

"DO YOU TASTE LIKE HEAVEN OR SIN,
PRINCESS?"



MELODY MODE

*A Touch
of
Heaven*

A TOUCH OF HEAVEN

THE UNHOLY BASTARDS

BOOK ONE

MELODY MODE

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This book is for all the ladies that are called to the dark, those that find themselves thinking of the bad boys with the dangerous eyes. The girls that crave adventure and passion in it's purest form.

Let The Unholy Bastards take you into the dark whilst corrupting your light.

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TRIGGER WARNINGS

If you're anything like me this is one of your favourite pages in a book however they are here for a reason.

My book doesn't contain dubcon or those types of sexual desires however does deal with some darker themes including discussing Drugs, Murder, Suicide, Violence, Torture, Use of Guns and Rape (Not my FMC) Please take caution when reading this book if you feel like you may be triggered by any of the above.

Most of my MC's are a little messed up - but that's why we call them The Unholy Bastards, right? There are scenes where they may not be the kindest to my female characters at times, so be prepared to scream at them, but know that everything they do, comes from their worlds being filled with violence, bloodshed and a whole lot of darkness.

PLAYLIST

You can also find this playlist on Spotify – It's called "A Touch of Heaven" or you can search my name.

NOT LIKE I'M IN LOVE WITH YOU – LAUREN WEINTRAUB

WHISPERS IN THE DARK – SKILLET

CURIOSITY - BRYCE SAVAGE

SAVE ME FROM THE MONSTER IN MY HEAD – WELSHLY
ARMS

IF I EVER LOST YOU – TYLER SHAW

STOP FIGHTING IT – APRIL JAI

MONSTERS – CAMYLIO

YOU RLLY KNOW – KAYLEE FEDERMANN

HATE U, LOVE U – OLIVIA O'BRIEN

I'LL BE GOOD – JAYMES YOUNG

LOVE AND HATE – CAMYLIO

DON'T GIVE UP ON ME – ANDY GRAMMER

I THINK I'M IN LOVE – KAT DAHLIA

WALKED THROUGH HELL – ANSON SEABRA

STAY – RIHANNA, MIKKY EKKO

LEAVE ME IN THE DARK – ALEXANDER STEWART

BUILD YOU BACK – DARK SIGNAL

ALWAYS BEEN YOU – JESSIE MURPH

SANCUARY – WELSHLY ARMS
HOLD ON – CHORD OVERSTREET
VILLAIN ERA - BRYCE SAVAGE

PROLOGUE

BROOKE

I wish I could say my life was black. At least black has some substance to it, some depth. At the very least, it gives an emotion, a feeling, something behind the darkness. A hope that life could get better and change in some way. You just have to see the light.

But it would be wrong to describe my life like that. My life was gray. Gray is the absence of color. It's just so...so...blah. I mean, take the gray and add any color; all you get is more gray. It's nothing. It's boring, uneventful, an empty space. Yep, my life was gray. That was until he came and changed it.

Like a world to his own, he entered my life, my safe space and he took everything from me, stripped away all I was until it was just him. Those intense eyes bare down on me, thrilling me to the darkest depths of my soul. I always feel like I am drowning in them, but I didn't know what that was like until tonight.

I used to think it was an amazing feeling, but drowning in someone is frightening, heartbreaking, and just simply tragic. You lose all ability to think clearly, you can't breathe, you can't make decisions, and your body and mind just shut down on themselves.

When he used to look at me, it felt like he was breathing air into my lungs, but now it's different. I always knew he would take me to new heights of pleasure. What I didn't realize was that he would show me real pain, too.

That voice that carried hate and bitterness also carried lust, passion, and love. He turned my life into colors.

I was blinded by it.

Naïve.

I just didn't realize the color I would be left with was blood red and that it would stain my soul. I knew from the moment he revealed his secret I would stand by him and watch him burn the world. I would stand and watch the ashes fall to the ground and bury anyone who stood in our way. I never realized the fire burning the world down around us would catch and harm the people I love.

This summer was meant to be the best summer of my life. I was spending it with my best friends and the man I had loved since I was five. He was meant to be my prince charming, my happily ever after.

Instead, my entire world crumbled around me. My own selfishness and idiocy are the reasons I'm covered in blood and losing the one person in my life who loved me more than they do anyone or anything else.

"Please don't leave me," I plead, sobbing as his blood soaks my shirt like spilled juice. It's hot and surprisingly sticky. It's a funny thought to have as he lays there dying in my arms, what his blood feels like. My tears fall on his face as I hold him in my arms, rocking him to me. The pit in my stomach grows every moment as I look at him.

This is all my fault. I should have taken the chance I had while I still could have.

"I can't do this without you," I choke out.

He raises his hand and caresses my cheek. His touch is cold against my warm skin in the hot night air, and that's not how it should be. His touch is usually hot, caring, and sweet, but this is wrong. So, fucking wrong. His touch usually makes me feel safe and loved, but now it does nothing to chase my cares or fears away.

"Please, why won't anyone help?" I scream at those around me.

This has to be a dream; I need to wake up.

Why won't I wake up?

They all stand there watching. They're not doing anything. I hear someone scream, and I watch her fall to her knees. I'll never forget that scream. That will haunt me until the day I die. It's harrowing, the one you hear and know there's no point in trying. You can feel the pain, the loss, the torment, and I know no one will help because there's nothing we can do.

This is it. I look over at my friend on her knees; she knows the same as me. I look at her—broken, crying as her dark angel holds her. This isn't real. She's not like this. She's always so strong, the one that faces the world and screams at it, but now she's just as damaged as me.

"Baby," I look down at his face, that gorgeous face that always makes me feel safe and loved. "Please don't go, don't do this, you're going to be okay, just hold on, please," I plead with him as if begging will do anything against this heartless act.

He smiles softly, "I'm sorry for what I said, Brooke. I love you."

My tear lands on his cheek. "I love you too," I whisper, "so you have to stay with me, okay?"

He spits blood out of his mouth, and it runs down his chin. I try desperately to wipe it away. I can hear him gagging on it as it fills his lungs. His hand drops from my face with a sudden thud to the ground, so deafening I will never forget it.

That will be the last sound I ever hear from him. Not his laugh, not my name on his lips, not him poking fun at me or trying to make me feel better. Just a loud, dull thud of his hand as it lands in the sand around us.

I can hear the sirens in the background. Help is coming, but it's too late. You're meant to hear those and feel hope, but my hope just died along with the only one who loved me so purely and without fault.

I'm done being the innocent princess. I'm done being that naïve little girl. I can feel the cold seep in, taking root deep

inside me, making me its new home. Like the blood seeping into my jeans, this cold seeps into my soul, my very being, every little crack. I gently slip my hands from around him, leaving him on the ground.

I don't get up. I don't think my feet would hold me if I tried. Instead, I embrace the cold and darkness and pray it makes me numb for what I need to do. I feel arms pull me up off the ground, locking me in their embrace as they pull me to their chest to look away. They expect me to break down, to sob, but the tears stop coming. There's nothing left inside of me. I just look at him on the ground. He's gone. That's just a shell lying there.

They will pay. Every single person involved. I'm not a princess anymore. They'll learn I'm the fucking queen, and every single one of them will bow down to me and cower in fear before I destroy them.

And anyone who tries to stop what's about to happen will regret the day they crossed paths with me, including the man holding me in his arms right now because every single one of them is to blame.

CHAPTER ONE

BROOKE

A FEW WEEKS EARLIER

It's the first day of summer, and I'm here for it. I step out into the hot air, and the warmth immediately hits my skin. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I can't wait for what this season will bring.

It's as though I can smell the ocean already. I can taste the salt spray from the waves on my tongue. I can feel the ocean water cooling my toes and hear the water lapping on the sand. Freedom—that's what it feels like, and I honestly want it more than anything.

I can't wait to leave Asheville. Don't get me wrong, it's a pretty town, full of old architectural buildings, there's a lot of history here. It's one of those towns where they would talk about the founding fathers in class at middle school. A bunch of old rich white dudes decided to build on this land blah blah, insert eye roll here.

The problem is, it's not very big, and there's not much to do. The highlight of a weekend is just another house party with people you've known for years or milkshakes at Benny's. Those are about the only two options for a "great" weekend. I grew up here, and as much as I used to love it, as I get older, I realize it can be stifling at times. I feel like I've outgrown it.

Does that make me sound awful?

It's small, not like a huge city, and everyone knows each other's business. It's frustrating as hell hearing all the rumors that were more than likely true, yet no one's business except

those involved. Secrets here are hard to keep. That's the worst thing. You can never make a mistake without it being splashed all over the town.

I remember being at school and everyone's phones going off within seconds of each other as the gossip spread about whatever poor unfortunate soul stepped out of line that day.

And even though I'm not at school anymore, I still hear it. I even know that Jennie, the assistant at the local mayor's office, had slept with her dad's boss last weekend. I had never spoken to her, not once, yet I know everything about her private life. It's a little ridiculous. If Jennie wants to have a torrid affair with an older guy, good for her.

Hell, isn't that what I want?

I'm not about gossip. I never have been. I had seen how it ruined people's lives before; therefore, I guard my secrets well. The biggest one of all is kept hidden away. Not even Nate, my best friend, who knows all my secrets, knows that one.

Okay, well, maybe that was for a different reason besides not wanting to become the joke of Asheville. That secret haunted my dreams nightly. If it came out, everyone in town would know, and chances are it would destroy my best friend and others involved. I would never want that for myself or my friends, which is why I can't wait to graduate from college and leave this place.

I plan to move to a big city, one where I can get lost in a crowd and have adventures I can only dream of. I don't know which city yet. I figure I would close my eyes and point to somewhere on a map. The nearest city would be my new home.

I decided to study Drama and English Lit at college. I want to write when I get older and create worlds people can fall in love with, and I know I can write anywhere I want. My trust fund that kicks in when I turn twenty-one will allow me to live my dream without struggle.

We moved here from Chicago when I was five. My parents had lived in big cities their whole life. They had met in college, and it was love at first sight. My mother followed my dad from city to city as he built his media empire. They were now the third-largest media and advertising company in the US. When the business began to run itself, they decided they had enough of city life and semi-retired, though my dad still had a hand in making major decisions in the business. Ironically, they couldn't wait to move to a small town, and I couldn't wait to move out of one.

But this summer is different. Away from this town, away from the gossip, away from the dullness of my college life, away from everything and anything I could never want. Well, except for one thing. But that was one thing I could never have, and that was coming with me, anyway.

Nate, my best friend, had worked on my parents for weeks to allow me to go on vacation with him and a few others, and they finally caved on one condition. I could go if I wasn't the only girl.

My mother seemed to think me going on vacation with a group of boys meant wild orgies and drugs. I could only wish, but nothing that exciting or thrilling ever happens to me. Not that I would turn down an orgy with Chase, Asher, and Jax, even if I am a virgin. That would be way too hard to turn down.

So, I invited Harper, my girl bestie, and basically my sister. She had joined mine and Nate's dynamic duo a few years ago, and honestly, I can't imagine my life without her. She is utterly crazy about Asher, one of the guys coming with us, so it was an easy sell. They're not really talking right now though, their dynamic has shifted, I just don't know the reason why. I need to speak to Chase about it.

Her parents are away for business or traveling the world for ninety percent of the year, so no one is around to tell her no. Her family doesn't care enough to look after her, let alone tell her she can't go. I hate my overprotective parents sometimes, but I was always aware I would rather have them, than parents that didn't care at all.

Harper became part of our trio when we were juniors in high school and now attends the same college as us. She had come from another small town and instantly set her social status. Since small towns like to gossip, she announced everything she needed and wanted to say to everyone she met. Hard to gossip when everyone already knows everything about you.

I'll never forget how she just sat at our lunch table in the cafeteria. "You two look like the only people I've met today with a brain of their own. Friends?" The memory brings a smile to my lips. Harper doesn't give a crap about anything, and I envy that about her. She lives every day as if it's her last. To hell with the consequences. She's bold, loud, and knows what she wants, or maybe I should say who she wants, but that's another story.

Harper is simply stunning. Her long blonde hair always looks perfect, like she's spent hours on it, but I know differently. It naturally looks incredible even when she gets out of bed. Half the time, she doesn't even brush it. *Bitch!*

She's just a little taller than me, but with how she dresses, you would think she's six foot with legs for days. I don't know how she does it, it doesn't matter what I wear; I always look five foot two. She could be a model but instead wants to be a designer. Harper's like me and wants to get out of this small town and follow her dream. She has the same bright blue eyes as Nate, and I sometimes wonder if she's his secret twin. There's a startling resemblance.

I exhale deeply, letting go of the tension and worries. I can't wait to just have fun and let go. The fact it was only hours away thrills me to the core.

A low chuckle breaks me from my fantasy, and I open my eyes, looking over to see my best friend. His golden blond hair shines in the sunlight, the easy messiness of it blowing in the breeze, and those gorgeous eyes that sparkle with teasing like usual. I narrow my eyes at him playfully. "What are you laughing at?"

Nate walks over to me, grinning—those dimples melting my heart—and raises his fingers to my cheek, pulling a loose strand of my hair out of my face and tucking it behind my ear softly.

“You’re away with the fairies again, beautiful,” he whispers, staring at me intensely, keeping his hand on my hair. Those bright blue eyes search deep into my soul, but for what, I’ll never know. I smile, inhaling him as he keeps me close; he smells like sunshine and fall. I know it sounds stupid, but you know when you’re outside as the summer winds down, but it’s still beautiful weather, and the first leaves begin to fall? Well, that’s when you know fall is here, and you can smell it in the air, and well, that’s what he smells like.

Anyone looking in on this action would see a couple having an intimate moment together, but not us. This is just how Nate is with me. He and his brother are weirdly tactile. I laugh, pushing him back.

“I was imagining the ocean, dick. I can’t wait.”

I playfully punch his shoulder, and he acts wounded. Holding his arm and pouting at me. That only gives him two reactions from me—a classic eye roll and a grin.

He chuckles again, wrapping his arms around my waist and lifting me up against his rock-hard body, spinning me around a few times. I laugh again, feeling free. I throw my arms out, enjoying it. He always gives me that feeling. I know I can be myself around him.

While he is six foot, I am only five-two, and when he picks me up, I feel like I am experiencing the world from a different viewpoint. One a lot more carefree and fun. As he drops me to my feet, I rest my hands lightly against his chest. His chest moves heavily, and the palms of my hands are rising and falling with each of his breaths. God, I swear every time I see him, he seems more muscular, with more abs, hard lines, and broader shoulders.

When I was younger, I willed myself to like him. His deep, bright blue eyes are like pools of water you can lose yourself in. His muscled and defined figure causes most girls to drop to

their knees in worship. Football has made him built and ripped. Muscles ripple down his arms as he moves, and he's amazing because of it.

He could have had a football scholarship anywhere for college, but for some reason, he chose to go to the same college as me. It's just an hour's drive to the nearest city—if you could call it that—which is madness to me. I didn't even want to go there, but when it came time for college, my dad got sick with cancer, and I needed to be close to home. I sometimes wonder if he stayed because of me. He always says he has everything he wants here whenever he is asked.

Weird.

His soft, floppy, barely styled hair always looks perfect despite using very little product. Most days, he doesn't even bother. I hate that about him. He can just run his hand through it, and it is perfect. I love running my fingers through it. I can get to my knuckle before it disappears out of my hands. But the truth is no matter how gorgeous he is, how sweet and funny, I can't do it. I only have eyes for one man, and holy hell, what a man he is.

Chase freaking Anderson. Nate's off-limits older brother.

Six foot three, a wall of muscle, and a mystery to any girl he meets. He is hot. As. Sin. He is twenty-six years old, making him seven years older than me. Usually dressed in tight jeans and just a simple tee paired with a leather jacket. He always looks like he stepped out of a bad boy's GQ photoshoot. His eyes are bright green and almost crystal-like. They remind me of sea glass. They are haunting and draw you in.

Where Nate has taken after his mom, Chase has taken after his dad with dark brown hair that looks almost black at night. It's shaved a little at the sides, but the top is just a mess of hair. I've imagined gripping that hair multiple times and not in an I'm just your brother's friend kinda way.

His body looks like it was carved from a god's marble, and even though I love him in winter because he looks hot on his

motorbike with his jacket and dark hair, I love him in the summer more.

I know he is out of my league, but watching him every year at the pool at Nate's house fuels fantasies that will last for years to come. Water dripping off his cut abs, his hair soaking wet, and that cheeky grin is utter perfection.

Last year he got a tattoo on his ribs, and holy fuck, I wanted to run my fingers across it, but I can never get close enough to figure out exactly what it is. But, needless to say, seeing a guy like him tatted only makes him sexier. That level of hotness should be illegal.

Rule one of the best friend code is you don't fuck your best friend's brother... At least, I'm sure there's a rule somewhere like that, and I had just said yes to spending six weeks in a beach house with him, his best friends, Nate, and Harper.

It was going to be a long summer, but the truth was, I missed him. He hadn't been around much lately, always traveling for some unknown reason, and I missed sitting under the stars with him like we used to. Growing up, he was always sweet to me, but lately, he has distanced himself from me, and I don't know why. Another thing I have to find out about this summer. I was starting to feel a little like Nancy Drew.

"Hey, Tink... Leave the fairies alone, yeah, and come join me here." Nate's voice breaks me from my fantasy of running my tongue up Chase's abs under the night sky, and I find my eyes meeting his. He's tapping my temple and giving me a strange look.

"I'm sorry, I'm just excited!" He wraps his arm around my shoulder and pulls me close. Picking up my suitcase, he leads me to his sleek black truck before loading it into his trunk. He loves this truck more than anything. It was a present from Chase for his eighteenth birthday, and it's his pride and joy. I've never seen him love anything more than his truck. It's an F-150 Raptor. Dark black with a custom glaze on it that almost makes it look holographic. It's a beast, and I love the roar of the engine whenever I'm in it.

Harper, Nate, and I often drive up to the mountains on weekends. My father bought a cabin up there for us to escape to. We could have rented, but my father is crazy and sees it as an investment. Personally, I think he just likes to treat us.

As I put my hand on the truck door, Nate spins me around to face him, taking my hands and raising them between us near his heart. His dimples show again as he smiles. Those dimples are why many girls fall for him, and I can see why, even if I can't make myself feel it.

“This will be the best summer ever, Brooke. I can feel it. This summer is going to change things forever for us.” I feel my breath catch as he stares at me with such intensity in his eyes, like he has a purpose, a mission, a secret I'm about to find out. He looks like he wants to say more, but he drops my hands instead and presses his lips to my forehead softly. “Now get your ass in the truck, beautiful, before I leave you here.”

I laugh softly, wondering what he meant about this summer changing things for us and what else he was going to say before getting in the truck. I connect my phone to the stereo, browsing through my playlists before finally settling on one. I look out the window as the engine roars to life, and a shiver of excitement runs through me as we drive to Harper's house to pick her up.

Little did I know he was right when he said this summer would change things for us. He was so fucking right, and I never could have prepared myself for the things ahead. I wasn't ready and don't think I ever could be.

CHAPTER TWO

CHASE

I was fucked. Well, and truly fucked. How am I supposed to spend six weeks living with this girl and actually keep my hands off her? Brooke was my weakness, and my friends knew it.

I tried to stay away from her, yet somehow, while discussing the vacation I had planned a few weeks ago, I stupidly let those fateful words fall from my lips to my brother.

“Why don’t you and Brooke come along?”

Why, why did I say that?

What on earth did I think I would achieve by doing this?

Inviting your little brother and the girl he had been in love with since they were five to vacation for six weeks was stupid.

Because I, Chase Anderson, had also fallen for her.

She was a fucking temptress every time I was around her. A siren calling me to crash on the jagged rocks to my doom. The way her bottom lip pouted when she wanted something and couldn’t get her way, the smile she wore every day so fucking pure, and that fucking hot, tight body I wanted to defile every second of every day.

I’m screwed!

I was twelve when she came into my life, and I haven’t looked back. Her mother, Lisa, knocked on our door one day

to introduce herself to the neighbors as they had moved in next door.

I stood there watching, judging, leaning against the door frame from the kitchen. Deciding whether or not I liked her, whether she was as fake as the rest of them around here. All happiness and sweetness in front of you, but was there something behind that smile like everyone else had? An agenda of some sort.

My family came from money, old money, and that brought the snakes and the leeches out. Even at twelve, I knew this. I learned fast. I had to. People flocked to me, wanting to be my friend, hoping the family name would somehow grace them. Like a twelve-year-old boy had any control over that.

Then, this little bundle of energy and joy came out of nowhere, peering around her mother's skirt. Pure innocence in those beautiful, pale green eyes stole my breath away. A shy smile invaded her face as she locked eyes with me.

My mother noticed our reaction to each other and invited them both in. I think she hoped it would make me thaw out. She used to call me her little snowman because I was cold to everyone we met. I knew how I was to people, but it was better to be that than disappointed.

She waved me over. "This is my eldest son, Chase." She gave me a look that said behave and be nice. I was rarely nice to strangers. I had seen the greed and motivations in their eyes, but this girl was different, and so was her mother. "My other son, Nate, is at football practice."

This little girl with pale green eyes and shiny, long auburn hair in two pigtails wandered over bold as day and stuck her hand out to me. "I'm Brooke."

I took her hand, shaking it, a little dumbstruck at how confident this girl was for her age. She was grinning at me, even giggling at how silent I was, challenging me to talk. I couldn't help but smile back. I gave her a kiss on the back of her hand.

"I'm Chase."

She giggled, and that beautiful sound touched my heart, which had grown so cold. I knew that was a sound I wanted to hear for the rest of my life.

“Wow, you’re like a real prince in the stories. Mommy always calls me princess, so one day I’m going to marry you,” she continued giggling before her mother called her away, and she ran off. I was left with a feeling I had never experienced before. My whole body felt lighter, warmer somehow, like the indifference I usually felt was thawing.

From that day, I knew she was right. I wanted to marry that girl. Not that I knew what that really meant at that age, but I knew I could see her in my life forever.

Her innocence was something I needed in the shithole of the world I was raised in. She was just a girl that made me smile. But as we both grew up, my adoration for her boldness and laughter turned into a need to protect her, which quickly turned into love and a burning desire to make her mine when she became a woman.

There was one problem with that...my brother Nate. He had the same dopey, love-drunk look in his eyes after meeting her that afternoon in the street, and they quickly became best friends and have been for the last fourteen years. He is utterly crazy about that girl, and she doesn’t even realize it. It’s like she’s blind to it.

My dreams of marrying Brooke went out the window when my brother came home and told me about the pretty girl he had just met. So, I did what any older brother would. I stepped back, took that star-struck look out of my eyes, and did what I could to protect and shield her from harm without her being in my arms.

I ensured no one gave that girl any problems at school when she was there and that no one in town gossiped about her or looked at her in the wrong way. I made sure no guy disrespected her and that any guy who asked her out knew to treat her right and not touch her in any way I wouldn’t like.

And as far as I knew, it worked. She’s still just as innocent and pure with big dreams. They just didn’t involve me, and

that hurt me more than I could ever put into words. Now she's nineteen and ready to take on the world without me.

One day, my brother will tell her he is head over heels in love with her. But I don't think it's going to go well. I think he's hoping it will. He will never admit it to me, but it's obvious how he feels. I mean, he even followed her to college when he got scholarship offers to go to the top five sports colleges, not just in the state but the country. At least he didn't take the same courses as her, so he's not always around her.

I roll my eyes at how she's whipped us both without realizing it. Nate was her shadow, and they were nearly always attached. I sigh. Maybe I'm wishful thinking here. Perhaps I'm hoping it won't go well. Maybe I'm just hoping she will choose me and deny my brother. I'm an asshole for even thinking about it, I know.

I pretend she is mine when I manage to get her alone, though. I treasure those moments. I see how she looks at me, how her skin warms when I touch her, and how her breath quickens when I speak. I wonder if I make her nervous and, if so, why.

I never asked her because then I could fantasize about why. I pretend she's my girl. I live for those moments because I know I could never cross the line until my brother tries his shot...maybe not even after that.

So, I have to take what I've got and hope she responds that way because she has feelings for me more than you would a friend, and not because she doesn't feel that way about me and feels awkward or scared. Hell, my worst nightmare is if she is embarrassed about me because she loves him back, and I am just his brother acting inappropriately.

I have an out planned for that day if it comes, though. I couldn't stay to watch his lips on hers. It takes all my strength not to rip him off when he touches her as it is, but if the day comes when she becomes his, I'll leave. I won't even stay in the same country.

I'm ready if it happens because I don't know what I would do if I saw that. I've lived the last fourteen years dreading that

day. So, I've started distancing myself from her now because I know that moment will destroy me.

Whenever my brother found a girlfriend, I felt like I could breathe again, hoping they would stick. This would be the one that cleared Brooke from his mind, but it was hopeless. I knew they all paled in comparison to her, so they came and went. Every day, my brother gets a little closer to her, calls her beautiful, and gets a little bolder, touching her in different ways. The truth is anyone who didn't know them would assume they were together already.

But when he had his girlfriends, he would throw himself into his relationships, trying to make them work, and Brooke would step back, happy for him. And those were the best times of my life. Because in those moments, she would hang out with me without him, sharing her dreams and asking me about mine.

We would hang out under the stars and talk until the sun came up, then head down to Bennys for breakfast and talk some more. Besides Ash and Jax, no one knows more about me than her.

To everyone else, I am the mysterious, moody brother. But Brooke sees me for me and knows most of my secrets except the most important ones that I have wanted to tell her for years, and I can't because they are not my secrets to tell. She knows nearly everything I could give her about myself, and I trust her with it all.

However, in the last few months, I have backed off a bit; I stopped visiting them at college. I didn't even come home for Christmas. It just became too hard to see the girl I can never have for multiple reasons.

Instead, I threw myself into Asher's project, but lately, I feel I am losing myself in it. I need to see her to help ground myself again. Working with my dad has become a background thing. I know he is pissed with me, but my heart isn't in it, and the truth is my brothers, not of my blood, are more important to me than following my old man's dream. He's given me

freedom, but now he wants me to settle down and be realistic about my future.

I drove up here alone, telling my brother to take the girls. He thinks I am being my usual asshole self, but I'm only like that with him when it's about her. I can imagine them sitting in the back seat while I drive, giggling at those private jokes they have. It makes my blood boil.

Harper would likely be in the front seat trying to pry information out of me about Asher while trying to act cool about it. I smile at that thought, though. I could see her with Asher, but not yet. He still lives the playboy's life and isn't ready to give it up yet. He needs it to balance out the chaos he lives with.

But I notice the twinkle in his eyes when she is around. The way he casually touches her or the way he knows she is in the room and immediately goes tense without even seeing her. I see it all because it's like staring at my reaction to Brooke.

Asher hasn't lived the easiest life, and he's afraid of her catching his darkness like it was a disease. So, he throws himself into booze, weed, and girls, and until he is ready to get himself out of it, there's no hope for either of them. I also don't know how she could carry the secret we have. I understand why he thinks it would infect her. It's yet another reason I haven't told Brooke how I feel.

I hear a car horn honk, and it makes me jump. My heart beats out of its chest as it pulls me from my thoughts. I turn around to watch my friends pull up. Jax, Asher, and I have been inseparable since middle school. We have pretty much become invincible since we met. No one is stupid enough to mess with us.

Asher is a lot like my brother. Built and muscular. He's played a lot of football, including college. Until he got into yet another fight and busted out his knee. I feel bad for him. Football was the one thing that helped him escape his life and tragic past, and, in an instant, it was gone. He got into fights a lot growing up. He was angry with the world, and losing football makes him worse. He can snap in an instant.

Since then, he drinks and gets high to stop himself from feeling the pain, but to the rest of the world, he looks like a cool guy not to be messed with. He has dark brown hair and lets it fall over his face. It's longish and has a natural sweep to it.

I hear plenty of girls describe his eyes as smoke-like. They are probably right but smoke from a fire set to burn the world to the ground. The only time I see him with a genuine smile after he lost football is around Harper and sometimes us.

Jax, on the other hand, is the complete opposite. Jax is slimmer but athletic, with muscular arms and a decent six-pack that he always shows off if he can.

If Asher and I are the angry ones in the trio, then Jax balances us out. He's usually the happy one but also the most logical. He doesn't look at things the same way as us, and I've got out of plenty of scrapes because of him.

Jax has dark mahogany hair and lots of it. He keeps it styled like he is permanently windswept. For such a logical guy, he sure is vain. He has blue eyes, and they are sharp like a hawk. He always goes into everything with his eyes open and is aware of everything.

Everyone sees this popular hot guy who doesn't let life bother him. But there is a smartness there that he keeps hidden, and many people underestimate him. While in school, he was also taking college classes at MIT. That helps us a lot with the project. He's a great hacker.

Guys want to be us, and girls want to fuck us. Which Jax and Ash take full advantage of, and me?

If a girl throws herself at my feet, who am I to turn her away?

But the whole time her lips are around my cock, all I can see are pale green eyes looking up at me. And when I have their hair wrapped around my wrist as I fuck them to their orgasms, I always imagine it's her soft, pretty, auburn hair caressing my skin.

Fuck! I really am sick.

Asher slaps me on the shoulder. “Damn, I can tell where those thoughts were.”

Jax grins wickedly. “Yeah, that hot little piece of ass that’s joining us soon...you know if you don’t make a move soon, I’m going to tap that!”

I scowl at him, clenching my fists at my side. I know he’s joking around. He wouldn’t dare touch her, but he loves to wind me up about it, and it always works. He puts his hands up, backing off, and they both erupt in laughter.

“Idiots,” I mutter under my breath.

We all grab our bags from our trunks, and that’s when Nate pulls up in his truck. That is the best gift I have ever given him. I spent hours finding the right one for him, the excellent finish, the right color, and it is perfect. In fact, it’s better than mine.

He kept asking dad for an advancement on his trust fund to get one, but my dad said no. He said he wasn’t ready for that amount of money. Hell, out of both of us, he’s the sensible one. So, I went ahead and got him one under the guise of his birthday.

Things between us over the years haven’t been the easiest. He’s jealous of my relationship with my friends, and the truth is we’re not as close as we used to be, but I won’t let him get pulled into this stuff we have going on. It isn’t fair; he’s a good guy, and I want to keep him that way.

I watch Brooke open the door and jump out. Her gorgeous, tanned legs are on display in her little denim shorts. A lace white crop top exposes her flat-toned stomach. Fuck, she turns around, and I can see the bottom of her perfect ass cheeks on display. My cock immediately starts to ache for what it can’t have. I have to try and subtly rearrange myself before she notices.

She grabs her bag, laughing at something my brother says. I hate that he gets those laughs from her. It makes me feel sick to my stomach, but then she turns and looks at me, and my

whole attitude changes. She grins, her entire face lighting up, and those pale eyes that haunt my dreams sparkle.

I hear her sweet giggle, and I watch her drop her bag as she runs at me, jumping and wrapping her legs around my waist. My heart soars as I know she's missed me. I lift her by her toned thighs as she hugs me.

She smells the same, I think, inhaling her scent. God, I missed this smell. She smells like the rain on a hot summer's day. I dip my head into the crook of her neck and take another deep breath, trying to commit it to memory.

She's the only girl I would let do this to me. Most girls get a look, warning them to back off unless I want them to touch me, but even then, never this intimately, this sweetly. It's why my ex hated her.

I watch my brother roll his eyes, but I don't care. This is how we always are. We've always been close...just not as close as I would like.

"Hey, Prince Charming," she whispers in my ear.

"Hey, Princess," I respond automatically, a typical response over the years. The truth is she will always be my princess.

"Nice to see you finally showed up. I was thinking you were dead in a ditch somewhere." She smirks.

I laugh, holding her tighter against me, not wanting to let her go, pressing her hot, tight body against me. "I missed you too, gorgeous."

We hug tightly as if we're both afraid to let go, and as I feel her loosening her arms around my neck, I drop her to the floor reluctantly. If it was up to me, I would carry her into my bedroom and worship her until she came over and over again, begging me to stop, but even then, I wouldn't.

I can feel Jax and Asher's eyes on me, and I know they're wondering why I keep torturing myself like this.

She smiles at me, completely oblivious to the dirty thoughts running through my brain. God, I love how short she

is. She has to step back or tip her head all the way back to look up at me.

I keep imagining how easy it would be to lift her against the wall and pin her there as I devoured her tight little body.

I run my hand through my dark hair, willing these thoughts to leave my head as I caress her cheek and tip her chin up to me. “So, you ready to party hard this summer, Brooke?”

She laughs, flicking her hair behind her before her eyes sparkle with mischief. “Depends. Are you ready to learn exactly what that means? If so, stick with me, boys.”

She flicks her eyes at my friends, grinning, and walks over to them, hugging them both. My jaw clenches slightly as they look at me while their arms are around her. Jax winks at me, and I swear it takes everything I have in me to walk away.

Harper walks over to me with her shit-eating grin like usual. I wonder if she can read my thoughts. Harper is a lot like Jax in that way. She gives me a light hug.

“Hey, Chase.”

I nod at her, keeping her at a distance just in case. She laughs, rolling her eyes, walks over to Jax, and hugs him. She stops for a second in front of Asher as if she’s nervous and unsure what to do, and I notice Asher’s eyes flash with pain as he wraps his arms around her, pulling her close. That hug is longer than usual, and I can tell it’s a little tighter from Asher’s side.

I look to the side and see Brooke standing there frowning, and I know she doesn’t understand why they aren’t together. I shake my head. She doesn’t know Asher’s story the way I do. The confidence and the easy grins he gives the world are fake, and Harpers aren’t.

“What about you? Ready to party with your big brother?” I say to Nate, realizing my eyes have been on her long enough.

He chuckles. “Sure... I’m expecting a lot of good things this summer.”

He looks at Brooke when he says that, and I realize Nate's decided to tell her how he feels. I swallow hard before nodding, chucking my arm around him, and guiding him to the house, wondering if it's too late to take it back and uninvite them.

Fuck, I'm actually going to hell.

CHAPTER THREE

BROOKE

*A*fter unpacking everything in my room for the summer, I grab my phone and headphones and head out to the swing on the porch. Our beach house literally sits on the sand, and I feel like I'm in heaven.

It's a beautiful house. Dark wooden frames with an exterior facing the sea, pure glass panels cover the front so I can sleep in my room and stare out into the ocean. I've never felt so free being inside but nothing beats being outside.

Tired from the long drive, we decide to order in tonight, have a few drinks, and explore tomorrow. But I don't want to sit inside all night; I want to be outside and just enjoy being here. I want to stare into the darkness and watch the stars. Smell the ocean air and accept that I finally have my freedom, even if it's just for a little while.

I curl my feet underneath me and look out onto the ocean. I can hear the boys laughing in the house, making me smile. I always feel at home around these guys. None of them have ever tried to cross the line with me except Jax, who is just a hopelessly big flirt

I feel like he does it primarily to wind Chase up. He can be a little overprotective sometimes, and I swear it guts me every time. The whole protective big brother thing drives me crazy, and I'm ninety-nine percent sure he's the reason why guys haven't taken things further with me other than a chaste kiss.

Ass!

Truthfully, I'm not sure I want anything with anyone else, but still, it would be nice to decide on my own.

I think he still sees me as that little girl who met him as a child. I wish he would open his eyes and see the real me, the girl who's been crazy about him since the moment I saw him before she even knew what love was. The girl who fell for the angry kid with the beautiful smile he only showed me.

Instead, I watch him with girl after girl, and it's like a knife to my stomach every single time. None of them are good enough for him. They don't see the real him, only his looks and money. Most of them leave as quickly as they arrive in his life. His love life is a revolving door of quick fucks. Usually a night or two only, sometimes a couple of weeks.

Only one stuck around for longer than that.

Chloe Slutface Price.

God, I hated her. She was with him for just under a year, and I swear she would purposely be all over him in front of me, always touching him or giggling. Well, if you could call that high-pitched shrill a giggle.

The most annoying thing was that she was typically gorgeous. Tall, slim, and beautiful. Long legs and big boobs, stunning platinum blonde hair, too.

Now, I'm not a jealous girl normally, but seeing her and him together, looking like they just stepped out of a movie premiere, killed me.

The number of times I wanted to smash her face into the nearest surface just for looking at him, but I never did. I didn't have a right to, if I'm honest. He's not mine and never will be, no matter how badly I want him to be, yet she always felt the need to remind me every time I saw her.

Even now. Violence isn't my thing, but that girl would get everything she deserves if someone just happened to push her into the lake back home, and she drowned.

I sigh. My stomach is in knots.

What is wrong with me?

How can I feel that strongly about a guy I'm not even with?

I'm starting to regret coming here, suddenly realizing I'm going to see him hooking up with girls all summer. Since his bedroom is below mine, I might even hear it.

Maybe I should make an excuse and leave. I don't think I can handle that, if I'm honest. I feel physically sick just thinking about it.

Why can't it be like the books where everyone has a happily ever after?

And then, as if he hears my thoughts, he appears out the door. I take my headphones out and smile at him.

"Hey, you," he says, grinning at me. Unlike Nate, he has one dimple, not two, which, if you ask me, is way sexier.

"Hey," I say back, trying to sound enthusiastic and not like there's doubt in my mind about being here.

He walks over to take a seat next to me. I hear the swing chair groan as it takes his weight...all of it pure muscle, and I laugh.

He kicks his leg up on the chair swing and pulls me toward him, and suddenly, I'm leaning against him, my back against his chest with his arms around me and my knees between his. My heart beats a little faster as we stare out into the darkness and at the stars; we love to watch together. A beat or two passes before he talks.

"Why are you out here, Brooke?" His voice is authoritative and gravelly, his thumb slowly caressing my bare stomach up and down, sending tingles through my spine.

I swallow hard. This isn't unusual, sitting like this with him. I swear both Anderson brothers are very tactile, but something about his voice tonight puts me on edge.

