already on our way. Jack made the decision for everybody and never bothered to ask if the rest of us agreed to it.” He breathed out a laugh that had no amusement in it. “You know, when Juan Jr. first told us about their plan to kill Albrecht's ancestor, we *all* were stunned by the absurdity of it. Now, I feel like I'm the only one who still thinks this is crazy.”

“Ye' ain't the only one, buddy. It ain't never set right with me, killin' somebody... 'specially now. We ain't God, but it sure as shit feels like we're tryin' to play Him, don't it? Ye' shoulda' told me before Junior and them rode off. I'd have stopped 'em.”

Squeezing the reins, Chris closed his eyes. “They're... not going to find the right George Bennet in Chesapeake.”

Jim scoffed. “How the hell ye' know that?”

Chris pulled the parchment from his jacket pocket and extended it to Jim. “Because I wasn't going to let Maria put her life on the line only to have it destroyed when this was over. From the minute I stepped off that ship, I've been trying to find a way to take care of my own... And now that I have, I'm not sure if I'm making the right move.”

Jim scanned the page, his thick brows crinkled as his eyes moved over the words. “How'd ye' manage to get this before anybody else did?”

“You remember that night we followed Juan in Yorktown?”

He snorted. “That’s where ye’ run off to when I came back to collect ye’?”

Chris smiled proudly. “Paid some drunk guy a bunch of Juan’s gold to ride to Carter’s with a letter written from both me and Colonel Howe. I figured, since they were in our debt for Maria’s role in transporting their weapons, they might be more inclined to offer up the name to me first. I wasn’t sure if it’d work, but I had to try something to save that baby. You think I’m wrong to want to stop it?”

Jim glanced at the paper again. “I don’t know what’s right or wrong no more, Beanstalk. I really don’t. But, Lordt help me, I don’t see nothin’ wrong in wantin’ to save your child. What’ll ye’ do now?”

“I was thinking,” Chris said, taking the parchment back when Jim extended it to him, “once we get Maria back, we could scoop up Izzy and Lilly, stop in Norfolk on our way south to warn the real Bennet to use a different name for a while... then we could catch up to Jack and Alaina on the water... try to get back to the storm. If the others are already headed that way on the slave ship—Kyle and Magna and Bud—we’ll all be reunited in the future and no one else has to die. What do you think?”

“What about Cece?” Jim asked. “Ye’d leave her behind?”

He shrugged. “She can never *be* here to leave behind if we don’t kill Bennet. It was only Juan’s interference that granted her the kind of life worth leaving behind to go through time. She wouldn’t have left her daughter on the original timeline. I’m pretty sure we’ll find her safe and sound on the other side of that storm... as clueless about her time here as she was about the life she had before.”

Jim frowned. “Ye’d take Juan from her then?”

Chris sighed. “To save Maria the pain of losing a child? Absolutely. I’d try to give him back some other way. Maybe I could introduce them after it was over or something... I just... I can’t let Maria go through that kind of loss... Don’t think I could go through it again either. I’ll figure out a way to make it up to Cece at some point. It’s not like she wasn’t willing to take just as much from me by going ahead with this plan.”

“She knew about the baby?”

Squinting ahead, he nodded. “Yeah. Maria told her and Lilly a while back.”

Jim scoffed. “Are ye’ tellin’ me, *I’m* the only one that didn’t know ‘bout this?”

Chris laughed. “I think Juan knows—likely Cece told him—which means Dario would know too. I assumed Lilly had told you too... It actually surprised the hell out of me that she didn’t.”

Jim’s expression washed over with fond pride. “I know she seems young and spoilt, but she ain’t the type to go tellin’ other people’s business. There’s far more to her than what yuns can see.”

“I’m noticing that now,” Chris assured him. “Both of you are admirable in the way you’ve handled everything out here. What is it you two want to do?”

Jim let out a long exhausted breath. “Hell, we just wanna’ be still somewhere with the people we love safe and sound around us... Don’t matter how we get there so long as we all get there in one piece and we’re still recognizable as the folks we once was by the time we do, ye’ know? All this schemin’ and plottin’ and talks of murderin’ people... It’s gettin’ real hard to see any part of myself in my own dang reflection most days.”

“If she’s in trouble up there,” Chris said, tilting his head toward the trail, “I don’t want to make you that much more of a stranger to yourself... She’s got enough bad memories of this life, and I’ll make myself all manner of monster before I let her have another.”

Jim smiled and winked. “Like I told ye’ before, I ain’t no kind of man to leave ye’ now. I’ll be made a monster right there beside ye’, Beanstalk—a monster with enough sense to aim for knees and shoulders if she is in trouble.”



The ride from Carter’s home to Westover took less than an hour. Securing their horses a half mile down the trail, they

remained far enough inside the woods to be hidden among its oak, maple, and pine trees, but close enough that Chris could just make out the massive structure Maria was locked up inside.

Nearly double the size of Carter's home, it was a Georgian-style mansion sprawling wide across its plot with the same river running behind it. Similar to Carter's home, it had a brick exterior adorned with detailed white trim, and its architecture might've been just as impressive were it not for the prison it was serving as.

Enslaved people moved in droves from the house to various spots on the property, all of them with a weight upon their shoulders that seemed to sink their postures.

He saw Henry stiffen at the sight of them, like his own memories of the place brought back all the weight he once carried alongside them.

"Where do you think they'll put her?" Chris whispered, careful to remain concealed behind a thicket of blackberry bushes that was serving as their lookout. He scanned the rows upon rows of glass-pane windows, longing to catch even a glimpse of her within them.

"Not sure," Henry answered, squinting to see through the thorny coppice. "If it were up to me to guard a prisoner in there, I would place her in the garret on the top floor. There's only one way in and out, and it's too far to fall for her to attempt an escape out the windows."

Chris's eyes ventured up to the third floor dormers on the roof, praying she was unharmed behind one of them. Nightfall seemed like an eternity away, and there was no telling what someone like Lord Gordon might do to her in the time in between.

"See that man, there?" Henry asked, pointing at an ominous figure mounted atop a black horse patrolling the field nearby. "That's Mr. Ezekiel Blackwood, the main overseer. Folks used to say he had eyes in every part of his skull because there wasn't a thing that happened here he didn't somehow find out about. We have to be careful who we interact with and how we get in. If he catches wind of us, the entire estate will know

within moments. And he's the worst kind of wicked when there's promise of a fight. The man lives for violence."

Jim touched the strap on his chest. "He ain't the only wicked one among us. I've fished for walleye bigger than that ugly summbitch. He put them scars on your back?"

Henry shyly adjusted the collar of his jacket. "Yes, sir."

"Ye' ain't got to call me sir. Ye' can call me Jim or Jimmy or James or even dumbass if ye' want to, but don't you dare call me sir. I ain't nothin' like the men you call sir. Me and you, there ain't nothin' different between us that entitles me to no more than my name. Got it?"

Stifling a smile, Henry let his shoulders relax a smidge. "Yes... James."

"Good. Now," Jim looked around, "where's this tunnel at?"

Henry shook his head. "It's behind the house near the river. We won't be able to get any closer until nightfall."

"I *need* to get closer," Chris insisted, frustration boiling over as he watched someone move past the front door but couldn't make out any details. "I have to know she's alright while we wait. If someone lays a hand on her..."

Henry sat back on his heels. "Mr. Carter said they would've brought her to the jail if they were confident about the evidence they had. The fact that they've brought her here means there's doubt. These men won't lay a hand on her if they suspect there's any chance she might actually be the duchess."

"Lord Gordon would," Chris insisted, flexing his fingers as he remembered the way he'd sized her up like prey outside the palace. "He's already proven her guilt when he spoke High Dutch and she didn't understand him. I can't imagine he's left yet... and if he's in that house with her, she could be in danger. Could we go in farther up the river and swim to the entrance without being detected?"

Henry glanced up at the bright sun beaming through the spidery leafless tree branches over their heads. "After your reaction when they took her, Mr. Grace, they'll be watching for

signs of us. We'll be seen in the water long before we can get close enough to use the tunnels. We have to wait."

"What about the servants?" Chris asked desperately. "You said you worked here. Is there no one that can at least inform us of her condition while we're out here waiting?"

"They are too far away," he answered with an apologetic grimace. "I understand you are worried, but you would risk being caught before we can ever step foot past the gates."

He glanced at the rifle on Jim's back. "Jim... what if we ___"

"We agreed we'd only use it if we get in a pinch," Jim answered. "We don't know them boys' names and who they might be related to. They wasn't part of our research. Now, I know you're scared for her, but we gotta' be smart."

He turned back to Henry. "She's pregnant. I have to know she's not being beaten."

Acknowledging Chris's mounting anxiety with a nod, Henry raised up on his knee to scan the fields between them and the house. In the one closest, several men were working the soil, just as they'd been at Carter's, clearing out the old vegetation to prepare for the upcoming planting season. Nearer to the house, there was a group gathering what appeared to be root vegetables from a much smaller garden, and on the opposite side of the home, there was a large pasture where a few men and women were tending to cattle and sheep.

"I can try to signal Moses," Henry muttered, lowering back down to meet their eyes, "but he might not hear it at this distance and I can only do it once without drawing Mr. Blackwood's attention. If he doesn't come, we'll have to be patient. This is all I can offer."

Chris was nodding before Henry'd even finished his first sentence. "Please."

"Wait here and stay down," he said, then rose to sneak from one tree to the next to get closer to the field.

"Ay," Jim whispered, scooting closer to him as Henry moved farther away. "Why'd ye' tell me? 'Bout the real Bennet,

I mean. How'd ye' know I wouldn't go after him myself?"

"If you believed in what they want to do," Chris said, not taking his eyes off Henry as he cupped his hands around his mouth and sent out a bird call, "you wouldn't have come here with me. You'd have gone with Juan, Dario, and Cece and given me the same line of bullshit they did about how whatever happens to Maria will be undone once Bennet is dead. When you didn't, I figured telling you was the best option I had to getting us all back to that storm together."

Jim kept his gaze on Henry where he was crouched down near a tree waiting for signs Moses had heard his call. "I been thinkin' somethin'. If Junior and Precious don't go to the storm with us, there ain't no guarantee the real Bennet will be safe... especially when he gets to the Battle of Great Bridge, where we all know he'll be in December."

Chris ran a hand over his stubble. "Juan and Dario don't have an automatic rifle and we do... When we're done in Norfolk, Chesapeake is less than six miles away... They can either come to the storm with us after they take the life of the wrong George Bennet and nothing changes, or..."

"Or," Jim echoed, shaking his head. "Me and you, we might be actin' big and bad out here, but ain't neither one of us murderers. We're a couple lovesick men who make normal, stupid mistakes to beat ourselves up about—not this."

"How many Nikora did you kill on that ship?"

Jim lifted his chin. "We was protectin' our own then. That ain't the same."

"Isn't it?" Balanced on his haunches, he turned to face him. "They're talking about murdering generations of innocent people just to give Juan Josef some other life he thinks he belongs in. And when they do, there's no telling what we might lose. Yes, I'll lose a second child, but this isn't about just me here. What happens to the rest of us if we don't encounter Juan Josef? We don't know. What if we stay in Tahiti and Tu has his war with Eimeo? And what if one of us gets caught in the middle of it? What if Lilly or Izzy or Kyle dies by being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Or what if we attempt to make it to that first storm on the cutter the way we'd originally

planned and we can't get close enough without Juan's instrumentation? What if we all die in the waves that come after? You were on Juan's ship when you dropped us off at the coordinates and barely made it away from those swells without capsizing. How are we not protecting our own by stopping this madness right now?"

"Hell, I don't know them answers," Jim huffed, pulling frustratedly at his hair. "I ain't supposed to be here figurin' out who to kill and who to save for what reasons. I just wanna' go home with the folks I love and I wanna' feel like the kind of man that deserves 'em when I get there."

"Me too," Chris admitted. "And the farther we move away from the coordinates of that storm, the more complicated it gets to go back without sacrificing a piece of our humanity."

A thin, dark-skinned man in the field started toward the woods, putting a prompt end to their discussion.

Clad in tattered garments that barely clung to his emaciated frame, his clothing bore the unmistakable signs of long days spent under the unforgiving sun. The fabric, faded and frayed, mirrored the toll that physical labor and mistreatment had exacted upon him over far too many years.

Hidden behind a large pine, Henry made his way over to its shadow and the two stood conversing for a long moment.

Chris couldn't help but notice the physical differences between the two men. Where Moses seemed frail, his body worn down by evident mistreatment, Henry stood tall with a robust frame that exuded strength and vitality. The contrast was stark, reflecting the disparity in their treatment and circumstances. Moses, with sunken eyes and gaunt cheeks, appeared on the brink of death, every movement a testament to the heavy burden he bore. Henry's confident posture and well-nourished appearance, however, spoke of a life that, though still one of enslavement, had somehow evaded the harshest cruelties inflicted upon Moses.

He considered the brief exchange of smiles between Henry and Mr. Carter and wondered if he hadn't been right about Carter being more of a friend to his people than a master.

Watching Henry, he felt a profound sense of debt. Henry didn't owe him anything—didn't owe Maria this type of risk, but he was helping them all the same. He couldn't very well return him to a life of servitude after such a feat.

After a short eternity of holding his breath, he released it as the two separated and Henry crept back toward them.

There was a sort of confidence in Henry's expression that put his mind at ease. Maria was within reach.

"Word will move quickly to the house and back," Henry said as he knelt between him and Jim. "Moses will use a bird call to let us know her condition. If she's in peril, we'll hear a wren, otherwise we'll hear a cardinal. Adam, over in the gardens there, will send a second call to let us know her location. A blackbird for the second floor, a crow for the third. If we hear a catbird call, that means she's not in the house at all."

"Thank you," Chris breathed, every taut muscle in his body feeling like it relaxed at once. "Do you often use bird calls to communicate?"

Henry smiled. "Oh, this farm's got all kinds of secret languages. There's bird calls and taps, hand gestures and certain songs they sing. The women inside have melodies they hum, cue words and eye signals to send information from room to room. We didn't need to read and write to be able to circulate messages quickly around here. A man could be standing in front of you blinking a dispatch to another and you'd never know it."

Still very much aware of the risk Henry was taking to help them, Chris pried a little further. "Is it the same at Carter's?"

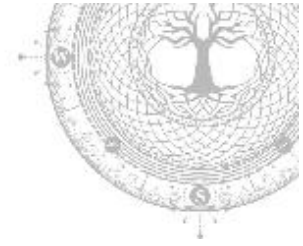
Henry flicked a wrist dismissively and chuckled. "No. There's no need for it there. Charles never wanted any part in that farm or what it took to run it. The poor fool actually tried to *hire* labor for a time when he first inherited the place. I told him there was no such thing. After about a month of being there, and realizing he didn't have other options, he fired his uncle's overseers and leaned on me and a few others to replace them; wanted us to make sure everyone was cared for and treated kindly. Cared for and treated kindly! We thought it was some kind of trick... kept waiting for him to turn sour but he never

did. That summer, he came out there and worked alongside us in those fields just to see how long was long enough.” He laughed. “And he didn’t care if there was more crop to collect. When it was quitting time, it was quitting time. He’s a good man, Charles, despite the circumstances that divide us, and all of us that work for him are grateful to be there.”

Chris cleared his throat and looked down at his gloved hands. “If I could give you your freedom, though... take you to a place where no one would ever have dominion over you but yourself... where you would be free to come and go however you see fit...would you want it? If so, I can take you with us when we leave here. Seems like the least I can offer in exchange for your willingness to help us.”

“You speak of dominion as if men might hold such power over other men,” Henry said, shaking his head, “but you are mistaken. The only one who has dominion over me, Mr. Grace, is God, and I come and go wherever it is He tells me to. It is only His reward I look forward to in exchange for my time in this place. Now, I know how it must appear to you, my circumstances, but I assure you, I am in no need of rescue. Charles is my friend and I am quite content in the life I’ve been given.”

They sat in silence then, watching the house and the fields for a long while before they heard the first call. Chris might’ve missed it, it had blended so perfectly with the other bird songs around them, but Henry leaned in and said, “Cardinal,” and his pulse eased with the knowledge she was unharmed.



Chapter Nineteen

Alaina

It was nearly nightfall before the waves finally subdued enough that Fetia and I were able to relocate to the big room.

Still stunned that we'd miraculously crossed through the oceans unscathed, I ventured off to the far corner of the room, sliding onto my butt on the floor in the shadows near the fireplace to catch my breath and feed the babies.

Looking down at their little pudgy cheeks and giant eyes, guilt seeped up into my throat. For a fleeting moment, when the swells had become their worst and I had been convinced we would die, I'd let myself become almost hopeful for an opportunity to skip over all the life between now and the moment we'd wake up beside Jack on a new timeline. The thought that I and my children might blink and find ourselves wrapped up safely in his arms, that we wouldn't have to wait any longer to join him, had made our survival less of a victory than it should've been.

It'd been a selfish thought, I knew, particularly with two amazing children I'd wished for all my life, but something about the arrival of the others had triggered an unrelenting ache inside me that hadn't been there before.

Where I'd been walking around the ship for a month in a zombie-like state—the soft parts of me hidden away from even myself beneath the mask I was forced to wear—the appearance of Bud, Magna, and Kyle had torn that mask away and made me acutely aware of Jack's absence. It was as if the lack of familiar voices and faces around me had made me numb to the fact he wasn't there—like I'd been cast out into some holding pattern of a reality where I was just waiting to join him once more, not

quite myself, but pieces of an existence waiting for its opportunity to be whole.

Hugging Zachary and Cecelia a little closer beneath the blanket, I closed my eyes and rested my head against the wall.

I hadn't realized I'd missed him quite so much. Avoiding any and all thoughts of him had made me far lonelier than I'd ever been. Letting go of my stubborn hold on the stone facade, I allowed my mind at last to conjure up one of the million memories I'd spent the past month circumventing.

I remembered our week spent on the summit alone with the babies when the others had taken Chris, Bud, and Maria to the storm. During one of the rare moments they'd both stopped crying, I'd dozed off and woken in the night to find Jack sitting with Cecelia tucked in one arm, the soft blue moonlight kissing their profiles to make them appear as if they were glowing. He was pointing up at the stars and explaining the various constellations to her as if she could understand him, and I'd been filled with this overwhelming sense of peace and contentment as I watched.

Right then, it was as if the entire universe had aligned to assure me everything was in the exact right place. I could feel the warmth of Jack's love for our children, and it mirrored the love I had for him and our family. The image of my husband with his tiny daughter in his arms had awoken something inside me that had been dormant—this deep sense of belonging and a profound understanding of who I truly was: I was that child's mother and that man's wife and, possibly for the first time ever, I was completely unbreakable.

I remembered thinking then about my mother—feeling sad for her that she'd let my father hurt her so bad that she gave up on ever letting herself fall in love again. To know she'd gone through a lifetime and might've never felt the enormity of contentedness that came with the right connection broke my heart.

Thinking of her had also made me think of all the things I'd given up on in my life... Music, jobs, friends, boyfriends, my marriage, and even my family for a time. In my craving for something more spectacular than the hand I'd been dealt, I'd

given up more than I'd gained... that is, until I was placed into a situation where I couldn't give up.

Sighing, I rocked Zachary and Cecelia gently as I let my heart settle. Jack was alive and so were we. I wouldn't give up on this. I had everything I ever wanted—love, family, affection, and hope—and I couldn't let distance make me ungrateful; couldn't look forward to death just to save myself the inconvenience of time.

Life was, after all, as spectacular as I'd always longed for it to be, even if there were some moments that didn't feel like it... Those moments were well worth it when I had so much more to look forward to.

A figure moved into the shadows with me, pulling me from my reverie as he sank down onto the floor a few feet away.

“Can I talk to you for just a minute?”

It was Phil, and my body inherently stiffened at the sound of his voice, images of his face hovering over mine flooding my subconscious to remind me of the not-so-spectacular moments once more.

Glancing toward the room to see Bud, Magna, Kyle, and Bruce all close by, I let my shoulders relax a little. It wasn't like he could hurt me... not anymore. “What do you want?”

“Kyle mentioned you might be willing to talk to me,” he mumbled. “And I know I probably should've waited, but I can't stop thinking about it... What I did on that island, I mean. Every day since then, every vile thing I've ever done plays on repeat in my mind, but that day with you... it's the most prominent. I can't unsee my hands on you—can't unthink the thoughts that kept pushing me to—”

“Phil,” I raised up my hand to put pause to his rambling, “if you've come over here looking for my forgiveness, I don't have it in me... not tonight.”

“No, no,” he insisted, “I know that's out of the question. I just... I wanted you to know that it plagues me, what I did, and it will for the rest of my life. I know those same images are likely a plague upon you too, and if there's any way I can put

your mind at ease; any explanation I can give or anything I can do to help, I want the chance to do it.”

“What the hell are you doing over there?” Kyle growled, marching toward us with his brow furrowed at the shadowy lump that was his father.

“We’re fine,” I assured him, unsure if that was an accurate statement as I tried to figure out my own reaction to Phil’s presence. I’d wanted to have clarity—to ease my mind—and intrigued as I was to hear Phil’s explanation for his behavior, I wondered what on earth could be said that would give any sort of closure to the things he’d attempted. Was there anything that could ever blur the images of him pinning me to the ground that had tormented my dreams nearly every night since? Could his explanation give me any modicum of peace or would it only serve to reopen the healing wound?

Kyle lingered there, his fingers balled tightly into a fist at his side. “Are you sure? You don’t have to do this with him. You don’t owe him anything.”

Staring up at Kyle and the way he stood ready to defend me, once again, from his father, pride swelled in my chest. More and more, the teenager I’d once sat beside on the raft seemed to vanish behind the man he was becoming. Feeling bits of his courageousness rub off on me, I smiled, ready to seek out whatever answers might be found in a conversation with my attacker. “I’m sure.”

His eyes darted between me and his father. “You want me to stay in case he gets vile?”

“No,” I laughed. “Really, we’re alright. Thank you.”

His fist flexed and he kept his gaze focused on his father. “I’ll be right there if you need me... just say the word and he’s gone. Okay?”

“Okay.”

I watched him inch cautiously back toward the rest of our group, then I faced Phil’s shadowy figure with my newfound bravado. “Alright, if we’re going to talk about this, I don’t want a lawyer’s explanation of the events that took place. I want the real thing. I want to know exactly what those thoughts were that

drove you to do what you did. I want to know why it happened at all. Can you do that?"

He tilted his head back to rest it against the wall. "In order to tell you *why* it happened, I have to tell you the things that occurred leading up to it to put my thoughts where they were that day. It's going to take me a minute to explain."

"I've got time," I assured him, readying myself for the type of drawn-out and exhausting explanation he would likely give. He wasn't exactly known for his ability to tell quick stories.

"Alright then," he said. "Well... you know I've never been a religious man—never thought there was anything to death but nothingness. I overheard Kyle telling you about my disbelief once... before I... did what I did."

I nodded. "I recall."

He shifted a little to face me. "But that wasn't true anymore when he told you. Everything changed when we crashed. See, I didn't experience that storm quite the same as the rest of you. I never blacked out. In fact, I remember every single second of crashing as if I were still sitting in that seat to experience it. And I know how insane this will sound, but I was certain I died in that airplane."

I hadn't meant to smirk, but I did.

"Like I said," he continued with a hint of chagrin in his tone, "I'm aware of how insane that sounds. Likely just as insane as stories of wormholes and the Bermuda Triangle... You wanted the truth... I'm trying to give you that."

"Sorry," I muttered, instantly regretting my choice of words. "Go ahead."

"Shortly after I lost my hearing," he said slowly, "there was this intense heat coming from behind me... I remember feeling it burn my spine through the seat. I can still feel the way it seared the hairs on my arms—can see the way its brightness lit up the front of the plane in orange light. I was in the aisle seat, and I instinctively turned to see what was going on. I'd never witnessed anything so horrifying in all my life. It was this roiling, swelling inferno—not some ordinary explosion, but this fire that seemed to have a life of its own—reaching for me,

calling for me even though I couldn't hear it... All I wanted was to shield myself from it, but I couldn't move... couldn't look away. It was as if it held me there, forcing me to see it.”

He shook his head. “The whole world stopped as I stared into that fire... Everyone and everything beyond it disappeared. It was just me... watching the metal melt and pry apart—seeing the faces of the people in those seats set in sheer terror as the two halves of the plane began to separate. I was staring at that terror, but I was aware of a piece of the breaking plane cutting open my midsection. I couldn't feel the pain of it—couldn't feel anything but the heat of that fire. I was transfixed—hypnotized even—by this strange sentient blaze. Inside those flames, I saw every awful thing I'd ever done... I saw my own evil; saw it through the eyes of the ones who'd experienced it, and as our half of the plane fell away, I knew, with every ounce of my being, I was a dead man preparing to meet an eternal punishment I'd never believed in.”

As much as I wanted to scoff or mock his words, I couldn't. Memories of my own brush with death made me empathetic to his. I remembered the pull of the mud, the stillness of the water, the bizarre sense of both peace and horror that came with the knowledge I was dead. It had been terrifying to wake up after being so certain I'd been gone, and it had taken quite a bit of time for my mind to sort out what I'd witnessed. There was no one who could ever convince me I hadn't experienced it, and I could hear it in his voice that his own experience had been just as powerful.

“The whole way down,” he said, running a hand over his hair, “I was stuck in that awkward position, unable to twist back in my seat, just staring out at the night sky where that fire had been. I remember the lightning was unrelenting, and not regular lightning, mind you, this was... something else... lightning that swirled around us instead of stabbing with a quick jolt. It moved like water caught in a wind tunnel. I thought—*no, I knew*—it was no ordinary lightning, but rather, it was eternity scolding me, some larger force rejecting my soul to send me down and down into the darkest pits of hell. I couldn't ask it for forgiveness... couldn't right all my wrongs in the little time I had left. I knew it was over and I was helpless to change anything I'd done to deserve the hell I was headed toward... so I

accepted it. And it was only then, when I accepted that my life was over, that I was able to close my eyes.”

“Then we were on a raft,” he continued shakily, “and for a minute, I thought, well, maybe I just had a brush with death and somehow survived it... but... the longer we went without any signs of an airplane or a boat or satellites, the more I became convinced I was in hell, one where I was forced to watch my son lose his arm and look at me as if I was the one who’d cut it off; one where everything I said or did was useless to the people around me; where I was surrounded by water that I’d spent my whole life terrified of, on a rickety life raft that threatened to spill over into it at any moment. I tried to convince myself my mind was just playing tricks on me, but then we got to the island and the feeling that I’d died only seemed to amplify there. Everything pointed to that death being real the longer we stayed: the lack of other life, the storms, the way my injuries didn’t really phase me, the journals and Frankie’s description of a demon... Hell, the island’s existence itself didn’t make any sense. It was far too big to have gone undiscovered. I *had* to be dead... and that island *had* to be hell, but what did that make the rest of you? Were you all my own personal demons or were you people who’d landed in hell alongside me, equally evil in your own lives as I’d been in mine?”

He adjusted his legs to bend up one knee with an audible effort against its stiffness. “There was no escape from hell, even if the people stuck there with me were convinced otherwise. Thinking I’d dull my reality in the way I always had, I started drinking more heavily. It dulled nothing. Drunk and delusional, I watched relationships form around me and became painfully aware of my lack of place among you—of the loneliness of being there with so many strangers. And I kept thinking, what better hell for a man who spent his whole life chasing after sex than to trap him on an island with several beautiful women who wouldn’t even look him in the eyes—who were only interested in the other far more athletic men trapped there alongside him? It was like I was in high school all over again, and that would’ve been the worst kind of torture for someone like me. See, I didn’t become a lawyer because I had some great passion in life for upholding the law. I wanted money, power, and, more than

anything else, I wanted the attention of women that came with having those two things.”

Again he adjusted his legs, shifting to find a comfortable position as he went on. “And I’d gotten it for a while. I went from being this pimple-faced nerd who girls laughed at to a man who could find himself in the bed of a different beautiful woman on any given night of the week. Alcohol wasn’t my addiction. Sex was. And the more I drank on that island, the more I thought... well, if I’m in hell, the women here with me aren’t exactly saints. If this is my eternity, why hold back at all? They’re not real... nothing is. My mind kept saying, *‘Take what you want. It’s hell. You don’t have to be lonely in your own hell...’* And one day... I tried.”

He shook his head. “Everything that’s happened since has been a far worse torture than simply being lonely. I don’t know what happened on that airplane, if I imagined those flames and that death or if it actually happened the way I remember it. All I know is that it made me into a madman, more so than the one I’d been before it happened. And I know an apology can’t fix it, but I am more sorry for it than you’ll ever know... and I’ll never stop paying for it.”

Adjusting Zachary and Cecelia in my arms, I frowned in his direction. “So... that’s your excuse? You thought you were dead so you... tried to rape me?”

“You wanted to know why I did it without the lawyer jargon, and that’s the truth...crazy as it sounds.”

Perhaps the crash and all that had happened since made me slightly mad as well because his confession elicited an explosion of laughter to erupt from me in such a way I couldn’t stop to catch my breath. I bent over with it, prompting both babies to wiggle and squawk with their aggravation.

“You think I’m lying?” he asked.

“No,” I managed between my unhinged tittering, “I think, maybe for the first time in your life, you’re actually being honest.”

“And that’s funny to you?”

Still laughing uncontrollably, I nodded. “I knew you were unstable, but Jesus, Phil, you really are insane!”

He straightened. “*I’m* insane for thinking we were dead after a commercial airplane crashed, but *you* were perfectly levelheaded for thinking we got sucked through time instead?”

“No,” I said, adjusting my breathing. “I think you’re insane for believing you were dead and could behave even worse than you did in life to somehow make hell a little more tolerable. Most people would at least attempt to right their wrongs; to repent in the face of an eternity spent in hell... Oh, but not you! You thought you’d embrace it—to be the very hell you were sucked into—and *that’s* insane.”

“That’s who I was then,” he admitted. “I’m not the same man anymore. Who could be after getting beaten nearly to death, losing half their fingers, having a hole stabbed through their cheek, being shot, and watching their son look at them as if they’re the devil incarnate?”

Pulling Zachary up against my shoulder to burp him, I raised my brow. “You still talk like you’re the victim in all this; like you weren’t the *sole* reason all those things happened to you. You only want my forgiveness because you hope it’ll lighten your own guilt for having tormented me. Do you have any idea what that torment really did? God, do you even know what I wouldn’t have given to be the one that cut those fingers off? To have inflicted some kind of damage on you equivalent to the damage you embedded in me?”

He blew out. “I’m sure there’s something sharp in here... If damaging me will help you forget what I—”

“*Forget?*” I scoffed, placing Zachary in my lap beside his sister. “Nothing can ever make me *forget*. There’s a part of me that will forever be down in that mud with you, loathed to relive that moment over and over again for the rest of my life. *I* can never unfeel your hands, mouth, and teeth on parts of me they didn’t belong... can never unhear the words you growled as you forced your weight down upon me... will never be able to forget how small and insignificant it felt to be unable to fight my way free. Maybe you believed you were in hell, Phil, but I didn’t... not until I was pinned down beneath you with no way out. You

became *my* version of hell, you know that? Almost every day since then, I've felt my own sense of lacking... like maybe I'd been just as messed up as you were to deserve it... That's not something you just forget... that lacking... that sense of unworthiness... it's still there... it'll always be there... and there's nothing you can do to take it back."

"I know," he said softly. "I just wish—"

"Look, I appreciate your explanation. It truly has been *most* enlightening." Somehow hoisting Zachary and Cecelia up against my hips despite my racing pulse, I managed to raise up onto my feet, anxious to be done with the conversation. "You've said your part and I've said mine, so there can be nothing left for either of us to say to one another. I can't forgive you, but I really do hope you find some kind of peace."

With my chin held high, I turned to step out of the shadows, determined to let the interaction be enough to provide whatever closure I'd needed from him.

But there was a little nagging voice in the back of my mind that wouldn't let me take the step forward I so desperately wanted—couldn't ignore the hypocrisy in the very location I stood in. I'd gone to that specific corner of the room because I knew Juan Josef could very well be on the other side of the wall, and when I'd been met by Phil, I found comfort, of all things, in the fact that Juan was likely listening in on the conversation inches away...

I found comfort with *Juan*... the man who'd taken us all captive... who'd murdered Anna, strung Jack up from the rafters while he forced me to beat Kyle, and continuously tormented us all with his endless head games...

I'd been in denial of my own Stockholm Syndrome, but there was no use in denying it any longer.

How could I so easily forgive someone who'd done so much harm to the people I loved, never once expressing any remorse for his actions, while refusing to even consider the apology of a man who'd attempted to harm *me*?

Yes, Phil was a man who was only out to save his own selfish soul, but, ultimately, so was Juan.

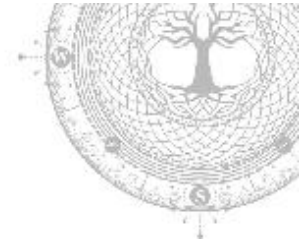
It was hard enough to live with my conscience without adding hypocrisy to my list of faults, and I wouldn't let Phil do any more damage than he'd already done to my mental state.

Slowly, I turned back to look down at his sunken figure. "You really want to help?"

He scurried up onto his feet, nodding profusely. "Yes. I'll do anything... *anything*."

I glanced at the wall behind his head. "Alright then. I want you to go to the other ship. After the things that were said over dinner last night about our history with one another, it should come as no surprise that we sent you away. I want you to find out what it is Benny saw that made him react to me the way he did in the dining room. See if something happened with my sister and what really caused them to chase after our ship. You're a lawyer so I have to assume you're somewhat decent at getting people to expose secrets they'd prefer to keep hidden. I think there's more to their story than what they're telling. Find out what it is and you'll have helped me."

He moved his hand as if he were about to touch me, but wisely retracted it to instead press his palm against his chest. "Consider it done."



Chapter Twenty

Cecelia

We hadn't gotten much farther than a few miles down the road before we stopped. Juan didn't say so at the time, but I think he felt just as guilty as I had for abandoning Maria. He'd been silent during the ride, and his brow had remained furrowed in such a way I was certain he was stuck deep in his own thoughts.

Pulling his horse to a halt on the side of the trail, he'd looked at Dario and said, "Wait here and don't take your eyes off her," before he rode back toward the Carter plantation without another word.

In the hours that passed, Dario and I busied ourselves setting up a small camp deeper in the woods, collecting wood for the fire, then unpacking and cooking bits of the salt pork we'd purchased at the general store.

Bellies full, we sat silently on opposite sides of the dwindling flames, both of us listening past the crickets and tree frogs for signs of Juan's return.

I wasn't the least bit worried about Juan. There was no question, in my mind, he'd come back safely. I was, however, worried about the growing quiet between me and Dario.

We'd barely said more than a word to each other while we set up camp—barely said a word to each other *at all* without Juan serving as a sort of middleman—and the more time that went on in silence, the harder it became to be the one to initiate any kind of conversation.

I'd never been a person that couldn't appreciate a bit of quietude. In fact, I longed for it most of the time when stuck with strangers who felt obliged to sift through small talk as a means to fill the empty space. But Dario wasn't just some

stranger to me. He was a part of the family I was building and I craved some kind of connection to him, even if it was made with meaningless small talk.

I knew he craved connection and companionship in an almost desperate way—could see it sometimes in the way he looked at me—and I wanted to be someone he could talk to.

If I could just figure out a way to get him to *start* talking...

A large pack of coyotes began to yip and howl in the distance and I smiled as he placed a hand on his sword and looked out over his shoulder.

“You know,” I said, clearing my throat, “a lot of people think coyotes do that because they’re hunting something, but, more often than not, they’re just trying to ward off rival packs or other predators getting too close to their territory. They’re not violent creatures and prefer to avoid conflict whenever possible, especially when it comes to people.”

He turned back and nodded, easing his shoulders a bit as he returned to his mindless stare into the fire.

Fiddling with the fabric of my skirts, I rambled, “Sometimes they howl like that just to strengthen their own bonds with each other. It releases stress for them to vocalize, and they do it often just out of the need to make a sound.”

Dario wasn’t one to take a hint, and instead of offering any type of response, he reached down to toss another log on the fire.

Sighing, I looked up at the blanket of stars overhead, spotting Orion, Taurus, and Canis Major with ease. “You don’t see the stars like this in the future. There’s too much light. You have to really travel quite a distance in order to get a sight even close to this one.”

As I’d said the words, a new memory slipped into my mind... I was seated upon the very same dock I’d been dreaming of, only it wasn’t frozen, and I was staring up at a similar starry sky, explaining the shape of Orion to a small someone sitting on my right.

I swallowed and returned my attention to Dario, desperate for a distraction before that small someone was given a face and a voice I wasn't ready to remember. "Dario, please talk to me."

His eyes softened when they met mine, his brows raising with surprise and perhaps a bit of helplessness. "I... eh... what do you want to talk about?"

"Anything," I answered quickly. "Tell me about your childhood with Juan or... what it is you're looking forward to in the future... or anything really... just talk to me so I can quiet my thoughts for a while."

Balancing his elbows on his knees, he stared down at his hands and let out a long sigh. "I'm afraid I don't quite know how."

"To talk?" I balked.

"To you, yes." His lips quirked in a nervous half-smile as he peered over the flames. "You belong to my brother, and I've never spoken at length with a woman I wasn't pursuing for my own. I don't know what to say for fear it may be the wrong thing."

I chuckled at that. "You're not going to say the wrong thing, and even if you did, I could never think less of you for it. I'm not some strange woman you'll be rid of that easily. Whether you like it or not, we're family to each other... and we should get used to conversing. Tell me what it was like to grow up in this time. Tell me about whatever happened with Elizabeth that makes you and your brother fight so often."

His shoulders relaxed, but his leg still bounced anxiously. "Our fight started long before Lizzie."

Resting my cheek on my palm, I stared at him, waiting for more to follow.

Even though his eyes had ventured back to the flames, I could tell he felt my gaze on him and was visibly conflicted about what to say next. He wanted to talk—needed it, really—but he was unaccustomed to having someone listen. "This... this really isn't for me to tell. You should know his side of things, not mine."

I grinned. “I already know his side of the story, and now I want to know *yours*. Whatever you have to say isn’t going to change the way I feel about your brother. It’ll only change the way I feel about you. Come on. Talk to me. I want to know you and I can tell you want to know me. We can’t just sit here in silence all night. Tell me where *your* fight started.”

With his fingers curled into tight fists and his auburn brow furrowed, he didn’t look up from the fire. When his words finally came out, it was like he’d had to reach down deep to drag them, kicking and screaming, out of his mouth. “Our fight started because of the way our father saw us.”

Realizing I was going to need to carefully coax him along if I wanted more than a sentence at a time, I curled my arms around my knees and leaned in. “He gave one of you preferential treatment?”

He brushed a bug off his pant leg and shook his head. “No... it’s just... he gave us the wrong definitions. He’d tell us that I had my mother’s kind heart and Juan had the same stone one as him. It instilled a sense of competitiveness in us... to be more like the other. Juan wanted to be the kind one and I wanted to be cold.”

“So you fought because you wanted your father to see you more like the other?”

He nodded, holding his palms over the fire’s heat. “For me, yes. For him, no. He has always hated our father, but our mother... well, losing her was harder on him than it was on me, and I think he was desperate to have a trait of hers inside him that he could hold onto. He didn’t want to be anything like our father, where I did. So we fought... constantly... like maybe that part of our parent could somehow rub off if we defeated the one who held it.”

I pulled my cloak a little tighter around my shoulders as the wind picked up a bit. “He mentioned the fighting only worsened once Elizabeth was thrown into your mix. I’ve heard, even as a child, she was quite a sight to behold.”

His lips pulled upward in a fond smile and I saw his entire body sink into something far more comfortable at the mention of her name. “God, she was so much more than that. She was

this little spitfire Indian creature, and I say creature because she was neither girl nor boy in our minds when we first encountered her, but this wild thing that had a heart soft on one side and stone on the other. Neither of us had ever seen anything like her. She could run just as fast and hit just as hard; could hunt and fish and wrestle, but then she'd tell us some story that would mesmerize us both—could make even *his* eyes water. Before her, we squabbled over our own sense of identity, but once we had a whole person to fight over, we fought solely for her attention, and that fight lasted for years.”

Juan had told me that Dario had been mad with jealousy when Elizabeth chose him, but watching his face as he spoke of her, I could see there was far more to it than a simple childhood crush.

“You loved her...” I said gently.

He nodded. “From the first day I laid eyes on her, and he knew it too.”

His eyes glossed over with the admission, as if he could see some vision of her in the flames between us. Words that had needed to be dragged out of him initially now spilled out without any effort whatsoever. “And she loved me back. She was different with each of us—softer with me. Where she'd run and hunt and wrestle with him, she and I would spend our time together talking. We talked about everything—the places we would go when we got older, our hopes and dreams, the meaning of life itself... She'd crawl into my bed when everyone had gone to sleep just to whisper a little longer. Night after night, she fell asleep right there, with her head on my shoulder, and there was never any doubt that she would belong there for the rest of our lives. I knew her, and she knew me—all the way down to our souls.”

Nudging a coal back into the fire with his boot, his jaw ticked and his face hardened. “She kissed me once, a few days before she kissed him, and I was too nervous to know what to do. It was awkward and messy on both our parts—made us both uncomfortable to so much as acknowledge each other for a time afterward. But I loved her with all my heart, and I couldn't wait to do it again. Foolishly, I went to him, hoping he'd give me some kind of brotherly advice. Instead, he took her from me, not

because he loved her more, but because, in his stone heart, the fight over her had never been won, and he was determined to be the victor.”

Clicking my tongue, I shook my head. “You were just boys back then, both of you only starting to discover what it was to crave the affections of a female. Neither of you can be blamed for chasing the only girl among you. Maybe it started out as a competition, but he did end up loving her. Very much.”

“He was *forced* to love her,” he spat, meeting my eyes, “when he put a baby in her and Tonauac insisted they be married. If it had been left up to him, he’d have just kept on ignoring her through the day and defiling her at the creek in the night. It was me she cried to, you know... Me who held her in my arms when she couldn’t figure out why he wouldn’t just love her back... Me who told him about the child in her belly and watched his entire body sink with the knowledge he’d be stuck with her forever. His stone heart ruined that wild and perfect creature she’d once been, and that’s why we fight... Not because I’m jealous of what he had with her, but because he ruined someone so wonderful; someone who deserved to receive a love as fierce as the love she gave out. You asked what it is I’m looking forward to in the future? The knowledge that she lives... and that she might live on with that same wild spirit without him there to destroy it.”

My heart breaking for him, I swallowed thickly. “Do you think you’ll come back to this time? Juan mentioned you’d found love again after with—”

“Whatever it is you think you know about *that*,” he cut in, his voice like a knife through my chest, “you don’t.”

Caught entirely off-guard, I opened my mouth to speak, but was cut off before a single word could be uttered.

“You know *nothing* of my personal life, and I’ll not have my misgivings put on display simply to distract you from your thoughts. Say nothing more of *that*, I beg you.”

Realizing that homosexuality in this century was not so easily discussed, my cheeks heated with regret. “I’m so sorry. I had no right to bring that up after you’d been so open with me. Please don’t be angry with me, I didn’t mean it.”

“I’m not angry with *you*,” he grumbled. “He had no reason, save my own humiliation, to tell you of such things.”

“That’s not why he told me.” I leaned in, trying to catch his gaze where he refused to look up from his hands. “I pried it out of him in my desire to know more about you. He hadn’t meant to tell it. I promise I won’t say anything more on the subject, but you should know, it’s not such an uncommon thing in the future... There’s nothing in it to be ashamed of. I certainly don’t think any differently about you.”

He stared into the fire for a very long time, contemplating, I supposed, whether or not he wanted to say anything more in his defense. I could tell there was a part of him that wanted to, but I dared not pry any more than I already had.

Just as the crickets and frogs threatened to retake their place at center stage, he looked up. “It was never meant to become what it was. Aaron was my friend—I loved him as my friend only. What my father saw between us... it wasn’t... I mean, I never meant...” He let out a long and frustrated breath, pushing his fingers hard through his hair. “It was something Aaron wanted to try and it made him happy, but I was never that way. If I’d have just said as much to him, he’d never have lost his life. But I was so desperate to have a friend just then, I’d have done just about anything to keep him. You say there’s nothing in it to be ashamed of, but you’ve not experienced that kind of shame for yourself. The way they all looked at me afterward... when I cried for him... it was as if that single event redefined the entire life I’d lived and every moment after... The way my father looked at me after... like I was a stranger to him... it’s never changed. There *is* shame in it, and there’s nothing to be said that can erase it or ease the guilt I feel for my part in killing my friend.”

Unable to prevent myself from doing so, I stood and moved around the fire to sit beside him. Pulling his hand into both of mine, I squeezed it. “I’m so sorry... for all of it. I *do* know what it is to be ashamed for the things you can’t change, and I know it’s hard to carry that alone. I’ll always be someone you can talk to... no matter what.”

His eyes, so identical to mine, slowly moved over my face. “What the hell do *you* know of shame?”

“Oh, I know shame quite well,” I admitted. “My experience is much different than yours, but the shame I carry is just as heavy and just as permanent.”

He gazed down at his hand where I still held it between mine. “Does my brother know of it?”

I shook my head. “Parts, but not all... He knows I loved someone once... but I haven’t quite mustered up the courage to tell him the rest.”

“Will you tell *me*?”

Tracing the knuckles on his fingers, I sighed and nodded. I’d wanted to tell Juan, and maybe, if I could get through it with Dario, it’d give me the strength I needed to finally be able to tell the story to him too.

“It was a long time ago,” I said. “I was young and naive, and, like you, I was desperate for something I could hold onto. I’d had a few boyfriends here and there, but it had all been innocent. I never felt comfortable enough with any of them for sex... and before I knew it, I was in my twenties. In the future, to grow into your twenties and still be a virgin makes you a bit of a pariah among your peers. I felt like something was wrong with me. I suppose I was eager to have an experience of my own... to finally know what all the hype was about... to be on level ground with the people around me.”

I tilted my head back to stare up at the stars. “One day, this guy, Greg, shows up in my life. He’s this super charismatic and attractive man who says all the right things at exactly the right times... He’s obviously pursuing me, and it doesn’t take much for me to give myself to him, anxious as I was to finally lose my virginity. But the thing about being an inexperienced female is that you tend to fall madly in love very quickly with the person you lose it to... Months and months of what I think is this whirlwind romance go by, and I’m certain I’ve found a relationship that’ll end up in marriage. I don’t see the little warning signs—he doesn’t take me out or hold my hand in public, never wants to leave my apartment or office—I’m too blinded by my obsession with him to see anything wrong and I’m just waiting for a proposal I’m sure will come any moment, you know?”

Squeezing his hand for support, I met his eyes and continued. “But then, one morning, I’m at work, going through some of his paperwork, and I find this odd female signature on one of his checks... Same last name... and, idiot that I am, I think it must be his sister or something. I dive a little deeper, start researching her name online—since he’s never told me about any of his family—and within the hour, I learn this man I’d been madly in love with has got a wife and kids and a whole other life I never knew of.”

“He was married?” Dario gasped.

My posture sank. “He was, and God, I wanted to die right then and there... I felt so foolish. I found photos of them... tons and tons of smiling pictures of this happy little family, and here I was, this monster hiding in the shadows, threatening to rip it all apart. I didn’t know what to do, I was so ashamed of myself... Of course, I immediately ended things with him, but I struggled with whether or not to tell his wife what had happened. I knew telling her would ruin her whole life, but didn’t she deserve to know who her husband was? Or was it better to never know at all? A part of me—the part that had just had *my* life ruined by it—wished I’d never seen that name; wished I could just turn back time and never know the monster he was—continue on like we’d been before it. Ultimately, I chose to keep it a secret and the shame I feel for the things she’ll never know has never left me.”

“Christ,” he muttered beneath his breath. “That’s not your fault. Why haven’t you told Juan?”

I raised a shoulder. “I only get him for so long—possibly days now that we have Bennet’s location—and then he’ll be returned to a place where he’ll wait for years and years for me to remember him. It sounds horribly shallow to admit this out loud, but I don’t want the image of me he’ll carry with him to be spoiled by something so awful. Time itself will taint my image on its own and I guess I’m apprehensive to add to it in any way... I never want to hide anything from him, but I’m already terrified I won’t be enough for him to want to return to.”

He made no move to pull his hand away from mine, but instead, interlaced our fingers and squeezed. “I told you once that you were too kind to love such a cold man and that he

didn't know how to love. I meant that then because I've known him to be cold all my life... But, in all the years I watched him compete to have my mother's heart, he never once came close to anything resembling compassion... until you. Whatever it is you give him when you are alone has brought him the kind of peace he has longed for all our lives, and I don't believe there is anything you can do or say that will make him any less anxious to be returned to you. I mean that. The man I knew, mere months ago, would've never ridden back to help Maria. He'd have insisted we keep riding and paid no mind to whatever torment she might be forced to endure while we did so. You've made him into the person he's always wanted to be and I promise you, he'll wait as long as it takes. I'll make damn certain of it myself."

For whatever reason, Dario's assurance made my insecurity seem so very trivial. My entire body relaxed like it hadn't since the altered memories began, and I found my own bit of peace as I looked back up at the stars. "I can see now why Lizzie sought out conversation with you. You're very easy to talk to."

"Careful there," he grunted, removing his hand from mine to lean back and stargaze alongside me. "I'm a much better kisser now too."

I chuckled. "I really hope you—"

A nearby snap of a branch underfoot put an end to our tender moment, the proximity of the sound forcing Dario to stand and draw his sword, swearing under his breath as he did so.

I turned to face the broad figure his blade was pointed at, a sizable man silhouetted entirely by moonlight, and every hair on my body rose at once.

Bits of our dim firelight danced over the exposed skin of the man's torso, shimmering on the multiple bead and bone necklaces that hung from his neck. Too dark to make out his face, I could only see the shape of his partially bald head, where a single patch of hair braided with feathers fell down to one shoulder, identifying him as a native—a formidable one.

"We don't want trouble," Dario informed him, keeping his sword steady. "We've got no war with the Shawnee... Go on..."

The beast of a figure did not move, causing Dario to become visibly more distressed, his hand shaking around the hilt of his sword as he stomped his foot. "I said, go on!"

A thick and deep voice spilled out of the man, words I couldn't even begin to comprehend spoken in a tone that sounded very much like a warning.

Tension hung heavy in the air as the mysterious figure took a single step forward, the light from the fire catching his dark eyes where they bore into Dario's.

Dario's grip on the sword tightened, his knuckles turning white as frustration etched lines on his forehead. "What do you want then? Eh? You want the horses? Take them and get the hell out of here. We've got no trouble with you."

I shifted uncomfortably, my pulse quickening as I tried to make sense of the situation. Dario's attempts at communication were met with an impenetrable linguistic wall. The stranger's unreadable expression left me to wonder if Dario's words had fallen on deaf ears, or if his tone had stoked the embers of a brewing storm.

A guttural response rumbled from the man, the cadence foreign yet commanding as his nearly black eyes slid to mine.

"No," Dario growled, adjusting the edge of the blade to align with his jugular. "I told you I don't want trouble, but you'll have it if you don't remove your gaze from her."

Dario's warning went unheard as those dark eyes proceeded to pierce through me. There was an intensity in his stare, a heaviness that made me squeeze my palms tightly together to stop them from shaking. He wasn't sizing me up as potential prey, but rather, inspecting me with an unsettling curiosity, as if I had sprouted wings and horns and he was attempting to determine what kind of creature sat before him.

He uttered several curt words intended for me, the intensity of them making my knees tremble beneath my skirts. Palms clammy, I stood on shaking legs to position myself slightly behind Dario.

"We're just waiting for someone to come back," I said gently, "and then we'll be out of your way."

Once again, the man spoke, pointing his finger at me, and once again, the language barrier between us made his words a threat to our existence.

“I don’t understand!” Dario shouted, his agitation boiling over. “Whatever it is you’re after, find it elsewhere! I beg of you! I don’t want to have to kill you, but I will!”

Additional branches snapped around us and leaves whispered under several sets of feet, signifying the arrival of more members of this man’s tribe. My heart pounding against my ribcage, I pivoted to find the forest shadows yielding more dark figures, an assembly that encircled us from every direction.

From the shadows beyond our stranger, another native stepped forward, close enough for the firelight to skate over his weathered face where he regarded me with the same foreboding curiosity as the man beside him. “He say you... not belong here.”

I swallowed and took a half step closer to Dario so our shoulders were touching. “I will leave then,” I stammered, my voice barely above a whisper.

The man’s wrinkles deepened with his frown as he shook his head. “Not belong here,” he pointed to the ground, “this world.”

A shiver traced a delicate path down my spine as the weight of those cryptic words settled upon me. Did he know I’d traveled through time? Was there some ancient understanding of the secrets that storm carried and something etched on my skin they might recognize?

“How—how do you know that?”

“Many time ago,” the man continued, taking a cautious step closer, “other woman come. She not from this world.” At his side, his fingers twitched slightly, as if resisting the impulse to reach out and touch me. Instead, he grasped his earlobe. “This... same.”

I moved my fingers to my ears to feel the three small stud earrings I wore on each side.

“Charlotte,” I breathed, remembering the painting and the same triple piercings that had lined her ears. He was talking about Charlotte Miller! I hadn’t thought we’d ever get close enough to Philadelphia to reach her before we got to Bennet, but newfound hope surged through me.

“Did she have a young boy with her?”

With his palm straight, he moved it to the side of his leg to indicate the height of a child and nodded. “Very afraid. Man chase them.”

My heart seemed to float right out of my chest. “Do you know where they are? I—I can help them.”

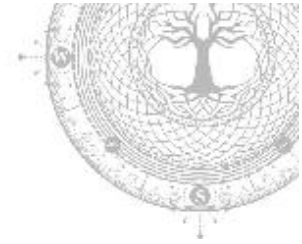
The man pointed to the native who’d first approached us. “My son keep them. We take you.”

I hadn’t noticed the rest of the tribe closing in, but where they’d once been far off shadows, they were now large and imposing men on every side of us, so close, I could feel their body heat.

I wasn’t sure I liked the idea of being *‘taken’*, but I was beyond excited to know Charlotte and Chase Miller weren’t in Philadelphia, but right here within my reach.

I’d intended to have Juan interfere in their travels through time, preventing them in some way from ever boarding that flight... I’d struggled with that, knowing how angry I’d be if someone had interfered in my own destiny without my knowledge of it, but we didn’t have many other options. Now... now I could see her, talk to her, and make certain an altered life was something she wanted.

“Yes,” I said, “yes, please, take me to her.”



Chapter Twenty-One

Chris

Throughout the day, they'd waited in the woods, listening to various signals from the fields. They'd learned Maria was on the third floor, and consistent cardinal songs informed them that she was safe. Time seemed to pass at a snail's pace in between calls, and it was only when the sun had lowered beyond the horizon that they heard the call of a wren indicating she was in some kind of trouble.

"We have to go," Chris whispered, hands shaking as he looked up at the navy sky. "We can't wait any longer."

Henry, who'd been adamant about waiting for the full cover of darkness before venturing out of the woods, nodded slowly, looking toward the river. "We'll lose the cover of trees when we round the house. The tunnel entrance is near the banks. We'll need to stay low, use whatever cover we can to remain hidden. Raise the hoods on your cloaks and cover your faces in clay."

Neither Jim nor Chris wasted a moment in doing exactly as Henry instructed. They pulled up their hoods and applied streaks of clay to their faces from the ground beneath them so their features blended into the dimming light of the forest.

Without another word, urgency propelled them collectively forward. The once vibrant forest now held an eerie stillness, broken only by the soft rustling of their steps and the distant hoot of an owl. The gnarled branches of ancient trees overhead reached out like skeletal fingers, their twisted forms silhouetted against the fading light to serve as a perfect mirror to the dark images plaguing his mind. What kind of trouble was Maria in that warranted that call? Could they get to her in time to stop it or would they be too late?

He glanced ahead at the candlelight shining against the top floor dormers, his pulse growing thicker in his throat as he wondered what might be occurring beyond them.

He envisioned her then, the way he'd found her in Tahiti after Sergeant Harris had attempted to force himself on her, her hair matted and clothing torn, her heart shattered for the world that had consistently chiseled away at it. Would he find a similar scene inside that house? Would she be able to stop it in the same way she'd stopped Harris? And what might befall her if she did with so many officers lingering nearby? Would they execute her right there on the spot, or would fear of her possible noble lineage hinder them from raising a hand to her?

With every step, the forest seemed to close in, a labyrinth of shadows that whispered of the dangers she might be facing—dangers he was too far away to shield her from.

The parchment in his coat pocket seemed to burn a hole into his chest, a reminder of all the things that could be undone should he fail to reach her in time... a reminder of the life she'd told him the night before she wanted to be returned to. Would he make himself a hypocrite if she was hurt? Would he ride for Norfolk and seek out the right Bennet in order to see her life restored?

Absolutely.

They followed the forest to the west side of the house, remaining concealed in its shadows as they grew closer to the river. He could see it through the gaps in the trees, its waters flowing silently, mirroring the twilight sky above, with a vast open space lying between the woods and its banks.

"I will go first," Henry whispered, pointing to a spot on the far side of the lawn. "Once there, I'll signal you, one at a time, to join me. We cannot go together for our movements will surely be spotted. Stay low to the ground on the edge of the gardens and move slow. Understand?"

Jim swung the rifle forward and lowered down on one knee to position it against his shoulder. "I got ye' covered."

As Henry moved out of the woods to crawl on his belly at a painstakingly slow pace toward the water, Chris inched closer to

Jim.

“If she’s hurt in there,” he whispered, “everything is for nothing... stopping them, I mean... I—”

“I know,” Jim assured him, closing one eye as he looked through the rifle’s scope. “It’s a funny thing what desperation will make a man do. One minute, you’re the hero, and the next, you’re the very same villain you was fightin’ to begin with.”

“You disapprove?”

Jim sucked on his teeth and shook his head. “When I told ye’ I was comin’ with ye’, I didn’t just mean here. You done more for me than most, givin’ that money to June, and I’ll stand behind ye’ till the end, Beanstalk... whatever end it’s got to be. I ain’t here to judge ye’ one way or the other.”

The call of an owl put an end to their conversation—Henry’s signal for the next to follow.

“Go on,” Jim said, not looking up from the scope. “Creep real slow up the side of the garden bed till’ ye’ reach the mud.”

Mimicking Henry, Chris lowered down onto his belly to crawl slowly across the lawn, grateful for the gardens to his left that gave him a sense of camouflage. To anyone looking down on the lawn, he was a patch of shadowy flowers... a part of the scenery... nothing more than a shrub... a poisonous shrub that would see anyone inside dead if they’d so much as laid a finger on Maria.

Inch by torturous inch, Chris dragged his body closer to the river until he could make out Henry’s crouched figure near the banks ahead.

Despite all the voices in him pleading he move faster, he crept forward with agonizing slowness, all the way until the cool mud of the bank seeped through the fabrics on his chest and legs.

Henry motioned to a small open hatch built into the embankment, his whisper hardly audible against the sounds of the bullfrogs in the river beside them. “Get inside and wait.”

Crawling silently through the small doorway, he found himself cloaked in utter darkness at the top of a narrow set of

wooden stairs.

With a steady cadence of singing frogs and chirping crickets bouncing off the stone walls around him, he waited for Jim and Henry, a thousand images of what Maria might be facing making him contemplate descending the stairs without them.

“Gettin’ too damn old to be belly crawlin’ in mud,” Jim grumbled breathlessly when he finally tumbled inside the hatch. “Lordt as my witness, when I get home, I’m plantin’ my sorry ass on a sofa somewheres and I ain’t movin’ from it for no-damned-body.”

“That was the easy part,” Henry informed him, squeezing past them both to take the lead. “Are you ready for the hard part?”

“Yes,” Chris breathed, bracing one hand on the cool wall to his right while curling the other around the hilt of his sword.

“Stay close,” Henry said as he descended into complete darkness.

With each step Chris took behind him, the sounds of the river were replaced by the thuds of their boots against the earthen floor, the sweep of their breaths against the rough stone walls, and the occasional drip of water in the distance, a haunting symphony that only added to his sense of trepidation about what lay ahead.

The air grew colder as they ventured deeper, the chill seeping through his mud dampened clothes to make a shiver creep up his spine.

It wasn’t just the cold that made him shiver. The shadows they walked through seemed to swallow them whole. He couldn’t see Jim or Henry or even his own fingers in front of his face, and an unwelcome fear slithered up into his shoulders that made him crave light as if it were air and he was held underwater.

The scent of earth mingled with a hint of decay as the tunnel seemed to stretch on endlessly before them. The floor grew more uneven, treacherous dips and protruding stones threatening to send them all toppling into each other like a set of

dominos. They moved cautiously, their senses heightened, silent and stiff until Henry's sudden stop forced all three of them to crash into one another.

"There's a ladder here," Henry whispered, placing Chris's hand upon one of its rungs. "It leads up through a dry well in the icehouse. I'll go first. Moses should be there waiting. I'll signal you once I know it is safe for you to follow."

He listened with bated breath as the ladder creaked and moaned beneath Henry's weight, and blinked heavily when a hatch overhead was lifted to send small bits of blessed lantern light down into the darkness.

He could hear Henry whispering to someone above and wasted no time climbing the ladder the instant Henry beckoned him.

At the top, he breathed in the chilly air of the ice house and was relieved for his eyesight once more as he stood staring at Moses's brittle frame near the door.

His relief was washed away by the sounds of shouting just outside and Moses's resulting grimace. "We told her you were coming, sir. Sarah warned her to remain docile until nightfall." He shook his head. "She nearly bit a man's ear off when he got too close. She's to be whipped for it. Mr. Gordon and Mr. Blackwood were taking her to the post when I snuck in here."

Henry gripped Chris's shoulder to stop him in his tracks where he'd already started for the door. "Not yet."

"What do you mean, not yet?" he spat, shrugging away from his reach. "I can't let her be whipped."

"She is *outside*," Henry reminded him, wincing as another wave of shouting rang out. "And when the whipping is done, the men who have gathered to witness it shall disburse. We are better to fight off the one or two left behind than the whole of them."

The scars that lined Chris's back from his own beating seemed to form a life of their own, burning in reminder of the feel of the whip that had once created them. "I'll fight the entire British army before I'll let them put a single scar on her."

“And you will die and so will she,” Moses said softly. “You cannot help her if you are dead.”

Jim, who'd emerged from the well, positioned the rifle across his chest with a finger near the trigger. “They ain't got the kinds of weapons we do. One or two warning shots from this might scare the bulk of 'em off. How many's out there?”

“Not sure,” Moses said, shaking his head. “But they've plenty of rifles of their own and they are not the sort of men to be so easily frightened. I beg of you, sir, wait until the time is right.”

Another wave of shouting echoed outside, and Chris realized these were not the shouts of overly excited men preparing to witness violence... These sounds were tinted with pain and panic.

Pulse beating rampant in his ears, Chris pushed past Moses and drew his sword. “Something else is going on out there,” he growled, pulling the door open, “and I won't see her caught in the middle of it.”

He marched toward the sounds of agony with blind determination, unsure just what he'd do when he reached whatever he was headed for, but pushing forward all the same.

Along the side of the house, Jim caught up. “Wait a second, Beanstalk,” he panted. “What ye' want me to do here?”

A man shrieked out in a gurgling and painful scream, and Chris's steps quickened. “That's not the sound of someone being whipped. If you don't want to be a part of this, give me the rifle and I'll handle it.”

Before another word could be uttered, Jim and Chris rounded the edge of the house and let out a collective gasp of horror when they saw Maria strapped to a whipping post. Her unmarked back was exposed in the lantern light, but every man who'd been gathered to serve as witness to her beating was now writhing in pools of blood on the ground around her.

Not dead, but injured, they groaned and clasped their wounds, all of them staring up at the tall figure who'd inflicted them, his sword still drawn as he stood ready to strike once more.

Juan Jr...

Stepping out of the shadows, Chris moved hurriedly to Maria, clamping his jaw tightly shut as he worked the thick knots securing her wrists to the wooden post.

“There are more of them,” Juan said. “Where is your horse?”

“Deep in the woods,” Chris answered, his eyes moving to Maria’s where she’d actually managed to smile and mouth the words, *I love you*.

Grinning like an idiot as a result, he loosened the first knot and continued to speak to Juan, not daring to remove his gaze from her. “If I can get us back the way we came in, we might be able to lose them long before they chase after us.”

“Doubtful,” Juan grumbled, kicking a noisy officer at his feet. “With the amount of commotion this lot is making, we’ll be surrounded any second now.”

Jim stepped out of the shadows and raised his rifle. “I got that covered, Junior.”

“You’ll aim for the knees and arms only,” Juan insisted. “We don’t know who these men are.”

“That’s why I got the gun instead of numbnuts over there.”

Their voices fell into a dull fuzz in the back of Chris’s mind as Maria instantly moved her free hand to his cheek, tracing the line of his jaw and running a thumb over his lips. “They told me you were out here somewhere,” she whispered. “They warned me not to fight, but I had to see it for myself.”

His smile widened. “Of course I was out here. You’re mine, and nobody gets to fight with you but me. Are you alright? I heard you bit off some guy’s ear?”

She smirked. “It’s not like he was using it. I warned him several times not to touch me and he didn’t listen. I figured, since they’d threatened to whip me twice already, biting him was a good enough excuse as any to get myself that much closer to you.”

He pulled the rope loose on the second knot. “Did he hurt you?”

“No.” She flung both arms around his neck and buried her face in his chest. “No one gets to hurt me but you. And I don’t care if you hurt me a thousand times over, I *am* miserable without you, and I’m not letting go again.”

“We have to leave,” Juan said. “Is she alright?”

Curling both arms tightly around her tiny body, Chris nodded. “She’s perfect.”

“Good. They’ll be after her, specifically, when we leave here. If we’re pursued, you cannot ride fast enough with your limited experience on horseback to outrun them. She should ride with someone else.”

“I’ll do no such thing,” she spat, tightening her hold on him. “He might not have the experience, but *I* do. He’ll ride with me.”

“Fine,” Juan groaned. “I’ll go ahead of you, lead them away to give you time to get to your horses. You cannot go to Carter’s nor can you ride with me on the open trail so soon. You’ll need to find a place to make camp for the night.”

“I’ve a place I can take them,” Henry cut in. “Carter knows it.”

“Very well. Go... Now... I’ll try to keep them on my tail for as long as possible and return for you in the morning.”

“Thank you,” Chris said just before he turned to leave. “I don’t know what made you change your mind, but... thank you.”

Juan waved this off and hurried toward the opposite side of the house, promptly disappearing into the shadows beyond it.

“Come on, Beanstalk,” Jim said, tugging on his arm. “If I gotta’ shoot one of these dumb summbitches, then we’ll have the whole mess of ‘em tailin’ us instead.”



With Juan leading a thunderous calvary in the opposite direction, they’d managed to creep back down into the tunnel and out near the river, using the cover of darkness to sprint back

into the woods to their horses. Not once, during the entire escape, did Maria let go of Chris's hand, and his heart might've floated out of his chest with the relief of it.

As Jim and Henry swung up into their saddles, he offered her his folded palms to assist her into their own, but she grabbed hold of his collar instead and pressed her lips to his.

Maria didn't do anything lightly, least of all kiss. She kissed with her entire body, like she'd been drowning and he was her single source of oxygen. Palms exploring wildly, her hips and breasts pressed against him, she was everywhere at once. And perhaps it'd been him that was drowning, because he couldn't imagine ever surviving without her... He grabbed on and dared not let go until she was good and ready to—the rest of the world be damned.

“No more bullshit, superman,” she breathed, resting her forehead against his. “Not from me and not from you. I love you too much to pretend not to ever again.”

“No more bullshit,” he promised, pressing his lips to hers one final time. “I swear.”

Shouting erupted somewhere near the house, forcing them apart so she could leap, unassisted, up into the saddle and extend her hand to him. “Come on. Don't you dare die here right when things are getting good again.”

Taking her fingers in his, he'd hardly hoisted himself into the saddle before she was kicking them off into a full sprint, dizzying the whole darkened world around them as he slid both arms tightly around her waist.

“Stop them!” someone ordered from behind, and Chris formed his torso to hers in such a way that she was fully shielded.

Henry sped past them in a whoosh of air. “This way!”

Juan had been right. Chris never would've been able to ride fast enough, especially in the dark. He had no idea how Maria was able to even see at the speed they traveled, much less guide the horse, but he was relieved when they turned and he could hear the sounds of Henry's horse ahead.

Smiling with a profound sense of pride, he nuzzled her ear. “You’re such a badass.”

“Sí, I know,” she bantered, increasing their speed as the ground below leveled out. “I kept telling you I was, but you didn’t listen.”

“Fire!”

This order was spat from their left, and he couldn’t quite wrap his mind around what he’d heard before he saw the bright white blasts of a line of musket fire being shot in their direction.

Maria expertly maneuvered the horse into a narrow gap between trees, twigs smacking and scraping his cheeks and arms as they weaved behind and around one tree after another.

“Are you hit?” he panted, feeling around on her left side for any signs of a wound while still attempting to shield her from any additional gunfire.

“Don’t think so. You?”

He slid one hand over his own chest. “Don’t think so.”

“Good. Hold on to me... there are more of them... we’re gonna take a hard right in a second... Dios mío, where did all these men come from?”

He squinted ahead and could just make out the silver glint of reflected moonlight on one of the bayonets moving toward them.

There was no order given this time, and just as he saw the bright white blast of its ignited gunpowder, they veered hard to the right, galloping hard and fast over much more rocky ground.

“Do you see the other two anywhere?” she asked, her words wobbling with the horse’s stride. “I don’t know where I’m going once we get away from these bastards.”

He awkwardly turned in the saddle to search for signs of Jim or Henry, and saw nothing but dark forest in every direction, blurry bits of movement scattered throughout, indiscernible from the shape of a rider or a branch blowing on the breeze.

“I’m not sure,” he answered. “I can’t see much of anything.”

She guided the horse to leap suddenly over a downed tree. Without a proper hold on her or the saddle, his body was jerked backward and to one side, placing him at eye-level with the mare's underbelly.

More shots rang out around them, a few farther out, and two much closer as he attempted to right himself against the unvarying speed they traveled.

He managed to get a grip on one of the stirrups and awkwardly pulled himself back upright, taking hold of her just in time for them to veer hard to the left.

More gunfire and shouting could be heard behind them and he wondered, for the first time, if Henry and Jim were caught up in it.

He listened for the sounds of automatic gunfire, but heard none. Was Jim hurt or simply refraining from using the rifle for fear he might kill someone important?

"You don't see them?" Maria asked, slowing their pace only a little as they ventured between a thick grouping of pines. "We can't afford to be lost out here, mi amor."

As they rode out of the pines and into a far more dense cluster of beech trees, a murder of agitated crows exploded from one of the canopies overhead.

"Bird calls," he said, scanning the rows and rows of trunks for signs of a horse. "Listen for bird calls. That's what they used before."

"*You* listen for bird calls," she snarked, navigating them expertly between the tightly clustered branches. "I'm trying to keep us alive up here."

He heard another blast—far too close for his liking—and felt a musket ball whizz past his cheek. Turning again, he saw an officer weaving in and out of the dense brush, unable to keep her pace with his larger horse. "Where the hell is Jim with that rifle?"

"Maybe you should use your bird call to signal him, eh? Hold on tight." Finding a broader path, she increased their pace,

the horse's hooves churning up a thick splash of leaves in their wake.

Their trail wouldn't be hard to track in the daytime if they continued at this pace... They needed to outrun these men while it was still dark, send the horses ahead, and hide.

Glancing over his shoulder and finding no signs of the man who'd been chasing, he cupped a hand around his mouth and attempted—*poorly*—to mimic the hoot of an owl.

“Oye,” she snorted, guiding the horse across a trail to the other side of the woods, “what the hell kind of deranged bird is that supposed to be?”

“An owl. Shut up. It was loud enough to be heard.”

They rode for a moment in silence until a similarly poor, “Ca-caw!” sounded from behind.

His whole body seemed to relax at once. “That's Jim. Thank God.”

He spun to look over his shoulder for signs of his black mare.

“I don't need Jim,” she growled. “I need the other one to tell me where to go. This horse can't run in circles all night.”

Still staring out behind them, he attempted one, much less ridiculous, hoot of an owl, and within seconds, two horses appeared in their wake, a responding hoot indicating Henry as one of the riders.

“Slow down just a bit. They're behind us.”

She did so, only enough to allow Jim and Henry to pull their horses up on either side of them.

“Think we lost 'em,” Jim panted. “Yuns alright?”

Maria wasted no time with cordialities. “Where am I going?”

“There's a cabin northwest of here,” Henry said. “It's well hidden. I figure, once we get a little closer, we can send the horses on down the trail and walk to keep our tracks hidden. Are either of you hit?”

At the very same time Chris said “No,” Maria responded, “Maybe.”

His heart might’ve stopped beating. “What do you mean, *maybe?*”

“It’s probably nothing,” she said. “Might just be a cramp or something. How far is the cabin?”

Henry pointed ahead of them, his brow furrowed in the moonlight as he inspected her. “About a kilometer or so in that direction. Can you still ride?”

“Of course I can ride,” she answered. “It’s nothing.”

He bowed his head. “I’ll lead the way then.”

At that, Henry moved his horse to the front and they were sprinting once more through the trees, the shouting of officers becoming farther and farther behind them.

Chris tucked in tighter against her. “When did you get hit, Maria? *Where* did you get hit?”

“I don’t know for sure if that’s what it is yet,” she said calmly. “I have a pain in my side. Might just be the baby aggravated with the movement of the horse. There’s no sense in making a big deal out of it yet... not until we get somewhere.”

Swallowing, he slid his palm over her ribs. “This side?”

“Stop it. We’ll figure it out when we get to the cabin.”

Inching downward, he felt something warm and wet, evoking a hiss of pain to seep through her teeth when he pressed down on it.

“It’s nothing,” she insisted, smacking at his arm as he moved his fingers over the stiff fabric of her corset in search of the wound. “Leave it alone.”

“Fuck,” he ground out, his pulse beating out of his throat when his fingertips were met by the frayed threads of a large bullet hole in her lower abdomen. “Maria...”

“It’s nothing,” she said again shakily. “We’re fine... the baby’s fine... Just... put pressure on it or something until we can fix it.”

He pressed in hard, his jaw tightening as he felt the warmth of her blood seep through his fingers, a chilling contrast to the cool night temperatures. Too much blood... Way too much of it.

Feeling her pulse against his palm, he remembered Juan Jr.'s dire warning that day on the ship and wondered if what he believed to be delusion at the time actually had any merit. *'We have tainted God's plan for us,'* Juan had said, *'and so God will take everything good from our lives until we are returned to the path he intended for us. You shall suffer nothing but heartache and loss until you are returned to your destiny.'*

If that was true, then God was a cruel and heartless being. They hadn't asked to be in this time—hadn't traveled here on purpose... One thing after another had gone wrong ever since that plane crash. If this was the God he'd spent the past year attempting to reason with, if He really was this spiteful, he wanted nothing more to do with Him. God couldn't have Maria... She wouldn't pay for a mistake they didn't mean to make.

"Talk to me, baby," he whispered, pulling her spine against him and lowering his chin to her shoulder. "Please... keep talking so I know you're alright."

"I told you, I'm alright," she groaned, "and stop calling me *baby*... What do you want me to talk about?"

"Anything," he answered. "Tell me what happened in there. What was it like in the house? Did anyone hurt you?"

Sighing, she let her body relax against him. "No. They took me up to this room and locked me inside it. Mostly, I just sat there staring out the window. I thought a lot about our time on that little island... about how you were with me when it was just the two of us."

He cringed as the blood continued to ooze out against his palm. "I was an asshole on that island."

She breathed out a painful attempt of a laugh, slowing their pace as Henry slowed his in the lead. "Most of the time, yes... Not always. Do you remember the night I taught you the lyrics to Guantanamera? And you sang it as loud as you could?"

Despite their dire circumstances, he couldn't help but smile at the memory. "I didn't have any choice in the matter. You forced me to do it."

"Oh, *I* forced you to close your eyes and spread out your arms and sing at the top of your lungs like a big, stupid, idiot?"

Resting his cheek against the top of her head, he held her closer. "If I didn't sing it exactly the way you wanted me to right then, neither of us would've gotten any sleep."

She relaxed even further into him with a contented hum. "You didn't get a single Spanish word right except for '*Guantanamo*', and I'd never smiled so big in my whole life. I think that's my favorite memory of you."

He could feel the warm, thick blood seeping into the fabrics of his own clothing and attempted to ignore it. "You know what my favorite memory of you is?"

"With so many great ones to choose from, I don't know how you could pick only one."

Grinning, he pressed a kiss against her temple. "Panama," he said. "Seeing you up on a horse for the first time... God, you were so pissed at me right then, but I remember standing there thinking what a fool I'd been to deserve it... and how the only thing in the world I wanted was to have that sight of you on that horse for all my life. I didn't care if you were scowling at me, so long as you were looking in my direction."

"You know," she said softly, "you looked pretty good, yourself, once you finally got up on your own horse. It was very hard to *stay* pissed at you after that."

The growing heat between their bodies had him pressing down on the wound with more urgency. "I've wasted so much time."

"Es la vida," she said, her voice barely coming out in a whisper. "No one is perfect, but we *all* waste our time searching for someone who is and then waste even more of it being disappointed when it turns out they're not. I stayed mad at you for too long."

“We can walk from here,” Henry announced, pulling his horse to a halt and quickly dismounting. “It’s not far.”

Carefully, Chris hopped down and raised his arms to Maria.

“She’s shot,” he informed the others, taking her full weight into his arms as she fell over into them.

“How bad?” Jim asked, instantly at his side and trying to get a glimpse at her where Chris didn’t bother lowering her to her feet.

“Don’t know yet.” He tucked her into his chest. “She’s starting to get a fever, though.”

Henry gathered the reins of all three horses and led them out to the main trail, smacking the hind end of one to send them all sprinting down the dirt path.

“How far are we from Carter’s?” Jim called ahead. “Cece had some medicine in one of ‘em trunks. Might help with the fever.”

“I can walk it,” Henry said, motioning for them to follow into a much more dense wooded area. “Soon as I get you to the cabin, I’ll head that way. It’s my wife’s cabin and she’ll be able to help. I’ll ask Carter to call for a doctor to bring back with me.”

“Thank you,” Chris managed, holding her closer so he could speak softly, “You hear that? They’re bringing a doctor. Everything’s gonna’ be okay.”

“It didn’t hurt before,” she whispered. “It hurts now.”

“We’ll get it fixed soon. You just gotta hold on a little longer. Can you put your hands over it? Try to apply pressure until we get there?”

“Sí.” She sucked in dramatically as she did so. “Ay, mi amor, this is bad... Really bad... I’m sorry.”

“What on earth do you have to be sorry for?”

She barely had the strength left to get the quivering words out of her and that terrified him. “The baby... I know how much

you wanted her... but I don't think she's gonna make it. This is too much blood..."

"Shh," he scratched her head and tucked her up under his chin. "As long as you're alright, nothing else matters. We can always have a baby."

Following Henry through a labyrinth of pine and beech trees, she began to grow heavier in his arms, and he thought she might've lost consciousness, but after several minutes, she asked, "Does he know?"

Confused, he glanced down at her shadowed form in his arms. "Does who know?"

"Tío," she breathed. "Did you tell him about the baby?"

His heavy heart nearly shattered at the mention of the uncle who'd abused her. "No, Maria... I didn't tell him."

"Good," she whispered. "He doesn't deserve to know."

Those words plagued him for the remainder of the walk, forcing a knot into his throat that no amount of swallowing could diminish. She'd told him about her childhood and how she'd pray, night after night, that God might save her from that monster of a man...

And He hadn't.

Instead, He'd let an innocent child endure years and years of cruelty. Perhaps God wasn't punishing them for being on the wrong path, but instead, punishing them for existing at all... Maybe He was just a spiteful and hateful being... Or maybe He wasn't there at all. Either way, Chris decided, he was done looking up for help.

After a short eternity of walking, Henry slowed, and at first glance, Chris wasn't sure why.

The cabin was indeed well-hidden and was so tiny, no one could've found it unless they knew exactly where to look. He would've walked right past it.

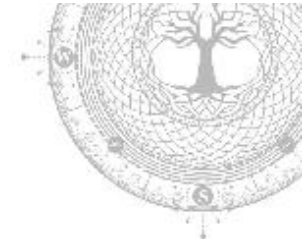
Dappled moonlight filtered through the canopy overhead, casting bits of silver light over its worn facade. The aged logs, weather-beaten but resilient, absorbed the faint glow, creating an ethereal play of light and shadow upon its surface.

Whatever was hidden away inside was veiled behind thick drawn curtains that hung from its narrow windows. No warm light emanated from within, and the only real sign of life was a plume of smoke roiling gently from the stone chimney.

He followed Henry to the threshold, and when the door was opened for soft lantern light to spill out over them, he looked down into his arms to find nearly every inch of Maria's body covered in dark red blood.

"Christ almighty," Jim breathed as he, too, took in the extent of the damage. "God help her."

"God's not helping her," Chris growled. "God *did* this to her. It will be us, *not God*, that will undo it."



Chapter Twenty-Two

Alaina

I tossed and turned in the bed, unable to will my mind to shut off long enough for me to fall asleep. Between lingering trauma from the rough waters of Cape Horn, my bizarre conversation with Phil, and an unrelenting fear that something had happened to my sister, I just couldn't lie still.

Normally, this was the time of night where Juan would venture down to take his place on the sofa, and the two of us would wade through awkward chit-chat until we landed upon more meaningful dialog.

With my people returned, Juan had refrained from intruding upon our reunion, opting to find some other place to rest for the night... no doubt close enough he could still listen in on any potential schemes they might have.

I knew, without a doubt, he was just beyond that fireplace, and where I should've been content with so many of my island family members sleeping peacefully around me, I found myself continuously glancing over to that side of the room. I'd been anxious to get his opinions on the arrival of the Ruiz men, and accustomed as I was to talking through my thoughts with him before bed, I didn't think I'd be able to sleep without it.

His company, despite all we had been through, had somehow become an unexpected source of comfort, and I hadn't even noticed. He'd filled a space in me that should've remained empty—a space my uncle Bill or Bud might've once occupied—one where I could seek advice and feel somehow improved after receiving it. He didn't belong in that spot... How on earth had he gotten there?

Rolling onto my back, I stared up at the ceiling and attempted to deflect the burgeoning awareness of Juan's

newfound place in my life.

From my kidnapper to my shield, his role had morphed from tormentor to protector in my psyche. Without even realizing it, I'd been seeking out his counsel on a nightly basis, searching for guidance in the chaotic world *he'd* trapped me in. The irony was not lost on me: I'd spent my entire childhood longing for a father to banish the monsters from my room only to end up seeking fatherly solace in the company of the very monster I'd once been afraid of. What a paradox I'd become.

Huffing, I rolled back onto my side, begging for sleep.

But the room's noises became amplified—the steady breathing of its sleeping occupants, the occasional creak of the ship's timbers, and the distant lull of the waves—each sound an echo of the questions stacked up inside me. Alonso, Cece, the fire, the portals, and Phil... There was only one person who could put my mind at ease.

With a defeated sigh, I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and slid my arms into my robe, checking on the babies before I tiptoed across the room.

Kneeling by the fireplace, I peered around the room to make sure no one was awake before I whispered, "Are you in there?"

A few clicks later and the doorway opened just enough for me to slip inside. A wave of familiar scents greeted me, almond soap, leather, and a hint of sweetened pipe smoke, ushering in that familiar wave of displaced comfort.

Apparently, I wasn't the only restless one between us. The lanterns were lit and *'The Golden Key of El Dorado'* sat open-faced in the center of the bed beside Luna, where she lay sprawled out on her back. I wondered if he, too, wasn't tossing and turning without our usual nightly exchange... just as loathed as I was to suffer without his enemy's rapport.

He pulled the lever to close the door, then turned to regard me with a puzzled expression. "Something wrong?"

"No—yes... I don't know," I huffed, leaning against one of the shelves. "I couldn't sleep."

Crossing his arms over his chest, the quizzical look remained in place. “And so you had a mind to seek *me* out instead of waking any one of the people you have been most anxious to be reunited with?”

I raised a shoulder. “They’re all exhausted. I figured you were probably still awake... too suspicious of the world not to be in here listening to it.”

“Aye,” he said, sitting down on the edge of the bed to mindlessly run a hand over the dog’s belly. “But I am not the only suspicious one, am I?”

Relieved at how quickly he could recognize what kept me awake, I shook my head. “The Ruiz men... Terrence thinks something might’ve happened between Alonso’s sons and yours, and after Benny’s outburst, I’m pretty sure Cece had something to do with it. How well do you know Alonso?”

“Well enough not to trust him.” He motioned to the foot of the bed. “You can sit. I’ve no intention to touch you simply because it is a bed instead of a sofa.”

Glancing at the red comforter, I debated standing for a moment, but resigned to perch on the edge of the mattress, my shoulders stiff as I awaited the rest of his answer.

More so than anyone I’d ever met, Juan knew people—could see through them to expose their underlying intentions almost the instant he laid eyes on them. If anyone could predicate what might’ve occurred to cause Benny’s reaction, it would be him.

“Alonso and I were good friends at one time, but that doesn’t mean he has any loyalty to me. He’s not the type. If that man has any love inside him at all, it is reserved for his sons. There is no friendship more valuable than family, and he’d willingly sacrifice whatever history lies between us if something’s happened between our boys... which, like you, I surmise to be his reasoning for hunting me down.”

Toying with the edge of my robe, I chewed my bottom lip. “You don’t think his sons might’ve done something to Cece? Like... to hurt her?”

He sighed. “Benny’s never been quite right, but his response to your appearance certainly implied he’d encountered your sister, and that encounter left a mark. With that said, none of Alonso’s boys have ever been outright wicked. Brutish and deviant, yes, particularly Adrián, but I can’t see any of them intentionally *harming* a woman, especially one that is married to Juan. They’ve always looked up to him. Benny’s reaction certainly alluded to your sister being present during whatever altercation took place, but I couldn’t say with any certainty that means she was in any real danger.”

I wasn’t sure what kind of response I’d been looking for, but it certainly wasn’t so... abstract. I’d been hoping for more surety; for something that would relieve me of any doubt I had when it came to Cece’s wellbeing. “How long do you think it will take, now that we’ve reached the Atlantic, to get to Virginia?”

“The winds are in our favor,” he said proudly. “We’re traveling at nearly sixteen knots right now, which is twice the speed we could manage on the trip down. Should we maintain it, we could see Virginia in as soon as fifteen days.”

At least there was that. I didn’t think I could take another whole month of not knowing what had happened to them; of not knowing if Cece was hurt or possibly even dead somewhere in the jungles of Panama. Over and over, I thought of Benny’s hysterics when he spotted me... The terror in his expression... What had he witnessed, and what role did my sister play in it to have been labeled as a witch? I wasn’t sure I could sleep again until I saw her alive and well.

“My Juan is with her,” Juan said, evidently reading my thoughts, “and if anyone so much as *considered* harming her, they would be dead long before they could do anything about it. She is safe.”

Much closer to the type of confident assurance I’d been looking for, I felt my relief seep all the way down into my bones. Still, a part of me now needed to see her in the flesh to confirm it. “Once we get to Virginia, how will we find them?”

As he always did during our nightly talks, he toed off his boots, crossing an ankle over his knee to massage his foot,

“You’ll recall the letter I sent to my ancestor in Yorktown?”

I raised my brow. “How could I forget?”

He grinned. “Well, I also sent instruction and coin for Juan Francisco to employ a few men on my behalf. Those men are to watch my sons’ movements and report back. There should be one waiting at each of the three main Virginian ports to inform me of their exact whereabouts.”

“Of course *you* have informants,” I laughed, his ever-reliable cunning forcing the remnants of my anxiety to melt away. “How the hell do you do it? Think so far ahead, I mean. From the moment I met you, you’ve been two steps ahead of everyone. I feel like my brain is constantly moving, but never in the right directions.”

“Your brain is *not* moving, my dear,” he teased, switching leg positions to resume his massage on the opposite foot. “It is spinning in place. There’s a big difference.”

I gaped at him. “What?”

“Your thoughts don’t progress linearly; they loop,” he said, scooting back to rest his spine against the pillows, allowing Luna to curl into his hip. “From past to present, randomly darting off to the future, only to circle back to the past again. You muddy those thoughts with a whirlpool of regret, worry, anxiety, and a level of self-loathing that baffles me. It’s impossible for your thoughts to truly move forward when they’re trapped in such mud.”

A hint of defiance forced my voice to raise. “You have regrets too... you’ve told me about them...”

“Of course I do,” he admitted, scratching the dog’s head. “We all have our skeletons... shadows we can’t shake. But while I’ve learned to move forward and carry them, you seem to let them constantly pull you down; to cloud your ability to think outside them.”

I turned to rest my knee on the bed and face him. “I can’t help it sometimes... When I think about all the stupid things I’ve done—all the people I’ve hurt—seems like I need the constant reminder in order to stop myself from making the same mistakes again.”

He laughed lightly, but there was a note of tenderness in it. “That’s a convenient excuse to be depressed.”

I rolled my eyes. “So you never harp on your own mistakes and that’s how you’re able to see what everyone else is thinking?”

Studying me for a moment, his expression softened. “No... The mistakes are there, but I know how to disassociate my feelings from a thought. I can look back at my past and learn from it without getting bogged down with endless amounts of self hatred. Same with the present and the future... My opinions of myself have nothing to do with where I’ve been or where I’m going. I can see ahead because I can remove myself from the equation.”

