



**Beauty**  
and  
*Cards*

**Lyla Raine**

# Beauty and Kaos

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The Daughters of Kaos

Book 1

Lyla Raine

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*To those who believed in me. The ones who are here, and the ones who are not.*

*To my friends and family, whose unwavering support watered this seed until it grew. I love you all...*

*...but for the love of God, please stop reading now. Thanksgiving is already awkward enough.*

*And to the readers willing to take a chance on a new author, you are magic. Truly. Buckle up, and enjoy the ride. ;)*

Content Warning:

I say fuck (a lot).

Breath play.

Open-door spice.

Drug use.

Themes of suicide.

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# Chapter 1

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## *Skye*

**R**aised voices echo down the hall, escaping from the cracked hotel room door where sheer white drapes billow out as if in surrender. I stall at the threshold, steeling myself. I've been doing this job long enough to know what to expect, but it doesn't ever get any easier. I knock once. Twice. Announce my intent. But there is no acknowledgment.

I look over my shoulder at Heather for reassurance, the weathered lines of her face twisted in fear and disgust, and receive none. She's barely holding it together. I swallow hard and push the door open.

Garbage and liquor bottles litter the floor like New Year's confetti. Pictures hang askew on the walls, splattered with a dark substance that has likely dried to stain. Watching my feet as I move, I carefully skirt a spilled pile of Raman beside an overturned side table.

"Do you smell that?" Heather asks, glancing around hesitantly, her nose wrinkling in offense.

I nod. "I should have called out today." I retrieve a pair of latex gloves from my back pocket and slide them on. Whatever happened in here, I definitely don't want to touch it. I knock on the bedroom door, but again, no answer.

Heather makes a startled sound, and I turn around to see her at the entrance to the bathroom. "I found where the smell is coming from." Her hand flies to cover her mouth in horror.

I keep moving, around the sofa and across the room to the TV. At top volume, political commentators shout passionately at one another about opposing legislation.

I scan the destruction, look for the remote, and reluctantly pick through a

damp pile of clothing before spotting it beneath a stack of take-out cartons. I grab it and flip the TV off, grimacing as the remote sticks to my gloved hand when I place it on the table.

“Mr. Benson?” I call out, walking toward the double glass doors that open onto the balcony. I can see the ocean beyond the glass, the waves curling as they roll into shore. “Mr...” I pause, taking a breath to steady myself, and question again. “Mr. Benson?”

Flat on his back, a naked man lies still on the cool concrete of the balcony, partially saturated with the spilled contents of a whiskey bottle still clutched in his hand. His blonde hair is matted to his head with a reddish substance, which I might find concerning if I hadn’t already noticed the strawberry jam mural on the kitchen cabinets. I repeat his name again, and call over Heather.

“Is he okay?” She asks, nudging him with her shoe. He rambles off a mouthful of slurred nonsense about the liberal media and rolls over.

“He’s alive,” I grumble, leaning down to him. “Hey! What’s his first name?”

“Leonard.”

“Leonard Benson? Jesus. His parents really had high expectations for his future.” I shake him. “Leonard. Man, you’ve got to get up.”

He groans, lifting the hand with the whiskey bottle to shield his eyes from the sun, and dumping the remaining liquid into his face.

“Are you the police? What day is it?” He coughs, startled.

“Today is Thursday. And no, we’re not the police. We’re the hotel maid service. You need to come with us.”

“What? Why? I paid for this room.”

I nod. “Yes, you did. But you see, you’re on the second floor of a sixteen-story hotel that’s shaped like a C. That means that there’s basically an amphitheater of hotel guests who can see your naked ass lying down here. And they may be able to forgive your appearance, but not the fact that you’ve been blaring Frank Colson’s talk show at top volume for the last hour. We can only take so much.”

Leonard curses and rolls into a sitting position. I hand him a washcloth and turn around for privacy. He looks at it.

“Really?” He asks in annoyance.

“You know I’ve seen you naked, right?”

Leonard curses again, covers his crotch, and staggers inside. Cheers erupt



from various hotel balconies, and I glance up at our audience.

“Sorry,” I shout back with a shrug.

“Oh, Summer break. I’m glad it’s a break for someone,” Heather says, watching Leonard amble into the bedroom with a hand braced against the wall for support.

“It’s going to be Summer broke for this guy when he gets the hotel bill,” I laugh.

“Hello,” a cheerful voice calls from the hallway. “Skye?”

“In here, Paige,” I answer, carefully picking my steps back through the living room.

“Angie said you were...” Her words trail off as she glances around the room. “Fuck, what happened here?”

“Leonard Benson’s vacation seems to be of the Fear and Loathing in Gray’s Cove variety.” I pull off my gloves and toss them into a random pile of garbage in the corner. “I’m so not cleaning this room tomorrow. We need to draw straws with Sierra and Ramona or something.”

“Agreed,” Heather answers, hopscotching her way back into the hall. I tuck the sheer curtains back into the room and shut the door. Out of sight, out of mind. For now, at least.

“Okay, what’s up?” I ask, dumping a generous puddle of hand sanitizer into my palm and directing my attention to my younger sister. “Are you done with rehearsal already?”

“Yeah, it was quick. How to walk, where to walk, where to sit. We didn’t practice the speeches or anything.” Paige shoves at her long, blonde hair as the sea breeze whips through the hotel halls.

“Are you ready for yours?”

She rolls her eyes. “I’ve had this valedictorian speech written since Freshman year.”

I laugh. “Of course you have.”

“But right now, I need a break. I don’t want to think about graduation for at least an hour or two.” Paige jabs her thumb in the direction of the parking lot. “I have the boards in the truck. Can you take off yet? We can hit a few waves before I prepare for the ceremony.”

I glance over at Heather, eyebrow raised in question.

“As long as 437 doesn’t look like that,” Heather nods toward Leonard’s room. “You’re good to go. I’ve got this.”

I smile. “Call me if you need me.” Then I turn and follow Paige down the

hall to the stairwell, my pace building into a sprint. We jog out to the light blue '82 Bronco and slide into the worn leather seats.

Paige throws a bag at me, and I pull out a sage green bikini. I dip down beneath the height of the windows and wiggle out of my clothes. Once my suit is on, I pull down the visor mirror and run my fingers through my long, purple hair. We step out together and grab our boards from the back.

"I heard the TDC is going to build a catwalk down to the beach sometime this summer," Paige says, beginning her descent down the sandy switchbacks of the cliffside trail disappearing behind the hotel.

"Fuck, I hope not," I reply, half-sliding down the steeper steps. "It's just enough hassle to keep most of the tourists in the parking lot."

My gaze gravitates to the waves curling through the cove, with smooth swells peaking consistently around six or seven feet. A dozen surfers sit bobbing just beyond the breakers, waiting for the perfect wave.

"You ready for this?" I ask, jogging down the last of the incline to the beach.

"Always," Paige tosses back with a grin.

We hit the water together, paddling hard, coasting over several swells before ducking beneath a wall of whitewater. Unfazed, we continue steadily until we're out among the group of other surfers. I ensure we're evenly spaced, then pull the board beneath me to sit.

"Hey, you made it," a male voice shouts from down the line. I shield my eyes from the sun and smile.

"Gavin. I thought you were working today?"

He laughs, shaking his head. "I'm sick."

"You look awful," I reply sarcastically, my gaze lingering on his tanned biceps as he strokes the water beside the board to maintain his position in the current. He's gorgeous, and he knows it. I may be guilty of occasionally falling into bed with him, but he's more like a hobby. Like a boat I purchased once for \$400 because it was in good shape, but had no motor or trailer. Just a beautiful, stagnant thing that I could lose myself in for a few hours, but I don't have the capacity to truly fix or understand.

"You should call me later," he continues.

I laugh. "I have a lot of things to do later."

I can feel the power in the waves rolling beneath the board, and I watch for the set to rise against the horizon. Spotting the wave I want, moving through the cove like a sea monster, I turn my board around. I offer Gavin a

smile as I slide past him.

“But you’re not one of them.”

Laughter rises from the peanut gallery as the other surfers within earshot chime in, fading as I paddle into the roar of the wave.

In one deft motion, I pull myself onto my feet and lean into the curl, sliding down the face. I carve down and back up again, letting the wave guide me. I glide my fingers through the wall of water, watching the tunnel forming at my keel. I evade, catching speed, then tuck my body closer to the board as the water curls overhead in a deep blue arch.

For a moment, I let it envelop me, heart pounding, holding me on the precipice. That’s when it’s the best. When one wrong move could fuck it all up, stealing my breath away as I tumble beneath the force of the wash. But I don’t. I hold it, and I know I’ve got this.

Coasting out of the tunnel, I carve away from the curl and cut a few impressive maneuvers to keep the peanut gallery talking, then sail over the back of the wave. The board falls away as I hang suspended in the space between swells, free falling, before splashing back into the sea.

The next wave approaches quickly as I slide the board back beneath me, paddling hard before it can curl. I glance back for Paige. She’s several waves back, carving along the crest, her blonde hair fanning out around her as she turns. I want to take all the credit for Paige’s brilliance in the water, but I can’t, even though I taught her. Paige is her own special brand of awesome.

We meet back up beyond the breakers, side by side, watching as the sun slides further down the sky.

“I got accepted to the Caldwell School of Art and Design.”

I look over at Paige in question. “What?”

Paige meets my gaze. “It’s a full-ride scholarship. Hundred percent. Caldwell is one of the top ten design schools in the country.”

“Holy shit,” I reply, glancing back out to sea. “That’s amazing. Congratulations. Truly. You worked really hard for that, and you deserve it. It’s about an hour’s commute, are you staying on campus?”

She nods. “Dorm. I’ll be back on the weekends, though.”

“You better,” I tease, breathing a sigh of relief. She applied to schools nationwide yet chose local in the end.

“But I have something I need to do first,” she begins carefully. The hesitation in her tone puts me on edge.

“Laundry? Maybe learn how to cook?” I offer sarcastically. “The Ramen

directions are on the back of the pack, you'll be fine."

"I'm going to Florida for the summer."

I jerk my attention back to her in surprise. "What?"

"I want to travel, see another coast. I've never been outside of Gray's Cove. This program at Caldwell is accelerated, so I won't have a break until I'm done. If I'm going to travel, this is my chance."

I swallow hard. "Florida." It's not a question, I just needed to say it. To taste the words in my mouth so maybe it will feel more real.

She's never had to ask my permission for anything. This is no exception. Even though I stepped up as her guardian, I've always trusted her. I've never had a reason not to. Since the day our parents died, we've been a team. Looking out for each other when no one else would. I close my eyes and dig my nails into the layer of wax on my board, feeling small and ineffective all of a sudden.

"How long?"

"Three months," she says, and my heart drops.

"Can I talk you out of it?"

"I leave next week. It's a small town on the Gulf Coast called Pelican Beach."

My mouth drops open. "Next week? And you're just telling me now?"

"I didn't know how," Paige confesses, chewing on her bottom lip.

I shake my head, looking up at the clouds moving in from offshore.

"What about your internship at the gallery? We had plans... What if you like it better than this? What if you never come back?"

"Hear me out," she says, choosing her words carefully. "I need a break from Gray's Cove. From California. From all the memories here, good and bad. When I leave high school, the rest of my life begins. The future is now and all that shit." She leans back on her hands.

"That year we spent living in the Bonneville when I was in eighth grade was the first time I wasn't afraid to go home. I will always remember the day we left because that was when life actually began. Even though we moved around a lot, that car was the first place to ever feel like home. We were kids, we struggled, but we were free. We built a life here, from the ground up. Blood, sweat, and tears. With no one to give a fuck if we made it. If we ate. If we were warm at night. We have a home now, we're safe now, and that's because of you." She glances over at me. "Don't ever believe that I am in any way oblivious to everything you sacrificed to get us here. I have choices to

make for my future that are hard, but the fact that I have any choices at all is because of you.” She pauses. “I’m not leaving you. I’m leaving Gray’s Cove. And only for the summer.”

I nod. “I know. And I knew one day you were going to leave. I just...” I skim my hand lightly across the top of the water, to touch but not to hold. “I figured I’d be ready for it, but I’m not.”

“I should have told you sooner.”

I shake my head. “No, I get it. Believe me. That’s the nature of home, right? The duplicity of it. To love the place that made you who you are, and hate it for the same reason.”

Paige nods. “I can have a fresh start in Pelican Beach. New place, new people. New possibilities.”

“Then go,” I agree reluctantly. “I’ve never stopped you before. I’m not about to start now.”

“You could come with me?”

An absurd laugh escapes me. “Yeah, and do what? I can barely afford the rent for our apartment, I’m in no position to pick up a summer home.”

“It’s an open invitation.”

I sigh. “How are you getting there?”

She shrugs. “Bus.”

I shake my head. “Take the Bronco. I can walk to work.”

A small smile lifts at the corners of her lips. “Really?”

I nod. “Just... don’t do anything stupid. Park and walk when you drink. It’s going to need an oil change when you get there.” I roll my eyes. Fuck. I’m losing my company and my ride for the entire summer. I guess I’ll have time to revisit that \$400 project boat.

Her smile broadens. “You know I don’t drink.”

“Florida,” I repeat, shaking my head, still trying to absorb it. “Do they even surf in Florida?”

Paige laughs. “Little waves, with big boards. And you know, even if we’re on opposite coasts, we’ll always have this.” She raises her cupped hand, letting the sea trickle out from between her fingers. “All the oceans touch.”

“I hate you,” I lie, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“I hate you, too,” Paige replies.

It hurts more than I care to think about. But I understand. The world has done its part to hold us back, and I’m not about to be next in line. Paige

deserves all the possibilities life has to offer. I just have to accept it, and trust she will be okay.

We rise and fall with the surf, and I feel the set moving in. A churning chaos of sea and salt and sand just below the surface, pulled into the magnetic power of the wave, and building into something beautiful. I glance over at Paige.

Beautiful, like her.

“Let’s get ready for your ceremony,” I say, nodding toward the shore.

“The first one to the beach gets the first shower,” Paige replies, turning her board.

“You’re on.”

A wave rises high on the horizon, sharpening at the peak as it prepares to fall. We paddle, gaining speed until the wave grabs hold. I let her go first this time, and trace the line of her wake.

## Chapter 2

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### *Skye*

“Oh, shit,” Heather says, head bobbing, her hips swaying to the beat. “Who’s this? I like her sound.” She walks over to the housekeeping cart and turns the volume up on the Bluetooth speaker, dancing through the room. Tendrils of red hair fall out of her messy top bun and into her face, dust rag swinging.

I laugh. “It’s a local band Paige sent me from Pelican Beach. Jupiter Crash. I added it to my Spotify. They’re pretty good.”

There’s something about the lead singer that strikes a chord in me. The passion and the pain in her words, breathy vocals that linger in my mind long after the song has ended.

She has a song out called Paper Flowers, about the beauty of the world folded like pretty little flowers. Fragile and easily cast by the wind, yet with no life of their own. Molded by another, only to end up as trash. I can’t help but feel it, pretty on the surface, waiting for the breeze to move me because I lack the roots to stay. Knowing I can never have what the real flowers do.

“Speaking of the wayward younger sis, how is she doing over there? It’s been, what? Two months? A little more?” Heather asks, glancing at me.

I shrug, moving to scrub at a stain on the kitchen counter. “She’s good, I guess. She moved into an apartment with a girl named Mia and started waiting tables at a restaurant on the beach. A place called the Sandbar and Grill.” I pause. “She’s dating her boss.”

“Scandalous,” Heather gushes, her mouth dropping open. “I didn’t know she had it in her. Way to go, Paige.”

“I don’t know. The guy sounds like a tool, to be honest.” I abandon the stain and move on to the few dishes sitting in the sink. “I spoke with her last

night, and she was on the way to this club his dad owns. He has her working bottle service on top of a double at the restaurant.”

“Hey, it’s Friday night. Make that money.”

“I’m overreacting, aren’t I? It’s just... I put money in her account so she doesn’t have to work like that.”

“You said she wanted an adventure. She’s out there making one. She’s strong. She’s resourceful. She will be fine.”

I nod. “I know.” I just can’t make myself believe it. I cast a glare at Heather before tossing my cleaning rag at her. “Fuck you, though. You’re supposed to be on my side. Pretend to be concerned, please.”

Heather laughs. “I side with your mental health. Free your worry. Breathe in with me,” she takes a breath, her arms raising dramatically. “And breathe out.”

“You’ve got to stop watching all those self-help videos on YouTube.” I sigh. Maybe Heather is right. Heather starts grooving to the music again while folding the bathroom cloths into little seashells.

“So, what are you up to tonight? Hot plans with that hot man of yours?”

I laugh. “Speaking of mental health. I let that one go.”

“Let him go? Like you fired him?”

“Yeah,” I confirm. “Like pink slip on the door, leave your key under the mat.”

“Ouch.”

“It was just a difference of opinions, really. See, I wanted to go get sandwiches from Mo’s after work on Tuesday. But he wanted tacos from Monica’s. With Mallory, his Tinder date.”

Heather makes a face. “Yikes. I’m guessing they didn’t bring you any.”

I shake my head. “Not a single fucking taco.”

“Wow. Well, I’m sorry. Lots of fish in the sea and all that jazz.”

Grabbing the mop, I shove the housekeeping cart out into the hall. “Your sympathy is on point every time. See? This is why I like talking to you.”

Heather laughs. “Sympathy? Shit.” She pulls her phone out of her back pocket. “Where can I find that? Does DoorDash deliver it?” She frowns. “This is your phone. I forgot I still have it. Here,” she slides it down the kitchen counter toward me. “You have a million missed calls. Maybe Mr. Wrong decided to swipe left on taco chick.”

I shake my head. “Maybe he realized I kept his set of Xbox Pro controllers for the inconvenience.” I scroll through the call log, frowning as



my confusion builds. I set the mop down and pull a stool out from beneath the breakfast bar to sit. “These are Florida numbers.” I tap on my voicemail and put it on speaker.

“This is Detective Phillips with the Pelican Beach Police Department. I’m trying to get a hold of Skylar Matthews about a matter concerning her sister, Paige. Please give me a call back at this number at your earliest convenience. Thank you.”

I tap my fingers nervously on the bar beside my phone, glancing up at Heather. “A Detective. What do you think she did? Do Detectives call family members over drunk tank lock-ups?”

Heather walks over, pulls out the stool beside me, and sits down. “I don’t know, but now I’m invested.”

I pull in an unsteady breath and dial Paige’s number, but it goes straight to voicemail. I leave her a message and send a text. Returning to the Detective’s message, I hit redial and leave it on speaker for Heather to listen in.

The line rings twice before a male voice answers roughly, “Detective Philips.”

“I think I received a call from you earlier. My name is Skylar Matthews. You said there was an issue with my sister, Paige?”

There’s silence on the line for several seconds, and I begin to wonder if the call dropped. “Yes, Ms. Matthews. I’m afraid I have some information about your sister. Has anyone contacted you before now? Or have you been watching the news?”

My eyes narrow, and I glance over at Heather. “No, no one has called me. Paige is my only family. And I live in California, so I don’t exactly get Florida local news.” Heather pulls her phone out of her pocket and starts scrolling.

“Okay. There was an incident with Paige last night, and we’re trying to figure out exactly what happened. All we know right now is that Paige ran over a young woman on a bicycle sometime around eleven. A passing officer saw the accident and pulled over to help. Paige panicked, returned to her vehicle, and backed over the responding officer as she drove away. There was a chase across town as other officers responded, and she went over the East Inlet Bridge.” He pauses. “We have search and rescue boats canvassing the area, but we haven’t found her yet.”

I swallow hard, struggling to digest everything he just said. “Went over...

like she drove off the bridge?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Heather makes a horrified sound and slowly turns her phone toward me. Her hand is shaking as I take it from her. I scan over the news article, my heart speeding as my breathing stops. There’s a photo of a bridge, early morning, as amber hues rise out of the sea and reach into the night sky. Police cars sit along the road with their lights flashing, illuminating the darkened figures of people standing near the railing. A crane arm extends from a tow truck, with a cable dropping toward the water, attached to a vehicle. I expand the photo, my mouth going dry.

The cable is attached to a light blue ’82 Bronco, suspended high above the sea.

“Ma’am?” The voice on her phone questions.

“Still here,” I manage to choke out as Heather’s phone slides out of my hand and clatters across the hardwood floor. “What, um...” I struggle to swallow. “So she drove off the bridge, and you haven’t found her?”

“She hasn’t been located yet.”

“And the people, that woman on the bicycle, and the officer...”

“They’re both dead. If we find Paige alive, she’s going to jail for murder.”

I shut my eyes tight, gripping the edge of the breakfast bar to keep from falling.

My voice wavers, trying to form words. “And you’re sure it was her? That she was driving?”

“The dash cam footage from the officer at the scene is pretty clear, and she was ID’ed by several co-workers from the Sandbar where she works. Look, we have a few things to go over, and I really need to do it in person. Is there any way you can come into town for a few days?”

I nod imperceptibly. “Yeah. I’ll grab the first flight out.”

“Thank you,” he concludes, disconnecting the line. My phone returns to the lock screen photo of Paige and I sitting on the beach. Silent once again, like he hadn’t just ended my whole world.

“Skye?” Heather asks cautiously.

I take a deep breath. Several. Then stand, sliding my phone into the back pocket of my jeans to grab the handle of the mop.

“Skye, talk to me. Sit back down.”

“I can’t right now. I need to finish this, then ask Angie for an advance on

my paycheck so I can buy a plane ticket.”

Tears, dark with mascara, stream down Heather’s face. “You don’t think she’s... that she’s...”

“Dead?” I provide. “A murderer? Somewhere at the bottom of the bay?” My voice gets louder with every word. I’m panting, my heart racing. There are too many emotions to grasp onto just one. “No. This isn’t right. Not Paige. She’s meticulous and organized. She’s responsible and logical and respectful. Even if she did hit that girl, she would never have left. She would have stayed. She’s a trained lifeguard. She would have done CPR until the paramedics arrived. This is wrong. It’s all wrong.”

Heather wraps her arms around me. I want to fight it, but I don’t have the strength.

“It just happened,” Heather says, choking back a sob. “They don’t know anything yet. Let them investigate. They’ll see that they’re wrong.”

“It doesn’t make any sense. She would never have left. She...” I struggle to breathe and sit down against the wall, resting my head between my knees. “She’s fine. It wasn’t her. It’s all a mistake.” Tears stream unimpeded down my face, pooling on the freshly mopped floor beneath me.

Heather sits beside me, and wraps her arms around my shoulders. “Go to Florida,” Heather states. “And don’t come back until you have the truth.”

I nod. This is what I will do. All I can do at this point. I can break it down, piece by piece, and figure it out. There’s a logical explanation for all this, I just need to find it.

Somewhere in Florida.

## Chapter 3

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### *Skye*

A wall of concrete twenty floors high separates me from the ocean as the cab travels along Beach Drive, an endless row of condos broken occasionally by seafood restaurants and tourist shops, sidewalks cluttered by racks of rafts and airbrushed t-shirts. The traffic is bumper to bumper, windows down, with people hanging out to holler car to car. Others walk beside the road like it's a swimsuit runway show, stopping occasionally to barter Mardi Gras beads for a quick boob flash.

I can see the ocean between the buildings, with white sugar sands extending into the aquamarine Gulf. Lines of rental hotel chairs sit nestled near the water, with navy blue cushions and matching umbrellas. The bare stretches of sand between the chairs are a patchwork of beach towels and blankets, anchored by coolers and half-covered by billowing pop-up tents.

The back passenger door of the SUV ahead of me opens, and a guy jumps out. He runs over to the bushes along the side of a condo and pisses into a palm tree. Jiggling the zipper on his pants, he jogs to catch up with the SUV and jumps back in, tossing several empty beer cans into the street. I roll my eyes and lean back against the leather seat. Maybe I should have policed Paige's life choices a little more.

"We're almost there," the cab driver offers, glancing at me in the rearview. "It's just over the bridge."

I swallow the lump in my throat. The bridge. The last place Paige was seen alive. I wrap my hand around the door handle and squeeze as we begin the ascent, my heart pounding faster with every *thunk* of the bridge sections passing beneath the tires.

The news photo scrolls through my mind on a loop, over and over, and I

feel the pain of it every time as if it were the first. The police cars, the crane, the darkened tree line on the opposite bank rising in the distance, the silhouettes of people watching from the railing. It overlays on the bridge I climb, bending memory into reality. A memory that's not mine.

I don't want to look, but I can't stop. Surrounded by police tape and orange barrels, a temporary concrete lane divider blocks off a section of mangled metal in the guardrail. I grit my teeth and swallow hard, my nails digging into the soft leather of the door handle. This is even harder than I thought it would be.

The cab driver glances up again, and our eyes meet in the rearview.

"A girl went off the bridge about three nights back," he explains. "It's been all over the news."

I nod uncomfortably. "I heard."

"They're still out there looking for her. I don't think they'll ever find her, though. The current coming under this bridge is strong, like a river. This is the only outlet for the bay to reach the ocean, and it can get really rough sometimes. I've seen it sink smaller boats trying to reach the beach."

"Do you think she could have lived through it? Swam away?"

He shrugs. "Maybe. That's a hell of a swim, though. And my brother Vincent will tell you, there's mad shark activity down there. He fishes off this bridge all the time."

I pull in a steadying breath. "Sorry I asked."

"Nah, sounds like she deserved it. Killing that girl and the cop. Kind of like karma or something."

"Maybe she didn't do it," I reply, my anger simmering just below the surface.

"Maybe," he says dismissively. "Not like it matters now. Can't convict the dead, right?"

I look away, trying to suppress the intrusive thoughts shouting at me to drag him out of this car and see how responsive those sharks are. Doesn't he know she has a family? People who love her, and don't see her as the monster the news is making her out to be. There has to be more to it than that.

Breathe. In and out. Count to ten. Find my happy place. I try remembering all the lame meditation strategies Heather shared from her YouTube videos. I glance back out the window. This may be the ocean, but it's so fucking far from my happy place.

The road smoothes as we cross back onto solid ground, curving with the

coast as a large, white concrete building rises in the distance. Three rows of slim, dark-tinted windows adorn the front of the building, with a large PBPD seal carved into the center. Other county buildings follow further down the line, a Chamber of Commerce, Tax Collector, and a Welcome Center, all a bright white like the police department, with teal roofs and landscaped beds of palm trees and multicolored azaleas.

“Here we go,” the driver says, pulling into the parking area. When he slows, I pass the driver cash beneath the plexiglass barrier.

“Keep the change,” I say quickly as I grab my backpack, and push the door open.

“I hope you enjoy your stay in Pelican Beach!” He calls out the open window. “You should check out Salty Sal’s down on Bayou Boulevard. Tell them Charles sent you. Best crab in town.”

I nod as he pulls away, sighing in relief when I’m alone again.

“Oh, perfect! Excuse me, ma’am?” I hear a woman’s voice call from down the sidewalk. My eyes narrow in confusion as I glance around to either side of me, then realize I’m her intended target.

“Yeah?”

“Can you take this for us?” She asks, striding toward me in a flowered maxi dress and a smile, her perfectly styled blonde curls bouncing around her shoulders. She shoves her phone at me, then jogs back to where her family stands in the grass beside a large colorful sign reading: *Welcome to Pelican Beach, home of the world’s most beautiful beaches*. I sigh and try to resist the urge to hurl her phone back at her.

“Ready?” I ask, annoyed, hastily centering the family of four inside the screen.

“Everyone say FLORIDA!” The dad yells excitedly, and his family echoes it, all smiles in matching flowered outfits, and stiff new flip-flops that have never seen sand.

I take several photos, then hand it back to the woman.

“Thanks,” the woman offers, skimming through the shots on her slow return to her rental minivan. She stumbles briefly over a crack in the sidewalk, and I roll my eyes. Why are beach tourists the same everywhere?

I continue to the police station, pausing at the large sliding glass doors. Once upon a time, I went to the police, looking for answers. For help. A scared kid who just wanted peace, and to be free. They sent me home and sold me out to the people I was running from. I realized then that the only

person who would save me was me. Yet I find myself in this place again, begging for help, and wondering if this time will be any different. I steel myself, cram all the emotions I've been experiencing the past three days into a tiny little box in my mind and lock it, then step through the doors as they slide open.

A chill travels through me as I step inside, immediately assaulted by a blast of supercooled air piped in above the doors. There's no color on the walls, only a sterile white reflecting the shadows of the department personnel as they move around the room. My heavy combat boots echo on the tile floors, and an officer looks up from one of the roped-off lanes leading to a metal detector. He hands me a tub to put my belongings into, and I set my backpack inside. As he sends it down the conveyor belt, he nods for me to step through the glowing arch. It beeps and flashes red.

"Please take your shoes off," the officer says, handing me another tub. "And any jewelry you have on."

I untie my boots, the chunky soles barely fitting in the provided bin. Then I pull off my studded belt, and drop a collection of silver rings and a necklace on top. I glance back up at the officer expectantly, and he nods for me to go through. It flashes red again. I sigh.

"I have body jewelry too, and an underwire bra," I offer dismissively, my patience wearing thin. "If you want me to take those off, I can, but it's going to start getting really interesting in here." I offer a half-wave at the officers watching from the desk across from us, paused mid-transaction.

The officer raises an eyebrow, then nods to a female co-worker, and the woman walks over and pats me down. When she is sufficiently satisfied, she sends me through.

"What can I help you with today?" The woman asks me.

I pull my boots back on. "I'm here to see Detective Phillips."

The woman nods. "Second floor, room 215."

I thank her as I stuff my jewelry into my pocket, then grab my backpack and head for the stairs. Officers bustle around the floor, carrying files between desks, accompanied by a constant chatter of noise from their radios. A door opens down the hall, and a disheveled woman escorted by two officers brushes past me, her hands in cuffs. Our eyes meet, and I can see the desperation anchored deep inside. The sign beside the door reads 215, and I take a breath. *Fuck.*

"Detective Phillips?" I ask, knocking lightly on the open door.

A man glances up from behind a mahogany L-shaped desk, his hands pausing on his computer keyboard. He's wearing a suit instead of a uniform, his striped tie so tight it looks like it's strangling him. His close-cropped hair is balding all the way to the dark sunglasses perched on top of his head, and he's sweating despite the frigid temperature of the office.

"Yes?" He answers, returning his attention to his work, his fingers tapping hurriedly along the keys.

"I'm Skylar Matthews. Paige's sister. You asked me to come in." He stops again, studying me for a moment, then motions to the chair in front of his desk.

"Thank you for coming in, Ms. Matthews."

I nod. "Sure. Any news on Paige?"

He shakes his head. "We still have teams out looking for her. Nothing yet."

"How can I help?"

The Detective shuffles around the papers on his desk, stacks up several files to get them out of the way, and lifts the receiver on his office phone. He doesn't introduce himself, so I can tell it's an in-office call. He asks another officer to come in, and my heart begins to race. Will this one have the cuffs?

"I've asked you in today because we need to go over the events of Friday night. We have video and eyewitness accounts of the incident, and testimonies from everyone she worked with at the Sandbar. When was the last time you spoke with her?"

*Breathe.* "She called me Friday afternoon, around three or so. We talked about work. We talked about the wave height in the Cove projected for the weekend. Everything sounded fine. She said she was going out that night with Evan, one of her managers at the restaurant. She works side jobs for him, cocktailing and bottle service at one of the other clubs his dad owns. The Aurora, I think." Paige's voice echoes inside my head, her laugh, her excited infliction every time she mentions Evan. "That was the last I heard from her."

The Detective nods. "She never called you after that? Didn't text? Email? Anything?"

I shake my head. "Nothing."

He nods again. "Do you have your phone with you today?"

My eyes narrow. "Yeah. Why?"

He pushes a piece of paper across the desk at me. "We're going to need to



collect that for evidence. You can have it back in a few days.”

“Is this a warrant?”

“Yes.” He stares at me expectantly, unflinching.

“Okay, look. I just got here. In a strange place where I don’t live and have never been. I don’t have anywhere to stay lined up. And without my phone, I can’t even call the cab back to get me. Paige has this number.” I pull my phone out of my pocket and place it on the desk, holding a hand over it possessively. “This phone is the most likely way I can get in contact with my sister if she is still alive. It is my ONE lifeline. And you want to take it.”

“Per phone records, you were the last person to talk with her. We need to check your records against what we have. I’m sorry. Kelly, at the first desk to the right of the door, can call you a cab when we’re done.” He takes the phone out from beneath my hand and slips it into a plastic bag, scribbling something on the label. When the second officer enters the office, he immediately hands it off, and I watch my phone disappear down the hall.

“Glad I could come all this way to help you guys,” I mumble, frustrated, as I slouch back into my chair.

“Look, there’s something you need to understand here. Is your sister missing? Yes. Are we looking for her? Yes. We want to find her alive as much as you do, regardless of the circumstances. But this is also a murder investigation. Two people were killed, and the only suspect I have is Paige.”

I straighten in my chair. “What about Evan? He was supposed to be with her that night. Where was he?”

The Detective shakes his head dismissively. “We’ve already spoken with Mr. Jacobson. He has an alibi and witnesses. He was doing inventory at the restaurant until two in the morning, with other employees present. He didn’t leave the building until then.”

“I thought he was going to Aurora?” I question, trying to remember every word of our phone conversation. “Paige works weekends at the club with two other girls, Natalie and Raven. What about them?”

“Paige was alone, Ms. Matthews. We have no reason to believe anyone else was with her that night.”

“What makes you so sure?” I can feel my anger rising, and I run a hand nervously through my long purple hair. It’s like he’s already made up his mind. There’s no investigation. Paige is already guilty.

“I want you to see something,” the Detective offers, his fingers clicking away at his keyboard again. He reaches over and turns his monitor screen

toward me. The screen is dark, except for the illuminated video playback buttons at the bottom. I swallow hard. Whatever this is, I'm not ready for it.

The road is dark, two lanes, with a strip of grass on either side bordered by pine forest. Red and blue lights strobe bright against the endless darkness, lit by a single dim streetlight and the headlights of a vehicle parked nearly sideways in the road.

A light blue, '82 Ford Bronco.

My heart races in my chest. There's no mistaking that truck. There's a small dent in the back fender where Paige tapped a parking meter learning how to parallel park. A surf sticker on the back window for a board shop in Gray's Cove. When it needed a paint job, I chose that color, an ice blue with silver metallic flake, far from anything that may have been stock in '82. It's Paige.

There's something in the road, illuminated by the Bronco's headlights. A figure lying motionless, in a green hoodie and jeans. Paige kneels beside her, bloodstains on her clothes, attempting CPR. I lean closer to the screen. Paige was trying to save her. The officer moves forward, shouting. Without the audio, I can't hear what he says. Why isn't he helping?

He pulls his gun, and I gasp, my fingers tightening on the edge of the desk.

Paige looks up from the fallen woman, continuing compressions as she argues, even at gunpoint, her head shaking furiously. Tears well in my eyes at her desperation, her unwillingness to give up. The officer fires a shot into the grass beside her. A warning. She reluctantly stops and raises her hands. I can see the blood on her skin, on her clothes, tears streaming down her face. She glances down at the woman again, and back at the officer. Slow, tense seconds pass as Paige stands frozen, and the officer continues to shout. I can see her mind working, and I curse softly because I know what's coming next.

She runs.

Paige was on the high school track team, in addition to being a fearless and skilled surfer who frequented the big wave breaks. She's quick, and her stamina is unmatched. She keeps the Bronco between the officer and herself, ducking beneath the hood as he fires off another shot. This time, it's not a warning. When the time is right, she leaps into the driver's seat.

The officer steps back against the front of his car, the flare from his pistol flashing again and again as the back window of the Bronco shatters. The backup lights flash red a moment before Paige ducks down, and floors it.

The Bronco slams into the officer, pinning him to the hood of his own car. The gun falls from his hand as his body goes limp, and the Bronco surges forward. She swerves, fishtailing across the road, and takes off into the night. As the taillights fade into the distance, I can see them both. The officer draped across the hood of his car, and the woman in the road. Both still.

Detective Phillips clicks the video off, and maneuvers to another file. I can feel tears running down my face, and reach up to brush them away.

“I... um...” I clear my throat, trying to pull myself together. “Sorry, that was really hard to watch.”

“Her name was Rose,” the Detective says, and I want to stop him. “She was a cashier at Danny’s Grocery, and had just gotten off work. She was going to meet her fiancée so they could ride home together. She was concerned about the environment and always rode her bike. Even in the rain.”

I close my eyes. Fuck.

“Officer Henrich was with the department eight years next month. Married. Two kids. Good guy. I knew him personally. Our kids play T-ball together,” the Detective continues.

“This isn’t like Paige. She would never...”

“It’s not over yet,” the Detective says, cutting me off as he navigates to another file on the screen. Another video appears, and I look at him in question. His face betrays nothing, emotionless, like the videos could be an ad for a new pizza restaurant. He meets my gaze. “I just want you to know what we do. So we’re all on the same page.” I nod reluctantly.

He plays the next video, and I recognize the bridge. Tears burn in my eyes, my breathing shallow and labored. I really don’t want to see this one. Police dash cam again, and from the car’s position, I can see others beside it. A solid line of police cars forming into an impenetrable wall at the base of the bridge. Officers stand behind extended car doors, guns raised, fingers on the trigger. After about a minute, vehicle headlights brighten the crest of the bridge, followed soon after by the Bronco.

The truck lurches, smoke curling from the tires as the brakes are applied. But before it can come to a complete stop, it accelerates, serving out in an arc before slamming into the guardrail. The force of the hit snaps the railing, and the Bronco plummets off the side and into the bay.

I look away, unable to stop the anguished cry that tumbles from between my parted lips. My heart thunders against my rib cage, threatening to tear through and tumble onto the cold white tile of the sterile police station. The

Detective shuts the video off and swivels the monitor back to its original position.

“I didn’t know,” I stammer, putting my head in my hands to keep it from falling apart. “When you said she went off the bridge, I thought it was an accident. I didn’t know she...” I can’t say the words.

“I didn’t do this to make things harder for you,” Detective Phillips states. “When someone acts out of character, against everything you know and believe, it’s hard to accept the truth unless you can see it. I had to show you this so you can choose a side. Officer Henrich was on his way home when he pulled up to the scene of the incident. Paige didn’t call it in. Maybe she didn’t have access to a phone, I don’t know. When he tried to intervene, she became combative, and he radioed in that he could smell alcohol.”

I shake my head. “That’s impossible. Paige doesn’t drink.”

“On this night, she did,” he corrects with a stern confidence. “If we find Paige, she will have to answer for this. If she contacts you, in any way, it is absolutely imperative that you facilitate her surrender.” The Detective pushes a tissue box across his desk in my direction, but I shake my head. I need to feel the tears to know it’s real.

“You have divers searching the bottom of the bay for her body, and you’re worried that I’m going to harbor a fugitive?” I ask incredulously.

“We’re covering all our bases.”

I nod. “Look, if you’re done, I need to go. I can’t be here anymore.”

The Detective stands, grabs a card from a holder on his desk, and hands it to me. “Please contact me if you remember anything that could help the case. Are you planning on staying in town, or flying back out?”

I slide the card into the back pocket of my jean shorts. “I don’t know yet.”

“We have everything we need from you, if that helps your decision.”

“Perfect. I’ll just hit Salty Sals and be on my way, I guess.” I can’t help the anger rising inside me, moving in to fill the vulnerable void of grief.

“Good choice,” the Detective says, settling back into his chair, and returning his attention to his work. “You should try the crab.”

I turn on my heel, toss my backpack over my shoulder, and stride off down the hall. I don’t realize I’m running until I hit the parking lot, panting, doubled over, and struggling to breathe. Every time my eyes close, I see the videos. The flashing lights. The woman on the road. The Bronco as it launches off the bridge.

Paige was drunk? Paige never drinks. Not after the shit we went through

in foster care.

I pull myself together out of habit, knowing no one will come along and do it for me. Then walk out to the main road, watching the cars as they soar past. Businesses and strip centers line the highway, punctuated occasionally by a palm tree growing out of a break in the concrete. I have no idea which way to go. Further into town and downtown, or back over the bridge to the beach?

Beach. It's not my ocean, but it's water. And it pulls at me all the same. I need time and space and steps separating me from the police department and the horror I just witnessed. I have no destination, no ride, nowhere to stay, and no idea what I'm supposed to do now. Do I stay, or do I go? Wait for a letter with a conclusion of the case? It's not like I have a phone they can call. Do I look for her? Is she looking for me? Can I save her, if she can still be saved?

I've never felt so helpless, with everything I love on the line. All I can do is walk, lost, down this fucking beach that isn't mine. Hoping to somehow stumble across all the answers I was never given, but so desperately need.

## Chapter 4

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### *Skye*

I walk along the highway, against the traffic, baking in the midday sun as the clouds roll by few and thin, and an eternity apart. I've never known heat like this, but walking feels constructive. Several men on bicycles fly by me as I climb the bridge, with PVC holders for fishing rods and a five-gallon bucket strapped to the back. The breeze off the bay is cool but humid, and thick enough to taste like salt. I concentrate on just that, listening for the crash of the waves against the pilings, and searching for any thread of familiarity that may transport me home, if only for a moment.

Police tape billows from the orange cones encircling the broken section of the guardrail, and I pause. Black skid marks on the concrete arc into the cones, and I follow the trail, slipping beneath the tape. I step up to the edge until the toes of my boots hang off, and stare out at the bay. The breeze flows over me, pushing me back and tumbling the long purple tendrils of my hair. The crash of the waves below rises high and loud, silencing the thunder of the traffic. It vibrates the bridge, traveling through the soles of my boots until I can feel the ocean inside me, but can't touch it.

This is the last thing she saw before she went over. I close my eyes, my heart pounding against my chest. The night and the flashing lights. The line of police cars across the bridge. Chased and cornered. She was desperate. Paige didn't kill herself. She was trying to save herself.

I need to do the same. I open my eyes and take a step back. Then another one. The road comes back into focus, and I slip beneath the tape. I follow the highway until it wraps around to the beach and blend into the mindless shuffling crowd of tourists, wandering aimlessly down the strip. I flip off several catcalls and let my mind get lost in the blur of traffic, and the echo of

horns and motorcycles reverberating off the condos.

The afternoon sun slips down the sky and behind the wall of concrete, casting the street into shadows. I don't know how long I've been walking, and I have no destination.

When I finally stop to look up, I see a sign for a restaurant nestled between a high-rise condo and a small two-story motel. In blue neon lights, a wave curls in a series of flashes, encircling the name: The Sandbar and Grill.

Paige's restaurant.

The building is large, adorned with dark stained wood and carved tiki poles for columns, with more space for outdoor dining than indoor availability. Decks wind around the entire outside of the building, with tables covered by teal umbrellas. Servers shuffle around the diners, table to table, like a dance. They're packed, with a full parking lot and more walking up from the beach beyond the deck.

A connecting catwalk travels down the beach in both directions, one to the neighboring condo, and one to the small motel on the far side. A jetty reaches out from the beach and arcs around the cove, sandwiching an extension of the catwalk between walls of dark rocks, and fingering out into docks for a small marina. The land ends beyond the jetty, just behind the motel, and I see boats bobbing in the water as they pass through the inlet and into the bay.

I can't seem to get my feet to move, stuck there on the sidewalk as a torrent of emotions tumble through my mind. Paige has friends here. A life. A guy she's seeing. Is she important to them? Is there someone inside as fucked up about all this as I am? Is Evan? I chew my bottom lip. Something doesn't add up about Evan's alibi. Paige said they were both going to the Aurora, and they do most of their business on the weekends. Then he stays late at the Sandbar for inventory on a Friday night? It doesn't add up.

I need to see him. I can't stand here and wonder. I stride up to the restaurant's front double doors, replacing my anger with determination. I won't tear him apart. Not yet. I'll even be nice, because more flies with honey and all that shit.

The lobby is bright and colorful, with high ceilings and walls of Sandbar-branded merchandise arranged around the hostess stand. Perfect, squared-off stacks of folded shirts line the shelves, followed by shot glasses, magnets, containers of pens, and beach items bearing slogans like "Life's a Beach" and "Seas the Day at the Sandbar". I wait restlessly and expectantly for several

minutes for a hostess to arrive, but it never happens.

I wander further inside, across a large space with shiny hardwood floors surrounded by high-top tables, and a stage for entertainment. Speaker boxes hang from the walls throughout the room, and two spiral staircases lead up to a second floor. It extends into a secondary room lined with windows and bathed in bright light, where tables of customers dine and servers move around them with trays of food and drinks.

In a curving wave, a polished wooden bar stretches from beneath the staircase and into the dining room, with teal leather stools tucked beneath. The wall behind the bar is lit with blue lights, backing an impressive collection of liquors. A man with shaggy brown hair walks up, shining a highball glass with a towel.

“Hey, welcome to the Sandbar. What can I get you?” His demeanor is easy and laid back as he shakes his hair out of his eyes, with a smile so magnetic I can actually feel it pulling at the button on my shorts. The tourists must love him.

“I’m not here to eat,” I answer back. “I just want to talk to Evan.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Business or pleasure?”

“Definitely business.”

“Oh, you’re here about the job,” he assumes, tucking the clean glass into a line with the others beneath the liquor bottles. He reaches beneath the register and pulls out a piece of paper, sliding it toward me. An application for employment. I pick it up, scanning over the lines of information.

“Um, yeah. Sure. The job. Is Evan around?” I question.

The bartender shakes his head. “Nah, he’s already over at the Aurora. He’ll be back tomorrow morning to check in the truck, though. Come in around eight or so, and you’ll hit him.”

I nod, folding the application and sliding it into my back pocket. I glance over at the kitchen window, where plates of food sit in a line beneath a heat lamp, waiting to be trayed. I’m suddenly very aware that I haven’t eaten all day. I look back at the bartender.

“I may have changed my mind about the eating part.”

The bartender smiles and slides me a laminated menu. Seafood baskets and burgers, steaks and pasta, salads with lots of fruit. I choose a grilled chicken sandwich with pepper jack, lettuce, and tomatoes, then slide the menu back. The bartender taps the screen on the register and pours me a water.



“Nick, shots,” a woman shouts, striding up to the bar. She has a slender frame, with bleach blonde hair falling to her shoulders, aged maybe in her mid-fifties. Her mid-length dress is starched and has entirely too much pink in it. The authority in her voice says she’s in management, but her choice of footwear says she doesn’t go anywhere near the kitchen.

“What are you thinking?” Nick asks, lining up an impossibly long line of shot glasses. She taps a finger against her pink-painted lips.

“Lemon Drops,” she answers thoughtfully. She scans over the dining room before her gaze finally falls on me. “Welcome! It’s a beautiful day for a beach vacation, right?”

I shrug, forcing a smile I don’t feel.

“Oh, she’s not on vacation. She’s here about the job,” Nick supplies.

The woman looks back at Nick. “I didn’t know Evan had started advertising the job yet.” She waves her hand dismissively. “He handles all that, I don’t keep up.” She turns to me again, assessing me carefully for a long moment before finally nodding in approval. “Pour her up one too, Evan will hire her.”

Nick laughs, and the woman walks away from the bar, her heels clicking on the wooden floor. “That’s Carolyn, one of the owners.”

“Evan’s Mom,” I say, watching the woman disappear into the back office.

“Yeah, Pelican Beach royalty. I think she likes you, whatever that’s worth.”

“Fantastic,” I comment dryly. “For a minute there, I thought she was going to stuff me and hang me between the Marlin and the Mahi.”

He grins. “Evan has a type, and you fit it. No offense.”

I nod, leveling him with a look. “I’m a lot of people’s type.”

“I’ll bet.” He smiles that beautiful smile again, nodding to one of the passing servers. She pauses in her trek across the room and steps up to the bar. “Giana, round everyone up, tell them to come grab a shot. Carolyn wants Lemon Drops.”

Giana rolls her eyes, running a hand through her pixie-cut dark hair. “Fuck man, that’s like our sixth shot in the last two hours. I feel great, but I nearly tripped twice with that last tray of drinks.” She laughs.

“Round them up!” Nick tells her, motioning with his hand like she’s a sheepdog collecting his stray cattle. She shakes her head and disappears around the corner into the kitchen. Several servers file back out of the door, followed by some of the cooks. They’re laughing, carrying stacks of credit

card books to drop at their tables. They crowd around the bar, grabbing from the line of shot glasses Nick prepared.

“Cheers to it being six o’clock on a Monday, because why not,” Nick says, clinking his shot against several others before tossing back the pale yellow liquid. His coworkers follow suit, setting their glasses back on the bar before disbanding to return to their tables. Nick slides one of the shots down to me, and I pick it up.

The kitchen doors swing open again, and a guy walks out with a white styrofoam to-go container. I hear rock music blaring from the open doorway, with heavy bass and quick guitars. He pulls off a black apron, shaking his dark hair free of the strings, and tosses it into a laundry bin behind the server station before striding over to me. His black Sandbar shirt is tight around his biceps, falling to a tapered waist, and black jeans held with a thick studded belt not unlike my own. Tattoos wind up his arms, with another barely visible near the collar of his shirt. The heavy tread on his black boots definitely isn’t regulation, which he knows and doesn’t care about. He rubs a hand over the dark stubble on his face, his ice-blue eyes locking with mine.

Nick nods at me as the guy walks up, mumbling something under his breath as he cashes out my ticket. The guy sidesteps Nick, and slides the to-go container down the bar toward me, picking up one of the remaining shots. He leans in and clinks his shot against mine. In one swift movement, I toss it back and set the glass back down.

“You don’t want to work here,” he says, placing his glass beside mine. “This place is a shit show.”

“Maybe shit show is my speed.” I toss a few dollars on the bar for a tip and grab my sandwich. As I stand, I watch his gaze slide down my body. It’s only a second, but it’s long enough to feel my skin heat.

“I’m Zaden,” he says, sliding me a second shot from the line of unclaimed Lemon Drops.

I pick it up and toss it back in a practiced motion that’s easier than I care to admit. “Good for you.”

“Leela?” He questions, raising an eyebrow. He picks up my kitchen ticket, showing me where LEELA is printed clearly in bold letters at the bottom under modifications. Nick reaches over Zaden’s shoulder and snaps the ticket out of his hand, crumpling it up.

“I don’t know her name,” he explains. “Tell me she doesn’t look like the Futurama chick.”