"I'm surprised you noticed I had gone?" I feel his body tense, but his thumb carries on without pause. It's just above the waistband of my shorts, and I can feel my breath getting

heavier as he catches the waistband of the denim material. I clear my throat.

“I mean, you were busy with the guys, and I just wanted to take a minute to look at the view of an evening here. You know how I can’t resist the night sky. It just calls to me. I’ve missed you looking at the stars with me. It’s not as special without you.”

“Hm? If you ask me, the view is always stunning, no matter where we are. I have missed this, too.” I hear his voice catch.

He moves my hair to one side of my neck as his voice whispers in my ear, “And I always notice where you are, Brookie...always. Never doubt that. I can feel you when you’re near, and I miss you when you’re not.”

Shivers run down my spine as I bite my lower lip, not wanting to make a sound just in case this stops. He’s never been like this with me, and my brain is trying to work out what it means.

And Brookie?

Where the hell has that come from?

He’s never called me that before, and I wonder if this is a dream. If it is, I’ll sleep my days away so he can call me that anytime. Hearing him call me that does things to my body I never thought were possible.

I feel him inhaling my scent, and I do the same. Stardust and magic. That’s what I imagine they smell like, just like him. I feel his breath on my skin as he tenses around me. Suddenly, I feel his lips move to my neck, and he presses the softest of kisses to it. My whole body feels like it’s trembling.

I’ve never been as nervous as I am right now. “Chase,” I whisper into the night sky. It escapes me as if I’ve just wished on a star like I always wish for him.

His thumb moves upward to the side of my breast over my lace top, caressing it up and down, and my breath stops as my nipples harden.

“Do you know it drives me crazy when I see you hugging my friends? Do you know how annoyed I get when they touch you? When they put their hands on your body?”

His thumb moves across my breast, and I gasp softly as it lightly brushes past my nipple, but it doesn't stop. Instead, he moves to my neck. I feel him put pressure on it as he tips my head back to look at him. His crystal green eyes are darker than I've seen before, and I love them.

“I don't like it, Princess, so stop it. Or else.”

I open my mouth to say something, anything, but the only thing that leaves my lips is a soft whimper.

He chuckles lightly, his other hand moving down my waist around my thigh as he slips his leg between mine and pulls mine over his.

“Tell me, Brookie, if I slipped my fingers into these tiny shorts, you tease me with...what would I find?” He moves his fingers inside my shorts, pulling them out of the way, and as he glides his fingers over the lace of my thong, I moan his name, willing him to do more.

He strokes two fingers, pushing the lace fabric of my panties down along my pussy, and I can feel the fabric soak through with my wetness, and he growls. I've never heard him make that sound before. It's animalistic and primal, sending delectable shivers to every part of my body. My legs fall open for him like that growl commanded them to.

“Fuck Brooke, you're so fucking wet, and I've barely touched you. Can you feel how soaked you are?”

My mind is hazy; I can barely believe what's happening. I can't form words. I just need more. My core is aching for him. There are too many clothes between us, and I can feel his hardness growing against my back. And from what I can feel, it's definitely a good size, not that I have anything to compare it with.

I squirm against his touch, whimpering breathlessly, “Yes.”

I know anyone could walk past on the beach and see us, but I don't care.

He moves my thong to the side, and I feel two of his fingers glide along my wetness before rolling his fingers over my clit. I feel like I could explode. My hand grips his leg to the side of me.

“Baby girl...is this all for me...or is this for those fuckers inside?”

“You, all you,” I say honestly, my voice shaking.

His thumb starts rubbing circles lightly around my clit as he slides two fingers into my pussy. I gasp loudly, my fingers gripping his thigh tightly as I squirm on him.

Pleasure erupts throughout my whole body. I’ve done this to myself a thousand times, but the way he does, it is like he knows what my body wants. His fingers are thicker than mine and stretching me more than I’ve ever been before.

“You’re so fucking tight, Brookie. Has anyone done this to you? Has anyone ever touched you like this before? Made you come as you rode his fingers?” I shake my head, moaning softly into the night sky. He thrusts them harder as he groans into my neck. His thumb puts more pressure on my clit as he curls his fingers inside me in a come-hither motion pressing against my G spot.

“No... Just you...” I moan softly. I can feel my pussy clenching his fingers as my orgasm draws closer.

The next thing I know, he pulls his fingers out and turns me around abruptly, making me dizzy. He slips his fingers into my mouth forcefully, and I find myself responding by sucking eagerly, tasting my arousal on them. I have no idea what I’m doing or why I’m acting this way, but I want it. I want it all, everything he can give me and more.

“Do you taste like heaven or sin, Princess...cause with you, I really don’t know if I can tell the difference anymore.”

He removes his fingers from my mouth and brings them to his. Sucking them clean in one swoop, and as they leave his lips with a pop, he grabs my chin with his thumb and forefinger hard, pulling me toward him as if he’s going to kiss me. He pauses as he looks into my eyes.

“Chase...please...” I whimper, not even knowing what I’m begging him for at this point.

He pauses, and just for a second, I see his jaw tighten, his eyes flash as if he wants this and is fighting it, and then it’s gone, and a cold, calm smirk lands on his face, one I’ve never seen before. It’s like he’s been replaced with a Chase I don’t know.

“What are you begging me for? You want me to make you come, Brookie? Fuck you senseless till you’re a mess on your bed with your eyes hazy and your tongue hanging out?”

I nod, my eyes wide. God, yes, to all of it, I think.

“Not going to happen, Brooke. Don’t act so fucking desperate. It doesn’t suit you, opening your legs like a slut for me. Tut tut, I’m disappointed in you. I’m not having my brother’s *friend* act like this,” he says the word friend like it’s disgusting to him, sneering as he says it. “Now behave while you are here. Not one guy will touch you in front of me, or else they will have those hands broken...is that what you want?”

I shake my head, tears pricking my eyes.

Why is he saying these things to me?

Is that what he thinks of me?

“Good. Now get your ass inside and change out of those fucking shorts. Because I swear, it will be on you if my friends look at you the wrong way.” He drops my chin, pushing me back forcefully, and looks back at the ocean as if I’m nothing to him but a nuisance.

I get up quickly, almost tripping over my feet as I run inside. I slam the door hard, bypassing his friends as they look at me with curiosity, and I rush to my bedroom, slamming that door, too.

Tears fall down my cheeks as I slump to the floor, leaning against the cool wood. I try to work out what just happened. He called me a slut, desperate.

He's never said anything like that to me before, so why now?

Is this how he always felt about me?

My heart is breaking, and I don't know what's happening.

Why would he treat me this way?

I can't stop the tears from falling as I hold my knees close to my chest. I feel like I could throw up.

Is that what I am?

A slut?

I opened my legs for him, knowing everyone was inside and anyone could catch us. I didn't care if anything; it excited me more. I begged him to touch me and wanted more—I wanted it all with him.

Does that make me a slut?

I'm starting to wonder if this is the side I haven't seen before. I hear rumors around town about Chase all the time. He has a temper and a dark side, but I've never seen it before, so I've never believed it.

Part of me feels ashamed of myself for what just happened. Another part of me loved every second of it, and I want to storm back out and demand him to touch me again and finish the job.

I'm so confused. I brush away my tears, get off the floor, and look at myself in the mirror.

Does he really think I'm desperate?

Did he really think I was trying to sleep with his friends?

He should know better. We've all known each other for years, and I wouldn't touch either of them like that.

"Brooke, food's here," I hear Nate call.

"I'll be down in a minute," I shout back, hoping my voice isn't betraying me as I wipe the tears from my eyes.

I swallow hard and grab a pair of jeans from my dresser, quickly changing into them. Not wanting a repeat of what just

happened...fuck, or do I? I groan, confused, before pulling my hair into a loose, high ponytail.

I take one further look in the mirror and nod at myself. There's no sign of tears, but a flush in my cheeks seems to rise as I think about how he just touched me. How possessive he sounded.

Well, fuck him.

He thinks I'm a desperate slut and wants to do this protective bullshit he can fuck right off.

I'll make him notice I'm not that silly girl anymore. I am a grown-ass woman, and he can suck it. I throw open my door and walk into something solid. I step back and immediately lock eyes with him. He smirks at me in a way I've never seen before.

"Good girl," he whispers, and I can feel my core clench in reaction.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHASE

I lost control, god damn it. I knew she wasn't in the house. I can always feel her when she is around, and I can always feel when she isn't. She always calls to me, and I couldn't hear that call. It's like something in my soul is missing when she's not there. She's my own personal siren, for fuck's sake.

Seeing her outside alone and then telling me it surprised her that I had noticed she was gone was stupid.

Doesn't she know my senses scream to me when she's missing?

Every fiber of my being tells me to find her.

Still, I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have touched her. It's one night in, and I've already fucked things up.

Feeling her soft, tight body against me as she settled under my arms was heaven. That was my first mistake. Touching her, hugging her like that. It's normal for us. I didn't think it would hurt, but I should have known I would lose control with the mood I'm in. She's my calm in this shithole of a world, and I couldn't help it. I needed her to soothe me.

Jax and Asher have been winding me up all day, talking about making a move on her and touching her when I'm around. Then, watching her giggle with my brother most of the day made it worse and eventually pushed me over the edge. I just needed it. I needed her to calm me, even though I had no right. But I took it too far.

The second she moaned, even though I had barely touched her, made me lose control. She was so fucking responsive to me, and I fucking lost myself in her. I could smell her arousal. I couldn't help but touch her to see if it was true. I felt her bare pussy grip my fingers and her wetness flood over them. God, she was so tight I wonder if she will strangle my dick if I fuck her as she comes for me, moaning my name.

That sound is the most beautiful, intoxicating sound, and I want to hear it again. I'm desperate for it, that moan. I lost control, chasing it, wanting more. I fell down the proverbial rabbit hole.

I shouldn't have taken things further, but I did, and now I feel like an addict craving his next fix. I thought her laugh did something to me, but fuck me, her moaning is one hundred times sexier and even harder for me to ignore.

God... Hearing her beg me...that was the moment I knew I had gone too far. I had to stop it. I had to make her hate me for it. I had to push her away for my brother's sake and my sanity. She shouldn't be begging me, even though I want her to. She looked beautiful, begging me, needing what I could give her.

Shit!

I kick the porch's deck as if that will do anything, but I need to get this out of my system. I need to get her out of my system. Usually, I choose violence or sex, and both are off the table tonight.

I can't watch her walk around so exposed to us the way she was dressed today, let alone any other guys here in this town. At home, it's okay. Everyone knows not to mess with her, or they would have me and the boys to deal with. They all knew what would happen.

Her ex, Carter, learned the hard way when I heard what vile things he had planned for their date, the way he talked about sealing the deal with the town virgin. There was no way I was going to let that happen.

He ended up in the hospital that night, unable to walk after I broke his leg with his baseball bat after practice while Asher and Jax held him down. They didn't care. They were used to that type of violence and knew it was about her, so they didn't think twice about it.

Asher even snapped his wrist while holding him down and didn't blink. Carter never made it to their date. And we made sure he wouldn't tell a fucking soul about what happened.

I felt terrible for Brooke being stood up. I watched her wait for him outside her favorite restaurant. Leaving him messages, checking the time constantly before she finally walked away, but it was better than what that slimeball had planned for her.

He broke her heart that winter. She thought he was the one for her. It made me so fucking angry that she was stupid enough to think that. She's too innocent, too pure for this world, and all I want to do is protect her, but sometimes I wonder if it's my fault she's so naïve with guys.

But seeing those tears in her eyes tonight, I knew I pushed her too far. I never want her to cry or hurt in any way. That's why I protect her so fiercely, but here I was, being the person to do that to her.

To hurt her and make her cry.

I toy with the thought of going after her for a few minutes, wondering if it would do any good. I showed her the mask I show the world when I want to push them away, and it worked. I feel like my heart is being skewered with a sword, and I deserve it. She always saw past the walls I built, and part of me is angry she didn't see through it tonight.

I'm twisted. I know it.

I stand on the porch, looking at the night sky. It is so clear here. No wonder she was outside. My girl has always loved the stars. My mind flashes me back to one of our nights under the stars.

Her father had just been diagnosed with cancer, and she called me in tears. She couldn't even speak, so I got in my car and drove like a madman to get to her. She was sitting on the

porch looking up, her eyes filled with tears and utter hopelessness, and I simply opened the door.

“Get in, Princess.” That’s all I said to her, and she got up without thinking, without questioning. She didn’t say a word as I drove her to our spot on the docks. I opened the car door for her and helped her out, guiding us to the end of the jetty, slipping her shoes off as we sat down with her feet in the cool water.

We didn’t speak for over an hour. She just laid against my shoulder, her head nuzzled against my neck. I simply held her as she cried for what seemed like hours before she finally told me what had happened.

She had just gotten into NYU, getting her college acceptance letter that morning. It was her dream to get out of this town, and she had told no one except me she had applied. I don’t even think she told Nate.

She had headed downstairs, and just as she was about to tell them the good news, her father told her his news first. Brooke thought she had lost two things that night. Her father and the chance for her to have her first real adventure.

She threw the letter in the trash the same night and told me never to speak about it again. Her father became her primary focus as she took courses at the local college and supported him through his illness.

Eventually, he was told he was in remission, and it was the first time I saw my girl breathe again, like really breathe, but by then, she had lost her shot at getting out of this town for college.

I know she doesn’t regret it. She would never put her dreams ahead of her father’s health, but a part of me wonders if that’s still her dream. To leave Asheville and set off on her own big adventure. I want to be a part of her life when she does that, even if I’m on the sidelines, and I know I need to fix this.

Just as I decide to apologize to her, I hear someone clearing their throat behind me, and the food arrives at the

worst possible moment. But I wonder if it's a sign that I shouldn't go to her.

I pay the guy and tip him. He's just a kid, younger than Nate, so I make sure it's a big one. His face lights up as I hand him two one-hundred-dollar bills, and I tell him no change. He darts quickly off the porch and in the opposite direction, just in case I change my mind. I can't help but smile, shaking my head.

I step into the house, and my eyes meet Jax's. He's shaking his head at me, looking pissed, and I know he saw her crying. Jax has known her for almost as long as I have, and I know he cares for her deeply.

I feel like a prick, but I don't know what to do. I had to get her away from me. I didn't trust myself with her. I didn't trust that I could stop myself. I had to stop her from falling into the trap I had set without realizing it. I tell myself it's better this way, even though it's breaking me.

I look around the room, and she's nowhere to be seen. Asher is talking to Harper in the corner, and she has her love eyes on him, nodding eagerly to everything he's saying. But you can tell she's still a little frustrated with him. I see his fingers slowly running over her hip in circles, which distracts her somewhat. Something happened recently between the two of them, though. I can feel it.

Nate is sitting on the couch, flicking through his phone, probably on his Instagram. He looks up and sees the food.

"Finally, I'm starving!" He shouts, leaping over the couch and pulling the pizza boxes from my arms, throwing them onto the table, calling for Brooke, and I thank God he didn't see her upset.

"I'll get her. You know how girls can be."

Jax snorts, knowing full well I'm the reason she's not here, and I shoot him a glare, mouthing the word "Don't." He nods, knowing I'm not in the best mood to be messed with right now.

I walk up the stairs as the boys shove pizza into their mouths. Harper tells them they're pigs as she holds plates in her hand. I chuckle, shaking my head, thinking we probably should have ordered more.

I stand outside her room for a second, contemplating what I should say. Just as I'm about to knock on her door, it swings open, and I come face to face with a very pissed-off but beautiful princess. I instantly notice she's changed out of her shorts, and I can't help but smile.

"Good girl" escapes my lips before I even realize it. I'm very proud of her even though I'm surprised she listened.

She looks like she's about to say something, but I watch her blush as she tightly squeezes her thighs. *She likes that*, I think. Making a mental note to praise her more often before I watch her nose scrunch up in the most adorable way and her eyes narrow.

"Let's get this straight, Chase. You are not my brother, you're not my family, you're not even my friend anymore. You have absolutely no input in anything I do, say, or wear from now on. I'm not here for you to toy with. I don't want to get involved with any of the games you play with your friends and girls. The next time you treat me like one of your sluts you better make sure your door is locked when you sleep, or you won't have a dick to feed them." She gives me a cold smile and storms off.

I feel winded, like I've just taken a punch to the gut. I know I've fucked up, and I don't know if I can come back from this.

That smile is the one she gave to Carter. The "I'm over your bullshit" smile when he tried to give her excuses for not getting in contact with her for months last winter, and god, it makes me feel sick. I want all her smiles and laughs, but never that one. For her to compare herself like that to any of the girls I've been with is absurd. I could never treat her like that.

But I did...didn't I?

That's precisely what I did out there. Toyed with her and played with her feelings. Called her names after getting her hot and heavy, then told her to fuck off when she wanted more. I rest the back of my head on the wall, hitting it against it three times while I try to figure out my next move, hoping the action might knock some sense into me, but it doesn't.

I groan loudly, cursing myself as I think for just a moment that I should have pulled her into my arms right then before she walked off and kissed her hard, passionately, brutally, so she knows I could never feel that way about her. She's the air I breathe, and right now, she took away all my oxygen. I'm suffocating without her, yet I'm oddly proud of how she stood up for herself.

I walk downstairs slowly and see her on one of the couches with Nate. He has his arm around her, and she's giggling, feeding him pizza. Jealousy creeps into me, and Jax locks eyes with me. A little shake of his head, and I know I must look annoyed.

I take a deep breath and grab a beer from the fridge, throwing myself down next to him, opposite Nate and Brooke, not bothering to grab any pizza as I think to myself, "*You're welcome, brother,*" bitterly.

Asher and Harper are now staring daggers at each other, and I realize he's fucked it up, just like me.

"Welcome to the club," I say to him, and he shoots me one of his death stares that chills even the bravest of us to the bone.

An hour or two passes, and I'm quite a few bottles of beer in. I'm drunk, I know it, but I don't care. It numbs this pain I'm feeling. I didn't even bother eating a slice of pizza. I spent most of the night drinking with Jax, who kept telling me I should slow down. Needless to say, I didn't listen.



Someone suggested a game of truth or dare a while ago, and it's my turn. Everyone has chosen truth so far. I stop all this pussyfooting around and choose dare. Jax and Asher whisper between themselves, and then Asher gives me his typical shit-eating grin. I don't acknowledge it, but I realize it's exactly like Harper's. I'm too drunk to care enough to see what's coming.

“Okay, Chase, get us started and pick someone here to kiss. We will let you decide how far to take it.”

“Whoa, but not me, man... I'm your brother.” Nate grins at me, laughing. “I'm excluded from this dare.”

I laugh until I see Brooke's hand on his knee and his arm around her, and the agony of seeing that hits me like a truck. She looks flustered as my eyes meet hers. I lick my lips and walk toward her but, at the last second, turn to Harper sitting beside her.

I pull her up with my hand on the side of her face and slam my lips against hers, kissing her passionately. Heavily making out with her, using my hands to run over her body and through her hair. She's kissing back just as furiously, which surprises me, and I have half a mind to drag her into my room, make her scream my name, and try to forget about Brooke for one night. As we lose air, I pull back.

“Thanks, Princess,” I say, deliberately using my pet name for Brooke for added spite to get back at her for looking so cozy with my brother. I know it's cruel, but right now, I don't care. I'm too far gone.

Harper looks flush and guilty as she sits back down, and I just grin, turning to Asher to brag about the fact that it was an easy dare. His eyes are like thunder, and his body is tense.

For a split second, I think he's going to jump over the table and hit me, which I know I one hundred percent deserve. But then he relaxes, the mask slipping back onto his face within a second, and laughs. Getting another of Harper's looks like she's disgusted with him.

I lean back on the couch, grabbing my beer and meeting my girl's eyes.

“I'm going to bed.”

She instantaneously looks away and gets up without saying another word, slamming her drink on the table, and I watch her disappear upstairs. I instantly sober up and realize I fucked up again, and I don't know who's madder at me right now. Brooke or Asher. I look at the beer in my hand and put it back on the table, sighing, realizing what I've done.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

CHAPTER FIVE

CHASE

The following morning, my head is killing me, and I'm not sure if it's the alcohol from last night or the drama I caused yesterday. I head outside in just a pair of pale gray joggers, feeling the breeze on my body, and hope the ocean will wash away my actions from last night.

I exhale loudly into my coffee, leaning against the balustrade, wondering how the hell I'm going to fix this. I didn't just hurt Brooke last night. I hurt my best friend, and he has more pain than he can bear already. I hear someone clear their throat, and I don't turn to look, knowing who it is already.

"What is it, Harper?" I growl, hoping she will go away. I am not ready to face anyone yet.

For some reason, she thinks that the tone in my voice gives her an open invitation to come and stand next to me. I take a sip of my coffee, not making eye contact, keeping my eyes on the sea.

"Well, aren't you a ball of sunshine in the morning?" I turn to face her, glaring a little at her but also impressed at how she stands up for herself. Maybe she's been rubbing off on Brooke. That's the thing I've always liked about Harper. She doesn't give a flying fuck. She wears her heart on her sleeve and gives everyone shit that deserves it.

"Why did you kiss me last night? Why not Brooke?"

I don't even know how to answer that. The truth is, I wish I had, but maybe that would have made things worse.

“I don’t know, Harper. Why did you kiss me back?”

She sighs, “Because Asher was being a dick, and I thought if he saw me with you...” she trails off, looking away, so I finish her sentence.

“You thought he would come to his senses and admit that he loves you?” She blushes and looks away.

“I wouldn’t say love, but I’m pretty sure he has feelings for me.”

I snort, not answering that, knowing full well that’s exactly how he feels, even if he won’t admit it. She rolls her eyes at me, and I can’t help but smile warmly at her.

“Looks like we both used each other then last night.”

She nods in response, sighing, resigned to her fate too.

“The difference is he knows how I feel...she doesn’t.” I tip my head, smiling at her, so she is smart, I think.

“Doesn’t matter how I feel, Harper. I’ll never be able to tell her or do anything about it, and if you’re as clever as I think you are, then you already know one of the reasons why.”

She turns around, leaning against the pale wood, looking at me intently, and says one word.

“Nate.”

I nod, taking a seat on the same bench from last night. I run my hand through my hair, pushing it off my forehead as I look at her. She really is a smart cookie. I get the feeling she’s a little like Jax. Has a smartness she hides away, but my guess is she sees everything. Things most of us don’t see.

“So, you know how he feels? Has he told you?”

She shakes her head, laughing softly.

“No, but anyone with eyes can see how he feels about her. I knew it the second I met them. That guy worships the ground she walks on. But then the same goes for you, Chase.”

My breath hitches as she smiles at me.

“If anything, I think you feel even more deeply for her. You’re like her reflection; she moves, you move.”

I meet her gaze, understanding why Asher likes her. She’s as sharp as a knife and doesn’t mince her words.

“Maybe, doesn’t change the circumstances, though. What do I do, Harper? Tell me...because I’m trying to do the right thing by her and him, but all I’m doing is losing her completely, and that’s the last thing I want.”

She stares at me for a few seconds, and I can see the wheels turning in her head, her lips purse before she speaks.

“The only thing you can do. You already know what that is, but you won’t admit it. You would rather suffer in silence. You’re an idiot, Chase Anderson, if you don’t see how she feels about both of you. You both need to open your eyes because she made her choice years ago. In fact, I don’t even think it was a choice for her. You’re both just too dumb to realize it.”

She gives me a smirk and a knowing wink before disappearing into the house, and I feel more confused by that than ever. I only know one thing for sure. I need to apologize to both of the people I hurt last night. I get up slowly, taking one more look at the sea and a deep breath before telling myself to grow some balls and get on with it.

I find Asher in the kitchen making breakfast, his back facing me, and either he doesn’t notice me, or he’s ignoring me.

“Can we talk?” I see the veins in his arms tense, and his body twitch for a split second before it’s gone. He turns around with his mask firmly in place and a smile on his face.

“What about bro?”

I don’t know why he does this with me. He forgets I know everything. I can read him easily, yet he still pretends like I don’t.

“Kissing Harper.”

His eye twitches, and his jaw ticks, then it's gone as quick as it comes. "Why do you want to talk about that? It was a game? I dared you, and you did it." He shrugs at me before he continues to make his food.

"You forget I know you. You're my brother. You may not have been born that way, Asher, but it doesn't make it any less true. I know this has fucked you off. You have a right to be pissed at me, but listen, man, it meant nothing... I was drunk and pissed off, and Brooke was angry with me," I sigh, exhaling deeply, "but that's not an excuse. I shouldn't have kissed Harper. I know she means a lot to you."

Within half a second, he's in my face, and I see the Asher few people see. The one full of anger and sadness at the world for the deal life has given him. "She means nothing to me, Chase. You all need to get that through your thick heads. She's nothing, no one. She doesn't mean shit. She has a stupid, delusional crush on me, and she needs to grow up and leave me alone," he spits out.

I hear a gasp, and I feel my heart break for her. I turn around, and there's Harper, who just walked in at the exact wrong moment. She looks devastated. Asher instantly softens, looking wrecked that he said that in front of her. "Harper, I didn't mean..." she cuts Asher off quickly and sharply.

"Yes, you did, and that's fine because, as of now, you mean nothing to me either. I'm done with this, Asher, and I'm done playing your bullshit games. If you want me to leave you alone, then that's exactly what I'll do. And don't you dare fucking follow me. I'm done doing this back-and-forth thing we always do. At least this time, I have a witness, so you can't tell me this never happened." A lone tear runs down her cheek, and she turns on her heel and walks off.

Asher looks at me, lost, almost vulnerable.

"Fuck!" He puts his head in his hands. "I keep fucking up Chase, I keep making mistakes."

"I'm not the guy to judge. You can only do what you think is best." I shrug softly, and he nods silently at me.

“Best for me or for her?” I don’t respond because I say those words to myself repeatedly.

After a few seconds pass, I give him advice I could never give myself.

“Go get your girl, man,” I say before he thanks me and chases after her. I wonder if there’s more going on there than I realize. What was that about me being a witness? I turn to ask him, but he’s already gone. Guess I’ll have to worry about that later.

I exhale, accepting that I probably just made that worse too, and make another cup of coffee, pulling out a second cup this time. I open the cupboard, grinning, knowing there’s no way Brooke would have left home without her coffee additions, and I was right. I add two shots of caramel and a shot of strawberry syrup. I turn my nose up at it as I stir the syrups in, wondering how Brooke could ever drink coffee like this. The first time she ordered this in front of me, even the barista looked shocked. I stir it thoroughly before making my way to her room, knowing this will probably be the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do.

I don’t bother knocking, knowing she won’t let me in if I ask. Instead, I open the door and creep in. She’s asleep on her bed still, her hair spread out over her pillow and her covers thrown off to the end. She looks peaceful while she sleeps, and I wonder if I should wake her, but as I get closer, I can see the tear stains on her cheeks, and I feel like I’ve been smacked in the face as I know I’m the cause of them. She’s fallen asleep in the same clothes as yesterday, which means she cried herself asleep. A sinking feeling settles over me as I realize what I’ve done to her.

I place the two cups on the bedside table and gently stroke her hair with my fingertips, pulling a few strands between them.

“Hey beautiful, wake up, lazy girl.” I kiss her cheek softly. “Come on, Princess, time to wake up.” She opens her eyes sleepily, yawning, and then, as she gets her focus back, her eyes narrow at me, full of disdain and disgust.

“Never call me that again, and get the hell out of my room.” She goes to turn over to put her back to me, but I don’t let her. I place my hands on her arms and pull her back, holding her down to look up at me.

“I will always call you that, Brooke, because that’s what you are to me.” I pull her up so she’s sitting. “You will always be my princess.”

She scoffs. “Yeah, just like every other girl you meet,” she says bitterly. Brooke has never looked at me this way. Like I’m the biggest disappointment in her life. I know I deserve that, but it doesn’t make it hurt any less.

“This is because that’s what I called Harper, right?” I know I look sheepish right now. She says nothing but doesn’t look at me either. I tip her chin back to me softly. “I’m sorry, Brooke, I shouldn’t have done that. I was angry at you, and I lashed out, but I promise you I have never, ever called any other girl that before, and I never will again.”

She chokes down a sob. “That meant something to me, Chase. That was always our thing. It always reminded me of how we met, how you took my hand and...and you twisted it, and you used it to put me down like I was nothing to you.”

I pull her closer to me, placing my arms around her, so angry at myself that I hurt her like this.

“I know,” I say softly, running my fingers through her hair as she stills in my arms. “I fucked up, Brooke, and I promise I won’t ever hurt you like that ever again. You’re so fucking important to me, and I’m an idiot for doing it.”

She pulls back. “And yesterday on the porch?” She looks up at me, and I can see the tears threatening to spill out of those beautiful eyes of hers, trying to stop them. She hates crying in front of others. It makes her feel weak and vulnerable. “Why? Why would you do that to me? Say those things? Touch me like that?”

My breath is heavy as I try to figure out what to say. “Because I’m the idiot that loves you, and I was angry. I took it out on you. You’ve been part of my family for so long now,

Brooke. I don't want anyone to hurt you or take advantage of you..." I swallow hard as I force the words out, trying not to choke on them. "You're like a sister to me, Princess, and I would never want that to happen to you. I know it happens to other girls, and I'm trying to protect you, and I overreacted." I feel her tense, and she scowls at me before she pushes me back.

"You always touch your sister like that?"

Wow, that hurt. She said it with such spite and hatred. I don't think I'll ever fail to remember that tone in her voice. She's never said a hateful word to anyone, even when they deserved it.

"I know I fucked up. I said this. But this is what guys do, and I'm no exception, Brooke—you're too sweet, too innocent, and I know some of that is my fault for protecting you so fiercely, but you need to know it. They will take advantage of you like I did last night, and I know I took it too far. I'm sorry, I will spend as long as it takes making it up to you, I promise."

CHAPTER SIX

BROOKE

He said it. He tore the heart out of my chest with one little word.

Sister.

I'm like his *sister*, and it's killing me inside.

It's what I always knew but never wanted to acknowledge. I guess I always hoped, maybe, just maybe, we could be something more, but I was wrong. I nod at his words, but I feel numb. I can feel the emptiness creeping in.

My entire world feels like it's crumbling. I have loved this man for fourteen years, and today, he told me I was nothing more than a sister. I try my best to give him a smile, trying not to show the real pain I'm feeling right now and why I am so upset. But physically, I'm trying not to vomit. I swallow down the bile threatening to come up. I've fallen madly and truly for a guy that thinks of me as family.

I can tell he's upset; worry lines are etched into his face, and dark rings around his eyes where he didn't sleep last night. "Never treat me like that again," I say firmly but quietly, unable to make any more words come out, fearing I might cry again.

I take the coffee he made me and drink, looking down into the mug. The hot liquid warming my insides the way coffee always does. He remembers how I take it. I think about the first time he saw me order it. The look of sheer horror on his face. My coffee tastes are complex, unlike Chases—black, one sugar. Simple. I smile at the thought, and I look up at him.

“I accept your apology on the account of coffee,” I say softly, and he smiles in response, his whole face lighting up. “Thank you,” I whisper. How could someone with that smile break my heart like this and not realize it?

He runs his hand through my hair, stroking down my face and ending up at my chin. He smiles, but it looks a little sad.

“No problem, Princess. Now get out of bed. We’re going out. Just you and me. I promised to make yesterday up to you, so I’m going to spend the whole day trying.” He gets off the bed and walks over to the door but stops just short of it, turning back to look at me. “And Brooke, I really am sorry.”

He looks lost. I rarely see Chase vulnerable, and I hate that it has to do with me. Even though he’s breaking my heart, I would never want to cause him any pain.

I put my coffee on the side and stand on the bed, walking over to the end and wrapping my arms around his neck. I must look ridiculous right now, but it’s the only way I can be at eye level with him.

Damn, his height.

He pulls me in close and buries his face just above my breasts. His hands slip down my back. There’s so much unsaid between us. I can feel it, but neither of us talks. It’s better this way because neither of us will say the words we want to hear.

I know that if he looks up, he will see the pain in my face. I feel like someone has just cut me open, hollowed me out, leaving only a shattered heart, and sewed me back up again, leaving me to walk around broken.

I swallow my words and my tears because I know I will always choose this, having him here hugging me this closely over the alternative of not having him at all in my life. No matter how much it causes my heart to ache for a future we will never have. We stand like this in silence for a few beats, both of us not wanting to let go, but I do because if I hold on any longer, I will crack.

“Chase, it’s okay, let’s move past this. Let’s forget yesterday ever happened.” He nods, smiling at me with that

sad smile again, and he looks like that twelve-year-old boy I met all those years ago.

That sad little boy who didn't trust anyone or anything in this world. He's still like that, but at least over the years, he's come to trust a few people. That's the thing with Chase. Everyone sees the guy he shows to the world, but he's not really like that. He will give up everything to help the people he cares about. I push his hair back gently, trying to say goodbye to the dream I had of us together.

“Okay, now get out of here, perv. I need to get dressed.”

He chuckles, walking out the door. I take a deep breath, trying to get my emotions together, or else all I'm going to do is start crying again. I stand on my bed, staring at the door after he closes it.

You can do this, I think quietly.

I jump off the bed and find my phone, switching my morning music on, realizing it's already noon. I opt for a white summer dress with little pink flowers and spaghetti straps. I pair them with my favorite wedges, giving me a little height so I don't look too small next to him.

I apply just a little makeup, opting for a natural glow, and throw my hair into a high, messy ponytail. I look at myself in the mirror, and for a split moment, I wonder what it is he doesn't see in me. Don't get me wrong, I'm not vain, but I know I'm not exactly a dog. I visualize Chloe in my mind and snort. We couldn't be further apart if we tried.

She's tall, I'm short.

She's blonde, I'm brunette.

I have a soul, she doesn't.

I've never been his type, and I never will be. It's time I accept it and move on. I'll let myself feel sad today, and it will be the last day I'll give myself to daydream about what could never be. Dream of a future that will never happen.

After this, I'm closing those feelings off, and I'll never look back. Even if it means my heart will always miss

something. After all, I'm like *his sister*. I feel a pain in my stomach like a knife is gutting me from the inside out, and I realize that pain is me finally accepting that the guy I've loved since I was five years old will never love me back.

I'll have to watch him meet someone else, a girl like Chloe. He'll get married to his perfect wife and have perfect kids and a perfect fucking life. I'll always be on the sidelines looking at something I can never have, with who I thought might possibly be my soulmate. I can't make somebody love me no matter how much I want it.

I blink back the tears in my eyes, threatening to spill and force a smile on my face. *You can do this, Brooke*, I think to myself. *You're strong. You've got this.* I exhale, taking all that nervous and sad energy and expelling it out to the world, my breath shaky before I tell myself to walk downstairs.

I finally gather the courage to leave my room and bump into Harper outside. She's been crying, I can tell. Her eyes are puffy, and her face red.

"Harper?"

She gives me a forced smile.

"Morning, Brooke," I pull her into a hug.

"Harps, what's wrong?"

She laughs a little manically. Okay, I'm definitely concerned.

"I'm nothing. I mean nothing to him."

I know immediately who she's talking about. "What happened?"

I have to ask her about what happened between her and Asher a couple of months ago because she's not been the same since. Just a little bit more reserved, and I can tell her heart is not in anything anymore. No one else can see it, but I sure as hell can.

There was a party in the spring thrown by Nate's brother and his friends. That night, I lost Harper in the madness of it all, and I was told Asher had dropped her off at home. But

when I saw her again a few days later, she wouldn't speak of that night. In fact, she physically excused herself from the conversation and disappeared every time I asked her.

One time, I found her crying in the girls' restroom on campus, but she wouldn't say a word about why. I wonder what happened that night every day, but she was still utterly and madly in love with Asher, so I hoped he wasn't the cause of her pain.

Asher was complex for sure, but could I imagine him hurting Harper?

Never.

Not for one second.

Oh, Asher, where do I even begin?

He's drop-dead gorgeous, and many people fear him. He has this dark side to him. He seems angry a lot of the time but never with me. I'm not scared of Asher, though, like others are. I have grown up around him, despite him being a few years older than us, but there is always a darkness in his eyes.

He isn't angry like everyone thinks, though. He's sad, a little broken. Even when he smiles, I can see it. But that night, something happened between them, and now something is broken in my best friend, and I'm determined to find out what happened this summer.

"Asher." She swallows as a sneer appears on her face. "He's being himself, as usual. I can't." Her voice breaks, and I step back.

"I'm going to kill him. Where is he?" I say, rage shooting through my body at how he could do this to her. Harper doesn't deserve this. She laughs again.

"I don't know. We had an argument, and he drove off."

"Harper, what's going on between you? Ever since that party, you both have been...I don't know...off?" She sighs, pushing her hair out of her face.

"I made a mistake, Brooke. That party...it was insane. We were both drinking, and I lost you coming back from the

bathroom, and I...”

At that exact moment, Chase walks around the corner. He sees us both and knows something is wrong.

“I can come back?” he says softly.

Harper shakes her head gently, offering us both an apologetic smile. “No, it’s fine. I’m good. I’m not wasting any more energy on this, on him. The past is the past, and Asher can stay in it for all I care.”

I watch Chase take a beat before walking over to her and pulling her into his chest as he strokes her hair.

“Hey... Don’t waste tears on him. Asher is...complicated, and if he doesn’t see what he’s got in front of him, Harper”—he pulls her back and tips her chin to him—“then he’s an idiot and doesn’t realize how dumb he is.”

She smiles up at him, and he’s looking deep into her eyes, smiling right back. They’re sharing a secret, and I feel like I’m forced to watch this moment.

My heart clenches, and I swallow hard. The kiss from last night comes flooding back, and I wonder if he likes Harper. She looks a little like Chloe. Blonde, beautiful. The only difference is that she doesn’t have that bitchiness to her beauty. “Thanks, Chase,” she whispers. He nods, pulling back.