I raised a brow. “And when Cece informed you that you’d remember every vile thing you’ve done in this time, even after we kill Bennet, that didn’t change anything for you?”

“For a moment, maybe,” he combed his fingers through his beard, “but there’s nothing to be done about it. Is there? What should I do? Lie down and await my eternal retribution? Sulk? Fear the future I’ll have with those memories to haunt me?” He chuckled. “Life’s not nearly as complicated as you make it out to be. You live while you’ve got life in you. You wake up and you move forward as best you’re able until you fall asleep, knowing, one day, you won’t wake up again. There’s no sense in looking backward... at least, not at the things you can’t change.”

Resting my back against the bedpost, I considered how much simpler it might be to look at life in such a way. While it was a lovely idea, Juan was far too complex to be so simple.

“What about forgiveness?” I pried. “You don’t seem like someone who can disassociate *someone else’s* misdeeds from your past so easily. Tell me your mind isn’t muddied with a plethora of grudges... Tell me you wake up and move forward without planning your revenge upon everyone who’s ever wronged you?”

“*I* am the vengeful one?” he quipped. “*You* planned to kill me once and here we are cozied up together like old friends. Your little pal, Bruce, too, had every intention to poison me and

my sons, and yet I've not harmed a single hair on his head. Hell, I even let the man back in my kitchens. I wouldn't say there are a *plethora* of grudges to muddy my mind. There is but one man I seek revenge upon, and I intend to be relieved of that grudge when we rid the world of Richard Albrecht."

He propped his legs up onto the bed and crossed his ankles. "Your question has nothing to do with me and *my* grudges, though, does it? I heard your interaction with the rapist earlier... that's what you've really come to ask about... Isn't it?"

Swinging my own legs up onto the bed, I folded them beneath me and leaned forward. "I hate that I've come to ask *you* about it. You've done so much worse than he did... He was drunk out of his mind and didn't even get a chance to do anything before he was beaten nearly to death. You, on the other hand, killed my friend, tortured me and my husband, and have been a monster from the moment we met you... It makes no sense that I can let go of one grudge and not the other."

"That's why you didn't wake someone else. You can't admit to them you've forgiven me."

With reddening cheeks, I nodded. "They'll never forgive you, you know... and I really shouldn't either... Just sitting here makes me feel like I'm betraying them... like I'm a hypocrite."

"And there you are in your muddy mind again," he smirked, resting his head against the headboard to close his eyes. "When all this is over, Alaina, I will have never harmed any of you—yes, you'll have the memory of it, but you'll also have the confidence of knowing I'm not a threat to you. You know what made me do the things I did, and you understand them because you would've done the same. A man like him, however, cannot be so easily understood. When all this is over, his actions will linger, and for the rest of your life, you'll wonder if he could do it again... You'll wonder if he might decide to get *drunk out of his mind* once more and seek an opportunity to finish the job. You cannot understand that type of behavior because you would never do it. It makes *perfect* sense when you remove your self-loathing."

Sighing, my shoulders eased a bit. "You know, you might've made a better therapist than a crook."

“Bah.” He flicked a dismissive wrist. “Where’s the adventure in that?”

I glanced at the book between us where it remained folded facedown on the pages he’d been reading, a testament in itself to Juan’s affinity for adventure. “I started reading that the other day. It’s a pretty exciting little story...”

Opening his eyes, he followed my gaze and smiled, tracing a finger over the faded jungle illustration on its front cover. “It has a little bit of everything: adventure, mystery, hidden treasure, and endless action. What’s not to love?”

“It suits you, I suppose.” I leaned back against the bedpost once more. “When I was reading it... I starting thinking about my life... and about the lives Cecelia and Gloria might lead...”

“Oh?” As he so often did whenever I mentioned Gloria, he perked up.

“For a month now,” I said, smoothing the pleats of my robe, “I’ve been trying to figure out how to make sure Gloria can live without robbing my daughter of an eventful and fulfilling life. I keep looking at those spots on the ocean and considering all the possibilities that might be out there. It’s hard not to think of all the places my descendants might be able to explore... all the adventure that could be available to them if they knew about them too. And so I started thinking... well, what if there were rules around time travel that prevented anyone from meddling in history; a very specific lineage my family needed to stick to... why couldn’t my descendants have the best of both worlds?”

He stared at me for a long moment. “You landed on a remote island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and look at all the history you’ve unintentionally meddled in yourself. How could anyone ever enforce those rules? How could you be sure the lineage would be followed?”

“I’ve thought about that too,” I assured him. “It’d have to be structured, something that was taught at a very young age—like a religion of sorts—with strict guidelines that could be passed down from one generation to the next. Those guidelines would need to be extremely detailed, ensuring the coordinates and dates couldn’t be given away until there was certainty the

recipient could be trusted with them. We've meddled in history because we were thrown back in time without any understanding of it. Their experiences, if there was instruction to guide their travels, if there was structure, could be far different. Maybe you could help me line out those instructions with your insane ability to plan for the worst?"

"You do realize how many potential *worsts* there would be to plan for with multiple generations bouncing through time?"

I nodded. "I do... But... just think about the lives our descendants might have... If they could jump forward and backward to see what was to come or what had occurred? There are more spots on the ocean to be explored... ones that move differently than this one. They'd live one hell of a life."

He massaged his beard for a moment as he considered it. "*Our* descendants? I thought we were talking about *your* descendants?"

"We *all* know about the storm, Juan, and it seems irresponsible not to include all the other families who might have a mind to pass the information down one day anyway. Having a set of guidelines for time travel seems kinda' necessary so no one else comes back to make a mess of it like we did. Don't you think?"

I saw his acceptance of it—his almost excitement at the prospect of creating such a thing. "It wouldn't be impossible—difficult to maintain order—but... not impossible."

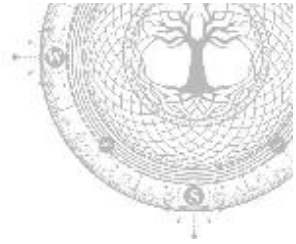
"So... does that mean you'll help me build it?"

"Aye," he sighed, once again letting his fingers grace the top of Luna's head. "I suppose I must. Since neither of us sleeps all that much, perhaps we'll convene here when the others have nodded off—just until we've created the initial foundation and can share it with them. I'll leave the shelf door open to the passageway. If you don't want anyone knowing we're friends, you'll probably want to come in and out that way from now on."

"I never said we were friends, Juan."

He shrugged. "Associates, then..."

Associates... Neither friends nor enemies, but two people working alongside one another... I could live with that definition.



Chapter Twenty-Three

Cecelia

“Nobody is *taking* us anywhere,” Dario hissed, pulling me behind him as he attempted to figure out which of the Shawnee men encircling us to point his sword at.

“Dario,” I said softly, laying a steady hand on his shoulder, “if *they*’ve been keeping Charlotte and Chase safe all this time, they’re not going to turn around and hurt us for wanting to do the same. You know how desperately we all wanted to find her, and how hard it’s been to accept we wouldn’t have time. We can’t just walk away now. We have to consider this.”

“We don’t know for certain they’re telling us the truth.” He spun quickly to point the edge of his blade at a younger man who’d taken a step toward us. “Maybe they ran into her at some point and maybe she’s long since escaped. You told me that painting was done in Philadelphia and she was dressed in an elegant gown. How can she possibly be here with them if she’s to pose for such a portrait so soon?”

“I intend to find that out once we get to her,” I said, keeping my voice as soothing as I could to ease his nerves.

“No, Cecelia,” he growled. “I will not let you, of all people, go anywhere with these savages.”

“Savages?” I balked. “How can you say such a thing when you grew up with the Paiute?”

He shook his head, turning to point his blade at another. “Lizzie was *not* Paiute. Her tribe cast her entire family out simply because her mother chose to love a Spaniard. These people don’t think like us. They’re cruel and heartless and we’re not going anywhere with them. We’re waiting right here for Juan.”

“Forgive my brother,” I said to the man who’d spoken English previously. “He’s afraid.”

“I’m not afraid,” Dario countered proudly, disproving this point when he spun to shakily aim his sword at another.

Ignoring him, I pointed to myself and continued, “I’m Cecelia. What’s your name? How did you come to find Charlotte and Chase?”

“Hokoleskwa,” the man answered, placing a fist on his chest. “I travel east with my family to find my young son. He was taken by Englishman to stop our war. Along the way, it is my middle son, Ellinipsco, who find the woman with stars in her ears. She and the boy were taken by Englishman too. She ask Ellinipsco to help her. She not afraid of him like many.”

Surprised, I pointed to the large and intimidating man who’d first come upon us. “*This* is Ellinipsco?”

“No,” Hokoleskwa said. “This Cutemwha, my *old* son. Ellinipsco stay with her always, keep her safe—hidden—so Englishman not find her again. We take you.”

I glanced up at Dario and then back. “The thing is... We’re waiting for my husband to come back, and my brother doesn’t want to leave without him. Is she very far?”

Hokoleskwa pointed to his left. “Down there. Cutemwha see your fire from his home and come to listen. We see your husband come too.”

Dario, his sword still held out, shook his head. “If my brother comes back and does not find his wife *exactly* where he left her, he’ll kill you all, whether you are friends or not. If Charlotte is close, why don’t you bring her here instead? I don’t want trouble.”

Hokoleskwa and his son shifted into their native tongue to debate this idea. Based on his tone, Cutemwha didn’t appear to like it one bit. After much back and forth, he was overruled by his father, and he, along with three other men, begrudgingly ventured off into the woods.

Hokoleskwa pointed at Dario’s drawn sword and shook his head. “No fight.”

I placed a hand over Dario's on the hilt, encouraging him to lower it. "How long have Charlotte and Chase been with you?"

"Many time now," Hokolesskwa said. "Englishman find them in the sea, bring them here."

Tugging Dario with me, I sat down on the log, motioning for the remaining members of the tribe to join us by the fire. "Was it just the two of them in the ocean? The man didn't take anyone else from the crash?"

Hokolesskwa moved close enough to the fire to warm his hands but didn't sit, the flames deepening the frown lines in his forehead. "He wait for others, but none come. He tell her she not supposed to come... not belong there."

I stared down at my feet and swallowed. Ever since I'd read about the Vile Vortices on Bud's laptop, I'd had a sneaking suspicion we weren't the only ones to know about the time portal. I wondered what else it was being used for if this man had been stationed there waiting for someone else to come through... Were others using history for their own personal gain?

"You said your son was hiding them from this Englishman?" I asked. "Why? What does he want with them?"

He lowered down to his haunches and pointed to his chest, carefully thinking through his words before he said them. "Some men empty here. Hunger for more than food. Power fill him... Power knowing what other man know not. If a man know when and where the rain come, he plant seed and have more riches than his neighbor. But if a man have wisdom to know the rain, he need not plant the seed, but sell same wisdom to hungry neighbor. She worth more than the seed he sow, and he never stop searching."

"He was exploiting them," I breathed, glancing at Dario. "They're children, both of them... They have to be so scared. I can't believe we almost missed them—almost left them behind..."

A muscle ticked in Dario's jaw. "What's the man's name?"

"Van Thorpe," Hokolesskwa answered. "Samuel Van Thorpe. Very rich man."

At the mention of his name, a sudden chill enveloped me, as if some unseen force passed over our fire to dim its warmth. The Van Thorpes weren't just any family in my time—they were a dynasty, an *empire*. Their names were etched on skyscrapers, stamped on the bottom lines of major deals, whispered in hushed tones in back rooms. Oil, technology, media—there wasn't an industry they weren't associated with. But more than their vast riches, it was the murmurs of their shadowy dealings and unseen influence that unsettled me.

Could they have gained such a foothold in the world by leveraging the secrets of the storm? What might they know about this doorway between worlds that I didn't?

Once all this subsided, could their knowledge be the missing piece to truly understanding how the storm worked?

"I've never seen them before!" a woman shrieked, dragging my attention to the shadows behind us. "No! No! Take me back! They've tricked you!"

Understanding how terrified Charlotte might be when presented with any stranger who came in search of her, I stood and called out, "Charlotte Miller? I'm not here to hurt you. I know how to get you back home... to the 21st century."

"She's lying," the voice trembled. "Take me back. *Please*."

"You were on flight 89 with your parents and your little brother, Chase," I continued, keeping my voice even. "Your parents are Mary Ellen and Stanford Miller. My sister was in the front of the plane. We figured out a way to get back home, and I can use it to save your family—make it so you never get on that plane at all. I'm not here to take you, honey. I'm here to help."

"If you know how the storm works," she said shakily, "then you are one of them. My family is right here, and I don't need your help."

"There's a painting of you in the future," I continued steadily. "It became the source of controversy because of Chase's Nike shoes. We matched it to the flight log and were able to identify the two of you. It was painted in Philadelphia in 1775—this year."

“Philadelphia?” she asked, and as she slowly moved closer, I could just make out both her arms clinging to a large man. “You’re sure it was Philadelphia?”

“I’m positive. Come sit and let me explain everything. We’re grossly outnumbered and couldn’t hurt you even if we wanted to.”

With a wary eye, she and the beast of a man she held onto moved close enough for the firelight to wash over them.

She was the very image I’d seen in the painting, thick brows over dark eyes with chestnut braids cascading down each side of her buckskin dress. She was taller than I’d thought, almost eye level with the man she clung to, and there was something haunted in her expression that made her seem older.

“You mentioned my parents,” she said, her voice growing more confident. “Are they with you? Did they survive?”

I shook my head. “No.”

At this, she unwound her arms from the man and stood straighter, holding her chin a little higher. “You’ll tell me what I need to know, and then you’ll leave us alone. Got it?”



For the next thirty minutes, I filled her in on all we’d been through: the storm, the island, the coordinates and the dates the portal opened... I told her about Terrence and how we’d had no signs of the back of the plane until we saw the painting, about Juan Josef and his plans for Bennet, and I told her about the way time was moving differently in the future and how Juan’s return to it could prevent her from ever getting on that airplane.

All the while, she sat with her hand wrapped tightly around the young man’s, squeezing it every so often for strength.

“We didn’t think anyone else survived,” she said slowly. “Me and Chase snuck into two empty seats in the very back so we could play a game on my tablet. That’s the only reason we lived.”

Staring down at her feet, she frowned and shook her head as she recounted it. “When it started, I kept telling Chase it was just turbulence and we’d be okay, but then there was this giant explosion... It blinded us for a minute, but once I could see, I realized it was just the two of us in this little back part of the plane that had broken off, holding onto each other. We were spinning, and it was so windy, I couldn’t keep my eyes open. I thought surely we were about to die, but... we didn’t. We were both injured when we landed in the water and we would’ve died had Samuel not been there to toss us a life raft.”

“He was in the exact place you landed?”

She met my eyes then and nodded. “As soon as he pulled us up, he was asking where the others were, and when I told him there was nobody but us, he kept saying, ‘*You’re not supposed to be here,*’ over and over. I didn’t understand what was happening then. I was in shock.”

“Did he ever mention who *the others* were that he was expecting?” I asked, attempting to determine what it was the Van Thorpe family was using the storm for.

“No,” she adjusted a bangle on her wrist, “only that we weren’t supposed to come through and, now that we had, he needed to figure out what to do with us. That’s when he started asking all these weird questions.”

I leaned in closer. “Like what?”

She took a deep breath, glancing up at the man beside her for a long moment before she answered. “Stuff I didn’t know the answers to... weird things that had to do with electricity and wiring. He took my phone and my smartwatch and kept tinkering with their batteries. I don’t know what it was he was trying to accomplish—he wouldn’t tell me anything, not where we were, or why he’d been there, or what he wanted... I didn’t even know we’d traveled through time until we got to the isthmus.”

Dario and I exchanged glances as she continued.

“Samuel took us to this house in the jungle to meet a man named William—he wouldn’t give a last name—but he asked William what he should do about us, told him he couldn’t kill a

couple kids for being in the wrong place, but he couldn't send us back either... William started probing me on what I knew about history. And I was so scared, I just started listing off everything I could remember from school—wars and presidents and things like that. I didn't want to die..."

The man beside her squeezed her hand and she smiled up at him, growing more confident. "William was most interested in what I knew about the war in the colonies. I'd just recently taken American history so a lot of the names and dates were still fresh... I was excited to be useful—useful meant they might not kill us—and I told him everything I could remember. He instructed Samuel to take us to a man named Robert Morris in Virginia. He said Morris would pay good money for that kind of advantage in the war and they might as well make a profit off us if they had to keep us... So... Samuel took us to the colonies... and a few days after we passed Williamsburg," she grinned up at the man, "Ellinipsco found us and brought us here so we couldn't be sold to anyone."

I peered across the fire at Ellinipsco where he returned her smile. Like her, his skin was unblemished and unwrinkled in his youth. He might've been twenty at most, as handsome as he was fearsome. Several dark braids fell over his broad shoulders, his honeyed almond complexion shimmering in the firelight, and though he held an intimidating countenance, his eyes had a gentle sparkle when they met hers. It was obvious the two of them were infatuated with one another.

"And in all that time, you never posed for a painting?" I asked.

"No," she answered, leaning into Ellinipsco's shoulder as he unlaced their fingers to wind his arm around her. "Samuel was very adamant about keeping us hidden and not allowing us to engage with anyone but himself or William. He said it was dangerous for us to be here at all. I realize now that he was worried about what we could do to history. Cutemwha has seen him out searching for us ever since, and I don't think he'll ever stop. His home is in Philidelphia, and if there's a painting of us there, then that means he could find us. Me and Chase need to leave right away... go west to a place he won't venture. Blue

Jacket says there are more Shawnee west of here where we would be safe and welcome.”

Smoothing my hands over my skirt, I inspected her face. She was just barely nineteen but she seemed so much older. After all she’d been through, I supposed she had to grow up quickly.

“My husband and his brother,” I motioned to Dario, “should, in theory, be returned to the year 1999 if we find George Bennet and erase their history here. That would put them in a position to stop you and your parents from ever getting on that airplane. I was planning to do just that if I couldn’t find you before we find Bennet, but since I have...”

“No,” she said decidedly.

“But your parents,” I insisted. “You could be returned to a life where you’d have a normal childhood.”

Her sense of maturity slipped away then, her posture mimicking that of a defiant teenager who was convinced she knew what was best.

“A *normal* childhood?” she balked. “Didn’t you say there was a detective with you who’d been investigating all the families on that flight?”

Frowning, I nodded. “Yes. Terrence.”

“Well, he can’t be that good at his job if you think our childhoods were anything resembling *normal*.”

I thought back to the photo I’d seen of the Millers posing together in the pumpkin patch. It was hard to imagine the people in that picture being anything less than the model white-collar American family. That photo, in and of itself, had served as justification in my mind for interfering in the past and making it so the Millers never got on the airplane at all.

“So you’d rather your parents were dead?” I asked, glancing at the man beside her who was very obviously the real source of her desire to remain right where she was.

“Mary Ellen and Stanford Miller were *not* our parents,” she spat, much to my surprise. “Mary Ellen is my mother’s cousin.

She and Stan adopted us after our *real* parents were arrested for racketeering.”

“Oh,” I said gently, not daring to pry when she hadn’t chosen to elaborate, “but they were still your *adopted* parents and surely you wouldn’t *want* them dead? You have to consider Chase too, honey, and what this decision might mean for him long-term. Don’t you think he might be better off in a future where he’s not going to have to spend his life hiding from Samuel Van Thorpe?”

“Chase?” She raised a brow. “You think you know what’s best for *Chase*? Samuel Van Thorpe never hurt us... He never snuck around outside my bedroom to catch a peek at me while I was undressing or forced my baby brother to stand in a corner for ten hours straight just because he wouldn’t eat something he didn’t like. I’ll deal with Samuel before I ever let Stan Miller anywhere near Chase again.”

I drummed my fingers anxiously against my skirts, attempting to figure out whether or not I believed her. I didn’t mean to doubt her authenticity—especially when it came to any mention of abuse—but she was young... And watching the way she smiled at Ellinipsco, I couldn’t help but wonder if she wasn’t inflating her story a bit to justify her desire to stay with him.

I knew what it was to be young and infatuated; to be blind to anything and anyone outside that infatuation; to be desperate in the need to hold onto it... desperate enough to give up your whole life just to keep it...

I knew that because I suddenly remembered doing that very thing with Owen once. A surge of memories swept through me of my own family attempting to talk me out of a marriage I was too young for only for me to demonize them for disapproving of it.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. This wasn’t just an image of a dock or a fuzzy memory of a man in a hospital bed... there was real emotion attached to this memory. This was pulling me toward it...

“You alright?” Dario whispered, placing a hand on my spine.

Straightening, I nodded, and pushed that life to the far recesses of my brain, focusing once more on Charlotte.

“Look, it’s not my place to interfere in your past if you don’t want that life—God knows I wouldn’t want anyone interfering with mine—but I won’t walk away from you if I think you’re only doing it because of an infatuation. Chase is very young, honey, and he needs to be considered in this.”

Her entire face distorted with distinct teenage outrage, her thick brows furrowing as her mouth fell open. “Are you kidding me? Chase is my *whole* world! Everything I have done from the moment they ripped us away from our parents has been for him! You don’t know what it’s been like for us, and you don’t know what I have with Ellinipsco. I *have* considered Chase’s life, and I’m positive he’ll be much better off growing up with these loving people around him than he ever would be in the 21st century.”

“You don’t have to make a decision right now,” I said, keeping my voice calm and even. “Why don’t you sleep on it? Think about it before I leave here? Talk to Chase, even, about what he might want.”

She raised her chin. “There’s nothing to think about. We’re home here.”

Ellinipsco, who hadn’t spoken a word but had merely watched our interaction silently, leaned in to her, speaking softly in his native tongue.

Much to my surprise, she responded in the same language, shaking her head while she hugged his hand to her chest.

They went back and forth for a moment before he turned to me. “We talk. Come back morning.” He touched his earlobes and pointed at me. “Hide your stars. We not only ones who know what they mean.”

Just as they all rose from their spots to leave us, the pounding of hooves on the dirt trail came speeding up from the road, and we all turned to find Juan pulling his horse to a sudden halt.

Holding a hand over his chest, he dismounted awkwardly and nearly fell over as he attempted to stumble toward me,

coughing to one side through rattling lungs.

“Joseph!” I shrieked, rushing to his side to find blood seeping through the fingers held against his chest. “What... what happened?”

“Can you fix it?” he asked.

I peeled back his palm to expose a gunshot wound near his sternum, and before I could open my mouth to speak, another sudden surge of unwanted memories spilled over me. In them, I saw Owen and Maddy and the life I’d been so ardently avoiding... I felt all the love and loss that came with their images and, despite my husband being the one with the bullet in his chest, it was me that fell to my knees.

“You husband?” Hokolesskwa asked above my head.

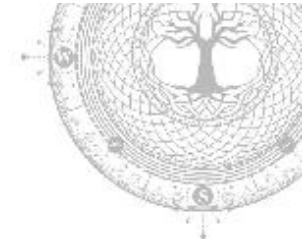
“Yes,” Juan answered weakly, coughing again as Dario appeared at his side with a supporting arm to keep him upright.

I couldn’t think. A pulse had taken over my whole consciousness—as if in sync with Juan’s heart—each struggling beat pushing another memory of my forgotten existence through me... I could feel the pull of that life, could sense Owen lurking just there, and I suddenly knew the only thing tethering me to this world was the slowing heartbeat of my dying husband.

When he died, I would vanish with him... I would be sucked up into a world with no knowledge he’d ever existed at all.

We’d been doomed from the moment we stepped off that ship in Yorktown instead of Mt. Vernon... and I was a fool for thinking I could do anything to prevent it.

“Bring him,” Hokolesskwa said. “And her. We help.”



Chapter Twenty-Four

Alaina

'Rule number 1...' The coarse texture of the paper on my lap felt oddly grounding as I stared down at it, resisting the urge to write: *'You don't talk about fight club.'*

Unable to sleep after my conversation with Juan and too excited about the opportunities my children could one day have, I'd decided to get a head start on our little project before the others woke.

Tucked in the far corner of the room with a dim lantern, my mind, which had spent the past month littered with ideas, now drew a blank.

If we really did this, whatever we created here would need to serve as a blueprint that could span generations. It needed to remain relevant across centuries, flexible enough to account for diverse personalities yet robust enough to keep each individual grounded.

How did one even start something so monumental?

Several minutes passed before I lowered my pen to the paper once more, stifling a laugh as I wrote: *'You don't talk about time travel.'*

It seemed like a good enough place as any to begin, and this was only a first draft. Besides, I couldn't think of anything more important than keeping time travel a secret for a first rule. Sharing knowledge of the storm with the wrong person could have disastrous results. If anything, the coordinates needed to be guarded at all costs.

With that thought, I followed my opening line with: *'Let no non-traveler witness any traveler passing through a storm, and should a non-traveler get too close, turn them immediately away'*

so they can never find themselves in either past or future. With your knowledge of time, you'll also bear the responsibility of protecting it. Fail to protect it and your own existence could be undone.'

I chuckled inwardly at my overly cryptic choice of words. Did this really need to sound so arcane and ritualistic?

Re-reading it, I supposed a bit of ritual couldn't hurt if this was to serve as rules to live by. I'd have a few years to perfect the tone before Cecelia and Zachary were ever old enough to understand any of it anyway.

Feeling a bit less pressure, I let my imagination roam free.

'When traveling backward, go only with a specific destination in mind. Study the destination and those who might occupy it. Know every important event that took place in that destination, every meeting, birth, marriage, or death, so you cannot alter history in any way. Limit your interactions with non-travelers and use time only as a means to enrich your life experience. Do not abuse it and stay no longer than six months at a time.'

Drumming my fingers over the paper, I considered what it might've been like to take the storm in the other direction... to travel to the future with no ability to study lineages or know who you were related to. If Chris, Bud, and Maria were able to take the storm back to the future from the southern coordinates, that meant there was a possibility someone in the 21st century could potentially seek out that same southern spot and find themselves two hundred, forty-four years in the future. Curiosity would no doubt compel *someone* to take the portal forward, so banning it altogether wasn't an option.

Again I lowered the pen to the paper.

'When traveling forward, engage with no one. You cannot know who descends from you, and therefore, your interactions could inadvertently alter the past of another traveler. Travel forward as an observer only and bring back nothing that will alter the past.'

"Hey you."

Quickly turning the paper over, and likely making myself appear scandalous in the process, I sheepishly met Magna's gaze where she'd somehow managed to sneak up on me.

"Hi," I answered, clearing my throat. "You couldn't sleep either?"

With an airy grunt, she lowered herself onto the floor beside me, her movements slow and mindful of the sleeping bodies a few yards away. "I never can these days. My grandmasenses, you know... always thinking I hear one of these babies waking up."

I smiled at that. "All these babies are so lucky to have you here. I don't know what we'll do without you. Juan said we could be in Virginia in as soon as two weeks at the rate we're traveling... With any luck, we could be home within the month. Are you excited to get back to your daughter?"

"Very." She rocked from one side to the other as she positioned herself to sit cross-legged. "I can't wait for her to meet all of you too. Excited as I am to be reunited with her, I'll always be a phone call away from your front door. You won't ever have to do anything *without me*. You going back to Chicago when we get there?"

I shrugged. "Jack and I haven't really had a chance to figure all that out yet. What about you? You think you'll go home to Tahiti or stay in the States?"

"Much as I would love to go home," she said, her fingers tracing imaginary patterns on the floorboards, "it's not exactly the same home anymore without family to fill it. After all we've been through, I doubt anyone will be anxious to jump on a flight to Tahiti anytime soon. I was thinking I might find a quiet place near my daughter that you all might be more inclined to visit."

"She's in California, right?"

Magna nodded proudly. "Los Angeles, working on her PhD in biophysics at Stanford."

"Oh, wow. She must be quite the genius."

"She's far too humble to admit it, but I certainly think so." She laughed. "Where she gets it from, I have no idea, but I

couldn't be any more proud. And *speaking* of proud," she patted my knee, "Fetia said you agreed to teach her to read?"

"I agreed to *attempt* to teach her to read," I mended. "After I give her the first lesson, I doubt she'll be seeking me out for a second."

She waved this off. "You're a mother now. Teaching automatically becomes second nature the minute you're a parent. I think it'll be good for both of you." She motioned to the papers in my lap. "Is that part of your lesson?"

"Oh," I blushed, "no. This is... something silly I've been toying with."

Her cheeks doubled in size with her grin. "Writing a memoir of our time spent in this century?"

Brushing my palms over the paper, I sighed. "No... I was... well, I'm playing with some guidelines... for anyone who might decide to time travel again."

"That's not silly at all," she said in that motherly tone that made it feel true. "I think that's a wonderful idea. We could've used a few guidelines ourselves."

"You don't think it's dangerous to let others go through?"

Her dark brow lifted. "With so many of us that know about those coordinates? Honey, I think it's dangerous *not* to have some sort of instruction in place. Someone else will find out about the storm and inevitably go out in search of it, whether we try to hide it or not."

Her gentle and encouraging tone made me feel foolish for keeping secrets from her. Apparently, in our month apart, I'd forgotten there were others who'd previously filled that parental void inside me.

"I wasn't going to say anything until I had this a bit more structured," I started, flipping the paper face up, "but I was thinking it'd be something we could hand down to our children... so they could explore more of the world without damaging it; serve as both travelers and protectors of time so no one ever finds themselves accidentally on the wrong side of it again. I don't even know where to start, though."

She tilted her head to get a glimpse. “Do you mind?”

I turned the paper so she could read it. “It’s... nothing yet, really... just random thoughts.”

“Have you thought about adding some personal experiences?” she pondered aloud, her eyes moving across the page. “Lessons often carry more weight when they have a story attached to them.”

I shook my head. “I worried anything personal might make the guidelines too specific, less universal.”

She clicked her tongue. “Stories don’t have to be rigid, honey. They can be like fables, guiding principles based on our experiences. Jack’s car accident, for example...” She paused her reading to look up at me. “You told me before that if he hadn’t stopped to sign that autograph or buy that drink, he never would’ve crashed at all... and if that car accident hadn’t happened, his sister wouldn’t have the scar that attracted her husband... and if she hadn’t met her husband, half of us wouldn’t have been on that airplane to attend her wedding. I think it’s a strong lesson to share on how the smallest change to any event could have lasting effects on history.”

I smiled. “I hadn’t thought of that. Maybe I should’ve asked for your help instead of Juan’s before I got started on this.”

I hadn’t meant to confess to Juan’s involvement—tired as I was, the words had just slipped out—and I stiffened in preparation of her potential reproach.

Instead of disapproval, I was met with a smile. “He’s a very strategic man and he’s been here far longer than all of us. It was smart to ask him for help. You trust him, then?”

Feeling guilty, my response came out a little defensive. “I don’t know that I trust him, but... I understand him, I guess. He did what he believed needed to be done for his family. It was cruel, yes, but if it had been me and my children stuck here for twenty years with no way out, I’d have done far worse.”

No signs of judgment even hinted at her dark features. “My mother used to tell me there was no such thing as a bad person,

only circumstances that bring the bad out of people. Finding peace with him is nothing to be ashamed of.”

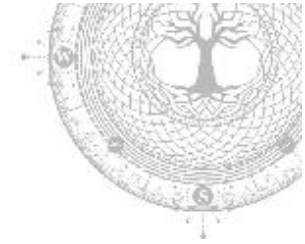
Magna always seemed to have the exact right words to say at the exact moments I needed to hear them. Where Juan’s counsel helped with thinking linearly, hers always guided the heart. Every interaction with her seemed to have a lesson in empathy embedded into it.

“You know,” I said, tapping the paper, “generations of time travelers are going to need more than just rules... Exploring history is about more than hopping through dates and events; it’s about understanding the humanity that shaped those moments. I think this document could use lessons that speak to the soul as much as the intellect. To ensure our travelers not only move through time wisely but also compassionately. Maybe you could help me with that? Make all our descendants into the same kinds of humble geniuses as your daughter. You said you have no idea where she gets it from, but you don’t give yourself enough credit. She most definitely got it from you.”

I’d never seen Magna blush until that moment, and her timid smile was endearing. “That’s very sweet of you... I suppose, if you *really* wanted me to, I could maybe write down a few of the life lessons handed down to me?”

“I *really* want you to,” I assured her. “Your influence makes us all better people than we would’ve been without it. I *need* to pass that down.”

As I handed her a blank sheet of paper and a pen, that shy smile radiated from her once more, nearly as bright as the lantern beside me, and I was excited again at the lives my descendants might live.



Chapter Twenty-Five

Chris

Maria's jaw was set firmly, her grip on Chris's hand unyielding as Jim worked to retrieve the bullet from her abdomen.

"I'm so sorry, sugar," Jim said over and over, his voice filled with genuine remorse as every attempt to grab hold of the bullet only served to intensify her pain. She hissed through her teeth instead of crying out as the tweezers moved against her insides.

Between Jim, Chris, Henry, and Henry's wife, Abigail, it was Jim who emerged as their anchor. Where Chris had stared helplessly down at the blood soaking through her skirts, unsure what to do in his panicked state, Jim had spurred immediately into action.

Under Jim's direction, Henry had set an iron over the hearth in preparation for cauterizing the wound, and Abigail swiftly arranged a cot to place Maria on. Chris was tasked with stripping her down to her shift while Jim sterilized tweezers and scrounged up whatever fabric could be boiled into bandages.

Sending Henry off to fetch Carter's doctor and whatever antibiotics they'd left in the trunks there, Jim had then gone straight to work searching her wound for the bullet that'd ripped into her.

Chris knelt on the opposite side of the cot, unable to offer much more than a hand for her to squeeze while he watched Jim work with unwavering determination. Overcome with gratitude, he didn't want to consider where they might've ended up without him.

With a furrowed brow, Jim's focus zeroed in as his tweezers finally grabbed hold of something.

“Almost there,” he uttered, prompting Chris to tighten his grip on Maria’s hand and glance across the room to the ominous black iron glowing in the fire’s embrace. He shuddered at the thought of the impending cauterization. She was already in the worst pain of her life, and the knowledge that they would have to intensify that pain just to stand a chance at saving her weighed heavily on him.

Could her life even be saved after she’d lost so much blood? Crimson covered fabrics were strewn from one edge of the room to the other, and pools of blood gathered in angry little puddles all across the floorboards, making it seem like any chance she had at survival was bleak. This heart-wrenching realization threatened to engulf Chris in despair, but Jim’s unshakeable focus became his lifeline.

“Gotcha’, ye’ lil’ summbitch,” Jim muttered, holding up the tweezers triumphantly to reveal the musket ball clamped between them. The small bit of hope he felt at seeing the bullet removed from her body fell away when the grip she had on his hand went suddenly slack.

“No, no, no,” he begged, leaning over her to comb the hair back from her face. “Stay with me, baby. I know it hurts, but it’s almost over. Just... please, stay with me. Okay?”

The faintest squeeze back was her only response.

“She’s your wife then?” Abigail asked where she knelt on the opposite side of the cot, prepping the bandages while Jim turned back to the hearth.

“I keep trying to marry her,” he answered with a shake of his head, “but I make a mess of things every time she gets close to agreeing to it.”

Abigail made a *tsk* noise and smoothed a hand over Maria’s crown. “All men make messes. Some more than others. It takes a pretty remarkable woman to demand a man clean them up *before* she’ll have him. Most of us take on that burden after we become their wives. She must be a fierce little thing.”

His throat tightened and he nodded, still staring at Maria’s face as if he needed to memorize every inch of it before she slipped away. “She really is.”

The thought of losing someone so fierce, even for a second, was unbearable. Memories cascaded upon him, vivid and intense, like a reel of cherished moments to remind him of all the life she had inside her. He recalled one of their first encounters on the island: her wide-eyed, unabating curiosity as she prodded at his bare form with a stick, trying to discern if he was still alive while still sneaking a peek at his naked body. His lips quirked, remembering the mischievous twinkle in her eyes as she shaved his face aboard Captain Cook's ship, proudly declaring afterwards that he no longer resembled a hairy ape. He could very nearly see her the day he'd been released from his prison cell, bathed in sunlight as she darted into the ocean, battling the constraints of her yellow dress just so she could launch herself into his arms that much sooner.

And he could never forget the determined stance she took—chin tilted upward, eyes blazing—as she stood between him and John Edgecumbe and declared her love for him for the first time.

The warmth of the kiss that followed, the softness of her lips, lingered even now.

No... Maria, so radiant with life, couldn't be vanquished by a mere bullet. She had far too much fight in her to be defeated in such a way. He knew she was in pain, but still, he couldn't help but beg for her to endure. The nightmare of living in a world devoid of her was too harrowing to even contemplate.

“Both of yuns get a good hold of her now,” Jim said, reappearing with the hot iron. “I'm gonna' have to do this quick and it's gonna hurt like a summbitch. Make sure ye' keep her pinned down cause she's gonna' wanna' come flyin' up off that bed to get ahold of me when I do it.”

Following Jim's orders, Chris immediately wound his arm around her chest, one hand still firmly gripping hers as Abigail took the other. He pressed a kiss against her temple and whispered, “Almost done, baby. Don't you dare leave me now.”

He kept his forehead rested against her temple and closed his eyes, tightening his hold on her as the iron met her wet, wounded flesh and hissed like water dropping into a sizzling skillet. Her entire lifeless body came alive with it and she

screamed out, a sound so raw and agonized it made Chris feel like he was the one being burned in the way it ripped him to shreds.

Her grip on his hand became firmer, her fingers digging into his skin, seeking some anchor amidst a level of pain he couldn't even begin to imagine. He squeezed back, tears streaming down his cheeks as he prayed to the very God he'd blamed for her torment to give him the power to ease it.

That power didn't require divine intervention, and some part of him knew it. She was on the very edge of death, and she was fighting it with everything she had simply because he kept asking her to. A better man would tell her it was okay to let go... A better man would understand she would find relief in a death that would be undone... Much as he wanted to be that better man, he couldn't find the courage to utter the words that would ease her pain; couldn't bear the thought of seeing her eyes go vacant... even if it was temporary.

The guilt-ridden seconds dragged on endlessly as the hot metal seared the wound closed, and the sounds and smells created a nightmarish assault on his senses he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to clear from his memory.

When Jim finally pulled the iron away, a collective sigh of relief reverberated through the room. Maria's once tense body collapsed, her labored breathing the only testament to her continued fight for life as she slipped out of consciousness.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered, coaxing her back to him with a gentle shake. "You have to stay with me. It's all over now and Henry should be back soon with a doctor. You're going to be fine, I promise. Just please stay awake."

He watched her throat move as she swallowed thickly, her brow furrowed in a wince as she croaked out, "The baby..."

Glancing down, the sight of her blood-soaked shift made his stomach churn. The crimson stains were so pervasive it was impossible to discern how much of it had come from the bullet wound and how much of it might still be coming from a miscarriage he was sure she was in the throes of. "The baby's just fine," he lied. "And so are you. Henry will be back any minute with help. We're alright."

“She’s with child?” Abigail asked somewhere close by. He dared not take his eyes off Maria’s face... not even for a second.

“She *was*,” he answered softly, squeezing her hand as she again began to drift toward sleep.

Abigail’s footsteps moved back to the cabinetry near the hearth. “I’ll fix her up something that’ll help with the cramps,” she offered, then he heard the clanking of glass jars as she rummaged through a drawer. “At least until Henry can get here.”

“What is it?” he asked, dabbing at the beads of sweat that’d formed on Maria’s forehead. She’d gone so very pale it was almost difficult to recognize her.

“Rose hips, blackberries, and willow bark,” Abigail called back. “Helped me a lot when I lost mine.”

“Was it... very painful... the miscarriage?” It was a stupid and thoughtless question, he knew, but as he watched the wrinkle between Maria’s brows deepen, he needed some kind of hope her pain could be manageable.

“I wish I could say it wasn’t,” she replied with a quiet intensity. “One of them almost killed me.”

“One of ‘em?” Jim echoed, his voice somewhere behind Chris’s shoulder.

“Mr. Byrd had his favorites,” she grumbled, the rawness of past hurt evident in her tone. “Most the time we lost them early, but sometimes Mr. Blackwood would wait to beat them out of us. How far along is she?”

“Four months,” Chris managed. “Maybe a week or so more?”

He heard the apology in Abigail’s long exhale. “The cramping will be hard on her, especially with that wound, but the tea should help some.”

Pulling Maria’s hand to his lips, he pressed a soft kiss against her knuckles. “You said one of them almost killed you... How far along were you then?”

“About a month farther than she is now,” she answered. “The babe wouldn’t come out and I got a fever that kept getting

worse.”

“How’d ye’ survive it?” Jim asked.

“Henry.” The pain that’d laced her voice previously was replaced by a warm fondness as she spoke his name. “He waited until dark and snuck me out. Brought me down to this cabin and said he’d make sure no man would ever put his hands on me again if I just made it through the night. The others, back at the farm, made a grave and swore they saw me lowered down into it—even put up a little cross marker with my name etched in its wood. I fought like hell to get past the worst fever of my life just so I could wake up on the other side of it the free woman he promised I’d be. Henry held my hand the same way you’re holding hers now, and when that fever finally broke, he kept that promise. No man but him has ever put his hands on me again.”

Chris hadn’t torn his gaze away from Maria long enough to really observe Abigail until that moment. He peered out to the counter where she stood preparing the tea. Far from beautiful, she bore the hard lines of a long and arduous life, her dark ebony skin spotted with pink scars he knew no person could’ve deserved. Her hair, once black, was now streaked with silver and her eyes were weighed down by heavy bags that had formed beneath them.

Despite all this woman had clearly been through at the hands of people who, no doubt, shared Chris’s complexion, she’d still shown them every bit of compassion she had... quickly springing into action in an effort to help. He owed her a great debt for opening the door to them at all.

“Thank you,” he managed, forgetting there was a lump permanently lodged in his throat that made the words cracked and shaky. “For taking us in and... helping... You have no idea how much it means.”

She waved this off and glanced at Maria. “I’ve got a few clean shifts you can have. You can’t leave her in that one. She’ll bleed through the night and you’ll want to be able to monitor it. We’ll need to swap out those sheets too.”

Maria’s voice, frail and breaking, whispered, “No more.”

Chris moved his attention back to her, leaning in as he stroked her cheek. “No more, honey. The worst is over. Abigail’s making you some tea and then we’re just gonna’ change you into something more comfortable. I promise, we won’t hurt you anymore.”

She shook her head the hint of an inch. “It’s too much.”

Heart sinking, he pulled her hand against his chest, praying his hold could give her the same strength Henry’s had given Abigail. “Don’t say that. You’ve already come so far. There’s a doctor on the way with medicine, and your wound is closed up now. It won’t be long until the pain’s gone, you’ll see. Please don’t leave me to do this without you.”

Her eyes fluttered as she struggled to open them. “I don’t *want* to leave you.”

A tear slid down his cheek and he swatted at it. “Then don’t. It’ll be fine. You’re going to be fine. I’m begging you, Maria, just stay with me?”

“I can’t.”

“You *can*,” he insisted, holding back a sob. “You’re the toughest person I know, and you can get through anything.”

Her whole body clenched as some invisible wave of torture made its way through her. “Not this.”

Those words nearly broke him. Much as he wanted to be the Henry of her story, to be the shining light that would guide her back to life, he couldn’t. The hurt he’d caused her cast too wide of a shadow, surely dampening whatever light he might attempt to offer.

He wasn’t enough to get her through it, but he also wasn’t enough to let her go. The words she needed to hear to give up her fight were right there in the back of his throat, but as he opened his mouth to speak them, the only sound that came out was a cowardly, “Stay.”

“Oye,” she managed weakly, grimacing as her body continued to punish her, “don’t argue... Not now.”

He squeezed her hand harder as her consciousness began to slip away. “No, no, no. Stay awake, Maria. Stay awake and

argue with me. Please. I want a thousand more memories of arguing with you.”

Her jaw tightened in a hiss, her back arching as she weathered whatever anguish was tearing through her. “You will.” She struggled to push the words out, taking long gaps between each attempt at speaking. “In another life.”

Shaking his head, he leaned in closer. “What if there is no other life? What if this one is it? What if this is the only chance I get and I let you go before I’ve had a chance to undo all my bullshit?”

Despite the torment, she raised her brows, taking several labored breaths before she managed, “There’s *always* another life.”

He blinked a fresh set of tears from his eyes. “I don’t want another life. I want this one, right here, with you. I want you in this life *and* the next. I want every single second of every single day I ever live to be spent right next to you. I know it’s selfish, but I can’t do this without you.”

“You can,” she said through a concentrated exhale. “You’re my superman. Remember?”

The way she writhed and grimaced sent pains through his own body. He couldn’t bear to watch her suffer.

For a second time, he opened his mouth to speak the words that would give her the relief she was begging for and came up short. “I can’t do it,” he wept, burying his face against her shoulder as he clung to her hand with both of his. “I know how awful that is, but I can’t say goodbye to you.”

“I won’t stay gone,” she whispered against the back of his head, the words so faint he hardly heard them. “You’ve got that paper?”

He nodded, unable to stop the sob that seeped out against her. However much he wanted her to hold on, he knew she couldn’t. She was already too far gone. Whether he said goodbye or not, he was going to watch her giant life fizzle out in front of him, and nothing could’ve prepared him for that kind of tragedy. He just wanted a few more precious moments—to feel her warmth, to inhale her fragrance, to hear that vibrant Spanish

lilt speak his name before it went quiet. He needed to kiss her, hold her in his arms as tightly as he could... He needed more time.

“Find Bennet,” she said, her voice strained as she battled for breath. “It is enough now. Put your arm over me?”

He raised up then, blinking uselessly at tears he didn't think would ever dry. Memorizing every freckle that dusted her nose, he very gradually surrendered to what he'd known was inevitable since they'd arrived at the cabin. “I promise,” he whispered, “when we get to that other life, I'm gonna' make it so much better than this one. You will never have a reason to be sad again.”

She managed a tormented smile. “You are so cheesy.” The grip on his hand slowly grew weaker. “I love you.”

Fat, warm tears took over his cheeks as he pressed his lips against hers and hovered there to feel her fleeting breaths against his cheek. “I love you too, Maria. So very much.”

“Sing to me?” she asked. “Like that day... on the beach.”

“You... want me to sing?”

Her eyes opened for just a second, a thousand shades of brown and gold as they moved between each of his before closing again. He felt the finality of that gesture deep in his soul, and he stared at her closed eyelids, wishing he could've seen those eyes just one more time.

“Sí,” she whispered, “sing so I'm not scared.”

His eyes, nose, and throat all burned in such a way that he wasn't sure he could so much as utter a sound around them. Draping an arm securely over her, he tightened his hold on her hand and pushed the botched lyrics out in a whisper.

A vivid memory of her singing the correct words, with the backdrop of a sun-drenched beach, danced behind his eyes.

What he wouldn't give to go back to that beach right then... to have all the time between then and now to appreciate every single second of her... to cherish every inhale and exhale she ever took.

How precious those breaths were, he realized, as she struggled now to maintain them... as they slowly grew more shallow.

Her hand felt so very small in his as its grip lightened, and he sang with more fervor to make sure she could hear him wherever she was going. He'd never learned the proper Spanish words but he did his best to mimic the way she'd sang it, unsure what the song was supposed to mean as it transformed, for him, into a heartbreaking lament.

With each pass through the melody, he felt her body relax and unclench, and he held his own breath as she sank farther into the cot and let out her last.

Sliding both arms beneath her, he held on as tightly as he was able, burying his face in her hair. "I never told you you were perfect," he whispered. "I spent my whole life looking for perfection and I found it fighting with you. You fought for the best parts of me when I gave you my worst and you made me a better man because of it. I promise, I'll never forget to tell you how perfect you are when I fix this. And I'm going to fix it."

He hadn't realized he was waiting for her to utter her usual witty retort about how cheesy he was, and when it didn't come, the remnants of his composure broke into pieces.

Brow pressed against her temple, he let the tears pour out of him, so strong in their release that his entire body trembled with the effort of their escape.

She was gone... and a part of him would be gone alongside her until he found a way to bring her back.



In the dull static that enveloped him, he was only vaguely aware that Henry had returned with Lilly, Izzy, and a doctor who was useless to do much but offer condolences he didn't want to hear.

Leaving Lilly to kneel and whisper her goodbyes at the side of Maria's cot, Chris went out into the dark woods alone to dig a hole.

Beneath a sliver of silver moonlight, he drove his shovel into the cold, unforgiving ground, using each forceful stab as an outlet for the anguish and rage roiling inside him. The damp, half-thawed soil clung to the metal, like the earth itself was resisting the grave she wouldn't remain in. With gritted teeth and sweat beading on his brow, he fought against its stubborn hold, treating each clump of dirt as if it were the very man who'd shot her down.

He welcomed the burn that crept up into his arms with the exertion; craved a more physical source of pain that might numb the unbearable ache of failing her...

How many times had he failed her? How many times had he made that beautiful, perfect soul feel like she was second-best? With all the strength he could muster, he drove the shovel into the ground, as if, in doing so, he could bury his guilt as deep as it festered within him.

New tears welled in his eyes, but these were born of rage—rage at himself that he'd squandered so much precious time. What if this was the only life they got? What if Bennet died and nothing changed at all? What if feeling second-best was all he'd ever leave her with?

With visions of himself falling to his knees before Alaina while Maria lay trembling in their bed feeling abandoned, he heaved the soil into the night with an intensified fury.

"I want to wake up, Kreese, in another life," she'd said to him. "I want to forget this place and everything that's happened here. Can you give me that?"

Hurling another clump of dirt through the air and roaring into the night with it, he stabbed the shovel back down into the earth with such force he felt it rattle his bones.

With the name in his pocket, there was a chance he *could* give her that... There was a chance he could give her so much more than that... if he was the type of man she deserved...

Gripping the shovel's handle so the coarse wood blistered his palms, he dug with a fervent haste as thoughts of her uncle sped through his mind; as he considered what her life might

look like if Juan Jr. or Dario showed up to kill that monster long before he could ever break her spirit.

They owed it to him, didn't they? If he gave them Bennet's location and helped them get to that other timeline, did that not earn him a bit of his own retribution?

Maria could wake up in that whole different life she'd asked for—a life where her childhood wasn't stained by having to suffer through countless abuses; a life where she'd never know the feelings of inferiority he'd instilled in her because she'd likely never encounter him at all, enriched as her life would be... Maybe he'd find her again or maybe she'd find a much more deserving man that would treat her the way she deserved to be treated... one that would never make her feel like anything less than perfect.

Visions of her standing in that stained wedding dress in Las Vegas poured over his mind; her eyes full of tears from the additional layer of anguish he'd added to the almost toppling stack she'd acquired from years upon years of abuse.

His shovel bit into a rock, and the last bits of his stability shattered in the reverberation that snaked up his forearms. His jaw clamped together, he sank down to his knees to claw at the dirt with his bare hands, incoherent sounds coming from somewhere in his chest as he tore through the frozen ground until his fingers were raw, that tear-filled face and that red-stained wedding gown branded into his vision.

Ripping at the soil, the stain on her gown grew larger... It twisted and morphed until she was covered in red... until those red stained fabrics were strewn all around the cabin... red covering his palms and her shift... A red smudge on her cheek when he'd laid her lifeless body back against the red cot. All he could see and think and feel was red...

And he drove his fists down into the dirt, beating at it until his knuckles turned the same shade.

"Ay!" Jim shouted, hopping down into the hole to grab both his hands in an effort to stop him. "It's alright. C'mon back now. That ground's had just about enough. And so have you."

Chris tried to meet Jim's gaze, tried to form words or find some semblance of reality amid the red that'd filled his vision, but the tightness in his throat made speaking nearly impossible, and he couldn't catch his breath... couldn't think or see or feel anything beyond that red sea that'd obliterated him...

Jim knelt beside him, his voice steady. "Tearin' up this ground ain't gonna bring her back, Beanstalk. Ain't no sense in it when ye' got the paper in your pocket that will."

He slowly shook his head, staring off into the darkness. "Bring her back to what? *Me*? So I can fuck her up even more than I already did? I never deserved her. I broke her."

Jim let go of his hands and squeezed his shoulders. "That ain't true. We all seen yuns together and there ain't a person among us that thinks you two wasn't made for each other. Yeah, ye' mighta' done some dumb shit here and there, but we all do, and we all got the rest of our lives to make up for it. Beatin' yourself up for things ye' cain't change now ain't gonna do no more good than beatin' up this dirt will."

"She deserved better," he said, grateful for the dark that the tears streaming down his cheeks might be hidden. "Better than me... Better than that pervert uncle that broke her down so much she could look at me as someone worthy of her."

"You're just hurtin' is all," Jim assured him. "Ye' don't mean none of that. She loved you and you loved her, and that woulda' happened with or without that piece of shit uncle."

"Maybe," Chris said dazedly, sinking back on his heels to let the cool mud seep into the fabric of his breeches. "Maybe not. Juan and Dario will show up in their new life when she's only nine or ten. The abuse was just starting then..."

Jim's brow furrowed. "Now, hold on a second, Beanstalk. If you're thinkin' about doin' what I think you are, that could change everything... Could make it so she ain't never on that airplane to run into you at all."

"Exactly," Chris answered, tipping his head back to rest against the dirt as he closed his eyes and let the sting in his knuckles fester and burn through him.

“Ye’ cain’t do that. Ye’ was supposed to find her on that airplane; supposed to end up right where ye’ are. God only knows what might change if ye’d been on that island with us or if ye’ hadn’t had her life vest to hang onto. Now, I know you mean well, but... what you’re wantin’ here... it’s dangerous. Ye’ ain’t thinkin’ clear.”

“Oh, I’m thinking *perfectly* clear,” Chris said. “Maybe for the first time in my life. That man destroyed her, Jim, and now I have a chance to take that away from her... To give her a life where she doesn’t ever have to look in the mirror and see all the scars he left behind. Don’t you tell me I’m not thinking clear when you know damn well you’d do the same for Lilly if it were the other way around.”

“Of course I would,” Jim spat back. “Anyone with a heart would want to erase somthin’ like ‘at. But messin’ with the past? That’s dangerous. Ye’ ain’t got no idea what kind of ripples you might cause, what other pains you might bring upon her, or even yourself because of it.”

He picked at the dirt between his fingers. “How could I ever face her again if I had the power to undo that damage and I didn’t do anything with it? What kind of man would I be if I didn’t try to make things right? To give her something better?”

Jim let out a long, frustrated breath. “It ain’t about just makin’ things right. Life has a way of balancing itself out. You take away one pain, and another might just pop up in its place. What if somethin’ else woulda’ killed her if she hadn’t gone through what she did? Eh? What if her uncle wasn’t the worst thing she could go through? Is that a risk you’re willin’ to take?”

He struggled to find a balance between his need to come through with some grand gesture for her, his own self-loathing, and the undeniable truth in Jim’s words. “I have to do something.”

Jim sighed, sitting back on his butt to sling his arm over his shoulders. “You’re doin’ it. By bein’ there for her, by lovin’ her and understanding her. Sometimes, that’s all we *can* do. And trust me, that’s more than enough. Now, that woman don’t light up for no damn body the way she does for you. We all hurt each

other; we all say and do things we wish we didn't. But she still lights up for you, and only you, despite whatever awfulness you think makes ye' unworthy of her. That woman woulda' laid up in that bed and suffered for days just cause' ye' asked her to keep hangin' on. It don't matter that ye' think ye' don't deserve her. You're what makes her happy. You're just about the only thing that makes her happy. And ye' cain't think you'd be givin' her somethin' better if you take away the only person in this world she lights up for. If ye' think ye' don't deserve her, then you do what all men do and ye' find a way to be a man that does. Ye' don't change *her*—you change *you*.”

Those words found residence in Chris's chest, settling his pulse just enough that the red fizzled out and the two of them sat in silence for a good long while contemplating it.

He didn't want to change *her*—she was perfect. Killing her uncle would undoubtedly change the events that had helped mold her into the fiery and resilient creature she'd become... It didn't seem fair that taking away the most painful parts of her past could make her into someone completely different.

Was there no way to have both?

He lost all concept of time as he sat there considering all the ways he might. Jim didn't speak a word, but remained right there in the mud beside him, an anchor to prevent him from slipping back into madness. Above them, the sky gradually shifted from black to cobalt, and the crickets quieted to allow a few nearby robins and sparrows to begin their morning song.

It was only the sound of a rapidly approaching horse cutting through the bird's chirping that pulled him from his thoughts. Reminded of the men that'd been pursuing them the night before, Chris clambered suddenly out of the grave, pulling his sword from its sheath in preparation of a fight.

And Jim was right there beside him with his rifle at the ready.

Before he could ask where on earth the rifle had been that he was able to pull it so quickly, two riders emerged from the forest shadows to reveal them as Dario and Charles Carter.

“Ay, precious!” Jim called out, lowering the gun. “What—”

“The medicine,” Dario roared as he raced toward them and pulled the horse to a skidding halt. “Cece sent me for antibiotics. You have them?”

“Inside,” Chris said, motioning to the cabin as he sheathed his sword. “Lilly’s got them. Why do you need them?”

“My brother is shot,” he spat, leaping off the horse to storm toward the cabin, venting his anger over his shoulder as he added, “You couldn’t just leave it, could you?! Couldn’t just let us finish the job! She would’ve been kept comfortable and unharmed if you’d just given it time! Now my brother could lose his life and that’s on you!”

Pulse racing and still ready for a fight, Chris was torn between following Dario inside to beat him to a pulp and processing the fact that Juan Jr. had been shot in his effort to assist them.

“How is your wife?” Mr. Carter asked gently, pulling Chris’s attention away from the cabin. “Were you able to retrieve her? I was not awake when Henry came to collect your things.” He glanced at the grave they stood beside, then took in their mud covered attire and his posture sank in the saddle. “I had presumed it was happy news that he’d come to retrieve her trunk...”

Chris shook his head. “She’s gone.”

“Oh, my dear boy,” he clucked, swinging his leg over to dismount. “I offer you my most solemn condolences, though I know they will not be nearly enough to unburden your pain. Tell me what I can do. Shall I call for the clergy?”

“No,” Chris said, dusting off his hands on his thighs before turning toward the cabin. “That won’t be necessary. I’ll be on my way within the hour.”

Dario reappeared in the doorway with the pill bottle clenched tightly in his fist, his expression far less proud than it’d been before entering. “I shouldn’t have said that... I had no idea.”

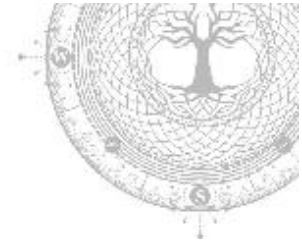
“Any lives lost will be restored, right?” Chris grumbled, reaching into his pocket to pull out the paper with the real

Bennet's information on it. "You'll need this... Maybe you'll get there before I can... undo the mess I've made of things."

Dario frowned at the parchment for a long moment. "He's... not in Chesapeake?"

"No," Chris answered, moving past him into the cabin's interior. "She was pregnant and I thought if I could save Bennet, I might save the child too... turns out I'm not very good at saving anyone."

Dario spun on his heel to follow him. "Juan's at a Shawnee camp a few miles up the road. He's stable for now. We'll go together. All of us. I'll help you bury her first, and then we'll *all* undo it."



Chapter Twenty-Six

Cecelia

In the thick, warm air of a wigwam with Juan's head rested in my lap, life, as I knew it, was unraveling before my eyes. The tautly pulled mat walls around us seemed to pulse and breathe in sync with Juan's shallow gasps for air, closing in on us the longer and harder he fought to remain alive. His chest, stripped bare and stained by his own blood, heaved in uneven waves, his rattling lungs interrupted only by the occasional grunt of pain while a large Shawnee woman cleaned the wound in his sternum.

Her hands moved with an assuredness that should've been comforting, but they only heightened my anxiety. To all the world, Juan was the embodiment of strength and confidence, but to see him laid bare in such a raw state was unsettling. An overwhelming urge swelled within me to shield him from the gaze of others who might see him so diminished; to protect him even from the woman who was so diligently trying to save him.

I was unfamiliar with the herbs that scented the water; uncomfortable with the sharp bite of burning sage that thickened the smoke wafting off the fire, its scratch in my throat threatening to suffocate me. His pained moans were a knife to my gut each time her fingers moved over him. I wanted—*needed*—to help, but I was useless to do much of anything with my mind half in one world and half in another.

Every struggled inhale from him sent another jolt of unwanted memories through me. One vision after another bulldozed its way into my mind while I squeezed his hand and attempted to ignore their pull. Try as I might, that life would not be so easily dismissed with this one crumbling.

The already stifling interior of the wigwam seemed to contract further as more Shawnee men and women entered to surround us, each presence making the air hotter, thicker... heavier. Each added spectator only emphasized his unveiled frailty, a sight I'd have given anything to keep hidden, yet one I was powerless to shield from so many watchful eyes. Their shadows against the firelight merged in a frenzied dance on the walls, a visual representation of the chaos in my own mind. Owen and Maddy lurked in one half of my consciousness while Juan sputtered and choked in the other, each end vying for the center in a relentless tug-of-war.

The more he struggled, the more I felt their pull, the beckoning tendrils of those fragmented memories attempting to crash through the ceiling I'd kept over them. Every glimpse, every shard of that life threatened to devalue the one I'd built with Juan, and the specter of a daughter I couldn't recall loomed largest of all.

Desperate to anchor myself, to prevent from being swept away into the depths of that other life, I focused strictly on the woman's hands as she spread a thick green-brown paste over his wound, its potent odor stinging my nostrils.

"What is that?" My voice emerged weak, almost drowned in the whirlwind of havoc around me. The men and women who'd entered had begun a deep, song-like chant, its vibrations seeming only to pull my consciousness farther away from its hold on reality. The beat of a drum outside provided a relentless backdrop, echoing the frantic beating of my own heart.

If the woman had answered, I couldn't comprehend it. The crushing heat, intensified by the throng of bodies inside; the deafening pulse in my ears and the chanting voices; all of it dragged me farther and farther into a state of hypnosis—into a torrent between two worlds I couldn't claw myself out of.

The scene around me began to spin and distort as my breathing became labored... whirring rapidly with my panic until what was once faces and shapes morphed into a blurry blotch of orange and caramel and brown...

The warm colors of the wigwam slowly lightened to a shade of pale yellow, and when I blinked, I found myself

standing under a pergola of carnations with Owen smiling back at me, twenty years old with a decision to make that would change everything.

Within mere seconds, the Shawnee camp was some far off dream, and I suddenly knew every joy and every sorrow that had led me to be standing there at that moment. I knew this man in front of me—with eyes more amber than blue, with that sandy blond hair that was purposely messy—I knew him just as well as I knew myself.

This was my sweet and exciting Owen, the boy I'd spent the past two years smiling and laughing alongside, and despite my family's objections to our hasty marriage, I was intent on saying "I do" in the coming moments.

I had plenty of time to finish college when we came back from Minnesota, but the two of us only had this one opportunity to live out our dream adventure before we settled into our more adult lives. And thoughts of our coming adventure made me excited for the ceremony to reach its finale.

I glanced over at his parents where they sat in the front row of our wedding congregation, their straight spines and stiff smiles the very image of opulence.

Owen's family dabbled in all sorts of business and were successful in every endeavor they touched. They owned several high-end restaurant chains and fitness clubs, a construction company, and a commercial real estate empire Owen was poised to take over.

He'd gotten the degree, but just a few short months before graduation, the call of the wild beckoned.

Of all the Koch family's businesses, there was one that held a special place in Owen's heart: a campground in Minnesota that'd been passed down from one generation to the next. He'd told me of his childhood summers spent with his grandfather up there, and every break we got from our arduous college schedules, we would sneak in a trip north to get lost in the woods.

I, too, fell in love with it. It was like time stood still among those giant pines. Days blended into nights with campfires,

songs, water sports, and fishing to fill them. By the time those breaks came to an end, our cheeks were sore from our smiles.

When the campground manager, just months before our wedding, informed the family he'd be forced to retire, Owen eagerly volunteered to take up his role, thinking it'd be a short-term adventure before we settled into adulthood.

He'd proposed at his graduation and we hastily made our way down the aisle with visions of our extended honeymoon in the pines sparkling in our eyes.

"Do you, Cecelia Ruth McCreary," the officiant started, "take Owen Jude Koch to be your lawfully wedded husband—will you love, honor, and cherish him for as long as you both shall live?"

He'd hardly finished the question before I confidently shouted, "I do!"

Again, the world around me spun, distorting in its churn until it was once more a blurry splotch of color. The yellows slowly deepened into rich, dark greens, and this time, when I blinked, I was on a boat, speeding across a lake and laughing at Owen's attempt behind me to remain upright on the one water ski he had left.

"Don't you dare fall now, O!" I cackled, taking a rather large chug of my beer before adding, "I've got twenty bucks on you making it to the cliffs!"

What a life we'd been living up there.

It felt like being on a perpetual vacation, two kids set free for the first time with no adult supervision. The campground didn't require much to run, and we'd often spend our days waterskiing, hiking, and tubing with our campers; our evenings at various fires with an acoustic guitar, singing and drinking and staring up at a sky full of stars until we had to crawl back to the main cabin.

We'd spent several amazing years in that paradise, evading responsibility and all the stresses that came with it. It'd find us soon enough when we were inevitably forced to return to the real world, but just then, I couldn't imagine a life spent doing anything else.

In a messy splash of white foam, Owen face-planted into the water, and I howled with laughter as the boat's motor shifted into a more gentle hum and we turned back to retrieve him.

With the change in momentum, my stomach lurched, and bile gathered so quickly in the back of my mouth, I hardly had time to reach the edge of the boat before I was retching miserably over the side of it.

I could hear the watery clamor of Owen working his way back to us as a set of feminine hands pulled my hair back for me.

For a second, I felt like a complete asshole. Josh and Blair Andrews were new campers. They'd only just checked in the day before, and there I was, vomiting down the side of their boat less than twenty-four hours later.

'There goes a customer,' I thought as I spit into the water. *'They're never coming back again now. Idiot.'*

"I knew it," Blair whispered as a familiar grunt informed me Owen was climbing back in. "When I saw you yesterday, I told Josh you were either pregnant or you had the most radiant skin I've ever seen."

Collapsing on my butt and wiping my mouth with my forearm, I shook my head. "I'm not pre—"

In a moment of clarity, it occurred to me for the first time that I was late... *very* late, and I gaped at Blair where a knowing smile had settled over her features.

Responsibility, it seemed, had found me far sooner than I'd expected it to. My cheeks flushed with the realization, and the once refreshing warmth of the mid-August sun now bore down on me, becoming unbearably hot. I wasn't ready for this... Owen wasn't ready for this... My family wasn't ready for this...

My skin tingled as the temperature continued to rise, and sweat poured down into my eyes to blur my vision. The scents of fish and pine melded suddenly into the sharp aroma of herbs and smoke, and I found myself once again in the wigwam.

My eyes struggled to remain open with the thickness of the smoke that had consumed the small space, the heavy fog veiling

the chanting bodies that surrounded me so I couldn't quite make them out.

In my lap, Juan's strained face was highlighted by the firelight, every line of pain and effort etched sharply against the dim backdrop as the Shawnee healer urged him forward to take a sip from a steaming clay mug.

Amid the heavy scents of sage smoke and camphor, the biting odors of onion and garlic wafted up from the mug, and I grabbed onto their familiarity, hoping to use them as a foothold on this reality.

Swallowing with a cough, he lowered back down and his hand sought mine, warm and trembling as those dark eyes landed on my face. In the shimmering pools of his irises, I saw every ounce of his pain, but I also saw his determination; saw his promise to hold on and fight with every ounce of strength he had just to remain with me. I wondered if he knew I was slipping away with him.

My throat tightened and my lips quivered as my grip on his hand became almost painfully tight. Somewhere just beyond the drumbeat outside, I could still hear fragments of Owen's laughter, could still feel the surprise of the pregnancy and the odd twinge of curious excitement that'd followed. It felt like I was trying to hold onto two diverging lifelines with the same hand, terrified to lose either if I eased my grip.

With Juan's sage eyes searching mine, I leaned forward. "I'm here," I whispered, as much to assure myself as him. This was where I belonged—the life I had been so certain I was destined for. No matter the allure of those other memories, I was anchored in this reality with him and I couldn't ever let him go... couldn't bear the thought of never knowing him.

I watched his face distort with his fight. Every labored breath he took felt like a tiny battle won, but I could sense him slipping, fading, as the effects of the tea began to sink in. His grip on my hand eased and his lashes lowered, and with every pulse of his dimming heartbeat, I felt another pull, a tug towards something else, somewhere else...

I battled to remain there with him, tightening my fingers around his, but my hold wasn't strong enough. My grip faltered

and I became little more than a leaf caught in a breeze, weightlessly dancing in a rhythmic back and forth only the wind could dictate.

This time, when I opened my eyes, I found myself on a tire swing beneath a massive oak tree. In place of Juan, a lighter weight occupied my lap, and I looked down to find a head full of bright blond curls pressed against my chest.

Madison...

However many lives I might've lived seemed to converge in that spot and stand still as I stared down at that angelic little creature and recognized every inch of her...

Memories welled inside me, not as a deluge but like a slow, trickling stream.

I remembered sobbing deliriously happy tears when the doctor had first placed her in my arms; knowing, in that very first moment I'd ever laid eyes on her, that I'd never love anything or anyone more than I loved her.

I remembered sitting in that very same tire swing the morning she'd said 'mama' the first time; remembered watching her wobble across the dock as she'd quickly mastered the art of walking a few months later.

I recalled the warmth of summer days on the boat with her, and cool evenings teaching her to skate on the ice. I remembered the spark in those hazel eyes as she pulled a fish from a hole in the ice, her laughter like a melody that lingers long after the song has ended. I remembered countless hours playing hide-and-seek in the woods; crayon drawings of butterflies and beetles; a pretty pink dollhouse that became home to her new pet toad for a short time.

She was extraordinary and she was mine and I held her against me as tightly as I was able, praying I could stay on that swing forever.

"Is daddy coming back tonight?" she asked.

"No, baby," I whispered, swallowing the burn of guilt from my throat. "Not tonight."

While Madison's existence lit up my life, Owen had become a dark shadow upon it. Our time at the campground was supposed to serve as a temporary adventure, but he could not be pulled so easily away from the allure of its untamed freedoms, even with a daughter he should've been excited to support.

His immaturity became an increasingly heavy burden. I embraced the responsibilities that came with parenthood, but he continued living just as he did before she'd existed, going off on hikes and adventures with strangers instead of helping me raise our child.

His love for alcohol transformed from a mere pastime to a threatening addiction. His voice, once joyous, sprouted sharp edges that cut deep whenever I broached the subject of responsibility. His absence became a glaring void, particularly as Maddy began to notice it.

The rope creaked against the oak as we swayed in the swing, and Maddy tilted her face up to me, her little curls flattening against my stomach as she exposed her teeth in a grin. "Mommy, go higher! I'm not a baby!"

I could've gotten lost for days in those giant blue-green eyes... in those freckles—so much like my sister's—that dusted her nose; could've danced in the sound of that sweet little voice and never grown tired. Whatever shadow Owen cast, she was worth it, and I happily kicked my feet against the dirt to propel us upward.

As the sky grew closer, the sunlight washed my vision over in a bright splash of white, and suddenly my arms were empty and I was standing on a snow-covered dock, staring at that half-compressed beer can.

No, no, no...

I didn't want to live this memory... I *couldn't* live this memory so soon after feeling her in my arms...

I squeezed my eyes closed and attempted to get back to that tire swing, but I couldn't find it through the acrid smoke that was burning my eyes.

I could hear the drum and the song-like chants far beyond the snow as two drenched heads emerged from the hole in the

ice in a violent gasp for air.

My sweet, little baby looked so tiny as Owen pulled her lifeless form up onto that snowy dock, and I angrily shoved him out of the way to press my lips to hers and blow warm air into her frozen lungs.

The drums only seemed to intensify as I administered CPR for what felt like hours, and when she finally coughed and sputtered back to life, my relief was cut short by the the muted glow of the wigwam's embrace dragging me back inside it. It was no longer Maddy that was choking beneath me, but Juan, his lungs just as saturated as hers had been.

I had kept the memories of my other life at bay to shield my heart, but now they'd flooded in, uncontrollable and potent. My love for Juan, deep and unwavering, had found its equal in the fierce maternal love I felt for Maddy.

Clinging to Juan, I willed him to fight, to anchor me to this reality, but every beat of my heart echoed with the resounding cadence of Maddy's laughter.

I was mourning a life I'd never known while desperately fearing the loss of the one I was living. My heart was shattered but I wasn't sure which one it had broken for.

The smoke that filled the space was heavier... wetter... Thick gray clouds of what'd become steam distorted the people around me, making the mud walls feel even more restrictive. The familiar sensations of impending panic attempted to take over my body.

I needed air, as desperately as Maddy had, but Juan needed me. For as much as I needed to fall apart, I couldn't afford to just then, so I focused solely on the gold wedding band on his finger where he squeezed my hand in his, and I recited the vows we'd shared over and over in my mind.

I give you my whole heart and promise to never offer it to any other. From this day till my last day, I will love you.

Those vows became my lifeline in a sea of fog both the memories and the steam-filled reality had encased me in. I leaned my forehead against his, allowing the rhythm of his heartbeat to plant me right where I was, to remind me which

reality I remained in. And with his skin against mine, the walls, the smoke, and the weight of my heartache fell momentarily away, leaving just the two of us in a fleeting quiet moment he'd ensured me we'd share before it was over.



I had no idea if we'd spent ten minutes, ten hours, or ten days inside that steamy little hut. My mind was fuzzy with exhaustion that only grew heavier with the heat.

The paste the woman applied had begun to slow the bleeding, and I'd helped her wrap a bandage around him before we propped him up against a stack of buffalo hides.

She didn't speak, nor did I, but I got a general sense that our thoughts were aligned when it came to potential damage to his lung. The cough worried me, but signs of a collapsed or ruptured lung weren't immediately present. His lips retained their pinkish hue, and I didn't observe any accessory muscles in his neck or around his ribs straining during his inhalation, a common compensatory response for diminished lung capacity. The blood he'd coughed up seemed tinged with sputum, but wasn't the frothy pink often seen with a serious pulmonary injury. Placing my ear against his chest, I discerned a crackling sound—rales—which made it clear he had some kind of injury, but the fullness and symmetry of his breathing reassured me somewhat.

I couldn't fully ascertain the extent of the injury until I was able to thoroughly examine the wound, and I couldn't do that until hemostasis had been achieved. Based on the entry point and his presenting symptoms, my best assessment was that the bullet might have grazed his lung and could be lodged in his chest wall.

Since his breathing was steady—for the moment—I decided I'd give him a few minutes to rest while I sought out the tools I'd need to stitch him and take a few much needed breaths of fresh air. I couldn't very well help him with my brain so hazy.

The Shawnee men and women who had surrounded us along with the woman who'd cleaned and dressed the wound

stepped outside when I began my examination. Her departure gave me an added boost of confidence that Juan was stable enough for me to poke my head outside for a few moments.

I placed a light kiss on his forehead and whispered, "I'll be right back," before I carefully crawled to the thatched door and pushed it open.

The sudden brightness of daylight nearly blinded me.

Squinting against it, I stepped outside and took several long deep breaths of the cool February air, letting its chill seep down into my bones and revive my debilitated body.

With Juan in such a state, I had to find a way to put those memories aside.

Despite all I'd done to fight it, I remembered my daughter. And she felt as real to me as Juan did, as if I might turn around to find her little figure bent over in the grass inspecting a bug.

A.J. had tried to warn me of this very thing, and I'd refused to listen, thinking all along it was *her* that was the nonsensical one between us. The very parental void she'd told me I was risking by choosing this life with Juan was shattering me, and I needed her more than ever to put myself back together.

"Nonhelema says he'll live," a timid female voice offered, forcing me to spin round and nearly fall into Charlotte Miller's lanky arms.

Composing myself as best I could, I straightened and cleared my throat. "Nonhelema?"

She nodded and motioned to the nearby creek where the woman who'd been helping Juan was kneeling at the side of it to splash water over her cheeks.

"Oh," I managed, my throat scratchy with fatigue. "I couldn't get her to speak to me in there."

Charlotte offered a crooked half-smile. "No one can. She refuses to speak English, says it's an ugly language that doesn't taste right on her tongue. She asked me to speak to you for her." Her lips turned back downward as she glanced at the wigwam behind me. "She said he got very lucky that the bullet missed his heart. She thinks it might be close to his lung."

I nodded. "I thought the same." I looked over my shoulder as if I could see him through the dirt walls between us. "What's that paste she put on him?"

"Yarrow," she answered, fiddling with one of the braids draped over her shoulder. "It stops the bleeding. Ellinipsco had to have her put it on a cut in his leg a few months ago. She'll leave it for a little while and then she'll wash it off and put a layer of clay on there to start closing the wound."

"I can stitch him up," I said dazedly, "if you have a needle and thread? His brother went to collect our antibiotics, but I'm not sure he'd think to grab the sutures."

"Hokoleskwa should have something that'll work," she said, twisting her lips to one side. "I'm guessing you won't be able to leave for a while?"

I stared out at the dense forest on the other side of the creek that split the small valley, letting the tranquility the scenery offered settle my pulse. "No," I sighed. "I don't think we will. The antibiotics will help, but... if his lung is damaged in any way... traveling will only serve to worsen it. He'll need rest. Do you think Hokoleskwa will let us stay for a few days? Give him time to recover before we put him up on a horse?"

Her eyes moved down me, seeming to zero in on my hands where I'd been squeezing them together. "What about your deadline?"

I shrugged. "Chesapeake is only a few days ride from here. We should have time to get him healthy."

Her gaze remained on my hands, moving between them as if she were attempting to find some hidden weapon up my sleeve. "You mentioned a few others that might be coming back with his brother?"

"We don't want to impose," I assured her. "We've all spent our fair share of nights camped out in the woods and if there's no room for the rest of us here, we can—"

"There's room," she cut in softly.

Frustrated with the lack of eye contact, I turned up my wrists to present my palms. "There's nothing up my sleeve if

that's what you're trying to determine.”

She let out a long exhale and shook her head, moving her gaze back to my face. “Sorry... It's just very hard to know who to trust out here. I'll make sure you have a place to sleep. But first... will you walk with me for a bit?”

Where she'd been dismissive and defiant in the night, she now conveyed a composed calmness. Much as I wanted to continue our conversation while she was in a more receptive state of mind, my feet remained rooted to the spot, my senses acutely tethered to Juan. “I need to be here in case he wakes, and I need to get back in there to search for the bullet once his blood has clotted.”

She motioned to the creek with her chin. “Nonhelema says the yarrow should stay on for at least twenty-minutes. We won't go far... just to the water's edge where no one might overhear us.”

Again, I glanced over my shoulder, terrified he might wake alone and be unable to breathe. I needed to know this girl's story, but I couldn't leave him.

Recognizing my struggle, she spun to shout in a language that seemed out of place on her lips.

Nearby, on a patch of grass, a group of boys who were not quite children and not quite men abandoned the arrowheads they were sharpening to turn their attention toward her.

One boy, who'd traded in the thick dark locks the others had for a shaved roach hairstyle mimicking the older men, stood. He replied in the same tongue, slipping a knife into his buckskin breeches before he moved toward us with a wide grin.

Charlotte turned back to me. “Nehweseno will watch over him. He'll call out if your husband wakes. We won't go far.”

The instinctual pull to stay by Juan's side made me hesitant, but looking into Charlotte's eyes, I sensed the turmoil roiling inside her. She'd been flung into this world without warning and had taken on the role as her brother's protector with no one to protect her. She needed guidance, surety, options... and I couldn't deny her that. Taking a deep breath, I nodded slowly. “Alright, just a short walk.”

With one last lingering glance at the hut where Juan lay, I followed Charlotte as she walked ahead, leading me down toward the winding creek that split the valley.

The fabric of her buckskin dress swished gently against itself, creating a soft rustling. The deep blues and vibrant reds of the fabric contrasted beautifully with her fair skin, while the beads sewn into its surface clicked lightly together, creating a subtle but rhythmic melody with each step.

As we walked, our path led us past wigwams constructed of bent saplings, their woven coverings catching the subtle hues of the morning light. Families gathered around fire pits, their conversations a gentle hum against the backdrop of children's laughter echoing from the water's edge.

For a fleeting moment, my eyes darted in that direction, instinctively searching for the familiar blonde hair of Maddy among the little playing figures. The sting that came with the realization that she wasn't there—that she wasn't *anywhere*—was going to be a pain I'd need to grow accustomed to.

I focused once more on Charlotte; on the intricate patterns of her dress and the braids cascading down her back... Where she should've appeared out of place, she instead moved with a grace that hinted at her deep respect for the Shawnee culture, blending seamlessly with the landscape and the people who surrounded her.

Clearing my throat, I caught up to her side as we got closer to the creek. "So... your real parents were arrested? How long ago?"

She slowed along the edge of the bank, reaching out a hand to smooth it over the tall grass that bordered the water. "A few months after Chase was born. They had this big charity they ran. Got caught pocketing the money and the judge made an example of them."

Moving her palm back and forth over the fragile wheat-like stems, she frowned. "You didn't believe me last night... about Stan and Mary Ellen. No one in our time ever believed me either."

“You didn’t really give me a chance to believe you,” I said carefully. “You shut me down before I could ask questions.”

“Wouldn’t have mattered,” she said, watching her fingers as she continued to pass them over the grass. “I could see it on your face, the same look as our caseworker back home... Mary Ellen and Stan are the perfect portrait of an American couple, and I’m just some immature kid with a chip on her shoulder. I could’ve told you every detail, and you’d still have doubted me.”

I ran a hand over my exhausted face. “If I doubted you, it was only because *I* remembered being stubborn in love at your age, and projected that on you when I saw the way you were with Ellinipso. That was my issue, not yours, and I shouldn’t have made assumptions. I just want to do the right thing here. It’s no small thing to have the power to change things and leave two people so young as yourselves behind. Was it really so bad with the Millers?”

Her caramel eyes met mine. “Not at first.”

Aware of her rigid spine, I kept my voice as even as possible. “Tell me what happened. Help me understand why leaving you and Chase here is the best thing for you both. What was it like at first and how did it get so bad?”

“Fine, I guess.” She took a deep breath. “We moved into this huge house with these people who seemed to have everything we ever wanted. They were older, and they’d wanted a child so bad for so long, Chase was a blessing to them.”

“What about you?”

She raised a shoulder. “They wanted a baby, not a fifteen-year-old girl. They both saw me more as their live-in-nanny instead of their daughter... which became a problem the longer I lived there.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. “You mentioned something about Stan watching you undress... Did he... abuse you?”

Sighing, she looked out over the creek. “Abuse is a hard thing to define sometimes. He never touched me, if that’s what you’re asking...”

She hugged her arms to her chest as her eyes ventured off in memory. “I suppose it’s difficult to live so long without children and then take in two of us at once. I think they might’ve been good before that; maybe they had good intentions, but it was just too much. Mary Ellen wanted to be a mother, but she didn’t know how... not with Chase, anyway. He cried constantly in those first months, and she’d get so stressed. I’d come home from school, and she’d just sort of... push him at me. Like she couldn’t stand to be in the same room as him for even a second longer. He was too much... And Stan worked a lot, so it was just her most the time with us. She was tired... and angry... and overwhelmed. She’d been a housewife accustomed to living a certain way and then two children were thrown at her—children who needed food and clean clothes and school supplies and nurturing, one who was pubescent and dealing with hormones, the other teething and screaming day and night over it. I felt sorry for her back then... for both of them... Stan would come home from a work trip, and they’d just fight and fight... all night sometimes.”

I watched as she fiddled with one of her braids. “This one night, though, he came home pretty late. Their fighting woke me up, but I stayed in bed trying to force myself back to sleep. My parents never fought and it made me uncomfortable. I’d put Chase’s crib in my room so I could keep an eye on him, and I heard Stan come in. I assumed he’d just come to sneak a peek at Chase before he went to bed... but... he wasn’t looking at Chase. He was looking at me... I pretended to sleep, but I could feel his stare.”

She shook her head. “He stared for a long time. *Too* long. Mary Ellen caught him standing right there at the foot of my bed... and that’s when things got weird. She shouted so many awful things... called him a pervert and a predator and a monster. Naively, I thought she was defending me... but she wasn’t. She was hurt—jealous. And that hurt turned to hatred from then on out. God, she hated me... Everything I did was a source of pain for her. If I smiled at something, it was me mocking her... If someone complimented me, it was an insult to her... If my report card came in with good grades, it was just to show her how much smarter I was than her. To her, I had loved every second he looked at me. To her, every time he came

home, I was just waiting for an opportunity to steal him away. She hated Chase too—like his crying had made her unappealing to her husband. Neither of them physically abused us, but that constant anger—the resentment and the uncomfortable way he looked at me when he did come home—it was worse than getting hit. And it was never-ending. We couldn't escape. All day, every day, we were prisoners to either a parent who screamed and cried and broke things just because we existed or a parent who could just pass by and make you feel violated. We had nowhere to go... and no one who would believe us since there were no signs of physical abuse and they pretended to be perfect outside the house. I prayed for a way out, and that crash was it."

"Jesus," I said under my breath. "I'm so sorry. What about your real parents? Did you ever tell them about what was happening?"

"I was going to once," she admitted, her gaze venturing to the forest on the opposite side of the creek. "Mary Ellen was pissed at my parents for what they did with the charity. She made it very hard to communicate with either of them... said they were a stain on the family and she wouldn't have us come out like them. But I begged Stan to let me see my mother, cried and cried until finally he gave in and took me up there. My whole intention of going was to tell the single person who would believe me everything we were going through. I knew, without a doubt, I could count on my mother to get us out of that situation. She was the strongest woman I knew. And I hadn't expected her to look so... fragile... Like she was just barely holding it together. She was so sad... so broken... I hardly recognized her at all. I couldn't bring myself to give her anything else to be sad over... so I told her everything was going well. Told her we were happy... and I went home, knowing the minute I walked through that door with Stan, all hell would break loose... and it did."

Shaking my head, I stared down at my hands, unable to imagine the kind of torment she must've endured. "What if I could make it so your parents never steal from that charity? So you and Chase can never be with the Millers at all to get on the plane?"

“It’s kind of you to want to help me,” she said, transitioning quickly from the young girl to the mature woman. “Time is not such a simple thing to tamper with. You speak of it as if changing one thing wouldn’t completely rewrite everything that came after. Even if you could guarantee that me and Chase would have perfect lives as a result, it couldn’t work.”

“Why not?” I asked.

She ran her palm over the tips of the grass again. “You said your sister and her husband couldn’t get seats together, and that’s why she was in first-class... If we don’t get on that plane, there could very well be four seats in the back that would seat them instead. If she doesn’t get that first-class seat, everything changes. Doesn’t it?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but promptly closed it. In all our endless discussions regarding the fates of Charlotte and Chase Miller, A.J.’s seat had never once entered my mind as something that might be changed by it.

“It’s alright,” Charlotte said, gazing out over the water. “I told you before, we’re fine here. I just... wanted to point that out in case you had similar plans for anyone else on that flight. Samuel was very secretive about the storm, but I did learn *some* things from him. The most important of them being that time is more fragile than any of us could ever imagine. Something so small as a friendly greeting could change the whole tree.”

“The tree?” I asked.

She shrugged. “He always said time is a tree... whatever that means.”

I peered out over the water at the dense forests that guarded the valley, attempting to find some evident correlation between the trees’ spidery branches and the movement of time.

“I’m leaving tonight,” she said, dragging my attention back to her face where her dark brow was furrowed. “Me, Ellinipso and a few others. We’re taking Chase with us. I told Hokoleskwa you and your people could have our home for as long as you need it.”

“Leaving?” I echoed. “Where?”

“West,” she said on a sigh, staring out at the landscape around us as if saying goodbye to it. “Deep into Shawnee territory where Samuel can’t venture. Maybe, if we’re lucky, that painting will disappear from existence, and our names will disappear from your mind along with it.”

“But if you—

She held up a palm to silence me. “You seem kind, and I can tell you mean well by coming here to make me that offer, but I’m not the one that needs saving.”

She took a deep breath and met my eyes. “My choice to stay in this time will have lasting effects on history, even if I am adamant about making as few waves as possible... I love these people with all my heart, and I know what time will do to them—how few will remain once our ancestors inflict massacre after massacre upon them. I can never warn them; can never protect them. It’s a cold and hard truth to say out loud, but because of the tragedies they’ll suffer, my place among them is safer to history as we know it than anywhere else might be. To be respectful of time and all the lives inside it, I will never interfere, never conceive or venture out of Shawnee territory. My life here will be lived carefully. But you,” she shook her head, “what you’ll do when you kill that man will shake the very core of the world we knew. One man becomes ten that becomes a hundred... all of them missing from a time they once helped shape. Maybe you’ll get lucky. Maybe every one of those hundred men and their interactions were insignificant and the world you wake in will be no different than the one you left... but I’ve never met *one* man, let alone a hundred, who seemed insignificant to the ones that loved him.”

Turning back to the water, she hugged her arms to her chest. “It’s not my place to tell you what to do here, Cecelia, but since you came to offer me knowledge, I thought I’d return the favor. Chase and I will be fine, regardless of whether that painting disappears or not. I don’t know that you will be if you proceed with this plan of yours.”

I struggled to find my voice, feeling unexpectedly small and unmoored.

Charlotte, the girl who'd been thrust into a world and time not her own, had managed to regard time with a respect and caution I hadn't mustered despite my years, despite my experiences. My mouth opened, but words—apologies, justifications—stuck in my throat, clogged by the abundance of humility and regret gathered there.

