# beneath these DARKS STEELS TO THE STEELS TO THE

RAVENPEAK BAY

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Stalk me!

# DARK SKIES RAVENPEAK BAY BOOK III RIA VIII





Beneath These Dark Skies is book 3 in the Ravenpeak Bay series. This book is set on a fictional island with a fictional town inspired by the islands off the coast of Maine.

Each book is interconnected standalone with crossover characters. It can be read on its own but is best enjoyed when read in order. To read in order, start with These Rough Waters, which follows Torin and Maya, then Like a Hurricane for Rett & Arryn's book and lastly this book which follows Kolten & Vanessa.

This book does include some dark themes throughout, these include attempted SA, harassment, graphic violence, blackmail/bribery and mentions of neglect, mentions of grief & loss, and drowning. There are also mentions of death of a spouse & child which happened off page. It involves a secret baby storyline and struggles of being a single parent.

This book follows Torin & Rett's adoptive brother, Kolten. This book is set in 2 timelines, 5 years before (including the years between) and present day. Because of this you will see glimpses of Torin & Rett before their stories, this includes Torin while he was married to Grace.

This book includes sexually explicit scenes and it is recommended for mature readers 18+





### **PROLOGUE**



*Five years before* 

There's a girl laying in the sand.

■ If I hadn't watched her walk down there, the sun kissing her skin, her blonde hair flowing behind her in her pretty black dress, I might have thought she was dead.

But no, she's just laying there, getting her pretty dress dirty and wet while the tide ebbs closer, and closer to the heels on her feet.

This small little town in the middle of the ocean is very odd, I'd realized that quite quickly. Everyone knows each other, knows their secrets, cries and laughs together. There's no anonymity, or peaceful isolation here like I can get in the city.

We buried my brother's wife today. And their son. I'm not sure I'd want as many people at my funeral, if I even wanted a funeral at all.

But that girl on the beach? I'd seen her at the funeral. I didn't know the names of people yet, this is my first time here to support my brother, but now he and my youngest brother are blackout drunk in the den, and I'm staring at the sand.

Burying my hands in the pockets of my slacks, I take a step down off the porch, the sun warm on my face, and make my way down to the waterfront. The sand grinds under the polished shoes on my feet and then I stop close to her head, my shadow falling over her face and blocking her sun.

"One hour," she mutters as if to herself, "I wanted one hour."

And then she opens her eyes, meeting mine immediately. They are the color of whiskey, framed by thick, black lashes. She has a gently sloped nose and plump pink lips with a prominent cupid's bow, and freckles that are scattered across her face.

"Who are you?" She says, remaining on her back.

Her dress has slid up her thighs, revealing toned muscle and tanned skin.

"Kolten," I answer.

"Well Kolten, you're in my sun," She replies, matter of fact.

"It's odd attire to be sunbathing in," I comment, letting my eyes wander down her body. If she stood, I doubt she'd get much above my chest, even in the heeled shoes on her feet. The dress clings to the upper half of her body, a black silk covered in a sheer lace, showing off soft curves before the skirt flares at her hips and thighs. Which I am currently staring at.

She clears her throat, and my eyes bounce to hers, amusement dancing in her expression. Oh, this girl is trouble.

"I wasn't sunbathing," She props herself onto her elbows, "I was taking a minute to be alone. Everyone was supposed to be at the diner."

I guess she is referring to the wake they have going for Grace and Leo, my brother's family, and it looks like my brothers, me, and this strange girl are the only ones not in attendance.

I take a seat in the sand next to her, "I didn't get your name," I tilt my chin so I can look down at her face but find she's already pushing up to stand.

"Vanessa," She answers as she gets to her feet, the sharp heels of her shoes sinking into the sand, "But you can call me Ness."

The smile she gives me can only spell trouble. The devilish little grin awakens something inside of me, making me follow her with my eyes as she walks off, full of grace despite the sand, and heads off toward the diner.

## CHAPTER ONE



Five years before A few hours later...

**T** 've always found peace in the dark.

There's just something about the way the day bleeds into evening, and then velvety night, that settles something inside of my soul. I can't tell you how much time I've spent doing this, gazing up at the stars as if I could count each one, dreaming up stories of how the moon chases the sun, longing for the chance to just spend one moment in the golden star's presence.

This town has the best nights, it's quiet and so dark on this tiny island, that the sky isn't polluted by blaring white lights like they are back on the mainland. And the inky water that surrounds us adds a symphony of sound so calming, it's as if it's a melody made just for the soul.

My toes skim through the dark water as I dangle my legs off the side of the dock, the water cold against my bare skin, but the air is warm and the night quiet. Boats bob idly on the water at my side and the town behind me is asleep, leaving me blissfully alone.

For such a small town, it's always busy, but I suppose that's what keeps the place running. There isn't a soul in town I don't know. I grew up here and have spent the last twenty-one years of my life on this island, so I've gotten to know everyone, even if it's just in passing.

Tipping my chin up to the moon, I think back to the beach earlier, and the man who found me laying in the sand.

He's a new face in town, one that didn't belong but was a welcome sight, nonetheless. While I hadn't met him before, I had heard of him from Grace. She used to spend hours talking about Torin and his brothers, Everett and Kolten, but while everyone had met both Torin and Rett, Kolten remained a mystery. Until now.

I glance over my shoulder, toward the newly built waterside house, which was supposed to be Grace's forever home with her husband and son. The lights are off, but the bright silver light of the moon reflects off the wall of windows that make up the first floor. The tragedy of Grace and Leo's deaths had hit the town hard, she was a friend of mine and someone who had grown up here also, and to lose someone so close to the town and so young too, had rattled us all.

Torin had come to town some years ago now, and never left after he met Grace. But now she's gone, he'll be all alone in that big house after his brothers leave. Would he even stay in town now he no longer had anything to tie him here?

He's a quiet man, decent as far as I can tell, but he's always kept to himself, not like his younger brother, Everett, who is loud, *very loud*.

I'm still looking towards the house when a shadow starts to move. My breath lodges in my throat as the silhouette of a man starts toward me. Wide shoulders, casual gait, hands loose at his sides. The dark conceals his face, but I already know.

"Hello trouble," His voice is like the whisper of the wind on a summer's day, a soothing caress that you want to keep chasing and yet it's roughened around the edges, turning it raspy and smoky.

"Trouble?" I counter, "How do you figure that?"

He stops a good ten feet away from me, still concealed by the night, but close enough I can smell his deeply masculine scent, something earthy and warm.

There's absolutely no denial on my part, this man is attractive in a way that makes it hard to think. Dark, so damn dark, just like the night, his hair is a deep brown, shortened at the sides and left longer on the top so it falls across his brow boyishly, dark low set brows and his eyes are so brown they could pass as black. Days old stubble surrounds his mouth and a single ring hangs from one ear lobe. He's so much bigger than I am too, him standing over me at this moment only makes me realize it more. He's at least six foot three to my five foot five – *and a half, because the half counts* – and broad, with muscles that stretch the material of his shirt, clinging to each curve and dip of his body.

"I can tell," his voice is almost a purr, "It's late, why are you out here?"

"Thinking about taking a midnight swim," I lie, turning back to the inky water. I'd swam in these waters plenty of times, but never have I been stupid enough to swim at night alone. "The town is asleep, no one around to see me naked."

He makes a strangled noise that has my lips rising on a smile. "Don't panic," I whisper, "It's only a joke."

His shoes thump on the planks of the docks, coming closer, "Trouble," He rasps.

"You're not from here," I state, "You're the third brother."

"The third brother?" He repeats as he takes another step closer.

"The elusive one," I gasp dramatically, "We've all met Torin and we've all certainly heard Everett, but you, no one has ever met you. People questioned if you even existed when Grace used to talk about you and your brothers."

"Well, I exist."

"That you do, Kolt," I like the way his name feels on my tongue.

Another step and he's right at my back, the warmth of his body pressing into my spine.

"My brothers are the only ones who call me Kolt." He says.

"Now me, too," I turn fully, crossing my legs on the dock as he continues to stand, and tip my head up. He tilts his chin down to stare at me, not moving an inch. I lean back onto the heels of my hands, "So Kolt, oh mysterious one, what do you do?"

Even though it's dark I swear one side of his lips quirk up in a smile, "A lot of things, some of which I can't tell you."

"Are you a spy?" I joke.

He doesn't answer.

"A serial killer?" I continue like the silence isn't deafening. "Just so you know, I have a lot of friends, they'll notice if I go missing."

"A boyfriend?" He presses.

"Not anymore. I'm too young to be tied down." I answer, hiding the smile on my face. It's fun to be flirty, but I'm not lying. I didn't want to start anything serious; I'm just twenty-one, barely legal to drink and I have no idea what I want to do with my life. This sleepy town has been my home forever, the idea of leaving it scares me, but I know I will have to sooner or later, if only to figure out what the rest of my life might look like.

And Grace dying, a woman only a few years older than me, just cements that fact. I'm destined for more, I know I am, more than the diner where my sister and I work, more than this island, just *more*. And time only waits for so long.

Getting myself into a relationship now will only hinder me.

But that doesn't mean I can't flirt with a stranger who is likely too old for me anyway. He isn't leaving though, and has edged closer.

"Are you going to sit?" I ask, "Take off your shoes and socks, the water is lovely."

I spin back around and dip my toes back into the water, cold drops hitting my shins as the waves slosh around my ankles.

"It's Spring, it's warm but not warm enough for that."

"Live a little, Kolt, it only happens once." I kick my feet against the waves, tilting my face to the stars.

I feel his eyes on me and then slowly, hesitantly, he crouches and then sits at my side, hands going to the shoes on his feet as he takes them off and then his socks.

He shuffles until he's sitting next to me and then drops his feet into the water. A sigh leaves him, and I take it as a win. We sit in a comfortable silence for a while until he breaks it with a question.

"Did you know Grace?" He asks.

I dip my chin in a nod, "Yes, we grew up together."

"Does everyone know everyone here?"

"Pretty much, it's a small town," I shrug, "Even if we don't *know* them, we know who they are. It's hard not to when it's the same faces we see every day."

"I'm sorry about Grace and Leo," He says quietly and my heart aches a little. Losing Grace is tragic, but losing her infant son too, is completely devastating.

"I can imagine Torin is a mess too."

"He's not himself," He sighs, "Blames himself."

Grace and Leo were involved in a tragic accident caused by a particularly rough storm. Torin had made it to land, but they didn't. Ravenpeak Bay had always and will always be, subject to mother nature. The weather here can change in the blink of an eye, storms batter us weekly but us locals are used to it. Our buildings have protection against the elements and the residents are educated on how to tackle the ever-changing weather.

"It will take time," I say, "Grief will strip a person to their bones, but those layers will build back up."

I let out a breath, the air between us turning somber. The whole town is grieving, but I can only imagine the pain Torin is feeling.

"Two truths and a lie," I clear my throat, pushing down the sorrow that wants to rise to the surface, "It's a game."

"The rules?" Kolt asks.

"I tell you two truths and one lie," I explain, "You have to guess which two are true and which statement is a lie."

"But I don't know you," He says and I turn my face to him at the same time he looks to me.

"That's the fun part," I grin.

The light of the moon casts dramatic shadows across the handsome lines of his face, highlighting the strikingly high cheekbones and sharp jaw line, the darkness of his eyes appearing bottomless in the shadows of the night. "I'll go first," I say, tapping my finger against my lip, the slight breeze teasing the blonde strands of my hair, "I can do the splits, I speak three languages and I love to knit."

"Knitting." He immediately replies.

Laughing, I shake my head, "The three languages is the lie. My mom taught me to knit, and I've been knitting since I was nine. Your turn."

He clears his throat, "I'm adopted, I like to whittle, and I can fly a plane."

My laugh bursts from me, "The plane."

"How did you know?" He chuckles deeply.

"You don't meet many pilots on an island this small."

"I don't live here."

"Still," I shrug. "You whittle wood?"

"My skills with a knife go beyond chopping meat."

"And you're adopted?"

"May as well be," He says gruffly, "The Avery's have been the only thing I've known. I'm an Avery and will always be an Avery."

"Okay," I blow out a breath, "My turn."

The laughter comes so easily for the rest of the night that time becomes a blur. We play until the sky begins to lighten and the rising sun brings dawn.

"Well Kolten Avery," I stand, stretching out my legs, "Now you're no longer a stranger. Perhaps I'll see you tonight."

The golden light of the early morning sun kisses his face, all the hard lines and edges, "Perhaps you will, trouble."

"You don't know how much trouble I could be," I tease.

"Oh, I know," He stands with me, "I'm looking forward to finding out."

## **CHAPTER TWO**



I haven't slept. Not since leaving Vanessa at the docks at the first light of dawn, the golden sun kissing the warm tones of her hair and setting her eyes ablaze.

Fuck she's so pretty. A little sleepy, lids hooded, her clothes crumpled, and hair mused from the sea breeze. She smiled at me, like the little troublemaker she could be, and I'd just about dropped to my knees for her.

Women. I've been around them a lot, parties, galas, events. My clients have daughters and pretty wives, I've run in circles where women are offered on platters and in circles where they rule, and never once have they tempted me the way she does.

And this is a woman I've known barely twenty-four hours.

I couldn't help going to the docks when I spotted her sitting alone out there. I don't even know why I went, just that she was there, and I needed to be too.

I never expected to be there all night, I never expected to be sitting beneath the dark sky, the stars and the sea our only company. This sleepy town wasn't the place for me. I was born in a big city, born into a family that forgot about me, and raised in a place I was never seen, but here, you can't walk down the street without someone seeing you, even if they don't know you, and talking to you. It's like they are invested in you, despite barely knowing you.

I was so used to being unseen. I like my bubble, with Torin and Everett, my brothers, and the father that had picked me, but everyone else...

I don't like people. Most of the time.

But I like Vanessa.

"And where the fuck did you go?" Everett, my youngest brother, stumbles into the kitchen as I'm nursing a coffee and watching the water from the window.

"Out." I grunt my response.

"All night?" He scoffs. "Which unlucky girl did you convince to take you home? There's only so many in this town young enough."

Everett talks shit. All the time. He likes to wind people up; he gets under their skin and gets a kick from their reaction. He's been this way since we were kids, and I was brought into their family. It's harmless, most of the time.

I don't deign him with a response, that's where he gets the thrill and he knows I won't bite, even if he tries. With a grumble, he makes himself a coffee and drops onto the couch, sinking into the cushions.

"Torin?" I ask, referring to our middle brother. He'd just lost his wife and son and out of the three of us, Torin feels the most.

"Sleeping," Everett sighs, "I don't get it."

"Get what?" I ask.

"Why he's so sad."

My eyes close, if emotionally constipated could have a picture, it would be Everett, "His wife and son died, Rett. You can cut him some slack."

But Rett just shrugs, "If ever the day comes when I get that tied up over a woman, just put me out my misery."

I shake my head and turn back to the water, mind conjuring images of Vanessa, first laying in the sand in her pretty black dress, and then to her with her feet skimming the water, face tilted towards the sky.

She was the sun.

I was the moon.

Night and day.

There's no way a woman like her would ever end up with a guy like me.



Sleep had tried to claim me, but I'd fought it, waiting for night to come. Now the sky is turning from blue to violet to black, the stars twinkling against the dark and I take an eager step onto the first wooden plank of the dock. Boats bob on the water, the air warm, crickets chirping in the grass and the sea gently lapping at the shore.

And she's there. Sitting at the end of the dock, her feet dangling in the water as she rests back on her hands. She's in ripped denim shorts tonight, a tight cropped tee that cuts off just above her navel, and her honey blonde hair swishes as the ocean breeze teases it.

"Hello, Kolten," Her voice is as soothing as the ocean, melodic and enticing.

"Trouble," I greet.

"Are we going for a swim tonight?" I hear the amusement in her tone, the teasing, flirtatious lilt that shoots warmth through me.

"How about another game?"

She chuckles lightly, "Grab a beer, Kolt."

I take a bottle from the pack and settle in beside her.

"Shoes off," She huffs, "You know the rules."

Shaking my head, I take off my shoes and socks, shuffling up next to her and let my legs dangle off the edge. The water is cold on the initial contact, but I relax into it and my shoulder brushes hers.

"What did you do today?" She asks.

"I drank coffee," I admit, "And helped Torin with the house."

She swallows audibly, "How is he doing?"

I shrug and grunt, an answer all on its own.

Vanessa tilts her face toward me, "Did you know Grace well?"

I shake my head.

"She was light." Vanessa says, "So pure and pretty. Just so good, you know?"

I remain silent, staring at the side of her face, at the slope of her nose and the plumpness of her lips. Her hair falls down to frame her profile, but she tucks the strands behind her ear which is pierced several times with hoops and studs. Her whiskey-colored eyes glance to me, "Leo was perfect too."

I stare down at my hands which remain lax in my lap, the tips roughened with use and try to figure out what I'm supposed to do with them.

"I hope he heals." Vanessa says eventually.

"He will." I rasp. "With time."

"Time is a bitch." She snaps to herself.

"It's a curse we all have to face."

She turns her face back to the moon, "Riddle me this."

My mouth tugs up at the corner. Another game.

"Two people go to dinner." She starts, "They both order drinks with ice."

"Okay." I answer.

"But both drinks are poisoned. One of them drinks their glass real quick and doesn't die. The other drinks theirs slow and dies. Why?"

I ponder the riddle, replaying each sentence, "The ice."

She whips her head to me.

"The poison is in the ice."

She nods, urging me to go on.

"The one who drank it quick, the ice couldn't melt so she didn't get poisoned but the one who drank it slow was poisoned because the ice melted."

"You're right," She laughs, "Most people look over the ice."

The water gently laps beneath my feet, "I have to look at every detail," I murmur, voice almost drowned by the sound of the tide.

"I can see you as a man who never misses a single detail, even the tiny ones."

She doesn't know how right she is. In this, with her right now and in every minute of my life. She probably doesn't realize I've been counting the freckles on her nose and face, though I'll never be able to get them all, or that she has a small mole above her brow, right at the tip of the arch and another beneath her lip. That her eyes look like they house flames, beautiful amber

flames and she has so many different colors in her hair I wouldn't be able to name.

"Your turn," She says, "Pick a game."

"I'm not very good at picking games, trouble."

"Then what do you do for fun? Other than whittle of course."

"I sleep and I read."

A tinkle of laughter has my face turning toward her, "You sound like an old man, Kolten."

I am older than her, I already know that, by at least ten years. "How old are you?" I blurt.

Her brows shoot up, "Didn't anyone tell you it's rude to ask a lady her age?" Never once in my whole life, "No."

"Clearly," she giggles, "I'm twenty-one."

So, eleven years, I was close.

I don't much care about the age gap.

We sit in each other's company for a few more hours, the night passing by. Sleep is needed but I can't bring myself to be the first one to leave.

"I could sleep here," Vanessa yawns.

"You shouldn't."

She snorts a laugh, "No, really?" She quirks a brow.

"I'll walk you home." I offer.

"No need," We'd taken our feet from the water some time ago, so she just slips her shoes on, "I live five minutes from here."

"It's late and dark."

"And this town is my home," she tells me, "I'll be just fine. Good night, Kolten."

"Good night, Vanessa."

I watch her walk until I can no longer see her, and then I linger some more, holding my breath as if it'll help me hear better, but when five minutes turn to ten and then fifteen and silence remains, I turn back to the house.

I needed to get some sleep, even if my dreams are filled with the woman I'd never be able to call my own.

# CHAPTER THREE



 ${f F}$  or the next night, and the next and then the next I'm with Vanessa. Our meetings are only witnessed by the dark, beneath the starry skies and the moon. We are left alone, in a bubble of our silence until it feels as if we are the only two people in existence.

And with each night I've noticed something new about her. She has a scar on her right knee, it's the shape of a crescent moon, and when I asked her about it, she told me she fell off a skateboard when she was seven and landed badly on a rock. Seven stitches later and she was left with the scar. On the second night I noticed that she touches her nose with the tip of her finger when she's feeling nervous and on the third night, I spotted the tattoo she has at the very top of her thigh.

It was pure luck that I had seen it, her little shorts had ridden up when she had turned to me and crossed her legs beneath her. At a different angle, I would never have seen the constellation inked into her skin. I couldn't get a good look to see which one it was, but the lines were enough to tell me it was one of them.

I didn't ask because I didn't want to make her uncomfortable, but I would. At some point.

Now it's the fourth night, Torin and Rett are drunk again, and I'm sneaking out of the house like a teenager, and not a grown ass man. I was the eldest out of us three too, which just made it all that more ridiculous.

But I didn't need Rett prying into my shit. And I knew how the conversation would end, especially since this stay here on the island would only be for another few weeks, if that.

It's later than I usually meet her when I finally get away, the air a little colder than it had been all week, the sky covered with clouds that stifle the stars, but it doesn't deter me. I looked forward to these hours beneath the dark skies where it was just her and me. I found peace in the silence, found light in the dark and in her. It gave me something I hadn't yet experienced in any other aspect of my life.

### Peace.

Like the world stopped spinning, tragedies stopped happening and it was just us, for a few hours.

I didn't feel weighed down or burdened, didn't feel like the ruthless monster everyone else knows me to be.

I was just Kolten.

I wasn't the abandoned child no one wanted, I wasn't the sought after assassin everyone needed. It was just me.

And I hadn't known I'd needed that.

I'm only ten steps from the house when I hear it.

Shoes on gravel, a scuff of someone trying to move away quickly, the whoosh of a breath. If I hadn't been trained to always be alert, I would have missed it. But mistakes like that means life or death in my line of work. I don't stop to investigate, that would alert whoever it was that I was aware of their presence, and continue my path away from the house. When I'm far enough away that they'll no longer expect me to be a problem for them, I double back, returning down a different path.

But where he didn't hide his presence well, I do. I'm silent on my approach back, body one with the shadows and where I'd grumbled about the clouds stifling the light of the moon and stars, I'm quietly grateful for them now. They hide me, allowing me to come up behind the house.

I find the figure immediately, he's at the side of the house, not even trying to conceal himself with a gun and hands covered in gloves.

Assassin.

I knew this would happen,

You don't leave the organization. Ever. And those who try never make it past a few weeks free. They always die.

Fuck, I'd even been the assassin on the job a few times.

They were coming for Torin.

He publicly left, everyone was talking about it. They thought that last job was his comeback but after Grace and Leo died, he made the statement again that he was never coming back. I'd hoped they would allow it, especially with the circumstance, but my mistake was thinking any of these people had a heart.

He's about to round the corner when I jump him, a hand across the mouth to stifle any screams or grunts. He fights back with a swift punch to my gut which startles me, but I don't release his head as he throws another, and another, his hard punches aimed at my ribs. After the fourth slam of his fist, I feel something crack.

I can't breathe and my grip on him slackens.

He lunges away from me, swinging true at the same time, landing a hit against the side of my face that splits my lip. He goes for his weapon, but I manage to shake out of the fog and tackle him to the ground, his gun scattering across the dry earth, and thumping against the logs stacked in the hold at the side of the house. My hands wrap around his throat as I straddle the motherfucker, pressing down onto his windpipe. He stops trying to hurt me and instead tries to escape. But I was bigger than he was, weighed more and he can't throw me off as I slowly strangle the life out of him.

It feels like forever passes by the time his body stops moving beneath me and his hands fall lifelessly away.

I drop at his side, my breath wheezing from my lungs as my ribs pull and throb. They are at least cracked, if not broken, and I can taste blood from my split lip.

But I can only rest for so long. The body can't stay here.



I dropped him in the middle of the ocean. I *borrowed* Torin's boat, the one that had been neglected in favor of using the newer one which was now destroyed, and took the body out to sea, throwing him overboard far enough away from the island, no one would ever see me do it, and I weighed his body down.

Now I'm on my way back to Ravenpeak, but I don't plan on going back to the usual spot Torin hooks up his boat. The boat creaks and groans beneath me, making me wonder if it's even seaworthy, and head for the dock where I know Vanessa will be. I'm so late. And the last thing I want is for her to think I'm not coming.

The light on the boat shines on her lonely figure, sitting cross legged in our normal spot.

The moment I'm able, I'm out of the boat and closing the gap between us. She stands up, "Kolten?"

"I'm late," I grunt.

Her eyes widen, "You're hurt!" Dainty fingers ghost over the split in my lip without ever touching, "What happened?"

I shake my head and grasp her small fingers in mine, "I'm fine."

"Kolt," She turns her whiskey eyes up, looking up at me from beneath her lashes and genuine concern shines there.

"I'm sorry I'm late."

"Sit," She orders softly.

She grasps my fingers and takes us a few short steps to the edge of the dock, but then she lets my hand go and the loss of it feels as painful as my ribs. She sits and dangles her feet off the edge, waiting expectedly for me to join her.

How quickly can addiction start? I wonder to myself as I gently lower myself down, expertly hiding my pain as my ribs jolt and pull with every move of my body.

Can it begin this quickly?

She turns to me, her eyes falling to the split lip and the dried blood. "Did you get into a fight?" She asks.

I shake my head. It wasn't an answer as such, but a plea for her to drop it. I couldn't tell her. I could never tell her.

She smooths her finger over the sting and my eyes close at the contact of her fingers on my lips. I wanted to know what her mouth would feel like, how she would taste.

Her hand drops but her eyes remain on my mouth. I can almost taste her, can almost feel her.

She leans in, her breath whispering against my lips. But then she shifts and places her hand against my injured side. It's a shock, one I'm unable to stifle and my breath hisses between my teeth.

She jolts back, eyes wide, "There's more!" She gasps, instantly going for the hem of my shirt.

"Vanessa," I try to stop her but she's persistent and drags my tee up, exposing the swollen and quickly bruising skin over my ribs. That motherfucker really did get me good.

It was worth the pain for my brother's life, but the look on her face right now, guts me.

Her hand flies over her mouth to cover her gasp of horror.

If only she knew what I had done. This sympathy and willingness to spend time with me would soon disappear.

"We need to get you to a doctor!"

"I'm fine," I reassure her again, "Nothing I haven't dealt with before."

Her brows pull, putting a little crease between them and despite my better judgement, I can't stop myself from lifting my hand and allowing my thumb to gently smooth out the crease.

"Don't you worry about me, trouble."

"I'm going to let you into a secret," She whispers, "I get attached to people. I always have. And when I get attached, I care. I care that you're hurt right now, Kolten."

"Then perhaps we shouldn't see each other anymore," The words taste foul on my tongue.

"And why would you say that?"

"Because I'm leaving, Vanessa. I don't belong here."

"Then I'll take what I can, now," She leans in again, "Because I'm young. And I'm not staying here either. It'll be our thing until the day comes when you leave, and I leave, and we never see each other again."

"Our thing?"

She's closer than she was before, her lips a mere whisper from mine, I can feel the brush of them against mine, "Our thing, beneath these dark skies, on this dock, while everyone sleeps."

I nod, the move forcing her mouth to shift against mine, the cut on my lip stinging but I don't dare move.

"Just here," I agree.

"Right here." She whispers back.

So, I kiss her.

And it's like the stars become brighter and the ocean gets louder. Like the skies above us envelope around us to seal this in because right now, nothing else matters, nothing else exists. I kiss her like she's breathing life back into me, like she's filling my lungs and feeding my soul.

Her tongue tests my lips, seeking entrance and I open, allowing her in and her taste is like nothing I could have imagined. She's perfection wrapped up in sunshine, she's light in my darkness.

And guilt tries to gnaw at me, guilt for dragging her into my dark but she was the sun to my moon, there was no way I could dim that light.

My hands tangle into her hair, the soft strands catching on the roughened tips of my fingers, and she tilts to let me in.

I kiss her until I can no longer think straight, until I can no longer remember who I am and then I kiss her some more, because nothing has ever felt as right as this.

And then the first light of dawn cuts through our bubble of darkness, chasing away the shadows and I have to let her go.

With her kiss swollen lips and lust filled eyes, I have to watch her leave.

And so, the moon sinks away for another day only to chase the sun, even when it knows it'll never catch up.

## CHAPTER FOUR



here have you been sneaking off to?" Imogen, my sister, corners me in the kitchen of the diner as I'm washing my hands.

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"Every night," She bumps my hip with her own and I scootch up, giving her some space next to me at the sink, "You leave here, and you don't go home."

"And how would you know that?" I glance to her.

"Because I'm your sister and I check," She shrugs.

"I'm revoking your privileges," I tell her, "I gave you access to my doorbell for package purposes only. Not to check when I get home."

"Who else is supposed to make sure you get home safe?"

"When has anything happened here, Imogen?" I laugh.

My sister took on the role of big sister and mom when our parents passed and despite the fact that we are both adults, she can't seem to let go that I can look after myself. She would have me live with her and Shawn, her husband, if she could, just to protect me.

"It's not the point, Ness," She says, "I like to know you're home safe. We

close late and it's dark."

I roll my eyes, "I'm fine. I've just been going for a few walks." It's easy to lie about it, too easy. I didn't want anyone to know about Kolt and our secret meetings down at the docks. It was our thing, our secret. It felt sacred and not to be shared.

It's not like I'm keeping anything important from her, flings happen without anyone knowing all the time. It's not like I'm going to fall in love with the guy. We have made it clear it's only for now, he isn't staying, neither am I, and after this is done it's not like I'll ever see him again anyway.

Even if I'm attached to him right now. I can let him go when the time comes. It's no big deal.

I can care about him; it's all going to be fine.

My lips tingle with the memory of his kiss. He kissed me like we were the only two people to exist on this small island. He owned me irrevocably in that moment, when our hands held on tight, and our mouths crashed in a kiss that had been building over several days of silly games and long hours spent in the dark.

But he'd arrived with a bloodied lip and broken ribs, and the fact that I don't know what happened still sits heavy and sickeningly in my stomach. I just can't imagine something like that happening here, so where was he before he met me out on that dock?

Not my business, I tell myself. This is nothing but fun.

We're friends. That's all. Friends who share earth shattering kisses.

I'm not even going to address the fact that I was completely ready to give my first time to him last night. I can't give a man, at least ten years older than me, who I don't even really know, my V card.

No.

I can't possibly do that.

My eyes flick to Imogen, checking to see if she has an inclination as to what is happening inside my head. Me and my sister are close, she knows I'm a virgin, but she doesn't need to know I'm thinking about giving it to a man I barely know, and has made it clear they aren't sticking around.

I wash my hands a second time, and then wipe them dry on a towel, "We

open in five, see you out front!" I call to my sister, escaping out the swing door. The diner, despite the low population here in Ravenpeak Bay, is always busy. We are the only real bar and restaurant in Ravenpeak Bay, and without much to do here during the evenings, we are always busy.

Tourist season kicked off some weeks ago, so new faces are a constant rotation through the door along with the regulars we can always count on.

At four, I flip the sign on the door and unlock it, and within a few minutes we have our first customer. Reggie, a regular comes and sits himself at the bar. Like clockwork, he orders a whiskey, neat, and a bowl of loaded fries. Was it healthy? No. But he's almost eighty, still has all his teeth and mans a fishing boat like he's still in his twenties, so he's got to be doing something right.

"Coming up, Reg," I tell him, grabbing the bottle and a glass before I put his order through to the kitchen. Imogen and Shawn join me in the bar a few minutes later, ready for the evening rush.

With tourists packing out the place, there is no time to stop and talk, which means there is no time for my sister to question me some more. There is only so much I can take with her interrogation; she knows it too.

The smell of grease and beer saturates my clothes, my hair, and despite washing it before I came to work, it feels greasy. My shoes have started to stick to the floor behind the bar, thanks to the copious amounts of alcohol and soda that has been spilled. It's loud and busy. It's home.

My parents started this diner when they first got together too many years ago to count, and as Imogen and I grew, we started to get involved too. My parents died some years back now, first my mom to cancer and then my dad to a heart attack, and we've looked after the place since. We inherited it, a partnership and for as long as we can remember the Hale's have lived and breathed this place.

But Imogen knows my dream to go and get a degree. I've always been interested in medicine and had applied to go to college. We both know I don't plan to stay.

It's five past eleven when the crowd starts to thin and almost midnight when I lock the door behind the last customer.

I slump into one of the booths, taking a minute to breathe before I'm on my feet again to help clean up, ready to do it all over again tomorrow.



I decide to shower before I head to the docks. I smelled too much like grease and beer and didn't want to subject Kolt to that stench. Once I'm clean, I dress in a pair of leggings and an oversized tee, shoving my blonde hair into a bun since I have no energy to dry it. And then I take a walk down to the docks, the air expelling from my lungs in a rush as the sounds of the ocean reaches my ears. The inky water laps at the shore, the sky clear and speckled with twinkling stars.

The dock is empty when I get there, though I had hoped Kolt would be waiting.

I try not to let disappointment slump my shoulders, the steady thump of my sneakers on the wooden planks joining the sound of the water gently lapping against the shore.

I get to the very end.

And there's someone swimming in the water.

"Kolt?" I call.

"Hi, trouble," He calls back and my stomach does this weird little flop.

"You're swimming."

"It certainly looks that way," He treads water, facing me, "You coming in?"

"I'm not dressed for swimming." I tell him.

"Neither am I," He teases.

Oh. Oh.

Swallowing, I take the hem of my tee, watching him. He seems to home in on where my fingers hook the bottom of my shirt, and he stills, barely moving in the water as I drag it up over my head.

"Are you naked?" I ask, swallowing down the nerves.

I'd been semi-nude in front of guys before, but never completely, and this information is important.

"No, I have boxers on. The water looked too appealing."

I nod, shimmying out of my leggings, slipping them off until I'm left in my mismatched bra and panty set.

"Fuck," I hear Kolt breathe.

"What?"

"You are stunning, trouble. Truly stunning."

Heat blooms in my cheeks as I take a few steps to the end of the dock, "Is it cold?"

"Freezing," He answers.

"Good."

I need it, I think to myself, and then I dive into the water.

Water rushes past my ears and I continue to swim down, silence surrounding me. He wasn't exaggerating, the water is icy, all my muscles contract, my stomach bottoming out and my whole system screams at me. I break for the surface, sucking in a shocked breath as I frantically push at the hair that covers my eyes, and suck in a breath.

But hands are right there, moving the hair, holding me above the water.

"You're okay," Kolten assures, "I've got you."

My legs frantically kick beneath me, my fingers digging into his shoulders as I grip him to keep myself afloat.

"Breathe, Ness," He demands, "Deep breaths, baby."

"That was colder than I expected," I admit.

He chuckles, shifting until he can grab my thighs and then he wraps them around his hips, my arms automatically going around his shoulders.

"Hold on to me," He tells me, "I've got you."

"I never thought I'd get you in the water."

"I was waiting, a swim seemed like a great idea."

"It's cold!"

"It's always cold."

His fingers flex against the flesh on my thighs. "You were late, are you okay?"

"Busy night at the diner," I tell him, "I smelled like beer and oil, I needed a shower."

He smirks, "You mean to tell me you're behind the best burger I've ever had?"

"No, no," I flex my arms, coming in closer, "Just the part-owner of said diner."

He chuckles, "I almost thought you would ditch me after last night."

"After that kiss?" I draw in close, whispering my lips on his, "I'm not sure I could."

A raspy kind of noise leaves his lips, part growl as he says, "I'm glad you feel that way."

"How about another, just to be sure?"

"Another?" He breathes.

I nod and shift impossibly closer, "Kiss me."

His mouth crashes onto mine without question.

Just friends, I tell myself. We are just friends.

## CHAPTER FIVE



Fuck, she's so damn perfect.

I ignore the bite of pain in my ribs holding her is causing, ignore the sting on my mouth in favor of devouring her. She tastes like mint and feels so good in my hands.

Hands that shouldn't be granted such a gift. Hands that have killed and maimed and harmed now hold this ball of absolute sunshine. If I wasn't going to hell before, I am now, because taking something as pure as Vanessa will be my damnation.

But damnation has never looked so good. Or felt this perfect.

I test with my tongue at the seam of her lips, praying she lets me in and when she opens for me, I waste no time getting a further taste of her.

She whimpers into my mouth, her legs tightening around my waist and her nails scratch at the skin on my back. I'm rock fucking hard, my cock aching to be inside of her. But I'll only take what she'll give and follow whatever lead she provides.

When she stripped earlier, like my own little show, I just about lost a few brain cells. Curves I wanted to sink my fingers into tempted me, her body a

temple I was ready to get on my knees and worship to.

Her hips shift, her pussy grinding against my abdominal muscles. I gently guide her with my hands, helping her with the roll of her hips.

She gasps against my mouth and I can't help but grin, nipping at her plump bottom lip.

"Keep going," My voice is a rasp between us, "Take whatever you want, trouble."

"I-" she whimpers, "Fuck, this feels so good."

I bury my face into her neck, inhaling the scent of sea salt and lavender that was her shampoo, keeping her moving against me as I taste her skin with my tongue. She trembles against me, fingers biting where they dig into my shoulders. I want her to fall apart for me, I want to see this beautiful girl shatter.

"Look at you, Ness," I growl against her skin, "Grinding your sweet pussy all over me. Are you going to come?"

She expels a harsh breath, "Yes."

"That's it, give it to me," I coax, "Let me hear you sing."

"Kolt," She moans.

"Fuck," I groan, "My name on your lips..."

"God..." She whimpers, "Yes."

I capture her mouth with mine the moment she detonates against me, swallowing down her moans like they're honey.

Her kisses turn languid, her body relaxing into my arms as she comes down from her orgasm. I squeeze her thighs, the rough tips of my fingers scratching on her soft skin.

"That was..." She whispers with a giggle, burying her face into my shoulder.

"Fucking incredible," I tell her. She shakes her head, giving another nervous little giggle.

"Don't be embarrassed, trouble, if I could watch again and again, watch you fall apart and feel you as you do, I would. I'd let you use whatever part of my body to do so."

She draws away from my neck, "You're serious."

"Deadly."

"I've never done that before," she gently unhooks herself from me and the rush of cold water is like ice on my skin. It makes me want to drag her back to me, keep her there where it feels like she belongs.

Pride swells inside of me that I was the first to have her like that. If I couldn't have any of her other firsts, I got that at least.

"Come on," I start swimming for the rickety ladder at the side of the dock, treading water next to it while I wait for her to swim to me. I guide her up the steps and give her a boost out of the water, watching her as she climbs out. Water sluices down her frame, over the curves of her breasts and ass, down her thighs and I've never felt jealousy towards water before. But here I am, envious that it's on her body and I am not.

I climb out behind her and find her sitting on the docks, shivering as the sea breeze bites against her wet skin.

"It's warm at night," she says through her chattering teeth "but apparently only when you're dry."

"Wait here," I tell her, grabbing my trousers. I pull them on, still wet, which is a struggle on its own, and jog towards Torin's boat, knowing there'll be towels and a blanket on board. I grab them and make haste back to Ness, throwing the towel around her shoulders which she accepts and promptly begins to dry off, her teeth chattering so loud it rivals the ocean. When she's dry, she covers herself with the towel, and I have to pretend I don't know what she's doing under it as she shimmies and fidgets, removing her wet underwear before she slips back into her clothes. She throws her panties and bra to the side, covering them with a towel before she grabs the blanket and pats the space next to her, expectant eyes falling to me.

I sit, the wetness over my legs making me uncomfortable but she doesn't notice it since I hide it so well, and she throws the other half of the blanket over me before her cheek lands on my shoulder and she rests there.

"Not sure friends do what we just did," She whispers.

I really don't like that word.

"Sure, they do," I shrug.

She chuckles lightly, the sound soft and sweet, "So it's a friend's with benefits type of vibe."

"It's a, call me whatever the fuck you want, but do it again kind of vibe." She whips her head to me, "I'm a virgin." The words tumble from her lips, quick and high pitched.

"Okay." My brows knot as I stare down at her face, her eyes wide and startled.

"Shit."