“See you tomorrow, Nick,” I say with a smirk, talking around Zaden and turning to leave.

“Bye, Leela,” Zaden says to my back, and I don’t give him the satisfaction of a response.

The incessant heat returns the moment I step outside, and I walk up to the road. In order to speak with Evan, I have to spend the night here. Somewhere.

*NO VACANCY* signs flash in front of the condos as far as I can see, and I glance over at the small motel. A woman with long, dark hair ambles around out front, halfheartedly sweeping trash into a dustbin while holding a phone to her ear and smoking a cigarette. I guess this is the *somewhere* I can start.

I nod at the woman sweeping as I walk into the lobby and approach the front desk. The interior looks as dated as the outside, like they chose their color palate from a Burger King circa 1987, complete with wall art of random geometric shapes and awful pots of dusty fake ivy everywhere.

“Welcome to the Sunrise Motel,” the woman says, stubbing out her smoke and walking back behind the desk. She’s close to my age, maybe a few years older. In a black tank top, shorts, and flip flops, if it hadn’t been for the sweeping, I would never have guessed she works here. Her green eyes meet mine, and it stops me for a moment. There’s something familiar about her, but I can’t put my finger on it.

“You don’t have any open rooms, do you?” I’m hopeful, but I know the answer before she can say it.

She shakes her head. “Nope, we’ve been booked up for months, just like all the hotels on the strip. If you need a room without a reservation now, you better look over the bridge in town. Even then, good luck.”

*Fuck.* “You don’t have anything at all? Look, I’ve had a really shitty few days, and I only need to be in town for one night. Maybe two.”

“Vacation?” She asks, folding her arms across her chest.

“Personal shit,” I answer. “And apparently I have a job interview.” *Fuck me, right?*

“On the beach?”

I nod toward the restaurant down the catwalk. “The Sandbar.”

“You have an interview at the Sandbar?” She chews her bottom lip contemplatively, walking over to the computer. She clicks around for a moment before glancing back up at me. “Okay, here’s the deal. I have an empty room, but it doesn’t have running water. There’s a leak in the wall and I’m waiting on a plumber to get in some part for one of the tankless hot water

heaters. He said it's going to be at least a week. I can rent it to you half off for the inconvenience if you're okay with using the restroom in the lobby. Whenever he fixes it, I'll have to honor the standing reservations first. But you have a few days at least."

"Sold," I say before she can change her mind, sliding cash across the counter.

"Did you just get into town?" She asks, typing up the room reservation.

"This morning," I answer.

"I'm Raven," she says, not looking up from her screen. "I also wait tables at the Sandbar, I'm just covering for my mom tonight while she's at a meeting for one of her MLM home businesses. The soft leggings or the wax melts or the customizable jewelry. I really can't keep up anymore. The back window of her car is like a billboard for pyramid schemes. Straight up, a warning that she's going to try to sell you something. Probably every day. Her name is Alice. You'll meet her tomorrow."

I smile. "Thanks for the heads up." Then I think about it. "Did you say your name is Raven?"

"Yeah. Do you have your ID?"

I start to reach into my pocket, then stop. Raven. She works at the Sandbar, and with Evan at the Aurora. If she finds out I'm Paige's sister, she might tip him off. I'll lose the element of surprise.

"I lost it."

She glances up at me. "That's unfortunate."

"Like I said, it's been a shitty few days." I feel like she can see the truth of that statement in my eyes, and she glances back at the screen.

"Don't worry about it. What's your name?"

"Ivy," I say, my eyes landing on one of the pots of fake foliage adorning the counter. "Ivy... Collins."

"Okay, Ivy. Room 219. It's the first door on your left, right up the stairwell. There's an elevator on the other side if you need it. Call me if you need anything. The lobby doors are open 24/7."

"Thanks," I reply, taking the keys from her. I follow her directions, around the side of the building and up the concrete stairs to the second floor. The room faces out toward the beach with a great view of the marina, and the restaurant sitting just to my right. The slight arc of the motel curves around a small pool with a connecting hot tub. It's quaint. Far from the sixteen-story hotel I work at, cliffside in California. But it has a humble, small-town local

appeal.

I put the key in the lock and turn, momentarily amused that there are still motels operating with metal room keys. The inside of the room matches the design of the lobby, with patterned royal purple carpet and rattan furniture. There's a small couch and a table near the window, a double bed in the center of the room, and a flatscreen TV on the dresser. At least they updated something.

I lock the door, dropping my backpack onto the sofa before collapsing face-first into the mattress. I need to shower. I need to think and prepare what I will say to Evan tomorrow. I need to at least take my boots off. But I don't do any of it, and fall fast asleep instead.

## Chapter 5

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### *Zaden*

The Bluetooth speaker buzzes as the bass drops, vibrating the plates on the shelf beside it. I slide around the line on the slippery soles of my boots, wiping down the last of the stainless steel tables.

“Incoming,” Lloyd says, tossing a bucket of soap water onto the floor beside me.

“This is done,” I announce, carrying several covered bowls into the walk-in as Katrina follows Lloyd with a floor squeegee. I spot Ryan headed out the back door and follow him, tapping my PIN on the back register to clock out. The sea breeze rushes in to cool my sweat-drenched skin the moment I step outside, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Sliding onto the top of the picnic table, I dig a pack of cigarettes out of my pocket. The lighter flares bright in the darkness, and I take a long, appreciative pull.

“It’s almost one,” Ryan states, pulling out his phone. The road in front of the Sandbar is empty, with the exception of a lone car every few minutes. Quiet again, finally. I lean back on my elbows, listening to the crash of the waves against the sand. “You still headed over to Ava’s?”

I shake my head. “Nah, it’s too late. She’s already in bed.”

“Long fucking day.”

“Yeah, sixteen hours today,” I agree. “The days suck, but the paycheck doesn’t.” The seventy-hour weeks are brutal, but the overtime pay more than makes up for it.

“Have you heard from Jax?” He asks, and I glance over at him.

“Nope. We were supposed to take the bikes to the track on Saturday, but he never showed.”

Ryan rolls his eyes. “He’s missed three days. Evan’s going to fire him.”

I shake my head, taking a pull from my smoke. "I'm sure he's aware. Katrina doesn't seem too alarmed. She said he left a note. You know he takes off for a few days every year around this time."

Ryan looks confused for a moment, then remembers. "Drake."

I nod. "Katrina buries herself in work. Jax dips out. It's how they cope." Eight years ago they lost a brother, and even as time passes, it doesn't seem to get any easier. When the end of summer rolls around, they struggle. I feel it, and I don't blame them. I knew him too.

Katrina walks out the back door and joins us, sighing as she takes the cigarette from my hand.

"I need something stronger than this," she comments, but steals my smoke all the same.

"Come by later," I offer. "I've got some shit right now that will make you forget your own name."

She smiles. "That's exactly what I need." She pauses, then makes a face and rolls her eyes. "Shit, I forgot to clock out." She hands my cigarette back as she turns on her heel.

"1127," Ryan calls after her. "Clock me out, too, please?"

"Fuck you," she calls back.

"I said please," Ryan grumbles, stepping off the picnic table to follow her. I smile and lean back, crossing my feet at the ankles. I've been waiting for this moment of peace all day. The full moon hangs low in the sky, illuminating the whitewater on the waves as they break. I exhale, and watch the smoke curl with the sea breeze toward the Sunrise Motel.

A movement on the pool deck catches my eye, and I lean up to follow it, curious. Barefoot, with a white motel towel tucked beneath her arm, a woman winds her way around the deck chairs. The pool closed hours ago, so she can't be there to swim. She strides through the back gate and down the catwalk to the beach access. When she steps beneath the orange glow of the safety light above the outdoor shower, and places her towel on the railing, I still. Long purple hair tumbles to her waist, in contrast to the stark white tank top hugging the curves of her chest. Her ripped jean shorts sit low on her hips, revealing long, lean legs. *Oh fuck.*

Leela.

I take another drag from the cigarette, watching as she sets down several small bottles beside the towel. She peels her tank over her head, her hands sliding lower to palm her shorts over her ass and down her legs. She tosses

her clothes onto the railing and turns the knob on the shower, stepping beneath the spray in nothing but black lace. She leans into it, water streaming down her body, her eyes closed. I know the water's cold, but she doesn't seem to care.

She empties several of the hotel bottles into her hand, and lathers them into her hair, her hands sliding across her wet, soapy skin. The lace leaves nothing to the imagination except how it would feel beneath me.

My skin tingles, and I realize the cigarette has burned down to the junction with my fingers. I quickly snuff it out on the table. When I glance back, she's arching her body into the spray, the soap running down her body to pool on the wooden planks of the catwalk, illuminated by the moonlight like the whitewater in the ocean. I lick my suddenly parched lips.

The spray stops and she reaches for the towel. I step off the picnic table and wander to the edge of the railing, leaning casually against one of the columns, arms folded across my chest. The movement draws her attention, and our eyes meet across the darkness. She pauses, and I wait for her to react. For embarrassment. For anger. Something. But it's nothing like that. For a moment, I wonder if she's as turned on by being watched, as I am watching her.

She runs a hand through her wet hair, wraps the towel around her body, and returns to the motel. Without a word, or a backward glance. I curse, digging into my pocket for a second cigarette that I'm going to need now even more than the first. I slide it between my lips and spark it, watching her trek up the stairs to the room on the corner. She's staying at the Sunrise. I take a drag, the moment already replaying in my mind. If she's staying there, she's not local.

Ryan's laugh echoes through the night as he walks back out the door, his footsteps heavy and loud on the wooden floorboards of the deck. "Hey man, I think we're done. You want to come out with us? We're going to Marleigh's."

Normally I would agree without hesitation, and head down to the local dive with everyone else. But something stops me, and I shake my head. "Not tonight."

"You sure? I owe you a beer for helping me finish the dish pit tonight," he offers.

"Raincheck," I reply, and he nods, following Katrina toward the employee parking lot.



I wander down the deck and onto the catwalk, following the path as it splits to the marina. The boats rock gently in their slips, metal hardware clanging against railings and masts in a chorus as natural to me as the sound of the sea itself. I take the third lane down to the end, and follow the narrow footpath out to the back of the houseboat, stepping aboard. It's nearly thirty years old, but solid. It's been a slow renovation for the past two years, but it's beginning to near something I could be proud of. I fall back into one of the chairs on the deck, and tug off my boots, leaning back to prop my feet on the transom. My gaze finds the window of her room. Her light is on, and I can see her shadowed silhouette inside for a moment before it goes dark.

The ghost of her remains in my mind, and I can't look away. I need a distraction. Desperately. I should go pick up a wrench and fix something. Paint something. Obsess about something I can actually put my hands on. I should be exhausted, but now I can't stop thinking about the girl with the purple hair that I only shared a handful of words with, and don't know at all.

## Chapter 6

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### *Ivy*

**T**his moment has trashy daytime talk show written all over it. Question: What do you wear to interview for your dead sister's job four days after her disappearance? Answer: Shame and guilt. That's what.

Apparently, that takes the form of bondage shorts and combat boots. I only packed three outfits. I mean, it's not like I actually want them to give me a job.

A sigh escapes me. This is a lot. But I can't let it go, because letting it go is letting her go. And I won't do that.

I waltz out the door of my room and down the stairs, following the connecting catwalk over to the Sandbar. As I walk through the employee break area on the side deck, my mind wanders back to last night. The smug set of Zaden's shoulders as he leaned against the column, his eyes locked on me, like I was dinner and a movie. My skin heats just thinking about it.

Okay, maybe I didn't hate it. Maybe I saw him on the deck the moment I walked outside. And maybe I needed a cheap thrill to feel alive.

The restaurant doesn't open for another two hours, but the double doors are already unlocked as I walk inside. Workers move around the building cleaning, restocking, and preparing for the opening. I spot Giana carrying bottles of wine to Nick behind the bar, and nod at Nick. He smiles.

"Hang out a minute, Evan's almost done," he says, sliding the bottles of wine into their spot along the lit wall. I amble toward the bar, taking my time. The walls are covered in beach decor, black and white pictures of fishing boats, mounted saltwater fish, and dollar bills signed by customers and stapled in place. I catch names and dates, noting that they go back at least twenty years. The walls are more than decor, they're a timeline. History.

Several potted plants sit along the windowsill of the large picture window in the back, letting in the light reflecting off the water just beyond the beach and bathing the dining room in orange.

The double doors for the kitchen swing open, and I study the man who walks out, clipboard in hand. He has short-cropped blonde hair and a muscular build. He's the only one in a button-up shirt, but it's a size too small, the buttons pulling across his chest. He calls over to several of the workers in the dining room, and they move to follow his request. I take a calming breath. That has to be him.

"Evan," Nick shouts, pointing at me. "Interview."

Evan looks frustrated, his attention returning to his clipboard before finally glancing over at me. Then he pauses, studying me. His posture loosens, and I can sense a change in him as he tucks his pencil behind his ear and walks my way.

"Hey, sorry. Busy morning. I'm Evan. You are?"

"Ivy," I tell him, chasing this lie.

"Ivy, alright. Come sit down with me." He walks over to one of the high-top tables by the wall and sits. I pull up the chair across from him. "Have you filled out an application?"

*Fuck.* "I lost it."

He shrugs dismissively. "That's okay. I haven't even listed this position yet, so you're the only applicant. It must be your lucky day."

I ball my hands into fists beneath the table, my nails biting into my palms. "Yeah, lucky." I can feel my anger starting to build, but I swallow it. Screaming at him won't get me any answers.

He asks me briefly about my experience, and I make a bunch of shit up. We're on that road now, why stop? He nods approvingly. It's not all lies, though. I've worked in restaurants before, and this is nothing new. I just changed all the details.

"So, where are you from, Ivy?"

"Nebraska," I answer, not missing a beat.

"What makes you want to move to Florida?"

"New place, new people. New possibilities." This is *my* fucking mantra now. Ivy owns this like Paige once did.

"Are you staying nearby?"

I nod, my gaze straying in the direction of the Sunrise Motel. "Yeah, really close."

“Okay. Good. Well, I have a server position open. Doubles are mandatory. Nights may go as late as midnight or so. We’re in the middle of the season, so business is crazy. I can start you this afternoon if you’re ready?”

“I’m ready for anything,” I tell him, locking my eyes with his. “I have a few questions, though.”

He places his clipboard down on the table. “Sure, what would you like to know?”

*So many things.* “I’ve been watching the news. That girl who’s missing, didn’t she work here?”

I see him stiffen uncomfortably, shifting in his seat. He nods. “She was an employee. We never had any issues with her, but I guess you never really know some people.”

“Do you think she’s a murderer?”

He shrugs. “No idea. The police are investigating it, and they really haven’t told us anything. We learn about the case from the news, just like everyone else.”

“There’s nothing you could tell me about that night? About her? Was she angry, scared, upset?” I pause, watching him squirm. “Was she drunk?”

“I’ve heard reports that she was drinking heavily, but it wasn’t anything I witnessed myself, or I would have sent her home early.”

“You sound like a responsible manager who strives to care for his employees.” Fuck. This guy isn’t going to give up anything more than what he gave to the police. Not like this. Not to someone he doesn’t know. The only chance I may have is to get under his skin. Get him to trust me. Maybe get him wasted.

“Thank you,” he says cautiously, raising a confused eyebrow at me.

“Sorry about the morbid line of questioning,” I say, leaning back in my chair. “I’m into true crime stuff.”

He nods slowly, and I can tell he’s buying it. “No worries. Usually people only ask how long we’ve been in business, or if our grouper is frozen or fresh.”

“So what is it?” I ask. “Frozen, or fresh?”

He smiles. “Fresh. Look out there,” he says, pointing toward the marina behind the Sunrise Motel and the line of six charter boats in the first lane. “We catch our own fish, and if we have to supplement, we always source locally.”

“Is that going to be on the test?”

He nods. “Everything is a test.”

“Noted.” I roll the ball of my tongue ring between my lips absently, and his eyes follow the motion.

“The job. You interested?” He asks, watching me expectantly.

*I’m going to hell for this.* “Yes.”

“Perfect, come back around three, and I’ll have you shadow Giana for the dinner rush.” The office phone clipped to his belt starts to beep, and he grabs it, studying the caller ID. “In fact, Giana just walked into the kitchen. Short dark hair. Go see if she can grab you a shirt from the gift shop. I’ve got to take this.” He steps out of his seat, puts the phone to his ear, and walks back toward the office beside the bar.

I slide out of my chair, watching Evan until he’s out of sight. I don’t know what to think about him yet, but he’s not what I expected. I figured he would be attractive. Based on his father’s portfolio, I figured he would be demanding. Controlling. Possibly narcissistic. But there’s something else there. Something that shook just a little when I started to question him, and his confidence wavered. I could see the cracks in his foundation, I just need to push him until they break.

I wander past the food window, sitting cold and empty as they set up. The server station is off to the side from the kitchen doors, and a guy with short brown hair and a rubber apron swings around the corner carrying two large empty glass racks. “Sorry. Coming through,” he says, pushing his way through the swinging doors. I stay out of his way, then step inside once he’s clear of the door, and directly into a wall. A human wall.

I look down, and my boots are toe to toe with other larger boots. I put my hands out, pushing against a black cotton Sandbar shirt.

“That’s the out,” he says, and I look up into his face. His eyes are as blue as arctic ice. Deep and magnetic. He raises an eyebrow in amusement. “One way in, one way out. Prevents collisions.” He has a full glass rack balanced on his shoulder, water dripping from the dishwasher onto the floor around me. *Zaden.*

“I suck at following directions.”

A smile teases at the corners of his mouth. “You suck at getting out of the way, too.”

I nod and step back, giving him space to get by. He disappears through the swinging doors. I scan the interior of the kitchen for Giana, but I don’t see

her anywhere. The doors swing open again, and Zaden walks through, slinging the empty glass rack back into place above the dish station.

“You need something, Leela?” He asks, drying his hands on a towel before tossing it onto the table near the grill.

“Giana. Evan said she could grab me a shirt. I’m starting on the dinner shift.”

He glances toward the back door. “She went out to smoke.” His gaze meets mine again, then he turns and strides toward the door. “Come on.”

I follow him to the gift shop, and he scans the shelves of shirts. He pulls down a purple tank top and hands it to me, his eyes drifting lingeringly on my body. “I took a guess.”

“You’re not wrong. I have a theme.”

“I know.” He glances toward the dining room, then back at me. “Shirts come out of your first check. Evan will want you to grab a few more after your first service, and he’ll discount them. But if you wait until Carolyn’s here, she’ll give them to you for free.”

“Thanks for the tip.” I turn toward the double doors to leave.

“Leela,” he says after me, and I turn back to face him. I hate that I’m answering to that. “Welcome to the shit show.”

I can’t help the amused smile that finds my lips. I nod and walk out.



THE LOBBY OF THE SUNRISE MOTEL IS BUSY AS I STEP INSIDE, WITH GUESTS wandering between the pool and the Motel’s small cafe space for sandwiches and drinks. I squeeze by a group of people examining the coupon wall, deciding what attractions to attend, and approach the front counter.

“Hey,” Raven says, glancing up from behind a pile of paperwork on the desk. “How did your interview go?”

“I start at three,” I reply, shoving my hands into my pockets. “So... good, I guess?”

“Congrats. It’s not a bad job. The Jacobsons are quirky, but you’ll get used to it. We have a good team.” The phone starts to ring, and she raises a hand to stop me. “Hold on a sec,” she says, disappearing into the back office. When she greets the caller, I carefully peer over the front of the desk and pull a dry-erase marker free from a cup of writing utensils. I slide it into my

pocket just as she hangs the phone back up.

“Sorry about that,” she says. “Did you need something?”

I shake my head. “No, I was just stopping through to say hi. I’ll catch up with you later.”

The loud thundering of a passing helicopter echoes through the halls of the motel. I follow the sound as it soars by, watching as it curves down the beach along the line of the land. By the colors and shape, I know it’s the Coast Guard. Still searching.

I glance back at Raven, her face softening as she chews her bottom lip. When the helicopter is out of sight, she returns her attention to me, takes a breath, and settles into her desk chair.

“They’re looking for her, aren’t they?” I ask, nodding at the beach. “That girl who went missing?”

Raven nods. “It’s been steady since early Saturday morning. I wonder how long they’ll search before they give up?”

I shrug. “I hope they don’t stop until they find her,” I answer honestly. “Did you know her? She worked at the Sandbar, right?”

Raven nods again. “Yeah. She started in April. Really fit in with everyone. Surfed. Hung out after work. Came to our shows. I liked her. When Evan brought her on at Aurora, I was skeptical because it’s really fast-paced, but she could handle herself. I don’t know, I just can’t believe all of this.”

“What happened?” I dare to ask. “That night when she went missing? Were you working? Did you talk to her?”

She shakes her head. “I spoke with her that morning, but I only worked first shift. I didn’t notice anything off. She had a bubbly personality, happy and optimistic, one that you can’t help but smile around. That day was no different. She was excited about the nightclub. Excited to spend time with Evan. We had plans to hit the beach on Sunday. She was supposed to be helping Mia with some videography stuff for the band. I never saw this coming. It’s like a bad dream,” she explains, glancing back at the beach.

I look away before she can see the emotion on my face. It’s hard to miss her, and even harder to pretend like it’s not destroying me. “I’m sorry,” I tell her after a moment, when I’ve pulled myself silently back together. “That you lost her. She sounded like a good friend.”

Raven nods. “Yeah. There was something about her that clicked with me. I don’t really mesh well with many women, but we had a lot of similar interests. And she was an awesome artist. Check this out,” she says, sliding

out of her chair and walking over to her backpack lying on the back counter.

She pulls out a sheet of paper, and hands it to me. I scan over the image, hand drawn, pen and ink, of a woman with dark hair and an electric guitar, singing on a stage. Behind her is a drummer, a bass player, and a pianist. The crowd is packed, with spotlights crossed in the background. The words across the top read 'Jupiter Crash', with concert details along the bottom. I recognize the artistry right away as Paige's.

"She did this?" I question.

"Yeah. I asked her to make us a flyer for the concert tomorrow night. She was mad talented."

I meet her gaze. "Hold on... Are you Jupiter Crash?"

A smile lifts at her lips, and she takes the flyer back from me, placing it on the counter and pointing at the lead singer. "I'm this one." Her finger moves across the page. "Ryan on bass. Nick on drums. Steph on piano. If you haven't met Ryan and Nick yet, you will. They also work at the Sandbar. Steph is Ryan's girlfriend."

"Holy shit," I exclaim. "I've heard of you, actually."

She laughs. "Are we a hit in Nebraska? Maybe we need to expand the tour."

I shake my head. "Yeah, maybe."

"Anyway, we're playing at the Sheds tomorrow night. You should come."

"The Sheds?"

She nods. "Down the beach next to Kaos Surf. It's West about a mile, on the right."

I fold up the flyer and slide it into my pocket. "I'll think about it." I walk back out of the office and up the stairs to my room, pausing on the walkway outside. I pull the flyer out of my pocket, studying the image. Paige was obsessed with this band. I've lost count of the number of pictures and videos she sent me from their concerts. I never knew Paige worked this closely with them.

My gaze strays to the Gulf, and I search the sea until I spot the boats. Bobbing just offshore, diver down flags flying, I watch them search for my sister. I want to ask them what they've seen. If they have any leads. If they're holding out hope like I am.

It's been four days since she disappeared. All I can do is wait. And I suck at waiting almost as much as I suck at following directions.

I walk into my room and shut the door, striding over to the mirrored



closet doors built into the wall across from the bed. I test the doors, sliding one behind the other on the track to see if it will completely conceal, then slide it back into place. I pull the dry-erase marker out of my pocket and write PAIGE at the top of the mirror in large, bold letters. Everything starts with Paige. I wasn't lying when I said I'm into true crime stuff, and it's time to pull from that useless wealth of crime TV knowledge and figure this shit out.

Beside Paige, I write Officer Henrich, Rose Whitman, and the date and time of the incident. My web continues down to the next level, and I write Pelican Beach Police Department. Apart from Rose, Officer Henrich, and Paige, they're the only other people I know for a fact to be on-site at the accident.

On the next level, I write Evan - who left at 2 AM. I don't like him, and I don't know if that's why I'm so hyper-focused on him. I know I have to consider other avenues of information, because there's an entire restaurant of people who saw her that night and might know something. I need details. I need to know who was working that night. Who was closing. Where she was going, if she was meeting anyone.

Next to Evan I write a large question mark. Then add the other Aurora cocktail servers - Raven and Natalie. Paige would have been on the way to meet them. I like Raven. I don't know her at all, but she feels genuine. She's also the first person I've found since I arrived in Pelican Beach who seems to care about Paige.

Then I add Mia Knight, Paige's roommate. I need to know more about her.

Beneath that row, I add Giana, Nick, Carolyn, and Zaden. Tapping the end of the marker absently against the side of the mirror, I stare at his name. Zaden. I'm intrigued by him, more than I should be. I have to squash this. I don't need distractions. I need information. And to go the fuck back to California.

I slowly slide the mirrored door aside to conceal it, then stand from the bed. I wander over to the window and look out at the ocean, watching the boats gently rocking in the marina. Behind the Sandbar fleet is a line of sailboats of varying sizes, sails wrapped tight, with polished teak wood shining like gold in the sun. The line is punctuated occasionally by a commercial shrimper or a dive boat, with larger sport fishing vessels anchored in the third row, and a houseboat on the end.

A familiar figure steps out of the back door of the houseboat and onto the

dock, and I squint against the morning sun to see her better. She's wearing a Sandbar shirt, with a slender frame and dark brown hair falling to her shoulders. I know her, yet I've never met her. Mia. I recognize her from the photos Paige would send me.

A man stands shirtless on the boat, leaning against the railing as he watches her leave. Even at a distance I know the shape of him.

Zaden.

Curious, I step out onto the second-floor walkway and watch Mia's journey down the catwalk to the Sandbar. She has her apron folded under her arm, and her server book in her hand. She must work the first shift today. My gaze drifts back to Zaden. He's beautiful with the sun on his skin, his jeans slung low on his hips, and his muscled arms folded over his chest. He watches Mia until she's out of sight, then runs a hand through his tousled dark hair.

I should move. Maybe hide. I definitely shouldn't be staring, but I can't help it. It doesn't take long for his attention to shift to me, and our eyes meet across the distance. I can feel my pulse pounding in my chest, and in the grip of my hands on the railing. I curse under my breath. I don't even know him. He has a girlfriend. He shouldn't be able to affect me like this.

I turn back to my room, and shut the door behind me. Striding to the closet, I slide the murder mirror back out and pick up the marker. I underline Mia's name with an arrow toward Zaden and write '*girlfriend?*' beneath it. It's a small town. I'm sure there will be a lot of intersecting arrows before I'm done here. I cap the marker and sit back on the bed, staring at the black names on the murder mirror.

This is where I start. Each piece of the puzzle has a place, and I'm not leaving until I figure out exactly where each one goes. When the police won't give me answers, this is how I get them.

Myself.

## Chapter 7

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### *Ivy*

The Sandbar in the afternoon is a completely different atmosphere. Servers hustle trays of food and drink out to the deck, tables full, with a line extending out the doors and down the sidewalk. The dinner rush hasn't even officially begun, and they're at capacity.

I slide in between the waiting bodies, passing through the crowd to the server station. Evan is standing at the food window traying food and barking at the cooks for items as he pulls tickets. When he passes a tray off to a waiting server, his eyes catch mine.

"Ivy, welcome," he says, motioning toward the server walking a tray through the dining room. Stress beads in the sweat on his forehead, and I can tell he's out of his element on expo. "Grab that tray jack and follow Natalie, then come back here, and I'll show you around." He turns to the window and pulls another ticket, flopping a large tray on the ledge beside the food.

I trace Natalie's wake, propping open the jack for her when she reaches the table, and helping her distribute the plates. I monitor her closely, her sassy blonde curls bouncing in a high ponytail on her head, her full lips painted a deep maroon, with a wide smile and a sultry laugh. She has a chipper, flirty vibe with the customers, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes.

Natalie. The other Aurora cocktail server with Raven, and one of my top-tier curiosities.

The table requests several items, so I grab a pitcher of tea and a handful of napkins, pausing at the kitchen window.

"I need a side of ranch and BBQ sauce, please," I shout.

"BBQ sauce is twenty-five cents extra. I need to see a ticket," one of the cooks answer from the back. I watch him shaking pans over a fire and realize

he's the only one in a white chef's jacket.

"You guys charge extra for BBQ sauce?" I ask skeptically, wondering why they're nickel and diming condiments when they have a restaurant full of people out there.

"Sauce is made in-house, this is a policy. It's on the menu. You should read it. The customer should read it. Y'all can read it together. Then send me a ticket," he replies flatly, never turning around to address me.

"Relax, Lloyd," Zaden says, rolling his eyes as he walks out from behind the grill to the cooler doors along the wall. He grabs several soufflé cups of sauce from a tray and closes the door, sliding them across the window to me. "She's new. Cut her some slack."

Lloyd shakes his head. "Next one needs a ticket, new girl," he shouts. I share an astonished look with Zaden.

"He takes himself very seriously," I whisper as I grab the sauces. An amused smile tugs at Zaden's lips, but he keeps his mouth shut tight. I walk back to Natalie's table, filling drinks and ensuring they have everything. When I return, Evan calls for a ribeye time and sticks the ticket he's holding back in the hanging line.

"We have a few minutes, come on. I'll show you around real quick," he says, and I nod, following him. He leads me around the dining room, pointing out table numbers, bar seat numbers, high tops, and booths. Sections are six to eight tables, and they rotate every day. Live music on the center stage on the weekends, and dinner service ends at eleven. Friday through Sunday, they open for night club hours until four in the morning following dinner service. He leads me up one of the spiral staircases, and along the wall is another line of high-top tables, with space to dance near the railing and a smaller secondary bar.

"Check this out," he says, leading me down a long, darkened hallway to a door. When he opens it, sunlight floods the room, and we step out onto a large half-circle deck overlooking the ocean. Posh little seating areas are arranged along the railing, surrounding a large round jacuzzi in the center. Evan pushes a button on the wall, and several gas fireplaces leap to life near the chairs with mirrored containers of dancing orange flames.

I walk up to the railing, looking out at the ocean. The salty breeze tumbles loose tendrils of purple hair across my face, but it can't obscure the boats. Not much farther away than before, and still searching.

"It's even better at night," he says, stepping up beside me. "With the

lights, and people dancing. We get VIP clients from time to time. I take most of them over to Aurora, but people like it here. It's laid back."

"Aurora?" I ask, glancing over at him. "Your Dad owns that one too, right?"

He nods. "He owns eight businesses on the beach and two more in town. I like Aurora. Nice views, good atmosphere. Like a little piece of the big city in a tiny town." He meets my gaze. "You should check it out sometime."

"I will." If that's what it takes to get under his skin, I will.

"Come on," he motions. "Let me show you the kitchen." I follow him back down to the kitchen and through the swinging doors. It's a chaos of motion. People moving around each other, grabbing pans, plating food. It smells divine. Rock music blares from a Bluetooth speaker on a shelf near the grill, and I watch Zaden flipping steaks and shuffling meat in tune with the beat. Flames lick at his tattooed forearms, moving skillfully over the grill, his shirt pulled taut against the muscles in his back as he arranges plates and juggles utensils.

By the third time Evan says "Ivy," I remember that's my name and glance over at him.

"Shit, yes. Sorry. I'm just... hungry, and it smells good in here," I cover.

"Employee locker room is over there. Dry storage is through here," he motions, moving on, showing me where to stock to-go containers, straws, and napkins. "Walk-in cooler is this one," he adds, opening the heavy metal door to reveal lines of perfectly organized shelves. "We slice two buckets of lemons in the morning, and they stay on the bottom shelf by the door. Then we refill the iced bucket by the drink machine as needed. Bar fruit is over there, help Nick out when he needs it because we're down a bartender right now."

I nod. "Got it."

"Good. Then follow Giana, and see if there is anything you can do for her. Grab a menu. Learn it. Know the sides, you're going to need to list them. Drinks, we carry Pepsi, not Coke. Full bar, obviously. Drink specials are on the board beside the hostess stand. There, on the wall beside the window," he points toward a dry wipe board where several things are messily scribbled in black. "Lloyd writes our specials, fish of the day, and any 86 items. Watch that. It will change throughout the service. Any questions?" He pauses, then holds up a hand to stop me. "About the restaurant, not about true crime, media rumor-mill bullshit."

I swallow my actual response. “I guess not.”

“Good. Let me know if you need anything.” He walks off back through the kitchen doors, and into the dining room.

“Ivy, huh?” I hear from beside me, and glance over to see Zaden passing through toward the walk-in. “So you do have a name.”

*This guy.* “Yeah, I just wasn’t giving it to you.” I watch as he pauses, eyebrow raised, with a glimmer of challenge in his eyes. I stride past him, not giving him a chance to counter. I find Giana in the madness of the dining room, and assist with her tables. She eventually finds me a lap apron and a notepad, and I tie it on, sliding the notepad into the front pocket. I take notes, but not about the ingredients in the fry batter, or whether we use peanut or vegetable oil. I’m writing names. I’m meeting people, and trying to figure out where they would fall on the murder mirror.

When the tables are caught up, Giana motions for me to follow her, and we head through the kitchen and out the back door to the employee deck. She lights a cigarette and leans back against the railing.

“As soon as we start the two-for-one drafts, it stacks the tables. Get ready.”

“More than it already is?” I ask, honestly impressed. The Sandbar definitely sets a new bar for high volume in my work experience.

She nods. “Like we need bait to bring these guys in. Seems like it’s Alabama and Tennessee this week. Rowdy drunk, and tip like shit.”

I laugh. “I haven’t learned the cycles here yet.”

“The Southerners are always the first,” a voice says from across the deck. I glance over as Raven stands from the picnic bench, taking a pull from her cigarette. “As soon as school lets out, they’re down here. Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee. Mississippi should be coming in soon. They’re just like Giana said, obnoxiously drunk, but super flirty and always want the cheapest beer on tap. They keep their tips to cover the \$1 Totino’s pizzas and Natural Ice suitcases they’re carting up to their hotel rooms. If they do tip, it’s never more than \$5.”

“They’re also the drunk jumpers,” Giana adds. “Several of them try it every year, climbing balcony to balcony at the condos. Or jump for the pool.”

“Remember that one last year that made it to the pool but hit the shallow end?” Raven says, shaking her head. “Yeah, the Southerners are the more chaotic bunch. But they can also be a lot of fun, if you like that rambunctious, *hold-my-beer-while-I-light-this-firework-the-size-of-my-head* brand of fun.”

“It has a place,” I agree.

“East Coast and Texas usually come later,” Raven continues. “With motorcycles. Lots of loud, revving, leather-clad, weaving through traffic Harleys. They tip better, but they underestimate the sun and the rip currents. So they’re as red as lobsters, and typically the ones who need to be rescued a mile offshore after drifting away on unicorn floats.”

“Those make national news sometimes, even where I’m from,” I add. “Crazy tourists, Disney World, hurricanes, and Florida Man. That’s all we know about you guys. It’s not a super appealing image, but it seems to do the trick,” I say, waving a hand toward the packed parking lot.

Raven stubs out her smoke. “Would you visit a zoo if it didn’t have wild animals?”

I shrug. “Bland lives need spicy adventure.”

“Exactly,” Raven agrees. “It’s a different beast in the offseason, though. It’s like a ghost town. Half the restaurant and retail stores close and won’t reopen until late February. We still get tourists, but they’re elderly northerners here to take advantage of cheap room rates. Right now, they’re \$200/night. But over winter, they’re \$200/week.”

“They’re all about the deals,” Giana adds. “They cut coupons, buy things on sale, and when they return north in February, they take everything they don’t use back to the store for a refund. They will take your condiment bottles and sugar packets, and use a calculator to compute exactly ten percent for the tip. To the penny. Which is not a lot, considering they used the maximum combination of coupons on a senior dinner, with water.”

“Have you ever had one of those moments when you start to doubt your life choices?” I ask sarcastically, glancing out at the waves crashing on the beach.

“Nah,” Giana says, shaking her head. “When you live in the zoo for so long, you forget if you work there, or if you’re the attraction.”

“Have you always lived here?” I ask, looking back at her.

Giana nods. “For the most part.”

“Pelican Beach is one of those places that sucks you in,” Raven says. “And never lets you go. You get stuck in this endless cycle of feast and famine. Summers are rich, with \$300 tip days, working doubles, maybe a shift off here and there. You can see the sun, but you can’t enjoy it. Everyone will tell you to bank the cash, but that’s hard. Because six months out of the year you’re poor, and when you have money again, you want to barhop.

Shop. Throw all your money at whatever will quiet your mind and help you paste on that fake smile for the next sixteen-hour shift. During the winter, most people are laid off. If you were smart, claimed all your tips, and worked at least six consecutive months, you could apply for unemployment. Which helps. Most pick up two or three retail or fast food jobs, and eat Top Raman until spring.”

“You’ve lived here a long time,” I deduct. “You must love it if you stay.”

Raven shakes her head. “I stay for personal shit.” She nods at the Sunrise Motel. “I can’t leave my Mom here alone. We don’t have any other family, and she loves it here. She’s one of those people who fully embrace the beach life. Living paycheck to paycheck, rent but never own, her nights spent at the dive singing 80s karaoke. She stacks her MLM businesses, lives in flip-flops, decorates her home in seashells, and wears a jacket when it drops below eighty degrees. She is the embodiment of local Florida.”

“It’s hard leaving a place that has been home for so long,” I add. “Like learning to walk again.”

Raven nods. “Right now, we just exist. We live to work, one day at a time. Who knows, maybe one day it will be different. Change will hit without warning, and without recourse. And we will have to evolve.”

I glance over at Giana. “Is that how it is? You’re just waiting for a catalyst to come along?”

She nods with a sly smile. “I always hope it’s going to be a man. Rich, handsome, likes to travel.”

“Good Lord, you guys,” I say, shaking my head. “For two people who sell Florida for a living, you really suck at it.” They laugh, and I turn to head back inside.

I walk into the cubby of the server station and lean back against the wall to stare at my notes. I add details about Giana and Raven. Other servers I just met, Mason Oliver and Rhonda Miller. The kitchen staff with Chef Lloyd, Katrina on sauté, and Ryan in dish. I tap my pen against the notebook, glancing back at the hustle of the dining room. I should check my notes against the employee schedule to make sure I’m not missing anyone.

Evan’s shadow eclipses the light from the dining room as he steps into the narrow space of the server station with me. I hurriedly tuck my notebook into my apron.

“How’s it going?” He asks, filling up his styrofoam to-go cup with water.

“Good,” I say, shuffling around items on the table and throwing away



random straw wrappers.

“You starting to get it? Make sure to watch Giana on the register. The modification menus can get confusing.”

I nod. “I’m watching...” My gaze falls on the wall behind the tea urns where a bulletin board of photos hangs. In the pictures are Sandbar employees, laughing and spending time together. Birthdays. Holidays. At work. On the beach. I focus in on one, my heart thudding faster in my chest. It’s Paige, standing beside Natalie and Raven in a club. Evan looms behind Paige, his arms wrapped possessively around her. Clutched to Raven’s chest is a clear tray with an inlaid ring of blue neon. It has to be the Aurora nightclub.

“I’m watching... everything. Hey, is that the girl?” I say, pointing her out to Evan. “You guys look pretty close.” I study him closely as he squints at the photo and sighs. He tugs it off the board and drops it into the trash beside me.

“I haven’t had a chance to clean everything out since it happened. Sorry about that.”

“Nothing to be sorry for, right?” I ask, my hands tightening into fists. “It’s not like you had anything to do with what happened.”

A woman walks into the station to join us before he can answer. She shakes her brunette hair free from its tie, combs her fingers through, and ties it back. I recognize her from Paige’s photos, and the marina this morning. It’s Mia.

“Where’s Giana? I double-sat her. She was the only one with open tables,” Mia says, glancing between Evan and I.

“Mia, this is Ivy,” Evan says. “She just started today. She’s shadowing Giana, who is...?”

I jab my thumb toward the back door.

“Out back, apparently. Let me grab her.” Evan turns to leave, and Mia steps quickly out of his way.

“Hey, new girl. I heard we hired a replacement for Paige already. Not wasting any time, is he?”

“Nope,” I say, shaking my head. “Out with the old, I guess.”

Mia nods. “I guess so.” She shrugs. “Anyway, I’m Mia. If you need any help, grab me. I’m working the upper bar today, but I’ll be in and out as my apps come up.”

“Thanks,” I say, studying her as she shuffles plates in the window.

“Katrina,” she shouts at the line. “Where’s my Scampi Dip for 212?”

“I’m waiting on bread,” Katrina yells back, casting a glance down the line. “Ryan?”

“You hear that beep? That’s the oven. You can grab it or dump these fry baskets in about fifteen seconds. Your choice,” Ryan replies.

Katrina rolls her eyes, and places her sauté pan on a back burner with low heat. She strides down the line and disappears into the back prep area.

“We’re down a cook right now,” Mia explains, turning around to lean back against the stainless steel expo table. “The kitchen doesn’t usually get weeded so fast. Plus, Natalie came and snagged my dip for one of her tables, so this one is on the fly. Otherwise, I wouldn’t hassle them.”

“Did someone quit?” I ask, watching the cooks work through the window.

Mia shakes her head. “No, he’ll be back. I think. Chris usually works fry. Zaden spoke with him yesterday, and he said he’s taking some time to digest. Then he’ll be back.”

I narrow my eyes. “Digest?”

Her eyes meet mine. “After Rose,” she says, swallowing hard and looking away. “To make arrangements and everything.”

“He knew her?” I ask, and a flash of pain crosses her face. She nods.

“They were engaged.”

Fuck.

“She was on her way here to see him that night. She usually gets off work earlier than he does, then rides over here to wait for him.”

I grit my teeth and look down at the floor. “Jesus.”

She nods. “Chris will be back. But he’s a little fucked up right now. The guys are covering for him until then.” Her eyes follow Katrina as she rounds the corner with a fresh Lexan of croutons for the dip. “This may be a madhouse, but you’ll come to find that the madness keeps us close. We’re all family here.” Her gaze slides to the bar as Natalie walks up to Nick, laughing as she says something flirty to him under her breath, and grabs her two margaritas. Nick doesn’t play into it, though. “Well, almost all of us are family. Others have their head so far up Evan’s ass-”

“Ugh. Please, don’t say anything more about Evan’s ass,” Katrina says, shaking the ick off as she slides Mia’s appetizer toward her.

“Thank you, love,” Mia says sweetly. “Now, don’t let Natalie take any more of my shit.”

“What do I look like? Expo police? 219 Will be up in thirteen minutes.” She throws her hands up dramatically, and turns back toward her station.

“May the odds be ever in your favor.”

Mia sighs.

“When it comes up, I’ll run it,” I offer. “I’m just support tonight anyway.”

She smiles, sliding the app platter onto her palm and grabbing a stack of small plates. “You’re awesome. I like you already,” she says.

I wait until she leaves, then bend over the trash can, and pluck the photo of Paige out of the rubbish where Evan cast it. I rub it clean on the side of my apron, then slide it into my pocket. I glance back to the doors where Evan exited, questions gnawing uncomfortably at my brain. He tossed her in the trash like she was nothing. Four days out, and she means absolutely nothing to him. Not even a hesitation. They dated for nearly two months. Even with everything she’s being accused of, I expected more. Any sort of emotional reaction that would prove she mattered, but his expression is hollow. Dismissive even.

Giana walks through the kitchen doors tying her apron strings behind her back, and I call out to her.

“I’ll grab drinks on 14 if you can get 17,” I offer, and she nods, weaving her way through the crowd toward the deck.

Evan emerges from the kitchen behind her, crosses to the bar, and pulls a ring of keys from his pocket. He unlocks a door beside the bar and disappears inside. I wait a moment for him to return, but he doesn’t.

I make drinks. I run food. I fill condiment bottles. I smile at rude people and apologize for long ticket times. I talk about the weather. I talk about town attractions I know nothing about. I tell drunk men I’m unavailable. And all the while, I’m scouring the building. Looking for more clues that my sister once existed in this place.

Every room has a camera mounted to the ceiling. Red light blinking, watching. All the dining rooms have at least one, including the decks, kitchen, and storage. I glance inside the walk-in, but surprisingly it’s camera-free. I guess it’s too cold. I trace a band of wires strung tight against the ceiling, running above the dish pit and through a hole in the wall. Just outside the expo window is the bar, and the mysterious door Evan entered. All the wires are fed into that room. It has to be some sort of security room.

Still no Evan.

I need an excuse to invade his space.

I walk to the register and input the food order I just picked up from the

new table. When I reach the last dinner, I put in a porterhouse instead of a ribeye, and send it.

I stride into the kitchen and over to the grill window. Zaden looks up as I approach.

“I fucked up on 13. That porterhouse needs to be a ribeye.”

He scans the tickets, and pulls several more out of the printer. He separates them, then grabs a pen off the counter to scribble a quick note.

“Fixed,” he says, his eyes meeting mine. “The porterhouse is the last one, Leela. Just watch your sizes, they’re in order. Fillet is 6oz, sirloin is 8oz, ribeye is 10oz, and the porterhouse is 14oz. It won’t say the actual name of the steak until you print the ticket.”

“I know. I screwed it up on purpose just so you would talk to me.”

His eyes follow my every movement with an intensity I’m not prepared for. “There are better ways to get my attention than fucking with my food costs,” he says. His tone is flat, but he can’t hide the amusement in his eyes. “Hit the radial for duplicate ticket when Evan fixes that void so I don’t fire two ribeyes, please.”

“And miss out on a free lunch? Not a chance.”

He rolls his eyes and turns back to the grill. “Did you need anything else, Leela?”

“Nothing you can give me,” I reply softly, automatically, answering more than his question without realizing it.

“You sure about that?” He asks, glancing at me over his shoulder. His voice is lowered beneath the chaos of the kitchen, intended only for me. Shit. I didn’t think he could hear me.

I turn and exit because I definitely don’t have time to figure out whatever that look was, or the dangerous way it makes me feel. I walk to the bar and pause at the door to Evan’s room. I knock, then wait. I can hear a rustling inside, and after several seconds the door opens. Evan leans against the frame, his expression expectant.

“What can I do for you?” He questions, crossing his arms across his chest.

“Can you fix a ticket for me? I hit the wrong steak size. I already let the kitchen know.” I glance over his shoulder, studying the room. It’s dark, and smells like cigarettes. A thin ribbon of smoke rises from an ashtray on an old mahogany desk, and a small side lamp sheds a dim light across the room from on top of a metal file cabinet. The back wall houses a large, built-in

safe, with a tower of blinking lights on a glass shelving unit beside it. All the electronics in the tower are attached to the cords dropping from the ceiling, and connected to the computer on the desk. I recognize the login screen on the computer as the same one we use for the dining software. “Is this the cash room? I need a \$50 broken, too.”

He nods and opens the door wider so I can step inside. He sits down in the desk chair, and it rattles as he rolls backward toward the safe. “You can get change from the bar. But since you’re here, I’ll handle it.” He presses his thumb against the biometric scanner on the safe, and it opens. I pull out my server book and hand him the cash so he can break it.

“It was table 13 for the void,” I tell him, looking over at the computer. “Can I log in here for you to fix it?”

“Yeah, pull it up,” he answers, shutting the safe back with a loud metal thud. He hands me a stack of bills, and I shove them into my apron before typing my code into the computer. I find the ticket and take a step back.

“The porterhouse needs to be a ribeye. Everything else is right.” I watch him carefully as he taps around on the screen, makes the correction, then clears the void with his code. Four digits, just like everybody else. I say them over and over again in my head to remember. When he closes the software, I head for the exit.

“Thanks,” I say, pushing the door open. His hand covers mine on the knob, and I pull my hand back quick, glancing up at him. I hadn’t even heard him stand up.

“You’re doing really well today,” he says. “If you need anything, you can come to me. Anytime. My door is always open.”

I jab my thumb toward the door. “It’s locked, actually.”

He smiles. “Figuratively. Not literally.”

I nod. “I’ll remember that.” I run a hand nervously through my hair, then stuff my hands in my apron, wrapping them protectively over the loose cash I’m responsible for.

“Have you learned anything interesting today?”

I glance around him at the computer, and the login screen I now have a password for. “Yeah,” I answer. “It’s been enlightening.”

“Good,” he says. “I’m going to have you close with us tonight so you can experience all the sidework. There’s a concert tomorrow night, Raven’s band is playing at the Sheds, so I’m cutting most of you guys early tomorrow. Rhonda and Natalie volunteered to close.”

“You want me to go to a concert?” I question, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Everyone goes, you should check it out. Get wasted, bond with the team,” he suggests.

“I’ll think about it,” I reply, reaching up to place my hand on his arm, and lingering there for just a little too long. “Thank you for all your help today. It’s been nice getting to know more about you. And the restaurant.”

He nods as we walk out into the bar. “Like I said. Anytime. Open door.” His statement is punctuated by the slamming of the office door as it closes, and locks, just behind us.

As Evan strides into the dining room, I turn back toward the server station and see Zaden standing at the drink machine filling his water glass. His ice-blue eyes are fixed on me, so intently I can feel his attention like a weight in my chest. My pulse quickens, and I lick my bottom lip nervously.

He disappears back into the kitchen, and I don’t know how to feel about this exchange. Or him. For a moment, that look felt almost possessive, and part of me liked it way more than I should. But that’s not why I’m here.

Yet, I still can’t help the curiosity that lingers, toying with the loose threads at the edge of my sanity like a playful kitten. The urge to explore whatever this is, and not give a fuck about tomorrow.

What does it matter in the end, if Paige is really gone?

## Chapter 8

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### *Zaden*

With the flick of my wrist, the low rumble of the Chevy pickup dissipates, and the silence creeps in. I open the door and step out of the cab, shoving my keys into my pocket as I grab a surfboard out of the back. It's nearly two in the morning, but the lights are still on inside the Sandbar. Surprising, but not unusual for a Tuesday. Evan regularly plans weeknight projects to ramp up for the weekend.

I begin descending the catwalk to the marina when I hear a voice call out to me, and I glance over at the restaurant.

"Nick?" I ask, my attention drawn to the darkened figure lounging on the picnic table. "How are you still here? Didn't you get cut with the servers?"