One plan of mine had already turned *my* life into a whirlwind of spinning havoc. What might this one do to countless others?

“That’s all I wanted,” she said, turning back in the direction of camp. “I’ll go collect the supplies you’ll need to stitch him up, and then there are a few things I need to do here before we go.”

“Wait,” I croaked out, holding my breath as she spun to face me. “You’re right. I’ve already changed things. Memories I shouldn’t have are finding me the closer he gets to death, and I don’t know what I’m doing from one minute to the next. I’m terrified, and I don’t even know which reality I’m terrified of. But I can see you’re terrified too... Staying here, avoiding a real life for fear of what it might do to the future... That’s not any way to live either. Please don’t leave yet... not like this. Let me get my husband healthy. Let me get my head on straight, and then, let’s try to find some way to help each other. Maybe it’s not undoing things... or maybe it’s undoing everything? Please... stay the night? I can’t leave things like this.”

Slowly, her shoulders eased. “I need to talk to my brother... He’s scared and I won’t have him up all night worrying about Samuel finding us. If we decide to stay tonight, I don’t want you anywhere near him. He’s got enough to deal with for a boy his age without thinking about *‘undoing’* everything. I’ll find you later.”

Before I knew it, I was standing alone by the creek, and the depth of my ignorance had crashed down upon me. I’d been so consumed with my desire to determine my own fate that I hadn’t once stopped to consider the countless others whose fates I was playing with in the process.

The fact that such a profound lesson in responsibility came from someone so young left me reeling, unsure which direction

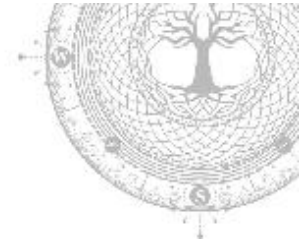
to even point my feet.

Life is a tree...

What would happen to that tree if we cut off several of its branches? What *had* happened to it after each life Juan had already taken in this time? Did it wilt after the Nikora had been killed on our ship or after Anna and Bruce had poisoned a whole crew?

If one man became ten that became a hundred, was it better to take the life of one man now to restore the countless others that'd already been lost at our hands or did it all need to come to an end now?

Was I remembering Maddy because *I* would be the one to put a stop to our plans?



Chapter Twenty-Seven

Alaina

With my forearms rested on the railing of the bow, a contented hum reverberated in my throat as I gazed out at the white capped mountains of Tierra Del Fuego. The early morning sun cast a brilliant yellow hue over the sky around them, coloring the rock that'd gone untouched by snow a lovely shade of purple.

There were no signs of The Resolution or Captain Cook, just an endless and untouched wilderness that seemed to go on forever.

I'd spent my whole life never really venturing out of Chicago, and it seemed like such a silly thing when there were places like this to experience.

I glanced down at the papers in my hands, at the frenetic scribbled notes I'd been up all night working on. My muddled mind seemed so out of place against such a serene backdrop. Several angry looking black scratches marred my writing, evidence of my own self-doubt as I'd struggled throughout the night to take myself seriously. Dreams of a fulfilling future for my children would send my pen gliding across the page one minute, only for my insecurity to go back and cross out half the words in the next.

In the grand scheme of things, I was no one. There was nothing that made me qualified to be coming up with guidelines for future time travelers—I'd hardly ventured out of Illinois. What did I know about traveling at all, let alone traveling time? And this nagging thought made everything I'd written seem like the fantastical ramblings of an overly-imaginative mind.

I smirked as I skimmed through my messy penmanship. Just getting through the first rule and all the subsequent

scenarios that protecting time spawned to life had taken up ten pages—front and back—and most of it had hardly scratched the surface.

The expanding lineage got me hung up for the duration of the night. If I had two children that each had two children who then went on to have two of their own, that was a lot of people to be moving through time simultaneously. And that was to say nothing of the descendants of everyone else or their spouses...

Too many people would know about the storms—too many people would have the power to alter history. Just because someone was born or married into a family didn't necessarily make them qualified to possess the kind of knowledge that could rewrite the world as we knew it. Hell, I certainly wasn't qualified to be where I was... If the knowledge had been handed down to me at a younger age, who knew what kind of mess I might've made?

My imagination had gone wild, thinking up tests that could determine whether or not a person's character could fit that of a time traveler. Our children, from an early age, would need to be given secrets that could determine their ability to keep them. Those secrets would have to become substantially more difficult to keep as they grew older and formed bonds outside immediate family. Because a person's spouse would eventually need to endure similar tests, our travelers needed to have the fortitude to, not only test the ones they loved, but to refrain from sharing their secrets if that spouse failed to pass.

My handwriting became smaller to account for space as I listed out potential secrets that could serve as a challenge: the location of some buried relic rumored to be worth money, some bit of political or celebrity gossip that might easily spiral into conspiracy if shared too broadly, the formula for a cure to a disease yet unknown, or the true story behind a local urban legend...

As I'd listed out at least thirty, I realized the trials would need to account for more than just silence. They'd need to challenge the ethical standards of our future time travelers too. If given the knowledge of an impending disaster, would they intervene, or would they respect the laws of time? If privy to the secrets of someone's past, would they use it for their gain or

keep it hidden, even if it could alter their present favorably? The complexities of human emotion, temptation, and moral compass would all come into play. Every test, every secret, would need to not only measure their discretion, but also their character, making the position of a time traveler one of the most challenging roles ever undertaken by humankind.

I read through my writing and considered how miserably I would've failed such testing.

But if I'd been prepared for it... If I'd gone my whole life knowing such a power might be bestowed to me... Would my ability to qualify be different? And how could I make sure my children would pass when the time came for them to be tested?

I'd spent so much of my time thinking about the lives they would live, I hadn't really stopped to consider what *my* life might look like as I raised them.

If I was going to hand down a life of adventure; if my children would grow up to pass their tests and travel the world, I'd need to offer them more than just a set of guidelines... I'd need to give them the kind of childhood that would prepare them for it. They'd need experiences, memories—adventures of our own that we'd craft together.

Looking back out at the snowy world around me, I envisioned Jack walking alongside a toddler version of Cecelia. Her tiny hand was almost lost in his larger one, and they chatted endlessly about the wilderness around them as they traversed the foothills of those same purple tinted mountains.

I pictured Zachary and I lagging slightly behind them, my struggle to keep hold of his hand slowing our pace. He'd have that same untamed spirit as his father—already did in many ways—and his desire to explore on his own would be a source of ongoing anxiety for me. The memory of that ancestry chart, of that chilling death year, would constantly shadow my thoughts, making it difficult to ever truly loosen my grip on him. Yet, I knew that one day, when I finally did let him loose, his spirit would take him further than most men.

Fantastical as my guidelines might've seemed, I couldn't help the little piece of me that desperately wanted them to be tangible.

The future I'd been painting seemed so very fulfilling for us all. Once we figured out how the other portals worked—which I was confident Cece would, if she hadn't already—there was no limit to what we might see. We could sit in the audience as Shakespeare himself acted on the Globe stage or witness the first steps of Neil Armstrong on the moon's surface. There was the chance to marvel at the construction of the Pyramids in Giza, to listen to Beethoven's symphonies in person, or to experience the bustling streets of ancient Rome during its golden age. I wondered if I would bump into my descendants at some point as they endeavored to experience the same things. Would I be able to recognize parts of myself or Jack in them if I did? Or identify traits from Lilly and Jim or Maria and Chris if I chanced upon one of theirs?

This thought seemed to spark a light bulb to life in my brain. Bud, in his attempt to find anything related to the storm during his time in the future, dug up old photos and paintings that hinted at time travel. Terrence had been able to recognize Charlotte Miller in one of the paintings. What if I could identify a physical trait of one of our descendants in them too? Would that prove that the guidelines I'd been putting together were more than a mere fantasy to pass the time? Would it prove this was actually going to work?

Giddy with excitement, and slightly annoyed that I hadn't thought of it sooner, I hurried across the deck and down the stairs, half-sprinting once I reached the corridor only to collide face-first into a very solid chest.

Terrence stumbled backward, just as surprised by me as I was him.

"Sorry," I breathed, rubbing my nose where it'd come in direct contact with his sternum. "I didn't—"

I frowned at the room he'd just stepped out of. It was Juan Jr.'s and I hadn't been aware that anyone from our group was allowed access to it. "What were you doing in there?"

"Investigating." He crossed his arms over his chest. "What were *you* doing flying down this hallway like a bat out of hell?"

I blinked, glancing again through the partially open door at all of Juan's books and journals lining the shelves inside. I

couldn't help but feel a little defensive of Terrence's sudden invasion on his privacy. "Investigating what?"

With a sigh, he smoothed a hand over his bald head and pulled the door closed. "I just wanted to get a better look at the man who seems to be at the center of all this. Make sure he doesn't have some hidden agenda for Cece we all don't want to see. After all we've gone through to get here, I can't just leave without knowing nothing will come back to bite us in the ass."

"And?" I asked, massaging my nose where it continued to throb. "Did you find anything?"

He shook his head. "Nothing sinister. His feelings for your sister are as authentic as we suspected. I did find one thing that struck me as a little... strange."

"What?" I asked, my brows darting high up on my forehead.

He gestured toward our room, lightly tapping his chest where the subtle crinkle of paper indicated something hidden inside his jacket pocket. "I'll show you."

Following on his heels inside, I was greeted by the sight of Kyle, Fetia, and Magna, each of them doting on one of the babies.

Zachary's cackling laughter bounced off the walls as Kyle playfully swooped him from side to side on his hip. Beside him, Fetia mirrored the motion with Cecelia, her eyes darting down to Magna where she snuggled Matty against her shoulder on the sofa.

The warmth of their affection overwhelmed me, and my vision of that hike in the wilderness expanded to include several more of our family members among us.

My attention was pulled from them to the corner of the room by the sound of rustling paper. At the small bistro table, Terrence unfolded a large parchment, smoothing his hands over its creases to flatten it against the surface.

Stepping close enough for our shoulders to meet, I stared down at the elaborate chart upon its surface in fascination.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one making frenetic notes and plans late at night.

Juan Jr. had created the timelines: one set in this century and another in the future, each with two paths: one reflecting on the things that had already occurred, and another to plan the changed versions and all they would need to compensate for.

In the very top center of the paper, there was a short, straight vertical line with dots and small threads coming off each year he'd spent on his original path. The top-most dot was marked: 1970, and a small box was drawn coming off it with important milestones lined out inside: *'J.J. is born, Gloria vacations in Colombia to meet father. The Martinez family is killed.'*

A little farther down, a thread marked 1974 read: *'Dario and Dahlia are born. Father brings Uncle Edwin into the business.'*

My gaze followed that line, noting every pivotal moment from his early years: the day Richard Albrecht was hired to watch over the family in 1975, Gloria's fateful attempt to run away with Richard and the children in 1976, and the ensuing wrath from his father when he located them and reclaimed Juan Jr. a few short weeks later.

Young as Juan Jr. had been at the time it happened, he still knew the exact day in 1977 that Gloria returned home with the twins to reveal that Richard Albrecht had been a DEA agent. He then detailed the events that followed in Hawaii, culminating in Gloria's death and the subsequent escape of their yacht to that specific location in the Pacific.

That's when the vertical line split into two, and an intricate web spiraled outward. Circles, threads, and boxes filled with his delicate cursive were sprinkled to the right and left of the lines. A dot on one side would align directly with a dot on the other, marking the year on both ends of the storm each major event occurred.

It was astounding how he'd been able to chronicle our lives so meticulously. There were details about mine—in both sets of memories—I'd never told him; things like the date Chris and I had met, when and where we bought our home, Evelyn's death,

our trip to Mexico, and intimate details about my life on the island he could've never known without aid. Even more specifics were delineated regarding Cece's forgotten existence with Owen and Maddy. I surmised the sparring lessons Juan shared with Jack, Jim, and Chris in the early mornings had supplied him with this level of information. I chuckled inwardly that I'd somehow overlooked Juan Jr.'s investigative prowess.

Leaning over the table, I studied the left side of the chart more closely where he'd painstakingly marked every important moment he'd spent in the 18th century: his arrival in California after the storm, his father's trip east to dig up the untouched gold, the seven years war, and the purchase of the ship. Hard as it must've been for him, he even recorded the date of his marriage to Elizabeth, each of his sons' births, and then their untimely deaths... so close together it tore at my heart. More names I didn't recognize were sprinkled throughout where he logged his or Dario's or his father's roles in the various lives they encountered year after year.

Some boxes had secondary lines sprouting off them with notes and arrows that led to connecting dates in the future. The first of such was marked: *'Age: 18 - Save Tomás from the natives.'* This had a date of 1763 and a looping line swept out over the parallel year of 1997 to a column reserved for alternative history: *'Age: 27. Cecelia is 11. There would be time to go back, but I will not yet have the memories.'*

Slightly farther down from this, he wrote under the year 1999: *'Memories return. 5 years to learn about the storms, spend time with Gloria, and watch Owen.'*

Owen's name in his writing was a glaring stain on the paper. What reason did Juan have to watch the husband Cece hadn't chosen?

Swallowing, I followed the arrow to the corresponding dot in the 18th century marked 1764. Inside the alternate path, a note read: *'Find Alistair and introduce him to Eleanor. Travel to Spain for the sale of the Sao Salvador. Purchase estate in Los Cerritos and give to Elizabeth's family.'*

Glancing back at the other line where Cece's high school career was proudly listed out, he had a few dates and locations

circled with a quick scribbled note of *'Anonymous visit.'*

For a moment, my heart lightened at the idea that Juan Jr. might show up at the mall to order a burger from the food court that served as her first job. I imagined him sitting at the back of her graduation ceremony just to get a glimpse of her walking across the stage... It was sweet to think of them in such a way... so pure in their love for one another that he would seek her out just to lay his eyes upon her.

But then I looked back to the corresponding years of 1764 and 1765 where he had other plans as well. He intended to travel to Connecticut in search of the Davis family that would one day ancestor my daughter's husband. He had a to-do list there that included purchasing land, building homes upon it, and seeking out someone to tend to the property until we returned.

He couldn't be in two places at one time, so I had to assume he intended to involve his brother...

Still very much aware of the *'Watch Owen'* entry, I continued moving from one side of the timeline to the other: past the years he'd intended to live in the past to slow time... past the parallel years Cece would spend in college working on her Ph.D... and that's when I spotted it.

Owen had a whole column of his own. Chris had obviously given him an account of everything he could remember about Owen's life... which wasn't all that much. Juan wrote down, *'The Rivers School, Weston, MA,'* which is where Owen spent his high school years before heading out to Ohio State on a lacrosse scholarship. A select few of the Koch family businesses were listed out along with the address to the campground in Minnesota.

I suppressed a laugh at Chris's lack of observation. Ten years we'd been married, and for ten years, he'd served as Owen's brother-in-law. Apparently, all that allowed him was a school, a handful of business names, and an address.

Tracing the column's border, I glanced up at Terrence. "This is what you thought was odd? Owen?"

Shaking his head, he slid his finger down the list until it reached the bottom. "No... this is."

“2013: Madison is born,” I read out loud. “What’s strange about that?”

The edge of his lip quirked upward. “That’s where Owen’s life on paper ends. Cece’s goes well into 2020, but Owen’s stops here. Why? What’s he intending to do here?”

I frowned, attempting to decipher Terrence’s speculation. Chris and I had two versions of our lives, and Juan had lined those out as well. Why wouldn’t he do the same for Cece? It made sense that he would want to account for every variation in order to paint a clear picture of our lives across time.

Furrowing my brow, I looked back up at Terrence. “What, you think he’s planning to let her marry Owen?”

“You don’t?”

My eyes darted back down to the paper. “For what reason? Just to conceive Maddy before he kills the poor man and steals his family away?” I shook my head and laughed. “Juan wouldn’t do that.”

Terrence shrugged. “Then why write down the details of Owen’s life at all? Or hers in that timeline if he had no intention of returning her to it?”

He pointed to a note on the left side of the chart marked 1770: *‘Elizabeth and the children get yellow fever and perish.’*

“He lost *his* children once. Maybe he thinks he can give her what he can never have back? What if he learned about that other life while he was building this and decided she wasn’t making the right choice here? There’s no way to know for sure what’s going on in his mind, but I don’t think he wrote this down just for the fun of it.”

Staring at Owen’s column, Madison’s name jumped off the page at me. I hadn’t allowed myself to think of her, heartbreaking as it was that my sister had chosen a life without her. But if Juan was trying to combine her two realities in some way... If he was trying to save Maddy for her... I couldn’t imagine anything *better* than seeing that curly little head of blond hair skipping around once more, taking part in all our adventures with us and jabbering about bugs and barbies and whatever else filled her giant brain at any given moment. She

had so much personality, it'd been hard to come to terms with the idea I might never see her again. I'd missed her the very instant I got those new memories, and this chart, odd as it might've been for Terrence to see, was a beacon of hope for me. Madison Koch was too brilliant not to exist... and I was relieved that someone other than me might've recognized that.

Terrence took a deep breath and massaged his chin. "None of us knows how this time stuff works... If he really intends to mess with her past... *again*, there's a chance the things that happened here, on *this* timeline—her involvement with the Nikora, to name just one example—could go differently. What if we don't make it to Bennet without her there to load those guns? How would we ever be able to get to the other timeline at all? And by that measure, if we can't get to the other timeline because she's not here, how could he change her life to give her Madison and take her off that deck in the first place? Seems like a chicken and an egg kind of scenario... We could create a glitch in time itself and end up floating up into some weird space in between worlds for all we know about how this works."

I smirked. I also wasn't the only one with an overly active imagination. "That's a bit dramatic, even for you."

Zachary began to squabble, putting an end to our theoretical quandary and forcing me to hurry in my efforts to relieve Kyle of him before a tantrum could ensue.

Venturing off to the secret chamber to feed both him and Cecelia in privacy, Terrence's discovery loomed in my mind. I couldn't help but wonder about the chicken and the egg myself. Everything about Cece's life had changed because she'd come here to tell Juan to change it... but there was a version of her life that *I* knew where she'd married Owen and given birth to Maddy. Which one came first? The fact that she had two lives at all was a chicken and egg scenario... Was there some third version of her life we'd all forgotten that blended the two and caused the initial interference? How many times had we already changed our history, and what factors needed to be at play that would allow us to remember the ones we did?



I waited until it was only me, Fetia, and Magna left in the room to pull the laptop from its solar charger. The babies had all settled into a nap, and both Magna and Fetia had nodded off with them.

Firing the computer up quickly, I clicked on the '*Strange Artwork*' folder, thinking I'd peruse the black and white photos there in search of a familiar face as a means to keep my mind off the possibility of forgetting any version of my life.

It worked. I became laser focused the moment I opened up the first photo to gaze upon the infamous VE Day Celebration in New York that marked the end of WWII. A large crowd held up American flags, peace signs, and newspapers with big, bold type announcing, "Germany Surrenders!"

The source of conspiracy in this particular photo was a man standing toward the front of the group, just beneath one of the flags. He was holding what could've been a modern video camera in one hand—it was too fuzzy to make out for certain—gazing down at what the internet had become convinced was a digital preview window.

I zoomed in as far as I could before the image became pixelated, but his face was partially blocked by the brim of another man's hat, and he was too far away from the camera to have distinctly identifiable features.

Not to be deterred, I opened the next. Similar to the VE Day Celebration in America, this photo was also influenced by the end of the war. Under a fabric canopy, several tables lined the patio of a Parisian café. The tables were filled with the relaxed forms of men, all of them holding open a newspaper with the bold headline, "*Les Nazis capitulent!*" Seated at a table close to the building, the man in question was leaning back in his chair, a cigarette in one hand, as he peered down at what was rumored to be an iPad in the other.

Much closer to the camera, this man's face was clearer than the one in the last photo. He had a pointed nose that didn't match anyone among us, a dimpled chin that might've come from Jack if it wasn't so square. His ears stuck out similarly to Jim's but that didn't necessarily mean they could be related.

When the idea had first come to me, this seemed like a far easier task. If I was really searching hard enough, I could've found a resemblance in anything. And I did...

Flipping through one photo after another, I found myself comparing one person's eyebrows to Lilly's, another man's jawline to Bruce... Cheeks and nose structures, teeth and ears all found some person among us they might have inherited them from. But not a single person had any one characteristic that stood out as definitively ours.

With only a small handful of images left to scan, my eyes had started to fatigue and I was debating joining the others in a nap when I clicked on the concert photo and found *her*.

The woman my eyes settled upon wasn't the source of controversy that had landed the photo on Bud's laptop. The first time I'd seen it, I'd only really focused on the man with what I'd been certain was a cell phone held out toward the stage. But this time, the woman beside him caught my attention. She was leaning over the stage, a wide grin spread across her cheeks, as she reached desperately to get a touch of Elvis, himself.

There was no doubt in my mind she was ours. Her almond shaped eyes looked just like mine; just like Cece's and Dario's and Gloria's. But that smile was definitely Jack's.

I glanced over my shoulder at Cecelia's tiny little body where she and Zachary were curled up together beside Fetia. Was this a photo of my daughter?

Turning back, my heart danced in my chest at the thought that it could be. The more I stared, the more the scene came alive, an electric current filling the air around me with a far off whisper of Hound Dog's bouncing baseline. The deafening screams of the women around her nearly drowned that baseline out, and I could almost feel the push of their bodies against her slim shoulders where they, too, had their arms stretched out toward him.

The picture lacked color, but I knew her every shade. Like me and Gloria, that hair that might've seemed brown to a stranger observing the same photo was a thousand shades of red where she'd pulled it back into a high ponytail. I could nearly see that ponytail swinging side to side with every bounce of her

feet, the stage lights catching hints of its splendor to shimmer like gold against the dim backdrop.

Much like the photos I'd seen of Gloria, she too exuded an infectious energy—as if every person around her was lightened by her spirit, laughing, and sharing in her joy as they reached and reached for the man on stage... a playful competition for who might touch him first.

I could sense her dancing beneath that sea of outstretched arms, uninhibited and full of life, singing along to every song with a passion that was palpable. And as the song reached its climax, I imagined her fingers brushing the hem of Elvis's dark leather jacket, a gesture that would remain with her for a lifetime—a tangible connection to a legend that would always be hers.

It might not have been my Cecelia in that photo. Dario and Dahlia were descendants of me and Jack as well. She could just as easily have belonged to one of them...

Still, she was undoubtedly ours and that delirious smile on her face was a reassurance that what we would build here would lead to something far more magnificent than any of us could ever begin to imagine.

To go back in time and touch Elvis's jacket? To stand among the men and women in New York as they celebrated the end of the war? To witness, in person, any wonder of history as you saw fit?

That's what I wanted for my children... that they could live a lifetime with delirious smiles always lighting their cheeks. It'd make everything we did here—all the forgotten lives and changed memories—worth it.

Not quite ready to leave that little concert hall, I refocused on the man who was standing beside her.

Could this man who was so carelessly attempting to get a photo of Elvis be my son-in-law one day? Again, I stole a quick peek at my sleeping children and smirked.

Maybe he was careless, but he was handsome enough, to be certain. With full lips, a strong jaw line, and that distinct

side-swept hair all men wore in the 50's, whichever one of my descendants that woman was, she could've done far worse.

His expression was alight with amusement as he held out the phone—and it undoubtedly was a phone—unbothered by the screaming women pushing up against each of his shoulders. Was he up there taking that picture just so she could have it? Did he love that woman enough to risk his phone's exposure just to capture that moment so she could take it with her?

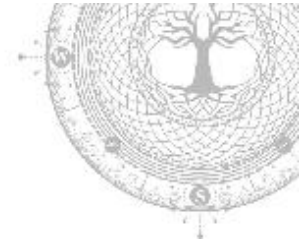
I thought of Juan Jr. then, and my eyes moved to the chart still spread out on the table beneath the laptop.

If Chris told him about the life Cece'd had with Maddy and how happy she'd made her, I knew, without a doubt, Juan Jr. would move heaven and earth to make sure my sister had the best of both worlds. And while such a feat might seem impossible for most of us, I couldn't imagine anyone better suited to figure out the chicken and the egg than the ever-cunning Perez family.

My gaze ventured back to that photo, inadvertently searching the crowd for a woman with light curly hair.

What a life we were going to live...

I couldn't wait to keep building it.



Chapter Twenty-Eight

Cecelia

I knelt in front of Juan, carefully removing the bandage to get a better look at his wound. His skin was warm, but it was too soon for a fever to be setting in, so I had to assume it was a result of the heat inside the wigwam and not some rapidly developing infection.

The wound itself was angry-looking, its edges red and swollen. Beneath the clotted blood, I noticed a disturbing, almost blackened hue—perhaps the shadow of the bullet resting deep within, and I traced my fingers softly over the circumference. Juan tensed beneath the touch, and every involuntary flinch, every subtle hiss of pain from him intensified my anguish. I never wanted to be the source of his displeasure.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

He shook his head a fraction of an inch. “Don’t be.”

His voice, once robust and assured, now came out thin and brittle, as if it required every ounce of his strength to push the words out. I yearned to see my resilient husband emerge from somewhere behind that fragile echo, eager to hold onto the man I knew so well.

Pressing my ear to his chest, I listened again for irregularities in his breathing. The soft crackling was still there, confirming my initial fears about the lung. He didn’t show signs of a collapse or rupture yet, but it was early, and things could change rapidly. The proximity of the wound to his heart only intensified my anxiety, making each of his breaths feel even more precious.

“Joseph,” I murmured as I straightened, striving to keep my voice steady despite my mounting fears, “I need to probe around a bit to see how deep the bullet is. It’s going to hurt.”

His eyes met mine—filled with pain and yet so very gentle. “I trust you.”

I moved my fingers lovingly against the warm, tattooed skin just to the right of where the bullet had gone in; a tender caress I hoped would make up for the torment I was about to inflict.

Without a real first aid kit, I was limited to whatever supplies the Shawnee could scrounge up for me. I’d asked Hokoleskwa for something small and thin and long enough that I could use it to probe the wound. He’d handed me a pointed tool made of bone that was used for leather, and after letting it sit in boiling water for a while, I prayed it was clean enough not to inflict any damage of its own.

Swallowing hard, I held it steadily and began to explore the wound’s depth, attempting to keep the touch as delicate as possible. The skin yielded with a sickeningly wet sound, and Juan’s fingers clenched, a low, pained groan erupting from his throat. Every sound of his distress stabbed at my heart, but I couldn’t let them still my hand. I needed to understand the gravity of his injury while I had the mind to do it. The thought of fading back into that tug of war between worlds and losing him as a result; of living in a reality without his voice, his touch, his presence, loomed large in my mind, creating a sense of urgency that pushed me onward.

My tool soon met the resistance of hard metal where there should’ve been soft tissue. The contact confirmed what I’d initially suspected: the bullet was lodged deep within his chest wall. It had just barely missed his heart and was alarmingly close to his lung; without the clarity of an x-ray, it was impossible to determine just how close. Cold dread washed over me as I realized the decision to remove or leave the bullet rested solely upon my shoulders. I couldn’t afford to choose wrong.

Extracting it would ensure no further complications arose from its presence, but the procedure was risky, especially without modern instrumentation. One wrong move could lead to catastrophic injury, and without proper sterilization, the risk of infection—even with the antibiotics Dario had gone off in search of—was ever-present.

On the other hand, leaving the bullet might mitigate immediate dangers. While having an object made of lead inside him could pose complications down the line, plenty of soldiers would live through the coming war with musket balls embedded inside them. His body should eventually isolate the lead, reducing the risk of any poisoning.

It was the proximity of the bullet to his heart and lung that was the most concerning. Any significant movement might cause it to inflict more harm. He'd have to remain still for an extended period of time to allow his body to stabilize the foreign object. Traveling to Chesapeake immediately was out of the question. Even after some healing, the bullet would likely be a source of ongoing pain and discomfort.

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to quell the rush of panic that wanted to take over. What I wouldn't give for the familiarity of modern machinery, the beeping of monitors, and the sterility of a 21st-century operating room—even if it was one setup for cats and dogs. I could've done it there, without question, but here, I had nothing but my knowledge, my hands, and my undying determination to save his life. Could that be enough?

“What's wrong?” he asked, his voice far too feeble to be recognizable as the same man I'd spent the past several months with.

I shook my head, chewing my lower lip as I stared at the angry little hole in his chest. “If we were in our time, I'd take that bullet out of you in a heartbeat.” Tears stung the back of my eyes, but I blinked them away. “But here... without the proper tools... I could cause more harm than good, and my gut is telling me that leaving it in is our best option... If I do, you'll need to rest for quite a while before you can get up on a horse, and even then it's going to hurt like hell.”

He took a concentrated breath, working hard not to cough while his wound was uncovered. “I can... handle it.”

“I'm sure you can,” I whispered, unwrapping the bone needle I'd been provided with and contemplating whether or not I was making the right choice. Once I started the stitch, it'd be too late to go back. I couldn't afford to be wrong.

Moving my gaze between each of his eyes, I suppressed the urge to break down as I realized he'd likely spend what was left of our short time together in pain if I left the bullet there. I didn't want his memories of our time together to be overshadowed by the throbbing ache of a lead ball buried in his chest. Every smile, every touch, every whispered word between us should be pure and untainted. The thought of pain being an ever-present third wheel in our final moments was unbearable.

Normally, I was not so indecisive. In my world, when it came to making important executive decisions, I'd always prided myself on being able to think on my feet. But those decisions had to do with dogs and cats and never someone so important as him. Every thought was muddled by my attachment to him, every choice weighed down by the gravity of our bond. The line between my personal feelings and my professional instincts was blurred, and I felt paralyzed in the face of such a momentous decision.

He took another concentrated inhale, fighting desperately against the cough in his lung.

Every second I stalled to stitch him up was only serving as additional torment. Instinct told me leaving the bullet in was the best choice, and I had to find a way to take my emotions out of the equation and trust that instinct. Much as I wanted his memories of this time to be untainted, it'd be nearly impossible to get that bullet out with the primitive tools I had and I'd known that even before I'd confirmed its location.

"Alright," I breathed, going promptly to work threading the needle's eye before I could change my mind again. "We'll leave it in. I'll stitch you up fast and then I'll get you some more of that tea so you can sleep. I want you on strict bed rest for as long as you can stand it."

I held the needle up and shuddered on his behalf. "This will likely hurt a bit too. I'm sorry."

He weakly raised a finger to wave this off, unable to speak as he closed his eyes and fought with another cough.

As I began the delicate task of stitching, I could feel his body tense beneath my hands. The needle pierced through the skin, and with each pass, I tried to minimize the discomfort.

That proved a difficult feat to overcome. There was a slight resistance, almost like his flesh was reluctant to yield to the bone needle, and the strained muscle around his jaw told me it felt every bit as awful as I imagined.

Recognizing that my physical efforts to be delicate would do nothing to alleviate his pain, I sought another way to offer comfort... or at the very least a distraction that might dull it.

“You know,” I began, focusing on keeping my voice light and steady, “Dario and I had a *real* conversation while you were gone. It was nice, talking to him and seeing parts of that big ole’ heart he’s got in there exposed a bit.”

Juan’s reaction was a skeptical raise of his brow and a grunt that might’ve been disapproval or discomfort.

Pushing the needle in and through, I clicked my tongue. “He means well, even if he’s done a poor job of showing it lately. You really should go a little easier on him. Panama wasn’t his fault and he’s more than sorry for it.”

His nose twitched in evident disagreement. I could see his desire to contradict that statement, but as I pulled the thread and looped it back around, he could do little more than grit his teeth and concentrate on breathing.

“He loves you,” I insisted, “more than most. I saw it in his eyes when he realized you’d been shot. Faster than I could get my wits about me, he was racing off to Carter’s to get the antibiotics you’re going to need to get through this.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek as I glanced at the open door. The distant sounds of the camp made the weight of his prolonged absence more pronounced. We weren’t that far from Carter’s... What was taking him so long?

I shook the worry from my mind and focused solely on the stitch. There was no room in my brain for anything beyond it. Not Dario, not Maddy, not Alaina or Charlotte, not even Bennet.

Juan was all that mattered right then. The rest I’d figure out once I knew he was alright.

“I’ll need to keep an eye on that cough of yours,” I said, switching into my best Doctor McCreary voice. “The antibiotics

will help keep you from getting any kind of infection, but the only thing that'll help a lung is rest. You'll need to sleep upright for a few days and if you do cough something up, I want to get a look at it. Nonhelema left a bowl here beside you, and I'm guessing it was for that very reason."

Again, he made a noise of disapproval in his throat and I smirked.

"If I don't get to hide my panic from you," I said, tying off the last of the stitch and letting out a breath of relief, "then you don't get to hide your spit from me. Got it?"

He made a far more amused sound as I gathered the fabric I'd boiled for a new bandage. "Come on, let's get this wrapped around you and then you can cough all you need to."



After I'd gotten him bandaged and comfortable, Nonhelema brought in another steaming clay mug. She didn't so much as utter a sound as she extended the cup and waited by the door until he'd drank the whole thing.

Unlike the sharp onion scents coming off the first, this drink gave off a mildly bitter, herbaceous aroma, reminding me of the smell of grass after the rain.

Whatever she'd put into it served to instantly relax him, and within no time, he was sound asleep.

Yawning, I debated curling up against his side to nod off as well, but the sounds of approaching horses had me scrambling out of the entrance.

Seeing Dario, Jim, Lilly, Iz, and Chris riding toward me brought a profound sense of relief that gathered in a knot against my throat.

For as much as Juan needed those antibiotics, I'd yearned for a familiar presence to ground me in this reality; to hold my hand and ensure me I was making the right choices.

Dario's horse hadn't even come to a full stop before his boots were on the ground, medicine pouch in hand, searching

for me with a laser-focused gaze.

“You got the antibiotics?” I asked, my voice cracking in my fatigued state.

He nodded. “How is he?”

“Stable for now,” I said, clearing my throat as I motioned to the door. “He’s not going to be able to travel for a while though.”

Dario’s brow creased with a mixture of concern and impatience. “We’ll deal with that,” he said briskly, already moving past me with a sense of urgency. “The river’s not far and we might be able to get him on a boat... I’ll handle that. You look tired enough as it is. Get some rest.” He paused just at the threshold, glancing over his shoulder. “I’ll watch over him.”

As he disappeared inside, Lilly was suddenly there, pulling me into an embrace before I could even register her presence.

She didn’t say anything, but I got the feeling the hug was more for her than it was for me. She put her whole body into it, like she was just as much on the verge of falling apart as I was.

Winding my arms around her, I looked out to Jim and Chris. They, too, seemed to be just barely remaining upright, their steps heavy with the weight of their bones as they moved closer.

“Where’s Maria?” I asked, prompting Lilly to bury herself even farther into my shoulder.

Chris shook his head slowly, his voice just above a whisper as he said, “She’s gone.”

“Gone?” I echoed, far too exhausted to catch his undertone. “Gone where?”

“*Gone*,” he said again, as if any other word would sink him.

“We’ll get her back,” Lilly whispered, tightening her hold on me. “Just like Anna... We’ll get her back too.”

The knot in my throat nearly suffocated me, and I couldn’t so much as utter an “I’m sorry” for the size of it. Maria was

dead? It didn't seem possible; didn't seem real. How had things gone so very wrong in such a short amount of time?

I stared, dumbfounded, at Chris; at the dirt stains covering his pants, the dried blood on his knuckles, the sunken posture and tightened jaw that told me he was a ticking time bomb on the verge of exploding, and I squeezed Lilly as tightly as she was squeezing me.

It seemed the longer we went on in this time, the more damage was done, both to history and to ourselves. Every single one of us was teetering just as closely to an explosion of our own. Could the mess we'd made of things ever be undone?

Looking out at the sprawling valley, where lush green forest met the sky and a soft breeze carried the scent of its pines, I wondered what kind of stain our presence might leave upon it.

I considered all those spots along the equator, the paintings and photos that proved there were other storms; storms that might move through time differently; storms that might allow for someone like me to go back and prevent that airplane from ever leaving the ground in the first place...

As Lilly released her grip on me, I thought about Charlotte's words on the fragility of time. How many countless interactions had occurred in this century by people who never belonged here to make them? What if history could be restored to what it should've been? Could we all forget we'd ever been here and just live on in the realities we'd had before we'd ever crossed through time? Would we all be better off?

Hokoleskwa and an older man stepped forward to welcome our newest arrivals. Their lips moved in what was surely a significant exchange, and while my eyes remained upon them, my thoughts drowned out whatever words they spoke, making it impossible for me to catch even a single syllable.

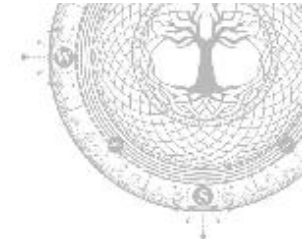
If that airplane could never take off, my sister could never fall in love with Jack to give birth to the twins. If Cecelia hadn't been born, she couldn't go on to ancestor Gloria. And if Gloria didn't exist, Juan Josef would never have been driven to that spot on the ocean to arrive in this time.

None of us would be here at all...

If one man became ten that became a hundred, then thousands of people who should've existed in the world we knew would be restored to it.

Juan wouldn't have killed countless Albrecht men. None of Juan Josef's crew would've been poisoned. The Nikora never would've boarded our ship to be slaughtered...

It might've been a cruel thought given the bonds we'd formed here, but would we even know we'd formed them? I'd loved my daughter more than life itself once, and my interference had made me forget her. Could we forget each other too?



Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chris

Unable to face the world and pretend to be interested in it, Chris left the others discussing Juan's condition and ventured down to a boulder near the water.

Climbing atop it, he let his mind go numb as he stared off at the forest, not quite seeing the trees or hearing the birds or so much as feeling the breeze against his skin.

Every flutter of whispering leaves and every ripple in the water only seemed to mock his stillness and deepen his solitude. The earthy fragrance of the forest floor became faint and unexceptional, its aroma indiscernible from the piss-scented interior of a city subway. Nature's vibrancy, which once soothed him, now felt like a cruel, indifferent backdrop. Its sights and sounds were those of a world that had continued to turn, but he was frozen in time, waiting for the moment he'd find her again.

He didn't think about Maria; didn't think about anything... He just stared off and became as insentient as the stone beneath him, welcoming the sanctuary of mindlessness over a world so meaningless.

Memories tried to creep in—the sound of Maria's laughter, the light touch of her hand on his, the gentle curve of her smile. But he shunned them, building walls around his psyche to keep out the pain... to keep out the world that had killed her.

Time passed, but the changing of sunlight to shadow amidst the forest leaves failed to register in his consciousness. The boulder beneath him grew cool as evening set in, but his body had long since gone too numb to notice it.

He was lost in a void—in a holding pattern between worlds—waiting for the moment he could be reunited with Maria once more.

It was only the gentlest of touches against his bicep that dragged him out of that void, forcing him to face reality once more.

Blinking, he looked to his left and found an old Shawnee man sitting beside him. His eyes were dark, his skin, wrapped around sturdy, lean muscles, was tanned and creased from years under the sun. Atop his head, silver strands were pulled into two long braids that draped over his shoulders. One knee was bent up near his chest with an arm wrapped around it. The other hand held out a rich, dark wood pipe in offering, the white feathers adorning it blowing gently in the wind.

Chris stared at the offered pipe, then out beyond the man to the purples and golds converging on the horizon that signaled the closure of a day he hadn't witnessed go by.

Again, he looked at the old man where he seemed lost somewhere in his own thoughts, the pipe still held patiently out toward Chris. He took it between his hands, tracing the intricate carvings on its stem as he let out a long sigh and blurted out, "I buried the only woman who mattered today."

He wasn't sure why he said it; hadn't meant to say a word, but when the man continued to gaze forward, likely unable to understand the language, he was relieved for the words no longer being bottled up inside him.

Bringing the pipe to his lips, the tobacco's earthy and slightly sweet taste encircled him as he inhaled. The smoke wrapped his insides in a warm embrace, as if Maria's spirit was interwoven with the delicate plumes, granting him a faint, transient moment of comfort.

As he exhaled that comfort in a thick plume of gray vapor, he handed the pipe back, empty and loathed to be once more reminded of the chill in her absence.

Slightly light-headed from the effects of the smoke, he scratched at a piece of dirt on his pant leg, watching his new companion for signs of understanding as he shyly added, "I can't stop thinking about her."

If the man understood, he gave no indication. He drew deep from the pipe's stem, his eyes fixed on some far off point

on the horizon, as if he too were lost in memories of another. Slowly releasing tendrils of smoke to dissipate in the evening air above them, he extended the piece back to Chris.

This time, when Chris inhaled, he held the smoke in his lungs as long as he could, hoping to find her once more in the sensation. Feeling only a light burning instead, he exhaled, and his tense muscles went slack with it. “I never used to need to talk,” he muttered, passing the pipe back, “but then she showed up and forced it out of me... Everything I ever felt, she needed me to tell her. Now... I’ve gotten so used to it... I don’t know what to do without her here to listen to all the ways her death is killing me.”

The elder took the pipe gracefully, his movements deliberate and unhurried as he brought it to his lips, a stark contrast to the raw tumult Chris felt inside him.

The words he’d spoken hung heavily in the air between them. He might have expected a reaction, a nod or a gesture, some acknowledgment of his agony, but the man seemed intent to remain infinitely silent.

He missed Maria’s voice—missed her snarky responses to the ailments he shared with her. How he wished the old man would spit back, “Oye! Stop feeling sorry for yourself!” or some version of it... just to snap him out of the dull static that seemed to be swallowing him whole.

When no such response came, he glanced over his shoulder in search of someone who would. The orange glow of small campfires dotted the hill that led away from the creek. Shadows of happier families surrounded those fires as they sat down to their evening meal.

There was no one out there that would give him the response he needed... No one but Maria could ever offer it...

He took a very deep breath. If he was going to get her back, he couldn’t very well sit around smoking pipes and waiting for someone else to decide when to make their next move. He knew where George Bennet was... and he didn’t need help to kill the son of a bitch.

Sliding off the rock, he set his spine straight and bowed his head to the elder. “Thank you.”

“Today is a hard day,” the man said in a husky voice, his dark eyes finally sliding over to Chris’s, “but tomorrow will be better. I will find you then.”

Taken aback, Chris blinked and cleared the shock from his throat. “I... didn’t realize you spoke English.... Eh... W-What’s your name?”

“Mehkewa,” he said through a thick plume of smoke, turning back to face the water. “Today is too hard to offer words, but also too lonely to leave you in your own quiet.”

Chris’s gaze ventured uphill to the silhouette of a wigwam where he knew he’d find the familiar faces of what remained of his makeshift family. A few yards away, his horse was tethered among the other mares, and her company seemed the better option.

The lure of undoing all that’d been done, of feeling Maria’s body pressed up against his once more, was like the craving for a drug whose effects had worn off. There was nothing stopping him from riding straight to Norfolk. He could end this nightmare and have Maria back in as soon as a few days.

So close to having his fix, he strode purposefully up the hill, where a whispered conversation caught his ear. Two figures sat near a small fire, their identities cast in shadow. The distinct voice of Cece, her usual calm replaced with urgency, was impossible to miss.

“If that plane never goes through the storm...”

The words yanked Chris to a halt, molten fury snaking its way up every vein in his body and forcing his fingers to curl tightly into fists at his sides.

“What the hell did you just say?” he ground out as he marched to the edge of their fire.

Visibly startled, Cece shrank inward. “It’s just... I thought ___”

“You *thought*?” he growled, the fire in his veins erupting into a fiery inferno inside his chest. “Fuck your thoughts, Cece.”

And fuck anyone else who agrees with them. I didn't come this far to have *you* show up and threaten to take away every memory that has ever been worth anything. The answer to whatever bullshit you were about to say is no. No, we are not changing that. Not ever. Not for any reason. Don't think it, and don't fucking say it ever again."

"But—"

"But nothing," he insisted, his jaw clamped together so tightly his teeth hurt. "Nothing changes about that day. You've already fucked up my life plenty by showing up here and altering things as you saw fit. You might've been happy to mess up your life, but I didn't need you messing up mine! Maybe there's some kind of McCreary trait that makes all its women think the whole world revolves solely around them. To hell with the rest of us, right? Long as you get whatever you want? Well, it's not happening this time. I won't let you, or anyone else, take her from me."

"You must be Chris," a second female voice said, forcing his watering eyes to the figure seated beside Cece. She was young and, despite the braids cascading over her shoulder and the beaded buckskin attire she was dressed in, her light skin tone set her apart from all the other Shawnee around them. "I'm Charlotte."

"Who?" he hissed, his pulse still beating rampant.

"Charlotte Miller," Cece clarified sheepishly.

In his enraged state, he was only vaguely aware of the name being significant, but he couldn't quite get a grip on his emotions to place it. "I don't give a damn who you are if you're the one putting these thoughts in her head."

She offered him a crooked half-smile. "I forgot there were so many men like you in our time."

His fists tightened even further, his fingernails digging into his palms. "Men like me?"

She nodded. "Ones that would rather react than to actually listen to whatever it is they're reacting to."

Blood boiling, his focus moved back to Cece where she was palpably shaken by his temper and attempting to shield her body from a potential physical attack. “There is not a thing you can say in defense of stopping that plane that I would be willing to hear.”

“You don’t understand,” Charlotte said, her voice steady. “History—”

“To hell with history.” He pulled at his hair to have something to hurt. “I didn’t go out researching all the ways to travel time when I chose to get on that flight. Don’t you dare tell me where I don’t belong. I’m here, aren’t I? And I’ve been through too much hell to have you take away the only person that made that hell worth going through. We’re going to kill George Bennet and get Maria back. And then we’re going home, and none of us is getting anywhere near that storm again. You can do what you want with your lives once we get there, but I will not let you mess with mine.”

“Or mine,” Lilly announced proudly, appearing beside him with her chin in the air. “You,” she said, pointing a finger at the center of his chest, “sit... *Now*.”

He wasn’t sure what compelled his body to instantly yield and lower down to a seat, but he was dumbfounded to find himself seated and silenced before her.

“All of you listen,” she said, her chest heaving as her eyes darted from one person to the next. “I know things seem like they’ve gone to hell here, but that doesn’t mean we can do whatever we want. This concept that we can just erase the things of our choosing has made you all mad.”

She glared at Chris. “*You* are a hypocrite to stand here and berate her when it wasn’t hours ago you were suggesting we do something similar with Maria’s past. Do you have any idea what would happen if you took away her trauma? She likely wouldn’t have been on that airplane at all, and you would’ve ended up on our island. *You* might be alright with messing up your life, but you’re not messing up mine.”

She turned her focus to Cecelia. “And you... I love you, but you don’t get to show up here and make these kinds of decisions. You didn’t live what we did and you don’t know what

you're talking about. You don't know that our airplane wasn't exactly where it was meant to be when it went through that storm."

Her brow furrowed as she inspected Charlotte. "Which brings me to you... Whatever history is being rewritten as a result of our being here is no different than whatever history we'd write by being in the century we were born in. People change the future every day they live. None of us planned to come here, but here we stand anyway. You wouldn't hide in the 21st century because you were afraid to make waves in the 22nd. And I refuse to tuck myself in a corner and hide just because some asshole told you that's what you needed to do."

Running a hand over her hair, she shook her head and let her shoulders slump. "Altering events to bring back the people we love? That's a risk I was willing to take because their lives are worth saving. But changing things so we can never come to love them at all? What the hell kind of world is better off without love in it?"

She took a deep breath and crossed her arms over her chest. "Now, we're all tired, and we've all been fighting for a very long time to be able to go home. Let's not fight each other when we're this close to getting there. Nothing about the airplane can change. Not the departure, not the flight attendants, and not the people who were in the seats they sat in. Nobody's riding off with their own agendas on how we'll make the world a better place. Every single one of us is going to stay right where we are until we can know for certain we're all going the same direction."

Chris shook his head. "But I have to—"

"Doesn't matter," she cut in, her jaw set firmly. "Like I said, you've all gone mad out here, mad enough that you've forgotten the very thing that put us in this spot. Whatever you think you have to do, it won't happen the way you intend it to. That master's log that caused us all to get off the ship in the first place? I saw it with my own eyes just as clearly as you did. The name written beneath Jack's was done in Juan's handwriting. Since that log is still on the ship with Alaina, I imagine that means we won't get anything done until they catch up and Juan's well enough to write it."

“Got *damn*, woman,” Jim bellowed from the shadows beyond the fire, emerging with a proud smile painting his cheeks. “I was just fixin’ to step in when ye’ come up here spittin’ all kinds of fire. Yuns see now why she scares the shit out of me?” He chuckled. “Let’s all just take a breath and sit down a spell. From what I heard, every one of yuns is reactin’ without listenin’. She’s right anyway. We ain’t goin’ nowhere with Juan laid up like he is and that ship still nowhere in sight. We got some time to sort ourselves out while Dario’s out lookin’ for a boat.”

Slinging an arm over Lilly’s shoulders, he pressed a kiss to her temple, whispering sweetly, “Didn’t I tell ye’ not to be out here yellin’ at folk?”

She rolled her eyes, but she let him guide her down beside him as he sat and she leaned into his shoulder as they settled by the fire.

The familiarity of their interaction made Chris long for Maria that much more.

“Pocahontas,” Jim said, obviously addressing Charlotte as his eyes landed on her, “since I ain’t met you yet, why don’t you go ahead and start by tellin’ us what makes ye’ so scared of time?”

She fumbled with the end of one of her braids, twisting it between her fingers as she stared into the fire. “For a year, we were stuck with Samuel... He kept us hidden; confined to one room after another after another. Over and over, he told us we couldn’t interact with anyone in this place outside whoever he brought in. He said if we even bumped into the wrong person, the memories we had of our world might be altered... Someone could disappear, a war could have a different outcome... The whole planet could go up in flames and we could vanish if our involvement in time influenced the birth of the wrong person.”

She dropped the braid and hugged her knees to her chest, resting her chin atop them so the fire danced in her dark irises. “There were a few times I thought about running away, but his words were just as much a prison as the rooms he kept us in. For me, it wasn’t the prospect of starting a war or changing some

random event... I was terrified one wrong move might prevent Chase from being born.”

She let out a long sigh. “But then, Ellinipsco showed up searching for his brother, and, terrible as it sounds, I thought... well, history already erased most of his people from it. Could I really do damage if I found a place among them? Chase would surely be safe if we stayed with the native people. I had no intentions to conceive or share my knowledge of the future with them... Didn’t plan to ever go back to the storm... I just... couldn’t stand the idea of my baby brother spending the rest of his life tucked away in some little room. We escaped one prison... I couldn’t let him sit locked up in another. I thought, if this strange looking man took us with him, Chase could at least have some semblance of a life... I hadn’t intended to fall in love at the time... Hadn’t realized I’d find the family I never knew among his.”

Resting her cheek against her knee, she shrugged. “I don’t want to leave the family I found here... but I also don’t want to do anything that might cause me to lose the only *real* family I have left. Samuel’s right. Time is so very fragile... and I can’t bear the idea of anything taking my brother from me.”

“We was scared of them same things too,” Jim said, squeezing Lilly’s hand. “Sent a few folks back to the future to pull our ancestry just to be sure we didn’t get ourselves killed with nothin’ we done here. We got lucky to run into other travelers that came here before us... Got even luckier when our little lightnin’ bug here decided to alter her own history. Without that, we’d have never known we could remember more than one version of our lives. Takin’ away the thing that brought them other travelers to that storm allows us a gap in time to fix whatever we broke by bein’ here. Just like we’ll use that gap to take care of our own, we won’t let nothin’ take him from you neither. I promise.”

She lowered her legs and sat forward, frowning. “I still don’t fully grasp this gap in time... or how you can use it to change what’s happened here...”

Jim let go of Lilly’s hand so he could use both of his to convey his message. “Time ain’t movin’ the same way on this side of the storm as it is on the other. See, I was born in 1979

and just turned forty. Juan was born in 1970, but, after spendin' the past twenty-some-odd years in this time, he's only twenty-nine. One year here is worth two years in the future."

He grinned at Cece. "When this one got a mind to take fate into her own hands, a few of our people got a second set of memories as a result. They didn't go back to relive nothin', but stayed just the same age they was before them memories hit 'em. If the same happens for Juan, then he'll get two sets of memories too: one where he lived right here alongside us, and one where he didn't never go through that storm at all... where he couldn't be twenty-nine years old at the same time I'm forty. Without the storm and the slowing of time on this side of it, he'll show up in another life about twenty years before we ever step foot on that airplane."

She narrowed her eyes in thought as she peered over the flames at Cece. "He'd go back to the time he would've originally been twenty-nine in... 1999... So... *technically*, it would be solely within his power to alter any manner of things as he saw fit... He could cause some sort of delay on the flight... Even if we decided against such a thing... We'd sort of be at his mercy, wouldn't we?"

"Juan would never do anything we didn't want him to do," Cece assured her.

"He might say the same about you," Chris shot back, "and yet, you're out here contemplating ways to make it so you never run into him at all. You forgot one life already, so you know the second memory thing might be limited to your involvement in the storm. Are you hoping to forget another life by never crossing through it?"

"No," Cece said defensively. "I just—"

"That's it, isn't it?" Lilly blurted out, gaping at Cece. "You remembered your daughter... and now you're talking about stopping our airplane..."

"No," she scoffed, "Maddy has absolutely nothing to do with this conversation. If you hadn't come up here to interrupt me, you'd know Charlotte and I were debating the moral high ground, not making plans around it. Earlier, I was thinking about all the lives we've taken during our time here: Elizabeth,

the Albrecht men, the poisoned crew, and the Nikora... Then I looked around me at where we've ended up and saw Anna and Maria dead, Juan lying in there very close to it, and my sister on a ship that's about to catch fire... I wondered if we'd be better off—if the *world* would be better off—had we never gone through the storm in the first place. I love Juan with all my heart, and there is not a single part of me that wants to live in a life where I don't know him. I wasn't making a decision to change things... I wouldn't make a decision to change things without all of you. I was just thinking out loud when you all came up here and started screaming.”

“Do you though?” Chris asked, his rage melting away to something a little softer. “Remember Maddy?”

She nodded and he could see she was fighting with the emotion in her voice. “I do, and I am very much aware of the decision I made to be in this life without her; of the effects my presence here has left on all of you. Despite whatever *McCreary trait* you think I have, I know I can never take that decision back.” Her eyes drifted in the direction of the wigwam. “Not that I'd want to... I love them both so very much, and I don't want to lose *any* of the people I love... Just like I don't want to take any of the people you love from you. I *am* tired, and my mind is a mess after all we've been through today. Sometimes I need to talk through my thoughts and Charlotte seemed the best person to do that with given the direction my thoughts had been heading. I hadn't meant for it to upset so many of you. And I certainly hadn't meant for it to make you see me as someone who would ever make those kinds of plans without you... who would be *capable* of doing such a thing just to suit myself.”

A tear slid down her cheek and she swatted it quickly away. “I wouldn't do that. I could *never* do that.”

Chris reached over and took her hand, fighting with his own voice as guilt swelled up inside him. “It's been a very hard day.”

That prompted another tear to follow the trail of the first. “It really has.”

“So... what now?” Jim asked. “We stickin' to the plan and leavin' here together when Juan's healed up or do I need to

sleep with one eye open?"

Chris squeezed Cece's fingers in his. "We'll go together... to *Norfolk*... where Bennet's actually located."

"Norfolk?" Cece asked, sniffing.

Chris nodded. "I promise, it's the last time I'll ever make plans behind your back."

She squeezed back. "I'm sorry about Maria."

"What about you, Pocahontas?" Jim asked, glancing over at Charlotte. "Ye' stickin' with us for a while or ye' still plan to run away?"

She shrugged. "There are only a few people around here who speak English and you might need me and Chase to serve as translators. I suppose we could wait until you leave to ride west. I need to know more about what you're planning anyway."

"Alright then," Jim said, looking over at Lilly. "You good, Princess?"

"I'm good," she answered, offering Cece an apologetic smile.

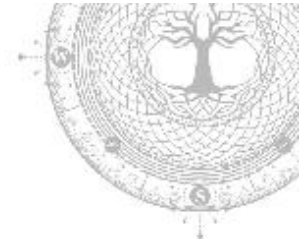
"Good," he grunted, "cause I ain't slept in days and I'm too damn tired to sit here all night. Come on and help me get up, Sugar, so ye' can find me a bed to fall down in."

Standing and tugging him up alongside her, Chris watched as Lilly wrapped an arm around his waist and they headed back to the main encampment. Her voice caught on the breeze as she asked, "When the hell did you turn forty?"



PART III

I'll see you on the other side



Chapter Thirty

Alaina

Ten days came and went quickly as we moved up the coast, proving Juan's optimism we might make it to Virginia in two weeks to be a very tangible possibility. We'd already made it into the Caribbean, and if we maintained our speed, we could catch a glimpse of the Virginia coastline in as soon as a few days.

Answers about Benny's reaction never made their way to our ship. Most days, the Sofia Martina lagged so far behind that any interaction between the two vessels was impossible. On the few occasions when our ships drew near, only Jacinto and Alonso would join us for a meal or a conversation on deck. Neither Benny nor Phil ever stepped aboard with them, leaving me caught somewhere between relief and concern.

Reliant as we were on the second ship and Alonso's crew as we grew closer and closer to Charleston and the fire, there wasn't much to be done about whatever intelligence Phil may have gathered. I preferred to feign ignorance than to know for certain the Ruiz men were some kind of threat to us, directly. It was a simple thing to do when my mind was immersed in so many things.

During the day, I busied myself with the twins while simultaneously teaching Fetia to read, a task I found surprisingly fulfilling. Her rapid grasp on the English language had been a pleasant surprise. She absorbed new sentence structures and vocabulary at a remarkable rate, further fanning my suspicion she was some kind of super-human. For as much as she was developing, I was too, learning patience, problem-solving, and more thoughtful ways to communicate. These skills proved particularly useful after the sun went down, when I

would slip behind the fireplace, anxious to continue my work with Magna and Juan the instant the twins fell asleep.

Fantastical as it might've seemed at first to build out a plan for future time travelers, the Elvis photo and the woman inside it had made the need for guidelines far more credible. The three of us, with that photo as motivation, were ignited into an obsessive effort to bring the guides to life, spending almost all of our spare time organizing overly imaginative concepts into a far more solid foundation.

What had started out as mere guidelines began to take on the gravitas typically reserved for governing societies. My frenzied thoughts transformed from scratches on paper to a sort of constitution—a framework for a traveler's entire existence. In the subsequent sections, the nuances of each stipulation, guideline, and provision were carved out, crafted not just with the intention to navigate time, but also to safeguard the integrity and security of the ones traveling it.

Time travel was a complex activity to regulate, and I was grateful for two unique minds to work alongside me.

Where I'd initially gotten hung up on ways to determine what earned a person the title of traveler, Magna helped me turn my raw ideas into something far more polished. She brought layers of depth into my concept for testing that made each challenge more effective in its ability to paint a full picture of a person's character.

For example, where I'd initially considered referencing some hidden treasure to see if our test subject would share its location, she helped me blend the need for secrecy with a test on morality. She suggested candidates instead be given the location of a treasure, but be told retrieving it would destroy the only water source for whatever town it'd been hidden in. This added catch, while still testing our traveler's ability to keep a secret, would also require our subjects to grapple with the temptation of wealth versus the well-being of innocent people.

Over and over, Magna amazed me in her ability to shape my ideas into something far more meaningful, forcing me to gradually begin thinking on a deeper level.

Juan, too, influenced me in his more tactical mind, molding my thoughts, when it came to safeguarding the portals, to be far more calculated.

While Magna was dedicated to the moral character of our travelers, he was fixed on the prevention of additional accidents like our own. People couldn't just chance upon those storms like we did. Surveillance needed to be intense, calling for dedicated teams to monitor each set of coordinates by air, land, and sea. We'd need to deter and divert any unfamiliar activities or individuals approaching a vortex during the moments leading up to a storm. And Juan was adamant: any indiscretion—be it so grand as sharing a coordinate or so small as letting a stranger slip past—would see the involved traveler stripped of their ability to journey through time altogether.

Each concept seemed to breathe to life a whole new quandary to ponder. If punishments were to be administered, a governing body would be required. Such an entity would be tasked with overseeing travel as a whole—keeping track of who was where, enforcing laws, ensuring proper procedure, and maintaining the balance of time's delicate fabric.

I frequently thought of Juan Jr.'s chart—the way he'd meticulously lined out every path and every detail of our timelines and all that would need to be accounted for. This was the level of scrutiny a governing body would need to maintain, and I couldn't imagine anyone better qualified for leading it than him.

Night after night, as our plans progressed from qualifications and security to the actual rules a traveler needed to abide when they got to a storm, our deliberations grew more intense, consuming much of the time that should've been reserved for sleep.

The previous night's debate on personal interactions had been one of the longest yet. Juan, after spending so much time in the past, insisted that it would be impossible for a traveler not to form connections, while Magna and I had been adamant about interactions being limited. The conversation's fervor had left little room for rest, and as the first rays of dawn peeked over the horizon, we were still steeped in conversation. The babies had woken up before my head could ever reach a pillow. And as

the morning stretched into afternoon, a deep fatigue gripped me, more profound than any I'd felt before.

Every sound felt distant, every movement sluggish, as if I was wading through a thick fog. My eyelids were heavy, and my hands fumbled to grasp what might've been my sixth cup of coffee, seeking its warmth against the chill of exhaustion.

It was in this weary state, my mind oscillating between our late-night conversation and the immediate surroundings, that Fetia's voice cut through the static, grounding me partway in the present.

"Too tired today?" she asked beside me, her dark eyebrows high on her forehead.

"No," I said, stifling another yawn as I inhaled the coffee, hoping its sharp aroma might combat the tiredness that clung to every bone in my body. "Keep going, *please*."

In the background, the gentle '*dah dah dah*' sounds of the twins filled the dining room, their coos directed at Kyle who was bouncing Matty beside their cradle. Far too immersed in her lessons to be distracted by their noises, Fetia tackled the third chapter of '*The Golden Key of El Dorado*'.

"This word," she said, pointing at the page as she sounded out '*ambiguous*' perfectly. "I don't know it."

Glancing over at the sentence, I considered the best way to define the term in my lethargic condition.

"Well," I pondered aloud, *slowly* to allow my brain time to catch up, "it's an adjective and it describes... something that can have multiple meanings... For example, if I said: '*I saw a man in my house in my pajamas*,' it's ambiguous because the sentence doesn't clarify if I saw him while *wearing* my pajamas, or if I saw *him* wearing my pajamas. Make sense?"

She nodded quickly. "Ohhh... Yes." She grinned up at Kyle. "That is a good word."

I chuckled, warmed by her ceaseless enthusiasm, and sipped my coffee as she continued through the rest of the sentence.

My mind began to slip back into thoughts of our guidelines, when the sound of hurried footsteps on wooden planks interrupted them, and I turned in my seat just in time to see Terrence burst into the room.

“Sorry to intrude,” he panted, having clearly raced from one end of the ship to the other. “There’s a ship ahead.”

“We’re getting close to the colonies,” Kyle said dismissively, patting Matty’s back, “there’ve been lots more ships lately.”

Terrence shook his head, his usually calm expression now a mask of evident excitement. “This one’s trying to get our attention.”

I exchanged a quizzical look with Kyle. “What do you mean?”

“Smoke,” he said, glancing over his shoulder and back. “*Red* smoke...”

“Like... a flare?” Kyle asked.

Terrence raised a dubious brow. “*Exactly* like a flare.”

Standing quickly while Kyle raced out the door, I felt a rush of adrenaline surge through me to diminish all the lingering drowsiness that had been weighing me down seconds prior. Could I hope it was someone we knew? The use of colored smoke was peculiar given the lack of resources in this century with which to produce it, but... did it mean it was one of ours approaching?

I motioned to my babies where they were still jabbering in the cradle. “Fetia, do you mind watching them for just a bit so I can get a look?”

She plucked up her book and shook her head. “Not at all. I will read to them.”

My gaze lingered on Zachary. He didn’t like it when I left him and tended to let the whole ship know about it. Guilt sat heavily in my throat as I considered the tantrum that might erupt, but Fetia waved me off.

“Go. What if it’s Cece? Or Jack?”

I chewed my lower lip, my pulse inherently increasing at the suggestion that one of them might be approaching. “I’ll be close... If he gets upset, I’ll come and—”

“Go,” she insisted, her dark brows furrowing. “I am mother now too. I can handle.”

Trying not to get my hopes too high, I turned and followed Terrence down the corridor to the stairwell.

We were in the Caribbean, I knew, getting closer and closer to the colonies, but we wouldn’t be approaching Virginia for another few days. Hoping the smoke might be a sign of the missing half of our island family would only set me up to be disappointed.

But a flare was not something readily available in this century, and that simple fact couldn’t be dismissed so easily.

With the guidelines I’d been writing at the forefront of my mind, I couldn’t help but think about the multiple vortices across the equator. Red smoke was uncommon in this century, but... not in others. What if it *was* a flare, but one that came from someone else who had knowledge of the future? Could it possibly be another traveler? Perhaps one who’d been taught the rules we were building and traveled backward to make adjustments?

‘You’ve officially lost your mind,’ my subconscious teased, putting pause to my overly excited imagination as my slippered feet landed upon the warm wooden boards of the top deck.

Around me, the crew’s restlessness seemed as heavy as my own. Sailors whispered and pointed toward the horizon, where an unusual plume of bright red smoke unfurled. It rose exactly like a signal flare against the vast expanse of blue, its color out of place in the natural hues of the ocean and sky. From this distance, it was hard to tell the source, but it was dense and deliberate, unmistakably a sign of some intent.

The ship casting the smoke was a mere blemish on the horizon. Its details were scant—too far away to make out even a hint of its masts, the shape of its hull, or the flutter of sails against the bright sun. It might’ve gone unnoticed so far out were it not for the smoke billowing from its surface.

Perched on the forecastle deck, Juan was already peering through his brass spyglass, its extended tube glinting under the midday sun. With one hand steadying the instrument and the other shading his eyes, he was entirely engrossed in his observations.

Hiking up my skirts, I half-jogged to stand at the railing beside him. “Can you see who it is?”

“Too far to make out yet,” he grumbled, “but there are figures on its bow.”

“You ever seen smoke like that out here?” I asked, shielding my own eyes from the sun to attempt to see farther.

“I’ve seen smoke signals,” he answered, keeping the scope pressed against his eye, “but never red ones.”

“Do you think it could be one of ours?” Terrence asked as he and Kyle took a place on each side of us.

“This far south?” Juan brushed the idea off, but his lips twisted in thought the longer he stared. “Maybe they’ve found our George Bennet in the Keys?”

Lowering the spyglass, he glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the Sofia Martina where she trailed a ways behind us, almost purposely slowing her pace. “That won’t bode well for my plans to handle Ruiz without changing the history that’s been written.”

Terrence and I exchanged equally puzzled looks. Was he talking about the fire? Was Juan planning to eliminate Alonso’s threat to his sons by luring them to this ship and setting the fire himself near Charleston?

It was entirely possible, given the way his mind worked.

But... we weren’t near Charleston yet, and if his sons were the source of that smoke...

I peered up at Juan as he raised the telescope back to his eye, watching the gears in his mind spin to put together some other scheme quickly.

We hadn’t clarified what threat the Ruiz men served yet—if there was even a threat at all—and despite our suspicions, there had been a real friendship once between them. Juan

wouldn't make a move unless he had certainty it'd be a required one. And that smoke, if it was coming from our people, could bring it all to a head within moments.

I looked back out at the red plumes wafting over the water. Could it really be our people? Chris and Maria, Jim, Lilly and Iz... Cece, Juan, and Jack signaling us toward them? *How*, exactly, *could* they be signaling us if it was them? They didn't have any flares. I knew that because the two flares remaining from the plane crash were hidden away inside my cabin.

And that thought brought on another: Red smoke didn't necessarily need to be a signal.

It could just as well be the result of some unfortunate incident, a catastrophe misinterpreted by us as an attempt at flagging us down. What if the red hue was caused by some kind of chemical that caught fire? I looked over at Kyle where he held Matty against his shoulder and stared out over the water. If the smoke was toxic, how much closer could we get before we put ourselves in danger?

Silent and stiff, the minutes drew on like hours, elongated by the weight of anticipation and uncertainty.

I stole glances at Juan every so often, trying to glean any insight from his demeanor, but he was a stone statue of focus, giving away nothing at all to ease my anxiety.

After several long minutes, he finally lowered the spyglass, squinted out, then raised it again to his eye, shaking his head when he lowered it once more. "Here." He extended the brass scope to me.

"What is it?" I asked, not waiting for an answer to press the metal to my eye, my imagination spinning up all manner of possibilities.

The little circle of world through the lens was a magnified blur. I adjusted the focus, fine-tuning the view until it was sharp. The horizon drew closer, the vast expanse of the ocean replaced by the detail of the ship. Even from this distance, I could distinguish the deep brown of its timeworn wood and the ropes that connected mast to deck, some fluttering with remnants of worn flags or torn canvas.

As my shaking grip moved the lens to the bow, the true source of my curiosity came into view: the thick plume of smoke, deep and red, billowing high into the sky. It was a sight that was wildly out of place among the earthen tones of the ship's battered sails.

I tried to steady my hand as movement within the smoke drew my gaze. While figures darted across the deck, far too quick for me to follow, one stood out more than the others. At the front of the ship, someone was waving frantically. My heart raced as I adjusted the telescope for a clearer view, and it skipped a beat when I finally centered its focus on him.

I couldn't discern the details of his face at this range, but I didn't need to. His familiar shape—those broad shoulders and golden locks, the way he towered over the men on each side of him—I knew, with all my heart, who it was. His presence was like a lighthouse beam in a turbulent dark sea, beckoning me home... It was Jack.

My knees threatened to give out beneath me, and I made a far off noise—something between a whimper and a shriek that was meant to communicate what I was seeing. Words were lost in my excitement.

Jack...

He was there and I could tell him about the guidelines; I could show him the Elvis photo and the vortices and the conspiracy theories that gave clues to how they worked. I could ask about Cece and Benito... I could find out what Juan Jr. was planning and show him the master's log written in his writing. We could know exactly where they were and... and...

Pulling the spyglass away, my vision momentarily adjusted to the expanse of the ocean, only to blur again with tears. The reality of it, the enormity of being reunited with him at last, of not having to do a single thing more without him, threatened to overwhelm me. "It's Jack," I whispered, my voice weighed down with disbelief as I raised the scope once more. "Jack... it's really him... he's here."

I held my breath, watching through the magnified lens as he took a few steps back and poured something into the bucket the smoke was billowing out of. Again, more plumes of red

swam out around him and he turned back toward me, pressing a telescope of his own against his eye.

Grinning like a schoolgirl, I waved frantically, and nearly fell overboard when he returned the gesture.

“It’s him!” I said again, hopping from one foot to the other. “He sees us!”

“Are my sons with him?” Juan asked.

Half-laughing, half-sobbing, I scanned the deck around my beautiful husband, my cheeks burning with the smile that wouldn’t be diminished. “It’s just him, Gabriel, and Tomás on the bow. I don’t see Dario or Juan.”

“Don’t suppose it matters now,” Juan grumbled. “Alonso will have seen the same signal and he’ll assume they’re aboard.”

“Alonso aside, what happens when *Jack* steps foot on this ship?” Kyle asked on the opposite side of me. “We all know you would’ve killed him before...”

It took everything inside me to lower the scope long enough to look up at Juan where he stood squinting out over the water.

“I’ll not kill him,” he sighed, “so long as he refrains from attempting to kill *me*. I’ve other things to worry about just now.”

Placing my eye back against the eyepiece, I wept when I found Jack again. He was pointing to the smoke proudly and close enough I could see him mouth the word: ‘*Red.*’



The ten minutes it took for the two ships to approach each other felt like the longest of my life. With Bud, Magna, Kyle, Bruce, and Terrence behind me, I watched as Juan hoisted up the sloop that would bring Jack back to me, anticipation making my feet restless against the deck.

Every breath was choked as the sloop grew higher, and when he, at last, stepped over the railing, my eyes were too blurred by tears to even see him.

I didn't need eyes. I felt him take the two rapid steps toward me, as if there was some magnetic force pulling us toward one another, and I fell into his arms the very instant he reached out.

Home. There was nothing that could ever hurt me with those arms wound around me. There was nothing to fear or worry about... No pain, no sadness... Everything that was once wrong was now right... and I melted against him with my relief.

All those dizzying thoughts about the time portals and the guidelines, Cece and Benito, Juan Jr. and the chart... they all got lost somewhere beneath the sensation of his lips pressed against my temple, my brow, my nose, and my mouth.

I sobbed in the familiarity of his fleeting kiss, tucking myself back into his arms to let my tears soak into the fabric of his shirt.

"What are you doing here?" Juan demanded somewhere far away from the reality I was living. "Are my sons with you?"

I held on tighter, clinging to the edges of Jack's jacket, not ready to part from my euphoria any time soon.

"No," he answered, the timbre of his voice vibrating through me to send another rapid surge of comfort coursing through every vein, muscle, and bone in my body. Molten in my contentment, I hardly heard the words, but relished in the tone of them as he continued, "I left them near Williamsburg. I had to come back. This ship is going to catch fire."

"Yes," Juan said lazily, "we know. That is why we have another accompanying us. Williamsburg, you say? Have they located Bennet then?"

Jack swept a palm over my hair and kissed the crown of my head, stirring up a flutter of anxious butterflies in my belly. "No, they were heading to Richmond to look at a military roster when I left." He paused for a moment, his fingers stilling against my scalp. "Now that I am here, and obviously unarmed, what now?"

"If you've no plans to fight with me, Mr. Volmer, I've no plans to fight with you. I have more unsettling threats at present to be concerned with. Your untimely appearance will have

undoubtedly made those threats far more immediate than they might've been otherwise. I'm afraid a more private reunion with your wife will need to wait a while. There is much to be discussed and precious little time with which to do it."

I inhaled his shirt, finding, beneath the layer of smoke clinging to its fabric, the familiar scent that was distinctly his—an earthy, salty, and warm aroma. God, I'd missed that smell. I held onto him and let that aroma become my own—a thousand memories returning to remind me of all the nights we'd spent wrapped in each other's arms... that scent becoming indistinguishable from my own.

"I didn't come here to fight with you," Jack said, "but I *will* have a few minutes alone with the family you stole away, whether I have to fight for them or not. Tomás and Gabriel can fill you in on what they know in the meantime."

At Juan's throaty sound of annoyed acceptance, Jack very gently pried me away from him, his clear blue eyes watering as he looked over my face. "Hello, Mrs. Volmer."

My breathing hitched and my nose burned and the only response I could give him was a painful sounding laugh.

His smile widened. "Where *is* the rest of our family?"

"Dining room," I managed, another incoherent sound seeping out behind it. I couldn't quite get a grip.

He began to turn us toward the stairwell but stopped short as he noticed the others standing just behind me, waiting their turn to be reunited with him as well.

"Kyle," he breathed, his eyes widening. "You had a baby!"

Kyle chuckled as I attempted to catch my breath. "Fetia did all the work. This is our little Matty. You can meet him properly after you spend some time with yours."

I watched as Jack's gaze moved quickly from face to face, torn between his desire to sprint down the stairwell and his need to acknowledge his love for the people who'd been anxious to see him too. That struggle melted away when his eyes landed on Bud, and his entire face lit up as he said, "Oh my God, we've all been worried sick about you. They said you'd been shot—"

“I’m right as rain,” Bud assured him, close enough he could squeeze my shoulder. “This one’s been far too miserable without you for me to take up your time right now. Lilly’s safe?”

Jack nodded. “She is. Jim’s never more than a few feet away from her, and they’re both just as combative as ever. Oh!” He reached both hands behind his neck, unclasping the chain that’d been hanging there to present me with my necklace. “She thought you might want this back.”

Taking it in my hand to admire the little bits of Evelyn’s copper hair in its globe, I squeezed it tightly against my chest. “What about Cece? She’s... alright?”

“She is,” he said, and the confirmation she was alive and well sent another overwhelming surge of relief through me. “They all were just fine when I left them. And I’ll be more than happy to tell you all about everything we’ve been through just as soon as I see my children.”

“Well, get out of here, already!” Terrence urged him. “We’re not going anywhere!”

On that note, he hauled me off before anyone could stop us, and we nearly tumbled down the stairs in his excitement to get to the bottom.

Laughing and still crying at the same time, I jogged awkwardly behind him with my hand in his all the way to the dining room.

Fetia remained in her seat with her book, both babies sitting up in the cradle beside her. She grinned and waved excitedly at Jack when he entered, but his eyes were glued to Cecelia where she looked directly at him and cooed, ‘*dah-dah-dah.*’

She’d been making that particular sound exclusively for almost a week, and I knew it wasn’t her recognizing her father as ‘*dada*’. But as Jack clutched his heart in amazement and moved toward her, I didn’t think it would hurt anything to let him believe she had.

“That’s right,” he said in the voice he used just for her, lifting Cecelia up to press a kiss against her forehead. “Daddy’s

here, and I'm never ever leaving you again."

Where Zachary's eyes were the exact color of Jack's, Cecelia's were a brilliant blend of both of us. She had my hazel coloring, but with the lightness of Jack's, making them appear like giant turquoise marbles when the light caught them. I watched those giant eyes examine her father's face where he held her out to do the same, wondering if maybe she did recognize him when she lit up in a gummy smile.

Jack laughed heartily, pulling her closer to kiss both of her pudgy cheeks. "Never ever *ever* leaving you again."

Fetia slowly pushed back from the table, smiling at me as she covertly made her way to the door. "I will go now," she whispered as she passed. "Be happy."

With a contented smile, I clasped my necklace back around my neck and leaned against the door frame to simply enjoy his reunion with our children.

Zachary's face was tilted upward, inspecting his father with wary curiosity where Cecelia was hogging his attention. Not one to share the spotlight or go ignored, he shouted, "Bah!" at an almost ear piercing decibel.

Hugging Cecelia to his shoulder, Jack knelt beside the cradle to stare back at his miniature reflection. "I didn't forget about you, little man. I only have so many hands. How did you get so big so fast?"

Zachary's brows furrowed and his entire face reddened as he pushed out a very aggressive little growl—something he'd recently decided was his favorite thing to do—accentuating it with plenty of foaming spit bubbles.

Jack's resulting laughter served only to encourage him, and, taking a deep breath, he did it again.

Preoccupied with his son's antics, Jack failed to notice Cecelia's little fist where she sneakily coiled a length of his hair inside it and pulled with the strength of a grown man.

Laughing at the uncomfortable angle of his head, I hurried over to unravel her death grip.

“She does that a lot,” I informed him, my throat still heavy and making my words wobble. “We’ll have to cut your hair before she pulls it all out.”

He grabbed my hand with his free one before I could remove it, those magical eyes sliding up to mine as he pressed a kiss to my knuckles.

Every hair on my body stood on end.

“Jesus, you’re beautiful,” he breathed, resting my palm against his cheek so he could inhale my wrist. “You have no idea.”

Balancing Cecelia against his hip, he stood, his gaze unwavering where it remained on mine. “I know your face so well I could see it in my dreams... Spent every night looking forward to just that and every morning loathing the sun for taking you from me. But looking at you now, those dreams don’t do you justice at all.”

I touched the mess of curls I’d haphazardly twisted into a knot atop my head, wishing I’d had the foresight to wash my hair before his arrival.

“I missed you, Red,” he whispered, tilting my face up to him, “and I don’t care if Juan Jr. shows up in my memory and tells me the whole world will end unless I leave you, I’m never going anywhere without you again.”

With his palm against my cheek, he bent to capture my lips with his, and I felt the warmth of him all the way down to my toes. His kiss was soft and gentle, a small smile reshaping our mouths with the sounds of Zachary’s growls serving as a soundtrack.

It felt like an eternity had passed since last we’d kissed one another, and yet, our lips knew the other’s so well, they fell effortlessly into a familiar dance. Mine gave invitation and his pressed in, shifting from a soft reacquaintance to a desperate homecoming. The warmth inside me became a blaze, igniting every nerve ending like a dormant volcano suddenly erupting.

I grabbed hold of his shirt, begging him closer as all the pent-up emotions in us both spilled out between our joined mouths.

Grunting with amusement, he pulled away to reveal our daughter's fist had once again found a place in his hair, and I chuckled as I untangled them for the second time.

"I don't think she's ready to share you so soon," I said, unable to conceal my grin at the sight of her wide eyes staring adoringly up at her father. "I do believe she might be jealous."

He kissed the top of her head, much to her delight, and bounced her gently. "Oh, this might become a problem, baby girl," he teased, his gaze sweeping down the length of me. "Your mother happens to be a weakness of mine."

To this, her entire face scrunched and she emitted the loudest string of babbling 'yah-yah-yah's I'd ever heard from her. He tilted his head back with a deep, guttural laugh and shook his head. "But who could argue with that?"

I reached up to wipe the bead of resulting drool from her chin. "She might have powers of persuasion, but *I've* got stamina. They're both due for a nap soon enough."

"Bah!" Zachary shouted at the mention of sleep, pounding his little fists against the edge of the cradle to remind us both of his stubborn presence.

Plucking him up to balance his wiggling body against my hip, I met Jack's eyes once more. "Probably for the best we have a minute to catch up. There are about a million things I need to ask you, although right this second, I can't remember what any of them are... I'm not even sure this all isn't a part of some really wonderful dream."

Still bouncing Cecelia, he brushed a hand over her copper fuzz and smiled. "I've got a million questions of my own... starting with Bud and the others being here with you when you said in your letter they'd boarded the slave ship?"

His question spawned to life all the ones that'd been momentarily lost by the shock of his nearness. "They did, but it was commandeered by a man named Alonso Ruiz. Do you know the name?"

"Ruiz..." He frowned in concentration, and I saw the recollection come to him all at once, like a punch to his gut that knocked the wind out of his lungs. "Jesus... After everything

that's happened, I'd almost forgotten about *that*. If they're here..." Shaking his head, he motioned to one of the chairs. "That's a much bigger problem than the fire... You're gonna' wanna' sit down for a second."

My mouth suddenly too dry, I kept my gaze on him as we both lowered down into seats facing one another.

"Is it Cece?" I asked, too worried to wait for him to begin.

His responding nod punched the air out of my lungs as well.

"When she came ashore in Panama," he explained, "Dario thought she was lying about her relationship to Juan Jr. He said he needed a way to both stall us while his father turned the ship and to seek his brother out for the truth about Cece. They've known the Ruiz brothers for a long time, and he didn't think she would be harmed when he asked them to keep an eye on her so he could ride ahead."

"Harmed?" I asked in a panic.

"She's alright," he said, but the upward inflection implied that there were far more complexities behind the '*alright*' part of his statement. "I spent quite a bit of time talking to Dario about it after. Adrián was not among them at the time. He said he never would've left her with Adrián... It really was an accident."

My pulse thickened. "An accident? *What* was an accident?!"

"She had a taser," he said, attempting to keep his voice even. "She tased Lucas and Martín and started to run, but Adrián showed up... struck her across the face with something and knocked her out."

I gasped, but he adjusted Cecelia in his lap and leaned over to squeeze my bouncing knee. "Your sister is tougher than she looks, honey. Breathe."

Breathing was the furthest thing from my mind. "What then? What happened?"

I could see it was hard for him to tell the next part. "She said he had some form of ether... and he used it to keep her

knocked out so they could take her to the cabin without getting hurt in the process. After being tased, they thought she might be some kind of a witch. When they got her there, Adrián was under the assumption she was still sedated when he attempted to...”

He didn't finish the sentence, but looked up at me.

“Attempted to what?” I insisted, rage replacing the panic as I envisioned my little sister beaten and sedated in the jungle with some vile man doing ungodly things to her lifeless body.

“He was going to have his way with her,” he said, “but she fought. She dug her thumbs into his eyes and that bought her the time she needed for Juan Jr. to kill every last one of them.”

“Oh my God,” I breathed, unable to process how she could ever walk away from such a thing unscarred. I knew Cecelia McCreary wasn't the fragile girl I'd always seen her as, but something so traumatic wouldn't be easy even for a heartless monster to move past. I'd hardly had to fight Phil and memories of him still plagued my dreams. Everything in my body shook at once. “You said she was alright... but how? That's... I mean... How do you know? Did you talk to her?”

“She's fine,” he assured me, moving his thumb up and down the side of my knee. “She promised me she wasn't hurt by it—wouldn't allow such a person to hurt her. She was proud of the way she fought and said the black eye was nothing compared to the marks she left on him. It wasn't even a full day later that she and Juan exchanged vows. And I can tell she's happy. You told me to watch over her and I did. I wouldn't have left her if I wasn't sure she was in good hands.”

I hugged Zachary against me in an attempt to settle my pulse only for another thought to set it right back racing. “And to think I planned to take him from her... If I had... if he hadn't been there...”

He squeezed my knee. “You and I aren't all that sly and they were way ahead of us. No one was ever going to take him from her. You didn't tell me she watched the show too.”

A fresh wave of panic swept over me. “She read the letter? I wasn't thinking. I mean, I *really* wasn't thinking... She's got to

hate me right now... Oh God... Please tell me you didn't actually try to find him? Tell me she talked you out of it?"

Smiling, he shook his head. "No, I didn't go after him. And no, she doesn't hate you. She said to tell you she loves you and that she can't wait to live her life beside you."

Still shaken, I swatted the tears from my eyes. "I don't know how she could after I'd been so willing to ruin her life. I'm such an asshole sometimes. I don't deserve her."

He chuckled. "You're not an asshole, Red, and your sister knows you well enough to know you were just scared. So was I when that ship left. She's alright, I promise. Now, I didn't tell you all this just to upset you. We're talking about the Ruiz men and what they're doing here."

"Right." Slowly letting my body unclinch, I attempted to organize my thoughts. I considered the taser that labeled her a witch, recalling Benny's use of the word in the dining room. "Were you there when Juan killed those men?"

"No," he said gently. "I was waiting at the inn for the ancestry chart to change. I had no idea any of it was happening until it was over. Tomás was there, though. He saw Adrián strike her and went to retrieve Juan. They rode out together."

"How many of them were in the cabin?"

He grimaced. "Four."

That's when it all clicked. Alonso had *five* sons... Benny had to have been the fourth man in the cabin for him to recognize me as a witch. "He didn't kill Benny," I whispered. "We had a feeling Alonso knew more than he let on, and that confirms it. They've known *exactly* what happened to Lucas, Martín, and Adrián all along, and they're just biding their time so they can have their revenge on Juan Jr."

A worried wrinkle formed between his brows. "Juan said he killed them all. Benny's alive?"

I nodded. "He's on the other ship with his father and Jacinto. If they saw you come aboard, they might think Juan and Dario came with you... They'll assume we know what they do, and I don't think Alonso's the sort of man to give up on his

revenge that easily. I'm afraid we won't make it out of here without an altercation."

I suddenly wondered if it was Alonso that would be the source of the coming fire. Could we all get away before it was too late?

He let out a long, ragged breath. "Red, I came here with the sole intention of getting you and these babies off this ship once and for all. Captain Davis is out there right now waiting to take us wherever we wish to go. Whatever war that man might be planning is not intended for us, and we could use it as an opportunity to get as far away from here as possible... Let him and Juan Josef battle to the death while we're safe and sound on another ship."

I laid my hand over his where it remained on my knee. "Juan's likely got all that same information out of Tomás already, and he's probably got a plan of his own brewing as we speak. It'd be better for us all if we talked things through while the Sofía Martina is still far enough away not to pose an immediate threat. Sneaking around behind Juan's back has never worked for us before. We should work with him, not against him."

He looked up as if he could see through the ceiling to the top deck. "You want me to *work* with the monster that ripped my family away from me?"

I offered an apologetic grimace. "I know how crazy it might sound for me to say it, but he's had his reasons for everything he's put us through. You can hate him for it as much as you want, but you know as well as I do he's got the type of cunning mind that gives him the advantage to always be two steps ahead. We'll get home faster with him than we ever could without him."

Unable to grasp my lack of malice, I watched his eyes confusedly search mine. "How can you say that? The only reason we're still stuck in this time is because he's continuously gotten in the way of our leaving it. If I give him an opening, he'll use it to do something awful."

Repositioning Zachary against my stomach so he wasn't craning his neck to see Jack, I sighed. "He's not nearly as

heartless as he would have people think he is. It's all part of his strategy. He uses the illusion of strength and brutality to instill a sense of fear so he can outwit his presumed enemies. Really, all he wants is to save Gloria... and he'll do just about anything to accomplish that. When there was no longer a fight to put up, he became human... and I hate to say it after all he's put us through, but I trust him."

"He hasn't... touched—"

"Oh God no," I said. "My resemblance to Gloria made me appealing to him in the beginning—made it easy to use that appeal as a way to scare you into submission—but it's very clear to him that she and I are not the same, and he's been nothing but respectful since we set sail."

His nose twitched with disgust. "There's no way I can just stand up there and smile in the face of a man like that; not after the hell he's put us through."

I squeezed his hand in mine. "You don't have to smile at him, but we need him to get us out of here in one piece. As long as we're not down here coming up with plans to kill him, he won't have a reason to do anything awful."

Sweeping a hand over Cecelia's hair, he slowly shook his head. "You know he'll never let us go... Never let her go..."

"And I have plans of my own when it comes to that," I assured him. "But first, we need to figure out the best way out of the predicament we're in."

He inhaled deeply, surrendering his stubborn animosity to a softer look of adoration when his eyes met mine once more. "Alright... You're right... Let's get it over with so I can have you to myself for more than a few minutes before all hell breaks loose... again."