"Ness, breathe," I tap her chin with my knuckle, "I'm not asking nor am I taking something you are not willing to give. Set your boundaries, I will not cross them."

"Okay," She says, "I'm sorry."

"What for?"

She shrugs, "Not being ready for that."

I cluck my tongue, "You don't apologize for that, trouble. Never apologize for that."

"Aren't you disappointed?"

"Disappointed?" I scoff. "I just got to witness you fall apart, all from grinding up against me. I'm not disappointed. Am I going to go home and fuck myself in the shower? Yes, I am. And I'll picture exactly how you looked when I do it. But I'm not disappointed that nothing else will happen. I will take what you give me and nothing more. If it's just time on this dock, then so be it."

"Film it," She whispers.

"What?" I say, unsure I heard her correctly.

"I want to see you do it," Even in the dark, I can see the color bloom on her cheeks, "Show me."

I grab my phone from the pile of clothes, "Put your number in here."



I watched Vanessa walk away and it was painful, to say the least.

And now I'm beneath the spray of the shower, the hot water cascading down my back while my phone records from the vanity, the camera pointing towards me as I pump my shaft with my hand, my grip firm as I picture every minute of our encounter back in the water. I could still feel her grinding

against me, her fingers biting into my flesh.

I hadn't realized just how hard she was doing it until I looked in the mirror and saw the red, crescent shaped welts in my skin.

I play back her needy moans and whispered pleas, my own teeth clamped tight together as I try and draw out my own release, I don't want to waste the fresh memory, don't want to waste the music of her cries.

"Fuck," I groan, head tipping towards the spray as I throw out a hand to steady myself, pleasure shooting through every nerve ending in my body.

"Ness," Her name slips out of my lips, the memory of her so vivid, it's as if we are back in the water, her body on mine, except in this fantasy I'm deep inside her pussy, the warmth of her squeezing every ounce of pleasure from my body.

She'd be tight and wet and inviting, and I'd lose myself in her over and over again as she sings so pretty beneath me.

On a long groan I lose myself to the fantasy, jerking my cock until I can't take anymore, and my knees threaten to buckle.

Expelling a breath, I rest my brow against the hand resting on the tiles, my heart pounding something fierce inside my chest.

Flicking my eyes to the camera, I can't help but let my mouth tug into a smile before it turns to a low chuckle that echoes through the bathroom.

Stepping from the water, I dry my hand on a towel and bring the phone closer, water dripping down my face as I grin into the camera, grin at *her*, "There you go, dirty girl."

And then I shut off the camera, finish up my shower and lock myself in the room I'm using at Torin's house.

The whole house is dark and quiet, sleeping, but that isn't a surprise. It's late and all Torin has done recently is drink and sleep, though I can't blame him.

We are here for him, whenever he is ready to need it.

Dropping onto the mattress, phone in hand, I click open Vanessa's contact and select the video before I send it to her.

The message is read instantly like she's been waiting this whole time for this.

The video itself is relatively long so I'm not expecting a reply anytime soon,

but I keep the screen on, eyes watching for the three little dots that would show her replying.

When they finally appear, I hold a breath and then they disappear almost immediately again before popping up once more.

Fuck, what was I doing? Acting like a damn kid waiting on their crush but do I stop watching? No, the fuck I do not.

I watch and I wait, seeing those dots pop up and disappear a further seven times before I finally get a reply.

My teeth snap shut, eyes unable to move away from the screen. It isn't a message staring back at me, it's her, spread out on a bed covered in pillows and blankets. A long tee covers her frame, and her head is thrown back, face hidden by the copious amounts of cushions but there's no mistaking what she's doing between her legs. While everything is still covered, her hand is beneath the white lacy material of her panties.

A message comes in a second later.

Ness: Fuck, that was hot. I couldn't help myself.

Me: You're killing me, trouble.

Ness: Well before you perish, Kolt, send me another. For the memories.

Me: I'll do you one better, you can watch in person next time.

When the dots appear and disappear like they did before, I wonder if I've taken it too far. She's a virgin and the last thing I want to do is make her uncomfortable.

Ness: Tomorrow night.

Me: See you then. Good night, trouble.

Ness: Good night, Kolt.

# CHAPTER SIX



I sit at the breakfast table at Imogen's house the following morning, my coffee cradled in my hand, my lip between my teeth and my cell burning a hole in my pocket.

That video.

That video.

My stomach knots and thighs ache just thinking about it. Just seeing every glorious naked inch of him, I knew he was fit, muscular but I didn't quite realize just how much. Ropes of muscles that flex and shift, coil and move, veins that snake around thick arms, large hands wrapped around his hard cock.

I swallow down the groan and drain the coffee, wincing at the heat as it hits my tongue.

I'd never done anything like I did last night, not the grinding on him or the video or the photo I sent to him after.

Sure, I'd taken nudes before, but they were just in a folder on my phone, never to see the light of day. But the video inspired me and the next thing I knew, I was setting up the camera and getting in position. It took every ounce

of courage I possessed to click send.

"What are you thinking about?" Imogen asks, dragging me from my thoughts.

"Huh?" I stutter, "What?"

"You're blushing," I look up to find Imogen staring at me, one blond brow quirked, "Isn't she blushing, Shawn?" She asks her husband.

"Definitely a little bit of color there," He teases, leaning on the counter as he watches me over the rim of his own mug.

"Who is he?" Imogen suddenly asks.

"Who?" I mimic an owl.

"The person getting you all flustered at my breakfast table."

Imogen lived in the house we grew up in, the two of us inherited it after they passed and while I loved this place I didn't want to live here forever. I wanted something of my own. Imogen didn't feel the same. She bought me out and now I live at the edge of town, in a small little bungalow nestled into the trees.

Though we always have breakfast together at least twice a week at this very table. The same one we grew up sat around with the worn in pen and scratch marks.

Shawn and Imogen have been together for as long as I can remember, childhood sweethearts that no one could ever separate. I loved Shawn like a brother, but I didn't want him or my sister digging too much into my business. And if I didn't tell them *something*, I knew they would.

"I'm seeing someone, okay?" I roll my neck, trying to chase away the unease, "Don't make a big deal over it, it's just a fun little fling that is never going to last."

"Who is it?" Imogen giggles like a teenage girl getting gossip, "Oo, is it that cute guy I saw you talking to at the diner yesterday!?"

"Huh?"

"You know, a little preppy, in the blue shirt. He's here for a few weeks."

"No."

Imogen deflates, "Then who?"

"It doesn't matter, Immy," I tell her, glancing at the clock. It's almost time to get to the diner to set up for lunch service, so I use it as an excuse. "It won't last. I'll be leaving. He'll be leaving so it's just a little fun. But I gotta get set up for lunch, you still good to cover me from four?"

She purses her lips but drops it, "Sure."

I say my goodbyes to them both and rush out before they can question me anymore, heading towards the diner. I'm almost there when I see him.

Kolten stands across the street at the hiking store with his brother, Everett. Everett is looking at something in the window, but Kolten spotted me at the same time I did him. We'd never seen each other in the day, and it strikes me dumb just how gorgeous he actually is. My eyes widen and cheeks heat so hot, I know I'm glowing red.

Memories swarm back in from the night before, the video playing on repeat, and I can't take it.

I duck into the diner, practically running away from him and as I hear the door click closed behind me, I swear I hear his deep rumble of a chuckle follow me inside.



By four, I've talked myself out and back into this evening at least ten times. It was too soon, I kept telling myself, we couldn't do this, I repeated over and over, we are both leaving and will never see each other again, but it's that last point that just keeps bringing me back.

Why *couldn't* we do this?

The point was that we weren't going to see each other again. This wasn't serious. It was just fun. We were friends that just had...fun.

Imogen arrives at the diner to relieve me of my shift a few minutes after four and while I know she has more questions, I don't stick around for her to ask them.

The air is warm but humid, sticky, causing a sweat to break out across my brow as I walk through town towards my house. It barely takes any time but by the time I'm home, I'm sweating from the humidity.

I grab a shower and change into a blue linen dress and grab my cardigan from the closet before I slip my feet into my sandals. Then I start to pack up a picnic basket, wondering as I stuff items inside, if it's too much.

What if it feels like a date?

Shaking my head, I laugh at myself. If overthinking could have a picture, I would be it right now.

It's dark by the time I make it out of the house, the streets quiet as I walk until I reach the diner which is lively. It's always like that through the spring and summer months, thanks to the tourists. The warmer seasons were the reason this town kept running through fall and winter. It came alive with water sports and hiking.

My footsteps thump on the wooden planks of the dock and to my surprise, I find Kolt already waiting for me at the end.

The moon reflects off the calm water of the bay, the night air warm as stars twinkle brightly above us.

"Hi," I breathe.

"Hello trouble," his voice rumbles through me, stirring butterflies deep in my stomach.

His eyes drop to the picnic basket, "I brought us food," I tell him, "Unless you've eaten," I go in a ramble, "Which you probably have but that's okay. There's wine too and beer. And some cookies..."

"Ness," He takes the basket gently, "Are you okay?"

"Yes?" I squeak in more question than answer.

He chuckles and places the basket at his feet, stepping closer which freezes me in my place. Something feels different, and it isn't a *bad* different, but *different* all the same. My heart gallops like a thousand horses inside my chest, my cheeks heating as he towers over me, looking down until I have to tilt my face up to keep my eyes on his.

He curls a finger under my chin, "It's cute seeing you all flustered, trouble, this pretty blush is making me hard."

I open my mouth to argue that I am, in fact, not blushing, but words die on my tongue. His eyes search my face, "Having second thoughts, Ness?" I shake my head, no.

"Was the video too much for you?"

"No." I breathe.

"Do you still want to watch?"

My thighs press together, "Yes."

"Right here?" He grins, "Where anyone could see?"

"No."

He quirks a brow, waiting.

Right! "I know a spot."

"Lead the way, trouble, you're my tour guide."

"I could lead you right off a cliff," I tell him, matter of fact.

"I'd follow," He vows seriously, "But we're not on a cliff, trouble."

"Right," I laugh awkwardly, "It's just," I point and begin moving, walking back up the dock and onto the sand. I feel him behind me. My dress suddenly feels too tight, the material swishing around my legs and tickling my skin. And fuck, had it just got hotter by like ten degrees?

"Did you wear this pretty dress for me?" He rasps behind me.

I glance over my shoulder, "Yes."

His eyes sparkle in the darkness.

I take us through some trees close to the waters edge and follow a trail that gets thinner and thinner the further you go down. Most don't go past the fallen pine since the branches and rocky earth make it difficult to navigate if you don't know your way past it, but I've been coming to this spot since I was little.

"Watch the rocks," I tell Kolt, too focused on not breaking an ankle or being impaled to forget about the nerves for a few minutes.

"Take my hand," I hear Kolt command gently but I'm already past the harshest part and turn back to find him navigating his way through.

"I'm a local," I tell him, "I could walk this with my eyes closed."

"Mmhmm," He grumbles. It's another five minutes before we spot the opening and I beeline for it, coming out onto the sand, the water lapping gently only five feet away, and to the left of us is the small cave I've grown so fond of over the years.

I pause to grab the torch I put in the basket Kolt is carrying, and shine it into the rocky cave.

The tide often came in far in these parts but I knew the very back edge of the cave was a safe spot. I lead the way and then come to a stop, finding the divot in the wall which tells me we're in the safe zone.

"Here."

Kolt looks around and then back out to the water.

"It's safe," I assure him, "This line is where the water will stop."

I grab the blankets from the basket, placing the torch down to start laying them on the floor. I take a seat and Kolt follows, sitting opposite me.

"No one comes out here," I tell him, "Not anymore."

"So, it's just us?"

"It's just us," I breathe.

"Then come here, trouble," He growls, "I want to see that pretty blush again."

# CHAPTER SEVEN



 $S_{\text{Fuck.}}^{\text{he crawls to me.}}$ 

She *crawls*.

Her cheeks are stained pink, her eyes wide and lips parted, but she comes to me and then straddles my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"There it is," I rasp, brushing my thumb over her cheek, "Look how pretty you are when you blush for me."

"Kiss me," She pleads.

"You don't need to ask with me," I cup her face, thumb moving from her cheek to her bottom lip, pressing down onto the plump flesh, "You don't need to beg. Take, Ness. Take what you need."

Her lips land on mine, arms tightening around me and her tongue plunges into my mouth. I meet her fervor, clutching a fistful of hair so I can manipulate her into a position that allows me in deeper.

I'm rock fucking hard and she's grinding herself all over me, warmth pressing in through the material of my pants, working me up so damn high, I'm actually concerned I'm about to blow in my pants.

She breaks away for air, her thighs spread over my lap, dress bunched up high. I allow my hands to feel up her thighs, watching her flesh yield under my firm grip. "You're so damn perfect."

"Show me." She whispers.

"That's what you want?"

"Yes," Vanessa's eyes drop to the bulge at the front of my pants, and she moves back, landing on her knees to give me space. "Show me."

"The sweetest trouble," I growl, getting to my knees to unbutton my pants, tugging them down. "You sure you want to do this?"

She nods eagerly.

I release my cock, grasping it in my fist, almost buckling with the first pump of my hand as it zips pleasure down my spine.

Groaning, I jerk my hand up and down my shaft, eyes watching her as she watches me.

She presses her thighs together, that blush still staining her cheeks as her fingers twitch as if she wants to help herself.

God, I want her to.

"Don't suffer, trouble," I groan out, "Touch yourself."

Her eyes bounce to me.

"You don't have to show." I struggle with the words as the pleasure of what I'm doing and her watching, strangles me, "Slip your hand up your dress." I instruct, eyes zoning in on her hand as she runs it up her thigh, beneath the dress. "Push your panties to the side." She sucks in a breath as her legs part, the dress dropping down between her thighs, keeping her covered, "And fuck yourself while you watch me."

The sweetest gasp leaves her mouth and I watch the material of her dress move as she moves her hand beneath it.

"Are you wet, Ness?"

"Yes, Kolt."

"Are you imagining it's my cock sinking in deep and not your finger?" She nods.

"You'd take me so well, wouldn't you?" I pump my dick, swiping my thumb over the crown to smear the precum over it, "Stretched open and spread wide, you'd look so pretty with me buried inside of you."

A breath whooshes from her parted lips and her hips roll, riding the hand she has under her dress. Her lashes flutter as her eyes close.

"Look at you, pretty girl," I rasp, fucking my hand faster, harder, "Does it feel good, baby?"

"Yes," She moans her eyes opening a small amount to look at me. "I want to see you come."

"I'm close," I admit.

"Me too," she whispers.

I was damn desperate to see it, to feel it, to taste it, imagining it is enough to tip me over the edge. I groan as I spill onto my hand, dripping onto the gritty floor, and she whimpers, watching my hand draw out every ounce of my pleasure.

Her lips part, body tensing as she follows me over the edge, coming all over her fingers.

For long minutes we stare at each other, my eyes taking in that glow on her skin. She's radiant. I want to possess her, take her, claim her as mine. Her hand rests on her bare thigh, her fingers drenched in her arousal and I just...

I clasp her dainty hand in mine and bring her fingers to my lips, sucking them into my mouth. She gasps as her taste alights on my tongue, so damn sweet for me.



She lays on my chest, dozing quietly as the sun begins to rise outside of the cave, the water a tranquil and soothing sound that tries to lull me to sleep, but I wouldn't be able to bear it, if I missed a single second of this. Her hand rests in the center of my chest, her head pressed in the soft spot between my neck and shoulder.

We ate a little after everything, and talked some more, this comfortable bubble surrounding us and then she got tired, so I let her rest on me some. Before I knew it, she had fallen asleep and I was holding her.

This perfect girl.

Someone who felt all kinds of right and yet I knew I was wrong. Wrong for her, wrong for this. Taking something that I did not deserve.

But until I leave this island, I'm not giving her back. I will continue to take, because that's what I do. I always fucking take.

Time. Lives. Happiness.

I take it. Steal it.

I run a hand down her arm, finger grazing her skin and she mumbles something in her sleep, snuggling in deeper. Her blonde hair fans out behind her, lashes fluttering against the apples of her cheeks.

If I was destined to be alone it was only fair, I got to have this for now.

Gulls shriek as morning breaks, the sound of voices traveling into the cave from the early fishermen heading out onto the water to get the best catches.

"Ness," I gently shake her, disappointed that our time here is coming to an end.

She grumbles.

"Time to wake up, trouble, it's morning."

She stretches out like a sleepy cat, turning onto her back but leaving her head on my shoulder so she's looking at me. A sleepy smile stretches up her mouth, her hair disheveled and adorably messy. "Hi," she rasps, voice etched with sleep.

"Good morning."

"Did you sleep?"

"No, but you did," I grin at her. This floor wasn't exactly comfortable, with grit and rocks biting at my body but she'd had no trouble curling up and getting comfy.

Her cheeks warm, "Sorry."

"I had a pleasant night watching you, Ness, don't apologize."

"You're a strange one, Kolten Avery."

"So, I have been told." Many, many times.

She sits up and stretches some more, trying to tame her hair as well as rubbing beneath her eyes to try and dislodge some of the black smudges left

behind by her mascara.

"I've got to go," she tells me, quietly, "I'm on shift at the diner."

"If I don't get back, I'll get the third degree from Everett," I say, helping her to pack up the things in the cave.

"You haven't told them, have you?" She asks.

"No."

She nods and looks away, checking to make sure we got everything. "Thank you." She says with her back to me, "it's just people are nosy, and they all know I'm leaving and well you're not sticking around, so I'd really like to not be center of everyone's gossip."

"Vanessa, you don't have to explain yourself."

She blows out a breath, "Last night was incredible." I didn't like this tone, "I don't think we should do it again."

"If that's what you want," I force the words out, the taste of them like acid on my tongue.

She mumbles something under her breath before she says louder, "It's for the best."

We walk in silence back towards the dock, using the same path we took the night before and part ways with a quick goodbye.

She doesn't turn back, not once, leaving me to watch after her until I can no longer see her.

She's probably right. Even if it feels wrong.

I walk slowly back towards Torin's house, the docks busy this morning with boats already coming in with the morning's catch, and tourists setting out on the water for a day of sports. It's warm, the sky a clear tranquil blue but a storm brews inside of me.

I'm almost at the house when I'm caught by one of the local fishermen.

"Hey!" He calls over. I turn to see an older gentleman jogging towards me, his hair and beard speckled grey.

"Can I help you?" My tone is flat, unwelcoming and he stops short, cringing a little.

"I wanted to know how Torin was doing," He tugs at the collar of his shirt,

"We haven't seen him in days, not since..."

"He buried his wife and son?" I finish.

"Yeah."

"He's resting and grieving. Is there something I can help with?"

"No, no," He shakes his head, "Just send him our regards."

"Will do." I turn back to the house.

"Oh wait!" He calls, "There is something actually."

"What?"

"Some guys came into town on an early boat, were looking for him."

That piques my interest, "And?"

"Well they looked like the type most want to avoid," He says, "I didn't tell them where he was but they never left town."

"Where did they go?"

"Just into town, I think. Probably asking other locals. If I were them, I'd be in the diner. Everyone goes there."

Dread sinks into the pit of my stomach.

"I'll let Torin know," I lie.

If I have anything to do with it, my brother will never know his life is in danger. And neither will Everett.

I watch the fisherman head back to his boat before I head into the house.

Everything is quiet. Calm.

Coffee brews in the pot in the kitchen and a radio is on somewhere in the house, the sound of music softly playing.

I look for anything out of the ordinary, the house is always spotless, almost sterile so anything out of place will be a red flag, but the house seems as per the norm.

"Everett!" I yell my brother's name.

He appears a moment later, "And just where were you last night?" He grins, wiggling his brows as if he has a clue.

It's his ease that takes me off alert. Everett may be the playful one out of the

three of us, but he is a skilled assassin, one of the best and he didn't have a single worry line on his face.

Whoever had come to town for Torin, hadn't come here.

Not yet at least.

Though they will, I have no doubt about that, but they won't be finding Torin.

They'll be finding me.

# **CHAPTER EIGHT**



I walk through the town casually, hands buried in my pockets but I'm watching. I'm looking for them.

They'll stand out in a town this small.

The organization we work for is ruthless. No one leaves successfully, it's either you stay until you die, or you leave, and you die, though they won't tell you that. It's a rumor that runs through us, whispers in shadows that some people choose to ignore and not believe. I've always been curious but never really investigated it, I should have.

If I had known, I could have prepared better for this.

I cross the street and open the door to the diner, finding it teeming with people, the booths filled, some overflowing and the bar at least two deep, three in some places as everyone tries to get a drink and order food for lunch. The jukebox plays in the corner, but the loudness of the diner overpowers the sound.

Vanessa is working overtime behind the bar, her skin has a sheen of sweat on it and she doesn't pause as she hops from one customer to the next.

She doesn't spot me which I'm glad for, I didn't want to distract her. I'm

trying not to think about her words early this morning, not when the image of her coming apart in front of me is still so fresh in my mind.

I knew it wouldn't last but I hadn't expected it to end so quickly either.

Shaking my head, I push those thoughts away and scan the crowd. It's the usual, families here on holiday with young kids that giggle and squeal in the booths, older couples dressed in hiking gear, their rucksacks on the floor by their feet, getting in a good meal before they set off for their afternoon hikes up the cliffs. There are the locals and some kids and I'm almost certain the people I'm looking for aren't here, until I find a booth in the corner that is currently housing three men.

Two of them watch the diner, but one of them, the one sat between the other two has spotted me.

He looks familiar.

His brow quirks and a knowing smirk pulls on the corner of his mouth as he leans in to say something to the man on his right. Whatever he says is enough for the second guy and then the third to look over to me.

Shit.

Unable to stop myself, I flick my eyes to Vanessa, my gaze snagging on her easy smile as she chats with one of her customers. She laughs and the sound lifts a weight off my chest even if dread and unease swirls like a nauseating pool inside my stomach.

But I realize my mistake the moment my eyes make it back to the group of men at the table. They've followed my eyeline and found her. A weakness will always be used. Exploited.

There is no limit to the deprivation this group of people will go to, no lines they won't cross. While most of us have our own set of rules, our own boundaries, the ones in the inner circle do not. It's why they have their seats. The Farrow's, the heads of the organization, are brutal and downright evil, but the men they choose to sit closest to them are so beyond redemption, I'm unsure hell will even want them.

And I just handed them my weakness.

I had to do something before they took this into their own hands.

I take a few steps towards them, but they get up, closing the distance between

us.

The one in the middle stops in front of me while the younger of the three heads to the bar, waiting as if he isn't the wolf in a flock of sheep and the other, older than the one in front of me stands to the side, hands in his pockets.

"Kolten Avery," The middle man says, "Pleasure to meet you."

"Can't say I know who you are," I grumble.

"Sebastian Levine," He holds out a hand, "Mr. Farrow sends his regards."

"Does he?" I don't take the offered hand which only appears to amuse Sebastian. While I didn't know Sebastian by name, I knew him by reputation. He sits at the right of the current head of Farrow industries. His spot was a stir in the pot, a man not related to the Farrow family in any way sitting as hand was unheard of. There were always two Farrow's at the head.

Not anymore.

Sebastian is younger than I expected though, with dirty blond hair and blue eyes, he stands around six foot two and is dressed impeccably in a blue suit.

"You know the rules, Avery," Sebastian continues, "We know where Torin is, his payment is due."

"Where is it in the contract that the payment for leaving the organization is death?" I ask.

"No one leaves," Sebastian shrugs, "It is the way."

"A word of warning to you, Sebastian," My eyes flick to the other two men, making sure they know my next statement is for them too, "Come near my brother, I'll kill you with my bare hands. No one will ever find you."

Sebastian just grins, "Since we are giving unwanted advice. Get in my way and I'll make sure your pretty girlfriend gets a spot next to you and your brother."

I step into him, my chest pushing into his, "Get the fuck out of this town."

"Say your goodbyes," Sebastian whispers, "Mr. Farrow is allowing you at least that for Torin's exceptional service to the organization."

"Not exceptional enough that he'll let him live."

"There are rules older than this town that must be followed. It is the way."

"Fuck you and fuck the rules. Come near him and I will kill you."

"Twenty-four hours." He taps his watch, "I'll be seeing you, Kolten."

Rage burns through me. I stand in the middle of the diner, the world continuing as if that hadn't just happened. The conversation was quiet enough that no one heard but fuck, it infuriated me that the world keeps fucking spinning.

I glance to the bar where the third man still is, but he's now speaking with Vanessa, smiling and chatting like he wasn't going to be the one to follow through on the order should I get in the way of Torin's murder.

No. There has to be a way to stop this.

## Fuck.

I wait until the man is finished with Vanessa before I head out and I watch him go, a grin on his face that was less friendly and more cruel. Vanessa has spotted me and opens her mouth to speak, her brows drawn low in confusion, but I don't speak with her or even look at her too long.

Disgust that I've just put her in danger doesn't allow me to take pleasure in looking at her, not even for a minute.

The street is empty when I finally get out of the diner, the three men gone off to wherever they've chosen to hide until they are due to finish the job.

The guy I killed had likely been an inner circle member which is why Farrow has sent three of them this time.

Only a short time ago they had wanted Torin in the circle too, now they wanted him gone.

# **CHAPTER NINE**



Y ou ever get the feeling something is inherently wrong? Physically you're fine. Everyone around is fine too. There's no fires, or natural disasters. Everything is normal but deep down there's a churning in your stomach, an unease that spreads through you that's impossible to ignore. A prickle on the scalp, goose bumps that chase over your arms and a sickness with no cause.

I wring my hands on my lap, the sky stifled by thick clouds that bring in a chill which rolls off the waves and tussles my hair.

There are no stars. The moon a blurred silver glow behind the clouds.

Behind me I hear his steps approach, slow and almost hesitant as he comes toward where I am sitting at the end of the dock.

"Hello trouble," he says quietly.

"Are you okay?" I can't stop the words from tumbling out.

I've been wanting to know what was wrong from the moment I spotted him in the diner this afternoon. I've never seen him look like he did today, his brows knotted, mouth set in a grim line while his eyes burned. I wanted to say it was anger, but I didn't know him well enough to read the emotion.

One thing I did realize though, was that I had caught feelings for Kolten. I told myself I wouldn't but how could I not?

And the realization that I had, had made me uneasy. I wanted to shut off my feelings, shut down my heart because I had a sense this was not going to end well.

I guess I knew it this morning. Knew it and ignored it. I told him we shouldn't do what we did again, yet I had the burning desire to give him everything. All my firsts. All my everything.

They would be safe with him.

I knew they would.

Perhaps we could make it work.

And if it didn't, I would be okay. It's not like I'm in love with him.

"I'm fine," He answers after a beat.

"Who were those people?"

"It's not important."

"It looked important."

He lets out a long breath and sits beside me, staring out at the water with his head resting in his hands, his elbows on his knees.

"Kolt?"

"Just be with me," He says so quietly I almost miss the words over the sound of the waves, "Right now. Just be here with me."

"Okay," I breathe, shuffling closer. I place my hand on his leg, "What do you need?"

His arm comes around me and pulls me ever closer before he tuns his face and buries it into my hair.

"How can a woman I've only just met feel like home?"

I open my mouth to speak but words are choked by the emotion that clogs my throat.

"I'm no good, Ness. No good for you."

"We're just friends." I manage to get out, the words tasting like acid.

He chuckles lightly, "Just friends." His hand reaching out to link with mine,

"Then as a friend, Ness, all I need is you right now."

"Okay," I breathe.

So I hold his hand, his holding mine like I'm the rock keeping him grounded in this moment. Unease swirls in my stomach, so heavy I feel sick with it.

This had only just started. It couldn't end yet, we hadn't had enough time.

I know it was just for now, but now was supposed to be longer than this.

We sit in silence for hours, watching the waters beneath the dark skies and when the sun begins to rise, turning the sky a beautiful periwinkle color, his hand releases mine. The clouds from the night before, the ones that threatened a storm, never unleashed a single raindrop.

I wanted to say it was a good sign, a good omen almost, but deep in my gut I knew that wasn't the case.

He doesn't say goodbye to me when we both stand and make our way back. Instead, he looks at me, his shoulders drooped as if he holds the weight of the world on them, and he lifts a hand, tracing a finger across my bottom lip.

"What happened?" I try again.

But he shakes his head, drops his hand and leaves. I'm left watching after him, the sun cresting the horizon, setting the tips of the waves alight in a burst of orange, red and yellow.

Eventually I go home and catch up on some sleep, tossing and turning as I try to piece together the day before. The diner. The men. The way Kolt was when I arrived on the dock. None of it made sense.

And then I tried to talk myself out of caring so much. And the more I fought myself on it, the more sleep eluded me. I just couldn't settle, even though bone deep exhaustion weighed down my body.

I toss onto my back and stare up at the ceiling, blowing out a deep breath before I throw off the sheets and get up. I have work, despite the lack of sleep. I'll just down caffeine like it's going out of fashion. I've worked on less sleep before.

I dress and head to the diner, finding Imogen already there setting up for lunch service.

"You look like shit," She quirks a brow.

"No sleep." I grunt, and head behind the bar. My first order of business is getting the coffee machine on.

"Well then I guess you're much too tired to read this?"

I turn to find her holding a white envelope, the college stamp clear on the front.

My eyes widen as a new riot of butterflies take flight.

"It came this morning," She fans her face with it, "The mailman was very excited to hand it over."

"Give it to me!" I demand.

She chuckles and holds it away from me, "Why so tired, little sister?"

"Stop being nosy, give me my letter!"

She rolls her eyes and laughs again but she hands it over this time. I take no time in ripping it open, unfolding the thick, luxury paper that feels like gold in my hands.

My eyes rush over the words, filling with tears as I take in every word printed onto the page.

"I got in." I whisper. "Immy, I got in."

"Of course, you did," She has her back to me and there's a wobble in her voice, "I never doubted you would."

"Immy." I repeat. "I got in."

"You got in, sweetie," She turns to me, eyes mirroring mine and filled with tears.

"I'm going to college," I say.

She nods.

Granted I was late, by a couple years, but better late than never. I'm going to fucking college. I'm going to be a doctor.

And then I can open a clinic here. This small town desperately needed one, with new staff, and new training.

"You're going to college, Ness."

We share the news with Shawn when he comes in with a new shipment an hour later. There are tears and laughs and a sense of melancholy that lingers

at the edges. I'll be gone for a few years.

But I desperately want to share the news with Kolt. I want to get excited, and laugh, and cry that it is actually happening!

By the end of my shift, I'm ready to meet Kolt again. Despite the unease of last night's meeting, I want to see him.

I change out of my oily smelling clothes and rush down to the docks, taking my usual spot at the end. I'm early so I can catch the sunset since I'll be leaving, and I already know nowhere else will have sunsets quite like the ones in Ravenpeak bay.



I wait in silence for a few hours. The sun has long since set, setting the sky ablaze before the dark velvety night settled in, letting all the stars out. I check my watch, fidgeting a little as the hard planks dig into my thighs as Kolt hasn't shown.

I glance behind me as if he'll arrive any minute now but there is no one here, it's just me and the ocean.

"Don't do this now," I whisper to myself, "Don't make this the end."

But when another hour rolls into two, and the night draws into early morning and he still hasn't shown, I realize he isn't coming.

Disappointment flows through me, the feel of it like a sting on my skin and I climb up, muscles stiff from sitting too long.

My steps echo down the planks and I've never felt so alone.

God, being stood up sucks.

I get to the end and peer toward the dark house in front of the water, unable to help myself but as it turns out, I'm not alone out here.

Three figures stand outside of Torin's house, it's too dark for me to see who but one of them draws my attention more than the others.

Perhaps it's his size, or the way he stands and holds himself, or perhaps it's because over the past few nights, I haven't been able to see anything but him. He's in my orbit, there's no way of ignoring the gravitational pull I feel towards him. If I am correct, Kolt is ahead of the two other figures, standing in front of the door.

There's no light, not even a porch lamp and they're quiet enough their voices don't travel over my way.

It isn't my business. But perhaps these guests are the reason he didn't meet me tonight. He has my number though; he could have text me...

"Hello Vanessa," A voice I don't recognize says from behind me.

I can't even scream before a hand is being pressed over my mouth and cold, hard metal is being forced into my side.

# CHAPTER TEN



**S** he struggles against Sebastian's hold, his hand pressed tightly over her mouth as he holds a gun to her side, just under her ribs. Tears well in her eyes but they don't spill over, instead fear, utter and complete terror, leaks from her gaze as her eyes cling to mine. There's confusion there... How had this happened to her? Here in this safe, little town.

Me.

I put her in danger.

I should have heeded the warning, should have protected her better, but I didn't, and now here we are.

"Let her go," I growl, fingers twitching to reach for my own weapon, but I know that'll only end in tragedy.

"I warned you, Kolten," Sebastian says, "Let us through and we let her go."

The war rages inside of me. I could save her by giving them Torin. But I couldn't do that either.

"You know I can't do that," I say in a low tone, shame forcing my eyes away from Ness's. I didn't want to see the betrayal I was sure would shine in those eyes.

"Cold, Kolten." Sebastian tuts, "she's so pretty too, such a shame to waste."

She struggles in his grip, trying to get free but he just presses the gun in harder, forcing her to stop.

"I'll ask one more time."

"Take me." The words spill from my lips.

Everyone stills, it even feels like the air stops moving and the ocean stops rolling, as if what I've just said will end it all. If my brothers were awake to witness this, they'd kill me themselves.

Doing this is as good as signing my life to the devil.

The inner circle is inescapable.

Death is the only way out. Which happens to be a theme for this organization. I've got to wonder what our father was thinking when he trained us for the life, knowing it would always end bloody.

"Say that again," Sebastian has a grin on his face.

"The Farrow's have always wanted one of the Avery brothers at the table. We have refused. I offer myself in exchange for my brother's life. He has my service and loyalty."

"You understand what that means don't you?" Sebastian drawls as he lifts the gun away from Vanessa's side, and runs the head of the barrel across her cheek, moving her golden hair with it. She whimpers at the feel of it, but her eyes never stray away from mine.

"Leave it all. Leave them all." I repeat what I've heard over and over, and it's one of the reasons me and my brothers never wanted a seat, "Forget the life I had."

"Well, I have to say," Sebastian finally lowers the gun and I loose a breath, "I didn't see that coming. But we can't go and accept on Mr. Farrow's behalf. A deal will need to be made between you and him."

"We'll leave now." I step forward, reaching for Vanessa but he doesn't let her go.

"Tomorrow, Kolten. I don't much like the idea of travelling the sea at night. Six A.M."

I dip my chin in understanding, waiting for what feels like eternity for him to

let Ness go. With a grin, he finally does, giving her a gentle shove towards me. She practically falls into my arms, which I wrap around her, tight enough to keep her upright when her knees are shaking beneath her. Her face buries into my shirt and her shoulders gently shake as the tears she was holding finally come out.

No more words are spoken, the three men leave, only to be gone for a couple hours. At sunrise I'll be saying goodbye.

"Who were they?" Her voice shakes with the question, thick with tears.

"People I work with."

She jerks away from me but not too far, at least she doesn't attempt to escape the cradle of my arms. Her wide, watery eyes stare at my face, searching for answers to questions she's too afraid to ask.

"Dangerous men, Ness. Like me."

"Who are you?" She swallows.

"Someone who has taken what he does not deserve." I lean in and flinch when she turns away from me.

"Let me go."

"Ness..."

"I said, let. Me. Go."

I release my arms and she stumbles back, "Would they have shot me?"

"Yes."

"You would have let them." She accuses.

"It's not that easy, Vanessa. They used you to get to Torin."

"I never want to see you again, Kolten." She whispers, "Everything was a mistake."

Fuck. That stings.

But I nod my understanding.

I expect her to leave immediately but she doesn't. She stares at me, fresh tears now rolling down her cheeks.

"Fuck!" She hisses under her breath.

"Vanessa," I try.

"Don't, Kolt."

"I'm sorry, really I am."

"The fucking fucked up thing is," She growls, cursing like she's only just learned how to cuss. "Is that I don't fucking think it was a mistake. That I don't want to run away when clearly I should!"

"You should." I agree.

"But I can't." Her voice lowers to a whisper that the wind wants to snatch away from me, "I can't fucking leave. Because you're leaving now. You're leaving before we agreed."

"I didn't realize we had an agreement," I tell her, "Just friends."

"Of course, we had an agreement. We were both going to leave. But it wasn't supposed to be yet."

"What did you want from me, Ness?" I ask her softly, "I can't give you what someone else can. There is no happily ever after for us, and there certainly isn't going to be one now. I'm no good, trouble."

"I don't know what I wanted," She tells me, "But I didn't expect it to hurt this bad."

"Go home," I say gently. "Don't think about me again."

She suddenly lunges forward, her arms coming around my neck as her mouth lands on mine. I hold her and kiss her back, pushing everything I do have to give her into the kiss. But too soon it's over and there's a space between us that will never close.

"Goodbye Kolt." She says.

I reach into my pocket, fingers running over the rough wooden trinket I have in there. Something I had made for her but hadn't yet given to her. I couldn't now. She didn't need the sour reminder of me.

"Goodbye, trouble."



The sun is cresting the horizon when I climb onto the boat, the sky a beautiful dusty blue that just serves as a reminder of her. I'm not entirely sure I'll ever enjoy the night sky again or watch a sunrise without being haunted by her memory.

I've always preferred the night but now it felt like my nights and the love for them will stay here, even when I'm not.

I didn't say goodbye to my brothers. They wouldn't allow me to go and it's best this way. To save Torin, like the Avery family saved me, I would do this.

I turn back to the island before we travel past the cliff's edge which gives this town its name, shaped like a raven, it overlooks the small little town like a mighty god, and I swear I can see a figure waiting on the dock. One with long hair that flows in the wind.

"This is why we don't get attached," Sebastian says to me, eyes on the figure too. Not a figment of my imagination after all, "It makes us weak. Makes us do stupid things."

"Shut the fuck up, Sebastian." I grumble.

He chuckles, settling back in the chair while one of the men drives, "It might be for nought yet," He continues, "Farrow might not favor your bargain. You know how the Farrow's are, they hate people leaving the game, and I'm not even sure your deal will be enough to save them."

"We'll see," I grumble.

If he didn't accept, I'd have to go down swinging. I'd lose but at least I'd take some of them with me before they raised hell on my family.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



*Eighteen months later...* 

**Y** es!" I grumble, rolling over in bed, "I'm coming! You're not going to starve!"

The angry meows coming from the side of the bed suggest otherwise. I often question my decision-making skills, right now being one of those times. But in my defense the cat kept coming back. Every day he was there. On my doorstep.

I'd somehow found the cat distribution system because this one, the orange and black tabby currently weaving between my legs as I place my feet on the floor, has chosen me.

But god, he is loud. If I was even a minute past the feeding schedule, he'll scream.

Half dozed, I trudge through the apartment, feet slapping on the hard wood floors as I make my way to the kitchen where his food bowls are.

As much as I grumble about the cat, I still had his name, Pumpkin – don't judge me, it was Halloween and he was sitting next to a pumpkin! – delicately printed onto his food and water bowls. Grabbing his food, I empty

it into his bowl and place it on the floor for him before I make myself coffee.

I didn't have classes today, but I had a killer assignment to complete for next week and I wasn't even halfway finished yet, so I'd planned on doing that today.

I've officially been in college for nine months now. It was hard leaving the island. Hard saying goodbye to my sister and brother-in-law, hard seeing Ruthie wave me goodbye but it was also hard seeing those docks everyday knowing he wasn't there.

He was gone.

Vanished.

My texts went unread and unanswered, though I knew the number was still in use – I called a couple times or maybe a couple hundred times – but he never answered. I'd found myself hovering over the delete button on his number more times than I could count but I could never bring myself to do it.

He was a dangerous man, he told me that, I *witnessed* it, yet I still have this strange obsession with him. Like an itch in my skin I can't scratch.