He laughs. "Fucking Mia, man. Signed us up for deep cleaning tonight. She may need the hours, but I need sleep." He takes a pull off his cigarette, and I stride over to the deck to join him, leaning my board up against the back of the building.

"You about done?"

Nick shakes his head and flops back onto the tabletop. "No idea." He sighs. "You just get back from Ava's?"

I nod. "Yeah, we had a lot to catch up on."

He glances over his shoulder. "Is that a new board?"

I stuff my hands into my pockets and wander out to the railing. "It's a new shape I'm testing. A swallowtail with some updates and a different skeg design."

"Looks killer, man. Let me know if you want my opinion on how it rides."

I smile. "If I need someone to tumble it around on the ocean floor, you'll

be my first call.”

“Hey, you want it broken in or not?” He argues, and I laugh.

Light lingers along the ocean curl and the slide of the whitewater toward the shore. At first, I think it’s moonlight. But it’s not.

“Bioluminescence?” I ask, watching the swirl of blue water race along the sand. Nick leans up on his hands to peer into the ocean, and makes a satisfied sound.

“Apparently so. Well, that explains it.”

I arch an eyebrow in question. “Explains what?”

He points down the beach, and I follow his direction until I spy a silhouette on the shore. A slender body with long legs, and just enough moonlight to pick up the violet highlights in her hair. She drags her feet in the surf, playing with the ribbons of blue water that wash back into the sea.

“Leela,” I say.

“She’s been out there for over an hour, just wandering.”

“I’ll be back,” I tell him, pulling off my boots and socks, and leaping nimbly over the side of the railing into the sand.

“Really? It’s going to be like that?” He yells after me, amused, but I don’t answer.

I jog up the beach, my bare feet silent in the sand. The breeze tumbles her hair around her shoulders, and she looks up as I approach. For a moment, our eyes meet, and I try to read her face.

There’s a sadness in her I can’t explain, buried just beneath the surface. I catch it from time to time. It’s not something that she shows to everyone. She glances back out to sea, and I match her pace.

“Tracers like these are usually drug-induced,” Ivy says, her tone soft and curious. “It’s fascinating.”

“It’s algae,” I add, a smile tilting at the corners of my lips. “What makes it so interesting is that you can see how the water moves. How it curls. Where it speeds up and where it fades out. All the living things. Look,” I motion toward the span of water between the sandbars where several fish swim, with blue glowing bubbles swirling in their wake.

“Cool,” she says, smiling.

My gaze falls to the sand, and I scoop up a piece of broken sand dollar, running my fingers over it in my palm to test the texture. Taking a step toward the ocean, I fling it, skimming it across the water in a series of blue ripples until it slides beneath an oncoming breaker.



“So, Nebraska girl. Of all the tiny beach towns in Florida, how did you end up in this one?”

She shrugs. “Just luck, I guess. Fate. Destiny. Poor and impulsive life decisions.” She looks over at me, and our eyes meet again. Flecks of gold shimmer in their emerald depths, capturing the magic in the moonlight like the luminescent sea. “What about you? Have you always lived here?”

I nod. “For the most part. My mom moved us around a lot. We ended up in Pelican Beach when I started middle school.”

“You like it here,” she states confidently. “It fits you.”

I laugh. “Yeah? How so?”

“The madness of the crowd and the traffic, offset by the serenity of the ocean. Side by side, occasionally intertwined. A balance.” She rolls the ball of her tongue ring absently between her lips, and glances back out to sea. “Beauty and chaos.”

My pulse leaps. “You’re perceptive.”

“I’m observant.”

“You’re an enigma.”

A smile teases at her lips. “I’m really not.”

“Okay, then fill in the pieces. Tell me something about you. Something no one else knows.”

Her gaze slides back to mine, studying me curiously. “That’s personal.”

“If you want it to be.”

She sighs, shaking her head. “I don’t like the way you get inside my head.”

“I said something I don’t know.”

She bites her lip to stop the spread of her smile. “I don’t know anyone here. Essentially, I could tell you anything, and there’s no one to disprove it.”

I nod. “Valid. But my challenge still stands.”

“Why?” She questions. “What’s your interest?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I ask, a slow smirk sliding across my lips.

She shakes her head. “I don’t know what to do with you.”

“Also something I already know. Try again.”

She lowers her voice conspiratorially and steps closer to me, her arm brushing against mine. “Sometimes, in my dreams,” she looks up, and her eyes lock with mine in the darkness. “Everything is made out of tacos.”

I sigh. “Never mind.”

She rolls her eyes. “Sometimes, I use sarcasm to push people away

because I don't know how to actually connect with anyone."

I glance back at her. That one was true. "Why does that scare you?"

"Vulnerability doesn't scare you?"

I shake my head. "Regret scares me."

"I guess you've never regretted being vulnerable."

The edge in her voice shakes me, and I want to break whoever made her feel that way.

"You scare me."

"Don't worry," she says. "I'm not here for you."

"I can change that."

She laughs, then feeds my line back to me. "Okay, then fill in the pieces. Tell me something about you that no one else knows."

I shake my head incredulously, digging into my pocket to retrieve a cigarette and a lighter. I slide the cigarette between my lips and light it. Pulling until it's cherry, I knock the ash off before offering it to her. She takes it from me, her hand brushing against mine and sending an electric shiver across my skin. I watch her breathe deeply as the ember brightens against the darkened beach.

Damn, I'm in trouble.

As the smoke curls from between her lips on a sigh, I shake my head again.

*Deep. Fucking. Trouble.*

"For years, I've trained in MMA. I compete from time to time, but nothing professional. Sometimes I have to hit things to feel better. This isn't a secret. However, the reason I started training is. When I was a kid, a guy broke into my home and beat the shit out of my Stepdad, then tossed around my sister and I. I was ten. I chased him off, but I couldn't stop him. Night after night, I couldn't sleep. I was waiting for him to come back and finish the job. In a way, I still feel like I'm waiting. So I learned how to fight back." I swallow hard. "I've never told anyone that before."

She glances over at me. "Did they catch him?"

I shake my head. "I gave the description to police, and the sketch artist was spot on. Broad, dark hair, dark eyes. He had this tattoo on his left arm, three large skulls stacked up from his wrist, with a sword passing through all three. The end of the blade extended down to his knuckles. I thought they would find him, but nothing ever came of it. The investigation went cold. And just like that," I snap my fingers. "Everything was different." My eyes

search hers. “You were right about the chaos in me. The balance I’m still searching for.”

“The balance is that you’re still here, fighting. And you learned how to tip the scale. When you stop fighting, you lose.”

“What are you fighting?” The question catches her off guard, and she runs a hand through her hair, looking out to sea.

“I don’t even know anymore. It keeps changing shape.”

I shrug. “Maybe you just need to tip the scale.”

She nods. “I’m trying to. Fuck if I’m not tired of fighting, though. For everything.”

I feel that. Deeper than she knows.

“It helps to hit something tangible,” I offer. “It materializes all the shit in your head into something you can hurt back.”

She smiles. “Like you?” She turns toward me, walking backward to maintain her distance.

I cock an eyebrow at her. “I dare you.”

“You have no idea how dangerous I can be.”

I nod. “I have an idea.”

She smirks, starts to turn, then swings at my head. I duck, grab her wrist, and twist it behind her back in a move that pulls her flush against my chest, with her other arm pinned under mine.

She struggles, her breath warm against my neck as she peers up at me from beneath a curtain of purple hair. I can feel her smooth legs between mine, her feet in the sand, her breasts heaving as she catches her breath. The fit of her against me is perfect. Delicate curves against the muscles and edges of me.

“You balled your fist before you swung.”

She smiles. “You’re good at this.”

I nod, and casually take a pull from the cigarette with my free hand. She struggles against me, and I release her.

“Want to try again?”

“When you least expect it,” she replies.

When she moves away, the moonlight catches a collection of lines and colors on the inside of her forearm. Curious, I catch her wrist, and she stills, glancing up at me.

“What’s this?” I ask, moving her arm into the light and running my thumb over the image. I smile. “I didn’t know you had a tattoo.”

I trace the intricate lines around in a circle. A Fibonacci spiral overlapping a watercolor ocean wave, with words beneath.

“All the oceans touch,” I read, looking back at her.

She swallows hard, and pulls her arm from my hand. “It’s just something someone said to me once that made sense. Like, we’re all connected. Despite time or distance or circumstance. We exist together as one world.” She slides her hands back into her pockets.

I raise an eyebrow at her. “The ocean as a metaphor for the interconnectedness of life. Very un-Nebraska of you,” I comment.

She glances over at me. “Are we judging people based on tattoos now?” Her gaze travels down my arms. “If that’s the case, where do you want me to start?”

I smile. “I’ve never met a woman who doesn’t like to talk about herself. I have to start assuming things at some point.”

“Assume all you want. I’m mysterious for a reason.”

“To drive me crazy?”

“Yes, exactly that,” she replies sarcastically. “Or, I don’t know. You could use your overactive deductive reasoning skills to determine why a woman would want to put twelve hundred miles between her past and present.”

I take a pull from my cigarette and pass it over to her. “You don’t have to tell me today. I’ll get it out of you eventually.”

“I applaud your confidence, as misplaced as it may be.” She takes the cigarette from me and hits it.

In the distance, I hear the cackle of Mia’s laughter echoing down the beach. They run across the back deck of the Sandbar and cross the beach toward us. I sigh.

“Doesn’t anyone sleep around here?” Ivy asks, arching an eyebrow.

I shake my head. “Not during the summer. Winters are for sleeping.”

“Holy shit,” Mia says, running into the water. “I haven’t seen it like this in ages.” She splashes through the shallow water in a shower of blue sparks.

“I thought you were going home,” I shout toward Nick, and he shakes his head.

“You know all I do is chase this girl,” he replies with a smile as she stalks back to him. His hands slide down her wet body as he dips his head, and takes her mouth with a kiss. I roll my eyes and glance over at Ivy, catching her strange yet amused stare. My eyes narrow.

“What?”

She looks away. “Oh, nothing.”

“Not nothing,” I challenge.

“I was just wondering if he knows about you guys?”

“You guys?”

“You know I saw you this morning, right?”

A smile slowly moves across my lips. “Ah. That.”

“Best friend’s girl,” she says sarcastically, shaking her head in disbelief.

“What if I told you he knows?” I ask, and her mouth drops. “It was his idea.”

“Mia,” she breathes. “I don’t know whether to be surprised or impressed. They say you always have to look out for the quiet ones.”

“She’s not that quiet,” I reply. I realize she’s still holding the cigarette, and I slide my hand down her arm, and across her fingers until I can take it from her. I swear I hear her breath catch.

“Well, that’s hot,” she says with a smile.

“Yeah, it can be. Especially when we’re working outside.”

She glances back over at me. “Huh?”

“The renovations on the boat. Mia’s my interior designer. Nick comes over when I need an extra hand.” I narrow my eyes at her. “Why? What were you thinking?”

She smiles and looks away. “You’re an asshole.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“For a minute there, I thought you were interesting,” she confesses.

“I am. And what’s even more interesting, is your interest in who spends time on my boat.”

She shakes her head and starts walking toward Mia. “Don’t get me confused,” she shouts back. “I’m just here for the tea.”

“Nick,” Mia drawls playfully, walking backward into the water, beckoning him to follow with a curl of her finger. “Come swim with me.”

Nick shakes his head. “Nope. Sharks feed at night.”

She turns her attention to Ivy. “You,” she says, pulling her shirt over her head. “Get naked with me, and come frolic in the fairy sea.” Her brunette hair falls across the tops of her pink satin demi cup bra, her hands sliding lower to pop the button on her shorts.

“Seriously?” Ivy questions. Nick mouths the word *sharks*, shaking his head.

Ivy glances back toward me, and I stop breathing. Even though I don't know her well, I know a *fuck-it* look when I see one.

"Fine," she says finally. She holds my gaze as she pulls her Sandbar tank over her head and tosses it into the sand. In purple lace and sun-kissed skin, she stands barely an arm's length away from me. "It's not like some of you haven't seen me naked already." Her hands go to the buckle of her studded belt, and her shorts slide down her long, lean legs into the sand. Matching lace panties lie beneath, a shade of purple so dark they're nearly black.

An amused smile creeps across my lips, my eyes unabashedly devouring every inch of bare skin. Her hair fans out around her in a whirl of purple as she turns, and walks into the luminescent sea.

Mia looks from her to me, and back again. "Okay," she says. "What did I miss?"

I shake my head. "Nothing. Inside joke."

"Outside joke, actually," Ivy clarifies, then leaps into the ocean as a wave rolls through. I watch her path beneath the wave, the stroke of her arms and the kick of her feet stirring a wake of glowing blue. When she emerges on the other side, rings of light radiate from around the motion of her, and I have to remind myself to breathe.

I turn to look at Nick and notice he's staring at me expectantly.

"What?" I ask, trying to swallow my smile as I look back out at the girls playing in the surf.

"Well, I haven't seen her naked," he says, crossing his arms.

"She wasn't naked. It was just a... chance encounter."

Nick sighs heavily. "And now?"

I pull my shirt off, and stub out my smoke.

"Hold on, what are you doing?" He asks, cocking his head at me in question.

"Swimming with the sharks."

He shakes his head in disbelief.

I leave my jeans on because one of the nearly naked women does belong to my best friend, and my cock wants every part of this. Then I walk into the sea, ducking beneath a wave and paddling over to the girls. As I approach, I shake the water out of my hair in a shower of tiny glowing droplets, and Mia splashes me.

"At least Zaden's not afraid of the fishes," Mia says loud enough for Nick to hear her from the shore. She swims over to Ivy and pulls her beneath the

water's surface, her breath catching on a quick yelp as Ivy reverses their positions and pushes her under. She pops back up, sputtering and laughing, turning her attention to me. I dodge them both, staying just out of reach.

A splash behind us catches my attention, and I turn to see Nick paddling over to join us. He swims up behind Mia and pulls her to him, his mouth moving from her ear down her neck until she shivers. She clears her throat.

"Okay, excuse us," she says, giggling as she shoves him off and swims back toward shore. They only make it a few feet away before she pulls him back in, wrapping herself around him and fixing her mouth on his.

I turn my attention to Ivy, our eyes locking across the glowing sea as I circle her like a predator.

"And then there were two," I say.

She shakes her head. "This is a really bad idea."

"Don't worry," I tell her. "You'll see the sharks coming from a mile away, like a glowing torpedo."

"Not that," she adds. "You. And me."

I smile. "I know."

"No, you don't."

Then she splashes me, sending a wave of blue sparks raining down on me. My eyes lock with hers, amusement reflecting back within their green depths. It's on.

I splash her back, blocking her waves as I advance. She kicks to escape, but every move in the darkness is highlighted in the water. She's quick, but I catch her, grabbing her foot and pulling her back toward me. She tries to tug her foot away but my grip is solid. My hands slide from her ankle up her leg and along the back of her thigh.

When I can reach the small of her back, I pull her into my embrace. She laughs, panting against me. Her skin is smooth against mine, the lace from her bra rubbing against my chest with every breath. We move with the waves, my hardened cock pressed tight against her thigh through the wet fabric of my jeans.

"Down boy," she says with a smile, chewing her bottom lip.

I reach out and touch her hair, playing with the long purple tendrils.

"You should let me take you somewhere," I say, my eyes meeting hers.

"Like to bed?"

I smile. "Like to dinner."

She nods. "Ah. Like a date."

I nod. "I cook. You should come over and let me cook for you."

She watches me curiously, then shakes her head. "I don't date."

My hand slides down her back until it meets the top edge of her lace panties. I run my fingertip along that edge, and just beneath. Just to torture myself. Then I lower my head to the bare stretch of skin at the base of her neck.

"Call it whatever you want, as long as you call me," I say against her skin, the warmth of my breath sending shivers through her. I can feel the thunder of her pulse where our skin touches, and the echo of mine. Need courses through me, and it takes everything I have not to sink into her and eclipse her lips with mine.

"I don't have a phone," she teases.

"I know where you live."

"Yeah, that's not creepy."

"It's convenient."

She sighs. "I can't think when you're this close to me."

I smile. "Same."

She shakes her head and rolls her eyes. "Fuck. I can't do this right now."

"I was thinking tomorrow. I need to pick up a few things first. Unless you just want breakfast. That I can do," I reply with a smirk.

She laughs and presses against my chest until I let her go, swimming out of my embrace.

"I admire your persistence."

"Is that all?" I ask, smoothing a hand down my cock to assuage the unfulfilled ache.

"That's all I'm admitting to."

I laugh and swim after her.

Mia and Nick wander up the beach, retrieving their discarded clothes.

"We're headed home," Nick says. "See you tomorrow?"

I nod. "Yeah, I'll be there. I'm getting cut early to help you guys set up."

"It's going to be a good turn-out," Mia says, tugging her shirt back on. "Social media response has been huge ever since Paper Flowers hit the radio." She turns to look at Ivy. "You have to come!"

"I'll think about it," Ivy replies.

"They're awesome. Think long and hard about it, then come."

Ivy's gaze slides to mine, and she bites her lip to keep from laughing. I grit my teeth and slide my hands into my pockets to keep from grabbing her



and dragging that dirty mind back to my boat. My body still tingles where we touched, my heart pounding from the swim, and the sight of her in the moonlight.

“Goodnight,” Mia shouts, waving as they walk up the beach toward the Sandbar parking lot.

“Later,” I shout toward Nick, picking up my shirt and slinging it over my shoulder. As Ivy continues her path along the water’s edge toward the Sunrise Motel, I fall into step beside her.

“Thank you for chasing me down tonight,” she says. “Sometimes the noise in my head is so loud it drowns everything else out. But the noise stops for you.” She glances over at me. “It’s nice to have someone to talk to.”

I nod. “Same.”

She climbs the wooden stairs to the catwalk, and I follow, watching the sway of her ass in those tiny blue jean shorts, and the tumble of her hair all the way to the bare strip of skin between her top and her black studded belt. When we hit the platform, my gaze wanders toward the outdoor shower a few feet ahead, my mind replaying the night before.

“Why were you showering on the pool deck last night?” I ask, unable to control my curiosity.

An amused smile lifts at the corners of her lips. “Maybe I’m an exhibitionist.”

“I’m not that lucky.”

Her smile broadens. “Or maybe my room has no running water.” She shrugs. “But at least it’s half off until they fix it.”

I nod. “If you want a hot shower...” I jab my thumb in the direction of the marina. “You know where to find me.”

She raises an eyebrow at my offer. “I’ll remember that.”

“Open invitation,” I add.

“There’s that persistence again,” she notes with a shake of her head.

I smile. “I like you.”

“You really shouldn’t,” she says, chewing her bottom lip.

“I know,” I agree as we step into the warm glow of the motel lights. “But I suck at following directions.” I step closer to her, purposely invading her space. She peers up at me from beneath her lashes, close enough I can feel the warmth of her breath against my skin. My arm brushes hers as I reach for the gate and open it for her.

“Tomorrow night,” I state as she steps onto the pool deck. “Jupiter Crash,

Raven's band. You coming?"

Her eyes meet mine. "Okay."

I smile. "Goodnight, Leela."

She nods, and wanders down the dimly lit pool deck toward the cement stairwell. When she reaches the balcony at her doorway, she turns to look back at me, then steps inside.

Fuck, I don't know what to think about this girl. I shove my hands deep into my pockets and walk down the dock to the houseboat. I briefly remember my shoes and board left at the Sandbar, but I don't really care. My stomach is in knots, my pulse thundering against my chest like I just ran a marathon.

But it's just her.

## Chapter 9

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### *Ivy*

**N**apkin knife fork roll. Napkin knife fork roll. Napkin knife fork roll. Napkin knife fork roll. I pause, glaring up at the dishwasher as he walks over another bucket of clean silverware.

“No Ryan, take that shit elsewhere.”

He smiles. “Sorry, Evan said to rush it. They’re running low up there.”

I sigh. I hate rolling silverware. However, volunteering gave me the opportunity to occupy a small table near the kitchen where I could babysit the cash office. All I need is for Evan to go inside.

Napkin knife fork roll. Napkin knife fork roll. Napkin... Knife... I slow down, not wanting to run out of silverware too soon.

“I’m going to need a re-fire on this ribeye for table 27,” Natalie calls out, sliding a plate into the window.

“Wasn’t that already a re-fire?” Zaden asks, turning to fix her with a confused glare.

“She says it’s still too rare.”

“Ticket says medium. Does she know what medium is?” He tugs a laminated sheet off the wall and hands it to her. “Because I have a visual aid, if you need one.”

“Look, her words. Not mine.”

Zaden sighs. “Okay, Natalie. If I cook this steak again, it’s going to be well done. No pink. Is that what she’s looking for? Because I can’t un-cook it.”

“I guess?”

He shakes his head. “Go check again.”

Natalie huffs in exasperation. “Everyone else at the table is already done.

They're just waiting on her now."

"Not my problem. You see these people?" He motions to the tickets hanging. "Right now, all these people are also waiting on her." Zaden plucks the ticket out of her hand, and puts it at the end of the list. "She's going to stay right here until I get a straight answer."

Natalie's mouth drops, then she turns on her heel and walks off. I bite back the smile creeping at my lips. My sick, toxic heart has such a soft spot for assholes.

"Okay, no pink at all," Natalie adds, approaching the window again.

"That's well done," Zaden replies dryly.

"Yeah. She doesn't want it to be too tough, though."

Zaden shakes his head in disbelief, pulling the ribeye off the customer's plate and plopping it onto a side plate. He fixes Natalie with a resolute glare, and shoves the plate right into the microwave.

"It's grilling. Come back in three."

She starts to open her mouth to say something, then gives up and walks back into the dining room. I glance over at Zaden, and our eyes meet. The frustration on his face gets me, and I bust out laughing. He rolls his eyes and turns back to the grill.

My attention lingers on his back, thinking about last night. The image of him wet and shirtless in the moonlight, in an ocean of exploding stars. The way his hands felt on my skin, warm and calloused from work. Water streaming down his shaggy dark hair, cascading to his jawline. I had no idea it was that long beneath the backward ballcap he wears on the line.

He makes me want to forget why I'm here, and I can't do that. I have to survive in this darkness until I find the way out.

In the crowded dining room, I see Evan weaving through the tables heading for the bar. He shouts something toward Nick, then reaches into his pocket. Change. Nick asked him for change.

It's go time.

Carefully, I wrap my arms around the teetering tower of rolled silverware and wander in his direction. I wait for him to open the door to the cash room, then look distracted and run slap into him. I make a startled yelp, dump about forty rolls of silverware onto the floor at his feet, and fall into his arms. A careful and calculated slide of my shoe moves one of the rolls into the crack of the closing door, and it sticks.

Success.

“Oh shit, I’m so sorry,” I say as his arms wrap around me, steadying me. I press my hands against his chest and look up into his eyes. “I can’t believe I just did that.” He smells like aftershave and wintergreen breath mints, his starched shirt crisp and smooth beneath my hands.

He smiles, “It’s fine. Are you okay?”

I nod. “Yeah, I’ve got this,” I say, kneeling before him to gather the silverware off the floor. My shoulder brushes against his thigh, and I glance up at him with wide, dick-sucking eyes and smile. “Sorry to put you in this position.”

“I’m okay with that, too,” he says, watching me carefully. I laugh.

“The silverware,” I explain. “Ryan said you’re almost out. I’ve got to send these back to dish.”

He nods slowly in understanding. “Don’t worry about it. We’re almost caught back up.”

“Oh,” I exclaim. “Did Giana find you? She just told me there’s a woman up front with the Gazette. Something about a headline in the Events section this weekend?”

Evan’s eyes narrow, and his gaze jerks toward the hostess station. “Marjorie Wilkins? Short blonde hair?” He asks.

I shrug. “I don’t know. I’m just passing along a message.”

Evan glances over at Nick and gets his attention. “Give me a few minutes, and I’ll grab that for you. I’ll be right back.”

Nick nods, then returns to his conversation with several patrons at the bar. Evan excuses himself and goes on a futile search that will hopefully take him somewhere in the realm of five to seven minutes. Giana’s on break, sitting in her car in the overflow lot across the street, talking to her boyfriend. It’s going to take him a while to locate her.

Once Evan is out of sight and I make sure Nick is distracted, I open the cash room door. I kick the roll of silverware inside and close the door quickly and quietly.

The office is small and dimly lit, reeking of cigarettes and folding money. I walk over to the filing cabinet and start rifling through the drawers. Employee files. Financial documents. Inspection forms. Recipes. Daily logs. I stop and concentrate on the drawer, flipping through dates, looking for June. It’s all the way at the end, and when I reach it, I pull it out. I grab June twenty-third and scan over the sheet. It’s a section chart. It says who was working, where they worked, and when they were cut. Perfect. I fold it up,

stuffing it into my pocket as I slide the drawer closed.

I turn to the computer, staring at the familiar login screen. I put in the number I memorized yesterday, and it opens to the home screen. Score. I scan through the files, seeing what's available. When I reach the files for the security system, I open it and scroll through the folders. The surveillance runs continuously, and uploads files every two hours. I click on the one for the night of the incident, and my eyes narrow in confusion.

"What the fuck..."

The folder is empty. Not a single entry. I click on the day before, and the day after. The files start again the next day around six, with the early morning files also missing. The day before is complete.

I chew my bottom lip, curse, and lock the computer screen back the way it was. Did the police confiscate it? Was it deleted? Is it in evidence? Was it a liability? *More questions. So many more questions.*

Pressing my ear against the door, I listen for the sound of Evan's voice and edge the door open a crack. Nick is still occupied with several customers at the bar. I slip out, quick and nonchalant, letting it close softly behind me just as Evan rounds the corner.

"I couldn't find Giana," He states, glancing around. "I didn't see Marjorie either."

I shrug. "I think Giana is on break. I'm not sure, though."

Evan nods. "Marjorie has my contact info." He reaches out and takes a pile of silverware from me. "Come on, let's take this back to Ryan. Then I'll have Mia introduce you to the lemon slicer." He moves into the kitchen, and I follow.

"You were right about the business here. It's not even the weekend, and it's packed. I haven't figured out your secret sauce yet, but it's working." A shameless ego stroke.

He smiles. "We have a consistent model across all of our businesses. You have to know what people want, and give it to them."

"What is it then? What do people want?"

"Beyond the obvious sustenance needs, they want an experience. They want something they can't get at home. Something unique, like an addictive high that keeps them coming back for more."

"The fish taco appetizer?" I offer, and he laughs.

"Here, maybe. It's fantastic. But at the clubs, like Aurora, they're looking for something different. Something hot. Something sensual."

“Aren’t we all?” I’m not entirely joking.

His gaze sweeps over me as if weighing my words. “Learn the Sandbar, and I’ll consider cross-training you like I’ve done with Natalie and Raven.”

“What have you done with Natalie?” Natalie asks, walking up to us. She glances uncomfortably at our proximity, her lips hardening into a thin line. Oh, I’ve hit a nerve.

“I still need another floating cocktail server for weekends at Aurora. I may start training her if she works out here.”

Natalie nods stiffly. “She’s got a long way to go.”

“Then it’s good you’re here to help her,” Evan adds. “Table 15 is waving at you.” He points into the dining room, and she reluctantly strides off. He glances back at me, lowering his voice. “You’ll like her when you get to know her.”

“I can feel the bestie potential radiating from here,” I muse sarcastically.

Evan cracks a smile and nods toward the kitchen. “Mia’s at the back table. See if you can help them catch up the sidework.”

I wander over to the stainless steel prep table where Mia stands assembling the slicer. She glances over at me, then drops the top of the slicer like a guillotine to test it. It lands with a loud metal thud.

“I’ve got tables, but I’m going to help you. Can you grab the lemons from the walk-in?”

I agree and head for the cooler. Once the large metal door is closed behind me, I glance around to make sure I’m alone, then pull the section chart out of my back pocket and unfold it. I see Paige’s name at the top left section of the deck. Mason. Rhonda. Mia. And Natalie. The bartender that night was Jax. I glance up, thinking. I’ve only seen Nick at the bar. But one of those people may have some insight into what happened.

I fold the chart back up and grab the bucket of lemons, pushing the door open and returning to Mia.

She sets the slicer down inside a Lexan on the table and grabs a lemon from the bucket. “Super easy, see?” She sets the lemon down at the apex of the blades, then pushes the top part down, slicing the lemon into wedges. Katrina calls her name from the window, and she looks up. “Shit, I’ve got to run this food real quick. I’ll be back.” She jogs off through the kitchen doors, and I stare at the metal chopper, wondering if I’m about to lose some fingers.

I emulate her example, positioning the lemon in the middle and pushing the slider top down. It only cuts through a quarter of the way. I push against

it, and it starts to smush the lemon instead of slicing it. I curse, pushing harder.

“You have to slam it.” I don’t need to look up to know who it is.

“I thought I was, but I’m just making lemonade.”

Zaden chuckles. “Like this.” He pulls out my smushed lemon and places a fresh one inside, pulling the top of the guillotine all the way to the top. His shoulder brushes against mine, and I can feel the friction of it all the way to my toes. Then he slams it down, splitting the lemon cleanly into pieces. “It’s all in the drop.” He grabs a squeeze bottle off his table beside the grill. “Also, these tracks can get oxidized after they’re washed sometimes. But if you put a little liquid butter here, and here.” He adds a drop to each side, then moves the top a few times before pulling it up and letting go. “It smoothes it out.” He looks over at me.

“I’ve always cut lemons with a knife,” I explain, setting the lemon inside, pulling up the top, and dropping it swiftly down. It cuts perfectly the first time, all the way through. I smile. “Cool.”

Mia reappears in the kitchen, her black ponytail swishing in her wake as she walks our way.

And she has gifts.

She sets down several shot glasses of amber liquid on the table, glancing between Zaden and I.

“Lemons need tequila,” she explains, picking up one of the shots and shaking a dusting of salt on her hand from a shaker. “Bartender boyfriend benefits.”

“And Evan said this job didn’t have any benefits,” I comment in amusement, taking the salt shaker from her.

“It doesn’t,” Mia says, lifting her shot and clinking it against mine. “That’s why we make our own.”

My gaze locks with Zaden’s as I lick the salt from my hand, and toss the shot back, reveling in the burn as it travels down my throat. He takes his straight, his attention falling to my mouth as I place the lemon wedge between my lips and suck. His eyes darken intensely, then shift back to mine. I know I’m playing a dangerous game here, but it’s too much fun to stop.

“Evan’s about to start cutting us,” Mia divulges, making a face as she sucks her lemon wedge.

“What’s his investment in this?” I ask. “He’s cutting half his staff so they can go to a concert?”



“He owns the property,” Zaden answers. “We can use it as a music venue as long as he can capitalize on the publicity and promote his other businesses. The property is basically a vacant lot after the last hurricane, with only a few of the larger RV units left standing.”

I nod. “Advertisement.”

Zaden nods in agreement. “He has his name all over it, from Sandbar branded band fliers, to Aurora drink coupons. He’s using the band, but the band needs the space. It all works out.”

“I do my best to cut the advertisements when I do the video editing,” Mia adds with a smile. “We don’t get a kick-back from any of that, so fuck him.”

I laugh.

“Did you decide to come with us?” Mia asks.

I nod, and she cheers. “See how hard I work for customer acquisition? I need a raise.”

“I’m already paying for your internet,” Raven interjects, squeezing through the crowd of cooks and servers to grab a shot of tequila.

“Yeah, so I can edit your shit.”

Raven tosses back her shot and forgoes the lemon. “If we stay on this trajectory, maybe I’ll pick up your electricity bill too. But I need to store equipment at your house.”

Mia frowns. “I don’t want all your ugly boxes.”

Raven shrugs. “How badly do you want that raise?”

Mia shoves her playfully.

“You’re inviting the new girl?” Ryan asks from behind me, reaching for the last tequila shot. “It can get pretty wild sometimes, is she ready for that?”

I glance over at him, surprised at the challenge in his tone. I thought Ryan was pretty chill. I take the shot glass before he can reach it, and shoot it back quick.

“Don’t underestimate the new girl,” I warn, flashing him a smirk as I scoop up the empty glasses off the table and squeeze through the sliver of space between him and Zaden.

Zaden could give me room to get by, but he doesn’t. He crowds me in, purposefully unmoving as I press my chest against him and shimmy through. Amused, I glance up at him, and curse myself for the way the world falls away.

Katrina walks by with several pans, headed to the dish pit. “You guys suck, leaving me here to close while you all go off and get...” She pauses,

glancing between Zaden and I, an eyebrow raised. She clears her throat and dramatically moves on. “Drunk. And stuff. Jesus. Let’s get Katrina to close to make up for her MIA brother. She doesn’t like live music or sexy goth girl musicians.”

I smile and look away, then stride off toward the bar. The tequila warms my insides, awakening parts of myself that have felt dead for days. This is probably a horrible idea. Maybe my worst one yet.

But this is how I get close to them. I’m bonding. Breaking barriers. Working my way into the inner circle where the secrets lie. At least, that’s what I’m telling myself.

After dropping the shot glasses in the bar sink, I stride back out into the dining room to survey my tables. Drinks are full, tables are bussed, waiting on food for one. My gaze drifts further, out toward the beach beyond the deck. The wave height is higher today, and choppy. There must be a storm offshore.

Just as I’m about to return to the kitchen, a movement in the water catches my eye. A guy in red swim trunks tumbles in the breakers, hit in two directions by intersecting wave sets. It’s dragging him further out, his hands clawing the water to keep his head above the surface. He’s caught in a rip.

I curse and take off running through the restaurant. I hit the swinging kitchen doors at full speed and they snap back against the wall. Zaden glances up from the grill, his eyes narrowing in concern as I fly out the back door and down the deck to the beach. I kick off my shoes and leap into the ocean as a crowd starts to form on the beach. An older man starts to wade out into the surf, and I shout at him to stay. I don’t need two people to save.

The swimmer is farther off the beach now, struggling in the water. He looks about my age, maybe a little younger. I duck beneath a wave, keep my breathing even, and my eyes on the man. A large wave breaks on top of him, and I watch for him to come back up.

He doesn’t.

Fuck. I swim harder until I reach the last place I saw him, then dive. The waves push me around, and I dive beneath the action, eyes open, searching the hazy sea for the red swim trunks he has on. I surface, scan the top of the water to see if he came back up. Nothing. I fill my lungs, and dive again.

I follow the flow of the current, scanning the sea floor. Then I see him lying in the sand, drifting with the push and pull of the waves, unmoving. I wrap my arms around him, and pull him to the surface. I gasp for air,

bringing his head above the water. He's not breathing.

"Get on," I hear a voice demand, and glance over to see Zaden paddling toward us on a surfboard. In a single quick motion, he slides into the water and wraps an arm around the man, hauling him up onto the board. He lies him flat on his back, with his feet forward. My gaze jerks to the next wave barreling toward us.

"Zaden!" I cry. "Go, get him out of here!"

"I'm not leaving you," he replies as the solid vice of his arms wrap around me and pull me onto the board in front of him. As Zaden paddles behind us, I straddle the board and start working on him. I check his pulse, then start CPR. The wave crashes on our keel in an avalanche of whitewater, propelling us forward as it rolls around us. When we finally pull out of the rip, the chaotic chop smooths out, and we ride the swells toward the shore.

After a steady rhythm of compressions and breaths, the man starts coughing up water. I breathe a sigh of relief and lean him on his side, glancing back at Zaden. Even as he continues to drive us forward with every determined plunge of his arms into the sea, I see his features begin to relax.

The crowd meets us at the shore, and Zaden slides into the water to support the man as he walks in. I watch his face and monitor his breathing. His mother runs up with tears streaming down her face, and throws her arms around him. I realize he's younger than I thought. Maybe sixteen or seventeen.

"He's breathing, but you may want to get him checked out," I tell her, and she nods furiously. Her gaze moves between Zaden and I.

"I don't know how to thank you both," she sobs.

Zaden runs a hand through his hair, and glances over at me. "I'm just glad we got there in time."

"I called 911," the elderly gentleman says, pointing down the beach. "I think they're coming."

I follow his direction and see a paramedic with a bag running our way. Beside him, I see another figure. A man I recognize, and the only man on this beach in a suit.

The Detective.

I curse, my gaze volleying between the faces in the crowd, the nearly drowned boy, and Zaden. If I stay, the Detective will recognize me, and everything I've done up until this point will be for nothing.

"I have to go," I tell Zaden softly, backing away from the crowd.

“What?” He asks in confusion, shaking his head. “Hold on, I’m coming with you.”

I can’t wait to see if he follows me or not. I turn and jog up the beach, grabbing my boots out of the sand as I retrace my frantic steps to the Sandbar and Grill. When I reach the deck, I glance back to see the paramedic and the Detective kneeling beside the boy, checking him out as he explains what happened. I feel a weight lifting from my chest. He’s going to be okay.

I slip back into the restaurant, barefoot and dripping wet, and walk quickly into the employee locker room. I lean back against the lockers, dropping my boots on the floor, my heart pounding as I catch my breath. Zaden follows a minute later, water running down his face and dripping onto the tile. His eyes reflect a mixture of frustration and concern, hardened with a tinge of anger.

“What you just did was completely fucking reckless,” he says, striding over to me and stopping with his body only inches from mine. He’s breathing hard, and I watch a muscle tick in his jaw as he searches my eyes. “But also really brave. You saved that kid’s life.”

“We did,” I clarify. I lick the salt from my lips, my gaze drifting down the wet contours of his body, his black Sandbar shirt glued to his chest like a second skin.

“When you didn’t come back up with him, I thought…” His voice trails off as he shakes his head. He reaches out and tucks a long tendril of purple hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering to trace the curve of my cheek. I can feel my skin heat, my pulse rising again.

“Thank you,” I tell him. “For coming after me.”

He nods. “I’m not letting you go that easy.” His eyes lock with mine. “When I saw you on the beach last night, I left a surfboard on the back deck. I grabbed it when I followed you out today. It’s almost like… I don’t even know what to call it. Luck?” His thumb traces the line of my lower lip. “Fate?”

“I have horrible luck,” I admit. I feel him moving closer to me, his eyes dropping to focus on my mouth.

“Ivy?” My name echoes down the hallway and into the room, where he has me nearly pinned against the lockers. I pull in an unsteady breath and turn my head toward the summons. “Ivy?”

It’s Evan. I shut my eyes tight, curse a thousand times in my mind, then dip out beneath Zaden’s arm and cross to the opposite side of the room.

Zaden drops his hands to his sides, his eyes following me as Evan enters the room.

“Oh good, you’re both here. I heard what happened. Nice work. I hope it makes the news, it would be great publicity for the restaurant.” Evan glances over at me, and I fold my arms across my chest, suddenly chilled without Zaden beside me. “I’m going to cut y’all first since you can’t work like that anyway.”

“Thanks,” I state, picking up my boots off the floor and moving past him toward the door.

“Leela,” I hear Zaden call after me, and glance back over my shoulder, past Evan, my eyes locking with his. “You still coming to the concert?”

I think for a moment, then nod. “I’ll be there.” A hint of a smile lifts at the corners of his beautiful lips, and I turn and walk out.

## Chapter 10

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### *Ivy*

I walk into the Sandbar locker room, clean and dressed, and searching for Mia. She glances up as I enter, and emits a low whistle.

“Holy shit, girl,” Mia says. “Could you be any hotter?”

I laugh. “You did say concert, right?”

“Now I want to see what concerts in Nebraska look like,” she comments approvingly. I approach the floor-length mirror and run my fingers through my hair. Luckily I packed a concert-worthy outfit when I left Gray’s Cove, although I don’t know why. It’s my favorite top, so it’s probably just a security blanket thing.

I smooth my hands down the tank of black lace skulls, low-cut and skin-tight, showcasing the black lace bra beneath. I adjust the buckle on my studded belt, and do a quick turn to test the flare of my purple plaid schoolgirl skirt. Fishnet stockings disappear into my black combat boots, and I prop my foot up on the wooden bench to tighten the laces.

“What do you have to set up?” I question, dropping my foot back to the floor.

“AV equipment. Set up the LiveStream to the socials. Check the lighting and the sound. Tonight will be especially fun because it’s probably going to rain, so I need to make sure everything is set where it won’t get wet.”

“You’re like a one-woman production crew,” I comment, and she smiles.

“I’m waiting for Raven to hit it big, then I’m going to make a play for the manager position.”

I nod. “I’d hire you.”

She pulls on a pair of jean shorts and a cute sheer but flowy top. With flip-flops, obviously. I can tell Mia’s closed-toe shoes clock out when she

does.

She grabs what appears to be a camera bag from her locker, and I hear the jingle of keys as they fall out onto the floor. The silver keyring flashes in the light, and I feel my breathing catch as I lean down to retrieve them, running my finger over the emblem for the Caldwell School of Art and Design. My hand tightens around the ring until I can feel the impression of the emblem in my palm, then I reluctantly hand them back to Mia. She sits down on the bench.

“These aren’t mine,” she says, staring at the floor.

“Oh,” I comment, hopefully more nonchalant than I feel. “Just leave them on the bench. Maybe someone will claim them.”

She shakes her head. “I know who they belong to. She’s just not here to get them.”

I swallow hard. “She’s off today?”

She shakes her head again. “She’s gone. Like gone, gone. Shit,” she curses, taking a deep breath and standing to pace up and down the wall of the small room. “They’re Paige’s.” She glances over at me. “Did you know she was my roommate? We only lived together for two months, but we were really close.”

“I’m sorry,” I reply. “She doesn’t sound like the type of person capable of everything the news is accusing her of.”

“She wasn’t. I don’t know what happened. I saw her that night, before she left. Both Evan and Natalie said she was drunk, but I never saw it. Paige didn’t drink.” She plops back down on the bench.

Fucking right. That’s what I thought. My heart pounds faster in my chest.

“Did you tell the police that?” I ask, sitting down beside her.

She nods. “I don’t think it mattered. It was almost like I was discredited because I was her roommate. Like I was trying to cover for her.”

I shake my head. “The news was pretty quick to paint her as the bad guy,” I admit.

Mia shrugs. “I always knew she had secrets. She would disappear sometimes. Hiding things when I walked into the room. I don’t know. Everyone has their own shit going on, I just dismissed it. Maybe I missed something, though. Something that could have changed everything.”

Her words mirror the thoughts echoing in my head, bouncing around mercilessly in the void.

“You can’t blame yourself for what you didn’t know,” I tell her, knowing

I should be telling myself the same.

“I know,” she says, holding the keys out in her palm. “She was supposed to be here. She was helping me with all of this.” She nods toward the wall of lockers across from us. “52 is hers. She has my tripod from the last shoot. I need it for tonight, but I haven’t been able to open it.”

I glance at the locker, then back at the keys. “I’ll do it,” I tell her, reaching for them. “I didn’t know her at all.” And maybe I didn’t. Fuck, I don’t know anymore.

She nods and drops them into my palm. I stand and walk over to the locker, blocking it from view with my body as I reach out and realize my hand is trembling. The lock slides open with a *clink*, and I set it on the bench. Then I pull open the metal door.

Braced inside is Mia’s tripod, and I pull it out to hand it to her. She nods.

“Thanks,” she says, tucking it into the strap of her camera bag.

I reach back in and pull out a pile of clothes. Shorts, a bundle of socks. When I unfold a yellow Gray’s Cove Track Team t-shirt, with a simple design on the front of a crane in running shoes, my breathing becomes shallow, and rapid. My heart thunders in my chest. I think I’m having a panic attack, but I can’t let Mia know.

I sit down and concentrate on long, deep breaths. This isn’t even her shirt, it’s mine. She stole it from me when she left, and I let her because I knew she loved it. I’ve had it since Sophomore year, and it’s the kind of soft that cotton can only get when it’s washed a million times. I fist my hands in the shirt, then remember where I am, far back behind enemy lines, and set the shirt on the pile of clothes with the others.

A black jacket hangs on the hook, the last item in the locker, and I pull it out. It doesn’t look familiar, and I glance over it curiously. In fact, it looks like a men’s jacket. When I flip it over, I read the logo on the back in bright red, shiny letters.

“Tesla?” I ask, glancing over at Mia.

She nods. “That’s Evan’s.”

“Oh,” I say. “I didn’t know Evan had a Tesla.”

“Yeah.” She looks up at me. “They were dating, you know.”

“Evan and Paige?”

She nods. “He didn’t like to let on how serious it was in front of the team, but I knew. I knew a lot of the nights when she wasn’t coming home, she was with him.”



“I wonder what he thinks about all this?” I ask, watching her carefully. “He seems so unfazed by the investigation.”

She shrugs. “Everyone grieves differently, I guess. Evan doesn’t want to look weak. They were pretty close, I’m sure he’s a mess on the inside. But, like the service we provide here, we plaster on that big, fake smile and keep right on going.”

“I know how that goes,” I agree, looking down at my boots. More than she knows.

“That’s why we have to do stuff like this,” she says, nodding toward her growing pile of camera equipment. “To leave everything else at the door, go somewhere that’s not work, and remember why we’re alive.” She brushes the tears from her eyes and picks up her makeup bag, striding over to the mirror.

I want to tell her that I feel her pain. That she’s not alone. I thought I was alone, but maybe I’m not. Maybe Mia isn’t responsible for any of this, and she’s collateral damage. Suffering beneath our customer service mask. Together, and also alone.

“I didn’t know if I should tell you about Evan. When I saw you two step out of the cash room together, it looked like you were into him,” she confesses, her eyes meeting mine in the mirror. A smile lifts at the corners of her lips.

“I don’t know yet,” I say. “There’s something about him that intrigues me.” Not a lie.

She nods. “You seem to be intrigued by several people.” Her claim is accusatory, but as her smile widens, I know she’s messing with me.

I sigh, fighting the smile that teases at my lips. “Some more than others, it seems.”

“I don’t know about Evan, just getting out of a relationship that ended like it did. Maybe he’s ready to move on. Maybe that’s how he heals.” She shrugs. “But Zaden... I’ve seen him with other women. And I’ve never seen him look at them the way he looks at you.”

I cock an eyebrow. “How’s that?”

She laughs. “Like he’s starving, and you’re a sandwich.”

I laugh too. Because it’s easier than crying, or grieving, or being so angry I want to hit something.

“You ready?” I ask her.

She nods and picks up her equipment. “Let’s go.”

I wait for her to walk out, then pick up the pile of Paige’s clothes. I don’t

know where to put them, so I place them in my locker. The idea of having to do her laundry again is comforting, if fleeting. If only for the last time.

I shut the locker door with a resounding thud, take a breath, and walk away.

## Chapter II

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### *Zaden*

“**A** lright, let’s give it up for Pulse, all the way here from Jacksonville,” Mia shouts into the mic as the bass from the final note fades out. Cheers rise from the field in front of the line of RV sheds, a crazy high pitch that has my blood running hot.

There’s at least three hundred people here, maybe more. Cars sit packed in the side lot of the storage shed facility, and line both sides of the road as far as I can see. An amazing turnout for an outdoor weekday concert I can only attribute to Mia’s social media sorcery.

I love this. I love that we have taken this place, half destroyed by the last hurricane, and given it life through music. Some of the storage units remain while others were bulldozed into the field where people stand, voices raised, begging for more.

It’s been almost two years since I talked Raven into going to Evan and renting out the sheds for her band, and several others. The beachfront location is a perfect venue for an outdoor concert. Evan doesn’t care how many people attend as long as he gets his cut.

I fold up my tool bag and walk back to the shed. I don’t make the music, but I help make it possible. I fix. I build. I run wires and fencing. Even work security as needed.

A bright flash of lightning travels through the clouds above us, thunder rattling the metal storage buildings, and people start to silence.

Raven takes the stage and steps up to the mic.

“If y’all aren’t fucking scared, neither are we,” she says, glancing back at the band to make sure they’re ready. With a nod from Ryan, she turns back to the crowd. “We’re Jupiter Crash.”

I smile and throw her devil horns. Rock on, punk rock princess.

Nick starts in on the drums, and she gives him a few beats as the shouting begins to fade. A movement catches my eye, and I see Mia inching up along the front with her camera out, panning between the band and the crowd.

Beside her is Ivy, her hair down, in black lace skulls, a schoolgirl skirt, and those insufferably sexy combat boots. I cross my arms across my chest and watch her, amused and mesmerized.

Raven's voice weaves through the chaos, haunting and beautiful, echoing through the buildings. She carries it for several lines before Ryan joins in on bass, followed by Steph on an old upright piano. Ivy sways to the music, her lips mirroring Raven's.

She knows every word.

Raven commands the stage with a raw intensity, passion echoing in every note. The band races to follow, pounding the bass into the night until it shakes the earth beneath us. The crowd is wild, dancing and moving, screaming the words back at the stage.

Rain starts to fall, drumming against the roof of the metal buildings. And not just a light shower, a complete fucking downpour. I watch the crowd, but they don't run. In fact, they get wilder.

A mosh forms a few rows back, a churning chaos of shoving hands and wet bodies. I seek out Mia and see she's filming, but I've lost sight of Ivy.

I scan the crowd for purple hair and eventually spot her. In the middle of the madness, in the mosh. She's dancing, purple hair fanning out around her. She follows the circle of bodies, pushing and shoving with the rest of them, holding her own.

Raven pulls the guitar off from around her neck and sets it aside, grabbing the mic from the stand to walk out into the rain. Another loud crack of thunder sounds overhead as she walks over to my Silverado parked beside the unit, and steps onto the bumper, then onto the hood. I can feel the energy from the crowd coursing through my veins, blurring the world around us until we are one, the audience and the music.

I join the crowd, my eyes on Leela. I shove my way into the mosh and follow the current. Inside the mass of writhing, wet bodies, I find hers. When she turns, she slams into me, body to body, my hands around her waist to steady her. A sly smile spreads across her deep maroon lips.

She shimmies to the beat, her wet skin sliding across mine. I am infinitely aware of everywhere she touches. Her hands along the back of my neck, the

smooth, cool strands of wet hair dragging across the heated skin of my chest. I match her rhythm with wild abandon in the mosh as we get tossed around, splashing through the mud in a frantic grope of hands.

The guy ahead of us trips and goes down into the mud, taking two more with him. I see Ivy's boots catch his arm, and she loses her balance. In the span of a second, I reach out and grab her. My hands slide from her waist, down her ass to thread through the holes in her fishnet stockings. In one swift move, I lift her up and swing her aside, then slowly set her down.