I smoothed my palm down Zachary's spine. "I think, if it's alright with you, I'd like to stay out of the planning this time."

He frowned. "Stay out of it? Why?"

I lifted a shoulder. "I've been doing far too much of it lately. My brain isn't wired for this kind of plotting, and tired as I am, I'll only add a level of stress and panic that'd inevitably

stifle things. Look what I almost did to Cece. You're here now, and I trust you. I don't want to be thinking about the Ruiz men or Bennet or anything that isn't you when I get you to myself. Okay?"

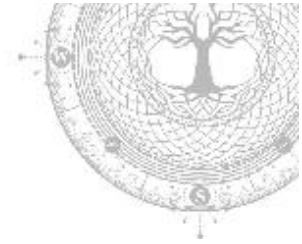
With a soft airy chuckle, he stood. "I like that your brain isn't wired for this kind of plotting, and I can't wait until we never have to plot again."

I scooped Zachary up against my shoulder and stood beside him, reaching out to pinch Cecelia's pudgy leg where he'd hoisted her up against his shoulder. "These two will be hungry soon. I'll head down and get them fed and cleaned up while you figure out our escape. Before you go up though, I do need you to tell me one thing."

He raised his brows, a slight crease of concern forming between them. "What?"

I bit my lower lip. "How'd you make the smoke that color when I have all the flares?"

The worried lines diminished from his face and the familiar smile that replaced them was contagious. "I spent my whole life in film, honey, and I know a thing or two about pyrotechnics. One of the minerals Captain Davis had on board was strontium... the very same thing they use to make fireworks red."



Chapter Thirty-One

Cecelia

I stood at the edge of the creek bordering the Shawnee village, staring out at the full moon where it reflected on the rippling water, thoughts of Maddy at the forefront of my mind.

The past ten days had been a relentless cycle: moments of misfortune met with a burst of relief, each reprieve tinged with a lingering sense of guilt that felt like misfortune.

To hope for Juan's recovery was to let go of my daughter, but to hold onto Maddy was to give up on Juan. I'd known, from the moment the first glimpses of that life had begun, I didn't have the mental fortitude to withstand memories of Maddy and be unaffected, but I hadn't been ready for just how heartbreaking they would actually be.

Every day, more and more glimpses of that life poured in, revealing the depths of my love for her—painting a picture of a child that was radiant with life and love and pure goodness, one that I would've done anything for. Knowing my life with her made it hard not to look at all the things I'd once been so stubbornly proud of in this life and not find them lackluster.

To know I would never see her face, never run my fingers through her hair or hear her laugh, never get to watch her grow past the age of seven... it felt like a part of me had died, and the part that remained was numb to the world around me...

I couldn't afford to be numb.

Much as I missed her, there was no one to blame for my broken heart but myself. And I knew I had already done far too much on this timeline to try to revert the changes I'd made, not just to my life, but to everyone's around me. I had to come to grips with this loss... couldn't let it sink me the way Evelyn had sank my sister.

Along with memories of Owen and Maddy, I gained insight into A.J.'s altered timeline too, watched the way her grief completely destroyed her life and tore her and Chris apart... I saw her shrivel inward and hide away at my campground for months on end; saw her throw away everything she had worked for in life to defeat herself in her own misery. I couldn't allow myself to do that—no matter how much I wanted to.

Becoming numb and shutting out the world was not an option. I needed to figure out how the storms worked and how we would get home safely. I needed to be rejoicing Juan's health instead of drowning in sadness, needed to be thanking the Shawnee who'd done so very much to aid in his recovery.

From the moment we'd arrived, the entire tribe had rallied around him and I owed them far more than my gratitude. Besides the initial poultice that'd stopped his bleeding, they'd provided a revolving staff of men and women who seemed intent to see him healthy. They served teas to regulate his fever and alleviate his pain. Sage and cedar were burned over him, a spiritual call to cleanse his wound as well as his soul. And they chanted ancient songs over him night and day, believed to harmonize the body's energies and hasten healing.

They hadn't just healed Juan. They'd healed us all, welcoming us unreservedly into their culture with open arms.

Lilly and I had found an unexpected friend in Charlotte Miller, and spent much of our time discussing life and time and the possibilities her life might have if she allowed herself to live it.

Dario had found a friend too with one of the men, dubbed Blue Jacket for the navy coat he always wore. He spoke very little English, but he'd still insisted on riding out with Dario on several trips to the river in search of a boat that might take us all to Norfolk. While they hadn't found a vessel to accommodate so many of us, they had found camaraderie in each other. The two of them could always be found together, sharing lessons in either archery or swordsmanship whenever they were stuck at camp. Jim quickly worked his way into their duo, and it warmed my heart to see Dario surrounded by friends he desperately needed.

Izzy, too, had been in need of a friend after so long with only adults for company. The day after our arrival, Chase Miller had been introduced to our group. Wearing those same black Nike shoes under his buckskin fabrics, he'd instantly hauled her off to introduce her to the other children. We'd worried at first about her ability to integrate, but her lack of hearing only served to hasten her understanding. Words were nothing to a girl who couldn't hear them, and she'd blended seamlessly into their daily play.

Even Chris, heartbroken and distanced from the rest of us, was always in the company of one of the tribe's elders named Mehkewa. At any given hour, I could look out toward the creek and feel heartened at the sight of the two of them sitting near it, sharing a pipe.

We owed these people so much for the amount of healing they'd given us in such a short time, and it was just as hard to know their future fate as it was to know my undone past. Soon, they would suffer at the hands of our forefathers, losing their lands and their lives until the country that had once belonged to them would become unrecognizable. All their vibrant culture and history, all their years of delicate guardianship over the nature around us would be overshadowed by the commercialism that would replace it.

After all they'd done for us, it felt immoral not to forewarn them of something. Then again, warning them of what was to come when we were about to alter our history so we could never be there at all seemed a moot point... About as moot as missing a daughter who no longer existed—who *never* existed in the life I'd been living.

Over and over, I had to remind myself that she had never been a part of me in this life, that I had been functioning perfectly fine prior to the memories of her... and I had to figure out some way to get back to the woman I'd been before I'd known the ache of her absence... before the void of being childless had nearly drown me.

A smoky voice cut through the sounds of the creek and its crickets to pull me from my endless contemplation. "Do you see those two trees there?"

Turning, I blinked at the gray haired man who'd come to stand beside me. Mehkewa spent a lot of time with Chris, but he'd never once spoken to me, and I couldn't help but look around in search of someone else the question might've been intended for.

He pointed a withered finger across the lake. "The ones that stand taller than all the rest... do you see them?"

With no one but the two of us there, I was obliged to follow his gesture and look out at the blackened silhouettes of two tall birch trees towering over the forest.

"I have always called them brothers, those two trees," he continued, a patience in the cadence of his words that was instantly calming. "They look like brothers... in the way they grow almost the same as one another but never touch... like they might have come from the same seed."

I smiled at that, noticing the strong similarities between the two. "They do look like brothers."

He turned to face me, the moonlight dancing over the labyrinth of wrinkles that had completely reshaped his face over time. "I used to tell the little ones tales of those two brothers... how they would fight against one another for the sunlight until, one day, their roots met beneath the ground, and they realized they could grow taller than all the rest if they helped one another. You see, after a while, the roots become so tangled that it is hard to tell where one ends and the other begins... To stand so tall, they had to learn to share with each other, nourish each other through their joined roots. They rely on each other to live, and if you cut down one, the other will die too." He smiled. "It was a good story for young boys... but for you, I think there is another to tell."

"For me?" I asked, intrigued that this man who'd never spoken to me before had come to tell me a story.

He looked back out at the two giants and nodded. "I think they are not brothers after all, but the exact same tree. Do you see how they grow just the same until they reach a certain point, and then, though their branches bend in varying directions, they still sprout upward at the same pace? I think they have the same

spirit inside them—and maybe many trees do—but these two were lucky for their roots to touch.”

“You know about my memories,” I said softly, following his gaze out to the forest. “Chris told you about my daughter.”

I saw him bow his head out of the corner of my eye. “Many nights I have watched you come to the water with your shoulders pointed downward—even when your husband’s health should raise them. To get a glimpse of a life you will not live might seem like a burden, but I think it is a gift to see the other side of your spirit. Just like the story of the brothers, I think you can use your shared roots for nourishment... Take what you’ve learned from memories of two lives to grow stronger in one—until your spirit towers over all who surround you.”

I forced a grateful smile. “That’s a very pretty metaphor, but I’m afraid it feels more like one of the trees has been cut down and I’m slowly dying without it. It’s crazy really. Before I knew her, I was so certain this life I’d chosen was perfect... But now that I’ve seen her, it’s hard to keep living without the heartbreak of losing her. I know I can’t have them both, but I can’t stop myself from wishing I could.”

I felt his gaze slide to my face. “Those trees do not mourn for the branches of the other. One tree has lost nothing for the direction the other tree takes upward. Maybe your spirit was too big for just one life and so it was split into two. One half is rooted in this world, and the other rooted somewhere beside you. You haven’t lost anything, and one day, when your big spirit becomes whole once more, you will understand... You will see you have *always* had them both.”

Much as I always did when conversation leaned toward the mystical, I did my best to brush it off without being outwardly dismissive. “Thank you. That’s a really beautiful way to think about it.”

Not to be shunned so easily, he inspected me for a long moment and frowned. “You do not believe in the spirit.”

It wasn’t a question, and the way he said it made me feel like *I* was the nonsensical one between us. “I wish I could—I really do. I would love to see the world the way you do, but I just... can’t make it make sense. It’s too easy to prove wrong.”

He plucked a white feather from the end of his braid and held it up, the moonlight illuminating the jagged wrinkles, veins, and darkened patches of his skin as he twisted it between his fingers. “Before winter, a bird flies to warmer air. A young bird, taking its first flight, already knows this path and when to take it, even if there are no other birds to guide it. It has never been shown the way, never been told where or when to go, and yet, just before winter, it flies south anyway. How does it know, if not for a memory—a spirit with answers passed down from a bird who’s flown it once before?”

He handed me the feather and grinned. “I believe the spirit is too curious to quiet so easily in the death of one of its lives. It seeks answers, moving from one life to the next to collect as much wisdom as it can hold. Some spirits have lived more lives than others. With so much knowledge inside them, they forget they are still curious, thinking they already have an answer to the questions life presents to them. Maybe you are just an old soul that thinks you have all the answers.”

“Maybe,” I agreed with an airy laugh, spinning the feather so the blue moonlight danced over its vanes. “I wonder what would happen to an old soul that doesn’t have any questions left to ask?”

The wrinkles on his face seemed to rearrange themselves with the size of his smile. “Perhaps they are split into two.”

It was very hard not to appreciate the way he so effortlessly could bring his lesson full circle. The Shawnee really were a very insightful people and had a beautiful way of seeing things.

And this thought brought me back to the ones that had been plaguing me when I’d first come down to the shore.

“You’ve all done so much for us,” I said, “and I feel like there’s something I should tell you... about the future of your people.”

“We already know,” he assured me, nodding when I shifted my gaze from the feather to his face. “Charlotte told us this morning. Unlike you, our spirits are still young and curious, and we will live on for some time still... long after you think we have perished.”

Charlotte...

Despite my inner conflicts, I couldn't help but feel a little lighter that she'd broken her own rule in telling them. The poor girl had been so afraid to make even the smallest mark on time, she'd barely allowed herself a life at all. Perhaps this was a sign that she might live after all.

Taking a step closer, Mehkewa patted my hand. "Do not waste your curiosity worrying for us. We have many lives left to live. I think I will look for you when *my* spirit is reborn. I will be anxious to see such an old soul again—to know that you have found peace and made sense of this life... to see if you've been able to connect again with the other side of your spirit."

He turned to leave and I extended the feather back to him. Grinning, he held up his palm and shook his head. "A gift to remind you of the questions you haven't yet answered."

With a gentle nod, he moved back toward camp, leaving me with only the lingering echo of his words.

I looked back out to the two giant shadows overlooking the forest. Perhaps time wasn't just one tree, as Samuel Van Thorpe had told Charlotte, but a whole forest... Maybe it wasn't a looping spirograph pattern like I'd always pictured, but an endless wooded landscape of the twisting branches that made up our lives.

An image of Maddy standing beneath a pine flashed in my mind and my shoulders sank. It didn't matter how many pretty metaphors I might come up with to explain her absence, the loss would forever live inside me—like a lead bullet moving around beneath my skin, a constant reminder of my decision to live without her.

Would the ache of it being there dull with time? Would I be able to live in this life and see the magic once more? Could I take the memory of being Maddy's mother and use it to shower a child in this life with that same unwavering amount of love?

I glanced down at the little white quill in my fingers, spinning it to catch the bits of brown that spotted its barbs. How *did* a bird know to fly south? While many had come up with

theories to explain their inherent knowledge of migration patterns, none had ever been proven as fact.

Could I accept that birds just knew the way and there was a little bit of magic to this life after all? And could that magic numb the ache of being childless by offering hope for an afterlife where I'd meet her again?

A familiar hint of almonds caught the breeze and a set of sturdy arms wound around me. "Aren't you cold out here, *mi paloma*?"

I closed my eyes and basked in the warmth of his body behind mine. "Not anymore. You're really not in the condition to be walking all the way down here. Is it hurting?"

He tucked in a little closer, inhaling my hair. "It is not the wound that ails me. You've been quiet, dove. *Too* quiet. And your silence is far more excruciating than any bullet could ever be. Tell me what is hurting you so deeply so I might heal you as you've healed me."

I hadn't meant to tell him, but the words came out like a gasp for air, uncontrollable as they passed my lips. "I remembered my daughter."

His hold around me tightened. "I was afraid you had when I continued to wake up and find my arms empty of you. Do you regret choosing this life with me?"

"No," I said quickly. "I mean..." My words trembled despite my attempt to appear confident and strong. "It's like this huge piece of me has been suddenly ripped away. But it's a piece of me that wasn't there before—not on this timeline—and I'm not sure why it's so hard to go on without it when it never hindered me previously. It hurts so much... So very much, I can hardly stand it... but I did it to myself... and much as it hurts, there's no doubt in my mind that this is where I belong. It has to be... I just... can't make it make sense."

He pressed a kiss against the side of my head, wrapping the fur blanket he'd been covered in over my shoulders as he held me closer. "You know, when Philip died, I was certain I'd died with him. I didn't mean to have a favorite, but Nicolás was so young still and Philip was this whole person already. I loved

him more than anything in this world. It was my job to protect him, to raise him up into a man, and I failed. That failure is not lost, *mi paloma*. I feel it even on the best of days. If it were possible, I'd move heaven and earth just to hold my boys in my arms one more time. It's not possible for me, but I could find a way to make it possible for you... Will you let me try?"

Slowly, I shook my head. "What if you or Chris or Jack or Jim would've died on that ship without me there to load those guns when the Nikora came? What if there was no memory of you warning me to get Jack off that ship and all hell broke loose between him and your father so there was no one left to kill Bennet when it was over? What if Adrián got a hold of someone else who didn't have you to come rescue them? What if Maria jumped off that cliff in Panama and we had no way to get that roster from Charles Carter without her? It's too much to risk. Maddy isn't real... not in this life. I just have to find a way to accept that."

He moved his thumb along the edge of his jaw. "When all this is over, *my* sons will have never existed. That doesn't make them any less real. Tell me what was she like?"

I rested my head against his good shoulder to stare out at the two twin birch trees in the distance. "She was... brilliant. In every way a person can be brilliant, she was. From the moment she was born, her eyes just sparkled with curiosity."

I half-laughed as Mehkewa's words blended into my own. "Like some old soul putting together pieces of a much larger puzzle. She needed to know everything there was to know—asked a thousand questions and was excited to learn more. The world was her playground, and she was so damn happy, you couldn't help but be anything less than ecstatic when she was with you. Her smile could light up the darkest of rooms. I know I chose a life without her, but it seems cruel that I'd have no memory of her when I did it."

He took a deep breath. "If you want that life back now—"

"No," I cut in. "I told you, I'm right where I belong."

"I could give her to you," he persisted, "then kidnap you when it's time to bring you here so you can do all you've done"

here once more. Even if you never remember our time together, we could fall in love again in some other way...”

I shook my head. “We’re right where we’re meant to be. I don’t want to fall in love in any other way.”

“But if I could—”

“You can’t.” I reached back to brush my palm over his cheek. “I’m right where I’m meant to be, Joseph...” I looked back out at the two trees in the distance. “So is she.”

I willed myself to believe it, to look at those two trees and see some parallel life where she was thriving. I would thrive beside her, and I would find a way to see her again... someday... even if it meant believing in something I could never allow myself before.

“Why did you not tell me sooner?”

I raised a shoulder. “I thought I could get past it on my own. You have enough to worry about, and I didn’t want you getting any ideas of putting my life back to what it was—didn’t want you to think my memories of her nullified any of the things I’ve built here with you.”

“I am not so insecure to think myself unloved because you are sad, Cecelia.” He pressed his lips to my temple. “I experienced our love the same way you did, and I know it is real. You are my wife, and I want to know the things that you know, to share the burden of the things that pain you so I might offer comfort when you need it. Unless you hide because you mourn him too?”

“Him?” I asked, momentarily forgetting that a part of those memories included a husband that wasn’t Juan. “Oh... Owen...”

“Yes, Owen,” he said gently. “I’m assuming you remember him now too?”

I nodded and sighed. “He and I were toxic for one another. I was just too young to know as much when we married. About six months after A.J.’s plane disappeared, I left him. Maddy and I moved into A.J. and Chris’s house to be close to my mother. I suppose I loved him once, but I loved Maddy more, and I

couldn't let her grow up with an alcoholic father any longer. It was too dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Juan asked, stiffening behind me. "Did he hurt her? Or... you?"

I looked back out over the water, remembering it once more as I shook my head. "Not on purpose. He was just... absent. We lived on a campground in the woods, and everything can be dangerous for a small child left unsupervised up there. She fell through the ice once and nearly died when he was supposed to be watching her. He promised to give up the drinking after that, and I didn't want to separate her from her father after A.J. and I had grown up without one."

I sighed. "He was good for a while... Good enough that I started to trust him with her. And I suppose I got too comfortable—too distracted. That summer after the plane crash was just as hard for me on that timeline as it was on this one. I was devastated and determined to find my sister. When Maddy was occupied, I spent every bit of my spare time on the internet looking for signs of A.J. or a crew that would go out in search of her plane in the Pacific. Owen offered to take her out on the four-wheeler for a while so I could spend a few hours online, and I foolishly let them go... See, he'd been sneaking alcohol behind my back by then and I had no idea. He shouldn't have been driving *anything* that day. When both of them came back hours later covered in scratches and bruises, I smelled it on him. And however much I once loved him, I wasn't willing to risk her life anymore."

A knot found its way into my throat and I broke down like a child—nonsensical and ridiculous in just about every way I could be. "It's not fair! Why couldn't I have her with you? She was so wonderful, Joseph, and she deserved someone as wonderful as you to admire. You would've loved her. God, she would've loved you! Why couldn't you just show up at that party and marry me right then and there? Why does it have to be a life with Owen or a life with pieces of shit like Greg to stain whatever memories I might've been proud of? Why couldn't I have her in a life with you? Maybe she'd look a little different, but couldn't she still be her? In some way? Is it too much to ask for you both?"

He turned me toward him, and I growled through my own tears as I hid them against his chest. “I know how stupid that sounds when I did this to myself... But what reason is there to get these memories now? If your God exists, why is he doing this to me? You’re not dying anymore, and yet... the memories are still coming. Why? What am I supposed to do with this? I can’t have her—can’t *ever* have her after all the changes I’ve made to our lives—so why do I keep remembering her? And how do I make it stop?”

He rested his lips against the top of my head and wrapped both arms around me. “I do not have those answers, *mi alma*. I wish I did... I wish I could give her to you and know all else would remain the same. I would try if you let me.”

“How did you keep going?” I asked. “After they died, I mean. How are you still standing at all knowing you’ll never have them again?”

He made a noise in his throat, smoothing his palm up and down my spine. “I killed a lot of men who didn’t deserve to die.”

I could suddenly relate to that because there was a deep seated rage at the world inside me that made me want to hurt someone—*anyone*—just to numb the pain of living without her.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I know it’s not the right time to break down like this... I just... I couldn’t hold it in any longer.”

“I’ve got you,” he assured me, tucking me into his chest where I could feel his bandage beneath my cheek. “I’ve always got you, Cecelia. There is nothing to be sorry for.”

“You should be resting,” I said defeatedly, making no move to pull myself from his embrace. “Not out here coddling me.”

He combed his hand down my hair. “Don’t tell me what I should be doing when I’ve got you in my arms. I’m right where I’m meant to be, and will remain right here for as long as I’m able to hold on.”

We both stood in silence for a long, long while, listening to the crickets and katydids that came to life around us. Not once did his arms slacken their hold, despite the bullet in his chest that was likely tormenting him for doing so.

Very slowly, the familiar smell and feel of him allowed my mind a much needed reprieve from its memories of Maddy, replacing them with memories of him... waking up on the ship with his hand in mine... those dark eyes lightening the first time he'd lifted me up into his arms... the way his voice had trembled when we'd exchanged vows in the mud... and the sheer joy of touching him every moment after and knowing he was mine.

“Do you think,” I cleared my throat, turning a little to glance at the two tall trees in the distance, “maybe those lives we lived are still out there somewhere? Like... even after we change things, there will still be some version of our pasts left behind where Philip and Maddy once lived?”

“I would not be standing here,” he whispered, “if I didn't believe in such a thing. I'll see my sons again just as you'll see your daughter.” He moved my hand to his chest where his tattoo was covered by the bandage. “I am certain they're watching over us from somewhere better.”

“What if we could see them again... before we die?” I asked, pulling back just enough to look up at him. “If we could figure out how time works—how traveling through it works... Do you think maybe we could steal a glimpse of their lives here and there? Travel back to some old timeline of ours just to watch them from a distance for an hour or two?”

He traced the edge of my cheek. “I believe anything is possible, and if you figure out a way to visit them, I can think of nothing better than getting an opportunity to meet your Maddy... or to see you smile at my Philip.”

He moved to slide one of his hands in mine, but paused, inspecting the feather still in my grip. “Where'd you get this?”

Holding it up, I turned to twist it against the moonlight once more. “Mehkewa gave it to me.”

“How fitting,” he said, tracing the edge of it with his pinky, “that he would give *you* a dove's feather.”

Surprised by this, I turned it slowly from one side to the other, and couldn't help but feel a little surge of magic between my fingers. Mehkewa couldn't possibly have known that Juan

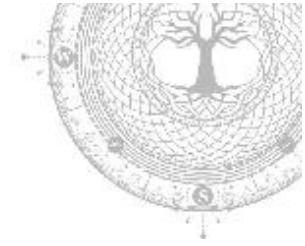
had referred to me as *his dove* from the moment we'd met, but somehow it felt like he did... Like he'd handed me this very feather as a reminder of the life my spirit belonged in.

I rested my head back against him and smiled. "You know what? I *am* going to figure out how the storm works, and the minute I do, we're going to visit our children."

"I have no doubt in my mind that you will," he said, stiffening his hold on me, "and we'll need to be on our way now so you can. We've delayed our journey long enough on my account, and I'll not stall it longer waiting for a boat to take us such a short distance. March is approaching and we cannot miss the storm; cannot afford to remain that much longer in the past because of an ache in my chest. I'll manage with a little pain, but there are people who will not manage at all if I am not able to remember them in time. We'll spend tomorrow offering the tribe our gratitude, and then, the following morning, we'll say our goodbyes."

"But—"

He tucked in closer. "This bullet will cease to exist soon enough, and I will happily live with the pain of it for a few days to ensure no additional lives are lost by the changes we make to history."



Chapter Thirty-Two

Alaina

“So much for stamina,” Jack whispered, his breath tickling my cheek where he hovered just above me.

Blinking back into a dazed half-consciousness, I wiped the drool from my mouth and sat up.

When had I fallen asleep?

The last thing I remembered was Jack heading up to the deck to scheme with Juan while I went down to bathe myself and our children... I’d fed them dinner, then put them down for a nap... I must’ve dozed off when they did.

Mortified, I squinted up at him where he was rocking Matty against his shoulder, the window beyond them now darkened by the arrival of night. “Oh God, it’s dark? I didn’t mean to pass out!” I blearily searched the bed for Zachary and Cecelia only to find Bud seated on the floor with them, engaged in an adorable game of peek-a-boo.

Rubbing my eyes, I looked back up at Jack’s amused grin and groaned. “I’m sorry. I was going to come up after I fed them, and I must’ve just... I mean... God, I feel like such a jerk. What did I miss? Do we have a plan to get out of here in one piece?”

He kissed the top of Matty’s head and nodded. “We do. You up for giving me a tour of this secret chamber I’ve been told exists behind the fireplace? We’ll be needing to use its hatch tomorrow. Maybe I’ll tell you about it once we’re in there and your eyes open the rest of the way.”

I shook my head, sliding my legs over the edge of the bed with a grunt. “I’m such an asshole for falling asleep the very second I finally get you back. I’ve waited so long for you to be

here...There's something seriously wrong with me. I'm so sorry."

He gently bounced Matty, inhaling the top of his head as I got my feet beneath me. "Don't be. It gave me a second to meet this little guy." He leaned closer to whisper, "Besides, you needed the rest. I don't plan on doing much sleeping later."

That playful insinuation stirred something to life inside me. The muscles in my face struggled to form the type of smile his words elicited, reminding me of the joy I'd been missing.

All those countless days and nights spent masquerading strength amidst Daniel Bacallar and the slaver crew... All the focus I'd put into figuring out the storms and the Mandela effects... The constant struggle to maintain middle ground with Juan and the hard work I'd invested in the guidelines... I'd been so rigid for so long, I hardly recognized my lightened heart.

As Jack handed Matty back to Fetia, my gaze lingered on him, a rush of warmth spreading through me as I took in the familiarity of every tiny gesture: the almost sarcastic upward quirk in his lips, the gentle way his thumb caressed Matty's back during the exchange, the familiar crease that appeared between his brows as he ensured Fetia had a firm hold. *My* Jack, the man I'd missed every minute of every torturous day, the man I'd dreamt of nightly, that I'd prayed for daily, was actually there... in the very same room I stood in... It hit me then, harder than it had before, that this wasn't another dream. My husband had returned, and the weight of all the days and nights without him diminished to leave a knot in my throat far too large to swallow.

I bent to retrieve the twins from the floor, but Bud, seemingly aware of the emotions swelling inside me, waved me off. "Honey, they're clean, fed, and happy. There's nothing you can offer them tonight that we can't. These two have had the past couple hours to reunite with Jack. It's your turn now."

"A-are you sure?" I stammered, glancing at Zachary, who was not a fan of being anywhere I wasn't. "He can be a bit much lately."

"Bah," Bud answered, crossing his eyes at my children. Both Cecelia and Zachary howled with laughter and delighted gibberish, each watching his face in anticipation of whatever

amusing gesture might come next. “I may be an old fart, but I’ve learned a thing or two about how to handle crying babies over the years. Go on. These two will be just fine with their grandpa Bud to take care of them.”

I pressed a kiss against his cheek and whispered, “Thank you... so much.”

“No need to be here kissing me,” he said with a chuckle, “when you’ve got a perfectly good husband over there waiting for you.”

Blinking back tears of joy, I met Jack’s gaze. He was leaning casually against the fireplace, but his gaze was anything but casual. It was that deep, adoring look I’d seen countless times. I’d dreamt of it every night since we’d been separated. Visions of us together, against a myriad of backdrops, had constantly flashed in my mind, always centered around that unwavering stare. A stare that silently declared, for reasons I would never comprehend, that I held an irreplaceable place in his heart.

With tentative steps, I approached him, every stride echoing the giddy excitement that was almost pouring out of me. I felt like a teenager about to experience her first kiss, suddenly self-conscious, my hands fidgety until they found their rightful place: with him.

I fumbled to get the key out of my pocket fast enough as he lightly brushed his fingers over my shoulder to send a chill up my spine.

“Just the sight of you walking toward me,” he breathed against the back of my neck, “you have no idea how much I’ve missed even that.”

‘Indeed, I do,’ I thought to myself, the words too thick in my throat to actually vocalize.

Prying the shield on the mantel out, I hurriedly shoved the key into its hole and turned it to engage the pulley system. Tears fighting to spill over my cheeks, the system clicked and groaned into gear, and I grabbed hold of his hand.

‘Indeed I do,’ I thought again at the familiar feel of his callouses against my fingers—at the sense of home that was his

thumb brushing over my knuckles. I tugged him into the lantern-lit interior the very instant the opening was wide enough.

Unlike everyone else I'd shown the secret chamber to, Jack's eyes didn't move across the shelves. His mouth didn't drop open in wonderment. He made no comments about how much time we'd spent searching for something similar, nor did he stop to inspect the pulley system that controlled it. Instead, he waited for the door to close, then pulled me to him and wrapped both arms around me, squeezing me as tightly as he was able.

Resting my cheek against the familiar warmth of his chest, I let out a sigh that seemed like it'd been building inside me for two months before I managed, "Did I tell you I missed you?"

His hold tightened and he pressed his lips against the top of my head, rocking us gently. "So far, you've mostly cried and slept."

I smiled against him, the tears I'd been uselessly fighting spilling out as if brought to life by his acknowledgement of them. "Well, I missed you... so much. I've been such a mess without you."

"Mmm, I disagree," he said, smoothing his palm over hair. "With the mess part, anyway. I saw the document you've been working on, and I—"

"You what?" A surge of panic swept over me as I pushed back to look up at him. For as much effort as I'd put into those pages, I hadn't been ready to share them so soon. I still wasn't entirely convinced, even with the Elvis photo, that my ideas were anything more than fantasy, particularly whenever I thought of showing them to Jack. He was a realist in every sense of the word, and I couldn't imagine how outlandish my ideas would seem to him. "I wasn't ready for you to see that. It's... I mean... I was going to talk to you about it before—"

He pressed his finger against my lips and smiled. "It's brilliant, Alaina. *You're* brilliant."

Still caught somewhere between happy tears and panicked ones, I was caught entirely off guard by his lack of resistance.

“I... You... I mean... you don't think it's ridiculous?”

His brows raised in surprise. “Ridiculous? Why would I think that?”

“Because...” I blinked the moisture from my eyes. “I mean... Sending people back through time after all this... I was so sure you'd hate the idea.”

Slowly, he shook his head, his gaze softening as he wrapped a piece of my hair around his finger. “Honey, do you have any idea how difficult it was to spend day after day with your own descendant and not see bits of yourself in him?”

He let out a long sigh, finally peering around the chamber to examine the shelves until his eyes landed on the Perez family portrait near the bed. “Everyone says Dario looks like you... And he does... But there are bits of me in there too.”

I hadn't expected that. Dario had never exactly been a friend to us, particularly after his role in my sister's torment, and I watched him closely as he stared at the photo with a far-off sort of affection.

“Some of the things he says,” he continued. “Or... His facial expressions when he's mad about a thing... The way he cares about what everyone around him thinks... Whether I wanted him to or not, there's no denying he came from me. And every day I spent with him made it harder and harder not to see him as my family... not to feel pride in the man he is sometimes... To know I would take his life away by simply going home and staying there? It ate away at me. I racked my brain every night, thinking up ways I could give Cecelia a life in both centuries so he could live.”

He turned back to look at me, something like awe pulling the corners of his lips upward. “But you? What you've thought of and planned for? The way you've actually managed to organize a future where our children can have the best of, not just two centuries, but infinity, itself? The way you've come up with the means to give Gloria and Dario their lives without robbing Cecelia and Zachary of theirs? Red, I couldn't be more proud. I mean it. You're brilliant.”

I blushed. “Oh... well, Juan and Magna helped a lot... And it’s not finished...”

He tilted my face up so he could meet my eyes. “I know the difference between my wife’s thoughts and theirs, and I’m proud of *you*. Let me be.”

The size of my smile made my eyes water again. Despite clearing my throat countless times, my words still barely came out in a whisper for the knot permanently lodged there. “How are you here? What happened out there?”

He grinned, his gaze venturing down to my lips as he moved his thumb across them. “That’s a very long story, and I’ll be happy to tell it to you. Before I do, I need to get a look at this hatch to make sure we can all get out of it safely. And then, I desperately need to touch every single inch of my brilliant wife.”

A warmth swept up the very center of me in anticipation, forcing my eyes closed for a split second before I actually heard the first part of his statement. “The hatch...” I blinked back to reality, pointing across the room. “It’s... on the other side of the bed... We have a plan to use it?”

With his palm still cradling my cheek, he scanned my face as if he were attempting to absorb all the details his dreams hadn’t been able to conjure. “We do.”

His eyes followed his fingers as he gently traced each of my eyebrows. “Captain Davis sailed ahead a while ago. Juan agreed I need to get you and the babies off this ship, but we need to do it in a way that prevents the crew Ruiz supplied from seeing us.”

“Through the hatch...” I frowned up at him as my still sleepy mind attempted to keep up. “But if Captain Davis sailed ahead, where will we go? With ten people all crammed inside a sloop made for two, I don’t think we’ll be able to row to shore.”

His eyes remained on mine as he combed the hair back from my face, no signs of panic whatsoever in his expression. “Davis’s ship will be hidden in an inlet up the coast. It’ll be late when we reach it, and the dark will cover us when we push the boat out of the hatch. Juan and Mr. Gil have come up with a

diversion that will serve as a signal when we're close to the inlet. It'll also keep the crew's eyes off the water while we row out."

"We're leaving Juan?" I asked. "I mean... he doesn't plan to come with us?"

I could see that same flicker of confusion pass over his eyes at my lack of spite for the man who'd kidnapped us, but he brushed it away and shook his head. "Alonso will have seen the smoke, and he'll have seen men rowing toward this ship. But at the distance he's kept, he wouldn't have been able to make out our faces. The only man among us Benny would be able to recognize is Tomás, and he'll be hidden in here with us tomorrow if Alonso decides to approach—which we don't believe he'll do. The narrative we set on deck is that we sailed out to inform Juan that his sons are *not* in Virginia as he thought, but in Wilmington, North Carolina instead."

"North Carolina?" I asked.

His lip quirked upward. "We have to pass *Charleston* to get to North Carolina. He's planning to use the fire as a way to lose them."

"Lose them?" I breathed. "Don't you mean *kill* them?"

He shook his head, lovingly stroking my cheek. "I mean *lose* them. Juan doesn't think Alonso will approach at all—at least, not for a few days. He won't know who came aboard here and he'll need time to adjust his strategy. As soon as the gap between ships starts to close, Juan will start the fire. With the amount of gunpowder in the hull, this ship will be completely burned by the time Alonso catches up to it. And it'll be too far from the shore for anyone who might jump off to be able to swim or row the distance. When he searches whatever crew is left and doesn't find Juan among them, he should just sail on toward Wilmington, assuming Juan is dead... and be embedded in his search on land there when we sail past on Davis's ship the following day."

I smiled, glancing at the shelf door across the room. "Smoke and mirrors..."

“Exactly.” His fingers made a trail down the sides of my throat.

“But... after he starts the fire,” I continued, “Juan Josef’s not the sort of man to plan out a suicide mission. How, exactly, does he plan to disappear?”

He shrugged, finally pulling away to turn toward the hatch. “All he told me was that he’ll be ready for us when we sail past the rubble, and if he doesn’t show up on deck, he’ll find us again one way or another. I wasn’t exactly concerned enough about his survival to ask those kinds of questions.”

I followed him to the other side of the bed, debating just how Juan might escape as Jack knelt beside the hinged ladder. “Careful when you release the latch. Juan said the whole thing will collapse down. I’ve never tried it, but he says it’s a pretty far distance to fall. Make sure you keep your feet outside the door.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he teased, unhooking the lock to push the entire thing down into darkness. He quickly began down the wooden rungs, his voice bouncing back up after his head disappeared from view. “So you and him... you’re friends now?”

“I don’t know that I’d call us friends,” I said, inching to the edge to peek down into the blackness that’d swallowed him. “But I don’t suppose we’re enemies anymore either.”

“Did you forget he killed Anna?”

“No,” I said. “But I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the same thing if it’d been me stuck here without you for twenty years and I saw it as a way to get you back—to give the twins a life of memories with their father. We’re really not all that different from him if you think about it. Look at us, hurrying off to kill George Bennet as a means to bring *our friend* back to life... I’m sure George Bennet’s family and friends might think of us as the same kinds of monsters when all this is over.”

A clunking noise and a grunt rang out from the darkness, and a sliver of blue moonlight lit the space nearly two stories down. I watched as he returned to the ladder to peer up at me.

“We were going to stop them before they could ever get to Bennet.”

The shock of his confession was overshadowed by my awareness that the walls around us couldn't be trusted not to overhear it. I hurried to slide my feet over the edge and climb down to the little space with him.

“You can't say things like that so loud here,” I hissed once I was close enough to whisper. “Why on earth would you try to stop them when we're this close? And who is *we*?”

When I hopped off the ladder, the sight of the water rushing past outside the open hatch hit me suddenly, leaving me feeling dizzy. It was a vantage point I wasn't used to, and the sheer speed at which we moved was disorienting.

“Because Maria's pregnant,” Jack admitted, grabbing my arm to steady me. “And she won't be if we kill Bennet.”

Pregnant...

My heart stopped.

A tidal wave of imagery washed over me all at once: Chris's face when he'd seen our positive pregnancy test; the sheer excitement he'd had to become a father, and the way he'd then made it a point in the following months to come home with some item, be it a teddy bear or a blanket or an image from the internet of a nursery that inspired him to create a space for his child...

Despite all our problems, there had never been any doubt in my mind that Chris would've been an amazing father. He'd been devastated when we lost Evelyn... But this, Maria's pregnancy, was a glimmer of hope, a chance at redemption. If Maria was pregnant, he could have another opportunity to be the father I'd always dreamt he'd become.

I frowned up at Jack. “What do you mean, she won't be if we kill Bennet? You don't know that.”

“Yes, I do,” he sighed, running a hand over his face where the weight of the truth seemed to age him in real-time. “She got pregnant when they went to the future, when they went to search for June. In the alternate timeline, you know Anna would go to

the future with them, desperate as she was to get to Liam, and she'd have been in California. Her location would've put her closer to Albuquerque to seek out June instead, and they would've never ended up at that hotel to conceive. It was an impulsive moment, and Chris was positive it wouldn't happen the same."

Noticing the tremble in his voice, I gazed up at him, struck by the depth of emotion I saw there. The last time I'd seen Jack and Chris together, a palpable tension hung between them, one I didn't think could ever be diffused. Yet now, seeing him mourn the potential loss of a future that wasn't even his made me that much more aware of the type of man I'd married—one that harbored deep compassion and a sense of responsibility for even those he had his differences with.

I closed my fingers around his. "Hey... We'll make it work. There's time to figure this out still. It's going to be alright."

He cleared his throat, staring out at the ocean through the open hatch. "It's just... Chris sought me alone to help him. I looked him in the eyes and I saw the same kind of panic I'd have if it was you pregnant with the twins and everyone was planning to undo the circumstances that put them in your belly."

With a thick swallow, he shook his head. "I've never seen someone so excited to be a father, like his whole existence became solely dedicated to fatherhood the very minute he found out she was pregnant. He was gonna stop them from killing Bennet, and I promised to help him. But then I found out the name of this ship... remembered the fire... and instead of helping him, I exposed him right before I left. I thought, if I couldn't get to you in time to save you from it, I was going to make damn sure the fire could be undone... I thought I was being valiant, but... I don't recognize the monster that would do that to him without so much as a flinch. I didn't even think to be ashamed of myself until now. What kind of man am I becoming here?"

My thoughts again drifted to Evelyn, to the NICU and the way Chris had been a pillar of strength for both of us—despite watching the child he'd wanted more than anything slip away. All that love he had inside him... all that good... He was

everything a father was supposed to be, and he didn't deserve to lose another child.

He hadn't asked for any of this—none of us had. Juan had shown up and made a mess of everything that should've been good and easy. This wasn't our mess... it was his... and it wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

Turning to face Jack, I cupped his face in both my palms. “You are the best man I know and you're doing what you can in a situation they put you in. The master's log on that computer has an entry on it that hasn't been written yet. Juan Jr. wrote it, and, since the physical log is still on this ship, that means we're going to catch up to the others before they can get to Bennet. There's time to make new plans and people that *owe* us whatever miracles need to be made in our pasts to undo the damage they've put on us. If they want Gloria; if they want this time traveling future we've been building, they'll do the bidding we ask. This isn't your burden. It's theirs. We didn't want Bennet dead, *they* did... Whatever mistakes have been made because of their pursuit of him, they'll have to undo. Nobody's going home with a loss.”

He paused, running his fingers through his hair, a gesture I'd come to recognize as an attempt to push his emotions away. “God, I'm sorry, Red. I didn't mean to get so suddenly worked up... especially now—here, with you. This whole situation... it's just... it hadn't hit me what I did to him until now.”

“*You* didn't do anything to him,” I said gently. “They did. And they'll have plenty of time to fix it. They're the puppeteers behind all of this. And it's far from over. We can still change things.” Aiming to redirect his attention, I glanced around us and asked, “You came down here for a reason, right?”

He looked momentarily distracted before his gaze sharpened, focusing on the open hatch and the sloop by the ladder. “Right... I had to ensure we could all...” He trailed off, scanning the area before nodding slowly. “We'll fit. It won't be comfortable, but it'll do.”

“Good.” Taking his hand, I squeezed it reassuringly. “Now, come with me. There's something I think you should see.”



Back inside the secret chamber, I spread out the large parchment with Juan Jr.'s chart over the mattress while Jack pulled the ladder back up.

Seated at the head of the bed, I waited for him to sit down beside me to move my fingers over the two timelines. "Juan Jr. has been mapping out every single detail of the past and the future and all the variations of it. See here?"

I traced the alternative paths on both sides of the chart. "He's likely come to the same conclusion I did about his family's role in fixing whatever gets broken. They'll have years to perfect this once they show up on their other timelines, but... look at all these dates. There's no way one man, or even two, could be in all these places at the same time. Much as he might want to kill his father, I don't think he will... He needs him to fix everything their plan has broken." I plucked up my pen and found the line in 2020 that marked Chris's surgery. "When did they go to Albuquerque?"

"July," he said, frowning in concentration. "Second week of July."

"Alright then." I added a dot and a box of my own to Juan Jr.'s diagram, scribbling in '*Maria and Chris go to Albuquerque in search of June.*'

Smiling up at him, I lifted a brow. "There's a briefcase in the corner over there that only Juan Josef knows the combination to. The master's log is inside it. As I have no intention to bring that briefcase with us tomorrow night, I imagine it should serve as insurance that we'll see him again. In the morning, I'm going to give him this." I patted the chart. "And inform him that every single item listed out on this paper is *his* responsibility to see accounted for. Gloria's life will depend on it."

Jack's gaze darted from the timelines to me, his expression washed over with surprise. "You don't think it's a bad idea to give a man like him an ultimatum? Particularly when there's a twenty-year gap in time he could use against you?"

Smiling slowly as clarity came to me, I shook my head. “All this time, we’ve looked at him like he’s been the one in control... Like he’s had something to hold over our heads... But not once—not *once*—in all this did he ever have the upper hand. We did. Even with a gap in time, he needs us—needs our daughter—if he wants to have a life with Gloria in it.”

He glanced at the shelves around us. “You’re not afraid he’s listening to us? What if he tries to steal her away again if you threaten him?”

I raised a shoulder. “You think he didn’t know that we’re the ones in control?” I breathed out a laugh. “He’s known it far longer than I have.” I pointed at Chris and Maria’s names with my pen. “He owes us this. He owes us *far more* than this. If he’s listening, then that’s one less thing for me to have to tell him before we leave here. I know him too well to ever be afraid of him. I know he won’t steal our baby because *he* knows too well what a difference a mother can make... and he knows there’s no certainty he’d get Gloria without me there to teach her ancestor to be a mother. Fuck him. He doesn’t get to ruin all our lives and then live his as if none of it ever happened. He’ll fix all of this. And if he doesn’t, he should be far more afraid of what I’m capable of doing to him than I will ever be of his gap in time.”

He stared at me for a long moment, the intensity of his gaze making my heart skip a beat. It was as if he was seeing a side of me he hadn’t fully recognized before.

“I love you,” he whispered, his voice filled with an almost overwhelmed sense of wonder. “You brilliant, badass, goddess of a woman, I love you.”

I hardly had time to push the chart off the bed before he was over me, staring down into each of my eyes with a fire in his I’d dreamt of endlessly. “All this time I thought I was the one coming to your rescue... but you’ve never needed rescuing.” He lowered down so I could feel the familiar weight of his body against mine, his fingers combing back the hair from my temples. “I love you for being the type of woman that could put up with all that man’s put us through and still find the strength to beat him at his own game... for somehow managing to be a mother to our children while you did it... If I’d known

you existed years ago, it would've been *me* with a poster of you on my wall growing up.”

Grinning, I draped my arms loosely around his neck, “I love you too, Volmer... more than there are stars in the sky or water in the ocean... Maybe more than any woman has ever loved any man in any world. And I *will* love you for as long as I have a soul to love you with.”

Glancing down at my mouth, a teasing smirk formed on his lips. “Was that... a rehearsed line you just gave me?”

I gasped in fake outrage, delighted to see a more playful part of him emerging. “No!”

“I think it was...”

I bit my lower lip and watched him notice it. “Unlike *some people*, I happen to be able to think of romantic words on the fly, thank you.”

Above me, his body trembled with the laughter welling inside him. “You rehearsed those words. You’re guilty of the same thing you’ve repeatedly made fun of me for doing. Admit it.”

I shook my head. “I would never.”

Gaze still glued to my mouth, he whispered, “Liar.”

“I hate to tell you this, honey,” I joked, “but some of us are just more romantic than others.”

A smile bloomed over his cheeks as his palm roamed slowly down my side, his words a breath against my cheek. “You looked in the mirror and whispered those lines... You practiced them over and over so you could say them to me... So you could make me feel special...”

Again, I shook my head, feigning innocence as if I hadn’t done that very thing. Of course, I had... I’d considered all the perfect things I’d say to him when I saw him again on countless occasions, and the couple cheesy words that managed to make their way out were only a fraction of the script that’d played out repeatedly in my mind.

His fingers coiled into the fabric near my hip, and he grinned as he began to bunch up my skirts, inch by tantalizing

inch. “Say something romantic right now then, Shakespeare,” he whispered. “Prove me wrong and give me some of that on the fly romance you’re so good at.”

I was going to burst into pieces long before he even touched me. Each pull of the fabric against my legs made my pulse thicker and thicker until it felt like my whole body was beating with my heart. I’d waited so long to be with him...

“Tell me more about how much you love me,” he teased softly, the feel of his words against my cheek only adding an additional layer of stimulation.

Up and up and up that fabric moved while his eyes remained fixed on my mouth. My breathing grew more rampant as the cool air of the cabin caressed the skin on my ankles, calves, knees, thighs, and, at last, the very center of me.

Just the air against my flesh was enough to make my muscles tense around my liquified bones. One single touch might have me completely undone.

“Nothing?” he asked.

A featherlight touch crept up my outer thigh, and as I opened my mouth to answer, my words were caught quickly against his lips.

His kiss was gentle and patient, exploratory even, and I relished in it. My hands, matching his same delicate pace, took on a role of their own, one gliding over his cheeks and up into his hair, the other tracing the outline of him through the fabric between us.

When his touch moved inward to climb up my inner thigh, he deepened the kiss, a low rumble of satisfaction greeting the whimper I released between our joined mouths.

‘I missed you,’ my insides screamed over and over as the taste of him invaded my mouth. *‘I missed you. I missed you!’*

My heart might’ve burst if it could’ve been any more content.

Floating off into some other universe where nothing existed but the two of us and that repeating mantra, I broke from

the kiss to inhale through my teeth as his fingertips skated over my center.

I was definitely teetering on the very edge, and as he felt just how much, he covered my mouth with a newfound hunger.

And there was the Jack I knew... urgent and possessive and voracious in the way only he could be. He didn't just kiss, he consumed, and I tilted my head back, welcoming him to indulge until he was satiated.

'I missed you,' my mind echoed, with a frantic desperation to show him just how much.

I tugged at the laces of his breeches, sliding my fingers down beneath the fabric to take his warm, solid length firmly in my grip and reclaim what was mine. As easily as I'd responded to him, he responded to me, a low, guttural groan ringing from deep inside his throat. He, too, was teetering just on the edge of delirium with me, and to hear that satisfying sound and know he would only offer it to me... It made me feel more powerful than I'd ever been—made me feel every bit the brilliant, badass, goddess of a woman he'd claimed me to be. I kissed his mouth, his jaw, and his throat, finding a path to his ear so I could whisper, "Did you want to hear the rest of my lines, Mr. Volmer?"

He breathed out a strangled sound that was as close as he could get to an affirmation.

"I dreamt of the way you taste," I said softly, and the words which I'd been certain would make me feel foolish only amplified my sense of power when he hardened in my hand.

A mangled curse escaped under his breath as I rolled him onto his back. "Red... wait, I wanted to—"

"Shhh." I pressed a finger to his lips as I sank down to the edge of the bed. "Whatever you wanted to do was taking too long."

I knew exactly what he wanted. I knew how to read every subtle movement as if it was my own... his pleasure indistinguishable from mine, every need laid out before me like a well-worn book I could read even in my sleep.

I started slow, lavishing in the little flinches and hisses as I moved my lips and breath tauntingly over him. I loved him like this... the way his head fell back and his fingers curled into fists in the fabric beneath him; the way the muscles in his thighs tightened with every soft sweep of my lips and tongue across his flesh. It'd been so long since I'd seen him like this... I wanted to stare—to embed the image of him like this in my memory forever.

'I missed you,' each breath and touch and taste assured him, whispering at first until I took him fully and it roared from the deepest parts of us both.

Every part of him stiffened, and his breathing broke into vulnerable fragments—a silent plea on every inhale.

It was my turn to be urgent and possessive and voracious, and each breath of his made me wilder... made me crave his undoing as if it were my own—as if I were the one writhing beneath me.

He raised up on one elbow, shaking wildly in his attempt to hold on. “Red,” he breathed, “let me have you first.”

Not yet...

With unrelenting determination, I indulged myself, exploring all the tastes and sounds of him over and over as his fist tightened in my hair; as his legs stiffened and his hips rolled. I did stare. I memorized every muscle in his body as I brought it to life. My own body came alive with his, climbing up and up and up alongside him, until he couldn't fight it a second longer. When he released, the flavor of him nearly sparked a release of my own.

'I missed you,' my mind continued as his stiff muscles melted down into a boneless euphoria. *'God, I missed you.'*

Humming with satisfaction, I crawled up over him to smile against his panting lips. “Now you can have me, Volmer.”

He cupped my face in his palm, letting out a breathless, “You really are a damn goddess. And I'm gonna' worship every single inch of you.”

With a smile, I pressed my lips to his. Delicate and tender, I seceded the dominant storm inside me over to him; offering submission in exchange when I sank my hips so he could feel the desire still warm between my legs.

And Jack was boneless no more. All the power and strength roiling beneath his surface erupted in a flash. His mouth crashed against mine, and he rolled me onto my back, hastily removing whatever fabric barriers separated us.

“Every single inch,” he assured me.

“God, I missed you,” I said out loud just before he took hold of my hands so we could *both* worship one another.

By the time we were through, I was positive the sun was rising in the other room, and I lay wrapped in his arms, listening for the babies to wake as he lazily combed his fingertips up and down my arm.

“More than there are stars in the sky,” he whispered, “and water in the ocean... It was a very good line.”

“Mmm,” I agreed. “I meant it. Surprised you didn’t have a few corny lines of your own prepared. You’re getting sloppy.”

He chuckled, raising his head to kiss my temple. “Who says I don’t have corny lines cued up and waiting for just the right moment?”

“Do you?”

He rested his chin on my shoulder. “Not anything as good as yours.”

My smile widened. “I’ll be the judge of that. Let’s hear it, Volmer.”

He laced his fingers with mine, sweeping his thumb over my wrist. “It’s not a script, really, it’s just... Well, while I was out there, I kept hearing your voice, like you were singing to our babies... It was always far off, and the minute I’d try to turn toward it or focus my ear, it was gone just as quickly as it’d come.”

He breathed out a laugh. “I couldn’t wait to hear it again... I’d go days longing for just one fleeting note to catch my ear. I told myself I wouldn’t try to focus on the next one—I’d let it be

there beneath the noise so I could hold onto you that much longer—but I couldn't help it. I would turn to search every single time, certain you were just behind me rocking the twins to sleep. I don't have some corny line to add to that, just... that it really felt like you; felt like I was somehow hearing you sing from thousands of miles away, and those little half-second glimpses of you gave me more peace than anything in this world."

He laid another kiss against my shoulder. "I guess I'm saying I missed you like hell... but you were with me the whole time."

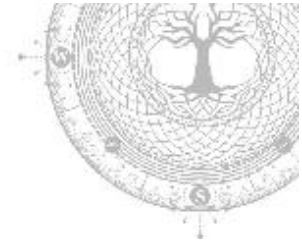
I pulled our joined hands up to my lips, but our sentimental moment was interrupted. Zachary shouted his morning "*BAH!*" just on the other side of the wall, likely waking up his sister and the rest of the ship's inhabitants as well.

Laughing, Jack stretched out behind me and yawned. "I'll get them."

Those three words brought the depth of my reality into perspective. *I'll get them,* wasn't a polite offer to give me a break from parenting. It was his job as much as it was mine, and somehow it hadn't hit me until those three words were spoken that there were two of us again. I hadn't just gotten my husband back. My children had gotten both their parents back, and with them, all the play and laughter they'd been missing. The relief was almost crippling.

He began to sit up, but I tightened my hold on his hand. "I made you get off this ship," I said, tracing my thumb over the wedding band on his finger. On the other side of the gold, he'd hammered an engraving, and I didn't need to see it to recite it. "*I go where you go. You promised you'd never leave us again, and I promise I will never ask you to.*"

Smiling, he bent over me and placed a kiss on my forehead. "I made my family stay behind when I should've taken you with me. There is no threat big enough to withstand the both of us, and I will never leave you, let alone *leave you behind,* again."



Chapter Thirty-Three

Cecelia

For what felt like the hundredth time, I rearranged the pillows inside the carriage and lay back against them, attempting to determine how much they might absorb the shock of the jostling coach once we got on the road the following day.

Dario and Blue Jacket had visited Charles Carter that morning, bringing back our remaining carriage with them, despite Juan's protests against it. He'd insisted he was fine, but we all saw the way even the subtlest movement brought a grimace to his face. If we couldn't secure a boat, a carriage was our next best option. It'd still be a miserable ride for him, considering we had to avoid the main trails, but better than the horse he'd intended to take.

Hoping to shield him from some of the road's jolts as best I could, I'd adjusted the seats so he could lie reclined against me.

I could've kissed Mrs. Carter for sending pillows for him as well, and I was determined to use every one of them to make his ride as comfortable as possible. I'd had them bordering my body, attempting to gage their efficiency, when Juan's voice just outside made me freeze in place.

"You and I have some business to sort out before we leave here tomorrow," he said matter-of-factly. "As I'm sure you are aware. We cannot avoid one another any longer."

"*Business?*" Chris spat back, making me sink further into the pillows to conceal my location. The two men hadn't interacted even once since we'd arrived at camp, and I was afraid I might need to jump out of the coach to separate them sooner than later. "You've got some balls on you to come over here talking about business when it was *you* that let Gordon take her. Just because you showed up after it was too late doesn't

make you any less guilty of getting her killed. I swear to God, if you didn't already have a bullet inside you, I'd have landed one a few more inches to the left... Still might, depending on what you say next."

Juan's tone seemed unaffected by Chris's, remaining neutral despite the evident charge in the air. "If that is where you wish to begin this conversation, Mr. Grace, then so be it. It was never my intention to see her harmed, and for your loss, I am deeply sorry. But I must ask you... Would you have had me go to battle on your behalf only to strike you down with my own sword hours later? You cannot pretend it would've taken anything less than your own death to deter your plans to interfere, and her arrest seemed a more agreeable alternative to killing you."

"I would've had you be a decent human being," Chris said through his teeth, "and go to battle on *her* behalf. She posed as the duchess for *you*. She studied hour after hour to perfect that stupid accent and learn that language for *you*. Not once did she fight against this plan of yours, but instead gave it everything she had. And I mean *everything*. We could've sailed to that storm and gone home... We could've raised our baby and lived happily ever after... but we didn't... because of *you*. I would've had you see her as someone who deserved to be fought for, and not just some pawn in a game you're playing with time."

"I will give her back to you in the same condition," Juan assured him. "I give you my word."

Chris's haughty laugh had no humor in it. "The same condition? You mean pregnant? How? You gonna' hold a gun to our heads in your alternative timeline and stand there watching to make sure we conceive? Fuck you, Juan. You can't make that kind of promise, and I don't want you anywhere near her to try. We're going to kill George Bennet so I can have *her* back. That's it. You stay out of my life otherwise... Stay out of hers too."

I gripped the pillows beside me tighter, wondering if I should venture outside and put an end to the conversation before the already heated situation got worse.

“You’d not have me attempt to recreate the same circumstance?” Juan asked. “Ensure that no one but the original three are able to go through time in the alternative?”

“No,” Chris answered coldly. “You’ve already gotten her killed once and I won’t have your meddling do it again before I’m even able to get back to her. Just stay away from us.”

Juan was close enough to the carriage that I could hear his heavy sigh. “I cannot pretend I would not feel the same if it were me in your shoes. I know my apology can do nothing to make up for her absence, but I’d hoped to make up for it another way. If it is your wish I abstain from any attempt, then I shall honor it.”

“Great.” I heard the crunching of leaves underfoot as Chris began to turn away.

Juan cleared his throat and raised his voice to stop him. “That is not the extent of our business. There’s still the matter of my wife I wish to speak to.”

“Your wife?” Chris growled.

I slid a little closer to the door and wrapped my fingers around its handle.

“Aye,” Juan answered in a very measured tone. “My wife... who you accused of ruining your life several nights ago? I may have been indisposed at the time, but I’ve ears to listen on my behalf when mine are out of reach. I know what it is to hurt, Chris. I know, too well, what it’s like to be angry at the world for taking someone you love from it, and while I cannot blame you for being angry, I will insist your anger remain directed at me, not her. She’s enough on her mind without adding your resentment to it.”

Another haughty laugh burst from Chris. “Oh, come off it. Just because you exchanged a few vows to clear your conscience so you could sleep with her does not make you a sudden expert on my sister-in-law. She’s not the type of woman who needs you to come to her rescue simply because I hurt her feelings. Ten years she’s known me, and she knows whatever resentment I might’ve eluded to in the heat of the moment means nothing.”

“Does she?” Juan’s voice moved slightly away from the carriage, toward the area Chris’s was coming from, and I held my breath. “She remembered her daughter mere moments before you took it upon yourself to unleash those venomous accusations at her. She, too, has lost someone she loves deeply, and she, too, is hurting and angry at the world... Your pain does not give you the right to worsen hers. You don’t get to accuse her of ruining your life when she’s sacrificing her own to save it. Be angry with me all you’d like—think what you will about my intentions for marrying her—but I’ll not see her suffer any additional guilt she’s done nothing to deserve. Not from you or anyone else among us.”

Both men were equally passionate in their need to defend the women they loved, and I knew them well enough to know their passion would only serve to worsen the tension between them. Just as Chris began to fire back, I opened the carriage door and stepped out.

“Enough,” I said, positioning myself between them and noticing the way they each had a hand rested on the hilt of their swords. “It’s enough now.”

I met Juan’s gaze where I could see he was struggling to remain upright with the pain in his chest. “While I’m honored that you felt the need to defend me, Chris is right. I don’t need it. He’s family and he’s allowed to hurt my feelings when he feels passionately about something. I’m not a martyr, nor is my pain deserving of anyone’s sympathy when it was self-inflicted. No one needs to walk on eggshells because of a loss I imposed upon myself. I chose this life and I am responsible for the consequences of that choice, however hard they may seem to you. You didn’t make the decision for me, and I won’t have your misplaced guilt turn me into some kind of victim.”

I turned toward Chris, my heart aching at the sight of his reddened eyes. “And you... God, honey, I know how much this has to be hurting, and I’d give anything to be able to comfort you. I know you’re angry, and I know how much you need to take that anger out on someone, but Maria wouldn’t want this. Maybe I didn’t know her as well as you do, but I did know her. And I know how happy it made her to see you and Juan becoming friends while we were on Navarro’s ship. She

wouldn't want you two turned enemies over an accident none of us saw coming."

I held my hand up as he opened his mouth to argue. "We *didn't* see it coming, sweetheart. We should've, but we didn't. And you know that. All of us—you, me, Juan, A.J.—we all want the same thing: to go home with the ones we love and get on with our lives. None of us wants to hurt anyone while doing so. And fighting only makes the trip there seem longer. So, please... let it be enough. For her sake... We'll get her back, but when we do, I need to be able to give her the same man she had when she left. This is not him."

I placed my hand over his on the hilt of his sword, and it pained me to see him flinch at the touch. Had anyone touched him since she died? Had any of us simply held him and let him fall apart? Or had we just let him spend day after day down by the water, hoping his time with Mehkewa would heal his broken heart long enough to get her back?

I took a step closer to wrap my arms around him, but he shook his head and put distance between us, fighting and failing to wiggle his fingers free of my grip. "Don't."

"It's not for you," I insisted, tucking myself into his stiff upper body despite his protests. "It's for me."

"Dammit, Cece," he uttered as I tightened my arms around him, "I... don't want to do this."

"I know that," I said with my cheek buried against his shoulder, "but I love you too much to see you hurting and I don't know what else to do."

I felt his muscles very slowly ease in surrender. He took a few very concentrated breaths before he let his own arms return the embrace.

I held on as tight as I was able. Just as I recalled my undone life and A.J.'s, I recalled Chris's as well; remembered the way my sister had completely shut him out when they'd lost Evelyn... the way he'd grieved for them both after she left... I remembered all the late night calls where he'd been on the brink of tears, utterly defeated and at a loss for what to do to fix things.

It was cruel that my decision to alter my own life had put him through it all over again, and I held on with a profound need to comfort him... to make up for the countless losses he'd had to endure in exchange for small glimpses of happiness.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered. "I did this by meddling with time I had no right to be tampering with... Please, let him try to fix it? Let him try to recreate the same circumstances for you?"

"I just want her back," he said defeatedly. "I'll fix the rest."

Of all the people I'd ever met, he didn't deserve this. Chris had always been one of the best men I knew... No matter the circumstances, he was someone you just knew would be there when you needed him most... whether it was to fix a flat tire or punch some asshole in the face who'd broken your heart... He'd always come through... even if he had to travel across the country... or across the world... or even across time...

"We're gonna' get her back," I promised him. "And everything's going to be so much better from now on."

Both of us sniffing, we stepped apart after a long while and I watched as his eyes moved past me to Juan. He didn't say anything, but there was a truce in the look before he turned back to camp.

Composing myself, I hugged my arms to my chest and faced Juan where he'd propped himself up against the side of the carriage for support. The grimace he was attempting to hide made it obvious that the bullet was more painful than he'd been letting on. "Look at you," I said, clicking my tongue. "You're in no condition to be out here starting fights. What were you thinking?"

He winced a little as he straightened. "It wasn't my intention to start a fight."

"No?" I asked, suppressing the urge to laugh. "So, you thought it would be a perfectly fine idea to stroll up to a ticking time bomb like Chris and poke him with a bullshit warning about upsetting your wife?"

He shrugged. "No... I just..."

“You just came out here looking for someone to take your own frustrations out on.” I raised a brow, daring him to prove me wrong. “Why?”

He struggled to hide that frustration, and ultimately gave up on his attempt. “You’re my wife and it’s my job to protect you. I can’t help it that I needed to fight someone—*anyone*— in your defense when I am so helpless to defend you against your own mind.”

I let out a long breath, loosening my stance to place my palm over his chest. “Honey, a husband’s job is much more than simply protecting his wife.”

His brows raised and he self-consciously ran a hand over his stubbled jaw. “I’m afraid I don’t know what else to do just now.”

Smiling, I traced the collar of his shirt. “Just love me the way you have from the moment I met you. That’s what I need from you... that’s *all* I’ve ever needed from you. I don’t need a protector, and I can’t have you end up with another bullet in your chest simply because I’m sad. There is only enough room in this relationship for one of us to be ridiculous, and that one is clearly me at the moment. If I’m going to stand any chance at being sane again, I need you to hold us together a little longer. Got it?”

“Aye,” he said softly, moving his palms down my arms. “You know, I am quite hungry...”

Shaking my head, I stopped his hands as they slid over each side of my ribcage. “Joseph, that’s not what I meant. You are just barely standing up right now. There’s no way you’re in any condition to—”

“And this spot right here...” he continued, pushing past my fists to coil his fingers in the fabric of my dress, “it still looks rather tasty...”

“Don’t,” I warned, suppressing the urge to giggle as it would only serve to encourage him. “I didn’t break up one fight only for you to get injured by my flailing limbs.” I backed up a step and he followed, pinning me against the coach. “Stop. I’m serious! You’ll get hurt!”

He tightened his grip on the fabric and closed the gap between us. “I am *always* in the condition for you, Cecelia. If you don’t want me to get hurt, then you’ll get back in the carriage before I’m forced to pick you up and haul you inside. You cannot think me strong enough to watch another man hold you, family or not, and not have a need to erase his touch with one of my own.”

“You’re jealous?” I scoffed, still attempting to fight his fingers where they were tracing each of my ribs. “Of Chris?”

“It is not jealousy,” he said, pressing in closer. “I’ve not touched my wife in far too long and seeing another man do so has only served to ignite a fire I intend to see put out. There is indeed more to a husband’s job than simply protecting you... and I’ll see you smile today, bullet or not.”

“But it’s... I mean...” Blushing, I looked out at the camp below us and shook my head. “We can’t. You can’t.”

“I wasn’t asking.” His voice grew as dark as his eyes. “Get in the carriage, *mi alma*. Or I shall put you in it myself.”



The man *had* made me smile... several times over. That smile had remained there for the duration of the day and well into the evening. Wrapped up in his arms, feeling his mouth over mine and his skin against my skin, I felt a sense of healing—felt the pull of him once more to ground me in this reality.

My reprieve had come at a cost, though. As we all sat around our last fire together, I saw the pain in his chest coming on more frequently, despite his attempts to hide it, and I hated that I’d contributed to it.

“When the timeline changes,” Charlotte said, leaning back in Ellinipsco’s arms to stare up at the evening sky, “it’ll be too close to March for any of you to come back here. You’ll likely be on your way to the storm by the time you wake there.”

“We ain’t leavin’ nobody without a way back,” Jim grumbled. All I could see were the bottoms of his boots where

he lay in the grass beside Lilly. “We don’t know what you’ll remember.”

Charlotte shook her head. “You’ll have a gap in time, though. One that could get a message to the people who wake with their memories sooner.”

Beside me, Juan leaned in, the orange light from our fire illuminating the flicker of pain that flashed over his features with the movement. He quickly adjusted his posture, hoping the wince had gone unnoticed. But I caught it, my gaze drawn to the way his hand instinctively brushed against his chest where the bullet remained inside him.

“The painting,” Charlotte continued, “if it doesn’t exist when you return to the 90’s to search for it, then you’ll know I remembered our time together and was able to flee to the west. You won’t need to worry about me and Chase having the coordinates. You won’t be leaving anyone behind without a way back.”

Lilly hugged her knees and rocked softly on her bottom. “And what if you go west and somehow still end up posing for that painting?”

Charlotte closed her eyes as Ellinipsco’s fingers traced lines up her forearm. “What color was the dress I was wearing?”

“The color?” Lilly asked, glancing at me.

“Cream,” I answered, able to conjure it clearly in my memory, “with embroidered flowers on the bodice and pink lace trim. Why?”

She smiled, her lashes lifting ever so slightly. “Well, I’ve been thinking. We don’t know yet what the circumstances were that put me and Chase there to pose for it in the first place. I don’t want anyone just assuming we’re in danger and interfering with things that might not need the interference. If I find myself in Philadelphia despite all my attempts to avoid it, I could add some element of color to send a message through. If not a different dress, then a feather in my hair or a ribbon round my neck. Blue to say I remember and I’m safe, red to say we’re in danger.”

“And if it’s red?” Lilly asked, lowering her feet.

Charlotte sat forward to meet Juan's gaze. "You mentioned before you would be in this century waiting for everyone else's memories to catch up. If it's red, you could find me in the isthmus when Samuel took us there. It wouldn't be so far for you to travel back to Tahiti, and I won't turn you away like I might if I come here to fall in love with these people."

Juan nodded, his fingers absently moving over his bandage while he considered it. "And if the painting is unchanged? What would you have me do if there is no sign that you remember?"

Adjusting the bangles on her wrist, she laid back against Ellinipsco. "I've spent a lot of time thinking about that too. Hokoleskwa's role in ending Dunmore's war should have *some* mention in history. There'd have to be something available on the internet about him. Don't you think?"

"I'm sure," I said, glancing toward Hokoleskwa's wigwam. The man was nothing short of a legend in my mind. When the English had started to encroach upon their lands, he'd been a renowned war chief. He'd united seven tribes to rise up against Lord Dunmore and they'd fought against colonization on the front lines. His rebellion had been valiant, but unfortunately had caused significant loss, with hundreds of Shawnee men, women, and children perishing at the hands of far more advanced weaponry. Feeling helpless to do much else, Hokoleskwa had given up his fight and signed a peace treaty, knowing it was the only way to keep his people safe. He conceded the land east of the Ohio River to the English while designating the west as Indian territory... He'd then served as a liaison to Dunmore's Indian Agents as a means to keep his family's camp in the valley.

"The white men all call him Cornstalk," she continued. "If you can't find his real name, there might be something written under that one. You could search for him during your time in the future to find out the fate of his family." She pulled Ellinipsco's hand into her lap, cradling it between each of hers. "If there is mention of Hokoleskwa in history, then there'd have to be mention of his sons... even if it's nothing more than a birth and death year in parenthesis next to their names. If Ellinipsco is alive, then you'll know there is nothing that will keep him from finding us in Philadelphia to steal us away." She closed her eyes

and squeezed his hand. “If, however, he isn’t, then you come find me in the isthmus.”

“Consider it done,” Juan assured her, swallowing hard when the faintest movement of his arm sent another brief flash of discomfort through him.

As we all fell into a contemplative quiet, I studied him closely. The tightness in his jaw and the rigidity of his spine were telltale signs he was in pain. Our afternoon exploits inside the carriage had definitely hurt him. I wasn’t sure how far we’d get with him in such a state, even with the adjustments I’d made to shield him from the bulk of the carriage’s movement.

He glanced at me, and seeing my evident concern, he shook his head and leaned in. “Do not pity me, Cecelia. It was worth it.”

The sudden thuds of sprinting feet on the grass and the howl of uncontrollable laughter put an end to our quiet. Izzy and two other Shawnee girls rushed past us, their giggles turning into shrieks as Chase and another boy caught up to their heels.

Juan laid his hand over mine, knowing, even before I did, the memory of Maddy their joyous play would stir up inside me... For as much as he would leave here with an ache in his chest, so would I, and he knew it. Turning my palm up to interlace our fingers, I met his smile and realized he, too, with all his ridiculousness, was attempting to shield me from the world’s jolts in the same way I was him.

“I’ve never heard her laugh like that,” Lilly said with a sigh, turning to watch as the group raced around a neighboring campfire. “She’s gonna’ be so sad when we leave tomorrow.”

“She ain’t the only one,” Jim grunted, sitting up to peer over the fire at Charlotte and Ellinipsco. “This place has been a Godsend when every one of us needed one most. We cain’t thank yuns enough for all ye’ done for us. It’s gonna’ be real hard to go back to runnin’ in circles after slowin’ down for a minute.”

Running circles...

Slowing down...

The looping spirograph of time...

Time is a tree...

Jim's words seemed to serve as a crank, winding up a set of squeaky gears in my brain that had stopped churning for far too long. An image of a tree trunk, cut open to reveal its rings, flashed in my mind.

I was only vaguely aware of Charlotte's question when she asked, "You said you're coming back one day, when it's safe enough for your nephew?"

Caught in the swirl of my thoughts, I replied, almost dreamily, "In a few years... Juan's going to buy a plot of land in Connecticut for when we do..."

Images of that tree persisted and became more vivid: a root taking hold, sprouting life that grew outward and upward, each passing year marked by the creation of a new ring in its center.

"I'll need people to watch over it," Juan suggested somewhere in the distance. "Maybe you could take care of it while we're away. You and Chase and Ellinipsco... any of the tribe who wanted to join you... you'd be welcome there. Maybe it'd help you avoid any coming conflicts with the English?"

His words were there, yet far away, as my mind fixated on the tree's rings. I envisioned a clock hand sweeping over them, each rotation representing the passing of time. The hand would cover more ground on the outermost layers, yet as it neared the tree's heart, the distance shrank, making its sweep seem slower. Time would move at varying speeds depending on which ring you found yourself on...

The firelight danced across Charlotte's face as her lips moved to form a response I couldn't quite hear. Her reply was overshadowed by the whirlwind of possibilities the tree had inspired.

Along with the rings in its trunk, there existed faults—cracks that branched out, sometimes linking one ring to another. Was that how the storm worked? And what about when we altered fragments of our past? Did a new crack form? What became of the original timeline when it did? Did it linger for an adjacent one to emerge? Was Maddy's existence tethered to a

ring close to mine? And could there be a fissure that would allow me to peer into her world? To catch glimpses of her life here and there? There was only one person who might know that answer.

“Samuel Van Thorpe,” I uttered aloud, looking up at Charlotte with a new sense of hope. “When was the last time anyone saw him in the area?”

Caught off guard by the sudden change in subject, she frowned and shook her head. “Maybe a month or two ago? Why?”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. “You said he told you time is a tree, and I think I might have the beginnings of an understanding of what he meant. If there’s any chance he could still be nearby... he could fill in the missing pieces... We could leave here with a full understanding of the storm.”

Dario, who’d opted to remain silent throughout the evening, clicked his tongue. “Samuel hid her and Chase away out of fear they could change the smallest piece of history. Even if we had time to seek him out—*which we don’t*—he’s not going to offer up what he knows about the storm to *us*.”

I frowned down at my hands, unwilling to let go of my sudden grasp so easily. “The Van Thorpe family is using that storm for their own gain. We know that. Maybe we don’t have time to pursue Samuel, but there are Van Thorpe’s in the future too... Perhaps you could seek out one of them to finish the puzzle before the rest of us wake...”

“For what?” Jim asked, his thick brows creasing as he peered across the flames at me.

“Understanding,” I answered. “Don’t you want to know how it all works? If there are other storms and other times they lead to?”

“Sugar, what we know already is dangerous enough.” He folded his legs in front of him and balanced his elbows on his knees. “We done changed history several times already without hardly knowin’ nothin’ at all. Can you imagine the damage we could do if we knew more? If there was some other storm that’d give us a chance to undo the things we regret? All of us, if given

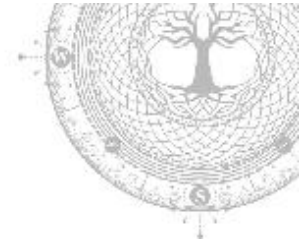
the chance, would be thinkin' about ways we could fix our mistakes, just like we're doin' now. There'd be too much temptation not to try. No, I don't want to know no more. I wanna' plant my happy ass in the time I belong in and forget that storm exists at all. Fix my mistakes the way I's supposed to —by learnin' from 'em."

"Show me," Ellinipsco said, sitting forward with a curious crease in his brow. "Time... show me the tree."

Jim groaned. "Lordt help me. I swear to God, everything I say goes in one ear and out the other." He grunted as he pushed himself up to stand. "I don't want to hear none of this, so I'm gonna' go check on Beanstalk. Make sure he ain't smoked himself stupid down 'er with the old man."

"Don't *you* be down there smoking with them," Lilly chided. "You think you're sly, but I can smell the smoke on you from a mile away." Making no move to join him, she waved him off and leaned in with the same interest as Ellinipsco.

As they all fell into silence, waiting for me to explain myself, I cleared my throat. "I'm gonna' need something to write with."



Chapter Thirty-Four

Alaina

With a deep breath, I stepped out onto the top deck to take in the twilight from the stern one final time.

It was a little bittersweet to know I'd never see the ship again after the night was over. Yes, it'd been my prison, but it'd also been much more than that. It was the place Jack and I had shared our first dance as Mr. And Mrs. Volmer, where we'd gotten to know our children, and where I'd gotten to know myself—both as a mother and as a woman to be proud of. I'd only spent six months on board, but it felt like an eternity with all the memories—good and bad—embedded in its wood.

Surrounded by the vastness of the sea, the twilight took on a deep, almost reverent hue as I found confidence that hadn't been part of me in ages—if ever. The gentle battle between day and night stretched out, painting the sky with layers of amber, purple, navy, and hints of pink. And as the first stars began to shimmer into view, I saw glimpses of my life inside them—past, present, and future converging in a gentle slow dance.

When I saw myself as a mother in one star, I also saw the tender smile of my own mother, eyes alight with joy as she'd soon hold my children. When I heard the distant echo of Uncle Bill's laughter in another as he and Jack formed bonds I was sure they'd cherish, I also remembered similar bonds forming between him and Chris. I saw my sister and Juan Jr. in a future no one could take from them, just as I saw Jim and Lilly covered in dust while sharing a loving embrace...

This twilight was far more than just a meeting of day and night. More than another nostalgic embrace, this sky was a canvas. It was filled with the stars that called us home, weaving tales of where we'd been, where we were, who was waiting for

us, and hinting at paths yet to be tread alongside them. No matter the distance or era, their steady glow could always reassure us of our place in the world—of who we were when we were still—anchoring us to the memories we held close and the dreams we dared to traverse across time for.

I made a mental note to add that to our guidelines as I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

The distant lull of the waves seemed to pull me toward an image of my childhood home, toward a stillness I needed very much after being away so long. More than all the allure our time traveling future offered, I found myself looking forward to the simple things: the honking of a car a block over... a dog barking in the neighbor's yard... the feel of a loose t-shirt and a pair of shorts on a Sunday morning... and my mother's arms wrapped around me...

I couldn't wait to be home.

"Come to bid me farewell?" I heard Juan say as he took a place beside me at the railing.

The interruption spawned to life Jack's confession the night before, withering away all the calm the twilight imagery had offered. Opening my eyes, I turned toward him and crossed my arms over my chest. "As a matter of fact, there *are* some things I need to say to you..."

His lip twitched. "Oh, how quickly she sours. Go on and say what you need to then so I can finally kick you off my ship."

I stared up at the darkening sky, organizing my thoughts so the words would come out the way I needed them to.

"We didn't ask to be here," I said slowly, "but you forced our hand. Instead of going home to be with our families—instead of pursuing our own dreams, we've been dragged along on this insane mission to pursue yours. The fact that I understand your motives doesn't make my sacrifice any less. The truth is, and I believe you know it as well, my people have nothing to gain by giving Gloria life. We're losing far more than we're gaining in this. A lot can happen in six months—a lot *did* happen—and it shouldn't be our burden to ensure those things can be replicated when you erase them. That burden is yours.

You want Gloria? You want us to ancestor generations of time travelers? You want the sort of life you and I have spent our nights talking about? Then you will make certain my people don't lose anything."

He smirked. "Are you making demands of me?"

"I am," I said, meeting his eyes. "And you'll meet every single one of them. Anna will live. Chris, Maria, and Bud will go to the future. Nothing about that trip will go any differently than it did—you'll ensure that, and you'll make sure Chris and Maria end up conceiving the child they're risking by going along with this. You'll also ensure that Matty, Cecelia, and Zachary are all born safely. When we get to the others, you'll take whatever demands they make of you as well and you'll see every one of them met. You and your sons will have years to sort out how you'll do it, and you won't leave any detail undone if you want Gloria when this is over. I swear to you, Juan, if we come out of this and any one of us has lost anything or anyone, then my daughter will never see this century again. I'll make sure of it."

With growing confidence, I stood straighter. "You're right about me. I'm not good at scheming or manipulating or being two steps ahead of people like you are. It's not because my mind is muddy, it's because I'm not like you, and I'm okay with that. The *real* me trusts people and doesn't need to outwit anyone. The *real* me is not vengeful and hateful, but creative and hopelessly romantic. I've spent the past six months hating myself because I was trying to be something I'm not in order to get the upper hand." I laughed. "But I've always had the upper hand... and I never needed to be like you to get it. So, yes, I'm making demands of you... ones I should've made six months ago... and I suggest you agree to them or this will have all been for nothing."

A slow smile spread over his cheeks. "You know, you are far more enjoyable to be in the company of when you've a backbone, Alaina. It really is a shame that it took you this long to find it."

"I mean it," I warned. "You owe us far more than this."

He sighed and lowered his forearms onto the railing to look out at the ocean. “Indeed, I do... *Far* more than this.” Flexing his fingers, he squinted to get a glimpse of the Sofia Martina in the distance. “I could not imagine *choosing* to come back to this time; robbing my children of the opportunities they might have in the future for someone I’ve never met. It is more than admirable that you’ve come up with options to give them both worlds just for the sake of my wife and children, especially after all I’ve done. I don’t deserve that, and I give you my word, any demands you make will be met when this is through... however big or small.”

I wasn’t sure if I’d been holding my breath or if the relief of his agreement just hit me hard enough to expel all the air from my lungs. I knew him well enough to know he wouldn’t make a promise he didn’t intend to keep, and I was grateful not to be met with argument. Resting my forearms on the railing beside him, I let my shoulders relax. “Thank you.”

Both of us with our eyes on the water, I saw him nod a little in my peripherals.

It was an odd feeling to be reluctant to say goodbye to the man who’d dismantled our lives. He shouldn’t have become my friend after everything we’d all gone through, but he did, and I didn’t quite know what to say now that my ‘*you-owe-us*’ speech was out of the way.

He’d taken me and my children prisoner, but he’d also taught me so much about myself in the few months we’d spent together. Yes, I was, and always would be, a bit neurotic. I made mistakes—sometimes monumental ones—and I still tended to get lost in my mind... But I’d learned that all those things were okay. Existence was imperfect, and so was I... so were we all... and my imperfections were no longer a reason to avoid my reflection. Somehow, because of him, I’d become a stronger woman, and while I wouldn’t outwardly offer him gratitude, I still felt I owed it to him in some way.

“So...” I started awkwardly, “Jack says you’re not planning to kill the Ruiz men?”

“No,” he huffed, brushing some invisible speck of dust off his jacket sleeve. “Alonso was my friend once, and I’ve no

desire to kill him or his two surviving sons. My Juan murdered his boys, and while his cause was just, as is Alonso's need to seek vengeance. I need only give him the illusion we have all perished in a ship fire in order to deter him."

"But you're not getting off the ship with us..." I said slowly, frowning up at him.

"Worried about me?" He raised a brow. When I declined to respond, he looked back out at the darkening ocean. "We are not yet near Charleston, my dear, and there are too many men aboard this ship to alter the history that's already been written. The ones meant to die on the pages of that history book will die, but you can rest easy that I'll not be one of them. When the time comes, I have the means to escape without being detected, and, with any luck, I will join you on Captain Davis's ship without having to kill anyone that is not already destined to die."

I flexed my hands in front of me. "What about Simón Bacallar?"

Tilting his head to one side, he straightened and crossed his arms over his chest. "What about him?"

"His name's on that log, but he's not dead. How are you planning to kill him before you catch up to us when he's on the other ship?"

"Simón Bacallar," he sneered, "has been dead for weeks."

I blinked. "But... I thought he was chained up in the hull?"

"Oh, he is..." His eyes darkened. "Alonso is far more ruthless than I am, particularly when it comes to the slave trade. He chained him up and denied him water—much like Simón has done to the men and women he kept down there—and he watched him die slowly of dehydration."

"Jesus," I muttered beneath my breath, turning to look back out over the deck of our ship.

"Jesus, indeed," he chortled, pushing off the railing. "That inlet will be coming up soon and I want you off this ship long before we get anywhere near Charleston. You and I don't need to have an awkward and extended goodbye. If I miss Davis's ship, you tell my sons I've made a promise to uphold your

demands. You tell them they'll have to wait to kill me until I've honored it. I've put the briefcase with the master's log in the sloop just in case I don't reach you in time. The code to open it is—"

"Oh, no you don't." I reached down to grab the briefcase where I'd collected it from the sloop prior to coming up. I pushed it hard into his chest. "You'll tell them yourself. This is insurance, remember? You're not missing that ship."

Fishing Juan Jr.'s chart from my pocket, I placed it atop the case. "And you'll need this too. It's our demands so far... You'll have some time to memorize it before Charleston. Don't you dare lose it before the others can see it and add demands of their own. You can't afford to miss the ship when you owe us so much."

He chuckled and adjusted the items in his grip. "You really are lovely when you've got a backbone about you. Thank you for not killing me when you had every chance to these last few months."

I raised a shoulder. "Well, don't do anything to get yourself killed by someone else before we can reach you. Okay?"

He smiled. "Honey, I spent more than twenty years in this time and you're the only one who's ever come close. I'll see you on the other side."



'A bit of a jump down' is how Juan had once explained the distance between the hatch and the water. As I stood staring out at the sloop that'd been lowered in already—nearly fifteen feet below me—I realized that was one hell of an understatement.

Several floors above us, the signal was loud and clear as Juan shouted, "You there! Where did you get that and where were you intending to take it?"

We all listened in as Gabriel answered, "This? You told the crew that any man who could outwit you in finding it was entitled to half... I'm taking my half!"

Murmurs swelled into an uproar, all of them with one core theme: stolen English gold.

“I said no such thing!” Juan spat.

“You did too!” another man answered.

And just like that, our diversion was created. We heard the scuffling of footsteps all moving away from the railings toward the quarterdeck as the men quarreled in Gabriel’s defense—all of them wanting a piece of what I knew must’ve been more gold than they’d ever seen.

“It’s time,” Mr. Gil said, holding out the rope harness he’d fashioned to lower us each down in.

Jack, with a sling securing each of the twins across his chest, slid his legs through it, smiling at me before he began his traverse down.

I’d intended to go right after him, but my nerves had me stepping aside to allow Fetia and Matty to be lowered next. It wasn’t that I was afraid of heights, there was just something about being so close to the dark water that had me on edge... Perhaps it was because each time I’d been in a smaller vessel upon it, I’d been traumatized; once in the raft after the storm, once in Tahiti when we’d gone out in search of Chris, and once when Juan had rowed me and my newborns out to this very ship.

I knew how absurd it was to let myself develop yet another crippling source of anxiety, but I couldn’t will my feet to step forward when that harness came back a second time.

“Go ahead, Magna,” I said softly, standing out of the way. “I’ll take the next one.”

Sighing at my own ridiculousness, I watched her secure the rope around her broad frame and step off the edge to walk her feet down the edge of the ship.

“Scared?” Bud whispered, placing a hand on the small of my back.

I nodded. “I don’t even know why. It’s not like the fall will kill me or that there’s even any danger, calm as the water is... What the hell am I afraid of?”

“You don’t always need a reason to be afraid,” he said. “Sometimes it can just creep up on you, especially in the dark. I couldn’t tell you how many times it’s found me unawares. Why don’t you and I go down together?”

I glanced over at Mr. Gil where he’d wound the rope around a beam to create a pulley system he was merely keeping balanced. It wouldn’t be too much weight for a man of his size... I turned back to Bud. “You don’t mind?”

He smiled. “Not at all, honey. A man’s not worth a whole lot if he can’t make a woman feel safe from time to time.”

I laid my head on his shoulder. “No wonder Bertie was so fearless.”

“Bah,” he scoffed playfully. “She was born that way and just let me think I was looking out for her. Really, it was her watching over me all those years. All our lives, it was like she already knew the things that should scare her long before they occurred—like she’d been preparing for them. Even while that plane was crashing and I was grabbing for something to hold onto, she was as calm as a Sunday breeze.” He breathed out a laugh. “I used to think she was some kind of psychic... You know, she said I couldn’t die with her because I had things to do, then she listed out a few, and I’ll be damned if some of them haven’t come true already.”

I smiled at that. “Maybe she *was* psychic. She told me I’d have a healthy baby just a few hours before she went... She said she’d seen it for me...”

He nodded. “She liked to use that phrase... I’d try to argue with her sometimes and she’d shut me down with: ‘*I’ve seen it, Lloyd Bud.*’ You know, I actually believe she did see things... and I don’t think some supernatural psychic ability was the source of it.”

“No?”

He shook his head and leaned in. “I saw those guidelines you’ve all been working on, and I believe someone visited my Bertie.”

Taken aback, I gaped at him as he grabbed the returned harness and wrapped it around us both. “How—I mean... what

makes you think so?”

Grinning, he linked our arms and led me to the edge of the hatch, leaning us both back so we could use our legs to propel down the side of the ship to the sloop. “You know what the last thing she said was?”

I was too busy holding my breath to answer.

“She said, *‘You’ll see me again before you die... And you’ll be buried right here on this island with me.’* I thought that meant I should go back to the island when it was my time to go... but now I think she was telling me it’s *me* that visits her.”

“When?” I breathed.

“Well, I think it was when I first arrived in Nam. She sent a letter mentioning that her great uncle George had come in for a surprise visit... I’d never heard of an Uncle George before, and never heard of him again after.”

I continued to stare at his darkened silhouette as we traversed downward. “That’s... incredible... You said some of the things she listed out have come true... Like what? Did she mention anything else that might guide us now?”