“Me and Brooke, we’re going out...but will you be okay? You can come with us? Or we can stay?”

She looks at me, shaking her head, and grins like a dope, giving me a look as if to say, “*Don’t mess this up.*”

“Hell no, go enjoy yourselves. Our friends from college messaged me this morning to say that a group of them were here, too. You picked a party town during the summer, so I’m sure we will see a few people we know around over the next few weeks. So, I’m going out to have fun and forget this whole thing.”

“You sure?” I ask her.

She nods. “One hundred percent, Brooke, I’m fine, I promise.” She walks over, gives me a quick hug, and whispers,

“Have fun, and Brooke, just tell him how you feel. I can’t stand the sexual tension anymore.”

I swat her away, laughing a little manically myself. If only she knew she wouldn’t be saying that. She walks away giggling to herself, and I wish I could pull her back and tell her the truth over a tub of ice cream.

Chase throws his arm around my shoulder so casually. “Ready Princess?”

I tip my head to him and smile back.

One day, I’m giving myself this day to pretend, and then after that, I’m done.

I raise my hand, threading my fingers through his.

One day, Brooke...just one day!

“Let’s do this!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHASE

*H*ow she smiles up at me and holds my hand down the beach makes me nervous. I have butterflies in my stomach. I know that's not a very manly thing to say, but it's true. But the way she smiles at me sometimes is strange.

It's like I'm the only one she sees, the only guy that exists in her life, and I love it...I love her.

I swallow hard just thinking about it but I am wondering if there really is something between us, whether she might have feelings for me, too. It would explain why she was so hurt earlier.

When I said she was like my sister, I saw her reaction. It was as if I had sucked all the air out of the room. She seems to be more upset about that than anything else.

Is that why she was hurt when I kissed Harper?

Or am I imagining it all?

For fuck's sake, Chase, it doesn't matter. You're forgetting two little things.

Your brother!

Or how about the fact that you can't pull her into your world?

I can't let her see that side of me or the guys. She's too pure, too innocent. It will break her, and I've broken her enough. I won't let her see the blood on my hands, too.

We spend the day in town shopping a little. She loves all the markets and independent shops, but I knew she would. She hates mass-produced items but adores anything handmade or one-of-a-kind. I always bring her stuff back when traveling; she has quite the collection now.

We're sitting outside, grabbing something to eat in the main square, and I can feel her leg touching mine as she reads the menu, deciding what to order for lunch. Curls of her hair have fallen out of her ponytail, framing her face. She looks beautiful like this, like my perfect angel.

She has her concentrating face on, the one where she's biting her lip, and my god, what I want to do to that lip. I imagine grabbing her, placing her on my lap, then nibbling on it before pulling her into an all-consuming kiss. Imagine pulling her hair down loose over her shoulders as I run my hand through it and her moaning for me as my hands wander.

I clear my throat, rearranging myself under the table as these thoughts shoot straight to my dick. She smiles coyly over her menu at me, unaware of the thoughts plaguing my mind.

"Okay, I've decided."

I laugh. "Let me guess. A strawberry milkshake with a classic bacon cheeseburger and fries combo that you always order whenever we eat?"

She frowns. "Am I that predictable?"

My hand reaches out to her, and I stroke my thumb along the back of her hand.

"No, Princess, you're just that adorable, and I notice everything about you."

This only intensifies her frown, her eyes drifting away from me, so I pull my hand back as I realize she thinks I'm playing with her again.

"I'm sorry. I think I need to say it again. I don't want you to second-guess everything I say. I promise I'm not intending to play with you."

“It’s just sometimes...the things you say...I don’t think you should say to me if you think of me as just a friend... sorry, your *sister*. They’re not things you say to someone you’re just friends with. It’s confusing for me. I never thought about it before like that, but after what you said this morning, it’s hard not to. It makes me feel...” she trails off, and I realize she’s right. I’ve never really watched what I said to her before. I’ve just stopped it before it got too far. I have to ask her why it bothers her because this is becoming harder and harder by the day.

“Brooke?” She looks up at me, those beautiful eyes on mine. I take a breath and decide to risk it. I need to know what she feels for me in her own words. “Do you have feelings for me?”

Her face flushes, and she laughs softly. “You’re Nate’s brother. Best friend code, you know.”

I notice she doesn’t deny it, and for a second, my heart feels lighter than it has in years, and butterflies return to my stomach. “That’s not a no?”

I grin as she rolls her eyes, blushing before opening her mouth to say something, and then the server appears to take our order. Worst timing or best timing? I’m not sure at this point. I order the same as her since I was too distracted by her to even check the menu once I realized it had her favorite.

“So, what’s the best friend code? I feel like I should know it for Jax and Asher.” She scowls at the mention of Asher, and I chuckle. “Yes, I know... He’s an idiot for hurting Harper, but there’s a lot you don’t know about him, about his past and why he does what he does.”

“So, tell me.” She looks at me, determined to find out more and change the subject completely.

“It’s not my story to tell Brooke. If he tells her or you, then that’s up to him, but Brooke, don’t ask him. It’s painful for him, and he doesn’t like people knowing. You need to leave it alone. There’s dark stuff there you shouldn’t be involved in.”

“And you... Are you involved in it?”

I take a slow breath, wondering how much I should say. I don't want her involved at all...to know what it's doing to me but I can't lie outright to her either.

“Yes, when he needs me to be, and yes, the same for Jax before you ask. I don't want you anywhere near it, so Brooke...drop it,” I say, my tone deeper and severe.

If she knew the things I was capable of, the things I've done and will do, she would run for the hills. She should run. I should stop this with her, but I'm selfish. I need her. She's the brightness in the dark, and every day, I take a step further with the guys. I feel a little bit more of the shadows creeping in. She's the one that keeps me grounded. Keeps me sane, but I won't have her involved in it. Even if it kills me.

She nods, sensing I'm serious, and I sigh in relief.

“I just don't get it. I feel like he's playing games with Harper, and I don't like it. I don't want her to get hurt. If he's not interested, he needs to tell her and let her move on. I thought things might happen between them, but since the party, things are different with them.” She sighs.

“What happened at the party?” I ask curiously, not really knowing what she's talking about.

That party got nuts. Jax threw it. After that week, the boys and I needed to blow off some steam, and many people were drinking heavily that night. But I didn't know something happened between Asher and Harper.

I know Asher disappeared for over two hours. When I finally caught up with him, he was furious and drank himself into an absolute stupor, getting high as a kite. Jax and I had to get him home, and he didn't talk to us for days. When he finally did, he pretended nothing happened. It's always bothered me, but I know Asher won't say anything to us unless he wants to. Pressuring him makes it worse.

“I don't know. She started telling me this morning, but then you came out.”

“Maybe they slept together, or she caught him fucking with someone else?” I say, shrugging. “Sounds like Asher.”

She narrows her eyes at me, clearly pissed off. My little hellcat.

“That may sound like Asher,” she spits his name. “Sounds like all of you, really, but Harper isn’t like that. She doesn’t just fuck for fun.”

“Why are you pissed with me? And what the hell do you mean, all of us?” I ask, and she laughs bitterly.

“Yeah, because you weren’t all over Chloe that night? You have a new girl every other day, Chase. You always have, but that bitch, she’s the only one that keeps popping up.”

I smirk at her. “Aww, is my little princess jealous?” It warms my heart to know she is—I can’t help but tease her. She just glares at me in response. If she was mine, I would fuck that attitude right out of her or have fun trying.

“I’m not your anything, Chase! Remember? We’re just friends.”

I lean closer to the table, slowly running my hand up her thigh, my fingers teasing her as they drift further upward deliberately.

“But you want to be? Mine?” I watch her breath get heavy, the swell of her breasts in that barely-there sundress that shows off her petite, little frame. Her face flushes, and I know right then she does. “You want me to slide those fingers up higher, Brookie, repeat last night, don’t you? Are you soaked for me, Princess?”

Suddenly, food appears on the table. I fucking hate this man. I pull back, mildly pissed at this shit-for-brains server who can’t read a situation. She sits awkwardly, tossing a smile at him before he leaves.

She takes a sip of her milkshake. Those sweet little lips sealing around the straw, and I can’t help but watch them. What I wouldn’t give for that straw to be my cock right now. The only difference—those sweet little lips would be stretched as she gagged on my thick shaft.

She shoots me another one of her adorable glares, and I chuckle. “I don’t want to be your anything, Chase. Anyone

that fucks Slutface Chloe is definitely not good enough for me.”

That’s twice she’s mentioned Chloe now.

Interesting.

“Why do you hate Chloe so much?” I ask her, genuinely curious.

She laughs fiercely. “You’re joking, right? That bitch made my life hell when she was with you. You would think I was trying to steal you away from her, the way she was with me. Several times, she barged into me on purpose and made a point of telling me how you were balls deep into her the night before. How she screamed for you. It was disgusting.” She gets really quiet, and for a second, I pause.

I know that girls always talk about sleeping with me; they think if they announce I’ve fucked them, I’m suddenly theirs, and I know she hears it, but it’s never bothered her before. She usually laughs about it knowing I don’t date, I just fuck.

“There’s more,” I state, narrowing my eyes at her, and she nods.

“She always put me down, telling me I was nothing, no one. How the only reason you and Nate hung around with me was that I was a charity case,” she says quietly, looking down at her plate.

I watch tears well in her eyes, and I’m angry. I mean, pure rage is filling my entire body right now, and I’m trying so hard not to tip this table over and hunt that bitch down for telling *my everything* she was nothing.

Chloe was nothing more than a convenience to me, a decent fuck, sure, but not exceptional. Though she can suck my dick good enough when I picture Brooke. But she was never more than that. Now I look back at it, she was awfully clingy, but I didn’t care. She kept people off my back when I couldn’t be bothered with girls.

That summer, Brooke and Nate made a bucket list of things to do by the end of it, and I was jealous, so I used Chloe to distract me. I finished with her earlier this year before I took

off for a while. But if I had known for one second that she had said that stuff to Brooke, she would have been out on her ass so fast, and we would have ruined her. She would have been destroyed by the time the guys and I had been through with her.

I make a mental note to talk to the guys this evening to make sure Chloe knows her place in the world. But for now, I take my girl's hand and pull her around the table and onto my lap. I wipe the tears from her eyes with my thumbs, slowly looking into those eyes that capture me.

“Brooke, you are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen in my life. I realized that when I first met you, no one would ever compare to you. You have the sweetest laugh, and I live to see your smile.” I tip her head to look at me. “You, Brooke, are my”—I clear my throat—“mine and Nate's world. Don't you see we would be nothing without you? You are the one that breathes light into us.” I run my fingers through her soft hair, and I can feel her heart racing as I press my hand to it.

“This heart you share with us, this is why you're in our lives. You made a sad, angry kid smile for the first time in years when you met me. You breathed life into me again and made me realize the universe isn't shit. There are people like you that are light to the shadows that plague us. The way you care about us, the way you fight for anyone in your life that matters, is why we both adore you.”

I slowly run my fingers over her bottom lip and watch her lips part. “Don't let anyone tell you any different, Princess.” I resist the overwhelming urge to kiss her...barely, instead opting to sigh.

“I wish you had told me this sooner. Chloe was nothing, a distraction from my shit life while you were busy, and she couldn't even compare to you, okay?”

She nods slightly, her breathing heavy, and I take her face in my hands, pressing my lips to her forehead for a few seconds.

“Okay, now eat your food before it gets cold, and let's continue with the rest of our day. Is that okay, Princess?” She

nods, and I smile at her before she stands up and sits back in her seat, dipping her fries in her ketchup quietly, not making eye contact with me.

Fuck, I was probably a little too honest there. This girl has me forgetting everything else when I'm with her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BROOKE

*I*t's been an amazing day. We spent the afternoon walking around the smaller markets and stores in town. It surprises me he knows how much I love that. I always look for unique things, but I didn't know he knew that. Come to think of it, he always bought me the most unique gifts for my birthday and Christmas. Things he had seen overseas, things he had made for me or had made himself...strange.

Lunch was...well, intense, I guess is the right word. Sometimes, I think he might like me despite him saying otherwise earlier. He pushes and challenges me and makes my body ache for him in ways I've never felt before. The way he ran his fingers up my inner thigh, I thought he would touch me again, but nope.

Stupid waiter.

And then, if that wasn't strange enough, that speech at the end blurred the lines I already thought were already blurry much worse. The things he said to me, and then for a split second, I thought he was going to kiss me, but no. That man builds me up and then lets me fall on my ass repeatedly.

I know he likes me.

I'm sure of it.

You don't say things like that to someone you don't. The way he held me, the way he looked at me, I thought... But then he changed his tone and told me to sit and eat.

I swear he's giving me emotional whiplash with his mood swings. He blows so hot and cold I just don't know anymore. I'm not sure I care. I'm just here for the ride. I feel like there's a shift between us, even though he said what he said earlier. I just don't know whether to find out more or just accept we can't be anything other than this.

We spent the rest of the day sitting on the beach, reminiscing about our lives when we were kids and all the dreams we still want. I wonder if he does that to remind me that Chloe's words are meaningless. I saw something in his eyes today when I told him that. A flash of something I've never seen before. At one point, I thought he was going to leave and beat the first person he saw. I've seen him angry before, but not like that.

Why would he react like that if he didn't have feelings for me?

He spends the afternoon lying down with his head on my lap, my hands running through his hair as I stare into the ocean. I smile at how comfortable things are between us, like old times, like how it used to be when we watched the stars together.

We've been doing that since we were kids. I remember the first night we did. He had this app on his phone that told us which stars were what, and then we made up stories about them. They were silly at first, about dragons and magic and knights that saved a damsel in distress, but over the years, they changed.

It's the night after my eighteenth, and Chase has brought me to the docks to look at the stars. It's our spot, and I love how he likes to daydream with me. We're doing our usual storytelling, making up tales about the stars and why they're there. He points to the star to the left of me, shining brightly. I think it's the brightest star in the sky tonight.

"You see that star there, Princess?" I nod in response, curling into his arm. "Well, right there is a goddess that lives amongst the rest of the stars. A mortal man with all of his mundane human faults fell for her. She was the most beautiful

thing he had ever seen. Her light shined so bright in the darkness that surrounded him. He knew he wasn't worthy of her love; he was only human, and she was a gift from the heavens, but he was determined to prove he was good enough to be with her. He would go out every night and share secret promises with her about their future, and she would smile at him in response. He decided to build a bridge to reach her, something no other human had done before. Every moment, he built that bridge higher and higher but realized while he was building, another man had beaten him to it. He watched them every moment growing closer, and before he knew it, he had built the bridge right past them. He looked down and saw they were falling in love. He discovered that man was the right one for her; he wasn't dark like him but matched her light so brilliantly it almost blinded him."

I listen intently as he continues. I recognize how sad this story is, but not only that, how soft Chase's voice is. It's almost vulnerable.

"What happened to him?"

"He got lost in the stars. He's still there, lost in the darkness, getting further and further away from her. He gets more lost and lonelier every day. That darkness infects him, making him hollow, like there's nothing inside of him. He keeps trying to bend the bridge back to his goddess, but he can't. He knows he could never share that darkness with her."

I sit up and punch him in the chest.

"That is the most horrifically heartbreaking story I've ever heard, Chase." He chuckles, holding his chest before reaching out to wipe the tear forming in my eyes.

"It's okay, Princess, you see that man, every so often, gets to see his goddess from afar. He watches how happy she is, how her light still shines, and it grounds him for a moment. Her light, however far away, helps him try to fight the darkness away. He has hope every time he sees her that he won't be lost forever, and he knows when the time is right, she will help him find his way once and for all, if only as a friend."

I smile sadly at that story. I don't even know why I suddenly remembered it.

He's holding my hand as we walk down the beach back to the house. Neither of us is talking. I don't think either of us want this day to end. I just wish he would say it. I pull on his hand, stopping us in our tracks. Having enough of this game that we play. The words on the edge of my lips, wanting to spill out.

He frowns at me as he turns to face me, dropping his hands to my waist. "Brooke?"

"You were right... What you said at the diner. I have thought about what it would be like to be yours." I run my hands up his muscled arms tentatively. "I still do because I want to be. Chase... I'm completely crazy about you. I can't help it. I've been crazy about you from the day we met, since the day you kissed my hand like a real prince. I want to be yours... I know what you said earlier, but I think you do like me more than that. The things you said back at the diner. The way you look at me. The way you're holding me right now... And if you do feel the same, then please just tell me... And if I'm wrong, then"—I swallow hard, trying not to crack—"then that's fine, but we need to stop this, whatever this is." I gesture between us.

I stare up at him, trying to read his expression. He takes one of his hands off my waist and tucks a stray hair behind my ear. I watch his gaze drop to my lips, and I think this is it. This is when he will kiss me, to tell me he likes me back.

I smile up at him, but he drops his hands and steps back, a mask in place covering the cheeky smile I'm used to. My face falls at the loss of his touch. This is wrong. This isn't how it's meant to go. He's meant to pull me into his arms, kiss me, tell me he feels the same way.

"I really don't know how much clearer I can be, Brooke. I don't feel the same way. I told you earlier, and it's the truth."

"No, no, you don't say that stuff to me and tell me I'm beautiful and the light in your darkness. I know you like me, Chase. Just admit it. I don't know if you're ashamed of how

you feel or if there's something holding you back, but just tell me, please, because I feel like I'm going insane."

I swallow hard, exhaling long and heavy. My stomach is in absolute knots.

Did I imagine the whole thing after all?

"You are insane, Brooke," he snaps. "The stuff in the diner... You were going to cry. It was embarrassing, so I said what I said to stop you. Chloe was right. You're nothing to me, Brooke. You couldn't give me anything that I could ever want. I mean, you're a virgin, for Christ's sake. How could you ever compare to Chloe? That girl is a real woman. You're just a girl playing princess, trying to find a hero to save her from her sad life. Well, guess what, Brooke, I'm not the hero in your story. I'm the villain. I only put up with you because of Nate. I took you out today because I felt bad because you put the tears on just like you're doing now." He starts walking away, and I chase after him.

I know I'm crying, and I can't stop. I wipe the tears away, but they just keep coming.

"Chase, why are you saying this to me? This isn't you?" I feel like the air has been taken from my lungs. I can't breathe and don't know how to, even if I wanted to.

"Because I'm sick of it, Brooke. I'm sick of babysitting you when Nate has a girlfriend because you're too fucking prissy to give it up to get a boyfriend yourself. I'm sick of watching you with those doe eyes of yours as you follow me around like some love-sick puppy. I mean, I might have fucked you last night. I haven't had it in a few days. I was horny, but the second you started begging me, my dick went limp. I don't fuck frigid girls that beg. I like my women with a little more self-respect than that."

He rolls his eyes and sneers at me, and I wonder if the Chase I knew for all these years was an act.

"Chase, that's not true. You used to spend your nights with me on the docks, just us. If you felt that way, you wouldn't have done that."

“Get it through your head, Brooke. I thought putting in the work so as you got older would get me laid. I mean, any guy would look at that body and want it. You think I enjoyed those nights?” he scoffs. “Oh, come on, surely you can’t be that naïve that you genuinely think a guy would spend his nights with you like that without thinking he was getting something in return? I mean, you grew up into being a hot little piece of ass. Plus, nailing the town’s only virgin. That’s hot!”

I take a step back from him before slapping him hard, so hard his face turns with the impact as I hear the sound of my hand meeting his cheek. My hand stings, but I don’t wince. I allow that burning sensation in.

“You’re a bastard, Chase Anderson, and I wish I had never met you.”

“Call me what you want, Princess, but you and I both know I could never be with someone like you...”

With that, he turns away and disappears out of my sight. I crumple to the ground, my legs unable to take my weight anymore. I feel physically sick as I recognize the last fourteen years have been a lie. I bet he joked about me with his friends. Him having to babysit the poor little virgin.

Did he tell them about last night?

I sob, and the tears keep coming. I close my eyes, bringing my knees up to my chest as I sit there, and let the pain overwhelm me. I cry for what feels like forever. The sun sets as I let enough tears fall I could fill the ocean itself, that is, until I feel someone approaching me.

I look up and wonder if it’s Chase coming back to tell me he’s sorry, but it’s not.

Instead, bright blue eyes meet mine.

CHAPTER NINE

CHASE

I slam the front door so hard it makes the glass in the window rattle. For a second, I feel like it will shatter, just like I did to Brooke's heart. Asher and Jax jump on the sofa, shocked.

“What the fuck Chase?” They laugh, “You scared the shit out of us.” Jax grins at me, but I don't acknowledge it.

All I can see is how I just broke her.

How I just left her on the beach.

I don't deserve her love.

I know that. I can't taint her world, no matter how much it kills me to live without her. I know what I've done can never be fixed, and that's how it should be. She's safer this way.

I walk to the cupboard and grab a bottle of whiskey I brought, chugging half the bottle like a man dying of thirst in the desert, leaning against the fridge, barely acknowledging the guys. Whatever they're saying feels distant to me. All I can see is her face in front of me, those wide eyes shedding tears as I watched them roll down her face. Hearing her choked sobs as I turned and left her.

I need to be numb.

I need it to go away.

Asher jumps up. He knows my signs of self-sabotage. After all, he does it all the time, too. “What did you do?”

Jax walks up, pulling the bottle out of my hand. “Whatever it is, this won’t help.”

I push him hard, and he stumbles back, hitting the island in the kitchen. Grabbing the bottle from him, not caring, just needing to numb the pain. My ears are ringing with rage at myself, the situation, and heartache from the fact I did it.

I finally pushed her away for good.

I look up, and Jax is holding his back, and I know I’ve just hurt him. I want to say sorry, but I can’t. I can’t be weak. He doesn’t give me a hard time for it. Instead, he looks at me, his eyes softening. “What happened?”

“I broke her...” I say, choking a sob down. “She was there telling me she wanted me, she wanted to be with me...and I... I...” I find myself sliding down the fridge, and before I know it, I’m on the floor. The cold kitchen tiles against my legs. The cold and the darkness creep into my soul the way it always does when she’s not around.

Asher sits down in front of me and grabs my head with his hands leaning against my forehead. “I get it, man,” he says, nodding his head against mine.

“Harper.” I nod back at him.

“Yeah...”

We exchange no more words, but we both get it. Neither of us can suck the girls we love into our world. It’s dark and brutal and bloody. Chasing Asher’s past, it’s not fun. We’ve become harder, different, colder. We’ve had to be.

I still remember how Michael’s body went slack as Jax and I held him down. Watching Asher smirk as he pulled the trigger. The feel of his blood soaking my hands as we beat him brutally until he told us who the others were. We all thought we would be happy that we finally caught him, but we know we all have a long way to go before we’re finished.

The truth is, I felt nothing.

I felt nothing when I hit him.

Nothing when I dropped his body to the floor dead.

Nothing when I helped dump the body and watched it burn.

And nothing when I stepped in the shower, washing his blood off my body.

I want to say that was the moment I changed, but the truth is I changed the minute Asher told me what had happened to his sister and him when they were younger. I felt empty inside hearing his story. I felt the darkness begin to creep into my soul.

We made a pact that day and we will all see it through, no matter what happens to us in the process.

I wish I had the chance to meet her.

I wish that I knew him before that.

Maybe I could have helped, done something. I know Jax feels the same. We were all eighteen when he told us that story, and it's taken us a long time to get to where we are now.

Jax is next to us on the floor with his legs crossed. He grabs the bottle from my hand once again and takes a shot. Asher lets go of my head and leans back, taking the bottle from Jax and taking a drink himself.

This is how we cope. We numb the pain. It's why Asher gets high often. It helps him forget. Jax...well, Jax has another reason to numb his pain. I think that's why we are friends. I think something in us recognized the pain and anger we all held.

"We still have a few more to go, you know... If you don't tell them now and let them in, you might lose them both forever," Jax blows out.

He doesn't know what it's like. To have someone in your life so pure and untainted by darkness. Brooke is my light. I need her more than the air in my lungs, but I can't be selfish anymore. I can't let her in. To find out who I really am. To allow the dark to taint that light she has.

"I know," Ash growls. "You think I don't fucking know that, Jax? You think I don't think of her every second of every

day and wish I never got started on this godforsaken path because it means I can never have the one fucking thing that makes me happy?”

I place my hand on his shoulder to calm him, and he breathes out, nodding. “I have to do this for my sister. It’s the only way. But Chase... You can walk away. You don’t need to lose her. I won’t blame you. You didn’t know Ellie,” he says quietly.

I think that over in my head for a second. I could be with her finally. Let her light chase the darkness out of my soul.

I imagine waking up with her in my arms, her hair falling over her beautiful face, framing it like an angel.

I imagine how she would feel against me, seeing her waking up smiling at me and kissing me good morning.

It’s heaven, and the thought of that warms my soul, shielding me from the demons trying to creep in. But I know I can’t leave Asher. I have to keep him sane on this journey. I worry sometimes that I’m losing him. Each day, he seems a little colder, a little more distant, and the truth is I’m happy Harper is in his life. As volatile as their relationship is, she keeps him grounded in the real world.

“We’re brothers, aren’t we? We don’t run away from this. One thing hurts us. It hurts us all,” I say with as much conviction as I can muster. Jax nods along with Asher.

“Thank you, brother,” he says, and I nod, assuring him.

I sigh loudly, trying to breathe the pain away, but it doesn’t help. “Nate is finally going to tell her. He basically told me on the first day here.” I swallow hard like I’m trying to accept it. “He’s a better choice for her, and he loves her too.” Asher scoffs, and I shoot him a look. “Asher, if someone like him went after your girl, what would you do? Knowing what we have done, what we plan to do... What choice would you make?”

He groans loudly. “I would walk away knowing that guy could give her the life she deserves, loved and cared for. To hell with how I feel because that’s what she deserves.”

I sigh, nodding. “Exactly...and he’s my brother, and he loves her...which is why I made her hate me. I had to do it. She needs to see him as the right choice... I said...I said she was nothing compared to Chloe.”

Repeating it makes me feel sick to my stomach. Part of me wishes I could take it back.

“I said I could never be with a girl like her, a virgin, that I was sick of babysitting her, and that she needed to back off.”

I grab the bottle of whiskey, hitting my head against the fridge and finishing the bottle. Repeating everything I said to her in my head, watching her tears fall, seeing her collapse on the beach as I turned away from her.

Nate is a better choice. He couldn’t do that to her. Maybe I am a son of a bitch, and I know my soul is damned to hell already. This way, I’m keeping her from sharing a room with me there.

Jax whistles. “Damn, Chase, that’s fucking cold. You’re the fucking reason she’s still a virgin because you didn’t let anyone near her! Fuck Man! And Chloe? You hated Chloe.”

I look at him, and he knows he’s right. I can’t stand that girl, especially after finding out what she did to her. I tell them everything she told me today and watch Asher’s eyes go cold and empty while Jax’s eyes flame, showing pure rage. They love her like a baby sister and are just as protective of her as I am.

“I could hack her and her precious daddy’s accounts, you know. Make their fortune disappear like that!” Jax snaps his fingers, an evil smirk on his face, “Or maybe plant something and feed it to the feds or the IRS? Can you imagine her face when she loses her reputation and her fortune?” Jax laughs coldly. “Can you imagine Chloe like that? Poor and destitute on the streets... That would be funny, man. Let me do it!”

Asher nods. “Personally, I’d choose a little more bloodshed before that. Let’s scare the shit out of her first. I reckon I could fuck her up before we push the button.”

I shake my head. Sometimes, I'm surprised by how cold they are until I realize I'm right there with them. "I want to be smart about this. She's an evil bitch, but none of that seems right. Let me think about this for a while. I don't want this coming back on Brooke."

"Where is B, though? She hasn't come back, and it's getting late..." Jax announces, looking at his watch.

Panic shoots through my body, guilt flooding in as I realize I left her alone on the beach at night. It's been at least an hour since I left her...

Fuck, what if something happened to her?

I jump off the floor, nearly falling over, and reach out to the fridge behind me to keep myself upright as I realize how much alcohol I've just consumed.

At that exact moment, the door swings open, and the sight of what's in my eyeline cuts my breath off sharply. Nate with his arm around her as she smiles coyly up at him.

"Brooke..." I croak out.

She doesn't even acknowledge me, but I see her body tense at the sound of my voice. Instead, she kisses his cheek lovingly and walks straight upstairs.

Her ignoring me is a pain I've never felt before. I want to throw up. I can feel the whiskey coming back up to haunt me.

God, what have I done to her?

Nate watches her walk upstairs until she disappears before turning and marching toward me. He grabs my shirt, pushing me back against the fridge. I slam into it hard, my head bashing against the cold steel, shaking it in the impact. He's always been strong, my brother, but without the drinks in my system, he could never have done this to me. I've gotten weak. She makes me weak. I laugh out loud at the thought, and he shoots me an absolute look of sheer hatred. A way he's never looked at me before.

"I don't know what the fuck you did, Chase, because, for reasons I can't understand, she's covering for you. But I know

you did something. You better make this fucking right, brother, or get the fuck out of my life and don't come back. I have never seen Brooke that way, and the fact you were the one to hurt her... I don't think I'll ever forgive you for that."

I nod slowly at him, unable to form words before he gives me one last shove, hitting my head against the ice-cold fridge before he lets go and walks off.

"Damn, baby brother has balls." Jax chuckles.

I don't answer, I can't. I have to get out of here. I can't breathe. I walk out of the house and into the night, thinking of my brother's warning.

I could never make it up to her.

Not now.

She's given me one chance too many.

So maybe now is the time I take the out I promised myself I would take. Maybe now is the time I leave Nate and Brooke's life forever. I can't be what either of them needs.

I don't deserve her. I'm too lost in the dark, and maybe that's where I deserve to stay.

CHAPTER TEN

NATE

I spent the day walking around town on my own, exploring. I needed some space from everything. Last night, something went down, though I'm not sure what. I feel like I'm out of the loop. The way Brooke looked at Chase after he kissed Harper, and vice versa. I'm worried there's something there between them. My heart spasms at that.

Did I leave it too late?

I remember seeing Brooke for the first time. She was on the street playing when I dropped my football, and it rolled right over her chalk drawing on the sidewalk. Her face was covered in colored chalk dust as she picked up my ball and looked at me. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. I was only a stupid kid then, but even now, it stands.

It's not just her physical beauty that does it for me. I mean, she's stunning. Everyone thinks I call her Tink because of her height, but it's not that. It was the way the chalk powder that covered her clothes shimmered and swirled like fairy dust in the air around her.

I will never forget that moment because I knew then when I saw her for the first time what I was seeing. I was seeing real magic. Her eyes are always sparkling like she knows the secret of the world. She's always daydreaming about bigger and better things. Her heart is so pure it radiates light and attracts everyone to it.

Her petite frame is just as joyous. She's so easy to pick up, and I make sure I do it often. The girl has curves, though, in all

the right places. Something about her ass has me staring, imagining how she would squeal for me as I sink my teeth into it.

Her auburn hair always shines, and I love running my fingers through it, but her smile gets me the most. Every smile she has is so genuine, and lights up her whole face. But there's a brightness in her that everyone wants to be around. She is a genuinely sweet girl who craves excitement. She's always searching for more, searching for something other than what she has. I love that about her.

Hell, I love everything about her.

I love her.

I was in love with her the moment she smiled at me and stuck her hand out, covered in chalk, as she handed me my ball. No tantrum that I messed up her drawing, just a pure, innocent smile. I fell so hard at that moment, and I've been falling ever since.

I've been her best friend since the moment I sat down on that sidewalk with her to fix the drawing I destroyed, but now I want more. I've always worried about ruining our friendship, so I've spent years trying to move on. To find a girl that rivals her beauty, innocence, and wonder, but she's one of a kind. Every time, I find myself comparing my girlfriends to her, and quite frankly, there's no competition.

I decided now is the time to tell her. I can't carry on any longer without giving it at least a shot. I never did because I don't want to ruin what we have, but I need to know one way or another if she feels the same way. But seeing her with Chase last night, her reaction to him kissing Harper... I'll be a wrecked man if she feels that way about Chase.

I've spent the day racking my brain, looking for signs between them that something is going on. The truth is, I don't think I would know with my brother. For the last few years, he's distanced himself from our family. Spending more time with Asher and Jax than me.

I hear them calling each other brothers, and I hate it. He's never once been there for me the way he has for them. Guess blood doesn't count. We weren't always so distant. It happened about seven, eight years ago. He went out one night with the guys as my brother and came back three days later a stranger.

He's not good for Brooke. I know that. I've seen his mood switch instantly, and I always wonder what he would do if he switched around her. But strangely, she never sees that side of him. He always gives her the softer side of him. I always assumed it was a brotherly thing, but now I'm not so sure.

My mind has been messed up all day. Going back and forth over every interaction they had. I need to stop. Instead of obsessing over them, I move on to my future. An equally messed up train of thought.

My father owns one of the biggest tech companies in the world. They work with our government on many confidential projects and they pay him very well for it. And that's without all the other companies paying him for his security network and tools. My father has some of the brightest minds working for him, and he has his fingers in many pies, although I don't know how many to the full extent. Our family comes from old money, and he owns a lot of businesses because of this.

My brother was meant to work with him to learn the ropes and take over someday. The eldest heir to the Anderson fortune. He goes into the office and does what he has to do. But he also disappears sometimes for weeks at a time, and my father is having doubts about him taking over the business now.

So, guess where that leaves me?

I don't want that.

I never did, and I never will.

I was in a position as the youngest son that I could do anything with my life, but now my dad wants me to go and work for him after I finish college.

Do I know what I want to do?

No, but it's not living in the corporate world. I get my trust fund when I turn twenty-one, but I don't want it. I don't want to feel tied into my father's money; to feel like I'm in his debt. I'm debating about telling him to cancel my trust, or maybe I should just donate it all.

Professional football is definitely an option for me. I had colleges fighting over me before I settled on one, and I've already had an offer for a team that would mean I don't need to finish my studies. I could just walk away now.

All I know is no matter where my life leads, I want Brooke in it, standing by my side as my equal. My father thinks I'm wasting my time with football. He thinks it's below our station. Personally, my father is an elitist SOB. His opinions are outdated and way too old school. He isn't horrible per se, but he definitely gives me a hard time.

I'm closer to Brooke's family than mine. They always welcomed me. Her mom always had warm cookies for me growing up, and her dad gave me advice on everything I needed. He followed his dreams, and that's all he wants for Brooke and me.

Brooke and I both come from privilege. The difference is my family has always had money. Brooke's family didn't, so they know it's worth, and Brooke was raised to know she wasn't above others. She's never had to want for anything, and her family would do anything for her, but she knows the value of her life and doesn't spend for spending sake.

I used to think my brother was the same. When he bought my truck, I legit cried. He handed me the keys the morning of my birthday and said, "Use this to get your freedom, don't be a dick about it. Use it to take you out of this town and out of the state if that's what you want." It's been one of the only times in the past few years he's actually been a brother to me.

I find myself back on the beach, walking back toward the house as the sun sets, making my mind up to tell her exactly that. I can hear shouting from a distance, though I can't make out the words.

It barely registers until I see her crumpled on the sand. She's tiny as it is, but right now, she's pulled herself up into a ball in the sand. She's never looked smaller, more vulnerable, and I can hear her softly sobbing.

I sit next to her, pulling her close as I breathe her in. She just cries in my arms as I hold her tightly. Pulling her close as I breathe in her scent. My hands run through her soft, silky hair, letting her cry whatever it is out. If there's one thing I've learned about Brooke, she needs to sit with her feelings before you try to find out what happened. If not, you get locked out, and she'll never tell you.

But I've never seen her this way. Brooke is fiery—she would rather scream and shout than cry. I know she was with Chase today, and I wonder what the hell he did to her for her to break like this. I feel the rage burning inside of me as she calms down. Eventually, Brooke looks up at me and gives me a sad smile.

“There's my Tink,” I say softly, pushing her hair out of her face and caressing her cheek with my thumb as I do. “What's got you sitting on this beach so upset, beautiful?”

She shakes her head as she slows her breathing to a point where she can at least talk. “I'm sorry,” she whispers.

“For what?” She shakes her head again. “Okay, Tink, I don't know what's going on, but considering you were out with Chase today, and now I find you sobbing like this. I know he has something to do with it, so I suggest you tell me before I get up and kick his ass,” I say firmly.

She giggles and *fuck me*, I could listen to that sound all day, every day. It's music to my ears. “What? Don't think I could take him? I'm the one with the football scholarship, girl. I could totally take him,” I joke with her.

She smiles at me sadly. “It's not him...it's me... I just realized some stuff that hit home, and it hurts, but I'm okay, I promise. Just realized that maybe sometimes I'm too innocent, too naïve,” she says innocently like it's dirty, and she scowls as she says it.

I tip her head to me, cradling her face in my palms as I look at her. “There’s nothing wrong with you, Brooke. You’re perfect the way you are. Don’t let anyone tell you differently. You’re perfection, Tink.”

I lean down, laying a soft, chaste kiss on her soft lips. I don’t want to push her in this moment, but I want to clarify how I feel about her. She is perfect to me. After meeting her lips briefly, I pull back and see her face flushing. I did that, and it brings a grin to my face.

We sit there silently for a while, just looking over the water and watching the moon reflect into its depths. Her body is still cradled against mine. My fingertips softly trace over her skin. Her breathing is soft against me before I whisper in her ear.

“It’s getting late, beautiful. Want to head back?” She nods, and I stand, lifting her with me before placing her beside me. I wrap my arm over her shoulders and pull her close to me, and I feel her hand slip into the back pocket of my shorts as we walk quietly down the beach.

When we get to the door, she looks up at me. Those beautiful eyes are now clear of tears, and she smiles.

“Thank you, Nate. You’re always here for me.” I open the door, my arm still around her as I kiss her hair softly.

“No problem, beautiful. I always will be.”