She bites her lip, her skin looking flush.

"Thanks for that," she says, glancing back at the fallen guy as he pulls himself back up, and others tumble into the pile.

"Anytime," I offer.

Cheers erupt as the song fades out, and I can't help the smile that washes over me like rain. I glance back up at Raven.

"This next song is called *Rain Checks are for Pussies*," she shouts, tapping out a beat as water streams down her face. Then she pauses, tossing her head back, and laughs. "Just kidding, guys."

She launches into the next song, and continues through the set before they wrap it up. If the crowd stays, they stay. They're here for a show, and Jupiter Crash does not disappoint. The band backs into the shed to keep the electrical safe, but Raven remains front and center on top of my truck, singing into the storm like the siren she is.

I drag Ivy back from the mosh, and we dance further back. Lightning flashes across the crowd like a natural strobe, and I laugh because this is fucking insane.

Mia finds us and joins in the madness, pressing her slender, wet body against Ivy as she dances. They slip and slide together, hips shaking, hands in the air. These two are going to be the death of me.

"Thank you for coming out tonight!" Raven shouts finally, and the crowd roars in response. "Jacob's Ladder is up next, unit 119. Grab a towel, and stay tuned." With a leap off the hood of my truck, her boots splash in the mud flowing over the gravel road. She strides back into the unit and claps Ryan on the back.

Mia weaves through the crowd, leading the pack back to the shed where Raven and the band are breaking out a bottle of Jack.

"You guys killed that," Mia screams, wrapping her arms around Raven. "We were up to ninety-two thousand viewers on the LiveStream."

The guys shout in celebration, banging on the metal walls of the unit and howling into the storm as they pass the bottle around.

“These shots are golden,” Mia adds, tapping buttons on her camera. “Check this out.” She walks toward me, swiping through photos of the band, with the crowd leaping and dancing to the beat. She pauses on one, glancing up at me as I study it.

The girl with the purple hair, mid-twirl, with her wet hair and purple skirt flared out around her. She has her arms up, eyes closed, her boots splashing in the mud amidst the sea of wet bodies surrounding her. Lighting snakes through the sky overhead, defining the contours of the clouds and bathing the crowd in its sudden flash of pale light. I shake my head, cursing softly.

“You’re amazing. These guys don’t deserve you.”

She laughs. “I know. I’ll have the website updated tomorrow. Sally Hill from Nowhere Girl called too, they want to play sometime next month if we have a spot.”

I smile. “Oh, we have a spot for Sally Hill if I have to rebuild the unit myself.”

“Who’s Sally Hill?” Ivy asks, and I look up. She’s leaning against the frame of the large open door, one boot propped on the frame behind her, watching the rain as water drips off the pleats in her skirt.

“Nowhere Girl is a band out of Birmingham,” I answer. “A badass, fast metal band. You think the turnout is good tonight, wait until we start advertising her show.”

She glances over at me, an amused smile lifting at the corners of her mouth.

“It’s incredible that you’re able to get all these bands to play at a half-demolished storage facility,” she comments.

I laugh. “We have a reputation. Sometimes you get tired of playing small gigs with capacity maximums and overpriced drinks. It’s a different experience. More music, less bullshit.”

“That should be at the top of your business card.”

“Did you like the show?” I ask, fishing for compliments and needing her to keep talking to me.

“High energy. Great music. I got to punch a guy.” She nods approvingly. “It was the highlight of my day.” I grin and take a pull from the bottle of Jack as it’s passed to me, then walk it over to her. She presses the bottle to her lips, takes a generous drink, and hands it back. “I’ve never been in a mosh pit

with so many people in flip-flops. You people are nuts.”

My head falls back in laughter.

“Welcome to Florida rock culture,” I manage when I can pull myself together.

“Ivy,” Mia asks, sidestepping the drum set to take the bottle back from me. “Steph just ran up to talk to the Renegade Radio rep. Can you ask her if she still needs a ride home? I’m quickly moving into Uber territory.”

Ivy nods and strides back out into the rain. I move to follow her, but Nick grabs me.

“Give me a hand with these cases. I’m not loading anything until they dry off, but I need to get them off the floor in case it floods.” I reluctantly agree and help clean up.

I pile several equipment crates along the back wall, knowing it never floods that high because of the slight slope. As I reach the front of the unit again, I glance out toward the covered area where the Radio rep was standing, but the booth is empty. I narrow my eyes, searching for her through the storm.

Across the parking lot, I finally spot her walking toward a familiar black Tahoe. A man walks beside her, his hand settled possessively on her lower back. A muscle ticks in my jaw.

It’s Evan.

He opens the truck door for her, and she climbs in. Mia steps up beside me, following the direction of my gaze.

“Where is she going?” Mia asks, confused.

Red tail lights brighten in the darkened lot as the engine roars to life, follows the dirt path to the exit, and peels off onto Beach Drive.

What. The. Fuck.

## Chapter 12

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### *Ivy*

“I knew you’d be a good investment,” Evan says with a smirk, leaning up against his Tahoe in the rain.

I stop short before I reach Steph and the Renegade rep, following the sound of his voice. Where did he come from?

“How do you mean?” I answer, curious.

His eyes travel slowly down my wet body from head to toe and back again. I know exactly what he means.

He shrugs. “I’m here to advertise. Entice customers to my establishments. What can I say?” He steps away from the Tahoe, and closer to me. “You’re enticing.”

“I’m wet,” I admit, obviously.

Evan chuckles. “And I could use a drink.” He nods his head toward his truck. “Care to join me?”

Everything inside me says no. Full stop. Run.

And yet, this is why I’m here. In Florida, working in food service, lying to everyone. For the chance to get closer to the truth than the police can. For answers.

Fuck. “Yeah. I could go for a drink.”

Smiling, he walks over to me and escorts me to his vehicle. He places his hand on my lower back, and I fight the urge to cringe and pull away. Instead, I let him lead me to the front seat, and climb inside.

What am I doing? What if he’s an insanely evil guy? I have literally no way to protect myself apart from pulling a muddy boot off and smashing him with it. I need to be better prepared than this. I don’t know why I felt safe going to a concert in the middle of a murder investigation.



He slides into the driver's seat, running a hand through his short, blonde hair. His eyes meet mine.

"I don't know if we can be out in public like this," he says, pulling at the soaked button-up shirt plastered to his skin.

"What's your alternative?" I ask, eyebrow raised. If a skirt is all it takes to lower his defenses, I'm leaping right in there.

He cranks up the truck and pulls out of the parking space. "My place it is."

I swallow hard, and reluctantly nod. He's taking me into the lion's den. This is stupid. This is so stupid. I glance out the window as he reaches the exit onto the main road. In the distance, I can see figures moving around inside Raven's storage unit. My eyes fall on Zaden, standing in the doorway, his hands shoved into his pockets. Mia stands beside him, watching me leave.

Something breaks inside me, and shadows move in around the periphery of the tiny light I've been nurturing and daring to hold close. Something that's just mine. Hope. The small space of relative normalcy I've found. As I drive away with Evan, I know the relationships I've built with everyone back in that storage unit are about to change.

I just sided with the enemy.

I glance away and concentrate on the road, trying to remember street names in case I need to find my way back. My heart beats faster the farther we get away from the Sandbar. He turns onto a dark side road that disappears into the trees, and for a moment, I start to panic. My hand reaches for the door handle to the truck, prepared to bail.

Out of the darkness, streetlights illuminate a small building surrounded by large black metal gates and tropical landscaping. Evan slows down and pauses at the entrance, rolling his window down. A uniformed officer steps out of the building and checks us before opening the gate. We pass through, and a wall of condos rise in the distance. My hand relaxes on the door, just a little.

"How long have you lived here?" I ask, breaking the silence.

"In the building?" He questions, pulling into one of the parking spaces. "Or Pelican Beach in general?"

I shrug. "Both."

"I'm going on three years at Oceanside. Before that I lived at The Pointe, but this is closer to work. I've lived in Pelican Beach nearly my whole life, except for the few years I spent at Columbia."

We climb out of the truck, and he leads the way down the sidewalk to the entrance. He swipes his card at the door, and we stride over to the bank of elevators.

“So you grew up here?”

He nods, pushing the button for the 24<sup>th</sup> floor. The Penthouse.

“Yep. Our family has lived in Pelican Beach for several generations, actually. That’s why the move into politics was so easy for my father.”

“Politics? Like city government?”

He smiles. “Sometimes, I forget just how little you know about this town.” He shakes his head. “Mayor Cyrus Jacobson is my ather. He’s building a campaign to run for Senate.”

“Ambitious,” I comment. “Planning on stepping into Daddy’s shoes?”

He laughs as the elevator opens. “Maybe one day.”

We walk out into his condo, and I try not to betray just how floored I am. Ornate black marble tile lines the open floor plan, accented by dark leather sofas and glass-topped tables. The kitchen runs along the wall with a marble bar separating it from the living room and matching leather stools tucked beneath. Large, intricate pendulum lights hover above the bar, suspended from the ceiling towering above me.

The back walls of the condo are windows, floor to ceiling, at least two stories high, with massive pillars separating them. Long silvery drapes cascade all the way to the floor, pulled back to reveal a breathtaking view of the beach stretching the coast in both directions.

Everything about this space exudes masculine superiority. I’m starting to understand Paige’s interest. Evan is everything we’ve never had.

I glance back at the elevator as it closes, feeling trapped despite the immense space. Muddy boot prints mar the shine on the marble floors all the way to where I’m standing. Oops.

Glasses clink in the kitchen, and I glance over at Evan as he opens a bottle of Scotch and pours several fingers into a glass for himself and me.

“This place is... amazing,” I say, stepping up closer to the bar. “You know, I met your Mom earlier this week, and Nick called her Pelican Beach royalty. He wasn’t lying.”

Evan smiles. “Pelican Beach prides itself on the small-town vibe, but it’s bigger than it looks. There’s a lot of money to be made here.”

“I guess so,” I comment as he hands me a glass. I take a sip and it hits me like smooth fire, all burn and no aftertaste. Quality. Interesting. He’s trying to

impress me. “A place like this makes me wonder if you sell more than shrimp.”

He watches me carefully as he tilts back his glass. “We also sell grouper.”

I laugh. “Fresh, not frozen. I remember.”

“Come on,” he says, nodding toward the balcony. “Check out this view.”

I look down at my boots, and then back toward the elevator. “I cannot, in good conscience, go any farther into your immaculate home.”

He shrugs. “Then take them off. And don’t worry about it, my housekeeper has seen far worse.”

Okay then. I unlace my boots and leave them beside the bar, then pull off my socks and stuff them inside. When I look up, I see Evan removing his shoes as well, and unbuttoning his wet shirt before tossing it onto the back of a chair. He pushes a button near the balcony doors, and they slide open to reveal a nighttime panorama of ocean and stars.

I wander outside, through a maze of perfectly arranged deck furniture that could easily be a backdrop for a home design magazine, and pause near the edge of the balcony. I place my hands on the cool metal railing and look over, twenty-four stories down into the sea.

“On the top floor, with the way this curves out,” he says, stepping up beside me until I feel his arm brush against mine. “The only thing you see beneath us is ocean.”

“It’s amazing.”

He nods. “Best view in the city. Hands down.”

“I believe it.” I take a sip from my glass and turn to face him. His white tank undershirt is pulled taut over his broad chest, outlining all the abs of his stomach, and tucked into his black slacks. The muscles of his arms and shoulders flex as he raises his glass to his lips for a drink. This feels so... intimate.

Answers. I’m here for answers. Fuck.

“So, Prince of Pelican Beach, what do you do for fun around here?” I ask.

“Work.”

I laugh. “I said fun.”

“My work is fun. Sometimes. My father wants me to babysit the Sandbar to ensure everything runs smoothly, which is why I’m so invested in all aspects of the restaurant. Running food and dealing with angry customers isn’t fun, but the benefits far outweigh it. The Aurora is fun. It’s elite and dangerous and decadent.”

“I’m intrigued,” I admit.

“You should be. It’s invite only.”

“So invite me.”

He smiles. “Soon. Let’s see how tomorrow goes. Endgame, I want you to come cocktail for me. The pay is generous, and the tips are better. I’m testing you tomorrow. No training, you’re on the floor with a section. I need to know that you can learn quick and adapt. High volume, and quality customer service. I haven’t seen anything from you so far to contradict that.”

I nod. “I’m always game for a challenge.”

“Good,” he says, his eyes drifting to my lips, then lower. “You know what else you should be game for?” He smiles. “A towel.”

“I tried to warn you. I literally just stepped out of a muddy mosh pit and into your truck.”

“My room is the first door on the left. Grab a shower if you want, I’ll set some clothes out on the bed for you.”

My mouth drops open. “Maybe I’m comfortable in my dirt.”

“And maybe I can’t let you sit on the furniture until you change.”

I look him squarely in the eyes, daring him to say more, then sit on the balcony floor at his feet. I down the remaining liquid in my glass in one gulp, then hand it to him.

“You want to see if I can adapt? This is me adapting. I don’t need to sit on your fifteen thousand dollar Italian leather sofa in order to have a good time.”

Evan laughs. He takes my glass, then wraps his hand around my arm and pulls me back up. I glare at him.

“It’s a thirty thousand dollar Italian leather sofa. But point made.”

I shake my head. “Fine. But if the towels are any less than seven hundred thread count, I’m out of here.”

“You won’t be disappointed.”

I walk away from him, back across the balcony, and through the large open doors. I follow the marble hallway down to the left, and into his room. I could easily fit my entire apartment inside, with space to spare. Impeccably decorated, dark, and modern, dominated by an enormous bed. More windows all around the room with an amazing view of the town down below.

I walk to the bed, and trail my fingers across the impossibly soft sheets. What I wouldn’t give to roll around in this bed. Just not with him.

Shutting the bathroom door, I release a sigh. Every surface is so clean it

shines. The space is large and open, with a glass area along the wall for the shower, and a long marble counter with glass vessel sinks. More floor-to-ceiling windows along the back, with a large circular ceramic tub in the middle. I've never seen a circular tub.

I can feel the alcohol warring with my common sense and best intentions. I glance around, feeling guilty, then remember I'm a poor housekeeper with no car living in a broken motel room with only the cash in my pocket... and I pull off my shirt.

I turn on the faucet in the shower, and the steam gradually starts to fill the room as I walk around and explore. I pull open cabinets and drawers, wondering if she was in here. If she bathed in this tub. If she stood in that shower, with him. I look everywhere, but she's not here.

I drop the rest of my clothes into a pile on the floor, and slide beneath the delicious warmth of the shower spray. I can feel the layers begin to melt off me. The mud and the rain. The cold beach showers. The infinite humidity of Florida in general, sticky with sweat and salt.

I soap up and wash my hair, then step back out. Evan was right about the towels. I wrap one around me, and it feels like a soft, warm hug. Then I walk back out into the bedroom. I hear him in the kitchen, and spot a pile of clothes on the bed. I frown.

"These are your clothes," I shout across the room.

"You don't live here," he replies with a chuckle.

I roll my eyes, then drop the towel on the floor. I pull on a white tank undershirt and plaid sleep pants, then pad back over to the bathroom counter for a hairbrush. Looking into the mirror, I brush out my hair and consider whether I should put my wet underwear back on. Without a bra, my bare breasts press against the thin white fabric of the shirt, showing the outline of my darkened areoles and the barbells in each of my nipples.

I know I'm playing with fire, and I need to set boundaries. But how far should I go for answers? What will it take?

Evan appears in the doorway and leans casually against the frame, crossing his arms across his chest. His eyes travel over me appreciatively as a slow smile lifts at his lips.

"If you're going to spend all night in my bedroom, you should let me join you," he comments, and I roll my eyes, grabbing for my pile of wet clothes. "How was your shower?"

"Amazing."

He smiles. "That's the kind of reviews I like to hear."

He straightens and crosses the room, handing me another glass of scotch. His gaze dips as he examines my attire, lingering on my breasts.

"My clothes look way better on you," he says. Then he steps back. "I threw together a quick snack tray, if you're hungry."

I'm starving. But I shake my head, toss back the warm amber liquid in the glass he gave me, and hand it back.

"I wish I could stay, but I have a test tomorrow. Apparently. And it's getting late."

"What if I promise to grade on a curve?"

I shake my head. "I didn't come for curves. Just a drink." I smile. "I appreciate the hospitality, though. This has been fun."

He nods. "Anytime." He walks back into the kitchen, grabs a plastic bag for my wet clothes, and hands it to me. "Come on, I'll take you back to the motel."

As we climb back into the elevator and begin our descent, he glances over at me. "We should do this again sometime. Maybe with less mud."

"I make no promises."

He laughs.

Once we're back inside the Tahoe, an uncomfortable silence overtakes us, but I don't care to break it. The air is heavy with unfulfilled expectations. I have a million thoughts racing through my head, and after minutes that drag on like hours, we finally pull into the lot for the Sandbar.

"I have to run inside or a few minutes," he says, stepping out of the truck. I climb out and meet him near the hood as we split ways. "See you tomorrow?"

"Can't wait," I reply. He steps closer to me, and I bite my lip. I see it in his eyes before he goes for it. The end of the night kiss. Shit.

I wrap my arms around his neck and hug him, pressing my bra-less breasts against his chest and hoping it's enough. Then step back.

"Good night," I offer as I turn toward the catwalk that leads to the motel. I don't look back, and I don't give him the invitation for more.

Behind me, I hear him shuffle into the restaurant, and a light appears in the office window. I take a deep breath. I made it. I entered the lion's den and returned unscathed. I wander down the catwalk, my bare feet silent on the wooden planks.

"Have fun tonight?"

I instantly still, my gaze falling on Zaden. Perched on the railing facing the sea, the smoke from his cigarette curling up into the night air, he turns his head in my direction. His eyes rake down my body, a muscle ticking in his jaw as he realizes I'm in men's clothes.

Evan's clothes.

Fuck. Okay, not unscathed.

"For the most part," I answer, holding my ground. He may be mad, but screw him. He has no right to be. He doesn't own me.

He leaps down from the railing, blocking my path, his body inches from mine. His boots are muddy, his clothes nearly dry but with just enough moisture to hold them taunt against his skin. His beautiful, muscled, tattooed skin. My hand tightens on the plastic bag of clothes at my side, fighting the vulnerability he makes me feel. The guilt.

"I guess you got that hot shower," he muses, his eyes searching my face, then falling to linger on my top. I cross my arms across my breasts, glaring at him.

"Why do you care?"

He takes a pull from his smoke, then stubs it out on the railing. "I don't."

"Good," I reply, rolling my eyes. I move to walk past him, and he blocks me. I move to the other side, and he blocks it too. I take a step back.

"If you have something to say, just fucking say it," I dare him.

"How do you weigh the things you think are real? What tips the scale? Money?" He takes a step closer to me. "Power? Influence?" His eyes dip to my lips. "Desire? Whatever is real to you, does he have it?" He nods toward the Sandbar.

I swallow hard. "Tonight he did." I hate that this is my honest answer. And I hate that I have to give it to him, with no explanation.

He nods. "I thought you were different. I was wrong." He turns to leave, and I drop my bag of clothes on the ground.

"What's real to you, Zaden? Do you think this is? A few days together and some hot conversations? Fuck, how well do you even know me? Did you ever stop to think that maybe I flirt with you because I thought you could handle it without falling for me? I don't have the time or the patience for this shit."

He stops, and turns back to me. His eyes lock onto mine with a dangerous intensity, like anger and frustration and need and desperation all rolled into one beautiful, fucked-up disaster. He strides toward me, crowding my space

and blocking out the ocean around us. His hands slide around the back of my neck and into my hair, tipping my head back as his lips fall against mine.

We collide in a tangle of heat and broken breaths. I cling to him like a lifeline, fisting my hands in his shirt to pull him closer. His mouth angles across mine and I trace his bottom lip with my tongue, then teeth. He growls, his lips traveling hungrily down my neck, his teeth skimming the sensitive skin beneath my ear. I inhale a sharp breath ending in his name.

His mouth returns to mine, deep and desperate, sinking in until all I can feel is him. His warmth. The sweat on his skin. The rasp of the stubble on his face as he leans into me. His hands slide down my body, gripping my hips and pressing me back against the wooden railing.

Then he releases me, and takes a step back. I'm panting, my heart pounding, the ocean breeze flowing into the distance between us, cool against my heated skin.

"That's real," he breathes, his hands balling into fists at his sides before sliding into his pockets. "I know it. And you know it."

Then he turns, and strides off down the catwalk. I watch him follow the path down the jetty to the marina, and try to catch my breath.

I curse and run a trembling hand through my hair. I want to tell him that there's nothing between Evan and I. There never will be. I'm just using him for answers. But in the same sense, I'm using everyone.

Even Zaden.

I take a deep breath to steady myself, and open the gate, crossing the pool deck to the stairs. As I reach the motel room door, I glance back at the houseboat, and our eyes meet across the darkened marina. My heart starts to race again, and I step inside the room, leaning back against the cool metal door as it closes. I shut my eyes tight, reminding myself repeatedly that it doesn't matter. He doesn't matter. That's not why I'm here. I may have wanted a distraction, a connection to someone to save me from my grief, but what I found is far worse.

I want him. And I don't know how to stop.



## Chapter 13

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### *Ivy*

**M**y head is pounding, and it's not just the scotch. I sit up in bed, toss back a handful of Tylenol and relax against the headboard. A business card on the nightstand catches my eye, and I pick it up, running my finger over the simple raised lettering.

Detective Raymond Phillips.

I lift the receiver for the motel phone and dial his number, waiting. It goes to voicemail, and I hang up. I've been here for four days, and no one has tried to contact me. No updates on the search. No more questions. No word on when I can get my phone back. Nothing.

The sun creeps slowly up the horizon, peeking above the sea to bathe the inside of the motel room in orange. I flip on the television and wait for the local news, hoping to hear her name. After about fifteen minutes, a woman appears on the screen, standing on the beach not far from the Sandbar. Dive boats bob in the surf behind her, and she turns her body into the wind as she talks so the breeze doesn't push her dark hair into her face.

*"It's been nearly a week since the search for Paige Matthews began, with rescue crews working relentlessly toward recovery. We spoke with Officer Woodman of the PBPB Dive Team, who explained that dangerous currents and high winds have hindered visibility, and slowed progress. Although the search continues, optimism is turning to doubt."*

I swallow hard and flip the television back off. I don't know what I hate more, the fact that I have to learn any new details about the case from the news, or that the terminology has changed from *rescue* to *recovery*.

I pick up the dry wipe marker and stand from the bed, walking over to the murder mirror. As I add information, my pyramid of names is quickly

becoming a web, with names connected and crossed off. Detail bubbles added around the periphery. I'm only a few six-pane windows and a spool of colored string away from reaching *A Beautiful Mind* status, but it feels like progress.

I draw a line between Evan and Natalie. There's something there. Something worth exploring. I feel her jealousy. Her possessiveness of Evan. And her utter distrust of me. She doesn't want me working at the Aurora with her, and that makes me want it even more.

I stare at Nick and Mia's names, wanting to cross them off, but I'm unsure yet. Several unknowns still float around Mia. The things she said about Paige's secretive behavior make me wonder what else she knows, even if she doesn't know she knows it.

I still don't know much about grumpy Lloyd, Katrina, Mason or Rhonda. And the two I still haven't met, Chris the fry guy who was engaged to Rose, and Jax the MIA bartender. Beyond the Sandbar, I draw a bubble for the PBPD... but I have no idea how to get my hands on their records, or how to verify who was on duty that night. They have the resources to spin the narrative in whatever direction they want, but why? Apart from covering up an accident, which ultimately claimed one of their own, I can't find a motive... And it wouldn't explain why Evan lied about Paige's drinking. Or why he didn't follow her to the Aurora. Or why he so easily dismisses their relationship.

My eyes fall on Zaden's name, and I pause. I really don't know what to do with that one. The whole situation is a mind fuck. The way he looks at me. The way I respond to it. The magnetic attraction that has me searching him out in a crowd. I can't stop thinking about the way his mouth felt on mine. His hands hot against my skin. The intensity in his gaze as he pinned me to the catwalk railing and told me this was real.

Part of me knows he's right. But the other part says he has feelings for Ivy, and not Skye.

When the rest of the world falls away, there is only the two of us. Paige and I. Getting her back is everything. And what I would give for it, is everything. I have to keep reminding myself of this. We were once forgotten and abandoned by the world, and despite whatever I may build to reach her again, it too will crumble. But not her.

Time is running out, and I only have a few days to figure this out. I have to get closer to Evan. He needs to take me more seriously to confide in me. I

underline Evan's name three times, like the power I give to this goal will help me achieve it. I will do whatever it takes to crack him, even if that means hurting someone else.

Someone like Zaden.



I SCAN DOWN THE LINE OF TABLES ON THE REGISTER SCREEN, TAPPING ON several to print, then tucking the tickets into slim leather books. I stuff the books into the front of my apron and pull a full tray of drinks onto my palm, hoisting it onto my shoulder to stride off into the dining room.

I drop a check and styrofoam to-go containers at the first table, then distribute drinks at the next, and grab a new order before dropping off the other two receipt books. I'm about to have three six-tops check out at once, and we're still on a wait for dinner, even though it's nearly nine. I'm about to be triple-sat.

I take a breath and step back up to the touchscreen register. I've been on a double since this morning, with no breaks, running on alcohol and unanswered questions. I don't know which one is more potent. But the tips have been decent, so that's something.

I hit send on the order and scan over it a final time, cursing. I forgot to add a steak temp on one of the plates. I walk into the kitchen and over to the window in front of the grill station. Zaden turns around and pulls a line of perforated tickets out of the printer, separating them and hanging them above the window as the noisy machine spits out several more.

"I've got two minutes on the burgers for seventeen," he calls down the line. "How long on those shrimp baskets?"

"They're coming up now," Ryan calls out.

"Behind," Katrina calls from beside him, and he flattens his back against the prep table to let her through with a hot pan.

He glances up and notices me standing there, trying to read through the ticket paper to see which one is mine.

"What did you forget this time?" He asks, scanning down the line.

"That last ribeye on 37 is mid-well. Sorry."

He plucks one of the tickets from the line and grabs a pen, scribbling a quick note on the paper.

“Fixed.”

I shove at the strands of hair falling messily out of my clip and tuck my notebook back into my apron.

“Thanks.”

“That’s the third correction you’ve made in the last fifteen minutes. What’s wrong?” He pulls down his water glass and takes a drink. “Long night?”

My gaze snaps to his, anger flaring. “I’ve had better.” I roll my shoulders and stretch. “Also, those modification menus are not very intuitive.”

“Lloyd set it up like that on purpose, so pretty girls have to come talk to him,” Zaden answers, casting a cocky glance down toward Lloyd. “Otherwise, he’d only have us assholes for company.”

“What was that?” Lloyd asks, carefully stirring his saucepan. “You want to pick up that 5 AM prep shift tomorrow?”

Zaden shakes his head. “No sense of humor.” His gaze returns to mine, studying me for a moment. I roll the ball of my tongue ring between my lips, and his eyes follow the motion. “Take a break, Mia will cover for you.”

“I can’t. I’m about to be triple-sat. And when I get back to 32, they’re going to ask me for ranch. Again.”

Zaden nods and walks over to the cooler, pulling out three soufflé cups of ranch and sliding them across the stainless steel window to me. “That buys you at least ten minutes. Take a break.”

A smile teases at my lips. “After I put in the orders for the new tables, I will.”

“Good,” he says with a nod. His response rings with satisfaction, and an unmistakable edge of concern.

I stride back through the double doors and tend to my tables, picking up the signed credit card slips and contemplating leaving them dirty so they can’t be sat. When I step back to the register, my attention is drawn to a man coming out of the cash office with Evan, gesticulating wildly with his hands as Evan cowers back in a way I’ve never seen.

The man is older, his hair a mixture of silver and blonde, muscled and just a tad taller, with carefully cropped facial hair and aviator sunglasses on even though it’s night. With his perfectly tailored slacks and a slim-fit button-up shirt, I instantly know who it is even before Mia walks up behind me, flipping out.

“I didn’t know Cyrus was here,” she squeaks, jogging back behind the

server station. “Help me clean off this counter and refill those sanitizer buckets. Whose drink is this? It’s going in the trash.” She chucks it into the Slim Jim trashcan at the end of the stainless steel table and slides me a rag. “Quick. Last time he chewed us out about this station because they had to spray for ants again.”

I help her clean as quickly as possible, keeping Evan and Cyrus on the edge of my periphery. I tune everything else out. The clanging of dishes, the low hum from beneath the counter where the CO2 for the drink machine lives, the steady drone of voices in the dining room. Concentrating on the words exchanged between them and the movement of lips.

Cyrus is yelling at him for selling the six crates of snapper that came in off the commercial boats this afternoon, saying they were tagged for distribution. I remember those crates, and I remember Ryan grabbing them, stoned as shit coming off his lunch break, and adding them to the trays in the cooler. I run my rag over the last part of the table and toss it into the sanitizer bucket, then stride over to Evan and Cyrus.

“Hey, sorry,” I interject, pulling a ticket out of one of my books. “I need your help when you get a minute, Evan.” The conversation stops mid sentence, and both men turn toward me, surprised at the disruption.

“Give me a second,” Evan replies. “I’ll be right over.”

“Did I hear you say something about some snapper crates? I saw a stack sitting on the back deck earlier and put them in the cooler. If that was them, it was my fault. I’m sorry.” I shrug innocently, feigning guilt. “I thought I was helping.”

Cyrus’s posture starts to loosen, and he looks between Evan and I. Finally, he nods. “Don’t worry about it. Next time, if you see the yellow flags on the crates, those go to the back freezer. We ship out nearly as much fish as we cook.”

“I’m really sorry,” I reiterate. “Evan told me not to touch the crates, but I just thought he was concerned about the weight. I went rogue. It will never happen again.”

Cyrus shakes his head. “It’s okay.” Glancing back at Evan, he hands him a gold key on a green lanyard. “Three and six are headed out for a night charter. Ice them down.”

Evan nods. “I’ll do it right now.” When Cyrus brushes past him and disappears into the lobby, Evan looks down at me. Beads of sweat collect in the lines of his very confused forehead.

“You covered for me.”

“I didn’t want to see you chewed out over a fish,” I explain coyly, reaching up to pull the clip out of my hair. Purple hair tumbles down around my shoulders, and I toy with it as I put it back up. “Plus, I’m a server. Apologizing for something I didn’t do is part of my job.”

He smiles. “Thanks. He can get rather... passionate about his work.”

“I get it,” I reply, leaning back against the wall and arching my back just enough to make my breasts strain against the front of my top. “Keeping you in line keeps the rest of us in line. That’s why they all scatter like scared ants when he’s around.”

His gaze falls on my top, and he licks his bottom lip absently, leaning in closer.

“But you’re not a scared ant?”

I shake my head. “He may be your boss, but you’re mine. I have allegiances.” I know my words hit home when his eyes meet mine, and he studies me closely. Too closely.

“What are you doing tomorrow night?”

“Why?”

He smiles. “I’m not hitting on you. I want you to come work the Aurora. Your sales are already over three thousand, and your experience is solid. It’s about four hours work, and pays five hundred to start. Plus tips.”

“You want the new girl to work Bass and Lace?” Her voice intrudes into our conversation like an alarm bell, and I glance over to see Natalie walking up to us, arms folded, looking offended. Evan doesn’t acknowledge her.

“You in?” He asks, watching me.

I nod. “Yeah. I’ll do it.”

He smiles, and finally looks over at Natalie. “She needs an outfit. Take her shopping.”

Natalie’s mouth drops open. “What?”

“Yeah,” he reinforces, reaching into his pocket and handing Natalie a black card. “Put it on that. Get something for you too. I’ve got a purple tray, make the rest of her purple.” He nods at my feet. “Shoes too. No boots.”

I frown. Cocktailing in heels should have been mentioned at the beginning of the conversation. I glance over at Natalie. She looks mad, and I struggle to hold back the satisfaction it gives me.

“Just tell me when and where,” I comment.

She shakes her head in disbelief. “Neither of us open tomorrow, so meet

me here at 9 AM. I know where to go.”

“Oh, team meeting!” Mia says, stepping into the circle. “What are we talking about?”

“Natalie’s taking me shopping for Bass and Lace tomorrow,” I explain.

“I want to go!” Mia exclaims excitedly. “I could use a new outfit for the party too.”

“Are you working it?” I ask her, and she shakes her head.

“No way. Those parties are way too much fun, I don’t want to work while I’m there. I grabbed tickets from Evan weeks ago.”

Natalie rolls her eyes. “Here. Tomorrow morning. Both of you.” She strides off into the dining room, and I glance over at Evan.

“Care to watch us try on lingerie?” I say with a smirk. Evan’s gaze travels down my body, and I know he’s picturing it.

“Yes,” he says. “But I have to open. You girls have fun.” He steps back, straightens his shirt, and follows Natalie into the crowd.

“I’m so excited,” Mia says, pulling out her phone. “I’m checking to see what’s new in stock at Gwenevere’s.” She looks up suddenly and places her hand over her mouth. “Oh, shit. I forgot to tell you. You were just triple-sat.”

I sigh. “I know.”

She shoves her phone back into her apron. “I’ll grab drinks on 41 for you.”

“Thanks,” I call after her as she jogs away. I turn toward the server station, and my eyes lock with Zaden’s as he tosses a glass rack onto the shelf above the drink machines. He glances between Evan and me, accusatorily, and maybe a little angry. Then he turns and walks back into the kitchen.

I know I’m here to make waves, but each one keeps knocking me down and tumbling me through the wash. I have to stay in my lane, and only make the relationships I need. The rest of them are complicating my mission. And my head.

For better or worse, it seems the closer I get to Evan, the farther I get from Zaden.

## Chapter 14

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### *Zaden*

I grab the new line of tickets from the printer and pull them apart, cramming them into the ticket holder. Removing the butter from the cooler at my side, I slam the stainless steel door a little too hard and run a hand through my hair. I have no right to be possessive of her, but it still feels like a slap.

Grabbing the tongs, I start flipping stakes and slathering on another puddle of butter.

“Yo,” Katrina calls from beside me. “What’s with the hostility?” I glance over as she shuffles pans, adds ingredients, and navigates around the flame.

I shake my head. “Nothing.” I throw on a few chicken breasts, take another look at the new tickets, and add several skewers of shrimp.

“Nothing never means nothing,” she says.

“This time, it fucking does,” I reply sharply.

“Like I said,” she drones on, turning to pour one of her Alfredo sauces onto a waiting plate.

I put my tongs down, glancing over my shoulder as I hear Evan shouting orders at the servers from the window.

“What do women see in that asshole?”

Katrina looks up, then shrugs. “Could be the Tesla, the beach condo, his substantial real estate portfolio, the CV with that long list of owner/GM positions, free access to his grandfather’s yacht, money, power, success. Take your pick, really. You know, that signature on my check every week is pretty sexy.”

I roll my eyes and turn back to the grill, checking the temps on several steaks before moving them over to the plates waiting on the line.



“Steaks are up on 15,” I shout down toward Ryan. “Throw some fries on that ribeye, please.”

I try to block it all out, concentrating on the music blaring from the speaker and the tickets hanging. It doesn't take long to fall into the familiar groove, slinging plates into the window so fast I have to slow down so I don't tank the rest of the line. But as I speed up, so do they.

Evan's trying to expo, but he's getting weeded quick, and sweat stains start to spread across his pretty button-up shirt. I start feeling more satisfied with myself, but then I see her.

Ivy walks up to Evan and places her hand on his arm. She moves him out of the way, and plates up several trays of food as servers run it out. She gets the window caught back up with a confident quickness, like she's worked here for years. I may have been just as satisfied at her show of superiority had she not touched him. Or smiled at him. Or talked to him in hushed tones that I couldn't hear.

Evan thanks her and wanders back into the dining room. Once she clears the window, she steps back into the server station to lean against the wall, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. She rolls her shoulders and stretches her neck, looking exhausted. I don't think she ever took that break, and she's been running non-stop all day.

Damn it. Why am I feeling sorry for her?

“Oh. Okay,” Katrina says from beside me, and I glance over to see her staring at Ivy. “I get it.” She turns around to tend her pans.

“What?”

“You've got feelings for that one.”

I shake my head and dismiss it. “Fuck you. Feelings. The only feelings I have for her are in my cock.”

“And she wants Evan's,” Katrina adds, and I throw my cleaning rag at her. Katrina laughs, shaking her head. “Come on, don't get caught up on her. She lives in a motel, she could be gone by tomorrow. I don't know what her story is, but she's got heartbreak written all over that perfect little ass.”

I glance back over at Ivy in the server station as Giana walks up to talk to her. Giana rips a page out of her notebook and hands it to her, and they both start making drinks. Her purple hair tumbles in long tendrils out of her clip, brushing against the bare nape of her neck. A neck that had my teeth in it last night. A silver bottle opener protrudes from one of the back pockets of her tight jean shorts, catching a flicker of light from the kitchen as she moves. It

is a perfect ass.

I mumble a curse under my breath and pull a chicken breast out of the cooler, throwing it on the grill.

I don't have feelings for her.

I repeat this to myself several times, over and over, as I flip the chicken, sauce it, and slide it into a bun with lettuce, tomato, and pepper jack cheese. I tuck it into a small styrofoam container, and call Mia over as she's walking by.

"Can you watch Ivy's tables for a few minutes so she can take a break?"

Mia's eyes narrow, but she slowly nods. "Yeah, I'll cover them."

"Thank you," I tell her as I approach the mic. "Table 23, please," I announce.

I see Ivy pause mid-step near the bar, and pull her notebook out of her apron. She flips through several pages, then walks toward the window in confusion.

"Table 23 is gone. I just cleared it," she says, looking up at me.

"I know," I say, sliding the small to-go container over to her. She picks it up, and pops the lid to see a chicken sandwich just as she ordered it that first night I saw her. "Kitchen screw-up," I explain. "Go take that break."

Her eyes meet mine. "I just got sat."

"Mia's got it. Go," I say, nodding toward the back door. She glances between the dining room and the door, weighing it. Hunger wins in the end, and she picks up the container.

"Thank you," she says. The sincerity in her tone nearly breaks me, and plants that seed of doubt in my head that I want so furiously to water and grow, that says she doesn't want him over me. I watch her until she disappears out the back door, then turn to face the grill.

"Cock feelings don't make chicken sandwiches," Katrina announces, shuffling pans over the fire.

I roll my eyes. "Yeah? What do you know about it? How's Sophie, anyway?"

"Gone," Katrina answers, not skipping a beat. "Caught me coming home with Amanda."

"See, who are you to give any kind of advice when your relationships are knee-deep in a dumpster fire?"

She shakes her head. "I wish I could say it wasn't worth it."

"Me too."

She glances over at me, sweat running down the short, bleach-blonde strands of her hair plastered against the side of her face.

“It’s not nothing.”

“Maybe not,” I finally, grudgingly agree. She smiles, shaking her head, and pulls a pan off the fire.

Mia walks back into the kitchen and up to the window. She has her phone out, scrolling through photos.

“Where did Ivy go? I want to show her some of these outfits at Gwenevere’s,” she asks, and I raise an eyebrow curiously.

“Tell me why you’re going to Gwenevere’s, and I’ll tell you where she is.”

“Bass and Lace, of course,” she says, like I should know already. “We’re going shopping. I think I found just the right dress.”

Katrina steps up to the window. “Let’s see it. I like lace.”

Mia turns her phone around, and images of a strappy purple dress fill the screen. It’s all buckles and silky belts and cinches, crisscrossing in intricate patterns across the bodice, all the way to a short skirt that flares around the hips with built-in garters. My mouth goes dry just thinking about Ivy inside it.

“That’s not a dress. That’s bondage lingerie.” I pause, then curse. “I want tickets.”

She leans in close. “It’s been sold out for weeks, but Jamal is working the door. I’ll slide him a text.”

“She’s in the back on the deck,” I say, nodding my head toward the door. Mia skips away toward the employee break area, and I turn back to Katrina. She shakes her head.

“I’ve never seen you chase after a girl.”

I shrug. “They don’t usually run.”

I can’t let Ivy get to me. She’s already proven that she can’t be trusted. She came home late, showered, and in another man’s clothes. She proved that whatever we may have started, it means nothing to her. All the red flags. And yet, here I am. Still chasing her. Knitting all those red flags together to make a blanket for the bed I’ll lie in later.

Fuck it. “How long you got on that Scampi?”

“Three minutes. But I’ll make it seven if you keep pining away for the servers instead of grilling those skewers for 72. My shit is getting cold, and you’re making me look bad.” She slishes the sauce into the air over the fire

and catches it in the pan.

“I’ll grab your sides,” I say, amused, and make my way down the line.

## Chapter 15

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### *Ivy*

Friday flies right on by before I can stop to breathe. With a shopping trip in the morning and only working the second shift, I feel like I've barely been at the Sandbar at all by the time Evan walks to the front and turns off the open sign.

As the chaos in the dining room begins to wind down, I lean back against the wall in the server station, feeling the tick of the clock like a hammer against my skull. My nerves are on red alert tonight, the weight of the impending club job baring down on me like Atlas's Earth. Will I find out what Paige was doing there? Will it be a complete waste of time? Is it a strip club? Was that her secret?

Maybe I don't want to know.

"You still have a table?" Zaden asks from behind me, catching me off guard as I fill a drink from the machine.

I nod. "I can't seem to get that woman to shut up and pay her ticket." I set the glass down on table and turn around to face him.

The kitchen is almost clean, and he shed his Sandbar shirt in favor of the black tank he wears beneath. The blue neon from the bar catches the highlights in his tattoos, lines wound intricately around hard muscle glistening with sweat within the dim interior of the tiny server station. I want to read his art like a book, in Braille. Slowly, and without interruption.

"That's surprising," he says, his gaze falling on my mouth.

I angle my head to peer up at him. "Why?"

He steps closer, nearly touching, and I retreat until I feel the cool steel of the table in my back. He reaches toward the shelf above the machine, his head falling to the side of mine until I feel the warmth of his breath against

my ear.

“Because I know those lips can silence all thought and reason. You don’t even have to speak.” His words run like an electrical current across my skin as he grabs a styrofoam cup off the shelf and steps back, his eyes meeting mine as he presents the cup to me. “Put her drink in a to-go cup. She’ll get the idea.”

Mia walks around the corner with a cleaning rag, and Zaden takes another step back.

“Do you have any tea drinkers? I’m about to break down the tea urns.”

I shake my head. “No. My last table is about to leave.”

“Good grief. Kick them out already. I’m ready to go to the party,” she exclaims, tossing her towel in the sanitizer bucket and grabbing the lid off the urn. She glances over at Zaden, realizing we aren’t alone in the space.

“Oh good, you’re still here. Take this into the kitchen for me, will you?” She asks sweetly, nodding toward the empty metal urn.

Zaden smiles, his eyes never leaving mine. Then he grabs the urn and disappears back into the kitchen.

I take a breath, and make the to-go drink.

“Last call,” I hear Nick yell from the bar, and I see Evan walk out of the cash office. I wander over to meet him.

“As soon as that table is out the door, cash out so you can go change. Raven and Natalie will meet us here in an hour, and I’ll drive. We’ll explain everything at Aurora.”

I nod. “I’ll be here.”



AN UNCOMFORTABLE SILENCE SETTLES LIKE A STAGNANT FOG INSIDE THE interior of the Tahoe as Evan drives us to Aurora. Natalie sits up front with Evan, glancing over periodically to stare at me in the rearview like a suspicious parent. I try to swallow my amusement, but after the several shots I had before leaving the Sandbar, it’s becoming more and more difficult.

The Aurora is farther down the beach on the west end, and Evan takes the highway, weaving through traffic at fifteen over. Eventually, he turns off onto a darkened road that winds through a pine forest, and I read the collection of signs on the post at the entrance.

Dead End.

Coral Cove Road.

Every muscle in my body stills. This is the road. The one from the accident. I look out the window, trying to remember the video the Detective showed me.

“I thought the Aurora was on the beach,” I say, breaking the silence.

“It is,” Evan confirms. “We actually overshot it by about two blocks, but it’s quicker to take Coral Cove to get down there. There’s a shortcut through the back of the Danny’s Grocery parking lot that goes to Beach Drive, but no one knows about it. This time of night, Dolphin and Beach are stagnant with traffic trying to get to the strip.”

I nod. A shortcut to Aurora. I ball my hands at my sides, panic rising in my chest. Up ahead, I can see the sign for Danny’s Grocery along the curve, dark green like the hoodie Rose was wearing that night. The headlights illuminate a set of tire tracks on the road that slide into the grass, and a glittering sparkle along the grass line. Broken glass.

This was the spot where Paige’s life changed forever. Where my life changed forever.

We pass over it, following the curve, and turn into Danny’s Grocery. I glance up at the rearview, studying Evan, but he looks entirely unfazed. How can he not care at all? How can he drive this road and not think about her? It was a week ago today. A fucking week!

I glance over at Raven, bathed in the dim reading light mounted above her window. Her hands are paused in midair, holding a small compact mirror and makeup brush as she stares out the window. Evan might not look affected, but she does. Regardless of how I may feel, she and Mia have taught me that I am not alone. At least not in this. There is a degree of this pain that we share.

Evan drives around the parking lot for the small independent grocery store, and I spot two lingering cars in the back lot. The signs are dark, but the inside lights are bright against the night as stockers reset the store for the next day. Behind the building is a small, single-lane road leading away from the loading dock, and a *One Way* sign.

We’re not going the one way.

I grab the door handle and wait for headlights, wondering when the trucks arrive to restock. We make it through, and pull out into the crawling traffic of Beach Drive. Further down the block, there’s no way to miss the Aurora. In a

display that would rival the Las Vegas strip, laser lights swim into the night sky above the club, in blues and greens and purples, reflecting off a continuous spiral of smoke wafting up from the roof of the building.

Evan pulls into the sprawling parking lot, packed solid with cars, and drives around to the back where he has a reserved spot. I take a breath, compartmentalize everything I just felt on Coral Cove Road into a tiny locked box in my head, and open the door. It's go time.

The Aurora isn't just the largest nightclub in Pelican Beach. It's the largest nightclub I've ever seen. Several stories tall, and shaped like an iridescent dome, it's truly an architectural marvel. Lights and colors flash across the surface of the building, and shine a cool light on the patrons lined up at the door.

"You never told me the Aurora looked like someone buried Epcot Center in the sand," I tell Evan as we form a line behind him, and head toward the employee entrance. "I don't know how I missed this place from the plane. You can probably see it from space."

Evan chuckles from the front of the line. "Like I told you, we like to create an experience they can't get anywhere else. People come to Pelican Beach just for the Aurora. It's like this all summer."

"I don't know why I expected anything less after witnessing your bougie monstrosity of a condo last night," I comment, and he flashes me an amused glare that clearly says *shut up*.

Natalie's head whips in my direction, and I can feel her murderous eyes boring into me.

"Wow, Evan," Natalie says, flashing him a giant fake smile. "Is there anything you haven't shown Ivy?"

He shakes his head. "I trust her, and you should too. Now give it a rest, this may be one of our biggest nights of the year."

Natalie's smile falters briefly, but she plasters it right back on. The loyalty in this one is strong.

Evan speaks to the men guarding the back door, and after a moment, we're all waved inside. A darkened tunnel snakes into the interior of the building, and we follow a path of twinkling purple lights to a side door. The bass from the music pounds in the walls, and my heartbeat rises to match it.

Evan opens the door, and we walk inside. He orders us to line up against the back wall, and I glance over at Natalie and Raven for guidance. When they obey, I fall in line. He picks up a camera from the table, presses several



buttons, and stands before Natalie.

I can't lie, she looks hot. We all do. Natalie is wrapped in a bright yellow lace lingerie dress with matching undergarments and gold platform heels. Her blonde hair is wrapped into a fluffy pony tail at the top of her head, and she has on enough body glitter to rival the giant disco ball we're standing in. I know the moment she steps foot inside the club, she will shimmer like a Christmas ornament beneath the lights.

A bright flash strobes through the room, and he moves on to Raven.

"So we have a process here, and I'll explain it to you," Evan says, snapping Raven's photo. Raven maintains her gothic princess vibe, with her long dark hair falling around her shoulders, with lime green highlights in the front, dark makeup, and a black lace corset and skirt. Her spiked black boots rise to her knees, and I immediately want to bother Evan about why she's allowed to wear boots and I'm not.

"This part is all electronic," Evan continues, moving over to me. "We have special lighted trays and an app ordering system." He holds the camera in place and glances at me over the lens. His eyes rake down my body, examining my bondage dress in the same plumb shade as my hair, and my ungodly sexy black heels with a cage of straps rising all the way to my thighs. I've never felt more like an anime character before, and it's glorious.

"How does it work?" I ask, bracing myself for the flash of light. He snaps it, and stars explode in my vision for a few seconds.

"I'll demonstrate," he says, pushing several buttons on his camera before setting it back down. "Come here." We follow him over to the table, and he turns on three round lighted trays. Green, purple, and yellow. He pulls out his phone.

"Not everyone has access to this app," he says, showing me the screen. "People order drinks, and the order gets sent to the Galaxy Bar. That's where you operate out of. The only bar you operate out of. Understand?"

I nod.

"The club has eight bars over three floors. This is your area. If you bring anyone else your drink orders, they won't fill them. You have to go to the Galaxy." He types something into the app, then turns the purple tray so I can see the surface.

In the center of the round tray are five smaller circles. As soon as Evan hits send on the app, one of the circles lights up with a bright number one encircled with a red ring.

“On the customer’s end, they get a number, a barcode, a color, and a photo of you. The color around the photo is your tray for the night. The photo confirms that they have the correct server. The front of the tray is a scanner.” He taps the front of the glowing tray. “Scan their barcode, confirm their customer number, and serve the drinks. The ring will be red when you receive the order, and when you pick it up from the bartender, it will turn green. Tips go into your server account, and you can check the balance on the back computer behind the Galaxy Bar.” He glances between Natalie and Raven, then me. “Any questions?”

Raven smiles. “Let’s fucking rock,” she says, turning to head for the door. I grab my tray and follow the line of girls out into the chaos.