And it was affecting everything.

I was still a virgin. Imagine that, now almost twenty-three, late to college which makes me so much older than my classmates, which is embarrassing anyway, and still a virgin. Not that anyone knows that.

I have friends but I would never tell them.

Cradling my coffee I lean against the counter, watching Pumpkin as he happily eats his food. I wasn't staying in any student accommodation and didn't share, Imogen and Shawn helped me pay for this one bed apartment a block away from campus, while I worked part time down at the bar to pay the rest of the rent and my bills. It's hard, doing it all, but worth it.

I maintained some of my independence this way while satisfying my sisters' need to mother me, which I'll forever be grateful for.

I head back through to the living room after I brush my teeth and tackle my hair into a bun, grabbing my laptop to continue the assignment. I'm on shift tonight at the bar so wouldn't be able to do it this evening, even though I've always much preferred doing my school work at night.

I wasn't, however, looking forward to seeing all the college kids. There's a

game tonight and the bar always gets crowded on game nights, but it wasn't that that made me nervous. There's a guy and damn, he's been nagging me for a date. No wasn't good enough of an answer for him and he corners me whenever he catches me out from behind the bar. He's on the team so there's no doubt I'll be cornered at least once tonight.

I haven't dated once since coming to college, I've maintained my no men rule, especially since every man I've met has been weighed up against Kolten, and they all fall short. They're not tall enough, not dark enough, they don't laugh like he does — this deep chuckle that rumbles through my bones in a way that settles into my soul. They don't look at me the same way, their hands are too soft or too hard, their eyes too blue or too brown.

They aren't him.

Which is ridiculous.

It's been almost two damn years since I stood on that dock and watched his boat head for the horizon. So many months have passed since I last saw his face or felt his mouth on mine, and yet I still think of him as if I saw him yesterday.

We didn't even sleep together!

Rolling my eyes at myself, I slam my laptop shut, my focus now everywhere else but my assignment and decide to take a shower, getting ready a little early for work since I had nothing else to do and couldn't focus on anything else.

Dressed in jeans and my bar polo, I slip my feet into my docs and put some treats down for Pumpkin before I head out. It's evening now anyway but my shift doesn't start for another hour, though I'm sure they'll appreciate my help anyway.



My feet stick to the floor behind the bar as I move from one customer to the next, pouring beer and shots for them as they scream and holler, zealous after the win the team had tonight. Cheerleaders dance on the tabletops, and cups lay scattered across the floor. The staff have long since given up collecting them and I'm so grateful that we switched to plastic cups earlier in the evening. Cleaning up glass in a crowd like this is not the way to go.

Music blasts loud enough to vibrate my eardrums, and I've taken to lip

reading to take orders, since I can barely hear myself think, let alone hear someone talking to me.

Swiping the card for the customer, I hand it back and move to the next, taking the order. It' only midnight and close isn't for another three hours. I'm sticky with sweat and alcohol, and my clothes are damp, but I don't stop, and I smile like I'm having as good of a time as everyone else in this place.

"Hello gorgeous!" A cringe runs down my spine when I see Patrick shouting at me over the bar. He could be the poster boy for entitled, rich kids, with his varsity jacket and slicked hair that literally shines in the dim lighting. His teeth are gleaming and he's clean shaven. He's the type of guy who believes himself a god and that women should be grateful just to be in his presence.

In total, he's a prick. But I'm too nice to tell him to fuck off directly. I doubted he'd take the hint even if I did. How many times can a girl say no before he'll get that they're not interested? I've lost count of how many 'no's' I've given him.

"Hello," I grumble, "What can I get you?"

"You know my order," He winks.

Gag.

"No, I don't," I yell back, "What can I get you?"

"Jack," The smile drops as irritation flashes because I'm not entertaining him, "Exactly three cubes of ice."

I stifle my eye roll and pour him the drink, dropping in the ice before I hand it over and take the cash he hands me, "One for yourself too." He winks again.

"I'm good."

I hand him his change and move on, but he follows, talking over the customer I'm trying to serve, "There's a party later. Come with me."

I barely catch the order I'm given but I manage and turn to make it, ignoring Patrick.

"Vanessa, baby," He yells, leaning further over the bar, "You hear me?"

"I'm not going to a party."

"Come on," He pouts, "You gotta stop playing hard to get, I know you like

me."

"No, really I don't," I hand the drink over to the guys next to him, and they throw some serious side eye at him which makes me smile. Desperation never looks good on anyone.

"Just let me show you how good we could be."

"Patrick, I'm busy." I tell him, "Please stop."

"Later then?"

"No."

He continues to talk at me but after several minutes of pretending I can't hear him and his irritating begging, he gives up. Though it won't be that easy. He'll be back, he always is.

I go through the next two hours as busy as ever until the bar starts to empty out, the college kids disappearing to the party Patrick had mentioned before.

He's still here though with some of his friends. They're all so drunk they can barely sit up straight, their laughter obnoxiously loud now the music has been turned down for the last hour.

With it quieter, we start to close, getting the floors clean and the glasses into the washer. I start my way back to the bar with a tray full of cups only to be stopped in my tracks. Patrick is the same height as me, so I have his face right in front of mine. His whiskey breath is nauseating, and I can smell the sweat on him.

"Excuse me," I say politely.

His hand lands on my hip, "Come on," He slurs, "Come home with me." "No."

His face contorts into anger, but he smooths out the lines almost immediately, "Stop being a tease. You wore these jeans for me, didn't you? You know how much I like you in them. Your ass looks so fucking good." He groans.

"Get off me," I tell him, "I have work to do."

"I'll wait for you."

"I'm good."

I manage to get away from him and head back behind the bar where it's safer. The lights are brightened, and the bouncer calls out close in five minutes and

I've never felt so damn relieved in my whole life.

Scanning the bar, I check how many are left inside. They're slowly exiting but right in the corner there's a lone guy. He's just sitting there, unmoving, shrouded in shadow.

And there's something so familiar about him that awareness runs down my spine. It's likely someone from class but I can't help but feel like it's more than that.

He's purposely angled to keep himself out of the light of the bar but it's like I can feel him watching me.

There's a tugging in the pit of my stomach that's urging me to go over, to see and I'm about to do just that when Patrick steps back in front of me.

"That's enough," I growl at Patrick, "I am not interested."

He opens his mouth to speak but I'm saved from whatever he's about to say by the bouncer who comes over and escorts him out, never even saying a word.

It's odd but I don't look into it too hard as my eyes go back to the dark corner.

But it's empty now.

A strange sense of loss settles into my bones, like I'm grieving something I've never even had.

And that just reminds me of Kolt and all the things we didn't have too.

# **CHAPTER TWELVE**



" G et home safe, girl," Kiera, one of the girls I work with, calls as I head out the door.

"You too!" I shout back. I tuck my coat closer as I head out into the early morning chill. It wasn't a long walk home; I've done it so many times at this hour of the morning that I'm used to it now. It's quiet, peaceful. The night sky here doesn't have the same effect as it does back at home on the island, the stars are stifled by all the light pollution and even the moon, despite how fat and round it is, looks dull.

I don't enjoy my nights nearly as much anymore.

My footsteps are loud in the otherwise quiet streets, echoing down the roads as the wind rustles the leaves in the trees.

I'm almost home when a second set of steps joins mine.

I don't stop but I do check behind me, glancing over my shoulder to see the figure following me. His steps are wobbly, stumbling to the left and right and I already know who it is.

Fuck.

"Vanesssaaaaaaa," He calls my name, dragging out the sound with his slur.

I quicken my step and dig into my pocket for my phone, pulling it out only to find it out of charge. Double fuck.

But then Patrick starts to run toward me, and even in his drunken state, he's quick. Fear propels my legs to move, and I take off in a sprint, pumping my legs as fast as they can go. But he's still quicker.

His arms circle my waist, and he yanks me back hard enough, my phone drops from my hand and the screen smashes on the pavement. "Where you going, gorgeous?" He slurs into my ear, his alcohol breath almost making me gag.

"Get off me," I try to stay calm, "You're drunk, you don't want to do this."

"Oh, I do." He drawls, "I've wanted to all fucking semester. But you're being a little cock tease and keeping it from me."

"Patrick," I claw at his wrists, trying to get him off me but it doesn't work.

"So, I'm just going to take," He whispers. "It's mine anyway."

"Get off me!" I cry loudly, "Help! Someone help me!"

I throw my weight around, stamping on his feet with the heels of mine and try to headbutt him, but he doesn't let go. He throws me toward the bank at the edge of the sidewalk, using his weight to push me down into the wet grass.

"Get off me!" I scream. "Help me!"

"Shut the fuck up," He growls, "Fuck, I've wanted you for so damn long."

"Please," I beg, "Please don't do this."

I feel so damn powerless. Before I left the island, Imogen begged me to get a safety kit, mace, a taser, I'd said yes to appease her, but never did get anything. I regret that decision now.

Patrick's hands fall to the edge of my top, tugging it but I manage to keep it down, fighting him every second to try and stop this.

This couldn't be happening. I needed this to stop.

Fear and sickness rolls through me, but no matter how much I kick and scream and fight, he continues to push and pull and yank. I can feel my skin being grazed and cut up by the rocks in the dirt, can feel my thighs bruising from where he is pressing them down with his knees and his weight.

"Get off me!" I scream uselessly, digging my nails into him hard enough I feel the wetness of his blood run down my fingers.

"You'll like it," He tells me, "Just fucking stop fighting!"

"Get-"

My words are cut off as Patrick yells out as he is suddenly yanked off me. He lands on his back and a man moves in quick, throwing one punch, then two, then three, his fist striking Patrick true, connecting with his face. I can hear bones cracking with every hit, see the blood as it covers the man's bare knuckles.

I'm so frozen it takes me a second to see Patrick is no longer moving.

"You'll kill him!" I lunge forward, wrapping my arms around his to stop his next punch.

My eyes finally see his face and I swear the whole damn world stops moving. "Kolten?"

Kolt stops, releasing the hand that was tangled up in the front of Patrick's shirt and straightens up, dark eyes bouncing around my face before his expression softens and he says on a whisper, "Hello trouble."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



I shouldn't have come. Which is what I say every time I do. It's always this is the last time but then I'm here once again. Watching her, taking in her pretty face, seeing her sunshine smile but I hide from her. I never let her see me.

Which is why I'm in this booth. It's dark, cloaked in shadows which keeps me hidden from her, but I can see her clearly. Her cheeks are flushed with heat, the fine hair around her temples dampened with sweat, and the smile on her face is as fake as they come.

I've seen her smile. I've seen the beauty of it, the light and that one on her face? That's more grimace than anything else.

Going to her is an itch under my skin but this is as close to her as I'll allow. Even when I see another guy getting too close, even when she's clearly not interested but he persists.

My hands fist on the top of the table, nails digging into the palms of my hands. It's not the first time she's been asked out while I've been watching but she's never said yes. And it gives me far too much satisfaction to know she's still single.

The guy is drunk, handsy but she keeps him away and protects herself but still, it takes everything in me not to throw him through a damn window.

I stay in my booth, my eyes never straying from her and it's near close when she finally looks in my direction. Fuck, I miss her.

Is that even normal?

To be this damn obsessed?

She stares toward me, confusion tugging down her brows as she tries and fails to see me properly but it's while she's focused on me, the fucker takes advantage again.

And he goes too far.

I can't risk her seeing me, not when it puts her in danger. I have rules to follow now that I'm in Farrow's inner circle, rules that forbid me from having contact with my past. I didn't much care what it would do to me, but if they find out, my punishment would be their pain. And I was never going to risk Nessa. Not again.

Slipping out of the booth I head to the bouncer on the door, the fucker isn't even watching what's happening in the bar, instead he's getting handsy with a college kid.

Anger pulsates through me as I grab him and forcibly tug him toward me.

"Get in there," I growl "And fucking protect your staff!"

Rage fills his face, "And who the fuck are you!?"

"You either get in there," I step in close, "And get him off of her, or you'll be eating through a tube for the rest of your life, do you understand me?"

He wants to fight me, I see the war on his face but ultimately, he backs down, turning to where I point. He doesn't say a thing as he escorts the drunk guy out the bar and away from Vanessa, and with him gone, and not allowed back in, I decide to leave. She would have eventually come to me and if she was close, I wouldn't have been able to control myself.

My Tesla sits at the back of the lot, and though I go to it, I don't leave. Not until the lights start to turn off one by one and the staff start to leave. There's a chill in the air but it's quiet and practically deserted. I see Vanessa leave, waving goodbye to whoever is left inside, and my hands grip the wheel. It'll be nothing to follow her. I know where she lives, where she studies. I have

her class schedule, and her work schedule. I always know where she is.

It's physically impossible for me not to know. She's a drug I can't get clean from.

I stay rooted to the spot, watching her as she walks away from the bar and disappears around a corner, and I continue to fight myself.

But I have to wonder.

What would she do if she saw me?

Get mad? Be happy?

Would she kiss me? Hit me?

The goodbye we shared was so abrupt and painful, I've wondered if she's had time to think and realized I am no good.

She texted me a lot the first few weeks we were apart, I read them and never replied. But she continued to text until one day they stopped.

Was it then she realized she was better off without me?

This is the last time, I tell myself on a sigh. I can't keep sneaking off to see her. If I get caught...

Just one more look.

Just one more time.

I start the engine and pull out of the lot, taking the streets slow in case she's still walking.

But it's just up ahead that I see two people. A man is pinning a woman to the ground, and she is fighting him, her screams so loud I hear them even this far away in my car.

The shrill scream turns my blood cold, and the flash of blonde hair has my stomach churning.

I press my foot down, speeding up as I head toward them and brake suddenly, coming to an abrupt stop.

They don't see or hear me, too focused on themselves which makes it easy for me to grab him.

He would have raped her.

The rage I feel is nothing like I've ever felt. It burns hot and violently, fueling

my fists as I pound them into his face, over and over again, hearing and feeling his bones crunch and skin split.

Blood warms the skin of my knuckles, a mixture of mine and his, and his weight is heavy as I hold him up, continuing to pound into him even though he has long gone unconscious.

If I continued, they'd be scraping him off the sidewalk. But I can't stop.

He was going to rape her.

She screamed.

She pleaded.

No one came but me.

He would have raped her.

I replay the sentence in my head.

Repeatedly.

"You'll kill him!" Arms wrap around my arm on the upswing, stopping my forward motion and I turn, finally seeing her face up close for the first time in too long.

She's even prettier than I remember. Gold flecks swim in the depths of the brown in her eyes, like stars in the night sky, the color of whiskey and fire. I would have counted the freckles that dot her nose if I could have, and traced her lips with my fingers until I could remember the shape of them with my eyes closed.

"Kolten?" She gasps, tears swimming in her eyes.

I drop the guy onto the pavement, straightening myself until I'm looking down on her as she searches my face. I feel everything in me soften, the tension leaving me as I truly look upon her face, inhale her scent, feel her hands on my body.

"Hello trouble," I say on a breath.

For seconds, silence settles between us, until finally, "You're here."

I nod.

She blinks a few times and then looks up and down the street before her eyes settle on the very beaten body on the sidewalk. Fresh anger makes me want to beat him some more.

"Is he alive?"

"For now."

She jumps away from me, "We need to call an ambulance!" She cries.

"He tried to rape you, Nessa. He doesn't deserve your pity."

She swallows.

On a sigh, I dial my guys, relaying our location and the need for cleanup the moment they answer. They'll dump him at the hospital and scrub all footage of my involvement. And hers.

"Get in the car," I order her gently.

She shakes her head frantically, "You can't be here."

"I'm here, trouble."

"You were at the bar."

A nod confirms her suspicions.

"Do you do that a lot?"

"For the past eighteen months," I contemplate, "Yes."

"We said goodbye, Kolt."

"You did." I agree. "I couldn't."

"You never answered my texts."

"Because you're better off if I didn't."

"Kolt," She steps closer, but I step away.

"Get in the car."

I walk that way, hearing her take steps to follow and open the passenger door for her to climb in. I don't wait for my guys to arrive; I know they'll show and deal with the mess. Vanessa remains quiet in the passenger seat, her hands lodged between her legs and her face pointing forward, the blank expression and watery eyes a tell to her emotions.

It would be better if she hated me, fought me, and told me to leave. For both of us.

I never expected to become so attached to her. Like our strings are tied and without her, I simply cannot survive. She is everything I need and can't have.

I pull up to the apartment building she lives in and climb out, going around to her side even though she's already opened the door and got out herself.

"I'm sure I should be concerned you know where I live."

"You aren't?"

She shakes her head, the chilly breeze teasing the blonde strands of her hair, "No. I'm kind of relieved."

"And why's that, trouble?" I ask, watching as she begins to head for the door to her apartment building.

She pauses and glances back to me, "Because it means you've thought about me, as much as I've thought about you."

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN



I can still feel my body trembling, the adrenaline from the attack wearing off. Part of me believes I'm hallucinating, like Kolten can't really be here. He didn't beat Patrick half to death on the sidewalk and he didn't rescue me.

Part of me believes I'm still there, on that sidewalk.

The door clicks closed, and I *feel* his presence. Feel him in every aspect of my being. There were things I probably needed to do, call the cops, call an ambulance? Wait, Kolt said he was handling that, but I should probably still call the cops, right?

But then wouldn't that put Kolt at risk?

"What are you thinking?" His deep rumble of a voice vibrates through me, and a shiver runs down my spine. My head is a jumbled mess of emotion, I wanted to cry, be angry, cry some more and soak in the tub. I wanted to scream at him and hug him all in the same second.

I wanted to feel something other than this crushing numbness that was seizing me from my chest and spreading out.

Patrick tried to rape me. And even though I say the sentence repeatedly inside my head, replay it over and over like some sick tape stuck on repeat, I can't

seem to attach myself to it. Like it wasn't really me being crushed under his weight, it wasn't my skin being scratched up by the grit and dirt and rocks on the ground.

"You're bleeding," Kolt's in front of me in a flash, I hadn't even heard him or seen him move but he's in front of me, on his knees, hands gently tugging at the bottom of my pants, trying to get the leg up to where blood is seeping through my jeans.

I didn't feel it, the blood or the pain.

"Your hair is longer," I mumble, unable to stop my hand as I reach forward and let the tips of my fingers run through the thick brown mane of hair. It was so much longer than when I last saw him, he's grown out the shortened sides and it now sits about halfway down his neck, the ends curling up slightly.

"I can't get to your knee, trouble," he says, looking up at me from beneath his lashes.

The year apart has made me forget just how handsome he is, with his night dark eyes and straight, strong nose. His stubble is thicker too, groomed and trimmed and I had to wonder if it would feel different to be kissed by him now. A silver hoop still dangles from his ear, and I drop my eyes to the hands still tugging at my pant leg to see several rings adorning his fingers, thick bands that just look good on his long fingers.

"Your leg," he urges.

"Right," I drop my hands, "Give me a second."

I turn to the bathroom and shut the door behind me, breathing in slow and steady to try and keep calm as I strip out of my ruined clothes. Dirt cakes to the denim but I get them off, along with my sweater and grab my robe to cover myself.

My knee is an absolute mess. The skin torn and seeping blood that runs down my shin like a crimson river. Okay and now it hurts. It was just fine until I saw the state of it.

There's a huge chunk taken out of my knee and then grazed skin all around it and I must've landed on a rock or something in the fight with Patrick. My palms are grazed and there's sore patches on my back too.

Fuck.

That adrenaline was doing great at masking all this shit.

I grab a wad of tissue to mop up some of the blood and then hobble out of the bathroom with it pressed to my knee. I didn't want to get blood all over my floor and my first aid kit was in the kitchen!

"Ness," Kolt's voice makes me pause. "Sit." He orders when I turn to look at him.

I almost drop right there and then, right onto my ass in the middle of my floor but I'm grateful my brain is able to keep up, because he's pointing to the chair he's pulled out from my tiny dining table.

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"I can..."
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I plop down into the chair, wincing with all the sore spots.

"Where else do you hurt?"

"I'm okay," I try.

"Where else?"

"My hands," I show him my palms, they were just scratched up with tiny beads of blood that really weren't much of a concern, "And my back, mainly at the bottom. I think I landed on something or he uh, pushed me down too hard."

There's something weirdly hypnotic about watching a man clench his jaw. Kolt's jaw twitches as he grinds his teeth, the muscle jumping as he focuses on the cut on my knee. He pulls supplies from the box, but the first spray of the antiseptic has me jumping in my seat.

"Motherfucker!" I yell.

"Easy," He grumbles, his hand curling around the top of my thigh to keep me seated.

"Easy!?" I growl, "That hurts!"

"I know, baby, but stay still so I can see the damage."

He gently swipes over the wound, the white cloth coming away redder and redder with each wipe. "It's not too deep," he says quietly, continuing his cleanup of the site before he pats it dry and gets a large white band aid from

<sup>&</sup>quot;Sit."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Yes sir," I grumble.

the box.

"I'm a little old to have band aids on scuffed knees."

"Why would you be too old?" He asks, expertly applying the dressing before he gets a new wipe and starts to clean up my hands.

I shrug, "Just something I didn't think I'd ever need again."

"Becoming an adult doesn't automatically mean you won't cut your knees," A small grin is pulling on his mouth, the anger from before seeping away, "It just tends to be carpet burn over grazes."

My mouth drops open.

He chuckles, "Turn around, let me check your back."

"I'm not wearing anything," I tell him.

For a quick second something flashes in his eyes but he masks it and quirks a brow, waiting for me to do as he has asked.

I stand and turn, pulling the robe off my shoulders and hold it just above my ass to keep myself covered from my hips down. I still have a bra on, so it isn't like I'm fully nude.

The first touch of his fingers to my back makes me jump, the rough tips of them a shock even though I can clearly see the callouses that harden his fingertips.

"This is just a little red," He says in a note just above a whisper, his tone a rasp that scrapes along my insides in the most delicious way, "It might bruise a little but there isn't anything I can do to make it feel better."

"It's okay," I say, holding very, very still while his hand continues to move over my skin, the touch like the flutter of a butterfly wing.

"I should have killed him," The words are said so quietly I almost miss them but, in every note, they hit true. If I hadn't stopped him, he would have killed Patrick.

So why am I not afraid of him?

"He'll never come near you again," He vows, "Ever. I promise you."

"What are you going to do? Kill him?" I shake my head.

"I want to," He helps push my robe back on and takes a step back, putting space between us, "I want to bury him for even thinking about taking

something you are not willing to give. He would have hurt you, Vanessa."

"But he didn't."

"He did hurt you!" He growls, "The bloody knee and scraped hands are evidence of that."

"But you stopped him." I tell him. "He didn't get to take it."

His eyes fall closed, "He won't come near you again."

"I believe you."

"You should rest," He tells me, "I should go."

"No!" I lunge forward, "No not yet."

"Trouble," He groans as if in pain, "I have to go."

"Just stay until I fall asleep?" I ask, my vulnerability making my throat burn. His dark eyes flick around my face, "Please."

His chin dips in the barest of nods and for the first time in almost two years, I take his hand in mine. Nothing had ever felt quite as right like his hand engulfing mine, so much bigger than me, and strong yet safe and warm. Kolt isn't a man that's safe, but I knew with him I would never be in danger.

His body towers over mine as we head to the bedroom. I needed to shower but I was too afraid that if I left the room, he'll disappear so I take him straight for the bed. He holds so still, like he's afraid as I gently push him down onto the mattress and then climb in beside him. The lights are still on, but I didn't mind, not when I can stare at his face. He watches me back, committing my face to his memory.

"I like it long," I gently lift my hand to his hair again, curling one of the long strands around my finger, "It suits you."

"Shh, trouble," He whispers, "Go to sleep."

"But when I wake, you'll be gone."

He nods.

"And I won't see you again."

He shakes his head.

The sting of tears burns my nose and throat, "I don't understand how I miss you so much."

Kolt slowly places his fingers around my wrist, lowering it until it's between us, and his hand is covering mine, then he looks away, down to our joined fingers and doesn't say another word.

And try as I might, the claiming of sleep is too hard to fight. I am exhausted, from the shift at the bar, to the attack on the street and the emotional overload still rioting inside of me. Unable to stop it, I fall asleep.

And when I wake up the following morning, I'm alone in the bed.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN



**S** he sleeps so peacefully, so elegantly, her long blonde hair pooled behind her head, her lashes fluttering against the apples of her cheeks. I trace the slope of her nose with my finger, the cupid bow of her upper lip and the plump bottom one. I count her freckles, the pain of leaving becoming a physical thing inside of me.

But before the sun breaks, I get out of her bed and tuck her in, turning out the light before I go. There's a chill in the air as I walk to my car and hit the dial button the moment I'm able.

"Did clean up go okay?" I ask.

"Yes sir, he is in the hospital."

Somewhere he didn't belong. "Room number and wing?"

I type down the details in my cell and hang up the phone, inputting the location of the hospital into my GPS. The roads are quiet as I make my way there, the hospital too with empty halls and minimal staff that pay me no attention as I walk through the building. I take the elevator to the fifth floor, finding Patrick far too cozy in a private room. He's a mess of blood and bruises against the stark white sheets, but still, even seeing him in this state is

not enough of a punishment for him.

He shifts on the bed and whimpers like a little bitch, reaching for the remote and the call button. He hasn't spotted me yet and no nurses will be coming to his aid.

I snatch the remote away and stand in his eyeline. "Hello Patrick."

"Who are you?" He slurs, the words barely coherent with all the swelling around his mouth. I'm also incredibly satisfied to see he's missing a tooth.

"I'm the man that wants to kill you," I tell him, "The man that was going to if she hadn't stopped me."

His eyes widen, showing off the bloodshot whites, and then he opens his mouth to scream. I slap my palm over it, pressing down hard on the painful bruising. He thrashes in the bed, clawing at me but I press harder, "You're going to listen to me very carefully, Patrick," I tell him. "Are you listening?"

He just continues to thrash, moving in the bed and causing blood to seep through the dressings he has on his face and body.

"I don't think you understand me," I snatch my other hand over one of his eyes, pressing my thumb in, "You will listen, or you will die."

He groans and cries out, "Tick tock, Patrick. Make your decision. I'll count to five."

He fights me as best he can, which isn't much, "One." I count. "Two." I press my thumb into his eye harder, feeling it move beneath it, "Three. Do you really want to find out what happens when I get to five?"

He mumbles something and stops moving, "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. What was that?"

I lift my hand to allow some noise to come out, "What do you want!?" He cries.

"Well, I want you to pay for what you did," I tell him, "But killing you will bring up all sorts of questions. She'll get dragged into it but if I must, I will, do you understand?"

"P-please," He begs, spittle spewing from his lips.

"Look at you begging," I tut, "Tell me why I should listen when you didn't listen, even after she begged you to stop."

"I didn't do anything!"

"Are you sure about that, Patrick?"

"You stopped it!"

"But you would've done it if I hadn't been there, right?"

He goes quiet.

I nod. "I know you would. It didn't matter that she said no. It didn't matter that she begged you to stop, you wanted her, so you took what doesn't belong to you."

"I'm sorry!"

I scoff, disgusted in him, "The only reason you're here and not in the ground somewhere is because she stopped me. The only reason I am not finishing the job is because it'll harm her more. Do you understand me?"

He nods frantically, blood seeping out of his gauzes and down his face.

"But I'll know if you ever go near her again." I warn him. "I'll know if you're even in the same vicinity. You're going to stay away from her."

"We have classes together!" He argues.

"Then leave." I walk toward the windows and turn back to him, his eyes never leaving my body. He's the prey here and I'm a very dangerous predator. "Leave town. I don't give a fuck where you go, but it better be far away from here."

He swallows with a wince.

"And never contact her. Ever. Do not even think her name."

When silence stretches between us, I cross back over to him, "Are you understanding me, Patrick?"

"Yes."

"Good." I grin like I'm not completely prepared to end him, "I'll allow a few days to wrap all this up, but even if you have to transfer hospitals, I want you gone by the end of the week."

"Who even are you?" He whimpers.

"I'm hers," I tell him, "And I will always protect her."



My hotel room is cold and quiet when I finally make it back there at midday. I had some other errands to run before I could get back and take a shower. The Farrow's don't take lightly to *missing work*, so I had to make it look like I was still doing what they employ me to do. Plus, I wanted to get marks set up on Patrick to make sure he actually leaves.

To my surprise, he's being transferred this very evening.

The marks will never leave him though, no matter where he goes but for now Vanessa is safe from him.

With a sigh, I hang my head.

I don't understand how I miss you so much.

Those words were like icepicks, they stabbed me over and over. She shouldn't miss me. But I understood. And I think that was the terrifying part in all of this.

We were two people who could never be together, for her safety, I would never allow it. And I was never going to know a day of peace because of it.

She shouldn't have been able to capture me this much, but Vanessa owns my very being.

I'm hers.

It didn't matter that we were apart and she has a life, I was hers. Even when she moves on, gets married, goes and has the happy life she deserves, I'll still be hers.

I'm weak for her.

I curl my fingers into my palms at the same time my phone buzzes on the mattress next to me.

Ness: It would have been you.

I frown at the screen, itching to ask what she means, but she sends another text seconds later.

Ness: I haven't given it to anyone. It never felt right because I wanted to give it to you. I still want to give it to you. It was always supposed to be yours.

Fuck.

I couldn't. I couldn't take it.

I shouldn't take it.

My eyes burn with how hard I stare at the words on the screen and then like the weak, selfish man I am, I go to her.

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN



T he blue ticks signifying that he's read the messages mock me. There are no dots to show he's replying, no signals to say he'll ever speak to me again and part of me wishes I never sent those messages, even though I meant every word.

I woke to an empty bed and a locked apartment, there was no proof that Kolt was ever here except for the band aid on my knee, and I felt more alone than I ever had before.

It likely would have been easier if I never saw him at all. It had been eighteen months since the last time, and sure, I was still pining, but I would have moved on eventually. Now it'll be another year, maybe two.

God, I am pathetic.

He probably thinks the same thing. He's older, he doesn't want a college girl who doesn't know when to take a hint.

I slept until eleven, showered after I realized I was alone and then fed Pumpkin who I had accidently locked out on the balcony last night. He was a very unhappy boy when I let him in, his loud angry meows still echoing through the apartment. He scoffed his food and is currently glaring at me from his perch on the chair by the window, his fluffy body bathed in sunlight.

"Yes, I know," I roll my eyes at him, "I'm a terrible human for locking you outside."

He just continues to stare.

"I said I was sorry; you're being a bit of a dick about it now."

More staring.

And then he gets up and turns himself, giving me his back.

"Wow," I huff, glancing at the clock and wondering if it's too early to drown my pathetic self in wine. I mean there's no one here to judge me and no classes.

Decision made I trudge across the apartment to the kitchen, only dressed in an oversized T and panties since I was being too lazy to get dressed and be productive. I grab the glass, pour the wine, and prepare to take a sip when there's a knock on the door.

"Just a minute!" I yell, panic seizing me. No one ever shows up unannounced. What if it's the police!? Did Patrick die!?

Shit.

I rush to the door, forgetting my lack of clothing and throw it open, my heart getting lodged somewhere in my throat when I see who is standing on the other side.

There is something feral in the way he's looking at me right now, his eyes darker than I've ever seen them, his chest heaving like he ran all the way here.

"Kolten?" I sputter.

"Tell me you didn't mean it." He demands.

"Mean what?" I swallow, stepping back as he steps over the threshold, the door hanging open.

"Your messages. Tell me you didn't mean them, Ness."

"I don't like to lie," I breathe, taking another step back as he fully lets himself inside, grasping the door with one hand but not closing it.

"Lie," He pleads, "Tell me it was a mistake to send them."

"I can't."

He pushes the door, and it slams closed behind him.

"Why me, trouble?" He rasps as he closes the distance between us, his hand rising so his fingers can slide into my hair, "Why would you want me to have something so special?"

"Because you're the only one I trust with it," I admit, "Back then and now, that hasn't changed."

"Nessa," He groans.

"I didn't expect you to come," I tell him honestly, "I didn't expect you to even still be here."

"Do you regret it?"

I shake my head, "I meant it. I can't take that back."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No, Kolten," I whisper, "Take me to bed."

The words snap something in him and the remaining distance between us is closed with one large step.

His mouth crashes down onto mine in a possessive claiming, tongue pushing between my lips to taste and tease and all I can do is hold on and give myself to him. He cradles my face in the palms of his hands as he kisses me, desperation leaking from him as we slowly walk backwards, mouths still joined, a clash of teeth and biting.

God, he tastes so good. I cling to him, holding him close until my knees hit the arm of the couch and I tumble over it, but while I'm shocked by it, it seems Kolt was expecting just that. His body follows me onto the couch, hips parting my thighs as he settles between them. The t-shirt rides up, pooling around my middle to leave me exposed in just a pair of white panties.

He groans, a deep rumble that heats me to my core, "Fuck, Ness, look how pretty you are."

My cheeks flare, burning so hot I know he'll be able to see me blushing like a tomato.

"Fuck, I've missed that blush," He caresses my cheek tenderly, "You have always blushed so pretty for me."

"I can't help it," I whimper.

"Good," He growls, nipping my bottom lip with his teeth, "I fucking love it."

He rolls his hips forward, pushing his hardness into me and I could feel myself getting wetter. I've only ever gone this far with him, but it feels natural, it feels right.

"Seeing you in this shirt, nothing but a pair of panties on underneath," He groans, "I'm so fucking hard for you, Ness."

I nod eagerly, hands dropping to the belt securing his jeans, but he just chuckles and grasps my wrists, forcing them above my head. "You can't take me yet, trouble." He rasps, "But you will, won't you pretty girl?"

"Y-yes," I stammer as he maneuvers my wrists into one hand and runs his free one down my body, grasping my inner thigh.

"You're shaking," He frowns down at me.

"Don't stop," I beg.

"Are you scared?" he asks, genuine concern tugging his dark brows down.

"Nervous," I admit.

"Tell me you're sure you want me here, Ness."

"I'm sure," There is no shake to these words, no hesitation.

"I'm going to take it slow with you, trouble." He promises, a fire lighting in his eyes as he drops them to where my leg is spread, and center is covered by the white panties. "Work your sweet pussy up until you're begging me to fill it."

I almost choke on my tongue and a devilish grin lifts the corner of his mouth, "Is that what you want, pretty girl? My fingers deep in your cunt? You want me to fuck you and get you ready for my cock?"

I squirm, my pussy throbbing, soaking my panties as he slides his fingers closer to my center. He watches his hand the entire time, watches as he slides his finger under my underwear, and I gasp at the first touch against my sensitive flesh. "So wet," He praises, "All this for me, trouble?"

"Only you."

"When you touch yourself, is it me you imagine?" He asks, working me up with a gentle caress against my pussy, drawing pleasure from me I didn't

even know existed.

"Yes."

"Is it my cock you want deep inside you when you fuck yourself, Ness? Do you imagine it's me between your legs?"

"Yes," I cry as he circles my clit, my hips bucking beneath him, but he just pins them down and tortures me some more, keeping that slow pace until I'm so wet and hot it physically hurts.

"Good," He growls, "So fucking good."

"Please!"

"You need to come? You're so responsive for me," He praises.

He applies more pressure, keeping the pace but then he leans down and captures a peaked nipple through the material of my shirt, and *oh my fuck!* 

"Kolt!" The climax barrels through me, rattling my body as his fingers keep moving.

"That's it," He guides, "Say my name, baby."

He continues to push the orgasm, prolonging it until it's almost too much to bear before he moves his fingers away from the sensitive bundle of nerves, and through the wetness between my legs.

"I'm going to take these off," he tells me, referring to my underwear and I give him the barest of nods for my consent. The orgasm has left me languid, sated, but we aren't nearly close to being finished.

I lift my hips to help him remove my panties and he takes them down my legs slowly, drawing them over my feet before he throws them to the floor and places both hands on my knees, pushing them apart to expose me.

"Look at you, trouble, dripping all over the couch for me. So damn perfect."

I didn't have it in me to feel vulnerable, not when he is looking at me like a man starved, the praise doing something I can't describe to my body.

"Am I taking all your firsts, Ness?" He asks, flicking his dark eyes up to mine.

I nod, "Yes."

He groans as he lowers, and I practically jump off the sofa at the swipe of his tongue. He rumbles something against me that I can't hear, but I don't really

care. My nails scratch against the cushions on my couch, my teeth sinking in hard to my bottom lip. It's hard not to scream, I desperately want to with the way his tongue is working through me, playing against my overly sensitive clit.

My muscles are taut, shaking even, and my heart pounds something fierce inside my chest.

I grab one of the cushions and bite down, wanting to push my knees together, but he holds me open for him and he does not relent.

Suddenly he lets go of one of my legs and grabs the pillow, tugging it from my grip before he tosses it down on the floor.

"Don't hide your screams from me, Ness," He rasps, looking up at me from between my legs, my tee bunched up around my waist and seeing him there, his mouth wet with my arousal and a smirk playing on his lips, I almost combust there and then. There's something erotic about it, about him on his knees between mine, his eyes alight with heated desire that's all for me. "I want to hear you sing for me."

"Kolt, please," I beg.

He chuckles, "You need more?"

"Fuck yes."

He doesn't leave me waiting, his mouth descends, and he laps at me, paying attention to that bundle of nerves until I can feel myself begin to twitch and vibrate, pressure building in a knot that's about to snap.

My hand latches onto the long strands of his hair as if he'll leave me hanging there at the edge. But he doesn't, and I detonate once more against him, my head throwing back against the couch as I contract and pulse. He strokes me through it with careful caresses of his tongue, expertly bringing me down until I'm breathless.

"So fucking pretty when you fall apart," He gives me a long lap of his tongue before he climbs to his feet, "But you're going to be even prettier when you're full of my cock."

# **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**



I carry her through to the bedroom, barely seeing where I'm going as my mouth is attached to hers, the kiss slow and languid. Her hands are locked behind my neck, her small body held in my arms.

She's more than I could have ever imagined. More than I can ever deserve.

I gently lower her onto the bed and detach my mouth, putting my focus to her shirt. I want her bare for me, I want her body and her soul. She lifts her arms to allow me to remove the t-shirt and I let my eyes feast on her. All soft curves and smooth skin, freckles dot her shoulders and her chest heaves with her breaths, rosy pink nipples peaked and ready for my attention. She's perfect and it's almost painful to look at her.

I tug out of my shirt, watching her watch me as I strip down for her, smirking when her eyes take in every inch as if trying to commit me to memory. I'm doing the same. I don't want to forget a single part of this or miss even a second.

I kick off my pants and drop my boxers, my cock hard and aching.

"How is that supposed to fit!?" She gasps, propping herself onto her elbows like she wants a closer look. I stroke myself, letting my thumb roll over the

very tip of me, to the bead of precum leaking from the head. She watches with rapt attention, following the movement of my hand as I jerk myself.

I let out a loud laugh, "I'll fit, trouble." My knees dip the mattress and I reach down for the wallet I've left discarded on the floor, pulling out a condom before I let it drop again. "You're so ready for me," I tell her, "Dripping, Ness, I can't wait to feel you around my cock."

Her eyes flutter as nerves work their way in, making me pause, "We don't have to."

"No, I want to," She whispers, her hands sliding up my arms as I hover over her, body wedged between her legs.

"I'll be gentle, Ness," I promise, rising to my knees as I tear open the condom.

"I know."

I roll the condom on, my cock overly sensitive already and leaking, ready to be inside of her. But I refuse to rush, I won't be the cause of her pain at all. I have to go slow, let her adjust to me.

"Relax for me," I ask, settling myself between her legs and lining myself up.

She lets out a long breath, her eyes searching my face as a little fear leaks into her gaze. "It's okay." I tell her, nudging in barely an inch. It's enough for me to suck in a breath.