She freezes suddenly, and I realize it was because of Chase calling her. I watch a flicker of pain cross her face, which tells me everything I need to know. I keep my gaze on her as she leans up, kisses me on the cheek, and heads up to her room. When I know she’s gone, I look over at the mess my brother is in. He’s clearly drunk with his so-called brothers, and I see red as I storm toward him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BROOKE

I throw myself on my bed. My heart is beating so quickly that I can hear it. What the hell is going on? I feel so overwhelmed as I try to make sense of today. I jump off the bed, look at myself in the mirror, and run my thumb over my lip where Nate kissed me.

What was that?

I pace as I try to control my mind, which is going so quickly I can't keep up. I sit back on the bed, kicking my shoes off as they land with a thud, and take a long, deep breath, closing my eyes.

Nate kissed me... Not like a kiss kiss, but still a kiss. He said I was perfection. The complete opposite of Chase calling me a frigid bitch.

Fucking Chase.

I fucking hate him.

I run my hands through my hair, pulling it a little too hard. What an utter prick. I feel the tears coming again, and I grab my pillow, screaming into it. I will not cry over him again.

How dare he.

How dare he say those things to me?

I feel sick, the bottom of my stomach threatening me to come up again.

I don't understand the switch. It's like I'm talking to two different people sometimes. My Chase—the one that stares at

the stars with me and calls me his princess. The one that's had my heart and allows me to see his vulnerability. The man I am truly and completely in love with.

Then, the other Chase, the imposter. The one who wears a mask of control and hates me. I don't know what I did to deserve that hate. Was it all a lie? All those nights under the stars or the smiles between us. The secrets we kept as kids.

Was it all fake to him?

What did I do wrong?

I just don't know which Chase is real anymore. All I know is I'm going to find out once and for all, but for now, I need time away from all of them. I grab my phone, texting Harper, and she's at my door within seconds.

"Hell yes!" she screams, and I laugh. "I really need this!" she says.

We're both dressed up and ready to go within half an hour. I opt for a short, deep black dress that clings to my body. My skin is exposed by a low-draped back that sits just above my ass. My feet are in my favorite red high heels with matching lipstick. My long brown hair straightened into a sleek but sexy style. Harper grins at me.

"We look smoking, girl." I smirk back at her, agreeing. She's wearing a red dress with a very low-cut V, showing off all her assets with her blonde hair pulled up into a high ponytail. I can't help but smile at us in the mirror, knowing we look hot but for us and not for anyone else.

I've spent the last thirty minutes catching her up on today's events. She listened attentively with the odd gasp or occasional insult thrown out before understanding why I needed to blow off some steam.

"I just don't get it, B. That guy worships the ground you walk on. I know he's worried about Nate, but still... If you both feel the same way, Nate will understand," she says, applying the last swipe of mascara.

"What do you mean he's worried about Nate? Is he worried he wouldn't approve? Being honest, it's not up to him.

I love Nate, but his opinion on who I should date only goes so far.”

Harper looks over at me and shakes her head. “You really are blind, you know!”

I go to reply, but we hear the guys downstairs, and my stomach knots at the thought of facing them. *I won't cry, I won't cry*, is all I repeat to myself, worrying I'll come face to face with the man who just left me alone on the beach.

“You ready?” she asks me, and I nod, breathing unsteadily.

“As I'll ever be.”

I walk down the stairs, laughing as she snaps a few shots of us. Nate is the first one I see, and he can't take his eyes off me. His gaze roams over my body. My breath hitches a little. I've never seen him look at me like this before. Or maybe he has, but I never noticed. It's intense like he's thinking of stripping this dress of me right here and not caring who sees. Part of me responds to that.

Nate is gorgeous, honestly, he's like a Greek god, and he makes me laugh. He's caring, sweet, and cheeky. I know we would probably make a good couple like everyone says. If only I could bring myself around to think of him as something other than my best friend.

He walks over to me, and I watch his Adam's apple bob as he swallows. “You look...incredible.” It's like he couldn't think of a word that was good enough, and I blush at that thought.

I playfully smirk at him in response.

“Thanks.” I whisper quietly as his fingers slowly trail down my arm, and it's like my skin has been electrified as goosebumps travel over it. “We...uh, decided we needed a girl's night.” I look at Harper, and she grins back at me like a bobcat ready to cause chaos.

“Oh, hell fucking no,” I look over, and Asher is staring at us, his whole body trembling as he stares daggers at Harper. “I swear to God, Harper, you better change right now...and you, Brooke... You're fucking lucky Chase isn't here.”

I bite back this time instead of staying silent. “Or what? Chase is nothing to me. He made that clear this evening, so he gets no fucking say in anything I do or wear.”

I know it’s not Asher’s fault, but the way he thinks he can talk to me like this on Chase’s behalf is so wrong that it ignites a fire in me I’ve never had before.

Asher steps toward me, and his bulky frame towers over me. “Brooke...I swear to fucking Satan himself, if you and Harper do not go upstairs and get changed, I’m going to drag you both up there myself.”

I won’t slap him.

I won’t slap him.

I silently chant in my head and as I go to respond, I hear my hero speaking up.

“Back off, Asher, they’re not kids, and frankly, they look hot,” Nate growls before turning back to me. “In fact, better than hot.”

Nate smirks at me and pulls me close as his fingers run down my exposed spine, making me shiver with a feeling I’ve never had with Nate before. It’s like that kiss changed things between us, allowed me to see something that may be there that I’ve not noticed before, or maybe it’s just opened me up to thinking about Nate differently.

“There are no words to describe how stunning you look, Brooke. I won’t be a dick and tell you that you’re not going alone despite the idiots in this world, but do you have your phone if you need me?” I shiver at his touch again, my breathing slow as I reply.

“Yes,” my voice shaking a bit.

“Then have fun and call me if you want me to meet you girls later.” He leans down, kissing my cheek. I can still feel his lips there as he pulls back, and I know something between us has definitely changed.

“Okay, I will.”

He nods, stepping backward, but his eyes never leave mine.

“God, you guys are idiots. We’re going to meet some people that we know from high school. They’re all here, so we will be safe. Chill the fuck out.” Harper bites back, rolling her eyes as she wraps her hand around my wrist and pulls me toward the door.

“Yeah, like you were safe that night.” I swear the temperature in the room drops below freezing as Asher drops his statement.

“Thought you said nothing happened that night?” she cynically replies. He doesn’t say a word as a heated look exchanges between them.

“Don’t wait up.” She blows a kiss to Asher, and I can’t tell if he wants to kill her or kiss her right now.

Before I’m out the door to enjoy my night, Nate gives me a final smile, a little cooler than earlier because of the exchange in this. Hopefully, a few drinks will help me figure out exactly what is happening here. But for now, I need to get out of this house and away from all the god damn testosterone.

NATE

I watch her walk out the door and smile after her. My eyes firmly planted on her ass, which I wanna have in my lap right now. The way her body moves in that dress makes my brain think of delicious, sinful things that involve me dragging her into my room and making her scream my name over and over until she doesn’t remember her own.

I saw how she reacted to me tonight, and I know that kiss on the beach made her realize there’s something between us. Who knows, maybe it will work out in my favor. Feeling her shiver under my touch, the way her face flushed when I called her beautiful, she’s not had that reaction to me before, and I can’t say I hate it.

I turn to Asher, who is scowling at me now. I can’t seem to find a reason to care, only annoyed at the fact he broke me from my thoughts of making Tink my girl.

“What?” I snap at him. None of them are in my good books right now, and frankly, I’m sick of all this tension. We should be enjoying ourselves out here; instead, we’re all down each other’s throats.

“You’re seriously letting them walk out of this house dressed like that. I know you’re a little sheltered, Nate, but you know what guys think of girls looking like that. You know what would happen if we bumped into girls looking that way...you know they would respond to us exactly how we would want them to.”

Asher smirks at me as my mind wanders. Maybe I made a mistake. I trust Tink completely, but I have to admit I don’t trust other people around her.

“Yeah, but not all guys are like us,” Jax pipes up, grinning.

“Yeah, some guys are worse...they don’t wait for a yes,” Asher retorts, his eyes darkening at the thought. I watch his body tense and see his hands fold into fists at the idea of anyone hurting the girls that way. For a split second, I appreciate that. No one messes with him, Jax, and Chase for a good reason, but there’s something a little too extreme in his reaction.

I pull my phone out of my pocket. “Guys, seriously chill. Tink has her phone, and she has the Life360 app. It’s something we set up years ago, so I can always find her if she needs me, like when her car broke down in the middle of nowhere last year.”

I run my hand through my hair as I open the app, knowing she will kill me for this, but now I’m nervous.

What if she accepts Chase isn’t the guy for her, but neither am I?

Or what if another guy doesn’t care what she thinks.

“She’s heading to Blaze...it’s a local club. Well, the only club round here, but I can see her taxi heading along Main Street. The clubs at the end. Me and Chase have gone before when we summered here with the parents. If you want to go, we can just say we went out and didn’t know they were there.”

Jax grins and slaps me on the shoulder. “Damn, Asher, we could use him, you know. I didn’t realize he was so sneaky.”

I look at him, puzzled. “Use me for what?” Glancing at Asher.

“Sure, that will go down well with Chase,” he responds, grinning at me.

I’m confused and suddenly realize my asshole of a brother is missing.

“Where is he?”

Asher and Jax go quiet for once, and I raise my voice a little, repeating the question.

“I dunno, man. He stormed out earlier after you went in on him.”

I sneer. “Fucker deserved it...you should have seen Brooke.”

Jax looks at me with an intense gaze as he drops his hand from my shoulder.

“Trust me, Nate...your brother is in a worse state than you think because he hurt her, but he did it for what he thinks are the right reasons, whether you want to believe it or not. That guy wouldn’t just kill for Brooke...he would lay down his life for her. He’s just looking at the situation wrong, is all.”

I sigh, feeling out of the loop again. “And I’m guessing you’re not going to tell me what that means either.”

Asher laughs. “Nope, we’re not.” Slapping me on the back. “But you’re an idiot if you don’t see how he is with her, Nate. Or maybe you’re just too blinded by Brooke yourself to see it?”

He’s right when it comes to her. I am blind because all I see is her.

“That obvious, yeah?”

He chuckles. “To everyone but her Nate...but then she’s a little blinded herself.” I wonder what he means about that

again. These guys are so fucking good at saying everything but nothing at all.

“You two are cryptic mother fuckers...you know that, right?” They laugh and agree with me and proceed to walk out the door.

“We’re taking my truck,” I shout. Jax chuckles.

“Oh, no doubt...I already swiped your keys.”

“What the fuck, man?” I shout as they exit the house and pat down my jeans pockets. “How the fuck did you do that... Get the fuck out of my truck. No one’s driving baby but me!”

He laughs, getting out of the front seat and tossing my keys at me before jumping in the back.

“You call your truck ‘baby’?” I glare at him in the mirror of my car as I get in before blasting my stereo loudly, slamming my door, and starting the ignition to go find my girl.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BROOKE

This is a regular summer spot for a lot of us from Asheville, and Harper texted a few girls from our old high school who are here on vacation. Turns out they are at Blaze. To be fair, it's the only club here so there's not much surprise there, but it's actually pretty cool. They play decent music and have a bouncer that looks the other way if you're underage.

Currently, I'm sitting with Harper and a few people from school. I'm on my fifth drink...no, sixth drink, and life feels good. I haven't even thought about the guys...much. Maddie, one of our friends I haven't seen since school because she went to California for college, is laughing uncontrollably as we discuss the guys she dated in the last year.

"I tell you, Brooke, I'm actually jealous, though, of you and Nate. Have you both finally admitted you're together yet?"

I look at her, surprised. "We're not together? We never have been."

Harper starts laughing, a little drunk herself. She definitely gets freer with her opinions when she's hit the vodka. "No, he just wishes you were."

I shoot her an exasperated look. "No, he doesn't. Why do you girls always say stuff like this? We're just friends." I say automatically whenever someone says this, yet here I am thinking he wants that after all.

The question is, do I want him to?

Maddie rolls her eyes. “Brooke, open your eyes, girl. That boy has been in love with you for years. No one calls their friend pet names like he does with you or drops everything to be with her. He looks at you like you’re the only girl in existence. That boy turned down his scholarship to play football in one of the best colleges in the country just to be near you. Why do you think none of his relationships last? They’re not you.”

“I’m getting another drink,” I say, standing up, my mind spinning a little from what Maddie said. My heart races as I realize everything she just said makes sense. I walk away from the group and over to the bar as my mind goes over and over everything that’s happened since we got here.

There’s no way Nate loves me, not like that, right?

I order another round for me and the girls, making mine a double, and scan the club. I look over at the dance floor when I spot something that makes me feel physically sick.

Chase is on the dance floor with a blonde skank grinding all over his crotch.

His goddess.

Chloe.

I can’t pull my eyes away from them. Where the hell did she come from? They move like they’re one, though clearly Chase has had one too many drinks. His hands are on her waist as she dances for him. I watch her thread her hands through his as she smiles disgustingly, pressing her ass into him. *They look perfect together*, a voice whispers in my head as I realize I never stood a chance against her.

“One day, he’ll get some taste. At least, I hope so because if that girl marries into my family, I’m going to gouge my eyes out.”

“What are you doing here, Nate?” I ask, tipping my head upward to look at him, knowing his voice anywhere.

“Me and the boys decided we wanted to go for drinks...” he gestures to Asher and Jax, who are at the other end of the bar, grinning at me and waving as I roll my eyes.

“I didn’t know you would be here. But then there’s not really much choice out here,” he chuckles, and I can’t help but smile back at him. He thinks I’m stupid. My guess is he used the Life360 app we both have. I roll my eyes playfully at him. I would be so mad if this was anyone else, but he does it because he cares. He knew I was upset and wanted to be around for me in case I needed him.

I wonder for a second if it would be so bad if Maddie was right...if he really stayed for me. I think it’s clear now he sees me as more than his friend, but would he give up his shot at a career in football for me?

Could he feel that serious about me?

Could I feel the same?

He holds his hand out to me, smiling. “How about we show everyone out there how we do it?”

“Sure,” I laugh. I give him my hand, forgetting the drinks and letting him lead me to the dance floor.

We weave through the crowd, and I turn in his arms as he pulls me close, wrapping his hands around my waist. We dance for a couple of minutes. My hips swaying against his. He’s an amazing dancer, considering how built he is from football; it surprises many people. I feel him brush the hair off my neck, and his breath is so close to my skin that it sends shivers up my spine.

“You look truly stunning, Brooke.” Before I know it, his lips are pressed against my neck in a kiss that makes my whole body sigh against him, and a part of me loves it. “You always look so beautiful, Tink,” he whispers into my ear so close I can feel his lips graze it. “You mesmerize me.” He turns me to face him, and his hands cup my jaw. “Don’t you know what you do to me?”

I take a breath as I stand in his arms, my lips slightly parted. Everything is fading to black around me. Before I know what’s happening, he pulls me closer, and his lips touch mine. I’m overwhelmed as his hand moves to my hair, the other sliding down my back to rest on the bare skin above my

ass. His tongue caresses mine. The kiss is slow and sensual despite the surrounding chaos. I find my hands stroking up his arms before wrapping around his neck. I moan softly into the kiss as I respond to it, and I hear Nate groan back in response, intensifying the kiss between us.

My god, he's an incredible kisser.

I can feel the need and want he has for me. Everything Maddie said from earlier, he's showing me now. It's true, and I realize I always knew it on some level. He pulls back eventually, and I gasp for breath, yet wishing he never stopped.

"I love you, Tink. I always have. You're my one. I can't hold my feelings back any longer. This is me putting my heart on the line for you." I stand there in shock, barely able to contemplate his words.

"Nate. I..." I wonder how to finish this sentence.

Do I like him that way?

I mean, I like the way he kisses, but what about my feelings for Chase?

Is it possible to love more than one guy at once?

He takes a step back, his hand in mine, and he brings it to his lips to kiss it.

"You don't have to say anything, Brooke. I've waited fourteen years for you. I can wait a little longer while you work through what you feel for me." He smiles at me before turning me quickly under his arm and pulling me back close to him. I giggle at the sudden turn before I'm back inches from his face, taking my breath away. "You're worth the wait, Tink... I'll wait forever if I have to."

He steps back from me and gives me one of his cheeky grins before leaving me on the dance floor. I let my fingers dance over my lips, which still taste like him.

What can I say to that?

Could I be with him?

Do I deserve him?

Maybe I could. That kiss definitely made me feel things, things that you don't feel for just a friend. I take a deep breath, knowing I should get back to my friends, and as I spin on my heels to find them, I come face to face with Chase.

I gasp a little as I bump into his solid body, not expecting to have been this close to him ever again. He looks at me, and I don't know what I expect to see in his eyes, maybe anger, rage, or disinterest, but he looks sad and beaten down.

“He will make you happier than I ever could, Brooke. I'm so sorry I can't give you everything you could ever want.”

His hand wraps around the back of my head, threading in my hair as he pulls me close and presses a soft kiss to my forehead. He holds me there like that for a few seconds, and I close my eyes at his touch. I'm confused and overwhelmed, yet content.

Before I know it, I feel him rip himself away from me, and by the time my eyes open, I'm alone on the dance floor, and he's gone. I look for Nate, and he's chatting with Jax and Asher, laughing and smiling. He looks so happy.

These boys will be the death of me. I know it. The hot and cold from Chase and now that intense fire from Nate.

What have I gotten myself into?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHASE

I needed to get out of that house. I needed away from it all. I feel like I've thoroughly messed up and don't know what to do about it. She couldn't even look at me, and I'd never seen Nate that mad before.

I'm trying, but I keep screwing up. I keep trying to protect the ones I love, but somehow, they always get hurt. The darkness in me does that. It doesn't matter how hard I try to keep it locked away. It will always hurt those around me.

I end up at Blaze. It's a club I've ended up at a dozen times before during the summers here. I need a drink, so I walk straight up to the bar and down a couple of straight whiskeys.

I feel two arms snake around my waist and lips touching my ear. For a second, I think it's Brooke until I realize she would never touch me like this. Not after tonight, not after how I left her.

"Hey, baby." I turn around, and it's Chloe.

Of all the girls to see here, why her?

"You miss me?" she asks, beaming up at me.

"No. Not at all. Now fuck off, Chloe, I'm not in the mood for company tonight."

I pull her arms off me, and she pouts at me, and I wonder how any man could ever find her act cute or appealing in the slightest. I never really did. She was an easy lay and consistently threw herself at me, so I took advantage of that. I

know that makes me a terrible man, but fucking her made me expel some of that darkness.

She never complained because she likes it rough. Chloe would let me do anything to her because she honestly thought if she slept with me enough times, I would make her mine. Which would never happen, but she was a good distraction, and she got what she wanted from being associated with me the same way I did with her.

“Oh, come on, Chase, you have to admit we were good together...all those times in bed, I never heard you complain once.”

I smirk down at her, sliding my hands around her wrists and jerking her forward to me.

“The only thing you were ever good for Chloe was when you were on your knees,” I say savagely, spitting out the words. I push her backward, sick of her shit.

She doesn't get the message, though, and instead grins at me, slipping her hands into the loops of my jeans. “Oh, I was good at so much more than that, and you know it, Chase. Maybe you got distracted for a while, but you know you want me, crave me, to touch you the way I used to.”

Nothing could be further from the truth, but she might come in handy and help me forget everything. I know I'm a prick for even thinking of it, but I wonder if I can fuck Brooke out of my system. She's in every fiber of my being, but right now, I need to numb this pain. Whenever I fucked Chloe before, it did that, however brief and fleeting it was.

“Come on, Chase, at least dance with me. You owe me for the way you finished things between us.” She pouts at me again, pulling me closer to her, sensing a weakness in me.

“Fine, one dance Chloe.”

She smirks up at me like the cat that just got her cream and loops her hand in mine, pulling me to the dance floor. She starts grinding up on me, pulling my arms around her waist, and I let go of all the shit for a second and dance with her. Her ass is grinding against my cock as she moves her hips. I think

of what it would be like to have Brooke do this to me. I let myself imagine it's me and Brooke right now, and I pull her closer to me, pressing my length into her tight ass. I hear Chloe moan and realize I've got hard thinking of Brooke. Great. Just what I wanted. Now, she definitely thinks she has a chance.

She threads her fingers through mine and dips against me. The mood I'm in, I need to either hit something or fuck it out of my system and so I decide she can help me after all. I pull her up to me, whispering in her ear deeply.

"Chloe, if you keep dancing on me like this, I'm going to fuck you harder than I ever have before. The mood I'm in right now, I don't think you could handle it, but you need to know I'm not thinking of you when I do it. I'm thinking of someone else. So, if this happens, you're just going to shut the fuck up and take it and let me pretend. Hell, I'm putting a fucking gag in your mouth, so I can't hear your annoying screeches when you take my cock. It's your choice."

She turns in my arms and smirks.

"You mean your precious little princess? The girl who could do no wrong in your eyes. Yeah, I'm not stupid, Chase. I could see the way you looked at her, but it looks like your precious little virgin doesn't feel the same about you." She turns her head, and I follow her gaze.

The wind leaves me, and I nearly collapse to my knees. Brooke...kissing Nate. I wish I could drag my eyes away from them, but it's like they're glued open. I watch her hands knotting into his hair and his hand sliding down her back, settling just above that peachy ass of hers that I dream of biting and marking as mine.

"Make a choice, Chloe," I growl, not even looking at her.

"I'll get my coat," she says, smiling at me like she's won before she walks off as I watch their kiss continue.

It should be me there. My arms around her, holding her close, but I know it never will be because I can't be the man

she needs or deserves. I watch Nate walk away, and Brooke stands there in a daze.

My feet move before I even acknowledge what I'm doing. She turns around and gasps as she walks straight into me. I see her swollen pink lips from kissing my brother. They shatter my heart even worse than before. For years, I tried to doubt that anything could ever happen between them. Yet here I stand, looking at my freshly kissed princess, all flushed and flustered. But it's not from me, and truthfully, that breaks me more than anything I've ever been through.

For a second, she looks like she wants to say something but doesn't, so instead, I pull her close.

"He will make you happier than I ever could, Brooke. I'm so sorry I can't give you everything you could ever want." I press my lips to her forehead and feel her sag against me a little. I hold her there for a few seconds until I can't bear it any longer, leaving her alone for the second time today.

I walk out of the club, and Chloe is standing outside waiting for me. "I called a taxi. My place or yours?" I look at her for a second, inspecting her. She couldn't be further from Brooke, and maybe that's what I need right now. Someone who won't remind me of her.

"Mine. We'll be alone for a while as everyone's here, and I don't need your friends blabbing about us. This is one time, Chloe, that's it, and then you're gone. The only reason this is happening is because you're here and willing, not because I want you."

"If you say so, baby." She runs her hand across the front of my shorts, grazing her hand over my hard, thick length, and once again, I think of Brooke. She's smirking up at me. She thinks she has control here. She forgets she never did, and I'm going to make sure tonight she remembers.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BROOKE

Tonight did not go as I expected. I thought I was going to go out and have a few drinks and forget about the craziness with Chase and Nate.

Yet somehow, I ended up kissing my best friend.

Nate confessed his feelings toward me.

Chase is giving me emotional whiplash yet again.

He looked so sad and broken. I wanted to try and sort through my emotions, but instead, I'm drunk and more confused than ever.

Chase left me broken on that beach. He took my heart and squeezed it until there was nothing left but broken shards of it bleeding out on the sand. Nate rescued me, as always. I called Chase prince charming after our first encounter, but maybe that's really Nate. I think back on the years we have known each other. Truthfully, he's always been the one by my side, the real prince charming who's always been there when I need him.

But do I like him that way?

I mean, he's attractive, and that's putting it mildly. The kiss was incredible, but were there fireworks? I don't know. It all happened so quickly. I'm trying to sort my feelings out for him, but it's all happening so fast that I don't know what to do.

We're all back at the house now. As soon as we got back to the house, everyone went to their rooms to crash, but I can't sleep. There's too much running through my brain. I'm lying

on my bed and can't focus on anything other than this evening's events. My mind is racing, and I need to get out of bed and take a walk or something.

I get up, needing air, and walk downstairs when I bump into the last person I expect. She's trying to sneak out. Her hair is a mess, and her dress is disheveled. I feel wrecked as I watch her close the door to Chase's room.

I am such an idiot.

I felt sorry for him after seeing what a mess he was in the club. He looked so sad but the encounter in the club is just another one of his games, and I'm done playing them.

As of this moment, Chase Anderson is officially nothing to me.

I try to ignore her as I continue down the stairs of my beach house, not hers. She has no right to be here, but I do, and I won't let her intimidate me this time. The boy's rooms are down here. Only mine and Harpers are upstairs, along with another living space with couches and such, but she doesn't know that.

She sees me and gives me the biggest smirk she can manage. "Hello, Tink," she mocks the name that Nate gave to me. She can take Chase. I don't care anymore, but I won't let her take what I have with Nate.

I roll my eyes, choosing to ignore her, when she grabs my wrist. "I said hello, Brooke. People with manners usually respond."

I turn to her, giving her the biggest glare I can manage. "What do you want, Chloe?" I spit out, pulling my wrist out of her grasp.

"Nothing from you, Brooke. In fact, I'm getting everything I want," she laughs, and my god, I want to kill her. "Chase and I are getting back together. You should know that so you're going to see me around a lot more, so you might want to develop some manners and graces around me. I'm sure Chase will put you in your place if not."

Everything about this girl I hate. The shrill voice, her sheer arrogance, even down to her sweet and innocent little routine she's perfected over the years.

“You act like I give a shit about Chase and who he dates Chloe. I don't. I'm here with Nate for a vacation. Chase just happens to be here with his friends,” I say with as much confidence and indifference as I can muster.

She laughs, and her eyes narrow at me. She grabs my wrist again, her nails digging into my flesh, pulling me close to her as she grins at me. “Don't think I don't see how you look at him. Like a little lost puppy following him around, begging for scraps of his attention. Well, get it through your head. Chase could never want you, Brooke. How could he when he has me?”

Chase's words flash through my head from earlier when he said I couldn't compare to Chloe.

Did they discuss that?

Did they laugh at me?

Pity me?

I can feel tears escaping my eyes. I never want to cry around her. She smiles even more as she realizes she's won. They did talk about me, it's too similar.

“Aww, poor little Brooke crying at not getting her way.” She stands there smirking at me. “Keep those tears coming, Brooke because it's the only way you'll realize you're nothing to him. Hell, you're a little slut kissing his brother while your pining after him. How could he ever want you?”

Rage is filling my body, sending fire through my veins, but as quickly as it's heating them, an icy cold follows them as I realize the truth. Chase doesn't care at all about me. If he did, he wouldn't have gone back to her after what I told him and how I feel about her.

I'm feeling numb as I realize I've been betrayed by the man I love, but truthfully, the man I love doesn't exist. He never did. I feel blood trickling down my wrist as she holds it

tightly and digs her nails even harder. She's like a big cat tearing at the flesh of a gazelle she's caught.

“Get your hands off Brooke.”

A sharp, cold voice sweeps through the house. We both turn and look, and it's Asher. Asher has a dark streak in him. Everyone sees it. He can switch in an instant, but right now, he looks like a monster that's about to destroy everything in his path.

He's standing there in black sweatpants. His bare chest heaving with anger. His hair is swept over his forehead, and his eyes are as dark as midnight. He's staring at Chloe's hand around my wrist. The way her nails are drawing blood from me. Chloe immediately drops my wrist as she realizes where his eyes are drawn. Even she knows not to mess with him.

“Don't sweat it, Asher. We were just having some girl talk.” She turns on the smile I've seen her use before. The sickly sweet one she uses with Chase. He walks over and pulls me behind him quickly. I wince slightly in pain as he squeezes my bleeding wrist.

He leans into Chloe, and I see him whisper in her ear. His whole body is tense. I can't hear what he's saying to Chloe, but I watch her face drain of all color and tears fill her eyes. She shrinks back into herself, and I watch her nod. She doesn't even look at me as she quickly stumbles out of the house. I never want to be on the receiving end of those dark eyes when he's in a mood like this. It's like he's not him but something else.

I watch him stare at the door she just left through. Slowly, I can see the tension leave his body. Whatever he just said terrified her, and I wonder what it is. I've never seen Chloe back down from anybody. He turns to me, and his eyes fall to the half-moon crescents left on my wrists from her nails. He walks over to me and pulls up my wrist tenderly.

“Let's get this sorted, shall we?” His voice is a lot calmer and more caring than moments ago. He pulls me over to the stools in the kitchen and pushes me gently onto one of them to sit down. He presses a cold, wet towel into my wrist and looks

up at my eyes. He's gentler now. Back to the Asher I know and love, and he smiles warmly at me.

"I don't know what she said to you, Brooke, but that girl is not worth your tears." He wipes his thumb under my eye, catching one. "Why was she even here?"

I shrug as if I don't care, but truthfully, it's like a knife is implanted deep into my heart. "She came out of Chase's room... I think they..." I trail off, not needing to say the word.

"Motherfucker," he says under his breath, and I laugh. He looks back up at me, smiling. "That's the Brooke that keeps making the Anderson brothers crazy." My face drops as tears threaten to spill again. I'm so sick of crying.

"He hates me, Asher. I don't know why, but he hates me."

Asher shakes his head. "No, Brooke, it's more complicated than that. He doesn't hate you, quite the opposite. He hates himself. You and Harper...you're both so much more than us. You both have this pure light about you that draws us in. We hate ourselves because we can never be a part of that. If anything, it makes us realize how truly lost to the darkness we are."

I'm confused as I look at him, but suddenly, it dawns on me. The look in his eyes, the way he mentioned Harper. This isn't just a protective thing.

"You love her," I state.

"I'm not talking about this with you, Brooke," he says sternly, and something about his tone makes me drop the subject.

He pulls the towel away from my wrist, and the bleeding has stopped. He kisses my wrist gently. There's nothing intimate about it. It's a simple gesture, like something a brother does when you fall down and hurt yourself.

"You remind me a lot of someone, Brooke. She was sweet and pure and full of light and laughter." His voice hitches as emotion swells in his tone. "I watched her light get destroyed. I watched darkness infect her till she couldn't take it anymore.

She wasn't tough enough, Brooke." He looks away from me, clearing his voice.

"Chase needs you to be tough. He needs you to be stronger than what you are. He thinks pushing you away is the right thing to do. I even thought that, too, but now...I'm not so sure. Watching you two try to go solo weakens the both of you, and that's dangerous."

He sighs, taking a step away from me. "I think I might regret this, but I'm giving you a choice right here. You can go back to bed where it's safe, or you can come with me to find out more. But Brooke, I can't promise you that you will come out unscathed here. I can't promise that you won't run from us screaming. But it's your choice. It will only happen once, and no matter what you choose, we will *never* talk about this again, and you will never mention this to anyone. You get one night, and then you can decide if you're going to play it safe or be the tougher, stronger Brooke that I know is in there."

He places his thumb under my chin, staring deeply into my eyes. "I'm going to get ready. If you want to come, you have ten minutes to meet me outside, wear something comfortable. We're going to be gone for a few hours, and you'll need to spend some of that walking."

I nod, leaving him there as I go to my room. Ten minutes later, I'm wearing jeans and a hoodie with my hair pulled back high in a ponytail, sitting in his car, wondering whether I've made the right decision. But no matter what, I need to know what the game is and how to make it stop.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BROOKE

We drive for what seems like hours in silence in Asher's Camaro. He's tense. I can see the way his knuckles turn white as he grips the steering wheel. I dare not say anything. A thick uneasiness lingers in the air, and I wonder why. We pull up to a little church a few towns over. He turns the car off and sits there, staring at the church in silence before turning to me.

"Are you ready?" His voice was void of emotion.

I nod, and he gets out of the car, walking around to my side to open the door for me. I don't know why, but I take his hand in mine. Right now, he looks like a shell of himself. His eyes are empty, but looks heartbroken at the same time. I don't think I've ever seen him this vulnerable before.

I squeeze his hand, and he smiles at me. It doesn't quite reach his eyes, though. If anything, he looks like a sad little boy who's lost his world, and I don't want to hurt him further.

"We don't have to do this, Asher. I can tell this is making you uncomfortable."

He lets go of my hand and puts his arm around me, pulling me close and kissing the top of my head.

"This is why we all love you, Brooke, the way you care so passionately. Willing to stop this night. You would stop trying to get answers because you care about my happiness so much you would sacrifice your own."

I nod because I agree with him. These boys have been in my life as long as I can remember, and they are family. Jax once told me blood doesn't make you family, and I remember laughing, thinking how cliché it sounded, but truthfully, he's right. Asher is my family, and I would gladly sacrifice my happiness to spare his heartache.

"I used to live here, in this town. This place was my home."

He leads me around the side of the church before hopping over the wall. The gate is closed and locked, so it's the only way in. I barely manage to jump the wall due to my height, but he helps me, and I land on my feet. He then retakes my hand and leads me through a graveyard, and I wonder why we're here. We walk amongst the tombstones before reaching one he stops at. He runs his hand over the top of the smooth stone softly.

"Hey, sis."

My eyes drop to the name on the tombstone. Ellie Moore. She was seventeen when she died. Younger than me—something in me dies a little at knowing Asher lost his sister at such a young age. He takes a seat on the grass in front of her grave with his legs crossed.

"This is Brooke, the girl I've told you about," he says softly, and I look down at Asher and sit beside him. He looks like a little boy with his haunted eyes.

"Hi, Ellie," I say softly, staring at the etched words on the stone as he leans forward, running his finger over the wording.

"Do you remember I told you that you reminded me of someone? You remind me of Ellie. She was like you. She had big dreams; she wanted to see the world and explore everything she could. She was so good, Brooke. Too pure for this world. She did everything for me growing up. My parents...they shouldn't have been parents. They don't know that having children means loving someone else more than loving themselves. They didn't care enough about us, but Ellie...she loved me enough for both of them and herself."

A tear drops down his cheek, and I reach out, catching it and wiping it away. There's something wrong with this picture. Asher is the strong one. He either looks like a cheeky guy hellbent on causing trouble or an angel of death, but never like this, never vulnerable. I always knew there was something else behind his eyes, and now I know.

"I was nine when she died. We moved to Asheville shortly after. My parents couldn't cope with the scandal of what their daughter did and ran," he spits out bitterly. "I don't even think they have been to visit her since the funeral." He picks up a stray stone, throwing it to his side.

I place my hand on his thigh, not saying anything, just letting him know I'm here to listen. "She was so full of life, Brooke, but she needed more than what this town could give her. She was always around at home, you know? Studying to graduate. She wanted to go to an ivy league college, and she could have done it, Brooke. She was the smartest person I knew, but I think she got worn out and needed a break. Her friend had convinced her to go to a college party to let loose for once. She snuck out that night, but I saw her. She looked beautiful and so full of life. I didn't know that would be the last time I would see her smile."

He takes a deep breath and stares into the cool night air before continuing.

"I saw her when she came back early the next morning. The Ellie I knew was gone. Her dress was shredded. She only had one of her shoes. Her lip was split, and I could see the bruises on her wrists and legs.

"I asked what had happened. If she was okay. She looked right through me. There was nothing in her eyes, Brooke. It was like she was empty. Like she had died that night, and something else was making her walk around. Three days went by like that. My parents were away on a vacation. They left the day after the party. They didn't even notice there was something wrong. They didn't even notice their own daughter was hollow. I'll never forgive them for that.

“On the fourth morning after that night, I was working on my school project when I noticed water dripping onto it. I looked up and saw a pool of water on the ceiling, and it was leaking onto this stupid farm thing I was making. I remember being really annoyed, as it was ruining all these figures I had painted. I went upstairs to see what was going on, and I found her in the bath. She was wearing her favorite dress. She always looked like an angel in it. It was meant to be white, Brooke, but it wasn’t.”

His voice turns desperate, and it’s like he’s not even here right now. He’s back there, being that scared little boy reliving finding his sister.

“I ran over to her, and I realized what she had done. God, Brooke, the water was red. I didn’t know water could look like that. It was everywhere. It filled the bathroom; it was overflowing, and I realized I was standing in it. I was standing in my sister’s bloody bathwater. I tried to pull her out of the bath. I really tried, but I couldn’t. I pulled her arms up, and her wrists were...she cut so deep, Brooke...even if I was there when she did it, I never could have stopped the blood. She cut to the bone, I could see it. She didn’t want to survive. There was no hesitation. I remember screaming her name, but she wasn’t moving. She was so cold.” He shudders as if he can feel it on his skin now.

“My parents came home four days later from their trip, and I was sitting on the floor covered in blood and water. I remember nothing from those days. Those memories are gone... I don’t remember turning off the tap. I don’t remember sitting down. I don’t remember my parents coming home. I died that day with her. I sat in that bathroom for four days, Brooke. I couldn’t leave her. I couldn’t leave her alone. She didn’t deserve that.”

He looks at me, and I can see the tears streaming down his face. The pain, the devastation. I don’t know what to do or say. There is nothing I can do to make this better. I lean into him, wrapping my arms around his body as tightly as possible.

“I am so sorry, Asher. I can’t imagine how painful that was.”

He wraps his arms around me, and we sit silently as he sobs into my shoulder. The anguish in his voice is heartbreaking. Asher is the strong one. The one that doesn't take anyone's shit. But he's also the cheeky one, the one that, when he smiles he lights up the room, making us all smile with him. Now, all I can see is that nine-year-old boy who lost his sister. Eventually, the tears stop, and I feel him pull me up.

"I'm sorry Ellie...I'm so sorry I couldn't protect you." He whispers as if afraid to wake the ghosts that haunt him. He leans down, kissing the cold stone with his lips.

He threads his hand through mine and begins walking to the graveyard's far side. We climb the wall and walk for what seems like miles in silence. The rough trees get denser and denser as we come to a large, wooded area. His hand is in mine, helping me through so I don't trip over the brush.