“Are you ready for this?” Evan says, placing his hand on my lower back and leading me through the tunnel.

“Not really,” I admit. “But let’s do it anyway.”

The tunnel opens into a huge room full of flashing lights in a sight that takes my breath away. Spirals of intricate lights and crystals dangle from the ceiling, and lasers dance along the walls. Staircases arch up the walls to different floors, splitting off to private rooms, dance areas, and tables.

Several rings of dance floors comprise the bottom floor, some higher and some lower, with railings and staircases creating a maze through the center of the dome I’m certain I will get lost in. Above it all, in the center of the room, hovers the DJ booth on a large silver disc suspended from the ceiling. Three men move around the space, spinning records and sliding levers, dancing to the beat.

“Holy shit,” I say as we climb one of the smaller staircases and cross a crowded platform to the Galaxy Bar.

“You pick up here,” Evan says. “But orders can come from all over the club. Try to stay around the Galaxy, and the next two areas, Nova and Lyra. Your app customers know your general location, so stay close.”

I nod.

“Any problems, any questions, get directed to me. I’ll be at the table near the railing,” he advises, pointing across the floor to a semi-circle of elegant glass tables. His hand moves down my back, soft and lingering as he leans in close to me. “Save me a dance. You look hot tonight.”

I smile. “I was going to say the same to you,” I comment, trying to look interested in his white slacks and shiny blue button-up shirt. The fit is perfect, but the style shouts disco luau. He and Natalie are perfect for each other. He

strides off toward the tables, and I follow the girls to the bar.

The bartender looks up from his register, a tall, well-muscled guy with olive skin and dark hair. “I haven’t met you yet,” he says. “I’m Alex.”

“Ivy,” I say, taking his hand as he offers it.

“I’m going to push the orders out if y’all are ready?” He asks, glancing over at Natalie and Raven.

“Orders?” I ask, my gaze meeting Raven’s. “We already have some?”

Raven laughs. “Hit us, Alex.”

Alex nods, and a second later, all the circles on my tray light up red with different numbers inside. I glance over, and the other two trays look the same. Well, fuck me.

Alex starts slinging us drinks until my tray is full, and I stride off into the dancing mass of bodies with no known destination.

“Over here,” a guy says, waving me down within thirty seconds of my departure from the bar. “Number four.” He shows me his app, and I scan the code to confirm the order. When I hand him the drinks, he thanks me. It was that easy.

One by one, my tray clears, and more red rings appear in their place. I return to the bar and refill. Over and over, it never ends. After about an hour, I wander by Evan’s table on my way back out onto the floor. I hold my tray high and sway to the beat, conscious of how my dress slides up my thighs as I move, and Evan’s attention to it. He smiles and stands from the table, walking over to join me.

He mirrors my movements, sliding his body in tight behind mine. His hands fall to my hips, controlling the sway as my head falls back against his chest.

“Um, Order number ninety-one?”

I glance over and see a woman watching us. Her eyes are wide in the darkness as she chews her bottom lip, memorized by the lights of my drink tray. I laugh and step away from Evan. She presents her phone, and I scan the code before handing her two shot glasses.

“Hold on,” Evan says from behind me, then reaches into a basket in his booth. He retrieves a bottle of water and hands it to the woman. “Hydrate,” he advises, his voice barely audible above the booming of the bass. She nods, and disappears back into the crowd.

He motions to the table where he has a round of shots poured up, and hands me one. I clink my glass against his and tip it back, savoring the

immediate burn followed by a rush of cold. Chilled vodka. Good vodka. He can keep these coming.

“What do you think of the party?” Raven asks as she walks up beside me, tray empty, heading for the bar. She grabs one of the shots and drinks it.

“I’ve never seen anything quite like it,” I admit, nodding toward a woman passing by, topless except for the shiny strawberry-shaped pasties over her nipples. “Pretty wild.”

“It’s still warming up,” Evan says, his eyes following the topless woman. “Give it another hour or two and reassess.”

I roll my eyes, and wander back into the crowd with the remainder of my drinks. Two hours later, I realize he was right.

Bodies move as one in the crowd, sliding against one another in sweat-drenched lingerie. The DJ hammers out the beats, never slowing, giving them exactly what they want. Every time I pass Evan’s table, he passes me a shot like it’s a drive-thru. I don’t even have to pause, and I feel fucking fantastic.

With an hour remaining in my shift, I place my empty tray on Evan’s table and grab another shot I definitely do not need.

“You’re killing it,” Evan says, sliding out of the booth.

“The bottle? I know.”

He laughs. “No, the job.”

“To be honest, I forgot I was working,” I admit. And it’s not far from the truth. I’ve been pulled into this night, the sway of my body to the music involuntary at this point.

“The best jobs are work and fun,” he advises.

“I’ll drink to that,” Natalie says, stepping in between Evan and I to grab a shot off the table. She slides her body in close against mine, and I’m too wasted to let her get away with the obvious cockblock. The bass drops, and I dance.

I press my ass against her and rock my hips, letting the music flow like ripples over my body. I slide against her yellow lace, then turn and wrap my arms around her neck, breasts to breasts, pulling her into the dance. I see it the moment her icy exterior cracks, and she warms with amusement. Maybe she can be broken.

I glance over at Evan as our bodies glide together to the beat, her nails dragging lightly across my arms, and down the sides of my breasts. Evan raises an eyebrow, and slides his palm down the front of his slacks.

“You should take her up to the silhouette room,” he says to Natalie. “I’ll

reroute your orders until you get back.”

Natalie smiles and grabs my hand. “Come on,” she says. “This is fun.” I’m drunk enough not to protest as she drags me through the club and up the spiral staircase to the second floor. We disappear into a door along the wall, and follow a darkened tunnel of twinkle lights into a bright room with a white wall.

“I know he said silhouette, but... explain this to me,” I say, smiling as I wander through the room in confusion.

She points at the white wall. “This is a screen. The whole club can see everything you do in here, but only your shadow. You can take all your clothes off, and they still won’t see anything.”

“Scandalous,” I comment, raising my arm and watching my shadow on the screen. The lights gradually change color, following a pattern from warm to cool colors and back again. The music transitions into a melodic dubstep, with ethereal female vocals curling around the bass like a lover’s caress.

Natalie sways to the beat, slow and deliberate, her hands running down her body. She reaches for me, and I join her. I watch our silhouette as we dance, sliding against each other with bold, deliberate movements, adding in the occasional hair flip for spice. We’re nearly the same height and shape, and in skintight dresses, our shadows look nearly naked.

I mold myself to her, hips rolling to the music in time with hers. I place a hand on her lower back and gently bend her backward into an arch. My other hand starts at her neck, then travels down between the valley of her breasts, palm flat, over her yellow lace dress to latch onto her hip and pull her back up again. She laughs, and swivels her hips against me, sandwiching one of my legs between hers.

“Not too bad, new girl,” she admits, biting her lip as she studies my face. I realize something in this moment, surprised I didn’t pick up on it sooner. The hostility around Evan, her awkwardness around me. She doesn’t want Evan.

She wants me.

I smile. “You were right. This is fun.”

“It gets better. Have you checked your server account yet?” Natalie asks with a smirk.

I shake my head. “Honestly, I’d offer to do this for free.”

She laughs. “It’s far from free. Come on,” She says, pulling me toward the darkened twinkle-light tunnel. I follow her back down the spiral staircase

and across the platform to the Galaxy Bar. Before I can reach it, a familiar set of figures emerge from the flashing blur of dancing bodies, and I stop.

“Mia?” I question, smiling as I walk to her and wrap my arms around her. She’s in pink lace underwear and matching little pink wings.

“I saw you in the silhouette,” she says. “Whew, girl.” She fans herself. “You look hot.”

“And you look like the tooth fairy,” I blurt without thinking. Thanks, Vodka.

She laughs. “I’m an angel.”

“Damn right, you are,” Nick says, wrapping his arms around her. My gaze drifts over him, noting his sharp club attire but expecting nothing less.

“Nick,” I acknowledge.

“I’ve never seen Natalie that limber,” he comments. “You found a way to melt the ice queen.”

“It’s all friction,” I explain with a smile. “You just have to rub her the right way.”

“Which way is right?” A voice asks from behind me, and even in the loud booming chaos of the club, I know who it is. My heart starts to race, and I turn to face him.

“You don’t know?” I ask Zaden, my eyes raking unabashedly down his body. His dark hair falls around his face, his ice blue eyes locked on me, in a silky silver shirt with black accents folded to the elbows, and slim-fit black pants disappearing into his clunky combat boots. His shirt is unbuttoned to mid-chest, revealing the tattoos hidden beneath, and winding down his arms beneath the fold. My mouth goes dry, and I’m suddenly aware of just how badly I need another drink. A big one, far, far away from this absolutely gorgeous man.

Zaden nods, and the intensity in his stare tells me he caught the whole show. “I know.”

I can’t stop thinking about the way he kissed me last night. The way his hands felt on my skin, rough and demanding, taking what he wanted because he couldn’t stop wanting it. We have that dangerous need in common.

“Come here often?” I inquire, moving closer to him and knowing I shouldn’t. “Or are you stalking me?”

His eyes lock on mine. “Stalking.”

“How’s that working out for you?” I slide my body against his, turning until my back is against his chest, and swaying my hips to the music. His

hands glide up my thighs as he moves with me, pulling me tighter against him as the club lights strobe around us.

“I’ll tell you in the morning.”

I bite my lip to hide my smile, undeniably turned on by the confidence in his tone. “Why? Are you going to follow me home, too?”

I feel the stubble on his face scrape against the nape of my neck, his voice warm against my skin. “Keep grinding on my cock like this, and I’ll throw you over my shoulder and take you there myself.”

I turn in his embrace, my arms sliding around his neck as our eyes collide in the darkness. “I dare you.”

His eyes darken, his hands tightening on my hips before sliding down to grip my ass. “You’re playing a dangerous game.”

I lean closer until my lips are a breath from his. “And it’s your turn.”

“Ivy,” Natalie calls as she weaves through the crowd. “Come on, we have orders piling up. Check your balance, and let’s get back to work.” She glances around the group, her attention pausing at Zaden. “Hey, you guys made it.”

I sigh, taking a step back from Zaden. “On my way,” I reluctantly agree. Natalie watches his hands slide off my ass, then turns back toward the bar. “Time’s up,” I tell him, smoothing my hands down my dress. He shakes his head, a muscle ticking in his jaw. Before he can reply, I turn and follow Natalie back to the Galaxy Bar.

Fuck. I’m way too drunk to be that close to him. Too stressed out and lonely and angry and sad to feel an outlet for my emotions at the tip of my fingers and not grab it.

I walk behind the bar and greet Alex as he refills Natalie’s tray on the opposite side of the counter. “Natalie said there’s a computer I can check my server account on?” I question, and he nods toward the door behind the bar. I thank him, then disappear inside.

It’s a small room with two stainless steel prep tables. One table has rows of empty, clean glasses lined up and ready to go. The other has two computer registers, and I log into one. A long line of transactions appear, several pages long. The cumulative tip total sits in bold numbers across the top, and I’m almost at a thousand dollars.

I curse. I’ve never made this much money in one day, let alone four hours. I close out of my account and lean back against the table. I’m fucked up, I’ll have a thousand dollars in my pocket by the end of the night, and five

hundred more when I get paid for the job. I've figured out some of the mystery of Paige. I found a way to dial Natalie's bitch-mode back a notch, and Evan said flat-out that he trusts me. Altogether, tonight has been fairly successful.

On the opposite table, one of the glasses in the line of highballs catches my eye, and I tilt my head to study it. It looks slightly crooked and not like the others. I walk over and lift it up, setting it in the palm of my hand. At the bottom of all the glasses I've run tonight is a metal pedestal, presumably for the tech that links each order to the POS system. On this glass, the pedestal is pivoted out to the side just enough to appear detached. I twist it further, and it slides open to reveal a small metal dish. Inside the dish are two blue pills.

I dump the pills out into my hand and run my finger over the inverted blue goldfish stamped into each pill. It's ecstasy.

I glance back at the table and all the rows of glasses. I think about the transaction list on the computer, plus Natalie, plus Raven, and whatever Alex may do at the counter. They're running a drug ring.

Paige was dealing for Evan.

"Hey, do you need any help with the..."

I jerk in surprise and drop the glass onto the tile at my feet. It shatters. Natalie pauses in the doorway beside me, her eyes wide as her mouth falls open.

"It was already open," I explain, watching her face. "What is this?"

Her features begin to harden. "Did you really think people pay this much for drinks?" I can see the suspicion start to creep back in.

Alex ducks into the room with us and spies the glass on the floor. "What happened?"

"It was on the edge, and I knocked it," I lie. Natalie holds my gaze for a moment, assessing me. Sizing me up. Then she turns on her heel and walks out. "I'm sorry," I tell Alex, sidestepping him to chase Natalie out into the crowd.

I'm several steps from the bar when I remember I still have the pills in my hand. I grab a napkin off a table, wrap the pills into a tiny package, and tuck it into the bra of my dress. Natalie reaches Evan before I do, and immediately gets his attention. By the time I arrive, they're both staring at me, cautious and accusatory.

"We need to talk," Evan says. "Come with me."

"I don't think so," I assure him.



“She’s a liability,” Natalie tells him. “I told you she wouldn’t be okay with this.”

I shake my head. I can feel everything start to unravel. The jobs. Their trust. My only chance at prying any sort of truth from them about the night Paige disappeared. All because I stumbled onto their side gig.

“Listen,” I tell Natalie, focusing on her because I know she’s the hardest sell. “I’m walking out of here tonight with over a thousand dollars. I don’t care what I have to do for that kind of money.”

“Evan said you wouldn’t find out. I barely know you. How can I believe a word you say?” She questions, her eyes searching mine. My heart races in my chest, like I’m on the precipice about to leap.

They trust me now, completely, or not at all.

I shake my head. “Just stop talking.” I close the distance between us, threading my fingers into her hair and pulling her lips to mine. I silence her surprise with my mouth, dragging my tongue along her satin soft lips. She tastes like peaches and vodka, and the moment her tongue touches mine, I know I’ve won. She leans into it, her arms wrapping around me, her breasts pressed against mine.

I release her, and take a step back. Her lips, wet and swollen from mine, are parted in confusion.

“I don’t care. Whatever y’all have going on here, I’m all in.”

Her nod is slow, her argument forgotten and silenced. It worked.

I glance over at Evan. “Are we done here? I have drinks to run.”

He struggles to hide his amusement. “Yeah. We’re good. Carry on.”

I nod and stride off through the crowd toward the Galaxy. I slide my tray behind the bar and tell Alex I’ll be back. I need a minute, or a year, or another bottle of liquor to even begin to process everything that just happened.

I walk around the maze of the dance floor and across the Nova section toward the stairs. I need to find somewhere quiet, if such a place exists. Somewhere to think, without further distraction or complication.

The crowd parts, and my gaze immediately collides with Zaden’s. Through the shadows of the club and the flashing lights, I can feel his intensity. Something dark and dangerous that sends a shiver through me. I duck through the crowd and pause near a spiral staircase ascending the wall like a vine. I turn around to see if there are any witnesses to my retreat and find Zaden standing directly behind me, his ice-blue eyes locked on mine.

“You were right,” I tell him, licking my lips to see if they still taste like

her. "About the silencing."

"I know," he replies as he reaches for me, his voice low and rough, barely above the roar of the crowd. "That's the power of you. You can take things people didn't know they could lose." He places his hand on my hip and pushes me back against the wall, just out of view of Evan's table. Colored lights dance on the wall around us, my pulse pounding in tune with the vibration of the bass.

"I don't want to take anything," I admit.

"You don't need to," he replies, his gaze drifting down my body as he studies my sexy, strappy purple bondage dress. "It's already yours."

"Zaden," I plead, glancing back toward Evan, wondering if he can see us. "I want to explain, I just can't."

"I don't care," he replies. "That's the fucking crazy part. I don't care. All I want is you."

I shut my eyes and take a deep breath, shaking my head.

"Tell me you don't feel this," he continues, his grip tightening on my hip as he reaches up to toy with a long tendril of my hair. "Tell me I'm alone in this."

My breath quickens, and all the lies I've so carefully constructed in this quest begin to quake inside me. I can feel the truth on the tip of my tongue, but I swallow it. Not now. Not before I get the answers I need.

And yet, maybe I deserve this. A moment to let go. A moment that is just mine amidst the upheaval of everything I once believed. I don't know what to think anymore. All I do know is that I want it to stop. The thinking. And I know how to do that.

I meet his gaze, my heart racing as it realizes I'm about to do something reckless I can't take back. The confession tumbles from my lips.

"You're not alone."

As soon as the words escape me, his mouth is on mine, hot and hard, pressing me back against the wall. He buries his hands in my hair, holding me to him. Each kiss is a breath of life inside the darkness of me. My head spinning as I revive. I kiss him back with everything that I am, a tangled mess of fear and angst and grief and passion I've kept so carefully in check. As his mouth travels hotly down my neck, his hands sliding around my waist, I feel the ground disappear beneath me, and I lock my legs around his waist.

I run my hands up his chest and across his shoulders, needing to feel him. All of him, for as long as I can. I run my fingers into his messy, dark hair and

pull his head back to feast on the salty expanse of neck I've been staring at while he cooks every night. When my tongue turns to teeth, he growls and fixes his mouth on mine again. He drags his thumbs across my pierced nipples through the material of my dress, and I pant against his lips.

"I've wanted you like this since that first night, when I saw you shower in the moonlight," he says, pressing his forehead against mine, and pulling the long purple strands of my hair through his fingers. "I can't get you out of my head."

"I knew you were watching," I reply. "I was fucking with you."

He shakes his head, his mouth returning to mine. "I'm definitely fucked." His lips devour mine, his body caging me in against the wall. Everywhere I touch is solid muscle, ridged as he presses into me. When I lift the hem of his shirt and slide my hands along the skin beneath, he deepens the kiss, his tongue hot against mine. I trace the muscles of his abs, up his chest to drag my nails across his nipples as I nip his bottom lip.

Breathy female vocals weave through the beat of the dubstep song pounding in the speakers, and I embrace it, undulating my hips against the hardness of him pressed tight between my thighs. I move with the beat, sliding against him as his hands move down to cup my ass beneath my dress. Need pulses through me, trapped within me, searching for an escape. I slide my hand lower, tracing the V of muscles beneath the waistband of his pants. Lower, until I wrap my hand around the rock-hard length of him.

I want to see him crash. To lose all control and claim what is left of mine. I don't want it anymore. All I want is him. To leave everything else behind. To forget it all, at least for a little while. He can take it. The gravity of him can pull it in, all the darkest parts of me wrapped tight around my neck, weighing me down and holding my head beneath the sea. I can give it to him and just breathe.

His eyes go dark, and he curses, crushing his mouth against mine. The kiss is desperate. Rough. Teeth and tongue, his body pressing me so tight into the wall I feel like I'm going to sink into it. He grinds against my hand buried deep in his pants as I slowly stroke him from base to tip. His fingers follow the line of my lace panties, and when he presses a finger inside me through the fabric, I moan his name against his lips.

His hand slides up my body and beneath the material of my dress to cup my breast, his thumb tracing circles around the barbell in my nipple. Suddenly, he stills, and our lips break. My legs slide slowly back to the floor,

and he steps back. Between us, he holds a small napkin-wrapped package in the center of his palm.

He glances at me curiously, and I pick it up, unrolling the contents into my hand. I stare at the two blue pills.

Maybe it's the alcohol. Maybe it's the lights and the music painting enemies as lovers, masking the truth I want in favor of the touch I need. His touch. Whatever it is, I'm running out of reasons to fight it.

I pick up one of the pills and place it on my tongue, my eyes locking with his as I swallow. I hold the other up to him, and he opens his mouth.

Then I kiss him, hard and hungry, sliding my hands into his hair. He presses me back into the wall until I feel the whole weight of him against every inch of me. His hands slide under my dress to cup my ass, then travel up to my hips.

"Am I going to find anything else in here?" He asks, his mouth trailing down my neck.

"I can't remember. Maybe you should keep looking," I reply, running my nails through his hair, my head falling back to give him easier access.

"What about Evan?"

He shakes his head. "I don't want to talk about Evan."

I blink, and struggle to focus. "I wasn't." I glance over and see Raven standing beside us, an eyebrow raised curiously.

Fuck.

I push against Zaden until he takes a reluctant step back, and blocks me from view until I can fix my dress. The glare he cuts at Raven could break skin.

"Is Evan..?"

She shakes her head. "He's behind the bar."

"Raven, I -"

"I don't need an explanation. I just thought you needed a wake-up call. If Evan had seen that, you'd both be on the chopping block." A smile creeps at the corner of her lips.

"Fire me," Zaden says as his arms wrap around me, pulling me back against him. "Fire us both." His head lowers, his voice soft and hot against my neck. "Then come home with me. I'll make you breakfast in the morning, and we can stand in the unemployment line together."

His words travel through me like an electrical current. Every part of his offer appeals to every part of me. Yet, I find myself saying, "I have to get

back to work.”

Raven nods, and wanders back around the corner. I turn to face Zaden.

“I’ll find you,” I promise. “Give me twenty to finish up and clock out.”

“Nick and Mia are about to leave,” he says. “We can catch a ride with them.”

I nod and chase Raven’s wake through the crowd. I grab my tray, finish the last few orders sent my way, and tell Alex I’m done for the night.

I can feel it creeping in on me as I finish the last order and retire my tray. The acceleration of my heartbeat, the extended tracers of passing lights, the shiver that races up my spine every time my skin touches skin as I weave through the crowd. I know I have to get out of here, and soon. I pass beneath one of the AC vents in the club, and the rush of cool air feels like a million tiny fingertips sliding over me. I shudder, take a breath, and move through the club to Evan’s table.

Evan smiles as I approach, and motions to the space in the booth beside him, but I shake my head.

“I’m beat,” I lie. “If it’s okay with you, I’m going to ride back with Mia.”

His eyes rake over me. “You sure? Last call doesn’t apply to owners.”

I nod. “Raincheck.”

“Will do,” he reluctantly agrees, watching me carefully. “You feeling okay?”

I smile, resisting the urge to giggle outright. “Yeah, I’m fine. It’s just hot in here.” Really hot. Inside my dress. Inside my skin. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” Then I turn and leave, cutting myself off before I can say anything that might give me away.

I can feel every strap of my dress where it touches my body, the ribbon of thong down my ass, the cool metal buckles of my heels down the sides of my legs. It feels like a cage, and I’m stuck inside. I weave through the crowd back to where I last saw Mia and Nick in the Nova section near the railing.

Then I see Zaden. Our eyes meet, and he comes for me.

We fall into each other with open mouths and roaming hands. I run my nails up the back of his neck and fist my hands in his hair. He moans against my lips, his arms wrapping around me and pulling me tight against him.

I vaguely register the stream of giggles that ring out from Mia, and turn to look at her.

“Well, that was unexpected,” she comments.

Nick shakes his head. “Not that unexpected.”

I smile. “Let’s get out of here.”

## Chapter 16

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### *Ivy*

**M**ia leads the way through the club, zigzagging through the crowd until we're finally outside. The warm salt air rushes over me all at once, and I glance up into the night sky, lost in the blanket of stars. I've never seen so many stars before, shooting across the sky.

Zaden places his hand on my back and leads me to his truck where Mia and Nick wait. He pulls his keys out of his pocket and tosses them to Nick.

"We'll be in the back," he says.

Nick takes a step closer, his gaze volleying back and forth between Zaden and I.

"You guys are fucked up," he accuses.

"Yeah, we're leaving a bar at three in the morning," Zaden replies, but he can't hide his amusement.

"No, like fucked up, fucked up," Nick clarifies.

I start laughing. I don't know why, and I don't know how to make it stop.

Nick laughs and rolls his eyes. "Get in."

Zaden helps me climb into the back of his lifted Silverado, then follows me. His hands wrap around my waist, lifting me up and spinning me around until his back is against the cab of the truck. He kisses me breathless beneath the stars, and I feel the truck engine rumble to life. Holding me tight, he sits down as I straddle his lap.

"How do you feel?" He asks, his lips meeting mine before roaming down my neck and across my shoulder.

"Hot," I answer. "Everywhere. Inside. Outside. All the places you touch. All the places you don't."

He smiles against my shoulder. "I can relate."

“This needs to go,” I demand, pulling at the buttons on his shirt. “You’re wearing too many clothes.” I get it partially undone before he reaches back and pulls it over his head, tossing it behind me. Finally, I can touch him. My hands slide across his skin, following the curves of muscles, tracing the lines in his tattoos. I dip my head and trace those same lines with my tongue, tasting the salt of his sweat.

His head falls back against the cab of the truck as he watches me, his hands sliding to my hips to pull me flush against his cock, hard beneath the material of his pants. The truck turns out of the parking lot and onto the main road, whipping the wind around us as we pick up speed. My hair tumbles behind me, and I meet his lips again.

Desire races through my bloodstream, pushing me closer to him, my skin hungry for his. I grind against him, riding him through our clothes, the ridge of his cock sliding against my panties. My breath comes in short gasps against his mouth, faster as I feel the energy building. His mouth travels down my neck, his hands gripping my ass until I can feel the individual points of pressure in every fingertip. When he bites me, I come. Hard and fast, the world exploding around me. Waves of fire rush over me until I’m trembling with sensation, vibrating on his lap with my head thrown back to the wind.

He holds the shattered pieces of me together until I can return to Earth, and I meet his gaze.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he says.

“I want you,” I tell him. “All of you. Right now.”

He smiles. “Soon.”

I shake my head, kissing him as my hand slides down his chest to his belt. “Now,” I repeat.

He laughs and grabs my hand, pinning it behind my back.

“Not yet. If I start now, I won’t be able to stop.”

“Still not understanding the problem.”

He laughs again, then wraps an arm around my waist and hauls us both to our feet. The Silverado races down the road, dark except for the occasional streetlight passing overhead. As we get further from the Aurora, the traffic dies out, and we’re the only car on the road.

I grip the top of the truck and watch the road in front of us, the wind rushing around me. I feel Zaden step up against my back, his arms wrapping around me. He kisses my shoulder, then moves up my neck.



“Do you trust me?” He asks against my skin, and I turn in his embrace. I meet his gaze, his ice-blue eyes dark with desire.

“I trust you.”

His hands go to my waist, and he lifts me up to sit on the top of the truck. My hands grip his arms, fear bubbling inside me as I watch the world fly by on all sides.

“Lay back,” he instructs, and my eyes widen. “Trust me.” He stands between my knees, his hands firmly gripped around my waist.

Fuck it.

I lay back against the cool metal roof of the Silverado. The night air flows over me like water, billowing the material of my skirt. I stare up into the sky, watching the stars dance and pulsate around the moon. Signs and condos and dimly lit strip centers pass as a blur along both sides of my periphery. I reach my arms out from my sides, the air rushing around my skin.

I’m flying.

His mouth is warm on the inside of my thigh. Kissing. Sucking. Dragging his teeth against my skin. The familiar craving begins to build again. He nips his way up my thigh until I feel his breath against the thin lace of my panties, then he applies the same attention to the other side. I feel his thumb dip beneath the fabric and tug it over to the side.

When his tongue slides inside, I almost lose it completely. He eats me like a delicacy, slowly and purposefully. Then picks up pace. His tongue hits a rhythm, brushing against the tiny bud of nerves with each lap. I moan, unable to help myself, trapping his head between my knees and burying my hands in his hair. I arch against his mouth.

“More,” I urge. “I need more.”

He slides a finger deep inside me, thrusting in time with the movement of his tongue. Then he adds another. I grind against his mouth, meeting the thrusts of his fingers as they start slow and gradually build. I can feel the rasp of his knuckles, the way he curls his fingertips when they’re buried deep, stroking me, teasing me.

I can feel it coming, the pressure building inside me. I grab the hand he has locked on my hip and drag it up my body. He lifts his mouth from between my thighs, and our eyes meet.

I shake my head. “Don’t stop,” I beg. Then I take his free hand and wrap it around my throat. His eyes darken. I rock my hips against the thrust of his fingers as his hand tightens around my neck, pinning me to the roof of the

truck. Shirtless, muscles ridged as he reaches over me, his jaw set in determination, he holds my gaze. I want him to see it.

Then I fall. Darkness envelopes me, the salt air rushing around me as I orgasm hard around his fingers. The stars in the sky explode into supernovas, raining embers across my skin. I ride it and his hand as waves crash over me, one after another, falling deeper into the darkness as I let go of everything, even life.

His hand loosens on my neck, and he pulls me down off the roof and into his arms. As I come back, I feel his mouth against my neck where his hand just was.

“Fuck, that was hot,” he says against my skin. “We’ve got to get out of this truck.”

As if in answer to his request, the truck begins to slow, and Nick pulls into the Sandbar parking lot. The second it stops, Zaden strides to the edge and leaps out, reaching for me. I climb over the tailgate, and he grabs me, lifting me down to the ground.

“Holy shit,” Nick says, laughing as we walk around the side of the truck. “You guys are fucking nuts.”

“I’m more than a little turned on by all this,” Mia admits, fanning herself dramatically. “We’re headed home. Good luck with... everything.” She laughs, then drags Nick across the parking lot to her car.

“Come on,” Zaden says, lacing his fingers through mine and leading me down the catwalk. Anticipation builds with every step we get closer to the houseboat. When we arrive, he leaps onto the back deck and reaches a hand out to me. I take it, and follow him aboard.

He slides the back door open and we step inside. Dim lights illuminate the interior of the cabin, painted in greens and grays, with a fluffy area rug beneath a charcoal C-shaped couch. Several surfboards are mounted on the walls around the room, all bearing the same logo for Kaos Surf.

“This is impressive,” I admit, glancing around the room.

“I did the repairs, but the design is all Mia,” he replies.

I reach out and run my hand over one of the boards, feeling the texture of the wax. These aren’t just for decoration. He walks around me into the kitchen and pulls a box out from beneath the counter. One by one, he removes candles and arranges them in a line, then reaches for a torch. With a click, it flares to life with a perfect uniform flame, and he waves it down the line as all the candles light.

“Did you really just light all those candles with a creme brûlée torch?” I ask in amusement.

A smile lifts at the corners of his lips as he extinguishes the flame.

“Cook, remember?” Then he walks to a panel built into the wall, and the interior lights of the cabin go dark. He taps on another few buttons, and I hear music rise from the speakers mounted around the boat’s interior. Something dark and exotic and dubstep that rolls through me like a mood instead of sound. He picks up the candles and distributes them around the room.

“Come on,” he coaxes, grabbing the last two candles. I follow his flickering light down a hallway into the bedroom. A large black four-poster bed dominates the space across from a wall of windows overlooking the sea. He sets a candle down on each nightstand and turns to me. Firelight dances across his skin as he moves, and along the inside of his bicep as he reaches up to run a hand through his hair.

I bite my lip. “I swear I could come just looking at you,” I say, then smile. “Did I just say that aloud?”

“Then touch me,” he dares. “It gets better.”

I move toward him, and we collide in the middle of the room, his mouth hot and hungry on mine. His arms wrap around me as I slide my hands into his hair and push my tongue into his mouth. He groans, grabbing the back of my bondage dress like a human net to pull me closer.

“Free me,” I whisper against his lips. “I’ve been in this cage all night.” I turn around so he can see the corset closure, dual lines of D-rings threaded with thick purple ribbon. He pulls at the ribbon, and the bodice loosens. With a quick shimmy, the dress slides down to my feet, followed by my thong. I step out wearing nothing but strappy thigh-high heels.

I finally feel like I can breathe. When I turn to face him, candlelight ripples across my naked body. I run my hands through my hair, down my sides, and across my breasts. The skin hidden beneath the dress begs for attention, and I drag my nails across it, my gaze meeting his in the darkness.

“So. Fucking. Beautiful,” he says, closing the distance between us and fixing his mouth on mine. His hands grab for me, explore me, tracing all the dips and curves. His hands cup my breasts, thumbs toying with my nipple piercings as I lean into him.

I slide a hand between our bodies and undo his belt, then the button on his pants. They fall around his feet, and I greedily drag down his boxer briefs, desperate to feel him. I wrap my hand around his thick, ridged cock, pulsing

against my palm. I drag my hand up and back down, watching the play of emotions on his face. I stroke him until he groans and grabs my ass, hauling me up to wrap my legs around his waist.

“Ivy,” he whispers, rough and desperate against my lips.

I shake my head. “Not tonight,” I say. “Tonight, I get to be someone else.”

“As long as you’re mine, that’s all that matters,” he replies, tumbling me back onto the bed, his weight pressing me into the soft blankets. His mouth finds mine as I feel his cock between my legs, pausing at the entrance. He reaches over, and I hear the drawer on his nightstand open. The foil package glints in the candlelight as he rips it open, and sheaths himself.

I arch against him, and he slides the tip inside, then pulls it out. My breath catches, and he does it again. Then again. Fucking me with the tip of his erection and nothing more. I squirm. I beg. I claw at his back. Needing more as I feel my orgasm building and about to break. He holds me hostage, edging me closer, giving me just enough to drive me mad.

I’m done with this. I shove him back and climb on top of him, straddling his hips and sinking all the way down onto his cock. A moan tears through me as he fills me, pleasure coursing through every cell of my body like a circling vortex, tightening around me like a fist. His groan melds into mine as his hands slide down to grip my ass.

I rock against him, my hands gliding up my body, over my breasts, and gripping in my hair. I ride him, arching my back, my eyes locked on his. I want to keep it slow, but I can’t. He leans up and wraps his arms around me, fixing his mouth around my nipple as he pulls me down harder into his thrusts. Wet skin sliding, hands gripping, nearly bruising, my breaths fall as soft gasps against his neck as my body trembles.

“I’m going to come,” I pant against him as it races toward me like a wave in the ocean, curling to break.

“Come for me,” he rasps against my breast in hot demand. “Take what you need so I can really fuck you.”

The darkness around us shatters, careening out into the ether in colored tracers that swim around me. I’m on fire, the embers rolling like water down my body, over my breasts to pool between my legs. The tethers holding me to this world break and I’m free, without time or place or dimension. Only energy, arcing, reaching for his.

He growls as his control snaps, flipping me onto my back as he drives

himself deep inside me. His hands grip my hips as he pounds into me, hard and fierce, the slap of skin in rhythm with the beat of the music and the thundering of my heart.

Before my orgasm can finish, another one rises to break. He moves a hand between my legs, his thumb teasing the nub of my clit.

“Zaden,” I breathe, begging but unable to ask.

“I know,” he answers, slamming into me.

I come again, arching against him as his head falls back, and he buries himself deep inside. He roars with his own release, pumping into me, his fingers digging into my hips. A galaxy of stars race through my mind at lightspeed, electricity surging through my bloodstream as I reach for him and draw him down to me.

Sweat drips from his forehead onto my chest, and I wrap my hand around his neck to pull his mouth to mine. His lips slide over me, hot and wet and breathless.

His eyes meet mine, his lips curving in amusement as he shakes his head. “Fuck,” he says. “I’m in so much trouble.”

“I’d say I’m sorry, but I warned you,” I tease. “Your trouble is your own fault.”

“I should have listened.” His arms tighten around me, and he rolls us until he’s propped back on the pillows and I’m settled on his lap. His fingers trace spirals on my thighs as my hands run up his chest. Just touching him feeds the ache between my legs, the friction like sparks against the insatiable kindling of me.

“Why did you come to the club tonight?” I ask curiously.

“I can’t stop thinking about you,” he admits. “Part of me wanted to see if you were with Evan. Wondering if you want him as much as I want you. But the other part of me doesn’t fucking care and just wants to see you, touch you, steal moments away with you that should belong to someone else.” He sighs, his head falling back against the pillows. “Fucking Blue Fish.”

I swallow hard, trying to clear my head as the truth serum drug threatens to unmask me.

“I want to explain it to you, but I can’t. Not yet.” I shake my head. “Just know that whatever I have with Evan isn’t this. That night after the concert, he only offered me a change of clothes. I don’t want him. Or Natalie. It’s a power play. A fucking game.” I run my hands through my hair. *Stop talking. Just stop talking.*

“I trust you,” he admits, his confidence constricting around my heart until it struggles to beat.

“Don’t,” I reply softly. “I’ll only hurt you.”

“I can take it.”

“There’s broken, and there’s me. So far past broken that there’s no hope. I lost all the pieces so long ago, I can’t even tell you what it looked like when I was whole.” My eyes close. *Stop talking.*

His hands wind into mine, threading our fingers together.

“You don’t think I know? The things that are broken in you fit against the broken in me. This is how we become whole.”

“There’s so much you don’t know,” I confess.

He smiles. “Then tell me. Now.” His hands slide out of mine and around my back. “Over breakfast.” His fingertips explore my skin, up my hips, over my sweat-dampened skin to cup my breasts. “Dinner. Tomorrow and the next day.” His thumbs drag over my nipples, and I shiver. “I want all of it. All of you.”

“Stop it,” I plead as his cock begins to harden beneath me. “I’m here to fuck you, not fall for you.”

“Then stop talking,” he says. And he’s right.

I rise above him, and he slides back inside me. His hands move to my ass, and I roll my hips, holding him deep. He groans, and I feel a shudder of pleasure ripple through him. I rock against him as his hips thrust to meet me. He leans up, his mouth trailing along the side of my breast before fixing on my nipple. My hips mirror the stroke of his tongue, faster, harder. I pull his mouth to mine, my breath broken against his lips.

“Not yet,” he tells me. “You don’t get to come yet.”

“Try and stop me,” I say breathlessly, tossing my head back. My hand slides down my body and between my legs to rub my clit. He growls, lifting me from his lap to set me on the floor, then stands.

He kisses me, his tongue filling my mouth as his hands wrap in my hair. Then he pulls me away, pressing my mouth against his neck. I lick and tease as he pushes me farther down his chest, and I capture a nipple between my teeth. Farther, across the muscled abs of his stomach. I smile against his skin and bite his hip. I know where he’s going with this.

I glance up at him, and our eyes meet, holding as I pull the condom off. I wrap my lips around his cock and slide it all the way down my throat. He groans, and his head falls back, his hands gripping tighter in my hair as he

fucks my mouth. My lips slide along his shaft as my hands grip his ass. I can taste him, salty on my tongue, and mixed with the unmistakable creaminess of me.

He curses, and pulls me up by my hair to kiss me. In one swift motion, he twists me around and bends me over the side of the bed as he rolls on another condom. A hand on my hip, and the other still wrapped in my hair, he plows into me from behind. I moan as he presses me into the bed, holding me hostage as his hips slam into me. Every thrust is harder, more frantic, as he chases his own release.

“Give it to me now,” he says, his voice low and rough. “I want you to come.”

He tugs my head back by my hair as he buries himself deep inside me, and I explode around him. Ripples of electricity race through me as every cell in my body orgasms at once. His fingers dig into my hip as I hear him groan amidst a rhythm of slaps that bounce me on the bed. As his hips slow and his grip releases in my hair, I struggle to catch my breath, smiling into the comforter.

A giddy wave of euphoria washes over me as I stand and lean back against his chest. His cock slips out, and I wind my hand around the back of his neck and pull his mouth to mine. He bites my lip.

“Why are you looking so pleased with yourself?” He asks, amused.

“I feel amazing,” I explain, my smile widening.

“I agree,” he says with a nod, his hands roaming over my heated skin. “You feel amazing.”

I laugh. “Since I got here, my life has been out of control. I’ve been chasing it, but it keeps slipping through my fingers. Then I give it to you, and the world stops spiraling.”

“You can have it back when you’re sober. Right now, it’s mine,” he says, smiling against my neck as his arms tighten around me. “You’re all mine.”

“If you have all of me, what do I have left?”

He nips my shoulder. “Me.”

I sigh. It would be so easy to love him.

“You should show me your boat,” I suggest, watching his eyes in the candlelight. “If we don’t get out of this room, I’m just going to keep using you as a scratching post.”

“You think changing locations is going to stop that?” He drags his fingers down my arms, and I shiver.

“Point taken.”

“Come on,” he takes my hand in his. “I’ll show you around.” He picks up one of the candles from the nightstand and leads me through the interior rooms. A second bedroom, two bathrooms, a room surrounded by workbenches and hanging tools that I suspect is his garage. When we return to the kitchen he grabs me around the waist and sits me on the counter. He pours an ice water from the fridge and hands it to me, setting the candle on the counter beside me.

His hands run up my leg, over all the buckles of my shoe to pause at the tiny zipper on the back. Pulling it slowly down the full length of my leg to the ankle, he slides it off. Then he repeats the motion for the other shoe. I’m finally completely free.

I sip the cool water, sighing as it courses through my body. His hands return to my bare leg, massaging my foot. I lean back and take a deep breath, my eyes colliding with his in the dark.

“There’s still so much of you I haven’t explored,” he explains, his hands moving over my ankles to my calves. “I don’t know how long this will take. We should probably call out of work today.” He kneels and kisses the inside of my knee. “Maybe the rest of the week.”

I laugh. “We’re going to feel like shit when this wears off. You won’t want anything to do with me.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t need X to want you like this.”

My heart skitters in my chest, and I bite my lip. “You can’t say things like that.”

He kisses the inside of my thigh, massaging the muscles above my knee. “The truth?”

I shake my head. “Yeah. Definitely none of that.”

He smiles. “You fucked me up. It’s your problem now.”

“I can find better things for your mouth to do,” I challenge, and he rises to kiss me. Lingering and wet, and cool from the water.

“Talking to me scares you,” he says against my lips. “You’re so fearless, it’s hard to believe that you could be afraid of me.”

“It’s because you’re real. I’m not ready for it. It’s not why I’m here. I wasn’t expecting you.” I don’t mean to admit it, but I do.

“I wish I didn’t want you,” he says. “I tried not to, but I can’t stop. It’s like I’m drawn to you. Hopelessly. Uncontrollably.” His mouth trails down my neck. “And now that I’ve had you, I need more.”



“I don’t belong here.”

He shakes his head. “You don’t belong anywhere else.”

“It’s only sex,” I say, and I’m not sure if I’m trying to convince him or me. “Nothing else.”

“I want that to be true. Because if it’s not, I’m really fucked.” He leans back, takes a sip of water, and picks up one of the ice cubes from the glass. He places it in his mouth, his hands sliding up my thighs to my ass as he pulls me closer to the edge of the counter. Then he removes the ice cube, and leans in close, fixing his mouth on my neck.

I leap at the contrast of his ice-cold tongue against my hot skin, my hands threading into his hair as his mouth travels to my breast. My breath catches, and a shiver races through me as I hold him there, leaning into his touch as his tongue circles my areola, his teeth grazing my nipple.

“You drive me crazy,” I admit, my head falling back.

“Honey, I’ve only just begun.”

“Is that a threat?”

He smiles. “It’s a promise.” He pulls me off the counter, and picks the candle back up. “Come on.” He leads me through the living room, and out sliding door to the back of the boat. Off on the side is a metal staircase, and he waves me on ahead of him. The ocean air flows around my naked body, tumbling my hair behind me as I reach the top step and walk out onto the deck.

The deck is partially covered, with bench seats and a steering wheel surrounded by a wall of dials. I walk over to examine it, and place my hand on the cool metal of the wheel. Various steel levers are mounted below the dials, with a domed compass in the center, swaying slightly with the rock of the ocean.

“Does this work?” I ask, glancing over at him.

He nods. “Almost. It washed ashore in a hurricane two years ago. I pulled the call numbers and found the owner, a guy up in Michigan. Retired, had no interest in the boat anymore. Definitely didn’t care to tow it off the beach. I bought it and towed it here. Made it livable. Making it so it can live somewhere else? In progress.”

“Do you want to live anywhere else?” I ask, glancing out at the other boats bobbing in waves beside us, and the dim lights of the businesses just up the beach. Beautiful and peaceful. “It’s hard to find a better view than this.”

“I want to travel. Take it around the coast. Dock in different cities. Try

different food. Explore. I haven't spent much time outside Pelican Beach, and I want to do it on my own terms." He glances over at the beach. "But this will always be home." He takes my hand, and we wander across the deck, out from beneath the overhang of the steering area to a large outdoor daybed near the balcony. He pulls open one of the bench seats to remove a fluffy gray blanket, and sets the candle down on a table beside the bed.

Zaden walks to me and kisses me, sinking into it as he tosses the blanket on the bed. I wrap my arms around his neck, pressing my naked body flush against his as he lifts me and tumbles us back onto the daybed. I straddle his lap, trailing kisses across his jaw.

He pulls a cigarette out of a pack on the table, and lights it, taking a deep pull before offering it to me. I hit it, and a wave of euphoria rolls through me from my toes to my head, releasing with the smoke that tumbles from my lips.

"If this is just sex," he says, his hands gliding down my back to rest on my ass. I roll my hips, his cock sliding against the slick warmth inside me, and he groans. "I guess it's about time you leave."

I smile. "You promised me breakfast."

"I'll promise you more than that if you give me the chance."

I shake my head, leaning over him as I grab a foil package off the table beside the candle. "Fucking, not feelings," I remind him as I roll the condom on. I rise and guide him inside me, sinking slowly onto his hardened shaft. His breath catches as I rock against him, leaning back to hit the cigarette as I ride him. His eyes lock on mine as he takes the cigarette from between my fingers, takes a drag, and drops it into an ashtray on the table.

I feel guilty for using him, for fucking out all my frustration and grief and hopelessness and anger on him. Without the backstory, he sees feelings, and I hate myself for that. Regardless of how I feel, it's not real. He wants Ivy. Not me.

I thought I could want him. I thought I could have him, and still feel indifferent. Detached. Locked onto that single focus of Paige and truth. I just wanted to feel alive, somehow, in some way, through these days that string on in an endless cycle of pain and despair. But I can't. It's not just fucking, and I know it. I'm falling for him. And I don't even really exist.

I match my rhythm with the roll of the waves through the marina, rising and falling as they do. He wraps his arms around me, rocking against me, his breath hot against my skin as he fixes his mouth on my breast. I tremble on

the edge of my orgasm, pulling him closer, burying my hands in his shaggy dark hair. His lips find mine.

“Don’t close your eyes,” he says, and I lift my lashes to peer into his ice-blue eyes. “I want to see you come.”

My breath falls in gasps against his lips as he works my hips against him, pushing me farther. I hold his gaze, my body shaking as I cling to him, and let go. The stars overhead spin around us, the salt air tumbling my hair down my back as we fall. Together. In a tangle of limbs and ragged breaths, we collapse on the daybed. My head on his chest, his heart thundering beneath me as he pulls the blanket over us.

“I was just kidding about you leaving,” he says, and I smile.

“I’m too exhausted to leave,” I admit.

A line of orange creeps at the edge of the horizon, beyond the dark blue roll of the waves, with fingers stretching into the infinite field of stars. It feels safe. Like home. Some version of home I’ve never known. I want it to be real.

But it’s not.

I close my eyes, the rock of the boat and the crash of the waves lulling me to sleep. Content in this moment, if this is all I can have.

## Chapter 17

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### *Zaden*

The sun warms my exposed skin, and I shut my eyes tighter against the blinding light. I vaguely register the call of my name, soft against the pounding of my heart in my head. I reach across the bed, my hand groping through the blankets as I search for her, but the bed is empty. I squint into the light, glancing around for her.

I'm alone.

"Zaden?"

Not alone. I sit up, running a hand through my hair and pulling the blanket around my waist as a man crosses the deck toward me.

"Joe?" I ask, rubbing at the pounding in my temples. "Why are you on my boat?" Joe owns the sailboat moored beside me, and visits once a month or so from Illinois with his wife. He pulls off his cap and scratches his balding head.

"Sorry man, long night?" He surveys the scene and smiles.

I shake my head. "Do you need something?"

"The police called me. I'm waiting for them to get here." He jerks his thumb toward the sailboat.

I squint into the light to see his face. "Why?"

"They found my jetski floating about a mile offshore, nearly to Fairhaven. I figured it just came untied, but they told me the keys were in it, and it was almost out of gas. It wasn't like that when I left it." He pauses, glancing over at the parking lot, and shrugs. "You haven't seen anything the last few nights, have you?"

"Nope," I answer honestly. If it didn't have purple hair and long legs, I haven't seen it at all.

“Alright, just figured I’d come over and ask when I saw you up here. How have you been? Staying busy? The boat is looking good. I noticed the new deck paint from the parking lot. Big improvement.”

I nod. “Yeah, she’s getting close. You and Maria going over to the island for the weekend?”

“We’re thinking about it, whenever we’re done dealing with this shit. Hopefully, it won’t take too long.”

I wrap the blanket tighter around my waist, and stand. “Good luck. Let me know if there is anything I can do to help,” I offer, glancing down the dock toward the motel, wondering if Ivy went home.

Joe thanks me, and turns to walk back across the deck to the stairs. “Your girlfriend left about an hour ago,” he says, and my head jerks in his direction.

“What?”

“Yeah, I saw a girl leaving. Purple hair? Headed for the Sunrise.”

My eyes narrow. “Okay. Thanks, Joe.”

After all that, she just left? Not even a goodbye? Does she regret it? Did it mean nothing to her? I follow Joe’s descent at a distance, then duck into the cabin of the boat. Her shoes are gone. Her clothes. One of my t-shirts apparently, judging by the empty hanger on the nightstand. Candles sit around the room, long extinguished, as physical proof that last night did actually happen, and it wasn’t some figment of my drugged-out imagination.

Tossing back a few ibuprofen, I shower and dress. I slide on sunglasses when I step outside because fuck it’s bright, and walk down the dock toward the Sunrise. The wind whips across the pool deck as I climb the cement stairs, pausing at her doorway. I’ve been staring at this room from the marina all week, hoping for a moment to see her. Then I finally got my hands on her, and let her go...

I knock and wait, but there’s no movement. No sound. She’s not here. I walk back down the stairs and over to the Sandbar. Opening the door, I glance around inside the dining room, then step through the swinging doors into the kitchen.

“Zaden’s here,” Katina announces immediately, sliding small plastic containers of cut vegetables into her line cooler. Then stops. “Why is Zaden here? You don’t work until tonight.”

“I’m not here,” I say, shaking my head. “I’m just looking for Ivy.”

“Also not here,” Katrina adds. “She was in earlier and swapped shifts with Mia. She works tonight.”

I nod. "Did she say where she was going?"