Her lashes flutter as I go forward just a little more, stretching her gently but not enough. My hand curls around her hip, my grip tightening as I control myself and push forward, her tightness gripping my cock as I stretch her to fit me.

"You're so big," She whispers, an edge of pain to her voice, eyes squeezed closed. I hadn't taken anyone's virginity before and taking hers feels like I'm teasing the devil. It's like I'm taking something sacred, something holy, but fuck, I can't not. I've wanted Nessa since the moment I saw her lying in the sand. Wanted her from that first smile, that first laugh. I wanted her to be mine and though I know that isn't possible, this right here, sharing this together, makes it feel like she is.

"You're doing so well." I praise, "You're taking me, you see?" I look between our bodies, at where the tip of my cock is buried inside of her, her pussy stretching to fit me, "We look so fucking good together." "Kolt," She whimpers, "More."

"Slow, baby," I tell her, pushing in just a little.

"Please." Her eyes crinkle at the edges as she presses them harder together, and I know she's feeling the pain.

"Shh," I drop down until my chest is against hers and my hands cradle her face, her thighs spreading further to fit me. I latch my mouth to hers, tasting her gasps and moans as I push in deeper with each thrust of my hips. I'm almost there, almost fully inside. Her heels dig into my ass, and I roll my hips, trying to keep it slow and steady to ease her into it, ease her body into fitting mine. She's stretched so full, her pussy clamping around my cock tight and unforgiving.

"So good, baby," I tell her, "You feel so good. You're taking me so well. Are you okay?"

She nods against me, "It hurts a little."

"I know," I soothe.

I roll my hips, easing out of her and then back in, gently thrusting to stretch her just a little more. Her nails claw at my shoulders, her gasps and moans hitting somewhere deep inside me that'll forever remain.

I knew she wasn't going to finish for me now, not this time. I'm so damn close after such a short amount of time and I'm holding on until it's almost too painful to bear. I slide in and out of her, pushing deeper, going slow but I feel the zip of pleasure down my spine, telling me I was there.

"I'm going to come," I tell her, "Fuck you feel too good, Ness."

"I need more," She urges.

I grasp her behind her knee, pushing her open for me and thrust, sinking into her completely. She envelopes me entirely, my whole cock wedged inside her, her wetness soaking the base of me. With a cry her head throws back, her nails clawing at me, the gasp of pain making my damn heart twinge.

I kiss her jaw, her cheeks, her neck, trying to ease her pain in any way I can. I keep my thrusts slow and short, letting her feel me and adjust. Nails biting, she lets out a small moan, eyes opening to find mine.

I nod barely, trying to tell her without words how well she is doing, how good she feels.

Her pussy is so warm and wet, so damn tight. I slip out a little further and pump forward, letting my body slap against her with a harder thrust.

"You're so perfect, Ness," I whisper, my teeth scraping down the column of her throat, "Made for me."

"It's yours," She whimpers, rolling her hips into me, teasing me.

"Fuck, I'm going to come, Ness."

"Let me feel it," She pleads, "Show me."

I can't prolong it any longer.

I empty into the condom, the warmth of her pussy enveloping me, her tightness squeezing me for every last drop while her wide eyes, heated with so much lust, watch the pleasure cross my face.

My cock jerks inside of her as I bury my face into the crook of her neck, inhaling her scent, so intoxicating it could end me. I need her to come for me again, I need her to finish on my cock, but I have no doubt she'll be sore now.

I gently pull out of her, looking between our bodies. There are a few spots of blood on her sheets, her pussy swollen while her body trembles enough I feel it vibrating the mattress beneath us.

"Come with me," I urge her, helping her from the bed and into my arms. I start the shower, getting the water hot and guide her in, following her under the spray.

"It was always going to be you," She whispers, words almost lost to the sound of the water, "I wanted it to be you."

I stroke down her wet hair, holding her to me for a while before I gently coax her away and grab the soap, lathering it up in my palms. My hands start at her shoulders, moving in circular strokes as I work down her arms and then back up, down over her sternum before I work the soap over her breasts. She lets out a whimper as I go over her nipples, paying a little extra attention to the hardened peaks before I run the bubbles down her stomach to her hips and then between her legs.

"Are you in pain?" I ask her as I gently massage my hand between her thighs, cleaning her up and removing any blood that remains.

"I'm okay," She tells me, her head rolled back against my shoulder, "I want

more."

I chuckle, "You think you can take me again?"

"No," She laughs, "But I want to. Even if I can't walk tomorrow."

"Trouble," I groan, "You have no idea how bad I want to fuck you till you can't walk."

"Then do it." She says, "Don't worry about my pain, we knew it was going to hurt."

"Ness," I sigh, "I don't want to hurt you."

"I want it to hurt, Kolt. It makes it real, and I want you regardless. Make me come, Kolt," She pleads, "Fuck me until I come against you. Show me what it's supposed to be like. You're the only one I trust."

"I don't know if I can," I admit, "I don't know if the pain will be too much for you to be able to come."

"Let me try," She says.

I follow the curves of her body with my hands, committing every part of her to memory before I shut the shower off and guide her back to the bedroom. Taking a seat on the edge of the mattress, I move her to stand her in front of me, a lone water bead running down her stomach which I lean forward to lick up. She shivers in my hands, her breathing hard and fast as I keep mapping out her body with my fingers, feeling, caressing, worshipping. Her skin pebbles and she lets out a sweet little sigh that my cock jerks at. All her noises, all the little whimpers and moans are the best music. I run my hand up the inside of her thigh, careful as I pass them over her pussy, watching her face for any hints that it's too much.

She doesn't flinch, not once, instead she starts to roll her hips against my hand, working herself up until I can barely take another second.

I need to be in her again, to feel that grind of her hips against me. Grasping her at the back of her thighs, I gently coax her toward me until she can straddle my thighs.

"Sit on my cock, trouble," I guide, "Work yourself against me. Show me what you like."

"What if I do it wrong?" She breathes, hovering over the tip of me.

"You can't do it wrong, baby girl, I promise."

With her hands gripping my shoulders and my fist holding the base of my cock, I help her as she starts to lower, going slow to allow me in. Fuck she feels so damn good, hot and wet and tight. Her nails claw into my skin as she lifts and lowers herself again, taking more of me with each go round until she's fully seated against me, her body pressed impossibly close and still I wanted her closer. I dip my head to take a rosy hardened nipple between my teeth and she jerks against me, letting out a moan that makes me want to fuck her hard and rough.

I won't do that though.

"Ride me, trouble," I rasp against her skin.

She begins a gentle roll of her hips and slowly, I edge down until my back is against the mattress, my hands gripping her toned thighs as her head tips back, hands on my pecs as she finds a rhythm, pumping me in and out of her body as she goes.

I become a little obsessed with how she looks, wet hair pushed back, falling in waves, breasts bouncing as she rocks against me and fuck, my cock sawing in and out of her feels like damn heaven.

"That's it, baby," I praise, "Look at you, so fucking pretty like this."

"Kolt," She whimpers my name, bringing herself forward until her lips are pressed to mine. I grasp her, circling my arms to keep her there. I can feel her grinding against me like this, rocking her body over my cock as her clit rubs on me. "It feels so good."

"Keep going, trouble," I groan into her mouth, "Come for me."

She kisses me deeply, continuing her rhythm until I feel her body shudder and her pussy start to twitch. She cries against my lips as her orgasm rocks through her and the sensation is enough to spur on my own. I spill into her, fingers digging into her skin as pleasure bursts through me.

Spent and sweaty, she lays atop me, her breathing heavy before she slips off, and lands on the mattress next to where I lay.

"That was so much better than I thought it would be." She giggles, crawling up the bed until she collapses onto the pillows, her eyes heavy.

"Thank you," I lay next to her, "For giving me something that special."

A light smile touches her lips and while I should urge her to go clean up, I'm

too content watching her. The sun has started to set beyond the window and the apartment is silent other than the ticking of the clock.

I watch as she falls asleep, her face buried into the pillows, naked body cooling with red marks on her thighs left by my hands.

It's all borrowed time, her, and me. The tick of the clock hammers home just how true that is.

I stay for another hour watching her sleep, repeating it over and over in my head.

This was it.

No more. I couldn't keep putting her at risk. She deserves more than me.

So, after the hour is up, I dress into my clothes and reach into the pocket of my pants.

The small wooden carving sits in my palm, the shape of a crescent moon and a star. I've carried it with me every day since I left her on the docks. The moon reminds me of her, but I want her to have it now.

Saying goodbye the first time was hard, but this time it rips something out of me.

Placing the carving on her bedside stand, I tuck the sheets around her and pull the curtains closed, leaving her to sleep.

And then I walk out of her life forever. I take the sim from my phone and snap it in half, discarding the pieces in a nearby trash can. I didn't have numbers saved to anything else so her, my brothers... it's all gone.

There would be no contacting any of them again and no calls or texts from them.

I do what I was supposed to do when I made the deal, and I disappear like I never existed in the first place.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



One month later...

hit," I groan, glancing at the clock on the bedside table. It's noon already, yet it feels like I've only just gone to sleep.

Mentally, physically, emotionally, I'm exhausted. I roll over in bed and get a face full of orange and black fluff, courtesy of Pumpkin's butt, and sit up abruptly.

And that's when my stomach rolls. Nausea churns wildly, and I'm on my feet, rushing to the bathroom and barely make it on time to throw up what little I have in me.

I must have eaten something bad. With a groan I land on my ass in the middle of my bathroom floor, the tiles cold and unforgiving but my stomach continues to churn, making it impossible to move right now.

Pumpkin chooses this moment to let himself into the room, leaping onto the vanity above my head as he meows loudly.

"I know," I groan, "You're hungry. Just give me a moment."

He yowls again but I don't move until my stomach stops flipping and

flopping and then I carefully get up, still not feeling great, like I'd vomit at any moment. When I get to the kitchen, I make Pumpkin some food, the smell of it adding to the nausea and then stare down at the bags of shopping I left on the counter when I rolled in last night. I only managed to put away the perishables before I decided I was too tired, and it could wait.

But if I didn't do it now, I wasn't sure I'd ever do it. So, when I have the coffee on and have had a glass of water, I empty the contents onto the sides, sorting through it and putting it into piles so it's easier to put away.

With everything that belongs in the kitchen away, I grab the bag for the bathroom and pause, staring at the bright pink packaging on top.

I'd picked up pads and tampons last night on autopilot, but I hadn't thought it then...

I'm late.

I mentally do the math in my head and realize I'm over by about two weeks. I'd had my period about a week and a half before the hours I spent wrapped up in Kolt. It was a day I couldn't forget, both the time during and the devastation after, so I remembered the dates and I am definitely late for my period.

Shaking my head, I laugh at myself. It's probably just stress from college and work. Things have ramped up in the past couple weeks, I was throwing myself into my studies while also picking up extra shifts. To be honest I didn't like being here alone. Not since Patrick – though he's disappeared off the face of the earth, and then being left by Kolt after I gave something so special to him.

Had I expected him to stay for long? No of course not, but I hadn't expected to wake up and find him not there. It stung to say the least and I haven't been able to contact him since.

He did leave me a gift though. A little carved crescent moon and star that is still sitting on my bedside table where I left it. I stare at it often, remembering how he told me he liked to whittle. Did he make that for me?

I asked myself the question over and over but there was nothing to suggest he did. He could have bought it at some flea market and thought of me. Maybe it was a thank you for a good fuck. I had no company and no one to speak to other than my sister to go through these thoughts, so I often spiraled.

But imagine being in my shoes. I gave him my virginity. I gave him something sacred to me and then I woke up, still sticky between my legs, to an empty bed and a cold, quiet apartment. No note. No message. Just isolation.

So yeah, I spiral about it. And I'm pissed at him, pissed at myself. I never should have caved to my craving for him, should have just picked a nice boy from one of my classes and moved on with my life. Instead, I gave it to an older man, a dangerous man that appears and disappears like he's some damn magician.

Jaded? Yes. And I'm not even sorry about that.

But those sanitary products are staring at me, reminding me that we didn't use a condom that second time round, he came inside me, and I haven't had my period.

Dread works through me. I pull out my phone and double check my dates but my mental calculations are correct. I am a week and six days over.

"Fuck."

What do I do? I was a virgin a month ago! A *month*! This can't be happening to me. I grip my stomach as another wave of nausea batters me along with a hot flush. It's food poisoning. It's got to be food poisoning.

But I had to be sure.

I quickly shower and dress, throwing my still wet hair into a bun before I grab my keys and bolt out the door. There is no way I'm using the campus drug store to get a test, so I jump into my car and head into town, practically leaving it abandoned in the lot outside the store.

When I get to the aisle I need, I stand and I stare at the numerous different brands and types. Which one do I need to use? Some of these are super expensive too but did that make them better?

"You okay, sweetie?" My head jerks around to the sweet, feminine voice next to me.

I'm pretty sure I'm crying, and the way she softens and steps forward, just confirms it. She's an older woman, maybe fifty if the greying in her hair is anything to go by, with fine lines around her eyes and laughter lines around her mouth. She looks like the type to be motherly, and her kindness right now is just tugging on my emotions. I sniffle loudly. I'm not even entirely sure

when I started to cry, maybe back at the apartment? On the drive here?

I didn't know but there was so much panic and sickness and dread turning over inside of me, I can barely hear myself think.

"Shh," She gently pats my arm, "It's okay. You need a test?"

I nod, the words lodged behind the lump in my throat. "Okay," She nods reassuringly, "You just need a simple one, okay? It can be quite daunting looking at all these, can't it?"

I nod again, mute.

But she just smiles patiently and selects two tests from the shelf, "One for now, and one for later," She explains, "Just go wait over by the door, I'll get these, okay?"

I dig into my purse for my wallet, grabbing a bunch of notes since I've clearly forgotten how to function, but she shoos me off and heads to the counter, so I do as I am told and wait by the door.

"My name is Diane," She tells me when she returns, the tests hidden inside of a paper bag, "We're going to go across the street to that coffee shop. Here's my ID, take a picture of it, okay? Send it to your family."

My brows knot together as my brain tries to keep up with what she is saying. It's after a few long seconds of brain lag and some awkward staring, that I realize she's doing it to make me feel safe with her. She only wants to help. And right now, this kindness from a stranger is helping tremendously. With a shake to my hands, I dig out my phone and snap a picture of the ID, sending it over to Imogen with a quick text to say I'll explain later.

Not a moment later, my phone is buzzing with an incoming call but right now, I can't deal with my sister. I can barely handle myself.

Diane walks quietly by my side, the rustle of the paperback sounding like a death toll though I know it's not that bad.

This could all be a big deal for nothing. I might just be late and that's it.

I suck in calming breaths, trying to get a handle on myself as we head into the coffee shop and get in line. "Tea?" She asks, "It calms the nerves."

"Yes, please," I whisper, "Thank you."

"Go get a table, sweetie. I'll bring it over."

I'm still shaking when I find a seat and stare at my interlocked fingers. I haven't even given her my name, or even spoken more than a few words to her and yet she's treating me like I'm her own daughter. Perhaps she does have her own children, perhaps she's had to do this before.

It would make sense. And I didn't know how to thank her for this.

"Here we go," She slides a pot of tea my way and the sweetness of it hits me in the face. It's some type of fruit tea and smells divine. I pour a cup as she takes the chair opposite me.

"I'm Vanessa," I tell her when the cup is poured.

She smiles, "I have a daughter," She explains, confirming my theory, "If you're wondering why I helped you back there. We did this too and you looked like you needed a friend."

"I did," I nod, feeling the fresh sting of more tears, "I don't know if I am."

"That's why we have the tests, sweetie." She says gently, "So you can find out."

"I didn't even know which one to buy," I rush out, "If I am pregnant, how am I supposed to do this when I can't even get a test in the store right."

"How about this, Vanessa," she says gently, "Go do a test, when you have the results then you can start to worry about the future."

"You're right," I agree, accepting the bag from her.

The shake is still in my hands as I walk to the bathrooms, only getting worse when I lock myself inside. I rip open one of the boxes and read the instructions.

"Pee on the stick. Wait three minutes." I tell myself, "Pee on the stick. Don't pee on your hand."

It's the oddest feeling, doing this but when it's done, I put the cap on the test and rest it on the side as I flush and wash my hands, purposely keeping my eyes ahead and not on the test as it processes. I look a mess, my hair just a ball of wet blonde strands, my eyes blood shot and watery and skin pale. I also didn't look when I got dressed because a dress shirt and a pair of grey sweats is not a good look, pair that with my flip flops and we have a whole shit show going on.

When I think three minutes have passed, I finally lay my eyes on the little

screen and then I sink to my knees.

Two lines stare back at me.

Pregnant.

I don't know how long I stay on that dirty floor, but a knock at the door startles me.

"Vanessa?" Diane calls through.

"I'm coming," I sniffle. I shove the test back into the bag before I rewash my hands and walk out of the bathroom, finding her concerned face staring back at me.

"It's positive." I whisper. "I'm pregnant."

# CHAPTER NINETEEN



Came as fast as I could!" Imogen barely makes it through the front door when she kicks off her shoes, throws down her purse and rushes to me where I'm bundled under blankets, face a blotchy mess from all my tears, and hair looking like a bird made a nest in it. "Shit, Ness, you're a mess." I don't even have it in me to be offended. I feel like shit, so I know I look like it too.

I've vomited every morning for the past four days and only worked up the courage to phone my sister this morning.

She got the next ferry over after my tearful call, which in her words, made no sense.

She climbs onto the couch next to me, pulling the blanket over herself, purposely ignoring the ice cream stain to put her arm around me, "Is it a boy?" She asks like I'm a lovestruck teenager again with a crush.

"Not exactly," I sniffle.

After the coffee shop and the positive test, I said goodbye to Diane and called in sick to work. I haven't been to class. I haven't left the house. All I've really done is order take out, shower and sleep. How do I process this?

What do I do?

"I'm pregnant," I whisper, a fresh wave of tears blurring my vision.

"I'm sorry, what?" Imogen stutters.

"I missed my period," I tell her.

"Okay, but that doesn't mean you're pregnant!" She gets up, "Stress can cause delays."

"I did a test, Immy." I look up at her, "Two. They were both positive."

She opens her mouth before snapping it shut, "Okay perhaps they're faulty?"

I shake my head. "I'm pregnant, Imogen. And I'm scared."

"Who's the father?"

I drop my eyes to my hands, going over in my head everything that has happened. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her but for some reason I don't. I don't know if it's to protect him or me, but I keep his identity to myself for now, "One night stand." Not a lie exactly.

"You don't know!?" She practically screeches.

"Please don't get mad, Immy." My voice wobbles, "I don't need mad, I need you. I need my sister. I'm scared, Imogen, I'm not ready to be a mom."

Imogen sighs and perches on the edge of the couch, "You have options," She says gently.

"I know." I agree.

I'd always wanted kids; I just hadn't expected it now. I expected marriage and stability, a good job, a great home... a man who hadn't disappeared off the face of the earth.

"But those options aren't for me," I tell her. "I'm not ready to be a mom but I damn well will be one. I'm just going to cry about it for a while."

She chuckles lightly, "There's time, Ness, you don't have to make a decision right now."

Truth be told I'd gone through my options days ago, I knew what I could do, and I'd made the decision not to do them. Was it terrifying? Absolutely. But I *could* do this.

Despite not being ready, despite it putting a little bump in my plans – no pun

intended.

Imogen cups my cheek, just like our mom used to do, "I feel sick." I tell her.

She cringes, "How far along?"

"My last period was six weeks ago."

"Well, I guess we need to get to the clinic, get them to confirm and make a plan."

"Are you mad?"

With a sigh she shakes her head, "I'm not mad, Ness. I'm scared for you, babies are..."

"Hard?" I finish, "A commitment you can't just leave? Babies are a lot of things."

"What about the dad?" She presses, "Are you going to try and find him?"

I nod even though I know the search will be fruitless. Kolt seems like the type of man that if he doesn't want to be found, he won't be.

I'll likely never see him again.

"And college?"

"I'll continue," I say, "I'm coming up with a plan to be able to finish my studies and take care of a baby."

"Here?" She chews her lip, "All on your own?"

"I can do it."

"Ness," She's up again, pacing this time, "You need support. If you're going to have this baby, you need your family, maybe you should come home."

"I'm going to be a doctor, Immy. I can't just come home."

"But you're pregnant!"

For the next three hours we go over the same argument. Back and forth until I become so mentally exhausted by it, I pass out on the couch. Imogen doesn't leave, not like I wanted or expected her to, instead she curls on the sofa with me and we both stay there till morning, only to resume the same argument.

I understand her worry, but I have to try and do it all. There must be a way of studying and being a mom, I know a lot of mothers do it. But I am alone here, and the island is my safe place.

Imogen goes home after three days and on the fourth, I head to the clinic for my appointment.

And I leave only knowing what I already knew.

I'm having a baby.

And I'm doing it on my own.

# CHAPTER TWENTY



8 months later

e need you to push, Miss Hale," The midwife tells me, "You're ready."

I shake my head, skin slickened by sweat, pain making me want to scream but instead I clamp my teeth together so hard it makes my jaw ache.

"Come on, Ness," Immy croaks through her own pain but I don't let up on the squeezing of her hand. Ruthie is on the other side of me, the kind old woman I've known since I was little and has been as much a motherly figure in my life as my own mom, strokes back my hair.

"Good girl," She coos affectionally, "He's almost here."

"I don't want to do this," I cry.

"It's a little late for that, sweetness," Ruthie says, "Big push."

My body takes over and I have no choice but to bear down.

"That's it," Someone says though I have no idea who, "Crowning."

It feels as if I am being torn in half, the burn and ache of labor burning through whatever energy I have left. Tears leak from my eyes and exhaustion

weighs heavily on my bones, I'm struggling to even keep my knees up and open.

"One more," someone says, Ruthie I think, and I obey, bearing down as relief floods through me at the same time as a wail rents the air. The sound of my newborns first cry is something I don't think I'll ever forget.

"It's a boy!" The midwife cheerily confirms. Everything moves so quickly in the next few minutes my brain has trouble keeping up but the one thing I can focus on is that cry. It hits some deep, primal part of me, and it swells, blooming to become this warm core of happiness that sits right in my chest.

And when he is placed in my arms, and I see his face, tiny fingers curled tight, I know I've done something I was always meant to do.

"Ethan," I whisper, "Hi baby."

Tears roll down my face as I move the bundle of blankets away from his cheeks so I can look at him better.

No one knows his dad, but I do and while I'll name him with his father's name, I'll do so secretly. He is an Avery. Ethan Avery-Hale, and he is perfect.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Present day...

T here was something happening with the Avery's. Maya, Torin's new wife paces back and forth in the kitchen of her large waterside house, a fire crackling in the fireplace as she watches out the window.

I'd asked but she'd just stared at me and began her pacing once more.

It's unusually quiet, there's no Everett or Arryn, no laughter or warmth.

Coming back to the island had lifted a huge weight off my shoulders. I had tried to keep up with my studies, but Ethan needed me more, so a few months ago, I stopped college, packed us up and brought us home. Imogen was relieved we were home and I'd gained some unexpected friends since returning too.

Maya, and her daughter Harper, came to the island for refuge, and she'd fallen in love with Kolten's brother, Torin. From what I'd heard from Imogen, Torin had been a shell of a man in the years since passed, until Maya and Harper. I'd tried to warn her off him, though I don't know why. Torin is a good man; he was good to Grace before she died, and he is good to Maya and Harper. He deserves the happiness he's found with them.

I guess it was my own jilted past and heavy secrets moving my tongue, but I was glad she didn't listen. The Avery's are dangerous but to their women, they are not.

Even Everett, the youngest brother had fallen head over for Arryn, and I never thought that guy would ever settle. But Arryn and I have become close friends in the past few weeks.

Neither brother is Kolten, and I must move past it. I have their nephew and they don't know, but whenever I try to come clean, my mouth stops working. It's been two years since Ethan was born, and now I feel like it's too late.

"Maya," I gently call her name, "What is it?"

Before Maya can answer, Harper comes bounding into the room, a grin on her face and an armful of stuffed animals which she drops in front of the fire.

"Ethan is awake," She states, "We are going to have a tea party."

"Go on," Maya smiles but it's strained, "I'll be fine. They'll be home soon."

"Okay," I breathe. Ethan had been napping when Maya called this morning and I'd come right over. He'd remained asleep so I'd made use of Harper's bed and left him there to sleep but I can hear him now, babbling away to himself. It hasn't been easy, as a baby he had some illnesses and was diagnosed with Asthma but in himself, he's always been happy. Smiling and giggling with these adorable little dimples and eyes that match mine. But in everything else, he looks like his father.

"Hi sweet boy," I coo as I lift him from the bed, settling him on my hip. His hand instantly goes for my hair, his chubby little fingers curling the strands around them. I'd taken to putting it up as much as I can since he likes to pull. Who knew kids could have enough strength to make it feel like they're ripping it out?

"Mama," He babbles happily as I walk towards the stairs.

"Daddy!" Harper's shrill, delighted squeal echoes through the house and I release a breath. Maya's nervous energy had rubbed on me some and I had been thinking the worse.

I hear the quick running steps of Harper as she bolts for the door, followed by more determined steps from Maya and I join them at the door a moment later.

"They're home," I say to Maya who blows out a breath, tears glistening in

her eyes. "What happened?"

But she just shakes her head, "They're all back," She says it as if reassuring herself. They leave to head to the docks where I guess they're coming, and I take a moment to grab a jacket for me and Ethan. It's freezing and he's only just gotten over a cold.

"Let's go say hi," I baby talk which earns me a cute little smile. Glancing out the window to make sure they're all there, I freeze when I see the third man on the boat.

Long hair pulled up into a messy bun, broad shoulders, tall frame full of rolling muscle. He's dressed in a long black overcoat and a beard grows over the bottom half of his face. He looks different and all the same.

"Kolten," I whisper.

Why is he here!?

My heart begins to gallop inside my chest, a sweat breaking out on the back of my neck and my stomach flops with unease and dread. He shouldn't be here! I'd convinced myself I'd never see him again, that he'd never come back.

He said he'd never be back.

But there he is, standing at the docks with his two brothers, Arryn and Maya and another girl that looks so much like Arryn, I presume they're sisters.

He shakes Maya's hand fondly and his mouth moves as he speaks, but they're much too far away for me to be able to read the words, and now they're walking this way.

Oh shit.

I back away from the door, swinging my gaze left and right and spot the back door. I can't face him, not holding Ethan now, not yet.

I bolt, running as fast as I can while holding Ethan firmly to not bounce him around too much and I run all the way to Ruthie's, throwing the door open before I slam it closed behind me.

"Geez, Ness," Ruthie tuts, "You being chased by somethin'?"

I shake my head, the burn of tears stinging my eyes.

"What's wrong?" She immediately asks, "What happened? Is Torin okay?"

My mouth opens and closes like a fish, the words stuck behind the giant lump in my throat. Ethan wiggles restlessly on my hip, picking up on my energy and wanting away.

Ruthie takes him gently, "Talk, Ness. What happened?"

"He's back," The words are a whisper from my lips.

"Who?"

"Kolten."

No one knows. No one will understand.

Ruthie's dark brows tug low, "Kolten? Kolten Avery?"

I nod.

"Okay..." She urges for me to continue, to explain, her eyes flicking between me and my son before she settles on his face and looks. Like really looks.

I swallow, my stomach a mess of knots as I watch realization dawn on her face.

"Kolten is his dad," She gasps.

"Shh," I hush quickly, "Please don't tell anyone!"

"What? Why not? How did this happen!?"

"I just..." How do I explain this?

Ruthie blows out a breath, "Ness, I've known you your whole life," She softens, adjusting Ethan, "You wouldn't do this without a reason."

"What do I do?" A single tear rolls down my cheek, "He wasn't supposed to come back."

"Breathe, Vanessa," She calms, "You'll know what to do when you do."

"I need to go home," I open my arms for my son, "I need time to process this."

"You can't hide from him forever, Ness," She warns me, "It's a small town. Secrets don't stay in the dark for very long. I don't know how I missed it before, but Ethan looks like Kolten. With him here, people will see the resemblance."

"I know." I swallow. "I can't face him yet, Ruthie. I just can't."



I make it home, closing and locking the door behind me before I place Ethan down in his play pen and then just stand there. His father is here. The father who doesn't even know he exists.

On the mantel, above the dark fireplace the little carved moon and star sits in the center. I never had the heart to throw it out, even when I became so angry at Kolt, I physically hated him. Even when I cried, and I screamed that he was gone, and I was doing this alone.

I held that carving in my hand every time my anger came out, I held it until it cut into my palms, and I cried myself to sleep too often holding it.

But I never got rid of it.

I let it haunt me every day. I let it hold my secrets.

But now he's here and my secrets aren't going to remain that way for long.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



T he air is cold, a wind coming off the ocean to nip at the bare skin on my face and hands. Maya, Torin's new wife hugs him tight, and Everett keeps Arryn close.

I had my freedom now, thanks to the deal I made with Malakai Farrow, but I had to wonder if the bridges were too far gone to remake.

"Hello," Harper, Torin's stepdaughter greets me with a rosy cheeked smile, "I'm Harper."

"I know."

Her brows tug low, "Who are you?" She asks.

"Kolten. Torin's older brother."

She gasps, "I have another uncle!?"

"I guess," I swallow.

For the last few years, I've had to shut down, close off, ice over my heart to help resist the urge to contact my family and Vanessa. I've forgotten what it's like to be more than just an emotionless robot. Forgot what it's like to live normally without being surrounded by so much death.

But I'm now back in Ravenpeak Bay.

"Vanessa is at the house," I hear Maya tell Arryn and my head whips around at the sound of her name.

"She's here?"

Maya's brows lower, "Yes?"

I'm moving before another word can be said, legs eating up the gap between the docks and the house quickly, until I'm shoving open the door.

"Ness!" I call her name, something fluttering in my lower stomach at the thought of seeing her in the next few seconds, but only my echo responds. "Vanessa?"

Behind me, the rest of them come inside, "Kolt?" Tor finds me, "You okay?" "Where is she?" I ask.

"Vanessa?"

"Yes, where is she?"

"Maya?"

But Maya shakes her head, "She was here a moment ago, perhaps she wanted to give everyone some time."

I feel a set of eyes on me and turn to see Everett watching me, analyzing me. He always was good at reading people.

"Check at Ruthie's," He says, "She spends time there."

Arryn grips his arm, eyes wide with understanding but he looks down at her and shakes his head, a silent conversation moving between them.

I'm out the door in the next breath, making my way towards Ruthie's inn. Despite not being here in years I remember everything, the way to the diner and inn, the trail that leads to the cave, the docks. I remember it all.

When I push open the door to Ruthie's, warmth and the smell of coffee greets me, the older woman sitting behind the reception desk with a newspaper.

"Hello, Kolten," She smiles at me kindly. I've only met her once or twice, but she looks at me like I never left.

"Ruthie," I greet, "Is Vanessa here?"

But the old woman shakes her head, "'fraid not."

"Was she here?"

"Why are you looking for her?" She quizzes with a quirk of a brow.

I close the gap between us as if she has her hiding behind the desk, but it's just Ruthie here and a few guests relaxing in the lobby in front of the fire. Behind the desk is a wall of picture frames, some shots of the bay and boats on the water, others the dramatic cliff edges that border this small town, but within the shots of the scenery other photos are scattered. Ruthie with her late husband in the top left corner, the image in black and white and so old it's barely cohesive, another of Maya and Harper, and then Maya and Torin on their wedding day. I scan them all, almost missing the image of two women with blonde hair smiling back at the camera.

"Let me see that," I rasp, unsure I'm seeing it correctly.

Ruthie follows my gaze and with a sigh, she takes down the picture, laying it gently on the counter in front of me.

My eyes aren't deceiving me. That's Vanessa and Imogen. Standing in front of the fire behind me, both beaming, their smiles bright and lighting up their eyes. And Vanessa is cradling her swollen abdomen, her baby bump large and round. She's glowing. Happy.

Pregnant.

Something cracks inside my chest, fracturing and splintering into tiny little pieces.

She's happy. She moved on.

"Kolt," Ruthie says with a softness to her tone, like she's soothing an injured animal.

But I can't see it anymore, I can't handle it.

I don't know why I expected her not to have moved on. Where I've thought of her every day since I left her, she's forgotten about me.

It's what I wanted so why the fuck does it hurt so fucking much.

"Kolt?" That's Everett's voice behind me. He steps up next to me and glances at the picture before he looks to my face, reading the expression.

"It isn't what you think," he says. "Go find her."



The day is drawing to evening, the light dimming enough that the lights shine bright inside the small bungalow ahead of me.

I can see her moving around, her long blonde hair tied in a lose ponytail that sits at the nape of her neck. She's smiling.

Fuck she's so pretty.

She disappears from my view for a moment only to come back holding a small child with a mop of dark hair.

My breath gets lodged in my throat seeing her with a child.

I need to be closer. I need to see her in front of me, nothing between us and before I can process the thought, I'm moving through the gate and up the path, my knuckles rapping gently on the wood of the door.

"Just a minute!" She calls and then she's at the door.

"Kolt!" She gasps, pulling the door further closed as if to stop me from seeing inside. She doesn't realize I already know.

"Hello, trouble," I rasp, eyes moving over every inch of her face, moving over the freckles and the dimples, staring at her amber eyes and blonde hair.

"Why are you here?" Her voice has a hint of edge, a coldness to it that was never there before.

"I'm back." I explain.

Silence hangs between us as she stares at my face, brows knotted and causing a tiny crease between them. Behind her, a baby starts to cry.

"For how long this time?" She moves to close the door. "I've got to go."

"Can I come in?"

"No."

And then she closes the door, the sound of the lock clicking into place echoing through my head.

My eyes close as a breath works out of me, and I turn to leave. I didn't know how to fix something that was never really mine. I took from her, and I left. I deleted myself out of her life so what did I expect? For her to just drop it all for me?

There's another man in her life, a baby but I didn't see a ring.

It makes me unreasonably angry that she's not even engaged to whoever got her pregnant. Does he not realize what he has? What she has given him?

I turn to leave, as much as I'd stay all night if I could, I won't do it to her. She doesn't want me here, if on this island at all.

My brothers are waiting for me when I arrive back at the house though they say nothing. I should spend time with them, but isolation is all I've known for the past few years. I sit on the back porch in the dark, watching the night sky turn from clear and starry, to cloudy before a few flakes of snow begin to fall.

There is one thought occupying my mind as the flakes turn heavier and the wind grows colder. One thought on a loop. Over and over.

It should have been me. She should have been mine.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



**G** uilt eats at my stomach making it hard to swallow even a bite of food. The pasta is steaming and smells incredible, a creamy mushroom bowl Imogen made up last night for family dinner, and I'd taken the leftovers. But I can't even bring myself to put a spoonful in my mouth.

Pumpkin meows at my feet in the hopes I'll drop him some food, but the vet told me he was overweight and needed to go on a diet. He's hated me ever since. But it's for his own good. He'll give up eventually and go nap in his spot on the couch soon enough.

Ethan went down for bed over an hour ago and silence weighs heavily on the small bungalow I call home. It's always been cozy, a safe space for me and my son but I can't help but feel like it's empty now.

I keep seeing his face. Whenever I close my eyes, it's the wounded look I see, the plea in his dark eyes, the apology on his lips that I didn't give him a chance to say.

I hadn't expected him to turn up at my house. He heard Ethan cry, he knows there's a baby in here, does he know he's his?

So many questions I want answers to, but I'm far too afraid to ask them.

But one thing I am certain of. He'll leave again.

He always *leaves*.

What if I tell him about Ethan and they grow a bond, only for him to disappear again? Ethan is young now but what about when he is older, and I have to tell him his dad didn't stick around?

I push the bowl of pasta away and cradle my head in my hands. I still feel guilty shutting the door on his face. So much damn regret stirs through me, and I have no idea how to manage it.

I know I have to tell him. He has a right to know even if I have to risk him leaving once more. But I have to promise myself I can't let him in again, he can have a relationship with his son, I cannot and will not stop that, but with me? He can't have me again.

Physically, mentally, emotionally, I will not recover from another heartbreak at his hands.



When the sun is up the following morning, shining light on the freshly fallen snow, I take Ethan over to the diner where I know my sister will be. She's preparing the diner for the day while Shawn makes breakfast like we do most mornings. It smells like pancakes, bacon and syrup when I let myself inside and help myself to coffee from the pot, pouring a bottle of juice for Ethan at the same time.

"There's my favorite munchkin," Immy opens her arms for her nephew, showering him with kisses while I sip at my coffee, needing it after the restless night's sleep. "You okay?" She asks me.

I nod even though I am so far from okay it hurts. "Can you watch him for a bit after a breakfast?" I ask, "I just need to do something."

"Sure," She grins, "You know I'll never say no to this little face," she scrunches her nose and rubs it on his which makes him giggle and call her name before handing him back, "Breakfast in two!" She calls as she disappears into the kitchen, and I hear her and her husband laugh.

I place Ethan in his highchair and set one of the tables for breakfast, taking a seat just in time for the food to come out.

A half hour later, I leave Ethan in Immy's capable hands and head out into

the cold. It snowed all night, leaving the town covered in a white blanket that crunches and slides under my feet. Nerves riot inside my stomach, making me feel sick while I try not to spiral with my imagination on how he is going to take this.

I've not seen Kolt angry, not really. When he saved me from Patrick, I was so dazed and disorientated it didn't register until it was over, but I had a feeling he was going to be raging after I give him the news.

Was there more I could have done back then when I found out? I don't know.

I called him so many times without any success. But I also kept it from his brothers who may have been able to help me get hold of him.

The Avery house looms ahead, Torin's red truck parked by a shelter of logs and Harper's chicken runs around out front. I still find it strange that the child has a pet chicken but hey, it could be worse.

My knuckles tap against the door, and it's opened a moment later by Everett and his big grin.

"Vanessa," He greets, "What do we owe the pleasure?"

He knows something. I don't know how I know that but it's Everett, he always knows something. I like him even if I don't show it, there's just something about him that makes people gravitate towards him, even if he likes to stir the pot. He's my friend's boyfriend, and he makes her happy which is enough to tolerate whatever game he wants to play.

"Is Kolt here?" I ask.

"Afraid not," He sighs dramatically, "coffee?" He opens the door wider for me, but I shake my head.

"Do you know where he went?"

"A walk," He shrugs, tucking his hands into the pockets of his grey sweats, "Early this morning. Looked kind of depressed if you ask me."

"Vanessa?" I hear Arryn call my name before she appears next to Rett, "Everything okay?"

"She's looking for Kolt." Rett explains for me.

"Kolt?" Arryn frowns, "Why?"

"History, I guess," Rett chuckles before he spins and leaves me with Arryn at the door.

"He's so cryptic," Arryn rolls her eyes, "You okay?"

"Fine," I lie, "I just need to go find Kolt."

Rett had said he went for a walk, and I had a feeling I knew where he was. "I'll catch you later, okay?"

"Yes!" Arryn beams, "Oh we promised to have a girl's night! Can we do that soon?"

I smile genuinely, "Of course, how about Friday?"

"Perfect! I'll be round at five!"

I say my goodbyes and make my way through the snow. It wasn't deep thankfully, but it's enough to make it a little more difficult to walk.

Boats bob on the icy water and the clouds tumble in the sky, a murky kind of grey that promises more snow. I come to a stop at the dock where Kolt and I used to spend time, spotting his big body at the end, sat with his back to me, facing out to the water.

I take the walk slow, the snow somewhat melted here thanks to the salt but it's icy and treacherous and one slip will have me going over and into the water. And I could think of nothing worse than falling into those icy depths.

Kolt turns at my approach having heard my steps and immediately gets up, brows drawn down low, "Nessa?"

My heart twinges at my name on his lips, bringing back memories of those nights, "Hi Kolt." I swallow, coming to a stop in front of him. He looks down at me, searching my face, looking for answers as to why I'm here when I turned him away so rudely last night.