His voice makes me jump as the silence is interrupted.

"I didn't understand then why she did what she did, but a few years later, I was unpacking some boxes and came across her stuff. I was surprised my parents even brought it, considering the tape hadn't been touched since sealing them. I started going through them, and I found a letter unopened with her handwriting on it. It was her suicide note. Our parents didn't even read it; it was sealed and addressed to them, and they just tossed it in a box with the rest of her stuff like it was trash."

We continue to weave through the woods as he slowly reveals everything to me.

"She told us everything in it. How she went to the party and met a guy called Michael. He seemed sweet, and she had seen him around town, but she started to feel a little funny at the party. He took her to one of the bedrooms in the frat house. He had drugged her, and then he raped her, Brooke. His friends tied her down as she tried to fight him off. And then they took turns in raping her all night repeatedly over and over again."

He lashes out, hitting a tree and punching it repeatedly. He doesn't stop, and I can see the blood trickle down on the tree

as he splits his knuckles open. I've never seen him like this before. This is the angel of death everyone talks about. It's terrifying, and my heart bleeds for him.

"Asher, stop, stop," I cry out. I pull him away, and he collapses to the ground. I lean down. "Oh my god, your hands." There's blood everywhere. Bits of stray wood and splinters sticking out of them, making them look even worse.

"Asher," I say softly, pulling his head up to look at me. "It wasn't your fault. You were a kid. You couldn't have done anything." He looks up at me, and his eyes are cold, frighteningly so.

"But I did, Brooke. I did do something. I found one of those fuckers, and I killed him. But not before beating him to an inch of his life and making him beg for me to stop. I broke every finger, his wrist, his arm. I cut him in places I knew would hurt him but not enough to bleed out. I told him if he gave me the names of the other guys, I would let him go. He gave me the names, believing me because he couldn't hack the pain any longer." A hysterical, crazed laugh escapes his lips. Honestly, at this moment, I'm frightened of him.

"I tortured him for hours, making him feel every spark of fear my sister would have, and then I shot his dick so he couldn't rape anyone anymore, and when I was bored with hearing his screams, I shot him again right in the face, without blinking. I dug a hole over there and dropped him in it. I soaked him in lighter fluid and threw in a match and burned him till there was nothing left of him."

He looks at me dead in the eyes, so deranged. "It's okay, B. I filled in the hole so you can't see, but I promised him his friends will join him soon."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BROOKE

I drive the two of us back since Asher isn't in a fit state. He's staring out the passenger window without any emotion on his face. He's gone silent on me again.

I get it. I can't imagine anyone having to go through what he did. Asher is broken inside, and I don't think he will ever be right again. He sat there on his own with his sister for four days.

How can anyone ever get over that?

How could she do that to him?

A little part of me is angry at her. She knew he was on his own with her. Another part of me knows she was too broken to even realize he was there at all. How alone she must have felt in those final days.

I texted Jax on the way back to the beach house. I don't know what to do about Asher's hands, and he's refusing to go to the hospital to get them looked at. They must hurt, but Asher just shook his head when I asked.

My head is spiraling, and I have a pit in my stomach that won't go away. I don't know what I'm more shocked about.

What happened to his sister or the fact he just admitted he killed a guy in cold blood and plans to kill everyone involved?

Would I do that?

Could I kill someone if they hurt the people I loved?

Yeah, I think I could.

That thought leaves me reeling a little as I realize what we're all capable of for the ones we love. I pull up to the beach house just as the sun rises, but I find it hard to appreciate its beauty. All I can think about is Ellie never seeing another one. I feel tears threatening to spill, and I blink them back. I can't do this in front of Asher.

Right now, I need to be the strong one like he told me I had to be earlier.

As I pull up to the house, I see Jax on the front porch, waiting for us. "How long have you been out here?" I ask as I get out of the car, slamming the door shut to get to Asher as quickly as possible.

"About a minute. I hacked the GPS on his car and saw it pulling up."

I blink. "How...I mean, you can do that?"

He chuckles at me. "Brooke, I can do a lot more than that." He wiggles his eyebrows and smirks at me, but I don't even know what to do with that information and decide to put it away for later.

He pulls Asher out of the car and leads him inside. I stay outside, leaning against the Camaro, not wanting to intrude. My legs feel like jelly right now, and I can barely stand up. I don't trust myself to walk into the house. Instead, I slide down the car to sit on the cool sand.

I try to process everything from the last few days. What I can't figure out is how it connects to Chase.

Asher said Chase needed me to be strong, but why?

How does Asher's past connect with that?

Oh god, Asher. Every time I replay that story, my heart breaks a little more for him. There's no way Harper can know this. He's too protective of her. The pieces fall into place on why he tries to keep her at a distance, although every so often he can't, pulling her in to give him a little comfort. I don't know how long I sit on the sand. I feel like time has lost meaning tonight...or this morning. I don't even know anymore.

A hand touches my shoulder, and I jump, my heart beating right out of my chest.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.” Jax lowers himself into the sand next to me.

“Is he...his hands?” I ask, and he nods.

“All sorted. It’s not the first time, and probably won’t be the last time they have been in that state.”

I’m not surprised by that comment. Asher’s pain and rage need to be directed somewhere, so all I do is simply nod back, staring out into the ocean.

I used to love the water. It made me feel free like anything is possible. Now, it just feels cold and empty, and all I can see is the red tint of blood that isn’t even there.

“So, he told you? About Ellie?” he asks a little tentatively.

“Yeah. I’m just trying to wrap my brain around it, but my heart hurts too much. I don’t know what to say or do. Nothing will ever make that right.”

“Maybe not, but we can try.”

I look at him, and he seems harder, like Asher did. There’s a mask that goes up on these guys. I never noticed it before, but now I do. It’s like they shut everything off to deal with this. It can’t be healthy for any of them.

“We? You said we can try. You know what he did...what he plans to do?”

He laughs a little darkly.

“Do you honestly think Asher could do that on his own? I was the one that found him. The guy we killed. He was the weak link. There had been reports of him doing that to other girls on his own, but nothing came of it, and now we have names for the rest of them. I’ll find them soon.”

I swallow hard; my mouth is completely dry. “The guy that you killed? We...who’s we? Chase... Did he?”

Chase told me, he told me he and Jax helped Asher. I just didn’t know what he meant. Oh god, I’m going to be sick.

“Why? Why help him?”

He gives me a sad smile. “Because brothers aren’t just born through blood, Brooke. They’re made. You don’t understand what it’s like for him, B. He had no one. His parents are a joke. You know they sent him away when he was a kid. He spent two years in a psych hospital trying to deal with his sister’s death, and they didn’t visit him once. They only let him come home because the hospital told them he needed to. Chase and I—we’re his real family. We’re brothers, Brooke, and we will always support each other through anything.”

“Even murder?” I ask.

“It’s not murder, Brooke, it’s justice.” I nod because I get it. I wonder what kind of girl that makes me.

Am I someone who could accept this?

“Asher said to me earlier that Chase hates himself because of me, that I need to be stronger for him... What does that mean?”

Jax chuckles, shaking his head.

“Wow! That motherfucker... If we did that to Harper, he would kill us,” he exhales slowly before looking directly at me. “Listen, Brooke. Asher let you in tonight for reasons I think I know, but I can’t be sure. I’ve told you what I’m willing to tell you for now, but Chase, I won’t tell you his story. If you want to know why, then you need to talk to him about it, and it’s his choice if he wants to let you in.”

I scowl, thinking back to the earlier parts of last night.

“Yeah, well, Chase can go fuck himself after sleeping with Chloe last night.”

Jax looks shocked; his mouth opens wide. “No way he slept with Chloe.”

I nod.

“She was sneaking out of his room, told me so to my face while she left this on my arm.” I show him the marks on my wrist, and his eyes darken.

“I swear, Brooke, that girl will never get near you again. I need to go and have a little talk with Chase. Find out what the fuck he’s doing.”

I shake my head. “Nah, leave it. It doesn’t matter, anyway. He’s not my concern and I’m not his. As far as I’m concerned, they deserve each other. They’re both as fucked up as each other.”

Jax takes my hands in his, pulls me up, and grins. The same cheeky grin that seems to appear on his face when he has a secret that no one knows, and he’s dying to spill it.

“Sure, Brooke, whatever you say. I trust you’re not going to go spilling any of our secrets with anyone?”

I shake my head. “No, of course not. I just wish I could do more. Asher looked so small tonight. He just looked so broken. It was scary. I’m not used to seeing him like that.”

Jax pulls me into a hug. One that I desperately needed, even though I didn’t know it.

“You’re an amazing girl, B. Always wanting to help, but I think with this, you just gotta let it run its course.” He keeps his arm around me, and we silently walk back to the house.

“I’m going to grab some sleep before anyone else is awake.”

He nods at me. “Yeah, I get it. It’s been one hell of a night for you. First Chase being an ass, then Nate kissing you, then Chloe, and now Asher.” He exhales, and I’m shocked at how much he knows.

“Hey, listen Brooke, you’re already strong. You’re still standing despite everything that’s been thrown at you in the last twenty-four hours. Don’t let anybody tell you anything different, Okay?”

I take a moment to absorb what he said and realize he’s right. I lean up on my tiptoes, kissing him on the cheek. “Okay. Thanks, Jax.”

I wander upstairs, my feet barely carrying me up to my room. Even though I think sleep will never come, it does but

so do the nightmares. I dream of a pretty young girl with Asher's eyes, whose dress turns to blood as she screams.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BROOKE

I wake up, realizing it's already dark out and I've slept away the day. Hearing talking downstairs, I pull on shorts and a crop top and freshen myself up before heading down.

My mind is still reeling from everything last night, so I try to put it out of my brain. I need a break from it all. For Christ's sake, I'm nineteen and having talks about murdering people. I laugh hysterically at myself as I shake those thoughts out of my mind.

Harper and Nate are on the sofa together, laughing, when Nate's eyes meet mine. I can't help but think of the kiss last night, and for a second, I want him to get up, wrap his arms around me again, and kiss me like that. I can't wait for Chase any longer. He has to get his shit together, and I wonder what it could mean for me and Nate.

Nate smiles at me. "Hey, sleepyhead. Feeling better?" I laugh a little as I realize he thinks it's from me having a hangover and not spending the night with Asher and Jax as they spun my world upside down, giving me unsteady feet. I know it's a secret they have let me into and one I can never tell.

"Definitely. Where is everyone?" I ask, noticing the other guys are nowhere to be seen.

"Gone. They said they had to go work something out for a bit and will be back in a couple of days. So that leaves just us three for a while to have some fun. The three musketeers back

together again.” He hugs Harper, grabbing her head under his shoulder as he messes with her hair.

Harper laughs before pushing him off and smoothing down her hair again, punching him in the arm as he plays wounded.

“Actually, two...I told Maddie I would come over tonight, and I’m already late, but I promise I’m all yours tomorrow!” She slips off the chair, grinning at me, and disappears out the front door.

Nate looks at me and stands up quickly. He strides over, pulls me into his arms, and kisses me like yesterday. I can’t help but sigh into the kiss, responding as I stand on my tiptoes and wrap my arms around his neck. I feel his hands reach down to my waist, lifting me off the ground slightly as he kisses me. It’s all-consuming like he wants to devour me, and I let him.

The kiss breaks, and I’m still in his arms off of the ground, and he’s grinning at me. That cheeky boyish grin, which I am discovering makes me blush. I can feel my cheeks heating. I’m breathless, and we’re both panting. Gasping for breath. He lowers me to the floor gently.

“I...I couldn’t help myself. I’ve wanted to do that all day.” He cups my face, laying a chaste kiss on my lips before pulling back.

“Hmm,” is all I can manage, a little overwhelmed.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done that.” He says, taking my hand as he leads me to the sofa.

“It’s fine. Just a little...shocked,” I say honestly.

He pulls my legs onto him and tenderly lays his hands along them.

“I get that, Brooke... I just can’t hide my feelings from you anymore. You’re my one. I told you last night. I’ve tried with other girls, but no one can compare to you. I love you. It’s that simple.”

The knife that seems permanently embedded in my heart twists. Chase told me I couldn’t compare to Chloe, and here

Nate is saying no one could compare to me.

I need to give this a chance.

I know it.

I don't know how it will end, but I can't wait around for a guy who will never want me when there's a guy here telling me he loves me. And that guy is Nate. My best friend in the entire world. That must mean something.

How could I possibly turn him down?

"I don't know how I feel, if I'm honest, Nate. This happened really quickly, but I want to give it a go. Explore if there could be something there between us." I look into his eyes, and I can see true happiness shining back at me, and I can't help but smile back and crave his lips back on mine. I pull my legs off his lap and lean forward until I'm straddling him, deciding to give this a full go, hoping he will chase his older brother from my mind.

"It might take lots and lots of making out to help me figure that out, though." I grin wickedly at him. "I'm talking many, many hours of kissing me... Think you're up to the challenge?"

He slips his hand under my ass, squeezing it a little as I squeal excitedly. His voice is low and heavy.

"Tink. I definitely think I can arrange that. In fact, I think we should start right now." His other hand slides up my back and around my neck. He slams his lips against mine, and once again, the kiss consumes my very being. I feel his tongue run over my lips before slipping into my mouth, and my hips naturally start rolling over him, against him.

My hands find the hem of his shirt, and I pull it over his head, breaking the kiss for a moment. My fingers trace over every ridge and curve of his abs.

He pulls back, groaning. "Fuck Tink...that feels like heaven to have you touch me like that." I freeze a little. Chase's words from the other night come back to me, "*Do you taste like heaven or sin, Princess?*"

I block all thoughts about him from my mind as I look up at Nate. He deserves my full attention right now. This man is telling me he loves me. I lean in, kissing him again as I feel his hands trace over my sides. His hands wrap into my hair, pulling my head back, and I gasp in surprise before his lips move down to my jawline. Laying soft kisses along it before his head drops to my neck. His tongue and lips move along it as I feel him lay a love bite there.

I can't help but moan, bucking my hips against him as he sucks on the soft flesh of my neck. I want more. I need it. My hands move down to his shorts, and he grabs me to stop me. He whispers in my ear, making my whole body shudder as his hot breath gives me goosebumps.

“All in good time, Tink...right now, I just want this from you. You'll get everything from me once I know wholeheartedly you feel the same way.” He runs his tongue along my ear, and I shiver in pleasure as he leans back, his hand cupping my chin.

“Your first time will be with me. I guarantee it, Brooke. But not like this. I want you to know that you love me first, and until you say it back, well, all I want from you is your kisses, okay?”

I nod, and a little tear falls from my eye at how thoughtful he is. I can't believe I didn't know he felt this way about me, and I know most guys wouldn't say that. They would take what they wanted from me without those words even being thought, especially as I can feel how hard he is under me.

“Okay!” I say back, pulling myself off him as I watch him rearrange himself, and damn, he's hard as a rock right now.

“Just...fuck Brooke, figure it out soon because I don't think my cock can take much more of that.” I laugh softly. I can feel my face flushing.

“Since it's dark outside, I was thinking of going out onto the beach just to look at the stars. It's so clear here. Do you want to join me?” I ask.

“I was hoping we could just chill and watch a movie or something? Is that okay?” I nod, trying not to be disappointed. It’s okay; he and I will have different things to do together. I get up, grabbing a couple of bottles of water for us both, and as soon as I’m back on the sofa, he pulls me into him. His arm goes around me, and his fingers trace along my bare thigh.

I settle into his arms, and the movie plays. I try to be in the moment—I do—but my mind fears about where the guys went.

Is Asher okay?

What is Chase doing?

Has Jax found another one?

I close my eyes and pray they’re okay, that they’re safe... even Chase.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BROOKE

I wake up on the couch. The sun is streaming through the windows. Nate's body is no longer entwined with mine, and I look up to find him in the kitchen making coffee, looking over at me.

"I'm so sorry I fell asleep," I yawn, stretching my body out. I remember parts of the movie but not much after that. He chuckles softly, bringing me a cup of steaming coffee.

"It's okay, I fell asleep too. I woke up with a blanket around us, so I think Harper must have done it when she got home."

I bring the coffee to my lips and take a sip. Sighing into it. He also knows my coffee order.

"What time is it?" I ask as he sits next to me.

"About five. It's still early, you're fine."

I nod. "Any news from the guys?" I ask, checking my phone, hoping to see a text, but there's nothing.

His eyes narrow at me as his tone turns cold. "You mean my brother?"

"Well, yeah, your brother, Asher, Jax? They're together, right?" I look at him, and I swear he's annoyed at me.

"No, there's nothing from my brother Brooke." He gets up and walks away from me. I put the coffee down on the table, turning my body to look at his.

“Hey, what’s going on? I can tell you’re angry with me, and I don’t know why.”

He turns around, and his face looks earnest but conflicted. “I’m only going to ask this once, Brooke, and I’ll accept your answer, but I need to know. Do you have feelings for Chase?”

Do I?

After everything that’s happened?

The truth is I’m so angry and confused with everything I haven’t been able to figure that out.

Can you fall out of feelings from someone that quick?

He may not deserve my love, but does that mean he no longer has it?

Does it matter if I do because I want to try things with Nate, and if I say yes, then I don’t know?

Maybe things will be over between us before it even starts?

I feel like Stevie, torn between two men, from the book I read over the summer. *The One I Want* has stayed in my mind since I read it, but then everything by my favorite author does. Siobhan Davis has a habit of tearing you in two. But even when she puts you back together, you still feel like you’re not fully you again, you’ve changed.

That’s how I feel now.

Not fully me.

I run my hands up his arms, slowly standing on my tiptoes as I notice him studying my face.

“Not in the way you think. I like him as your brother. Well, I actually don’t right now because he’s annoyed me, but even if he hadn’t, I don’t like him like that.” My heart twitches as I say that and realize I still do. I can’t help that he still sits in my heart, but it’s clear nothing will happen between us, so I need to move on. And here’s Nate in front of me, and I think I could develop those types of feelings for him.

My lips find his, and I kiss him slowly, trying to pour those emotions into it, and I wonder if I'm trying to convince him or myself. I don't have time to figure it out as his hands find my waist, and he kisses me back just as slowly, just as carefully. One of his hands wraps around my jaw, pulling me closer to him before he stops the kiss, sighing.

"You spoke his name in your sleep last night, Brooke... I thought it might mean..."

I cut him off, kissing him again before whispering against his lips.

"I dream of all of you. You're all a big part of my life. It doesn't mean anything, I promise." He nods, lifting me up, placing me on the kitchen island, and stepping between my legs.

"So, you dream of me, Brooke?" He smirks at me like I just hugely boosted his ego, and I can't help laughing at his reaction.

I nod, telling him the truth. I do dream of them all a lot. I just don't think it's the way he wants it to be.

"Soon, Brooke, I'll be the only one you dream of." He pulls me into a punishing, hard, and passionate kiss as if he's trying to make Chase disappear from my mind, and I respond in kind, wanting the same. I want to be able to kiss him without thinking of his brother.

God, I really am awful, but I quickly lose myself in his lips.

He really is a great kisser, and I really do love him. Maybe not in that way yet, but this could be so easy. Suddenly, I hear someone clear their throat, and it's Harper looking at us. We both pull away awkwardly... Well, I do. Nate couldn't grin anymore if he tried.

"Wow...anyone wanna fill me in on when this happened?"

I blush but can see the accusations burning in her eyes. She clearly disapproves. Nate turns around to look at her.

“I’ll let Brooke fill you in on the details.” He turns back to me, kissing me softly on my lips. “I’m gonna go for a swim, then grab some breakfast with friends in town, but can we do something later? I don’t mind just us or the three of us. I’ll leave that to you, okay?”

I nod, watching his muscled back walk away from me, and I can’t help but admire just how good he looks in the morning. Harper grabs my wrist and pulls me off the counter.

“Okay, we need to talk. Outside, right now!” She pulls me outside but doesn’t stop there as we walk halfway down the beach. She’s practically dragging me without me even having my shoes on.

“What the hell, Brooke? I thought you liked Chase? So, what now? You’re going to start sleeping with his brother because he pissed you off! Think, girl!” She flicks my forehead hard.

“Ow...what the hell, Harper?” I rub my forehead, laughing. “It’s not like that...I just can’t wait around for him. You know what he said to me.” I sit on the sand beneath my feet. Even early in the morning, it’s warm, just a little damper than usual. “He slept with Chloe the same night he left me on the beach.”

Harper drops to the sand in front of me, her judgement of my bad decisions subsiding. “Damn girl...I’m sorry. How do you know?”

I fill her in on everything I saw and what Chloe said, stopping at the point of Asher coming down and finding us, knowing that’s not my story to tell.

“He clearly doesn’t want me, so why should I wait around for him to hopefully change his mind?” I pull my knees up and wrap my arms around them just like that night on the beach he left me.

“I can’t do this anymore with him. I can’t keep my heart on the line, knowing he will just hurt me again.”

Harper sighs. “Oh, Brooke...I swear things would be so much easier if you just were honest with each other. He does

want you, but he knows Nate likes you, so he doesn't want to get between that! He basically told me yesterday morning. Before he went up to wake you."

I take a second to think about it, but it makes little sense, even if that is true. He wouldn't say that shit to me if it was true. You couldn't say that stuff to someone you like. My stomach is in knots, and I don't know if I can keep playing this game.

"No, Harper. I really don't want to hear it. He wouldn't sleep with Chloe or say any of those things if that were true. He's just playing games with me, and I'm done with it all."

"So what? You jump to Nate? You don't like him like that, Brooke!"

I exhale, and my breath is a little shaky. I can't look at her. I can hear the judgment in her voice. Instead, I focus on the water, knowing she's right. I watch the water lap slowly on the sand. Focusing on the movement of it all, wishing it would wash away the confusion and the guilt.

"I could..." I say softly. "Maybe I could fall for him? He's kind and sweet, and he told me he loves me, Harper."

"But he's not Chase, Brooke. You can't make somebody love somebody," I tense as she speaks my words back to me. "Sure, feelings develop over time, but there has to be at least a little spark to begin with. You know there's not Brooke. You're trying to make feelings appear so you can get over Chase. All you're going to do is hurt you and Nate. Do you really want to risk your friendship over this?"

I can't answer because the truth is I don't know what I feel. If anything, I feel a little numb. Neither of us says anything more. Instead, she hugs me, and then we watch the water lapping at the shore and the sun reflecting off the water. Both of us are deep in thought.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BROOKE

After what seems like hours of silence, I turn to her. It's probably been minutes, but I need to fill the silence by asking her something that's been playing on my mind for a while now.

“What happened between you and Asher?”

She sighs. “It's a long story, Brooke, and one I don't know if I can handle bringing up. I need to accept that me and Asher will never be together because of what happened that night.”

It's ironic because she has the same thinking as me. We both want to accept that the guys who hold our hearts will never return our feelings. Yet, we are both so invested in each other's relationships and want it to happen. I swear we both need a therapist.

“You know I'm always here for you right?”

She sighs before starting. “There were so many people there that I didn't know, but hey, I figured it was the boy's party, right? They know everyone there. It's perfectly safe. I went to get a drink, and I bumped into a couple of guys from another college. I was talking with one of them, and I think the other slipped something into my drink. I didn't notice at the time, but when I came to find you, I felt dizzy, so dizzy, and so tired. I could barely keep my eyes open. One of them came up behind me and grabbed my waist, and took me upstairs to the bedroom. I thought...I thought he was helping me.”

She goes quiet for a second, staring out to the horizon, and I can see the pain in her eyes, hoping this story doesn't end

like Asher's sister.

"The room was spinning, and everything was an effort. I couldn't even lift my arm up. It felt so heavy like I had weights strapped to me. He laid me on the bed, and I felt his... his hands on me. I tried to call out, but nothing was coming from my lips. I wanted to fight. I really did, but I couldn't. I remember thinking I was about to be raped by this bastard, and then I remember Asher. At least I think it was Asher, and I don't know if it was just the drugs they gave me or he was really there, but he grabbed the guy off me and Brooke. He went mental. He kept hitting him and hitting him repeatedly, and I'm sure I saw..."

She's shaking terribly as she talks about this, and I wonder if I should have asked or just left this alone.

"It's okay, Harper, you're safe. You're here with me."

"He snapped the guy's neck, Brooke. I'm sure of it. I heard the sound of the bone crunch. I saw his dead eyes looking at me as he fell to the bed before I passed out completely. I'll always remember those lifeless eyes staring at me. I woke up in my bed the next day with no recollection of how I got there. I felt awful the next morning. I had such a migraine, and I drifted in and out as pieces of the night before came to me. I knew I had to find Asher. He would tell me the truth, right? So, I drove myself to his house. He didn't answer, but his door was unlocked, so I went in. He was in the middle of hooking up with some girl."

She's disgusted as she says that, and I know that really hurt her because if I saw Chase and Chloe in the middle of it, it would break me.

"I went to leave, but he saw me. He told her to get out and threw her dress at her. She was fuming, calling me a bitch for interrupting, but left all the same. I loved him in that moment, you know. He didn't blink, just kicked her skanky ass out because he could see I was upset. He grabbed my hand, pulling me on the bed with him, and I confronted him about what happened. At first, he looked concerned for me, then he turned. It was like a switch went off in his head. Telling me

none of it happened, and I must have been high. He fucking accused me of taking drugs willingly. You know I don't do that shit. I fucking hate that he does it. I know I didn't take anything, but maybe someone did slip something in my drink. I know something happened. I'm sure of it. We argued some more, well, a lot before I finally left. But he was so cold to me, Brooke. He laughed at me. He fucking laughed like I was deranged."

She wipes away the tears as she laughs a little wildly before she sighs deeply and shrugs.

"I saw him a few days later. He came to my house, and he said he was sorry for how he acted, but could I blame him? After all, I went in there accusing him of murder. Of course, he was going to react that way. This time, he was different. He was so tender with me and held me for ages as I cried. I cried for hours, and we fell asleep in my bed with him holding me, but when I woke up, he was gone. The next time I saw him, he just acted like he didn't hold me the entire night."

I have no doubt in my mind that it happened. I've seen Asher lose his cool, and the thought of what happened to his sister nearly happening to Harper, I'm sure, would have sent him into a spiral.

"So, do you think it's true, or did drugs make you hallucinate?"

"I don't know anymore. I mean, I've heard rumors about Asher, but I can't see him as a murderer, you know? But Brooke, that guy is missing! No one can find him, and the last time he was seen was at that party."

I don't know what to say to her at this point. Anything I could say could implicate Asher, and she would want to know more. Instead, I turn to her, grabbing both hands in mine.

"Listen, Harper. Whoever he was he clearly drugged you, I know you wouldn't touch drugs voluntarily. If he is gone or dead then good, I'm glad because he deserves nothing but death for what he did, for what he intended to do. But Harper, would you really think badly of Asher for protecting you if he really did do what you think you saw?"

She sighs, shaking her head at me. “No. Not at all, but what does that make me?”

“It makes you stronger! You survived, and even though we may never know the full truth of what happened, I will thank whoever did that to that guy because he saved my best friend. Not everything in this world is black and white, Harper. There are elements of gray, and I’m only just realizing it myself. But I’m happy for those shades of gray because I understand sometimes things need to be done that don’t fit into the confines of our world. You understand?”

She nods, wiping the tears from her eyes. “I think I love him, you know? But he’s so hot and cold with me. Every time I think he feels the same way, I find out he is fucking some other girl or he acts like a prick. I can’t play that game anymore. I deserve better.”

I nod at her, thinking the same thing. What she just said describes Chase and the way he is with me.

“Harper, let’s make a deal. New starts for both of us? I don’t know if my new start is with Nate, but I think I owe it to both of us to try. So please, I’m asking you to support me in this.”

She stands up, brushing the sand off her shorts, and puts her pinky finger out to me. I smile, standing up and curling my pinkie around hers. “Deal.” She says, and the next thing I know, we’re hugging and giggling.

“Sooooo, Nate,” she wiggles her eyebrows at me, “That boy can kiss, right? I mean, it looked like a good kiss?”

I laugh, nodding at her. “God, yes, Harps, the boy can kiss like a god!”

She grins, linking her arm with mine as we walk down to the beach. “Damn, girl! The boy looks like a god. Of course, he can kiss like one. Have you gone any further?”

I shake my head. “He told me he’s waiting for me to tell him I feel the same.”

She gags. “Urgh, what a dork! Does he not realize sex happens wayyyy before you declare your love for each other?”

I mean, it's not 1930...god you must be gagging to lose your V-card by now. I think you're the only virgin I know...well, except my ten-year-old cousin." I nudge her in the ribs, laughing.

"Hey."

We both laugh as we walk through the door to our beach house. The heavy mood is gone; it feels lighter, and Harper seems lighter, too. I don't know how I would be if that happened to me. Yesterday, Jax told me I was strong. If only he could see Harper. She seems to be the epitome of the word.

"Okay, girl, get dressed! I'm starving and could seriously eat lots of bacon right now. I need to know how I came home to you two being so cozy on the chair last night."

I roll my eyes, knowing I'm going to spend the next few hours detailing every moment between me and Nate until she's bored with hearing it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

NATE

Last night was unbelievable. Feeling her in my arms so openly. Having her not only kiss me back but initiate it. Feeling her incredible body against mine. I want her so badly. I always have, but right now, all I can do is think about how good my dick will feel as I push inside her for the first time.

I want to be the one taking her innocence. Part of me wishes I waited for her, but the other part is glad I didn't because now her first time will be perfect. I can show her how good it feels. Make her crave me as much as I do her. I want to spend hours worshipping her.

My first time was shit. I was drunk, and so was the girl at the time. It was pointless because all I could think of the whole time through my drunken haze was how wrong it felt. After all, it wasn't her, but I was the only guy on the football team who hadn't slept with a girl, so I eventually gave in to the pressure.

I can see the look in my Tink's eyes now as she starts to think differently of me, now considering what we could be. I need to keep trying with her because I need her to be mine in every sense of the word. But I need her to want to be mine. If anything, that's more important to me.

When I woke up with her limbs entangled with mine, I lay there watching her sleep. She looked like an angel in my arms. I watched her chest rise and fall steadily. I watched her hair shine as the sun hit it through the window. I watched her lips murmur silent words as she dreamed. I felt how soft her skin was as I stroked her cheek, how amazingly beautiful the sight

was. I leaned in, kissing her forehead, and then that's when things changed for me.

The image of my beautiful angel became tainted because she whispered his name. I wanted to kiss her. I couldn't resist. I leaned in and kissed the cheek I just stroked. The second my lips touched her skin, she cuddled into me more. But his name was the one that fell from her lips. She thought I was him, and she liked it.

Suddenly, everything came crashing down on me. The looks exchanged between them, the comments Asher and Jax made, and why she was crying on the beach. She was in love with Chase, not me.

I felt like I was dying at that moment.

Had I waited too long?

Had my brother crept in before me?

Did they fall for each other when I was off trying to find another girl to replace her in my heart?

She tried to reassure me when I confronted her, but there are still doubts in my mind. All I know is I'll love her more than he ever could, and I'll show her that. I'll show her I'm the right choice for her. He can't love her the way I can. I don't think my brother is capable of it anymore.

Chase changed a few years ago. Before, he always had my back. My older brother always protected me and was always there for me, that was until he became part of the unholy bastards. Since Asher came to town and they became friends, he stopped and they owned the name given to them at the fight ring downtown.

And as he grew up, he got closer to Jax and Asher; he distanced himself from me and everything else in his life. They became his brothers, and it left me on the sidelines, cold and alone. If he wasn't with his fling of the week, he was with them. They would disappear for days at a time.

I figured they were off partying, but over the last couple of years, I had seen something change in him. He stopped caring about things; he drank more, and he slept around a hell of a lot

more. Sometimes, when he came home to stay, I would hear him shouting in his sleep. I sometimes wonder if they got him mixed up in something bad because he's come home with bruises. I found out he's been fighting in the illegal fight ring downtown.

He has always been hot-headed, but he loses his temper much quicker now. He used to walk away from a fight, always saying it wasn't worth it, but over the years, he stopped doing that. Instead, he opts to turn his knuckles bloody, and he won't stop until someone pulls him off, whoever is unlucky enough to get on his bad side.

I snuck in once, wanting to watch him. There was a guy completely unconscious on the floor, and Chase was just laying blow after blow. It took three guys to drag him off the poor dude on the floor.

I don't know where they went; I don't care. I just got a text saying they were heading out for a couple of days, and, to be honest, I was thankful for it. This vacation hasn't been the easiest so far.

"Hey, man. You in there?"

I look up and see a couple of my friends from my old high school football team laughing at me.

"Yeah, I'm here. Sorry, I got distracted for a second."

I take a swig of my beer and relax back into the seat.

"Let me guess, Brooke? Tell us you finally fucking told her, man." Hunter flicks his fry at me.

I give him a short, sharp nod, throwing the fry back. Hunter and Jake had been friends with me since we were kids. They know all about how I feel, and this was the first time I had seen them since we split into different colleges.

"Yeah, I told her. She's working out how she feels about me." I take another swig of my beer.

"Bro, that doesn't sound good. If she didn't immediately jump into your arms, she doesn't feel the same. Maybe it's time you move on?"

I glare at Hunter. His words annoy me. It's not like I haven't fucking tried. "It's not like that. She was kissing me last night, not vice versa; it's just different. We've been friends forever. She needs to figure out if there is more to it than that."

I don't know if I'm trying to convince them or myself.

My eyes flick around the bar, and I see my girl with Harper in the corner. They're both giggling away. I can't believe I didn't realize they were here. I watch her smiling and laughing, and I feel my heart squeeze. This is the happiest I've seen her in days, and I wonder if that's because of me. Jake's eyes follow mine and spot the girl that makes my heart race and my dick swell.

"Talk of the devil. Why don't you invite her over?"

I take out my phone, smiling, and text her, telling her to look up, and she does. Her gaze meets mine, and she smiles... she smiles for me. There's no better feeling in the world than that.

She whispers something to Harper and looks around before they pick up their stuff and join us. Harper slides into the booth next to the boys and Brooke slides in next to me. My arm quickly goes around her waist as I pull her closer. "Hey beautiful," I lean down, briefly touching my lips against hers. Her eyes sparkle as I pull back.

"Mmm, is that really all the welcome I get?" She giggles cheekily.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BROOKE

The moment his lips grace mine, I want more. His kisses are becoming addictive, and I challenge him to give me more. He chuckles briefly before moving his hand from my waist to my neck and kissing me deeply. My hand finds his shirt as I slide my hand up. Our tongues meet each other in a dance as I feel his other hand on my thigh. He breaks away from me too early for my liking, and I pout at him before realizing that Harper was making gagging noises and laughing at us both.

“God damn it, Harper, you’re becoming the biggest cock block.”

He groans, and I laugh at him, punching him playfully.

“Hey, guys.” I turn to his friends, settling in his arms, smiling at them as Nate’s arms find my waist again, settling his hand around it and pulling me closer to him. His warm, spicy scent overwhelming me.

We spend the next few hours catching up. The drinks flow freely between us all. Nate’s hands have been wandering my body the entire time we sit here. He pulls my thigh over him as I lean into him. His fingertips swirl against the skin of my inner thigh, sending shivers up my spine.

My phone buzzes, and I see Chase’s name on my phone, sending me a text message. I don’t open it, instead putting my phone face down on the table. I look up at Nate, and he’s laughing along with his friends. His easy-going nature soothes my soul.

This is comfortable right here. It always has been between us. I wonder if I can see us together after the summer ends.

Is this my life now?

Comfortable in his arms.

It could be.

But something in me longs for more. I don't want to be comfortable. If I wanted that, I could stay in Asheville for the rest of my life. I want to be challenged; I want excitement and thrills. I want to live my life never knowing what's coming but enjoying every second of it. I wonder if I can have that with Nate.

I know Nate will go pro. He's too good not to. I know teams have already approached him about his plans after college. One day, he will be playing football in front of millions of people, but can I be the good little girlfriend in the stands cheering his name?

"You okay, Tink? You've gone quiet on me."

I tip my chin up to find Nate's eyes on me, looking concerned.

"I'm good. Just thinking."

I give him a small smile, hoping it persuades him. He kisses my lips softly, happy with my answer, and turns back to his friends. Harper's eyes meet mine, and I can see the look in her eyes. She's saying I told you so. She knows exactly what I'm thinking, but I need to give it more time.

"I'm just going to get some air. It's a bit hot in here."

Nate looks up concerned. "You want me to come, babe?"

I shake my head, knowing it won't change anything.

"No, I'm good. I just need a minute."

I slide out of the booth, taking my phone with me. I weave my way through the crowded bar before stepping outside. The cool air hits my face, and I inhale deeply. Nate always made me feel free, but right now, I'm not sure. I feel a little trapped and don't know what to do.

I look down at my phone and open the message from Chase. Two words flash on my screen.

CHASE

I'm sorry

I snort in anger. This guy has apologized to me more times in the last few days than ever before, and it's starting to mean nothing to me.

I text back, tapping on my phone furiously.

ME

For what?

Playing with me?

Making me fall for you and then leaving me alone to cry?

Fucking Chloe the same fucking night?

Your apologies don't mean anything to me anymore.

I click send on the last message, and within seconds, my phone rings. I stare at his name on my screen for a few seconds before sighing and answering it.

"Brooke. Listen." I immediately cut him off.

"No, Chase, you listen. I am so sick of the games you play with me. You and Chloe fucking deserve each other. I'm moving on. I'm not waiting for you anymore. I'm with Nate now, and you're with Chloe."

He laughs deeply. "I'm not with Chloe."

I roll my eyes, my blood boiling. "Of course not. You don't commit to anyone. You're too fucking messed up in the head. You just play with girls and use them and drop them the second you are done with them. Well, guess what? I'm not yours to play with, and I'm done."

I hang up the phone. Screaming into the open air, startling the girls next to me. I give them an apologetic smile, embarrassed, but then my phone rings again. I stare at it, knowing nothing will change, and turn it off.