She shakes her head. "I didn't sign off on her travel itinerary if that's what you're asking." She pauses, narrowing her eyes at me. "Something happened between you two." She raises an eyebrow. "You guys fucked."

I roll my eyes.

"Oh man, that's it. Fell into bed with her after Bass and Lace, and woke up alone. How does it feel over there on that side of the equation? New sensation for you?"

"I really don't know why I talk to you," I admit, glancing over as Chris steps out of the walk-in cooler. "Hey, welcome back," I shout, and he gives me a half smile.

"Doesn't matter how fucked up life gets, rent waits for no man," Chris explains grudgingly. "Thanks for covering for me, though."

I nod. "No problem. I'm here if you need me. We all are."

"I appreciate it. It's been a lot. Even today, the city is doing a memorial thing at Danny's. But I just can't do any more right now. I need to work," he says, dropping his metal pans into the fry station dividers.

"I get it. Believe me. But if you need a break, call me," I say, glancing over at Katrina. "Speaking of covering for MIA coworkers. Where's your brother at? I thought for sure Jax would be back by now."

Katrina shakes her head. "You know how he gets this time of year. I keep hoping it will get easier, but it really doesn't."

Chris makes a sound of agreement from the fry station.

"Have you heard from him at least?" I ask. "He hasn't reached out to me at all."

Katrina shakes her head. "His phone goes straight to voicemail. But I know he's okay. He took off on the bike and left me a note."

"He needs to be back by Friday, or Evan's going to can him," I advise. "He's already asked several servers if they can bartend."

"Is your girlfriend one of them?" Katrina asks, and I level her with a glare.

"Girlfriend?" Chris asks, turning around to participate in the conversation. "I'm gone for a week, we have a new stuffed mushroom app, and Zaden has a girlfriend?"

"She's a server," Katrina provides. "Ivy. You'll see her tonight."

"Oh shit. I thought you were done with server drama after what happened last summer with Nina," Chris says.

“That’s what I said,” Katrina adds. “The last one left Pelican Beach and broke his heart. This one lives in a motel with her bags packed. Somewhere in there was a learning opportunity.”

“It wasn’t intentional,” I claim. “And she’s not my girlfriend. I don’t know what we are.”

“Is she Evan’s girlfriend?” Katrina asks.

Chris rolls his eyes and turns back to the fry station. “This is why we don’t chase servers anymore.”

“I’m not,” I clarify. “Just this one.”

Katrina shakes her head. “She’s going to break you. I’ll go ahead and say I told you so now because when it’s over, it will be too fucked up for me to say it then.”

“I love your eternal optimism. You’re like a fucking ray of sunshine. You know that?” I reply sarcastically, turning to head back through the swinging doors. I have a few hours before my shift. I can swallow my pride and search for Ivy, or go over to Ava’s.

Muscle memory guides me into the parking lot of Kaos Surf. I need something to occupy my mind and my hands. I step out of the Silverado and shut the door, glancing at the back of my truck where I had her writhing beneath my mouth only a few hours ago. I’ve done some crazy things in my life, but that hit number one on a lot of lists.

The bell above the shop door rings as I walk through, and Aunt Freya looks up from folding a box of shirts to smile.

“You made it,” she says, sliding a shirt off the folding board. “You never answered any of my texts last night, I thought you were blowing us off. Did you bring the wood?”

“What?”

“For the shelves,” she states expectantly, then shakes her head. “Okay, maybe you didn’t read my texts.”

“No,” I admit. “I haven’t read anything. I got in my truck to clear my head and ended up here. But I have a few hours, so put me to work.”

“Are you sure?” She asks. “You look really tired.”

I shake my head. “Long night.”

“I have a pot of coffee made. Come get a cup. You can tell me what you were up to last night, and I’ll tell you all about the new shelves we want built behind the register.”

I grab a bottle of water from the mini-fridge under the counter and sit

back on a stool. Sunlight streams in through the large windows, filtering through the rows of surfboard displays. Freya has already reorganized several clothing racks near the entrance and set out an area for clearance. The t-shirt wall has been cycled through with new designs, and she added an accessory display.

“You’ve been busy,” I notice, nodding toward the displays.

“Yeah. Business has been good. If you spent more time here, you would know.”

“I’ve been sneaking into Ava’s garage a few nights a week to finish all the boards she has out,” I explain. “I just keep getting caught up at the Sandbar.”

“You need to work with us full-time,” Freya suggests.

I shake my head. “I don’t want to detract from Ava’s business in any way. I can make a paycheck somewhere else. My services here are free.”

“So what happened last night?” She asks, crossing her legs as she sits back with her coffee.

“Bass and Lace at the Aurora. I didn’t get home until around three.”

“Sounds like fun,” she says, sipping her coffee expectantly, waiting for details. “Now, tell me about the girl.”

“What girl?” I ask.

“There’s always a girl when you look like that.”

I roll my eyes. “She’s a server at the Sandbar. Evan just started her cocktailing at the Aurora. I went to see her.”

“And did you?” She continues.

I sigh. “I brought her back to the boat, and we spent the night together. When I woke up, she was gone.”

She frowns. “Shouldn’t that be a benefit?”

I shake my head. “Not with this one.”

She smiles. “Oh, shit. You like her.”

“I don’t know how to feel about her.”

“Why?” She asks, taking another sip of coffee.

I shrug. “She’s living at the Sunrise. And each day since she arrived, I’ve looked over at the motel, wondering if I’ll see the housekeeping cart in front of her room.”

Freya nods. “You’re afraid she’s going to leave.”

“She will,” I admit, trying to let that concept resonate within me so it hurts less later. “I already know that. I’m just trying to find a way to be okay



with it.”

“Don’t get too attached,” she offers, then holds up a hand to stop me. “Or, ask her to stay.”

“Push her away or pull her closer. Great advice. Thanks, Aunt Freya,” I comment, rubbing at the residual throbbing in my temples. The bell above the shop door rings as it opens.

“Think about it,” she advises. “Hell, even go with her if you want to. I don’t want you to feel trapped here. We will be fine.”

I shake my head. “I won’t leave Ava.”

“I want you to be happy.”

I nod. “I am. I’m just... fucked up right now.”

“Is there a name for this mess you’re in?” She asks with a smile.

Movement in the shop catches my eye, and I glance toward the rows of surfboards. Sunlight streams in through the window and dances along the highlights in her purple hair. She has her back to me, sliding her hand along the finish on one of the boards.

“Ivy,” I say, standing from the stool.

“Ivy,” Freya echoes. “I don’t think I know an...” her voice trails off, her attention following me as I set my water on the counter and wander through the clothing racks.

I pause behind her, watching her appreciate the surfboard in the stand. She studies the inlaid wood accents, running her fingertips over the line work around the design. She smells like soap, dressed in my black Deftones t-shirt, tiny jean shorts, and her combat boots. When she tilts her head, I can see the faint outline of a bruise on her neck. A bruise the size of my mouth. I swallow hard. What do I even say to her after everything we did last night?

“It’s a hybrid between a fish and a longboard,” I begin hesitantly. “Suitable for smaller waves, but with enough definition to slice through the larger ones when the surf picks up. A local favorite.”

She stills, then slowly turns to face me. Her intoxicating green eyes rise to mine, shimmering in the sunlight.

“It’s beautiful,” she says, chewing on her bottom lip. “Do you work here?”

“I own it.”

“You own Kaos?”

I nod. “Are you... interested in surfing? Looking for recommendations on a beginner board?” I pause. “Something else?”

She releases an unsteady breath, shaking her head. “I fucked this all up, didn’t I?”

I shake my head. “The only thing you fucked up was breakfast. I’m an amazing cook, and you missed it.”

A smile teases at the corners of her beautiful lips. “There’s a lot of baggage in my head right now. I had to walk it off. I’m sorry,” she confesses, shoving her hands into her pockets.

I step closer, reaching out to toy with the bottom hem of my Deftones shirt. “I’m not sorry. For any of it.”

She retreats a step. “We really should end this,” she says. “Before we both get hurt.”

“Probably,” I agree, moving toward her, my hand sliding to her waist as my thumb traces circles on the smooth skin of her stomach beneath the edge of her shirt. Her breath catches, and I lick my bottom lip. “You’d better go.”

“I know,” she says, rolling the ball of her tongue ring between her lips. A war wages in the green depths of her eyes, and I feel it echo inside me. I know what I should do and what I need to do. But the intrusive thoughts are louder, screaming at me to grab her. To kiss her and never let her go.

She pulls away, sidestepping me to wind her way through the clothing racks, heading for the exit. For several seconds, I watch her leave, my heart thundering in my chest. When she reaches for the door, I curse and follow her.

I grab her hand, and she turns back toward me, her eyes narrowed in confusion. I close the distance between us and fix my mouth on hers, my hands threading into her hair. A sigh escapes her as she leans into me, her arms sliding around my neck. I sink into her, losing myself in her, fighting to pull her closer. I glide my palms down her body, under her shirt, and up the bare skin of her back. I hold her tight, my mouth trailing down her neck, tracing the outline of her bruise with my tongue.

She drags my mouth back to hers, her lips sliding over mine as her hands grip the fabric of my shirt. I pull her bottom lip between mine, silky and smooth, and cherry from her lip gloss. Then I pull back, resting my forehead against hers as I catch my breath.

“I’m trying really hard to be mad at you,” I admit, my fingers toying with the long ends of her violet hair.

“You should be.”

“I know,” I reply. “It’s a work in progress.” I release her and step back.

“You must be Ivy,” Freya notes curiously, winding her way around the sales floor with her coffee cup.

Ivy nods.

“I had a feeling,” she confirms with an amused smile.

I roll my eyes. “This is my Aunt Freya.”

“Hey, your family. Great,” Ivy says awkwardly, combing a hand through her hair as she shoots me a warning glare. I bite my lip to keep from smiling.

“Zaden said you work at the Sandbar,” Freya adds. “You like it?”

Ivy shrugs. “The tips are good, and the help is tolerable.”

Freya laughs. “I like you. You’re good for his ego.”

“Ivy was just leaving,” I interject before Freya can embarrass me. “Come on, I’ll walk you out.”

“Nonsense,” Freya says. “You have to meet Ava first.”

“Who’s Ava?” Ivy asks.

“My sister,” I answer. “The other owner of Kaos.”

She shakes her head in amused disbelief. “I have about three working brain cells in my head right now. Can I take a raincheck on that? A few people at work recommended this place, so I decided to check it out, but I’m not equipped for quality interaction.”

Freya grabs her hand and drags her toward the back room. “Honey, this is Pelican Beach. Three working brain cells is the average around here.”

Ivy allows Freya to lead her through the large swinging doors into the workshop, where Ava runs a sander over a foam surfboard core. A fog of foam dust lingers in the air, blanketing Ava and the surrounding materials in white. Her slender body rocks to the music in her headphones, her face concealed by a respirator and goggles.

“Ava,” I shout, but she doesn’t acknowledge me. I walk over to the desk and blow the dust off Ava’s iPhone, tapping on the screen to wake it up and pause her music. Ava stills, killing the power on the sander before setting it down on the board and pulling off her headphones.

“Ava,” I try again, and she glances over at me, removing her respirator.

“What?” She asks, running a hand through her short dark hair to shake off some of the dust. “This order is due out by the end of next week, make it quick, Zae.”

“Meet Zaden’s girlfriend,” Freya says. “Ivy.”

“Girlfriend?” Ava says, laughing. “What did I miss?”

“Trust me, it’s news to me too,” Ivy says sarcastically, reaching out a

hand to Ava.

Ava doesn't move to shake her hand, and Ivy glances back at me in question as she lowers her arm.

"She's blind," I provide, knowing Ava isn't the least bit sensitive about it. After everything we've been through, she's like the female version of me. Thick-skinned and all sarcasm. "Blind and deaf when she has her headphones on."

"But still smarter than my brother," she adds seamlessly. "I bet he told you he owns this place when he's really just the handyman."

Ivy laughs. "I almost believed it."

"Starting a relationship on a foundation of lies? Sounds healthy and totally not toxic at all," Ava comments.

"It's a foundation of sex, actually," Ivy clarifies. "I haven't really listened to anything else he's said." Ava and Freya bust out laughing, and Ivy glances over at me in amusement. "That's for the girlfriend comment."

"I like her," Ava says, leaning back on her workbench. "Where are you from, Ivy? What brings you to Pelican Beach?"

"Nebraska," Ivy answers. "And I came here searching for... something. I don't know what exactly."

"Have you found it?" Ava asks.

Ivy shakes her head. "Not yet."

"Just keep looking," Ava advises. "Sometimes it's in the last place you expect."

Ivy glances around, exploring the materials and surfaces, running her hands over the unfinished boards.

"You have an amazing shop," Ivy tells her. "How do you decide on board shapes?"

"Some coursework in hydrology and a handful of good friends willing to get wet in the name of R&D," she replies. "With Freya's help, we've pushed our reach online and ship worldwide."

"How long have you owned it?" Ivy asks, glancing over at me.

"About five years," I answer. "Ava started building boards in the garage when she was fifteen. It just made sense to her. When the old owners of Kaos Surf put the store up for sale, we bought the whole business. Freya helped them run the shop for years before they sold it, so she's like a walking history of Kaos. But they were strictly retail back then. We added the workshop and the custom boards." I nod toward Ava's desk. "Many of those photos were

from back when the store began in the seventies and eighties. They started sponsoring a few surfers in the nineties when Pelican Beach entered the competition circuit.”

Ivy walks over to the photos, curiously glancing at each one. Suddenly she stills, and her eyes narrow. She reaches out, and lifts a framed photo off the wall. She wipes the frame free of foam dust, her head tilting to the side in contemplation.

“Who’s this?” She asks, holding the photo up so I can see it.

“Sienna Lassiter,” Freya answers. “She was one of the first girls Kaos ever sponsored. Brilliant surfer. I knew her quite well, actually.”

Ivy glances over at Freya. “What do you know about her?”

Freya shrugs. “Good kid, shitty home life. Parents were deadbeat druggies who lived off Millcreek, back when it was just a dirt road through the woods. Sienna would work odd jobs for us occasionally. Damien Roark, the previous owner, took her under his wing. He gave her a board, taught her to surf, and sent her into tournaments. She was good. See that one,” Freya steps closer, pointing toward a framed photo on the far side. “When she won the regional championship in Jacksonville, she made the cover of Surfer Teen Magazine. She was only seventeen there.” Freya taps the photo.

The girl in the photo is young, blonde, sliding down the face of a wave in a bright green Kaos rash guard. I’ve looked at that photo hundreds of times over the years as I passed through the shop, but I’ve never looked at it like Ivy is. She runs her fingertip over the image, brow furrowed in confusion, like a puzzle she can’t figure out.

“Does she still live around here?” Ivy asks, carefully setting the photo back on the wall.

Freya shakes her head. “She died a few months after that photo was taken.”

Ivy’s head jerks back to Freya. “Died?”

Freya nods. “She and her boyfriend both died in the fire at the Pier. Such a shame. She was on track to really be an amazing role model for young women.”

Ivy sits back on Ava’s desk, her gaze drifting off. “Where was the Pier?” She asks.

“Cyrus Jacobson owned Pier 34 back when it was a seafood distributor,” I answer, watching her carefully. “When it burned down, he bought the Sandbar and moved operations over there. Then he built the Aurora in the

ashes of the Pier.”

Ivy’s gaze meets mine. “Did anyone ever figure out what happened?”

I shake my head. “No. Not really.”

“Dylan Knight, her boyfriend, was a deckhand for Cyrus. He got back late from a night charter, and Sienna came to pick him up,” Freya adds. “Somehow, a fire broke out on the deck and ignited the propane tanks. The whole thing blew up. Took out two of Cyrus’s boats tied to the dock, and rocked the whole block. They had to tear down several neighboring businesses afterward for structural damage.”

Ivy shakes her head in disbelief, standing from the desk.

“I have to go,” she says suddenly. “I forgot about this thing.” She moves toward the exit. “It was nice to meet you both,” she says, then slips through the swinging doors.

I glance over at Freya, who shrugs. When the bell rings above the front door, I run after her. I don’t stop until I’m outside, spinning in a circle in the parking lot, looking for her. But she’s gone.

I curse, scratching my head. I literally have no idea what just happened.

## Chapter 18

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### *Ivy*

I can't breathe. I run, needing distance between myself and Kaos and everything I just heard in that room. Weaving around groups of tourists meandering down Beach Drive, I leap over curbs and dodge cars as they pull into parking garages. I finally slow as the Aurora comes into view up ahead, struggling to catch my breath.

There is no question in my mind. The woman they call Sienna Lassiter is also Sarah Matthews.

My mother.

It doesn't make any sense. For one, my mother didn't die when she was seventeen. I was born nearly four years later, and Paige three years after that. But I know the look in her eyes, the curve of her lips, the slender set of her shoulders, because they match mine. I see it every time I look in the mirror.

I lost my parents when I was six years old, but I still remember her. Flashes of her. She cleaned rooms at a motel, like me. She surfed, like me. She loved my father and her kids, and if they hadn't died, our whole life would have been different. The idea that she once lived here, with a family I never knew, and a past she never divulged, hits hard.

Part of me wonders if she had a sister. Maybe even identical. But Freya didn't mention any siblings. I pause, panting. My mother lived here. There was a fire, and she faked her own death? What about the other guy? Dylan? I have more questions. Generations of questions, with a side of what-the-fuck.

Then there's Paige, opting to spend the summer in Florida on a whim. She had plans for an internship this summer that she bailed on. Plans that she spent years preparing for. I shake my head. She fucking knew. She knew and didn't tell me. And I don't know why.

Walking past the Aurora, I find myself searching for ghosts. A hint of the building it used to be, back when it was the Pier. Is the concrete old enough to be the same road my mother walked on? Did she walk down this sidewalk? Stand beneath that tree? She felt the same breeze that washes over that stretch of beach. Touched the same sand.

I walk past it, turning onto the road that curves behind Danny's Grocery. As I approach the store, I see cars parked in the grass, and filling every available space. A crowd gathers close around the front of the building for some sort of event.

I shove my hands into my pockets and blend into the crowd, circling the outside to see what's happening. A local news van is parked off to the side, and behind it, a familiar black Tahoe.

Evan is here.

I weave through the groups of people until I'm near the front line. In the grass, front and center, stands Cyrus Jacobson with a shovel, posing for photos. He smiles, waving his hand toward a garden of yellow rose bushes with Evan at his side.

"We're here today to honor Rose Whitman. An important and loved member of our community, tragically lost too soon. With a generous donation from the Fairhaven Garden Center, we plant Rose's Garden here at Danny's, a place she loved, so she can still make people smile every time they walk in." Cyrus nods, wiping the sweat from his brow for work he had someone else do. The crowd claps, and Cyrus sets his hand on Evan's shoulder like a proud father.

As the people begin to disperse, I wander closer to the front, my eyes on a large photo propped on an easel off to the side. A pretty woman, maybe nineteen or twenty, with dark hair and a floral top, standing near the ocean. Around her neck is a silver necklace of yellow roses. She looks happy.

"You're a long way from home," Evan says, stepping up beside me and peering at the photo.

"Grocery shopping," I lie. "But with this crowd, I'll just wait." I glance over at him. "Did you know her?"

"Rose?" Evan asks, shaking his head. "Not really. Only through Chris. The few times I met her, she was nice. It's a shame what happened."

"It's a shame they never caught the person responsible."

"Paige?" He questions. "I don't know how the family will ever get closure. Maybe this garden will help."



I glance over at the garden. “Yeah. I’m sure they feel much better.” I take a breath, stopping myself from saying anything I’m actually thinking. Then turn to walk back through the crowd.

“You need a ride?” He asks. “Come on, I’m headed that way.”

I shut my eyes and curse. No, I don’t need a ride. I need a sedative, or a stiff drink, or a surfboard and a mile of beach without another living soul on it. I need to somehow reconcile my sister’s betrayal with her absence, and I don’t know how to do that.

“Sure,” I tell him instead. “Thanks.” Because, in the end, that’s why I’m here. For answers.

I follow him over to the Tahoe and climb into the passenger seat as he slides in beside me. The engine roars to life, and he pulls away from the parking area and out onto Coral Cove Road. The game I’m playing feels more dangerous than ever before, but I don’t care. I’m in too deep.

“I want you to come to the Aurora next week, Friday and Saturday. As a permanent weekend server. Interested?” Evan asks, glancing over at me.

I nod. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

“Good. So... what are you doing after work?” He asks. “And this time, I am hitting on you.”

It’s time to get him so fucked up he can’t stand and interrogate him. It will cost me my job, any relationships I’ve built here, and any other chance I may have at another avenue of truth. But if it’s going to work, I have to double down and jump in with both feet. I’m done with his cagey answers and partial truths, diverting the conversation whenever her name is mentioned. Tonight he’s going to tell me about Paige if I have to hold a gun to his head.

“I’m free,” I reluctantly say.

He nods. “Raven and Natalie are covering the Aurora tonight. I need a night off. Let’s go out for drinks and see where we end up.”

“You’re the boss, just cut me whenever you’re ready to leave,” I reply. He reaches across the truck and grabs my hand, weaving his fingers between mine. I take a deep breath and sink further into the mask of Ivy. Tonight I let her take the reins and do whatever she needs to do. She can flirt with Evan and hurt Zaden. She can break my heart for me, and his.

Evan pulls into the parking lot for the Sandbar, and stops the Tahoe. I climb out, my gaze automatically falling on the employee deck where Mia and Giana stand, absorbed in conversation. Mia glances over at me with an

initial smile before her gaze slides to Evan. Then she looks confused.

It begins already.

Evan places his hand on my arm, then slides it down to my wrist. I glance up at him, itching to pull my arm away.

“I’ll see you in a few hours,” he says.

I nod. “Thanks for the ride.”

He releases me and strides off toward the restaurant. I watch him go, my hands balling at my sides. It’s going to be a long night.

With a quick glance around, I step into the front office of the Sunrise. I hear people moving around, and laughter echoing up from the pool deck. But no Raven. I walk over to a side table and sit down at one of the guest computers, pulling up an internet browser. I type in Sienna Lassiter, praying I’m wrong about all this, but knowing I’m not that lucky.

Articles appear from long ago, surfing magazines, and competition line-ups. Images of a girl who looks just like me, and just like Paige. Fuck. It’s our mother. I click on one of the images, and pull up a photo taken by the Pelican Beach Gazette. Sienna balances on a wave, perfect stance, blonde hair billowing behind her, in a lime green Kaos Surf shirt. She looks determined. Practiced, with a hint of a smile crossing her lips. Like she was made for this.

I close it and pull up the next article. A photo of a concrete foundation surrounded by debris and charred walls, with several large boats sitting nearly submerged in the shallow water beside the small marina docks. The title reads, *‘Fire at Pier 34 Claims Two Lives.’* I stare at the photo, thinking about the Aurora and what it looks like now.

The article claims propane tanks on the back dock were the cause of the explosion, but they don’t know what started the initial fire. Two teenagers died, Dylan Knight and Sienna Lassiter. Dylan was an employee of Jacobson Enterprises, and Sienna was his girlfriend. They recovered Dylan’s body, but Sienna was never found.

I don’t get it. Why would she run? Was she responsible? Was it something she did that caused the explosion, and she didn’t want to claim responsibility? She moved to California, changed her name, and kept a low profile. The Sarah Matthews I knew didn’t call attention to herself. She didn’t have credit cards. She paid cash for our apartment. Nathan Matthews, my father, was the janitor at the motel where she worked. They lived a simple life. Surfed when they could. Did all the free things. We walked. Attended

town festivities. Laid under the stars at night while my Father pointed out the constellations. It wasn't strange to me, it was just life.

Staring at this article, I can't help but wonder if my father knew. If she ever told him. Was he as oblivious as Paige and I, or did he just not care? I flip back to the picture of her surfing, sadness tugging at my heart for the Mom I knew, and the Mom I never did.

"Sienna Lassiter? Going way back in the town archives, huh?" A woman asks, and my gaze jerks up to meet hers. Alice stands over me, a clipboard tucked under her arm as she balances a stack of white pool towels in her hands. She chews her bottom lip, her eyes glued to the screen. "I haven't seen that photo in a long time."

"I saw some old articles on the wall at Kaos, and figured I'd look into Pelican Beach's surfing history," I attempt to explain, my heart hammering in my chest. I didn't even hear her approach.

Alice nods, and drops her pile of towels onto the table. "She was the youngest competition surfer in North Florida back then, and a girl. So she made huge waves around here, pun intended. She had quite a following."

"Did you know her?" I ask, curiously watching the shift of emotions on her face.

She nods again. "I knew her. We were friends, actually. She had a shitty family. Hustlers and drug addicts. Her father and her uncle were regulars at the local lock-up. A day here, two weeks there. Sienna was always out running the streets, picking up odd jobs, doing anything she could not to go home. But she wasn't like her family. She was a straight-A student, and always made it to class. She was saving money, and she was on track for a scholarship. She was getting out of this town. She always wanted to go to California."

I swallow hard. I want to tell her that she made it, but I can't. "Did she have any siblings? Cousins? Any family still in Pelican Beach?"

Alice shakes her head. "She was an only child. As you can see, she passed in the fire at the Pier. A week later, her family home burned to the ground off Millcreek Road. Police said it was a chemical fire from a drug lab. Nobody was hurt, but they moved away after that. I have no idea where."

"What about Dylan?" I ask. "Does he have family around here?"

She nods. "He does. Dylan had two older brothers, Stephen and Harley, and one still lives in town. Stephen Knight owns Cut Crew, a local landscaping business. They do our landscaping, actually. Stephen is amazing.

His daughter Mia went to school with Raven, and they're really close. Both Dylan's parents still live here too."

Full stop. "Mia Knight, like server at the Sandbar Mia Knight?"

She nods. "I wish all of y'all would work somewhere else. Anywhere else, except at a Cyrus Jacobson business. I tell Raven this daily, but she's a grown woman and won't listen to anything I say."

"You don't like Cyrus?"

She shakes her head. "I do not like Cyrus. Once you've been around this town long enough, you understand the kind of man he is. Like this instance with Pier 34. It burned to the ground, and he used the insurance money to further his business ventures. He should have paid out more to the families. Instead, he paid bottom dollar to get the Knights' off his back, bought the Sandbar and moved his seafood business, expanded the seafood business, and built a nightclub where two kids passed away. The next year, he was Pelican Beach Businessman of the Year and had a plaque on the wall at city hall. I don't get it."

"It's political," I offer with a shrug. "There's nothing to understand. It just is."

"Sometimes I wish I had gone to California," Alice says, glancing down at the floor. "The way Sienna always talked about it made it sound like the most magical place on Earth. I just never got my shit together enough to leave. As a single mom, I did the best I could. We struggled. We lived in this motel for years until we moved out into the RV park. And here I am, still living paycheck to paycheck, twenty-five years later. Time moves so fast sometimes. You think you have a good grip on it, but it always gets away."

I nod, my eyes searching for the clock on the computer screen. "It sure does." Just like the time I have left until the start of my shift, and my date with Evan.

I have questions now that only one person can answer. Paige. I have to get into her apartment. I have to see if something can explain all of this.

I glance back over at Alice. "Speaking of Mia, she actually asked me to stop by her place and pick her up a change of clothes for this afternoon. You wouldn't happen to know her apartment number, would you? It would save me a trip back down to the Sandbar."

"Yeah, it's building G, room 204," Alice answers.

"Thank you," I tell her, closing the screen down on the computer and standing from the table. "And thank you for the history lesson. Growing up in

large cities, I forget the best way to learn anything about a small town is to talk to the people who live there.”

“You’re welcome,” she says, picking up her pile of towels from the counter. “And I’m sorry about your room. Just know that there was nothing Raven or I could do about it.”

My eyes narrow. “My room?”

Her head tilts to the side in question. “Didn’t you talk to Raven?”

I shake my head.

“She’s in your room right now with the plumber.”

My room. There are people in my room, right now. “It’s okay,” I say quickly. “I’ve got to go. Thanks again.” I turn and jog out of the office, the wind rustling my hair as I take the concrete stairs two at a time to my room. As I reach the second floor, I see the door propped open with a brick and stop short. I hear voices inside and carefully peer through the doorway, recognizing one as Raven.

I stride through the main room, spying the photo of Paige and Evan lying on the nightstand, barely obscured by a bottle of water and a paperback novel. I quickly shove it into my pocket, hoping no one saw it. With a quick check at the closet, I see the door open and the murder mirror concealed. I curse silently. I wasn’t at all ready for unannounced company.

“Hey,” I say casually, glancing between Raven and the maintenance man, kneeling with his hands buried inside the wall. “Anything I can help with?”

“Oh no, I’ve just about got this thing back together,” the man says. “Your hot water should be good to go by tonight. Just give this plumbing adhesive about four hours to dry before you put the heat to it.”

I look over at Raven. “The water is fixed?” I ask.

She nods, glancing away. “Yeah. Ray said the room needs to be vacated by tomorrow morning so we can honor the reservations.” She shrugs. “I’m sorry. I’ve got a friend over at the Ambassador, I can call to see if they have an opening. They’re further from the beach, so they don’t get as much traffic as we do.”

I shake my head. “No, it’s fine. I’ll figure something out.” I sigh and slump down onto the edge of the bed, watching the worker until he finishes up and grabs his tools.

“Enjoy that hot water,” he says with a smile as he and Raven walk out, and I struggle to smile back.

“Yep,” I agree. “Super happy about that.” I close the door behind him and

fall back onto the bed.

I'm about to break into Mia's apartment.

I'm going on a date with my sister's ex.

I'm ending it with Zaden.

And I'm being evicted.

Regardless of how this night ends, I'm leaving here tomorrow.

Alone.

## Chapter 19

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### *Ivy*

**A**n old Ford pickup pulls up to the front of OceanView Apartments, rusty bolts rattling with the rumble of the truck. After a moment, the gate slides open so it can pass through. I follow, strolling in nonchalantly like I live here.

My gaze follows the long line of tall, pastel-colored buildings connected by a maze of sidewalks and parking lots, searching for the building letters. Music plays from one of the lower balconies, where a man smokes a cigarette surrounded by a mess of children's toys. Beside him, a small dog barks from the next balcony, head stretched through the railing bars as far as it can go, watching me walk by.

I find the G building and climb the stairs to the second floor, passing a series of identical doors until I reach 204. A philodendron sits on a plant stand by the entrance, and above it is a small dry wipe board mounted to the wall. Scrolled in blue ink across the middle are the words: *Pizza tonight? My treat.*

The handwriting has an artistic, calligraphic flare, with elaborate loops in the letters. It's Paige's handwriting. I'd recognize it anywhere. This is the place.

I knock on the door and listen, unsure if anyone else lives inside. When there's only silence, I glance up and down the hallway to ensure no one is coming, and pull several items out of my pocket collected from the motel. I straighten a paper clip and break a ball-point pen into pieces. With a motion more natural to me than I'd care to admit, I pick the lock and walk inside.

I step lightly and carefully shut the door behind me. I check the living room and the kitchen, peering slowly around each doorway before moving

on. Once I've checked the whole house, I relax a little and investigate.

The apartment is well decorated in a boho design, with lots of neutral colors and natural light. It's clean and quite beautiful. This has to be Mia. Paige was never this clean. Or this monochromatic.

Starting in the living room, I search. I want notes, paper, receipts, personal effects, maybe a calendar. Something that may tell me what Paige was up to. But I find nothing.

I wander through the kitchen, opening drawers and cabinets, careful not to leave anything out of place. How do they not have a grocery list? Do they even own a pen? Room two, strike two.

The bathroom is the first door down the hallway, and I walk inside, rifling through the mirrored medicine cabinet and scanning the surfaces for anything Paige may have left behind. On the ledge in the shower, I spy her shampoo and conditioner. I wonder if Mia is using it now or just hasn't thrown it away. I pick up the shampoo and pop the lid, breathing deep. Hints of Jasmine and Lavender fill the room, and tears burn in my eyes. Memories flood through me, bathrooms we shared in different homes. Grocery shopping. Anytime I grabbed her and hugged her close, her head tucked beneath my chin. I press the lid closed and place it back where it was, waiting for her to return.

Further down the hall, based on the decor choices, the next room must be Mia's. Clean, organized. The woman is meticulous. I check the drawers, the closet, and nightstands. I sift through a pile of mail on the dresser, but don't find anything relevant. If this girl has skeletons in her closet, they pay rent from their day job, far away from here.

Paige's room is the last door on the left. The familiarity of her things should feel like a warm hug right about now, but instead, it just twists the knife buried deep inside the throbbing pain in my chest. She has surfing posters on the walls, a Kaos surfboard leaning up against the wall in the corner. There's clothes on the floor around the hamper, and none inside it. I smile. This is the Paige I know. She has a corkboard on the wall above her desk, and I scan over the things she has pinned. Ticket stubs from Jupiter Crash concerts. Photos of the beach. Photos with people I recognize from the Sandbar.

An empty cardboard box sits in the center of her bed, and I wonder if it was Mia, considering when she should pack up Paige's things. I pull open drawers, searching for her secrets. The dresser is full of clothes. Nice, lacy, silky clothes. On the dresser is a rack of necklaces, and I run my fingers



across them. Jeweled pendants, shiny bracelets. Some of this stuff looks real. I stride over to the closet and pull open the doors, eyes narrowed in confusion. The closet is packed with dresses. Short, saucy, barely-there club dresses. Fun skirts, tiny tops, strappy high-heeled shoes, knee-high boots, and an entire shelf of designer purses. It's like a stripper starter kit. More than that. Much like myself, Paige came to Pelican Beach with a backpack to her name. Now she has a whole room of expensive clothes.

This has to be from the money she made at the Aurora. Paige was too smart not to know what she was selling at the nightclub, and the extravagant wardrobe tells me one thing: she was okay with it. She bought in, eyes open. And the Paige I knew only a few months ago, valedictorian of her school, full scholarship to an esteemed design school in California, was dealing drugs on the beach in Florida so she could buy shoes. And dresses. And handbags.

I dig through the closet, beneath piles of shoeboxes and bags of clothes with the tags still on. I curse, flip the light back off, and step back into the bedroom. It's so hard to find something when I don't know what I'm looking for. I just know there has to be something, somewhere here. Something that can explain why this girl I've known my whole life, who I basically raised, has been accused of murder, and was keeping secrets from me.

We had hiding places in the foster homes. In the group homes. Places to stick money, valuables, and the sparse few things we still had from our past. Where would Paige's hide spot be here?

I check the air vents in the ceiling, but I don't have a screwdriver, and the screws aren't scratched like they've been removed. I check behind the posters, looking for missing drywall. I check under the mattress, under the dresser drawers, feeling around on the carpet for a spot out of place. In the corner of the room is a small door, waist high, with a large vent beneath. I open the door to reveal the air handler for the AC. With a quick glance inside, it doesn't appear that anything is out of place, and I shut the door back.

My gaze falls on the large vent cover beneath the AC unit for the air return, and I kneel to open it. The AC filter fits snugly in the space, and I have to bend the cardboard edges to pull it out.

"Oh, shit," I mumble, leaning the filter against the wall beside me. Inside the hollow space beneath the unit is a small safe. I try to pull it out, but it's heavy. I run my fingers over the keypad on the front, thinking. I can't open this with a paperclip. I try several numbers without success, trying to remember any sequence that may be important to Paige. Cursing again, I sit

back on the floor. The answers I need may be inside, right there on the other side of that metal wall. And I can't have them.

Memories flip through my mind like a spun rolodex, searching snippets of conversations for numbers. Or dates. I pause. July 17. The day we escaped foster care for the last time, to live life on our own terms, success or failure by our own hands and no one else. She said she would always remember this date, because this is the day we became free. I punch in the numbers on the keypad, and a low beep echoes through the AC closet. The door opens.

My breath catches and holds as I peer inside, my eyes narrowing in confusion. The first shelf is full of cash. Stacks of bills in solid rows. I pick up one of the packets and thumb through the notes. It's a thousand dollars. And judging by the number of stacks here, it has to be in the neighborhood of twenty thousand dollars. Holy fuck.

I search through the bottom shelf and find a box of miscellaneous objects, some jewelry, and a phone. I pick up the phone and turn it over in my hand, then try the power button, but it's dead. Beneath the box is something else, something thinner and smooth. I pull it out and run my fingers over it.

The plain white cover is yellowed from time and wear, with simple black block lettering across the middle that reads *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Montclair*. I sit back. Mom's poetry book. I didn't even know Paige took this with her.

I turn it over in my hands, and the book begins to slide out of the dust cover. I realize the cover is wrapped around the book, but not how it should be. I fold the back flap in first, pausing at the library check-out card tucked into the paper pocket on the back cover. Stamped across the pocket, it says Pelican Beach Public Library. I slide the card out, reading the rows of handwritten names and dates, pausing at the last name on the list: *Sienna Lassiter*.

How have I missed this after all these years? Mom never had many possessions, but she kept this one. I never thought much about it because everyone has a favorite book. As time passed, I recognized the demons that my Mom fought with, and it didn't surprise me that her favorite book was written by Sylvia Montclair, an author notorious for dark, introspective poetry. But I still could never bring myself to read it. I guess Paige did.

I slide the card back into the pocket and turn the book over to tuck in the front flap. I still instantly, my eyes widening and my lips parting in shock. Taped to the inside of the dust cover is a polaroid. It's a girl lying in a bed

holding a newborn baby. Her blonde hair is disheveled, a blanket pulled to her waist as she cradles the tiny dark-haired child against her chest, wrapped in a green shirt that says Kaos Surf.

It's Sienna Lassiter. Sarah Matthews. My Mom, at seventeen, with a baby. Scribbled at the bottom of the photo is a single name reading RAVEN.

*Fuck.*

Questions and emotions bounce around inside my brain, breaking things as they hit, cracking and shattering the illusions of my past I once believed as canon. I study the photo until I realize what I'm really looking at, tears welling in my eyes. My Mom had a baby, years before Paige and I. A baby she never told us about, here in Pelican Beach, and not at the hospital. I recognize the retro vibe of the room, the purple and teal abstract wall art, and the rattan furniture. She's at the Sunrise Motel. And she didn't take this photo, which meant someone else was in attendance when it happened. My thoughts fly back to my earlier encounter with Alice, and the way she looked at the photo of my Mom.

*Alice?*

Alice isn't Raven's mother, but she raised her. A single mom.

I have a sister. Paige figured all of this out and came here to investigate. To see if her suspicions were true. If they are, not only did our Mom have a secret life in Pelican Beach, but she had a secret baby, and abandoned her. For what? For the magical life in California she told Alice about?

A sudden clicking sound fills the silence of the room, and I instantly stop breathing. It's the front door. Someone is coming in. Quickly, I shut the safe and slide the filter back into place, closing the vent before throwing myself into the closet. I hold my mother's book tight against my chest like a shield. The door opens and shuts, and I hear footsteps traveling down the hall. A male voice echoes through the apartment.

"No, don't tell me that. You know how I feel about that shit," he says, walking into Mia's room and opening several drawers on her desk. "Where did you say they are? Never mind, I found them." His footsteps return to the hallway and head my way. I back further into the darkness of the closet, watching through the thin slit of open door. When he walks into the room and pauses in the doorway, I recognize him immediately.

Nick.

"Are you thinking about getting a new roommate?" He asks, glancing around the room. "Mia, she's not coming back." He pauses. "I know, it's

only been a week. But even if she miraculously shows back up, she's going to jail. She won't come back here." He nods. "Okay, look. Raven texted me earlier. She said Ivy needs a place to stay, and they're kicking her out of the motel. I know you don't know her very well, but she may be a good fit. Zaden is..." His eyes narrow. "What do you mean she's dating Evan? You mean, she's dating them both?" He shakes his head and turns to walk back out of the room. "I don't know, Love. I'm just passing along information. I'll see you in a few." He ends the call and steps into the bathroom, flipping on the light.

Through the doorway, I watch as he pulls off his shirt and tosses it into Mia's room. He stretches toward the ceiling, flexing lean muscles tanned in the sun, then flicks open the button on his jeans.

Well, this just got interesting.

Nick runs a hand through his shaggy brown hair, his pants sagging on his hips as he walks to the shower. When he turns on the water, steam trickles out of the half-open door. With a clatter of metal shower curtain rings, I hear him step into the tub, and I emerge from the closet.

Creeping softly, ready to sprint at a moment's notice, I move down the hall. When I reach the bathroom, I step quickly and keep going until I reach the front door. I open it as quietly as possible and close it back. Jogging down the corridor, I take the stairs two at a time until I'm back in the parking lot. Once there's space between me and the apartment, and I'm sure he's not following me, I breathe.

That was close.

I walk back out the front gates of the property, trying to digest what just happened, the book tucked under my arm. If Paige was making that much money, why didn't she tell me? I've been sending her cash every month to help with living expenses, which I could have spent on my own bills. Or at least shoes in *my* size. Shit.

Then there's Sienna and Raven. I have an older sister. Raven thinks she's an only child with no family outside of Alice. She has no idea.

Her father is Dylan Knight, who has family still in this town. Family she grew up with, and never knew as family. Her best friend Mia is her cousin. Why wouldn't Alice tell her?

The summer sun beats down on me as soon as I step out from beneath the canopy of trees surrounding the apartment complex. I glare up at the sky, hoping for clouds but seeing only blue, and start my trek back to the Sandbar.

I came here for answers, but only found more questions.

## Chapter 20

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### *Ivy*

I wander through the kitchen with several sleeves of styrofoam cups and a box of straws, pushing open the double swinging doors with my ass as I pause at the server station and dump everything onto the table. I try to put everything I just learned this afternoon out of my mind, worried that someone could just look at me, and read it on my face. There's one person I know capable of that, and I know it's only a matter of time before he appears.

I open one of the sleeves and start stocking the cups when movement at the bar catches my eye. Zaden strides in through the front door and ducks beneath the bar to talk to Nick. They laugh, and Nick slides him a to-go cup before Zaden dips back out. Our eyes collide, and he pauses, his gaze sweeping over me.

Shit. I feel like a caged animal. How do I avoid him when he fills up the whole room every time he enters it?

"Are you okay?" He asks, his voice laced with genuine concern. "You disappeared."

I nod. "I do that."

"You should reappear at some point," he advises, reaching out to toy with the tendrils of hair beside my face.

"I know." I swallow hard, glancing back toward the bar and hoping Evan doesn't walk out and see us.

"A bus just pulled into the overflow lot," he says, taking a drink from his cup. "Softball team. You're about to get like twenty kids and a handful of adults."

I curse. That's really harder than I want to work right now.

He tilts his cup toward me. "LIT?"

I know I need to push him away, but I grab his straw and pull it to my lips, searching for strength somewhere in that cup. The ice is cold, but the liquid hits me like fire. I raise an eyebrow at him.

“There’s no tea in your Long Island,” I comment, licking my lips as his eyes drop to my mouth.

He smiles. “That’s how I like it.”

The front doors open, and people in red-striped uniforms and knee-high socks begin to pile into the gift shop.

“You’re about to be slammed too,” I comment, and he shakes his head.

“Nope. All those kids want chicken tender baskets. That’s on Chris.”

My eyes meet his. “Chris is back?” I feel a surge of nervous energy run through me. He must hate Paige. And if he found out who I really am, he would hate me, too.

Zaden nods. “He’s here. I wouldn’t ask him for the world, but he’s present.”

“I’ve never asked anyone for the world,” I admit honestly.

“Why?” He asks, his thumb brushing against the side of my jaw. “Afraid someone might give it to you?”

I open my mouth to say something else, then shut it. His ice-blue eyes sparkle with amusement, and I struggle to keep from losing myself in them. I take another long drink from his cup, then move to step around him, pressing my body flush against his as I squeeze past.

“Bye, Leela,” he says, watching me stride over to the hostess stand. I hear the kitchen doors swing closed behind me, and I know he’s gone.

I take a deep breath. Fuck. Getting involved with him was a huge mistake. He makes me want to abandon everything I’ve been working toward and just live my fabricated life. I could be Ivy. I could live in Pelican Beach and fall in love with a grill cook. There’s only a handful of people in Gray’s Cove who know Skye, and one of them may be gone forever. Only I know the truth. I can lock it away with the rest of my darkness and conveniently lose the key.

My mom did.

I fill my entire section at once and spill into half of Giana’s, so we decide to work it together and split the tip. I start running, and don’t stop for nearly two hours. I fill drinks, run food, clean up spills, apologize to other tables for the noise, apologize for long ticket times, fill cracker baskets, sweep cracker crumbs, and finally split seven different checks across thirteen tables. By the

time I drop credit card receipts, I'm exhausted and need a break.

I leave my section dirty, hoping it won't get sat, and yell to Giana that I'm going outside. I walk out onto the employee deck, taking a deep breath as the salt breeze hits me. In a fiery mosaic of oranges and blues, the sun sinks slowly beneath the waves, reflecting through the clouds building just offshore.

I shove my hands into my pockets, then frown, and remove my hand. Curled into my palm is the photo of Paige and Evan. I forgot to leave it back in the room. It's haunting me, like she is. Begging for me to find her while I stumble around on this fucking beach, lost and failing everyone.

I sit back on the picnic table, grabbing for a lighter that someone left. Holding the photo in front of me, I strike the lighter and hold it close to the edge of the photo, focusing on Paige. When we were kids, I had to work to make her smile. To find the happiness buried beneath all the chaos in our lives. But here, with Evan, she looks happy. I don't know what to do with that. I move the lighter to the corner of the paper where Evan stands, and a small trail of smoke appears.

"You must be Ivy," a voice says from behind me. I release the flame on the lighter, and the darkness rushes back in as I glance over my shoulder. Chris wanders up from the kitchen door with a cigarette pinched between his fingers, and I slide the photo back into my pocket. "You've caused quite a stir, considering you've only been here a week."

"I can't learn anything by staying in my lane," I admit as he slides onto the tabletop beside me. "I heard about Rose. I'm sorry."

"Me too," he says, nodding solemnly. "Have you ever lost someone and wondered if anyone will ever know you that well again?"

I nod.

His eyes meet mine. "How did you get over it? How do you stop thinking about it every minute of every day?"

I shrug. "I'll let you know when I figure that out."

"I just keep wondering what I could have done differently. What one thing I could have changed, even in the smallest increment, that would have been enough to alter the events of that night." He takes a drag from his cigarette, and I glance away. My thoughts and fears echo in his words. Feelings that he can voice, but I can't.

"It doesn't matter," I tell him. "It's fucked up, but that's what it comes down to. It doesn't matter because it's too late. They're gone, and we're still



here, trying to figure out what to do with the pieces they left behind. Do we throw it all away? Move on, try to forget? Be someone else?" I pause. That's the ten thousand dollar question. "Can we still be who we were, and who we are, without them?"

"I don't know who I am without her." He says, cursing. "I'm trying not to be so angry about it, but that's all I feel. I can't grieve. I can't be sad or lonely or thankful for our time together. Our families are consoling, crying, being logical about arrangements. But I can't take any of it. I can't help with any of it. All I can do is be angry and come to work so I'm not homeless."

"Then be angry," I tell him. "This is your loss, nobody gets to tell you how to cope with it."

"How do you deal?" He asks.

I shrug. "Denial mostly. Anger. A healthy dose of self-loathing and desire for revenge."

He nods. "I hope you get it. I know if I had any chance at revenge, I would take it."

"It's the only thing that makes sense."

"So, who was it for you?" He asks, taking a pull from his cigarette. "Who did you lose?"

I swallow hard, and look down at the wooden planks of the deck beneath us. "I've lost everyone."

"At least you have Zaden," he says, and I slide off the tabletop onto my feet.

"I don't have anyone."

I walk back across the deck and nearly collide with Raven as she exits the kitchen door.

"Shit, sorry," she says, reaching out to grab my arm so I don't topple over. "Did you order a pizza?"

I shake my head. "I work at a restaurant, why would I order a pizza?"

She nods. "My sentiments exactly. I bet it's Rhonda. If it's vegetarian with extra portobellos, it's hers. She's tied up with a new eight-top, can you go talk to the guy? I've got to run this food before it gets cold."

"Yeah," I agree reluctantly. "I've got it." I look at her in the moonlight. Really look at her. The curves of her face, full lips, slender yet toned body. She's the same height as me. Her green Iteyes meet mine, and it's like looking in a mirror.

She raises an eyebrow at me. "What?" She asks cautiously. "Why are you

looking at me like that?”

I shake my head and glance away. “Nothing,” I say dismissively. “I was just curious about what kind of shampoo you use. This humidity is killing me.”

She laughs, and pulls the kitchen door open. “Beach Scene makes it. They sell it at Mario’s in town. 10/10 Highly recommend.”

I nod. “Thanks, I’ll check it out.” She disappears back into the kitchen, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Fuck. I really don’t know how to act around her now. Do I tell her? Do I talk to Alice first? She’s kept it a secret for twenty-five years, do I just let it go? Is she better off not knowing? I don’t even know if I want to know.

I walk down the back steps to the employee lot and over to a waiting pizza delivery car. A man picks up a blue pizza bag from the hood of his car and opens the flap, pulling out two large boxes.

“Vegetarian, extra mushrooms?” I ask, and he nods.

“One of them is. The other is a Meat Lovers. Interesting pairing, really,” he says with a smile. “They’re already paid for, you just need to sign the slip.” He hands me a clipboard and a pen.

“How’s your night?” I ask absently, starting to sign Skye before I remember I’m Ivy, and correcting the signature into an illegible scribble.

“Not bad, really,” he says. “Better than last time I was here. Good grief, that guy was a dick.”

“Which guy?” I ask, handing him the clipboard back.

“The drunk guy in the red Tesla.”

My eyes narrow. “When was he here?”

He shrugs. “Last weekend. Friday night, if I’m not mistaken. I parked out back like I did tonight. There wasn’t an open spot. I ran in real quick with a pizza, and when I got back out, he was yelling at me about how I needed to go to the overflow across the street, and I was blocking him in. I was here literally less than three minutes.”

I glance over at his car, then back at him. “How do you know he was drunk?”

The pizza guy laughs. “How could I not? I could smell it on him from three feet away. He said a bunch of sloppy, slurred words, then got into a red Tesla. I’m glad that guy has autopilot.”

“It must have been the highlight of his good decisions that night,” I muse. “Okay, thanks...?”