He shook his head. “That’s not for me to tell just yet. You’ll learn soon enough.”

I hadn’t even noticed we’d landed inside the sloop until the ropes were being hoisted back up over my head. Yes, I’d been planning for future time travelers, but in the back of my head, it had never occurred to me that they might play a role in our time here. If his theory about Bertie was true, that meant there actually was a time portal that moved differently...

“Red?” Jack whispered. “You alright?”

I turned to see him awkwardly attempting to balance both babies in his arms. Nodding, I took Zachary from him. “I’m fine... just... being me and overthinking everything.”

He leaned in to kiss my temple as he handed Cecelia to Magna and grabbed one of the oars. “Well, if you have to overthink something, think about the first place you want to go when we get home... It won’t be long now before we’re there.”

Taking a seat next to Magna, I attempted to settle my pulse as we began to row out, my eyes venturing from the dark water back to the ship with every pull of the oars.

Again, I felt the longing for home—for my mother... Could I dare to hope I would see her so soon?

The night air was dense with the scent of salt and brine, and though it wasn't particularly cold, an eerie chill ran down my spine the farther we moved away.

Who was Captain Davis? Would he be our savior or just another chapter in our growing ledger of misjudgments? Could we really be close to home or would we find ourselves that much farther from it with yet another person to potentially stand in the way? The uncertainty was heavy, making each row of the boat and every beat of my heart seem like a countdown to either sanctuary or another snare.

“That him?” Terrence asked, pointing to a darkened bowsprit at the edge of the cove.

Jack, beside him, nodded and proceeded to row. “That’s him.”

It was so dark, it was almost impossible to discern any definitive details of the ship. The faintest outlines of its structure were visible as we approached. The soft creaks of wood and the occasional flap of sails were the only indications of its presence in the almost complete blackness around us.

Glancing back out to the ocean, I could see the lantern light from Juan’s ship moving ahead, a small dot of orange indicating the Sofia Martina far off on the horizon in pursuit.

“We left Phil,” I said, frowning. “He’s got no way to know where we’re going... no way to know we’re still alive.”

“Let him think we’re gone,” Kyle muttered, looking out at the same dot of light on the horizon. “Maybe he’ll burn trying to find us in the wreckage and suffer his final taste of hell before this is all over.”

“That’s pretty dark, kid,” Terrence said, examining Kyle’s face as he pulled the oar steadily. “I thought you were trying to forgive him?”

“It’s not nearly dark enough.” He moved his gaze to Matty where Fetia held him in the crook of her arm. “It’s not right that he can just say sorry after all the shit he’s done and get to have a family. I was willing to get him home, but I don’t owe him forgiveness—don’t owe him family.”

“So, we’re just going to leave him?” I asked, feeling a little guilty that I’d been the one to send him off.

“He’ll be fine,” Bud informed me. “He’ll figure out we didn’t die when he shows up in another life.”

Glancing over at Bud, I was struck by the familiar calmness emanating from him as he sat unfazed at the front of the sloop. It was the same resolute serenity I’d seen so many times in Bertie. Even during our most testing moments on the raft and on the island—when the rest of us had felt the crushing weight of despair or been lost in our fears—Bertie never wavered. Not once did I see a tear stain her cheek or hear a tremor in her voice. At first, I’d simply thought she was made of sterner stuff than the rest of us. But now, watching Bud and thinking back on Bertie’s calmness, especially her words just hours before her passing, I couldn’t help but wonder: Did she know more than she let on? Did she foresee the challenges we’d face and even her own end?

I considered Bud and Jack’s time with the Nikora... They’d gotten so lucky that day to have planned their fake fight within the very hour that Captain Cook’s ship would discover them... Had Bud known the ship was coming? Was the scheme just a way to stall them long enough to get to it? Had Bertie told him to go out in search of the other islands in the first place—had she placed him in danger knowing it was the only way we’d ever get off our island?

What else did Bud know that we didn’t? What did he mean when he’d said *‘you’ll learn soon enough’*? And if he wasn’t worried... why should any of us be?

As I pondered the mysteries surrounding Bud, the ambiance around us began to change. The previously open waters of the ocean gave way to a narrower, more intimate channel as we ventured into the inlet. Tall trees on either side stood like walls, their canopies effectively blotting out the

moonlight. Without the guiding glow, everything went dark. It felt almost like a blanket had been draped over us, quieting our already soft whispers.

It was calmer than the open sea. It made the sound of the oars dipping into the water even more pronounced—each splash echoing a reminder of where we were and the uncertainty of what awaited us.

“Line coming down,” a voice above called, and I heard the rope being tossed over to thunk against the ship’s hull.

I held Zachary tighter as Jack and Terrence stood, the sloop swaying against their movement as they secured the ropes that would hoist us up.

Within moments, the block and tackle system groaned and steadily began drawing us upward. Without visual cues, it was unsettling to be lifted into the void, feeling only the sensation of ascension and the subtle rocking from the ship.

I had so many questions, and while I was nervous, I wasn’t afraid. I didn’t think I’d ever be afraid again so long as I could look over at Bud and see he was calm.

The ascent came to a halt with the feeling of the sloop nestled snugly against the side of the ship. The distant murmurs we’d been hearing grew into discernible voices, hinting at our arrival on the main deck’s level.

“Steady now,” said a voice from the blackness, stilling our boat with a hand on its frame. Jack and Terrence stepped out first, their movements only traceable by the sound of their steps and the slight creaking of the wooden deck as they settled onto it.

With Zachary clutched tightly to me, I hesitated for a brief moment, acutely aware of the gap between our sloop and the water beneath. With Jack’s guiding hand on my arm, I took the step. The feeling of the wooden deck beneath my feet, firm and unyielding, offered an immediate sense of stability. Despite the utter darkness, there was a collective exhale, a subtle release of tension. We were safe, even if we were still surrounded by the unknown.

“Is everyone accounted for?” A male asked nearby. His voice was firm yet gentle, a strangely comforting sound amidst the dark. It prompted an involuntary relaxation of my shoulders, an odd trust drawn just from its timbre. “Mr. Volmer, were you able to retrieve your entire family?”

“They’re all here,” Jack replied gratefully. “Thank you for waiting, Captain. I’ve got plenty of gold to make up for your time.”

“It’s no bother at all,” the captain responded. “Mrs. Volmer?”

“I’m here,” I managed, pulling Zachary closer against my hip. “Thank you for helping us.”

“It’s my pleasure, madam. Unfortunately, we’ll need to remain in the dark on deck to avoid detection, but I’ve cleared the few cabins I have for you and your family tonight. The sleeping arrangements won’t be as luxurious as those on Captain Perez’s ship, but they’ve each got a door and a bed and no one will disturb you.”

That small promise, a door and a bed, felt like the grandest of comforts in that moment. “A door and a bed sounds perfect,” I replied.

“Come, I’ll lead you to them then. Mind your step; it’s a bit of a maze down below, especially in the dark.”

The subtle shuffle of footsteps started, followed by the creaking of a hatch opening. Even without sight, the sounds painted a picture of a narrow passageway, a descent into the ship’s belly. The captain’s pace was measured, ensuring we could follow by sound alone. Every so often, his voice would offer a direction: “Watch your head here,” or “Step up here.”

The salty sea aroma gradually gave way to the unique scent of the ship’s interior: aged wood, the faint musk of old linen, and the underlying aroma of oil lanterns. It was cleaner than Juan’s ship, lacking the stench of bedpans and unbathed men the farther we ventured below.

After a short journey, the captain stopped. “Here we are,” he announced. The sound of a door creaking open followed. “It’s modest, but it’ll be a safe haven for the night.”

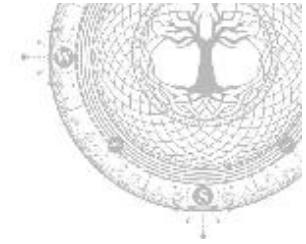
Stepping inside the small space, another wave of safety enveloped me. For the first time in what seemed like an eternity, I didn't feel like a prisoner—not to Juan Josef or the slaver crew or the Ruiz men—but I felt like an actual guest on a ship. The burdensome chains of captivity lightened as the captain ignited the lantern's dim flame.

But as the small light grew to warm his features, my heart stopped beating entirely. I knew that face... Yes, it was older, but still handsome... with full lips, a strong jaw line, and that same distinct side-swept hair...

"You..." I breathed.

His lips lifted in a smile and he glanced fondly at Cecelia where she was tucked in the crook of Jack's arm. "I didn't believe you or her when you told me you'd recognize me. It's been ages since that photo was taken and I was a far handsomer man back then... Granted, I was no Elvis, but I wasn't such an old man yet, either."

He glanced at Jack where he was staring confusedly between us. "Name's Captain *George* Davis and that's my wife you're holding, Mr. Volmer. I suppose we all have some things to discuss so I can make sure she'll remain my wife when you're done here."



Chapter Thirty-Five

Cecelia

“Wake up, *mi paloma*, it is time to go.”

I’d been dreaming of Maddy. We’d been right there on that tire swing for hours, watching the sun lower over the lake as we propelled over it... I told her about time, about the tree and how I thought it created a new ring for each of its passing moments.

I’d envisioned it more like a pulsing frequency in my dream, each wave expanding outward like rings on a tree... every action accounted for in a circle, even those that had gone undone. Across our laps, I showed her the same diagram I’d drawn in the night, explaining how time might move differently.

She was such a curious little creature, and she’d been fully absorbed in every word, asking questions and tracing my lines with her tiny fingers.

“This is my ring, mommy?” she’d asked, tapping one of the outer circles as I heard Juan’s voice attempting to wake me.

“It might be, baby,” I answered, squeezing her to me in one final embrace. “If it’s out there, I promise I’ll find a way to visit.”

She tapped the same circle again. “I’m right here, momma. It won’t be hard.”

As I drifted slowly back into consciousness, I didn’t feel at odds with my reality—didn’t feel the loss of her like I normally did, but rather, I felt the peace the dream had brought still warm in my heart... felt my shared roots as if I’d really been visiting my parallel life.

‘I’m right here, momma,’ she’d said... And she was... She was so close, I could almost still feel her against me.

Juan pressed his lips against my forehead. “I would attempt to carry you to the coach, dove, but you gave me implicit instruction not to lift anything *heavy*.”

With bleary eyes, I blinked up at him. “Did you just call me heavy?”

He chuckled, patting my bottom. “Aye. If we didn’t have a storm to catch, I’m afraid I might be inclined to stay a little longer at this camp just to fatten you up a bit more. You were but skin and bones before we arrived here, but now I’ve got something to grab onto.”

“You brat!” I swatted his hand away, noticing the darkness on the other side of the wigwam’s open doorway for the first time. “What time is it?”

“Very early for some,” he whispered, tenderly brushing his palm down my spine, “and very late for others.”

“We’re not waiting till morning?” I asked, yawning as I sat up to stretch my arms.

He shook his head. “Some of Gordon’s men are out there still searching for us. Dario’s been scouting their routes and schedules. The next patrol will not begin until sunrise. It would be better to get ahead of them now, especially if you insist on taking that blasted carriage.”

I leaned in sleepily to press a kiss against his shoulder. “You’ll be grateful for that blasted carriage about a mile into our trip, brat. How’s your chest?”

“A dull ache I can live with,” he answered, massaging my back. “How’s yours? Did you dream of her?”

Smiling, I nodded as I reached for my clothes. “I did. We were swinging and talking about time. It was a very good dream.”

I quickly shimmied into one of my skirts. “Think you can help me get my stays back on?”

The sound of a horse’s neigh and a cluster of Spanish obscenities pulled our attention to the doorway.

“On second thought,” I yawned, “I don’t need stays in the carriage. Go help your brother before he wakes up the whole

camp. I'll be right behind you."

Quickly tying my petticoats around my waist I tucked my corset under one arm and crawled out of the wigwam, suppressing a laugh at the sight of Dario attempting to calm his agitated mustang.

Mr. Carter had gifted us all horses for our help in moving the rebel weapons, and Dario had picked the most beautiful of them all: a shimmering jet black stallion... who also happened to be the most untamed horse in Carter's collection.

Dario finally grabbed hold of the beast's bridle, pulling his nose inches from his own. "¡Ya basta, cabrón! You hear me? Enough!"

"We told you not to pick that one," Juan tittered, stretching his arms with a wince.

"He's fine," Dario spat, his biceps visibly taut, even through his shirt, where he was struggling to keep the stallion still. "He's just worked up about something. I can handle it."

"Mmm." Juan mindlessly massaged his chest. "I imagine most of the camp would disagree with you given all the noise you're out here making. Why don't you set the poor bastard free and man the carriage you insisted on bringing out here instead?"

"Ellinipsco is manning the carriage," Dario informed him, much to my surprise. "And there's nothing wrong with my horse. Probably just tired of standing still waiting on *you*."

"Ellinipsco is coming with us?" I asked.

"Yes," a female voice answered, forcing me to spin around to find Charlotte smiling back at me. "He wants to know more about this land in Connecticut you offered us, and he wants to search Norfolk for signs of his brother."

"What about you?" I asked, taking her hands in mine as Juan ventured off to either assist or continue to tease Dario. "You're not coming?"

She shook her head. "No. Me and Chase are going west to wait for him in Shawnee territory. We'll be safe."

I took a very deep breath and pulled her into my arms. "I can't thank you enough for helping us. We'd have been lost if

we hadn't come here."

She tightened her long arms around me. "I'm the one that would've been lost. It should be me thanking you... You all gave me hope for things I told myself I had to give up on. You showed me how silly it is to be afraid of time when I'm still a part of it. I'll see you again... in Connecticut when you return with your sister."

Grinning, I hugged her tighter. "I can't wait."

Just beyond her, I saw Chris and Mehkewa standing near the single fire still burning. The firelight danced over Mehkewa's wrinkled smile as he gifted a wooden pipe to Chris and spoke words he was too far away to make out.

Between my body and Charlotte's, I felt the feather he'd given me lying against my chest with Juan's ring, attached to the same chain. I would keep it there for as long as we remained on this timeline as a reminder of where I belonged... as a reminder of the other tree and just how close I was to it.

Charlotte pressed a kiss against my cheek. "Good luck out there. I hope this works."

I smiled as she pulled away. "It will. Good luck to you out west. Be careful."

She began to turn away, but stopped midway to ask, "Do you think it'd be okay to let my real parents know we're alive and safe? I don't want to worry them, but... I don't want them to think we're dead... Prison is hard enough."

"I'll find a way," I promised.

"Thanks." She gave me a crooked smile and continued forward, disappearing in the shadows beyond our horses.

I took one last lingering look around, soaking up the silhouette of wigwams, the lingering scents of shared meals from the night before, and the remnants of child's play scattered throughout in the form of sticks, wooden carvings, and footprints in the dirt. Every corner of the camp held a story, a lesson, a moment of healing for each of us. It'd given me both, my daughter and my husband... two lives to hold onto and

cherish... It'd given me time... and hope for all its possibilities...

With a heart full of gratitude, I turned and made my way to the waiting carriage, ready for the final chapter of our journey before the next would begin.

Juan was already inside, his large silhouette moving every single pillow I'd carefully positioned hours prior.

"Seriously?" I huffed, climbing in beside him to grab one and put it back. "I had these set out a certain way so you wouldn't—"

In a flash, he had me beneath him, his palm pasted over my mouth. "You and I are going to get one thing straight, mi paloma. I am not a wounded and helpless beast to be pitied and doted on any longer. I am a man, and I would rather ache than have you look at me as anything less. Aye?"

I nodded and he leaned in closer, his words a heated breath against my cheek. "Besides, I've not agreed to ride in this carriage for the sake of comfort. If we're to find George Bennet in the coming days, then I intend to spend every second leading up to his death in here learning everything there is to know about you." His palm slid down to my bottom. "Starting with this glorious rear-end you've developed!"



There were few things more gratifying than lying in the crook of Juan's arm and feeling his fingers brush through my hair after having him inside me. It was hardly what I'd had planned when I set up the coach's interior to cater to his injury, but I supposed none of our plans ever went the way we intended.

I sleepily watched the still dark world move past our window in shades of navy and black, willing myself to ignore his flinches and not coddle him as the carriage jostled over the rough terrain.

"You never told me what you and Dario talked about in my absence," he whispered, pressing a kiss against the top of my

head.

“I didn’t realize you’d remember me telling you about that,” I answered, curling into his side to lay my palm over his bandage.

“Oh, I remember every second,” he said. “Including that damn bone needle digging into my flesh. The bullet didn’t hurt nearly as much as that needle did. I might’ve just bled out if I’d known beforehand how painful that thing would be.”

I smiled. “And here I was, thinking you were such a big and strong man to have endured it without making a sound. Such a baby you are beneath all that brawn.”

He snorted. “You’ve no idea. I wanted to sob like a child the first time it went through me... and knowing you’d have to do it several times over? I would’ve prayed for death were it not for your presence there to hear it.”

“I wouldn’t have let you go,” I whispered, tracing the edges of the bandage beneath his shirt. “There was no way I was going to let you die... even if I had to torture you to keep you with me.”

He made an amused sound in his throat, tensing a little as we hit another rocky patch of ground. “So... what *did* you talk about with my brother? Did the vile beast attempt to flirt with you?”

“No,” I laughed. “We talked about you... and Elizabeth... and your father... and... Greg.”

“Greg?” he scoffed. “What on earth would you have to share about *Greg* with my brother?”

I took a deep breath, propping myself up on my elbow. “Well, he was telling me how ashamed he was after your father caught him with a man in his bed... and I couldn’t very well let him be the only one feeling vulnerable. So I told him how ashamed I was... when I found out Greg was married.” I hurriedly added, “And I know I should’ve told you that sooner... I was just scared you’d think less of me. I didn’t know he was married... but that doesn’t make it any less horrible.”

He lifted a brow, no hint of judgment accompanying it. “You were scared that *I*, a man nicknamed *el cazador* for the amount of innocent lives I’ve taken, would think less of *you*?”

I sighed. “Fourteen years is a long time to wait... and I guess I just wanted the image you held onto to be a bit less... damaged.”

“You’re right,” he said, closing his eyes. “You are definitely the ridiculous one in this relationship if you think I could ever see you as damaged.”

“I told you I was,” I said, resting my chin against his chest. “Do you want to know what happened with Greg?”

His eyes remained closed as a dimple formed in his cheek. “If you wish to tell me, dove, I’m all ears, although, I should inform you that Dario is a horrid confidant. He offered up the details of your conversation the very instant he arrived at camp.”

“You really are a brat!” I hissed, smacking playfully at his shoulder. “Why didn’t you tell me you already knew?”

He opened one eye. “I’ve been a little preoccupied... between dying and staring at your rear, I suppose it slipped my mind.”

Rolling my eyes, I lowered back down into the crook of his arm. “Did he tell you that we talked about Elizabeth too?”

“Aye,” he said softly. “I suppose he told you he loved her? Told you how terrible I was to steal her away when I knew as much... how awful I was to destroy her spirit when he would’ve given her all she ever dreamed of?”

“He did.”

“Imbecile,” he huffed. “He was just a boy then and knew about as much about love as he knew about traveling time. He would’ve done far worse than I ever did if the roles had been reversed. The truth is, neither of us deserved her... which is why she’ll be better off in the life we give back to her.”

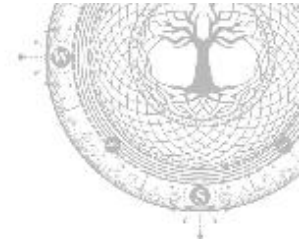
“Do you ever miss her?” I asked.

“Of course I miss her.” He tightened his hold on me. “I might not have known what to do with her, but that didn’t mean

I didn't love her fiercely... doesn't mean I don't think of her often. I grew up loving her... loved her for so long I didn't know how to exist after she was gone—didn't care to until you showed up.”

I nodded, trying to imagine the type of woman that would have both him and Dario wrapped so tightly around her finger. She had to have been extraordinary... probably didn't have panic attacks for no reason or tamper selfishly with time and then sulk because of it...

“Cecelia,” he grumbled, “I can hear your thoughts, dove. You asked if I missed her and I do, but if she stood before me today, neither of us would recognize the other. You, on the other hand... At any point in my life, you could've walked by, and I would've recognized you as the person I have always been destined to call my wife.”



Chapter Thirty-Six

Alaina

Jack and I both sat down heavily on the bed, gazing up at Captain Davis as he lit a second lantern and leaned against the cabin door.

“You’re... George Davis?” I asked, my mouth feeling suddenly too dry. If he was George Davis, then the woman laughing in that Elvis photo really was my daughter... and that felt far too inconceivable right then, even despite its confirmation standing directly in front of me.

“I am,” he said, gaping similarly as his gaze moved from me to Cecelia and back. “My God, you look so much like her. I knew you did, but... it’s a little hard to look away...”

Jack reached into his jacket pocket with the arm that wasn’t protectively cradling Cecelia to his chest. Unfolding our ancestry chart between his trembling fingers, he lifted the paper up and asked, “I’m to believe you’re this *same* George Davis?”

“In the flesh,” he tittered. “For two people who built our founding principals, you both seem far less imaginative than I thought you’d be at such a young age.”

I hugged Zachary to me to be certain I wasn’t dreaming. “It’s a bit much to believe. Where... I mean... *when* did you come from?”

“When,” he laughed. “I forgot you don’t have those answers yet. Time doesn’t really work in whens. There isn’t a ‘*when*’ to come from when you’re a traveler.”

“So...” I managed around shaking vocal chords, “if not when... then *what* are you doing here?”

Despite being what I had to guess was close to eighty-years-old, he had a boyish sort of smile—charismatic and good-

natured. Unfathomable as what he was telling us might've seemed, it was very hard not to believe him when he spoke with a smile that felt so very familiar in its warmth. "Travelers have infinite access to time, so there are lots of *chicken-and-egg* type situations, as you so fondly like to refer to them, Mrs. Volmer, and this is about to be one of the most infamous."

"I... don't understand," Jack croaked out. "Chicken-and-egg?"

"The two of you sent me here," he continued as if this were nothing. "And you only did so because you remembered me being here." He patted his chest and said, "Chicken," then pointed a withered finger in our direction. "Egg... Strange, right?"

I massaged my temples. "Dizzying."

He laughed. "For me as well. It's called an echo. And this one's quite historical. I'm excited to finally live up to the name you've made for me on the pages of TAO history."

"TAO?" I asked.

"The Adrift Order," he answered. "A little on the cheesy side, but Chris Grace is incapable of being anything less. He liked it being a play on the Chinese word and the general Tao philosophy of yin and yang. The name was his idea. Or... I suppose it will be soon enough."

At our lack of amusement, he pulled a chair out from the small table beside our bed and sat with a grunt. "Forgive me. I have spent my whole life looking forward to this moment and I'm speaking to you as if you know me the same way I know you. Given the looks on your faces, I've already overwhelmed you. I'm here to kill George Bennet."

I'd had very little sleep in the past few days, and apparently that was clouding my ability to comprehend much of anything. I blinked heavily at him. "Forgive my bluntness, but... why?"

"Why?" he asked, raising a salt and pepper brow.

I nodded, swallowing thickly. "Why would we send you to kill George Bennet when so many of us are on our way to do that very thing?"

“Oh... well, I’m not sure.” His lips twitched. “That’s just the way it’s written.”

I was still struggling to wrap my mind around his existence, let alone his purpose. “So... you came here from the future to do something we told you you’ve already done?”

He casually crossed his ankle over his knee. “Dizzying indeed when you put it like that. But like I said, time doesn’t move the way non-travelers think it does. There’s no such thing as past or future inside TAO. We are all present and the lives that once held us are but an echo of our collectively altered existence.” He winked. “I’ve been waiting years to say that so you’ll write it into our founding covenants.”

“I’m... going to write it in the covenants?” I asked. “So you read that part before you said it?”

His amusement was almost frustrating. “That’s what I mean about the lack of past or future. A man, even from centuries ahead, can travel backward to add to your guiding documents. It will happen many times, as a matter of fact. Each contribution will be credited to the person who made it, even though our histories as travelers will all shift as a result of its addition. Time will make it so the true discoverer of any given thing cannot actually be the one to discover whatever is written once it’s written. So which came first? My speaking those words to you or my reading of that very passage that prompted me to sit here and share it at all?”

Again, I blinked heavily... as did Jack.

“All part of an echo,” he explained. “Since you taught me that, you’ll have plenty of time to understand it soon enough. I have a job to do here that we should be discussing instead. Cecelia Volmer is far too brilliant a woman to fall in love with just any old schmuck. The man she chooses has to be written as a hero in her society’s history and, as I have very much enjoyed being married to her these past fifty-five years, I intend to live up to the name you gave me.”

I swallowed, looking up at the wooden boards over my head. “Is-is she with you?”

“No,” he scoffed. “You already wrote that rule, remember? No one is allowed to visit their past selves, no matter how old or young. She’s at home, likely spoiling our grandchildren with any manner of expensive gifts while she awaits my return.”

I glanced at Cecelia’s sleeping figure in Jack’s arm, then at the chart he was still holding partially upward in the other. “But... this says she will only live to be sixty-five, and if you were twenty-five when you married... you’re much older than you should be...”

He chuckled. “If you think about time linearly, sure... But as I’ve said, time does not move the way you think. There are echoes all across it, and that chart will change several times over... as it has before your very eyes not that long ago.”

“Zachary?” Jack asked, his thoughts mirroring my own as we both held our breath waiting for an answer.

The smile on Captain Davis’s face made my pulse instantly settle. “Your son has escaped death more times than I can count. He’s far too stubborn to die in an uninteresting way, daredevil that he is. Every version I’ve ever seen of his future obituary has suggested he’ll live to be well over ninety, and every single death written is as exciting as he’d want it to be.”

“Every version?” I asked, frowning. “There’s more than one?”

He grinned. “It’s a funny thing, Mrs. Volmer, to be explaining time to you, of all people. We may travel forward once to end up on an echo pattern before its history can be altered. We can travel that same path later and find a much different future than the one we last encountered. Take your sister, for instance... Say a traveler from the 17th century went forward before she altered her history... that traveler might end up on an echo where she was married to another man, living out an entirely different life, one where she hadn’t come here to figure out the initial formula for time. Make sense?”

Jack let out a long and frustrated breath. “Not really... How did she even come to change her course in the first place?”

“Echoes—several of them.”

“You keep saying echo,” I said, frowning. “What does that even mean and why do you call it that?”

He raised a brow. “That’s how your sister wrote it—sorry, how she *will* write it in the coming days. Her findings here serve as the foundation for the man who ultimately will define time with his Theory of a Magnetic Infinity. This man, whose name I can’t give you until he’s born, with the help of Magna’s daughter, took your sister’s early references to a wavelength pattern similar to a tree’s rings and wrote his own after his initial hypothesis allowed him to manipulate time’s gates. In his theory, he said time works similar to a sound wave: like a beep emitted long long ago in an infinite darkness where there was never any barrier for it to get hung up on—no condition that would mute it, dampen it, or stop it as it endlessly pulsed outward. Each circular sound wave creates another and another, generating an endless pattern similar to the rings of a tree. Each ring has its own frequency—generated by the lives lived upon it. Every six months, relative to the ring last created, a new one is formed as that frequency continues to evolve and move across that darkness, creating the whole universe over and over again. Each circle creates another larger one and then another and another as that original sound continues on its journey... ever changing... ever learning... ever growing larger and unique in its frequency. The signal never dulls or weakens as it travels, but remains forever.”

He adjusted his spine against the unforgiving wooden chair with a wince. “And the echoes... Well, those are made by us. See, each circle of time can have a slightly smaller version of itself—renderings where one or two or even a hundred events no longer exist as they once did, thus changing the frequency ever so slightly to create a new one. We call these echoes. Each ring of time has a frequency of its own, but so do their echoes. I like to think of them like a faint glow around the inner perimeter of a circle. The primary ring can grow out of these echoes once, twice, or even a thousand times within its six month lifespan as travelers alter the events upon it... and the ring and its echoes will swell outward collectively as more are created—given there is nothing out there to quiet them. This pass through time we are on? It will become an echo as well, one of the most significant to date for the principals written upon it that breathed to life the

very existence of TAO. It is the only instance ever recorded where we've been allowed to make such a large alteration, and we have only allowed it because of the life that will be restored in doing so."

"Anna?" I breathed.

"Maria Grace," he mended. "She cannot be permitted to die when she's yet to give birth to the very same man I've just referenced."

"Maria's going to die?" Jack asked, genuinely shaken.

The captain clicked his tongue. "I'm afraid she already has."

We both simultaneously opened our mouths to ask questions, but the captain held up his palm. "It does not matter when it's to be undone so soon. What matters is the retained memories. There are a few of you—"

"Wait..." Jack's body had gone completely rigid beside me, his eyes glued upon the man's wrist. "What's that?"

"This?" Davis chuckled—a light, knowing sound—and flexed his wrist, revealing the small tattoo etched into his skin. "I suppose I forgot about that. It's a little extra security, courtesy of Matavi Ramsey's ingenuity. Make sure to credit him when you recount this part of our tale. He insisted we travelers have a means of recognizing one another. The ink is not something non-travelers could ever get their hands on—not unless they had the means to journey into the future to find it... And I've heard the formula has evolved as we have to account for new discoveries."

He offered his wrist closer so Jack and I could take in the details, almost like he was presenting a piece of fine art. The tattoo was a series of concentric circles centered around a dark dot, reminiscent of a bullseye. From the central mark, a line branched out, slicing through the rings toward another set of symbols closer to his palm. There, a lone star accompanied by a dot sat nestled within the curve of another circle.

He began his guided tour of the inked map on his skin, his fingertip pausing first on the innermost circle. "This is our first

mark. It signifies a traveler who has conquered their first trial and it is one of the proudest moments of our lives.”

Moving outward to the middle ring, he continued, “This one marks the completion of the second trial. There are many who live with only the first and never get to experience travel at all.”

His narration was almost reverent as he touched the outermost circle, “And this one means the traveler has survived the final test and their first jump, earning the right to navigate time on their own.”

“And that one?” I asked, motioning to the star closer to his palm.

His finger trailed the inked path to the smaller circle that encased it. “Each founding family has a symbol. The Volmers,” he said, a hint of pride warming his voice, “are stars.”

Finally, he touched the small dot on the outer rim of the secondary circle, his smile widening. “And this little addition signifies that I’m not a direct bloodline traveler, but rather, I married into the legacy.”

“Volmers are stars...” I echoed breathlessly, thinking of the countless nights I’d spent watching the twilight breathe the stars above me to life. “Whose idea was that?”

Captain Davis motioned to Cecelia. “Hers.” He glanced at Zachary and laughed. “Poor Zack hated the idea—argued that it should be something *more fierce* like the Grace’s sword—but here we all are, years later, wearing our Volmer stars proudly... That’s the thing about our Celia. Once her mind’s made up, there’s not a soul among us that can change it.”

I couldn’t help but grin at Jack.

But his focus remained glued to Captain Davis, mouth partially opened as if he were frozen mid-sentence.

“Jack?” I tapped his arm. “Honey, are you alright?”

Very slowly, he closed his mouth and shook his head. “I’ve seen that tattoo before. In Panama. At the inn... there was a man there that had one just like it... only there was a half moon in place of the star.”

Captain Davis nodded. “That would be Omar Farley... He’s a spouse to one of Isobel’s descendants. There are three of us here besides the rest of you... Omar’s first mission took him to Panama to make sure you ended up on Navarro’s ship instead of the slave vessel. He’s in Charleston as we speak, and will be there when the fire erupts on Juan Josef’s ship to collect the remaining travelers.”

“Let’s back up a little,” Jack said, running a hand hard over his face. “I... told you what to say and do to get me on your ship in Virginia? You already knew everything that was about to happen when you took me aboard? You know what’s going to happen from here?”

The old man grinned. “Not exactly. I knew where to find you and when, just as I knew where to find the ship that held your family. I know where to find the others and George Bennet, but I do not know the events that will lead up to me striking the man down. Time would be rather dull if travelers already knew everything that would happen while there. Wouldn’t leave a whole lot of room for adventure, eh?”

I glanced over at Jack where the lines between his brows were creased in such a way that I was certain they’d leave permanent wrinkles.

For as much time as I’d spent seeped in the guidelines, I had no doubt whatsoever about George Davis’s authenticity. I’d obsessed over that Elvis photo nightly and, just as I recognized him as the man inside it, I’d always somehow recognized the woman beside him as my daughter.

The realist in Jack, however, was not so easily convinced, and I could see every one of Davis’s words was becoming more difficult for him to believe than the last... The longer the conversation went on, the harder it was going to be for Jack to remain optimistic.

Captain Davis cleared his throat and straightened. “Like I said, there’ll be plenty of time to discuss the inner-workings of TAO later. Right now, I need to talk about what we’re preparing to do. This is the only time anything like this will have ever been done, and you need to know how to handle the alteration

of your memories. They'll come in slowly for those of you that remember this variation.”

I laid my hand over Jack's bouncing knee. “What do you mean, those of us that remember? When my sister altered her timeline, I remembered two versions of my life... so did Chris. This wouldn't be like that for all of us?”

“You and Chris remembered because you possessed something from before the alteration—objects anchoring you to each timeline,” he explained. “Chris had his grandmother's ring upon him, and you had the necklace that Evelyn's pendant hangs from.”

His words prompted me to trace my necklace, remembering the day in Minnesota I'd nearly lost it when the original chain's clasp broke. I'd hastily put the pendant on one of my older necklaces, always meaning to get around to repairing the broken clasp on the one Chris had given me, but never quite finding the time to do it.

Davis leaned forward, elbows on knees. “In 2004, an echo was created when Juan intervened in your sister's life. Since you already owned that chain, and Chris had already been gifted his grandmother's ring, you both were anchored, thus able to retain your dual memories when you woke with those same items touching your body. Mrs. Volmer, can I see your ring?”

I laid my palm protectively over the ring Jack had given me. “What for?”

Smiling, the captain drummed his fingers over the table beside him, directing our attention to a folder on its surface. “We needed to create something you could have ownership of in both 1775 and in 2020—something we knew each of you would wake with once you move from the echo. In 1642, a Dutch man by the name of Abel Tasman discovered ManawaTū—*your island*. Your daughter arranged for the discovery and the creation of this... a land grant issued by the Dutch Republic that declares the land on ManawaTū to belong to all of you. Zachary Charles William—the man in those journals you found—had a slightly different ring with him during his time on the island. Your daughter went back and exchanged it for one she made with bits of the island's volcanic rock molded into its band,

hoping that would be a strong enough anchor to carry you through. There should be a bit of silver around the diamond, and within that silver, you should see a few hints of the darker stone.”

I held up my left hand, letting the lantern light shine over the ring. I knew exactly what he was referring to. I’d always thought the dark spots on the silver were tarnish from where it had sat in a bag on the island for almost a hundred years. To think it’d been forged by my own daughter suddenly made it that much more significant.

“You... didn’t do this for all of us?” I asked, unable to pull my eyes from the black dots around the diamond on my finger.

“No,” he said, a hint of apology in his tone. “There are a few of you that won’t remember at all, and that’s what I need to prepare you for.”

My mind was only partially present as I continued to stare at my ring, imagining it in my adult daughter’s hands... in awe that she’d touched this same material before it’d even ended up on my finger. “Who?”

“Our rules state that the secrets of death should always remain sacred,” he answered, “and so we cannot allow those that have passed to wake with their memories of it... nor can they ever know they died in the first place.”

I looked up from my ring then and frowned. “But you said all this has already been written into history? Won’t they find out if they read it?”

He shook his head and pulled back his sleeve to present his other wrist, where a tree was tattooed in the center, its roots and branches identical where they grew outward into a knotted circle that connected them. “Only gatekeepers know this particular part of our history. You see, we realized pretty quickly that memory retention was a dangerous thing to have knowledge of. Good as our intentions might be, if every traveler knew they could completely alter one existence and live in the next with the memory of both, it’d be too tempting for them not to take advantage of infinity itself. Safeguards have been put into place to preserve this secret. Personal items are not only closely monitored, but also removed during travel. Travelers are given

attire suitable for their trip before they reach whatever gates they're intending to pass through. This allows keepers like me to correct mistakes without anyone knowing they'd ever made them."

I thought of all the various disaster scenarios we'd been preparing for in our guides and how little we'd even scratched the surface in light of just the few things he'd explained so far. There was so much more work to do by the sounds of it.

"With that said," he continued, "a traveler who has died on *any* echo can never have knowledge of it—nor can they ever learn the secrets of memory retention." He glanced at Jack then back down to his hands.

"I don't understand," I said. "You mean, Anna and Maria will wake with no memories of our time here? No knowledge that they'd died at all?"

"They'll have memories of your time," he said, "but only up until you encountered Juan Josef in Tahiti. From there, they will remember only the new version of their lives... and this will be a challenge when you first arrive as your own memories will take time to catch up."

"And why exactly can't we tell them?" I asked.

Again, he glanced nervously at Jack, then back down at his lap. "Because there are some things we're not meant to remember. A traveler who learns they'd died on some pass through time might take it upon themselves to craft a personal item—just like we did for you—that could span across all their echoes in order to get a glimpse of their experience with death. It's forbidden."

"Forbidden by who?" Jack demanded.

Davis cleared his throat uncomfortably. "By you." He pointed at the chart still in Jack's grip. "You died on another echo. And... whatever you remembered was enough for you to create the rule and insist the memory be undone. That's why your name is not upon this land grant... and why you won't be able to remember your time here either."

My heart sank in my chest as I thought of everything the two of us had been through since we'd first encountered Juan

Josef... we'd gotten married, gotten to know our children and each other as parents... It was unfathomable that Jack could forget even a second of the past six months.

Jack, evidently more frustrated than shocked, placed Cecelia on the bed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Forgive me, but this is all a bit too much. You have been kind in all you've done to get me here, and I don't want to be rude, but this... This is... Well, what am I supposed to do with this information? You can't expect me to just go along with it like it's some kind of irrefutable truth simply because you know our names and resemble someone in a photo."

"You're right," Davis said, his eyes moving to Cecelia once more before he stood with a grunt. "I've given you far too much for such a late hour, particularly after all you've gone through to get here. I'm likely not telling it properly anyway, given my own lack of sleep. Here."

He plucked a large book off the table and handed it to me, the weight of it surprising as I placed it in my lap.

"That's the TAO as a whole," he explained. "Our guiding principals, laws, and history are written on those pages. Perhaps you'll understand your own words a little better than mine. Take some time to read through it tonight, and tomorrow, when we're all better rested, we'll talk."

I peeked inside the cover where a simple inscription was written in my handwriting: *'Celia, When you've lost your place, love, look for the stars that call you home. —Love, Mom.'*

I dared to turn to the first page and my pulse thickened when I read: *'Rule number one: You don't talk about time travel.'*



Neither of us slept at all. We'd tried a few times, but the book kept calling to us... kept urging us both to read more... kept leaving us with more questions we needed answered. We quietly read page after page of the history we'd all written, both of us recognizing our own contributions—even the parts that hadn't been written yet. We also recognized thoughts that

distinctly aligned with the others, things that couldn't have come from anyone but Lilly or Jim, Cece or Juan Josef... bits of all of us sprinkled throughout the pages and discoveries to create a truly magnificent way of life.

We learned that our island's name, ManawaTū, was decided by Magna, and it translated roughly to '*the heart still standing*', which was fitting for the role it played in TAO culture.

Despite being mostly destroyed in 1824 by the eruption of its volcano, ManawaTū, and our experiences upon it, served as the transitioning point for time travel candidates who'd passed their first two trials to advance into full-time travelers.

Grouped with descendants and spouses from varying centuries, age groups, and backgrounds, candidates were sent back to a time the island still existed where they were tasked with surviving with nothing but their wits and the bonds they formed over the course of a year—just like us. Obstacles similar to our own, along with a few more creative ones, were weaved into their experiences there: the building of a boat and its overnight destruction, the flooding of the summit, and a missed ship all being examples of a few. Passing or failing this final trial was dependent on each candidate's ability to overcome the obstacles they were presented with throughout their time spent there.

I had no doubt in my mind that Magna had come up with this final trial and I couldn't help but smile at the idea that our descendants would share in our experiences on the island.

As the night progressed, we ventured into the Theory of a Magnetic Infinity. In it, we learned about the '*gates*' sprinkled just above and below the equator—aligning with Cece's early musings about the Vile Vortices—and how they opened twice a year as time's frequency pulsed outward, the movement of our universe creating small gaps we could slip through.

Far more complex than a simple lightning strike, the theory determined that the lightning we'd experienced was actually an electromagnetic discharge. Time's pulse, it seemed, emitted a high-voltage, low-current frequency—similar to that of a Tesla coil—which created an arc whenever the '*ring*' you were on

created another, resembling lightning. This arc was linked to other rings across what was coined the *'grand frequency'*.

Each gate was initially believed to only move a certain distance, but it was later discovered that the arcs could be navigated by setting off additional electromagnetic charges within them that could alter their trajectory to reach the frequency of the traveler's choosing.

I found it truly fascinating, the things our descendants discovered—or rather, *would* discover—if not a little over my head and slightly terrifying.

The sun had come up by the time we got to the section related to the death of a traveler. I recognized the thinking behind it as distinctly Jack's almost the moment I began, and my heart grew heavier and heavier as the two of us sat side by side, silently reading the rule he'd written... the rule that would make it so I remembered a life he could never know about.

'Knowledge of death is reserved for the dead. Under no circumstances should a traveler ever have the means to remember an undone death, nor should they ever possess the knowledge that such a thing was ever possible.'

At first, it saddened me that we'd created such a rule. I'd been so curious to find out what Anna might've remembered about her death—anxious even to know for certain if there was a God or a heaven that awaited us...

But what would I have done with that knowledge? How might it have changed my life if the truth about death didn't align with the faith I'd always clung to?

What if there was nothing?

I supposed it was a far better thing to not know than to find out something you weren't prepared for... something that might rattle an already rattling existence that much further...

Jack's eyes were red with fatigue when they met mine, and I realized, as he spoke, it'd been hours since either of us had looked up from the book to say a word to one another. "It's all real, isn't it?" he asked. "Davis is really... our son in law?"

Swallowing, I nodded. "I think so."

He glanced at the pages on his lap, then back to me. “You don’t think there’s any possibility that this is... some kind of very elaborate prank?”

I attempted to smile but couldn’t quite get there in light of his inability to remember it in the near future. “It’d be one hell of a prank. Don’t you think?”

With a deep breath, he shook his head, frowning at the words once more as his shoulders sank with acceptance. “What do you think I saw in death that scared me so badly?”

I shrugged, tracing a gentle circle over his forearm,. “Who says you were scared? Maybe death was so far beyond any level of happiness you could experience in life that you needed to forget just to make it worth living? We can’t know for certain it was something that scared you.... Can’t allow ourselves to think that way and live in fear because of it...”

He massaged his temples. “I don’t know... It’s a very strange thing to think I would choose to forget everything that’s happened these past several months... more strange to think it didn’t come from a place of fear. Especially knowing you’ll have to carry all these memories alone...”

“I don’t want to remember it if you don’t,” I confessed. “I only want to know the life you know. Maybe we could both forget? Live blissfully unaware that these past six months ever happened?”

He stared at the book for a long moment, then glanced at Zachary, the gears of his mind visibly churning until he found some semblance of resolve.

Reaching out, he cupped my cheek and forced a smile. “You have to remember this... I don’t. You made all this possible... Forgetting six months is no big deal, right? I mean... with all the drugs I did in my twenties, who’s to say in five or ten years, the memories wouldn’t have grown fuzzy anyway. I’ll remember everything that happened before we met Juan, and I’ll have all the new memories we’ll make after we wake.” He motioned to the pages on his lap. “Obviously, we’re going to have a lot of them. So what if you remember a few things I don’t? We could handle that... couldn’t we? What we’ve built... it’s strong enough to handle it. Isn’t it?”

“But... our wedding... our babies...”

His thumb brushed over my lips, his smile coming much easier now. “I’ll know a life where I never left them, where I was right there beside you to witness every first moment they’ll ever experience—where no one ever showed up to threaten them or take you all away from me. And you’ll know that life as well as one where you got to spend even more time bonding with them... where you built this extraordinary life for them to live in... The wedding? Well, if you think there’s any way in hell I won’t marry you on that timeline just the way I married you on this one, then you don’t know me at all. We’ll make new memories... all across time.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but was unable to get a word out before our door was pushed open. Kyle, with eyes the same shade of red as ours and his own version of our covenants clutched to his chest, stared between each of us. “This is what you and Magna were doing all those nights in the chamber?”

I nervously adjusted the blanket over Zachary. “Parts of it... It’s—”

“Incredible,” Kyle answered for me, his face lighting up in a wide, toothy smile. “Alaina, it’s *incredible*.”

Jack let out the breath of a laugh and nodded, squeezing my knee. “It really is.”

Kyle hugged the book tighter as he leaned back against the doorframe. “I was so afraid for Matty... Unsure exactly when he was conceived—before or after our first encounter with Juan Josef... Unsure what kind of man he might become or what century we’d even raise him in.” He sighed, his eyes venturing to some far off place. “But to know he’s not only going to live, but that he’s going to be a good man—a smart man who’s nothing like my father? That he’ll go on to shape this world you’ve created and have a place in its history? You’ve given my son a life I never could’ve dreamt for him, and you have no idea what you’ve given me in knowing the man he’ll be. Thank you.”

Blushing, I waved off the gratitude. It felt misplaced when we all had contributed so much to those pages—or would contribute to them... “You think everybody got a copy then?”

He nodded, clearing his throat of its emotion. “They’re all on deck already. It didn’t seem right to be talking about it without the two of you. Terrence and Bruce aren’t exactly happy about it, and I could really use your help up there.”

Jack closed the book in his lap and tossed it to the side, stretching both arms over his head. “It’s going to be a very *very* long day.”

“Mmmm,” I hummed, holding Zachary closer, “and you’ll be lucky enough to forget it soon enough.”



In the night, the Sofia Martina had passed right by, our ship inside the inlet but a piece of the shadowy coastline for all they’d noticed.

Without any sort of conflict from the Ruiz men, we were left with little else to do but wait... and argue.

To say that Terrence and Bruce weren’t happy about the covenants was the understatement of the century. They were livid. Bruce felt slighted that I’d chosen to keep such a secret from him, and they both felt that the existence of TAO was a bad idea—that we were creating a world where no history and no future could ever be safe.

Despite all the safeguards I threw back at them for all the various worst-case scenarios they came up with, they remained adamant in their stance: No one should be allowed to travel time ever again, not after all we’d gone through in our own experiences and our struggles to get back home.

Neither of them cared about the discovery of time’s inner workings, nor were they interested in the ways our descendants had come to navigate it. To them, TAO shouldn’t exist—couldn’t exist if we wanted to return to a world we were once familiar with—and therefore its framework wasn’t something they were interested in learning.

Throughout the heated debate, Captain Davis had sat in a chair with his booted feet propped up on a sandbag, ankles

crossed with a casual and patient half smile affixed to his lips as he opted to remain silent and wait his turn to speak.

I liked him. I hardly knew him, but I liked him. So did Bud, who decided to take a seat beside him and wait for the more boisterous voices to simmer down.

The two of them, so close in age, were amusing to watch as Terrence, Bruce, Jack, and Kyle all vehemently butted heads, nodding off every so often the longer they waited.

I imagined they felt much like I did and would likely get around to saying so when they got their turns to speak. Our support of or objections to the existence of TAO didn't matter. TAO existed... with no past and no future and with advanced systems and processes that could ensure its survival even if someone was intent on destroying it.

There was no use in arguing about it, but I knew these men well enough to know it was better to let them try than to cut it short before they'd said their parts.

With a baby on each hip, I decided to join the older men, leaning Cecelia toward Davis in offering as I did so. "Do you want to hold her?"

He grinned in such a way I could very nearly picture him in his youth, outwardly portraying the portrait of the hero but trembling inside when my daughter was near. "I've been waiting some time to do just that."

Reaching out, he took her gently, turning her so he could balance her socked feet against his thighs and hold her at eye level. "There you are, little dipper. I'd know those eyes anywhere..." His smile widened as he examined her. "But these chubby little legs... you never told me about these."

Zachary shouted various vowel sounds at him as I perched on the edge of the sandbag beside his feet to admire the interaction.

"I'd know that voice anywhere too," he said, chuckling as his gaze moved to the baby wiggling in my lap. "We went to ManawaTū together, him and I. I would've never made it through if it weren't for his friendship—even though he almost

got us killed more times than I can count. We climbed the summit on the very first day just to see the same view you had.”

I grinned. “What are they like?”

His eyes moved back to Cecelia, lightening as he said, “Extraordinary. She’s so passionate about everything she does. It’s humbling, really, to have a wife who dedicates herself so fully to the things she loves. And she loves just about all there is to this life. Music,” he swooned, “the woman never heard a note that didn’t bring a tear to her eye. In our twenties, she took me on a tour across time, insisting we stop in every decade to catch a concert from each of the greats.”

She curled her fingers around the cuff of his jacket, as mesmerized by one of its buttons as he was of her. “She’s very decided when she sets her mind on something,” he continued in that same far off tone, “but she’s too creative not to decide on a great many things. I’ve followed her all over the world and time as she’s consumed as much knowledge as she can fill her giant brain with. You know she has four different degrees in four different decades? And she got them all while managing to raise four equally smart and passionate children.”

I couldn’t contain the smile his words incited.

“And Zack,” he added with a smile, “he’s got that same passion, but it’s far more untamed. The man’s got to see and do everything... He travels more than any of us—even now in his old age—never wanting to live the same day twice. And that heart of his... He doesn’t love many, but the ones he does... he gives everything to.”

There was a lump in my throat that was far too large to swallow. “Does he marry?”

Davis’s smile widened. “He’s never been the type. There’s one, though, that’s outlasted the others... She’s not the type to sit still either—both of them far too wild to be good for each other... She’s a traveler too. Comes from a far off branch of the Jackson line. They make it a point to bump into each other every few years to share in an adventure or two before they venture back out on their own.”

I hugged Zachary a bit tighter, tuning out his annoyed protests and efforts to wriggle free. Soon enough, he'd be off living his adventurous life, and he didn't seem like the type to drop in and let his mother hug him from time to time either.

Cecelia, always the more cheerful and easygoing baby, naturally received more attention from the others in our group. But from the moment I'd looked down at that ancestry chart and seen Zachary's life cut short, my arms had instinctively reached for him first. Selfishly, it brought me joy every time he cried for me, allowing me more opportunities to swoop in and hold him close. I was determined to cherish every minute of his life, and even in that moment, assured of his long future, I clung to him with all my might, terrified of the day I'd no longer be able to.

"Can I ask you something, George?" Bud inquired, his head tilted back and eyes closed. "In regards to the other, less fortunate George we're headed for?"

Davis tore his eyes from Cecelia and looked over at Bud, raising one of his thinning brows. "You want to know what kind of life we're putting out?"

Bud nodded, sitting forward a little to meet his gaze. "It's been on my mind for some time now. I can't imagine it wouldn't be on yours if you've lived with the knowledge you'd kill him your whole life."

At that, the argument behind us quieted and we all leaned in a little more.

As a group, we'd always avoided discussing George Bennet as if he were a person, often even avoiding the first name and referring to him solely as *'Bennet'* or *'the ancestor'* as if that could dehumanize him enough to numb what we were setting out to do.

Internally, though, I think we all thought of him frequently—wondered who he was and what we would be stealing from the world when his life was put to an end.

"I have never killed a man," Davis explained, his voice solemn as he lowered Cecelia into his lap and curled an arm around her, "but I've lived my whole life as if I had already... It ate away at me for a time—not knowing who he was or what he

might've done—so I took it upon myself to travel to a distant echo... a version we didn't land upon... to see what kind of life I might be robbing him of.”

“And?” Kyle asked, hugging his good arm self-consciously over his bad one where he'd opted to remove his prosthetic for the day.

“And,” the captain sighed, “I saw the death he would've had instead. In the original timeline, he went on to live for about another year and a half, seeing the worst of the battles in the coming war as he worked his way up the British ranks. An injury in January granted him a short break where he and his new wife conceived the son that would've gone on to ancestor Richard Albrecht. But he never got to meet that son. In July of 1776, a cannon blast in the Battle of Gwynn's Island ended his life. Posing as a medic, I experienced his death first-hand and I think that's why I am here—I think I needed to see it for myself to be able to kill so young a person.”

He shakily adjusted Cecelia's bonnet, clearing his throat before he recounted it. “I sat beside him and watched him suffer for three long days and nights, begging endlessly for me to put his suffering to an end. No man would want to die in such a way and I would've given anything to have been able to give him the relief he wanted right then and there, but it wasn't my place. Ever since then, I've told myself I will be doing him a favor by saving him that kind of torture... I will be giving him what he begged me for then.”

“How young?” Jack asked, his voice coming out in a croak as he rested his hands on each of my shoulders. “You mentioned he was young... How young?”

The captain winced and shook his head. “Seventeen.”

“Jesus,” Terrence grumbled. “Seventeen? All this time, we've been hunting a child?”

“A soldier,” Bud cut in, “no matter his age, can never again be a child after he's stepped foot on his first battlefield. I don't know George Bennet, but I do know, if he's aimed and fired upon another man, he's no child. War changes you—hardens you—forces you to become something unrecognizable when you're caught in the middle of it. You're neither man nor child

when you're active, but something very nearly soulless as you try like hell to reach the end of your tour. I've seen men of all sizes and ages suffer and beg for a death that took too long to find them, and I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy. We're not hunting a child... and we're not murdering a man. We're putting some poor beast out of its misery."

It wasn't often Bud spoke of Vietnam, and none of us dared to make a sound as some shadow of his past played out behind his eyes.

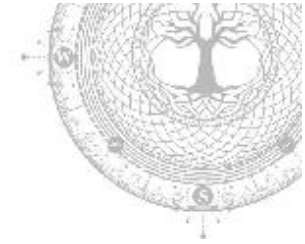
It was Davis that broke the silence, leaning forward to put a hand on his shoulder and squeeze gently. "There is a time for everything, Bud, and a season for every activity under the heavens..."

Taken aback by the very verse Bertie had always loved to reference, Bud gaped at him, his eyes watering ever so slightly as he breathed, "You met my Bertie."

Davis nodded. "Didn't have a choice. As a gatekeeper, it's my job to follow any traveler that breaks the rules, and your Bertie had one show up at her door during the time you were imprisoned in Hanoi. I was obligated to be there to ensure that traveler didn't get too near to his younger self."

Bud's breath hitched and he blinked to prevent the tears that might've spilled out at the implication. "It's me, isn't it? Tell me I'm buried right there beside her at the end?"

Davis grinned. "You are... and you were... long before the day you put her in the ground, she put you there first to wait for her."



Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chris

Sleeping without Maria was impossible. During the day, he could trick his mind into thinking she was just somewhere else—on the ship with Alaina or visiting a friend. With the noises of other people to drown out his thoughts, it was an easy enough trick to pull off. But at night, when those noises quieted, his mind couldn't be tricked so easily and he would relive her dying moments over and over as he tossed and turned.

It didn't matter if her death was temporary. He'd spent almost two years with her constantly beside him and each second of her absence felt longer than the last. Every night was the same. Sleep would beckon him, offering a welcome reprieve to the pain of living without her, only to torment him with images of her bleeding to death on that cot.

He preferred being awake.

The sun hadn't even come up when he ventured down to the water to pack up his horse, desperate for a menial task that could keep his mind far away from those nightmares.

They'd ridden south the day before, keeping off the main trail to avoid encountering any soldiers that might recognize them for their involvement in Maria's escape. When night fell, they'd setup a small camp deep in the woods near a creek.

Kneeling at the edge of the stream, he cupped his hands beneath it to splash the icy water over his face and hair, the fatigue that weighed down his bones diminishing with the shock of its coolness.

With a deep breath, he rang out his hands and turned, nearly falling into the creek with his surprise when he found himself face to face with Lady.

Lady was the name of the horse Mr. Carter had given him, a giant chestnut pacer, and while she had a kind temperament, Charles warned him that she was exceptionally good at one thing: escaping.

Catching his breath, he ran a hand over her muzzle and gathered the frayed rope she'd chewed through where it dangled from her halter. "Tired of my moping too?"

She nudged his hand with her nose and took a step forward, leaning in as if to urge him for more affection.

With a chuckle, he obliged, smoothing his palm over her snout as he peered past her at the other mares upstream, all of them perfectly docile. Of course, *he* would get the single escape artist among the group. Was this another test on his patience? Would he wake up tomorrow with no horse at all?

Behind him, Dario's stallion let out a loud whinny, pulling Chris's attention to the place downstream where they kept him safely distanced from the females. The beast was rolling happily on his back in the dirt, a partially erect fifth-leg serving as evidence of the type of night he'd indulged in.

Eyes widening, Chris turned his focus back to Lady. "You're not a lady at all, are you?" He shook his head and stole another glimpse at the satisfied male. "This is what you've been up to all night?"

She nudged his shoulder, and he sighed as he rested his cheek against her and continued to comb over her muzzle. "You know, Maria would've gotten a kick out of this. She'd have dreamt up some crazy tale about how he's your soulmate, and you just can't live without him. The woman was tough, but she loved a good romance. She'd probably be out here helping you escape every night if she was with us."

He laughed at the image this conjured up in his mind. "You would've liked her. She couldn't be tethered either."

Both he and Lady stared at the stallion where he gathered his legs back beneath him and stood, nodding and snorting a few times before he explored the grass underfoot.

"He's awfully proud of himself..." Pursing his lips, he turned to inspect Lady. He didn't know much about horses, but

he didn't think they mated for fun. She was likely in some kind of heat, and he couldn't imagine that'd make for an easy ride to Norfolk. With a long sigh, he placed a hand on her muzzle. "This is gonna' be a problem, isn't it?"

The faint aroma of coffee drifted by on the breeze, and the promise of something warm on such a chilly morning begged him to abandon his equestrian debacle if only long enough to defrost.

"Come on then." He grabbed hold of her reins and turned her upstream. "We've got a long day ahead of us. You're gonna need to rest... and I'm gonna' need coffee... Can't be out here having full conversations with horses. I've already lost my mind once."

With a new rope from his pack, he tethered her to a tree with the other females and treaded slowly back toward camp, suppressing a smile as he imagined telling Maria all about his promiscuous escape artist of a horse. He could very nearly hear that deep sort of laughter that came from her diaphragm whenever she found something particularly hilarious. God, she would love this... although she would've hated how chilly it was... He could almost hear her complaining in his wake about her frozen fingers and toes, her teeth chattering dramatically as a thousand Spanish curses rolled out under her breath.

He never minded the cold; there were times when he preferred its bitter sting on his skin to the sticky heat of a hot summer day. As a child, he'd looked forward to the snow—always staying out longer than the other kids to play in it until every inch of his body was too numb to go on.

The sun wasn't up yet, but the sky had lightened to a shade of purply blue and the path was clearer than it had been on his walk down to the water. A layer of frost glistened on the long-since fallen leaves surrounding him, making each one appear as though it had been outlined in sparkling silver. The cold air made his breath visible in steamy wisps, each exhale swirling briefly before dissipating into the pre-dawn light. As he moved closer to camp, the scents of dampened earth and pine were joined by the warmer aromas of smoke and coffee. Just through the trees, he caught sight of the small fire where Jim sat with

Lilly, both of them wrapped in a blanket and staring at the flames.

At the Shawnee camp, Mehkewa's small bits of guidance had been invaluable in getting him from one day to the next, putting a lot into perspective that he could look forward to. For the Shawnee, everything had meaning, and they could make a single day span on for years by drawing out the significance of even the smallest moments.

Concealed in the shadow of a pine, he watched Lilly and Jim as they shared one of those small eternal moments. She rested her head against his shoulder while he took a sip of coffee and pressed a kiss to her temple.

Chris had spent his whole life putting meaning on the wrong things—always working toward something bigger—something that might mean more... but this... sitting still in each other's arms and sharing a cup of coffee... this was the type of moment that could give a lifetime its real value.

A soft sigh escaped him, almost involuntarily. The scene before him was a simple one, yet profound in its intimacy. The gentle glow of the campfire lit their faces, and even from his hidden vantage point, he could see the love and comfort reflected in their eyes. If he got Maria back—*when* he got Maria back—he would make time for thousands of these small moments with her, dragging out every second he had in a life beside her to make them into an eternity.

Lost in thoughts of a better life, the biting cold on his bare fingers snapped him back to the present. The numbing sensation served as a reminder that he'd hovered in the shadows for too long, inadvertently intruding on their intimate exchange. With a touch of embarrassment, he cleared his throat and stepped forward to join them.

"Mornin', big man," Jim said. "Where you been off to?"

He blew a warm breath into his palms, rubbing them together as he took a seat by the fire. "Horse got loose."

Jim motioned to a set of mugs laid out on a tree stump. "Fix ye' a coffee and warm up a spell. Ye' get her squared away?"

Reaching over to grab the kettle, he nodded as he poured himself a cup. “Do you know if horses go into heat?”

“Not till’ spring.” Jim frowned. “Why?”

He took a sip, holding the warm, bitter liquid in his mouth for a moment to heat his bones before swallowing. “She was over by Dario’s stallion... and he definitely had a good night.”

“Well shit,” Jim chortled. “They ain’t known to go in season this early, but they can sometimes. She’s gonna’ be right cranky if she’s in heat... Oooh, wee, and that stallion’s gonna’ make it a hell of a lot worse. I don’t know if you should be puttin’ a saddle on her today. Might be better to stick her in the rear with the supply mule. You can have one of ours and we’ll ride double.”

Lilly craned her neck to look back at him. “What about Iz?”

Jim winked at her. “She can ride in the carriage with Cece and Juan... Give us some time to snuggle up for a change in the saddle.”

Chris cupped his palms around his mug as a chill swept up his spine to make his teeth chatter. “Leave it to me to pick the problematic horse. I swear, if something could go right, I wouldn’t know what to do with myself.”

Handing Jim their shared cup, Lilly sat up and unwrapped his arms from her, revealing a second blanket wound around her body as she stood and stepped around the flames.

“Here.” She draped the fur over Chris’s shoulders and patted him on the head before she retreated back to her spot in front of Jim.

“Thanks,” Chris managed, clearing an unexpected lump from his throat.

“You’re welcome,” she said, resting her head against Jim’s shoulder once she got comfortable again. “Can’t let you freeze to death. Maria’d kill me.”

He adjusted the blanket over his arms and smiled. “She’s not as big and bad as she pretends to be sometimes.”

“You only say that because you think she’s not here to hear it,” Lilly bantered, her eyes dancing across the forest around them. “But she’s here, alright. I can feel that distinct Maria-energy out there somewhere, just waiting to come back and let us know all the stupid things we did without her. You don’t feel her?”

“Only when I do something stupid,” Chris laughed, “which, by Maria’s standards, is most of the time.”

Jim cackled, rocking Lilly to one side, “Ye’ know, it ain’t just Maria with them kinds of standards. Ever since these two decided to buddy up, I ain’t done nothin’ right neither. Shit, I could go out there right now, catch us a cougar and teach it to do a jig, and this one’d find somethin’ wrong with the way I done it. She’d be over there in them bushes cacklin’ with yours about how the choreography was all wrong or how I forgot to put a collar on the summbitch.”

There was truth in that statement that made Chris’s heart lighten. Every day since Maria and Lilly had become friends, they’d teamed up against him and Jim. If Maria was upset about something Chris had said or done, he got dirty looks and snarky remarks from both women. The same went for Jim whenever he angered Lilly. They really were a dangerous duo... and Maria had cherished every second she’d been a part of it.

“She needed a friend like you,” Chris admitted, again clearing his throat of the permanent scratch there. “She’s always craved someone she could laugh with—someone who would have her back at all times and didn’t dismiss her for being different. I’m glad you two figured things out... glad she’s got you in her corner... even if it means having two women scowl at me instead of just the one.”

Lilly took a deep breath. “It was *me* that gained everything from that friendship. She’s one hell of a woman, you know.”

She looked back out at the forest. “You hear that, crazy? I love you... wherever you are... and we’re coming for you.” Her eyes moved back to his, lighter with her smile. “And until we get her, I’ll have to keep an eye on you... scowl for the both of us when you do stupid things.”

Jim sighed, hugging Lilly tighter. “Sugar, I hate to be the one to tell ye’, but ye’ cain’t scowl no harder than ye’ already do without breakin’ somethin’.”

She rolled her eyes but laughed, extending an arm in invitation to Izzy where she’d crawled out of their tent. “Hey! Good morning, sweetie. Did we wake you?”

Izzy yawned and rubbed her eyes, her sleep-swept hair matted in several places and her tiny feet bare on the dew-dampened grass. She glanced at Jim and Lilly, blinking several times in her attempt to wake up before she walked right past them to stand in front of Chris and spread her arms.

Surprised, he opened up the blanket to allow her to wrap her little arms around him and climb into his lap. Closing it gently around her, he was unsure just what to do next. Izzy had never given him much thought and he was caught off guard by her sudden interest in him.

“She’s very perceptive,” Lilly said, keeping her eyes on Izzy where she curled up against his shoulder. “You know, she hasn’t asked a single question about Maria? Maybe she notices that Maria-energy out there too. The girl is far wiser than we think she is—*feels* more, I think, than most people ever do. Last night, she gave me this big ole’ hug and asked me if the hug fixed my heart.” She breathed out a laugh. “I told her that her hugs *always* fix my heart. And you know what she asked next?”

He shook his head.

“She asked if I thought it would fix yours too.”

Chris couldn’t help but smile as he gazed down at her knotted bits of hair where she was pressed up against his chest. “She’s never paid me much attention before. I just assumed she thought I was a cranky asshole.”

“Oh, she does,” Lilly smirked. “But she can see you’re hurting, and, for her, even a cranky asshole needs his heart fixed when it’s broken.”

Frustrated with how heavy his throat had become despite all his attempts at clearing it, he croaked out a strangled, “How do I say *thank you*?”

Jim grinned. “Just make sure she’s lookin’ at ye’ and say it. She’s sneaky too, ye’ know... Reads our lips even when we think she don’t know what we’re talkin’ about—*especially* when we think she don’t know.”

He leaned to one side, just enough he could get a glimpse of her big hazel eyes, and mouthed the words, ‘*thank you.*’

Izzy tapped her little palm against his chest. “Nah sad?”

He shook his head. “Not today.”



Apparently deciding Chris was no longer a crabby asshole she should avoid, Izzy pleaded with Lilly and Jim to let her ride with him for the day instead of being cooped up in the carriage.

Since Lilly’s horse was the most mild mannered and easy of the group outside Lady, it wasn’t a terrible option, but given his lack of experience on horseback, they’d both been wary about it.

Ultimately surrendering to her wishes, Lilly and Jim spent the first several hours riding alongside him and watching as if he might accidentally spur them off into a deadly sprint over a cliff at any second.

As the afternoon set in, however, everyone settled and rode at their own paces.

Izzy turned out to be an amusing riding companion. Seated in front of him, she played with her doll the whole trip, walking it along the edge of the saddle and up the mare’s back. She didn’t talk, but he imagined she had some kind of inner dialogue going on with the doll, particularly when she would hold it out and stare at its too wide eyes as if she were engaged in a serious debate.

Occasionally, her little fingers would fumble, and the doll would slip from her grip. Each time, he’d catch it before it hit the ground, handing it back to her with a chuckle. Izzy would respond with a quiet, appreciative smile, her attention quickly returning to her toy. Their journey was marked by these small

interactions, painting a silent yet communicative camaraderie between them.

The weather was cool, but not cold, and when the sun peeked out from behind the clouds, he couldn't help but hum appreciatively as its warmth spread across his cheeks.

Izzy immediately swiveled in the saddle, shooting him a puzzled frown.

He playfully mirrored her expression, furrowing his brow right back at her.

With a theatrical huff, she faced forward again, her small hands resuming their play with the doll. Chuckling to himself, Chris couldn't resist the temptation. He hummed once more, drawing out the note just a tad longer to see if he'd get the same reaction.

Sure enough, she spun around swiftly, giving him a glare that would rival any adult's. Such a fiery spirit she had—her scowl was as intense as Lilly's, perhaps even more so. She kept her eyes fixed on him, narrowing them further as she slowly turned her face away.

Waiting just a heartbeat, he hummed again, this time with more gusto.

Her growl was audible as she shot him an exasperated glare, poking him squarely in the chest as if to say '*what the hell are you doing?*'

He pointed to his lips, drawing in a breath, then let it out in another hum.

Curiosity filled her hazel eyes. Once he finished the note, she reached up to press a finger against his throat. "Do a-yin!"

Her voice always took him by surprise, and because she'd vocalized her demand, it required his immediate compliance. Taking a purposeful breath, he hummed a consistent note, heart light with mirth.

This time, she made a noise with him, trying to match his note, her finger still pressed to his throat, feeling the vibrations.

"A-yin!" she exclaimed with palpable excitement. She wedged her doll between them and placed her other hand on her

own neck, intent on understanding and replicating the action.

He was struck by her determination. The world around them seemed to blur as she became fiercely focused on mastering this particular talent. He'd seen adults give up on lesser challenges, but Izzy was unwavering in her quest to grasp a new skill. Her spirit was infectious.

Breathing deeply, he sustained the note, occasionally glancing at the path ahead while she endeavored to match him. Their game was punctuated only by her assertive "a-yin!" whenever he paused for breath.

When she finally hit the note, holding it steadily, he looked down to see her gaze, bright with achievement, seeking validation.

He nodded, a broad grin spreading across his face. In response, she hummed even louder, her face glowing with pure, unadulterated pride.

For hours they they rode with her finger against his neck, trying out different note progressions once she got better until she could recognize the vibration in each.

By the time evening set in and they stopped to rest the horses, the two of them had mastered the chorus to Guantanamera. While everyone worked to set up camp, she skipped from one person to the next to show off her melody. Each one clapped and congratulated her when she bowed at the end, and he couldn't help the pride that welled inside him as a result.

His cheeks actually burned from his smile, and he wondered if the smile had been there through the whole ride.

As he loosened the buckles on his saddle, Jim smacked a hand on his shoulder. "Now that was a good day, Beanstalk. What the hell song is it though? Got all the notes stuck in my head now and don't know a damn word."

Chris laughed. "Guantanamera, and I don't know a damn word of it either."

"Well," Jim grunted as he helped him pull the saddle from Lilly's horse and drop it near his feet, "maybe tomorrow ye'

could teach her one we can *all* sing. It was a good day for her too.” He glanced over his shoulder where she continued to hum proudly to Lilly. “Ye’ gonna’ make one hell of a daddy when all this is over.”

Chris waved this off and followed Jim’s gaze. “What happens to *her* when this is over?”

With a shrug of his shoulders, Jim deflected that question as quickly as Chris had brushed off his reference to fatherhood. Instead of answering, Jim turned to move his palm over Lady’s muzzle and pursed his lips. “Ye’ reckon chamomile will keep her calm through the night? I think I heard somethin’ once about chamomile and heat...”

“You act like I know anything about horses,” Chris quipped, taking Lady’s reins and waiting for Jim to take his own to start toward the small pond. “You don’t wanna’ talk about what happens to Izzy... Why?”

Jim raised a brow and fell into step beside him, the horses snorting heavily at their sides. “Same reason, I reckon, you don’t wanna’ talk about bein’ a daddy. We’re men, Beanstalk. We ain’t got to talk about the shit that’s killin’ us to know it’s there.”

Nodding, Chris continued down to a thick patch of grass near the water’s edge. He tied Lady’s rope to a tree and knelt to splash water over his face and neck.

Jim was silent for a long while, but he could sense him standing near the horses, deep in thought. When he finally spoke, his words were carefully chosen. “You... eh... ye’ reckon Charlotte Miller would remember any of us if we’d stopped her from gettin’ on that plane like we was plannin’ to do?”

Chris slowly shook his head. “I don’t know...”

“What about us?” Jim asked, his voice a little shaky. “Ye’ think maybe we’d have forgotten about Charlotte too?”

Balancing on his haunches, he turned to look up at him. It was obvious in his conflicted expression this conversation had nothing to do with Charlotte and everything to do with his question about Izzy. “We already talked about this at the

Shawnee camp. Stopping one person from getting on that flight could just as well put someone else in their seats. Alaina and I couldn't get seated together, but if *Charlotte* and her family weren't on that plane, we could've. And nothing would've gone the same way."

Jim still had a hand on his horse, his thick brows furrowed in thought. "Lilly thinks we could ask Junior and Dario to buy up them seats so nobody else would get put in 'em..."

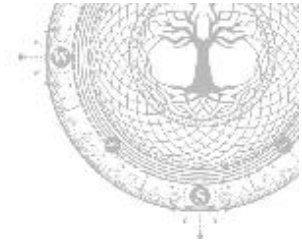
"You heard Charlotte as well as I did," Chris said gently. "People move around on flights all the time. Charlotte and Chase moved to the back... What's to stop someone else from doing the same?"

Jim ran a hand hard over his face. "It's just... She's so little, ye' know? And she could have her hearing and her mama and her whole dang life if we stopped her from getting on that plane. What the hell she got now that's better than that?"

Chris sighed and stared down at his hands. "You know, Maria did a lot of digging to find Izzy's family, Jim. She's got *one* grandma out there in the world who's just barely getting by. No father even listed on her birth certificate, and her mother was working three jobs. I don't know what kind of life she had or would've had if she hadn't been on that flight, but I know she's got a whole family around her now she didn't have before, and two amazing people that have been raising her just fine. The hearing doesn't bother her. She *excels* without it... and she excels because of the support she's got. There's technology to help her hearing in the future if she wants it, but there's only one Jim and only one Lilly and I don't think keeping her off that plane gives her a better life. She's got *you*... and that's a whole hell of a lot more than most people ever get."

Jim sniffled and straightened. "I'm... eh..." He stretched out his neck and cleared his throat. "Ye' know, I orta go see if we got any chamomile... We don't want your horse takin' off again tonight. Thanks... for the talk and the hummin' and stuff..."

"Any time." Chris smiled and turned back to look out over the pond. "Chamomile's in Cece's bag."



Chapter Thirty-Eight

Alaina

The next morning, we set sail before the sun had even risen, intent to catch up to Charleston and whatever was left of Juan's ship by the following day.

Bruce and Terrence never fully conceded in their argument against time travel, but they refrained from initiating additional debate once Davis was given more opportunity to speak.

As I'd suspected he would, he informed us all that TAO, from the moment it'd come into existence, was and forever would be impenetrable. There were too many safeguards in place to allow anyone to go back and prevent its formation.

Whether Bruce and Terrence liked it or not, time travelers would always exist in the world they knew—*had* existed from the moment the idea had first entered my mind in 1775. Our lineages would forever be scattered across time—our ancestry weaving in and out of decades and centuries that didn't work with a traditional linear chart.

Descendants as far ahead as the 31st century and as far back as the 14th would always be a presence among us, contributing to our ever-evolving way of life.

It was amazing that what started out as a means to give my children the best of two centuries without erasing Gloria and her children from existence had breathed to life a hidden world where anything was possible.

My nose had been buried in the covenants almost from the moment it'd been placed in my lap, and the more I read, the more I was spellbound by the world we'd ended up creating.

Outside founders, travelers, and gatekeepers, there were so many roles in so many places, it didn't seem possible there were

enough of us to fill them all...

But there were.

There were *mediators*, a branch of the keepers whose primary job was to go in and rectify egregious mistakes made in time. If we hadn't been destined to end up right where we were, any one of us might have encountered a mediator on several different occasions. Juan Josef would've crossed paths with one when he set out to hunt down any one of the various Albrecht men. Bruce and Anna might've come into contact with one when they prepared to poison Juan's crew. Maria might've been stopped before she could ever kill Sergeant Harris... Or Jack when he ventured onto the Devil's Islands... not to mention the rest of us when the Nikora attacked our ship months later.

If a traveler's interaction took a life that was otherwise supposed to continue on, mediators were brought in. This was not limited to instances of murder. Something so small as a conversation might prevent a person from meeting their future spouse and so, while travelers were free to interact, mediators were required to watch over the echoes they made to ensure no life was ever lost as a result of those interactions.

While mediators and gatekeepers oversaw TAO activity as a whole, there were other roles as well that were equally important for our society to work the way it did.

Navigating the portals, for instance, was a complex skill that not every traveler could be expected to master. It required a lot of tedious study and an understanding of physics most people just didn't have the mind for. *Pilots* were the men and women who *did* have a mind for it, and they navigated for the travelers. Whether by land, sea, or air, they each possessed a special transmitter which could generate the type of electromagnetic energy required to manipulate the portals. Each gate in each echo and each ring of time was allowed one pilot in and one pilot out during every six-month window, so schedules had to be set and strictly adhered to.

Wardens were assigned to regions of time, and they oversaw the scheduling processes. Wardens, unlike gatekeepers, kept more localized rosters. A warden had to approve your travel, but could only do so after verifying you couldn't run into

another version of yourself or cause some interruption with your own existence just by visiting the wrong person. They also coordinated the pilots coming in and out of their regions.

Once the warden approved your trip and assigned you a pilot, you were given a gate and escorted to it by a *prepper*. Preppers ensured no one could slip through time with a personal relic that might serve as an anchor for retained memories should a mediator need to step in. They would strip each traveler and outfit them with the proper attire, currency, and identity so they could move around with ease upon their arrival anywhere in time.

And once inside any given time period, there were some who simply lived normal lives, trading in their travel privileges for a quieter life. These were called *settlers*, and they were allowed to live in peace in any time and place of their choosing—even inside echoes—so long as they would always be available to come to the aid of a traveler who needed help.

Typically, wherever there were settlers, there were also *mavericks*: descendants born in an era not their own who were never taught our ways. Mavericks lived their whole lives never knowing they were a part of something so much bigger.

But TAO knew every single member—no matter their role—and kept an elaborate roster of who was where at all times.

Kyle chuckled across from me, where he too was sitting on a sandbag near the helm with his nose buried in his version of the covenants.

“What?” I asked, blinking as my eyes adjusted to the world outside the black and white pages.

“The Ramsey symbol,” he said, shaking his head. “Have you gotten to that part yet?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m still working out mavericks.”

He turned his book and held its open pages up to me, revealing an illustration nearly identical to Davis’s tattoo. In place of the star, however, there was a single fist inside the circle representing the Ramsey line—Kyle’s line.

“A fist,” he laughed. “Matty chose a *fist* to represent me.”

I grinned. “Who says it doesn’t represent Fetia?”

He raised a brow, returning the book to his lap. “You really think a fist is the right representation for Fetia? Or *me*?”

Still smiling, I nodded. “I think a fist suits you both. I’ve never met two people more resilient. You lost a hand and you never once became handicapped by it—it was you that fought Juan the hardest when he took us. I’ll never forget seeing you come through that window with two black eyes and a grin! And Fetia? There’s no challenge too big for that girl... I mean, sixteen hours of labor? You’re both fighters and I couldn’t imagine a symbol more fitting.”

Brushing his palm over his short beard to hide his blush, he smirked. “I suppose it’s better than a dove. That’s the Perez symbol. No clue how it worked out that Chris got the sword and Juan Jr. got a dove!”

“What about Jim and Lilly?” I asked, excited to find a connection to them so close. “What’d they get?”

He flipped the page, then another, and another. “Those jerks took the whole damn mountain!”

Again, he held up the open page to present the illustration, and I couldn’t help but smile that Jim and Lilly were represented by the island’s distinct volcanic peak. I could almost see the two of them, covered in its ash, kissing for the very first time inside that cave.

“That’s perfect,” I said, suddenly missing them both so much the words felt heavy.

“There’s one founding family though,” he said, returning the book to his lap and frowning, “that’s out of place.” Flipping through the pages, he landed on whatever he was looking for and held it out again.

The illustration was a broken compass, and beside it, in a headline type, was the name ‘*Morello.*’

“Morello?” I scoffed, leaning in to examine the page. “Who the hell is Morello?”

“*Frank* Morello,” Davis answered from the helm. Again, that familiar, boyish smile pulled at one side of his lips, making

him seem decades younger. “You read about him in those journals on ManawaTū... He’s the man that named the Devil’s Islands.”

Kyle frowned for a moment, then his eyes widened. “You mean, the mobster bootlegger guy that went crazy?”

“I suppose that’s as accurate a description for Frankie as any,” he tittered. “Zack became quite fascinated with those journals and traveled out to see if either Dutch or Frank had survived after they left ManawaTū. If there is one thing we all live by it is that no traveler ever gets left behind, and Zack insisted they were travelers too, even if made so by accident. We learned that both men ended up being taken captive on the Devil’s Islands after they abandoned Captain William, but only Frankie managed to get away. He swam for two days before Zack and the Portuguese naval ship he’d taken out there were able to pick him up. Didn’t seem right not to make him a founder after all he’d been through to get back. He’s contributed quite a bit to our way of life over the years, helping us craft ways to keep our movements hidden from more public view.”

“Oh, Jim’s gonna’ freak out,” Kyle said, smiling at the symbol as he traced a finger over it. “He spent hours reading those journals and was obsessed with every one of Frankie’s parts. Can you imagine the look on his face when he finds out it’s possible to meet him in person and hear the story first-hand?”

I peered over my shoulder to where Bruce was standing at the bow staring out, very much still angry if I had to guess by the rigidity in his spine. “I have a feeling Jim won’t be too thrilled about all this either. You know he doesn’t like change.”

“Yeah,” Kyle said, “but Lilly’s gonna’ love it, and she’ll bring him around.” He followed my gaze to Bruce. “He’ll come around too, you know. Bruce is incapable of *staying* mad at anyone.”

I sighed. “I don’t know if he’ll forgive me this time. After everything, I really should’ve told him sooner. He was the only one there for me on that ship before you guys showed up... I’d have gone crazy without him. And I knew how much it bothered him when he was left out of our plans before. It wasn’t fair that I

kept it secret... I just..." I shrugged. "It was a dream... you know? I knew he'd object, and I didn't want him to kill that dream so soon. I never thought it'd end up turning into anything more than a means of escaping my reality... dreaming of this adventurous life for my babies was just about the only escape I had. I didn't mean to keep it from him."

"He has a symbol," Kyle said, bouncing his eyebrows. "It's a flame... I have to think that means he'll forgive you. And big bad Terrence over there has one too—a shield. Let them have their moment to sulk. They'll accept it soon enough."



That night, with the babies asleep under Magna and Bud's watch in the ship's great cabin, I ventured back up to the top deck to find Jack.

He stood on the bow with his back to me, his arms spread where he held the railing and looked out at the nearly black sea ahead.

Pulling my cloak tighter against the slight chill in the air, I snuck over to coil both arms around him and rest my cheek against his spine. "Are you avoiding me, Volmer?"

"Never." He idly slid his hand over mine on his stomach and sighed as he traced my fingers. "Just having a hard time sitting still. It's a little difficult to know what to do with myself when I won't remember doing it, you know?"

I kissed his shoulder blade. "You should've said something sooner. I can always think of creative things to do with *you*... Things I don't necessarily need *you* to remember."

He chuckled, leaning back a little in my grip to let out a long sigh. "You think Chris is alright out there? I mean... if you'd died pregnant... God, Red, I'd lose my mind. Wouldn't matter that we were going to undo it. I'd be a lunatic all the way up until I felt you breathing once more. And even then, if I had to live with the memory of your death? I don't think I'd ever be the same."

With all Davis had exposed to us in the past two days, I hadn't really had a chance to process what it meant that Maria had died out there.

How had she died? And how would Chris have reacted?

The man I'd spent ten years married to was not the same man I'd been reunited with. I might've thought the Chris I once knew could handle it—could be that pillar of strength he'd once been for me, his emotions guarded behind a thick barrier I wasn't even sure he could get past.

But the Chris I'd come to know in this time was far more passionate. With Maria, he held nothing back—she wouldn't let him—and every emotion the man had inside him was sitting right there on the surface, ready to spill out of him.

The fact that she'd been pregnant? I couldn't imagine his devastation at losing them both, couldn't imagine any reaction other than a complete melt down.

My heart broke just thinking about what he must've been going through... the amount of loss he must've felt.

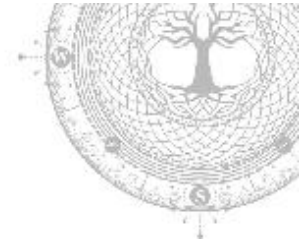
What if Juan Jr. couldn't recreate whatever conditions had led up to her pregnancy? What if only Maria's life was restored after Bennet died? Would Chris have to carry the weight of having lost, not one, but *two* children without Maria ever knowing she'd carried the second? It didn't seem fair.

I cleared my throat to speak, unsure what words might've even spilled out had Captain Davis not shouted, "Drop the anchor, boys, this is where we get off!"

Jack and I both spun around just as he turned to smile in our direction. "It would appear Mr. Farley has arrived with the other travelers a little earlier than I thought. We'll be hitching a ride with him for the last leg of our journey."

Jack confusedly scanned the dark ocean that surrounded us.

"Oh, you won't find him out there, old friend." Davis raised a brow and pointed to the deck boards. "Farley doesn't like to travel *above* the water."



Chapter Thirty-Nine

Cecelia

The cool night breeze coming through the carriage window was sharp against my cheeks after another long day of travel. The damp air carried scents from the nearby Elizabeth River, a mix of briny water and fresh earth.

Where we would normally setup camp when the sun went down, we'd chosen instead to continue on through the dark to Portsmouth, and the journey had been a grueling one when we were forced to travel off the beaten path. Our coach had jostled violently, and I'd done my best to shield Juan from the worst of it. In doing so, every muscle in my body felt like it was vibrating long after we'd passed through the roughest terrain. The transition from dirt trail to cobblestone signaled our arrival, and the soft glow of lanterns was a welcome relief to my tired eyes.

Late as it was, the only signs of life in the town were the sounds of our horses' hooves on the stone where they echoed softly against the buildings that lined both sides of the street. On the left, an apothecary showcased its wares behind a faded sign depicting a mortar and pestle. Adjacent to it, a three-story townhouse stood, its windows framed by fluttering lace curtains.

Across the street, the silent profile of a blacksmith's forge was evident, marked by hung horseshoes and the shadow of an anvil. The neighboring bakery's fogged windows hinted at a cozy warmth within, teasing my hunger with imagined scents of fresh bread.

Homes and establishments dotted the path: a physician's plaque here, a tailor's sign there, warm light dancing in the windows of a variety of taverns. Each structure added its voice to what I imagined through the day was a lively narrative,

culminating in the promise of rest at “The Traveler’s Respite” inn at the end of the street where we were headed.

Much as I was looking forward to spending the night in a warm bed, I was all too aware of the looming silhouette of Norfolk across the river, and I wasn’t ready for all that would come after our arrival there tomorrow morning.

I glanced over at Juan where he stared out the window beside me. His posture was slightly hunched, not from fatigue or pain but from the weight of contemplation. The lantern light flickered across his face at intervals, briefly illuminating a gaze that was fixed on some unseen horizon. It was clear that the looming challenges of Norfolk weren’t just pressing on my mind; they were weighing heavily on his as well.

He’d been pressing me about Maddy and my life with Owen throughout the ride, needing to know every detail I could remember. The closer we got to Norfolk, the more information he asked for, and I knew he was searching for some way to give me both worlds.

It was too late for that. The decision had long since been made. I’d refused to listen to Alaina when she’d tried to warn me, and I’d done too much in this time to turn things backward.

He was far too valiant to give up so easily though, and I commended him for his desire to give me the world. I would’ve wanted to give him the same if I could.

A soft, amber light spilled down on us as we pulled to a stop just outside the inn, contrasting sharply with the deepening shadows of the night.

Juan, still appearing distant and contemplative, couldn’t get out of the carriage fast enough, and I stepped out behind him, just in time to catch Dario passing the reins of his steed to a young stable boy who appeared just as drowsy as we were.

Hobbling on shaky legs up the porch steps behind Juan, I waited as the others joined me, and couldn’t help but smile at Chris where he held a sleeping Izzy against his chest. None of us had been able to separate them since they’d started their little two-person choir, and it made me happy that he’d found a use for his own forgotten parental instincts.

I absentmindedly brushed a palm down her hair. “I think you’ve got yourself a permanent little admirer.”

He adjusted her weight in his arms and smiled. “I don’t mind it so much... except for all the name calling. She’s decided to refer to me exclusively as *grump butt* now. Not sure how I feel about it.”

Jim, with an arm slung over Lilly’s shoulders cackled. “Ye’d think a man who’s been called just about every name in the book would be used to it by now.”

Dario stretched his arms up over his head with a wide yawn as he climbed the steps behind them. “They’ve only two rooms available. The stable boy says we might find a few more open at that tavern we passed a few houses down. Chris, what say you to a stiff drink before bed?”

Echoing Dario’s yawn, Chris nodded and carefully handed Izzy over to Jim. “Stiff drink sounds good right about now.”

“Ay,” Jim cut in as they turned to leave, rocking Izzy against his shoulder. “We got a long day tomorrow. Don’t yuns make ‘em too stiff.”

Dario waved him off. “Sure thing, *father*. Goodnight.”

We watched the two of them wander off down the darkened road before we turned to push the heavy wooden door to the inn open.

Inside, the faint strains of a fiddle played in the background, accompanied by the low hum of conversation. The tantalizing remnants of the dinner hour—hints of roasted meat and fresh-baked bread—hung in the air, merging with the undertones of tobacco and the woodsy scent of the burning hearth.

An older woman with graying hair pulled back tightly stood behind a polished wooden counter. “Evening,” she greeted, her gaze sweeping over us. “You’ve just missed supper, but I might still have some bread and broth left over if you’d like.”