I groan loudly before returning to the bar and heading straight to Nate.

“Do you want to get out of here? Just us two?” I ask him.

He doesn't answer, instead jumping up.

“Make sure she gets home, okay?” He nods toward Harper, and the boys nod while she rolls her eyes at him. He wraps his arm around my shoulder and leads me out into the air as I lean my head in the crook of his shoulder, knowing I need to leave Chase behind and move on.

“I want to be with you. I choose you.” I say, looking up at him. He stops, turning to me, his hands dropping to my waist and catching my lips in the softest kiss he's given me so far. I try to push for more, needing it in this instance, but he doesn't let me. Controlling the kiss as his hand moves to my hair. He pulls back, leaning his forehead against mine.

“No, you haven't, Brooke. You're settling for me. That's the difference, something has upset you, I can tell and your answer is to say that.”

He sighs, kissing the tip of my nose, placing his arm back around me as we walk away from the bar in silence back toward the beach house. He's right. I know he is, but I don't want it to be like this.

As we approach the house, I speak for the first time in what seems like forever.

“I'm sorry, Nate. I don't want it to be this way.”

We sit on the swing outside, and I look at him.

“I do love you. I don't want you to think I'm settling.”

His hand cups my cheek softly. “I know, Brooke, but you don't love me the way you love him. I get it. I was too slow to tell you, but I want you to give it time with us. I think you could love me that way if you really tried to. I told you before,

I'll wait an eternity for you if I have to. But I won't be the second choice. You have to decide if you really want this."

I feel his lips touch my cheek softly, realizing he's kissing the tear rolling down my face. He lets go and walks into the house, leaving me alone with my thoughts in the dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BROOKE

The next day, I wake up knowing I have to give it another shot with Nate. Once Nate left me in the cool night sky, I said goodbye to Chase and what could have been. I get up, still in my lace babydoll nightdress, and walk into Nate's room, letting every thought of Chase go as soon I step in.

He's snoring softly, and honestly, the way the sun catches his golden hair, I can't help but smile at how he looks. I'm ready for this. I'm truly ready to give this a shot. I quietly tiptoe over to his bed, straddling over him but not settling down. Instead, I lean closer, holding my phone over him, pressing play on my music and blasting Bryce Savage, making him scream and jump up, smashing his head against mine.

"Oh, fuck, why did I think this was a good idea?" I cry out, nursing my bruised head. "Shit, Nate, no wonder you're so good at football. Your head is made of solid stone."

He reaches up to me, pulling my hand away from my head. "Tink...let me look... Babe, you have a bump..." He rubs his fingers over it, and I smile, the pain subsiding just from his touch.

Our eyes meet, and there's a pause between us where we just look at each other. Taking in this moment. I made my choice, and he realizes it. His hands lie on and caress my thighs, giving me tingles.

"Fuck...what are you doing to me coming into my room looking like this... Do you have any idea how much I wanna

ruin you right now?”

“Then do it,” I whisper.

He smirks, challenging me. “Then say the words Tink.”

I shake my head. “Not yet, not like that because you know it wouldn’t be real.”

He nods, smiling. “Well done, Angel, that’s what I needed from you. That honesty. Thank you.”

He flips me over with such ease, and suddenly, he’s lying on top of me, pulling one of my legs over his shoulder as he grinds his very clear erection against me, catching my lips with his as he groans into my mouth. His fingers trail up under my baby doll night dress, flicking his thumb over my nipple, and a needy moan escapes me. His kisses move to my neck as he breathlessly speaks.

“I can’t wait to worship this body, Tink. I swear I’m going to make you feel so good you forget everything else except the pleasure I’m giving you. I want every single moan, every whimper as I make you come repeatedly before I’m even inside of you.”

His lips descend over one of my nipples, pulling it between his lips, and god, it feels incredible in this moment. But then he pulls back, smirking at me.

“But not yet, Tink... not till I hear those words.”

He quickly climbs off me, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Fucking jackass.

What is it with this family working me up and leaving me hanging?

I grab the pillow underneath my head, throwing it at him and groaning.

“Fine, I deserve that.”

I sit up, pulling the last remaining pillow behind my back as I breathe heavily, trying to get it to steady.

“So, I was thinking, how about we spend the day together? Just me and you?” I ask.

“Like a date?” He smirks.

“Yeah...like a date, asshole. Don’t make me change my mind.”

He grabs my wrists, pulls me into his lap, and smiles, brushing the hair from my face.

“I would love to go on a date with you, Tink.”

His fingers cup my jaw, bringing me toward him to kiss me softly, so sweetly. Before he smiles, “So, what should we do?”

I sigh in contentment as he rests the palms of my hands against his chest. “Well, I was thinking we could rent jet skis? Head out to the water? There’s a little dock about ten minutes from here, and then I thought I could pack us a lunch? We could have a little picnic, just the two of us on the beach?”

He beams so sweetly and genuinely at me. “You really are perfect, baby. It sounds like a dream come true. Let’s do it. I’ll meet you downstairs in thirty?”

I nod, kissing him on the cheek before kissing him on the lips.

“Mmm, what was that for?”

“Just because I wanted to... What a girl can’t kiss her guy without needing a reason?”

I climb off his lap and head to my room, but he stops me just before I leave.

“Brooke?”

I turn to look at him. “Yeah?”

“Thank you...thank you for taking a chance on me.”

“No, Nate, thank you for giving me another chance to discover what we could be.” He nods, giving me a smile that starts to heal my heart as if that knife wasn’t there anymore.

I head back to my room, close the door softly behind me, and lean my head against it as I realize I still have goosebumps from him being on top of me like that. Fuck, I've never had chills like that before. *Except with Chase*, that little voice says as I think back to our first night on the porch.

How was that only a few days ago?

It feels like so much has changed since then.

I flip the shower on, letting the warm water run over my body, silencing that little voice that calls to Chase, and start thinking about my date. I know I could love him that way. I mean, my body clearly knows it as I remember how needy I sounded on that bed.

I quickly get dressed in a little baby pink bikini that goes well with my golden tan, throwing on a pair of denim shorts and a little white lace kaftan before heading down to the kitchen to pack our lunch for the day.

I'm singing along to a song blasting from my phone when I feel his arms go around me, and I instantly lean back into him, letting his scent surround me as he kisses my neck.

"Tink, you're seriously teasing me with what you're wearing right now. A guy only has so much restraint."

I giggle, turning into his arms.

"Well, I keep asking you to take me to bed, but you keep saying no. Plus, we're going on a jet ski, babe. I have to be in a bikini."

I laugh, pushing him back, grabbing two bottles of water and Coke from the fridge and placing them in the cooler with the food I made up for us. He grabs the cooler off the counter before wrapping his arm around me, pulling me in, and kissing the top of my head.

This is what I need. I need this type of love, safe, warm, not something that burns me alive and only leaves me in ashes, no matter how much I crave it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

NATE

This morning has been one of the best days of my life, and it's not even over yet. I was woken up by a scream. *Literally*. Tink thought it was hilarious to wake me up to a Bryce Savage song just as the beat dropped that scared the living shit out of me. Then, I spent the next twenty minutes falling deeper in love with her as she asked me out on our first official date. I know I should have been the one to ask her on a date first, but I've just been obsessed with touching her, kissing her, telling her I want her to be mine.

A date was a good idea and one I wish I had. I need to back off a little, give her some time to breathe, and work through her decision to make me hers. I can see her internal struggle when she looks at me.

I realize now she's been in love with my brother for years, and that's hard to compete with. So, I've decided I'm not going to compete with it. She needs to just see me and her without her comparing us twenty-four-seven. The only way I can help her do that is to spend time with her as Nathan, the guy she's interested in dating, not trying to force her to skip all these steps.

Granted, I got carried away with her earlier. It's hard not to when she's invading my senses and, in my bedroom, half-naked.

God, I want to fuck her.

I want to be her first and only.

I want to be the man that marries her, that puts a baby in her stomach. The guy she lives happily ever after with, but she's not there yet, and that's fine. Just because I've been in that headspace for years doesn't mean she has to be. She's only just started looking at me differently and she needs to make up her own mind if she can see me as her boyfriend.

I look into her eyes, and she's stunning, the kind of girl that takes any guy's breath away. It's not even how she looks. She is gorgeous, but it's her aura. The way she laughs and smiles at me. The way her cheeks flush when I say something sweet to her. Her ability to want to help anyone, no matter her own sacrifice. That's the girl I am in love with, and I know I would sacrifice everything to be the one that makes her happy.

“So, I kinda packed everything just in case.”

I laugh as I watch her unpack sandwiches, fruit, chicken pieces, and even cake selections.

“Tink, when did you do all this?”

She bites her lip as she looks at me, and I have to hold back from pulling it from her teeth and biting on it myself.

“I may have done some of it early this morning. I couldn't sleep, and I was hoping to surprise you.”

She's perfect. There's no other word for this beauty in front of me.

I lean forward, brushing her wet hair from her face, as I kiss her cheek tenderly.

“Thank you...for being open to us, for planning this day.”

Jet skiing was a rush and so much fun. It didn't hurt that I got to see my girl in this cute little bikini that somehow isn't just cute but sexy as hell. We both got soaked, and we rode for hours until both of us were ready to just spend some time just talking.

She blushes as she realizes I'm checking her out again. “Open,” she whispers as she slips a piece of mango in between my lips. I smile as I take it from her with my teeth, and she

giggles before blushing again and going back to lay out this delicious spread in front of us.

“So, I wanted to run something by you. No matter what happens between us, you’re still my best friend, and I want your opinion. The Panthers have approached me, wanting me to play for them. They want me to drop out of college and go full-time with them. I won’t be starting for a season or so just yet. I’ll need to train with them for a bit, so I’ll more than likely be a reserve, to begin with, but they’re going to support me in still getting my degree, just not quite at a college.”

She shrieks, jumping in my lap and straddling me.

“Nate, that’s incredible.” Her hands slip behind my neck as she beams at me. “You have to take it. That’s an amazing opportunity.”

I give her a peck on the lips, moving her hair back before holding her cheeks in my hands as I stare intently into her eyes.

“I was thinking, it’s only two hours away, and I can get an apartment there in the city. You could come up to visit me, and I can visit you. There are off-seasons, and we can make this work.”

She smiles at me purely as she tosses my hair, pushing it back from my face. “Of course we can, but Nate, that shouldn’t matter in this decision. Nothing is more important than following your dream.”

“I would give it all up for you, though, Tink. You are my dream. Football is great, and I can see myself going pro. I know I’m good enough, but none of that matters if you’re not by my side. And look, there’s no pressure here. If it’s just as friends, then that’s okay. I would still want you there cheering me on.”

I leave the part out where she’s holding our son or daughter’s hand as they wear my shirt number and they both cheer from the box for me.

She leans in slowly, with no hesitation, before her soft lips land on mine. Her lips part, and I follow suit, inviting her

tongue to play with mine. My fingers slowly trail down her back as the other holds her neck. I stop my hand just above her ass. Wanting to prove that I won't touch her until she tells me I'm her first choice. I could lose myself in this girl. I know she might break my heart, and I'll never recover, but it's worth the risk for that vision I have for us to come true.

I bite her lip gently, causing her to moan softly into my mouth and pull my head back, stopping myself from wanting to make her moan in a way that would only be for my ears.

"We have to go out tonight to celebrate." Then she stops pulling a face.

"What?" I chuckle, pulling that lip that's pouting down. "What's in that head?"

"Your brother should be here for us to celebrate. We can do it when they come back. He's going to be so proud of you, Nate. Your whole family will be."

I smile at her, but it doesn't quite reach my eyes as she slips off my lap and carries on unpacking. For that brief fleeting moment, she forgot him, but I'm wondering if that will ever be longer than a moment. After all, Chase and I are forever linked by blood.

He won't care about the Panthers. He hasn't taken a single interest in my career, in me at all for years. I'm not his *precious friends*. I grab a slice of apple from the fruit tub, placing it in my mouth as doubt sets in that she will never be mine because he's already made her his.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BROOKE

I had the best day, but something in me is worried about Nate. We had an amazing moment, then he pulled back, and I don't understand why. He was a little more reserved once I told him we had to celebrate, and I don't get it. One minute, he gives me the most amazing news and the next...

He's gone out with the boys tonight, making up some excuse about having plans already, and that just leaves me and Harper to catch up.

We sit on the deck with a glass of wine in our hands as I tell her about our day, and she attentively listens to everything. I know I shouldn't have told her about Nate's news, but I'm so proud of him, and I couldn't help but share.

"I don't know...I can't quite explain it. It was like every time he looked at me, it was like he was a little melancholy."

Harper takes a sip of her wine—well, a large mouthful. "So, when did it happen? What was said exactly?"

"I was telling him we should celebrate but wait till Chase was back as he would want to join in."

Harper snorts, "You really are thick, you know!"

I punch her in the arm. "Hey!"

She shakes her head. "B, you're Nate's best friend, and you've never noticed he and Chase aren't exactly close?"

“I know that, but of course, he’s going to be proud of his brother. This is life-changing for Nate.”

She sighs, “It’s a good job you’re pretty, B. Okay, one!” She holds up a finger, “That boy knows you like his brother, but you asked him for a date and then mentioned said brother when you should have just been living in the moment with Nate. Two...” She holds up a second finger, “I don’t think Chase even knows his brother plays football anymore. He’s never been to one of his games. Well, at least not as long as I’ve been your friend. Think! Have you ever seen him there? I haven’t. Honestly, I don’t think I’ve seen Chase even say more than a few sentences to him, and when he does, it’s never about football. He spends all his time with Jax and Asher.”

Suddenly, it hits me. She’s right. Chase hasn’t been to one of his games for a few years now. And usually, when I’m at their house, I’m either with Nate or talking to Chase. They’re very rarely actually talking to each other, let alone in the same room.

“Oh fuck. You’re right.” God, I feel like I’ve let him down, not realizing that it’s that bad. I mean, I knew they weren’t very close, but how could I not know they barely talk anymore?

“Okay, well then, I need to make sure Chase fixes that. He needs to grow up and be a fucking good older brother to Nate. He deserves that!”

“See, that’s where you’re going wrong, B. Your job, *if* you’re in this with Nate all the way, is not to try and fix his relationship with his brother. It’s to support Nate in whatever he chooses to do about it. Hell, it wouldn’t surprise me if Nate chooses to walk away from his brother.”

I say nothing, instead, sipping my wine quietly, knowing she’s right. But if he and Chase aren’t getting on and this thing with Nate works out, that could mean cutting Chase out of my life because I couldn’t be there for Nate and still hang out with Chase in the way I do now.

I know I’m angry with Chase, sick of playing his games, but could I do that? Take Nate’s side if he decides to cut Chase

out when he moves.

I look over at Harper, and she's giving me a pitiful smile.

"You can't...can you? Support Nate if he decided one day to cut his brother out of his life?"

"I...I don't know," I say honestly.

"Then you have your answer, B. You need to be honest with Nate. No matter what happens between you and Chase, you need to tell him. That you can't be who he needs. It's not fair to him. And if I'm honest..." She reaches out, taking my hand. "You've been using him. It's some kind of twisted payback or to help you try to get over Chase."

I know she's right. I want the kind of relationship that Nate can give me, but I don't want it to be with Nate. She pulls me close, lays my head on her lap, and strokes my hair.

"It's okay, B. You have no judgment from me. It will be okay eventually."

What have I become?

I lay there in silence and realize I could lose Nate completely if I come clean to him, and I think I've already lost Chase. If I can even say that I ever had him. Instead, I have gotten myself into a situation where I may have just lost two of the most important people to me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BROOKE

A few days have passed since my conversation with Harper. I've spent most of that trying to figure out what I want. It always comes back to Chase, but how can I have him when it's clear he doesn't want me? I try to see Nate in the way he wants me to, but I never quite make it there.

Do I think I could love him in the way he wants?

Maybe, but it's not fair to keep him waiting. Nate is my whole world, along with Harper, but not in the way he wants to be. The truth is I was kidding myself thinking he could be anything other than my best friend.

Nate has spent most of his time here avoiding me. He's been out every day with his friends and rolled back in at four a.m. this morning drunk. I need to speak with him.

The warm sand under my thighs as I sit here staring at the horizon against the sea is a reminder that this vacation so far has been far from what I expected. I wanted freedom. A chance to be who I really wanted and I feel like I've messed everything up.

I think Nate's been giving me space, hoping I will realize I'm in love with him, but I know now that will never happen. Either that, or he's avoiding me, knowing this conversation will come. Chase hasn't contacted me again after I ignored his calls that night.

I sit and wonder what he's doing. My mind is scared senseless with him being involved in Asher's vendetta. I understand it, though. The more I think about it, the clearer it

becomes. My heart breaks for Asher. His family is Chase and Jax. It's clear his parents never cared enough.

My family cares about me. Sometimes a little too much, but I know now I would rather have that than not have them care at all. But I also know family is more than blood. Nate, Harper, and even Chase, Asher, and Jax are my family, too. As long as they are careful, then I can support them in this.

I feel someone sit down next to me. Their hand tosses my hair, and I turn slightly and see Jax. "Hey, pretty girl, penny for your thoughts?"

"You're back!" I say excitedly.

"Yeah, we are." I hug him tightly, realizing how much I've missed these boys.

"Did you...I mean, is someone..." I ask, pulling back.

He shakes his head.

"No, Brooke. We just needed a few days to sort through some things. Asher needed time. He hasn't told anyone about his sister since us, and he's good at compressing things usually, but telling you..." he trails off, and I get it.

It brought everything back. I saw how he was at the end. Not the tough Asher we know. He was that nine-year-old boy again. Broken and scarred, and I realize he will always be that boy under the mask. No one could ever get over something like that.

"And Chase?" I ask nervously.

His voice turns cool, "What about him, Brooke? The last thing I heard was you telling him you wanted nothing to do with him. You were moving on with Nate."

He looks directly at me, and I can feel the anger for his friend burning in his eyes. He's annoyed—I know it—but to be honest, I don't know why.

I quickly stand up. "I won't argue with you, Jax. What goes on between me and Chase is between us. And nothing is going on between us anyway. He made it clear he didn't want

that, so why does it matter? Sure, he's sorry for how it went down, but he doesn't care about me the way Nate does."

Jax catches my arm, pulling me back down with a thump on the sand.

"And you? Do you care about Nate the same way you do Chase?" His brilliant blue eyes stare intensely at me.

"No," I say quietly. "I want to, but I don't. I've been in love with his brother for so long now I don't think I could. But I haven't told Nate that yet. He's been avoiding me."

Jax stands up, brushing the sand off his shorts before holding his hand out to me. I take it doing the same and brushing the sand off me.

"Okay. No more moping about, girl. Fuck them both. You do you, alright Brooke? You're an amazing girl, and if I'm honest, I'm not sure either of them deserves you. But I do know that you need to hear my friend out. He's been thinking a lot about how things have gone down here, and I think you need to hear what he has to say first."

I briefly look back at the ocean, mulling over what he said before meeting his gaze.

"Okay, but not yet. I still need time, and I don't think I can forgive a lot of what happened."

He nods, pulling me into a tight hug, and I press my head against his chest. "You know it would just be simpler if you just dated me, right?"

I laugh, pulling back and pushing his chest. Not that he moves much. "Yeah, Jax, that would definitely not make it worse!"

He shrugs.

"Maybe, maybe not, but you know I would rock your world."

He gives me a wink, and for the first day in a while, I feel a little like old times.

Suddenly, I spot Asher as he walks over, pulling me into a hug and lifting me off the ground.

“Thank you,” he says to me, his eyes a little less melancholy than before.

“For what?” I ask him, confused.

He pushes his hair out of his eyes as he contemplates, “For a lot of things, Brooke.”

“Okay...no problem, I guess?”

I look up, and Harper stands on the porch, looking over at us.

“Harper told me what happened at the party. Asher, did you do what she thinks you did?”

He nods, looking directly at me. Surprisingly, I’m not as bothered by him admitting what he did as I thought I would be.

“Then I guess I should thank you for saving my best friend. But you need to be honest with her or figure out a better lie than she was just high because it’s tearing her apart.”

He sighs, “I know.” He rubs his jaw as he ponders what I just said.

Jax pipes up. “What happened at the party?”

Asher shoots him a glance and sighs loudly, “Something we need to discuss, but not here and not near Harper. I don’t want to bring it up around her. She’s been through enough.”

He turns away from us and walks toward the house. I watch him stand in front of her awkwardly, and before I know it, he’s wrapping his arms around her. I know they will end up together one day. I just hope he can pack all this away beforehand because there’s no way he can be with Harper right now, doing what he’s doing and her not getting hurt.

My gaze moves slightly to the left after watching him solidly hold her longer than I thought he would, and I see Chase staring at me intensely. Those gorgeous eyes trying to see into my soul.

“It’s up to you, Brooke. But whenever you’re ready, he’s ready to talk,” Jax whispers to me.

I see Nate walk out and look between me and Chase. His eyes land on mine, and I see him smile, but this one is sad like he’s giving up. He walks back inside, and I follow him to talk to him. I need to do this before I hear Chase out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BROOKE

I follow Nate into his bedroom, closing the door behind me. My eyes lock with his, and before I know it, he's striding toward me. His hands cup my face as he presses my back to the door, kissing me desperately, deeply.

I can feel what this kiss is. It's his way of telling me not to decide now. Not to walk away from this. I can't bring myself to kiss him back how he wants me to, and his hands drop from my face. He pulls away from me, walking back a couple of steps.

"Don't do this, Brooke. Don't end this before it has a chance to start. Please."

His voice is pleading with me. I can see it on his face. I shake my head slowly.

"I'm so sorry, Nate. I just don't feel it. You asked me to take time, and I have. I tried, I'm sorry, but I don't."

He takes my hands in his, pulling them up between us.

"But you could, Brooke, you could love me, I know it. You just have to not give up on it yet. We were so close on that beach. You know it. Don't give up. Fight for me."

His eyes scan mine, searching for something to hold on to. I know what he's looking for. I also know it's not there.

"I can't give up on something that's not there, Nate. You're right. Over time, I probably could fall in love with you, but you don't deserve that. You deserve a girl that loves you like that now."

He drops my hands and turns away, walking over to the window and staring out onto the beach.

“But there’s something there with my brother, right?” he says bitterly.

I’m breaking his heart right now, and I hate it. I walk over to him slowly.

“This isn’t about Chase. It’s about us.”

“That’s not a no, Brooke. You love him, not me.”

I swallow hard, putting my hand on his arm, and he shrugs it off.

“I do love you, just not like that.”

His voice raises as he throws his arms up.

“God, I should have known. You’re just like every other girl, Brooke. Always wanting what’s bad for you! You’ll never learn. You’ll never see the right guy for you, even if he’s stood right in front of you because you’re too busy looking at the wrong guy. I thought you were different, but you’re not, are you?”

I take a step back, shocked at the change in him. His words cut me deep. I know he’s hurting, but I never expected him to attack me like this.

“I told you it’s not about him. This is about you and me, Nate. There’s no reason to be cruel.”

His eyes narrow at me as he takes another step toward me. He grabs my wrist, holding me there as he glares into my eyes.

“Cruel?” he shouts. “Cruel is kissing me, telling me you pick me when the whole time you’re in love with another guy, Brooke. Why even bother telling me you want to give us a chance if you had no intention of following it through?”

“You asked me to,” I say softly.

“Of course, you’re the good little girl, Brooke. Always doing what she’s told, right?” he scoffs. He lets go of my wrists, walking over to the window and turning his back on me.

I've never seen Nate like this.

I never wanted to hurt him the way I am now.

"I'm sorry," I say, watching him.

"Just go, Brooke. I can't be near you right now. My brother comes back, and you give up on us straight away. You're not the girl I thought you were, and it hurts too much to be around you!"

A tear falls down my cheek. "Nate, please," I whimper.

He turns and looks at me, walks over, and wipes the tear away. For a minute, we just gaze at each other. I can see the pain in his eyes, and I hate that I'm the cause of it. He lifts his hands up as if he's going to pull me into a hug, but he drops them, taking a step back.

"I'm sorry, Brooke, but I can't. I won't make you feel better because you feel guilty. Please leave." He turns his back on me, walking back to the window as if I'm not even in the room anymore.

"I knew it would hurt you, Nate, but I never thought you would be so dreadful to me. You say I'm not the girl you thought I was. Well, you're not the guy I thought you were either."

I back away to the door, finding the handle behind my back and twisting it. Stepping out and closing it behind me. I hear something smash as he curses, and it makes me jump. Loud music begins to blare from the room. I stand there looking at the door for what seems like forever before turning away and heading out to the porch.

I take a moment to breathe, looking at the ocean, wondering if we will ever get past this. I've never seen him so hurt, and I know he feels like I've betrayed him. Earlier, I decided I couldn't live without Chase in my life.

But can I live without Nate?

What if he ends this?

Never wanting to talk to me again?

I feel like I could die right now. I think a part of me did in that room the moment he told me to leave.

“Princess.”

A husky voice snaps me out of my mind, and I realize Chase has been sitting on the bench behind me. I wipe the tears from my face, not wanting him to have the satisfaction of seeing me like this. He will never see my tears again if I can help it.

“Please don’t, Chase. I don’t need you telling me how I’m nothing right now. I already know that.” I’m surprising myself with how much venom is in my voice.

“I wasn’t going to...are you okay?”

I turn around to face him. He looks earnest. I can see in his eyes that he regrets how he spoke to me, but I don’t care right now.

I just broke my best friend’s heart.

“Do you care?” I growl.

He gets off the bench, walks toward me, and cups my face, pulling it toward him, and my heart betrays me, skipping a beat. Damn traitor. I can’t think clearly when he touches me.

“Of course, I care about you, Princess. I’m sorry I ever told you differently.”

He looks deep into my eyes, and I don’t even know what’s real anymore. Those eyes pull me into his world and make me forget everything, but I can’t. I can’t forget how he treated me. I can’t forget my best friend, yet I need him right now. I need him to sit by my side as I think everything over. The way we used to on the docks.

“I want to get drunk. I mean, absolutely shit-faced, wrecked, don’t even remember my own name drunk. Can we just put all this shit between us away for one night and forget it, please? Come with me. Let’s just forget everything just for tonight. No bullshit. I don’t want to know how sorry you are. I don’t want to talk. I don’t want to know what’s going on

between you and her. I just need to get drunk and numb everything.”

“Me and her? We’re...” he stops after I throw him a glare. “Okay. But we really do need to talk, Brooke, at some point.”

I know he’s right, but I can’t face it now. I need the man who held me when I found out about my dad; I need the man who can just be there quietly to hold my hand.

“I know, but not now, please.”

He takes my hand in his and kisses it.

“Okay. No talking. Just lots of alcohol. Check.” He smirks, putting his arm around my shoulders as we walk down the deck. But what I don’t see at this moment is Nate looking out the window, thinking he just lost his girl to his brother.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CHASE

She looked beautiful sitting on that beach this evening. Her hair down loose over her shoulders. A sweet little summer dress. Her shoulders were bare. I wanted nothing more than to walk over to her, pull her into my arms, and apologize for everything over the last few days, never letting her go and beg her for her forgiveness.

I had been a dick; I knew it. I fucked up, and I lost everything I ever wanted that night. Now she's here with me in the booth of a bar. I watch her knocking back shot after shot, trying to erase the pain from the last few days. Asher told her everything, which means I can finally come clean to her, but she's told me she doesn't want that yet, and I'll respect her wishes.

She's a little buzzed and is slurring her words ever so slightly. Not quite to the point of being drunk, but not far off. She's leaning against the back of the booth, her knee resting on the seat as the other drops to the floor.

My beautiful princess is showing every inch of herself to me without knowing. Her dress is draped over her upper thighs. I try not to look down and keep my eyes up on hers, but fuck me, that's a struggle.

"So, want to tell me what was with the shouting upstairs yet?" She scrunches her nose up in that little cute way she does.

"Me and Nate are finished." She laughs a little. "I don't know if we ever started. Can we be finished if we didn't

start?" She shrugs, rambling a little, and I push the Coke to her that I ordered for her earlier, and she rolls her eyes, taking a sip.

"So, what happened?"

"I'm not in love with him. He wants me to be, but I'm not. I can't pretend there's something there when there isn't, no matter how much he wants me to. I love him, I do, but not like that."

I feel like a dick, but my heart soars at hearing that. I gently place my hand on her leg, squeezing her thigh.

"I love my brother, you know, Brooke, but you always have to do what's right for you. His heart is broken right now, but I'm sure he will be okay. He just needs some time."

"Yeah, but that's no reason to say what he said," she tells me.

My eyes narrow at that, wondering what he said to her. I'll be pissed if he's said something unkind to her. I scoff at myself for that. Considering what I did the other day, I have no right to think it, but I do.

"What did he say, Brooke?" She looks up at me and snorts as she takes another sip of her Coke.

"Nothing as bad as you. Don't worry. You still hold the title of being the biggest jackass in the Anderson family." She sighs when I look at her. Little brat is testing me now, even though I know I deserve it.

"He said that I'm just like every other girl. Always falling for the wrong guy when the right guy is in front of me."

"And the wrong guy is..." I ask. I'm hoping it's still me.

"It doesn't matter, does it? Not anymore," she says quietly. She avoids my eyes, playing with the straw in her drink, stabbing the ice cubes with it.

I grab her chin, pulling her face up to look at me. "Me?" I ask her bluntly. I need to hear it. "I'm that guy, right?"

She sighs a little dramatically, and it's cute.

“He thinks that the reason I won’t give him and me a chance is because of how I feel about you.” I watch her face flush a little, but her eyes are upon me this time. She’s not looking away, but directly into my eyes.

“And how does he think you feel about me, Brooke?”

She rolls her eyes at that one.

“Fine. We can put that one to the side for now. Let me try a different one. What does he think I feel for you?”

She pulls her face from my hand, physically distancing herself from me, and I know I’ve pushed a button.

“He doesn’t know what you said to me on the beach if that’s what you’re saying. But he kept bringing you up, so I’m assuming he thinks you like me. Like something could happen between us. You’ve made it perfectly clear what you think of me.”

I’m also a few drinks in at this point and feeling a buzz myself. The good kind, the one where I finally want to be honest with her. I look down at her. The worry makes her nose crinkle, her breathing a little irregular from the nerves of coming clean to me about why they argued. I reach down and touch her chin, tipping it slightly, making her look up at me.

“What if he’s right? What if I am crazy about you? What if I want you more than anything in this world?”

I gaze into her gorgeous pale green eyes for a few moments longer, feeling like I’m drowning in them. I’ve always been drowning in them since the day I met her. She just never knew. “Because that’s all true,” I whisper quietly, just loud enough for her to hear me.

I watch her lips softly part to say something, and I lean down, hesitating for a fraction of a second before claiming them with mine. There’s no hesitation in my kiss. I run my tongue along her lips before I feel hers parting more for me before I slip my tongue into her mouth, taking hers with mine. Pouring out every feeling I have for her. Showing her that everything I said before was a lie.

I hear her moan into the kiss, and my hand finds her waist, pulling her closer. Her delicate hand trails up to my chest and around my neck as my hand cups her face and weaves into her hair. God, her gorgeous silky hair, I've wanted in between my fingers like this for so long.

I finally pull away slowly as I see her swollen lips, her chest heaving as she gasps for breath, and I can't help but grin down at her. My beautiful princess is breathless for me.

"That was..." she trails off, and I pull her back into another kiss. The kiss is even more passionate this time, and I show her how much I need her. How she's always been my light in the dark. I slowly run my hand up her inner thigh, and she moans into the kiss.

God, how much I have missed that noise. I've craved it since the moment I elicited it from her lips the first night here. I want more. I need more, but it isn't appropriate for me to do this to her where we are.

Not yet.

I pull back. "Incredible," she says, finishing her last words, and I can't help but chuckle at her reaction.

"Better than I ever imagined it would be, Brooke." I watch her fingers trail over her lips as if she's imagining it still happening.

"You're beautiful, you know. I hated Nate saying that to you. It should have been me every single time."

Her nose crinkles again as she disappears into her head.

"But you said I was nothing to you. Just a little virgin," her voice catches, and I hate she remembers that night.

"I'll spend every day of my life making that up to you, Brooke, if you'll let me. I knew Nate liked you. I knew he was telling you this summer. He never told me, but it was obvious. And you know the stuff I do with Asher and Jax now." I run my hand through my hair, pushing it back as I sigh. "I didn't want to pull you into that, but the truth is, Brooke, the day I met you, you changed my life. You wormed yourself into my

heart with your giggle and pigtails, and I've been in love with you ever since.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

BROOKE

The first kiss takes me off guard, the second one even more so, and my head starts spinning as he comes clean to me. I don't know what to do, what to say. All I can focus on is him telling me he's in love with me. All the pain and hurt from the last few days start fading away. His fingers slowly stroke over my inner thigh, sending me into a tizzy.

"And Chloe?" It's the last thing I need him to clear up. "I saw her." He picks up my wrist that she hurt and kisses it softly, his lips making me shiver.

"I know. The guys told me and gave me an extremely hard time. Nothing I didn't deserve, mind you. The truth is, Brooke, that I hated myself for doing what I did to you that night. I did the one thing I have spent my life trying to protect you from, and I will never forgive myself for that. Never. I got drunk and then more so at the club. She came over. I didn't even know she was here in town, I swear."

He holds his hands up, making sure I know he's being honest with me. I nod briefly, and he sighs before continuing. "I danced with her. I can't blame the alcohol. I knew what I was doing. I was fucked up, and then watching Nate kiss you and your reaction to it...I lost myself. I was so angry at myself and heartbroken from watching you kiss him I took her home with me. I can't even explain it."

"You don't need to go any further. I can't hear it."

I feel physically sick right now. Sobering right up as I look down at my feet. He cups my face, making me look up at him.

“I didn’t sleep with her, Brooke. We were going to go back to the house, but I called it off, I knew it was a mistake and instead we went for a few more drinks at a different bar. I wanted to talk to her about the things you told me, but I was so lost seeing you with Nate, I drunk myself into a stupor. She called a taxi and we got back to the house, and I felt awful. I knew what a mistake it would be. I couldn’t do it, and I certainly couldn’t have you bumping into her. I told her I changed my mind in the taxi. Threw some extra money at the driver and told him to take her home, but she followed me into the house, into my room. She tried to kiss me, but I pushed her off and told her to leave. That it was a mistake and that I would ruin her if I ever saw her again. She walked out of my room pissed off, and I thought she left. It wasn’t until Jax and Asher told me the next day about what she said and did to you. Fuck Brooke, I’m so fucking sorry.”

He grabs my wrist, pulling me so close to him that I’m almost sitting on his lap.

I run my fingers through his hair; I need to feel him right now. To know this is real, these words are real, and I’m not in some hopeless dream.

“Just promise me no more games. I can’t take it anymore. My heart can’t take it anymore. I want this to work with us, and the only way that’s going to happen is if you’re honest with me, Chase. I’m not that little girl anymore, and you don’t need to protect me or make my decisions for me. I know what’s good for me.”

“Wait, does that mean you and Nate?”

I shake my head furiously as I feel my cheeks heat.

“No, I’m still...that.”

He chuckles at me, pulling me closer, running his fingers a little higher on my thigh, dancing under the hem of my dress. He whispers in my ear, his warm breath on my neck making me squirm.

“You have no idea how crazy that makes me, Brooke. To know I’m the first and only guy that’s going to feel you like

that.”

I feel his tongue run across the shell of my ear as his fingers trace up my inner thigh even higher as he grazes my underwear.

“Tell me it’s still only been my fingers here.”

A purr leaves my mouth that surprises me as I feel his fingers against my clit through the lace.

“Yes.”

I moan a little breathlessly. He growls low in my ear, and I can feel a little bubble of need escape me, soaking into the lace of my lingerie. Fuck, he’s going to touch me here, in front of everyone. I feel him move my underwear to the side, sliding his finger up my slit so slowly it’s torturous.

“Fuck, are you always this wet for me, Brookie?”

I nod slowly, biting my lower lip so I don’t say anything to ruin this moment like the last time. He senses that and starts trailing soft kisses down my neck, occasionally dragging his teeth over my skin.

“Beg me again, Princess. Beg me to slide my fingers into you right now. In front of all these people. Tell me how badly you want that,” he groans. Pulling my thigh over his so he can touch me more intimately with no one seeing.

“Please, Chase.”

I moan breathlessly, and another growl leaves his lips as I feel him slide one finger into me. Fuck, it feels incredible. No words could describe it. He pushes another one into me, and I feel so full already. A curse leaves my lips as he starts dragging them in and out of me, slowly curling them in a come here motion, making me want to scream in pleasure.

“Tell me what else you want from me, Princess. Beg me for it.” His husky voice is low, almost predatory.

“I want you to be my first.”

“Use your words, Princess, and finish that sentence. Your first what?”

My face flushes as he makes me say it, but then he puts pressure on my clit using his thumb to massage it, and god, I see stars.

“I want you to be the first guy inside of me,” I barely manage to whimper. “Oh god, Chase,” I moan.

Before I know what’s happening, he removes his fingers and slips them around my wrist, pulling me up and into the bathroom.

He locks the door before slamming me against it. Kissing me with such intensity, I can’t breathe. His hands hitch my dress up as he pushes his fingers back into me with such force that my eyes roll back in pleasure.

“I’m not going to fuck you, Brooke, not here. Your first time will not be in a bathroom, but I am going to make you come. Because I’m not having you moan my name again like that, and you not give me the satisfaction of watching you come undone.”

I moan again, louder, this time unable to control it. His hand moves to my throat, not squeezing but pinning me there.

“Open your eyes, Brooke. I want them on me.” He says softly but firmly before kissing my neck and collarbone as his fingers slide in and out of me. His thumb applies pressure to my clit in circles again, and I can barely keep my eyes open. My chest is heaving as he kisses down my body over my dress as he drops to his knees.