“Ben,” he adds, extending his hand so I can shake it. “I work every weekend, and Ms. Vegetarian-Extra-Mushrooms orders from us religiously. I’ll see you again, I’m sure.”

I nod. “See you next week.” Ben climbs back into his car and pulls out of the parking lot as I walk the pizzas toward the kitchen.

Evan did leave the restaurant on Friday night. And he was drunk, in his car. A car I haven’t seen since I arrived.

I have a lot of questions for Evan. I hope he’s ready for our date.

I walk back inside, sliding the pizza boxes onto the back prep table near the entrance to the employee locker room. I try not to look up as I pass the line, but I can’t help it. Zaden turns from the grill to the window to throw a steak on a plate, and our eyes meet. Sweat runs down his face, his Sandbar shirt plastered to his chest like a second skin. My heart skitters wildly in my chest as he holds my gaze while the chaos of the kitchen swims around us.

“Ivy,” Evan says, walking in through the swinging doors. “I’ve been looking for you. We just sat you. Twice.”

I glance over at Evan, pulling my server book out of my apron. “Apologies. I was taking a break.”

Evan wraps an arm around my waist and leads me through the kitchen, his hand resting low on my hip.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve already got Mason grabbing your drinks. I was thinking Marleigh’s tonight. Then maybe head back to my place? You haven’t even seen the pool yet.”

I nod and force a smile, my nails biting into the leather cover of my server book. “Sounds great.” I know his loud, demanding voice carried through the kitchen. Maybe that was his intent. To claim me, officially, in front of everyone.

As I walk through the swinging doors, I glance back toward Zaden, then wish I hadn’t. The intensity from only moments before is gone, replaced with a stoic, hardened glare. I can see the flash of pain in his eyes, the betrayal and anger, before he turns back to the grill. I curse a thousand times in my mind, but this is how it has to go.

Somehow, I hope he sees my pain, too.

## Chapter 21

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### *Zaden*

A single street light flickers at the center of the parking lot in a run-down strip center, casting a dull strobe on the rows of cars beneath. Nick pulls his truck into one of the spaces, and I leap out of the back, falling into step beside Nick and Mia.

“Sorry about your girl,” Nick says, glancing over at me.

“If you think I’m giving up, you don’t know me at all,” I respond dryly, shoving my hands deep into my pockets.

“Come on, man. She’s seeing someone else. Just let her go.”

I shake my head. “She’s playing a game, so I’ll ante up.” Cigarette smokers crowd the front porch, their voices barely rising above the poorly sung karaoke pouring out into the night from behind the cracked door.

“Just don’t go all in, okay?” Mia pleads. “This girl has all the red flags.”

“You know I can’t resist a woman in red,” I admit with a smirk. She laughs, brushing past me as I open the door. I take a fortifying breath. I can’t let them see that I’m hurt, or they’ll know I let her get to me. That pain is my secret, and I hold it close, determined to prove it false.

The inside of the bar is old and dated, with mismatched chairs and tables, mostly lit by the neon beer signs hung around the room. It’s the kind of place that light never touches, thriving in the dark on cheap drinks and local patronage. I spot the Sandbar crew in the corner, sprawled out around several tables with iced buckets of beer in the center. On one side is Evan, his arm wrapped possessively over the back of Ivy’s chair. A muscle ticks in my jaw, and I ball my hand into a fist so tight I hear my knuckles pop.

Mia glances over at me. “You sure you’re okay with this?”

My eyes meet hers. “Don’t I look okay?”

She slowly shakes her head. "Don't hit him."

"I make no promises."

"Hey," Mason says, glancing up from his conversation with Rhonda. He grabs a couple of beers from the bucket and hands them out to the three of us. "Fashionably late, but always fashionable. The first round is on me. You guys killed my ticket times tonight."

I nod in appreciation, pulling a lighter from my pocket and popping the lid off the bottle. I take a long drink and settle into a chair at the table. The chair right beside Ivy, sandwiching her between Evan and I. She glances over, and our eyes meet. I can tell she looks uncomfortable, but there's something else there too. Something that makes my blood simmer just below the surface. A challenge.

"I thought you had plans tonight," Mason asks, raising his voice above the crowd.

"I did," I answer, holding Ivy's questioning stare. "She blew me off." I lift the beer to my lips, my arm brushing against hers. I'm close enough to smell the soap from her shower, clean and floral and intoxicating. My eyes travel from her face to her lips and down her neck, remembering the taste of her skin.

"Well, her loss," Mason adds with a shrug.

A cheerful blonde server steps up to the table, a pad and pen in her hands. "Your party is growing," she comments. "Any drinks for the newcomers?"

"We'll both take a scotch, neat. Top shelf, whatever you have. And a round of shots for the table. Surprise me," Evan says with a smile, his arm tightening around Ivy.

"We," I repeat softly with a sardonic laugh, taking another drink from my beer. "You guys are a 'we' now?"

Evan glances over at me. "When you spend more than one night with someone, that's what happens," Evan explains. "You should try it sometime."

"Well," I begin, leaning back in my chair to fix him with a murderous glare. "Since you asked about my night--"

"Let's skip to mornings. Like tomorrow morning," Mia intervenes. "Surf report says eight to ten feet. Any takers?"

"If they evacuate us, I have to leave," Ryan says from across the table. "I'm in Zone A. But if the hurricane doesn't go more than a Cat 2, I'll be there." He glances over at me, and I nod.

"I'm in."

“Evan should close the restaurant,” Rhonda says playfully. “It could be dangerous.”

Evan shakes his head. “Only if we lose power.” Mumbles of disappointment rise from around the table. “Come on, guys. Unless they evacuate, these condos will be full of hungry tourists who can’t go to the beach in the rain. Make that money. Dare to live dangerously.”

“Dangerously?” Zaden asks, raising an eyebrow at Evan. “What’s your definition of dangerous? Unbuttoning the third button on your shirt? Pouring your own champagne? Flying Economy?”

Evan laughs, but the look he casts at Zaden is anything but amused. “You’re funny. Everyone knows that private planes don’t have Economy.”

The server reappears with a tray of shots, and Ivy grabs one off the tray before it can even be served, tossing it back with a single flick of her wrist. I suppress my enjoyment, knowing that I’m making her wildly uncomfortable, and she can’t say why without revealing us. The *us* that is greater than *we*, who made love all over my boat last night, not even twenty-four hours ago. *We*. What a fucking joke. I want to expose her right here and now, but curiosity has me playing along.

When Evan turns to talk to Rhonda, I lean in closer to Ivy, my voice low and rough near the side of her neck. “Come talk to me.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t.”

“I need answers,” I continue.

“Don’t we all,” she replies.

“Leave with me.”

“I. Can’t,” she reiterates, carefully punctuating each word.

“Why?”

She closes her eyes. “Im here for a reason. I’m sorry.”

I shake my head. “Not good enough.”

I place my hand on her leg beneath the table, and she instantly stills. Then, I slowly slide my fingers up the inside of her thigh until I hear the soft catch of her breath.

“Stop,” she whispers.

I shake my head, moving further, over the material of her tight jean shorts to dip beneath the waistband. I watch her face as her breathing speeds, sliding my fingers across her smooth skin, beneath her lace panties and deep inside the warm, wet core of her. She bites her lip to stay silent.

“Tell me why,” I ask again. “Why him?”

I slowly move my fingers inside her, my thumb circling her clit. I stroke her like an instrument, increasing the tempo as I feel her body leaning into me. I glance around the table at everyone engrossed in conversation, completely unaware of our indiscretion. Her eyes begin to close, her head falling back onto Evan's arm still wrapped around her chair.

"Look at me," I demand roughly, and her eyes meet mine again. Her breath comes in pants, her body trembling. "Tell me it's him you want as I make you come."

Her hand slides into her shorts and grips mine, pushing it deeper inside of her. Her nails dig into my skin, her muscles tightening around my fingers. My cock strains against the ridged denim of my jeans, and it takes every ounce of restraint I have not to drag her out of here.

"I hate you," she whispers breathlessly, her hips rocking imperceptibly against my hand.

"Wrong answer," I say, removing my fingers and pulling my hand out of her shorts as she trembles on the edge. Her lips fall open in surprise, her eyes glaring at me with a mix of desire and frustration. I raise my hand to my lips and lick her from my fingers.

"I'm about ready to go," Evan says, turning toward Ivy. "Are you?"

She glances between Evan and I, her breathing unsteady.

"I need to use the restroom," she replies, standing from the table. Evan returns to his conversation with Rhonda, and I watch her weave through the crowd toward a darkened hallway at the back of the building. I give her a moment, then follow. When I reach the hallway, I push back against the bathroom door as it closes, and step into the single stall with her. The door clicks as I lock it, and I turn to face her.

Her long purple hair falls around her shoulders, her bright green eyes narrowed in question.

"Last night meant something," I say, reaching out to skim my fingers over her jaw. "If you tell me it was nothing, I'll turn and leave right now. I'll leave you alone."

She grabs my hands, pulling them gently from her face as she shakes her head. "I can't think straight when you touch me."

"I know you said it's just sex, but I don't believe it. I can feel it when you look at me across the kitchen. The way your heartbeat speeds when I touch you." I lean in closer to her as she backs against the concrete wall, my eyes falling on her full, soft lips. "I can't feel this way about you, and see you with

him.”

“Then stop,” she says, frustration lacing her words. “If you need me to tell you it meant nothing, then I will.” Her eyes lock defiantly with mine. “I. Feel. *Nothing*. For you.”

I shake my head. “Liar.”

“Now let me go,” she whispers.

“I can’t,” I admit, losing the fight inside myself and closing the distance between us, wrapping my arms around her. My lips collide with hers, hungry and desperate, devouring her soft sound of surprise. I expect her to protest, but she doesn’t, her arms sliding around my neck, her body molding to mine.

I deepen the kiss, my tongue thrusting against hers as my hands roam over her, pulling her closer. Her lips trail across my jaw and down my neck. I growl and slide my hands under her shirt and beneath her bra, filling my hands with her breasts. My thumbs stroke over the barbells in her nipples, and I kiss her to silence the moan that tumbles from her lips.

Her hands skim across my chest and beneath my shirt, dragging her nails down my back. I pin her to the wall with my hips, my cock pressing hard between her thighs. I’m drunk on her. Lost in her. Hopeless and reckless, I feel my control slipping.

“Tell me again,” I urge, desperate to hear it. “Say you feel nothing for me.” Her eyes meet mine, clouded with desire and a need that matches my own.

“You’re not going to let this go, are you?” She asks breathlessly.

I shake my head. “I want you. All of you. If I take you again,” I rasp against her lips, my hands sliding down her body and along the curve of her ass. “You’re mine.”

A frustrated breath escapes her, and she shoves hard against my chest. My eyes narrow, and I take a step back.

“I can’t give you what you want,” she says, anger flaring in her eyes. “Obviously, I have feelings for you. But I can’t be yours. When I walk out that door, I’m going home with Evan. Nothing we can say or do in this room will change that.” She curses, running a hand through her hair. “I can’t believe I’m having this argument right now. My self-control is shit when I’m around you.”

A muscle ticks in my jaw as emotions war inside me. “You know what? I’m done. I came here to fight for you, but it doesn’t matter, does it? He’s already won, and I have no idea how. I have no fucking breadcrumbs to lead



me back to the mysterious place where the two of you fell for each other.”

“Why is love always such a fucking disaster?” She asks in exasperation. She reaches around me to pull open the door, but I shove it closed before she can escape. Her gaze rises to meet mine. “That was a rhetorical question.”

“Do you want an answer?” I offer, watching her carefully.

She shakes her head. “No. I want to leave this tiny room and get away from you before I forget why I’m here.” Her eyes search my face, pausing on my lips. Electricity arcs in the space between us as every cell in my body aches to touch her. My hand fists at my side to keep from reaching out, and I take a breath to steady myself before I say something I’ll regret.

I open the door. “Then go.”

She brushes past me and leaves without another word. I walk down the hallway and pause at the entrance to the main room, leaning against the wall with my arms crossed over my chest. She gathers her things and strides over to the dartboard, grabbing Evan by the arm. He glances up, tries to convince her to stay, then reluctantly tells the rest of the crew goodnight as she drags him to the exit.

Ivy glances back as the door opens, and our eyes collide across the room. I can feel the heat in her gaze, wound up in an anxious mixture of aggravation and anticipation and something I can’t quite define. Fear? Her hand falls as she turns to the parking lot, and the door slowly swings closed.

Rejection sits heavy inside me, ripping me apart as I take a deep breath and press my back against the wall. It’s over. Whatever this was, whatever I thought it could be, was only in my head.

“Are you okay?” I glance over to see Mia standing beside me, her expression soft with understanding. It drives the dagger of rejection further into my soul, but I love her for caring. I run a hand through my hair and shove off the wall, wrapping my arm around her shoulders.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I answer.

“Fine should be a drink,” she adds. “A stiff one that burns, with a killer hangover.”

I nod. “I’ll take two.”

## Chapter 22

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### *Ivy*

I cross the parking lot of Marleigh's in quick, frustrated strides, leaving Evan to scamper behind me like a trailing toddler. When I hear him pull his keys out of his pocket, I turn back to him, my gaze meeting his. I reach out my hand expectantly.

"I'll drive," I offer, struggling to keep my emotions buried beneath the surface where he can't see.

"I'm fine to drive," he says dismissively with a shake of his head.

I pluck the keys from his hand with a smile. "I saw your game back there. The closest thing to a circle your darts just hit was a beer coaster on the next table."

He laughs. "Really, I'm fine. Do you have any idea who my father is in this town?" He asks, taking his keys back from me. "I don't get pulled over. It just doesn't happen."

"Fine," I say, snatching his keys back. "Then they won't pull me over either." I know I shouldn't be driving, but my head is swimming in a toxic mix of thoughts and feelings and anxious, nervous energy. Answers. Tonight he needs to give me answers, because this is all I have.

Time's up.

I slide into the driver's seat as Evan opens the passenger door, then glances over at me, cursing softly.

"I forgot to pay the tab," he says. "I'll be right back." He pats his pockets until he locates his wallet, then walks back toward the bar. I note the missteps in his stride, the stagger and near trip at the steps near the door. He's pretty wasted. At least something about this night has been a success so far.

I lean back against the leather seat of the Tahoe, mentally inventorying

the interior. I watch Evan enter the bar through the rearview, then flip on the dome light. I pull open the glove box and rifle through the random pieces of mail and booklets. Cyrus Jacobson's name is on all the papers. This is his father's truck. I slam it shut and move on to the center console. Nothing there either.

I reach over the console and into the backseat, feeling my hand deep inside the leather seat pockets on either side. Garbage in one. But the other... I pause as my hand wraps around the unmistakable textured grip of a handgun. I pull it out curiously, examining the black metal stamped with Smith & Wesson on the side. I check the safety, then eject the magazine. It's loaded with 9mm rounds, and one in the chamber. Fuck me. Why does Evan have a gun?

I slide the bullets out of the magazine, and dump the chambered round into my lap, then toss them all out the open door into the gravel. I can't worry about that shit right now. I pound the magazine back into place and return the gun to the seat pocket, glancing up at the rearview, but still no Evan. I look around the truck for anything out of place, but it's clean.

As I sink back into the driver's seat, I catch a glimmer of something shiny between the seat and the console. I lean closer, struggling to see what it might be. I slide my hand down into the crack and grab it with my fingertips, holding it up to the light. A gasp lodges in my throat, my heart hammering against my chest as my hand begins to tremble.

It's a silver necklace of yellow roses, just like the one Rose wore in the photo displayed at the Rose Garden memorial.

Fuck. FUCK. It was Evan. Or Cyrus. This is his truck. One of them was involved that night. Maybe more. I don't know. Cyrus could have used his authority to cover it up. To blame it all on Paige. She's undoubtedly the one who ran into the police officer, but Rose... there's more to that story.

Footsteps crunch on the gravel lot approaching the Tahoe, and I shake myself back to reality, sliding the necklace into my pocket as I flip off the dome light. Evan climbs into the passenger side and shuts the door as I crank the engine. He glances over at me with a smile, winding his fingers through mine. I can still feel the tremble in my hand, and pull it back, placing it on the steering wheel.

"Okay, where are we headed?" He asks, his words slurring together as he lounges back comfortably, stretching his long legs out into the floorboard and crossing his feet at the ankles. My gaze travels over him, so calm and relaxed

despite the things he's done. He probably believes that he's gotten away with it. That he's untouchable, just like the traffic citations. I have to show him he's wrong.

He took Paige from me. He knows what happened that night, and he's been lying about it all along. His eyes begin to drift closed, and I grit my teeth to keep from screaming at him.

"Why don't you tell me about that pool," I tell him, and he glances over at me, half awake. "You said there's a pool?" I quickly back out of the parking space and pull around to the exit. I feel the power in the rumble of the V8, my hands tightening on the steering wheel as I struggle to manage my rising anger. "You should put your seatbelt on," I warn, then floor it. The tires squeal out of the parking lot and down Beach Drive.

Evan sits up, struggling to become more alert as he pulls on his seatbelt. "It's um... private. An infinity pool that looks right over the edge of..." His voice fades beneath the blare of the stereo as I crank it up and roll the windows down. Being nice to Evan hasn't gotten me anywhere, and I need another approach. As the bass from the speakers vibrates the bolts out of Evan's Tahoe, I tear down the highway.

I weave through traffic with a confident determination, no turn signal, gas pedal on the floor. As the speedometer needle climbs, the truck's interior becomes a wind tunnel, billowing the seatbelts until they make a steady *thrum* rivaling the beat of the bass. Up ahead, two cars ride side by side, blocking the lanes, and I veer into the shoulder to pass, pulling ahead.

Evan glances over at me. "You sure I shouldn't drive?" He questions.

I shake my head. "You said you don't get pulled over. I'm testing that." The speedometer climbs over eighty. Then ninety. I slow, then pull onto a side street. As we pass the sign for Coral Cove Road, I see Evan straighten in his seat.

"My exit is further down," he instructs nervously, and I nod.

"I know. I'm taking a shortcut." I follow the curves in the road winding through the pine forest, speed climbing. I turn the radio down and look at him. "You wanted to go out, get to know one another. So let's do that. I can ask you what your favorite band is. Your favorite movie. Maybe your favorite dish at Thanksgiving dinner. Or we can skip all that and go right for the tough ones. How about... what's the worst thing you've ever done?"

"What?" He asks, glancing between me and the darkened forest flying by the truck windows. I ease the gas pedal closer to the floorboard, and the

engine roars in response.

“Come on, Evan. You know what I’m talking about,” I coax, weaving across both lanes to stay on the winding highway at this speed. “I’ll ask you again. What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?”

His hand reaches for the door handle to steady himself as we careen around a curve. “I don’t know,” he answers anxiously. “I lied on my taxes last year.” I floor it. “Okay, for the last six years.”

I swerve off the road and into the grass, hitting a bump and sending us airborne for a moment before swerving back onto the road. Evan yelps, his frightened eyes meeting mine.

“Wrong again.”

“Look, why don’t you pull over, and we can talk about this,” he says carefully.

“Not a chance,” I reply, swerving back into the grass, riding the tree line so close he could reach out and touch the pines only inches from the side mirror. Years of mountain trail riding in the Bronco have prepared me for this moment.

“Okay! Okay,” he screams in fear as I slide back onto the asphalt sideways. “Eight years ago, I sold a batch of pills to a bunch of kids, and three died. Seven more ended up in the hospital. We’d just started manufacturing in-house, and the recipe was off.”

I slam on the brakes and skid to a halt, slamming Evan’s head into the dash. Smoke and the overwhelming stench of burnt rubber rolls in through the truck windows. Evan leans back, blood dripping down his face from a gash in his forehead, and throws up all over his shirt.

“Hold on,” I say, shaking my head. “What?”

“I didn’t know.”

“Drake?” I ask, my heart pounding in my chest.

He nods.

“Fuck,” I yell. “I didn’t know I needed to specify WHO you killed.” I take a breath, then reach over to take his hand. His gaze drifts to mine, but he looks fucked up. He’s already drunk and nearly passing out, and I just gave him a head injury. “Rose. Evan, I need you to tell me about Rose.”

He shakes his head in denial, fighting the urge to answer. When he finally speaks, the words are broken and distant. “It was an accident.”

“What kind of accident?” I pry, but his head drifts off to the side, his eyes closing. I shake him hard, trying to keep him conscious. “No! Evan, what

accident? Tell me about that night!” I shout, but it’s not registering at all. He’s snoring.

“FUCK!” I scream, beating my hands against the steering wheel and laying on the horn as it echoes into the night. I glance out the truck’s front window and notice we’re stopped beneath the lone streetlight, with the sign for Danny’s Grocery just up ahead. I’m back where this all began, with a confession of murder, but not the one I need.

I fall forward until my head rests on the steering wheel, tears burning in my eyes. I failed. All I have is the necklace in my pocket and whatever confession can be assumed from Evan’s *accident*.

I pull away, taking the shortcut behind Danny’s until I hit Beach Drive. I pull into the lot for the Aurora, and park his truck off on the side. It’s packed, with lights flashing and music pounding on the walls of the club. With a quick glance around to ensure there are no witnesses, I use all my strength to pull Evan into the driver’s seat. My stomach protests at the smell of him, and I step back before I start gagging. He slumps over the console, snoring loudly. I crack the windows so he has fresh air, toss the keys in the floorboard, and shut the door. Maybe he’ll wake up and think it was all a dream.

The clock on the dash of the Tahoe says one in the morning. I’m exhausted, and I have literal miles to go before I can sleep. I turn East, and start walking toward the Sunrise Motel, the wind whipping my hair around me and plastering my clothes to my skin. The crash of the waves echoes in stereo through the condos on either side of me, forcefully pummeling the beach. Clouds darken the stars, and the beach beyond the streetlights fades into an unfathomable darkness.

The storm is coming. It’s a perfect time to be homeless, jobless, and alone.

*I miss you, Paige.*

## Chapter 23

---

### *Ivy*

**R**inging shatters the silence of the motel room, and I startle awake, twisting in the sheets and tumbling onto the floor. I stare at the purple-patterned carpet beneath me, struggling to remember where I am. The piercing ring continues, and I shrug out of the burrito blankets and crawl across the mattress to the phone, lifting the receiver to my ear.

“Hello?” I ask groggily, rubbing a hand over my face.

“May I speak with Skye Matthews, please?”

The use of my real name grabs my attention, and I’m instantly awake and sober.

“Detective Phillips?”

“Yes,” he answers gruffly. “We need to talk about the investigation. Is this a good time?”

I rub the sleep from my eyes and squint into the morning light filtering through the sheer drapes covering the window. “I spend every minute of every day waiting to hear from you. There is no wrong time,” I reply, sitting up and grabbing a notepad out of the nightstand in case I need to take notes.

“It’s not good news.”

I drop my pen onto the pad, my hand tightening on the receiver. “Just give it to me, Detective.”

“We’re suspending the recovery, Skye. Indefinitely. We had to pull the dive teams because of the storm, and we don’t have the available manpower to continue the search. We’ve done all we can do. I’m sorry,” he says bluntly, the most unapologetic apology I’ve ever heard.

I swallow hard, his words echoing down the hollow halls of my mind on reverb.

“What?”

“You can come pick your phone up whenever it’s convenient, or we can mail it. It’s your choice,” he continues like he’s processing a checklist. “I suggest you return home, and make arrangements for your sister. There’s nothing more you can do here.”

Tears well in my eyes, running down my cheeks. “What sister?” I ask. “I have no sister to make arrangements for. She’s still out there somewhere!”

“Many things are lost in the ocean, Ms. Matthews. I wish we had the resources to keep looking, but we don’t.”

“No,” I say, violently shaking my head. “You can’t stop looking. If you stop, then she’s really gone. And she can’t be gone. She’s all I have.” My voice wavers as I struggle to breathe. “Please,” I beg.

“I’m sorry,” he reiterates.

“But I have evidence. I’ve collected pieces of the puzzle. I can help with the investigation. I was waiting until I had something substantial-”

“It doesn’t matter,” he says, cutting me off. “The investigation is closed. I know how hard this is for you, but you have to let it go.”

“I can’t,” I cry. “I won’t let her go. I’m not giving up.”

“We’ve looked everywhere there is to look. We’ve had certified experts exploring every lead, diving square miles of ocean, searching up and down the shoreline every day and night for over a week. She’s not here, and we can’t find her.”

“You can’t give up,” I plead. “Please, you can’t.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he says sternly. “I wish there was more I could do. Goodbye, Ms. Matthews.”

His voice shifts into the solid hum of the dial tone, and I cradle the receiver against my head, straining my ear for more. Another opinion. Another voice. For hers, Paige... to pick up the other end of the line, laughing, and tell me the surf report. That she loves me, and I’ll see her soon.

The solid hum continues, and I let the phone slip from my fingers, pressing the heels of my hands against my eyes. I break down, sobs racking my body as I scream.

I leap from the bed, wrap my hands around the motel phone, and yank it from the wall. With every ounce of anger I possess, I hurl the phone at the murder mirror, and it strikes dead center, shattering the mirror in an explosion of glass. I overturn the table, toss a chair across the room, my hands fisting in my hair, desperate to find something to dull the pain.



The wind whistles through the corridors of the motel, and I fling open the door to a gust so hard it shoves me back inside. I push through, striding down the stairs and breaking into a run as I reach the pool deck. I don't stop until I reach the sand, standing at the water's edge, staring at the massive swells rolling in from the storm.

Movement down the beach draws my attention, and I glance over to see a group of people with surfboards. I blink the tears from my eyes, and realize it's the Sandbar crew. Nick and Mia, Ryan and Katrina, Raven and Chris. Ryan steps aside, and I see Zaden behind him, watching the waves, a board tucked beneath his arm. Beside him in the sand are several more boards, experimental designs from his shop.

I start walking, determination growing with each step I take. As I near the group, it grows quiet, and every head turns my way. I know I'm an outcast and unwelcome, but I don't care. They cannot offer up any harsher words than I have heard already today.

I weave through the group, ignoring them all with a single focus: to get my feet off this Earth. Zaden glances over at me and stills, our eyes locking across the stormy beach. I pop the button on my shorts and drop them into the sand, continuing forward in nothing but a purple tank and black lace panties.

"Ivy?" He asks, concern lacing his words. "What's wrong?" He reaches for me as I near, and I brush past him to retrieve one of the boards from the sand. Then I stride toward the water without a backward glance, barely registering the sound of his voice above the crash of the waves.

I run into the ocean, leaping nimbly onto the board and paddling over the breakers that roll toward the shore. I can feel the power in the current pulling me out to sea, tugging at my limbs with every stroke. A wave begins to crest ahead of me, and I press the nose of my board into the sea, ducking beneath the swell. I pop up on the other side, paddling hard, then duck beneath the next. I gasp as my head breaks the surface, shaking the water from my eyes, and continue.

My heart is pounding, grief fueling every rapid plunge of my hand into the sea. When the next wave starts to curl, I'm just far enough out that I soar over it, up the vertical wall of water to coast down the back side. I made it. I'm outside the breakers. I pull my board beneath me to stare out at the darkened horizon. Lifting my eyes to the sky, at the mercy of the ocean, I beg for the comfort I can only find here, and nowhere else.

Paige's voice echoes in my head, the words she said on the final day we

surfed:

*All the oceans touch.*

I'm here, and so is she. This is how we can be together.

"Ivy!" A voice shouts above the roar of the sea, and I glance back at the shore. Zaden paddles toward me with long, powerful strokes, sliding his board up beside mine. "Are you fucking crazy? This is dangerous for inexperienced-"

I level him with a deadly glare, every bit as destructive as the ocean around us. "Do I look inexperienced?" I ask, glancing back at the horizon.

He bites his tongue and pulls his board under him. We sit in silence, soaking in the sounds of the raging water, and the thunder rumbling in the distance. His silhouette fills my periphery, his dark hair slicked back, tattooed muscles flexing as he balances on the board. When he turns to look at me, I meet his gaze. I feel like he sees me. Really sees me, for the first time.

"You're not from Nebraska, are you?" He asks, although I can tell by his tone he already knows the answer.

I shake my head.

The swell passing beneath the board is larger than the last, and I watch the formation. When I see the one I want, I turn away from him and paddle harder than I ever have before. The wave towers over me like the hand of God as I slide down the face, leaping to my feet to carve hard. I tuck my body for speed, riding the smooth curve as it tunnels behind me in a turbulent tumble of whitewater. When I'm far enough away from the wash, I slide down the wave and back up again, catching speed before flying off the peak. I'm airborne, weightless, pulling the board up into a grab before landing on the curl and sliding back down.

Adrenaline starts to clear my head, and I feel like I can finally breathe again. I know what I have to do. I have to take my evidence to Detective Phillips, and pray he's on my side. He doesn't get to say when this is over. I do.

I slide along the wave until it mellows, then peel off the back with a 360, landing it before sinking slowly into the sea. My gaze falls on Zaden, aggressively carving a wave even larger than mine, his beautiful body leaning skillfully into every turn. His control is total. Textbook. He spots me as he sails past, and curves in toward me, breaking free from the curl in an airborne arc that lands at my side. He sinks into the water, in paddle position, and meets me stroke for stroke.

The chop pushes us in until I can put my feet into the sand, and jog up the beach.

“Ivy,” he shouts, falling into step beside me.

“That’s not my name,” I shout back, refusing to look at him. I don’t care if he knows. Not anymore. I drop the board in the sand and retrieve my discarded shorts as the Sandbar group parts like the Red Sea, their faces wide-eyed in astonishment.

“Wait,” Zaden calls, catching my arm as I near the catwalk. I turn toward him, shoving long, wet strands of purple hair out of my face.

“What?” I ask in exasperation. “I have to go.”

“I want the truth,” he says, his eyes pleading. “You aren’t Ivy from Nebraska.” It’s not a question.

I slowly shake my head.

“Then who?” He pleads. “Because the woman I just saw out there is a pro-level surfer with a lifetime of experience on the water. She wasn’t shy. Or afraid. She was real, raw, and fueled by the ocean with a passion rivaling my own. I’ve seen that fire when we’re alone, lost in each other. But then it’s gone.”

I take a deep breath. This is harder than I thought it would be.

“I’m Skye Matthews,” I say softly. Apologetically. “I’m Paige’s sister.” His features soften as the realization sets in, and he releases his grip on my arm.

“What?” He questions, shaking his head.

“The police called me when she went missing, but wouldn’t tell me anything about the investigation. Things weren’t adding up, and I knew that right here,” I wave my arm at the Sandbar. “Are all the people who saw her last, and I just wanted to get their side of the story. I didn’t expect Evan to hire me. I didn’t come here to lie to everyone, it just happened.” The pain in his eyes shatter the remaining pieces of my broken heart.

“You could have trusted me.”

“I didn’t know that you weren’t the enemy,” I shout as frustration builds. “Fuck, sometimes I still think you are. You’ve been my biggest obstacle in this entire investigation because you make me want to stop, end it, tell you the truth, or continue living this lie forever just to be with you.” I lace my hands behind my head and turn away before I say something I can’t take back.

“I told you about Ava, and how I’ve lived with the guilt of my failure

every day. You honestly believe I wouldn't have understood the need to protect family?"

I turn back to him, tears burning in my eyes. "My parents died when I was six. Paige and I were in and out of foster homes, group homes, and detention centers until I was beaten so badly that I almost died. I was fifteen when we ran away. I raised her. I kept her in school. In clean clothes. I dropped out, did anything I could to make money and give her the life she deserved." I shake my head as the tears begin to fall. "You don't understand. I've never had anyone to turn to. To trust. It's always just been me and her against the world." My voice shakes. "And now it's just me."

"Was it all a lie?" He asks. "Or is this?"

My eyes lock with his. "If you have to ask that, then you're not the man I thought you were."

"Does he know who you really are? Is that why you keep going back to him?"

Lightning travels through the clouds above us, reaching down into the ocean just beyond the marina with a crash of thunder as rain begins to fall.

"It's him, Zaden," I confess, my heart pounding as the cool rain streams down my face. "Evan's responsible for Rose's death. I have proof, I just can't get a confession. And every moment I've spent with him has been for that reason."

"I don't believe you."

I nod resolutely. "That's my problem. No one does." I turn back to the motel, and climb the wooden steps to the catwalk. When I reach the gate for the pool deck, I look back at him. Rain slides down his face, dripping from the dark strands of his hair to pool where his arms cross his chest. Arms I need so desperately to wrap around me right now, more than I've ever needed anything before. "I wasn't pretending with you. I was always Skye."

I push through the gate, and climb the concrete stairs. As I pause at the doorway, a movement at the Sandbar catches my eye, and I glance over to see Chris standing on the employee deck. He faces me, his features unreadable, his hands balled at his sides. I don't know how much he heard, but judging by the rigid posture of his stance, I just made an enemy.

I open the door and fall back onto the bed, wrapping my arms around myself and staring up at the dusty popcorn ceiling. I was right. I am leaving here today.

Alone.

## Chapter 24

---

### *Skye*

Cars fly down the wet streets beside me, splashing rivers of water onto the sidewalk that rise to my boot laces. I shove my hands deep into my pockets and continue forward as rain streams down my soaked body. When the squared concrete building of the Pelican Beach Police Department comes into view, I stride through the grass and over to the front doors.

A blast of frigid air attacks me the moment the doors slide open, and I fight the shiver that races through me. When the doors close back, silence overtakes the room, and I glance around the office. Water drips off my clothes and onto the pristine white tile floor beneath me, my boots squeaking as I follow the zigzagged path of rope barriers to the metal detectors.

“Did you swim here?” An officer asks from the other side of the rope as he hands me a plastic bucket for my belongings.

I raise my head to glare at him. “Left the windows down at the car wash,” I reply sarcastically, dragging my necklace over my head. I toe off my boots, pull the fragile silver chain of yellow roses out of my pocket, and pile everything into the bucket before stepping through the metal detector. It beeps red, of fucking course.

“Step back, please,” he instructs, grabbing for his magic wand.

I roll my eyes, then reach under my shirt to pull the clasp on my bra, stripping it off and pulling it through the arm of my tank. I toss it into the bucket, and reach for the button on my shorts.

“Wait, wait,” he pleads, holding up a hand.

“I don’t really have time for this today,” I advise. “And I’m not afraid to get naked right here in the middle of your office.”

He waves his magic wand over me from head to toe, but my wet clothes

don't transform into a sparkly gown. I'll never be ready for the ball at this rate.

He motions for me to pass through. When my bucket comes down the conveyor belt, I hastily pull my things back on and shove my bra into my pocket. With an eyebrow raised, he picks up the bucket and walks it to the trash, dumping half an inch of standing water into the bin.

"Do you know where you're going?" He asks, reaching for a towel from beneath his table.

"Detective Phillips," I answer, striding toward the stairs. "I've been there before." He watches my departure carefully, then calls for a mop as I begin my ascent.

The second floor isn't anywhere near as loud as it was the other day. I guess the storm has quelled criminal intentions, at least for now. I wander down the hallway, pausing outside the shut door of 215. I see movement behind the frosted glass window, and knock.

"Come in," he calls, glancing up from his desk. I push open the door, and his eyes narrow. "Ms. Matthews?" He's in a suit like before, but there's something off about him. He looks disheveled, his tie loosened and crooked, with obvious coffee stains on his blue button-up shirt. He looks like he hasn't slept in a week.

"You said to come by and get my phone," I answer. "Figured I'd save you the postage."

"You... okay. Yeah, give me a moment," he says, stumbling through his words as he fumbles with the papers on his desk. He picks up the receiver on his phone and dials an in-house line, but no one picks up. He frowns, tries again, and slams the receiver down.

"Jennifer," he shouts down the hall, waiting for a response, but receives only silence. He curses, and stands from his desk. "I have to pull it from evidence. I'll be right back." He strides out of the room, and I stare after him, leaning back in my chair.

My gaze roams the room, settling on the piles of papers on his desk. I glance back over my shoulder to see if anyone is looking, then stand to thumb through the files. I'm down half the stack when suddenly I still, brushing my finger over the tab that reads *Paige Matthews*.

Inside the manilla folder are several typed reports, photocopies of personal accounts, photos of Paige and me, her high school transcripts, my juvenile record, transfer forms from our foster homes, and death certificates

from our parents... Our whole life is in that folder. I pile everything back together, and a small piece of torn paper slides out onto the desk. I pick it up, frowning as I study the handwritten note.

TRV759

I have no idea what that means. It looks like a tag number, but it's not from the Bronco. Down the hallway, I hear the stern booming voice of the Detective as he approaches. I slide the paper into my pocket, and settle back into my chair.

"Sorry for the wait," he says, rounding the side of his desk and handing me a plastic bag containing my phone. "I really am sorry about your sister, and thank you for your compliance in this investigation."

"That's what I want to talk to you about," I begin. "The investigation isn't over. I have information that needs to be considered. You said Evan Jacobson had an airtight alibi the night of the incident, and I have proof that it's bullshit."

His eyes narrow. "Excuse me?"

"I've been doing my own research, and spoken to everyone who worked at the Sandbar that night. Here's what I've realized," I explain, holding up a finger for each of my points. "One: Evan lied about Paige's drinking, and I've found several people who corroborate her sobriety. Two: Evan wouldn't have lined up inventory on a Friday night when he has standing weekend commitments at the Aurora. There's no way. Three: Paige called me from work that night and said she was going out with Evan later. He didn't plan to be separated from her all night. Four: I have an eyewitness account that Evan was drunk and driving his Tesla that night. Throughout my extensive search this week, I have yet to see that car anywhere. Five: I have a partial confession from Evan that needs further exploration. And six: I found a—"

"Wait, hold on. Full stop," he says, holding out his hands like he's directing traffic. "You've been questioning witnesses in an active investigation, and believe Evan Jacobson is responsible? Mayor Jacobson's son?" He questions incredulously.

"Yes," I continue. "I've found—"

"It doesn't matter what you've found. This is not your job, Skye. It's ours. Unless you go through the proper channels, everything you've discovered is null and void, and only served to warn off any truth we may have been able to retrieve through viable procedure," he lectures, his voice rising. I'm in shock. I bet on the Detective, and lost. He doesn't care.

“Listen, I’m not just going to sit back and *not* search for her, and *not* try to prove that the Paige I knew, that I grew up with, is the monster you all make her out to be,” I argue. “I have proof that she’s not.” I stand from my chair, and the Detective stands from his, reaching for his phone.

“Enough!” He shouts.

“Not nearly,” I shout back, anger and disdain punctuating each word. I reach into my pocket, and in a single quick motion, the Detective pulls his gun and levels it at my head. My eyes widen as I slowly remove my hand from my pocket, holding up the fragile silver chain of yellow roses in front of the gun barrel. “Whoa, Detective,” I urge. “I’m not here to hurt anyone. I just want to clear Paige’s name.”

“Time for you to go, Ms. Matthews,” he says, watching me through the iron sights.

“I found this in Evan’s Tahoe. This is the same necklace Rose always wore, which you can see in the photo displayed at the Rose Garden memorial at Danny’s.”

“That’s the thing about proper procedure,” he continues. “I have no proof that’s where it was found, that it belonged to Evan, or Rose.”

“Isn’t that what forensic science is for? Don’t you have a lab you can send it to? And in the meantime, maybe you could further investigate Evan-”

He shakes his head. “That necklace is common around here. It was sold as part of a school fundraiser three years in a row. My wife has one just like it, and you can probably find one at any of the local pawn shops.” A muscle ticks in his jaw, and he lowers his weapon, sliding it back into the holster. “Please leave the premises before I have you removed.”

My mouth falls open. “I just gave you solid information to doubt your own research. People lied-”

“GET OUT!” He screams, and I toss the necklace at him. I want to toss more than that, but he rounds the desk and grabs my arms, forcing them behind my back. Holding me captive, he shoves me forward, out the door, and down the corridor. I stumble down the steps at a breakneck pace, my boots wet and slipping on the tile. When we reach the front of the building, the doors slide open, and he thrusts me out into the rain.

Water streams down my face as I turn back toward him in shock. “This isn’t over.”

“If I see you near this office again, I’m arresting you,” he promises, then walks away.



I glance over at the officer standing beside the metal detectors, his hand resting on the gun at his side.

Fuck this.

I stride off into the storm, across the parking lot, and back toward the beach. My hands fist at my sides and I want to break something. I want to break him. He doesn't care. He doesn't want evidence. Certainly not evidence that may implicate the son of the man who signs his paycheck. I should have known I couldn't trust him.

I start running, hard and fast, like I'm being chased, my boots splashing in the torrent of water streaming down the sidewalk. My tears mix with the rain as I ascend the bridge, chest heaving as I struggle to breathe. I reach the top near the temporary barricade, orange cones overturned with caution tape billowing madly in the wind.

I walk around the barricade to the break in the guardrail, looking out at the turbulent toss of the bay beneath the bridge. The sky is so dark it's nearly black, coloring the ocean the same until it's all nearly a single shade of endless gray. I step up to the edge of the concrete, the wind plastering my clothes to my skin, my hair tumbling behind me.

I lost Paige forever, right here. Driven from the bridge in fear, she believed this was her only escape. She's gone. Really gone. And I couldn't save her.

I've lost Zaden. I don't know how to explain any of this to Raven, and doing so would ruin everything for her. She has a Mom. She doesn't need to know that her Mom is dead. Her Dad was murdered. That she was abandoned. An orphan, like me. Alone. All this pain circles me, falls on me, and it can end with me.

I close my eyes, and reach my hands out to my sides to feel the strength of the wind push back against me. Thunder crackles through the air, rumbling the concrete beneath my boots. Further down the bridge, I hear the screech of tires. For a moment, I think I even hear my name.

Then I fall.

I'm weightless, like a bird in flight. Images flash through my mind. Moments growing up with Paige, the years before we lost our parents. The way Mom would hold me close as she read us a story at night. My Dad's laugh. How they would take us out to the protected part of the beach, and set us on a surfboard to practice on the small waves that roll in slow, and gently lap at the shore. This is the only love I've ever known, until I met him.

Zaden appears in my mind, his hands warm on my skin, his ice-blue eyes locked on mine. He makes me want to believe in a life beyond survival. Beyond loss and grief and servitude and mind-numbing rage. I want to let him fix me. I want to let him love me... like I love him. But this has never been about what I want. I'm just a passenger in my own life. A stagehand preparing the main event, working furiously behind the scenes until the curtain falls.

I plunge feet first into the ocean, the impact smashing against my skin like a baseball bat and stealing my breath away. I sink into the shadowy depths of the sea, further and further down into the deep dark abyss beneath the surface. My lungs burn for air, and I reach for her, waiting for her.

A hand grabs me in the dark, strong and unyielding, wrapping around my waist. I'm rising with the bubbles that trickle from me, the pressure lessening, the darkness fading into light until suddenly my head breaks the surface. I gasp for air like it's the first breath I've ever taken on this Earth.

My eyes blink open, my hands gripping the solid arm still braced around my waist. I turn, and my eyes collide with Zaden's. Fear and worry echo deep in his beautiful blue eyes as he places his hands on either side of my face.

"Are you okay?" He asks.

"Where did you come from?" I ask between ragged breaths.

"I jumped."

I glance back up at the bridge towering above us. "You..." I shut my eyes tight as the tears begin to burn. "Fuck, Zaden."

"Look at me," he demands, and I shake my head. "I just leaped off a fucking bridge for you. Look at me."

I open my eyes, and lick the salt from my trembling lips.

"I shouldn't have let you go. None of this is your fault. You hear me? What happened to Paige was not your fault."

"I'm the only one left to blame," I say in defeat, pulling out of his embrace, and swimming toward the shore. Waves crash over my head, but I keep coming back up, Zaden close at my side. The current carries us fast, through the narrow passage of the East Inlet and around to the jetty. I swim hard around the outer ridge of rocks, into the calmer waters of the cove around the marina, and steady until I feel the sand beneath my boots. I'm panting, my arms on fire from the swim, my trembling legs barely supporting me. I can see Zaden in my periphery, escorting me, protecting me from myself.

Rain continues to pour as I cross the beach toward the Sunrise Motel.

“Skye,” Zaden calls after me, and I stop, turning back to face him. My heart speeds in my chest at the sound of my name on his lips. My real name.

“Just let me go,” I reply softly.

“If I was capable of that, I would have by now.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “Why do you keep trying to save me, Zaden?”

“Haven’t you figured that out yet?” He asks, closing the distance between us. “I’m in love with you.” His hand wraps around my arm, warm and firm and grounding.

“You’re in love with Ivy,” I counter. “You don’t even know me.”

“I know you,” he argues. “You’re strong, fearless, and fiercely independent. You suck at following directions because you only follow your own. You have the skill and knowledge to overshadow most people, but you don’t let them see it. You stay in the background and let them shine.” He steps closer to me, his voice softening. “You’re dedicated, with an unwavering, single-minded devotion to those you love. And you don’t love easy. Once you let them in, they’re a part of you, and you protect them with everything you have.” His thumb traces circles on the inside of my arm. “You’ll die before you ask for help, but you’re confident enough to believe you don’t need it. And I know you feel like you’re all alone in this, but you’re not.”

“Zaden,” I whisper through the rain.

“I fell for you that night you showered beneath the stars, and every night after. I may not have known your name, but I know you.”

My heart tumbles in my chest, end over end into the abyss, utterly lost for this man. Even in my darkest moment, he can see the light in me.

“I tried not to love you,” I reply back, my eyes locked with his. “But I suck at that too.” I slide my arms around his neck, and our lips collide, hot and hungry and desperate. He pulls me against him, his hands stroking down my back as his tongue finds mine. My skin heats despite the rain, my hands sliding into his hair as his mouth angles across mine, and kisses a trail down my jaw to my throat. The stubble on his face rasps against my skin, my breath catching as his lips lock onto the pulse at the base of my neck.

Rain falls in sheets as lightning snakes through the clouds above us, followed by a rumble of thunder. The feeling of his warm arms around me, encompassing me and grounding me, sends fissures through the walls I’ve

built so carefully around my heart. He loves with his whole body. It's all around him. In the places we touch, in the air we breathe. For the first time in a long time, I don't feel alone. Even when the world is so fucked up I don't recognize it, and I fall, he's there to catch me.

I pull his mouth back to mine, exploring his lips, memorizing every line and curve of his face. His hand slides under my wet tank and up my chest to close over my breast, my hardened nipple pressing into his palm. He groans.

"You lost your bra," He states, his voice low and rough against the side of my neck.

"I took it off at the police station," I answer, and he leans back just enough to give me a questioning smirk so devastatingly sexy I want to strip everything else off. Right here and now. "Long story."

He shakes his head. "Are you always this much trouble?" I slowly nod, and he rolls his eyes, then dips down and throws me over his shoulder. My surprised yelp ends with a laugh as he strides over to the wooden stairs and up to the catwalk. I struggle against him, but he places a solid hand on my ass to hold me steady and crosses the windy pool deck.

He sets me down beneath the stairs, and his lips come crashing back to mine, backing me into the cool concrete wall of the motel. I lean up on my toes, arching against him to fit my body to his. I run my hands under his shirt, and over the taunt muscles of his chest until he reaches behind him and tugs it off. His rough hands cup my face, his thumb tracing my lower lip as he studies the emotions on my face.

"You have no idea what it did to me, watching you leap off that bridge."

I shake my head, an ache forming in my chest. "I never meant to hurt you. I just... didn't think I had any reason left to stay."

"You have me," he says, threading his fingers into my hair. "Staying isn't a choice anymore, because I'm not letting you go."

"I love you," I tell him, honestly and unapologetically, the words surging through my veins like a drug. Truth. I can finally give it to him. "I don't know if I deserve to, but I can't stop it."

"After everything we've been through, we deserve this." His hands slide down the smooth skin of my arms, his fingers interlocking with mine. "And whatever happens next, we can handle it. Together."

I nod, then lean forward and press my lips to his. I close my eyes, sinking into him, my heartbeat pounding in rhythm with his. I feel his tongue against mine, his hands moving to my hips and pulling me flush against him. The

hardness of him presses between my thighs, and my breath catches as need courses through me.

He breaks our kiss and takes a step back. As if he can read my thoughts, he grabs my hand, and leads me up the stairs. When he opens the door to my room, we fall in together, his hands roaming over my body. His mouth finds mine, and I wrap my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss. He takes a step back, and his feet hit an overturned chair. He glances down, raising an eyebrow as he looks back at me.

“Did some rockstar redecorating?” He comments, glancing around the trashed room.

I shrug. “I guess it’s in my blood.” He stares at me curiously, and I shake it off. “I’ll explain later.” He decides not to question it, and pulls my mouth back to his.

His warm hands are electric on my cool, wet skin. I smile. I can’t help it. My world has been so dark without Paige. I know I need to find some way to get past it, and let her go. I don’t even know how to begin to get there, but letting Zaden in, and letting him be the light in this darkness is going to be what saves me.

His hands slide beneath my shirt and tug it over my head. With one hand on the small of my back, I lean back as his mouth trails down my neck, across my collarbone, and over the swell of my breast. When his lips close over my nipple, his tongue flicking over the hardened, pierced nub, I moan his name. My hands dive into his dark, wet hair and hold him there, my breath quickening. I writhe against him, eager for more. When he releases me, he slides his hands down my body, palming my shorts and underwear off in one motion.

The moment he has me naked, my hands are on his jeans, pulling at his button. I tug the wet material down far enough to wrap my hand around his cock and hear his breath catch. Our eyes meet in the dim, gray light filtering through the sheer drapes, the wind whistling around the building and blowing a torrent of rain against the window. I stroke him from root to tip, slowly, watching the need building inside him, toying with the threads of his control until they snap.

“Skye,” he breathes, kissing me deep as he pulls his wallet out of his pocket and removes a condom.

“Keep saying it, just like that. Over and over, forever,” I whisper against his lips.

“Skye,” he repeats, pulling me against him as he falls back onto the sofa, and I straddle his lap. “I’ll say it as many times as you need me to if it will keep you in my arms forever.”

I feel the thick, hard length of him between my legs, and I wrap my arms around his neck, kissing him deep. The foil packet glints in the light as he rips it open, and slides it onto his cock. With a quick roll of my hips, I take him all the way inside, moaning in relief. In satisfaction. In the total feeling of fullness that comes with truly having Zaden as mine. His hands move to my ass as he pulls his hips into mine, and I ride him. My nipples scrape against his chest, my hands gripping his wet hair as I hold his mouth to mine.