“That’d be kind,” Juan answered, his voice bearing traces of exhaustion as he dropped a few coins on the counter. “Two

rooms, please.”

With a smile, she handed over a pair of keys, each marked with a room number. “Up the stairs, corridor to the right.” She nodded towards a staircase dimly lit by flickering candles. “I’ll send Olly up with some food for you after he gets your horses settled in.”

All of us too tired for conversation, we silently made our way to the stairs, the steps groaning softly beneath our feet. The hallway was quiet, save for the occasional muted whisper or soft chuckle from behind closed doors. Our adjacent rooms awaited, and upon unlocking mine, I was met with a simple, inviting space. The room featured a bed draped with worn but clean linens, a dresser, and a window whose curtains had been drawn against the night.

“Night, y’all,” Jim said softly as he and Lilly inspected their similar space.

“Night,” I answered, taking three heavy steps forward to fall face-first onto the bed.

I heard Juan snicker as he closed the door and followed to the foot of the bed. “Tired, *mi paloma*?”

“Mhmm,” I grumbled into the blanket. “Wake me up when the food comes.”

He unlaced my boots where my feet hung off the edge of the mattress, laughing at my resulting sigh when he freed my toes of their awful confines. “I do not think even the promise of food shall be enough to rouse you.”

I snorted. “Just give me five minutes.”

Taking one of my feet between his hands, he kneaded it gently and I sank even further into the bed. “Maybe ten if you’re going to do that...”

“You cannot fool me, Cecelia,” he teased as his fingers worked heavenly circles into my aching soles. “You’ve no concept of time when you are tired.”

I let out a long audible exhale. “Unfortunately, Joseph, I have a *very strong* concept of time and how little we have left of it at the moment. I can’t afford to be this exhausted.”

“No?” He climbed over me on the bed, moving his massage to my shoulders. “It is not you who will be waiting, and the present image of you will serve my memory quite well.”

I turned my face to rest my cheek against the mattress. “I have other images in mind that would serve your memory *much* better.”

“I don’t need anything more than this.” He bent down to kiss my shoulder. “I won’t remember an image anyway... I’ll remember *you*... the way you smell and the feel of you in my hands... that little curve in your lip that’s not quite a smile but couldn’t be anything else... and this sound.” He pressed his thumbs into my neck muscles to elicit a deep groan from my lips. “That sound lives in my mind like a song. You can sleep all you want, Cecelia. I’ll memorize you just fine from here.”

“I don’t want to sleep,” I yawned, my eyes closing as he worked a knot near my spine. “If you’re awake, I want to be awake with you.”

“We’ve plenty of time to be awake together, *mi alma*. Sleep and dream of your daughter. I’ll be right here when you wake.”



I had dreamt of her. I wasn’t sure there would ever be a night when I wouldn’t dream of her.

We’d just walked through the door of Alaina and Chris’s house, and Maddy was still wearing her purple unicorn backpack. It had looked so big against her little body and the sight of it had always made me grin.

Her curly blond hair had frizzed in spots from an adventurous third day of kindergarten, and the light from the large bay window caught its stray ringlets as she skipped across the living room.

“I made you something, mommy,” she’d announced as she slid the straps of her bag off her shoulders to fling it onto the island counter. “We need some my-you stuff here.”

“*My-you* stuff?” I’d laughed when I circled around the counter opposite her. “What’s *my-you* stuff?”

“Stuff that’s just me and you,” she explained, pulling the zipper on her backpack to fish out her glittery unicorn folder. “If we don’t have my-you stuff, how can this be our house?”

I peered past her at the monument to A.J. and Chris I’d left entirely untouched. We’d lived in their house for almost six months but I couldn’t bear to so much as replace a picture frame for fear they’d come home one day and expect it to be the same.

“See, look,” Maddy said, patting a paper she’d laid out on the counter. “It’s our first my-you, mommy.”

I’d leaned over the counter and my heart swelled as my eyes followed the broad crayon strokes of the white house with black shutters. Standing just to the side of it were two stick figures, hand in hand: one taller with yellow hair, the other shorter with the same hair but made curly to resemble her, both of us with wide smiles under a large orange sun.

“Do you like it?” she asked, tracing the corner of the paper with her finger.

With tears in my eyes, I’d looked up at her where she swiveled in the barstool. “Oh, I love it. It’s beautiful.”

Her proud smile was infectious. “I could make more and we can hang them all over so you won’t be sad anymore.”

Sniffing, I stared down at the happy little picture and, for the first time since we’d left Minnesota, I felt like we were actually doing alright. “Where should we hang this first one, baby?”

She pointed beyond me. “Fridge. So you see it all the time and remember this is my-you house now.”

My cheeks were wet when I woke suddenly from the dream, and much like every night since I’d first remembered her, I felt the void of being childless like a knife through the heart. I tried to think of those two trees in the woods; to imagine her alive and well on some other pass through time, to convince myself this was the right path, but I couldn’t quite come to grips with the idea that I’d never hear her say *‘my-you’* again. It felt unfair that some other version of me got to hear those words; that some other version of me would see that wonderful little human grow into an adult.

I took a deep breath, noticing Juan's heavy arm draped over me as I did so. It was still dark. All the lanterns and candles that had been lit when we entered the room had been put out and Juan somehow managed to remove my stays, skirts, and stockings while I slept. I could smell remnants of a hearty broth that had since gone cold nearby—a hint of thyme, carrots, and salty chicken in the air that told me he'd set aside my food in the hopes I'd wake to dine with him.

That wasn't fair either. I'd chosen this life with him. Hell, I'd chosen this life *before* him. Adamantly, I'd dismissed all notions of an existence where I dropped out of school and gave up on my dreams. I got the degree, the career, and the husband I'd wanted, and prior to those memories, this life had lacked nothing. There was no one to blame but myself for whatever unfairness I felt, and crying about a life I chose not to live was not an option.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself to drown out the echoing remnants of her tiny voice saying: *'It's our first my-you, mommy.'*

Quickly, I rolled toward Juan and buried my face in the center of his chest, squeezing my eyes closed and assuring myself over and over, *'That's not my life. It's just a glimpse of someone else's. This is the life I wanted. This is where I belong. Right here with him...'*

Never one to sleep all that deeply, my movement woke him and his arms tightened around me as he pressed his lips against the top of my head.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, inhaling the amaretto scent on his warm skin. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"I don't mind," he said, sliding his palm down my hair. "Are you alright?"

I traced the bandage on his chest and nodded. "Just a dream."

He made a noise in his throat that vibrated through me. "You've been having a lot of them lately. Are you sure you don't want to at least discuss the possibility of—"

"No," I said, laying a kiss on his sternum. "I'm alright."

He pulled back just enough to tilt my face up to him. “Cecelia, we are preparing to change our histories. What kind of man am I if I alter time to serve myself and not you? I cannot bear the thought of robbing you of someone so important.”

“This isn’t about me,” I whispered. “It’s not up for discussion. I told you, I’ll find a way to see her when I figure out how time works. That’s what I can hope for—that’s *all* I’m allowed to hope for. And I’m alright with that.”

He pressed his lips to my forehead. “But if there was a way I could give you everything—”

“There is.” I closed my eyes and savored the warmth of his breath on my skin. “Just keep doing that...”

“Kissing you?”

I shook my head. “Loving me.”

Laying gentle kisses across my brows and nose, he rolled over me to hover just above my lips. “That’s easy. I would love you in every possible version of our lives, *mi paloma*—even if you never spoke to me at all.”

I curled my arms around his neck. “Keep saying that, okay?”

He laughed. “I thought you didn’t want me to say it too often?”

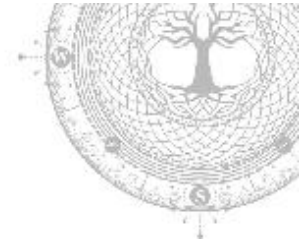
“I changed my mind,” I said with a deep sigh.

Pressing his forehead to mine, he smiled. “I love you. So much it—”

A loud pounding on our door froze us both stiff.

“Who is it?” Juan called, balancing on his forearms over me as he looked toward the door.

There was a long pause before we heard the answer. “Name’s Samuel, sir. Samuel Van Thorpe.”



Chapter Forty

Alaina

What a difference 48 hours could make. If someone had told me 48 hours prior that I'd be standing where I was, I'd have thought they were delusional. The idea of a submarine, in my mind, was synonymous with cramped quarters, a tangle of pipes and controls, where one could barely move without bumping into a cold, hard surface. I'd braced myself for claustrophobia and the metallic taste of recycled air when Captain Davis had first informed us we'd be boarding one.

But as I stood there, with the soft weight of Zachary in my arms, what met my eyes was the antithesis of every preconceived notion I had. There were no bulkheads dripping with condensation, no narrow walkways or harsh artificial light. Instead, the interior surrounding me was spacious, its design akin to some luxury CGI spacecraft in a futuristic film. The walls and ceiling arched in a continuous, elegant curve of glass viewports, a seamless expanse that gleamed with a soothing blue light.

Where I expected the harshness of steel, there were chairs that spoke of comforts alien to this century, their white surfaces clean and inviting against the gentle blue ambiance spilling down upon them. They were arranged with care, not crammed in every available space, each adorned with a plush pillow that seemed to beckon for a moment's rest.

In place of a cluttered dashboard, a holographic console seemed to float at the front of the ship, a carousel of information that was as much a piece of art as a tool for navigation. Plants, improbably lush and green, brought a touch of the terrestrial to this aquatic realm, their presence a silent reassurance of life's perseverance.

The vessel had been lowered beneath the surface the moment the hatch had closed behind us, and through the panoramic viewports that surrounded me on three sides, the ocean's mysteries, illuminated by the bright lights outside the sub, were laid bare.

The inky blackness of the deep water was transformed into a theater of silhouettes and shadows, a nocturnal ballet of sea life performed just for us. I was suddenly six-years-old, standing at the glass of an aquarium, mesmerized by the occasional flash of silver scales or hints of color as an array of marine creatures darted in and out of the beams of light.

"It's rather unbelievable, isn't it?"

Not looking away from the window, I nodded slowly. "It's... like nothing I ever could've imagined."

"Nor I. My plan to escape that fire was *far* less luxurious."

Realizing it was Juan that'd been standing beside me, I blinked back into cognition as I turned to meet his gaze. I couldn't help but smile at the sight of him.

"Miss me?" he asked.

"You're not burned," I noted after a long minute of examining him. He looked as tidy as I'd ever seen him—his beard groomed, his skin clean, and not a single tear or wrinkle in his uniform. "You *did* set the ship on fire, didn't you?"

"I did not," he admitted, reaching down to lift Luna up into his arms where she'd pawed at his calves demanding his attention. "Omar Farley came climbing up my hatch in the night. Told me who he was and hauled us off the ship so he could set the fire himself."

"Us?" I asked, glancing at the strange looking man near the controls I assumed was Omar Farley.

"I couldn't very well leave Mr. Gil behind after all our years together. Nor could I abandon Tomás or Gabriel to potentially burn with the ship. Those two were both quite beside themselves after being told the truth about who we are and haven't left their cabins since boarding."

"You told them who we are?" I asked.

A soft airy chuckle escaped him. “I needed some kind of way to explain all this.” He motioned to the room around us. “Besides, I didn’t see the harm in it since it’s to be undone so soon.”

“What about Ruiz?” I asked. “Did he buy it?”

He grinned. “According to the man from the future, he did. I imagine we’ll find out for certain in a few hours when we pass beneath the harbors in North Carolina.”

His eyes slowly moved up the curved window in front of us as he idly scratched Luna’s ears. “Can you believe we did all this?”

I shook my head, following his gaze. “I’m still not convinced I’m not dreaming. Did you see the covenants yet?”

He nodded. “Omar gave me a copy. To be honest, I wouldn’t have even lifted the cover if he hadn’t immediately brought me to this vessel, unbelievable as it all seemed. I haven’t had much more than a few hours to look over them, but he told me how it all works...” He sighed. “When you came to me with the idea, I never imagined *this* would be the result.”

“Me neither,” I laughed, looking over to the controls where Jack, Davis, Magna, and Terrence surrounded the elusive Omar in conversation.

Jack hadn’t interacted with him in Panama, but I could see why he’d stood out enough for his tattoo to be noticed.

He looked like he’d been carved from a myriad of different worlds, a composite of histories and ethnicities melded into one indistinguishable, yet undeniably captivating, appearance.

His skin was neither pale nor dark, but a mix of earthy tones that seemed to shift subtly with the play of light, peppered here and there with the faintest hints of freckles. Those freckles were dusted across his high cheekbones and the bridge of his sharp nose, giving me the sense he’d had plenty exposure to the elements.

His hair was a thick mass of dark curls, cropped close to his head in a no-nonsense style that suggested practicality over vanity. It was the kind of hair that held a slight sheen when

caught in the light, a deep brown that could easily be mistaken for black in a dimmer setting.

Standing between two giants like Terrence and Jack, any man would appear diminutive, but he compensated for the shortfall in height with an undeniable brawniness, visible even beneath his 18th century attire—which seemed so out of place among the opulent backdrop. His shoulders matched Jack’s in breadth, formidable and squared, while his biceps seemed to challenge Terrence’s in their sculpted bulk. Catching my stare, his gray eyes met mine and he smiled, revealing the whitest teeth I’d ever seen.

“This is magic?” Fetia asked, turning my attention to her where she bounced Matavi against her shoulder and scanned our surroundings with wide, sparkling eyes.

“This is human ingenuity, my dear,” Juan answered, motioning to the single part of the room without a window where a circular doorway hinted at more marvels to be seen. “Wait until you have a shower. *That’s* magic.”

My entire body tingled with excitement. “There are... showers?”

He chuckled. “Every cabin has one... along with the most comfortable bed I’ve ever laid my bones upon.”

I looked back toward the controls to find Omar still grinning at me. Running a hand over my face and hair to be sure he wasn’t grinning because of some random sticky goop that might’ve been smeared on me by my children, I hesitantly approached them.

“And there she is,” Omar said, his voice surprisingly gritty, “the mother of TAO in the flesh. Mrs. Volmer, it’s an honor to meet you.”

“Oh,” I stammered awkwardly, “I eh... well... it’s nice to meet you as well. Thank you for picking us up... and hosting us on this gorgeous... do I even call it a submarine?”

“*You* can call it whatever you’d like,” he said with a wink. “My apologies for the early morning arrival. I’d expected the infamous Juan Josef to put up more of a fight. I could show you

to your room if you'd like to rest for a few more hours before I overwhelm you with information?"

"I have a room?" I asked, glancing at the mysterious door and back.

"You *all* have rooms," he said with a slight bow of his head. "You're the founders and I would not come here with a ship that could not sleep every last one of you comfortably. Even the little ones have a place."

"Oh," I breathed, "I eh—"

Zachary began to fuss in my arms—he didn't like being awoken before sunrise—and I was grateful for his interruption, stupid as I felt standing there attempting to respond to praise that felt so grossly misplaced for the small bit I'd contributed to the covenants.

I cleared my throat. "If it's not too much trouble, these two really could use a few more hours of sleep."

"It's no trouble at all." He pressed a few buttons on the console and motioned Captain Davis over. "You still know how to work one of these, old man?"

Davis chuckled, pushing past Omar to stand at the controls. "I had one twice this size before you were even born. And I didn't rely on autopilot to get me from one place to another."

With a good-natured pat on Davis's back, Omar met my gaze and started toward the front of our gathering group. "It's easier to move around in the past beneath the water than atop it. No one to stop you down here and ask questions. We tried for a time, crafting what appeared to be wooden ships and concealing their engines beneath the surface, but we were still forced to move at a snail's pace the moment another vessel came into view. And some vessels are more dangerous than—"

He froze in front of Kyle, his eyes widening as they moved over his prosthetic arm. "You're Kyle Ramsey."

Taking a protective step closer to Fetia, Kyle nodded. "I am."

Omar's cheeks doubled in size with his smile. "You're a legend, you know."

“Me?” Kyle laughed uncomfortably. “For what?”

Omar shook his head. “Oh, you’ll see in about seven or eight years.” He squeezed Kyle’s good shoulder as he moved to the circular door. “As I was saying, it became a safer option to travel below the water, particularly after one of our wooden marvels was nearly commandeered in the 16th century. Come on, I’ll show you where your rooms are.”

A wave of his hand over a panel had the door gliding open, silent and smooth, revealing the first of the submarine’s many marvels: a suite. The interior was stunning—a room not just of function but of futuristic elegance. It was as if we had stepped into a scene from a distant, utopian world, the walls and furnishings bathed in that same tranquil blue.

The bed, large and inviting, was dressed in crisp white linens, a striking contrast to the dark floor. But that’s not what caught my eye. Directly above us, the ceiling curved into a generous viewport, offering a living tapestry of the ocean. Schools of fish flitted by, their forms momentarily illuminated by the submarine’s lights before they disappeared back into darkness.

“That’s a friggin’ shower,” Kyle blurted out, pulling my gaze from the glass overhead to the en suite bathroom enclosed in glass on the far side of the room. There, indeed, was a shower—a massive one. The fixtures inside were sleek, silver accents that reflected the soft blue light, and even the toilet was an avant-garde masterpiece, its design as intuitive as it was aesthetic.

“Mr. And Mrs. Volmer, this is your room,” Omar said, stepping forward to wave his hand over a panel beside the far wall. The entire wall slid open to reveal an attached nursery, just as sleek in its minimal decor, with two roomy cribs in its center beneath another overhead viewport.

“All the rooms are connected in this way,” he explained, stepping over to another panel to repeat the gesture and reveal yet another suite identical to our own. “It allows all our guests an equally breathtaking view.” He guided Fetia to a bassinet beside the bed. “Mr. And Mrs. Ramsey, this one’s yours. You can all close the privacy doors the same way you open them,

and you can lock them by pressing the smaller button on the panel—it will light up red to indicate an active lock.”

At the far end of their room, another panel opened up another room. “Magna Amaru,” he said, taking her hand in his to lead her inside, “this one’s yours, my dear, and the next belongs to Bud Renaud.”

He continued on his tour, opening more doors and assigning a suite for Terrence and one for Bruce before he pointed out the ones that had already been assigned to Juan, Mr. Gil, Gabriel, Tomás, Captain Davis, and himself.

Turning back toward us, he moved to another translucent panel that I’d noticed was a fixture in each suite beside the bathroom door. “You can control everything in the room from this screen: lights, shades, temperature, the frost on the bathroom glass, and the bypass corridor.” Tapping the screen to wake it, he selected *‘bypass exit’* and a section of the side wall—indistinguishable as a door—silently retracted, revealing a small set of stairs that led to a passageway running beneath the cabins.

“If you want to move around the ship while the privacy doors are locked, the bypass corridor will take you back to the main control room and foyer. If you get hungry, you can go the opposite direction and you’ll run straight into a galley that’s very well stocked.”

He chuckled as he observed each of us gaping at our surroundings. “Tomorrow will be a long day for you all. There’s much we’ll need to go over in preparation of the echo we’re about to create. You all should rest.”

The tour had left me standing in silent awe, not just of the submarine’s grandeur, but of the boundless human creativity that had birthed such a vessel—a vessel that was not only a means of travel but a testament to the wonders that awaited us in the future.

We truly had time at our fingertips... and there was no limit to what we might experience in our lives.

“Red,” Jack whispered, nudging my elbow with his own, “we should probably get back to our own room now so Magna

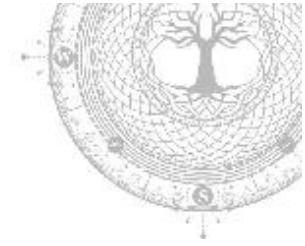
can get in that shower she's been salivating over."

"Shower," I echoed dazedly. "We have showers..." I looked up at him. "Actual showers."

He breathed out a laugh, adjusting Cecelia against his shoulder as he turned me back. "We do. Let's get you in ours. Eh?"

"When exactly will this echo be created?" Kyle asked, his hand resting on the bassinet as Fetia lowered Matty into it.

"According to our history," Omar started, turning toward the main door, "You will arrive in your new lives the day after tomorrow."



Chapter Forty-One

Cecelia

Juan's entire body had gone stiff over me as we both stared in the direction of the door.

"Mr. And Mrs. Perez?" Samuel Van Thorpe called from the opposite side.

"What do you want with us?" Juan asked, remaining over me as he reached over the side of the bed to grab his discarded sword.

"I have a letter."

"From who?" Juan demanded, sitting up to light the lantern. "And who told you you could find us here?"

"Y-you did, sir," the voice continued shakily. "You said to come to this room on this night at this time to give you this letter. I don't know who it's from. You said 3 a.m. on the nose and not a second sooner or later."

Frowning, Juan cleared his throat. "*When* did I tell you this?"

"I'm not allowed to give you that information, sir," Samuel said. "I'm just supposed to give you this letter. Your instructions were very specific."

"Specific?" he asked, standing with his sword pointed ahead of him. "And what of Charlotte and Chase Miller? Have I also given you instruction to capture and torment them?"

"N-no, sir," Samuel stuttered. "This is my first trip and I didn't know what to do with them, so I took them to a settler here. It was his idea to take them captive since their names are not on the roster."

Juan and I exchanged confused glances before he turned back toward the door. “What roster?”

“The travelers’ roster, sir.”

Juan took a step closer. “Travelers’ roster?”

Samuel cleared his throat. “Y-yes, sir.”

“*Time* travelers’ roster?” I called out, earning me a glowering side-eye from Juan where he’d expected me to remain silent.

Again, Samuel stuttered nervously. “Ah, y-yes... Mrs. Perez. I... eh... I’m really not permitted to say more.”

Massaging the bridge of his nose, I watched Juan’s chest move with a deep inhale. “Slide the letter beneath the door and take a step backward.”

“I’m s-supposed to hand it to you personally,” Samuel managed, evidently mortified to challenge either of Juan’s conflicting instructions. “Y-you said I have to see you read it... sir.”

Juan looked over his shoulder at me, his eyes darting to the blanket and then to my shift, a wordless command I was quick to obey, pulling the blanket up over my body.

“Ye’ lost, son?” Jim asked from the corridor, a dark warning in his tone that indicated he had no actual interest in the answer.

“M-Mr. Jackson,” Samuel quivered, “you don’t want to do that. P-put the gun down. I’m only here to deliver a letter.”

“In the middle of the Got damn night? Who the hell are ye’, and how’d ye’ know my name?”

In the months we’d spent together, I’d never seen the side of Juan that’d earned him the name *‘el cazador’*. The man I knew was gentle and romantic, sweet and playful—the opposite of the ruthless killer the name eluded to. Even when he’d come to the cabin in Panama to save me from Adrián, I’d been too caught up in my own fight to witness his. Sure, I’d seen him spar, and I’d seen him brawl with his brother, but I’d never really seen the way he could move.

Not until that moment.

Faster than I could blink, the door was pulled open, and he had a young man pressed firmly against its frame, the edge of his sword positioned against his jugular.

Jim, with his rifle still pointed at the spot the man had been previously, blinked and slowly lowered it. “How in the Sam Hill did he know who I was?”

“Start talking,” Juan commanded through his teeth, pressing the blade in closer against Samuel’s throat. “I am not the sort of man to invite a stranger to the room I share with my wife in the middle of the night, no matter the circumstance. I would’ve killed you already were she not awake to see such a thing. Who are you really? And why have you come here?”

“I t-told you already,” he stammered, his hands trembling where he slowly raised the envelope he’d been holding between them. “M-my name is Samuel Van Thorpe, and I’ve a letter... sir.”

The Samuel Van Thorpe I’d envisioned when Charlotte spoke of him was not at all the quivering boy who stood in our doorway. This was hardly an adult at all—with youthful cheeks and wide frightened eyes, a head full of thick dirty blond hair, and a lanky figure that was hardly a threat to the men on each side of him... I couldn’t imagine he was old enough to even be capable of violence, let alone any of the things he’d been accused of.

“Joseph,” I said gently, “I think he’s telling the truth, honey. Look.” Holding the blanket securely with one hand, I pointed with the other to the envelope. “Maybe you should read whatever’s in it before you give the poor kid a heart attack.”

I watched a muscle in his jaw tick before he issued another wordless command to Jim, tilting his head in the direction of our room to usher him inside.

Just as quickly as I’d obeyed, Jim did too, hurrying inside as Juan launched Samuel into a chair by the door, ripping the letter from his fingers before his bottom had even hit the upholstery.

“If you so much as look anywhere in this room but at me,” he warned, “I will instruct Mr. Jackson to shoot you. Do you understand?”

Swallowing as Jim raised the rifle back up against his shoulder, Samuel nodded. “Y-yes, sir.”

Juan peered out into the hallway. “Are there others with you?”

“No, sir,” he answered, his eyes glued to Juan’s bare chest where the bandage was beginning to unravel. “It’s only me, I swear it.”

Lowering his sword, Juan continued to stare out in search of anyone else who might be lurking in the corridor. “How did you manage to get past Ellinipso without being recognized?”

“I was here before you arrived,” Samuel said, making a conscious effort not to move his head in any way. “My room is two doors down. He never saw me.”

“You’re a scrawny lil’ summbitch,” Jim observed as Juan closed the door and inspected the envelope. “Got some balls on ye’ to be bangin’ on *this* door in the middle of the night. If there’s more of ye’ out there and ye’ ain’t sayin’ so, you do know he’ll kill ye’ all dead before ye’ even know what hit ye’?”

Samuel nodded, still staring at Juan’s tattoo. “I’m not stupid enough to lie to him, of all people.”

“Shoot him if he moves,” Juan grumbled, sheathing his sword before he tore the envelope open and unfolded the letter inside.

Whatever was on that paper made the crease between Juan’s brows instantly melt away, and I watched as his hand idly moved to his mouth while his eyes moved across the page.

“What’s it say?” Jim asked, keeping his rifle pointed at Samuel as he craned his neck in an attempt to get a peek.

Juan was too engrossed in his reading to give an answer, his body frozen in place as if he couldn’t quite believe whatever he was seeing.

All of us were frozen, waiting for some kind of explanation for the bizarre encounter.

“Who’s it from?” I asked when I couldn’t take it any longer, wrapping the blanket around me as I crawled to the edge of the bed.

He looked up from the page, his brows lifting as his gaze met mine, the gentle, romantic man I knew recognizable in them once more. “It’s from... *me*...”

He turned back to Samuel, gently gripping the boy’s chin to tilt his face in such a way he could examine it. “Why would I send someone so young?”

“Evidence,” Samuel said, “that it will actually work.”

He stared for a long moment, then let go of him as if the boy’s skin had burned him, stumbling back a step. “Christ. You’re—”

“I am,” Samuel cut in. “And that’s why I’m here. You wouldn’t believe it from anyone else.”

Jim lowered the rifle an inch and huffed. “Somebody wanna’ tell the rest of us what in the Sam Hill is going on?”

Whatever knowledge had just passed between Samuel and Juan seemed to hover solely between them, each of their eyes locked on the other’s in some silent exchange.

“*Hello?*” Jim goaded, lowering the rifle so he could wave his hand between them. “If I ain’t shootin’ nobody, then I’d sure as shit like to know what I’m doin’ standin’ here at three o’clock in the mornin’.”

“We... have to go,” was Juan’s only response, his attention still focused on Samuel as if he was staring at a ghost. “You have to go too. The others can’t know you were here.”

Samuel slowly rose from the chair. “Where do you want me to go, sir?”

Juan glanced down at the letter still in his hand and shook his head. “Go home to your mother.” He extended the letter to him. “And take this with you... burn it before you leave.”

“Y-yes, sir,” he said, tucking the paper into his jacket pocket before he turned toward the door.

“Wait!” I shouted, hopping off the bed. “You can’t leave yet. There’s so much I need to know! You told Charlotte time is a tree. What did you mean?”

Standing that much closer, there was something so very familiar about his eyes when he turned and met my gaze. I recognized him but I couldn’t figure out how. “You already know that answer,” he said. “You saw it in your dream.” He bowed his head and quickly spun away, hurrying back down the corridor before I could ask for clarification.

My dream? Which one?

“What was in that letter?” I asked, staring at the path he’d disappeared down, attempting to place Samuel in a memory to account for the bizarre sense of recognition that was lingering in my mind.

“Instructions,” Juan answered, plucking his shirt up off the settee to shove his arms through it, “on how we’ll get this right. Pack up your family, Mr. Jackson. I’ll go retrieve the others. We need to be on our way within the hour.”

“Within the hour?” Jim scoffed.

Juan pulled the shirt on over his head and glanced at me. “My father will be arriving in Norfolk sometime today... We need to secure a ship right away so we can receive them. As far as they’ll ever know, that boy was never here. Got it?”

Jim had opened his mouth to ask questions, but upon meeting Juan’s eyes, closed it and nodded. “Alright,” he said instead. “You gonna’ tell me what the hell just happened?”

“Not yet.”



The sun had just barely begun to rise when we all stepped onto the docks. Mist hung over the water, a delicate shroud parting to reveal the silhouette of Norfolk in the distance, its skyline a modest assortment of gabled roofs and slender chimneys.

After Samuel’s swift departure, we all were on edge.

Juan had hurried out behind him to collect Dario and Chris—likely to avoid additional interrogation from me and Jim, and I didn't push him for answers once he returned.

I knew Juan well enough to recognize the weight behind his silence regarding the letter; there was some purpose far greater, some hidden significance he was not yet ready to disclose. Pressing him would do no good. Juan was not the sort of man to willingly withhold information without reason, nor was he the sort of man who could be easily coerced to share whatever information he was withholding.

If I'd learned anything during our time in the colonies, it was that I could trust him. I would never again sleuth around in his shadow to sneak a peek at his secrets, but rather, I would be patient, knowing, in the end, he would unveil the mystery of the letter when he believed the moment was right.

Jim was not nearly as accepting of Juan's more withdrawn demeanor, and had spent the duration of the walk to the docks beside him in the lead, asking questions I knew would get no answers.

I trailed behind with Lilly, both of us scanning the water for signs of Juan Josef's ship in the distance. Rattled as I'd been by Samuel's brief appearance, I was equally anxious to be reunited with A.J. It'd been almost two months since I'd last seen my sister, and with all that had happened since then—all the things I'd longed to talk to her about—our separation felt longer than the years I'd spent searching after her plane had crashed.

The harbor around us was coming to life, each sight and sound laden with the promise of her arrival. The masts of the moored ships, silhouetted against the dawn sky, evoked memories of childhood drives through downtown Chicago, each of us glued to a window and attempting to see the very top of every skyscraper we passed. The rhythmic creaking of wood and rope from the docked vessels kept me constantly turning, hopeful the sound was that of her footsteps aboard one. Smoke wafted from chimneys across the water, its scent merging oak and sea brine, reminiscent of cool autumn nights spent in Minnesota, where we'd huddle by a fire, lost in conversation. Every sensory detail painted a vivid picture of her face in my

mind, amplifying my yearning for a reunion—transforming hope into a profound and urgent need to see her.

I needed to tell her about Maddy... and Samuel... and Charlotte and Chase Miller. I needed to wrap my arms around her and tell her what happened in Panama... tell her about Maria and the baby and Chris... about my marriage to Juan and about time and the dreams I'd had of it.

More than anything, though, I just needed her... to sit beside me... to assure me, simply by being there, that I was on the right path.

“Where do you think you’ll go?” Lilly asked, curling her arm around mine as she squinted ahead where Juan and Dario were approaching a man near one of the larger ships in the harbor. “When we get home, I mean... Where’s the first place you’d want to go?”

There was only one place that came to mind...

Millennium Park. A memory of Maddy’s smiling face played out behind my eyes where she was bundled up in her purple winter coat, her blond curls spilling out beneath her hat as she skated by me on the ice.

It had been our first winter in Chicago, and I knew how badly she missed the ice in Minnesota. I remembered her eyes sparkling when we’d arrived, her senses overwhelmed with the twinkling lights on the trees and inside the buildings that towered over us as we stepped out onto the frozen ring.

She never wanted to leave. The two of us skated until our cheeks were numb... until nearly every other skater had ventured off... until a soft snow began to fall upon us to remind us that we were cold. With snowflakes dusting her lashes, she’d asked for hot chocolate, then smiled up at me every so often while we walked to this little donut shop in search of it. Over and over, I’d asked her why she was smiling but it wasn’t until we sat down in a booth and she’d developed a proper chocolate mustache that she said, *‘I didn’t miss the ice, mommy. I missed skating on it with you.’*

And right then, that was the only place I could think that I *truly* wanted to go...to sit in that booth and drink hot chocolate

and feel some part of her that'd once been there... to skate on that ice and stare up at those buildings, feeling some distant echo of her happiness surround me...

An echo...

Samuel had said I'd seen the answer to time in my dream... And in my dream, I'd explained it to Maddy as a frequency... as an echo... one where her pattern existed just outside mine... one where I'd promised her I would one day visit. If that was the answer he was referring to, then I had to hope there really was a reachable path that Maddy still lived on.

Could I get to that same evening we spent skating? Could I live that same euphoric moment over and over again?

"Cece?" Lilly said, squeezing our joined arms, "are you okay?"

"Millennium Park," I answered with a smile, peering ahead where Juan and Dario were deep in conversation with what I presumed was the shipowner. "I'd go skating in Millennium Park. What about you?"

She sighed and rested her head on my shoulder. "I've been dreaming of my dad almost every night. I think I'd go there first... dive head-first into his big ole' arms and let him figure out all the problems I can't."

Watching as Dario pulled the mule forward that carried the last of our gold toward the man, I focused my attention on her, realizing she hadn't asked the question just to hear *my* answer. She needed someone to listen to hers. "What problems can't *you, Lillian Renaud*, figure out?"

She motioned toward Izzy, giggling happily beside Chris where she was attempting the cup-and-ball game. "She doesn't belong to us, but she doesn't remember the grandmother that's out there. And I don't know what to do... Don't think I could just drop her off somewhere unfamiliar and walk away... where no one knows how to speak to her... where no one knows who she's become... where her lack of hearing would be treated like some kind of handicap... What if no one loves her like we do? What if no one sees how brilliant she is because they can't see past her disability? I can't bear the thought of anyone seeing that

girl as some kind of charity. She might not belong to us, but she belongs *with* us. Doesn't she?"

I nodded, suppressing a smile when Izzy caught the ball in the cup and hopped proudly, looking up for Chris to acknowledge her victory. "You know," I said, "I learned a lot about child custody cases in my other life. There's a lot that goes into it. Simply because she has a relative doesn't mean the relative would make a good parent. Not everyone is suitable for parenthood—and more importantly, not everyone is willing to take on that kind of responsibility."

I thought of Owen and his parents... how they'd completely disconnected from Maddy the instant I moved us away. No phone calls... no attempts to visit... no long, drawn-out battle over custody. I'd tried for nearly a year to force Owen to be interested in her... drove her up there to see him every other weekend... but he was distant, cold to her... treated her like she'd divorced him with me. His parents weren't any better. I'd reached out to them several times and was met with excuse after excuse why they couldn't come see her... I could never understand how anyone could turn their backs on such an amazing child, but it broke my heart far more than it broke Maddy's. She'd chosen to stop going up there... said it wasn't home anymore and I wouldn't force her to see it as such.

"If her grandma wants her," Lilly continued, pulling me from the memory, "I don't see how me and Jimmy could do anything to stop it. We've got no claim to her."

"Izzy's case would be unique," I assured her, clearing my throat. "Her lost hearing and the language you all have created would need to be accounted for. And the time you've spent raising her—her attachment to you—would be taken into consideration by any judge as well. No one will expect you to just hand her over the minute we get home. Not after all this time."

"*If* we go home," she said. "Maybe Jimmy and I should stay here, where we'd never have to risk handing her over... We could go to that plot of land in Connecticut Juan's gonna' buy and raise her there with Charlotte and Ellinipsco... Wait for you all to return in a few years..."

At the mention of Charlotte, my thoughts again drifted to Samuel. He knew how time worked... he knew how time worked and he was obviously working on our side... we could see him again... we *would* see him again.

“Or,” I said, towing her alongside me when Juan waved us over, “we could use our advantage of time.”

“I’m not sending Juan to kill her grandma,” she groaned.

I chuckled. “That’s not what I was suggesting.”

“What, exactly, are you suggesting then?”

“A time-traveler visited us last night,” I explained, “with a letter Juan wrote to himself. Do you know what that means?”

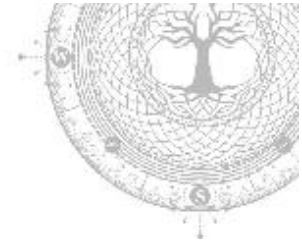
Frowning, she shook her head. “What?”

I slowed our pace and leaned in. “It means we have the ability to see the future... and it means we can change that future as many times as we have to long before we ever get there. It means that no future, however bleak, could ever be guaranteed.”

The conversation, and my revelation, was brought to an abrupt end when a heavy-set man stumbled into us, the heavy trunks he’d been unloading from the ship pulling him to one side. We both assisted in balancing the weight before all three of us could fall into the water.

His response was a wide, cheeky smile. “Well, if this isn’t my lucky day, then I don’t know what is. First, that man there paid my weight in gold for a ship so ancient it may well sink before the day is done, and now, two of the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen stand here smiling before me. Tell me, dear, am I asleep?”

I laughed, patting his shoulder, all the possibilities of the future blending with my excitement to see A.J. to make anything feel possible. “You never know till you wake up...”



Chapter Forty-Two

Alaina

I smelled amazing. Not only that, but my children smelled amazing as well, and we had all slept more soundly than as far back as I could remember.

To be truly rested, after a short eternity of living with the cloud of fatigue hovering over me, made everything around us more vivid, made the impossible room that much more magical with a fresh mind with which to appreciate it.

Surrounded by a glass dome of blue sea and its marine life, everyone's spirits seemed just as lightened, several sets of clear eyes moving around the galley as we sat down to a breakfast of eggs, bacon, hash browns, and toast.

Even Mr. Gil, who'd taken a seat beside me, seemed to be in a good mood for the first time in... well... ever.

"You look well, Mr. Gil," I said as he picked up his silverware.

He actually showed his teeth—perfectly straight and clean—as he smiled a genuine smile in my direction. "My first name's Reynaldo, you know."

I stared stupidly, my fork still hovering over my plate as I took in the unc customary expression.

"What?" he asked. "You did not think I smiled?"

I shook my head. "I wasn't entirely sure you knew how. I take it you're pleased with this place?"

He shook his head. "It is not *one* place that pleases me, my dear. It is all of them. Juan has only ever told *me* of his real identity, and swore I would have a place in the future if I assisted him in getting back to it. Everything I have done has

been in anticipation of this moment. I am pleased because I am here... at the precipice of the future I've been promised... where my adventurous life is only just beginning."

Juan, pulling out a seat beside Jack, chuckled. "He'll never shut up now that you've got him talking. For almost two decades I've sailed with that man jabbering my ear off."

The good mood Jack had woken up with melted away and he tensed visibly as Juan sat. "It's bad enough you're still alive, do you really have to sit *there*?" He motioned to the array of vacant seats farther down the table.

Juan's green eyes met mine, sparkling with mischief as he plucked up a piece of bacon and smirked. "Oh, come now, Mr. Volmer, you know how I like to be entertained over my meals. Any other seat would've been far too dull in comparison."

"That's not funny," I snarled as I offered a spoonful of eggs to both Zachary and Cecelia where they sat in their own state-of-the-art highchairs.

"My apologies," he said, though his voice still held a devilish lilt. "I'd thought we might've moved past all that."

Jack's jaw was clamped together so tightly, I was sure he'd break a tooth. "All *that*?" he growled. "Which part of *all that* do you think I could so easily move past? Chaining us up on your ship? Making me believe you were repeatedly accosting my wife while I was stuck in those chains and helpless to do anything about it? Stringing me up from the rafters to watch while you forced her to whip the skin off the back of a boy she loves? Perhaps you thought I'd just forget that you slit Anna's throat? And did so in front of my wife and child? Or snuck a knife into my bed on our wedding night... or shot a man I look to as a father? Or maybe you thought I'd just get over the fact that you would've murdered me had I not gotten off the ship so you could sail off with my wife and four-month-old children? Which one of those did you think we'd moved past, Juan?"

I concealed my smile and looked to Juan, daring him to attempt a response.

But Juan was not one to be so easily jolted when he was in one of his more diabolical moods. He raised an unconcerned

shoulder and took a bite of his bacon, that same sparkle appearing in his eyes as he bantered, “I do believe, Mr. Volmer, you will have no choice *but* to move past every single one of those things when you wake up tomorrow with no memory of them. And who knows... with all the spare time I shall have on my hands, you and I could be the very best of friends by the time you arrive on the other side... only one of us living on with the knowledge of how easily I’d once bested you.”

“What are you doing, Juan?” I grumbled, placing a hand over Jack’s to prevent the punch he’d curled his fingers in to throw. “What’s the point in provoking him now? When we’re this close to it all being done?”

Juan’s brows lifted, the devilish expression melting away to genuine concern as he met my eyes. “The point? Alaina, my dear, I am an old man in comparison to him, and yet, I’ve outwitted him on far too many occasions. With infinity at our disposal, I am not the worst thing you could encounter. Your husband needs to be better at defending his wife and children... as well as himself. He needs to be better at seeing what threats surround you. All the brawn in the world will do nothing if he cannot use it. Perhaps I shall use my spare time to teach him a thing or—”

Jack’s punch landed so fast, I wouldn’t have been sure it’d happened at all were it not for the blood spilling out of Juan’s lower lip to stain his salt and pepper beard in a dark red.

“Sick and tired of listening to your shit,” Jack growled, settling back into his seat to pick up his fork and knife once more, “pretentious son of a bitch.”

I’d seen it in movies, that far off look a person gets when they’re on the verge of passing out—a wobbly sort of countenance as they attempt to regain control of their body. I hadn’t ever witnessed it in real life, and I was surprised by how satisfying it was to see Juan so instantly proved wrong... to see him finally feel some bit of pain to make up for our own... to see him caught completely unaware.

He and I had found our middle ground, but that didn’t mean the others owed him the same. Jack was entitled to his

own justice—however he needed to make it—and, friends or not, I would always stand behind my husband.

Mr. Gil roared with laughter, forcing my gaze in his direction as he spoke through a mouthful of food. “It’s about time someone shut him up! You satisfied now, Captain? Maybe you’ll wake up on the other side just a little more humbled.”

As Juan slowly returned to consciousness, he dabbed at the blood on his mouth with his fingertips. “You’ve busted my lip.”

Jack’s responding shrug was a mirror to the one Juan had given him seconds prior. “Lucky then you won’t feel it tomorrow. Eh?”

“Friends,” Omar announced loudly where he filled the galley’s doorframe, putting a prompt end to the theatrics that would’ve only escalated without the interruption, “if you direct your attention to your left, you will see the Sofia Martina overhead, effectively docked in the harbor of Edenton, North Carolina—just as we suspected she would be.”

All of us looked toward the large glass window as our craft floated upward, closer to the surface. The blackened silhouette of a ship sat atop the shimmering blues over our heads, unidentifiable as any one specific vessel from such a vantage.

“How do we know for certain that’s her?” Juan asked, holding a napkin against his lip and glowering at Jack.

Omar smiled. “We don’t, but we will soon enough... Mr. Davis has taken a bluefin out to retrieve Phillip Ramsey. While we await their return, let us not fight one another.” His eyes ventured to Juan, then Jack, a sort of parental condemnation washing briefly over his expression before his usual smile returned. “Tomorrow, you will arrive on a timeline some of you will have no immediate memory of. Memory retention across timelines is a finicky thing. For some, it takes days to pull together all the missing pieces of that life... For others, it can take weeks.” He held up a stack of sealed envelopes. “Each of you will go on to write down your memories of the past six months once they finally come to you. These are your own words and will help fill in the gaps until you’re all caught up... they’ll also serve to ease your minds about tomorrow’s outcome.”

As Omar began to hand each envelope out, I recalled the way my first set of altered memories had come to me: a piece here, a vivid dream there... trickling in bit by bit until I just... knew both versions of my life. As no one on the island with me had been affected by the new memories, it hadn't really been a challenge to let them come slowly... but to show up in a completely different place? One where my husband was equally clueless about the things I *did* remember? I couldn't imagine how frustrating it might be to recall it all so slowly.

"Nothing for me?" Juan asked as Omar moved right past him to hand me my envelope.

"Your experience will be a little different than theirs."

Instead of a letter, Omar placed an icepack in front of Jack, winking at me as Jack quickly laid it over his knuckles.

Juan's gaze lingered on my letter, then he swiveled in his chair to watch every other person receive one of their own, a palpable panic forming in him. "Wait... What do you mean different? I... I will not forget too, will I?"

"Just different," Omar said cryptically, handing the last to Kyle before he pulled out a chair and sat down at the opposite end of the table.

Dropping his napkin to let his lip bleed, Juan leaned over his plate to retain eye contact as he repeated, "I will not forget... Will I?" His fingers curled into a fist. "I cannot forget. You understand this? There is too much I must make up for—too much I have promised to do."

Omar calmly folded his hands together and shook his head. "I was not given a letter for you, Mr. Perez. I was told simply that your experience will be different. How? I do not know. There is but one man that can answer that and he will be with you when you arrive there... as will I, where I'm sure he might give us both explanation."

"Who?" Juan spat, his inability to plan for such an event rattling him to his core.

Omar's smile was a patient one. "Your eldest son. He has plans of his own for tomorrow which I am not privy to as a lowly pilot."

“Plans of his own?” Juan scoffed. “You mean, *you* have no plan for tomorrow?”

“I have instruction to get you there,” Omar said, “and that is all.”

As their conversation went on in circles—Juan asking for clarity Omar didn’t have—I glanced down at my envelope, recognizing my own writing on the front where I’d addressed it to myself.

My hands trembled as I turned it to break the seal, exposing more of my distinct half-cursive-half-print on the pages folded inside.

In my peripherals, I saw Jack offer Zachary a spoonful of eggs and my eyes darted to them as I slowly began to unfold the paper. What would he be like without all the memories of this place? Would he be a sort of stranger to me when I woke? Would I be a stranger to him? My eyes moved to the words I’d written, just as desperate for clarity as Juan was.

‘Dear... me,

It’s a funny thing to sit here and write a letter I’ve already read. I can recall sitting in the galley and staring down at that very opening line not all that long ago. I suppose I’ll have to get used to this chicken-and-egg thing being a permanent part of my life.

I know, I know... get to the point already. Right?

Well... Much as I remember wanting to know every last detail of the life I’m about to show up in, there are some surprises that are well worth the surprise, so I’m going to give you what you need to know, and leave the rest to be the wonderful surprise it was when I discovered it.

First things first, both Zachary and Cecelia are perfectly healthy. You can stop worrying about that now. Nothing about their births changed, thanks to Juan Jr.’s promised presence in Tahiti to keep Anna occupied. She’s alive and well too, by the way. As is everyone else you’re sitting there wondering about.

When you wake—and yes, it will be a wake and not a blink, so you’ll have a second to get your wits about you—you’ll need

to be ready for a few things...

Let's start with Jack.'

I glanced up at him. One hand covered in the icepack, he was wiping egg goop from Cecelia's chin with the other. His expression was forcibly neutral, and I knew it was eating away at him that he had no letter of his own.

'It's not as hard as you think it will be to have memories you can't share with him. Without Juan to serve as an obstacle in this life, he's far happier. There was never anything to make him so suspicious... so pent up... He's been with you every single moment of these past six months, and the man you knew on the island... the one that hadn't been tormented and torn away from his family... has been restored. He needed that, and you didn't even know how badly until you woke with him and saw it gone... Saw that playfulness return to him... saw the way that playfulness made every moment with the twins that much lighter.

Do you remember the original plan? How he and Chris agreed to help the Tahitians build houses so we could stay there and wait for the next storm?

That's what we did. And let me tell you, our memories there are far more beautiful than the ones he lost.

Just as we did on our island, you and Jack married on the beach in Tahiti while we waited. So did Jim and Lilly. I'll let the details of those memories come to you naturally, but I'll tell you they are far more magical than the ones you remember now—surrounded by these loving Tahitians and with no uprising to plan for. The celebrations lasted well into the next morning.

Unfortunately, Chris still took a bullet from Oro, and he, Maria, and Bud all went through time just as they did before—with the help of Juan Jr., who has been here almost since our arrival. But unlike the original, Anna went to the future too.

That brought a few changes you'll need to be ready for as well.

She brought her son back with her. So, be ready for Liam to be among you. He and Izzy have been inseparable. He's about the same age and, while he's a little on the shy side with most of

the adults, he absolutely adores her. It's funny, the way he talks to her. He hardly says a word around the rest of us, but to her, he'll talk for hours. She's very good at reading his lips, and his presence among us has encouraged her to become more vocal as well. If you spend your first few days hanging around their play, you'll start to collect a lot of the small bits and pieces of our time here that I don't have enough paper to list out.

Liam's not the only new addition. You'll be excited to know that Gloria is here in the flesh and she is every bit as fascinating as you imagined all that time you spent looking at her photos.

The Perez family didn't have the reputation they'd had the first time around so their presence on Eimeo—particularly with Gloria among them—was a blessing. It was her that greeted us on the shore, and the minute we were alone, she told us they too had come from the future. Yes, I know... this was supposed to be a version of life where we never ran into them... Turns out, we had to.

TAO mediators needed us to make some adjustments. In our echo, Captain Cook returned to find us gone, but the delay in his trip would affect the discoveries he should've made.

So, Juan and Gloria escorted us back from Eimeo. They informed Captain Cook that they would be traveling home to Spain and could escort the Duchess of Parma home with them after the trials on Izzy's hearing were completed.

He's far older than he was when you last saw him, and with Gloria beside him, no one would think them a threat. She softens him the way Cece does his son... and you love her as both a motherly figure to you and a distant grandchild.

You love her for the way she's made Juan too, and for the sacrifices he made in his own life to prevent from losing her. It won't hurt to show the old fool this letter to ease his mind about the coming events. He'll remember, but Omar was right, his experiences are going to be very different. In order to make up for his mistakes, he's got quite a bit of traveling to do before he can get to us. They all do.

Dario had to do some moving around in order to make sure Chris purchased the same tickets I had, and then he had to go

back a little farther to account for Johann Forster's initial equation.

We needed that formula in order to understand the trajectory and frequencies of the other storms.

So Dario went to the very same dinner where Johann had initially met Juan to be placed in his debt, and he planted the very same seed so Johann could recognize Chris's I.D. as something potentially real.

He might've been a bit of a snake, but with no debt to pay off on this timeline, he never had any reason to betray us. Still don't trust him, but with Juan and Gloria here, there was no reason for him to stay behind. He'll be long gone with Captain Cook when you wake, but he's still a part of your story.

Juan Jr. had promises to keep to Cece that prevented him from being immediately present in Eimeo, but he arrived the day before Cook's departure to ensure no part of the twins' births could be changed.

Now that the memories have returned, it's quite amusing to look back at all Juan Jr.'s valiant attempts to avoid Cece before her memories caught up. Such a gentleman he is... No matter how much she flirted with him—and she flirted with him endlessly—he would not take advantage of his more intimate knowledge of her... torturous as it was for him.

You'll wake on your way home, on Bud's yacht, surrounded by all the people you love, and while the memories won't start trickling in until after you cross through the storm, you'll do fine, both before and after they come. There is nothing to be afraid of.

This version of your past six months was perfect. It was like a very long vacation. You and Jack were never separated, and everyone—Cece, Lilly, Jim, Chris, Anna, all of them—were there to contribute to the twins' initial development. There was nothing to be sad about... no fighting, no killing, no pain...

All of you are at peace, and going home. I don't need to tell you about home, but I'll tell you it's the best feeling in the world when you finally get to see mom holding these babies.

Everyone is perfect and so are you.

Enjoy the surprises!

-Me.'

I was smiling when I finally looked up again, as were Bud, Bruce, Terrence, Kyle, and Fetia.

I extended the letter out to Jack. "Here. You should read it." I met Juan's eyes. "And so should you."



With promises of a peaceful life at the front of my mind, not even Phil Ramsey could diminish the smile that was permanently etched on my face.

We'd seen the bluefin, a small and very quick means of underwater travel resemblant of a fish, returning through the overhead windows shortly after breakfast.

Omar led us to the docking bay, a feat of futuristic design, which opened beyond layers and layers of glass, its mechanisms whirring quietly as the bluefin nestled into place.

I'd watched in awe as a series of separate airlocks engaged, a necessary passage to ensure environmental and pressure equilibrium. When the air pressure reached its proper levels, Captain Davis stepped out of the vessel, moving with a calm efficiency that was a stark contrast to Phil's wobbly and nervous steps.

His eyes were like saucers when he finally set foot in the foyer to take in the same marvels in engineering I had the night before. Unlike the rest of us, however, he wouldn't get the same amount of time to fully process his state-of-the-art surroundings before being bombarded with questions and information he couldn't have been ready for.

"Well?" Juan probed, "what happened? Is Alonso effectively off our trail?"

Phil's eyes somehow widened even further as they landed on Kyle, Fetia, and Matty where they lingered in the doorway. "Kyle... You're alive. I thought for certain I'd lost you all and I... I was so—"

“Have we lost them?” Juan demanded impatiently.

Phil turned toward Juan, his palm brushing over the scar on his cheek as his entire demeanor changed—like a threatened dog suddenly raising its hackles. I’d seen the look on him before and I realized his wobbling steps had little to do with the changing air pressure and everything to do with his need to drown his sorrows in something stronger.

After thinking his family had burned to death, I couldn’t exactly fault him for falling off the wagon.

Face to face with Juan, the fingers Phil had left curled so tightly into fists that his knuckles became bright white. “You’re still alive...”

It wasn’t a question or an acknowledgement, but a low growling sound... like whatever thread Phil had holding him together had just snapped in two and the sentence uttered was a warning that it wouldn’t be that way much longer.

“Dad,” Kyle coaxed gently, taking a few cautious steps closer, “it’s alright. We’re going home to a better life now—a life where he never touched us.”

“No,” Phil spat, his eyes watering. “Demons like us don’t get to have happy endings. His life will end here... with mine.”

Juan, pompous instigator that he was, lazily inspected his fingernails and yawned.

“Dad,” Kyle said again, placing his hand firmly on his father’s shoulder, “his life won’t end and neither will yours. There’s no use in fighting when it’s already been written. Come on, we’ll get you sobered up now and you can read it all for yourself.”

Phil shook his head, his glazed over eyes glued to Juan. “They were going to gut you, you know. Alonso and his sons... they were going to cut you open like the pig you are and keep you alive so you could watch them do the same to your sons. I was going to help them.”

Juan grinned. “Lucky for me then that it is only you here. Eh? I think it’d be a little hard to *gut* someone in your condition, Mr. Ramsey. Perhaps you should listen to your boy and sober

up. I certainly wouldn't want you to hurt yourself any more than you already have."

Phil attempted to lunge, but Kyle was quick to place himself in the way. "Look around you, you idiot!" he shouted, taking a strong hold on his father's shirt and pulling him to meet his eyes. "I just told you he won't die here, and how do you think I know that? Huh? Where do you think we are right now and how do you suppose we got here? You're not defending anyone with this... this... whatever it is you're doing. It won't change a damn thing. So I need you to snap the fuck out of it and calm down. Maybe take a shower and get your head on straight so you can answer the questions we need you to be able to."

"A shower?" Phil echoed.

"Yes, dad, a shower." With a long sigh, he took Phil's arm and draped it over his shoulders, a movement that seemed to have been done so many times it was second nature. "Come on. I'll help you get cleaned up and then I'll explain everything."

As if he only just realized his own drunken condition, Phil's anger melted immediately into apology. "Oh, God..." He looked down at himself and back up. "Fuck. I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"I'm not angry," Kyle assured him, turning him toward the door. "Can you think for a second... Do you remember if Alonso went to shore to search for Juan and Dario? Did he believe Juan burned to death and that he was planning to go to North Carolina instead of Virginia?"

Abashedly, Phil nodded. "He only half believes the part about North Carolina. Plans to sail to Virginia tomorrow if he doesn't find any signs of them."

Kyle waved his hand over the panel to open the door to our rooms, his attention darting over to us as he paused mid-step. "That all you need from him right now?"

I nodded. "That's more than enough."

Fetia handed Matty to Magna, not needing to ask if Magna minded watching him—she never minded—before she hurried

to the opposite side of Phil and draped his other arm over her shoulder.

“You should just stay out here,” Kyle groaned. “You don’t need to be caught up in this.”

“I am your wife,” she said in a tone that left no room for argument, “and I will be your wife for many many years. Where I go and what I caught up in is same as you. Let’s go.”

As the three of them disappeared, I turned to Juan and lifted a brow. “Are you planning to start a fight with anyone else before this is over?”

He took a deep breath and lowered down into one of the chairs near the window. “I did not start that one. He did.”

Adjusting Zachary against my hip, I sat in the chair beside his. “You didn’t exactly diffuse the situation with your smart ass remarks. What’s gotten into you?”

His eyes ventured to Zachary where I’d positioned him in my lap. “I thought I’d have more time to prepare for the day I’d see my sons again—thought I’d have mended at least a few of my mistakes before we found ourselves face to face. I suppose I thought, maybe if I take a few blows now, they might decide to go a little easier... might adjust whatever separate plan Juan’s made in my absence to no-doubt be rid of me.”

“You’re afraid they’re going to physically hurt you?” I scoffed. “You can’t be serious.”

He shook his head. “If physical harm was all that awaited me as retribution for the things I’ve put them through, Alaina, I would welcome it with open arms. It’s the hatred and the disappointment I am not prepared to face. There was nothing in that letter of yours that indicated either of my sons was particularly glad to have me there with them. Nor was their any indication that I remembered this part of my life.” He motioned to the doorway Phil and Kyle had disappeared beyond. “Neither of my sons would be so forgiving as to drape *my* arm over their shoulders and help me to a shower.”

I brushed a palm over Zachary’s blond hair and breathed out a laugh. “You saw that letter, and just like I did, you had to notice the part that said you’ve got some traveling to do... The

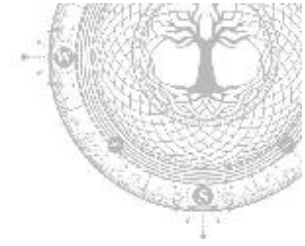
way you always think two steps ahead? I imagine, once you stop letting your muddied mind drag you down, you'll find a way to use that travel to make up for whatever bad memories they might retain."

He stared out the large window, the blue world outside racing by in a blur as we headed for Virginia at a speed that didn't seem possible. "If they'll allow me to remember that I need to. I don't know that there is any gesture great enough to make up for the father they see me as—one more lowly than that rapist bastard."

"With all the *spare time* you'll have on your hands," I teased, "I'm sure you'll think of something. You've got that chart I gave you?"

He tapped his jacket pocket, the crinkle of paper indicating it was stowed safely inside.

"Maybe you should add a section of your own... a list of things you need to make right for them."



Chapter Forty-Three

Cecelia

The ship we'd purchased was the largest of the ones available in the harbor but still smaller than any I'd been on during my time in the 18th century. Sailing conditions weren't at all unideal, but the vessel rocked with even the smallest bit of resistance, leaving my stomach caught halfway between my abdomen and my throat.

I wasn't the only one. Chris had come down with a very bad case of seasickness ten minutes into our journey and had set up permanent residence at the stern's railing.

Jim took a spot beside him, his face a pale shade of green that kept us all avoiding that part of the ship. Even Dario was a little queasy as we ventured into deeper water. He forced a straight face, but I noticed he was taking great efforts to maintain it, his throat moving more and more to keep down whatever was threatening to come up.

Lilly, in stark contrast to the rest of us, was miraculously unfazed by the ship's constant movement, and walked around the deck as if she'd been born a sailor, helping adjust the sails to navigate us where most of our group was too indisposed to serve as crew.

Izzy didn't seem bothered by it either as she hopped from one person to the next to offer us water from her canteen or a cracker from her pack.

Lucky for the rest of us, our journey wasn't a long one. Juan's mysterious letter had contained a set of coordinates just outside the view of the harbor where we could expect to find the others.

With the anchor at last dropped, I focused on the horizon, both as a means to offset my seasickness and to search for signs

of my sister.

The morning light draped the ocean in a soft, golden glow, painting both the sky and the sea shades of light blue and pale orange. Slowly, I felt the familiarity of that image wash over me to replace the chill of nausea.

I'd spent the last two weeks almost exclusively remembering the alternative timeline with Maddy, but right then, I could't help but be reminded of the years I'd spent on this timeline searching the ocean for signs of Alaina's airplane.

How many blue and orange skies had I looked out upon from the bow of that old fishing boat, hoping to catch some sign of her?

The tattoo on my ankle burned as if it was attempting to answer that very question.

"Celia-bug," my mother had said through tears as we'd stepped out of the tattoo parlor the day we'd gotten them, "going back out on that boat isn't going to do anything but break your heart all over again. We've already searched everywhere there is to look and... honey, if she was out there, someone would've found her by now. I know you don't want to hear that, and believe me, I don't want to say it, but I can't bear the idea of you going out again. Stay home and start your practice back up. That's what she'd want you to do. It'd break *her* heart if she knew how much you were giving up."

It killed my mom to give up on A.J., and I knew it was killing her that I couldn't. I was the only daughter she had left, and she was desperate to keep me close.

Much as I wanted to stay for her sake, I couldn't. No matter what anyone said, no matter how much time passed with no signs of A.J., part of me had remained convinced she was still alive.

Maybe it was akin to that strange phenomena some twins have where they can sense the other in some way because I *felt* her out there... like our shared genetics were linked and I could sense her pulse still beating, even in another century.

Or maybe I was just so desperate to have her back that I convinced myself I could feel her heart still beating...

My life didn't make sense without her in it. There was no joy in my career without my sister there to be proud of me, no purpose to seeking out a husband or starting a family without A.J. there to celebrate every moment alongside me...

Even on the alternative timeline, I was lost without her.

Divorced and homeless were it not for A.J. and Chris's house to escape to, I was just barely holding it together. Yes, I'd gone back to school, but I'd gone because Maddy needed me to, not because I was passionate about starting a new career.

I wasn't passionate about anything but my daughter... And the minute I'd drop her off at school, my composure would unravel and I'd question myself all the way until I picked her up again. Had it been a mistake to leave Owen? Was I being too hard, giving up too easily? Maybe he was immature—maybe he was an alcoholic—but she wouldn't want for anything if I'd just stuck it out. Without him, was I capable of supporting her? Could I get Maddy through college on my own? Would I ruin her by not being enough? Should I just... call him?

I'd stared at the happy photos of A.J. and Chris littering the house in both versions of my life, hoping I might hear some echo of her sisterly wisdom if I looked long enough... How I'd longed for just a second with her... if for no other reason than to feel her curl her fingers around mine and squeeze... not necessarily to tell me what I needed, but simply to be there so I could find it for myself.

That was the thing about us. We could be lost in utter blackness, but as long as we had the other's hand to grab hold of, we could always find our way out.

As I stood there staring out at the ocean, I wasn't thinking about Bennet or the life I would live after we'd kill him. I wasn't thinking about Samuel or time or the letter that had kept Juan at a distance throughout the morning. Not even Maddy had a place in my mind right then. I was simply craving A.J.'s hand over mine, searching for the familiar sensation of her fingers in my memory that might give me the guidance I was lost in the dark without.

That's how it felt to have two completely different lives inside me... Like my identity was lost in some dark place

between them. Which woman was I? Was I the mother whose only passion in life was her daughter? Or was I the same Doctor Cecelia McCreary who'd been so proud of all she'd worked to accomplish? Was I the half-broken woman who'd stared down at Owen's name in my phone and considered crawling back to him, or was I the depraved soul who'd looked up at my thumbs in Adrián's eyes and felt nothing but vindication?

How I craved the reassuring touch of someone who might know those answers.

Even with my mind spinning in such a way, I felt Juan approach the railing beside me. He didn't speak, but stared out similarly, his hand grazing mine on the railing as if he'd been craving the same reassuring touch I had.

Excited as I was to be reunited with my sister, he was likely equally apprehensive about seeing his father again.

Given Samuel's appearance in the night and the bizarre letter from the future, it hadn't really occurred to me that he'd be coming face to face with the man he'd been plotting to kill for the past two decades...

With a sigh, I let go of my quandaries to lean against him and absorb some of his. "Bout time you wandered over. Just because you got a secret letter from yourself didn't mean you had to avoid me all morning."

He tugged a strand of my hair that'd come loose from its pins. "And here I was thinking I was not allowed to have secrets of my own after your whole, *'if you have secret business, then so does your wife'* bit."

I smiled up at him. "I imagine I'll find out whatever was in that letter soon enough if it had instructions for how we'll do this."

"Aye," he said, the corner of his lip curling upward as he examined my face, "you will."

"I can accept that as answer enough for now," I said, looking back out over the water. "Besides, we have more important things to discuss."

He traced the edge of my mouth with his thumb. “Like your suddenly weak stomach?”

Shaking my head, I straightened and took a deep breath. “Like your father.”

He glanced at the horizon, idly rubbing his bandaged chest as the light-heartedness faded from his features. Juan didn’t like to talk about his father, particularly when it pertained to the subject of his long anticipated revenge upon him. “You’re worried that I might kill him the moment I see him?”

“I’m worried that *you* are worried about whatever might happen when you see him... worried you’re afraid of what you might become if you do what you’re thinking about doing.”

“You don’t know him the way I do,” he said softly, staring at some distant spot on the ocean. “If you did, you’d see the world would be better off without him in it.”

I laid my hand over his on the rail. “The world would be better off without a lot of people in it. You don’t owe him a death any more than you owe every other person who’s ever made a stain upon the lives of others.”

He glanced down at my fingers over his and sighed. “He only cares about himself, you know... about getting his vengeance... there is no one he won’t hurt to see it done... no life he will not ruin.”

“You stubborn fool,” Dario hissed, appearing at the opposite side of me to glare at his brother. “The only reason we are here at all is because he insisted on making things right for *you*. Are you really so dense that you don’t see that?”

With a deep breath, Juan shook his head a fraction of an inch, his attention returning to the ocean ahead of us. “You cannot think our father would hunt for the ancestor of Richard Albrecht—the very man our mother chose to love instead of him—strictly for the sake of my happiness. I am merely an excuse for him to take back what he believes was stolen. What do you think he’d been out there searching for all those years he spent at sea when we were children? It was not a way home. He was searching for Albrechts long before Lizzie and the children died. He was searching for them even when he took us all out with

him and they got sick. He saw their deaths, not as a tragedy, but as an opportunity for me to join him in his search. He reveled in my despair... let my heartache be his weapon. This isn't about me anymore than it is about our mother or righting his wrongs. It's about the man that bested him and making it so he never could. If our mother *is* alive in the life we return to, he'll not love her... He'll have, once again, made her his captive... trapped her beneath him in that awful house in Colombia for these past twenty-odd years... I will not let him use my tragedies as an excuse to cage her just as I'll not use his as an excuse for forgiveness he is not owed. I won't watch him destroy her a second time, and so I will do what I must to ensure she is free."

Dario squared his shoulders as he turned to face him. "You really are a fool. You know that? Philip, Nicolás, and Lizzie were family to *all of us*. Their deaths were more than your tragedy, alone, brother. We all mourned them—*father too*—and you might've noticed that if you'd looked anywhere beyond your own cold heart. He never saw anything in their deaths but devastation. I saw it break him with my own eyes and that broke me too. I watched him fight for you—fight to make things right for *you*. Maybe he made a few mistakes, and maybe he wasn't the parent *more* deserving of life, but he's not without a heart, and I won't watch you kill him."

"I'm not going to kill him," Juan groaned, massaging his chest as he looked down at me. "Much as I'd like to, my wife won't have me if I do. I don't need to kill him to be rid of him. He's a criminal, and like any other criminal, he'll die rotting in a prison cell for his crimes... with the life he was so desperate to take back just out of his reach."

"That's cruel," Dario breathed, looking back out over the water as if he could see his father in the distance.

"Aye," Juan agreed, following his gaze, "as is he. After all he's done to you, it's foolish that you could think of him as anything else."

Dario shook his head. "No one is perfect, but you keep expecting us to be. Me, Lizzie, father... even your own children. There is no error too big or too small to go unaccounted for by

you, is there? Unless, of course, that error was made by mom...”

“Don’t you dare,” Juan growled, his eyes narrowing as they slid to his brother.

“She wasn’t even your mother,” Dario pushed on, “but she couldn’t ever be wrong, could she? You could never blame *her* for our situation... could you? No, of course not... So you blame him instead. Did you ever think about how difficult things must’ve been for *him*? To know the one person he loved more than anything in this world had betrayed him in such a way? How do you think it felt to watch her snatch up his children and run off with another man? To then watch her die mistakingly by his own hand after she jumped in front of a bullet intended for the man who’d destroyed his life? What would you have done if it’d been you standing there in his place? If it’d been Cece that’d lain there dying before your eyes after she took a bullet intended for a man she loved more than you? Eh?”

“Don’t answer that,” Dario huffed. “It doesn’t matter. To hell with your retribution. He’s my father too, and as he’s done a far better job than you at keeping *his* children alive, I won’t have you judge him for the crimes he committed in doing so. I will do what I must. You hear me? To hell with your retribution... you stubborn fool.”

Before Juan could open his mouth to grind out a response, Dario spun on his heel and stormed off, leaving us alone in the too thick air he’d created.

I didn’t quite know what to say. Had Dario not injected himself into our conversation, I’d planned to make many of the same points he had, though I’d intended to do so in a far less harsh manner. I wanted Juan to let go of the grudge he’d been holding onto—to live without the weight of it to bog him down in the life we would soon create together. Juan was a good man, and he meant well, but I was afraid he’d hate himself for whatever justice he delivered his father before I could get to him... Afraid I might not recognize the man he’d become if he regretted whatever might occur between them during the years before I’d wake.

I couldn't say any of that now... not when Dario had brought up the death of his children. That was a wound far too deep to probe, so I didn't say anything at all...

Instead, I curled my fingers over his on the rail and squeezed, hoping that'd be enough for him to find his way out of the dark... to figure out which man he was deep down.



“Are ye’ sure it was *this* spot?” Jim shivered, hugging his jacket tightly around him as the much cooler evening temperatures set in. “We ain’t seen shit out here all day.”

Juan, who’d sat down on the quarterdeck beside me to prop his back up against the helm, nodded. “I’m sure.”

It was the first thing he’d said in the hours that had passed since Dario’s outburst and his voice was hoarse from a lack of use.

“Well,” Jim turned to squint out, “where the hell are they? We gonna’ freeze to death out here waitin’ on ‘em. You couldn’t have put a dang time on there?”

Juan raised an unamused eyebrow as he rested his arm across his knee. “All it said was to purchase a ship and sail here immediately after my receipt of the letter to wait for their arrival. That is the extent of my knowledge, Mr. Jackson. I’m afraid you’ll have to be patient.”

“What if they done passed through already?” Jim asked, scanning the expanse of vacant ocean around us. “What if we took too long gettin’ this ship out here and we’re just sittin’ here waitin’ for no reason?”

“They’ll come,” Juan answered. “Just... be patient.”

“Hard to be patient,” Jim muttered, “when your dang fingers is ‘bout to fall off.”

“Umm... guys?” Chris called, his upper body bent over the railing of the stern, much as it had been all day. “There’s eh... something under us... something with lights on it...”

“Lordt help us,” Jim said to the sky, “losin’ our fingers *and* our minds, apparently.”

“No, he’s right,” Lilly said, waving us over where she’d bent over the rail beside him. “There’s something coming!”

Compelled by a mix of curiosity and fear, Juan and I quickly made our way over to the stern. The others were huddled there, peering into the darkness below. As I joined them to catch the sight for myself, my breath caught in my throat.

Below us, the sea was alive with an eerie, unnatural glow. It was as if a piece of the night sky had fallen into the ocean, its stars twinkling and moving in a synchronized dance. The sight was otherworldly, more reminiscent of a UFO’s description than any maritime vessel I could imagine.

“The fuck is that?” Chris whispered, his voice barely audible over the hum of whatever was ascending beneath us.

The water’s surface began to bubble and churn, and the massive structure emerged slowly from the depths, feet from our ship, its dome-like windows giving it an almost celestial appearance where the ocean parted around them. Each window seemed to hold a universe of its own, a myriad of colors where droplets of water dripped down to create a play of dancing light in their reflections.

Docking against our ship with a precision that lined its topmost dome up perfectly to our deck, the massive glass hatch opened with a hiss to reveal several figures silhouetted against the vessel’s interior lights.

“Cece?” one of the figures called out. “Lill? Chris?”

My knees trembled as I recognized the voice as A.J.’s and not some aquatic alien life form my imagination had been attempting to conjure up. “We’re here!” I shouted back in unison with Lilly, both our voices cracking with relief.

Jim called out simultaneously as well, his voice far more supported by his elation than ours. “Shit, I thought we was bein’ abducted! What in the Sam Hill are y’all standin’ on?”

As the figures stepped out onto the deck, my senses were bombarded—confusion and apprehension whirring around me

as a wave of chattering voices surrounded us where we'd spent the past several hours in almost complete silence.

Blinded by the craft's lights, I heard A.J. and Kyle and Jack moving closer, all of them speaking at once so I couldn't quite make out their words. I heard Juan's father calling out for him as Bud called out for Lilly... And I heard Luna's bark as she darted past me toward Dario.

Blinking against the light, I felt A.J.'s familiar arms wind around me to nearly squeeze the air out of my lungs. Were my mind not being pulled in so many directions, I might've been relieved by it. As it was, I was teetering on the edge of what felt like panic.

"I was so worried about you," she whispered. "Are you alright? Jack told me... about Panama..."

"I—I'm... I'm fine," I managed, attempting to understand what I was witnessing in my dizzy state. "Did you just... I mean..." I squinted to see beyond her. "Is that a submarine?"

She chuckled. "I'm not sure that's the right word for it. Another time traveler brought it here... Oh, there are about a million things I need to tell you and I don't even know where to start!"

Another set of arms found their way around both of us. "You can start," Lilly cut in, her added embrace only amplifying the calamity that had taken a firm grip on my mind, "by telling us what the hell kind of magic you've got on that submarine that's made you smell this good. Oh, I missed you so much!"

Beyond us, similar embraces and questions were occurring, pulling my focus into a numbing tug of war.

"Hoss! Ye' made it, ye' lucky summbitch!" Jim exclaimed.

Kyle's voice mixed in too as he greeted Chris in a far more solemn tone. "We heard about Maria. I'm so sorry. How are you holding up, man?"

And then there was the distinct growl of someone who couldn't be mistaken for anyone other than Juan's father, the timbre in his voice almost an exact copy of his son's. "What the

hell happened to you? What's the bandage for? Are you hurt? I need to talk to you about whatever you're planning."

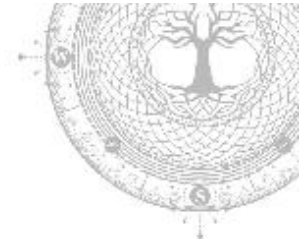
Planning? What *Juan* was planning?

"He was shot in the chest," Dario answered, adding to the stack of voices I was attempting to wade through. "Cece saved his life."

"Are those *our* earrings?" A.J. gasped, pulling me back to my own embrace to find her eyes widening as she inspected my ears. "The ones we used to fight over when we were kids?"

Swallowing the massive lump of anxiety that'd worked its way up into my throat, I nodded. "I... eh..." The world was spinning far too quickly, the seasickness that had plagued me throughout the day returning to bring a chilly tingle over every part of my body. "I... eh... Oh God, I think I'm gonna' pass out."

And I did.



Chapter Forty-Four

Alaina

Immersed again in the deep water with a new group to gape, gasp, and ask a thousand questions about the impossible craft, I found myself staring at Juan Jr. and Cece, lost in a sort of trance as he lovingly eased her back into consciousness. Months of listening to Juan's father recount tales of his son as a boy had almost made me forget the man he had become—his imposing stature softened by the proximity of my sister, his touch tender, and his gaze adoring whenever it found her.

While Davis and Omar brought the others up to speed on TAO and their hand in its creation, I observed Juan Jr. by Cece's side, gently dabbing her brow with a cool cloth, squeezing her hand, and whispering words of comfort that didn't quite reach my ears. She was awake but disoriented and queasy, and I knew it would be some time before she regained her composure.

Cece had always had two modes of panic: one crept up to torment her with a prolonged attack, and the other assaulted her all at once, causing a sudden drop in her blood pressure that would send her plummeting into unconsciousness. Her doctor likened it to those who faint at the sight of blood or from acute pain—extreme emotional distress could trigger the reaction in just about anyone. And for Cece, the cacophony of unseen faces, unwelcome touches, and indecipherable conversations was the epitome of extreme emotional distress.

I should've known we were overwhelming her, but I'd been too excited to hold her in my arms to even think about her condition. Luckily, Juan Jr. had, and he'd been there to scoop her up into his arms long before she'd ever toppled.

The sight of her in his embrace was so natural in its familiarity, so right, that it evoked a deep sense of fittingness

within me. Like I was home... or close to it, the two of them together a permanent staple in the very meaning of the word.

“This don’t make no sense!” Jim hollered, pulling me from my euphoric reflection to notice the world still turning around me. He, along with the other newcomers, had the covenants open on his lap, and his hair stood on end from where he’d repeatedly pushed his fingers through it. “You’re tellin’ me I’m fixin’ to help write all this... but I’m sittin’ here readin’ it before I can ever even come up with the dang words? Now, I might not be the quickest squirrel to the tree, but I can still find my nuts when I need ‘em, and I’m tellin’ ye’, this don’t make no sense whatsoever!”

“It will,” Omar said calmly. “The inner workings of time defy everything we once thought we understood about how it works. There is no before or after... You exist in this moment, and you’ve existed in this moment for all of time. You wrote what’s on that page same as you’ve just read it, Mr. Jackson, and conversely, you haven’t yet read or written it at all. Time is not linear and therefore what might’ve once seemed nonsensical is now entirely possible.”

Jim’s mouth was frozen half open, and he frowned at Omar for a long, long while before he looked at me. “Where *exactly* did yuns dig up *Dr. Seuss*, here? And is there somebody else can speak in plain English?”

“Let’s try another way,” Davis cut in, plucking up a pen and a pad of paper from a side table. “Cecelia, dear, are you feeling well enough to humor me for a moment?”

Slowly, she sat forward and rubbed her temples. “I think so... Depends on what you’d like me to do?”

He extended the pen and paper to her, mindful of Juan Jr.’s weary eye as he did so. “I’d like you to draw time... the way you drew it for Maddy in your dream.”

“Maddy?” I gasped, leaning forward with my pulse suddenly far too rapid. “You dreamt of Maddy?”

She nodded as she stared down at the blank paper and tried to steady her mind. “I remember her.”

I felt like I might be the one to faint. “H-how’s that possible?”

Davis touched the diamond stud on one of Cece’s earrings. “She found her anchor.”

At the scowl he received from Juan Jr., Davis quickly retracted his hand, bowing his head in apology.

Cece grabbed her opposite ear. “*These* are what made me remember? Does that mean I’ll forget her if I take them out?”

I could feel the pain in that question, and I suddenly felt too far away to offer the comfort she had to have been in need of. I couldn’t imagine the torture that’d come with remembering a daughter who no longer existed. I’d barely gotten a chance to hold Evelyn before she died and that had ripped me apart. Cece would’ve remembered an entire childhood... her first words, her laughter, every proud moment she ever witnessed as a mother... I wondered if she *wanted* to forget or if she was terrified to lose what memories she had.

“You won’t forget anything you’ve already remembered on this timeline,” Omar said apologetically, joining Davis at the side of her seat.

“Will I see her again?” she asked, both brows raising as she looked between them. “On another timeline? Is it possible?”

Davis smiled and motioned to the paper. “You tell me. Show me how time works and where you think she is.”

“Why don’t ye’ just let her *look at whatever she’s supposed to draw first?*” Jim grumbled sarcastically. “Ye’ know... since she done drew it ain’t drew it and all that...”

“That’d hardly prove my point,” Davis chuckled, leaning in to watch Cece’s pen begin to move across the page.

As the room fell into silence waiting for her to finish, my eyes ventured to Juan Jr. once more. Everyone was staring at the paper, but he was staring at her, a contemplative look on his dark features that made me think of his chart... of Owen’s name upon that chart... and of the plan Omar claimed only Juan Jr. was privy to.

Had he been trying to find a way to give Maddy back to my sister even before she'd remembered her? And now, with the memories obviously tearing at her heartstrings, would he rewrite time itself just to see her happy?

I watched his left hand comb over her skirts and noticed, for the first time, the light reflecting on the gold band he now wore on his finger. Surprised, I realized it was the very same gold band I remembered placing upon Chris's finger once...

Chris...

Given Cece's episode, I'd hardly had time to help her into the foyer before we were descending and Davis was explaining time. I hadn't any chance to even acknowledge the others. Quickly, I turned in my chair to find him and Jack standing near the control panel, each of them holding one of our twins as they spoke in hushed voices.

Seeing Chris without Maria made her absence suddenly palpable. Her boisterous commentary was a constant undercurrent to any gathering Chris was a part of, and now, the silence in its place felt deafening. How loud that silence must've been for him. Even with the knowledge we would get her back, the void Maria left was heavy. It hung there like a heavy cloak draped over us... and I was anxious to be rid of its weight the moment she was finally returned. But would Maria return to us in the same condition she'd left? Would the child she'd died carrying have the same opportunity to be conceived on a different timeline?

As I continued to watch Chris with Zachary, the sight struck a bittersweet chord in me. He held him with a naturalness that spoke of his innate paternal instincts—leaning in occasionally to engage him in a playful mimicry, patting his bottom, or bouncing him gently as he carried on his conversation with Jack—and I couldn't help but long for a day when I saw him hold his own son in such a way.

Omar told us he and Maria would have a son that would go on to figure out how to manipulate time. It was unclear exactly when that son would be born—if the child they'd conceived on this timeline might make it to the next or if he'd be born later.

My letter hadn't given clarity around Maria's pregnancy status either, and I found myself increasingly frustrated with the elusive wording. What were the surprises I promised myself I'd find? Was it Maria's pregnancy? Or perhaps it was Maddy? Why couldn't I just be a normal human being and spell out the details I had to know were killing me? Why did I have to insist on '*surprising*' myself when I knew how agonizing the suspense would be?

"Where are we going?" Dario asked where he stood at the front of the vessel to stare out at the moving sea ahead.

Omar, not looking up from Cece's sketch answered, "George Bennet is working on a patrol ship in the bay. There is a very specific location I'm to take you all to find it."

"You all?" Dario echoed, spinning around to frown at Omar. "All of us?"

Omar nodded. "Yes, of course."

Dario's furrowed brow dipped down even further. "Why all of us? Why not just Davis if he's the one that will kill him?"

"That's just the way it's written," Omar said with a lift of his shoulder.

"What about the children?" Chris asked, bouncing Zachary on his hip.

"They're written as being present as well," Omar explained. "That's all I know. The gates are opening next week, and I've been given instructions to take you to a set of coordinates and then head for the storm so I can be present in the year the Perez family will wake in. Even at top speed, I'll barely make it in time. Given the existence of TAO and all your names upon its foundation, I hardly think there is anything to fear."

"Done!" Cece announced, putting a momentary pause to the discussion as she held up her diagram. "This is what I drew in the dream... I saw time kind of like a pulse," she tapped a dot in the center of a series of circles. "It grows out from here like a frequency... creating these sort of ring-like patterns that resemble a tree." She moved to one of the circles that had a doubled border. "Since I remember another, different life, I had

to account for changes in time... and I thought... well, since energy and frequency are directly proportional to each other and since the energy that powers that frequency couldn't technically be destroyed, we have to assume the unchanged version still exists... as a manipulation of the original energy... perhaps close by to the new one... like a shadow... or... an echo... or... something like that..."

"Mr. Jackson," Davis said with a proud smile, "open your book to page 145 and take a look at the diagram there... Tell me if it looks familiar to you..."

A few seconds of rustling later and Jim muttered, "It's the same... It's the Got damn same! And it still don't make no sense! How in the hell did she know to draw this?"

"Because this," Davis said, squeezing Cece's shoulder, "is an echo, a variation of time soon to be replaced by another... and another... and another. The book in your lap, Mr. Jackson, was created across multiple echoes in time, one where you hadn't yet read the words before you wrote them, and one where she hadn't seen this diagram in order to sketch it. You can't remember those yet because you don't yet have your anchor."

Cece sat forward. "Wait, I'm right? The changed versions are out there? Maddy's alive out there? She's... reachable? I can get to her?"

Davis nodded. "Yes. As a visitor. We cannot take from the echo she belongs in, but you will have access to her any time you'd like. And you will have it because of this." He tapped on her drawing. "This sketch will serve as the foundation for everything we will come to know about how time works." He turned to Chris. "And we will come to know how time works because of the son you will father. I know things on this echo have been hard for you, Mr. Grace, but I assure you, the life you're preparing to live beyond it will make up for the hardships you've endured."

"Maria?" he breathed. "She'll live again?"

Grinning, Davis reached into his pocket to pull out another set of labeled envelopes, extending the first to Chris. "I'll let you read that part in your own writing."

I watched as he handed letters to Lilly, Jim, and Cece as well. Where Chris, Jim, and Lilly immediately tore into each of theirs, Cece stared at hers, deep in thought, before she turned suddenly to Omar. “If we know how time works... and you said you have to get to the gates in time to arrive in the year Juan will wake in... does that mean we know how to navigate it? How to get to a specific date or its echo?”

Omar bowed his head. “We do. Thanks to you.”

She turned to Juan Jr., lovingly stroking his cheek. “So he won’t have to wait fourteen years or more for me to remember? He could travel forward?”

“He has a few things to do first,” Davis said, “but he could shave quite a bit of time off his wait if he so chooses.”

Her eyes, remaining fixed with Juan Jr.’s, watered as she whispered, “Whatever it is you have to do, you make it fast. Okay? And the minute you’re done, you come find me so we can both go visit our babies.”

He nodded, tilting his head to press into her touch. “I will.”



After a more thorough explanation of time, similar to the one Jack and I had been given, Omar took the others on a tour of the ship, presenting each new member of the group with their own private cabin.

The rest of us made our way to the galley to wait for their return—a wait that was extended by the appeal a hot shower had on them all.

Our arrival had brought a lot with it, and I was excited to share a dinner where we would have the opportunity to take a breath and simply embrace one another properly before all hell broke loose the following day.

Placing Zachary and Cecelia into their highchairs, Jack and I fed them from an assortment of baby foods Omar gifted us while the others buried their noses in the covenants.

“The future holds no guarantees,” Terrence read aloud, “as it can always be altered. The same goes for the past... and so there is only the present and the waves we make around it.” He looked up from the page and shook his head. “It’s not right.”

“Not right?” Kyle asked, looking up from his own copy. “What couldn’t be right about something so incredible as time travel?”

“A lot of things,” Terrence muttered. “I happen to like the future I thought I was guaranteed to return to.”

Kyle frowned. “What do you mean?”

Smoothing a hand over his bald head, he let out a long, frustrated breath. “You heard Omar when he said Juan Jr. had a plan of his own and you saw the way he was looking at Cece when she talked about her daughter... We all saw that chart he made before she even remembered being a mother, and it doesn’t take a genius to know that man’s thinking about changing something. If she doesn’t graduate from Ohio State... if she goes off to some other life where she’s hidden away in the woods on the day she would’ve graduated, then she won’t be there to drag Jasmine into the bar I was sitting in the night I met her.”

“Oh,” Kyle uttered.

“Oh is right,” Terrence continued, closing his book. “My wife is the only thing that’s right in the whole world, and I haven’t gone through all this just to go back to a life she’s not part of.”

Kyle perked up. “But your letter said—”

“My letter means nothing when the past and future have no guarantees.” He tapped on the book’s cover to remind him of those very words inside. “If he changes her life, he ruins mine. And that’s to say nothing of the countless other lives out there that will be unknowingly altered by every traveler that follows this crap. It’s not right... it can never be right.”

“That’s why we have mediators,” Davis said, pulling out a chair across from Terrence. “If you didn’t slam your book closed every time you read something you didn’t like, you might’ve seen that part by now.”

Terrence's head was buried in his hands, his voice muffled as he ground out, "What the hell is a mediator?"

"They go in and fix things our travelers have altered. Let's say some alteration to time prevents a certain woman and a certain man from meeting in a bar and going on to marry... a mediator goes in to ensure it happens the way it should've. We've already accounted for all the dangers you are afraid of, old friend."

The screeching of a chair being pushed back suddenly put pause to whatever argument Terrence was preparing to make, and I looked over to find it had been Juan jumping up from his seat as Dario strolled into the room.

With Luna dancing happily around his ankles, he examined the tables of the galley until his gaze landed on his father.

"Are you well?" Juan asked in a voice far too timid for the man I'd come to know, his fingers tapping against each other where he held them behind his back. "You... eh... you look well."

When this question was met with silence, he cleared his throat and motioned to the dog where she sat against the side of Dario's boot. "I... eh... I made sure to take good care of her in your absence. She hasn't wanted for anything, you know."

Dario glanced down at Luna and then back at his father, his thick brows furrowing. "Why?"

"Why?" Juan echoed. "She is yours, is she not?"

"Aye," Dario said coolly, "she is *mine*, not Juan's, and so I must ask you again... why?"

Juan squared his shoulders and stood straighter, his defensive nature biting into the words. "You are just as much my son as he is. The dog means something to you. Of course, I would take care of her."