"Are you okay?" He asks with genuine concern, his hand lifting only to drop again, and then he looks over my shoulder as if expecting someone else to join us.

"I'm sorry," I start, "For last night."

He opens his mouth to speak but then closes it.

"I have something I need to tell you." I fill the silence.

He lets out a long sigh, "I know you have a child, Vanessa."

I nod, he heard him last night.

"You've moved on," He continues. "Are you happy at least?"

"Wait." I hold up a hand, confusion tugging at my brows, "What?"

"The father, does he make you happy?"

Oh god.

"There isn't anyone else, Kolten."

"He left you!?" His eyes darken, anger twisting his features, "Who is it? Where are they!?"

I swallow, "You don't understand, Kolten." Unable to stay in one spot, I start to pace, "My son, his name is Ethan. He's a little over two years old."

His eyes flick around my face.

"He's so lovely, Kolt. The happiest little boy."

"He's two?"

I nod.

There's a pregnant pause between us, I can see him working it out, figuring out the dates and when he realizes, the color drains from his face.

"He's two." He repeats.

"His name is Ethan," I whisper, "Ethan Avery-Hale."

"He's my son?"

"Yes, Kolt, you're Ethan's father."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



I have a son. *I have a son*.

"I'm so sorry," Vanessa whispers, a crack in her voice and eyes filled with tears, seeming to make the gold hues in her eyes pop.

"He's two," I repeat like a broken record, "There's been so much time. I've lost so much time." I can't process a single thought, can't fully come to terms with the news. I can just think about how much time has passed, how many minutes I've lost.

"I have videos and pictures," She tells me urgently, "I documented everything."

"He was right there last night," I cannot grasp it fully, it's a fleeting thought, flinging around inside my head. There's too much to think about, too much to talk about. She did it all alone, her pregnancy, the birth, raising him for the past couple years.

"He's with my sister right now," She explains. "I tried to tell you."

I snap my head back to her face, hearing how thick it's become with emotion. Tears roll down her cheeks, rosy from the cold, the tip of her nose red.

"After... I was late on my period, and I took a test, it came back positive. I went to the clinic to get it confirmed and I tried to call then. It never went through. I called every day for six months. I text every day. I never got a reply."

I swallow down the bile that rises in my throat.

"Then I went into labor, and I called then. I called when he was born. I sent you a photo from the hospital."

There's so much pain in her voice, but it's edged in venom too, anger, "I called, and I called, and you weren't there, Kolten. I called and you didn't come."

"Ness."

"No," She steps back from me. "I haven't come to rekindle whatever it was we had; I came to tell you you're a father. No one knows, except Ruthie. Your brothers don't know."

"Why didn't you tell them?" I ask.

"Because I was scared, Kolten. And I was fucking angry."

There's no sunshine girl left here. I couldn't see a single ray of the girl I used to know. She's still as pretty as ever, but she looks tired, worn down. Like a weight is on her shoulders and she's struggling to bear it.

"I gave you something special and you left me. You blocked my number or whatever it is you did. I had your baby, and I was alone. I left college and came back here because I was alone. My sister and Ruthie are the only ones who have helped me. How was I to go to your brothers and tell them you knocked me up?"

She steps further back from me, swatting at her tears, pushing down her emotions and I had nothing to say.

"You can meet him," Her voice turns flat, even if tears continue to fall, "I will keep it a secret for now, until you're ready to let people know." She sounds as if she is reading from a script or a contract, it's monotone and emotionless, "Or if you'd rather pretend you don't know, that's fine. I don't expect you to be a dad to him. You can forget we even exist if you'd like."

"I don't want that," I whisper.

She nods, "Come over at four. It's before dinner and bath time. He's in a

routine and I don't want to break that."

"Is he healthy?"

Vanessa nods, "He has asthma, and we dealt with a few infections in the early months but yes, he is healthy Kolten. He looks like you."

"He does? And the birth?"

"Painful," She laughs, "God it hurt."

I have so many questions.

"Did you do it alone?"

"You can ask everything later," She sighs, "I'll tell you everything, okay?" I nod mutely. No words come out, physically I feel broken.

She tells me goodbye, and I watch her leave, hair teased by the wind. The mother of my child. The mother of my son.

Ethan Avery-Hale.

I somehow make it back to Torin's house, walking into a ruckus of boisterous laughter and childish giggles. My brothers are in the living room, their girls at their sides while they play a game and it's Harper in the center, making odd faces and movements.

"Kolt!" Rett yells, "Charades, and we have no idea what Harper is trying to tell us."

Numbly I walk to them, standing behind the couch they all sit on while little Harper continues to make faces and shapes.

"Frozen!" Maya yells confidently but Harper shakes her head.

"It's got something to do with ice." Arryn adds.

But Harper shakes her head again.

I can't connect here though, there's too much going on inside me. So much pain radiating throughout me I have no idea how to handle it. For a man who thought himself emotionally dead, this sure is a lot of feeling.

My heart is skipping beats and my stomach is a knot of nausea.

Silently, I leave the room, heading for the kitchen and the bottle of whiskey Torin keeps in the cupboard.

I stare at it, contemplating the warming numbness that would come with a

drink, but I was going to Nessa's. I was going to meet my son and drinking didn't seem to be the wisest idea.

I felt disconnected from all of this, from all of them. It doesn't feel like I'm their brother, their family, I'm more like a stranger imposing on their time.

I don't belong here.

"You good?" Rett's voice sounds from behind me.

I turn to find him casually leaning on the frame of the door, a twinkle in his eyes and a grin on his mouth.

"Fine," I grunt.

"Vanessa, huh?" He laughs, "Never would have guessed it."

"I don't know what you're talking about." I grab the bottle.

"No?" He tuts, taking the bottle from me, "So he isn't your son?"

I spin on him, grabbing the bottle back with a snatch, "You knew!?"

His brow quirks, "Not exactly."

"Everything okay?" Torin walks into the kitchen next, a frown on his stern face.

He always was so serious.

"Kolt here was just telling me about his relationship with Vanessa."

"Ness? Really?" Torin says.

"I wasn't doing shit."

Rett rolls his eyes, "Come now, Kolt. Tell us all about it."

Rett stirs the pot, reveling in all these little secrets while Torin stares blankly, "He's my son." The words stutter out of me, pain lining each one. I'd missed so much. Lost so much time.

She had my baby without me and where was I? I didn't even know. She tried to contact me, and I'd severed every connection. Granted I'd had to, but it doesn't make it any easier.

"What?" Torin grunts.

The smirk has been wiped off Rett's face, concern now lining his expression. "Shit," He hisses beneath his breath, "You never knew."

"Knew what!?" Torin demands.

"Ethan is my son," I whisper, "I have a son."

"I thought you knew," Rett steps in.

I shake my head.

"Fuck."

"What's going on?" Maya walks into the room, a pair of empty mugs in her hand.

"Little doe, I'll make the coffee," Torin tells her, "We just need a minute."

"What happened?"

I focus on their interaction. Focus on how much Torin gives her his attention, touches her where he can, soothes her in between and then kisses her so gently, I wonder where the brother I knew went. He's so damn happy it hurts something inside of me, something that is missing.

I didn't know how to explain what happened between Vanessa and I, didn't know how to tell them I'd fallen in love with a girl ten years younger than me in a matter of weeks and never moved on. How do I tell them I failed her so explicably there was no coming back from it?

She had to do it all without me. Despite the decision I made being the right one, I failed her. While I did right by everyone else, I did wrong by her.

I took and she gave.

"Let's rewind a moment," Torin says when Maya has left the room, "You and Vanessa?"

But I just shake my head, not wanting to delve into the history. "What do I do?" I ask instead.

"Well big brother," Rett clucks his tongue, a grin on his face, "You're a daddy. It's time to step up."

I simply glare at him. I have no patience to deal with his games right now, "Well no shit, Everett," I grunt, "I've missed two years of my son's life. How do I get that back?"

"What about Vanessa? Is she...?" Torin doesn't finish.

"I'm heading over this evening, to meet him."

And truth be told... I am fucking terrified.

More than any job I've ever been on. That two year old boy is scarier than any mark or hit or mission I've ever been a part of.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



The house is tidy... ish.

There's toys and stuffed animals all across the living room floor and picture books stuffed in every hole and on every surface. And I'm pretty sure that's dried milk on my shirt but fuck, I don't have time to do anything about it because there's a knock on my door. My hair smells like apple sauce and has been tugged so many times today a bird could nest in it.

A mess didn't even come close to how I looked right now.

Pumpkin meanders into the kitchen as I head to the door, letting out an almighty yowl to remind me that his dinner is soon.

He jumps up onto the kitchen counter which makes me cringe since no matter how much I try to stop him, he still does it, every single time.

Letting out a calming breath, I open the door to find Kolt on the other side. He devastates me whenever I look at him. His hair is long now, he's pulled it back into one of those sexy man buns with a couple tendrils that fall around his face. A silver ring glints in his ear and rings sit on his fingers. Age gently lines his eyes but if I didn't know how old he was, I'd never think he was a day over thirty.

And in his hands is a beautiful bouquet of winter blooms, held together by a pretty purple ribbon.

I try not to cringe at the mess I am in comparison, and steel myself against the blush, pushing down the fluttering butterflies and knots that work through my stomach.

"These are for you," He says, holding the bouquet out to me.

With a swallow, I accept the flowers and open the door wider for him. "Thank you."

He steps over the threshold, and I become even more aware of how untidy I am. He smells like citrus, leather and spice, and I could use a shower, my house, while looks tidy, really isn't and my cat is still sitting on the damn counter, his judgy brown eyes assessing Kolt and me.

"Ethan is in the living room," I tell him, "Do you want coffee?"

"Coffee would be good," He smiles but it looks strained and uneasy. Fuck, had we ever had such a stilted experience together? No. Even when we didn't know each other, we instantly got on and now it feels like we don't know each other at all.

This man has been in my vagina, I just needed to pull myself together.

Kolt follows me through to the kitchen though I had expected him to go straight for Ethan. I don't say anything while I fix a couple mugs with the fresh coffee, adding cream and sugar to mine and looking to Kolt expectedly.

"Just black."

And there it is. I don't even know how this man drinks his coffee, but I have his baby. How fucked is that?

"Do you want to meet him?"

"Is that okay?"

"Of course," I gesture for him to follow me through.

Ethan is sitting in his little chair, cartoons playing on the screen ahead of him. He babbles and grins to himself, not even noticing us enter. Pumpkin, finally getting off the counter, joins us, strolling to my son where he then sits to judge us some more.

The cat definitely loves my son more than me.

Kolten stares at Ethan for a long time, frozen where he stands as his eyes travel all over him, taking in his dark hair and dimples, the rosy hue to his cheeks and his amber eyes, to the slope of his nose and podgy little fingers.

He doesn't hide his expression from me, I can see every emotion flitter through him. Sadness. Regret. Longing. His eyes are glazed, his lips slightly parted as he stands frozen, staring at the little boy we made together.

"He's ours," Kolt finally whispers.

I nod, "Yes, he is."

He doesn't move still, just stares, his eyes a riot of emotion that makes my stomach twist.

"Do you want to go in and...?"

"What if he doesn't like me?"

I can't help it, a laugh erupts from me, loud enough it startles Pumpkin and draws Ethan's attention.

"He's two," I giggle, holding my middle as if trying to contain myself, "He likes everyone."

Kolt simply stares at me, a frown knotting at his brows, "Okay but how do I make him know I'm his dad?"

I sober, "It doesn't work that way Kolt. You know he's yours, but Ethan doesn't. You have to work on your bond and grow it. I know it would have been different if you knew when he was born but we can't turn back time. You just have to be with him, be his dad."

"I lost so much time with him," He whispers, a wobble to his voice that brings tears to my eyes.

"But Ethan doesn't know that," I say quietly, the guilt devouring me whole, "He's not going to remember the last two years. He won't even remember now or the next couple. He'll only remember you always being there if you decide to stay."

"Why do you think I won't stay?"

Feeling my stomach knot, I head towards my son, "Because you leave, Kolt. That's what you do."



I am being completely unfair. I know I am, but I'm sour on it.

We haven't said a single word to each other in the past twenty minutes, but he's provided his undivided attention to our son who is giggling with a strand of Kolt's hair in his hand. Maybe I should have warned him he had a habit of hair pulling. But Kolt doesn't seem to mind, he hasn't taken his eyes off Ethan, and Kolt's grin, this big, white toothed smile, lifts his whole face and gives a light to his eyes that wasn't there before.

It's a smile I've never seen, so genuine and unabashed that it's got my heart feeling some kind of way.

"He has your eyes," Kolt says quietly, managing to detangle Ethan's hand from his hair and providing his pinky finger as a distraction.

"It's the only thing," I laugh, "Everything else is you."

"He's beautiful, Ness," Kolt stares at his son, "You did good."

"We," I correct, glancing to the clock, "You okay if I go make him some food before bath time?"

"Of course," he agrees, "Anything you need, Ness."

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I head into the kitchen and grab some food from the fridge to start heating up. I can hear Kolt's low baritone voice, the sound of it so at odds with the house only me and my sister have only ever really been in. I can't hear his words but the deepness of his voice travels through the walls, a calming murmur that soothes me as much as it's probably soothing Ethan too.

I didn't know how I was supposed to do this.

How I'm supposed to coexist and coparent with a man that has this invisible hold on me, that has something tied to me that I can feel tugging me back.

I've been fighting memories since he showed back up on the island, been fighting dreams of his hands and his mouth and trying to drown out his words.

For my son's sake, I have to remain strong. I can't fall for Kolt again, especially since I'm still struggling to get back up from the last time.

I dish up Ethan's food and grab one of his spoons from the drawer, heading through to the living room where Kolt now has him on his knee, a picture book open in front of them. Ethan points to the bright colors on the page while Kolt attempts to read it in between the constant hand grabs and him repeating the words Kolten says.

"His highchair is over here," I interrupt them, pointing to the small round dining table set up in the corner of the room. We didn't have a dining room, not that we needed one. I don't eat until way after Ethan has gone to sleep, and it's usually either leftovers still out of the dish, I brought it home from Immy's, or ramen noodles. I'm usually so exhausted by the time Ethan goes down that cooking's just too much.

Kolt carries Ethan to his chair and gets him in place like he's an expert, fastening the straps to stop him from climbing out before he pulls out a chair and holds out his hand for the bowl of food.

Speechless, I hand it over, leaning against the back of the couch to observe.

"When do you eat?" He asks me, spooning some food to give to Ethan, letting our son take it to feed himself with guiding hands so it doesn't go all over the place.

"Later."

His eyes flick to me as if he senses a lie, "Okay, but when?"

"Later," I repeat, "When he is in bed."

Ethan takes the food from the spoon, "What will you eat today?"

My frown tugs my brows low, "Why?"

"Curious."

"Well, it's none of your concern, Kolt," Hackles raised, I push up from the couch to start putting away the toys I hadn't managed to get to earlier, "He is your concern."

"I can't care about the mother of my child?"

"To some extent," I shrug, "What said mother eats is not part of that."

I throw a handful of building blocks into the toy box, pushing back hair that needs a wash, "And for the record, I eat. Everyday."

"I just wanted to make sure you were taking care." He comments.

My teeth grind together, "It's none of your concern but if you must know, I have breakfast and dinner, it's not much but I eat and I exercise. It's been nearly three years since you saw me, I am older, I've carried and birthed a

child and my body has gone through so many damn changes since then. Don't come back here and expect the same girl you left behind, that girl isn't here anymore." I snap, "My body and my eating habits are none of your concern and I didn't invite you over for you to make comments about such."

I see him visibly wince before he nods and goes back to feeding our son.

"I'm going to run his bath," I grumble, storming out of the room.

Who the hell does he think he is!?

I plug the bath and add the oils and bubbles before I collapse onto the edge, resting my elbows on my knees so I can cradle my face in my hands.

How did life go from normal to this in just a day!?

God, I want to cry. And scream. And eat so much ice cream I feel sick from all the sugar. I haven't felt this emotional since my third trimester, and boy was that messy. I cried over everything, had the patience of a lion with an injured paw and slept so much I could have hibernated.

It's been a long time since I've felt this unraveled.

With the bath ready, I test the water and then shut it off, pushing down the riot inside of me to go back downstairs and face him.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



M y boy talks quietly to himself, happy little words that make no sense or even a sentence. Seeing him was like the first breath after being under water for too long, like he's always been a missing piece of the puzzle. He has his mothers eyes, and nose but Ness is right, he looks like me, with his dark mane of hair and low brows. He's rosy cheeked and happy and I guess that's all I could have hoped for.

It physically hurt when my eyes first laid on him, seeing this tiny bundle made up of me and Ness. My throat had stung and eyes watered and what ifs flowed through my mind. What if I didn't leave? If I'd been there to hold her hand when she went through the hours of labor? What if I got to hold him for the first time when he was born?

I'm not so used to having feelings at all, not when I've stifled them as much as I have over the past few years, and all these intense emotions feel as if they are crushing my chest.

"Red truck," Ethan points to a picture in the book I have open for him.

"That's right, baby boy," I say quietly, "Just like Uncle Torin's."

He doesn't react to my brother's name but then I suppose that should be

expected.

I hear Vanessa's light steps moments later and glance up as she reenters the room. Try as she might, she can't hide from me and the pain I caused her is written all over her face. I don't know why I didn't expect the hostility from her.

"I didn't mean to upset you," I tell her when she stops a few feet away.

She drops her eyes to the floor, "I'm sorry for snapping," She replies with a sigh, "I just don't know how to handle this."

I just wanted to make sure she was taken care of, that she had everything she needed. "I'd like to be a part of his life," I change the subject because I didn't want to deal with the sting of her rejection again.

*I haven't come to rekindle whatever it is we had.* 

Any chance of me and her, in her eyes, was gone. I did that.

But I'm determined to prove to her I'm not going anywhere. That I am here, and I am here to stay. She and I are now tied together forever through our son, but I am damn well going to try and tie myself more to her too.

I've never forgotten, not a day passed without me thinking of her in some aspect. She was my light on the darkest of days, this candle that burned through my shadows and kept me sane. She kept me human.

And fuck, I want to try with her. I want to know what we could be like. Properly. Without secrets and distance between us.

"I'm not going to keep him from you, Kolt," she says quietly, "That was never my plan. I wanted you to know... I just couldn't tell you."

"I understand," And I did. *I* severed our contact, not her. This wasn't her fault. "But now I'm here and I'm not leaving, Nessa."

It broke something in me seeing her so fractured, the girl from the dock and the one sitting in front of me are not the same girl anymore.

She stares at me for a long time, her eyes glistening but no tears fall and then she crosses the room and crouches in front of the TV cabinet, opening the doors before she pulls out a large box.

"There are photos in here, and a couple of drives, pictures, and videos of everything. I didn't know if I'd ever see you again, but in case I did," She shrugs, passing it over. "I have copies of everything so you can keep this."

I take the box from her, wanting to rip the lid off immediately to see everything inside.

"I um," she fidgets, "I have to bathe and put Ethan to bed, do you mind seeing yourself out?"

Ouch.

"Sure."

"Good night, Kolten."

"Good night, trouble," My old pet name slips out, and I see her physically flinch, but she doesn't say anything and disappears out of the room, our son in her arms.

With the box in hand, I head out, closing the door behind me. Snow is falling again, coming down thick and adding to the already covered ground. In the distance I can hear the sea rolling against the shore and cliff edges. I can't help myself as I assess the outside of the small bungalow, it's in good shape mostly but the yard could use some maintenance and her stockpile of logs for the fire is concerningly low. When did she ever find the time to do all of life's little admin jobs with everything else?

I know she said she had help with Ethan from Imogen, but that would have only gone so far.

It just hammers in that I should have been here.

I should have raised our son with her, held her hand when she birthed him, cradled him during those long nights.

My feet crunch in the snow as I head back to Torin's place, the day now fallen into night, the town plunged into a darkness that I never got on the mainland. I can't remember the last time I saw the stars, not that I could see them tonight with the thick cloud cover.

The box feels heavy in my hands, not literally, but it feels like a weight pressing in on me and I am both dreading and excited to see what's inside.

Torin's house is lit up, casting a golden light out onto the blanket of white and in front of the house, Rett and Harper build a snowman, the small girl piled in winter clothes, a hat too big on her head. She beams and laughs with Rett as he hauls a big ball of snow onto the base they'd already built.

"Hi uncle Kolt," Harper greets with a smile, and I pause.

"Hello."

Rett scoffs, "He's so formal," He nudges Harper with his elbow, "Maybe by the end of winter you can convince him to build a snow man with you."

The girl gasps, "Will you!?" She asks, wide eyes on me.

Fuck.

Rett is grinning like the little shit he is, "Maybe."

"If you do, then I would have built a snowman with everyone! So far, daddy is the best."

My brother gasps in mock horror, "I am offended."

Harper rolls her eyes, "You're always offended but you can't be best at *everything*, uncle Rett, like cooking, momma is best. Your cookies tasted like flour."

"Jeez, kid," Rett pats the snowball, "are you trying to wound me?"

"You're the best at hide and seek!" She placates him.

"That's right!" Rett hollers loudly, his voice booming through the quiet town, "I am the best."

"What's in the box, uncle Kolt?" Harper queries.

"Just some things I need to take a look at," I tell her.

"Can I see?"

"Maybe another time," I tell her gently, heading past them and into the warmth of the house. I hear them get right back to building their snowman while the house is alive with voices and laughter. Arryn, Arryn's sister, Olivia, Maya and Torin sit in the living room, a fire roaring in the hearth, warming the house. Torin looks at me and quirks a brow, a silent question asking how it went. I shake my head because truthfully, I have no idea how it went. It could have gone better and it could have gone worse but it hadn't eased the empty feeling I had inside of me.

"There's some food on the stove," Maya says with a smile, a hand resting on her abdomen, "Should still be hot!"

"Thank you," I nod in her direction but don't head through to the kitchen. I couldn't stomach food while this box was left uninvestigated. Taking it through to the guest room, I close the door and place it on the pristinely made

bed.

Apart from the double, and a chest of drawers, it's empty. I have a few clothes with me and even less belongings since I'd left everything on the mainland. None of it matters. I don't need any of it.

I flick the lid off the box and find a thick photo album on top, the cover a deep blue with constellations painted on the front. In neat, cursive writing, Ethan's name is scrawled in the center.

Pulling it out, I lay it in my lap and flick to the first page.

Dear Kolten,

*If you have this then you know about Ethan.* 

I bought this album the day I found out I was pregnant, the cover reminded me of us, of the time we spent at the docks. It seems like a lifetime ago now, so much changed so quickly and then the pregnancy happened...

I could ramble all about it, but I won't.

I pause, finger tracing the handwritten note on the inside page, the pen strokes indented into the thick paper as if she was holding the pen so hard, she was trying to push the ink through the paper.

For a long time, this sat in storage, I felt so silly after I bought it that I couldn't even look at it. I mean, I got it because of you. I was stuck on you, but you weren't coming back.

But then I had the idea of documenting everything for you, just in case, you know?

The way she writes... it's as if she is talking right at me. As if she always knew, even if it was just a small part of her, that I would come back.

And if you are reading this, then I guess you did come back. Who knows under what circumstances but just know I never wanted to keep Ethan a secret.

He is my greatest accomplishment. My pride and joy.

*The greatest adventure.* 

I reread the letter again and again, putting off opening to the next page so I can imagine her voice speaking to me like this. Like she wants me to be here.

My hands shake when I do eventually turn the page and find several photos

of Vanessa in various stages of her pregnancy.

The first photo, she's wearing a pair of blue jeans and a blouse, her hair flowing around her as she beams at the camera, her sister at her side.

*Twelve Weeks Pregnant* is scrawled beneath the photo. I move to the next and the next and realize she's taken weekly shots, some with others, others on her own, showing her moving along in the pregnancy. She's beautiful in every single one, her stomach round, her smile wide.

I stop at the final photo on the spread.

*Thirty-eight weeks pregnant* 

In this photo she isn't smiling fully, there's a gently curve to her mouth but it's her eyes that hold my attention. There's something in them that makes my stomach turn, something that makes me want to turn back time so I can hold her in this moment.

I flip the page, my breath catching in my throat.

She's lying in a hospital bed, dark circles under her eyes, her hair a slight mess in the bun she's pulled it into, and in her arms is the smallest bundle. A dark head of hair pokes out from a pile of blue blankets and she is smiling so wide it physically hurts to look at.

Ethan Avery-Hale

Six pounds, four ounces

Born at 2.35.P.M. on the twenty-fourth of September.

My heart aches inside my chest.

Unable to stop, I flip the next page and the next, seeing all the photos she took of him and the two of them. Each one has a date so I can see how old he was when he first went to the park or ate solid food for the first time. He's so little, this fragile little thing that seems much too pure and perfect to have been created by me. Her, she was made for this, made to be a mother. She cares for him in a way I never got when I was young, and I can only hold so much gratitude towards her for doing it.

I don't know how to be a dad.

I saw some from the father that chose me instead of the one that made me, but I'm so rotted from the years before, that I feel dirtied by it. Like I am not fit to be a father.

The album is filled with images, so many images taken from the past couple years, and I can see the weeks and months go by in each one, Ethan growing up, getting bigger and stronger. And even when I come to the end of the album, I start again, worried I missed something but just wanting to see it all and memorize everything.

There's more in the box, another album and a small bag that rattles when I pick it up. I empty the contents, finding three USB drives.

I place them next to me to look at in a moment and reopen the album to the first page, unsticking a photo of Vanessa when she was six months pregnant. She's in a flowing blue dress that reminds me of the dress she wore that night in the cave, and she's at an angle that shows off the growing baby bump. She's looking down at her stomach, cradling it gently as a smile pulls up her mouth and sinks dimples into her cheeks.

I place that photo down and then go to the one taken just after Ethan was born, removing that one and then flick a couple more pages to a photo taken when Ethan is eighteen months old. They're in the park, she's holding him with her back to the camera as she points to a flock of ducks that float on the lake in front of them.

I have to fold them a little to make them fit, but I stash each of them in my wallet so I can carry them with me everywhere I go.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



ay hi to daddy," Vanessa's sweet, whisper of a voice speaks into the camera, she's barefaced with her golden hair tied back but her smile is wide and her eyes neon. And in her arms is a small bundle, sleeping as she rocks him.

"He's four days old today," She tells me as if speaking to me directly instead of to an empty room and a camera. "We are being released from the hospital today. I wanted to start these videos straight away, but we had a bit of a scare with his health, and I didn't get a chance, but he's perfect now." She shows him to the camera, his squishy face surrounded by all that dark hair, "He feeds all the time, and sleeps so much but apparently that's normal. I feel like I'm going crazy sometimes. Like he makes this squeaking noise and I think something terrible." She rolls her eyes at herself, as if jesting but I see the tears glistening.

"The nurses say that's normal too."

She rocks him for a few seconds, looking down on him, "We can go home soon. Just me and him."

She gives me one more show of the tiny baby before she shuts off the camera and the video ends.

I don't wait long to move to the next video, the pain in my chest radiating to the rest of my body.

She sits on the couch, Ethan cradled to her chest as she feeds. She looks so tired, "It's hard." She says to the camera. "It's so hard. Immy comes often but I feel so damn lonely." With a pause, she looks down at our son, gently stroking his head, "He's so perfect, Kolt. I'm beside myself, like I have all these big feelings inside me and so much love for him. We've been home for a week now and I haven't slept much. Immy will be back tomorrow," she blows out a breath, "I've expressed some milk, so I'm really hoping he'll take some bottles from her while I get some sleep."

If I were there, if I had known...

What would I have done?

I was tied to Malakai, for her safety, for my family's safety... would he have made an exception knowing I had a son?

I finish that video and move to the next one and then the next and the next, watching each one from start to finish, not once taking my eyes off the screen or focusing on anything else.

I give Vanessa and our son my undivided attention like I should have done back then.

The videos range from happy and cheerful videos to somber and sleepy. There's a couple filmed in the hospital when Ethan had to go in because of bad colds and flus and a nasty bout of whooping cough.

I click on a new video and this one starts unlike the rest.

Vanessa is in tears, the house is dark save for a single lamp on which throws shadows across her face, and highlights the deep purple-like bruises under her eyes from lack of sleep.

In the background I can hear the wailing of Ethan.

"It's so hard," She sobs. "I can't do this anymore."

Swallowing, I fight back my own emotions at seeing my beautiful girl so fractured. There is no sunshine in her eyes, no light left, nothing more she can give.

"I can't keep this up, Kolten." She sniffs, swatting at the tears on her cheeks, much like the other day on the docks. It's like she's angry at herself for being

upset.

"School is killing me. Work is killing me. Childcare is *so* expensive and the no sleep. I feel like I am dying."

She blows out a harsh breath.

"I feel like such a failure. And I'm so angry at myself because I chose this, I decided to keep with school and work and being a mom, but it's so much and I can barely get through the day without crying."

My thumb swipes across the screen as if I could wipe the tears from her cheeks but I can't turn back time and be there. I can't help her.

"I've decided to quit." She whispers, "I'm giving up, accepting defeat. I'll be back on the Island by next week. My bungalow is still empty, and it has two rooms, so I'll be taking us back there. It's time Ethan has his own bedroom now anyway; he's been in with me for the past couple years and I need the help."

Guilt rips through me. She gave it all up for our son, her career, her independence, her life, to take care of him, to raise him without me.

I force myself to watch the rest of the video even if it continues to rip at what little I have left of my heart.

"He's getting stronger though," She adds, "The doctors have diagnosed him with Asthma though. They have said it's difficult since he's so young. He is being treated and seems to be doing better and we will keep assessing as he grows."

He's still crying in the background, but it appears that's been going on some time now. Her hair has since almost fallen from the braid she has it in and exhaustion weighs on her, "Please don't judge me for the crying. I can't get him to stop. He doesn't have a fever, his cough has cleared, he's changed and fed, and clean but I can't get him to stop. He won't stop and gah—" she groans, "I don't know how to keep doing this alone, so I am choosing not to. I'm going to end this here now."

She leans forward and plucks up the camera from wherever she had stashed it to record, "I miss you Kolt. And I don't know how I can miss something or someone I never had. I know you would have been a great dad and maybe it would be different if you were here."

"Ness," Her name is a broken whisper from my lips.

"I'm going to stop these for a couple weeks until I can settle back in on the island. Ravenpeak Bay is home, Ethan will love it there and Imogen is so excited for us to be back. I don't know if you know already, Torin found love again. Her name is Maya, and she has a daughter. Their wedding is coming up and while I know you and your brothers are dangerous, I am so happy he's found light again. He cares for her. I only saw it for a couple days but man, I wish for the kind of love they share."



I flick through the folders and paperwork, reading the notes on Ethan's medical record. He's had serious bouts of infections, colds and flus and admissions which had ultimately led to the early diagnosis of Asthma. He hadn't been admitted to the hospital for six months since that diagnosis and his prescription has been collected, without fail, on time.

It's late now, way past midnight. The house is quiet, dark, my brothers and their girls have all gone to bed. Snow falls outside the window, but I cannot stop thinking about Vanessa and Ethan.

Are they warm enough? Are they sleeping?

Before I can think any better of it, I'm heading downstairs and shoving my boots on.

Torin has plenty of firewood, so I don't mind piling some into a wheelbarrow to take over to her. I'll chop her some more when I'm least likely to wake the whole town and catch a charge but really, I just want to know she's okay.

I need to know that her house is dark, and she is sleeping like the rest of this town.

With the snow falling and the dark sky smothered in thick clouds, I walk through the thick white blanket on the ground, shoving the pile of logs as I walk. It's not easy and despite the freezing temperatures, I break out in a sweat.

But I make it across town and my heart drops into my stomach when I see her kitchen light is on and shining out across the front yard.

It's not a mistake either, she's stood at the window, her back to me, oblivious that I am right here.

I'm here for her.

I may be late, but I am here now.

And I'll continue to be here.

The gate creaks and groans when I open it to get to the path that leads up to her front door, and the sound is loud enough that I see her spin in the window, looking out to find the source of the noise.

I stop halfway up the path, letting her see me and her mouth drops open before she's moving, and I hear the door unlocking.

"Kolt!?"

"Hello trouble," I give her a smile.

"What the hell are you doing!?"

"I've got you firewood," I show her the barrow as if it isn't obvious.

"It's three in the morning!"

"It's cold."

"Jesus Christ, get in here!"

I stash the wheelbarrow under some cover and grab as much wood as I can carry before I step into her home, and she shuts out the cold behind me.

But it isn't much warmer here, either.

"You didn't start a fire?" I ask.

"I haven't had a chance to," She blushes, "And my boiler broke. Ethan is warm, I have an electric heater going in his room."

"But what about you?"

She shrugs, "Layers."

"Why are you awake, Ness?"

"Couldn't sleep," She shrugs, "You?"

"I was watching the videos."

"Oh."

"I want to take care of you Ness," I admit. "Take care of you, and Ethan."

A mask comes down over her face, "I don't need to be taken care of, Kolt. Ethan is your priority."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



 $F^{\,\,uck,\,\,I'm\,\,such\,\,a\,\,bitch.}$  "You can stay," I blurt, "The couch is comfortable, but I'd start a fire, it can get cold."

For a few seconds Kolt seems to be suffering from a case of whiplash and quite honestly, I'm not shocked. I snapped and then offered to let him stay, and I'm pretty sure if he wasn't going to leave, he will now just to get away from me.

"What happened to the boiler?" He asks.

I shrug, "It just won't heat. I phoned the gas company, but it'll be a week before they can send someone over."

"Okay," He nods, moving towards the cold fireplace, the burned, blackened wood looking a little sad among all that ash.

Ethan is warm, I know that for sure, his bedroom is the perfect temperature, and I did have a small fire going before with the little wood I had remaining. I was planning to go out tomorrow to sort the firewood though I should have done it much earlier.

I know how brutal winters on the island can be, but I guess being on the

mainland has ruined me to it.

Kolt kneels in front of the fire, cleaning it out before he starts making up a fire with the wood and kindling he brought over, and then before I can comment, a fire has started, a beautiful orange flame that glows through the living room.

The best thing about this small little bungalow is that the fire will warm the whole house, and I almost sigh at the heat I know it'll bring.

"Thank you," I breathe.

"The couch, yeah?" He asks.

I nod, "Let me grab some bedding for you."

But he shakes his head, "Ness, go to bed. Get some sleep."

"But-"

"Show me where Ethan is," He says, "I'll handle him tonight and the morning. Please rest."

"If this is about the videos... I was in a bad place..."

"Shh, Ness. It's not. It's about splitting this equally. You rest, I've got this."

"He might be unsettled because he's used to me being here," I say, uneasy.

"We will be fine," He tells me, jerking his chin towards the door, "Go rest, ness. You need it."

"Okay, well," I chew my lip, "Good night, I guess."

"Night, trouble."

My emotions are in a knot inside my stomach, part butterflies, part an angry swarm of wasps. Despite him telling me not to worry about it, I grab spare blankets and pillows and creep back out to the living room.

He's in front of the now thriving fire and in his hand is the small wooden carving. I'd hidden it earlier when he came over but the moment he was gone, it was back on the mantel. The room always feels incomplete without it.

Placing the blankets down close to the couch quietly, I sneak back out, checking in on Ethan before I go to bed myself.

My breath leaves me in a whoosh as I hit the mattress and pull the blankets

up to my chin, sinking into my pillows. I'm very aware of his presence, even though he's in a completely different room. I can hear him moving about, hear the crackle of the fire as he tends to it and his soft footsteps as he steps on the creaky floorboards scattered throughout the house.

My eyes are heavy and stinging with fatigue, but I almost don't want to give into sleep. It makes me feel vulnerable and I've been so determined not to be vulnerable again. Because that's how he made me feel. And it's so wrong of me to put that pressure on him, to make him out like he's the bad guy, because deep down I know he's not.

But it hurts. It hurts so bad, remembering how it was when it was just Ethan and me, how lonely I felt. It hurts remembering waking up the morning after I shared myself with Kolt to find him gone and unreachable. I felt used. So damn used, and cheap and then the baby happened.

I throw myself onto my side and force my eyes closed. It was easy to push these memories away over the past couple of years because of how busy I've been but now he's here, I can't fight them.

I hadn't really thought about how far he had dug himself into me. How much of him is woven into the fabrics of me.

I think I loved him then. After those few short weeks, I think I fell in love with him, and I guess they do say first love always hurts the worse.

Eventually, the fatigue takes control and I pass out only to be woken by the shrill scream of my son.

The sun is shining now though, breaking through a crack in the curtains, which means I'd slept at least four hours, which is longer than any stretch I've had in years. Rolling over, I grab my cell and click the screen on to check the time, bolting up in bed and an instant sweat breaking out when I see it's almost eleven A.M.

I've slept almost eight hours!

I throw the blankets off, but they land in a pile on the floor which I get tangled up in as I try to get out of bed. My knees hit the floor with a loud thump which makes me wince, but I can barely focus on the pain that shoots through my joints as Ethan's cry still echoes through the house.

Fuck, how did I sleep so long!?

I throw my door open, sprinting out and towards Ethan's room. Guilt works

through me, pressing in, hammering in. Making me question my ability as a mother but when I get to Ethan's room, it's empty, his bed is made, the curtains have been opened. But he still cries.

Then I remember Kolt.

He promised he had Ethan last night. He let me sleep.

But something is wrong.

That cry is one I've heard before, one that has taken me to the hospital countless times.

I find Kolt and Ethan in the living room, the fire still burning healthy in the hearth. Ethan is in Kolt's arms, he's laying still but he is sobbing.

"He's hot," Kolt's wide eyes turn to me, "I can't get him to settle."

"Okay," I rush to the kitchen, grabbing the thermometer and some meds in case he's throwing a fever and run back to them, uncapping the thermometer to take Ethan's temperature.

I watch the dial like a hawk, seeing it creep up but it's not so high I have to worry. Just a cold or something like that. I let out a breath and measure up some meds to help him before I place the syringe in his mouth. He fights but ultimately takes it.

"He's susceptible to colds and flus," I explain, helping to soothe him. He still cries but he's calmer now with me stroking back his hair and Kolt rocking him, "He throws a fever a lot and it makes him uncomfortable but he's okay. He'll go to sleep soon, and I'll recheck his fever when he wakes."

"He was okay when he woke this morning," Kolt gently rocks our boy, staring down into his reddened face, "It happened so quickly."

"You didn't do anything wrong," I assure him, "It just happens sometimes. Sit down with him, I'll go make us coffee."

I head into the kitchen to pour us both a mug and when I'm back, Ethan is already asleep. I place Kolt's mug down and then mine.

"You can take him through to his room to sleep."

"Can I just..." He looks down at our son, "Hold him?"

I melt a little, "Of course you can."

It's hard not to remember when Ethan was smaller, how it was easier to

cradle him and nurse him but as he's gotten older and bigger, I've found it hard to hold him the way Kolt is now. And despite him growing and getting too big for me to do what Kolt is, Ethan looks tiny against Kolt's bulky frame. He's swallowed up by the mass of muscle, wrapped up in strong arms and big hands, cradled so tenderly I wonder if Kolt thinks he's fragile.

"Did you sleep?" He asks.

"Too long."

"Eight hours is right," He frowns, "It's how long you should be sleeping."

I laugh, "I haven't slept longer than three or four at a time," I shrug, "Not since he was born. I'm used to it now."

"Absolutely not," Kolt grumbles, "We're not doing this that way."

"It's only been a couple days," I try, "Let's just see if we can get into a routine and go from there."

"I saw those videos, Ness. I saw how tired you were, I don't believe that's changed. You were alone then but you're not alone anymore."

But he would leave again, wouldn't he?

I couldn't start to trust or rely on him with this because it'll only hit me worse when it ends.