I try to keep it slow and steady, to savor every moment. But I can’t. The friction between us is too much, and the fire quickly spreads. My teeth nip at his bottom lip, then skim down his throat. He groans, and I grind harder, faster, need growing into desperation as I search for the release I so desperately need. I feel my body start to tremble, and my head falls back.

“God, you’re beautiful,” Zaden says, his hands sliding up my body, exploring me, worshiping me as he pulls me into every thrust of his hips. His hand reaches between my legs and finds the bud of my clit.

“You’re going to make me come,” I whisper.

“I need it,” he replies, quickening the movement of his fingers. “Come for me.”

And I do. I fall. I crash. Helplessly, hopelessly, and so completely lost in Zaden. My orgasm races through me, head to toes, my body trembling as he wraps his arms tight around me. He groans as my muscles tighten around his cock, and he stands from the couch with me still wrapped around him. He lies me back on the bed, his hands gripping my hips, my legs around his waist, as he plows into me. His pace is frenzied and wild, holding nothing back as he chases his own release.

I arch my back, my heels digging into the muscles of his ass as my hands twist in the sheets. The old bed frame squeaks in protest to every thrust, banging against the wall in a steady staccato that matches the beat of my heart.

“Zaden,” I say breathlessly, rising to the edge of my orgasm. His eyes meet mine, hungry and fierce, as his hands slide behind me and pull me to him. He crashes his lips against mine, and I come, falling again, tumbling uncontrollably into the abyss of passion as the stars explode in the sky. He growls against my lips and follows, pulled into his release as my muscles grip

his cock, and he buries himself deep inside me, over and over, until he collapses against me. I nip his ear, kissing down his exposed throat and sinking my teeth into his neck as he comes.

“Skye,” he rasps against my shoulder, turning his head to kiss a trail up my neck. His lips find mine as his fingers skim along the side of my face, and thread into my hair. He props his head on his hand, staring down into my eyes with an intensity so disarming it makes me smile. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Just hold me,” I tell him, leaning up to brush a kiss across his lips.

“I need you to stay. Let me be your home.”

I swallow hard. “Zaden...”

He shakes his head. “I’ve never loved anyone like this before. Desperately. Wildly. Against all logic and reason.” He kisses me, licking along my bottom lip until I feel the need begin to flutter in my stomach again. “I know you have a choice to make after the conclusion of the case, and I just want you to know you have options. You can stay here with me. I want you to. I need you to.”

“I need time to think about it,” I tell him honestly. “Time to think, when your cock isn’t inside me, fucking with my head and making me want to give you everything you ask for.”

A smirk teases at the corners of his lips, and I feel him hardening, pressing his hips into mine. “If that’s all it takes to get what I want, we’re not going anywhere.”

“So unfair,” I breathe as he fills me, and I wrap a leg over his hip to pull him in closer. “You can’t win every fight like this.”

He leans down and nuzzles his face into the side of my neck. “You’re not fighting.”

I sigh. “You’re missing the point.”

“And you underestimate me if you think I won’t keep you here, just like this, until I convince you to stay.”

I arch against him, taking him deeper and pressing my breasts to his chest as I stretch my arms around his neck. “You sure you want to get wrapped up with me? You see how it is for me. Terms like easy and simple, predictable and ordinary, have never described my life. I am nothing short of chaos.”

“Beautiful chaos,” he clarifies. “And I’m here for every,” he nips the side of my neck. “Single,” his mouth moves across my jaw. “Moment of it.” His mouth collides with mine, hungry and hot and demanding, as he steals every

remaining thought from my mind and replaces it with him. I sink into it, sighing as he starts to move inside me.

If he wants to rewrite my chaos, I'll let him. I never knew that was possible, but it seems to be his superpower. Maybe I do need him. Maybe I can put all of this behind me, and find a real life. Here, with him.



## Chapter 25

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### *Zaden*

Piercing orange light creeps into the darkened motel room from between a break in the curtains, seeping into my dreams until it pulls me from them. The sun is rising over the ocean, and I can see portions of clear blue sky peeking out from beneath the clouds. The wind has returned to normal, and I can hear the calls of seagulls circling the beach.

The storm has passed.

I lean up on my elbow and admire the sleeping woman beside me, her purple hair spread across the bright white motel pillows. Still here. Still wrapped in the sheets with me, warm and naked and mine. I lean down and softly kiss her shoulder, tasting the salt on her skin from our swim yesterday. She begins to stir, arching her back as she stretches and pressing her ass into my hardening cock. I bite my lip, enjoying the exquisite pleasure of feeling her smooth skin rubbing against me.

Her eyes flutter open, and a smile crosses her lips when she realizes I'm hard for her. She reaches down beneath the covers to wrap her hand around me. My breath catches as my hand follows the curve of her hip, pulling her harder against me.

She turns in my embrace, twining her arms around my neck as she rolls on top of me. Her mouth meets mine, soft and exploratory, teasing my senses awake.

“Good morning,” she says finally, nipping along my bottom lip before leaning up, her thighs straddling mine.

“It is,” I agree, my eyes roaming over her. Long purple hair, tousled from sleep, falls around her shoulders. Her emerald eyes lock with mine, her full lips curved into a sleepy smile. Her skin glows in the orange light from the

sunrise, flickering off the metal barbells in her nipples, and I slide my hands up her thighs to settle on her hips. My cock throbs beneath her, pressing into the warm center of her.

“Do you have plans today?” She asks, sliding her hands up my chest as she rolls her hips. I groan.

“Very short-term plans,” I grind out, my hands moving to her ass.

She smiles, and leans over me, her nipples brushing against my skin as she trails her lips up the side of my neck. “Short isn’t the term I would use to describe it.”

I growl and flip her over, sliding her body beneath mine and settling between her thighs. “Keep touching me, and talking to me like that, and your day is going to fill up real fast,” I warn, kissing her deep, my tongue licking against hers.

“That’s not an option,” she says when my lips leave hers to travel down her neck. “I’ve been evicted. I should be gone by now.”

My teeth graze the skin beneath her ear, and she shivers. “Good thing I know people who work here,” I offer.

She shakes her head. “The order comes from Ray. Raven and Alice can’t do anything.” I still, then lean up on an elbow to look at her.

“Put your things on the boat.”

She raises an eyebrow. “You want me to move in with you?”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t label it and make it weird. Just bring your shit over,” I tease, and she laughs. God, it feels good to hear her laugh again.

“Am I sleeping in the tool room?” She asks, leaning up to brush her lips against mine.

I shake my head. “I’m in the middle of an engine rebuild, that would never work.” She smiles, and I kiss her deep, my lips slanting over hers hungrily. If she has any more sassy words of wisdom tumbling around inside that beautiful head, I take them all away until they transform into the soft sighs that I crave like air.

With a surprising strength, she pushes me back and rolls on top of me. A sultry smirk crosses her lips as she slides out from beneath the blankets and walks toward the bathroom.

“Where are you going?” I ask incredulously.

“If I’m about to be evicted, I’m going to take a shower first.” Her head peers around the corner. “You coming?”

I make a face. “A cold shower? Not what I had in mind, but thanks.”

She smiles. “They fixed the hot water. That’s why they’re kicking me out.” She disappears around the wall, and I hear the water spray in the shower. I reluctantly roll out of bed and follow her. The glass shower doors are pulled closed, and I pause, leaning against the doorframe to watch her. Water streams over her face and down her body, dripping off the peaks of her breasts. Steam rises above the shower, filling the room around us. Her hands slide over her skin, and into her hair. My mind falls back to that moment when she showered beneath the stars, when I barely knew her yet longed to touch her.

And now I can.

I slide the glass door open, and step beneath the spray. Her arms wrap around my neck as she leans up to kiss me, pressing her warm, wet body against me. I pull her closer into me, my hands sliding down her back, over the curve of her hips, and around to cup her breasts. My thumbs flick over her pierced nipples, and she moans softly against my lips.

I break the kiss to reach for the shampoo, and lather it into her hair before adding some to mine. Bubbles slide over our skin, the air filling with the soapy floral scent I’ve come to associate with her. She picks up the bar soap and runs it over me, across my shoulders, and down my chest. Lower, over my hips, following the V of muscles to my cock. Her eyes meet mine as she wraps her hand around me, sliding it up and down my thick length.

I growl and push her back against the tile wall of the shower, covering her mouth with mine. She smiles against my lips as I devour her, kissing a path down her neck. I can feel her pulse quicken beneath my mouth, her nails digging into my back as I move further down, across her chest to her breast. I circle her nipple with my tongue, then close my mouth around it. She arches her body against me, her hands sliding into my hair to hold me there as a moan escapes her lips.

I feel her breaths quickening, and I reach between her legs and push a finger inside her. She’s so wet, her muscles clenching around me as I slide in and out. Her body starts to tremble, and I know she’s close.

She shakes her head. “No,” she says breathlessly. “I need...” She pulls out of my embrace and cracks the shower door, reaching into a bag on the sink. It takes her a moment to find whatever she’s searching for, then she slides the door back, reaching for me. She slides a condom over my cock then pushes me back against the wall, hooking a leg over my hip as she sinks onto me. I growl as I slide all the way inside her, her hips grinding against mine.

Whatever remains of my control breaks, and I grip her ass, lifting her off her feet and spinning her back against the wall. Her legs wrap around my waist as I plow into her. Her arms slide around my neck, her hips bucking to meet my thrusts. She moans into my neck, her nails digging into my hair. We slide together, steamy warm water streaming down our conjoined bodies. I lose myself in her more with every passing, fleeting second, pushing her further and further until she breaks.

Her moan echoes through the room as she shatters, coming in my arms, around my cock, her cries driving me mad as my own orgasm races through me. I drive deep inside her, my forehead pressed against hers as I capture her cry with my lips.

I dip my head and nuzzle my face into the side of her neck, tightening my grip around her wet, naked body. I close my eyes, letting the warm water run over us as the ripples of my orgasm subside. Fuck, it's always like this between us. Frantic and devastating, pushing me to the edge every time. Whatever she is made of, my body wants it. Craves it. Needs to be lost inside it. I can't get enough of her.

Fucking love.

A laugh ripples through her, and I lean back to gaze into her eyes. She's smiling, breathless.

"Okay," she says, shaking her head.

I raise an eyebrow. "Okay...?"

"I'll move my shit into your boat."

I release a sigh of relief and take a step back, allowing her legs to slide back down to the shower floor.

"Thank God. I thought we were going to have to do this all day."

"That's not off the table," she replies playfully, lathering conditioner into her hair and stepping back beneath the spray.

"I'm not doing anything else until I've had breakfast." I press my lips against hers, my hands sliding down her back. "Even you." Then I take a step back, and slip out of the shower. "Pack your stuff, I'm headed down to the boat to throw some bacon in the sink. Then I'll come back and help you."

"I'm really more of a sausage girl."

"I'll bet you are," I answer with a chuckle, shaking my head.

"You're welcome to bring your dick jokes back into this shower."

"Breakfast," I laugh. "Your beautiful, soapy ass is going to eat with me. Then we can talk about everything else." I glare at my wet clothing scattered

across the floor, then tuck my towel more securely around my waist and gather them all up. There's no way I'm putting these back on.

I step into the bathroom, and smile at the image behind the glass. Wet and beautiful and mine. I draw in the steamy shower door, my finger squeaking against the glass:

*I love you.*

She places her hand on the glass, and I cover it with mine. Then I walk back through the room, open the door, and close it securely behind me. I feel like a weight has been lifted. Like the light shining through the clouds finally falls on us, and promises the sun's return. I know it's not over, and we still have a lot to discuss, but we have time. She's going to stay.

## Chapter 26

---

### *Zaden*

**M**y feet are light, barely touching the ground as I walk to the houseboat and leap onto the deck. I circle the exterior, checking for any signs of damage from the storm. The pilings held, and the bumpers stayed in place. Seaweed has collected on the dive platform that will need to be raked off. Other than that, it's solid. She survived another hurricane, still floating.

I stride into the cabin and drop my clothes into the washer, then pause with my hand held above the start button. Skye will need to wash clothes too. It's not just me anymore. I leave the lid open for her, and walk back into the bedroom to change. I pick up any messes that may have accumulated, throw some fresh sheets on the bed, light a candle, and pull some sausage out of the freezer to thaw. My gaze falls on the kitchen clock, and it's been nearly an hour. She's probably close to ready by now.

I step off the boat and back onto the dock, following the wooden path beside the jetty. I smile. I can't stop it. That beautiful woman loves me back. All I need to do now is not fuck it up. I glance up at her room, watching the window that has haunted my thoughts ever since she arrived.

Suddenly, I stop, and my breath catches in my throat. The curtains move inside the room, and it's not the wind. They rip from side to side, then I see Skye's back pressed against the glass, a hand wrapped around her throat.

*What the fuck?*

I take off running, faster than I've ever run before. I hurdle the pool gate and sprint across the deck, bounding up the stairs. When I reach her room, the door is caught on the chain lock. I step back and slam all my weight into it, breaking the chain and flinging it open so hard it sticks in the drywall behind it.

My heart pounding, chest heaving, my gaze falls on a broad-shouldered man with dark hair, his hands wrapped around Skye as she fights to free herself. His attention jerks to me. My fists tighten at my sides until my knuckles pop. Rage flows through me, taking over until all I see is red.

“I don’t know who you are, or what you think you’re doing in here, but you just fucked with the wrong woman,” I growl. Then I run at him. I land a solid punch in the center of his face, breaking his nose as he releases Skye. She screams and scrambles away. The man stands and crosses the room toward me, swinging with arms twice as thick as mine. I dodge, light on my feet, and land another punch to the face. He’s unfazed, and heaves his body into me, wrestling me into the dresser. A lamp slides off and breaks, followed by the flatscreen TV. I reach back, my hand wrapping around the cable box, and I swing the black metal box around and connect with his head.

The man staggers back, and I tackle him to the ground, landing hit after hit on his face. His hands claw at the patterned purple carpet, and I catch the flash of something in his hand. A large shard of broken mirror. He jabs it at me, and I leap back. He pulls himself back to his feet, his face bleeding, a look of murderous determination on his face.

“Look, my fight isn’t with you. It’s with her,” he roars.

“She’s mine,” I clarify. “That makes it my fight.”

“Suit yourself,” he says, holding the mirror shard in a fighting stance, watching every move I make. Then he runs for me. I dodge, and he reaches out with the shard and catches me in the bicep. I feel it slice through my skin, but I keep on going. He swings again, and I grab his arm, shoving it away as I land another punch in his face. He stumbles back as I hold onto his shirt, tugging him into another punch. He slams into the bathroom sink, his shirt ripped open as he turns back to me. This guy just won’t quit.

I still, my gaze falling on his bare arm. My eyes narrow, examining the tattoo of three stacked skulls with a sword passing through all three, extending to his knuckles. My gaze meets his, and I’m transported back to that moment when I was a kid. The man who assaulted my stepfather. Who blinded my sister and beat the shit out of ten-year-old me. The man who changed my whole life and lurks in the shadows of every nightmare I’ve ever had.

“It’s you,” I say incredulously. “Fourteen years ago, you beat up a junkie who owed you money, then turned your anger on his kids. My sister and me.”

“You think that narrows it down?” He angrily states, spitting blood on the

carpet. “This is just a job. Do you remember every burger you flip?”

“Fuck you,” I growl, lunging for him and dodging his advance, knocking the shard from his hand. I twist his hand behind him and plant my boot in his back, shoving him headfirst into the bathroom mirror. Cracks spread out across the mirror, and he stumbles back, turning and tackling me onto the bed. His hands wrap around my throat, his blood dripping down onto my shirt. I struggle beneath him, but he has easily a hundred pounds on me. I swing, I shove, but he has me blocked.

Suddenly, he releases me as Skye leaps onto his back, a length of coax cable looped around his neck. She tightens the cord, planting her boots on his back to steady herself as he bucks. I start swinging, landing several body blows, and one to the face before he can sling her off. She slams into the broken bathroom mirror with a sickening thud and a yelp.

“Skye?!” I shout in paralyzing terror. She doesn’t answer, but I see her moving. My anger boils over, and I’m done with this.

I slam my body into him as he continues to fight with the cable around his neck, shoving him over the small entrance table and straight through the front window. Glass rains down on us as I maintain the momentum, and we tumble over the second-story railing.

“Zaden!” Skye cries as we fall. The cable around his throat catches him as he dangles above the pool deck, and I plunge into the pool, barely missing the cement wall. Cool water rushes over me, and I push up from the bottom. My head breaks the surface, my eyes trained on him. He struggles against the cable, his feet kicking the air helplessly. I drag myself out of the pool as his motions slow, then stop.

Metal groans from the motel room above, then snaps.

“Look out!” Skye screams down to me as I leap across the pool deck. The cable pulls out of the wall, and the man falls the remaining six feet onto the cement deck, followed by a length of cable, a broken strip of metal, and the cable box. He lands with a thud as the box smashes into pieces beside him. I scramble backward, waiting for more things to fall, but they don’t.

I curse, panting. Movement across the pool deck catches my eye, and I see Raven emerge from the office.

“Call 911,” I shout at her, and she runs back inside.

The man lies motionless on the concrete, blood pooling around his head. I glance back up at the room above me, and my gaze collides with Skye, leaning out over the balcony. I pull my feet under me and stagger around the



corner to the stairs. As soon as I reach the first step, Skye runs down and throws herself at me. I wrap my arms around her trembling frame, her tears wet against my neck. I pull her back, placing my hands on either side of her face to examine her. She has a split in her lip, and a bruise developing on her cheek.

“Are you hurt?” I ask, my eyes searching her face.

She shakes her head furiously. “I don’t think so.” Her eyes assess me, pausing at the cut in my shoulder. “But you are.” She strips off her shirt and ties it around my bicep to stop the bleeding. “We need to get you to a hospital.”

I shake my head. “I’ll be fine.” I struggle to catch my breath. “What did he say to you? Why was he after you?”

Her bottom lip trembles, and her eyes dart nervously around the pool deck. Her voice lowers. “It’s the investigation. I pissed someone off. It was a threat. They want me to leave.”

My eyes narrow. “What?”

She nods. “I went to Detective Phillips yesterday. I told them I was investigating Evan. I...” She swallows hard. “I did some fucked up things to Evan to get a confession out of him. A partial confession, before he passed out. I know things that could take him and Cyrus’s entire organization down. I didn’t think Evan would remember. He was so drunk.”

I shake my head. “Fuck, Skye. You kicked a hornet’s nest.” I take a deep breath. “But whatever you did, it’s deeper than you even know. That man out there is the one who assaulted my family when I was a kid, who I haven’t seen since that night. And now, somehow, he’s here. Attacking you.” My eyes search the sky for answers, then return to her face. “Are you dealing drugs? That’s why he went after my stepfather.”

She shakes her head. “Cyrus and Evan are.”

I throw up my arms. “We have a lot to talk about. And apparently, none of it can be explained to the police. We have to get out of here. Come on.” I tug her arm, and she pauses.

“Hold on,” she says, sprinting back up the stairs. I curse. Seconds later she returns with her backpack, and we jog across the deck toward the catwalk leading to the Sandbar. I glance over my shoulder to see if paramedics have arrived to collect the fallen man, and skid to a stop.

“What...?” I circle back around, but the man is gone. I follow a trail of blood into the front parking lot, where it disappears. “Fuck!”

Raven runs out of the office, the phone at her ear. "What happened?"

"He's gone. He... left?" I question.

"I thought he was dead!" She calls back, then pauses to relay something to the emergency operator on the other end of the phone.

"So did I," I reply, shocked. I glance over at Skye, and she starts shaking. I take her hand. "We have to leave."

Raven runs up to us, her eyes darting between Skye and I. She covers the receiver with her hand. "What just happened here?"

"I don't know," I tell her. "But we can't be here. I'll explain everything, just not right now. We weren't here."

Her eyes narrow in confusion. "What am I supposed to tell them?" She asks, holding up the phone.

"I don't know, but we can't be involved. I'm sorry."

"Zaden," she breathes incredulously, shaking her head. But I can see it in her eyes. She understands. She puts the receiver back to her ear. "Yeah, no. He fell off a balcony. But then... got back up and left. I don't know. He wasn't staying here, so I don't know his name." She nods and turns away. "I may have a tag number on the cameras. I'll check."

I run with Skye across the parking lot to the Sandbar and over to my truck. We slide into the front seat, and the engine roars to life. Tires squeal as I back out of the space and peel off down the road.

"Where are we going?" She asks.

"I know a place." I fly down the road, weaving through traffic until it thins near the edge of town, where the businesses fade into farms. I pull off onto a no-name dirt road, winding effortlessly around the curves in the narrow trail, pine boughs brushing both sides of the truck.

Her gaze slides to mine. "You know this road."

"I've been coming here since I was a kid," I explain, taking a lane as it splits into three, then choosing another path as it forks. The truck dips, and mud sprays over the hood. I flip the wipers and spin the wheel to the right as a mailbox appears out of nowhere. The winding driveway opens into a clearing where a white picket fence surrounds an old blue, two-story farmhouse.

"Whose house is this?" She asks, her hand gripping the door handle of the truck.

"Jax," I answer. "Katrina's brother. He's out of town." I pull the muddy Chevy around to the back of the house and into an old barn. We leap out, and

I glance around quickly before closing the large barn doors. “Come on.”

I lead her to the back door, around the tables of dirt bike parts in various stages of rebuild. Reaching up to the edge of the doorframe, I feel along the dusty lip until I touch the key. Then slide it into the lock and open the door.

“Jax,” I call out as we walk inside, locking the door back behind us. “Jax, you here?” I shout again, searching through the rooms, the old wooden floorboards creaking beneath my boots. I shake my head, and glance back at Skye. “He’s gone.” I run a hand through my hair and fall back into a chair at the kitchen table.

Skye wanders through the hall and flips the light in the bathroom, emerging a moment later with a towel and a first aid kit. She settles into the chair beside me, her eyes locking with mine.

“Fuck, Skye. Explain all this to me. Somehow. Because I have no idea what’s going on right now.”

She takes an unsteady breath. “I don’t know where to begin.”

“At the beginning, Skye. Just give it to me straight for once.” I hate the desperation in my tone, but my whole world was just upended. Seeing him again brings back all the old feelings I’ve spent so long suppressing, convincing myself that it was only an isolated event and could never happen again. Not to me. Not to someone I love.

She nods, taking a deep breath in an attempt to still the trembling of her hands. “My mother’s name is Sarah Matthews, and she met and married my father, Nathan Matthews, in Gray’s Cove, California. That’s where I’m from.” She unties her tank top from around my bicep, then uses a clean cloth with a strong smelling antiseptic to clean the wound.

“California,” I echo. “Figures.”

A hint of a smile lifts at the corners of her lips. “My mother had me and Paige on a surfboard before we could even really stand. I never knew how deep her love for surfing went until a few days ago. At your shop.” She pauses, and my eyes meet hers. There’s an unfathomable pain swimming just below the surface, so deep I can’t reach it. “My mother had a whole life I never knew about. She never told us about her past, and I never asked. I mean, she and my father died in a car crash when I was six. Paige was three. So I never knew to ask. But she had another name. Sienna Lassiter.”

My eyes narrow. “What?”

“The woman on the wall in your shop, who won the surfing competitions when she was only a kid. Kaos Surf’s first sponsored surfer. She was my

Mom.”

I shake my head. “That’s impossible. She died in a fire.”

“It didn’t make sense to me either, but then I started researching. They found her boyfriend’s body, Dylan Knight. But they never found her. They only presumed she was in the fire because Dylan was, and her car was in the parking lot. I don’t know what happened, but she escaped. She faked her death. She left Pelican Beach for California, changed her name, and started a new life.”

“But why?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t know. I wish I had answers, but I don’t. All I know is that she left. My Mom had me four years after that photo on your wall was taken. She wasn’t that different when I knew her, and there is no doubt in my mind that Sarah Matthews and Sienna Lassiter are the same person.”

“Shit,” I say, thinking back to all the times I’ve passed those photos on the wall at Kaos, and never knew. I reach up and rub at the ache forming in my temples. “I’ve heard stories about Sienna my whole life. And now I’m sleeping with her daughter.”

“Trust me,” she says, rolling her eyes. “It’s a mindfuck for me too.”

“Okay, so crazy family history with unknown ties to Pelican Beach. What does this have to do with Evan and Cyrus?” I ask, struggling to connect the dots.

“Buckle up, it’s going to be a bumpy ride,” she warns. “This is only the beginning.”

I suck in a pained breath when the antiseptic stings my wound, and she apologizes.

“My Mom left something in Pelican Beach, and Paige came here to find it,” Skye continues, setting the cloth down on the table as she reaches into her backpack. She pulls out a book with a worn white cover, and black lettering across the front that reads *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Montclair*.

“She left a poetry book?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

Skye shakes her head. “This is hers. This book is one of the only things I have left from my mother. I don’t know why, but I could never bring myself to read it. I found it in Paige’s things when I went to her apartment.” She opens it to the back cover, and shows me the library check-out card with the name Sienna Lassiter on it. My eyes meet hers.

“So it is true,” I say in shock.

She nods. "Then I found this." She pulls the dust cover off the front and carefully detaches a Polaroid picture taped inside, handing it to me. My eyes glance over the photo, studying every intricacy of the scene, my heart speeding in my chest. The woman I recognize on the bed, the newborn wrapped in a Kaos Surf shirt, the dated motel room, and the name scribbled at the bottom.

*Raven.*

"Um... hold on. What?" I ask.

"Sienna was Raven's Mom too. She was pregnant when the Pier burned down, and Dylan died. When she left Pelican Beach, she left Raven. I don't know why, unless she was in trouble. Maybe she was responsible for the fire. But that's why Paige was here. She found that photo and came here to see if it was true. She never told me any of this. I was completely blindsided. I never knew why she chose to come here, all the way across the continent. I just thought she wanted to travel and experience a different life. But this is why. She came here for Raven."

I look into her eyes. Really look at her, and think about Raven. The shape of her face. The haunting green eyes. I lean back into my chair. I can see it. "Fuck. What about Alice? Raven has a Mom."

She nods. "I've been thinking about that too, and the only thing I can come to is this." She points to the Polaroid in my hand. "Who do you think took that photo?"

"Alice knows." It's not a question. "She kept it a secret all these years."

"Maybe she was afraid the state would take her away. Maybe she promised Sienna she would take care of her. Or maybe she thought Raven would leave if she knew the truth. Whatever that truth is, only Alice can tell us. Because clearly, no one else knows." Skye takes the photo back from me and sticks it into the book's dust jacket, tucking it back into her backpack.

"Paige started working at the Sandbar to get close to Raven," I state. "Raven works at the Aurora, Paige starts working at the Aurora. She went to Jupiter Crash concerts."

Skye nods. "Paige would send me her music all the time. That's how I know all the lyrics to a local band. I've been listening to her for months, never knowing she was my sister."

"Then the relationship with Evan just... happened?"

"I guess," Skye offers with a shrug, closing my bicep wound with a large butterfly bandage. "They're a close group, probably due to their side gig."

Those pills we took at the Aurora that night? They sell them. And apparently, they've sold drugs in this town for a long time, according to Evan."

"The Aurora has always had a reputation as a party club. I just never knew the drugs were a part of the establishment. Evan told you all this when you worked there?" I ask, studying the careful movements of her fingers as she tends my wound.

"Kind of," she says, making a guilty face. "I found out about the pills accidentally when I worked that night. But the knowledge about the other drugs, I had to pull out of him by force." She shrugs, cleaning the last of the blood off my skin, and closes the first aid kit. "I wanted him to confess the details of that night with Paige, but all he said about it was 'it was an accident'. He did, however, confess to selling a bad batch of pills to an unsuspecting group of kids eight years ago, claiming fault with their new in-house manufacturing."

I swallow hard. "Eight years...?"

Her eyes meet mine. "Three kids died, Zaden. One of them was Drake."

Anger warms my blood, and I stand from the table, pacing up and down the worn wooden floorboards of the kitchen, my hands laced behind my head. I want to hit something.

"I'm going to kill him," I say, the image of Evan's smug face filling my mind. "Or Katrina's going to kill him. The police never found where the drugs came from. Never made an arrest." I shake my head. "I guess I fucking understand why."

Skye stands and strides over to me, and I walk around her to continue my pace.

"How long have you known about this?" I ask, shooting her a fuming glare.

"Since that night after Marleighs," she answers softly. "I didn't know how to tell you. Or who I should tell. After leaving Evan passed out in his truck at the Aurora, I walked back to the motel. The next morning, Detective Phillips called me and said they were suspending the search for Paige. That she was really gone. And my life stopped. I couldn't think past that."

I approach her and wrap my hands around her arms, gripping just hard enough to make her understand that I care. "This is the kind of shit you have to tell me, Skye. You can't keep this to yourself. This isn't just about Paige anymore. This is about Jax and Katrina and Raven and Alice."

"And Mia," Skye adds. "Fun fact, Mia's father is Stephen Knight, Dylan

Knight's brother. They're cousins."

I release her, and return to pacing. "I don't even know what to say," I admit, completely at a loss for words. "I can't believe you would keep me in the dark like this after everything we've been through."

"I don't know, Zaden. Why wouldn't I tell you?" She exclaims, and I pause to look over at her. "Maybe because my sister died because of Evan? Maybe because Drake and two others died because of Evan? Raven's father?" She shakes her head, tears welling in her eyes. "You tell me."

"The Jacobsons can't get away with this."

"I didn't want you to get hurt!" She finishes. "Because I'm selfish. I see all this pain and death around me. I've lost every single person I've ever loved, and I don't want to lose you too. So if you have to hate me, fine. Just chalk it up to another one of my fuck ups. But don't you see the theme here? Each time nothing happens. It all gets swept under the rug because of their ties to law enforcement. There is no way to win against Evan or the Jacobsons, and I am not adding your name to their list of casualties." Her voice starts to waver, and she looks away, wrapping her arms around herself.

I release a frustrated sigh and walk over to her. I pull her into my embrace, tucking her head beneath my chin. "We're going to figure this out," I say, trying to sound reassuring.

"I don't know how. I've been trying ever since I got here, and I'm no closer to any sort of closure than I was when I started," she says, burying her face in my shirt and taking a deep, steadying breath. "You wondered why I would jump off a bridge? This is the shit in my head right now."

I tighten my arms around her. "You were almost added to the casualty list today." I kiss the top of her head, and she looks up at me. "Fuck, I was scared."

"I told you my life is chaos. They want me to go back to California. We can end this. I wouldn't blame you," she says, an edge of unmistakable sadness in her voice.

I shake my head. "I'm not losing anything else to them. Definitely not you." I lean down and kiss her softly. "I can't believe that man got up and left today. In fourteen years, not a day has gone by when I haven't thought about him. And I let him leave."

"I don't know how he survived," she says, gripping her hands in my shirt. "I'm sorry you had to see him again because of me."

I sit back on the kitchen table as Skye steps between my legs, her hands

resting on my thighs. “He said it was a job to him. Back then, and today. You’re being targeted for threatening the Jacobsons, jeopardizing their side business. My stepfather was a junkie with a debt. And that guy was sent to clean it all up.” I run a hand through my hair. “It all circles back to them. What was your plan? If you get a confession or evidence, who can you trust with it?”

“There is no one person,” she says, her eyes locked with mine. “You have to go beyond Pelican Beach. You have to go to the masses. They can’t silence everyone.”

“You want to take it public.”

She nods.

“What are you missing? What do you need to make that happen?” I ask, searching her eyes for hope.

“I’ve found evidence linking Evan to that night with Paige, I just can’t prove that it belongs to Evan. I need something physical that people can see and can’t be disputed. I tried to pull the security footage at the Sandbar, but it was erased. That was the only day missing. There had to be something there. But I don’t know how to retrieve it,” she says, shaking her head. “Evan’s alibi hinges on the truth concerning his whereabouts during that timeframe. He said he never left the Sandbar. I believe he did. I want to know if he was driving his own car, or Paige’s. If we can prove that, his alibi is bullshit, and they have to consider where he went.”

I chew my bottom lip, thinking. Then I nod. “I got this. I know a guy.”

Her eyebrows raise in surprise. “Just like that?”

I nod. “Just like that.”

“Maybe there are some benefits to you.”

A smile teases at my lips. “You have no idea.” I tug on the hem of my Deftones shirt, which she has apparently claimed as hers, and pull her into a kiss, deep and lingering, threading my fingers into her hair. Her heart starts to race as her body presses against mine, her hands sliding up my thighs and beneath my shirt. I slide slowly and purposely off the edge of the table, my mouth locked on hers, muscles flexing beneath her hands as I make sure she feels every hard inch of me in the process. Then I break away from her and stride into the kitchen, leaving her breathless.

“Where are you going?”

“To make something spectacular for us to eat out of whatever random shit Jax has in this kitchen.” I glance back at her. “Then I’m going to take all your



clothes off and kiss every single place where that man touched you until you forget all about it.”

She rolls the ball of her tongue ring between her lips, the heat in her gaze unmistakable. “I’m a dessert-first kind of girl.”

I shut the cupboard and walk back to her, anticipation building with every step, my eyes locked with hers. My hands slide around her waist, then down to her ass, lifting her against me before sitting her on top of the table. “I can work with that.”

## Chapter 27

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### *Skye*

A thunderous pounding wakes me before the sun, and I scramble out of bed, ducking behind Zaden as he reaches for a baseball bat sitting in the corner of the room. The pounding sounds again, and my gaze meets Zaden's.

"I thought no one knows we're here," I whisper as fear creeps across my skin.

"One person knows," he answers, striding intently to the farmhouse's front door, bat raised, in nothing but boxer briefs. "And it better be him." When we reach the foyer, Zaden peers through the curtains and slowly lowers his bat. He flips the lock on the door.

"Whoa man, it's just me," Ryan says as he steps inside, holding his hands up in surrender.

Zaden shakes his head, closing the door and running a hand through his hair. "It's not even daylight yet, you couldn't have texted me?" Zaden growls, propping the bat against the door. "You were almost a fly ball to left field."

"You asked me to check into something, and what I found couldn't wait." He glances over and offers me a half smile. "Ivy, always nice to see you. Even more so when you don't have pants on."

I roll my eyes and stride back into the bedroom to pull on my shorts. "One person knows where we are, and it's Ryan?" I question Zaden.

"You needed someone with a particular set of skills, and Ryan is that guy," Zaden answers. "He may only be halfway through his IT degree, but he's been an amateur hacker for years."

Ryan scoffs. "I don't like your usage of the terms amateur or hacker. I

just have a fondness for exploiting poorly secured resources.” I hear the chairs around the kitchen table scrape against the floor as they sit down, and I wander back into the room. Ryan pulls a laptop from his backpack and sets it on the table. “What I don’t understand is why you care.”

I pull out a chair beside Zaden as he leans back, crossing his arms across his chest and meeting my gaze like he’s asking for permission.

“You’re here about the surveillance footage, right?” I ask him, and he nods. “I’m investigating the night Paige died, because I’m her sister. My name isn’t Ivy, it’s Skye Matthews.” His movements still, and his mouth parts in surprise. His attention flicks to Zaden.

“Did you know about this?” He asks.

Zaden rolls his eyes. “Recently. Long story.”

I give him the cliff notes version, and answer whatever questions he needs to get him back on track to explaining why he just woke me up before the fucking roosters in the yard.

“Okay, so I tried to recover the missing files from the Sandbar, but they’re gone. They wiped everything from that day, locally and in the cloud, at the device and manufacturer level.” The screen on his laptop comes on, and he navigates to a file set. “However, the Sunrise Motel has not. And their security is about as updated as the rest of the motel.”

I lean forward in my chair as he pulls up a video, swallowing the nervous lump in my throat. Every video I’ve had to watch in this case so far has haunted my thoughts, rolling on repeat over and over again, and I’m not super excited to see another one. But it’s necessary. As if sensing my uneasiness, Zaden reaches over and firmly places his large, warm hand on my leg. I reach down and lace my fingers through his.

“So there are several segments that I found interesting, given the context you provided last night,” Ryan begins, starting the video. The camera angle directly captures the Sandbar’s back parking lot, taken from the second story of the motel. My heart thunders in my chest, and I squeeze Zaden’s hand.

“The Tesla is in the back lot,” I whisper to Zaden, and he nods.

“It looks like Evan is cussing out that pizza guy,” Ryan comments, pointing toward the guy scrambling to the driver’s side of his delivery car. Evan’s hands gesticulate wildly until the driver pulls away, and I see a figure emerge from the kitchen. I immediately recognize her as Paige.

“Now he’s arguing with Paige,” Zaden comments. “He’s on a roll.”

“He’s drunk,” I state. “I spoke with that Pizza guy.” Words are exchanged

between Paige and Evan before they go their separate ways, and climb into their own vehicles. Evan pulls the Tesla out onto Beach Drive and disappears, followed shortly by Paige in the Bronco.

Zaden's eyes meet mine. "Evan did leave."

"Yeah," Ryan says, closing the video and pulling up another one. "Which is interesting. Check this out." He plays the next video, where a Black Tahoe pulls into the employee lot. Evan steps out, slamming the door before falling back against it, fisting his hands in his hair. There's movement further up in the frame as several of the remaining servers walk out onto the deck to smoke. Evan takes notice, and steps away from the Tahoe, straightening his shirt before striding into the kitchen. My eyes narrow.

"He's in a different car and a different shirt," I comment.

Zaden shakes his head. "Fucking liar," he growls.

"I knew it," I whisper, my gaze sliding to Ryan. "You did it, Ryan."

Ryan chews his bottom lip nervously. "There's more. I wish there wasn't, but there is." He pulls up a third video and plays it. "So, you saw Evan and Paige leave, then Evan returned. But something happened between those clips that I can't quite explain." His eyes meet mine. "Paige came back."

A man walks through the kitchen door toward the dumpsters with a trashcan. He heaves the large can over his shoulder and into the dumpster, then drops it back on the ground before grabbing for another. Before he can dump the next one, the Bronco speeds onto the scene, fishtailing to a halt behind the building. The door opens, and Paige leaps out. She runs to him frantically, pointing down the road. She's crying, and falls to her knees.

My heart breaks wide open, and I can't stop the tears that stream silently down my face. Oh God, Paige. Why did this happen to her? And why wasn't I there to save her from it? As Zaden's arms wrap around me, pulling me against his chest, I continue to watch the video, and the man does the same thing for Paige. He reaches down and lifts her off the ground and into his arms, holding her as she sags against him.

"Is there any audio at all?" I question, wishing I could hear what she was saying.

Ryan shakes his head. "No audio on the outdoor cameras."

Suddenly, they break apart, and both of their heads turn toward Beach Drive. Paige runs back around the Bronco and climbs into the driver's seat. But she can't close the door all the way before the man grabs it from her, and climbs in behind her, pushing her to the passenger seat. The door slams, and

they take off, spinning gravel under the tires as they peel out onto the road. Seconds later, flashing lights fly down the road after them. Police cars.

My eyes meet Zaden's. He's in shock. He leans back, running a hand over his face as he shakes his head in denial.

"NoNoNo. FUCK." He shoves his chair back and stands from the table, pacing back and forth in the kitchen.

"Zaden, who was he?" I ask, watching him carefully.

He locks eyes with Ryan.

"It was Jax," Ryan says.

I stand from the table and walk over to Zaden. "Are you sure it couldn't be anyone else?"

"No. He's in South Florida, fishing. He always takes off at the end of the summer for a week or two," Zaden replies, leaning back against the wall. He looks off across the room, his chest heaving, his gaze empty and distant.

That means Jax drove the Bronco over the bridge. He was driving as they evaded the cops. And when Paige went into the sea, he did too.

"I don't understand," I declare softly. "Why would he do that? She was running from the cops. She must have told him that. I saw him look at her clothes. Clothes that I know were covered in Rose's blood. Detective Phillips showed me the dash cam footage. Why did he get into the car with her?"

"He has feelings for her," Zaden admits. His attention slides over to me. "But she only wanted Evan." He pushes away from the wall, and I watch him make several more laps up and down the kitchen before he finally swears and picks his truck keys up from the counter. "Come on, we have to go."

My eyes narrow. "Go where?"

"Katrina," he says, his voice breaking as he struggles to maintain his emotions. "I have to tell her that she's lost both brothers." He nods at Ryan, and Ryan closes his laptop and zips it back into his backpack. I slide my boots back on, and we both follow Zaden out to the barn and climb silently into the cab of the truck.

With the sun barely peaking over the horizon, Zaden maneuvers us along the dim dirt trails and back onto the highway. He's going two miles under the speed limit this time, using his turn signals, and coming to full stops. He may be moving toward Katrina's house and the conversation we're about to have, but he doesn't want to be.

I feel guilty. There are four people dead. Rose and the Officer, Paige and Jax. And I can't help but wonder if Paige had never come here... If she had

told me, so I could accompany her... Or if I had only followed her anyway... Maybe all of this would have never happened.

I have no idea how to tell Katrina her brother is gone, and my sister is responsible. Anxiety gnaws away at my insides, my heart pounding, pushing me toward that inevitable panic attack waiting to wrap around my throat the moment I look into her eyes, and she sees me as every bit the murderer as I feel.

Zaden turns down a side street, and I see the sunrise over the ocean at the end of the road. Small homes with well-landscaped lawns line each side of the road, and he slows down in front of a peach house with a shiny tin roof, pulling into the driveway. We all step out of the truck, and walk in a line behind Zaden, along the winding sidewalk of blooming azaleas to the front door. Zaden raises his hand to knock and freezes. He shakes his head, his fist tightening. Reluctantly he knocks, and we wait for agonizing seconds for someone to appear.

Lights brighten the curtains in the front room a moment before the door opens, and Katrina steps outside, looking between the three of us in confusion.

“What’s up, Zae?” Katrina questions, crossing her arms over her chest. Her short blonde hair is disheveled, and she looks like she just woke up. “You just in the neighborhood or something?”

Zaden shakes his head. “We need to talk to you about something.” Her eyes travel over him, and I know that she sees the war inside him. They’ve been friends for a long time.

“Yeah, come on,” she says, opening the door wider so we can enter. Her home is well decorated and warm, with a beach theme of shells and seabirds set on pastel-colored walls. She leads us into the living room and we sit on her off-white canvas sofa, staring at one another expectantly.

“What’s wrong?” She asks. “You skipped work yesterday.” Her gaze shifts to me. “I heard about an incident at the Sunrise, and a guest was attacked. I hoped it wasn’t you.”

I nod. “It was.”

She curses under her breath.

“That’s not why we’re here, Kat,” Zaden says, stopping her. “It’s about Jax.”

Her eyes narrow. “What about Jax? Has he contacted you? He needs to get his ass back to work, too.”

Zaden slowly shakes his head. “He got into the Bronco the night Paige disappeared. He was driving when they went over the bridge. Ryan pulled the security footage from the Sunrise on the night it happened.” Ryan pulls out his laptop.

She shakes her head. “No, Jax is fishing down in Sargassum Point. We have a cabin down there.”

Zaden shakes his head again. “He’s not, Kat. He went off the bridge.”

Her attention volleys between us, her eyes wide as her hands begin to shake. “No. What? No!” She stands from the couch, walks into the foyer, and then returns. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Ryan starts the video, and she watches it, transfixed for several minutes before I see tears roll down her cheeks. She shakes her head violently. “No, you’re wrong,” she cries.

Zaden stands and walks over to her, wrapping his arms around her. Tears well in my eyes, and I struggle to swallow the lump in my throat. I glance over at Ryan, and I see him struggling too.

“Do the police know?” She questions desperately. “This is from the motel. They must have taken the footage from the Sandbar. Why aren’t they looking for him? Why isn’t his picture on the news with Paige?”

“It’s the Jacobsons’. All of this revolves around Evan and Cyrus. We believe Evan may have killed Rose, and Paige was framed for it. They wouldn’t want to alert the public to another possible casualty if they don’t have to, especially if they didn’t find a body,” Ryan clarifies. A pained sound rips through her at the word *body*, and Zaden holds her tighter.

“How do you know all this?” She asks, glancing back at Ryan and I.

I swallow hard. “Because I’m Paige’s sister. I came here to find out what happened.” I release a tense sigh. That admission never gets easier.

Her eyes flare. “You... You lied to everyone, and your sister...” She tries to wrench out of Zaden’s embrace, but he holds her fast. Her eyes lock with his. “You’re going to fucking protect her? I’ve known you since we were kids. Kids, Zaden!” Her face hardens in disgust and outright rage. “So that’s how much our friendship is worth, huh? Little less than a good fuck?” She fights against him again, screaming until he releases her. I stand from the couch, but he stays between us. Then she huffs and walks out of the room.

“We just found out today,” Zaden admits, although it doesn’t look like she cares to hear it. “I came as soon as I knew.”

“Well, you get the loyal friend award,” she calls from the other room. I

hear things getting knocked over, piles of papers hitting the floor, pens clattering across the kitchen counter. For a moment, I wonder if she's looking for a weapon. When she walks back into the room, she's holding a sheet of paper out to us, her hand shaking. "Explain this, then. Jax left me a note and stole my motorcycle."

Zaden takes the paper from her, and I take a careful step forward. His eyes dart back to her. "When did you find this?"

"Saturday," she exclaims. "The day after all that shit happened. Jax never came to work, so I went looking for him at the Auto shop, thinking he had swapped shifts, and was working at the shop instead. He wanted to change the oil on my bike, so I dropped it off Friday night after work. By Saturday afternoon, it was gone, and I had that note." She points toward the piece of paper.

Zaden glances over at me, then holds it out so I can read it.

"The only thing I couldn't figure out," Katrina adds. "Is the handwriting. It's not his."

My heart quickens, wild and erratic, drumming a staccato bass inside my chest until I feel like it's going to break free.

*I took your bike. I'll explain everything later.*

*- Jax*

The artistic angles of the lines, the calligraphy swirls in the looping letters... I sit back on the couch before I can collapse. My eyes lock with Zaden's.

"It's her. This is her handwriting. Paige wrote it."

Zaden shakes his head. "How?"

"I don't know. They made it out of the Bronco. They escaped, went down the beach, borrowed a bike..." My mind races with possibilities, struggling to comprehend.

"The jetski," Zaden comments. "Someone took Joe's jetski for a joyride. He thought it floated off, but he said it was missing gas. He always keeps the keys close by." I can hear the excitement in his voice as he puts it together.

"When we jumped off the bridge-" I begin, and Katrina stops me, her eyes darting to Zaden.

"You jumped off the bridge?" She questions incredulously.



“There’s a really long explanation for all this,” Zaden says. “But yes, we jumped off the fucking bridge.”

I shake off her concern. “The current in the bay took us through the channel and around the jetty. They could have kept a low profile, climbed the rocks on the back side of the marina, and took the jetski. Staying off the roads would have kept the police from seeing them. Most jetskis don’t even have running lights. At night, they would have been like a ghost on the water.”

“Jax knew the bike was at the shop. They dumped the jetski, and took the bike,” Zaden finishes. He crosses the living room back to me, and pulls me up and into his arms. Tears stream down my face.

“She’s alive Zaden,” I rasp against his chest.

“They both are,” he confirms. “We just don’t know *where* they are.”

Katrina sinks into the chair across from us, her hand over her mouth as she struggles to digest everything we’ve just said. My body is trembling, thoughts and images and emotions tumbling around wildly inside my head. All the grief and the tears I’ve shed over the last few days, the anger and despair, frustration and fear, all bubbling to the surface in a boil that melts away at the frigid wall around my heart.

*Paige is alive.*

I keep saying this, over and over in my mind. My sister is alive. I may not have physically found her yet, but I’ve found her truth. And it feels almost as amazing as holding her in my arms again. Zaden takes a step back and kisses me lightly on the lips.

“See,” he says softly. “I told you you’re not alone.”

My gaze drifts over Katrina and Ryan, then back to him. I’m starting to believe him when he says that. “Thank you,” I tell him. “Thank all of you. I never meant to hurt anyone, I was just looking for the truth. I’m sorry to get you involved.”

“Paige may have been the final catalyst, but a war has been brewing in Pelican Beach for twenty-five years,” Zaden states, walking over to sit beside Katrina. “We have to finish this so our family can come home.”

I wander over to the front door, scanning over a wall of family photos. I lean in close, examining the ones of Jax, wondering where he and Paige are right now.

“You think they’re safe, wherever they are?” Katrina asks.

Zaden nods. “Jax is with her. You know your brother. He won’t let anything happen to either of them.”

I glance over the remaining photos on the wall and pause, lingering on a photo of Jax and Katrina on a winding mountain road, helmets tucked beneath their arms as they stand beside a set of motorcycles.

“That’s the bike,” Katrina says, noticing my attention. “The one on the right is mine.”

With my eyes glued on the photo, I reach my hand into my pocket and retrieve a small ripped piece of paper. It’s crinkled from being wet in the ocean and dried again. But the letters are a permanent stain across the white. Katrina steps up beside me, and I hand her the paper. She frowns.

“Is your tag number TRV759?” I ask, my eyes meeting hers.

She nods. “Yeah, why?”

I point at the paper. “I found that when I went to talk to Detective Phillips. It fell out of Paige’s file.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t understand.”

“They know,” Zaden supplies. “Of course they do. They towed the jetski back in. They may not have caught him before he could steal the bike, but they know he’s on it. They know Paige and Jax escaped.”

“And the police are looking for them,” I add. “The entire search and rescue effort was a lie. A public spectacle. It’s easier to disappear two people when everyone believes they’re already gone.”

“What do we do?” Ryan asks. “Do we still take this public?”

I shake my head. “We can’t release all the details of the story, because it’s not over. Paige is still alive. She is the real story. If we find Paige, we find the truth.” I glance over at Zaden. “Then we take them down.”

# About the Author



Lyla Raine is a writer and graphic designer from Panama City Beach, Florida. She dreamed of writing professionally while working toward her BA degree, waiting tables in beach restaurants, and scribbling story notes on cocktail napkins. She writes spicy, angsty, contemporary romantic suspense about strong female characters and the men bold enough to challenge them.

*Beauty and Kaos* is her debut novel, and the first book in The Daughters of Kaos trilogy. Follow her on social media for details on the next installment: *Lost in Kaos!*

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