Resting his forearm on the helm of his sword, Dario sighed. "I suppose I should thank you then... though it will have all been for naught tomorrow. Won't it?" His eyes moved to me, evidently finished with the awkward father-son moment. "It was

not my intention to leave you and your children alone with him. Has he been kind to you?"

I could feel Jack tense beside me as I nodded and said, "My trip here was surprisingly without incident thanks to your father's kindness."

"Good." He glanced at Jack. "I wish I could say the same for ours. I suppose he's told you what I've done? To your sister?"

Again, I nodded.

"I am so sorry," he breathed, hugging one arm to his chest. "She was not deserving of it and I would give anything to take it back. *Anything*. She has been too kind to forgive me, and while I do not expect the same forgiveness from you, I offer you my most sincere apology nonetheless. I never meant to hurt her... or you, for that matter, when I'd only just come to know you as my own family... It matters not what I meant when the damage is done. I know that, but I want you to know I am sorry for it—as I will be sorry for all of this life and the next."

Jack was right. It was very hard to look at Dario and not see bits of us in him. I'd hated him for his role in Cece's torment, but as he stood there in front of me with his broken heart laid bare, I couldn't help but pity him, couldn't help but see myself begging Cece to forgive me for the letter I'd sent. Dario wasn't ruthless—even when he attempted to be to impress his father. I knew, deep down, he was like me, foolish and desperate for someone who would accept him despite it.

"It's alright," I said softly. "We all make mistakes and yours will be undone tomorrow. There's nothing to forgive."

The door to the bypass corridor opened and Cece, her blond hair dripping down her corset and skirts, hurried into the room on bare feet to scan it with a frantic urgency. Catching sight of me, she pushed past Dario and nearly knocked me over as she launched herself into my arms.

"My stupid, broken brain prevented me from doing this sooner," she said, squeezing tightly. "I had just gotten you back when I lost you all over again! I have wanted to do this for so

long! You're not allowed to leave me ever again. Not ever ever again! I love you, butthead... so much."

I squeezed her back just as tightly. "I love you too, jerk-face, and I'm not going anywhere."

"There's so much I need to tell you," she said, refusing to loosen her hold, "but there's not enough time."

"Don't be silly," I said, rocking her to one side, "we have all the time in the world now, remember? You and Juan will need tonight to say your goodbyes, but when all this is over, you and I will have a night just for us—up talking until morning like we used to—because I have about a million things to tell you too."

"Oh, A.J.," she whispered, "I should've listened to you when you told me how wonderful she was. God, it's been so hard to remember her without you."

"It won't be hard anymore," I promised. "You'll be the best version of you when you get to see her again, and she deserves that. She's gonna' be so proud of you... I know I am. That letter I sent to Jack... I shouldn't—"

"Hush." Her arms somehow tightened even more. "I've already been mad at you for that and I've long since forgiven you. Knowing I can have both my worlds now... I don't think I could ever be mad about anything again! How are you? Davis told us about Jack... the memories..."

I combed over her hair and smiled. "I'm glad he won't remember and so is he. Besides, it'll give me and you an excuse to see each other more regularly. We'll have secrets we'll need to talk about."

Sniffling, she released me and straightened, wiping her eyes as she smiled at Jack. "I told you you'd make it in time to save them. Didn't I?"

He laughed. "You did, and you knew all along that your sister has never needed saving."

"Neither of 'em do," Terrence said from farther down the table. "Unless they're fainting, of course."

She sprung up and spun around to grin at Terrence. “Tee! I thought you were going home?!”

He crossed his bulky arms over his chest and shook his head. “I told you before, I *can't* go home without you. Jazz would kill me.”

She strolled over to him to kiss his cheek. “Thank you... for being here and for taking care of my family... I owe you.”

He rolled his eyes. “You bet your ass you owe me. You do know my whole life has just been turned upside down?”

She chuckled. “Don't act like you don't love it when things are chaotic. That's why Jazz loves you. You both live for this kind of drama. God, she's gonna' be perfect for a life of time travel. Can you imagine the things we'll see?”

“No,” he grumbled. “Right now, I can only imagine the shit we could mess up. This isn't exactly exciting news for me. What if I go back and Jazz doesn't know me at all? What if you or me or your Don Juan messes something up?”

She cupped his cheek and grinned. “Honey, there are no mess-ups. If we change something, the original exists elsewhere... and we have access to all of it! Infinite variations of history lie at our fingertips! Infinity itself is in our grip... Can you imagine? What's there to fear?”

Terrence motioned to the opposite side of the table where Juan was still standing awkwardly near his chair staring at her. “Men like him with the same kind of power.”

Cece turned then, her hazel eyes softening as she inspected her father-in-law. “Hello again, Mr. Perez.”

“Hello,” Juan managed, a little breathless. I imagined, after having watched the video of her and Juan Jr. in the hull at least a thousand times, the sight of her might've been resemblant to meeting a celebrity just then. “I owe you an apology for our last encounter. That wasn't the first impression a father wishes to make upon his new daughter-in-law.”

That sweet Cece charm radiated from her, her smile contagious as she flashed her teeth. “You look too much like

him for any impression of mine to have been a bad one. Those eyes... you couldn't be all bad with those kinds of eyes."

He breathed out a laugh. "I'm afraid you are mistaken, my dear. My eyes say nothing of the monster beneath them."

"Nonsense," she said, still examining him in a way I could tell was making him uncomfortable. "I've seen a real monster before and I know the difference. A monster doesn't feel anything. And I happen to know that you do. You might've done some monstrous things in the past, but you're no monster. You're just a man pretending to be one."

The clearing of a throat forced all our eyes toward the doorway where Juan Jr. stood with one hand braced against the frame. "I told her once she would see the good in the devil himself if he stood before her." He shook his head, keeping his gaze focused on Cece. "Turns out I was right."

Juan glanced at the sword hanging from his son's hip. "I don't suppose you've come to kill me given the things we have to make up for?"

"My wife won't let me," he answered, leaning into the doorframe to cross his arms over his chest. "Lucky you, eh father?"

Juan smiled at Cece. "A wife who rewrote time itself to be with him and he calls me the lucky one."

"Careful, dove," Juan Jr. said, strolling toward us to take the seat farthest from his father, "he bites if you get too close."

Cece raised a daring brow. "So do I."

"Oh, I've heard you do more than bite," Juan chuckled, hurrying over to pull out the chair across from him for her. "I would be quite frightened, my dear, to ever find myself on the wrong side of your temper."

She sat down with a proud smirk. "You'll have to be extra nice to me then if you want to *remain* on my good side." She peered around the table, grinning at Kyle and Fetia, Bud, Magna, and Terrence before she frowned. "Where's Bruce?"

Kyle motioned to the back wall of the galley and the door that led to its kitchens. "He's been back there all day cooking

something that smells amazing.”

Bruce had been beyond excited to see Cece again, and after learning her favorite meal ever had been a beef Wellington she'd had at a fancy restaurant in Chicago, he'd spent the entire day making the dish—at a size that could cater to all of us.

Juan flung his briefcase onto the table with a clunk, his eyes darting to his eldest son as he worked the combination. “Need you to write a name down now...”

Cece sat taller to peek over the edge of the case. “Simón Bacallar...”

Juan nodded and pulled the master's log from inside along with a fountain pen, passing both down to the far end of the table. “That name in your writing served us well in getting here, acted as a sort of,” he glanced at me, “breadcrumb.”

As Juan Jr. silently leaned in to scribble down the entry, Jim and Lilly swept into the galley, Chris and Izzy directly behind them.

“Best shower of my life,” Lilly swooned, twirling so her skirts swelled out around her before she skipped toward the open seat beside me. “It feels like ages since I've smelled this good!”

“Speakin' of smellin' good,” Jim tittered, turning to shout in the direction of the kitchen door, “Tiny! Is that you cookin' somethin' back there? You couldn't come say hi to us when we come in?”

Bruce poked his head out the swinging door and grinned. “I wouldn't have gotten a word in with you here, would I? I heard that mouth of yours coming long before you came in anyway!”

Jim split off and headed for the kitchen in a hurry. “You know you missed me, ye' handsome summbitch. Come on, I'll taste whatever ye' got goin' and make sure ye' ain't back here cookin' up somethin' awful.”

I laughed at the familiar banter between them, my smile widening as Cece slid out of her seat and scurried through the door behind them.

“So... Omar said we can't talk about any of this with the ones that don't remember,” Lilly said, pulling my attention back to the table. “That's gonna' be so hard. I mean... to wake up and see Anna and Maria alive again? You know the first thing I'll do is wrap my arms around them and sob like a baby... we all will... there's no stopping it... and we'll have no explanation for our bizarre behavior.”

Jack, with a spoonful of bananas held out for Zachary, smirked. “What, you won't want to wrap your arms around *me* and sob like a baby too?”

She laughed. “I'm planning to do that very thing as soon as I'm done with your wife.” Before I could blink, she pulled me against her in a very uncomfortable hug. “Ugh. I missed you. I'd have been lost without Maria there with me. These men were just awful. Awful, Lainey! You know what their idea of fun is? Sparring... day, night, didn't matter. It's *all* these guys did whenever there was downtime. Sparring and pissing outside and grunting in the morning... that's been the past two months of my life. And after all that, I'm gonna' have to look at the only other person who'll complain about it with me and not say a word? You know I'm terrible at secrets, and you know I'm gonna' screw it up.” She released me enough to rest her head on my shoulder and sigh. “This is gonna' be impossible.”

“You'll be fine,” I said, smiling at Jack. “The new memories are supposed to be pretty amazing... I'm sure the ones here won't be all that difficult to let go of—given all the sparring and pissing and grunting...”

“Can you believe it'll all be over after tomorrow?” she asked dazedly. “All of it... My letter said we'll wake up on our way home and everything's going to work out just fine... You'd think I'd be excited, but... I'm kind of terrified to get there.”

“*You're* terrified?” Dario teased, unraveling his hair from my daughter's grip. “I've spent my whole life here and I'm going to wake up in the 90's.”

“1999 is *not* the 90's,” Chris playfully informed him. “You're gonna' miss all the good 90's stuff and go straight to the weird early-internet-MTV-reality-show era.”

I scrunched my nose. “Ooh, that’s right... with low-rise jeans and Smash Mouth and boy bands... Oh! And Y2K! I don’t think I’d ever willingly travel back to that particular moment in time.”

“These are words you’re saying?” Dario asked, looking somewhat mortified as he glanced at Lilly. “What in the world is a Smash Mouth?”

Lilly shrugged, pinching Zachary’s pudgy cheek. “Don’t look at me. I was in kindergarten back then.” Some thought made her jump and she leaned in to address Omar at the far end of the table. “What year were you born in, and what’s it like in the future? How far forward have you traveled?”

Omar chuckled. “I was born in 2130. My time is... well, it’s not one we advise travelers to visit since it was a bit of a turning point for humanity. We almost went extinct for a minute there. I was lucky to find myself a part of TAO so I could leave it. The centuries that follow, however, are far more extraordinary than anything you could imagine. It’s funny what a near-apocalypse can change about people as a whole... the things they come to appreciate when they know they might’ve lost it. It’s peaceful there... and beyond beautiful in the way we’ve realigned with nature.”

She swooned. “Oh, I can’t wait to see that.”

“Planning to travel right away then?” Davis asked, surprised.

Resting her cheek in her palm, she grinned at Jim, Bruce, and Cece where they came through the kitchen door with trays full of food. “If Jimmy and Iz are up for it.”

“Up for what?” Jim asked, awkwardly setting plates from his tray on the table and nearly dropping every one.

“Traveling to the future.”

“Lordt help me,” he groaned, glaring at Omar. “Ye’ don’t think you could make her forget too, could ye’? It was enough when she thought she had the whole world to get a look at. She was makin’ plans to go see some place I never heard of in Italy before we was even off the dang island. This? Hell, I ain’t never gonna’ have me a minute of peace now.”

“Where would you go first if it was up to you?” Kyle asked, his eyes widening as Jim placed a plate of masterfully prepared Beef Wellington in front of him. The pastry was golden and flaky, enveloping a perfectly cooked fillet of beef, surrounded by a heap of creamy mashed potatoes and a bundle of bright steamy green beans. It was a dish that promised a culinary journey as exciting as any destination we could imagine.

“Me?” Jim scoffed. “I’d park my happy ass in the time I know and be perfectly content to do nothin’ for the rest of my life. Princess over there ain’t gonna’ have none of that though. She might let me sit for a day or two ‘for she gets all fidgety.”

“Oh, come on, Jim,” Bud huffed, plucking up a buttery bread roll, “use your imagination. There’s got to be some place you’d wanna’ see if you could go anywhere in time.”

Jim dragged a chair to the side of Lilly’s, forcing Dario and Jack to scoot theirs over as he sat down. “I done seen it already.” He combed a hand affectionately over Lilly’s damp hair. “Ain’t no place better than the one she’s in.”

“I’d go to the 1920’s,” Lilly announced, too excited for her chance to answer the same question than acknowledge the sweet statement. “I could be a flapper and dance all night long to jazz music while sipping champagne.”

“You see what ye’ done?” Jim shouted through a mouthful of food. “Not even a second of peace for ‘ole Jimbo.”

Izzy sat forward and excitedly signed something to Omar. We all were surprised when he answered, “Of course I have!” He spoke this aloud while also using his hands in the very sign language we’d invented. “I saw a t-rex up close too. They look a lot different than we thought they did!”

“You understand her...” Lilly said, her fork and knife frozen over her plate.

“She’s my wife’s ancestor,” he explained. “And her language is as much a part of our trials as the island is.”

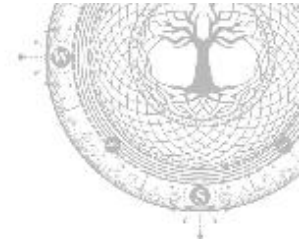
Jim took a swig of his water to wash down his food before he spoke again, his tone much less playful as his gaze landed on Izzy. “Didn’t seem like we wrote them letters all that far in the

future... There wasn't nothin' in mine about Izzy bein' ours after this. What happens to her if we go back? She cain't speak to nobody but us and she ain't got nothin' but that old woman she don't remember as far as family goes."

Omar signed something back to Izzy before he acknowledged Jim. "We've accounted for that. There will be a legal process to it, and her grandmother will be a large part of Izzy's life, but ultimately, the judge will rule in favor of granting custody to the two of you." He tapped his wrist. "There are more advantages to being a member of TAO than just time travel. Now, I hate to cut short the pleasantries, but there's one last thing I need to tell you before I leave tomorrow."

His gray eyes darted around the table. "I've already told you memory retention is not common practice for travelers, and those of us that are permitted only retain a handful of dual memories. You, however, as founders—those of you who will remember, that is," he offered Jack and apologetic glance, "will wake with an anchor that tethers you to every version of this time span that has ever existed. You'll remember being visited by more than just myself... You'll remember versions of this time period where you failed over and over... where others died... where different mistakes were made or where you wrote certain words or made changes to your own lives... all the echoes that brought us to this moment—all the lessons learned that had you send us to get it right—will slowly trickle in. You'll have an understanding of time more so than any other traveler who has ever or will ever exist. I do not know what that will be like... to hold onto so many memories at once... but the things you will create as a result..." He smiled and lifted his hands as if to illustrate the futuristic space that surrounded us. "It will be extraordinary."

Jim, hardly taking a breath between bites, grunted. "So long as I don't start talkin' in riddles when my brain fills up, that's fine. If I come out the other side talkin' like Sam I Am, over there, one of yuns just go ahead and put me out of my misery."



Chapter Forty-Five

Cecelia

Lying on my stomach across the most comfortable bed I'd ever been in, I was completely immersed in the covenants. Page after page compelled me to keep reading, even though I'd promised myself on every page prior it would be my *'last one'*.

Time was ticking away, and Juan only had so much of it left before he'd be launched into a world separate from mine. I knew I could read the covenants later—I desperately wanted to create lasting memories of our final night together—but after I'd seen the Perez symbol of a dove, after I'd read the Theory of a Magnetic Infinity and learned about the trials on ManawaTū, I couldn't seem to stop.

Neither could Juan.

He sat cross-legged beside me in the bed, bent over his copy where it was open on his lap. Every time he would turn a page, he'd idly run his palm over my hip as if he too was promising, *'last one'*. For as little time as we had left, he couldn't help but be just as transfixed as I was. The world we were about to become a part of—the world we'd managed to help create through our experiences in this time—was fascinating.

As I moved the letter that would serve as a bookmark if ever I closed the book, I laughed at the words *'you big idiot'* that jumped off the paper at me.

I'd never been one to sugarcoat things written to myself. Journals of my past were often littered with angry-faced drawings and name-calling to better portray my own ridiculousness.

This letter had been both wonderful and slightly mortifying at the same time. In it, I'd assured myself I'd wake with Juan on

Bud's yacht, surrounded still by all these people I'd come to love. Maria and Anna would live, and Anna's son, Liam, would be among us, much to Bruce and Izzy's delight.

I'd gone on to paint a pretty picture of a time where we arrived in Tahiti instead of on Juan's ship, living peacefully in two large homes near the beach. Details about the native people I'd come to know there were meticulously documented—things I'd loved about each person and their culture along with all the amazing experiences I'd shared: feasts and dances, hikes through the wilderness and weaving cloth from bark, nights spent talking under the stars...

I spoke fondly of the female bonds that were made stronger in a time where none of us had ever been separated, my love jumping off the page with every mention of A.J., Lilly, Anna, Magna, Maria, or... Gloria...

My words described her as a woman who was fascinating in the way she could exude a sort of wild spirit—a need to explore and dance and stack up every experience she could—while still maintaining a motherly sort of calm at the same time. I depicted her as someone who loved her family with a passion that radiated from her at all times, every interaction she had with her husband and sons carrying some bit of meaning.

And that's where my letter became a bit mortifying. I was equally spellbound by her oldest son—drawn to him the same way I'd been drawn to him on this timeline. Only I wasn't the stranger to him he was to me, and he wouldn't take advantage of his more intimate knowledge until I'd remembered him.

Oh, but I'd been relentless in my pursuit of him—embarrassingly so. That's where my angry-face drawings and name-calling reared their heads. Without apology, I'd listed out every single attempt I'd made to flirt with him—chasing him around Tahiti like some lost puppy—and every single dismissal he'd graciously served me.

I had to laugh at it though, knowing he'd repeatedly turned me away while waiting for the moment he wouldn't have to... Knowing I'd likely tested every bit of willpower he had in him as I became increasingly determined to win his affections... I'd

never been the type of woman to actively pursue a man, but I'd never met a man who'd been worth the pursuit until him...

And when I remembered, I promised myself, it was a moment worth the wait. Reunited at last, he and I had made plans to return home long enough to be married and spend time with my family before we would hitch a ride to the storm once more to visit Maddy's timeline.

Life looked so very promising the way I'd written it... or rather, the way we *all* had written it...

With the covenants still beckoning me, I read on, marveling at the various roles and rules and precautions we'd created. Collectively, across timelines and echoes, TAO was a masterpiece. As we learned, we rewrote. As we rewrote, we relearned... and ultimately, there was no room for error... no place beyond our reach.

We had members in prominent positions of power that spanned infinity... a responsibility to watch over it all—to act as time's guardians in a way—ensuring its preservation and the preservation of life in general.

There was history on, not just the coming events with George Bennet, but other times—moral dilemmas—moments where we'd broken our rules just to save humanity. I couldn't wait to find my place in such a society, and as I perused each chapter, I randomly found myself lost in daydreams of the things I might do.

"Enough now," Juan said to himself, closing his book and squeezing his eyes closed. "I'll not spend this whole night with my nose in a book when it's to be our last one here."

Grinning, I closed mine and slid up onto my knees to remove the tome from his lap and stack the two on the bedside table. "About time you paid attention to me. I was only reading because you were..."

He chuckled, tugging on my skirts to pull me to a seat in front of him. "You are a terrible liar, *mi paloma*. If I hadn't spoken up, you would've read until morning. Let me look at you then..." He framed my face with his palms and smiled when I

crossed my eyes. “There it is, the image I shall hold in my dreams every night until I see it again.”

I laughed and adjusted my features to look somewhat normal. “Better?”

His gaze swept over my brow, nose, and lips. “There is no better when you are always stunning.” Gently, he combed my hair back from my face. “What did your letter say?”

“That I’ll wake up with you and live happily ever after.” I bounced my brows at him. “Seems unfair you get to ask me about my letter when you still haven’t said a word about yours.”

He smiled, watching his fingers move over my cheeks and down each side of my neck. “Mine speaks of the things I have to do so that you *can* wake up with me and live happily ever after.”

I traced the collar of his shirt, chewing my lower lip. “Doesn’t seem fair either that you have to do all the work. I wish I could go with you... I know it might seem a little greedy to ask since you won’t be waiting the fourteen years, but... how long do you think it’ll take?”

“A year or two,” he said, his hands working their way back to my stays to pull the laces, “maybe three if I’m to do it without aid.”

“Three years,” I echoed, shaking my head. “I hate that any amount of time will pass at all.”

“It’s nothing.” He leaned forward to press his lips against my brow, and the feel of his breath there made me want to grab hold of him and keep him right where he was forever.

“What’d your father say to you earlier?” I asked. “Just before we came in here?”

“He wanted to know what my plan was for tomorrow,” he answered. “How I intended to kill Bennet.”

“How *you* intend to kill Bennet?” I raised a brow. “I thought that was Davis’s job?”

“As did I,” he mused. “My father seems to think I have some grander scheme to do it myself... one that might serve him his own bit of justice in the process.”

Frowning at him, I slowly shook my head. “You don’t though... right?”

“He’s just being paranoid,” he assured me. “It’s his nature to want to be able to see the future, and I daresay time travel might make it worse. If I’m to spend the next several years without you, *mi alma*, I’d prefer not to waste the hours I have left speaking about him.”

I did grab hold of him then, winding my arms around his neck as I crawled into his lap. “Let’s just travel backward... as far back as it can go... where time is hardly moving at all and there are no interruptions. We could stay just like this for days—years even, if we wanted—and then come right back here where we’ve only been gone a few hours...”

He made an amused sound in his throat, stroking my shoulder as he rocked me ever so softly. “It will go by quickly, and once it has passed, there is not a force strong enough to separate us ever again. When you are mine—when I’ve wed you properly—then, I shall take you to the beginning of time itself and we will spend however long you’d like doing only this.”

I slid my fingers beneath his shirt collar, tracing the edges of each stitch in his chest. “When you’ve wed me properly... So you want a big ole’ fancy wedding then?”

“No,” he laughed. “Do you?”

“Already had one of those and I hated it.” I sighed and rested my cheek against his shoulder. “I did like wearing the dress though... I think I’d like wearing a dress for you...”

“Then we’ll have a small wedding with a *big ole’ fancy* dress. Aye?”

I snickered. “It’s so weird when you say regular things.” I sat up to meet his eyes. “Oh my God, what if you wake up and you’re all... modernized?”

“Modernized?” he tittered, taking advantage of my position to resume his work on my stays.

“Yeah... I mean, in that life, you’ll have lived all these years in the 70’s, 80’s, and 90’s... You’d be exposed to slang and different culture. Do you think you’ll talk differently?”

“Well, I don’t know... Would that bother you?”

“I’m not sure... I feel like it’d be weird...” Twisting my lips to one side, I thought back to the awful slang of the late-nineties that I’d unabashedly partaken in all through junior high. With a laugh, I urged him, “Say... *My bad.*”

“My... bad?”

“Oh, no... we can’t have that,” I laughed. “It doesn’t fit at all—not even a little. You’re not allowed to get all modern.”

“No?” That devious smile spread across his cheeks as he pulled my stays from my midsection. “I thought it sounded rather nice... *My bad.*”

“Ew, stop!” I howled with laughter as he slowly crawled over me, forcing me back and back until I was lying beneath him. “You’re not even saying it right and I still hate it!”

“Teach me another,” he breathed, taking both my hands in his to pin them over my head. “I should learn the slang, no?”

“I regret the one I taught you already. I’m not teaching you anything else!”

“Pity,” he said, biting his lip as his eyes darted down to my midsection. “After such a large dinner, I wasn’t prepared to be hungry again so soon...”

“No, no.” I squirmed in his grip. “You re-injured yourself the last time we played this little game, Joseph. I’m not hurting you on our last night here.”

“Then you had better teach me another,” he beamed, tauntingly moving toward my gut. “Because this spot, as always, is looking rather tasty, particularly after that shower...”

Unable to prevent myself from giggling, I shook my head. “You can torture me all you want, but I will never again teach you 90’s slang. I love you too much to ruin you.”

That playful look melted into something far more sultry, and he released one hand to let his glide down the center of my abdomen. “Every single time you say those words, Cecelia, my bones shake beneath me. I could spend the whole night just hearing you say those words over and over and I’d face the

years to come as if I'd defeated entire armies for the power it gives me."

I slid my fingers into his hair and smiled down at him. "That, Joseph, is why I will not teach you 90's slang. No one has ever spoken to me as beautifully as you do. You make *my* bones shake when you say just about anything, and I wouldn't change a thing about you."

His brows lifted sweetly and he pressed into my touch. "You wouldn't?"

I shook my head. "Not a single thing." I ran my thumb over his lips and grinned. "You were made for me, and I think maybe something inside me—something that hadn't remembered yet—knew, the moment I laid eyes on you, that I'd once figured out time just to stand there on that deck in front of the person I was made for too. No, I wouldn't change anything. Not about you or the life that led me to you. You're mine and you're perfect... and there is not a doubt in my mind that the life I will wake in will be perfect too because you'll be in it."

"It is you that is the perfect one," he whispered, returning to hover over my face with that familiar dimple in his left cheek. "The way you are with everyone you encounter... the way you speak to people—the way you can simply look at a person and make them soften... You've the perfect heart, and when I watch the world around you notice it, I am overwhelmed with pride... pride that this woman that could melt the world with a smile would look at me and find me perfect."

He lowered down just enough to brush his lips over mine, gentle and cautious, as if one of us might shatter from a less deliberate kiss. Fragile as I was made by him, I wasn't sure I hadn't already begun to crack... wasn't sure I wasn't a mess of tiny pieces lying beneath him, dancing in the warm breeze that was his breath against my cheek.

A hundred times he'd kissed me, and somehow my craving for the next felt as long-awaited as the first. We were strangers the first time his lips met mine and yet I'd longed for that kiss like it had been air and I'd been trapped underwater. Now, we knew every intimate detail about each other—he was my

husband and I was his wife—and I longed for the familiar taste of him with a desperation transcendent.

This wasn't goodbye for me—my letter confirmed he would be right there beside me when I woke—but it somehow felt like goodbye... and not a temporary one... like the moment might never come again once it was over. Like after tomorrow, I might never know it had been there at all...

His fingers traced a featherlight line along the edge of my jaw, then up over the dip beneath my lower lip, winding around to each line carved out by my smile, his eyes following his touch as if memorizing every contour.

I'd always been able to feel his love—every touch and every look blanketed me in it—and I wondered if I'd done enough to make him feel it—*know it*—the way I did.

“You know I love you, right?” I whispered, watching his eyes as he continued to trace lines over the bridge of my nose and the bones in my cheeks. “I mean... Have I done enough to show you that? Do you feel my love the way I feel yours? Do you know it well enough that you could never forget it?”

“Aye, Cecelia,” he said, a smile tugging at his mouth as he outlined the curve of my ear. “I know your love as if it were the sky... I do not need to see the sky to prevent from forgetting it is there. For as long as I live, I will know it. Even if I am undeserving of it, it will always be there...”

My eyes burned and my throat swelled so suddenly it hurt to inhale as that same sense of dread washed over me. Perhaps I was being paranoid—my letter should've erased any doubt—but I couldn't help but think of Samuel Van Thorpe standing in our room as Juan said, *‘The others can't know you were here.’*

Others...

Neither Davis nor Omar had mentioned anything about Samuel being among them... and if Juan's father thought he had some other plan...

I watched him watching his hands on me, saw a heaviness in his stare, a sort of sorrow that only heightened the sense that this was a far more permanent goodbye, and my whole being trembled as if it'd been branded by the covenants' words:

The future holds no guarantees, as it can always be altered.

Despite all my insistence, he was going to try to change it... and I knew that as well as he knew the sky...

“Joseph,” I breathed shakily as his touch glided over my collarbone, “tell me what was in your letter.”

He pressed his lips ever so gently against mine, pulling back an inch to whisper, “Instructions,” before he swept over them again, a ghost of a kiss meant, not to tease, but to command, to solicit my lips be used solely for kissing his until he decided otherwise.

“What... kind of instructions?”

“You’ll know soon enough,” he said, sliding his palm along my cheek to graze my lower lip with his thumb, his eyes darkening as my lips parted on my exhale.

I thought of Samuel’s familiar face and Juan’s shock when he figured out his identity...

Had I imagined those features that made him recognizable? Had I recreated him in my mind to resemble someone I knew? Or was Juan about to rewrite everything I’d sent in my letter?

The burn in my eyes spread to my nose as I fought back tears. “Who is Samuel?”

He swept his lips over mine once more. “No one, dove.”

“Please don’t,” I insisted, my words cracking. “I want this life... with you. You hear me? You’re mine and I’m yours and I don’t want to live in a world where I don’t know that. I can get to her. I can have you both. Don’t change it. Promise me you’ll be there when I wake?”

“I promise,” he whispered, lowering his weight upon me as he lovingly stroked the hair at my temples, “you will never wake in a world where you do not know who you belong to—or who belongs to you.”

“Make me believe it,” I breathed, unconvinced by his cryptic choice of wording that he wouldn’t make some valiant attempt to give me Maddy in a life where I’d be more than a visitor—that he wouldn’t undo everything that’d been done, sacrifice himself and all of TAO just because he thought I could

be happier in another time. “Show me every part of the man I belong to. Show me all the things I haven’t had the time to learn—all the parts of you that make you think you’re undeserving—so I can tell you again which life I choose and know you’ve heard me... make me believe you’ll be there when I wake.”

“I’ve already told you—”

“And I don’t believe you. I need you to prove it.” I pulled his mouth to mine, commanding his lips apart as I wrapped both arms tightly around him and urged him to let go of his guard—to be as lost as I was.

And he did.

Like the panic that so often took over to steal my breath, we spun uncontrollably into that chaotic void, violent, disorderly, and demanding—each of us clawing for our next inhale, even as we stole the other’s. We were a mess of heated kisses and torn clothing, pulling and grabbing and tasting in a frenzied struggle to be both held in that strangling grip and released from it.

Like too many thoughts at once, we were consumed by that same static fizzling across our bodies, painful, euphoric, and numbing as we were everywhere at once—no touch discernible from the next for the overwhelm of their feel. We were gentle and brutal, devastated and elated... all the versions of all our identities that’d been lost in the dark now tangled in a knot we each were trying to unravel.

For a moment, there was clarity—a single sensation to cut through the rest—both of us made quiet and stiff by the shock and relief of his length charging into me.

And then we were lost once more...

His forehead against mine and a firm grip on my shoulder, he drove himself in again with a commanding thrust that evoked a sound from somewhere I wasn’t sure I knew existed in my body. It was a single note that carried all that chaotic pain and pleasure, euphoric and devastated and eager for another to follow...

I wound my arms around him, digging my fingers into his hair to keep him right there against me—to beg him to do it

again... to show me this side of him and never take it away.

And he did... with every bit of power he could muster, he pushed that same sound from my lips, releasing one of his own with it that nearly undid me.

“This life,” I pleaded breathlessly when he began to retract, holding his forehead against mine. “I want this life with you. I want to hear you make that noise over and over for as long as I live. Say I’ll have that.”

“Aye Cecelia,” he breathed, driving himself in even deeper and groaning with the pleasure it brought him. “You’ll have it.”

My head fell backward when he thrust again—a guttural moan seeming to seep out of every part of my body. I needed more of him, craved more even as he was giving...

With a soft grip on my hair, he pulled me back to meet his eyes, watching me as he pushed deeper than he’d ever been. I saw that undying love that made him want to soften, but I also saw the madness the sound of my tormented pleasure had created, and I watched him tremble to keep himself restrained.

I’d seen that restraint far too many times, and in that moment, I wanted to know what was on the other side.

“No,” I panted, making sure to hold his gaze so he could see my own love and my own maddening—the untamable need to never ever lose him—to feel this, and only this, for the rest of my life. “No restraint—not tonight. Show me the parts you hold back.”

He stared for a moment before that restraint snapped in half, that same unhinged desire welling in me erupting from him. He covered my mouth with his, his kiss heated and unforgiving as he tasted just as deeply as he thrust, with no pause or restraint... his hands everywhere as he became voracious in his own indulgence... breathless and selfish, wild in the ways I’d craved him to be.

Winding an arm beneath me, he lifted my hips to meet his, burying himself inside me at a pace that had me instantly coming apart, those mangled cries in my throat morphing into his name... over and over...

The bed threatened to collapse beneath us... the whole world threatened to shatter and bury us beneath it, but I grabbed on tighter, digging my nails into his shoulder as he kept going—harder and faster and painfully beautiful in the way he lavished in it. Every movement was more euphoric than the last, his mouth and hips and sounds dragging me up and up and up to some spiritual new height before I was again calling out his name without any regard for who might hear it.

And still, he had more...

Roaring in his throat like a beast that'd been caged too long, he released my mouth to latch onto my neck, a heated mass of tongue and teeth and panting hot breath that only served to stoke the fiery inferno I was burning in.

I'd asked for all of him and this was it... raw and exposed before me...the gentle and romantic lover who would serve me his heart if I asked for it, the violent hunter who could rip a man apart with only his hands if he stood in his way, the broken boy who'd held his mother in his arms and promised vengeance, and the man who would stand up for the things that mattered to him, who would rewrite history over and over to see that the people he loved were cared for.

And I held on to each of them, unsure whether I was sobbing or calling out his name or gasping for air as I kissed and bit and pulled at every part of him I could reach for.

His breathing became more erratic against the dampened skin of my collar, and I moved my hips with his, joining him, encouraging him, showing him all the same hidden parts of myself as we both climbed up and up and up together... I showed him the woman that broke apart marriages... the murderous creature that took pleasure in the image of her thumbs pressed into another man's eyes... the mother without a child... the old spirit that had found her curiosity again, and the lover beneath him who wanted to beg him to do ungodly things—to ride harder, to go deeper, to take and take until there was nothing left of me at all.

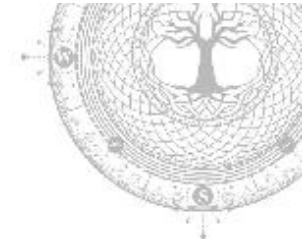
I might've begged... I might've screamed out all those ungodly desires... and I might've heard him do the same as we

reached the top of that euphoric ledge and plummeted, at last, head first into a boneless heap on the bed.

I wasn't sure if we'd fallen asleep or died in the moments after, but eventually, he rolled onto his back, tugging me into consciousness with him as he pulled me into his chest.

My pulse raced as rapidly as my mind as I tried to figure out what either of us had just done to the other, but somehow I managed, "I want this life," though my voice was raw and hoarse and very nearly painful. "Promise me I'll have it."

He idly rubbed his chest where the bullet was lodged. "You'll have it, *mi alma*. If you give me a minute or two, I intend to prove it to you again... and again..."



Chapter Forty-Six

Alaina

It was late when we got the babies to finally fall asleep in their cribs, and Jack and I were heavy-limbed as we turned toward the bed.

“You want me to give you a few extra memories to take with you?” he asked, attempting to hide his yawn with a scandalous bounce of his eyebrows.

Yawning for him, I shook my head. “No. I want to sleep and wake up in a place where you’ll share whatever new memories I make. Besides, from the sounds of things, I might not have room for another memory... Is it weird that I’m gonna’ have all these lives stacked up inside me and you won’t?”

Moving behind me, he dug his thumbs into my shoulders, encouraging an array of groans to escape my lips. “No. I’ll remember the good stuff... the island and our time with Captain Cook... this new, peaceful version where we’ve spent the past six months vacationing with the babies in Tahiti. It’ll be nice to not feel so murderous all the time... to not throw punches at the breakfast table in front of our children...”

I reached back and caressed his knuckles where I could feel the scabbing from his earlier moment of weakness. “He wanted you to punch him. Hell, *I* wanted you to punch him for provoking you like that. And I don’t think I’ve ever been more proud than I was when he realized you’d actually done it.”

“You know,” he whispered, “with the anchor, you’ll remember a version of this time where he killed me.” He kneaded the knots just beneath the nape of my neck to offset that fact. “Did he ever tell you how he planned to do it?”

“No.” I closed my eyes and let my head fall forward. “I didn’t want to think about that so I never asked him. Don’t

really want to think about it now either...”

“You want to know how I think it’ll go?” he asked, moving his massage up to the base of my skull.

I shook my head. “By the excitement in your voice, I suppose you’re going to tell me whether I want to hear it or not.”

“It’ll be a showdown,” he assured me, “an epic death that any man could take pride in. I’ll show up on that ship with my sword drawn, demanding he releases you.”

I took a deep breath and surrendered to let him tell his tale, his fingers working me into a half-trance so I couldn’t fight it even if I wanted to.

“All his men will be there with guns pointed at me,” he continued, keeping his voice low to prevent from waking the babies, “but Juan... oh he’ll have been waiting for this fight for a long time. His pride will demand that no one but him can end me, so he’ll order the men to stand down... come strolling up with his own sword drawn.”

I snorted. “Is this your death you’re describing or are you writing a movie, Volmer?”

“Shhh.” He pressed his thumbs in deeper, melting the stiff muscles around my collar. “Juan’s good with a sword, *real* good. It’s all I can do to defend his attacks... They come on so fast and so hard, it’s almost a certainty he’ll best me, but every swing is met with the crash of my blade... I’m not the swordsman he is, but I manage... and we go round and round, from one side of the deck to the other and back, our arms on fire, both of us panting... After a brutal eternity, we’ve each drawn blood... I’ve caught his shoulder and he’s caught my ankle, and we’re both bleeding, limping and bent over in our stances...”

I grinned. “You really have given this some thought, huh?”

Again, he pressed into the knots in my shoulder blades, demanding my silence so he could continue describing the scene that was undoubtedly playing out behind his eyes.

“He’s a better fighter after so many years here but he’s forgotten one crucial thing... He’s old, fat, and he’s tired out far more quickly than I have. The next time I raise my sword, his defense comes too slowly, and I’m surprised to find my blade embedded in his chest, just beneath his heart.”

“I thought this was the story of how *you* die?” I chuckled.

“It is,” he assured me. “Be patient. I’m getting there.”

He cleared his throat and wound both arms around me, telling the rest of his tale with his cheek against my temple. “With my sword deep in his chest, he’s defeated and he knows it... He can feel his body going limp as he stares into my eyes... his life fading with his muscles... so, with the last bit of strength he’s got in him, he cries out... and it’s an order to his men to take me out.”

I gasped. “That coward!”

“Indeed,” he breathed. “I’m surrounded and I know I’m done for, but just as they raise their weapons and I prepare to meet my end, I see you in the stairwell, and I run for you... dodging one bullet after another, leaping over men as I take a few shots in my arms and legs... too determined to get to you to stop.”

I held in my laughter, imagining the shower of bullets, explosions, and smoke that were likely a part of his action-packed image.

“And just as I reach you, Red, they hit me right through the heart... Blood pours from my chest and mouth, and I choke out, *I love you* while I collapse at your feet.”

Leaning back against him, I hummed with my smile. “That’s the way I’ll remember it, darling, regardless of how it happens.”

“Oh, that’s how it’ll happen,” he tittered, pressing a kiss against my cheek. “I just know it.”

“Mmm, I’m sure. Come on, Rambo. Let’s get some sleep. Tomorrow’s gonna be... a very long and weird day.”

Just as we began to step forward, a light rap on the bypass door near our bathroom stopped us in our tracks.

“Or not,” I said, running a hand hard over my face. “Shall we take bets on who that is?”

He chuckled, unwinding his arms to lazily move toward the door. “The way the past few days have been going? Might just be George Bennet himself come to offer himself up as sacrifice.” He paused before the panel and raised a brow in my direction. “You know, I kinda’ liked it when you called me Rambo. Do that again on the other side, eh?”

Tying my robe around me, I snickered and waved him on, watching as the door slid open to reveal Chris on the other side.

His eyes were bloodshot and his hair stood on end, like he’d been tossing and turning for the past several hours. His voice was hoarse when he spoke, nearly unrecognizable as his own. “If I’m interrupting, I can come back...”

“Not at all,” I insisted, motioning him inside. “Come in.”

“You alright?” Jack asked, waving his hand over the panel to close the door as Chris stepped in. “Something happen?”

Shaking his head, he took a deep breath. “I just...” His eyes moved to me. “I eh... I couldn’t sleep... and... well... I didn’t mean to barge in so late...”

“It’s nothing,” I said, motioning to the sofa. “Come and sit down. We couldn’t sleep either.”

He didn’t move from where he was, but straightened his spine as he focused on Jack. “They shot her, you know... Gordon’s men... a few days after you left.” He laid his hand over his abdomen. “Shot her right where the child would’ve been.”

“Jesus,” I breathed. “Chris, I’m so sorry.”

His eyes remained on Jack. “It put a lot into perspective... having to watch her go. And... I should apologize to you.”

“To me?” Jack scoffed. “No, it’s me that—”

“What I did when those new memories hit me was stupid,” Chris persisted. “You were kind not to bring it up on Navarro’s ship, but I can’t leave here—can’t let you forget all this—without saying some things.”

Finally, he looked at me. “I loved being married to you once, when we were young and crazy about each other... And when we lost Evelyn, all I wanted was for us to be that crazy about each other again... I used to think back almost daily to those first couple years, imagining how perfect life would be if we could just look at each other the way we did before it happened... I spent years waiting for the day we could laugh and touch like we used to. When I got those new memories, all I could see in them was this relationship that had never lost any of those things... saw that same perfect marriage I’d clung to for so long in my dreams become a reality and thought I was giving up everything I’d ever wanted by letting you go. I realized, though, while I was in Panama, you and I had never been able to get *past* the laughing and touching—we couldn’t give each other more than affection—which is why we fell apart when the affection was gone... and why we would’ve fallen apart even had that plane not crashed.”

With a deep breath, he addressed Jack once more. “I should’ve seen that sooner, but I know it now, and I want you to know that no matter what new memories might come, I will never again beg your wife to be mine. If tomorrow works and those letters are real, I will hold Maria in my arms once more, we will go on to raise a son, and my life will be that perfect picture I’d dreamt of because she not only gives me more, she *makes* me more by doing so. Maria will forget that I overlooked her, but I won’t. You’ll forget I fell down on my knees to beg your wife to have me, but she won’t.”

His eyes reddened then and I watched him flex his fingers anxiously. “Tell me what to do when I stand in a room with the three of you, knowing only Alaina and I remember what an asshole I’ve been... Tell me how I can look you or Maria in the eyes, knowing how much of a mess I made here, and not feel like I’m betraying you—lying to you both—for having that secret with her and pretending it never happened.”

“Oh, sweetie,” I said, hurrying over to them as if I might touch him. Given the way he stiffened as I began to reach out, I decided against it. “There is no mess and you are not an asshole. You and I were married for ten years. Just because we couldn’t give each other more doesn’t mean we didn’t still become family to each other, and no one could just let go of their family

that easily. Jack knows that and so does Maria. You didn't stop loving her when you got those memories and she knew that too. If she was here with us, she'd tell you the same thing... So what if you and I have a few extra shared memories? We have ten whole years worth of them. And not a single one has any affect on the way either of us feels about the ones we chose to be with. Maybe you stumbled a little, but you've got a clean slate—one where you know what you want and you won't stumble again."

I smiled as I pulled from the arsenal of surprisingly convenient Juan Josef advice that lived permanently in my head. "Life's not nearly as complicated as we make it out to be. You live while you've got life in you. You wake up and you move forward as best you're able until you fall asleep, knowing, one day, you won't wake up again. There's no sense in looking backward... at least, not at the things you can't change. You're making more of it than it needs to be. I know who you love and so do you. We won't need to pretend because we won't need to give it any thought—it doesn't mean anything. It never did."

Crossing his arm over his chest, he looked at Jack. "If it were the other way around... if it were her that'd come to me and you had no memory of it... would you expect her to put distance between us? To never speak to me again?"

Jack raised a brow as he inspected me. "If she felt about me the way you feel about Maria... no, I wouldn't." He brushed a hand over my hair and smiled. "Ten years is a very long time to know a person to suddenly cut off all contact. I've seen you two attempt it and it's painful to watch. You don't just stop caring about a person after that long, even if things didn't work out. No matter what, I wouldn't expect that of her. And I know Maria wouldn't either."

I leaned into Jack's side. "Is that why you came? To tell me you can't see or speak to me anymore?"

"Honestly, I don't know what I came here to do." His shoulders sank as he looked down at his hands. "When I sleep, I see her death, over and over... and when I wake, I think of all the ways I hurt her by doing stupid things... All the ways I hurt most of the people in my life by always thinking perfection was some milestone I needed to get to... *If I could just finish school... If I could just make this much money... If I could buy*

this house... If I could save this child...’ things would be perfect.”

He glanced at the cribs and rubbed his eyes. “I’m sorry... I’m rambling. I don’t know where I was going with this... I’m not even sure how I got here... One minute I was tossing and turning in bed, worrying about what the hell we’re gonna’ do tomorrow, and the next thing I knew I was knocking on your door. I shouldn’t have come here so late...”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” Jack said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “We were awake anyway. I’ve been worried about what we’re gonna’ do tomorrow too, and since you’re here, we might as well worry together. You want a drink? Like old times?”

Chris offered me an apologetic look. “I don’t want to intrude any more than I have already.”

“Bah,” Jack scoffed, “you weren’t interrupting anything but me making up elaborate stories of how Juan Josef will get the best of me in another version of this life.”

Chris’s eyes widened and he gaped at me. “Oh God, you’re going to remember his death... aren’t you? I hadn’t even realized...”

I smiled. “It’s alright. I’ll remember it like a bad dream.”

He shook his head. “That’s not a memory that can be so easily forgotten... Seeing someone you love stop breathing...”

Jack clicked his tongue. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We don’t even know if she’ll see my final battle.”

I rolled my eyes. “This one thinks his death is gonna’ play out like a scene from Die Hard.”

“Die Hard didn’t have a *sword fight* in it,” he informed me, turning Chris toward the sofa. “Come on. They put a bottle of scotch by the bed that I couldn’t bring myself to drink alone.”

I turned to retrieve the bottle and glasses before Chris could change his mind. I was slightly terrified for him to walk out of our room... worried he might actually decide to never speak to me again.

“Have they said anything more to you about how this is supposed to go tomorrow?” Chris asked, sitting with a grunt. “I mean... it doesn’t seem like there’s much of a plan beyond boarding the ship and then relying on the fact that history wrote Davis killing him to do the rest. I can’t imagine it’s going to be as easy as strolling up to the first man we see and striking him down... We don’t even know what George Bennet looks like.”

“I was thinking the same,” Jack admitted. “It’s a naval patrol ship and there’d have to be... what? Fifty to a hundred men on board?”

“At the very least.” Chris sat back and scratched his stubble. “If it’s a bigger one, there could be hundreds of them. And we can’t very well start taking random soldiers out... we don’t know who they might be related to...”

I poured out three glasses and hurried back over, extending one to each of them. “Davis knows what Bennet looks like. He said he came here when he was younger to see who he was and sat with him when he was dying. Remember?”

Jack held his glass just beneath his lips and frowned. “That still doesn’t account for *how* we’ll get to the man when he’s likely surrounded by soldiers.”

Sipping his drink, he twisted his lips to the side in thought before he looked back at Chris. “You remember the way Juan’s crew looked at you when you came up on the yacht? How they thought you might be angels?”

“I forgot about that,” Chris smirked, inhaling the contents of his glass.

I perched on the arm of the couch. “You think Omar and Davis are planning to use this craft to create some God-like scare-tactic?”

“Why not?” Jack asked, placing a hand on my thigh. “Jim said it scared the hell out of *him* when we started coming up out of the water with all the lights on... We could approach while it’s dark, ascend, and use Terrence’s deep baritone as the voice of God, demanding they send his chosen son, George Bennet over...”

Holding the scotch in his mouth for a moment, Chris swallowed and shook his head. “I don’t think we can rely on every single man aboard a British Navy vessel falling to his knees just because we’ve got some bright lights...”

Jack looked down into his glass as he swirled the amber liquid around and considered it. “No, but it’d be a hell of a sight to see if it worked.”

I pursed my lips. “What if there was a distressed woman in the water? Wouldn’t they take her in and help her? Maybe she could find Bennet and get him down into the hull where the rest of you might be waiting?”

Jack groaned. “We’re not sending a woman *alone* to a ship loaded with male soldiers. Even if we could somehow get into the hull undetected.”

“Oh, come on,” I scoffed. “Those soldiers wouldn’t be like the sailors we’ve encountered in the deeper water. They go home regularly instead of spending months at sea without ever seeing a woman. I wouldn’t be in any danger.”

“*You*,” Jack said, his voice hoarse as the scotch made its way down his throat, “are going to be wherever I am. We’ve got babies to figure out what to do with...”

“It seems odd that Davis and Omar are so passive about the children going aboard,” Chris noted. “You think they’ve got some TAO people on that ship?”

“Jim asked Omar the same thing a little while ago,” Jack said, propping a bare foot up on the coffee table. “They don’t have any other travelers out here to help them. That seemed strange to me... and letters or not, these children aren’t going anywhere.”

“You don’t trust that they’re telling the truth?” I asked, surprised by this. “They mentioned Juan Jr. having a plan of his own... Maybe we could go talk to him?”

Jack laughed and patted my thigh where he kept his hand rested. “As many times as I’ve had the wool pulled over my eyes? Hell no, I don’t believe them, and if Juan Jr. has a plan he’s not sharing, I don’t like that any better.”

I glanced at the cribs. “But Davis... He’s one of ours... And Juan Jr.’s got no reason to hurt us... Don’t you think we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves? They haven’t given us any reason not to trust them.”

Jack shook his head. “I don’t trust anyone who isn’t you, Red. Not on this timeline anyway.” He held his glass upward, motioning to the large dome window overhead. “You know... we’re parked... and... they have those weird fish-looking boat things down by the galley. Maybe we could go scope things out for ourselves? Create our own plan... a sort of insurance...”

“We?” Chris asked. “You know how to drive one of those weird fish-looking boat things?”

“No,” he laughed, “but I know someone who might have an idea how they work.”

I frowned down at him. “Who?”

“Phil,” Jack answered. “I know he was drunk as all get out when he rode in it, but I can’t imagine, even hammered, he wouldn’t be staring at every single thing that was happening inside there—shocked as he must’ve been when he stepped foot in it.”

“No,” I said, taking a sip of my scotch and attempting to appear like a person who drank scotch and not one who wanted to spit it right back out. “Nobody’s relying on Phil to navigate a futuristic submarine. And what’s there to scope out anyway? I’m pretty sure we’re in the middle of the bay, and Davis said that ship won’t set sail until morning.”

“Whatever harbor Bennet’s ship is docked in could be close by,” Jack said, sitting forward to place his now empty glass on the table. “Wherever there are docks and soldiers, there are taverns full of talkative drunks. It’s late, but it’s not too late for a drink or two... There’s plenty to scope out if we can find a way to get out of this thing. Hell, we might even kill the son-of-a-bitch before anyone can notice we’re gone. I didn’t come this far just to mess it all up right here at the end.”

I opened my mouth to argue when another light tapping sounded against the bypass door.

Jack raised a brow as he stood. “Perhaps that is our fish-thingy driver right now, sent from the future to knock on our door and tell us it’s time to do just that...”

Chris and I both managed a laugh as Jack animatedly strolled to the panel and opened the door as if expecting a man from the future to greet him.

“Great,” he groaned, his humor melting away as the doors parted to reveal Juan Josef behind them. “Just what I needed right now... What do you want?”

“Nice to see you too,” Juan tittered, not waiting for an invitation to stroll right past him. “This doesn’t seem strange to you?” he asked me. “Going in with the children?”

“We were just discussing that,” I said, holding up my drink. “You want one?”

“Aye.” With a tired grunt, he sat down on the sofa in the spot Jack had been, propping one booted foot up on the table.

“By all means,” Jack grumbled, plucking up his empty glass, “make yourself comfortable.”

“They’re not telling us something,” Juan speculated, draping an arm over the back of the couch. “And I cannot figure out why... If we’re these sacred founders they claim us to be... if the events that are to come tomorrow are so earth-shattering in their importance to have shaped the world as they know it, they would not go in blind. They would not leave it to some unknown scheme my son swears he has no knowledge of. There has to be some plan in place that we are not privy to and so I must assume they keep it a secret because the plan will not work out in our favor.”

“But the letters,” I said, pouring a glass for Juan and refilling Jack’s. “I know that was my writing I read earlier. I told myself there was nothing to be afraid of. You saw it yourself.”

Juan took the glass I offered, sipping it and waiting until he’d swallowed to continue. “The letters are meant to serve as proof that what we are setting out to do will work, correct? Why then, did not a single one of you write about the events that would lead you to that perfect world you spoke of? There is not one mention of George Bennet in any of them. No one thought

to tell themselves what he looked like, where we'd find him among the other men, or how, exactly, he would die so we could get on with living? We're just going to let the letters hypnotize us into taking these children aboard an unknown ship and hope we kill the right man first so the ones around him don't have time to retaliate?"

"Davis knows what he looks like," I said again.

"And Davis cannot be trusted," he spat back. "Not when he is withholding some part of this finale. The longer I sit on this vessel, the more it feels like a prison... and I do not intend to be anyone's captive."

Chris held his glass out toward the dome window, mimicking Jack as he said, "There's those fish boat things by the galley. Maybe you could try the first one out... if you don't drown, we could follow... see what's up there... see if we can find Bennet tonight."

"I don't want to sound naive," I said a little timidly, "but... somebody has to be the voice of reason. You've seen the same things I have here. They know us... they know everything about us... Omar knew Izzy's language, and I recognized Davis from that photo just as well as I recognized the woman beside him as my daughter. You can't really think these men would hurt us? Or send Izzy and Cecelia into danger?"

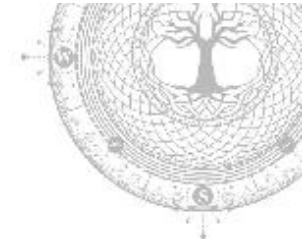
"I saw that photo too," Juan reminded me, "and there was no indication that the woman in them even knew the man beside her. Perhaps he planted that photo so you would see it and trust him... and perhaps they learned the language for the same reason."

"Or *perhaps*," I huffed, "I am entirely surrounded by paranoid men and they haven't told us the plan because we have a tendency to mess those up so often."

Juan finished off his scotch in a single gulp, placing his glass on the table as he stood. "Perhaps... but *I* am going to get some kind of answer tonight. I came to ask if you'd like to join me, Mr. Volmer. Mr. Grace, you are welcome to come too."

Chris ran a hand over his face. "I was joking about the fish boats. You could kill yourself just going through the dock area."

Juan shook his head and let out a long sigh. “I’m not going to attempt to drive some futuristic contraption when I can get my answers right here, right now. I’ve got George Davis tied up in my room as we speak.”



Chapter Forty-Seven

Chris

George Davis looked as relaxed as a man who might've been sitting down to a cup of tea, not one that was presently tied to a chair with Mr. Gil pointing an automatic rifle between his eyes.

"Mr. Grace," he said in greeting as Chris entered, "Mr. Volmer... good to see you both again so soon."

Jack inspected the ropes wound around Davis's body and shook his head. "Jesus, Juan, was all this really necessary? He's twice your age. You didn't need to tie him!"

Juan brushed past him, his hands folded behind his back as he came to a stop in front of the chair and leaned in. "I do not need to do a lot of things, Mr. Volmer, but I would much rather do them and find them unnecessary later than to look back and wish I'd done more." He glanced at Mr. Gil. "Have you been able to get any additional details from him about tomorrow?"

Mr. Gil shook his head.

Juan took a very deep breath and paced in front of Davis. "There are a few ways I could do this, old man. The first is that I could torture you..." He stopped, turned and studied him for a long moment. "I hardly think you'd live through such a thing at your advancing age."

Davis smiled at him. "I am too old to be afraid of death, Mr. Perez. That threat will not work on me."

Nodding, Juan turned and paced the other way. "Perhaps you are not afraid of your death, but what of TAO as a whole? Eh? What if I have Mr. Gil fire upon that glass overhead? Are you afraid of the death of, not only your future wife, but every one of TAO's founding members?"

Davis shook his head, his lips maintaining their upward curve. “That glass cannot be penetrated by a bullet. Even if it could, I do not have any details to give you because I do not yet know how *tomorrow* will go.”

Again, Juan turned and paced the other way, glancing at Chris as a slow smile spread over his cheeks. “Tomorrow... but tomorrow is not tonight... not yet, anyway. There is nothing stopping me from dragging you down to those bluefins to insist you take us to Bennet right now. The future is not guaranteed... nor is the past when it can be altered...”

“Bennet’s ship is docked in Annapolis until morning,” Davis countered. “As the men have been given the night off, I wouldn’t know his precise location...”

Chris and Jack exchanged glances before Jack asked, “How far are we from Annapolis?”

Davis tilted his head back to stare at the dome window overhead. “Why, we are just beneath her harbor, of course.”

“You said you don’t know how tomorrow will go,” Chris said, taking a step closer, “but you’ve only ever said we would show up in another life tomorrow... You never mentioned Bennet’s exact time of death.”

Davis raised his brows. “No, I don’t suppose I did...”

“And you said you don’t know his *precise* location,” Jack added, pursing his lips, “but you know the general vicinity?”

“Soldiers of Bennet’s age often frequented two spots in Annapolis when they were given time off.” Again, he looked up at the overhead viewport. “The Beaver and Lac’d Hat, an ordinary a few blocks from the harbor, or the Maison Duval, a rather lucrative brothel tucked away on Prince George Street. If I were to guess where we might find him, it would be in one of those two locations.”

Juan, with his hands still clasped casually behind his back, tilted his head to one side. “You will take us without a fight then?”

“I am too old to fight,” he answered, his smile still intact.

“What about the others?” Jack asked, glancing at the door. “What happens to them after we leave here?”

“I do not know how tomorrow will go,” he said for what felt like the hundredth time. “Omar only said there was a very specific location he was to take us in order to find the ship...”

Juan tilted his head upward, gazing out the dome window in thought for a moment. “*This* location... He never said we would board that ship... never said it would be at sea or that the women and children being written as present meant anything more than them being in this very location... beneath it.”

“No,” Davis said, wiggling a little against his restraints to scratch his spine with the chair, “I don’t suppose he did.”

“And my son’s separate plans,” Juan continued, a knowingness washing over his expression, “they have only to do with what comes tomorrow... when we find ourselves in another life... they’ve nothing to do with what happens tonight... You knew we would bring you here... you knew it would only be us that would pursue him... Didn’t you?”

This was met with a subtle nod. “The others *must* retain their memories in order to go on to shape the world we’ll live in. We cannot put any risk to their lives by allowing them an opportunity to follow... and so it can only be us that knows we are leaving here.”



Chris’s heart drummed a nervous beat that seemed to align with the sound of his boots echoing off the walls of the metallic bypass corridor as he followed Davis to the docking bay. In as soon as a few hours, Maria would be alive again... She’d be safe and sound in his arms, and as if awoken by that very thought, goosebumps broke out over every place the shape of her belonged.

Beside him, Jack seemed just as anxious, his face drained of its usual color as they reached the docking bay and the overhead lights shined upon him.

What a strange feeling it must've been to know he would wake without any memory of the things they were about to do... Likely, Chris thought, just as strange as the knowledge that he would wake with the memories of several different attempts...

"Is it safe?" Mr. Gil asked, his throat moving as Davis opened the main gate to reveal the bluefin secured in its chassis, its hull a seamless blend of dark materials and gleaming metal that was intimidating when witnessed so close.

"It's safe," Davis assured him, reaching up to a control panel to bring its systems to life.

The vessel's design was an homage to its namesake, the fluid lines and aerodynamic shape mimicking a bluefin tuna—one that could swallow several men, that is. He might've blanched a little when the side hatch slid open, giving him that same sensation he'd had as a boy about to step on the tallest rollercoaster in the park.

Despite the windows that had been surrounding him since he'd first come aboard the submarine, he'd hardly experienced any type of trepidation as it pertained to the deep water around them... But staring at the much smaller craft made him suddenly aware of how deep they actually were, stirring up memories of that first storm—of the water dragging him beneath it to steal the air from his lungs.

"None of you are particularly small men," Davis said with a smirk as his eyes moved between each of them. "I'm afraid it'll be a little tight in there with so many of us... It's a short trip to the surface so, if any of you get claustrophobic, please attempt to refrain from being sick until we go ashore."

Watching as Juan and Mr. Gil stepped into the craft, Chris took a deep breath, reminding himself of how close he was to Maria, and climbed in behind them.

He was immediately struck by the compact array of technology encased within. The cockpit was a nest of sophistication, with monitors and dials glowing softly beneath the single viewport at the front. The seats, one for a driver and one for a passenger, hinted at a minimalist elegance, their surfaces some futuristic blend of high-grade synthetics.

Since Juan had already helped himself to the passenger seat, Chris was obliged to slide into the small space behind the cockpit to stand beside Mr. Gil. He'd never been a claustrophobic man, but as Jack moved into the remaining space and he found his shoulders pressed against each of theirs, he couldn't help the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Short trip, boys," Davis reminded them as he sat down in the driver's seat and his fingers danced across the controls. The hatch slid closed and the bluefin's systems hummed to life around them. A symphony of beeps and pings filled the air as Chris focused on the docking area beyond the glass.

The cabin's recycled oxygen carried a sterile scent, the only warning of the changing pressure inside before he felt a slight pressure against his eardrums, a subtle pop to muffle the world around him.

Again, he was reminded of the first storm... of his ears going completely quiet in those moments they fell from the sky...

Maria... he thought solely of her image and focused on his breathing as the bay doors of the larger craft opened to reveal the yawning expanse of blackness beyond.

As they edged forward, the bluefin's lights were switched on to slice through the abyss in a comforting beam of white, casting the black into a much more soothing blue.

Before he could let out his breath, they were shooting upward... and he squeezed his eyes closed as his stomach met his throat.

Maria... He was so close to her, he could feel it—could sense her drawing nearer as they drew nearer to the surface at hyper speed.

Beside him, Jack's breathing grew rampant, and he could sense Mr. Gil stiffening at his opposite shoulder. They seemed like they were closing in, crushing him between them so he had hardly any space to breathe. That sense of being crushed was only worsened by the momentum of the craft climbing upward and the strange changes in air pressure. He was once again that

boy on the rollercoaster, second-guessing his bravado as his entire body threatened to go limp in the grips of his fear.

“There she is,” Davis said, the ship slowing to force Chris’s eyes open. “I told you it was a short trip.”

As they ascended, the black waters began to lighten, and the silhouettes of boats anchored in the harbor sketched themselves against the moonlight above. Chris watched, his fascination overcoming fear, as Davis dimmed the bluefin’s lights, guiding them to emerge in the harbor unseen, a ghost slipping silently through the night... the rollercoaster screeching to a stop so the boy could smirk and fool himself into thinking, *‘that wasn’t so bad.’*

The hatch’s hissing release was accompanied by a collective sigh of relief from them all. The rush of cool night air replaced the cabin’s sterile scent with the briny smells of the sea and wet wood from the dock they’d pulled alongside. Once Davis and Juan exited, Chris, Jack, and Mr. Gil nearly tripped over one another in their mad dash to be free of their confines, landing awkwardly on the planks, but relieved for their solidness nonetheless.

“What now?” Juan asked, his composure an anomaly as Chris remained bent over beside Jack, both men attempting to catch their breath. “Should we split up—half to the brothel and the rest to the ordinary?”

“I’m the only person who’s ever seen Bennet’s face,” Davis said, motioning them to follow as he turned toward the town. “It would be best if we remained together, otherwise you might walk right past him. We’ll start at the ordinary first since a search of Maison Duval would require us to be a bit more intrusive. The Beaver and Lac’d Hat has rooms upstairs that are often occupied by soldiers, so even if the boy’s paid Madam Duval a visit, there would be a good chance he could return... We’ll embed ourselves in the atmosphere long enough to listen in for any mention of him.”

As they stepped onto the cobblestone streets, they found the bay area mostly deserted, the clamor of daytime commerce replaced by a tranquil hush that only the deep hours could bring. They moved as shadows themselves, passing by the sturdy,

brick-faced shops and houses that lined the way, their architecture a testament to the colonial craftsmanship of the time. The wooden signs above the doorways, unlit at this hour, swayed gently in the night breeze with an eerie creak to break the silence.

As if those creaks reanimated him, Davis slowed and reached into his pockets, pulling out a few velvet bags of coins to hand one to each of them. “I will go in separately so I can scout the place without being tied to you. Purchase a drink and find yourselves a spot where you might easily overhear conversation. Any of you familiar with the card games of this century?”

At the mention of cards, Chris stood a little straighter. “Depends on the game. Anything related to poker, spades, or cribbage, and I can hold my own.”

Davis pursed his lips as they turned a corner and the muffled chatter of life in the distance drew their eyes. One building’s windows were illuminated with lantern glow, shadows dancing in and out of the light near its doorway. “In there, they’re likely playing Brag... Do you know it?”

“Brag...” Chris pondered aloud, his pulse quickening as they headed toward the lively brick structure. “Isn’t that five-card stud but with three cards?”

“Pretty much. Think you could manage?”

Chris nodded proudly. If there was was one place he could always feel confident in himself, it was seated at a card table. “Absolutely.”

As they drew nearer, the crisp night air was warmed by the scents of tobacco and ale, the silence slowly overtaken by the sounds of laughter, clanking glasses, and conversation.

“Five-card stud with three cards?” Jack echoed. “Hell, I could play that... I mean... I’m no shark or anything, but I know the rules and I could at least stay in the game long enough to listen in on conversation.”

“If there is room at more than one table, separate,” Davis advised. “And try not to speak too often. Your accents will seem odd and might spark unwanted attention. Mr. Perez, you and Mr.

Gil can find a spot at the bar, strike up conversation with the keep there to get a feel for how many soldiers are in the area. I'll come in shortly after you and signal if I've located him."

Chris wasn't a silent card player, he knew, and he wondered, as they ventured on without Davis, if he would be able to remain silent after he'd won a hand or two...

Juan and Mr. Gil did not so much as pause at the steps to the tavern. They both strode with confidence to the door, their pace dictating Chris's so he and Jack could maintain their proximity.

Once through the small entryway, they found themselves in the first barroom. Cigar and pipe smoke greeted them upon entering, along with far too many voices and the constant clanking of glass.

Soldiers in uniform mingled nearly shoulder to shoulder with the townsfolk, a vivid tapestry of life in motion.

Navigating through a sea of elbows and damp fabrics to the main bar, Chris stood peering out as Juan called out for four ales.

Candlelight flickered off brass candlesticks and gleamed on the faces of countless patrons, some deep in conversation, others deep in games of chance. Cards snapped onto tables amid shouts of triumph or groans of defeat, each game a small drama unfolding under the watchful eyes of the participants. This was his element... and the familiar excitement of a coming card game welled inside him as his eyes moved around the room.

Women were sprinkled in here and there, some seated upon the laps of men who looked important, others slinking around high-stakes games seeking out a lap for their own.

The lighting was horrid... and with so many people all crammed in so tightly, he didn't feel too confident about Davis's ability to spot Bennet among them... particularly at his advancing age. Nearly every soldier in the place adorned a powdered wig and hat, casting their faces in shadow so they all looked almost the same. No... he couldn't sit quietly and wait for Davis to do the work... He'd have to account for his strange speech some other way.

Mr. Gil handed him his tankard, and he strolled to the doorway connecting the two barrooms, studying each card table for a place he might fit into.

Several games were being played, some he recognized and some he didn't, so he focused only on the ones holding three cards...

His gaze lingered momentarily on a table near the entrance. The players were deeply engrossed in a game of Brag, their movements fluid and relaxed, a sign of experienced, casual players he might easily play alongside. However, a closer look revealed no military uniforms among them, rendering the table irrelevant for their purpose.

Next, he eyed a game by the window, where a group of older soldiers were playing. While their game looked equally intriguing, these men were unlikely to mingle with or divulge anything about the much younger Bennet, their worlds and ranks too far apart.

"That one," he said to Jack, when he spotted his targets. "You see those younger men on the far end of the room? They're not playing high-stakes and don't seem to know what they're doing. Half of them are too drunk to even know they're playing at all. You take that table. I'll take the one beside it."

In all the time he'd spent in the 18th century, he'd never felt more himself than right then. There was no awkwardness in his step as he approached, no second-guessing his posture or the way he might look... He was in his element, and he was excited to play his part.

His target was a table of mixed players, where Chris's skills would be both challenged and inconspicuous. The soldiers there were engrossed in their game, their uniforms slightly disheveled from the day's activities, a mix of ranks and ages evident from their varied attire.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked when he reached them, placing a hand on the single empty chair.

"You got money?" a young man with plenty of his own riches stacked in front of him asked.

Chris dropped his velvet bag on the table and raised a brow. "Enough to win some of yours, I imagine."

The men on each side of the young soldier cackled with laughter. "That would be a welcome sight," one of them announced, waving him to take the chair. "Tommy has had a rather unruly streak of good luck I would be delighted to see brought to an end." Balancing his cigar between his teeth, he stuck out his large palm. "Name's Arch. This is Tommy and that's Edward on the other side. Those two over there are Charles and Matthew."

Chris took his hand firmly. "Christopher."

Arch maintained his hold. "You're not a rebel, are you, Christopher?"

Chris shook his head and laughed, feeling far more confident than he probably should've. "Not at all. No sense to me in fighting over land when I spend so little time upon it. I've just come ashore after two years at sea. Spent the first year working for Captain Cook before Captain Perez offered me a better role. Now that he's settled in for a time, I'm looking for my next adventure."

"A sailor, eh?" Tommy beamed. "What the hell are you doing here? Don't you know there's a brothel two blocks over? You've got to be itching pretty badly."

Chris grinned and motioned to the stack of money in front of the boy. "Two years I spent at sea, kid. Itching isn't even the start of what I am. For the amount of time I plan to spend at Duval's, I thought I should come here first and win enough money to pay for it."

Again, the men around Tommy howled with laughter as Arch smacked his back and shouted, "Now there's a man who's got something to play for! Deal them out, Edward. Let's see how lucky this sailor can get!"

Settling in, Chris stole a glance at Jack's table where his own game of cards had already gotten underway. Drunk as the men around him were, he wasn't entirely sure they'd realized Jack was a newcomer among them.

“So,” Edward said as he began to deal, “where you off to next, sailor?”

Chris shrugged. “Not sure yet. I’ve a couple opportunities that would move me up and down the coast until I can find a job more exciting.” He feigned embarrassment. “I’m sorry. You’re patrolmen, aren’t you? The bar keep mentioned you’d all come in and I meant no offense to your own practice.”

“None taken,” Arch said, glancing at his cards and tossing a few coins in the pot. “We’re only patrolmen until this war gets on anyway, and you mark my words, it’s coming any day now. You may want to be on your way sooner than later lest you end up in the middle of it, sailor.”

Tommy raised the bet, his eyes darting to Chris. “You have a very peculiar accent. Pray, where are you from?”

Charles and Matthew folded but Chris doubled Tommy’s raise with a daring smile. “I was born to a sailor and I have been a sailor all my life. My accent has no origin, but is instead a blend of the places I’ve been and the people I’ve sailed with. There is not a place in this world I haven’t been, but I couldn’t call any but the ocean my home.”

Arch debated his place in the game before tossing his cards on the table. “That’s what we call a real sailor, Tommy boy.”

“I’ve told you I don’t like that name,” he growled, eyeing Chris dubiously as his fingers hovered over his coins and he stole a glance at his cards. “I will see your bet, sailor, and raise you the rest in your purse... only because you called me kid when you sat down.”

“Careful,” Edward warned, leaning back in his seat. “Tommy’s had surprisingly good luck all night.”

Chris didn’t break Tommy’s stare, all too aware that the odds of the flush in his hand winning were in his favor. “Call.”

Tommy laid his cards down on the table, revealing a run of off-suit 5-6-7. It was a good hand, but it didn’t beat Chris’s. He kept the smile on his face as he presented his flush, and Tommy’s youth slipped out with a, “you bloody bastard!”

“Sorry, kid,” Chris teased, pulling in his winnings with a wink as the men around them roared with laughter.

While Arch and Charles both taunted Tommy for his loss, Chris glanced around for signs of Davis. If he was there, he was well-hidden... Juan was seated at the bar engaged in conversation with the man behind the counter, and Mr. Gil was standing near the doorway watching...

“What about you?” Chris asked, steering the conversation right back to where it had left off. “Where are you all from?”

He knew George Bennet had been born in Norwich, and he hoped he might use that knowledge to his advantage. Aside from Tommy, the only other men close to Bennet’s age were Charles and Edward. He wondered if he could be so bold as to claim he once knew a family by the name of Bennet if any of them heralded from the same area.

“Henry and I came from Newcastle,” Arch said, shuffling the cards and still chuckling at Tommy.

“I was born in Bristol,” Edward said, “but I’ve been in the colonies most of my life.”

“Edinburgh,” Matthew said, a hint of his Scottish accent becoming apparent.

“Are you planning to deal any time soon, Arch?” Tommy spat, holding his fingers out impatiently.

Moving his cigar to one side of his mouth, Arch snickered. “Are you certain you still wish to play now that your luck’s run out?”

Tommy narrowed his eyes. “Just deal already.”

With an airy laugh, Arch began tossing the cards out.

“I take it you all sail together frequently?” Chris mused, that familiar adrenaline spiking as he lifted his first two cards to find a pair of kings.

Arch plucked up his cards and gave Tommy a very sarcastic grin. “They are my family away from family.”

Chris pulled the third card from the table, a queen, and stole a glance at Jack’s table where two of the drunkards were

getting a little loud.

“That your brother over there?” Tommy asked, his eyes sliding down to his hand and back. “The one you keep checking on?”

“He is my family away from family, I suppose,” Chris said, tossing several coins into the pot. “Got a bit of a temper on him so I’m always keeping one eye out. You know the boys he’s playing with?”

Once again, Charles and Matthew folded as Tommy nodded. “There is not a uniformed man among us we would not call brother. The two arguing now though actually are brothers and it’s not uncommon for them to go to blows when they’ve had too much to drink.” He lazily raised Chris’s bet.

Arch looked between Chris and Tommy, shaking his head as he threw his own coins on the pot with a clank. “That’s Patrick and Phelim Murphy. They never saw a fight they did not end up in the middle of.”

Chris chuckled, tripling the bet. “I don’t know many Irish who wouldn’t match that exact description. What about the one on the far end? Giving my brother the quizzical look... Should I be concerned?”

Tommy’s fingers tapped on his coins as he stared at Chris, attempting to find a tell in his demeanor similar to the one he was giving. The way his eyes never moved to the cards as his fingers tapped slowly told Chris he had a low pair but was attempting to feign the confidence of someone holding triple aces. When Tommy’d had a good hand, he couldn’t help looking at it.

He matched Chris’s bet and raised it again, tripling the original. “That’s Georgie,” Tommy said, glancing at the young man at Jack’s table. “He gives everyone that look... he’s above the company everywhere he goes.”

George... It was a common name, and he couldn’t be so naive to think the only George among their ranks was Bennet... but he couldn’t help but hope...

“Oh, so he’s from York?” Chris tittered, pulling from one of Captain Furneaux’s teasing remarks as Arch folded his cards

with a huff.

“Hardly,” Tommy scoffed, not looking at his cards as he waited for Chris’s next move. “He’s from Norwich. Like me.”

Chris could feel his heartbeat quicken, but even two Georges from Norwich wouldn’t be all that uncommon. “All in,” he said calmly, inspecting the scowling young Georgie in an attempt to determine his age. Davis had said he was seventeen, but it was hard with the wig and hat to determine how old he might be.

“You’re bluffing,” Tommy said, still refusing to look at his cards. “I know you are.”

“So call,” Chris dared him, “and find out.”

“Oh ho, Tommy boy,” Arch teased, puffing on his cigar, “I believe you’ve met your match in both luck *and* jest. To think I nearly decided to turn in early!”

Edward chuckled, his eyes widening at the large pot in the center of the table. “Sailor, how many women do you intend to lie with at Duval’s?”

Chris raised a brow. “Many as I can, I suppose.” He returned his gaze to Tommy, who was still glaring at him. “Norwich, you say? I knew some folks from there when I was a younger man... Oh, what was their name...” He gazed upward in thought, stealing the opportunity to search for Davis among the room’s occupants.

Once again, he saw only Juan and Mr. Gil in the distance. Where the hell was Davis?

With a groan, Tommy painstakingly matched Chris’s bet, pushing his coins slowly to the center to leave very little left in front of him. “Show your bluff, sailor.”

Chris laid down his pair of kings and smiled. “Now you show yours.”

“Son of a bitch!” Tommy shouted, tossing his pair of sevens angrily on the table before he proceeded to rip both the hat and the wig from his head and launch it across the room.

“Two years,” Chris teased, leaning forward to rake in his winnings. “I’ve got two years worth to pay for.” As he scooped

the coins with his forearms, he noticed Tommy's left ear was red and swollen, half of it torn off to leave a nasty looking scab that had become grossly infected.

And George Bennet became the farthest thing from his mind, the edges of his eyesight fizzling with red heat as he remembered standing in front of Maria and saying, "I heard you bit off some guy's ear?"

"What eh..." He cleared his throat. "What happened to your ear?"

Arch, somewhere far beyond the rage that was slowly boiling up from the depths of Chris's stomach, snickered. "This lucky little prat was granted leave a few weeks back to visit his high-ranking uncle over in Williamsburg. Oh, but his luck ran out then too. Didn't it, Tommy boy? Tried to dance with the wrong woman and came back missing half his ear!"

Tommy covered the infected ear and raised his chin. "She's a dead woman now because of it."

And that was the last thing Tommy said before Chris launched himself across the table to topple onto the floor in a noisy heap of shattered glass and bouncing coins.

He didn't feel anything as his fingers curled tightly around Tommy's neck—didn't feel the Murphy brothers leaping into action to punch, kick, and pull at his upper body... Over and over, he saw Maria lying in a pool of her own blood, and he knew the man beneath his tightening grip was one of the men that'd likely fired on her.

He almost saw the musket in Tommy's hands... the pull of the trigger in the dark that would send the bullet through both Maria and the child she carried.

Obscenities poured out around him, and he wasn't sure if they'd come from his own lips or from the growing number of soldiers who'd surrounded them... They might've been fighting him or watching him... He knew nothing beyond the squeeze of his fingers and the dark shade of purple Tommy's face began to turn beneath them.

It was only when more men joined in to rip him suddenly away that he became aware of himself once more.

The whole tavern was out of their seats, some merely observing the theatrics, others foaming at the mouth for a chance to join in. Some had taken advantage of the chaos to launch themselves into their own brawls. Just beyond the five or six men attacking him, he could see Jack and the Murphy brothers wrestling on the floor.

His pulse far too rampant to be stilled by regret, he returned the punches and kicks he was being delivered with ones of his own, diving onto one man only to be rolled into a chokehold with another.

He bit down on the arm of his attacker and flung himself on the next to deliver a few satisfying blows before he was on his stomach receiving several more to the back of the head.

He reached out for some sort of weapon, coiling his fingers around a shard of glass before a heavy weight settled on his spine to pin him against the floor.

Quickly, he scanned the faces above him, searching for Juan or Mr. Gil or Davis and finding only a sea of soldiers in every direction.

“Let me go!” Tommy growled from somewhere behind him. “I’ll kill him! You hear me? I’m going to kill you, you bastard!”

And then a commanding voice shouted out from the crowd, “Bennet! That is enough. Stand down at once. All of you stand down!”

Bennet...

From Norwich...

George *Thomas* Bennet... from Norwich...

He tightened his grip on the shard of glass, feeling Maria’s nearness as his pulse beat even louder in his ears.

“He attacked *me*, sir!” Tommy shouted.

“I do not care who attacked whom,” the voice continued, growing closer. “You are a member of His Majesty’s Navy, and as such, you are expected to uphold a standard of conduct befitting that position. Resorting to brawling like some common thug is beneath you and brings disgrace to your uniform.

Control your temper, or you will find yourself facing disciplinary action yet again. Is that understood?"

"He *did* attack him, Lieutenant," Arch confessed, the weight on Chris's back lightening as he was pulled suddenly upward by two sets of hands under his biceps. "And as far as any of us could tell, he had no reason to do it. Tommy, here, was only defending himself."

"Let me go!" Tommy insisted, breaking free of whatever grasp he was held in to move into Chris's view, his chest heaving as he wiped the blood from his lip. "He's likely a rebel posing as a sailor... he came in with that one over there," he pointed beyond Chris's view to where he knew Jack had been. "And that man there."

At some point, Juan had ventured into the crowd to observe the fight for himself, his posture casual even as the soldiers around him turned in his direction.

"Say it!" Tommy demanded, stepping closer to Chris but not quite close enough for him to make a move. "You're rebels, aren't you? What other reason have you for such an unwarranted assault?"

"Bennet," Chris said through hoarse vocal chords, realizing his fight had come at a cost. "Your first name... It's not Tommy... is it?"

The boy tilted his head to one side and frowned. "It's George. And let that be the last name you hear before you die. You never should've stepped foot through that door. You're a dead man now." He turned to Juan. "You're all dead men!"

The corner of Juan's lips lifted ever so slowly in a dubious smile. "Son, you were dead before we ever stepped foot through that door."

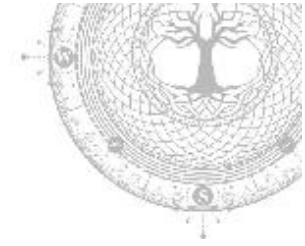
As Tommy's entire face distorted in preparation of another threat, a small red dot appeared on the center of the boy's forehead. His threat never came.

Chris heard only the gunshot before it all went black.



PART IV

Until then...



Chapter Forty-Eight

Alaina

It was a soft sound from Cecelia that pulled me part way back to consciousness. Half-asleep, I listened for another to follow, and when none came, I rolled toward Jack's warm body and tucked myself into his chest.

His fingers scratched softly against my scalp and I hummed with my content. "I fell asleep waiting for you," I mumbled against his skin. "Did you get your answers?"

"Hmm?" was his equally sleepy response.

"About tomorrow," I yawned. "Did he tell you how we'll kill Bennet?"

His chest quaked beneath my cheek with a chuckle. "You always have the strangest dreams."

I opened my eyes, expecting to find the soft blue glow of our futuristic cabin instead of the utter darkness we were cloaked in.

"Where are we?"

He combed his fingers over the hair at my temple. "Mmm... Not sure... Probably getting close to Chris's island pretty soon." He turned his head to inhale the top of mine. "Go back to sleep."

"Chris's island?" I balked. "Wait... where did you go earlier?" I sat up suddenly, attempting to figure out where I was. "You couldn't have... I mean..." The air lacked that artificial recycled oxygen taste I'd started to get used to, and the gentle hum of the submarine was now replaced by a louder set of motors. We were moving... not beneath the water, but atop it. "You did it already? Without me? We're... on the other side?"

He let out another airy laugh. “No, honey, we’re still on this side. The storm’s not coming for another two days and I promise, nobody’s doing *anything* without you. Come and lie down now.” He rubbed the small of my back. “It’s late and you’re tired. Go back to sleep.”

The storm... we were headed to the storm... which meant they hadn’t simply gone out to get answers, they’d gone out to kill Bennet... and Jack would have no memory of it at all.

Blinking, I tried to adjust my eyes to the room around me, noticing the only light available came from a digital clock on Jack’s side of the bed, its glowing blue numbers reading 3:07.

‘Tomorrow,’ I thought... *‘It’s officially tomorrow... the day both Omar and Davis promised I’d arrive on the other side.’*

My throat felt too tight... the whole room felt too tight. I hadn’t been ready for this. The last thing I remembered was pacing that cabin, waiting for signs of Jack’s return... and the next... I was waking up without any warning I was about to do so. I’d told myself in the letter I would wake... that I’d have time to get my bearings... But I hadn’t prepared to do it so soon. I thought I had a whole day, or at least several more hours before... before... what?

“Red, sweetie,” Jack purred, his calloused palm sweeping over my bare thigh, “it was just a dream. Lie down.”

I frowned as I ran my own hand over the very thin silk slip I’d been sleeping in where it was bunched at my waist to expose my lower half.

Silk... A far softer and more heavenly silk than any that could’ve been made in the 18th century caressed my upper body... This silk belonged to Lilly... It belonged in Lilly’s things on her family’s yacht...

Everything in my letter, everything I’d promised myself I was headed toward was suddenly a reality. And while that should’ve been exciting, I couldn’t help but feel like I’d been robbed the opportunity to say goodbye to the reality I’d left behind.

With only the alarm’s soft blue numbers to serve as light, I looked down at Jack’s massive shape in the bed. He felt the

same, but he wasn't... He didn't know what I did... and that's what had me feeling uneasy. I didn't get a chance to say goodbye to the Jack that did...

Not that he would've remembered it... but I would've... And I would've been more ready to face this partial stranger lying next to me...

Slightly shy in light of the missing memories that would've connected us, I ran my fingers over his abdomen, feeling the familiar lines of him that ensured me he was still Jack. I traced a zig-zagged trail up to his chest, then along his collarbone to his jaw where I was met by a scratchy beard that hadn't been there hours prior.

He reached up to curl his fingers around mine, dragging my knuckles to his lips so he could kiss them, his whisper warm against my hand. "Are you attempting to seduce me, Mrs. Volmer? Or is there some more sinister reason you insist on keeping me awake? If the latter, you should know I fight dirty when I'm tired. If the former, then I am not tired in the slightest."

My heart lightened. This was no stranger... No matter what memories might've been missing, Jack and I were always connected. He could never be a stranger to me. I hadn't lost anything, but I'd gained *everything*. Moments before he'd left our room, I'd told him I wanted to go to sleep and wake in a place where he'd share whatever new memories I made... and he went out to ensure I would.

Grinning, I leaned in to kiss his forehead. "Just making sure you're still you."

With a hand on my cheek, he redirected my lips to his, pulling me in for a fleeting kiss. "So... does that mean you're *not* attempting to seduce me?"

I laughed and lowered my lips to his once more, enjoying the tickling sensation of his new beard against my cheeks. "I love you so much," I whispered. "You know that?"

His arm wound slowly around me as he tugged me closer for another sleep-warmed kiss. "This... kinda feels like it could

be seduction..." He kissed me again, parting my lips ever so gently this time. "Mmm... Tastes like it too..."

I giggled as he rolled me onto my back, that prickly beard of his teasing me as he passed his lips over mine. "Seriously though, are you alright? What's got you up so late?"

"Just a very strange dream," I said dismissively, draping my arms around his neck and noticing his weight over me seemed... a little heavier... his shoulders a bit bulkier... "I didn't mean to wake you."

"You can always wake me," he whispered. "My favorite thing is waking up to you. And you're not usually bothered by your strange dreams. You mentioned the other side... Are you scared about what's gonna' happen when we get through the storm?"

"No," I breathed, remembering the letter and all the perfect things I'd promised I'd be returned to. "Are you?"

I felt, rather than saw, his smile. "No... well... maybe just the part where my name becomes a dirty word again. That should go by pretty quick."

"I almost forgot about that," I said, grinning as I reached up to trace the scar that split his brow. "My insanely famous and *gorgeous* husband..." I chewed the inside of my cheek. "You know, I never meant to make you feel like your name was a dirty word—never meant to discredit your career or your talent in any way. I mean... I didn't watch every single episode of *Fairview Nights* several times over because you were bad at acting. You're a very, *very* talented actor. And I should've said that sooner. If I've ever made you feel like that was something you couldn't do again... or that I wouldn't be comfortable with it, I didn't intend to."

"You'd want me to act again?" he asked, smirking.

"I want you to do what makes you happy, Jack. And I want you to know that I'll support you—that I'll be proud of you—no matter what that is. Acting was your career and I've teased you about your fame more than I've celebrated the talent that made you so famous in the first place. I'm sorry for that. I'm proud of you... in everything you do."

Lowering onto his side to stare down at me, he sighed. “I know that, Red. It’s a strange thing, after all this, to think about going back and doing mundane things like working or buying groceries... I certainly wouldn’t want to act again, not with two babies I want to witness growing up. And... I don’t know, with the traveling we’ll do in the future and my royalties from the show, I hadn’t really thought either of us would plan to do much working during our time in the 21st century... I guess I really haven’t asked, though. Do *you* want to work again?”

I pursed my lips. “Nothing that would take me away from the twins, but I’d like to have something of my own that gives me pride in myself—outside motherhood, of course. Something that challenges my mind to think a little differently... that gives me these small little personal victories here and there so I see the same person you see when you look at me. I have far too much love around me to let myself slide back into the type of self-loathing I tend to lean on when my mind isn’t being creative. I think a job is important for me.”

“Would you want to write music again?” he asked, brushing his palm over my arm.

“Of course,” I said, very nearly blurting out the part I’d played in creating TAO and how much more fulfillment it had given me than any other endeavor I’d taken on. How I wanted to tell him that I craved a job doing something for that world—wished for nothing more than to find a role I could fit in so I could always be a part of the world I helped create. I couldn’t tell him that though. I knew he would learn about TAO eventually, but I wasn’t sure when... or if he already had.

“What would give you your own personal victories?” I asked instead. “Outside being an amazing husband and father, of course... You don’t think you’ll miss acting?”