I hold my tongue though. I've been hostile to him, snappy and unwelcoming and even if I believe he's going to leave, I have to give him a chance to bond with Ethan. My son deserves a father, and I didn't want to be the reason he doesn't have one.

I give him a non-verbal response and press my hand to Ethan's cheek. He's still a little warm but he's settled, eyes closed and dreaming peacefully.

"Why did you come back, Kolt?" I finally ask the question that's been burning on the tip of my tongue since he showed up.

He stares at me, his deep brown eyes so expressive and open it catches my breath.

"I came back for you, Vanessa." He whispers it, "I came back to fix what I broke, but I'm starting to realize there is no remedy to the damage I caused. I can only tell you I'm sorry, even if sorry isn't good enough."

Tears sting my eyes. Fuck, I've cried so much in the past seventy-two hours I

wonder how I'm not dehydrated. "I just..."

"You just what?" He presses.

"I gave something so damn sacred to me, it was special. And you left. No note. No text. No anything. I thought there was more between us, but I felt used, Kolt. Like I was a game to you."

"I was trying to protect you."

"No one asked you to protect me, Kolt."

"What you gave me," He says, "I treasured it."

"Stop." I stand abruptly. "Please don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying, trouble. I fell-"

Panic surges through me, my heart rate picking up so quickly I feel it beating inside my ears, "I need a shower." I don't even wait for a response when I retreat, locking myself up in the bathroom.

And standing under the hot spray, years of heart ache crippling my body, I cry. I cry until I have nothing else to give, cry until I feel sick and weak and tired.

I cry for what I could have had, and what I'll never let myself fall for again.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



H e returns that evening and spends the night though I make sure I get up with Ethan when he wakes around two A.M.

"I've got this," He whispers.

"I'm good," I reply, opening Ethan's door to find him standing in his crib, not fully crying yet but if I don't pick him up, he'll certainly let me know. Pumpkin weaves between Kolt's legs, purring gently in the quiet night. Kolt glances down to the cat before he bends, tickling his fingers against the cat's head, but then he stops and looks up at me.

"Why are you so against me helping?"

"I'm not," I lie, holding my son against my hip, using Pumpkin as my focal point, instead of Kolt's face, "I'm just so used to this."

"Can I do anything?"

With a swallow, I say, "Sit with me?"

There's a two-seat couch in Ethan's bedroom, a hand me down from Immy that's been covered in blankets and cushions since I've fallen asleep on that sofa more times than I can count. I'm in a baggy pair of pajama pants and a light cami, the house is warm thanks to the fire burning in the lounge, and

Kolt had worked some magic to get the boiler working again though he said it was only temporary, so a repair man would still need to come out.

Kolt's dressed in a pair of plaid pajama pants, a white tee stretched tight over his muscles. His thigh is against mine where the couch is so small and he's so big, and I lay Ethan across me, cradling his head in my arm as I gently rock him, but the boy appears to be wide awake.

He stares up at me with his big amber eyes, dimples sinking into his cheeks as he reaches for a strand of hair.

He's almost got it when Kolt provides his finger instead.

Pumpkin continues his love on Kolt, his purr loud enough to rival an engine. Damn traitor.

"I thought I'd lose my hair," I laugh quietly, focusing back on the small fingers wrapped around the much larger one, "He has this fascination with hair and has pulled mine so much I had to check every day for bald spots."

He chuckles with me, letting Ethan yank on his finger and I can't help but watch him. I'm still in shock at how long his own hair has become, and envious that he can pull off a messy bun when I can't.

"You grew your hair out," I point out, "A lot."

His eyes flick to me and a grin tugs on one side of his mouth, "I'm not ashamed to admit the pull you have over me, trouble."

"Huh!?" I gasp, "Me!?"

He chuckles.

"How is your long hair *my* fault!?"

"Do you not remember lying in bed with me, telling me how much you liked my hair long?"

My cheeks heat, "That was a long time ago, Kolt."

"Too long." He says quietly, "He's asleep."

Sure enough, Ethan has passed out in my arms, much quicker than he ever usually does, "Must be your voice," I muse.

I don't move from the couch though, gently laying myself back against the cushions as I stroke his hair.

Kolt settles down himself, and for a long while silence fills the room. I'm

about to get up and put Ethan down for the rest of the night but when I look over to Kolt, his eyes are closed, and his mouth slightly parted. My cat is curled up on his lap, his large hand resting over his back.

I can't bear to move and wake him, so I watch him, seeing so much of him in Ethan, it physically pains me. I have my boy on my chest and his father at my side, the man that stole my heart without trying, who then broke it and took every piece with him.



He stays for the next week; I've become so used to him now that I no longer get all sweaty when he arrives, but my heart still gallops and my stomach knots. He's done so much already, fixed things in the house I didn't even know were broken, chopped and stocked the firewood supply, cooked a few times too and fuck, having a hot fresh meal was like heaven.

I no longer put away his bedding, instead I wash it and fold it ready for him and we've taken it in turns handling Ethan through the night. I've slept more this week than I have in two years.

And it's been...nice. Having him here, having someone to talk to at two A.M when it feels like the whole world is sleeping.

There's fresh coffee in the pot when I come out of the shower and giggles coming from the living room, but it's the female voice I hear that catches me off guard. Not just any female, my sister.

"Immy?" I rush through to find her and Kolt sitting on the couch, Ethan on the floor with a set of building blocks while cartoons play on the TV.

"Oh hey, Ness," Imogen gets up and comes over, embracing me and kissing my cheek before she quirks a brow like I've been hiding something from her. Which I have, I guess. I never told her about Kolt.

"Uh, so you met Kolt?" I chew my lip sheepishly. Like I used to do when we were kids, and I stole her favorite sweater.

"Oh, Ethan's daddy," Her voice has this high-pitched ring to it that tells me she's upset without telling me she's upset. Shit. "Yeah, I met him."

I glance over her shoulder, finding Kolt staring, and when he makes eye contact with me, he mouths the word sorry. He told her!?

Shit.

"Don't get mad at him, Vanessa," Imogen steps back and crosses her arms, "He didn't say anything but it's hard not to notice how much they look alike when they're in the same room. He couldn't deny it when I asked him."

"Immy..." I start.

"Don't," She sighs, walking past me into the kitchen for the coffee which she brings back into the living room to top up hers and Kolt's cups, "You lied to me."

She's moving around a lot, taking the coffee back to the kitchen, without offering me a cup, another signal that she is pissed at me. My sister is a mother hen, she looks after people, it's what she does so her not making me a cup is a sign of how pissed at me she is.

"It's not that easy," I say.

"You always knew?" She asks, "That Torin's brother is the father of your son? My nephew."

"Yes." I answer.

"And you kept it from me? You kept it from him!"

The judgement rings true and clear in her tone.

"Hey now," Kolt stands, "It's not Nessa's fault."

But Immy just glares at him and while that glare would have stopped a weaker man, Kolt doesn't even flinch at my sister's wrath.

Panic is surging up in me, my hair is dripping water down the back of my sweater and my palms are clammy, and everything is pressing on me, boiling and spilling like I'm about to explode.

"You lied," Imogen accuses, "You told me you didn't know. Why would you do that, Vanessa!?"

Shit, Shit, Shit,

I'm falling apart.

How is this happening!?

Everything was going fine until right fucking now.

"Why!?" Imogen presses harder.

A part of me understands where my sister is coming from, the betrayal she

must feel knowing I've been keeping secrets. We've always been close, sisters and best friends and we never kept anything from each other. But I'm also getting real damn angry at the accusations and the blatant judgement she is throwing at me. She thinks she can get away with it as my sister.

"How could you do this?" She snaps, "These are people's lives, Vanessa!"

"You don't think I fucking know that?!" I yell back, and then wince at myself since I startled Ethan on the floor. His wide eyes snap to us, instantly welling with tears. But before I can move, Kolt is with him, plucking him up from the floor to cradle him to his chest. He nods to me once, a silent confirmation that it's okay, that he's got him.

"You think it's been easy for me, Immy?" I ask, keeping my voice calm even if I feel anything but that, "You think this is what I wanted?"

"I don't know, Ness," Immy says, "Isn't it? You've been keeping it a secret around everyone who could have done something about it!"

"What, you think it was a power trip?" I scoff, "Knowing I had Kolten's son, and his uncles were just a few minutes down the street?"

She quirks a brow, going right to that conclusion.

"You want to know why I never admitted it? You want to know why I kept it a secret for so long!?"

"Please do enlighten me, Vanessa!"

"I was ashamed!" I snap.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Kolt visibly flinch from my words.

"I was ashamed because I fucking fell in love with a man who made it so clear we would never be anything. I gave him my body, and my virginity because I trusted him. And then he left, and I felt like a naïve little girl who got screwed over."

Imogen stares at me wide eyed.

"I tried and I fucking tried," I say, "Over and over, to tell him and when he didn't answer I got scared. I got scared of telling his brothers in case they didn't believe me, and then I got scared of them believing me and getting hold of him. I got scared because I haven't moved on from it and it terrifies me. I'm a mother but I have no idea what I am doing."

"Ness," Immy starts.

"And every day I'm fucking terrified because I can't have my heart broken again. It destroyed me then, it'll destroy me now, but I have my son to think about. I can't just stop and give it a chance. And I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to judge me, Immy. I didn't want people to pity me. I wanted to prove I could do it and be just fine!"

I begin to pace back and forth, feeling hot, my scalp prickling.

"You don't get to come in here and judge me, Imogen. I am trying. I am still trying and Kolt is here now. He knows. I didn't try to hide it from him. He's Ethan's dad and he's a good dad too! We are working on it so please, for the love of God, just let me work it out myself."

# CHAPTER THIRTY



I was ashamed.
If anything was going to hit hard, that was it.

Vanessa has retreated into herself since her sister left an hour ago, barely spoken to me, barely even looked at me. She looks as if she's on the verge of tears, eyes glistening, the amber of her eyes like molten gold. She makes coffee, makes snacks for Ethan and tidies, all of it a robotic fashion, but she looks one blow away from falling apart.

And I didn't know how to help her.

This past week, we've fallen into a kind of routine, like we were heading on the right path, and I was going to be able to start fixing what I broke, even if I had to do it little by little, piece by piece.

Since Imogen came in and tore her apart, there's very little sunshine to see now.

And fuck if that didn't make me want to destroy a whole damn town.

"Ness," Ethan is down for his nap, comfortably snoozing on the sofa where I left him after barricading him in with cushions and blankets, and then padding out the floor in case he decides to roll.

"I just gotta clean up real quick," Vanessa says, her back to me, shoulders stiff and spine straight.

Damn she looks uncomfortable in her own skin right now.

"Trouble," I try, gently touching her arm to try get her attention away from the dishes that were sparkling clean, but she's still scrubbing like they have burned grease on them.

I replay the whole thing in my head, replay her broken expression and the tears that fell. Replay how her voice cracked.

I was ashamed because I fucking fell in love with a man who made it so clear we would never be anything. I gave him my body, and my virginity because I trusted him. And then he left, and I felt like a naïve little girl who got screwed over.

God, I fucked up so bad.

And every day I'm fucking terrified because I can't have my heart broken again.

"Please don't call me that, Kolt."

"Why?" I ask, taking advantage now I have her attention, "Because it reminds you of before?"

"Yes," She admits.

"But you are trouble, Ness. The kind of trouble I want to keep finding myself in."

"You're only here because of Ethan."

"No." I correct her, "I came back for you. I'm not trying because of Ethan, though I'll always be around for my son. I'm trying for you."

She huffs, kind of like a scoff, "Please stop."

"I won't." I get her to turn but she keeps her eyes down, "I won't stop, Ness. Because I fell in love with you too. Spending those nights with you, watching the stars, witnessing those dark skies melt into dawn, they were the best nights of my life. I want to do life with you, every messy minute of it. I want every sorry and thank you, I want messy mornings and quiet evenings. I want to watch the moon, see every sunset, and count the stars with you, trouble."

Her breath stutters as she inhales, "Kolt." She says in a watery whisper.

"I want to love you, Ness." I tell her, "Every day I was there, I only thought of you. When I was alone and doing things I hated, it was you who kept me from being drowned by that darkness. I never stopped thinking about you."

"Kolt, please," she begs.

"How do I fix this, baby?" I plead, "How do I make you see you're my endgame?"

Her eyes flick to mine, her tears freely running down her cheeks, "It hurts."

"Can I get a band aid?" I crack the joke and revel in the laughter that bursts from her lips. It lights me up, a break in the clouds after a severe storm.

"I'm not sure a band aid will cover it," And even though her laugh is watery, and still soaked in sadness, she has a soft smile on her face.

"I can get a whole box of band aids." I offer, "The store sells ones with pictures on them."

"Oh, I know," She says as my thumbs brush over the fat tears on her cheeks, "Ethan won't accept any band aid without that little frog on it."

"Is the frog your favorite too?" I ask.

"No, I like the owl." She shrugs.

"Please give me another chance, Ness," I practically beg, "Please."

"I just..." She trails off.

"Let me try," I inject.

"I don't know how to anymore." She says in a whisper.

"Come with me in a couple hours," I say, "When Ethan is awake, come with me."

"Where?"

"My brothers."

Her face goes white, "What?"

"They know, trouble." I assure her "I told them when I found out."

"But no one has said anything, not even Arryn."

"Not sure the girls know yet, but my brothers do. They're not going to say anything either."

"Did you threaten them?" She asks seriously.

I can't help the laugh that booms from me, "My threats would do nothing, if they wanted to say something they would, and then they'd fight me on it later."

"Why are we going?"

"Why not?" I shrug.

"We're not playing happy family, Kolt," She says, "I can't just pretend."

"I'm not asking you to, trouble. But a change of routine and some different faces would be good. I know your sister hurt you earlier."

"She's upset because I lied."

"I understand that," I assure her, "Doesn't mean it was right either."

"How are you not mad at me too?"

"Because this isn't your fault," I tell her, "It's mine."

"I could have told Torin," She counters.

"You could have, and he would have somehow got the news to me, but they didn't know I was with Malakai." I tell her, "By the time I saw their message, several months could have passed. I understand why you didn't, nor do I think you had an obligation to tell them either."

A knot forms between her brows and she puffs out a breath, "Okay. We can go."

The next couple hours are spent in somewhat domestic harmony. Vanessa decides to change out of her leggings and sweater and when she comes downstairs sometime after Ethan wakes from his nap, I almost choke on my tongue.

It's a blue dress.

*The* blue dress.

It's hard not to recognize it even though she's accessorized it to fit with winter over the spring that I first saw it. A white sweater has been placed over the top, tied up with a belt but the skirt is left free and flowing. There's no way I wouldn't remember the dress, how it fell over the curve of her hips or how it teased mid-thigh. She's wearing a pair of tights with it today and a dark brown pair of boots but fuck, I think I'd recognize that dress even if it

were in tatters.

I still remember how it bunched up when she straddled my legs and how it pooled between her thighs while she touched herself beneath it. It's a damn miracle I don't drop to my knees right now and here.

"You're beautiful," I manage to stutter out, holding my son at my side.

A gorgeous blush warms her cheeks, and she shyly tucks a strand of blonde hair behind her ear, "Should we go?"

"Lead the way, trouble," I offer, following behind her as she makes her way to the door, grabbing a bag from the hook on the way out.

"Are you sure it's okay to go over?" She asks, locking up behind us.

"Yes, Ness." I assure her.

While we make our way down the path, I adjust Ethan, lifting him until he's on my shoulders, his tiny hands gripping my hair like its reins.

Vanessa laughs at my side, "He'll rip your hair out," She warns.

"Perhaps it's due a cut," I counter.

She gasps as if I offended her, "No!"

I laugh and while Ethan holds my hair tight, he doesn't pull or rip, he uses it more to keep himself balanced while he giggles with delight atop my shoulders. And I can see Vanessa smiling in the corner of my eye, walking at my side, her hand brushing the side of my leg with each stride.

It's something I can get used to, something I can see us doing over and over again.

I can see her swollen and glowing with another baby, see her cradling a newborn while I hold our son. I want to know life with her.

We make it to Torin's house ten minutes later, trudging through the snow and ice so our skin is cold, Vanessa's cheeks pinkened by the frost, but Ethan didn't seem to mind, even if his own cheeks resembled his mother's. He squeals with delight when Maya opens the door, saying her name on repeat and fidgeting atop my shoulders to get down and go to her, which she accepts gladly.

Ness embraces Maya warmly as she enters, and my brother's wife gives me a sweet smile as I follow. I hadn't spent a lot of time here since I've come

back, not since I've dedicated my time to Ness and Ethan, but I'd never guess it with the warm welcome we receive as we head through to the living room.

Arryn is on Vanessa immediately, hugging her close like she's a second sister and Harper is there too, grinning up at her. Vanessa takes it all, speaking with them while I greet my brothers with rough back slaps and tight nods.

I guess it'll take some time before we're on good terms like before, Rett feels betrayed whereas Torin doesn't know how to handle what I did for him to keep him alive.

Olivia, Arryn's sister just sits awkwardly in front of the fire. She smiles and talks but you can tell this isn't where she belongs.

She greets me kindly enough but quickly goes back to her phone, wincing a little. I feel bad for her, understanding how hard it is to fit in to such a lifestyle. Both her and Arryn have lived a life in the limelight, constantly social and active but where Arryn is relieved with the solitude this island brings, Olivia, I can tell, is not. It didn't matter that she's about to marry a literal devil, she isn't a small town girl.

When the greetings and conversations are done, Arryn throws herself down next to her sister while Maya goes to Torin, my son on her hip. I knew she was also pregnant with her and Torin's first baby, though they had yet to make it public.

Rett however sits in front of the fire, his elbows resting on his knees while he stares at Vanessa and me, notably the space between us.

"Look at this," Rett grins like the cheshire cat, "The whole family back together."

He's still pissed at me, even if he understands why I did what I did, but he wasn't getting over it anytime soon and I have a feeling he's about to mess with me. He'd never do anything to harm me or Vanessa, but needling and stirring the pot is definitely in his skill set.

And I'll have to deal with it until he feels like he's fairly got his own back on me.

And with Rett, who knows how long it'll be before he decides he's paid me back for the shit I put him through with Arryn.

It appears my brothers have filled their girls in with the news of Ethan which made mine and Vanessa's life easier, I guess. Vanessa gently touches my arm

and heads over to the space next to Maya, and Rett just grins wider. I guess it's time I sit and play whatever game he's about to start.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



 $\label{eq:All-equation} {}^{\text{\em constraints}} A \ \ \text{re we settling into blissful domestic life?" Rett asks Vanessa.} \\ \text{``Rett,'' Torin warns.}$ 

"It's just a question," He shrugs.

"It's been fine," Vanessa says nervously, flicking her eyes to me. My own narrow in on my brother, he can fuck with me all he likes, but I'll be dead before I let him fuck with Ness.

"Just fine," Rett winces dramatically, "My big bro that bad?"

Torin groans, throwing an arm around Maya to drag her into him until her back is on his chest, and Ethan is sat between them with a cookie Maya snagged from the plate in the middle of the table. He's happy there, which I'm grateful for, because it'll be hard to kick my brother's ass with a baby on my hip. Doable, but I'd rather not.

"We're getting used to it," she defends.

"I imagine," He agrees, "So how is it going to work with dating?"

"Rett," Arryn this time is the one to chastise him.

"That won't be anytime soon," Vanessa says, looking away from me quickly

as the words jab a knife into my chest.

"So, you and my brother...?" He leaves the question open, waiting for Vanessa to finish.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Don't say it baby, I beg silently, don't say it.

"We're not dating," she replies quietly, "We can co-parent just fine as it is."

Rett quirks a brow and looks to me, "Is that so?"

"I need to use the restroom," Vanessa gets up quickly, hurrying from the room. I try to get her attention, but she keeps her chin tucked to her chest and her cheeks are flaming.

"Maya," I say, my voice more growl than anything else, "Mind picking Ethan up for me?"

"What are you going to do?" She asks, wide eyed.

"Please," I ask. She does as I ask, lifting Ethan and getting up from the couch to go over to Arryn.

Rett just sits there all cocky, "Hurt, did it?" He mocks.

"It's one thing to fuck with me, Everett," I growl, my strides eating up the space between us so I'm looking down on him. The fucker doesn't even flinch. "But to fuck with her, to embarrass *her*."

"Everett," Torin says to our youngest brother, "Even I know that was low."

"That's the mother of my son," I growl, "You will treat her with some damn respect."

"Vanessa's a lovely girl," Rett shrugs, buffing his nails on the chest of his shirt, "No disrespect to her, you however, you can get fucked."

"Rett, that's enough," Arryn tries, "We talked about this."

"Yeah, well I thought about it a bit," Rett stands, shoving into me but I plant myself, not moving an inch as my little brother squares up to me, "He doesn't get to come back here to play house after he almost got you killed."

"What would you have him do!?" Arryn says.

"Play house?" I snap, "I'm not playing fucking house. I'm here for my son."

"That you never knew about," Rett scoffs, "Wonder why she never told

anyone, Kolt. Maybe it's because she knows she can't fucking trust you." "Fuck you, Everett."

"Nah, man," Rett shoves at my shoulders, "Fuck you and your damn martyr complex. What happens the next time, you just gonna up and leave? Leave the mother of your child alone with your son to go save the world?" He shoves me again, "Get your head out your ass, Kolten because you're destroying everything in your path, not fucking fixing it."

"Leave her out of it," I warn.

"She was better off without you." He whispers it so low, but damn it rings fucking clear inside my head, and I snap.

My fist connects with Rett's jaw, snapping his head to the side but the little fucker just laughs. "That all you got, big bro?"

I get another punch to his face, cracking his nose when he swings for me, getting a sound connection to my eye socket which bursts pain through my skull. I grab the fabric of his shirt and toss him across the room, reveling in his body slamming across the table, scattering the cookies, and shattering the plate they were on. He gets up quickly, the fire roaring behind him.

With a wipe to his nose to clear the blood, he squares up again, "You disappear," He snaps, "not letting any of us know if you're okay, and then get some poor girl knocked up and disappear again. You're no fucking hero, Kolten."

"You think this is what I wanted!?" I yell. "I loved her! I fucking loved her, but I left her for you! To keep you fucking safe."

"No one asked you to protect us, Kolten," Rett hisses, his words a duplicate of Ness's only a few days ago. "Don't get me wrong, I appreciate it but a little heads up would have sufficed. We're fucking Avery's, you really think it would have been that easy? We would have handled it. But no, you fucking took on that burden and then you dragged my girl into it!"

"I apologized for Arryn, Everett," I say, "I did what I had to do."

"Sure, you did," He scoffs.

"This isn't even about me," I retort, "It's about Vanessa."

"Yeah?" Rett jerks his chin, "Then why is she leaving with your son and not sticking by you? Maybe it's because she knows you'll pretend to be around

but when things get tough, you'll disappear."

"I'll get her," Arryn says from the doorway and it's then I notice everyone has cleared out of the room.

I nod subtly and turn back to my brother, "I'm sorry, okay?" With a sigh, I drop to the couch and hold my head in my hand, "There's so much to fix, and I don't even know how to anymore."

Porcelain crunches under his feet as he crosses the room. He doesn't give me some wise answer or even a snarky comment, instead his hand lands on my shoulder in a brotherly gesture before he says, "Fuck, Maya is going to kill us."

I look up, wincing at the state of the living room.

"Damn straight she's gonna kill both of you idiots," Torin crosses his arms, "next time you wanna fuck each other up, how about you go do it in the back yard where the dogs belong."

"I'm too pretty to fight in the dirt," Rett says seriously, "just tell your pretty wife to move all the valuables."

"Watch it," Torin warns, "I have no problem finishing what Kolt started." Rett chuckles, "So serious."

"Clean up this mess, Maya and Arryn have gone to get Vanessa. It's hardly a good impression of what we're like," Torin tells us both off, "You gotta sort your shit out, Kolt, before you lose her permanently."

"I'm trying!" I defend.

"Not hard enough." Torin dismisses. "Clean up."

It's hard to remember I'm supposed to be the eldest when Torin goes and acts like that.

Rett and I manage to clean up the living room, collecting the shards of porcelain from the carpet by the time the girls come back with Vanessa. They're laughing about something but when Vanessa sees me, the smile drops from her face and her eyes turn down.

Fuck.

"Can I talk to you?" I ask, forgetting the mess in favor of my girl.

"I've got him!" Maya immediately plucks Ethan from her arms.

With a nod, she turns and heads back into the cold and I follow.

It's cold, the sky full of tumbling grey clouds that promise more snow. The water laps at the shore, foamy and white while gulls squawk over the waves. There are no boats out in the bay, and the huts that line the shore are closed, shutters down and bolted to fight the wind that constantly batters them. Vanessa tucks her coat closer, tucking her face into the neckline before she turns to me.

"You're bruised," She points out.

"Hardly a surprise," I say, "Rett has a mean right hook."

"I can only imagine what it was like with you three growing up," She laughs lightly, "How many busted noses and split lips there were."

"I lost count," I agree, "We always fought as kids, ever since their dad took me in and made me one of them."

She nods, "It's good to see you all together, though."

"Why did you leave?" I ask.

"It's a lot," She admits, "And then you got in a fight with your brother, and everyone was asking questions."

"It didn't exactly turn out the way I hoped," I agree, "It was supposed to be relaxing."

A laugh bursts from her, "It was certainly something."

We keep walking, talking and by the time I realize where we are, we've stopped at the end of the dock where we used to sit all those years ago. Where it all started.

"This place never changes," She admires the view.

"I'm glad it doesn't," I add, "It keeps my memories fresh."

She nods in agreement, "I haven't been on this dock once since I've been back, except the other day when I found you."

For a few seconds, silence eats up the space between us, the only noise to fill it is the sounds of the waves, but I can't keep myself in this loop any longer.

I can't pretend it would be okay to live without her.

"I can't let you go, trouble," I tell her, "I can't be here, where you are, and not want to drown in you."

"I'm finding I'm not very good at it either," She glances at me, her eyes flicking away quickly.

"Let me show you," I beg, "Let me show you how much I love you."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



M y blood rushes in my ears and my cheeks burn, a mix of the cold and anticipation warming me through, "Okay." I whisper.

I don't want to be strong with him anymore. This week has been hell, having him under my roof, so close and yet not allowing myself to get near. I can't help but be scared of it, of feeling the kind of pain I went through back then. But I'm annoying myself with the same mantra, I can give myself to him, satisfy that craving I have for him, and protect my heart.

I'm not that girl anymore.

It seems to take Kolt a moment to realize what I've said but when he does, he closes the gap between us, his thick arms snaking around me. His eyes are filled with an expression I can't completely place, his smile wide and unguarded.

Despite the layers I have on me, I *feel* him. I feel the connection of him like a brand on my skin, burning me, permanently etched into me. I tip my face up to keep looking, but then his mouth crashes on mine and fuck... It feels like home.

My memories have not given this man justice, not when this is better than I

could ever remember. He tastes divine, feels like heaven. I'm on my tiptoes, kissing him in the spot where I fell in love with him.

His stubble scratches at my skin and his tongue swipes through my mouth with a fervor that I match. I let my hands thread into his hair, tugging at it until it becomes loose from the bun, and it just forces him into deepening our connection.

"I missed you so fucking much, trouble," He groans.

"Keep kissing me," I beg.

"Let me take you home," He asks, capturing my bottom lip in his teeth which shoots heat straight through me. It's been a long time since I've felt that. Felt the rush to be with a man, felt need and want. It's been hard, and I've not been with anyone else.

"Ethan," I groan, remembering where we are.

"Shit," He curses, as if too, he'd forgotten.

"It's okay," I whisper, "let's just go get him and go home."



We don't end up going home at all.

Instead, we're all sat around a big dining table while Torin serves dinner. Harper plays with Ethan at one end of the table while Rett whispers something into Arryn's ear that makes her blush, and Kolt sits at my side. His hand is on my knee which bounces with nerves. I guess I'm waiting for the shoe to drop. Waiting for the questions and accusations on why I kept Ethan a secret from them, but they never come.

Kolt gives my leg a squeeze before he tops up my glass of water, and then grabs the bottle of red from the middle of the table to fill up my empty glass.

While Rett and Kolt haven't spoken since their fight in the living room earlier, it didn't feel hostile either, and while I didn't know what had gone down between them, I guess whatever it was earlier has cleared the air some.

It's nice being with everyone, even if it did feel like I was to be roasted at any minute, but perhaps that's just my nerves talking, and not them in any way.

I expected them to be mad at me, even if it was just a little bit for keeping Ethan a secret from them. But I haven't dealt with an ounce of judgement

from them.

"While I love being around everyone," Kolt whispers in my ear, "I can't wait to get you home to kiss you some more. I have years' worth of catching up to do."

My cheeks burn, "Kolt," I admonish beneath my breath.

"Just saying how it is, trouble."

The nickname still makes my heart do a little flip flop inside my chest. But it was okay, I could control how deep I let myself fall into this.

"But we will feed you first," He continues, "then I'm having you for myself."

I swallow and focus back on the room, finding Maya staring with a sweet little grin. She doesn't say anything which I am grateful for and then we all tuck into the food Torin prepared. It tastes so good. Everything I've eaten these past few days has tasted amazing, to the point I wonder how I ever lived off warmed up leftovers and ramen. I could cook, I loved to cook but it was just something I lost.

Conversation flows and laughter is shared as the meal is devoured and even Rett and Kolt get into a joking match at some point, clearing the air some more between them, and by the time we gather our coats and put on our shoes, the light of day has disappeared and the moon now shines in a clear sky.

I'm not sure when the clouds cleared and the threat of snow passed, but it had and now the stars twinkle against the velvet black night, the sound of the ocean a calming lull that joins our steps through the frozen snow on the ground.

"Thank you," I whisper, hoping not to wake a sleeping Ethan who is tucked in the cradle of Kolt's arms, wrapped up in blankets Arryn and Maya pulled together to keep him warm for the walk home. They were wound all over his body and around his head to try stave off the chill which seemed to be working because he hasn't stirred one bit.

"For what, baby?" Kolt asks, glancing to his son.

"Bringing me here tonight," I sigh, "I needed it."

"Anything, Ness." He looks over, "I'll give you anything you need."

"I don't want the world Kolt." I tell him.

"I'd give it to you if you asked." He answers so genuinely I truly believe him in this moment.

"Just be his father," I say quietly, "Just be here."

He nods, "Always.

The remainder of the walk is had in a comfortable kind of silence, our focus on not slipping on the ice beneath our feet and keeping our son from waking up. We make it back to the little bungalow, frozen to the bone and get inside. The house is warm, thanks to Kolt fixing the boiler, and we go through to Ethan's bedroom before either of us even attempt to make conversation.

Kolt sets up his bed, closing the curtains and pulling back the blankets while I go about gently undressing him, trying to keep him from waking fully while I change him and put on his pajamas. He wakes once but he's so dozy he barely stirs and I'm able to transfer him into his bed, tucking him in with his favorite stuffed bear. Grabbing the monitor on the way out, I shut his door, and head through to the living room, collapsing onto the couch with a sigh.

Kolt is there a moment later, standing in the threshold of the door before he closes the gap between us.

"You look tired," He comments.

"I am," I admit with a sleepy smile, "it just hit."

My brows tug low when I see him kneeling on the floor at my feet and then his hands go to my boots.

"It's okay," I try to pull my leg away, but he silences me with a stern look.

He unzips the boots and gently pulls them off, placing the pair to the side as his hands then go to the soles of my feet. The noise that comes out of my mouth can only be one of pure pleasure. His thumbs press into the bridge of my feet, kneading the muscles as he gently massages them.

"Your dress," He mumbles, "you wore it that night in the cave."

My eyes widen, surprised he remembers such a small detail, "Yes."

"You seem shocked I remember," He muses, rubbing my feet like a goddamn expert.

"Because I am," I groan, flopping back on the couch.

"Why?" He laughs, "I'll always remember the dress, especially when the

memory that goes with it, is you riding your hand while you watched me." My breath catches in my throat.

"Fuck you looked so damn pretty, your cheeks all flushed, lips parted as you moved on your hand. And when you came, God, I'd never seen anything more perfect."

I'm a mess. Heat pools between my legs and my stomach knots, my thighs aching as arousal floods my entire system. I want to squirm, and I want to climb the man like a damn tree.

He chuckles, "I know baby," He rasps, "but try to relax for me."

How the hell was I supposed to relax?

I force my eyes closed, squeezing them tight and when he's finished with one foot, he moves to the other. I stay really still, and I don't say a word, too afraid my voice will give away just how turned on for him I am right now.

Damn, I feel so easy.

Breathing deeply, I calm myself, focusing on how good it feels with his hands on my feet, working muscles I didn't even know were so tense.

"Come on," He finishes with my feet, "You need some sleep."

"Wait, what?"

He just chuckles, "I'm here to prove we have time, trouble," he knocks my chin gently, "Bed, now."

In some sort of trance, I head through to the bedroom, so confused with his signals I'm wondering if I made it all up. But I change out of my clothes and into my flannel pants and a cami and climb under the warm sheets.

Kolt comes through a moment later, hovering at the door, "Can I sleep in here with you?"

I nod, swallowing, "Please."

Flicking out the lights to the rest of the house, he shuts the bedroom door and then walks over to the vacant side of the bed, placing the monitor on the cabinet. He then strips down into a pair of boxers and I'm pretty sure that's a little bit of drool coming out my mouth.

Muscles, so many muscles as if he's been carved from stone, a smattering of hair on his chest and a trail that leads from his navel and disappears beneath

the band of his boxers. He takes off the rings on his fingers, placing them on the side, and then pulls back the covers to lay beside me.

"Go to sleep, Ness," I hear the amused lilt to his tone, "staring at me like that will only lead to trouble."

"Isn't that what you expect with me?" I tease.

"Only when I'm not trying to prove to you how much I'm in." He rolls onto his side to look at me, "Can I hold you?"

I nod against the pillow and then move into the arms he holds open for me.

Can a person smell like home? I wonder about it as I inhale the scent of him, and he holds me so tight, like he can barely withstand the thought of letting me go.

And even though I wonder why he isn't wanting more, like maybe there's something wrong with me, I can't bring myself to ask or move from the cocoon of warmth he's put me in.

It makes not falling into the trap just that little bit harder.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



T here is nothing more right than when she is in my arms. I hold her close to me, not bearing a single inch between us and she sleeps so soundly, so peacefully as if she feels the same. Her breathing is even, and I feel her heartbeat against my own chest.

I've lost years with her but no more, there won't be a day that goes by where I am not with her. I want to be in her soul, buried under her skin like she's buried under mine.

The sun is just cresting on the horizon, poking rays of light through a crack in the curtain. I'd gotten up once in the night with Ethan, getting it done quick, so I didn't wake her and when he'd fallen back to sleep, I came back to her.

She's not stirred once but now she's starting to fidget, stretching out her limbs before her eyes crack open sleepily.

"Good morning," She rumbles.

"Good morning, trouble."

"You're still here," she doesn't move from my arms as her amber eyes fully open.

"I told you I'm not leaving."

Her cheeks warm, "Did you sleep?"

"Yes," I lie.

Her eyes narrow as if picking up on it, but she doesn't call me out, instead she wiggles against me, trying to get free. "Where are you going?" I yank her back, but her back is now against my chest, the curve of her ass pressing into me. Blood shoots straight to my cock, and the more she wiggles the harder I get.

"We gotta get up!" She laughs as she fights to get free but when she feels how hard I am, she pauses and looks over her shoulder, that blush on her cheeks intensifying. There are no words to describe how much I love that blush, how she's not able to hide it from me.

With her eyes on mine, head turned to look over her shoulder, she pushes back against me. Fuck. It's been a long damn time, I haven't had another since the night she gave herself to me, there was no way anyone would be able to compare to her, and now she's rubbing her sweet body all over mine, I'm just about ready to combust.

"Ness," I groan, a warning, a plea.

"Yeah?" She answers innocently, pushing back more and fuck, I am about to snap. My hand lands on her hip, telling myself to push her away. I didn't want to take until she fully knew how committed I was, but I don't find myself doing that at all. Instead, I'm pulling her to me, pressing in my own hips. There was just thin material between us, it wouldn't take much...

"I'm not taking until you're ready," I tell her but even I hear the lie.

"Who said I wasn't ready?" She moans as my hand slides up the center of her abdomen, up over her ribs until I can curl my hand beneath her breast, fingers gripping before I swipe over the hardened peak of her nipple.

"Shit you're so perfect, trouble," I press my lips to her shoulder, "We shouldn't. Not yet."

"Is this your way of protecting me?" She laughs, tipping her head back.

"Yes," I admit.

"Well don't," She growls. I hadn't seen her move, but her hand is now between us, fingers trailing over the hardened length of me, teasing me through the material of my boxers. "Fuck," I rasp, forcing her arm away as I push her onto her stomach, covering her body with mine. My cock is pressed to the center of her, beneath the lush curve of her ass. "Are you wet, baby?" I rasp.

"Yes," She breathes, her hips attempting to lift but unable to do so since I'm much heavier.

"I've dreamt of sliding so deep into you you'd feel me there for days. Of fucking you and hearing you sing for me. I remember how warm and tight you were. You're built for me, aren't you, Ness?"

I hold her arms above her head, pressing her into the mattress. "Please, Kolt," she begs, "Don't make me wait."

"So needy, trouble," I chuckle, "Let me take care of you," I say, letting her arms go, "Stay where you are."

A tremor works through her as I lift and straddle her thighs, my fingers going to the waist band of her pants. I begin to pull them down only to notice she'd come to bed with no panties, and I'm greeted by the firm cheeks of her ass and her pussy, wet and glistening.

She wiggles, helping me push down her pants until they're around her knees and restricting her movement.

I could come at the mere sight of it. Her spine arches as she goes up onto her elbows to look back at me, her eyes a molten gold, heated with desire.

"So pretty, Ness," I praise, giving her ass a squeeze.

I trace my hand over, my thumb slipping between her legs to give her wet pussy some attention. She collapses down with a groan, her hips lifting as if in offering.

"Tell me you're mine, baby," I tease her clit with soft circles from my thumb, my middle finger at her entrance, not inside yet but the way she pushes back on me tells me that's what she wants.

"I'm yours," she whispers, "Always been yours."

"Do you want to come?" I apply more pressure, teasing forward with my finger.

"God, yes," She begs. Keeping the same slow circle of my thumb, I push my fingers further into her as I lean and bite the soft mound of her ass. She bucks under me but with me straddling her, she can't get away.

So damn responsive for me, I fuck her with my fingers, her wetness coating my hand as she writhes beneath me, her moans being trapped by the pillow beneath her face. Her skin has a fine sheen of sweat to it, the insides of her thighs slick with her arousal.

"Give it to me, Ness," I demand, "Come all over my fingers for me."

She cries out, fingers curling into the sheets as her pussy contracts around my fingers and her orgasm shakes her body.

I want to bury myself into her, fuck her raw until she can't walk.

"So beautiful when you fall apart for me, trouble," I kiss my way up her spine, moving her hair away from the nape of her neck so I can scrape my teeth across her skin. Her skin pebbles as her breath rushes from her lips.

"Fuck me, please," she whispers, "God, Kolt."

"I've missed you, trouble," I kiss across her jaw, and she turns her face to me, capturing my mouth with hers.

"Don't make me wait," She pleads, her teeth nipping at my bottom lip.

Fuck it.

With my mouth remaining on hers, I shove at my boxers, freeing my hard cock. Precum leaks from the tip as I slip between her legs, the warmth of her shooting pleasure straight down my spine.

I don't let myself enter her yet, instead I revel in the feel of her on me, letting the wetness of her coat the crown of my cock. She's trying to push back, trying to hurry this, but doesn't she know we have all the time in the world? Every minute of mine is hers.

"Please, I need you," She begs.

"I'm yours," I kiss her.