“Chase, what are you...”

“Shhh, baby girl. You trust me, right?” I nod at him slowly, and as he looks up at me cheekily, grinning, he slides my thong down my thighs. He makes me step out of them, and I watch him tuck them into his back pocket as he grins at me wickedly. Heat rises through my core as I watch him do that.

“Take off your dress, Brooke. I want you to watch me.”

I do as he says, my fingers trembling as I drop it to the floor beside me. He lifts my leg over his shoulder and kisses up my leg until he reaches my inner thigh. I feel a sharp pinch,

and I realize he bit me. A mix of pleasure and a little pain shoots through my body, causing me to grip his hair tightly.

Suddenly I feel his warm wet mouth on my pussy. It's the most incredible sensation I have ever experienced. His tongue eagerly laps my clit, sucking it into his mouth as his fingers return to my pussy. I hear him groan.

"Fuck Princess, you taste so fucking sweet." I tug on his hair slightly, and he growls louder than he's ever done before.

Suddenly, he lifts my other leg over his shoulder and raises me against the door. *Holy fuck*, I think as he stands up. I'm suddenly six feet off the ground with Chase devouring me like I'm his last meal. My body trembles as I feel his tongue run up and down my pussy, playing with my clit as he pushes a third finger into me. Making my head go dizzy as he stretches me out.

"Oh god Chase."

I scream out in ecstasy, rolling my hips against his tongue, and before I know it, an overwhelming sensation hits me. My eyes roll back, and I explode. My orgasm is so intense my vision darkens. I hear him groan my name as he laps up every bit of it. My body and mind enjoy the high as he keeps playing and tasting me until I feel him drop me to my feet. And I nearly fall, but he catches me. I've made myself come before, but not like that.

My legs tremble as I watch him wipe his mouth off with his arm, and holy shit if that isn't the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

"Good girl," he whispers in my ear.

Just feeling his hands on my waist as I try to regain control over my breathing. He pulls my dress from the floor and pulls it over my head.

"I'm keeping your thong, Brooke. You're not getting them back. But we are going to go back out there and have one more drink before I take you home. Okay?"

I nod, swallowing hard and looking at him before he grins.

“God, you look beautiful like this, Brooke. All flushed and out of breath.”

He kisses my forehead, stroking my hair back down into place before he places his forehead against mine and smirks.

“I can’t wait to see what you look like freshly fucked from taking my cock like a good girl.”

I love it when he speaks filthy to me like this. There’s something so raw about it. I lean into him slightly as he wraps his arm around my waist, walking me into the crowded bar. Luckily, there was no one outside the bathroom, I think, my face flushing. Unable to comprehend what had just happened. All I know for sure is that I am one hundred percent madly, truly, and completely in love with Chase, and he loves me back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CHASE

*W*e're back in the booth, and I can tell she's replaying what just happened. I can't help but grin, knowing I'm the first guy to taste her, the first to make her come, and soon I'll be the first and only guy to fuck her. There won't be anyone after me. I'm going to marry this girl like she told me all those years ago. I will take her on all those adventures she wants to go on, and we will do it together.

I sit with her in the booth, my arm wrapped around her, my fingers stroking her soft, silky skin. It's been a dream of mine to hold her like this for years.

This girl is my everything, and I know I need to prove it to her. I know I need to make up everything from the last week up to her. I'll spend my entire life doing it to her. She will always be my princess; from now on, I'll ensure she's treated like one.

She sips on her Coca-Cola, and I can't help but smile at the flush in her cheeks. The way she sits there a little awkwardly, knowing I still have her underwear in my pocket.

Fuck, she was breathtaking.

The noises she made, the way her body squirmed against me, the way her tight pussy welcomed my tongue. God, I want to do it again...and again and again until she begs me to stop, and only then I'll take her. Only then I'll give her what she needs and desires. It certainly won't be in the bathroom of a bar, though.

I want her first time to be perfect.

She deserves it.

“You okay, Brooke?”

She looks up at me and smiles. “I’m good...just a little overwhelmed, you know?”

I turn slightly to look at her. I take her face with my hand before running my fingers through her hair. “Talk to me,” I tell her. “I want to know everything that’s in your head right now.”

Her nose wrinkles as she tries to work out how to tell me. God, I want to kiss her right now. One taste of her, and I’m an addict. Years of keeping away from her has made me crazy, and I want everything now.

“It’s just this vacation so far has been a lot. Asher, Nate, you. I’m guessing I’m still trying to sort things through.”

I nod in understanding. “So, let’s focus on one thing at a time. But not here. I guess some things are better just said on our own and not where prying ears can overhear us.” I stand up, taking her hand in mine and pulling her up. “I could get us a hotel? Just us...away from everyone? We don’t have to do anything if you don’t want Brooke. But it would be nice for us to be alone for a while to talk.” Her lips part to say something, but instead, she nods and closes them.

We walk out of the bar hand in hand. God, I’ve wanted this for so long to just be us in the open and not worry. “So, I already have a hotel booked, but it wasn’t planned. I just wasn’t sure if you would want me in the beach house, so I booked one just in case.”

Her pretty little face looks up at me in shock. “No matter what has happened between us, Chase, I would never do that to you. You invited me and Nate and Harper, not the other way around.”

I spin her around, picking her up in my arms and kissing her deeply, unable to keep my hands off her. Her tongue dances with mine once again as I breathe in her scent. “You’re perfect, you know,” I whisper against her lips.

I drop her to her feet again but keep my arms around her waist, resting my hands just above her ass. Her face is flushed

once again, and I realize how much I like that color on her. It's going to be the death of me. She shrugs and grins back at me.

“About time you realized.”

I chuckle, kissing her softly on the lips. “Trust me, baby girl, I've always known that.” I let my hands dip to her perfect ass cheeks and give them a squeeze, grinning at her as she smiles back at me. There's heat in her eyes, desire filling them, and I know my eyes show the same.

“Now, Brooke, you said you wanted to talk,” I say, teasing her.

“Technically, you said that!” She grins cheekily at me, and my god, I want to fuck that sass out of her mouth. I give her another kiss, just a quick one, giving her ass a cheeky tap as she squeals into the kiss. Before groaning and taking her hand again. Giving it a small kiss. “You're going to be the death of me, Brooke,” I whisper to her. She smiles up innocently.

“Same goes for me, Chase.”

We continue walking into town before coming to the hotel I checked into. She gasps a little as we walk in, tugging on the hem of her dress. “Chase, I'm not exactly dressed for a place like this.” She's not used to places like this yet, but she will be soon. I chuckle a little, pulling her close to me to ease her. She doesn't realize how much money I have yet. The money from my trust alone, not even ten people could spend in a lifetime.

The hotel I checked into is a five-star hotel; it's normal for me. Unless I want to be a little low-key. I whisper to the girl at the desk, “Any chance tomorrow morning you can bring in some clothes options for my girlfriend. This is a little last minute for us.”

She nods, making a note on the computer. “Size six, I'm guessing, but I'll ask the stylist to bring in a couple of sizes and options for her in the morning.” I give her one of my award-winning smiles, thanking her before taking the hotel key and leading my girl to our room.

As soon as we step into the elevator, she looks up at me. “Chase, I don't want to talk. I want to make the most of this,

of us, before something else comes along that we have to deal with.” The door closes, and I walk toward her with my hands on her petite waist and push her against the wall as she squeals in surprise. I kiss down her neck softly, grazing my teeth along her soft flesh, lightly nipping at it.

Her hands grab the bar behind her as her neck tips to the side. I bite softly down for now, knowing soon I’ll bite harder, sucking on her sweet spot as she moans softly for me. I can’t help but growl at the little noises she makes for me. Knowing I’m going to be the only man that makes her moan ever again. I kiss back up her neck.

“And what exactly do you want from me, baby girl.” I trail my fingertips up under her dress, softly tracing her inner thigh, getting so close to where I tasted her sweetness earlier.

She gasps and whimpers a little. I press my hardness into her, making her gasp for me. “Use your words, Brookie... Tell me what you want.” I whisper into her ear as I begin to run my tongue along the soft shell before sucking intimately on her earlobe. I feel her body shudder under me.

“I want you to fuck me.”

I immediately pick her up, showing no restraint, slipping my hands under her firm ass and lifting her up against the wall. My kiss devours her sweet lips. So innocent and pure; she drives me crazy. She’s my own touch of heaven in a world full of darkness and sin.

My hand is in her hair as she wraps her toned thighs around me. She gasps as I press into her harder, and I bite on her lower lip, pulling it back with me before letting it go as it snaps back into place. I pull back from her, hungry and desperate to feel her.

I drop her to her feet just as the elevator doors open. An older couple gets in, and we both step back a bit from each other. My girl is flush and a mess already. I cheekily grin at her. The sexual tension between us grows as I pull her close to me. Tracing circles on her hip as she squirms.

Finally, we arrive on our floor, and I pull her out of the elevator with me and into our room. She steps in front of me, and I drop her hand as she walks around our hotel room. “It’s beautiful.” She whispers as she runs her hand over the fabric of the bed. She walks over to the window that overlooks the beach below us. My princess is not looking down but looking out at the night sky, making wishes on stars like she used to with me.

Every night, I would wish on a star with her, and every night, my wish was that one day I could call her mine. I pull out my phone, sending a message to Asher and Jax, telling them I won’t be home, and neither will Brooke. Jax immediately replies with a ton of emojis, making me shake my head, smiling as he insinuates what will ultimately happen.

I turn my phone off, place it on the side, and join her. I kiss her softly on the neck as I whisper, “What are you wishing for, beautiful?”

She tilts her head up to me. “I’m not wishing anymore. I’m thanking the stars for making my wish come true.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

BROOKE

“*I*’m not wishing anymore. I’m thanking the stars for making my wish come true.” I say to him, smiling. Every year, I wished for him to be mine. Every night for as long as I could remember.

He smiles at me as he slides a strap off my shoulder softly with his fingertips, pushing my hair to the other side. His warm, soft kisses glide gently down my neck and across my shoulder. It makes me shiver with excitement and satisfaction; his hands run down my arms, lightly taking my hands in his as he curls them around mine. A little soft sigh leaves my lips.

“Then thank them for me, Brooke, because I’ve wished for you a million times.” I feel his teeth sink softly into the flesh of my neck as he bites me. I gasp because it’s such an intimate gesture. His way of saying I’m his. Claiming me and making his mark on my skin.

He turns me in his arms and slides the other strap down, following the same route as he did before with his lips as my dress falls to the floor. His hands are on my bra straps as he gently pulls it off so I’m now naked in front of him. “Your so fucking perfect Brooke.” He whispers as his fingers run over the curve of my breast, cupping it as his thumb runs over my hardened nipple. Every touch sends heat to my core.

I look up at him, and his eyes are full of something I never thought I would see from him. Love mixed with desire and hunger. My hands reach for the hem of his shirt as I pull it over his head. My fingertips slowly graze over every defined

muscle and ab. Every muscle is sharp, like it was carved from something beautiful.

My fingers dance over his tattoo, and my eyes fill with unshed tears as I read the quote he had marked on his skin forever.

“When I’m lost in the stars, my goddess guides me home.”

“That story you told me on the docks that night...”

He takes his fingers, pushing my hair back as he gazes into my eyes with so much love it takes my breath away.

“Yes, Princess, the man lost in the stars is me, and you’re my goddess that guides me home.”

Everything makes sense now. This man who pushed me away was so lost for so long and watched me get closer to his brother every day. I’m the one that grounds him. I’m his light in the darkness, and I really don’t want to wait any longer.

My hands drop to his shorts as I slowly unbuckle them. My hands tremble as he kisses me once again. His shorts drop to the floor, and before I know it, I’m in his arms as he carries me to the bed. He lays me softly down on it before sliding on top of me, resting on his elbows.

“Brooke, if you want to stop at all at any point, just let me know, okay? I want this to be perfect for you.” He tucks my hair behind my ear as I nod at him, slowly smiling up as he smiles down at me. He kisses me again deeply and passionately. His hands entwine with mine as he places them above my head. I moan softly into his kiss, bucking my hips up toward him. “Keep them there,” he growls at me. His voice is low and husky and thrills me to the depths of my soul.

His lips trace down my neck as his hands caress my sides. Every single kiss and touch lighting a fire in my body I’ve never had before. His kisses move south before he takes my breast into his mouth as his hand kneads the other slowly. “Chase.” I sigh softly into the room as his tongue swirls around my nipple, catching it between his teeth as he playfully but gently bites it.

His lips move to the other one as his hand trails down my body, finding me wet again as he runs his fingers up my pussy and to my clit. Pinching it between his thumb and forefinger softly.

“Already so wet again for me,” he groans. My eyes are on him. I can’t pull them away as he looks up, sliding two fingers into my pussy again. “Your so fucking tight, Brookie. Can you feel how you suck my fingers in princess? How needy you are for me? Fuck!” He watches my face as he curls his fingers inside of me, and I feel my hips buck in pleasure as they slowly roll against his fingers. His filthy words turn me on even more, making my eyelashes flutter.

I watch him tug his boxers down as his rock-hard cock springs free. My eyes immediately go to it, and I can’t believe how big he is. I mean, at least I think he’s big. I’ve not exactly got anything to compare it to, but he looks big. I tense up slightly at the thought of how he’s going to fit inside of me.

“Relax, Princess, I can feel you tensing. I promise after a few seconds, it’s going to feel incredible.” I nod, relaxing under his words as he kisses me slowly and passionately.

I feel the head of his cock running up and down my slit, teasing me as he presses his head in. I gasp, but he continues to kiss me like he’s never done before. Distracting me as he thrusts into me in one go. I gasp again louder as a sharp pain takes hold of my body. I wince at how bad it hurts.

“It’s okay, baby, it will be gone soon. I promise.” He caresses my cheek softly as I look up at him. His beautiful eyes are on mine. “I’m going to move. Okay, baby? It might hurt for a bit, but then it will feel so good I swear.”

“Okay,” I whisper. My body trembles as I pull my hands down and run them along his shoulders and down his arms. He slowly starts moving in and out of me, and even though it fucking hurts at first, it’s soon replaced by a pleasure I never knew was possible. He catches my lips in a kiss as he runs his fingers along the hard peak of my nipple.

“God, you feel incredible, Brooke. You’re taking me so well, baby, so fucking well. I’m so proud of you.”

Soon, we both catch a rhythm as my hips match his thrusts. Our hands are constantly exploring each other's bodies. Kissing each other nonstop. Suddenly, I feel his hand grab my leg and raise it up over his shoulder.

Fuck he feels so deep inside of me I can barely breathe, but it's the most incredible feeling ever. His cock raw and deep inside, touching places in me I didn't think possible. Kissing again as he speeds up until I can't concentrate any longer. His thrusts are hard, deep, and purposeful. My hands fall to the sheets on either side of me as I grip them hard. His hand wanders to my clit as he plays with me.

My whole body is completely overwhelmed by the sensation. "That's it, baby. Let go for me." I do, and my orgasm hits so hard I see stars. My vision is blackening and hazy as it racks my body. I vaguely hear his name on my lips as I shatter underneath him. "Good girl Brooke, good fucking girl." He groans as he thrusts harder before I feel him release inside of me. A few more slow thrusts, and he collapses on top of me, kissing me. I feel his hands run through my hair as he still sits inside of me.

I manage to open my eyes as they regain focus. "I love you." He kisses my forehead. "You did so good. I'm so proud of you, Princess." I smile up at him, cum dopey and blissed out.

I feel him slip out of me, and yet I can still feel him inside. He rolls to the side of me, leaning on his elbow. His head in his hand. His other hand trails between my stomach and the space between my breasts. His soft touches are soothing. "You okay, beautiful?" I nod, unable to form words, and he chuckles, leaning in to kiss me.

"Are you sore?" he asks, and I know my face is flushing. "A little." I smile bashfully.

"You better get used to that feeling because I will never stop loving you like this. All pretty with a blush in your cheeks. Your hair a little tossed with my teeth marks adorning your skin." I look down and see a bite mark on my breast, and I have to say I love it. "Next time, I'm biting your ass!" He

grins cheekily at me, and I giggle in response to how ridiculous he is.

“Okay, beautiful, we need to get you into a bath. You bled a little, and that’s okay. I knew you would, but I wanna get you cleaned up. You also need to get in some hot water, or you’re going to be really sore tomorrow. Stay there. Don’t move, okay?” I nod at him, grinning like a dope as I try to get my breathing under control. He gets up, and fuck, he has the most perfect ass I’ve ever seen. He disappears into the bathroom, closing the door behind him as I hear the water running.

I sit up and walk over to the mirror. Wincing as I do, I suddenly realize exactly how sore I am. I stand there for a few seconds, looking at myself, deciding if I look any different.

Will anyone know I’m not a virgin anymore?

I look down to see a couple of bite marks, several on my neck, my thigh, my breast, and one on my hip. I trace my fingers over them softly. I see him in the mirror as he walks over to me and wraps his arms around my waist. “I thought I told you not to move.”

I laugh softly, placing my hands on his. “Why do you bite me? Is this...a normal thing?”

He chuckles at my naivety. “No baby, most couples don’t do this, and I’ve never done it to anyone else. I just feel a need to do this with you. Is that okay? I should have asked you first.”

“No, no, it’s fine. I love it. I’m just wondering what to say if anyone asks me?”

He chuckles, pulling me closer. “They’ll fade tomorrow. The only ones who know they were there will be us.” I pout a little at that thought and then realize it’s probably a good thing. I don’t want to have to explain them.

I wince a little as I move to face him, standing on my tiptoes and kissing him slowly. My hand drops down his body, wanting to feel him. He catches my hand, chuckling into our kiss. “God, you’re going to be insatiable, aren’t you?” I nod, biting my lower lip slightly, smirking as I already feel it. “Bath

now, beautiful. Trust me, you'll hate me tomorrow if I don't get you in there now."

He leads me to the bathroom, picking me up in silence as he drops me into the warm water carefully. He's lit candles and poured bath oil, and my heart melts at how considerate he is. I feel him washing me softly, intimately, as I relax into his touch. Just loving the feeling of him taking care of me.

I feel my eyes starting to close as I yawn. "Okay, baby, I got you," he says softly. He lifts me out, drying me off with a towel before carrying me back to bed. He pulls the covers over me and pulls my back close to his chest. He slips his knee between my thighs, and I can't help but cozy into him. Our naked bodies intertwined.

"I love you, Chase," I whisper into the night.

"I love you too, Brooke." I hear back as sleep takes me, and I drift into a peaceful slumber wrapped up in the arms of the man I love.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

CHASE

During the night, she turned in my arms, and I woke up gazing at her stunning beauty, hardly able to believe that this is happening. I watch her for a while, just softly breathing. My girl is finally by my side. I know there's still a lot to work out. Most of all, my brother. I know he's going to be too angry with me, and I can manage that, but what I don't think I can manage is if he is angry with Brooke. She doesn't deserve it, and truthfully, all I want for this girl is to be happy.

I worry about the pact I have with Asher and Jax. I know I need to be honest, and even though I know Asher came clean to her about what happened to his sister and what he did to Michael, I don't know if she's fully put the pieces together and realized my involvement in it.

Then let's throw in the fact I'm seven years older than her, and I know what people will say. I need to know if she's okay with this before we move any further.

I hear a soft knock on the door. I slip out of the bed, careful not to wake her as I pull out my arm from underneath her. I quickly pull my boxers on and open the door. The hotel's stylist is there with a range of clothes for both of us.

I smile at her, thanking her. "Just charge it all to the card on file." I notice her eyes roam over my body. Nothing new to me, but it bothers me now. This woman knows I have my girl with me, and I snap at her. "That will be all," I say assertively, pulling the rail in with me and closing the door behind me, rolling my eyes at the nerve of her.

As I roll it in, I can see my girl stirring in the bed. I walk over to her, taking a seat on the edge of the bed as I push her hair from her face. “Morning, baby.” I lean down, kissing her on the lips softly.

“Mmmm, I could get used to waking up to that,” she says lazily, stretching out on the bed. The cover falls, exposing her breasts to me, and I can’t help but let out a low growl at her figure. She laughs teasingly. “It’s nothing you didn’t see last night.” She pulls me close to her, kissing me again and pulling me on top of her as I chuckle against her lips before losing myself in the kiss. Her hands graze over my back softly as she melts into me, and I groan.

“Baby, as much as I want to stay in bed with you all day, we need to talk.” Her eyes go wide as she sits up quickly, pulling the covers up and covering herself.

“Oh...about last night? Was it...was I not good?” My heart aches as I realize what she’s thinking. I pull her back to me, kissing her soft lips as my hands wrap around the sides of her face.

“Last night was incredible, Brooke. You were incredible, and it was easily the best night of my life. It’s not about that. I promise. I want nothing more than to keep seeing that look on your face as you come undone, but we have other things to sort out first. But I promise you I have no regrets about last night. Do you?”

She shakes her head furiously in between my hands, and I let go. “Good. I got some clothes for you sent up, they’re all new. Just pick what you want, and then we can grab some breakfast. I want to talk to you about some things you should know about me, and then you can decide on the next steps between us, okay? I’ll go with what you want at your speed.” She nods, her little nose screwed up in the way I love.

“Stuff with Asher?” Maybe she has connected the dots after all, I think. I nod. “Okay.”

She slips out of the covers, leaning down and kissing me briefly before her naked form wanders over to browse the clothes.

I groan, restraining myself from grabbing her and pulling her back to bed as my eyes follow every single curve on her body, committing them to memory. I push myself off the bed, grabbing a pair of jeans from the rack and a T-shirt and also grabbing a toiletry pack before disappearing into the bathroom.

Brooke soon follows, and within a few minutes, we're both done and ready. She looks exquisite. She's chosen just a simple pair of jeans and a cropped hoodie, and I can barely breathe, just watching her move around the room as she pulls her hair up into a loose ponytail.

I walk up, wrapping my arms around her waist. My head dips into the crook of her neck as I just inhale her scent. Completely enthralled by her. She giggles softly. "Is this what it's going to be like now? You unable to keep your hands off me?" She turns in my arms, and I smile at her.

"You're getting cheeky, you know that?" She stands up on her tiptoes.

"Maybe, but you still love me..." She licks the end of my nose playfully and pushes me away, tugging on her sandals from yesterday. "Okay, c'mon, I'm starving."

"So am I, Brooke, but not for food." Her face turns that delightful shade of pink, and I laugh, taking her hand in mine as she stands. "Okay, let's get some food in you. I know how grumpy you get when you don't eat."

She shoves me, and I grab her by the arm, pulling her back to me. And as she slams into my chest, I capture her lips in an all-consuming kiss, guaranteed to leave her breathless. "You know, Brooke, if you don't learn to behave, I have no qualms about spanking you."

"Then spank me," she smirks. I quirk my eyebrow at her, groaning.

"Baby, the day I spank you is the day I'm going to fucking ruin you. Yesterday, I went slow for you, knowing it was your first time. But the way you're looking at me right now with

that bratty little smirk makes me want to fuck that sass out of your mouth.”

She looks shocked, but then she smiles. “Do. It.”

She undoes her jeans, pushing them to the floor and showing off the new lace thong she chose. She pulls her hoodie off, too, leaving her now half-naked. I grip her hair tightly, pulling it to the side as I sink my teeth into her pretty little flesh, and god, she moans so needily. Her hand is already on my jeans, unbuckling them. “Baby, have you ever...?” She shakes her head, “No, but I want to...”

God, this girl is perfect. My little princess begging me to let her suck my cock like the good girl I know she is. I nod because how the hell do I say no to that. “On your knees, baby,” I say sternly. She drops to her knees, and I can’t help but smile at how she obeys me so well.

“Pull my jeans down and take my cock out, baby girl.” She tugs on my jeans and pulls down my boxers. I step out of them, kicking them to the side before I caress her hair as she strokes my cock slowly.

Fuck, this girl.

I hiss as she tugs on my shaft, groaning as I start to pulse. I can’t decide if I want to make her swallow every drop or if I want to paint that innocent little face in my cum. I go to say something else, but then she tongues my entire length. My caress on her hair turns into me gripping it hard. Her eyes widen as she gasps, but she doesn’t tell me to stop. I smirk down at my princess, realizing she’s not as fragile and innocent as she seems as she runs that filthy little tongue over my head. “That’s it, baby, just like that,” I moan.

“Don’t go easy on me, Chase. Lose control if you want.” She says, smirking up at me with those big beautiful eyes before she slips my cock into her mouth and starts bobbing up and down on at least half my length, and I’m impressed. Most girls are gagging by now, pulling off me, but not my girl. You never would have thought she hadn’t sucked a dick before.

Her tongue runs over every ridge and vein I have before her fingers start dancing over my balls. “Good girl,” I growl out as my head tips back. I try to hold back; she’s already doing such a good job, and I don’t want to scare her off. I look down, and her pretty eyes are watering as she slips lower down my cock. I feel my head hit the back of her throat, and I thrust forward, smirking down at her as I hear that beautiful gagging sound.

God, I want to fuck that bratty little mouth of hers, but instead, I pull her off my cock by the hair, pulling her up to kiss her deeply as I slam her into the wall, losing control. I pick her tight little body up, and the way she wraps her thighs around me feels like heaven. But right now, I want to be sinful with my girl. I fight her with my tongue as she tries to gain control.

Silly girl, I think before dropping her to the floor and tapping her tummy. “You want me here, baby girl? Feel your man buried inside of you again?”

She bites her lower lip and nods at me. “Good girl,” I whisper. I lead her over to the bed. “Baby, last night I took it easy on you, but seeing you on your knees just now, I’m not going to be able to hold back. Tell me you understand.” She nods again.

“Brooke, what have I told you. Use your words.” I take my thumb and pull her lip out from between her teeth. I need to hear them; I need her permission, but most of all, I just love hearing her voice.

“I understand Chase. Now, will you please just touch me?” I chuckle, throwing her on the bed and making her bounce a few times as she giggles for me. Pulling herself up to the pillows. I join her, crawling over her body as I pull her into a deep and passionate kiss, biting her lip as I do, and she moans into my mouth. Her tight little body writhing underneath me.

I slip my hand down over the swell of her breast, pinching her nipple as she gasps for me, letting it trail down to check she’s ready for me. She’s as wet as she was last night, so I waste no time. I take her thighs, pull them over my shoulders

and line up my cock with her tight little pussy that's like a siren call to me. As I slip the tip in, I growl.

God, she's still so tight.

I take her hands in mine, pinning them to the bed as I capture her lips in a kiss, then I slam into her in one go. I feel her body tense in surprise before she relaxes for me. "Good girl, baby, good girl," I whisper against her lips. She doesn't cry out in pain this time, but I know this is still new for her. "If it hurts, you need to tell me," I say.

"Chase, just shut up and fuck me." Looks like my girl has a mouth on her now. "I trust you," she tells me with me buried inside of her. I slip my hand down, pressing on her lower stomach, and she cries out in pleasure, and I smirk at her in response. I pin both of her wrists above her head with one hand before kissing her again as I pull back nearly to the head of my cock before I slam in again hard.

I need my girl to remember what it's like to have me inside her. To feel me even when I'm not there. I repeat this action a couple more times, and damn, her pussy thanks me for it by gripping my cock and milking it. I thrust over and over again like a madman, watching my girl's eyes flutter in pleasure as her body squirms and shudders.

I bask in how she purrs for me, moaning my name and a string of explicit curse words. I know I'm hitting her deep. I was worried due to how small she is, she wouldn't be able to take me this way. Don't get me wrong, I don't have a massive dick. I'm just over seven inches, thankfully, because I never want to hurt my girl during sex, but still, she is tiny compared to me. I have to trust her to tell me if it hurts.

My princess is a cute little mess beneath me, and I push hard against her thighs, bending them toward her head as I use them for leverage. My fingers wander down to that pretty pink clit of hers and rub it, making her come for me as I watch her eyes roll back.

I bite down on her thigh hard, I want this one to mark this time only increasing her pleasure before I can't hold back my own orgasm, and I empty myself in my girl. Collapsing on top

of her before immediately rolling her on top of me, not wanting to crush her. Her breathing is so heavy as I wrap my arms around her. I caress her soft, silky hair between my fingertips. I whisper that I love her again, and her response is a little moan.

A smile dances over my lips as I hold my girl close to me, letting her catch her breath as I acknowledge how goddamn fucking lucky I am to have her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

BROOKE

Last night was...there are no words, and this morning, well, there's definitely no words for that. I can't believe it happened. As I look down at my half-eaten pancakes, I wonder if I'm dreaming. If so, I don't want to wake up.

Everything about me feels different. It's a strange feeling, but I know it's something that will never fade. I feel lighter, a little more grown-up. I can't explain it. I look over at Chase, and he's just staring at me.

"What?" I ask, and he chuckles in return. "You just look a little in awe." I kick him under the table.

"Stop! I can't help it." I laugh, and this moment feels so easy between us right now. I'm scared something will ruin it.

"Okay, baby girl..." He starts, and there it is. Something that will ruin this moment between us. "I need to come clean to you about a couple of things between me and the guys. I know Asher and Jax spoke to you, but I need you to know more about it. You know what Asher did and why, correct?"

I nod softly, putting my fork down.

"Do you know I help him?"

"Yes, you mentioned it before; of course, I didn't know exactly what that meant at the time. Were you there...when it happened...when he..." I ask with a pit in my stomach, unable to finish my sentence, not sure if I really want an answer to it.

He nods slowly, taking my hand in his. "Yes. Asher told me and Jax years ago what had happened to his sister. He told

me what he intended to do, and me and Jax made a pact to help him.”

I swallow hard. He’s so matter-of-fact about it. It scares me. “A pact to help him commit murder,” I state.

“It’s not murder, Brooke. It’s justice for Ellie. These guys will never go to jail. They will never have to pay for what they did to her. How many other girls did they do that to? How many other girls are living in silence or worse? Ended up exactly where Ellie is. Six feet under the ground.”

“How do you know you even have the right person?” I ask. “Anyone will confess under those circumstances.” He laughs, and again, it frightens me slightly that he can laugh about this.

“We know we have the right guys, Brooke. Jax found him, and he’s currently confirming the rest of them now. There’s a lot you don’t know, and I’m not going to tell you. I’ll tell you what you need to know. Other than that, you’re staying out of it.”

“What if they find out what you’re doing, Chase? Or the police?”

He squeezes my hand from across the table. “Princess, we know what we’re doing. There is no evidence, nothing left behind, no witnesses, and no bodies.”

“Bodies?” I ask, fear creeping in and settling into my veins, making me icy cold.

“What?”

“You said bodies. Not body. Bodies as in plural. But when Asher told me, he only said about one.” He sinks back into his chair and looks out the window, avoiding my gaze. “Oh. When you guys disappeared. You...but Jax said...”

“Yes. We didn’t leave for that reason, but Jax got a hit when we were away.” I feel sick, as if these pancakes will come up at any second.

Jax lied so easily to me, and Chase came back as if nothing had happened. I study his face carefully, and there’s not one hint of remorse, not one hint of anything happening. He killed

someone in the last couple of days, and he came back as if he had just gone on a retreat.

“How many are left?” I ask him.

“There were seven in total. We have taken out two.”

I laugh a little hysterically. “Taken out? What, like, you’re a hitman or something. Do you hear yourself right now, Chase? You don’t even sound bothered by it!”

I can’t even look at him. Honestly, the whole thing has my stomach in knots. I understand it, I hate that I do, but I get it. Why Asher wants to do this, but none of them seem even just a little bothered by any of it. It’s like they can switch their emotions off at any point, and that terrifies me.

I think back to the rest of the vacation here and the way Chase acted with me.

Like I was nothing, just a nuisance.

If he can so easily turn off his emotions, then how can any of this between us be real?

The man I love murders people and can lie so easily.

Can I ever trust him?

“Brooke, Look at me, please.” I can’t at all. My mind is racing at the sheer enormousness of it all.

I feel him slide into the booth next to me as his hand caresses my face and turns me to him. “Baby, I’m still me. I’m still the boy you met all those years ago. I’m still the guy that looks at the stars with you. None of that has changed. You keep me grounded. You always have. You chase that darkness away and keep me surrounded by light.”

He kisses my lips gently, and even though I respond, it doesn’t chase the feeling out of my stomach. It doesn’t clear my mind. If anything, it makes the butterflies worse because he doesn’t even realize just how much that darkness has crept into him already. He pulls back from me, his fingers stroking through my hair softly.

“I’m scared, Chase. What if something happens to you guys? What if something happens to you?” He runs his thumb across my lips slowly before he tips my head up to him.

“Nothing will happen to Asher, nothing will happen to Jax, and baby, nothing will happen to me. I promise. We’re careful. Okay?” I nod as he pulls me close and under his arm. We sit in silence for a few minutes. I try to slow my breathing, but the truth is dread is creeping in on me, and I don’t know what to do about it.

I finally break the silence. “If I asked you to stop, to not do it, would you?” I feel his body tense.

“You wouldn’t ask me to do that, Brooke. You know what these guys are to me. You know how important this is to Asher. You wouldn’t ask me to break my word.”

I don’t answer because the truth is I would. Right now, I could, but the only thing that stops me is that at this moment, I think he would choose his friends over me, and I don’t know if my heart can handle it.

“You know Asher killed someone without you, right?” He pulls me off him suddenly, shaking me a little.

“What? What are you talking about, Brooke? How do you know that? Who?”

I pull my arm out of his grasp and stare directly at him. “There was a guy at your party over spring break. He drugged Harper and tried to...” The words don’t come out.

The thought of that happening to her.

I don’t know what I would do.

I don’t know if Harper could handle it.

What girl could?

“Asher found him and killed him in front of her before she passed out. She remembers. She knows her drink was spiked but he’s trying to convince her she was hallucinating, but she knows the guy is missing.”

“Fuck Brooke, I didn’t...I didn’t know. Fuck. Harper, is she...? I mean, how is she?” I smile a little inside. Maybe he’s not as far gone as I think if his first thought is about her.

“She’s dealing, I think. You know her. I think what’s messing her up more is Asher lying to her. She doesn’t know what to believe. Asher is trying to figure out what to do, I think.”

He nods as he talks, “Okay, okay. I’ll talk to him. Take care of it. I’ll figure it out, I promise.”

“You do that a lot, make promises.” He looks down at me with such intensity. “I do, and I plan to keep every single one. I promise.” We both look at each other before bursting into laughter.

“Okay, yep, I see what you mean! At least I’m consistent?” I shake my head at him. The tension between us is gone, and I know the conversation won’t return to what’s been said.

“Brooke, I have to ask you one more thing. I’m twenty-six, twenty-seven in a couple of weeks; you’re nineteen and not long turned. We’re both from a small town, and that will make people talk. I need to know you’re going to be ready for it.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, because you’re such an old man!” I giggle. “Damn, I’m dating an old guy. You’re kind of a perv, you know that!” He dips his head into the crook of my neck, nibbling on it with his teeth slightly.

“Only with you, baby girl,” his voice drops low and husky again, and I can feel my breathing falter. He looks up and chuckles at me, so easily amused by my reaction to him. “I will never tire of that. Feeling your heart race, your skin warm, and your breath catching.”

“Urgh, shut up! I can’t help that you’re hot as sin.”

“There’s a lot of sinful things I can do to you, Princess. Just say the word. Every single one of them will end with you screaming my name.” I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks, but my god, I want that.

The waitress appears above us. “You two are so adorable together. Reminds me of me and my husband when we were

younger.” She pours out another cup of coffee for us. “How long have you been together?”

Chase answers before me. “It’s recent, but I’ve known I’ve loved her since I met her, and she told me she was going to marry me one day.”

“I was five.” I laugh.

“Mmm yep, but you know I’m going to keep you to that Princess.” The waitress laughs, placing the bill down in front of us before walking away.

“You really want that? I mean, we just...” He breaks me off with a kiss so intense and loving, showing me exactly how he feels.

“I’m certain one day, Brooke, you’re going to be my wife. I’ve known it since the day we met and you told me. I’m not saying now, I’m not saying tomorrow, but one day, you are going to walk down that aisle looking as incredibly beautiful as you look every single day and marry me.”

I don’t respond.

I can’t.

I think if I do, I’m going to cry.

I can’t believe he even remembers that being said, let alone believe it all these years later. I nod slightly, and he smiles. He moves his hand around the back of my neck, pulling me close to him, and lightly lays a kiss on my forehead. “How about we get out of here, Brooke? I should speak to the boys, and Harper is probably wondering where you are.”

And just like that, dread seeps back in.

“Do we have to? I kinda like our own little bubble.”

He chuckles, standing up, throwing a hundred on the table, and holding his hand out to me.

“We have our whole life, baby girl, to live in our bubble.”

I take his hand and smile, but it doesn’t quite reach my eyes, and I hope he doesn’t notice.

We walk through town and along the beach toward the beach house. I left without anything last night, so I have a feeling Harper is going to be pissed with me after blowing up my phone. Chase's hand stays in mine the whole walk down, and I cling to it. His thumb strokes back and forth gently the entire time as if he's trying to soothe me.

I know he can sense there's something wrong, but the truth is I couldn't tell him even if I wanted to because I can't explain the uneasiness settling into my veins. I should be happy right now, and I am, but there's something in the back of my mind that's chilling me to the bone.

As we get to the house, I spot a shirtless Asher and Jax jogging down the beach. I can see girls' heads turning to watch them as their sweat clings to their abs.

They are hot.

I can't deny it.

The three of them together are like a dream come true, but as I look at them, all I can see is my family. My brothers. The ones that look after my man when he needs them and the ones that have spent years looking after me despite everything they have going on.

Nate has always been a little jealous of the bond the three of them have, but now I understand why they are so close. Asher's trauma brought them together, but their bond has kept them close and will continue to do so for life.