“Not even a little.” He yawned and slid down to adjust his head against the pillow. “I got far more enjoyment building houses for the Tahitians than I ever got from acting.” Another yawn escaped him as he draped his arm over me and chuckled, his voice fading back into a half-sleep. “Maybe Chris will give me a job when we get there.”

At the mention of Chris, it occurred to me how different the world outside our room would be when I stepped out that door. I thought of Maria and Anna and Liam among us... of Gloria, in the flesh the way I'd described her... I thought of the surprises I'd promised myself and I was suddenly too restless to lie still...

Were the others waking up too, confused to find themselves landed on this timeline a little sooner than we'd expected?

Would there be someone who could fill in a few of my gaps so I might be a bit more prepared for the next conversation I'd have with my husband?

As Jack's breathing slipped into the heavier cadence of a deep sleep, I tried to remember the layout of Bud's yacht. I'd only been on it briefly on the other timeline, and the only time I saw its interior was when I'd helped carry meat to its freezer before Juan Josef had stolen away on it.

We'd all been exhausted then, but since we'd been planning to move into its more comfortable rooms the following day, Lilly had given me a quick tour.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I tried to relive the tour in my mind, searching for small clues that might inform me where I was.

There were really only three rooms that could cater to the size of the bed we lay in since the crew's quarters were made up of twin bunk beds and two of the lower level staterooms had double twin beds. We were either in the master stateroom on the main deck or one of the two larger guest rooms on the lower deck. I remembered the master had a window on each side of the room where the guest rooms had a single window just above the head of the bed.

Slowly sliding Jack's arm from me, I sat up to reach over the headboard in search of a window. Finding none, I concluded we'd been given the master, likely to allow for the twins to sleep comfortably.

The twins...

I'd known they were with us—could sense them nearby even as I woke confused... but just where in the utter blackness, I wasn't sure.

I recalled from that tour the door and dresser being on Jack's side of the room, and directly in front of the bed there'd been a partition that separated the sleeping quarters from a large bathroom... So the babies had to be sleeping in something on my side of the suite.

Easing my legs ever so slowly over the edge of the mattress, I reached out as I stood, relieved to find my fingers land upon what felt like a modern crib... a sleek, polished wooden enclosure with sturdy, evenly spaced slats. I leaned in, listening for each of their distinct breathing patterns. It was funny, the ways I had always been able to tell them apart. Far beyond the difference in hair color, the two were different in just about every way. They smelled different, cried different, and they even breathed different. Zachary had always had a faint snore when he slept. Not loud enough to be concerning, but soft and steady beneath each of his rhythmic breaths. Even though he snored, Cecelia was the louder sleeper. Her breathing was quicker than his, the airy bursts of her exhales overpowering the low drum of his.

Confirming each of them was alive and peaceful in their sleep, I decided it would be safe to sneak out for a moment to get a glimpse of the world outside our room.

Painfully aware of the tiny slip I was wearing, I thought back to Lilly's tour. There had been a closet near the bathroom, I was almost sure of it. If I could find it, perhaps there might be something inside that offered a bit more coverage. With one hand gliding along the crib's railing, I reached out in the blackness with the other until my fingers found the partitioned wall. Inch by inch, I crept forward, feeling my way past a large flat screen t.v. and the bathroom door until I reached what had to be the closet's handle.

Careful not to let the door squeak, I eased it open and waved an arm inside, finding it was just spacious enough to step in, and, much to my delight, it had its own light switch.

Easing the door closed, I flipped the switch and squinted until my eyes adjusted, very nearly falling over when I came face to face with the full-length mirror and the stranger staring back at me.

It was me... but Tahiti had made me... *lovely*.

I had about a thousand more freckles, but beneath them, my skin was glowing a brilliant shade of, not pink, but copper. My hair, still unruly as ever, was made a few shades lighter in places from the sun's exposure, and my body...

I turned to the side and bent a knee, pulling up my slip to inspect the taut muscles on my thighs and calves... my eyes widening as I noticed similar definition in my arms.

Grinning, I dragged the shift up even higher to examine my stomach, the little pooch of leftover pregnancy fat I'd been carrying around now replaced by actual abs. I'd never had abs before in my life, at least not ones you could count from a distance... Unable to help myself, I watched my reflection in fascination as I turned around and flexed my buttocks, covering my mouth to muffle the excited squeal that might've otherwise woke up the entire ship.

What the hell had I been doing in Tahiti? And why hadn't I thought to do it before?

Taking a deep breath, I turned toward the clothing that hung inside, noticing, as I did, that even my lungs felt fitter... like I could run for miles and never tire.

'One point to the new timeline,' I thought, *'old timeline: zero.'*

I pulled down a floor-length champagne robe from one of the hooks, dragging its silky fabric on over my arms and checking out my legs one final time before I tied it around me.

Excited to find similar differences in the appearances of the others, I flipped the light switch back off and tiptoed back into the room, resuming my awkward blind steps until my fingertips met the door. With a grip on the handle, I glanced back at the darkness and listened to the gentle, airy sounds of my family's peaceful slumber for a second more. It was a strange feeling, after spending so much time living in danger, to know I could

leave the room and be confident they would remain just as I'd left them upon my return. My heart warmed as I realized we were headed to a place where that feeling would become a nightly occurrence. How wonderful it would be to one day tuck my children in a bed and close their door, knowing no one would hurt them while Jack and I slept just down the hall.

With thoughts of such a peaceful existence to look forward to, I slipped quietly out the door, eager to fill in whatever gaps I could so I could fit into my lovely new life. I padded down the dimly lit corridor, past the galley and stairwell to the large dining-living room area.

I'd forgotten how stunning Bud's yacht was. A gentle orange glow shined down from the edges of the ceiling to illuminate the simple and lavish interior—an elegant dining room table and chairs on one side, a set of lush beige sofas on the other, all of it bordered by floor to ceiling windows that showed off the exterior balcony and the dark ocean around us.

Finding the main deck empty of any additional occupants, I sighed, pulling my robe a little tighter around me as I strolled to the far doors and stepped outside to take a deep breath of the warm, salty air.

I looked out at the star-filled sky behind us as I reached the railing, thanking God and the stars, George Davis and Omar, and even the Perez family for finally getting my family here.

“Hey!” a female voice whispered from behind me, nearly scaring me right out of my skin. I spun around to find Lilly, wrapped in a similar robe, creeping out from the balcony that ran along the side of the ship, Jim just behind her in a dark navy robe and slippers.

“What the hell?” she hissed, wrapping both arms around me in a quick hug before she pulled away to continue her hushed interrogation. “We fell asleep and woke up here... Did you guys kill Bennet without us? How? When? Why didn't anyone tell us?”

I shook my head. “I don't know. Jack and Chris left my room a few hours ago with Juan Josef to go probe Davis for more answers. Before I knew it, I was waking up here.”

“Is Maria alive?” she asked, looking through the glass doors. “Or Anna? Have you seen anyone yet?”

“No,” I answered, matching her whisper because, for whatever reason, it felt like we were hiding. “I just snuck out to see if I could figure out what happened... Can’t exactly ask Jack, you know?”

“Them babies alright?” Jim asked, his voice kept just as quiet as ours.

Smiling, I nodded. “Babies are fine. Jack’s still Jack, with maybe a few more muscles than he had last night...”

“Oh, us too!” Lilly whisper-shrieked, unabashedly pulling the collar of Jim’s robe to one side to show off a rather bulky bit of chest. “Jimmy’s all ripped now! And I’ve got *actual* biceps. What the hell have we been doing?”

“I haven’t got a clue,” I chuckled as Jim self-consciously pulled his robe closed and glowered at Lilly.

“Ye’ ain’t had no memories pop in yet?” Jim asked.

I shook my head. “My letter said I wouldn’t remember until after we go through the storm. What about you two? Anything?”

Lilly frowned. “I woke up knowing Izzy was in the room connected to ours. That’s not really a memory, but... it’s something.”

“You didn’t see anyone else down there?” I asked. “Or... remember who else was in what rooms?”

“No,” she sighed. “We tried to sneak a peek in the rooms beside ours but the doors were locked. We were heading up to see who’s in the pilot house when we saw you standing here.”

“I’m kinda scared to run into anyone,” I admitted. “My letter said Gloria would be here with us... and Anna’s son. How do I interact with either of them when I don’t remember meeting them? I didn’t really do myself any favors in that letter... I barely told myself anything.”

“I did,” Jim said. “I didn’t write no pretty story like yuns did. I drew a timeline.”

“Smart,” I groaned. “I wonder, since we’re all standing here and haven’t yet sat down to write them, why we didn’t all receive timelines... I can’t think of anything better to guide me through this. Do we all know about TAO yet?”

Jim nodded, running a hand over his hair. “Juan Josef’s daughter sent the ones that went to the future back with a copy of the covenants. They know more ‘bout TAO than we do since they spent the past three months studyin’ it.”

I pulled my robe tighter around me as a breeze picked up and threatened to expose the skimpy slip beneath. “Well, I don’t know if that’s a relief or a source of additional anxiety that I might not know the same things they do... What else?”

“We set out a couple days ago and tomorrow we’ll get to that island Chris and Maria was on before... I made a note, said I’d get some memories when we first get there, so maybe stay close and I’ll fill ye’ in?”

I nodded. “My letter said I would learn a lot about what I’d missed by listening in on Izzy and Liam’s play. Will she remember the other timeline?”

Lilly shook her head. “No. Me and Jimmy cornered Omar last night and made him promise us she wouldn’t have an anchor. I kept thinking of everything she might remember from the moment we met Juan Josef... How scared she was on the ship of the *bad man that had taken her*—how she couldn’t sleep for the fear he might take her again... how terrified she was when he *did* take her and grandpa on the yacht and she had to hide in that little vent in the crew’s galley... the terror she had to go through when the Nikora attacked us... She doesn’t need those memories. She’ll make better ones that can never come back to haunt her. So will we all.”

“And Omar agreed?” I asked, feeling breathless just thinking about someone so young remembering all those things.

Jim nodded. “He said he’d hold onto that anchor til she’s older and comes round to ask for it. I reckon that means he wants us to tell her ‘bout it at some point... give her the choice to remember one day.”

“That’s fair,” I said softly. “I’d want to know if there was another version of my life other people remembered and I didn’t.”

“Was it hard waking up with Jack?” Lilly asked.

“No,” I sighed. “But it was hard to know what we’d already discussed... Without all the chaos, I imagine we did a whole lot more planning in this version of time. I don’t want to ask Jack where he’d like to live if we’ve spent the past few months planning out that very thing.”

Jim nodded. “My note said we’d been talkin’ ‘bout spendin’ a few years with our families before we start messin’ with all this TAO stuff... said we’s plannin’ to stay in the 21st century, raise up our babies together until your twins turn eight and Zachary’s got no chance of gettin’ hurt out there.”

“*Our* babies?” I echoed, thinking of Maria and Chris and Cece and Maddy. “Did your letter say *whose* babies we’d be raising?”

“Oh,” Jim glanced at Lilly, “it didn’t list out any more than yours, Matavi, and... the one I’m fixin’ to have brewin’.”

“What?” Lilly gasped, her eyes going as wide as saucers while her palms felt around her stomach. “*Now?*”

He chuckled. “No, not *now*, Sugar, and I ain’t tellin’ ye’ when neither, not after ye’ just spent twenty minutes in the dang mirror talkin’ about how you wasn’t never gonna’ do nothin’ to mess up that body ye’ come back in.”

She rolled her eyes. “I knew there was a reason you wouldn’t let me see it. What about Maria? Was Juan able to go back and recreate the—”

“Hey you,” a voice below us said softly. It was the voice of a ghost, and it had been so shocking to hear after so long, it made us all freeze and gaze over the rail.

On the deck below, a bright blond head of straight hair stepped across the wooden boards where Bruce was seated in a lounge chair staring out. The way the soft light touched her made her look angelic... made every movement seem otherworldly...

made me want to fall down to my knees and sob for merely being in her presence.

“Anna,” Lilly said under her breath, grabbing my hand as we watched Bruce stand up suddenly and turn toward her.

“Couldn’t sleep either?” she asked, hugging her blanket around her shoulders as she sat down in the lounge chair beside his.

“N-no,” he managed, gaping at her as he slowly lowered himself back into his seat. “I... eh... I...” His voice trembled and I watched his fingers flex as he attempted to compose himself.

“You alright?” Anna asked, sliding her legs over to the space between their seats so she could place her hand upon his. “You’re shaking. What happened?”

God, she looked perfect. I could hardly see more than the top of her head and shoulders, but that was all I needed to know she looked perfect. I felt the tears slide down my cheek at that familiar tone—so gentle and compassionate—and I shook with the effort it took to prevent myself from intruding on their reunion to have one of my own.

“I... eh...” Bruce stammered, sitting to the side of his chair as well so their knees were nearly touching. “I... eh... well, I made a promise to myself I’d say something to you the very next time I saw you... and... hell, I wasn’t prepared for the next time I saw you to come so soon... I was sitting out here hyping myself up for what I thought would happen in the morning.”

Lilly squeezed my hand, and I glanced over at her where an excited open-mouthed grin lit up her features.

“Hyping yourself up?” Anna echoed with a disbelieving laugh. “Bruce, it’s just me. You don’t have to hype yourself up to talk to *me*. Not after all this. What’s going on?”

I watched his chest move with a very deep breath. “Thing is, Anna...” His voice caught in his throat as he said her name, and he cleared it uncomfortably. “Thing is... I know you. I know you better than I’ve ever known anyone. And you know me, maybe better than anyone has ever bothered to know me. You know I’m more than some goofy schmuck in a chef’s hat,

and that's more than I can say for most of the people I've spent my whole life surrounded by. I was so scared to say anything before... Scared this woman who knew me so well might not want to know me once I said the words I've kept bottled up inside... But, if I don't, I know I'll spend an eternity regretting my silence... So..."

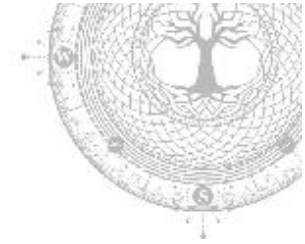
Once again, he cleared his throat, and the next part came out with a patient confidence I'd never heard from him. "Anna, I love you. Not in any one way, but in all of them. You're my best friend and my whole family. You're a woman I'd fall to my knees for just as much as you're the person I'd stand proudly beside if you found happiness with another. I love you for everything you stand for—as a mother, as a friend, and as the kindest human being I've ever encountered. I miss you the instant you're gone... even when you've just gone to sleep. And I need you to know that I just had to say it out loud. I want nothing more than what you already give, but if *you* ever want something more, at any point in your life, I also need you to know I'd give you everything I've got. Hell, I'll give you everything I've got even if the only thing more you want from me is a ride home from the airport."

Jim, Lilly, and I all held our breath, our lost memories far less important than whatever words Anna would say next.

Clasping the blanket closed over her shoulders, she gracefully glided from her lounge to his, sitting beside him to rest her head against his shoulder. "You're the only reason I came back here. Did you know that? When I went to the future and was finally able to wrap my arms around Liam, I couldn't imagine ever returning to that storm. Turns out, I miss you too when you're gone. You're *my* best friend and you're just about the only person I can be myself beside and feel safe. I couldn't leave you behind... and so I came back... and I brought Liam with me because I wanted him to meet you... Wanted to see if he'd love you like I do... And it makes me so happy that he does because I've wanted more almost since I met you, and I've been waiting a very long time for you to offer it."

"Ay," Jim whispered, tugging Lilly away from the rail. "Let's go fix us some coffee and then we'll go up and see who's

drivin' this thing. We can have our moment with Anna later.
Ole' Bruce has earned some privacy."



Chapter Forty-Nine

Chris

It was a blink... a single blink of his eyes and he was lying on his back with a body against his chest. The light had gone out—either that or the blows to his head had blinded him—and he moved his fingers and toes, searching for a semblance of normalcy, a sign he hadn't cracked his skull open again.

Nothing hurt... and that seemed strange given how hard the soldiers had struck him. Was he dead?

The rhythmic rise and fall of the chest pressed against his and the sensation of his beating heart argued against death. And if he wasn't dead... and he wasn't hurt...

It couldn't have been that simple... could it?

With utmost tenderness, he ventured to touch the arm draped over him. Delicate... soft.... It wasn't Bennet, Jack, or any of the men he'd just been fighting... It was far too petite to be male.

He moved his fingers up to her shoulder and felt soft, smooth wavy hair draped across it...

Nothing in his life had ever been that simple... Perhaps he *had* cracked his head open... and perhaps this was all a wonderful hallucination.

Tentatively, he turned his face, drawing in a breath that caught in his throat. That aroma... it was too familiar... too perfect. He'd dreamt of that very aroma for nearly a month.

His pulse dared to hasten as he explored further, combing his fingers through her velvet hair with one hand while the other examined the shape of her, terrified to be wrong, terrified to wake if this was a trick his mind was playing.

But she was so real...

Could it have been that quick? That easy?

Again, he lowered his nose to the top of her head and inhaled that rose aroma in her hair. There was no mistaking the scent. No one else had ever smelled like her...

Maybe he was hallucinating, maybe he was dead... or maybe... it had worked.

Eyes watering, he pressed his lips to the crown of her head and whispered, "Maria?"

Her response was a yawn, so achingly familiar it nearly broke him to pieces, "Go to sleep, superman. I am too tired for that right now."

Emotions he didn't even know he had poured over him in a torrent he couldn't control. His arms encircled her, drawing her close so she couldn't possibly vanish. Tears, unbidden, streamed down both his cheeks, the salty warmth tracing the contours of his face as he held onto her with a fierce, desperate grip. He didn't have words—couldn't have said them if he did for the burn in his throat—so he just pressed his lips against her head and held her as tightly as he was able, the sensation of her real, warm body against his like a lifeline in the dark.

"Ay dios mío," she grunted. "Are you trying to suffocate me? What the hell's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," he breathed, unable to quell the tremble in his words for the feel of hers—warm with life—against his skin.

"Nothing?" she echoed with another grunt as she wiggled free from his grip to flip on a lamp beside the bed they lay in. "What's going on?"

And there she was. Illuminated in the soft glow of the light, she was the very picture of perfection. There were a thousand shades of brown and amber in her eyes, a few more freckles across her sun-kissed nose, and her skin shined a warm bronze against the white slip gown she was dressed in. Her nearly black hair fell in waves down her shoulders, and her dark brows were furrowed in that beautiful scowl he'd fallen in love with so long ago.

He'd dreamt of her face so many times in the past few weeks, he thought he knew her by heart, but his imagination hadn't been able to capture the detail. She was far more stunning than he remembered.

And no amount of strength could restrain the tears that burst from him at such a sight.

"What's wrong?" she asked, blinking heavily as if she couldn't quite believe what she was seeing either.

"Nothing," he choked out, trembling as he sat up to cup her cheek. "I just... I just missed you."

"Missed me?" For a second, she frowned, but it melted into something much softer the longer she inspected him. "Kreese, I'm right here. Why are you crying?"

Sniffing, he attempted to blink the moisture from his eyes, but it was useless. "It's... nothing."

She reached out to dry his cheek with her thumb. "Nothing? Oh, please don't lose your mind on me now, superman... not when we're this close to being home. Please."

Home... Some faint awareness of his surroundings was attempting to overcome the more prominent memories of Bennet and Virginia and all that'd occurred leading up to this moment.

He peered past her at the modern architecture around him: the beige fabric panels on the walls, the silk sheets on the bed, and the large window above the bed. They were on Bud's yacht... but he wasn't quite sure yet how they'd gotten there.

His letter to himself had only contained two words: *Maria's alive*. And that was all the information he'd needed.

Blinking, he looked back at her where her scowl had been replaced by genuine concern. God, she was beautiful... Painfully beautiful. Just looking at her made more tears pour from his eyes. And that was a problem... because he had no explanation for them.

"Mi amor," she said softly, sliding her palm down to rest it over his heart, "please talk to me. Tell me what's going on... You're scaring me."

He traced her lips with his thumb, every part of him feeling the relief of her exhale against his skin. She was alive and nothing else had ever mattered more. “I just... I love you. That’s all.”

Her brows furrowed. “Oye, you’re crying like this because you love me?”

He nodded. “Very much.”

“Dios mío,” she grumbled, crawling over his legs to straddle his lap. “I will never sleep again if I have *two of you* waking me up to cry in the middle of the night. How do I get you to love me less? Eh? I am not the type of woman who can go without sleep. You know this.”

‘Two of you,’ his mind echoed.

As she rested her forearms on his shoulders, his eyes and hands ventured down to her midsection where he could feel and see the outline of her pregnant belly, a perfect little swell over his own stomach... untouched by the bullet... unchanged by their alterations to time save for it being a little bigger than it’d been before.

He hadn’t allowed himself to even hope for such a thing.

Again, emotion overwhelmed him, and he buried his face against her shoulder, keeping a hand on her stomach as he wound the other around her back. “I love you so damn much.”

“Ay, superman,” she sighed, combing her fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck, “you said that already. You are being very dramatic tonight—more than normal. Did you have some kind of nightmare or something?”

“Yes,” he breathed against her skin, trying and failing to rein in the magnitude of feelings possessing him. “A very very long one, and I just need a minute.”

She scratched softly at his scalp. “Are you going to tell me what this nightmare was about?”

“No,” he whispered, pressing a kiss against her collar, and then another to taste the salty warm skin just above it. Even the taste of her brought additional tears to his eyes. Nothing tasted like her, nothing felt like her, and nothing could ever compare to

waking up in this moment with her. He might never stop crying from the relief of it.

Humming, she tightened her arms around him and tilted her head to allow him access to more of her skin. “I already told you I’m too tired for this.”

“I just want to kiss you,” he assured her, making a slow path up her throat, “and hold you... and tell you how amazing you are... tell you how empty this life wa—*would be* without you... tell you how I’ll never hurt you again... and that I’ll spend every day of our lives making sure you know how fucking perfect you are.”

“Oh, is that all?” she chuckled airily, craning her neck so he could explore the opposite side. “Maybe you should have more of these nightmares.”

“No...” He combed his fingers through her hair, stilling himself just over her lips. “I never want to live that nightmare again. And I’m never taking a single moment with you for granted from this moment on. I’ve wasted far too much time on stupid things when you are what matters. And I feel like I’ve said that a thousand times and never once shown it to you. I’m gonna’ show it to you now—every day of our lives, you’ll wake up knowing it.”

Her gaze ventured to his lips and back. “Oye, if you’re just buttering me up to get me naked, I—”

Unable to wait a moment longer, he pulled her to him and kissed her, coiling his fingers deep in her hair and parting her lips to lavish in the familiar taste of her sigh. Just as she always did, her kiss responded instantly to his and melted away the weight of every agonizing second spent without her. He memorized it all: the slight tilt of her head, the warm possessiveness of her mouth, the way her hands moved to his shirt to grab hold and draw him closer. Every touch, taste, and sound was a sweet affirmation that she was real, she was there, and she was his.

However impossible it might’ve seemed, she was there, and he would never ever let her go.

Sighing, he pressed his forehead to hers and closed his eyes, exploring her spine with his fingertips. “I love you.”

“Sí,” she said softly, similarly exploring the sides of his face with her own, “I know. You keep on saying that. Will you tell me what happened in this dream that’s got you so worked up?”

He wanted to tell her everything, but he couldn’t—could *never* tell her any of it, even if it was framed as a dream... And that seemed like a far more difficult thing now that he was right there with her. There was nothing he knew that he *didn’t* want to share with her... no thought she didn’t see already inside him she wouldn’t fight tirelessly to drag out.

“No,” he whispered, tucking her into him and holding as tightly as he could, his tears seeping down into her hair. “It’s all over now. You’re here...”

She adjusted her cheek against his shoulder and yawned. “Mmm, where else would I be, superman?”

His fingers curled into fists as he held tighter, relief burning in his eyes, throat, and nose as he buried his face against her. He couldn’t get close enough, couldn’t hold on tight enough... couldn’t pull himself together to pretend he hadn’t spent the past month completely shattered by the loss of her.

She combed over the back of his head, poking at the scar on his skull. “Did you hit your head? If you did, you know you have to tell me. I’m not sane enough to be the sane parent between us, and I need to make sure you’re okay.”

Swallowing the delirium that’d been strangling him, he nodded, sitting back to wipe his eyes on his sleeve and take a very deep breath. “Honey, I’m so much better than okay. You’re here... and I promise, I’m going to give you and this baby everything you could ever dream of.”

Her eyes moved between each of his as she combed his hair back from his brow. “Don’t you dare start kissing my ass because of some stupid dream. I don’t need everything, *mi amor*. I only need you.” She placed his hand over her stomach and smiled. “*We* only need you.”

His gaze moved to her belly and he noticed a silver ring on his finger... nearly identical to the one on hers. He knew the memory would come soon enough, but he was too impatient to wait. How many times had he tried and failed to marry her? And how many opportunities would he have to see that memory solely through Maria's eyes—to hear it told and not consider his own recollection of the same day?

“Do you remember when I had the bad dreams before?” he whispered, brushing his thumb over her abdomen and doing his best to keep himself from falling back to pieces. “When you would tell me what was real?”

She, too, was attempting to hide her lingering concern. “Si.”

He turned his hand to curl his fingers around hers. “Tell me something real? So I can dream of that instead?”

“Like what?”

He traced the band on her finger. “In my dream, I kept trying to marry you, but I couldn't stop messing it up. Over and over, I failed you until I lost you.” He pulled their joined hands to his lips and kissed her knuckles, turning them ever so slightly so the light could catch the diamond on her ring. “I'd like to dream about this day...”

Adjusting her legs on each side of his, she breathed out a nervous laugh, glancing at her hand where he still held it in his. “You want me to tell you about our wedding?”

He nodded.

She softened, searching his eyes for a long moment before she clicked her tongue. “Oh, mi amor, I know what this is. This pregnancy has made me so cranky, I forget about how my moods affect everyone else. I haven't been very nice to you, have I? Haven't told you I love you hardly at all... And now you're having nightmares because I've let you forget you are loved?”

The memory of her dying gaze swept over him—that same look she'd always given him—the look that told the world no one existed to her but him. She'd held on through the worst levels of pain just because he'd asked her to, just because she

needed to make sure he'd be okay. Jim had been right. She didn't light up for anyone the way she did him, and there'd never been any doubt in his mind he was loved by *her*. Not even when she was at her most angry with him. Coiling both arms gently around her back, he pulled her a little closer. "Baby, there is nothing you could do that would make me forget I am loved. I want you to tell me about our wedding so I know I've made you feel the same."

"You are so cheesy," she whispered, tracing a line over his collarbone. "Of course I feel loved, estúpido. You wake me up in the middle of the night crying just to tell me as much."

Her palms swept over his chest and she sighed when he didn't accept that as answer enough. "I feel it all the time. I wake up arrogant and ridiculous because I know I'm loved by you. The day I married you, I cried because of how much I feel it. I never told you that. I was sitting in that little room at your parents' house, staring at myself in the mirror, sobbing like a big baby. Your mom asked me why I was crying, and I told her I just didn't know how to be that happy. She said none of us do until it hits us all of a sudden, and that she'd been waiting for a very long time to see someone be that happy with you."

He almost got choked up again at the mention of his mother being present on a day that would've meant so much to him, but the fact that she was there churned up a stronger sense of curiosity... He'd made Maria miserable during their trip to the future, harping on newly developed memories that shouldn't have served as an obstacle. What had gone differently on this timeline?

He brushed her hair back from her face. "Tell me more that I don't know about that day."

One dark brow shot upward. "You're really going to make me sit here and say cheesy things to you in the middle of the night?"

He grinned and nodded.

"Ay, carajo," she groaned. "I finally get rid of the heartburn that's been keeping me up all night and you wake me up instead wanting me to whisper sweet nothings in your ear." She shook

her head, but she softened. “Alright, superman... I will tell you one more cheesy thing so you can go back to sleep.”

She glanced down at his hands where he'd slid them along the sides of her ribs to trace his thumbs over her belly. “On the way to the courthouse, your father asked me if I was only marrying you because I was afraid your surgery would go wrong. And I, of course, got angry at that, thinking, how dare this man question me when he does not know the things I've been through. But before I could be all stupid about the way I answered, he said something I'll never forget. He said, *'A parent puts their whole self into raising their child. All the good his mother and I had, we poured into him, and when he disappeared, he took everything that was ever good with him. I don't mean to offend you, but we just got him back, and before we can let him go again, I had to be sure that you see all that good in him... and that you'll pour your whole self in, the way we did, to make him that much better.'*”

That burn in his eyes returned as he thought of his father, a man of so few words, saying something so revealing of the heart inside him.

“So I told him,” she continued, resting both forearms on his shoulders, “that it would be hard to make the good he put in you much better than it already was, but that I had poured my whole self in almost from the day I met you, and no matter what, that's where I would remain. I said I wasn't marrying you because of your surgery or my citizenship... I was marrying you because you're where I belong.”

Her eyes moved over his face. “Is that cheesy enough for you?”

Swallowing, he nodded, unable to speak as he held her to him once more and rocked ever so gently.

'Thank you,' he said in his mind, lifting his gaze up to the ceiling as if he could feel the God he'd so often blamed for everything looking down at him. *'Thank you for her... thank you for all of it.'*

He tried to remember, based solely on her accounting of it, his own experience of the same day... but the memories wouldn't be dragged up so easily. And that was okay...

perfection required nothing more than what he had right there in his arms right that moment.

“You done having your weird moment now?” she yawned, her body growing heavier against him as she reached for sleep. “I don’t want to be all tired when we get to our island tomorrow. I’ve been waiting forever to see if that stupid little shelter is still standing on the beach... and if that dress you love so much is still inside it.”

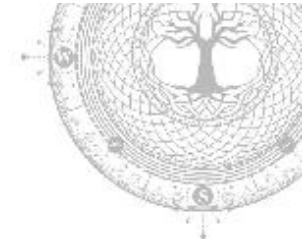
Pretending not to be surprised by their destination, he kissed the top of her head and lay down with her still tucked tightly against him. “I’m much better now,” he whispered, embedding his nose and lips in her hair to let her scent surround him. “Much... much better.”

Maria was his wife...

She’d married him at the courthouse like they’d originally planned... Just before his surgery... But... she’d changed her mind about the court house after seeing how deeply his altered memories had affected him...

Had his memories even been changed to stand in the way?

And if they hadn’t... what else was different?



Chapter Fifty

Cecelia

“Mommy, wake up. It’s morning.”

I’d been dreaming of her again, I knew, but her voice was so very real, it was hard to face the inevitable consciousness that was pulling me toward it. I wanted to bury myself beneath the blanket and stay right there with her indefinitely.

“Mommy,” she said again, “you said we could make pancakes.”

I wondered if I could remain in that half-sleep just a little longer... just to hear a few more words.

The mattress I lay on dipped beside me, and the memory of the night I’d spent with Juan surfaced to force the trance of sleep to fall away.

I was all-too-aware of the sunlight on my closed eyelids, the smell of saltwater nearby, and the steady forward momentum of... not a submarine, but a ship...

I was on a ship...

“Mommy.” The word was barely more than a breath, a soft secret whispered just for me. I felt the almost imperceptible movement of her breath as it sent strands of my hair dancing across my cheek.

Blinking against the bright intrusion of morning, my gaze settled on her, and my heart caught. Those eyes—shaped like mine with a captivating palette of blues and green—were fringed by the most delicate of lashes. A constellation of freckles sat just below them, playful and endearing. Her blond ringlets, kissed by the sun, cascaded around her face like a golden halo, framing her youthful smile.

“Maddy...” My trembling voice felt foreign to my ears. Reaching out, my fingers grazed her soft cheek, half-expecting her to dissipate into the morning air, like the remnants of a beautiful dream. But she didn’t.

She was real.

“Maddy?” I said again, sitting up suddenly.

“Good morning!” she beamed, rising up on her knees to present a smile that was missing a front tooth. “Can we go make pancakes now?” She pointed to a rectangular window where a soft ray of sunlight was streaming in over our two small beds. “I waited for it to be light out this time.”

Where the hell was I? How did I get there? Had Bennet died? And if so, what reality had I returned to? I didn’t recognize the room or the bed or even the nightgown my daughter was wearing.

My daughter...

“Maddy...” I said again, blinking over and over to be certain I was actually awake.

She remained there on the bed, her cherubic face momentarily clouded with concern, pulling a stray piece of hair over her lips in a gesture I remembered so fondly. “Mommy, what’s wrong?”

If she was here... where was Juan? Where was I?

I shook my head in an attempt to clear it. Scanning the small room, it seemed familiar... its paneled walls and fabrics similar to what I’d seen on Bud’s yacht... but my letter had said nothing about Maddy being on it when I woke there. Was I caught in some bizarre place between timelines?

Or... had Juan changed everything he promised he wouldn’t?

Maddy placed both palms on my cheeks and pulled my attention back to her. “Listen to me, momma!” she ordered, giggling as she smushed my face in her grip. “*You* said we could do pancakes this morning and I’ve been waiting *forever* for you to get up.”

The feel of her little hands on my skin and the familiar scents of crayons, baby shampoo, and the salty outdoors had my eyes welling with tears. I smiled despite them and wrapped both arms around her, dragging her into my lap so I could squeeze her tightly. It didn't matter what reality I'd been returned to if she was a part of it. "My little Madison! I love you so much, baby girl. So very very much!"

I kissed every inch of her hair, her forehead, and her bright pink cheeks before tucking her back in to my chest to rock her... and smell her... and simply soak up the shape of her tiny figure against me.

"I love you too, mama," she grunted, patting my shoulder impatiently. "Are you gonna' get us dressed so we can go cook soon?"

"In just a second," I hummed, resting my cheek against her head and lavishing in the feel of those soft little curls against my skin. I'd dreamt of her so many times and somehow forgot just how soft her hair was; forgot how tiny and warm she was—forgot the way her elbows and knees seemed to jab my softer spots even when she was perfectly still. How was I surviving without her? How could I have survived if I hadn't woken up right there with her? "I just need to hug you for a little bit this morning."

I had no idea what had happened or how I was holding my daughter, where the memories were or what I might find when I did venture out of the room, but right then, I didn't care. I couldn't imagine ever choosing a life she wasn't a part of... and since I'd retained my memories of Juan, I suspected I'd find him as the source of this joyful moment... wherever he was.

Big, fat tears spilled over my cheeks, and I wasn't sure if I was laughing or sobbing. It had been an odd thing to be living in a childless life with all the memories of motherhood. I was a mother again... I'd see my baby grow up, not as a visitor, but as a part of every single moment, and whatever career I'd sacrificed to have that opportunity was well worth it.

"After breakfast," she said, her voice muffled against my chest, "you want to play hide and seek with us in the crew's quarters?"

Sniffing, I nodded. “I will do *anything* you want to do today.”

“*Anything?*” she echoed, evidently considering her options.

Unable to handle the amount of joy that little shift in her voice brought me, several more warm tears made trails down my cheeks. “Anything, honey. Whatever you want to do, I’m all yours.”

“Can we play pirates when we get to the island?”

I chuckled. “Sure.”

“Can pop-pop play too?”

I had no clue who pop-pop was, but I laughed all the same. “If pop-pop wants to play with us, then I don’t see why not.”

“What if I want to eat chocolate ice-cream for dinner?” she continued. “Or s’mores?”

“If we have all the stuff and you eat a good lunch, then sure.”

She wiggled out of my arms to kneel in front of me, her big eyes wide with excitement. “Can we get dressed, momma? Please? I’m too excited now to have the best day ever!”

And in that heartbeat, despite all the unknowns and uncertainties that waited outside our bedroom door, I knew with absolute clarity that it already was the best day ever.



Both of us showered and dressed in comfy shorts and tank tops, I still hadn’t developed any memories of the new timeline, and not wanting to worry her, I stopped in front of the door and extended my hand. “You lead the way, baby. It’s your day.”

Her grin was infectious, and when she placed her tiny hand in mine, I couldn’t help but trace each finger, counting them as I’d done so frequently when she was born, a part of me worried I’d wake again soon without her.

She opened the door with exaggerated excitement, bouncing from toe to toe as she hauled me out into a foyer lined

with closed doors and a set of softly illuminated stairs.

A hint of a memory attempted to surface—a memory of walking down those steps with Maddy in my arms—but I hardly had time to delve into it as I was dragged up the stairs by my tiny offspring.

We exited the stairwell to a familiar deck, immaculately decorated with a dining table and chairs, a seating area, and a vast blue ocean and sky surrounding us through the array of floor to ceiling windows encasing it all. Not to be stalled, Maddy towed me the opposite direction, down a small hallway to the galley. This room, I knew well. I recognized the granite and light wood instantly. Terrence and I had regularly snuck to and from it to collect food on my old timeline.

Was it my old timeline? Was I living in my new one or was I just suspended in between? Was Terrence with me? Was I dead? Or was I dreaming?

Maddy hopped up onto a barstool at the counter and swiveled in her seat. “I want chocolate in mine.”

“Chocolate for breakfast *and* dinner?” I tittered, circling around the opposite side of the counter and scratching my head as I attempted to get my bearings.

If I was on Bud’s ship and it was still February 28th on this side of the change, then were we headed to the storm? Who was with us? Was Maria alive? Was Anna?

The jangling of a collar and running feet pulled my attention to the doorway where a giant, fluffy, black and tan dog skidded into the galley to lick Maddy’s feet.

She giggled wildly and hopped off the barstool to fling her arms around the beast’s neck. “Morning Hank!”

Hank... I frowned as I attempted to recall who the dog belonged to, staring blankly at the two of them as they rolled onto the floor in a mess of flailing limbs and kisses.

The sight seemed familiar, like the memories were just beneath the surface... but just before I could grab onto them, a voice bounced across the walls around me...

“Good morning, little Madison!”

I knew that voice... it was almost a carbon copy of the voice of the only man I'd ever loved... It could belong to no one else but his father.

Juan Josef strolled into the galley wearing a simple tan polo—perfectly pressed—with a pair of loose dark slacks and loafers. If it weren't for his voice, I hardly would've recognized him at all.

It wasn't the more modern attire that threw me off, but his age. His once salt and pepper hair was now almost entirely white, both on his head and in his beard, and the lines around his eyes and mouth were deepened... How many years had he spent traveling? He seemed so much older than I thought he'd be... And if he was that much older... how old were his sons?

Leaning against the doorframe with a cup of tea, he grinned at my daughter as she tilted her face—still being licked by the dog—up to him and giggled. “Morning, pop-pop!”

I gaped confusedly at him as his gaze slowly found its way to me. He smiled and stood to one side, allowing my sister to whirl past him nearly as quickly as the dog had. She knelt and scooped my daughter into a tight bear hug, never minding the dog that proceeded to lick both their cheeks.

“Maddy,” she purred, “oh, I couldn't wait to say good morning to you, my sweet girl! It felt like I was waiting forever for you to get up! Good morning! How are you?”

“Morning, A.J.,” Maddy grunted with a giggle, those bony elbows and knees going to work in her attempt to break free. “Why is everybody hugging me so hard today?” She frowned up at me, scrunching her nose as she pushed away A.J.'s kisses. “Today's not my birthday... Right, momma?”

I grinned down at her. “No, baby, but you just look so cute this morning, we can't help it.”

Straining to keep A.J. from pulling her right back in, she shook her head. “I look the same as always. Can A.J. and pop-pop make pancakes with us?”

“If they want to,” I said, meeting A.J.'s watering eyes as she stood. “Do you want to make pancakes with us, butthead?”

Hopping around with the dog, Maddy giggled. “Yeah, *butthead*, make pancakes with us... and then we’re gonna play hide and seek and pirates and eat ice cream!”

“Well, that sounds just lovely,” A.J. beamed, “but it’s getting a little cramped in here, and I think there’s someone else who’d like to make pancakes with you instead.”

It was a funny thing to watch my daughter raise her chin and cross her arms... So much attitude washed suddenly over her, I couldn’t help but laugh. “Not Liam,” she insisted. “I’m mad at him.”

Liam... Anna’s son... Anna was alive on this boat somewhere and my heartbeat quickened at the thought of meeting the woman I’d heard so much about.

“Liam?” Juan echoed, raising his nearly white brow as he sipped his tea. “What’d Liam do now?”

“He stole the purple crayon yesterday and hid it,” she spat, her little fingers curling into fists against her crossed arms. “We only have four crayons left and he knows purple is me and Izzy’s favorite. Mom said today is my day, and he doesn’t get to steal our favorite crayon and then have pancakes with me when it’s *my* day.”

Juan chuckled. “You’re right, we certainly can’t have a criminal in here spoiling all the fun, can we? Did he give it back to you or should me and Gigi go tie him up and demand he tell us where it is?”

I saw a slight sparkle of mischief appear in Maddy’s eye, but I was proud when she shook her head. “No, he gave it back.” She glanced at the dog, then back up at him. “He smushed the top of it real bad though so I’m still mad about *that*.”

“Well,” Juan said, again taking a slow sip of his tea to hide his amusement, “lucky for you, Liam’s not the one that wants to make pancakes. J.J. was wondering if he could join you.”

I glanced at my sister, and her expression told me J.J. was *exactly* who I suspected he meant.

My heartbeat quickened.

“J.J. wants to make pancakes?” Maddy asked, her eyes widening as she looked at me. “Does he know mom’s in here too?”

I thought about my letter and wondered how much of the words I’d written still held true in this new adjusted version of time. Had I still chased him around Tahiti attempting to flirt? And had he still avoided me the way I’d described it?

“He knows,” Juan said, winking at me as he knelt in front of her. “See... the thing about boys is we do things sometimes to make the girls we like *think* we don’t like them. Some boys steal crayons or pull a girl’s hair, others will just be mean to the girl and ignore her when she tries to talk to him... If you ask me, I think J.J. is getting a little tired of ignoring your mama—especially since he doesn’t get to see as much of you when he’s doing it. What do you think? Would you let him be a part of your day?”

It was strange to hear him speak so informally... strange to see such a hardened man alter his voice to be so soft for my baby.

Maddy looked up at me. “He’s not *really* mean, momma... he just pretends to be. He’s funny when you’re not around... and he does magic. Would it be okay if he helped us? I’ll tell him to be nice. I could probably make him do magic if you want?”

Suppressing the urge to burst into tears at my daughter’s excited defense of the man I’d fallen so deeply in love with, I nodded. “I suppose that’d be alright... I mean... if he can do magic, he can’t be all bad. Right?”

“Would you like me to show you a trick, Cecelia?”

There was no mistaking his voice... It rumbled through me to make my knees shake, and I turned toward the door just as he appeared in its frame, surprised to find he wasn’t several years older, but almost exactly the same.

He wore a loose black shirt with sleeves that reached his elbows, a pair of dark jeans, and his nearly black hair was cut shorter, swept back just above his ears.

There were no new lines in his face... no graying in the hair near his temples... his sage colored eyes still retained that youthful spark, though his size contrasted against the doorframe was as imposing as it'd ever been.

He was beautiful... and I wanted to sprint across the galley and leap up into those arms... the same arms I'd spent the entire night prior inside... making love a thousand different ways before I'd woken here... in my very own version of heaven... a heaven, I was certain, he'd bent time to create.

Clearing my throat, I straightened, remembering my daughter was watching. "What kind of trick?"

"The kind a man spends a good year or so thinking about before he attempts it."

A year... it had been at least a year since he'd experienced that same night I still felt lingering on my skin.

Maddy climbed up onto the barstool with a grunt. "Is it the one you told me not to tell her about? The one with the—"

"It is," he assured her, cutting her off before she could give away his secrets. "Cecelia, will you hand me that towel there?"

He sauntered into the room and Maddy bounced excitedly. "This is a really good trick, mama. You're gonna' love it."

A dimple appeared in his cheek as his eyes slid to hers. "If she doesn't, do you think she has any favorite crayons *I* might steal?"

She swiveled from side to side in her seat in thought. "You could steal the green one."

"The *green* one is her favorite?" he asked as I handed him the dishtowel he'd asked for.

"Well... no... but she uses it sometimes and it's Liam's favorite..."

He breathed out a laugh. "Well, I suppose if I must resort to thievery, I shall consider the green one. Now..." He wiggled his fingers over the towel in preparation of his trick.

A.J. and Juan Sr. had moved to the doorway, but both lingered there in the corridor, likely just as curious as I was for

whatever he was about to do next.

“I need something of yours,” he continued, inspecting the length of me. “Something to create it with, you see... Magic always needs a creator...”

“I gave him my sock,” Maddy giggled. “He gave it back after.”

Chuckling, I looked down at my body, clothed in casual attire that didn't belong to me, then at my hands... missing the ring I'd grown so accustomed to wearing. I reached for the necklace I'd kept so close to my heart, finding it gone as well since the ring that'd been on it was presently glistening on Juan's pinky. At last, I touched my earlobe, smiling when I felt the diamond stud, and unfastened it. “You promise you'll give it back?” I asked teasingly.

“I promise,” he answered as I dropped it into his palm.

Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out a folded piece of paper and presented it to me. “I need you to look over this closely to be certain there is nothing upon its surface.”

His fingers grazed mine as I took it from him, and I saw the longing in his eyes as I returned the hint of a touch.

“See anything?” he asked, winking at Maddy.

I unfolded the paper and inspected both sides. “No. Perfectly clean.”

“Good,” he said, “now fold it in half. Then fold that in half and place it here on the counter so you'll know you were the last to touch it before it was changed.”

I did as instructed, smiling like an idiot the entire time.

Maddy leaned in as he placed my earring atop the folded paper, then draped the towel over both, his voice shifting into something far more theatrical. “The Aztecs and the Paiute are distant relatives, you know. They share many of the same beliefs, though they've varied with time... The Aztecs, for example, believed that an animal was chosen for an individual at birth, and it would accompany them throughout their life's journey, presenting itself exclusively to the person it belonged to. The Paiute, on the other hand, believed that one's spirit

animal would reveal itself, not only to its owner, but to those who loved the one it belonged to.”

He extended his hand, palm up over the towel in invitation.

My cheeks burning from the smile that’d been there since I woke, I slid my hand into his... the familiar callouses of his palm a welcome scratch against my own.

“Imagine, Cecelia, your animal’s presence, its qualities, and how it resonates with your spirit. In doing so, you are inviting your spirit animal to reveal itself on the page beneath us... and if you are loved, then the ones who love you will see it too.”

I was like a child, in awe of him in every way, knowing exactly what would appear on that page when the towel was removed.

“Close your eyes” he whispered, his fingers curling around mine. “And tell me... can you see your animal?”

Letting my eyelids close, I nodded. “I can.”

“And what is it?”

My grin was possibly larger than it’d ever been. “It’s a dove.”

“Well then,” he said, slowly letting go of his grip, “open your eyes and see who it presents itself to so you can know who you are most loved by.”

I hurriedly pulled the towel away to find the paper folded just as it’d been with my diamond earring sitting atop it.

Dumbstruck, I plucked it up and unfolded it, gaping at the image of the bird in its center.

“How did you do that?” I breathed, inspecting every last detail of the intricately drawn dove before I let Maddy take it to do the same. “That’s amazing.”

“I told you he was good,” Maddy giggled, holding the paper between each of her hands and swiveling back and forth in her chair as she stared at it. “I can see the dove, so that means I love you.” She tilted her head just to the side of the page to look at him. “Can you see it too, J.J.?”

He pursed his lips and leaned over the counter as she presented it to him. “Well now, that’s very strange... I *do* see it. What do you suppose that means?”

Her smile grew wider. “I guess it means you love mom too...”

“I guess I do...”

She continued to swivel in her chair, studying the drawing in depth. “Can I keep this?”

His eyes never left mine as he smiled and said, “Of course.”

“I’m gonna go put it in our room with mine,” she informed us, happily hopping off her stool, the action reanimating the large dog so he scurried up onto his feet alongside her. “You can start the pancakes if you want, but I want to pour them. Okay?”

“Okay, baby,” I whispered, smiling up at Juan as she and Hank as well as my sister and Juan Sr. disappeared beyond view... leaving just the two of us... alone...

“How long did it take?” I asked as he moved around the counter. “To do all this? How long has it been for you?”

“Too long,” he breathed, not allowing me to so much as inhale before his lips were over mine... before I was up on my toes and that almond scent was once again a part of my own... before that familiar warmth of his kiss was making a path through me, igniting every vein in my body with the same heat.

“How did you do all this?” I managed, both my hands balled up in the fabric of his t-shirt, pulling it down just enough to reveal the black ink on his chest... ink that was slightly different than before...

“My father did most of it,” he said, watching as I pushed his shirt up to inspect the markings.

While the lines were more defined and the ink was darker, it was the same in many ways... In the center was the face of Tezcatlipoca, the warrior meant to give him strength and balance as a father and protector... The patterned blocks that represented Elizabeth and their children still wound around it in a circle, morphing into the serpent that climbed over his bicep...

But around the original design... there were doves... tons of them... a border of them flew around the circle, their silhouetted shapes capturing various stages of flight... they too flowed together into the serpent, its scales softened by the wings that formed them... I kept his shirt pulled upward as I moved to his back and found, where there was once the last pieces of the snake—it's head coiled round to complete the circle—it instead curled itself around an arrow, at the top of which the final dove was seated, its wings spread wide.

Letting his shirt fall back downward, I moved back to the front of him and hastily kissed his lips. "Thank you," I breathed between each kiss. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"You'll still have me then?" he asked. "You'll still let me marry you the right way?"

"Of course I will," I said, staring up with that same awe I'd had when I pulled the towel away. "How? How did you do it so I could have you both?"

He took a deep breath as he combed both palms over my hair. "I told you that letter had instructions. I went back to that party at Ohio State after I'd left you in the hotel... I gave him a few more shots of tequila, made sure he was too drunk to remember me taking him up to your room... and I let the original history create itself. It was the hardest thing I've ever done."

"And Samuel Van Thorpe?" I asked. "Who was he?"

He watched his fingers move over my cheek. "Maddy's son... your grandson... In another echo—one I remembered not too long ago—I went to the future to give him that letter... so I could know when I left that room, you would wake my wife once more."

I recalled the way I'd felt upon looking at Samuel's face, that hint of recognition. I'd put it together during our last night together that it was Owen he resembled... and it'd terrified me that his presence might mean I'd wake without Juan.

"But... Charlotte said he was looking for someone else when he found them... and the Van Thorpe family... they didn't become all powerful because they were manipulating time?"

He slid his hand into mine, turning them so I could see the TAO mark on his wrist. “There’s no such thing as the Van Thorpe family. The name itself is a cover for TAO. Travelers use the name whenever they’re adrift. I instructed Samuel to go to that storm to meet my father and brother so he would find Charlotte and Chase Miller instead and fish them out of the water.”

“Oh,” I breathed. “So... the painting doesn’t exist? They’re safe then?”

He grinned. “Oh, the painting exists, but... there are a few small changes... In it, she wears a *blue* dress and she and Chase are seated with a large Shawnee man. History no longer marks it as being painted in Philadelphia, but in Stafford, Connecticut. My father purchased the original painting several years ago and donated it to the Federal Prison Camp in Alderson... where Charlotte’s mother is finishing out her time.”

My heart might’ve floated right out of my chest. “How did you get me here... on this yacht?” I asked, my eyes watering as I looked between each of his.

He laughed. “I told you before I would kidnap you... and I did... well, Dario did... You were pretty angry at him for it.”

“What about Terrence?” I asked. “And Jazz?”

“He’s *still* angry at him for it. But Terrence’s wife is just as she was... We made sure you received an invitation to her graduation so that the two of you would still go out to celebrate it. I am sorry I could not make it your graduation as well.”

“I’m not. Where is he?”

“He and Dario had a few loose ends to tie up,” he informed me. “Pierre Beaumarchais needed to be encouraged to make a certain purchase I promised would be made a second time...”

I leapt up to wrap my arms around him and kiss him again and again. “I love you.”

He smiled, working his fingers along the length of my spine. “I have waited so long to hear you say those words, *mi paloma*.”

I tightened my hold. “I will say them as much as you’d like, Joseph... Over and over, all day, every day, I will say them to you as often as you need to hear them, and I will mean them more every single time I say it. How can I ever make you as happy as you’ve made me?”

“You already have,” he said, pressing his forehead to mine. “That morning you woke up from your sickbed and came to my room, I knew my life had just started, and there was nothing in this world that could make me sad again. You told me once you would go through that storm forward and backward as many times as you needed in order to have this life with me... I failed to tell you I was willing to do the same... although, I didn’t have to go through it quite as many times as I thought.”

“What about Tomás?” I asked. “And Elizabeth... and Alistair and Eleanor and... well... everyone?”

He combed his palm over my hair and nodded. “Every one of them has been accounted for, thanks to my father.”

“Your father?”

“Aye.” He smiled. “He said he’d studied my chart and decided Dario and I had given him enough of our time—said he owed it to us both to return whatever time he could. It was him that went through the storms over and over to ensure everything went as it should have so I could be here with you that much sooner.”

I raised my brows and glanced at the open galley door. “That’s why he’s so much older?”

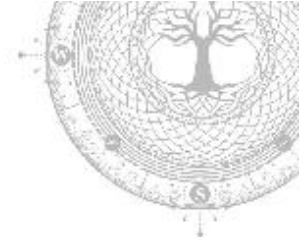
His eyes remained on my face. “It turns out there was quite a bit of work to be done. I was surprised, myself, to find them so much older when I arrived here.”

“*Them?* Dario went with him?”

Breathing out a laugh, he shook his head. “Our mother... She said he promised her the whole world once and she was going to have it.”

“Mom!” Maddy called, her rapidly approaching steps forcing us apart. “Liam stole *my* spirit animal! I had it hidden

away in my very own secret place and now it's gone! Pop-pop!
Tie him up and make him tell you where he put it!"



Chapter Fifty-One

Alaina

Sitting on a sofa on the topmost deck, I watched as Maria and Chris's tiny island came into view on the horizon. It had already been one of the most memorable mornings of my life. To be reunited with Anna and Maria and Maddy... to witness Bruce and Anna's long-awaited moment together... to see Jack and the twins' relationship stronger than ever once they woke... and to know we were going home... I couldn't imagine a more lovely morning than this.

"That's *it*?" Kyle scoffed from the railing beside us, bouncing Matavi against his shoulder as he stared disbelievingly ahead.

"That's it," Maria said beside me, tucking Zachary into her hip as she stood up from the sofa with a grunt. "Sixty-three days we stayed there. No water... barely any food... his head busted open and me with a broken ankle. You all walk around acting like you're big and bad because you had it rough in that paradise of yours... Wait until you see the hell we survived."

Chris laughed, joining her near the rail to place his palm against the small of her back. "We spent the whole night in the water clinging to a single life vest. Couldn't see anything in that storm... we were drowning, both of us... and just when we couldn't take it anymore, the sky lightened just enough for us to see our saving grace. That wasn't hell, baby... that was a Godsend."

She glanced up at him, covering Zachary's ears as she said, "We shit our brains out drinking rotten water on the very first night... You call that a Godsend?"

Jim howled with laughter where he and Lilly were perched against the far rail. "Now, why the hell ain't none of us ever

heard that story?! Beanstalk, ye' ought to know better than to drink rancid water! What was yuns thinkin'?"

Chris kissed the top of Maria's head and turned just enough to glower at Jim. "I was *thinking* I'd just ingested half the damn ocean after drowning in it all night and I was more dehydrated than I'd ever been. I was *thinking* it was a hundred degrees and I'd sweat out what little water was left in my body. And I was *thinking*, if I was going to have any chance of getting a fire started to signal *your* raft, I needed to drink something before I passed out."

A slow, rumbling laugh seeped out from deep inside Jim's belly. "And then ye' shit out every single drop ye' drank and still didn't have no fire..."

Maria snorted, bouncing Zachary as she grinned up at Chris. "It's not his fault. His brain was damaged."

Chris gaped at her. "*You* told me to drink it!"

"¡Sí! Exactly!" She shook her head. "What the hell do I know about surviving on an island?"

"Did I miss it?" a woman asked, turning all our attention to the sky lounge doors, where Juan Josef stepped out beside a woman who couldn't have been mistaken for anyone but Gloria.

She was just as old as Juan now was, her long red locks streaked with white and silver. Her face had deep set wrinkles, but her eyes were mine... It was like looking into a mirror to the future... but all that Gloria energy I saw coming from her photos was right there radiating from her excited expression

"No, *mi reina*," Juan answered softly, pointing to the horizon ahead. "It's just there."

She smacked his arm. "I know I didn't miss the island, you dope! Did I miss the *stories* about it when it first came into view?" She looked over at Chris and Maria. "The stories are my favorite part... I couldn't wait to hear about how yours started."

"Oh, them's just gettin' started," Jim beamed, raising his coffee cup in the direction of Chris. "Maria's just tellin' us 'bout how Beanstalk over there shit his pants on the first day."

Chris cleared his throat, reaching into Maria's arms to cover Zachary's ears for her. "I did not shit *my* pants. She did."

For the next half hour, the deck became alight with laughter as Chris and Maria recounted, in detail, their first several days on the island. By the time we were close enough to drop the anchor, all our cheeks were reddened from our smiles, our bellies aching from laughing so long.

Maria and I, along with Fetia, opted to escort the babies to shore in one of the dinghies, while Cece, Anna, and Magna escorted Iz, Maddy, and Liam in the other. Everyone else opted to swim... particularly when Gloria informed them that it was to be a race.

With one hand on the motor's tiller, I watched Maria gaze out at the ocean around us as we sped across it. "He swam all this," she said breathlessly. "All night long, he held us up, then swam all of this ocean to carry me to that shore. I shouldn't have said it was hell." Her lip trembled as she met my eyes. "How do you stop the hormones from making you say mean things all the time? I think I'm giving him nightmares because of all my moods lately. The nightmare he had last night woke him up in tears."

I smiled at her, knowing exactly what those tears must've been for him... to wake up beside her... to know he'd lost nothing... that both the woman he loved and the child inside her were alive and well. "Maria, love, you're allowed to say mean things when you've got a human growing inside you. Chris isn't the type of person to take that personally... and if he's having nightmares because of it, he'll manage. Just like you'll manage the nausea, heartburn, cramping, farting, and swollen everything that comes with motherhood."

"And the pushing," Fetia added with a scowl like I'd never seen on her stunning features, "push, push, push, they all say over and over with smiling faces... and you pushing out all your insides, you push your whole body outside you, but still they keep smiling and say *puuuush!*" She made a dismissive sound in her throat. "Let him cry at your mean things. He never push." She rocked Matavi against her and glanced out at the others where they swam behind us. "When I do again, I will say *more*

mean things. I will remember him saying ‘*puuuuush*’ over me and smiling at my insides.”

Both Maria and I exchanged glances, then exploded into hysterics at the unusual outburst. Fetia had never seemed more human than right then, and I think we were both equally relieved to know she was just as real as we were.

We were still in tears when I killed the motor and steered us to the beach, stepping out to drag the little inflatable boat up onto the sand and get my first glimpse of Chris’s experience.

“Wow,” I said as I took in the small atoll, turning back to hoist Cecelia up into my arms. “You weren’t kidding. It’s tiny.”

Maria had insisted she needed the practice and refused to let go of Zachary, hugging him to her as she crawled awkwardly out of the boat. “Tiny but perfect,” she said as she stood and took it all in. “It’s... so much more beautiful than I remember... You see those rocks there... that is where we tried to trap fish... and up there,” she pointed to a small shaded area, “that’s where our shelter was... you can see a few pieces of bamboo still.” She grinned and spun around, her eyes wide. “Right there is where we came ashore... and just there,” she pointed down the beach. “That’s where he went running naked into the water. Ay, he was so angry because I ruined his pants... and then I was teasing him with the soap...”

She took the lead, walking us up to the camp and telling stories of their survival... the crab, the fish, rain that didn’t come and rain that did.

We were just making our way back to the sand when the swimmers arrived, panting, but Jim, with his newfound brawn lifted his arms in victory as he was the first to the shore.

“That’s right, I won! How’s that taste, Hoss? Ay, Beanstalk, ye’ better flap ‘em big ole’ arms ye’ got. Junior’s whoopin’ your ass!” He cupped his hands around his lips and called out to Lilly who’d given up on the competition to backstroke and lagged far behind the others. “Ay! How’s that body workin’ out for ye’ now, Princess?” He cackled. “Swim, baby, swim! By the time ye’ get here, we’ll be headin’ back out!”

Shaking his head and snickering, he turned toward us, checking out his own muscles as he made his way over. “Man, I’m lookin’ good. Yuns see this?” He flexed. “I tell ye’, when we get home, I’m gonna’ have to get me a big ole’ stick to fight off all the women’s gonna’ want a piece of me.”

I chuckled. “I think Lilly will handle them just fine.”

“Ay, ‘for she gets here,” he glanced out to the water and back, “*in about an hour or so*, I wanted to ask ye’... You think there’s any way in hell we could maybe talk some of the families into relocatin’? I mean... I ain’t got no family but yuns and Beau, but the rest of ye’... Well, we all been dead for years far as they know... and if ye’ come back askin’ for some of ‘em to live close together, you think they’d do it? Cause... I don’t know that she can live without a single one of ye’ close by... I don’t know if I can neither.”

Maria nodded, lifting Zachary to kiss the top of his head. “I don’t have any other family either. I think Bruce doesn’t have any left... and Kyle already said he will go where we go... So that leaves what? Magna, Anna, and Jack’s families in L.A., Lilly’s in New York, and the rest in Chicago?”

Jim sighed. “Spread out all across the dang map. And I cain’t stand the idea of us bein’ so far apart. Neither can she.” Chuckling, he looked at me. “Ye’ know she was up late the other night talkin’ ‘bout how her daddy and your momma both been single too long... plottin’ how she was gonna set ‘em up so we could at least get her family to live close to yuns.”

I couldn’t help the laugh that burst from me. “Unless Lilly’s father is Mr. Darcy reincarnate, I don’t believe that’ll work out too well for her. My mother does not do being ‘*set up*’ nor does she set herself up due to her unrealistic expectations of men.”

He grinned. “I told her that wouldn’t work, but I’d like to see if we can avoid the set-ups altogether... If we got eight years to live in that future ‘for we start movin’ around... maybe we could find a place for us all to spend ‘em together.”

“We talked about that this morning,” Anna announced, stepping in between me and Maria. “Liam’s too attached to Izzy and Maddy now for me to ever separate them. Bruce and I are

going to Chicago. Magna's going to rent a place in Chicago too so she can bounce back and forth between there and L.A. It's not too far from New York."

"Me and Lilly ain't goin' to New York. We're goin' wherever the rest of yuns go. Sounds like Chicago's lookin' like a winner."

I watched as Jack made his way across the beach with Kyle, his upper body—definitely bulkier—glistening with the water that rolled over it. Where would we go, I wondered? I couldn't just expect that he wanted to live near my family when his own was so far away. Perhaps we could rent in both, like Magna. I wanted him to reconnect with his sister, and to be closer to his mother after all this time they'd been estranged.

"How's my dust taste?" Jim teased as Jack joined our circle, smacking him hard on the shoulder and winking at Kyle. "We's just talkin' 'bout where we're gonna' live. Sounds of it, most of us is gonna' be shacked up in Chicago for a while."

Jack smiled. "I was hoping for that. I don't know that I'd be able to blend in with the locals without the rest of you."

"Wait," I said, adjusting Cecelia against my hip where she was wiggling to get to him, "we haven't officially decided that yet. Your family's in California. I was thinking we could rent between the two."

"We'll visit," he assured me, taking Cecelia into his drenched arms. "*Often*. But while we've got a chance to give these babies a home, they'll have one. You're closer to your family than I am mine. It was always going to be Chicago, Red. Or... maybe an hour or two outside it where it's a little quieter."

Cece and Juan Jr., both of them breathless, drenched and grinning, slogged through the sand toward us, greeting Maddy halfway where she inserted herself between them to take both their hands. It seemed so natural, the three of them... like it'd always been meant to be this way... that same feeling of home washing over me as I watched them cross the beach.

"What about you guys?" Jack asked. "We're all gonna' go home to Chicago for a while. You coming too?"

Cece met my eyes, running a hand over the top of Maddy's fuzzy blond curls before she darted off to chase Izzy up the beach. "I wanted to ask you and Chris about that. I was wondering if I could buy your old house from you? Maddy really loved living there... so did I. If you were planning to move into it, don't even worry about it... I just thought... well, it's too perfect to sell to a stranger."

I grinned as I thought back to all the years Chris had spent perfecting the home I'd told him I'd dreamed of. "It really is a perfect house. I wouldn't feel right living in it now... but it wouldn't be right to sell it to some stranger. It's really not mine to sell though. Chris put all the work into it. It's his to do whatever he wants with."

Maria huffed. "I don't want to live in a house he built for you. I want one we build together... for us."

I watched Chris and Juan Josef where they stood together down the beach, deep in conversation as they waited for Gloria, Bud, Bruce, and Lilly to reach the shore. I imagined they were rehashing the bar fight that had brought us here... filling in the blanks in his memory and preparing for whatever might come next.

"Do you see what I mean about the hormones?" Maria asked no one in particular. "That sounded so much meaner out loud than it did in my head. I can't be spouting off at the mouth like this all the time. He built that house and I should love it... Shouldn't I?"

"You *should* want something that's your own," I said. "That's not hormones, that's human nature. I wouldn't want to live in a house Jack built for some other woman."

"Me neither," Cece said, looking up at Juan. "That would be so weird, I think."

Fetia nodded. "You push. Remember? He can build whatever you want."

Laughing at that, my gaze moved back to the far side of the beach, where Juan and Chris had turned their attention to the horizon to the east.

There was a ship heading toward us... far far out there... a big one...

“It’s Dario, Phil, and Terrence,” Cece whispered close, sliding her hand in mine. “There were a few slaves we set free in Panama on the old timeline. Juan promised me they’d see the same fate on this one... he also promised you wouldn’t wake up in the same place Phil did.”

Smiling, I whispered back, “You know, mom’s going to love him.”

She squeezed my hand. “Tomorrow night we’ll go through that storm and mom’s going to have both her girls back at the same time. She’s going to die of happiness... especially when you show up with the twins... and Jack friggin’ Volmer.”

I laid my head against her shoulder and sighed. “And the ability to travel time... you know, we *could* send her to the Scottish highlands in search of her William Wallace.”

Cece snorted, resting her head against mine. “Oh, but she’d find something wrong with him in the first couple hours... We’d end up in the 19th century shortly after looking for her Count of Monte Cristo... and he’d make a single chauvinist remark to send us off to another time... and another... and another... until maybe she goes home and Lilly’s father doesn’t seem half bad.”

I chuckled. “God, I’ve missed her so much.”

“Me too, and I’ve barely been gone compared to you. I’m telling her everything, you know... We made the rules so we can break them... and mom deserves to know every detail that kept both her daughters gone this long.”

I smiled. “She’s the only one that would believe us... and who’s she gonna’ tell? She doesn’t like anyone but us... I think we should make a whole night of it. We’ll snuggle up in mom’s bed, like we did when we were little, and we’ll just stay up talking all night... giving her every single detail exactly the way it happened.”

“She’ll love that far more than William Wallace.”

My heart warmed at the thought of telling mom all the ways she’d been with me the entire time... her voice always

alive in my mind. To tell her about the island... about the pregnancy and Captain Cook and Juan Josef and TAO... I couldn't wait for her to hear our stories...

"It's about dang time!" Jim hollered as Lilly finally stepped foot on the shore. "I's just about to come in there after ye'!"

"Shut up!" she shouted back, looping her arm around Bud's as they strolled up the beach toward us. "I was spending time with my grandpa!"

"Come on, Beanstalk, we's all waitin' on you to give us a tour!"



That night, we all sat in the sand around a roaring fire with our hearts content after a day spent playing pirates and hide-and-seek, listening to each of Chris and Maria's island stories, then sharing a few of our own.

Dario had anchored the larger ship farther out, and he, Phil, and Terrence joined us just as the flames had come to life.

We'd brought ingredients with us to shore—upon Bruce's insistence—and the smells of roasted pork, garlic and herbs, and butter made my stomach dance.

As he began to hand out plates, Magna stood with a small basket, a wide grin on her face as she reached in to pull out a small pink flower. "In the islands," she said, "we all wear the tiaré when we are celebrating. And tonight... we celebrate our good luck—surviving, finding ourselves and each other, and sitting down together for one last meal before we go home."

Just as she had the first time, she moved around the fire, handing a flower to each of us to be secured behind our ears.

"Was it left or right when ye' spoken for?" Jim asked, twisting his flower between his fingers.

"Left," she said handing one to Bruce and one to Anna, both of them grinning at each other as they shyly waited for the other to secure theirs first.

Laughing, Bruce positioned it on his left ear and raised a brow. Anna immediately put hers in the same position and leaned into his shoulder.

Liam, beside them, scrunched his nose at the flower. It was amazing how much he resembled Anna... but also us... as a group... like our time together had given us all a certain something that you could look at and see your family in.

“I’m not wearing a dumb flower,” Liam scoffed, glancing at Maddy and Izzy beside him where they both happily fixed theirs over their ears. “Flowers are for *girls*.”

“Ay!” Jim said, leaning forward to point at the pretty pink tiaré tucked behind his own left ear. “I ain’t no girl and I’m wearin’ it, ain’t I? Put your flower on and hush.”

Izzy smiled at Liam and Maddy leaned over her to stick out her tongue, the three of them looking like siblings where they sat with their legs out and their bare feet touching.

“She looks so happy,” Lilly said on a sigh, leaning into my shoulder as she watched Izzy. “Doesn’t she?”

Liam stuck his tongue right back out at Maddy, then tucked his flower behind his ear and signed something to Iz.

Izzy nodded in response and adjusted his flower.

“She looks like she’s having a wonderful childhood,” I whispered back. “One full of adventure and excitement and family. Could you imagine how much fun this would’ve been for us as children? The islands and the ships and the nights spent around a fire?”

Lilly shook her head. “I would’ve thought it was magical. I’m gonna keep making it that way. I’m gonna spend my whole life making sure that girl will always know magic.”

“All these babies will know far more than magic,” I said, my eyes moving between the three and over to Fetia where she held Matavi, then to Bud where he bounced Cecelia, then at last to Zachary where he’d fallen asleep hugging Jack’s knees. “We’re going to give them an extraordinary life.”

She nodded, adjusting the flower behind her ear. “And we’re going to have a pretty extraordinary life ourselves while

we do.”

“Eight years,” Jim said loudly, raising his small plastic cup. “Cheers to eight years of sittin’ on our asses before we get back out there and raise us some hell.”

The rest of us grabbed our plastic cups. Bruce and Anna had scrounged through the pantry of Bud’s well-stocked yacht, and they’d landed upon the perfect drink to serve with our dinner.

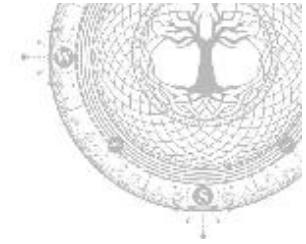
We all raised our drinks and echoed his cheers, and I hummed with content as the cherry sweetness of Dr. Pepper washed over my tastebuds.

It didn’t matter, right then, that any of us had a memory that was different from the one beside us... There was no past... no future... only the present... And the present was filled with the taste of cherries and the smell of garlic... the gentle sounds of the ocean kissing the shore, and family that would forever be bonded by the time that connected us.

Home was not on the other side of the storm we’d face the following night...

Home was my sister’s happiness and Chris’s health. It was Jim and Lilly bickering playfully while sneaking sweet whispers in the night. Home was the way Kyle would look at Feticia or Magna’s deep throaty laughter forcing everyone around her to smile in response. It was Jack talking in a sweet voice to the twins and Bud’s life lessons, Bruce’s joy as we all tasted a meal he’d slaved over and Anna’s silent pride as she witnessed him feeling it. It was Maria’s batted eyelashes and Izzy’s widened eyes as she read about Huckleberry Finn.

And I was finally home.



Epilogue

Alaina

“You nervous?” Jack whispered, taking my free hand in his.

Swallowing the nerves from my throat, I adjusted Zachary against my hip. “A little. Are you?”

“Oh, honey, I’m terrified.”

I glanced up at him where the moonlight cast a brilliant blue glow over his features. “Really?”

He nodded, kissing the top of Cecelia’s head. “Of course I am. There’s so much that could go wrong... especially with so many of us...”

Returning my gaze forward, I took a deep breath, squeezing his fingers in mine. “There’s a lot that can go right too. It’s gonna’ be fine, and I’ll be right beside you no matter what—”

“I told ye’ six Got damn times already, woman, I ain’t wearin’ that! Just leave it and come on ‘for I freeze my nuts off!”

Jack and I stopped, turning just in time to catch sight of Jim helping Lilly out of the passenger seat of their car. One hand on her oversized belly, she took his with the other, grunting as she slowly unfolded to peer around the snowy parking lot. “Oh, come on, Jimmy! They’re already in there! *Please?* Just for a little bit?”

“Sugar, ye’ can ask me six ways to Sunday, and the answer’s still gonna’ be no.”

“She got you a sweater too?” Jack called out.

Jim groaned, supporting Lilly with one arm as he closed the car door behind her. “Yes, Lordt help me! Whole way here, I ain’t heard ‘bout nothin’ else but that Got damn sweater... how Anna and Tiny are wearin’ ‘em and we should too... how she picked it out special just for me... and how it’s got *perfect lil’ palm trees on it that light up and it made her think of the island*... I don’t care if the Almighty himself come down and handed it to ye’ just for me, I ain’t wearin’ no stupid lookin’ Christmas sweater!”

I chuckled, turning toward the banquet hall as they caught up to our side. “Jack wouldn’t wear his either.”

“God forbid they have a little fun once in a while,” Lilly grumbled, pinching Zachary’s leg through his snow suit and shifting her tone. “Hey, little man! Look at you all bundled up and cute! Who’s your favorite auntie in the whole wide world?”

“Yeeyee,” he cooed with a giggle, a sound he made to address both Lilly *and* Cece.

“That’s right, yeeyee is!” She turned back to Jim. “You get the presents?”

“Now, do I look like I got the presents?” Jim huffed, motioning to his arm where it was wrapped tightly around hers. “No. I’m helpin’ ye’ inside first ‘for ye’ break your neck in ‘em boots. Once I get ye’ set down somewheres, *then* I’ll come back and get the presents.”

My gaze moved to Lilly’s feet and I couldn’t help but laugh. “Lil, honey, are you wearing *heels*?”

“Oh, they’ve barely even got a heel at all,” she scoffed. “I wanted some part of me to feel fixed up! It’s not like I’ll be standing anyway once we get to our table. Nobody lets me do anything for myself with this belly!”

“Twenty bucks says she’s barefooted in a half hour,” Jim tittered. He stared up at the building we approached as the sounds of laughter and conversation from within reached our ears. “Yuns ready for this?”

Jack grunted. “Nope.”

“Is June here yet?” I asked. “I’ve been dying to finally meet her.”

“Ye’ cain’t hear her in there?” Jim scoffed. “Christ, I could hear that woman’s mouth runnin’ ‘for we even pulled in.”

“Oh, hush.” Lilly smacked his arm. “It’s Christmas, and my dad went to a lot of trouble to make sure all our friends and their families could be in the same place at the same time. You be nice to June.”

Jim reached out to grab the door handle and sighed. “Alright... here goes nothin’.”

As the door opened and the heating inside defrosted our faces, so did the sounds of those we loved most.

We were greeted almost instantly by far too many voices and sets of arms: Anna and her sister, Lilly’s far-too-familiar second cousins, my mother—who did not come to hug, but to steal Zachary from me—Macy, Cece, and Chris’s mom all vying for our attention.

A thousand different conversations were attempted to be sprung upon us at once, some directed at me... some directed at Jim or Jack or Lilly...

“I saw they want to do a *Fairview Nights* reunion episode. You doing it?” one asked, as another simultaneously cut in with, “Jesus, you sure you’re not due in December? You look like you’re about to pop!” while another cooed, “Give me this baby!”

Several smaller humans raced circles around us, and I grinned when I spotted the oldest one among them, his front teeth hilariously too large for his mouth. “Hey dad!” he said just before he launched himself into Jim’s midsection.

“Hey Beau,” Jim wheezed, curling over his son to squeeze him just as tightly. “Ye’ get everything packed up like I told ye’?”

Beau nodded and released him. “Mom said you’re rich enough that you can just buy me whatever I forgot.”

Jim rolled his eyes, playfully messing Beau’s hair as he straightened. “Course she did. Well, lucky for us both ye’ ain’t

gonna' need a whole lot more than a fishin' pole and some common sense. We're gonna' spend four days gruntin' and spittin' and pissin' in the woods like men was s'posed to do. It's gonna' be fun."

"Ugh," Lilly groaned, letting Cece help her out of her coat. "Fun will be having all my girls with me while you're all out on your little boys' trip. We're gonna' spend four days gossiping and shopping online and doing nails... and eating cheeseburgers." She peered out into the main hall where the rest of the families were mingling. "God, I'm starving. Please tell me there's some appetizers out already?"

Cece chuckled, hanging Lilly's coat on the rack. "Yes, and Bruce has a whole tray of bacon wrapped dates set aside in the kitchens just for you."

Lilly sighed contentedly. "God, I love that man. Did you see my sweater?"

She stepped back to show off her black sweater where a snowman's tinsel textured bottom layer was formed by her pregnant belly, the rest of him climbing up her sternum in similar layers of shimmering glitz. She pressed a button near her collar to light up the string of miniature twinkling Christmas lights that was draped around the snowman's scarf.

Even with its lights and layers of tinsel, she made it look fashionable where she'd paired it with a black skirt, black tights, and a ridiculously expensive set of leather boots.

"It's perfect," Cece chuckled, presenting her own knitted sweater depicting a cat knocking over a Christmas tree. "Wait till you see what Bruce has got on." She waved a hand dismissively at Jim and Jack. "You two can go unload the cars. We're good from here."

Jack kissed my temple. "Grab me one or two of those dates before she sees them. Macy," he added, looking past me to the female version of himself, "if mom gets anywhere near Cecelia with a hairbrush, you steal her away."

Macy laughed. "Oh, it's way too late for that, Jackie." Her light blue eyes met mine, the faint scar that ran diagonally across her face only seeming to enhance her natural beauty.

“Both my mom and yours were complaining about her hair the minute they took her hat off.”

I took a deep breath and peeled my coat off. “Magna can handle them. Chris and Maria here yet?”

Macy nodded. “They’re over by the bar with your grandma.”

“God help them both,” I muttered, smiling as Macy slid her arm around me and led me to the main hall behind Lilly and Cece.

Richard Renaud—with the help of Lilly, I surmised—really had gone to great lengths to make the night perfect. The hall looked like something out of a movie, elegant and stunning in just about every way. Large chandeliers hung in rows from the twenty-foot ceilings, white-linen tables decorated with garland and vases of white lilies and roses positioned beneath them. A massive Christmas tree adorned with gold and white trim towered over the gathering in front of the floor to ceiling windows that lined the far side of the room.

The people we loved were clustered in mixed circles of conversation throughout the space, most of them wearing some hilarious form of Christmas attire.

It was funny that we’d come out of the storm to families that had bonded over our disappearance. They’d all known each other—connected in their grief and desire to find some part of the plane.

My mother and Jack’s had actually become friends before we’d even returned, spending hours on the phone some nights just to talk about their children. Sophia McCreary had never been the type of woman to talk on the phone to even me for more than a few minutes. It warmed my heart that she’d found a friend in my mother-in-law before she even knew our families were connected.

Izzy, Maddy, Liam, and Beau sped past us in a frenzy of squeals and laughter as Bruce emerged from the kitchens sporting a full Santa costume, complete with a beard, wig, and a large canvas bag of gifts.

“Oh Jesus,” Macy groaned, breaking away to chase the tiny blond toddler who was making a beeline for Santa with a shiny ladle held up over his head. “Jack Allen Harris! Where on earth did you get that? You give it to me right now or Santa’s not giving you any of your presents! Robert! You’re supposed to be watching little Jack!”

Lilly moved with similar haste toward Anna, who emerged from the kitchens behind Bruce in her lighted Christmas-tree sweater with a tray of bacon wrapped dates balanced on one palm.

I smiled at the scene before me, my eyes moving from one side of the room to the other. I saw Bud, his hands held out to illustrate whatever story he was telling to my uncle Bill and Dahlia Perez, the three of them laughing comfortably. My mom was sitting at a table nearby, both she and Jack’s mother making a useless attempt to style Cecelia’s hair while Magna and her daughter observed their efforts with some amusement. The older children hopped excitedly around Bruce as he sank into a large chair by the Christmas tree and scratched at the fake beard strapped to his cheeks. Kyle and Fetia stood close together, Matavi wiggling in her arms while they chatted with Jasmine and Terrence. Near the bar, Juan Josef and Gloria fussed over Chris and Maria’s daughter while my grandmother, with Zachary at her hip, snuck a sip of wine with a tiny blond woman I had to assume was June. Almost everyone was there.

“Where’s Juan?” I asked Cece. “And Dario?”

“Running late,” she answered, her eyes moving similarly across the banquet hall. “There was some urgent TAO business they needed to handle. They should be here soon.”

“Surprised you’re not with them... I feel like you’ve been immersed in TAO ever since we got home.”

“Thought I’d slow down a bit,” she said, laughing as Maddy and Izzy both hopped up into Bruce’s lap to whisper on each side of his ear. “The world doesn’t always need to run at such a hurried pace. There’ll still be plenty to learn when I’m done enjoying whatever moment I’m in.”

My attention was divided between Maddy and Izzy and the table my mother was seated at where Lilly pulled out a chair

beside her and motioned for her father to sit. “Oh, that poor man. He has no idea what Lilly’s dragging him into.”

Cece snorted as her gaze landed on the same sight. “Shall we take bets now on the amount of time it takes before she looks over here and rolls her eyes?”

I pursed my lips, frowning as Sophia McCreary actually ventured to smile at the man. “Well... wait a second... Richard Renaud is wildly rich. He’s not bad looking and if he plays his cards—”

“And there it is,” Cece cut in as our mother glanced over at us before promptly taking a gander at the chandelier over her head. “I’ll go over there and prevent her from saying something snarky. You wanna grab us a drink?”

Nodding, I moved over to the bar, scratching Maria’s back as I slid into the stool beside her. “Merry Christmas! How’s our little Ava doing?”

Chris hugged his daughter to his shoulder, inhaling the top of her head as he patted her bottom. “She started teething this week. It’s been rough.”

I clicked my tongue. “Poor thing. It goes by fast, but... it won’t feel like it until it’s over. How’s the new house coming along? You get that guest bedroom finished?”

He shook his head. “I did, but tomorrow I have to rip it out and start all over.”

“What?” I scoffed. “Why?!”

Maria swiveled in her seat to face me, one pointed brow raised. “Because Mr. *I-just-want-to-kiss-you-and-nothing-else* over there couldn’t wait a few more months to get that son Omar promised we’d have.”

My entire face transformed with my smile. “Oh my God! *Already?* Congratulations!”

“We went to Doctor Moore,” he explained, raising a brow. “She said you’d been in to see her too?”

I leaned over the bar to order cosmos for me and Cece before returning my attention to him. “I just wanted to see if

there was some explanation for the twins... figure out what kind of shape my body was left in. You know?"

"And?" Maria asked. "What'd she say?"

I shrugged. "*She* said I'm an anomaly. She said I'd still have a hard time getting pregnant again if we tried, but where she'd expected to find more damage, parts of my uterus were actually strengthened since the last scan. I had her send me all my files and Cece took them in for TAO to look over. I guess the type of electromagnetic charge we experienced in the storm is similar to a therapy they use in the future that assists with cell regeneration in lost limbs. It restored some of my broken parts just enough to be able to carry them. Kyle's already planning a trip forward to try it out on his arm and Lilly and Jim are talking about taking Izzy too."

"What about you?" Chris asked, handing Ava over to Gloria. "Juan and Gloria say that storm's not so bad with a pilot—nothing like the way we felt it... If you went too, you and Jack could have more kids... if you wanted..."

Shaking my head, I smiled. "We're blessed with the two we have and we want to spend the next eight years right here, giving them roots they can always come back to once we start traveling. Besides, I think, between the lot of us, we've produced more than enough time travelers already."

"Missing four still," Juan mumbled, casually sipping his whiskey.

"Four?" I asked, peering back out at the party. "How do you know that?"

He grinned. "Gloria and I spent a few extra years sight-seeing once we were done making things right. There are four more babies coming before those eight years are up."

"To who?" Maria snarled. "I already told Kreese I'm not having more than two." She ran both palms over her stomach and shook her head. "I miss my beautiful body. Please tell me I'm not going to spend the next eight years pregnant?"

"I'm not telling anyone anything," Juan said with a wink. "You'll find out soon enough." His eyes ventured to my sister.

My gaze followed his, but then it was pulled to the entrance where Juan Jr. and Dario stepped in with Jack and Jim, all their arms loaded with presents. It wasn't the presents that drew my eye, though. Jim's sweater lit up in shades of red, blue, and green, where a single palm tree was decorated with lights and the words '*Feliz Navi-DAD*' positioned just below it.

We all burst into laughter, and Maria, Chris, and Gloria hurried over to greet them, leaving me alone with Juan Josef.

He slid down the bar to take the seat beside mine. "You know," he sighed, "I didn't deserve a happily ever after, but I got one... thanks to you. We're taking one more trip out in March before we come back to settle in here. Is there anything more I can do for you to express my gratitude? Anything you need or want?"

"No," I said, laughing at Lilly where she crashed into Jim and showered him with kisses. "What you've done already is more than enough. I have all I need right here in front of me."

"Any idea where you'll go first when you guys start traveling?"

I smiled. "We all decided we'd go to the island first thing... like all travelers do. From there... well... Cecelia doesn't need to be in the 18th century until she's closer to twenty so... we'll see what time the twins want to explore first."

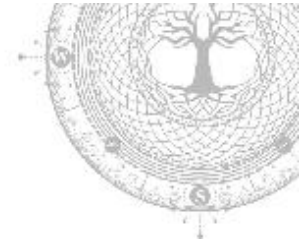
Jack's fingers slid over my shoulders. "One of those girly looking drinks for me?"

"You want one?" I teased, offering him my pretty pink drink.

"I ordered you a scotch," Juan said, extending a glass much more befitting to him. "We were just talking about where you'll go first when this is over. She said you're letting the twins decide? You *do* know they'll pick dinosaurs. Right?"

Jack nodded and grinned at me. "I believe my Jurassic-Park-loving wife is counting on that very thing." He raised his glass. "Until then. Eh?"

Juan and I raised ours and echoed, "Until then."



Acknowledgements

If someone would've told me in 2020, when I sat down with an idea to write a deserted island love story, that I would end up with *this* ending after writing more than a million words in three years, I'd have called that person crazy.

Me? Riddled with ADHD who has started and abandoned about a million different creative ventures in her life?? No way...

Well, to whoever wrote the paragraph above, I say to you, yes way! And that kind of achievement couldn't have been accomplished without the amazing support I've found around me.

There is no right order to thank each of my supporters in—every single one of you was detrimental to this beast of a series getting done—so... I will go based solely on proximity.

To my husband, who hasn't seen my eyes in three years for the computer screen fixed in front of them... Thank you. Thank you for creating the perfect space for me to write in, and for putting up with me as I lived with one foot in another world... Thank you for giving me ideas whenever I get stuck... for being that perfect man to inspire the perfect men I write... for always telling me how talented I am (even though you're the far more talented one)... and for pushing me to keep going, even when I felt like giving up. I wrote a million words because you made me feel like I could... like I wasn't some fraud or another putz with a computer, but a real author. You give me confidence in myself every single day, and I love you more than there are stars in the sky or water in the ocean (you'll get that reference when you read more than the acknowledgements).

To my mom... my very own Sophia McCreary, who has read every single word several times over as I've written this.

Thank you. This world and these characters wouldn't feel so real without you there to inspire and guide them... Just as I wouldn't be me without the same. Thank you for dealing with my "*yeah, but is it really good or just okay*" texts at 11pm and my countless "*I changed it again*" messages. Thank you for always jumping in to read a change or an edit or a new chapter and offer your thoughts... I couldn't do any of this without you cheering me on. You'd better go find yourself your William Wallace before I start the next one!

To my sister, brothers, nieces and nephews, cousins, and my in-laws. Thank you. This last one took far more than I thought and I'm so grateful for a family that's been understanding of all my "*I can't come, I have to finish this chapter,*" excuses that have kept me at a distance this year. I couldn't have done all this without knowing you'd all love me even at a distance, and I love you all so very much!

To my friends, who have been blown off more times than I can count, thank you for standing behind me... for still showing up even when I haven't. We're going on vacation, all of us. To an island... one with lots and lots of drinks!

To the readers... to every one of you who has offered a kind review or a comment or sent a message... I read every single one and I cannot begin to tell you how much it means to me to see this story I dreamt up resonate with so many different people. Every bit of feedback from you pushes me harder. I know I get wordy on occasion... and I know I'm far from the perfect writer, but your love for these characters and this story has encouraged me to continue growing... to *want* to develop this skill and write more characters and more stories for you to fall in love with.

Thank you for giving me the courage to make this my career!

And of course, I have to thank the voice of the books, Amelia Hugh! You continue to amaze me with your ability to bring these characters to life with your talent and I cannot wait to hear this one too. From southern accents attempting British ones to Spanish and Tahitian, you have nailed this story! Thank you for recording over a million words and never ever missing a single one. You're a badass and I absolutely love you!

This has been, and continues to be, an amazing journey. Thank you to everyone who has read, shared, or talked about these books to make this journey possible. And now, I'm off to write the next one... set in the year 2030...

I'll see you there!