I reach between us, grasping my aching cock and slide it up to her entrance, teasing forward so just the tip of me enters her. Fuck she's so tight and wet.

I push forward another inch, my restraint at a snapping point when an almighty wail rips through the house.

The monitor on the bedside cabinet blares orange flashing lights as the sound of Ethan's cry crackles through the speaker.

"Shit," I hiss, pulling out of her and scrambling from the bed. She tries to do

the same but gets caught up in her pajama pants and the sheets and ends up as a pile on the floor.

I chuckle as I hop into my sweats, "I've got him!"

Her cheeks are blooming red by the time I'm decent enough to get out of the room and across the hall to where Ethan is screaming.

"Hey baby boy," I enter the room, cooing gently. He's standing, using the railings of his crib as he attempts to free himself from his bed. "I got you," I lift him gently, holding him to my hip as I gently wipe away the fat tears that roll down his cheeks. "Daddy's got you."

He sniffles, eyes still glistening with tears, but the cries have softened. I carry him through to the living room, and then through to the kitchen.

"Is it breakfast time?" I ask, "Are we making all this noise because we're hungry?"

He shakes his head hard, making his hair flop all over the place, "Breakfast," he points to the box of oats left on the counter.

Chuckling, "I get it." I agree, "I'm cranky when I'm hungry too."

I grab the oats and milk, warming it on the stove before I add in the chopped blueberries from the fridge. The tears no longer fall, and he watches what I do with such concentration his little brows tug low.

"You're really good with him," Vanessa says from behind me, now dressed in a pair of tight blue jeans and a sweater, her hair tugged up into a bun.

"That's because I'm your daddy," I say to Ethan with a grin, bouncing him on my hip.

Vanessa smiles, "Here let me dish this up, did you want some too?" She asks me.

"Sure," I agree, stepping away from the stove while Vanessa dishes up breakfast into bowls.

We sit down at the small dining table in front of the window, a bright day beyond with the sun attempting to melt the snow covering the ground. Before Ness can pick up the spoon to help Ethan eat, I take it.

<sup>&</sup>quot;You eat," I order gently.

<sup>&</sup>quot;But-"

"You argue and I won't let you finish the next time I get you to myself," I tell her with a low voice. Her eyes widen and her teeth capture her bottom lip while I just chuckle at how hard she finds it to conceal her emotions.

I go about helping Ethan eat his breakfast, he does a lot of it himself, even if it ends up smeared over his face more than it ends up in his mouth and I eat in between.

It feels right doing this, the three of us, even with the silence between us, it's comfortable, like this has been going on for years instead of the mere week or so it has been.

Never had I believed, coming from where I came from, I'd be granted such a gift.

# **CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR**



T am on edge.

Levery touch, kiss, whispered word just winds me up tighter. My heart hasn't stopped racing and goddamn, the ache between my thighs makes me want to rip his clothes off right here and now. It didn't matter that we were in the middle of the only grocery store in town and surrounded by people who have known me since I was a kid.

"Are you okay, trouble?" Kolt asks when I jump at the brush of his fingers along my lower back. I glower at him, snatching the coffee from the shelf to shove it into the cart. I don't understand how he's in such a good mood and not wound up just like me since he didn't even get to come once. I did and I'm still balancing on that edge.

"Peachy," I grumble.

He chuckles low and unwraps the rest of Ethan's cookie bar to keep him distracted while we finish shopping.

"You seem a little on edge, baby," He whispers in my ear, his proximity and the tickle of his breath sending a rush of goose bumps to rise on my skin.

"Nope," I lie, "I'm perfectly fine."

I've gone the last three years without sex or even the touch of a man and have been *fine*, and now look at me!? I'm like a damn cat in heat. Pretty sure I'd back up on Kolt's dick if he so much as gave me the go ahead.

My cheeks flame at the thought and I quickly turn away since Kolt tends to love it when I blush, and him commenting on it right now will only make it worse. I can feel my ears burning and my poor lip is swollen and sore with how much I've nibbled on it.

It feels like hours need to pass before I can get Kolt alone. Ethan didn't even go down for his morning nap so it wasn't like I could climb him like a tree then either.

"You sure?" Kolt continues, reaching over me to grab the chips I was struggling to reach from the top shelf. I turn when he is still behind me and quickly look left and right to make sure the aisle is empty, then I grab the belt of his jeans and tug him to me.

"No, I'm not sure," I hiss, melting at his nearness, "I ache."

"Is that so?" He grins, leaning down to brush his lips on mine, "How bad baby?"

"I'd let you fuck me in the parking lot, bad," I groan.

His eyes widen a little at my forwardness, hell even I'm shocked at it but apparently, I have needs that he just lit a match to.

"We're revisiting that," He groans, and does the smart thing by stepping away, grasping the cart to keep moving through the store.

"How are you this calm!?" I hiss under my breath.

He glances to me with a smirk pulling on his mouth, "I've had to wait years to have you again, Ness. I had to teach myself restraint to not get hard every time I thought about you. Trust me, inside I'm roaring to get inside you."

A gasp draws my attention from Kolt, and I whip my head around to find little old Mrs. Kent staring at us with a mix of horror and offence.

"Sorry Mrs. Kent," I cringe.

She tuts loudly, clutching her imaginary pearls as she speeds past. For a sweet little seventy-year-old, she sure can move fast.

It doesn't take Kolt a second to burst into rambunctious laughter.

I round my wide eyes to him, "Stop it!" a giggle slips from me, "This isn't funny!"

But Kolt keeps laughing which sets Ethan off, even if he has no idea what's so funny.

"God, she's going to tell everyone in her book club! We will never live it down!"

"Let her," Kolt chuckles, his eyes lit with amusement.

I roll my eyes, "I have a reputation."

"And how will your reputation fare, my sweetest trouble," Kolt whispers,

"When I do get to fuck you in the back of a car out in the parking lot?"

"That'll never happen," I brush off the effect his words have on me.

"Don't test me, Ness, I have no problem proving how wrong you are."

We manage to finish grocery shopping without any more incidents, but does that mean I get to have Kolt to myself? No. It does not.

The moment the shopping is away my phone is buzzing with Immy's name flashing across the screen. It's the sixth time she's tried to call today but I'd been dodging her calls since I wasn't sure I was ready to face her after what happened yesterday.

But I guess I can't ignore her forever, so I hit the green button and press the phone to my ear.

"Hi," I answer nervously.

"Hey Nessa," Immy replies, her own voice betraying her anxiousness.

"Everything okay?" I pretend all is fine between us, like she didn't rip me apart the day before.

"You've been ignoring my calls," She says it quietly.

"Just busy," I lie.

"You and I both know that's a lie."

I lean on the counter and let out a short breath, "I don't know what you want me to say, Immy."

"I'm sorry, okay?" She breathes, "I was just hurt that you knew, and you didn't tell me and that he's here, Ness."

"I know," I sigh, "And I'm sorry I didn't tell you, it just..."

"I know," She says, "Can you come over?" She then asks, "Bring Kolt, I think I need to apologize to him too, for my behavior yesterday."

"Now?" I ask with a squeak. Ethan was about to go for a nap and Kolt...

"Yeah," she perks up, "I'll make you pancakes!"

Knowing if I don't, she'll only come here, "Okay, we will be there in ten."

I hang up the phone and go in search of my two boys, finding them in the living room where Ethan is lounging across Kolt's thighs, cooing words that don't really make sense like sheep and orange. He can string together some sentences but isn't a big talker yet.

"We're um, we're going to head over to see my sister." I tell him, "You're invited too, but don't feel like you have to."

He places Ethan down and casually strolls to me, "Do you want me to come?"

I nod which earns me a grin and then he's kissing me again, stealing my breath and knotting my stomach. "Guess we'll be waiting a little longer then." He knocks my chin with his knuckle, "Let's go."



We make it to Immy's before the sky decides to unleash a torrent of snow no one had seen coming. It turns the town white and makes visibility almost non-existent. Kolt holds Ethan close to his body, sheltering him from the bite of the wind, and the snow and we hurry into the diner, greeted by a warm fire roaring already and the smell of coffee.

My sister is somewhere in the back, I can hear her and Shawn laughing. I settle Ethan into one of the booths with Kolt and go searching for her. She's at the stove with Shawn, a plate of pancakes already made and piled on a large plate to the side of her.

"Hey," I greet.

She spins on me, chewing her lip. We fought when we were kids, all the time, over trivial things and over tough things too. We fought a lot when Ethan was born and most of the time her heart is in the right place, but she tries to act older than she is, tries to pretend to be something she isn't and yesterday, she went too far, regardless of whether I told her who Kolt was.

She closes the space between us quickly and envelops me in a warm hug. I hug her back, holding her tight. She's my only family, the only constant I could rely on.

"I'm sorry," She whispers.

"Me too," I reply, tucking my head into her neck.

We stay embraced for a little bit longer before she releases a breath and pulls away, keeping her hands at my shoulders as her eyes search my face. I guess she's just making sure I'm okay and when she's satisfied that I am, she nods and then says, "So can you tell me everything now?"

I laugh, "What do you mean?"

"I *mean* how the hell you ended up with an Avery brother? And not just any Avery brother, the brother no one really knows about!? Did you know he was adopted?"

I roll my eyes, "Yes, I know that. And I don't know how, it just happened."

"Okaaayy," She drags out the word, "That doesn't just happen, when did you meet him?"

"Five years ago, when he was here for Torin after Grace died."

She nods following and then gasps, "I knew you were up to something!"

"Yes well," I push it off, "It wasn't supposed to be anything then."

It feels like a lifetime ago and while most of it was good, part of it was stained by our departures. I still have nightmares about that night, about being held hostage by men who wanted to kill me and Kolt. Did I fully understand the whole of it? No, I didn't, but I didn't blame Kolt for it either.

It was easier saying goodbye to him then than it was the second time round, even if I did pine over him. I still like to believe I would have moved on eventually but who knows how long that would have taken.

"Okay but that wasn't when Ethan was conceived," She pries.

"I'm not going into that with you, Imogen," I laugh.

"I don't need the details! But he left before you went to college," she says, "I remember Ruthie saying how he didn't even say goodbye to his brothers."

I wince on his behalf, "I never pegged you to be a gossip."

She waves it off, "So it wasn't then, so when? How did you two see each

other again?"

"We just did." I never told anyone about what happened with Patrick or that Kolt saved me from an attack that would have scarred me for life. "And then Ethan was here."

She sighs, I didn't want to get into all of it, or rehash how it felt to find out he was gone, and I was going to be doing this alone.

"Have you forgiven him?" She asks finally.

"I'm working on it," and that was the truth because even if I do allow my walls down with him and let him in, I think I'll always worry he'll leave once more. And loving him makes me want to forget about it. Forget it ever happened.

And that'll just lead to more heartbreak for me, and I don't think I'll recover from that.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



I t's awkward with Vanessa's sister, but I had expected that and while I respect Vanessa's decision to let go of what happened yesterday, I can't help but feel a little cold toward her. I don't know Imogen well, just like I don't know anyone here at all really, and I know she loves her sister dearly, it was still a shitty thing to do. It's about respect and boundaries. Just like calling Rett out when he was disrespectful to her the day before.

The conversation flowed fine, but we didn't talk about much, mainly Ethan and settling into town. She pried for information about us, but Ness shut it down.

And an hour later we're leaving, without our son. Imogen had asked to keep him for the night, something the two sisters did often, it gave Ness a break and gave Imogen some time with her nephew. According to them they had everything they needed for an overnight stay and had practically shooed us out the door.

The snow is still falling, coating the town some more and we trudge through it on the way back to the bungalow.

And while I wanted to spend as much time as I could with my son, I'm

anticipating having Vanessa completely to myself. They'll be no screaming monitors to stop me from doing exactly what I wanted to do to her this morning.

When we finally make it back, I get a fire going to warm the house while Vanessa changes out of her clothes and into something warmer. I have a coffee made by the time she comes out and the fire started.

"You work fast," She muses with a sweet smile.

I lean back on the couch, "Come here."

She's changed into a pair of leggings and an oversized sweater, her hair now down and flowing over her shoulders like liquid honey. Her freckles are one of my favorite features on her, but nothing can come close to how much I love to see her blush.

She closes the gap between us except when she goes to sit at my side, I grab her instead and pull her into my lap. She stumbles and catches herself, but I barely give her time to recover when I crash my lips to hers.

I kiss her until I can't breathe, until it's her filling my lungs.

"I've been wanting to do that all day," I whisper, capturing her lip between my teeth.

"Do it again," She breathes, leaning in for more. I'm more than happy to oblige. She maneuvers herself until she's straddling my lap and I'll be honest; I'm already hard. She rolls herself over the hardened length beneath my pants, grinding against it.

My hands cup her waist, keeping her pinned to me, her mouth moving over mine. There are not enough minutes in a day to quench my desire for her. Not enough seconds or hours or weeks to explore every inch of her, from the body that holds her, to the soul underneath.

"Kolt," my name is a plea from her lips.

"I know baby." I groan, lifting her until she's on her back and I'm in the cradle of her thighs.

"More." She gazes up at me, her eyes that molten color of gold as her desire masks her expression completely.

"I know you need me to fill you up baby," I growl, trailing kisses over her jaw, and down her neck, hands going to the hem of her sweater to push it up

and expose her. "Fuck you so hard the only thing you'll remember is me, the only thing you'll feel is me stretching you open and you coming over and over."

"God, please," Her head tips back as I kiss up her abdomen, pushing her sweater up further to expose her breasts, only covered by a thin strip of lace that does nothing to conceal the hardened peaks of her nipples.

"Are you praying to him, trouble?" I growl, biting one of those buds between my teeth, "Perhaps you should ask him for forgiveness." I move my mouth to her other nipple, loving on that as much as I did the other, "Because what I am about to do to you is anything but *holy*."

She groans when I push the lace away and lay my mouth to her sensitive bare skin. Her spine arches, searching for more.

"I was your first, trouble," I move down her body, teeth grazing and tongue licking, tasting the salt on her skin, "I intend to also be your last."

"There's never been anyone else," She gasps out as I yank at her leggings, dragging them down her thighs along with the lace panties she has on. But her words make me pause.

"What did you say?"

"I've only been with you," she breathes, "Please don't stop."

I did not expect that. At all. Not that I expected her to have a whole list of new names, but I didn't expect to still be the only one who's experienced the perfection that is Vanessa.

I continue tugging down her leggings, "Look at the mess you've made, Ness," I muse at her panties that dangle from my finger. She blushes which makes me grin and then I'm between her legs, worshipping her like she deserves. And fuck she tastes divine. She jerks under me, her hands going to my hair which she loosens from the bun I'd kept it in. She holds me to her as if I'd rather be anywhere else.

My tongue swipes over her, nipping and sucking until I focus on that sensitive clit at the top. I kiss it gently as one hand keeps her thighs open and the other slowly penetrates her. So damn wet and ready for me. But this isn't going to be over in one or two or three rounds, I need her like I need air.

I have years' worth to catch up on, years' worth of showing her how much I've missed her and yearned for her. She's a craving I haven't been able to

satisfy, a desire nothing has been able to fill.

I take my fill of her now, tasting her, letting the tremors of her body work through me as I wind her up and up, keeping her on the precipice until her fingers are clawing at my scalp and her muscles are so tight, she's about to snap and detonate. I come away from her clit, looking up at her from between her legs. Wide eyes turn to me as I slowly insert my fingers, pumping them at a gentle pace, curling just right to hit that sweet little spot inside.

"You've been such a good girl all day, trouble, wound so tight you thought you were going to combust."

"Yes." Her eyes roll to the back of her head as I quicken the pace.

"So patient baby."

"P-please," She stutters.

"Such pretty manners," I praise, pressing a chaste kiss to her sensitive clit. She jumps, letting out a sweet little moan. My mouth latches to her clit and I don't keep her at the edge this time, I flick my tongue against the quakes of her body, intensifying until her legs clamp around my head and she rides my face and fingers, her orgasm shaking her to her core. She chants my name and comes on my tongue, and fuck if it isn't the most addicting thing I've ever experienced.

I gently ease her down, slowly bringing my hand away and kiss her lower stomach gently, her muscles jumping under my touch.

I crawl up her body, covering her entirely with my own before I capture her mouth, kissing her as my hard cock presses into her center. "Are you okay?" I whisper.

"God yes," she whispers, "Take me to bed, Kolt."

"If we go in that bedroom, trouble, I'm not letting you leave."

"Good." She grins. I lift onto my hands above her, as she wiggles under me and then she's shoving out of her sweater and lace bra, leaving her completely bare for me.

I don't waste a minute, plucking her up from the couch to take her through to the bedroom. "I want to pick up where we left off, trouble," I purr against her mouth before I set her down, "Get on the bed, face down."

Her cheeks heat but she does as I ask and climbs onto the bed, crawling up it

and showing me her perfect round ass and her pretty pussy, glistening with arousal. She lays down, arms above her head and turns her face, "Like this?" She breathes.

"God yes," I groan, cupping my cock as if it'll help the ache. "Lift your hips for me, Ness." She does as I ask, and I walk to the edge of the bed, grabbing the pillow from the other side to slide beneath her and keep her in the air. I trail a finger down the dip of her spine, tracing it as it curves into her ass and then give it a squeeze. So perfect.

She turns to face me, "What are you going to do?" She asks, her voice shaking a little, but her eyes are heated and her cheeks bloom with color.

"I'm going to fuck you, Ness." I bend till my face is level with hers, "I'm going to fuck you until you forget we were ever apart. Fuck you until you can feel me there for days after to remind you, I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to prove to you over and over again that you are mine, and I am yours. And when I'm done doing that, I'm going to worship your body like the temple it is. Thank it for giving me a beautiful son, thank *you* for giving me another chance. And when you think you can't take anymore, I'm going to do it all again to prove that you can."

Her lips part at my words, "Now stay still, trouble," I tell her, grabbing the hem of my shirt to strip it from my body before my hands go to the waist of my pants, "I've been waiting a damn long time for this."

"Kolt," My name is a prayer from her lips. I climb on the bed, my hard cock jutting out from my body, ready for her. I straddle her thighs like I did this morning, and drop to cover her, scattering kisses across her shoulders and spine, slipping a hand between us to make sure she's ready for me. She soaks my fingers, and I use it to spread wetness over my cock before I line myself up with her entrance.

"Tell me if it's too much," I tell her gently, slipping in just a little.

She lets out a breath that turns into a moan the more I push inside her, her tight cunt stretching to fit me. "So goddamn tight, baby," I groan, "Look how good you take me."

I thrust in deeper but slow, making sure not to hurt her, pumping with gentle rolls of my hips until I'm fully seated inside, my pelvis to the cheeks of her ass. The pleasure just about fries my brain. "Fuck you feel so good, trouble."

"More," She lifts her hips a little, so I withdraw and thrust, repeating it with hard pumps of my cock and her body is unable to stay up for me. The slap of our skin is obscenely loud, her mewls of pleasure just spurring me on to go harder. I pull out almost all the way before I thrust back into her, earning a beautiful moan from her.

My fingers bruise where I hold her hips, and her skin becomes slickened with sweat, much like mine but fuck it feels so damn good. And I can't last. Not after it being so long since I'd had her or anyone for that matter, and it only takes me a few more thrusts before my balls are drawing up tight and pleasure zaps down my spine.

"Don't pull out," She groans.

"Ness..." My voice is strained.

"I'm on the pill, Kolt. Don't you dare pull out."

"Fuck," I groan and in the next second I spill inside of her, filling her up, thrusting to get every last drop.

Loosening a breath, I drop down on her, slowly removing myself from her body.

I need more. I've not even nearly sated my desire for her.

Pushing up, I spread her ass cheeks, looking down at where I leak from her body. She squirms beneath me, but I don't let her move as I use a finger to mop up all my come and push it back inside of her.

"Tell me why I have the strongest need to fill you and get you pregnant again," I groan, making sure she takes every drop of me, using my fingers to keep on fucking her which she takes like such a damn good girl.

"Shit, Kolt," she whimpers.

"Do you like that, trouble?" I ask, the sound of her wetness and my come filling the room between her heavy pants and moans.

"Yes."

"You like the idea of me fucking you until I fill you with a baby?"

She moans in response, "Answer me, trouble," I order, "Or I won't let you finish."

"Yes, I like it," She groans, "But not yet."

I chuckle, "Not yet."

And as I promised I fuck her with my fingers until her pussy spasms on my hand, and she moans her release into the pillow beneath her face.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



My body writhes on top of his, skin slickened with sweat, heart pumping a million times a minute. I've lost track of how much time has passed since we've locked ourselves up and gotten lost in each other. His hands caress my breasts as I ride him, his cock sawing in and out of me with each roll of his hips. He's so attentive with me, making sure he's pressing every button of pleasure my body has and finding new ones I didn't know existed.

"Look at you riding me, trouble," His eyes are focused on the space beneath me, where his cock enters me, stretching me so full of him. I'm exhausted, sore, but I cannot get enough of him.

And it seems he can't get enough of me either. I need him. Need his hands on my body and his lips on my skin, I need the bruise marks left behind by his fingers and the bites left on my neck. His skin is red with nail marks from my own hands, his mouth swollen by my lips.

It's a claiming of us both, a make up for all the time lost.

I didn't know I could come so many damn times, didn't know I could be this aroused for this long.

There is no more light of day, the sun disappeared hours ago but we've not left this room save for once to get drinks, which had only ended up with him fucking me on the kitchen counter, hard and fast, his cock almost punishing me with the brutal thrusts of his hips. And I'd come hard again then, so hard I swear stars burst behind my eyes.

And then we had ended up back in bed, with his hands massaging my aching muscles before I'd climbed on top of him, sank myself onto his hard dick and started to ride.

He looks at me like I'm his moon and stars, touches me like I am precious, and I just store it all up, let it sink into the fissures of my broken heart like it's glue.

I lean forward, letting my mouth crash on his as I keep riding him, his own hips moving to aid the grind. His teeth graze my bottom lip, and the angle allows my clit to rub up against the course hair at the base of his cock, adding a sensation that is not all that unpleasant.

I don't know how I can come again, not when my body is in serious overdrive, but I do, my head dropping to his shoulder as I moan into his neck, his hands falling to my hips to keep me moving, to keep the orgasm going until it becomes too much but he doesn't stop. Instead, he just flips us, forcing my legs over his shoulders as he watches himself thrust into me, over and over, again and again. It feels too good and painful all at the same time.

His promise of me feeling him for days after this seemed like an impossibility, but I believe it now. My nails claw at his arms and his hips begin to jerk, the muscles in his neck straining as he comes inside of me, filling me up once more.

He collapses to the side of me, on his back as he breathes hard and fast, his own skin wet with perspiration.

"I need to shower," I giggle sleepily.

He grunts his agreement, his own mouth tipping up into a grin. He gives me a quick peck on the lips before he gets up and wraps a sheet around his waist, strolling through the house and out of the bedroom. In the next moment I hear the faucet turn on and water begin to fill my tub.

It's a few minutes before he comes back through, leaning on the door frame with his arms crossed across his chest, perusing me with his dark eyes.

"You're beautiful," He says quietly, "did I tell you that?"

I smile, "A couple times."

With a deep chuckle he closes the gap between us, "Go clean up and get in the bath, I'll be through in a moment."

I nod my agreement and stretch my muscles that scream in protest. Parts of me ache that I didn't know were possible and that soreness between my legs is more intense now that we've finished.

I don't bother with a sheet or robe to cover myself and I had fresh towels in the bathroom, so I start to make my way there. I startle when I get a quick tap on my ass and find Kolt staring at it like a man hypnotized.

"Quit staring at my ass." I playfully scold him.

"Why?" He pouts, giving one of my cheeks a squeeze, "I fucking love your ass."

I roll my eyes, such a damn man comment and then disappear in the bathroom. The steam rising from the tub smells like lavender and jasmine and bubbles pop on the water. I add a little bit of cold while I use the toilet and then I'm climbing in, the hot water like hands that instantly soothe the ache in my muscles.

A sigh leaves my lips as I submerge myself, fatigue overwhelming me the moment I'm laid out and resting on the back of the tub. Bubbles pop around my ears and the scent rising with the steam, calms and relaxes me. I can still feel the soreness and the ache, but it's easier to handle when submerged in the heated water.

I hear Kolt enter, and crack open my eyes, seeing the two glasses of fresh juice he has in his hands. I sit up to accept the one he holds out to me, taking a healthy sip, suddenly parched.

"Do you feel okay?" He asks me, sitting on the edge of the tub.

"Tired," I admit, "sore!"

"I did tell you," He gives me a feline grin, "Sit up for me."

I place my glass down and sit up, watching as he drops the sheet he had tucked around his waist and comes to climb in behind me. The water rises dangerously to the rim now that two people are in the tub, but it doesn't spill over and then he's pulling me back against his chest as I lay between his

muscular thighs.

No words are spoken between us as his hands brush my hair from my shoulders and he trails his fingers, featherlight, over my skin.

"Never did I think we would end up here," I admit quietly.

"It was always my goal to make my way back to you," He says, voice a rasp at my ear, "Whether it be now or in a couple more years, I would have made my way back."

"What if I had moved on?" I ask, semi-joking but curious to know what he would say.

"Then I'd accept I'd lost my chance and hope you were happy. That I would have been happy just being in your life, even if it meant it would kill me to see another man love you the way I do."

"You wouldn't have tried to take me for yourself?" I jest.

"Oh, I would have," He rumbles, "I would have just changed tactics. Made you fall in love with me more than you loved him."

I shake my head, "I never found anyone who could compare."

"I never even looked," He replies.

"Not even once?" I ask, trying to figure out exactly what life was like for him in the years we were apart.

"No. Every face I saw, all I could see was you. You haunted me every minute we were apart."

"That sounds unpleasant," I try to lighten the mood and his arm bands tighter around me, the movement splashing water over the rim of the tub and onto the tiled floor. I'll worry about that later.

"Painful," He admits, "Because I'd stopped myself from checking on you and looking for you. You were a drug that I couldn't get enough of, and every time I saw you, I just wanted more. I knew it wouldn't stop, so I forced myself to stop."

"What do you mean you checked on me?" I turn my head to look up at him.

For once, it's his cheeks that burn, "I may have come to your college a few times."

My mouth drops open, "That's why you were there *that* night."

A flash of anger crosses his face, but he pushes it down, "I'm not sorry for that."

After it had happened, Patrick disappeared, I never did find out why. Realization dawns and a gasp leaves me, "Did you kill him!?"

But he just chuckles, this deep rumble of a laugh that vibrates through my spine, "No, trouble. I gave incentive for him to leave."

"So you threatened to kill him?"

"No, trouble," He looks at me seriously, "I *promised*."

His fingers twirl a damp piece of my hair, "There wasn't and never will be a length I will not go to, to protect you, trouble. No person I will not destroy to ensure you are safe. The only reason Patrick didn't end up dead is because of the trouble it would have caused you, and every day since, I have fought that decision not to end him, and even now, sat here, being reminded of what he tried to do to you, makes me want to go find the little piece of shit and rip his head from his neck."

My heart thumps inside my chest and his words hammer home just how dangerous this man really is. To me, he isn't in the slightest bit dangerous, but to the rest of the world, he'd kill them all.

Should I be concerned at how much that warms me?

Probably.

But I'm not.

I sigh as I relax further into him, letting his hands wash away the last few hours and by the time we climb into bed, I'm so tired my eyes are already closed when my head hits the pillow.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



T he next week passes in a blur of domestic bliss and tangled limbs. It's easy to fall into a routine with Kolt when I'm not actively trying to guard myself.

And he's a really fucking good dad.

Ethan adores him.

I haven't a single ounce of worry with Kolt taking over some things, like watching him so I can go grocery shopping, or taking him to the little park so I can catch up on some of the chores I've neglected. He helps too, most days my house is spotless because Kolt has managed to get up before me to do it and handled Ethan at breakfast time.

Even Pumpkin loves him.

I've spent time with Arryn and Maya, both as a group with the brothers and on our own and neither of them judged me for my secrets. They didn't even bring it up. Like now, we're all sitting on the couches with Ruthie, a fire blazing in the fireplace and the topic hasn't even come up. Not even Ruthie has mentioned it and considering she's the one who figured it out, I expected a grilling from her.

But she baked cookies like she always did and had a fresh pot of coffee ready. It was kind of a weekly thing even though I'd missed the last one.

Arryn is laughing as she's telling a story of something Rett did last week, but my mind is so occupied with thoughts of Kolt, I've missed half the story.

"Earth to Nessa," Maya laughs, sipping at her drink. Harper is out back with the chickens, which is hardly surprising, and Kolt has taken Ethan with him to visit his brothers, so I have time, and yet they were all I was thinking about.

"Huh? Sorry, what?" I sputter, leaning forward as if that'll keep me focused on this setting.

Maya looks amused while Ruthie and Arryn just quirk brows at me, "What did I miss?"

"You okay, sweetness?" Ruthie asks.

"Uh, yeah," I agree, "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You've been out of it since we got here, babe," Arryn says, "Everything okay with Kolt?"

"I mean yeah, everything is fine," I start to ramble, "Why wouldn't it be fine? We're great, just perfect."

There is no humor left on Maya's face when she speaks next, "Okay, spill it, what happened?"

"No really, nothing happened. It really has been fine."

"So why does it feel like you're not okay?" Ruthie says.

I didn't know why they were getting that impression. Everything is perfectly fine. Blissful.

I shrug nonchalantly, even though I can feel my stomach knotting with unease, "Everything is great."

I can tell they don't believe me but they're also not the type to push for something I'm not willing to give. And truthfully, I'm not entirely sure what is wrong. I'd woken this morning with this heavy ball of anxiety in my stomach and I've been trying to ignore it all day. Since Ethan was born, I'd had bouts of anxiety anyway, especially with his illnesses and being alone, so it isn't unusual, I guess.

But it hadn't passed, even when I'd assured myself everything was fine. I'd kissed Kolt goodbye and hugged my son like I would if they were just popping to the store or to the park, and they were good when I left too.

I thought maybe a coffee with the girls and some away time from the house would have solved it, but it's been stewing all day. Not even remembering the past week and how perfect it has been has helped ease whatever this is.

"Okay my darlings," Ruthie stands with a groan, rolling her eyes as we all lunge to help her stand. "It's the cold," she tuts, "Messing with my damn knees. I'll be right as rain once spring comes round."

We back off, "I gotta get on." Ruthie tells us, "Same time next week?"

It's a collective agreement and after we help her clear up the mugs and tray of cookies, the three of us head out, collecting Harper on the way. While it hadn't snowed all week, it has been freezing, keeping the ground frozen and icy and the wind bitterly cold.

"I'll catch you later," I say, turning to head in the opposite direction to them and back to the house.

"Uh, Ness?" Maya calls back for me, "Don't you remember we planned dinner for tonight?"

God, what the hell is wrong with me?

"Oh right, yeah," I shake my head.

"Right, you've got me worried," Arryn says, linking her arm with mine, "What is wrong?"

"Honestly," I answer, "I don't know. I feel all kinds of messed up today."

"Well, when did it start?" Maya takes her daughter's hand and then links her free arm with mine.

"This morning," I say, chewing my lip as my breath comes out in white puffs in front of my face. "Really I don't know why I'm feeling all anxious, because there is *nothing* wrong."

"Maybe that's it," Arryn suggests.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I guess the past two years haven't been easy and I bet you've always worried about what would happen if Kolt did show back up."

- "Well of course," I agree.
- "I bet in your mind it didn't all turn out great like this," She quirks a brow.
- "No, I guess not, I expected arguments to be honest."
- "I don't know Kolt well," Maya joins, "But I know he isn't the type to hold a grudge and I know he doesn't blame you for Ethan or keeping it a secret."
- "I know that," I stare ahead. I can see the water from here and the red color of Torin's truck standing out in stark contrast to the white and green of the forests bordering the town. "I just feel like something is going to happen."
- "Like what?"
- "Like he'll get bored and leave." I whisper the confession. "When he came back, I promised myself I wouldn't let him back in, the first few times we had to separate hurt enough but now Ethan is involved... I just didn't want to get my heart broken again."
- "I think that's valid," Arryn squeezes my arm.
- "But he got in anyway. And it was so easy too."
- "Those Avery brothers just have their way," Maya shrugs, "They get what they want."

Arryn grunts her agreement and scoffs a laugh.

- "I was kidding myself if I ever thought I couldn't let that man back in," I shake my head at myself, "I fell in love with him so quickly when we first met that I should have known it wouldn't have taken much."
- "Do you still love him?" Arryn asks quietly.
- "With every ounce of my being," I admit, "And that terrifies me."
- "I think it's normal," Maya says, "You have Ethan to consider too but you'll see," she speaks with so much confidence, "Those men are here to stay. And I've seen the way Kolt is with you, he loves you just as much."

I nod but still that anxiety lays like lead in my stomach.

We make it back to the house quickly, finding the brothers lounging in the living room with a fire roaring to chase away the chill. Harper immediately goes for Ethan who sits, legs spread on the floor, an open book on one side and building blocks on the other and starts to play with him, and I find Kolt on the couch behind me.

He smiles at me when he spots me, his expression softening, and gestures with his eyes for me to come join him in the spot at his side. Removing my coat and shoes at the door, I take my place next to him, his arm immediately coming around me to pull me closer. He carries on his conversation with his brothers but absentmindedly strokes my arm, his fingers brushing on my skin so tenderly it makes my heart melt.

It's all nerves, I tell myself. Like Arryn said, it's valid since I've been so used to one thing and now everything is different. But Kolt notices that I'm not one hundred percent present and turns to me, "You okay, trouble?"

How many times in one day can you be asked the same question?

I nod, "I will be." It's not a lie and honestly, I didn't want to get into that here with him, if at all. It's my own internal shit, I just need to figure it out and then move on.

He frowns but nods and when dinner comes round, his hand remains on my leg for most of the evening. It grounds me, keeps me in the room and not in my head and he'll never know how grateful to him I am for that.

And I know this anxiety will pass as soon as I realize history isn't going to repeat itself.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



 $\mathbf{S}$  omething is wrong. Asking became redundant because she provides the same answer, and now we're home, she sits curled up to my side as a movie plays on her small TV, incredibly quiet. Now I know it isn't because there is a film on the TV, we've watched plenty of TV over the last few days and she's talked through the entirety of it.

She asks questions, a lot of questions like I would know the plot and outcome to the films we are watching when I haven't watched them myself. I'd found it endearing and a little adorable but right now she is silent, her hand resting on my stomach, thumb gently rolling in circles.

"What's going on, Ness?" I ask for what feels like the hundredth time.

"I'm okay," is that same damn reply. "I'm a little tired though."

Ethan had gone straight down to sleep when we got back from dinner with my brothers, and he's been sound asleep since. "Can you come to bed with me?" She asks quietly.

"Always." I switch off the TV and she locks up, heading through to brush her teeth before me. I join her a moment later, grabbing my toothbrush.

She's definitely acting strange, there's no eye contact in the mirror, in fact she keeps her eyes down as if there is something riveting in the basin.

But in bed, she curls up into me, making sure every part of her is touching every part of me. I kiss the top of her head and even though it's as dark as it can get in here, I can feel her looking up at me. And then she presses the tenderest of kisses to the underside of my jaw.

"Talk to me," I plead.

"Just kiss me," She replies, moving up my body so she can capture my lips with hers. I groan at the feel of it, let out a breath when her hand starts to slide down my abdomen, over every ridge and dip of my muscles.

"What do you need?" I rasp.

"You, Kolt," She whispers, "I just need you right now."

I roll us until she's on her back and her thighs are spread, my body easily slipping between them. She's in one of my shirts, I'd peaked it before I'd gotten into bed, but I'd expected something beneath. Only I feel bare skin and heat, her pussy rubbing against me through my boxers.

"Fuck, Ness," I growl, rolling my cock against her in a slow grind. Her nails score my back, and her feet dig into my ass as she pulls me tighter against her.

"Don't make me wait." She whispers against my neck.

"Goddamn," I yank at my boxers, freeing myself as she adjusts beneath me, reaching between our bodies to grasp my cock in her hand. I freeze, a rumble of pleasure building in my throat as she gently strokes me, her thumb rolling over the crown of me to smear the precum that's leaked from the tip.

I feel her breath fanning against my face as she breathes heavily, her hand working me before I take matters into my own hands and pull out of her grip.

"Are you already wet for me, trouble?" I lick up her throat, feeling her body tremble beneath mine.

I don't wait for an answer as I grasp my cock and slide it through her pussy, feeling her wetness start to coat my shaft.

"I love how responsive you are for me," I say to the darkness, "I bet I could take you right now and you'd open right up to fit me."

"Please, Kolt."

I slide the head of my cock into her, groaning at the heat and tightness that surrounds me. It takes everything in me not to slam forward but I manage it, stretching her open slowly, filling her with short shallow thrusts until I'm fully inside and I can't tell where I end, and she begins. She moans against my skin as I start to rock into her, her arms clinging to me while I hold her, hoping whatever it is that is bothering her, will pass.

I will be her rock if she needs me to be, her guide and aid, I'll be whatever she needs me to be. I find her mouth as I keep with the gentle pace, working us both up at a steady incline, my tongue mimicking the sensual stroke of my cock as it slides in and out of her, grinding up against that sweet little sensitive bud to give her that added pleasure that I know she loves.

Her breath stutters against my lips, and her legs tighten around my hips, and I can tell she's close.

"Come for me, trouble," I rasp, "Give it to me."

Nails digging in, hard enough to draw blood, she comes apart in my arms, her pussy tightening around my cock. I push her through it, thrusting into her as she continues to fall off the edge and then I follow her over it, losing myself to her.

She makes it so damn easy to forget there's anyone else in the world other than us.

When our breathing has returned to normal and we've both cleaned up I hold her to me, but my sleep is anything but restful.



Vanessa is tense this morning and the dark circles under her eyes suggest she had as good of a night's sleep as me, which was nothing.

She hands me a coffee silently, and goes back to staring out the window.

"Please don't ask me if I'm okay," She whispers.

"Okay," I glance over to the living room, finding Ethan in his little seat with cartoons playing on the screen. "Can I do anything?"

She shakes her head.

I didn't know what else to do so I say what I've been thinking about the past couple days.

"I think you should go back to college."

She whips her head to me, "Sorry?"

"It was your dream to be a doctor," I say, leaning back on the counter with my coffee. I'd shoved sweats on when I rolled out of bed this morning and I'm currently topless, my hair disheveled. I'd grab a shower in a minute.

"*Was* being the optimum word there," She places her cup down on the side hard enough that the coffee splashes over the rim.

"Is that not the case anymore, trouble?"

"No," She grumbles, "I have a baby who needs me more. And going back wouldn't be *that* easy. I'm still paying off my student loans from the fucked up first attempt."

"But I'm here now," I point out.

"You were there the first time too," She snaps.

Shit.

"Ness."

She narrows her eyes.

"Okay, trouble," I place my coffee down and take a step towards her, but she stiffens which gives me pause, "What can I do?"

"I don't know, Kolt," There's venom in her tone but I don't think she means for it to be there. Her defenses are up, just like the first day I arrived. I knew it would take time and this blissful week was a break, but I hadn't expected it so soon. "Maybe turn off this fucking anxiety?"

"It's going to take time," I assure her.

"*I* need some time," She whispers. "It's too much."

I can see the fear in her face, the tears glistening in her eyes.

"Please just tell me what to do."

"I need some space, Kolt." She says, her voice firmer.

"I'm not leaving, Ness."

"Just for today," she shakes her head and then starts walking, slipping by me and into the living room to check on Ethan, "Just for a couple of hours."

"Ness," I plead, "We can work this out."

"I need to sort my head out," she lifts our son from the floor, "It's not fair on either of us but certainly not you to walk on eggshells."

"How did this start baby?"