They stop jogging as they spot us. Jax digs his arm into Asher's ribs and points over to us as they start laughing and smiling. I squeeze Chase's hand a little tighter, and he looks down at me. "It's okay, baby. I think it's pretty obvious what happened between us after disappearing all night together." He chuckles, letting go of my hand and pulling me close, kissing my temple as his hand falls over my shoulder.

Jax pulls me away, hugging me and picking me up, twirling me around as a little growl escapes Chase's lips. "Girl, it's about goddamn time. I'm glad you two finally got together." He drops me to my feet and punches Chase on the

shoulder. "I'm happy for you, man!" Chase immediately pulls me back into his arms, and I roll my eyes laughing. Jax puts his hands up.

"Okay, okay, I won't touch her, man!" Asher starts chuckling. "Now you know what we put up with when we hugged you."

I look up at Chase. "Baby, I'm going to keep hugging other guys; you need to get over that! I'm yours, and that's not going to change." I stand on my tiptoes, bringing my lips to his as his hand slips around my waist, kissing me passionately, possessively in front of the guys. My hands run down his arms, and I get lost in the kiss as he leaves me breathless. I could get used to these kisses, I swear.

"You can hug these two but no other guys, Brooke. I can't promise I won't kill anyone that touches you now you're mine." I roll my eyes, knowing he's teasing, or maybe I'm hoping he's teasing.

The boys start laughing. "He's not actually going to kill them, Brooke. Though they might find their legs broken." They laugh hysterically, and Chase just glares at them as a thought slips into my mind about an old ex of mine, but just as I go to ask, I look up and see Nate on the porch looking at us. My gaze meets his, and I step forward, ready to talk to him, but instead, he turns away down the stairs and climbs into his truck, driving away without a second glance.

"He just needs time, baby girl. We can talk to him together when he gets back if you want?" Chase whispers, pulling me back into his arms. I nod as the guys start chatting away, my eyes following his truck disappearing in the distance, wondering if I have broken things forever between us.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

BROOKE

Harper comes storming out of the house and toward me with a searing, angry look on her. I watch her marching down the beach as she shouts.

“Brooke fucking Gray, are you kidding me? First, you disappear all night fucking long, then you don’t answer your fucking phone, and then...” She stops, looking between me and Chase at how his arms are around me. Her eyes flick between the two of us. “Wait, are you...did you...I mean, are you finally a couple?”

I laugh, nodding as Chase kisses the top of my head, chuckling at her. She screams, “Well, about fucking time!”

Jax laughs heartily, “That’s what I said. It’s been a long time coming.”

Chase rolls his eyes above me. “I’m sorry I didn’t bring her back last night; we just wanted some time alone together.”

Jax jumps on Chase, “Yeah, I bet you did.” He says, scruffing his hair up. I laugh, pulling myself from Chase’s arms. Watching the boys all play fight like kids as Harper links her arm through mine.

“Boys will be boys,” she says, laughing, “How about we leave them to it and catch up?”

I nod as Chase stands up, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward him so I slam into his chest. “You forgot something gorgeous.”

I look up at him as he pushes the hair off my face and kisses me slowly, sensually, and passionately. Everything else fades away until it is just us at this moment as he picks me up from the ground, my legs kicking out behind me. “There, now you can go!” I blush heavily as the boys and Harper all stand there silent and slightly gobsmacked at the sudden PDA.

“Damn Chase. Got any hot friends that will kiss me like that?” Harper grins.

Jax steps forward, grabbing her in his arms. “I volunteer beautiful, one hundred fucking percent.” She laughs, pushing him off her as I notice Asher tense, clenching his fists as Jax grins, wiggling his eyebrows at him. I swear that one day Jax is going to get his ass kicked.

“Have fun, guys.” I laugh, pulling Harper along and walking away from them just as I hear Asher. “What the actual fuck, Jax?”

“What, man, you aren’t willing to do anything about her, I sure as hell will. She’s stunning!” I watch Chase step in between them before looking back to a smiling Harper shaking her head.

We walk a little further down the beach before taking a seat on the warm sand. “So...tell me everything, girl!” I fill her in on the conversation Nate and I had to the incredible night I just had with Chase. I left out the conversation this morning, knowing it’s not my place to say anything, even though I hate lying to her.

“Okay, firstly, was it good? I mean your first time. Wow, and with Chase Anderson. God, I bet he’s big. He totally has that big dick energy.”

I blush, laughing at her. “I’m not talking to you about his dick.”

“Oh, Brooke, you just told me everything I need to know. He’s huge, right?” She wiggles her eyebrows, smirking at me, and I laugh.

“I mean, I don’t have anything to compare, but yes, he is.” I laugh, putting my head in my hands before looking back at

her. “Harper, it was perfect, everything about it was perfect, he is perfect.”

She smiles genuinely at me. “I’m really happy for you, Brooke. I think this has been destined for so long now it’s about time it happened for you both. Are you happy?” I nod, unable to stop smiling, butterflies fluttering in my stomach.

“I really am.”

“And Nate? Have you told him yet? I mean, Brooke, this is going to destroy him.” The smile drops from my face immediately as my heart begins to ache.

“He saw me and Chase kissing. I tried to...but he got in his truck and drove off.”

She pulls me in, hugging me. “He just needs time, but you did the right thing. You could never be his. Nate is an amazing guy, and one day, he’s going to find the perfect girl for him, but you are not it. You and Chase are written in the stars, babe. Don’t let anything bring you down from that happy bubble, okay?”

I smile, but yet again, it doesn’t reach my eyes. “What if he never speaks to me again? Or Chase? I don’t want to come between them.”

She sighs. “Brooke, I think you have no control over that. Let’s be honest, Chase and Nate have never really been close. I think the only reason they even speak at all is because of you. You’re the link between them. Chase, Jax, and Asher have this weird brotherly thing going on between them, and Nate’s never been able to accept that, you know.”

I nod, knowing exactly what she’s on about. I wish I could fix it. It’s not fair on Nate, to be honest, but I really don’t know if there’s anything that can be done to fix that.

We spend the next hour or two on the beach chatting. Talking about Chase and last night.

“He said that? That one day he was going to marry you?” I nod. “Wow, Brooke, that’s kinda huge and so freaking romantic.”

“I know. It’s one of the first things I said to him.” I fill her in on the story of how we first met.

“Wow, I can’t believe he even remembers that. He’s a keeper, you know. Even if he can be a dick sometimes”.

Suddenly, Asher jogs out to us. “Girls, we cooked dinner; it’s about ready if you want to come in.” He holds his hand out to me, pulling me up, then he hugs me and whispers, “I’m really glad you guys found your way to each other, you know. Gives me hope.”

I nod, smiling, “It will happen, Asher. You just need to be honest with her.” He pulls back, nodding before offering his hand out to Harper. She doesn’t take it, instead she glares at him, jumps up and turns to me, ignoring him.

“I’ll see you inside, Brooke.”

We watch her walk into the house, and Asher sighs. “What happened between you both? She told me you had an argument but hasn’t given me details. But then she hugged you yesterday? I thought things would be okay.”

“I fucked up Brooke. It’s what I always do, I fuck up, and I fail the people I love.” He tucks his hands into his pockets and walks into the house.

I wish I could wave a magic wand to get rid of the guilt he feels for his sister. I think that’s why he goes after these guys. It’s not for justice. It’s to help ease his guilt, but what he doesn’t realize is that it won’t help, that won’t make the feeling go away, and truthfully, I don’t know what will.



The house smells incredible as I watch my man in the kitchen. Jax hands me a glass of wine, and I sit on the counter with Harper as we both admire the view in front of us. I watch her eyes keep slipping back to Asher before she frowns and looks away. I wish I could play matchmaker with them, but I think if

things ever happen between them, it will happen naturally, and I can't get involved in it.

Chase turns around to me, "How do you look so beautiful just sitting there so effortlessly?" I wrap my arms around his neck as he slips in between my legs, and I kiss him. I would die a happy girl if all I ever did was kiss this man. He leaves me breathless once again, his hands on my thighs as he whispers in my ear.

"I hope you know you're in my bed tonight, Brookie, and tomorrow, don't make plans because we're going to be there all day." He bites my earlobe, and I can't help but moan softly in response. Blushing as I realize we're still in public.

He chuckles, cupping my face, "I will never tire of that sound, baby girl." Kissing my lips just once softly before wrapping his hands around my ass and pulling me off the counter, placing me on the floor. He kisses the tip of my nose, hands me my wine, and tells me to go sit down, slapping my ass as he does.

Harper sits down next to me and sighs. "Would you hate me if I said I was totally jealous right now?"

Suddenly, Jax is behind us, placing our dinner in front of us. "I told you, girl, just say the word." He says, winking at her. We both laugh as he takes a seat next to us.

"Wow, you boys did good!" I look down at the steak and fries on my plate, smelling the homemade garlic butter sauce melting into the meat.

"It was Asher, really. He's a great chef," Chase says. Harper and I both look at Asher, a little shocked. Unable to see him as the cooking type. He shrugs subtly, looking down at his plate. I cut open my steak, and it looks perfect. Just how I love it.

"How did you know I have my steak like this?"

Chase grins. "C'mon, Brooke, I know everything about you!" I flash him a smile.

"I guessed Harper's," Asher says.

She takes a bite and smirks at him. “A little overcooked for me.”

“It’s medium rare,” he replies, straight-faced and not happy.

She narrows her eyes at him. “What can I say? I like things that are a little bloody!”

Jax chokes and spits wine out in front of him, laughing along with Chase.

“What?” she says. I shake my head, unable to contain my laughter, too.

If only she knew.

Dinner is incredible, and Asher surprises us yet again when he pulls out chocolate brownies with ice cream for dessert.

“I couldn’t sleep last night. I cook to help distract me.” He tells me as he brings me mine.

“Mmm, this is incredible.” I close my eyes, pulling the chocolate off the spoon, and as I open them, I find Chase’s eyes on me. His eyes have darkened, and he smirks at me devilishly.

“Keep doing that, baby girl, and you won’t have time to finish that plate.” Everyone else laughs, and I just sit there, blushing, suddenly being very careful as I eat.

Suddenly, I hear a vehicle pull up, and we all go quiet. Chase gets up, but I grab his wrist and shake my head.

“I think it’s best if I go on my own. Let me just talk to him, please.”

He sighs, exhaling loudly and looking at me. “Ten minutes, then I’m coming out, We need to do this together.” I nod, grabbing my hoodie from earlier and pulling it on before opening the door and closing it behind me.

I walk outside into the dark, closing the door behind me, and feel someone grab my wrist. I turn around, and it’s a guy I don’t recognize. He smirks at me, and it fills me with dread.

“Hello, Brooke.” There’s something cold about this guy. His eyes, his smile—there’s nothing behind them. I try to step back, but he has my wrist too tightly.

“Do I know you?” He tips his head to the side.

“I’m someone your boyfriend and his buddies pissed off.” I go to scream, but he wraps his hand around my mouth. I look up and see Nate’s truck pulling in. I try to fight this guy off, but he’s too strong, and he pulls me into the darkness as I watch Nate walk right past me. Taking a deep breath before walking into the house.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

CHASE

The door opens, and I look up, thinking, “*That was quick,*” but I only see Nate.

“Where’s Brooke?” I ask. Nate scoffs at me.

“Well, if anyone knows that, it would be you, wouldn’t it brother?”

I stand up, pushing my chair back and striding over to him. “What the fuck did you say to her? Where is she?”

Nate gets into my face. “I didn’t fucking say a thing to her. I don’t know where she fucking is! You’re the one that spent the fucking night with her.”

I laugh, and it sounds a little manic. “Oh, come on, little brother, don’t be jealous. She chose me, not you. It’s pathetic now; stop playing games.”

I grab his shirt, and he goes to hit me, but I duck at the last second. Asher jumps up, jumping between us.

“Whoa, boys, stop. She came out to talk to you about five minutes ago when your truck pulled up.” He says to Nate as I step back, pushing my hand through my hair and trying to calm down.

“I just this second pulled up, and I didn’t see her. She wasn’t there.” I look at Asher, and he looks back at me, both of us on edge.

“What do you mean? Your truck parked a while ago.”

“I swear I just pulled up. There is another car out there. I just figured someone else was here.”

“Stay here,” Asher shouts at Harper.

“What, what’s going on?” she says, panicking and standing up.

“I said stay fucking here, Harper. I’m not fucking kidding,” he shouts before his voice goes quiet. “Please sweetheart, just stay here.”

Both Asher and I run to the door, Jax and Nate right behind us. I look around and see a guy smiling at us, but that’s not what catches my attention. It’s Brooke being held against him, her eyes full of fear as this guy has his arm wrapped around her neck with a gun pointing at her temple.

“Well, hello, boys. It’s about time you came out and joined us. I was just having a little chat with this beautiful girl right here.” He leans in, using the gun to pull her hair from her face, and I can hear her choke out a sob.

“Baby, it’s okay. Just stay calm.”

He tuts at me, “Now, now, Chase, didn’t she tell you earlier to stop making promises.” He grins at me, and I realize he’s been watching us, but for how long, I don’t know.

“Let go of her!” I growl out.

“How about no?” He laughs hysterically, and all I want to do is go over there and rip him limb from limb, but I know one wrong move, and my girl could get hurt or worse. I’ve never felt fear before, but at this moment, right here, I am drowning in it.

“Who the fuck are you?” Asher shouts out, taking a step in front of me. The guy pushes the gun back into her face, and I watch as tears run down her face. I grab his arm, pulling him back.

“Smart,” he says to me smirking. God, I want to knock that smirk off his face. Jax speaks up next.

“He’s one of them.” He grins. “David, right? I recognize your picture. You’re one of the guys that raped Ellie.”

David breathes in, closing his eyes. “Oh, she was such a pretty little toy to play with, but I didn’t rape her, pretty boy. She was begging for us to play with her. Putting on the little innocent act, but she wanted it, and she fucking loved every second of it.”

Asher starts walking toward him, but Nate gets in front of him, pushing him back.

“Asher, stop. Brooke...” he trails off, looking back at my girl.

“I’m going to fucking kill you. Nice and fucking slow,” Asher spits out. David laughs hysterically again, and I realize there is nothing in this guy, no sanity. We won’t be able to reason with him. He came here to make us pay and won’t stop until he does.

“What do you want?” I ask him, trying to sound calm.

He toys with that for a second before he slides his arm down from Brooke’s neck to her waist.

“Hmmm, well, you took two of my boys from me. So now I think it’s only fair I take two people from you. Why don’t you give me this little plaything here and the other girl inside. I think we could have lots of fun together. I’ll have fun ruining this one.” He licks Brooke’s neck, and something in me snaps. I watch her cry as she tries to get away, but this guy is strong. I can see his muscled arms, and I know she doesn’t have a chance.

“Your fucking kidding me. We’re not giving you the girls. You’re a fucking psycho to even think we would do that,” Asher screams.

He smiles at me. “Oh, she’s that much fun, is she?” His eyes light up, and I realize Asher and I made a mistake getting defensive. All it’s done is egg this guy on. He runs the gun down her neck and breasts, grabbing her neck again, and I can see her choking as he applies pressure.

“Is she a screamer? I like them when they scream. Just makes me fuck them harder before I hand them over. Course,

they're always a little damaged after, but my boys like them broken. Me? I like a little fight."

"Actually, you got it wrong. She just kinda lays there. She's a little too pure, if you catch my drift. I took her virginity last night, but that was the worst mistake I made. Needless to say, I won't be taking another hit at that." I try to keep my mask in place, looking bored by the whole thing. I hear Nate in the background shouting as Jax tries to calm him down.

"You son of a bitch."

I shrug, "To be honest, just take her. Saves me the drama of having to break it off with her. She was getting a little needy today." I watch him ease off the pressure around her neck, and I try not to look at Brooke.

"Chase?" she cries out at me. I look at her with disinterest.

"Sorry, Princess," I say, pretending to mock her, hoping she sees through it. "It's true, the worst fuck I ever had. But the boys made a bet with me that I couldn't take your virginity before the summer finished. Me and Chloe were laughing about it in bed the other night." I watch her body sag, and the light goes out of her eyes.

Please, baby, see through it. See me, know I wouldn't do this to you. Please.

"Yeah, I like my girls to scratch me, you know, dig their nails in, give a little kick out as I fuck them. I mean, this girl didn't even touch my cock. Nope, she was just lying there like a dead fish. Not doing anything to help at all. I like them to have a little fire to them; you know, give my cock a little attention." I look at Brooke for just a second before flicking my eyes back to him. "Listen, David. The truth is you and your boys, as you call them, deserve to die. You see, I may use women, but I don't rape them. So, here's the deal..."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

BROOKE

I feel numb, coldness seeping into my blood as Chase tells everyone about how awful I was last night.

And when he tells me I was just a bet, I can't help but give up. There's nothing left in me. I'm not surprised. I knew they could lie so easily, but this... I can feel the cold metal of the gun through my hoodie, and right now, I just want it to be over.

Suddenly, I hear Chase start talking again, and my heart shatters. He looks at me again before talking back to David again.

Wait.

I gave his cock fucking attention... Why is he lying... Wait, he said something about scratching and kicking out. To help and fight.

Is he?

Does that mean he wants me to fight back?

Is he telling me how?

Holy fuck.

He's talking about Harrison.

A guy was harassing me at school, and Chase found me upset sitting at the docks. He asked me what had happened, and I told him how this guy kept grabbing at me. Kept teasing me about being a virgin. I remember he was so angry, jumping up and asking me for this guy's name. I never told him.

“Brooke, give me this fucking guy’s name. I swear to god, he will never touch you again.”

“You’re not always there, Chase; you can’t always come swooping in to save me. Sometimes, there are times where I’m helpless, and you can’t help me.” He goes quiet before pulling me up.

“Okay Princess. Show me how he grabs you.” I look at him, confused. I have no idea what the hell he is talking about, but I show him. This guy always grabs me from behind. Always holds me by my neck, running his other over my body.

I can feel him tense up behind me. He is so angry. But then he takes a deep breath. He tells me if it happens again, I should go for his cock. Give it a hard squeeze, dig my nails in, and then he should let go.

“Trust me, Brooke. No guy will be able to keep his hands on you if you do that, and when he falls over, you kick as hard as you can, so he falls to the floor, and then you run to safety, and then you find me, Brooke. I mean it. Okay?”

The next time Harrison grabbed me, I did as I was told. I squeezed so fucking hard and kicked him over, left him on the floor in the fetal position, and told Chase I did it.

I was so proud of myself. I wasn’t the princess that day. I didn’t need a knight in shining armor to save me.

Of course, I didn’t find out until years later that I slipped up and told Chase his name when I was excitedly telling him how I defended myself. Harrison left school that year. I never saw him or his family in town again, and I knew that was because of Chase.

My eyes flick back to Chase, and I nod just ever so slightly as he starts talking again. I reach behind me quickly, grabbing David’s dick as hard as I can and squeezing it, digging my nails in as hard as I can. He lets go immediately, and I turn, kicking him as hard as I can before I go to run, but it doesn’t go to plan. He grabs my ankle as he falls down. I kick out again. “You fucking bitch!” he shouts at me angrily.

Suddenly, I feel someone grabbing me out of this guy's grasp, and he pulls me behind him. It's Nate. He looks at me, his eyes wide as he pushes me back, and that's when I hear it.

A loud noise.

A bang.

It comes quick and fast, and I find myself ducking, but nothing happens.

I don't feel anything. It missed me.

I exhale slowly, shaking. Suddenly, Jax and Asher are on David, and I hear another shot ring out. I see the gun in Asher's hand and David suddenly on the floor.

Chase runs over to me and pulls me into his arms. "Baby, are you okay? I didn't mean it, any of it, I promise."

I nod, crying. "I know, I remembered. You were talking about Harrison." He nods, hugging me tightly, and I look over to Nate to thank him. Without thinking, he pulled me away and saved me. I pull out of Chase's arms and scream. Nate's shirt is blood red, and I know at that moment where that bullet went.

All of a sudden, Nate drops to the floor, and I run over to him, dropping to my knees and pulling him in my arms.

"No, No, Nate, please." He looks up at me, his eyes wide like he doesn't know what's happening. Then I see it. The recognition on his face that he was shot.

"Please don't leave me," I plead, sobbing as his blood soaks my shirt like spilled juice. It's hot and surprisingly sticky. It's a funny thought to have as he lays dying in my arms, what his blood feels like. My tears fall on his face as I hold him in my arms, rocking him to me. The pit in my stomach grows every moment as I look at him.

This is all my fault. I should have taken the chance I had while I still could have.

"I can't do this without you," I choke out.

He raises his hand and caresses my cheek. His touch is cold against my warm skin in the hot night air, and that's not how it should be. His touch is usually hot, caring, and sweet, but this is wrong. So, fucking wrong. His touch usually makes me feel safe and loved, but now it does nothing to chase my cares or fears away.

"Please, why won't anyone help?" I scream at those around me. "Call fucking 911."

This has to be a dream; I need to wake up.

Why won't I wake up?

They all stand there watching. They're not doing anything. I can hear Harper scream, and I watch her fall to her knees. I'll never forget that scream. That will haunt me until the day I die. It's harrowing, the one you hear and know there's no point in trying. You can feel the pain, the loss, and I know no one will help because there's nothing we can do.

This is it. I look over at my friend on her knees; she knows the same as me. I look at her—broken, crying as her dark angel holds her. This isn't real. She's not like this. She's always so strong, the one that faces the world and screams at it, but now she's just as damaged as me.

"Baby," I look down at his face, that gorgeous face that always makes me feel safe and loved. "Please don't go, don't do this, you're going to be okay, just hold on, please," I plead with him as if begging will do anything against this heartless act.

He smiles softly, "I'm sorry for what I said, Brooke. I love you."

My tear lands on his cheek. "I love you too," I whisper, "so you have to stay with me, okay?"

Chase falls to his feet beside me, "Nate, I'm so sorry, I'm so fucking sorry."

Nate smiles up as Chase grabs his brother's hand. "It's okay. She's okay. Look after her, you do that, and it's okay."

Chase nods. “Of course, but you can look after her too; you just need to hold on. The ambulance is coming, brother. You have to fucking fight this. You’re going to be fine. I’m going to celebrate with you when you get drafted, and I’m going to be in the stands when you play your first game. I’m sorry. I promise I’ll be a better brother. You...you...you need to just hold on, okay? Hold on baby brother please.”

Nate chuckles, his breathing ragged. “You know that’s not going to happen. I’m dying; I can feel it. Just love her, that’s all I want.”

His eyes turn back to me. “Baby, all I ever wanted was you, but I know now it wasn’t...wasn’t...”

He spits blood out of his mouth, and it runs down his chin. I try to desperately wipe it away. I can hear him gagging on it as it fills his lungs. His hand drops from my face with a sudden thud to the ground, so deafening I will never forget it.

That will be the last sound I ever hear from him. Not his laugh, not my name on his lips, not him poking fun at me or trying to make me feel better. Just a loud, dull thud of his hand as it lands in the sand around us.

I can hear the sirens in the background. Help is coming, but it’s too late. You’re meant to hear those and feel hope, but my hope just died along with the only one who loved me so purely and without fault.

I’m done being the innocent princess. I’m done being that naïve little girl. I can feel the cold seep in, take root deep inside of me, making me its new home. Like the blood seeping into my jeans, this cold seeps into my soul, my very being, every little crack. I softly slip my hands from around him, leaving him on the ground.

I don’t get up. I don’t think my feet would hold me if I tried. Instead, I embrace the cold and darkness and pray it makes me numb for what I need to do. I feel arms pull me up off the ground, locking me in their embrace as they pull me to their chest to look away. Chase expects me to break down, to sob, but the tears stop coming. There’s nothing left inside of

me. I just look at Nate on the ground. He's gone. That's just a shell lying there.

EPILOGUE

BROOKE

*S*pace in the hospital for hours until I finally give up and take a seat. The last few hours are a complete blur. Nate's been in surgery for what seems like forever, and no one will tell me anything. Jax sits by me, handing me a coffee. I take it, but I just sit with it. My eyes stay on the floor. "Brooke. I think you need to get checked out."

"I'm fine," I say monotonously. I can't offer anything more.

"Brooke, you're not fine. You had a gun held to your head, and you are covered in your best friend's blood."

"I'm fine, Jax. I'm not moving until I know he's okay."

He sighs, "Let me see if I can find out anything again." He gets up, and I feel his hand on my shoulder, briefly trying to reassure me. It doesn't feel real. None of this does. A few hours ago, I was laughing with my friends, kissing my boyfriend, and now...

"Baby, he's right...I think you're in shock." Chase whispers, his hand on my arm squeezing, but I shrug him off, not wanting to feel him touch me.

I see the doctor from earlier, and he walks over to us. I stand up shakily, looking at him, bracing myself. "Which one of you is family?"

Harper talks for us, "We all are." She takes my hand and gives it a squeeze, and I offer her a weak smile because it's all I can manage. "Is he..."

The doctor holds his hand up to stop her. “He’s out of surgery, but he has a long road to go. The bullet punctured his lung and it caused a lot of internal damage. We removed the bullet and did what we could, but it’s up to him now. There’s nothing more we can do for him. If he wants to wake up, he will, and if not...” He stops, trailing off like he doesn’t want to finish the end of that sentence.

“Thank you, Doctor,” I hear Chase say. It’s like everyone is speaking through a bubble right now. Everything is muted, and I can’t feel anything but the cold.

“You can go and see him if you want, but not all of you at once.”

Chase takes my hand, threading his long fingers through mine. “Do you want to go first with me?” I nod slowly, I’m on autopilot, but I pull my fingers from his. He gives me a curious look but doesn’t push.

We walk up the corridor to intensive care, where his room is, pausing to stand outside for a minute. Chase pulls me into his arms, “Brooke, you can’t blame yourself for this. He wasn’t shot because of you. It’s not your fault.” I look up at him, taking a step back.

“I don’t. It’s your fault. You and Asher and Jax. You’re all to blame. You did this to him. You told me it was going to be okay, Chase. You told me you were careful. That there was no evidence you did anything. No witnesses, nothing. But that man knew. He must have found something that led him to us. You did this.” A burning fire fills my veins, and I stare at him dead on, pulling my arms out of his grasp as he reaches for me again.

“Brooke, I...”

I cut him off, “No, Chase, I don’t want to hear anything else. We were a mistake. It never should have happened, and if Nate dies”—I barely manage to choke that word out—“I will never forgive you.”

I’m interrupted by a loud, rapid beeping, and a group of doctors and nurses run past us and into his room. We know

what that means. His body is failing, and we're going to lose him.

I step back out of their way, hitting the cold wall behind me as they run into Nate's room, and a sinking feeling takes hold of me as I slide to the floor. Darkness is infecting every inch of me.

I watch Chase run into the room, pushing past a doctor, and I hear him scream Nate's name before an agonizing howl. I've never heard him make a sound like that before. "No, Nate, please, baby brother, please no."

I sit there for a few seconds, listening to Chase beg for Nate to respond as I hear them say they should call it, time of death 4:47 a.m.. I get up off the floor. He's gone, I know it. That long, shrilling sound shows there's no heartbeat. The cold sinks into every part of my body and mind, and I know it's here to stay.

I walk back toward the waiting room slowly, like I'm in a dream-like state. They all stand up, looking at me, concerned. Asher speaks first, "Brooke...I thought you and Chase were..." I interrupt him.

"He's gone." Asher goes to grab me, but I push him away. I hear Harper gasp as she slowly sinks into the chair.

"Don't fucking touch me, Asher." The venom in my voice doesn't even register before Jax walks toward me.

"Brooke, don't." I glare at him with a look I didn't think I was capable of.

"Don't what Jax? Come on, you're the smart one, right? The one who's always got something genius to say?" He looks hurt, but I don't care. My best friend is dead, and I'm done with all of them. "So, say something smart, I fucking dare you."

He doesn't because what can he say. I don't acknowledge any of them after that; instead, I walk out, none of them following me. They know better. I get into a taxi parked outside, telling them to take me to the beach house. The drive seems to take forever, yet no time at all.

They did this, all of them. They lied to me, they went after someone else, and now Nate is dead. I was naïve to think any of us could be happy. He promised me they never left anything behind and they wouldn't get caught. Rage is filling my veins, anger directed at the man who let his brother die.

I walk up the path to the beach house as the sun is coming up, yet it gives me no warmth as I stare at Nate's blood staining the sand. I look at it for ages, wondering if it will disappear over time before walking straight into the house. I head to my room, packing my suitcase as my thoughts start forming, and I come out of this haze. I throw everything I find in it before heading downstairs.

As I swipe Nate's keys, I see Jax's phone and grab it off the table without thinking before looking at the chaos we left behind us.

This house was cursed for us.

This summer was cursed.

Nate told me this summer was going to change things for us.

Well, he was right, but none of us could have predicted the hell this summer brought us.

I walk back out and into the sun, taking a deep breath and making the decision I need to make before getting into Nate's truck. I see his hoodie on the dash, his football helmet on the passenger seat beside me. A sob catches in my throat as I pull his hoodie into my lap.

He's really gone.

Nate isn't coming back. And our last conversation was me telling him I didn't want him.

How can I fix that?

I open Jax's phone, knowing his code, and go into his notes. I find a list of names and addresses.

I knew it.

I turn the ignition, and the truck growls to life before entering the first address into the navigation system. The roar of the engine sparks something in me. I didn't think I was capable of this type of vengeance.

I'm done being a princess.

I'm done being helpless.

It's time for me to be a fucking queen, and I swear I'm going to make everyone pay with their blood.

For me and for Nate.

SNEAK PEEK

**A Touch of Sin – Coming early 2024 – This is a first draft
and may be subject to change upon publishing**

I walk into the dimly lit bar, smoke wavering in the air, looking for the guy I'm meant to meet. He's sitting at the bar, a glass of whiskey in hand, his phone in the other. A smirk dancing over his lips as he taps away on his phone. To look at him, he looks harmless enough. In actual fact, he's a pretty good looking guy. Dark eyes, dark hair that sits messily on top of his head. Well dressed in jeans, a polo shirt, and a blazer. He looks up and spots me, smiling waving me over. I smile back flirtily before walking over to him, making sure I sway my hips in a sexual way.

I went full out tonight. Dressed in black leather pants and a dark top that ties around my back. Showing off my figure and wearing a pair of heels that give me an additional four inches. I reach up around his tall frame, giving him a hug.

“Wow Jessie, you look...there are no words.”

I giggle softly, giving him a kiss on the cheek, his stubble grazing my lips as I do.

“You look pretty good yourself James.” I run my hands down his muscled arms. “So, you going to stand there looking at me all night or are you gonna buy me a drink?”

He chuckles, it sounds light, fun, you could almost believe that he's real.

He calls the bartender over with a wave ordering another whiskey for himself and a wine for me. *Eye roll*. He didn't

even ask me what I wanted. Instead shooting me a smile and telling me that classy girls like me must drink this. I give him a smile in response but it's killing me to hold it.

“You know Jessie...who would have thought when you bumped into me in that coffee shop last week, you were meeting your future.”

God, I think I just puked in my mouth a little. So cheesy. I giggle for him again nudging him in the arm.

“Oh, is that right babe? Skipping a few steps ahead aren't you.”

He smirks at me pulling me close to him as his hand plants firmly on my ass. “You know it sexy. Play your cards right tonight maybe we will take the first step into our future...after all this is our first official date.” His hand squeezes my ass and it takes everything in me not to slap him right now but instead I lean forward, my hand around the back of his neck as I pull his head down to me and whisper in his ear.

“You have no idea what's going to happen tonight baby. I swear you're going to die.”

He laughs as he pulls back when the bartender places our drinks on the bar. He gets his card out of his wallet making sure he flashes all those notes sitting in it as he pays. His hand moves to my lower back leading me away from the bar and into a private booth. He lets me slide in first.

“What a gentleman.”

He slides in after me placing his hand on my inner thigh. For a second I freeze hearing that voice in my head. “Do you want me to slide my fingers higher Brookie...”

I push it out, leaning into the guy in front of me instead. My hand on his chest as I curl my fingers against him.

“So, tell me, James...what do you do?”

He knocks back his whiskey, giving me a smile that shows me all his pearly white teeth.

“Well, baby, you could say I'm in acquisitions. My clients have very specific tastes for exquisite things, and I help

acquire those things for them.”

“That sounds exciting and hard work.” I retort, trying to keep my voice a little even with stars in my eyes.

“Hmmm, surprisingly it’s pretty simple. Exquisite things seem to fall in my lap just like you Jessie.”

Oh god, he really is full of it.

“How about you? What does a beautiful creature like you do?” he asks, stroking those fingers along my thigh.

“Me? I’m still a student but taking a gap year to travel. I made the decision a little in the moment and ended up here.”

“Guess I’m a lucky guy then.”

I nod. “Or maybe I’m the lucky one?” I move in closer placing my thigh over his leg. “How about we get out of here baby?” I nip his ear with my teeth, and he verbally groans.

“You haven’t touched your drink yet?” he nods towards the wine on the table.

And I’m not going to, I think. “I had a few before I left... nerves.” I shrug smiling coyly at him.

He pauses for a second looking at me as if he’s analyzing if he should make a move since I didn’t touch the drug swirling in my drink that the bartender left in it. He looks all of a few seconds at me, assessing how small I am and coming to the conclusion I couldn’t possibly fight him. “Let’s do it.”

He slides out of the booth so gracefully holding his hand out to me. I take it as he slips his arm around me leading me out of the bar.

I see him lock eyes with the bartender briefly. A smile exchanged between them. Don’t worry, you’re next, I think.

We walk out into the cool air, and I take a deep breath.

“Back to mine sexy?” he asks me, and I nod. “My car’s just at the end of the street.”

Oh, I know I think. I already broke into his car and removed the taser slipped into his door pocket. I also removed

the gun hiding in the glove compartment.

I nod biting my lip at him. “Sounds like a plan.”

We walk quietly to the end of the street. His phone buzzing as he hides it from me quickly tapping out a text giving me an effortless smile as he looks back at me.

“You’re really special Jessie.”

“How many times have you used that line?”

He snickers, “Caught me, a few...did it work on you?”

“I’ll let you know babe.”

He opens the car door for me like a gentleman before he walks over to his side, opening the door and sitting down. He pulls me in to kiss him, I open my eyes as our lips meet watching his hand moving behind him. He pulls back his eyes wide as his fingers grasp air and he feels something press into his side.

“Looking for this James?”

I press the taser into him and press it on as he shrieks in pain, but I don’t let go instead pressing it harder as his body shakes and his eyes close. He actually looks sweet as he lays there unconscious. I reach over pulling his phone out of his jacket pocket.

“Happy hunting,” his last text said and I glance at the name of the sender. Sam...the bartender. I send a reply out to him.

“Want to have some fun before?”

“OMW” comes back the reply.

God, he can’t even be bothered to type properly. I jump out of the car taking the gun and taser with me waiting for him as I sit on the bonnet of the car. Very quickly he comes round the corner and I lean back on my hands. “Hey cutie.” I smirk playfully at him as he approaches.

“Where’s James?” he asks nervously.

“Gone to get a bottle or two. I mentioned how I like to be railed by two guys at once and how hot you were, and he told me you were friends and might want to join us tonight?”

His face eases as he grins at me. he leans his hands on the car bonnet.

“Mmmm is that right? I didn’t peg you for that kind of girl.”

I reply with a smirk of my own. “What kind of girl is that?”

“One that’s trouble...”

I laugh because he has no idea. I remove the gun from behind me shooting it quickly downwards and it hits his knee cap. Thank god this gun had a silencer on it. He crumples to the floor quickly and in agony I slide off the bonnet walking over to him.

“You...you shot me... You fucking bitch, you shot me” He cradles his knee to his chest as he looks up at me. His expression a mix of anger and shock.

“How many girls did you drug for him?”

His eyes widen as he realizes I know.

“What? No... I”

I shoot again, this time in his thigh, this time he screams out.

“You’re crazy.”

I laugh a little manically. “Maybe, now how about we try this again. How many girls have you drugged for him?”

He swallows hard as his eyes widen in fear.

“That many?” I slip off the bonnet before walking over to him slowly. He tries to back away crawling on the floor but it’s hard to do when your kneecap is in pieces and you’re bleeding out from your leg.

“Please, they made me. I didn’t know.”

I raise the gun to his head. “Everyone has a choice, you did, you made the wrong one.” I let off the final shot into his forehead and his whole body slumps.

I stand for a few seconds watching the blood soak the dark concrete floor around him before turning back to the car. I open the boot grabbing a can I stored there earlier before I throw the front door open wide, buckling James’s seatbelt around him before pouring gasoline over the unconscious body in the driver’s seat.

He starts coughing as I rain it over his face. He splutters as he tries to jump out of the car but the seatbelt pulls him back. I shoot him in the gut as he howls in pain, cradling his wound with his hand, like that’s going to do anything.

“You fucking bitch,” he screams as I stand there with a zippo lighter aflame.

“Your friend just said that. You guys aren’t very original in your insults, are you?”

“I’m going to kill you, you fucking whore.”

I smile at him. “Not much better but ok...and remember I told you earlier. Tonight, you’re the one that’s going to die.”

I throw the zippo lighter on his crotch. watching the flames erupt over his body as he screams in what I can only describe as unimaginable pain. His screams stop quickly as I burn him alive in his car.

I calmly walk over to the idiot on the floor pouring the remaining gasoline over his body before setting it alight with another lighter I have stored in my bag. The smell is unbearable if I’m honest. I have to force myself to not wretch. I coolly walk back onto the main street, the gun and taser tucked in my bag and the gasoline can in hand and away from the chaos and burning flesh behind me.

I slip into Nate’s truck, pulling his hoodie over me and I breathe it in. It’s starting to lose his scent and that breaks me. For the first time in four weeks, I cry.

That’s four off the list. The other two I couldn’t find. I’m sorry Nate, I’ll keep trying I promise. I’ll make sure every one

of these fuckers pay and then when I'm done, I'll make your brother pay too.

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