"Everything is just so perfect, Kolt," She sniffs, and the first tears fall down her cheeks, "Like none of it ever happened. But it did happen and it's hard to forget, and I understand it isn't your fault, but I'm still feeling the pain." She rubs her sternum, balancing Ethan on her hip, "And it makes me feel like it didn't matter."

"Of course, it matters," I step toward her, but she steps back.

"I just need today," She says to me, wiping at her tears with her free hand. Ethan grabs a strand of her hair, frowning at his mother's face, namely the tears that roll down her cheeks.

"Okay," I breathe, "But I'm not leaving Ness. I am coming back, this isn't done."

"I don't think we will ever be done," She whispers.

"No, we won't." I agree. "I need to shower and then I'll head out, okay? Can I help with anything?"

She shakes her head, no, so I trudge to the bathroom, my steps heavy and my heart galloping in my chest. She needed space and I'd respect her wish but I'm going to hate every damn second of it.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



The moment I hear the door click closed behind Kolt, I break. My knees hit the floor and my head lands in my hands as floods of tears unleash. I can't stop this crushing feeling in my chest, like someone has placed a lead weight right on top of my lungs. I can't breathe, can't move, can only think about the past and it coming back to haunt me.

Can only picture a future where Kolt has left, and my heart is broken.

"Mama," Ethan waddles over to me, carrying his favorite stuffed bear, "Here, mama." He places the bear in my lap, patting it softly before he tugs a strand of my hair, trying to get my attention. I look at him through my blurry vision, blinking rapidly to try and clear away the tears so I can see him better. He grins at me, so much like his dad it physically hurts to see his little face.

"Come here, baby," I grab him, hauling him into my lap but he just wiggles to free himself immediately, not wanting to cuddle like usual.

Instead, I watch him walk toward the front door, looking over his shoulder as he points to the handle, "Daddy."

My chest cracks as I nod, the sob building and choking me, "Yeah, that was daddy."

He frowns, "Daddy," he repeats, slapping his palm on the door.

What have I done? Why did I send him away!?

This pain is squeezing so tight around me I can't breathe.

"He'll be back later," I promise him and hope that I am right.



I go to my sisters, I hadn't told her I was arriving so when I knock on her door and she answers, seeing my bloodshot eyes and tear-stained cheeks, her eyes widen.

"What happened!?" She demands, her brows lowering in concern. She takes Ethan from my arms, bouncing to keep him entertained as she opens the door wider to let me inside.

"I'm a mess," I cry.

"What happened, Nessa?" She asks again. Her concern draws Shawn from wherever he was hiding in their house.

"I told him I needed space," I sniff, replaying how hurt he was when I said those words. It was never supposed to happen like that, I was just going to talk to him but then... I fucked up.

"Who? *Kolt*?" Immy's eyes widen as she places Ethan down when the door is closed. He pays us no attention, distracted by the noise of the TV. Shawn, bless his heart, guides him through and follows behind, leaving Immy and I to talk.

"I fucked up, Immy," I whisper, "But I'm so scared and I told him to leave."

"Okay, where did this all start?" She asks, "Like how?"

I explain how great this last week has been, how perfect Kolt has been. Ethan is besotted with him; he's helped me so much and we could have easily fallen into a routine. "But with everything that happened, and how we got here. I'm scared, Imogen."

She sighs, her face softening, "Where did he go?"

"I guess to his brothers," I say, "I didn't mean it. I let my fear control me. I don't want him to go."

More tears fall down my cheeks, the saltiness sitting on my tongue, "And now I'm scared I've pushed him away and he won't want to return. Who will

want to come back to someone who can't just talk like a normal person!?"

"You're overthinking again," Imogen points out quietly. "Take a breath."

"Did you outright say for him to leave?"

"Well no."

"Then he'll be back."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I saw the way that man looked at you, Ness," She touches my shoulder, "And it reminded me of when I first met Shawn. He loves you and all your ups and downs."

"Until I throw a fit in the middle of the kitchen when he suggests I go back to college."

Immy cringes. "It's not as bad as you think, I'm sure."

But it is as bad as I think. Because I fucked up.

I fucked up and I don't know how to fix it.

"Maybe go to Torin's. Find him and talk to him. It's only been a couple hours. But you need to really talk and not just fuck, Ness. Sex is great and all, but it doesn't solve all your problems."

"You're right," I agree, staring down at my hands, "I'll go."

"Want me to keep Ethan?" She asks. "Just while you go talk?"

"Yeah, please," I say to my sister, "I'd appreciate that."

<sup>&</sup>quot;What do I do?" I cry.

## CHAPTER FORTY



Y ou look like shit," Rett comments when he answers the door.
I'd tried to walk in, but it was locked and it felt wrong to break into my own brothers house.

"Don't make me hurt you, Everett." I grunt, not in the mood for his shit.

"Someone is feeling spicy," He chuckles, pushing the door open to let me inside while he steps aside, "In the doghouse already?"

"This close," I hold my thumb and finger close together, "This close to breaking your pretty nose."

"Aw," He taunts, "You think I'm pretty?"

Rolling my eyes, I trudge through the house, not even noticing the warmth of the place when I feel so cold. She asked me to leave, to give her space and I can't figure out what I've done wrong.

I am trying. Trying so hard to show her how committed I am, but it's useless. The damage I caused is permanent, a stain on a white cloth and I don't know how to fix it.

I grab a coffee from the kitchen and take a seat at the island bar, the house quiet around me until I hear the sound of little feet on the stairs. Harper bursts

around the corner a second later, still in her pajamas, hair mused from sleep.

"Uncle Kolt!" She exclaims with a grin.

"Good morning, Harper," I greet her.

The uncle thing still throws me, but Maya's daughter is as adorable as they come. Wise way beyond her years.

"Oh! I just remembered," She stops as she's reaching into the cupboard, "Wait right there! Don't move."

*I wasn't planning on it, kid.* I think to myself as I drink my coffee and listen to her thunder through the house.

As soon as evening comes, I'll be back with Vanessa. I just have to let these few hours pass; give her the space she has requested. Did I come on too strong? I wonder. Did I do something wrong?

Harper returns soon after, her hand fisted as she brings something into the kitchen with a bright grin on her face.

"I made these!" She beams, dropping two bracelets onto the kitchen island. They're clear elastic with beads threaded onto them, the beads are a mix of blue, purple and white and in the center of them are three beads with letters on them. K. V. E.

"I made two of them," She explains, the smile on her face never wavering as she picks up the smaller of the two, "One for you. One for me." She shows me her wrist which has four handmade bracelets on it already, she points to the first one, spinning to show the initials, M. T. H. "This one is for me, daddy and momma."

She moves to the next bracelet. E. A. "This is for Uncle Everett and Arryn." She pushes those further down her wrist as she shows me the bracelet she wears for Ruthie and Pickles the chicken and then for Imogen and Shawn.

I realize quickly that the bracelets she's brought down are to be added to her little collection on her wrist.

"And these are for you," She proudly states, slipping the bracelet onto her wrist, "Uncle Kolt," She points to the K and then the V, "Vanessa," And then to the E, "And Ethan."

"Why?" I sputter.

"Because you're my family," She grins at me and spins to the cupboard

again, pulling out the chocolate cereal she was reaching for before, "I like to keep family close."

"This one is for me?" I finger the bracelet left on the side.

"Yes, silly," She laughs, "I have one for Nessa too, and Ethan, but I think he's too little to wear a bracelet." She says, matter of fact, "Maybe I'll make him another one, a bigger one so he can wear it when he grows up."

"I think that's a great idea," I agree, slipping the bracelet that she made me over my hand and onto my wrist.

"I like having family," Harper says to me, "I didn't have a big one before, just momma."

I'd looked into Maya and Harper's past and knew it wasn't pretty.

"Do you want some of my cereal?" She changes the subject, "It's chocolate." I didn't have the heart to say no.



It's been about two hours since I left Vanessa this morning and I couldn't help but wonder what she was doing. At this time, we would be having coffee, laughing in the kitchen while Ethan plays or watches cartoons. I almost dial her number but think better of it.

Space. She wanted space and I had to respect her wishes. Even if I didn't understand where I went wrong.

I'm just about to head through to the kitchen when Olivia screeches into the room, her face as white as paper, her eyes wide with fear.

I'm on instant alert, looking behind her for a threat, scanning her body for injuries.

"He's messaged." She whispers, the sound filled with terror.

"Who?" Arryn asks, having followed her sister into the room.

"Malakai."

Shit.

Malakai isn't a *bad* guy, but he isn't good either and after everything the sisters went through with him, I can understand their fear of him.

"What did he say?" Arryn demands, instantly wanting to protect her younger

sister.

"The wedding is to happen soon. I'm expected to be on the mainland by tomorrow, and moved into his house by the end of the week, no exceptions."

"Who does he think he is?!" Arryn snaps.

"Her husband," I point out.

"Husbands don't make demands," Arryn growls.

"Malakai isn't like everyone else," Olivia sighs, "I'm going to need to get back today. I have things I have to sort before I go through with all of this."

"We can figure it out," Arryn begs, "You don't have to do this."

I don't correct her even though I know Olivia does have to go through with it. She agreed to a bargain, Arryn's life for her hand in marriage. She signed a contract. There is no do over, no way out, I know for a fact the contracts the Farrow's dish out are loophole free with no exit. If Olivia wanted to see Arryn remain alive, if she wanted to see her happy, she would have to marry the devil himself.

"You and I both know I do," Olivia says gently to her sister. "Is there a ferry today?" She asks Torin who had joined us sometime in the last few minutes.

But before he can answer, I say, "I'll take you."

Everyone turns to me, "I'll do it." I repeat, "I'll make sure she gets there safely."

"Thank you," Olivia smiles at me.

It isn't selfless. I need the time, and I know time on the water, despite it making me seasick, will be good to clear my head. Vanessa doesn't want me near her, and I won't lie, that shit hurts. It's too hard not to go to her so if I remove myself from the place, then I won't be able to go to her until it's time.

No one disagrees, and Torin trusts me enough to captain his boat, so within the hour we're packing the little belongings Olivia has and hauling them into Torin's vessel.

I stand at the edge of the dock, a witness to their farewell. It's standard up until Arryn has to say goodbye to her youngest sister.

"Call me as soon as you get home," Arryn demands.

"I will," Olivia placates.

"No, you won't," Her sister laughs, but it sounds off, like it's leaden with weight, "I just need to know you're safe."

"He won't hurt me," Olivia says with determination, "I plan on making his life hell."

"I don't doubt it," Arryn replies.

I help Olivia onto the boat after her bags are stowed but don't bother to say goodbye to my brothers.

This isn't goodbye anyway. I'm taking a trip to clear my head, not leaving for good, and I'm more than happy to show the woman who saved my own brothers life, back to her own world.

The journey there is uneventful. Olivia and I have nothing to speak about, so we spend most of the journey in silence though it's not uncomfortable, and when we land on the mainland, the boat anchored up at the dock I ensure her safety by showing her through to The Lauder Hotel.

She's greeted by a crowd of employees, all smiles and warm welcomes and when I know she's okay, considering the circumstances, I leave her to settle back in.

My thoughts are on Vanessa.

I start the boat, replaying the scene from this morning and come to a decision.

I'm not letting it end this way.

Her and I, we are built for forever.

I'm going to fight for her, no matter the cost.

I will prove to her what happened before, and what will happen now, are not the same.

She is my moon. My stars. My forever.

For as long as the night lives and the moon shines, I am hers.

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



I knock on Torin's door, hoping and praying it's Kolt that answers.
But I have no such luck.

"Vanessa?" Torin answers, shock slackening his expression.

"Is Kolt here?" I ask nervously, "I need to speak with him."

He visibly cringes, "Kolt left twenty minutes ago."

"Left?" I choke.

Maya appears in the doorway, "Just to help Olivia," She assures, "He'll be back."

But all I can hear is that he has left. He isn't here.

"Are you sure?" I whisper, tears stinging my eyes.

"We're sure," It's Rett that answers, somehow showing up at the right time, "He will be back for you, Vanessa."

I nod, even if my heart is cracking more and more. I should have expected this. I did this. I forced him to stay away.

How can I expect him to stick around when I am the one who asked him to leave?

"Okay," I whisper, doubt creeping in.

"Vanessa," Rett starts, "Just give him the chance to prove it."

My head jerks in a resemblance to a nod, "Sure."

But I can't get past the thought that he has left for good, that he isn't coming back.

I have pushed him too far. I am too much.

And now it is over.

## **CHAPTER FORTY-TWO**



T have one goal.

To fix all that was broken, to mend the ribbon with the one woman that holds my entire being in her whole hand.

I feel like nothing without her.

The boat slashes through the water as I push the boat to its limit. The water is choppy and rough, throwing me around as I tackle to keep control, needing to get back as quickly as I can. Clouds tumble above me, the sound of shrieking birds and turbulent water the only sound to accompany the journey.

I can see the storm, know it's going to hit any minute now. I can make it through it though, I know I can. I'll battle the damn ocean to get back to her if I have to, to prove to her we are forever.

Steadying my breathing and willing myself to calm down, I slow the boat. Going too fast will only cause trouble. The ocean all around me turns more violent, and icy needles of rain begin to fall from the grey clouds above. My grip on the wheel turns to steel as I focus on the horizon, the island not yet in view but it has to be right there, just a little further.

She's there, she's waiting for me.

The waves only become angrier, rising like vengeful titans, slamming into the boat as if they were holding a personal vendetta against me. The rain worsens, coming down in torrents, stinging where it hits my bare skin and soaks through my clothes. The further I get from land, the stronger the storm gets.

Not making it back isn't an option. My son needs me, the woman I plan to marry needs me too. She needs me even if she thinks she doesn't.

The boat tips sideways as a wave slams into the side of it and I hold on, praying it doesn't go over. When it rights itself, I push on, battling the ocean and the storm as I try to get back.

But it only intensifies, stronger, harder, faster, the waves rocking the small fishing boat which is too small to fight such a storm.

Each wall of water challenges my control, tipping the boat left to right and I have to hold on to save from going overboard, but as the clouds tumble and roll, and the winds pick up speed, my hope for survival fades.

I fight as much as I can, battle with this small boat through a storm that only bigger vessels and ships are meant to survive, and I already see the outcome to this fight.

A wave taller than I've ever seen slams into the boat, flooding the deck with ice cold water and drenching me further, the wind adding a bite that I feel right in my bones.

I'm not too far from the mainland even though it feels like I've been on the water for hours, and there are other boats, bigger ones than mine close by, though they don't appear to be having as much trouble as me.

I'm going to have to turn around, go back to shore and wait out the storm. Another wave rocks the boat, and then another and another, and I'm struggling to get turned when a final wave hits and pushes the boat onto its side. It's too far over to be able to correct, and the next thing I know, I'm crashing into the icy water.

The boat capsizes, throwing ropes and wood and fishing gear into the ocean that I must dodge to try and get to the surface. The cold is stealing the air from my lungs, my arms and legs feel heavy, my heart pounding so hard I can feel it beating inside my ears.

I break the surface, fighting the waves that try to drag me back down as I

furiously tread water. A life ring floats chaotically close by... if I can just get to it.

I swim as hard as I can, fighting the rough waters as the sky darkens. Throwing an arm over the rubber ring, I manage to get a secure hold but, fuck, I'm exhausted.

My bones ache.

I am frozen through.

I won't make it back to land. I can't even see land, not this far out and in the water.

Vanessa will think I'd left for good. No one will find my body unless I somehow wash up on a shore, but what of me will be left?

No one would know.

I didn't get to say goodbye.

It's the only thought I have, as the ocean continues to throw me around and the cold bites through me.

There were no goodbyes.

It doesn't take long for fatigue to sink in its claws. I know how this ends, how quickly cold water can rip away life. There'll be no staying afloat on this ring for much longer, no matter how much I fight. I can already feel my muscles beginning to give in, feel my heart rate slowing.

I'll fight for as long as I can, but I have minutes not hours.

I hope she understands.

I hope she tells our son about his father. My brothers will take care of her, Maya and Arryn will help her. I know they will.

She'll be okay without me like she was fine before.

I didn't want to leave her, but that choice has been removed from my hands.

I feel myself start to slip, the ocean continuing its relentless torture against me, my muscles frozen and weak.

Somewhere I hear the loud horn of another ship, but it's like it's being muffled by fog, and the last thing I see before I slip beneath the waves is lightning flashing across the sky.

# CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



 $I^{\ t's}$  been one night since Kolt left. He never returned to the island like Rett and Arryn had promised.

Imogen kept Ethan for the night, and I sat on the docks watching the horizon, waiting for the boat to show up. I waited until day melted into night, sat beneath the dark skies for hours as the cold nipped at me like it was trying to strip me out of my skin. And then I waited longer, as the town behind me went to sleep. A storm had brewed somewhere out at sea as flocks of gulls swarmed towards the island and the water became choppy and rough, but the storm never touched us here.

As if it was willing to give me a reprieve since I had my own storm inside of me.

I'd sat there the whole night, skipping food and drink until the night bled into day and it was with those first glimpses of dawn that I realized he wasn't coming back.

I didn't think I had any tears left to cry, but more fall now as I make my way home, fingers and toes numb from the cold, hair knotted and tangled from the wind. My mouth is dry and my stomach aching with how empty it is, and yet I have no desire to consume anything.

I want my son. I want to hold him and look at his little face and I want to cry until I feel sick. I'm in no state to go pick him up or even look after him though, so I don't. I go back to my little empty bungalow that still smells like Kolt. He is everywhere, in the t-shirt left on the couch and the shoes by the door. He's in the second toothbrush in my bathroom and the pack of beer in the fridge. He's the little wooden carvings scattered around the house, and the floorboard that no longer squeaks.

The bed smells like him.

It was hard before, but this is torture.

He's gone. And this time it's my fault.

I drag my feet as I walk through the house, not bothering with the heat or the lights as I go for the table. Before I asked him to leave, he was working on a small sculpture, I couldn't tell what it was at first but now as I look at it, at the curves and the edges, it's a woman cradling a child, the shape not completely formed since he didn't get to finish. His tools are still out on the table, the aged leather case rolled out across the surface. I run my fingers over it, over the tools so expertly held by his hands.

There are so many little wooden sculptures now, flowers and trees and moons, carved by him and placed in various areas of the house.

I drop my head into my hands as fresh tears heat my eyes, burning as they fall.

Physically, my heart hurts. Everything hurts.

A sudden knock on the door startles me from where I sit at the table, the thump of someone's fist on the wood loud and rushed.

They knock again, banging so hard I can hear the door rattling.

I get up, slowly edging toward the door when another thump sounds, like they're hitting the door with the flat of their palm, making sure to whack it as loud as they can.

It's still early so I have no idea who could be knocking at this time.

I peer through the peephole, finding Everett on the other side, his hair a mess, his eyes bloodshot and skin pale.

"Rett?" I open the door.

He barges inside, going for the coats on the hooks. "Let's go." Is all he says.

I swat his hands off me as he tries to bundle me into the coat.

"Shoes, you need shoes. It's cold."

"Rett!" I yell. I still have my shoes on, but he hasn't noticed since he's rifling through my shoe rack, looking for my boots which he pulls out a moment later.

"Put these on. Now." He demands.

"I'm wearing shoes!" I yell.

"Coat." He continues, "It's cold."

"Rett, what the hell is wrong with you!?"

He freezes, spine stiffening as if he's just realized where he is and what he is doing. If I didn't know him better, I'd accuse him of being on something.

"Vanessa," He turns to me, his mouth set in a grim line, "I need you to come with me. Right now."

"Not until you tell me what the hell is going on!"

He blinks a few times as if coming to his senses and then holds up one hand, like he's surrendering.

"There's been an accident."

"An accident?" I repeat.

"It's Kolt."

My heart drops into my stomach.

"There was a storm, it took out the boat. He was pulled from the water."

The ground is shaking, it's quaking under my feet making it impossible to stay standing. I hear my knees hit the floor, but I don't feel it, I hear a scream that I realize a second later is coming from me. It's being ripped from my lungs, my throat. The world is ending.

Arms are on me, holding me tight, keeping me from shattering into a thousand pieces. But barely.

"Vanessa." My name is being shouted.

"Vanessa."

But I only hear the scream.

"Ness!" More shaking, more pain, more tears.

"Ness, look at me!"

Rett grasps my face, forcing me to look at him. He's blurry and unfocused but he's right there, holding my face tight, "Look at me, Ness."

The wailing stops, just for a minute as I focus on his words, "He's alive, Vanessa."

"Where is he?" It doesn't sound like my voice, but I know it's my lips moving, my own words, "Where is he, Rett?"

"In the hospital on the mainland. Torin got a call this morning. He's bad, Ness."

My head is shaking, "He can't die!"

"We have to go!" He demands, sterner now, "Put your coat on. It's cold."

I slide my arms into the coat Rett pulled off the hook, not feeling the warmth it provides, and I lock up behind me. The cold outside is nothing compared to the cold I feel working through me, it doesn't make me ache or hurt, doesn't make me shiver. I feel numb as I follow Everett through the snow towards Torin's house.

Torin is already waiting, with both Arryn and Maya. They're wrapped up ready to go and a boat is waiting.

Absently I notice the boat isn't Torin's but one of the older town fisherman's, its aged with flaking paint but it's sturdy. But of course, it won't be Torin's. Torin's boat has been destroyed.

Maya grasps me the moment I'm at arm's length, pulling me in and then Arryn joins in behind. They hold me when I don't think I can hold myself.

Everything is a blur, a fog in my mind. I know it's happening but it's like I am watching from outside of my body. I text my sister, letting her know what's happening so she can keep watching Ethan for me and we're moving across the water before I can blink, the boat being pushed way beyond its limits to try and get us there as quickly as possible.

Arryn is holding my hand so tight I can't feel my fingers and she speaks to me every few minutes, but I don't know if I am answering her. All I see is him.

Accident.

He's bad.

Hospital.

He was coming back.

But he didn't make it.

Fresh tears spill over, instantly becoming cold as the wind whips at my face. The ride to the mainland is bumpy and treacherous, the sound of the birds in the sky shrill and alarming. I didn't know how to feel or what to think.

It passes quickly though, and we're soon anchoring up at the port, Torin helping Maya and Arryn out of the boat, and then me.

I just stand there, knees locked, heart heavy and wait until someone guides me. There's a car, it's warm but does nothing to tackle the cold I feel working inside of me. Music plays but I don't hear it, someone speaks but it's just noise and then the large, white building of the hospital comes into view.

Dread sinks into my stomach and sickness makes it hard to swallow. Hands guide me and my legs carry me though it feels as if I have no control over myself, like I am working on pure muscle memory alone.

Elevators and hallways, doctors and nurses, voices, cries, laughter, it's just a barrage of sound.

But then there's a door in front of me, and the creak of a handle and I see him.

I see him, and I break.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



He's lying in a hospital bed, a sterile blue blanket pulled up to his hips, tubes and wires connected to him and his eyes are closed. Physically he looks fine, his skin is pale and there's dark circles under his eyes, but he looks unharmed other than that.

But he's not awake. And he barely looks like he is breathing.

There's a doctor in the room with us, he's talking with Torin and Rett and I hear the word hypothermia before he goes on to say that he was pulled from the water, and he wasn't breathing. There's the word drowning. And brain damage. And we won't know more until he wakes up.

"K-Kolt," His name is a stutter from my lips, a whispered plea for him to hear me. I grasp his hand which rests above the blankets, and he feels so cold, not the warm hands that have touched me and loved me and comforted me. There isn't a single twitch as my skin connects with his.

"Why is he so cold?" I hear myself ask, running my thumb over the skin of his knuckles. No one answers me. It feels as if I'm a new mom again, standing at the side of a bed, watching for the rise and fall of a chest to ensure they are breathing. Kolt's barely moves, it's hard to see if that strong chest of his is rising.

If the heart monitor wasn't steadily beating behind me, I'd think he was gone. Panic swarms me, not the screaming, all consuming panic that makes you lash out, but this quiet, crushing kind of panic that feels as if it is burying me. The type of panic that makes it hard to breathe.

"I didn't mean it," I whisper, sucking in breaths to try and fill my lungs, "I didn't mean it. Please don't leave me."

"We will give you some time," The doctor says. The tone of his voice raises alarm bells, like he's telling us to prepare ourselves. The somber look on his face and the downturn to his shoulders tells me he doesn't have hope for recovery. Aren't doctors supposed to be hopeful? Aren't they meant to tell us they're doing everything they can?

This one doesn't, he just leaves the room, leaving us all standing at Kolt's bedside, praying it isn't his time.

He looks so small in a hospital bed, not at all like the man I know. This isn't Kolt. This isn't the larger-than-life man I met on the beach that one day many years ago. This isn't the man who went swimming at midnight or entertained my games long after the sun had set.

This isn't Kolt.

My heart breaks the longer I look at him, because it is him, isn't it? This is the father of my child and the man who owns my heart. I have to divert my eyes, the pain too much. I didn't know you could physically feel your heart breaking, but I can, I can feel it splitting in two, the pain so bad I want to rip it from my chest and give it to him.

How do I live without him?

At least before, I knew he was *somewhere*, he was alive, but now, while he looks helpless, death a breath away, I can't imagine a world where he doesn't exist. What would I ever say to Ethan?

A hand lands on my shoulder and I jump. "He's going to be fine." Everett says, his words directed at his brother and not me.

I know they had their own issues, knew they were fighting to get back that bond that was there before and even if I couldn't see it, both Rett and Torin love Kolten.

He's their older brother, not by blood but that didn't matter. They were raised together, did life together and it's not just me in this room falling apart.

Torin looks pale in the corner, Maya clinging to him and I can only imagine how triggering it is. He lost his wife and son the same way. And now his brother is laying in a hospital bed and he's having to watch the whole thing. It makes me want to climb into his head to find out what he's thinking. He has Maya now, and I know she'll take care of him.

"I fucked up," I whisper the words, but I may as well have shouted them for the way every head turns to me. "I was so lost in the past and what I went through, I never even considered his perspective. I told him I needed space. I didn't. I didn't need space. I was so scared." I tell them, "So scared because I never stopped loving him. I couldn't see past the pain to see our future and he's going to think I didn't want him. That I didn't need him."

"Ness," Arryn steps closer.

"I need him," I cry. "God, I *need* him." My tears land on his hand, "This is all my fault."

"That's not fair on you," Arryn soothes.

"Come back to me," I beg Kolt's sleeping form, "Please."

My fingers curl around his still hand, "Don't say goodbye." I whisper as I bring my mouth to his knuckles, "Please Kolt. I'm so sorry. I'm so fucking sorry."

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



I t's been three days.

The doctors are losing hope. There is no miracle, cure, or surgery to fix what he went through. He's warm now, his heart steady and he's responding, but he isn't waking. No matter what they try.

I haven't left the hospital, sometimes Ethan is with me, most often than not, he isn't. He's too young to understand and it breaks me every time he calls for daddy and frowns when he doesn't wake. I wanted him to be here, just in case, but seeing those big eyes filling with tears when his dad doesn't wake, even when he begs, shatters whatever is left of me. Perhaps it's selfish, to not let him be here as often, but how do you make a two-year-old understand?

If I've slept in the past seventy-two hours, it's been in this chair at Kolt's bedside but most nights I've sat and spoke with him. I've told him stories from when Ethan was a baby, stories I didn't manage to capture on video for him. I tell him the story of Diane and the pregnancy tests, how she helped me when I felt like I was drowning. I keep my voice low, but I hope he hears me, I hope he understands I won't leave him. Ever.

I hope he understands how sorry I am.

But despite the long hours we spend alone in this hospital room, it still feels like I've lost him, and we are just prolonging the inevitable.

He isn't going to survive this.

It's way past visiting hours when my sister arrives. Ethan, Ruthie and Shawn in tow, and he passes me my son, my beautiful son that looks so much like his father.

"Hey sweet girl," Ruthie greets me with a kiss to the head and a warm hug and my sister holds my hand, running her thumb up and down my fingers like she used to do when we were kids. Shawn hangs back but the way he winks at me gives me enough boost to know he is with me also. My family.

I stroke Kolt's hand, "Everyone is here to see you, baby," I whisper, "Did you know you're so loved?"

For a minute nothing happens but then his finger twitches. Just a small move but I feel it. "Kolt?"

Another twitch.

"Get the doctor!" I order, clambering to my feet as I lean over him. "Kolt?"

Ethan cries out as I take Kolt's face in my hands, cradling it as my thumbs stroke soft circles over his skin, "Baby, please." I beg, "Be with me."

Tentatively, my sister approaches the bed, a fussing Ethan fidgeting in her arms, "Trust me." She says gently and then she places our son on the bed. He instantly shuffles up, closer to Kolt's face and I move my hands away.

Wide eyed and full of fear, I watch as our son pokes and prods at Kolt, the big grin on his face never wavering. His little hands cradle his father's face, much like mine just did.

"Daddy," Ethan babbles, moving his hands on his face in a similar way to how he pets Pumpkin, like he's trying to be gentle, but he just doesn't have the motor control to keep his hands soft, "Daddy. Daddy."

My heart cracks in my chest.

"Daddy, wake up." Ethan says, "Daddy, we gotta make some Lego."

I slide my hands beneath his arms, ready to lift him up.

"It's okay, baby," I say to him, "Daddy's just sleeping right now." Sorrow weighs down my limbs but as I go to lift Ethan off the bed, something holds

him down.

"Legos?" Kolten croaks, eyes still closed, "We gotta make Legos huh, buddy?"

"Yep!" Ethan pops the P.

My heart stops beating and then it starts to gallop, my knees shaking.

"You're awake," I breathe.

"Hello trouble," His lids open and his dark eyes meet mine.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



H ands push at my face, warm and clammy and noise battles through the fog inside my mind.

Something slaps down onto my face and there's a weight restricting me from moving.

"Daddy." The word slides through my mind. "Daddy. Daddy."

That little voice, I'd recognize it anywhere, and those hands on my face, the podgy fingers prodding me. Ethan. My boy.

"Daddy, wake up!" I hear the pout in the tone, and I battle with the grip inside my head, fight through that damn fog to get my eyes open. "Daddy, we gotta make some Lego!"

#### WAKE UP, KOLT!

My son needs me. He's here. He needs me. I won't leave again, I won't be away from him another fucking second. WAKE UP!

"It's okay baby," That sweet voice, like music batters through the remaining fog. My Ness. The sweetest trouble. "Daddy's just sleeping right now."

No. Don't leave.

I feel the weight of my son begin to lift.

No. No. No.

I somehow manage to gain control of my limbs, letting my hands find my son as I hold him down, keeping him with me, like he's the tether and I'm pulling myself back to earth.

"Legos?" My voice is raw, and I struggle to make my vocal cords work through the rough sand papery texture, "We gotta make Legos, huh, buddy?" My eyes feel as if they're being held down by lead.

"You're awake." She breathes, the crack in her voice snapping something vital inside of me.

I just need to see her face, see that she is with me. That they are both with me.

Finally, I pry my eyes open, and she is the first thing I see, "Hello, trouble."

Her whiskey colored eyes bounce around my face, swimming in tears that turn them the color of molten gold and then a sob cracks through the silence and her hands grip the railing at the edge of the bed, as if it's the only thing to keep her upright.

I open my mouth to speak, to get her to me, to hold her and never let go but there's a sudden flurry of movement as a man in a white coat demands space.

"Mr. Avery," He says, a torch shining between my eyes.

Vanessa takes a step back, gently lifting Ethan from the bed as a nurse joins the doctor and starts taking my vitals. She stands away from me, her sister at her side while she cradles Ethan closely and watches intently.

I don't listen to a word they are saying, only catching certain words since my attention is focused on her and my son. Tears silently roll down her cheeks and now I'm more aware, I notice the dark rings around her eyes, like deep purple bruises. Her hair is limp and unwashed, skin pale and her nails have been chewed down to the point they look as if they've been bleeding.

Imogen keeps a hand on her, and I drag my eyes away, finding her brother-in-law standing close to the window, concern etched into his face as he watches the two women in his life.

Vanessa looks sick. Worn down.

How long have I been out for? What the fuck happened?

When the doctors are finally done poking and prodding me, they note something in the chart at the end of the bed and tell me I'll be staying in for a further twenty-four to forty-eight hours for observation and advise they'll call my brothers.

Silence falls after they leave, closing the door with a soft click.

"Imogen," I croak, "Would you mind taking Ethan out?"

Her eyes flick between me and her sister, but reluctantly, she nods, reaching for her nephew. Vanessa hesitates, but lets him go, and once they're out of the room, she steps further back, her spine hitting the wall.

For long minutes we stare at each other, and I see much clearer just how exhausted she looks.

Her throat works with a swallow and fresh tears spill from her eyes. "Come here." I order softly.

Her head works with a quick shake.

"Trouble. Come. Here." I pronounce each word with demand, forcing her to move toward me.

She stops a foot from the bed, uncertainty stamped all over her face, a war going on inside of her that she needs to let me into so I can battle it for her.

"No, here." I point to the bed and the space I make for her. My whole body aches but fuck if I won't drag her to me.

Tentatively, she steps closer and lowers the railings on the bed, gently climbing in beside me and avoiding the wires and tubes still attached to me.

When she's close enough I take hold, pulling her until her head is on my chest and my arm is around her waist, my other hand cradling the side of her face so I can manipulate her into looking up at me. I touch her forehead, checking for a fever and then run my thumb under her eyes as if I can somehow wipe away the dark circles of exhaustion.

"You've not been looking after yourself," I accuse gently.

She shakes her head, "I haven't left." She cringes, "I really need to shower."

My hand trails down the side of her face, toward her mouth and then my thumb is tracing across her bottom lip, the plump flesh yielding to me.

"How long?" I ask.

"Three days," She whispers, voice wobbling. My thumbs capture the fresh tears that leak from her eyes. "I didn't know if you would ever wake up."

"I'll always find my way back to you," I vow, "I was coming back for you."

Her lashes flutter, more tears falling from her pretty eyes, "I'm so sorry, Kolt."

"Don't be," I whisper, "I understand."

She shakes her head, "You shouldn't forgive me." Her eyes flutter closed as if she's trying to contain her emotion, hide it from me, "I pushed you away. I was scared."

"Look at me," I order gently. She shakes her head softly, burying her face into my neck beneath my chin. I move and curl a finger beneath her chin, forcing her to look at me.

Big, watery eyes swimming with tears stare at my face.

"I was coming back for you," I tell her, "I would have continued to battle that ocean for you, Ness. I lost but I was still coming. I'll fight for you."

"You were hurt because I sent you away." She sniffs.

I chuckle lightly, "No, I was hurt because I decided to try to fight a storm. We all knew that I was never going to win. I understood you needed space, I expected it to happen." I tell her honestly, "But I wasn't going to let fear stop us from being together. We're new, this is all new and it takes time. It's okay to need that space, Ness. We are it, trouble and nothing will stop me from taking it."

Her lips press tenderly to the base of my throat.

"You're the mother of my child, Ness and the woman I've loved since I met you on the beach all those years ago. We have nothing but time now."

"Are you sure?" She whispers.

"Am I sure about what?"

"Wanting this with me? After I panicked like that, I was sure you wouldn't want to deal with me anymore."

I laugh, "I've never wanted anything more than the way I want you." I assure her, "I will fight to come back to you every time."

"I was so scared," She tells me, "I didn't want to say goodbye to you. I never want to say goodbye."

"There won't be any goodbyes, Ness. Only see you soon, you hear me? We don't say goodbye."

"Promise?"

"Always, trouble."



I finally managed to convince Ness to go back to the hotel with Imogen and Shawn to grab a shower and a nap. It took a lot, but she eventually agreed, having left over two hours ago now.

I've spent the time lying in bed, chatting with the doctor again hoping I'd be able to convince him to let me go earlier. He'd refused and then told me my brothers were on the way before he left. I hated being in here while everyone comes to me, hated that they'd been here for days waiting for me.

There's a gentle tap on the door before it opens, showing Torin and then Rett, both of them alone.

"Where are the girls?" I ask.

"They're at the hotel, Vanessa arrived a couple hours ago. We figured we would give you some time before we showed up," Torin explains.

"She's been here the whole time," I shake my head, the darkness under her eyes haunting me.

"We couldn't get her to leave," Rett drops into the chair, making himself at home, "Trust me, I tried. The girl looked about dead on her feet."

"She's stubborn," I rub at the thick, days old hair on my chin that really needed a trim.

"She loves you," Torin says, his back to me as he stares out the window, watching the snow fall gently beyond.

I nod, agreeing. "I'll buy you a new boat." I tell him.

His head whips around, a scowl on his face, "I don't give a fuck about the boat."

Rett's face drops, a seriousness coming over him I don't see often in my younger brother, "We thought you died, man."

"Didn't you once say it's not in my nature to die?" I tease him, hoping to lighten the mood.

"I take it back," Rett huffs, "If you're gonna die though, it's going to be because you do something stupid like take a damn bullet for one of us. You gotta stop doing that man, it's annoying."

I chuckle, "Sure thing."

"He's right," Torin turns to me fully now, crossing his arms over his chest. I no longer felt like the older brother here. "You missed the first two years of your son's life because you were protecting everyone else. That's not time you can get back."

"I'm aware." I look away, shaking my head.

"We're family, man," Rett stands, slapping his hand against the top of my arm, "The fucking Avery's. We don't do shit alone."

"I couldn't even if I wanted to," I admit.

"Good." Torin continues to scowl, turning back to the window.

"It's a real wonder how he managed to bag the girl," Rett muses, "He's like a bear with an injured paw."

"Shut up, Rett," Torin growls.

But that just makes our youngest brother laugh. Always the shit stirrer.

It's another couple of hours before the girls arrive back at the hospital, Vanessa looking more alive, but the exhaustion of the past few days hangs off her shoulders.

She climbs into the bed on one side of me, while Ethan sits on the other, a book open on my abdomen which he's staring at, his podgy finger tracing the pictures inside.

And everything settles back into place.

No more fractures or splinters. Everything is exactly where it needs to be.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



Two weeks later

My son sits on my knee as laughter echoes through the kitchen at Torin's house. The smell of fresh food and fire saturates the air while Ness sits at my side, a glass of red wine in her hand and a smile that brings back all the good memories.

It's the smile that reminds me of the girl I found laying in the sand in a pretty dress, and the girl who stripped and took a midnight swim.

She's wearing her blue dress for me tonight, her blonde hair left down to tumble over her shoulders like liquid gold.

Ethan grabs a handful of pasta from his plate, shoving it into his mouth, "Use your spoon, buddy," I frown at him.

In retaliation he grabs another fistful, getting pasta on the floor and sauce on his face. Ness chuckles at my side.

"Just like your mother... trouble," I grumble, grabbing the napkin to wipe up the sauce stains on his cheeks before I turn and glance at Ness, her smile like damn sunshine.

Harper giggles at my other side and then she blows bubbles in her chocolate milk which sends Ethan into a fit of laughter. Everyone is happy.

Since being back from the mainland, I've officially moved in with Vanessa, and we've spent long nights talking through everything. I understand her fear and will spend however long I need to, to convince her that there is no chance of history repeating itself. I am going to earn her trust and earn the love she so freely gives me. I'll hold her through it all and be at her side.

It'll take time but she has always been mine, and I am hers. Even the years we were apart, I was always hers. She's my last thought before I go to sleep, and my first thought in the morning.

She is my family.



It's late by the time we get home, Ethan asleep in my arms so I carry him through to his room, Ness following behind. He doesn't stir as I place him down, adjusting his blankets to keep him warm before we sneak back out and head to our own room.

There's a comfortable silence between us, but I am watching her. She's already undressing, her back to me as I sit on the edge of the bed, already getting hard as I picture her naked.

"I had fun tonight," she says as she pulls the zipper down on her dress and slides it off her shoulders, exposing her back to me. The dress lands on the floor in a swish of material before she reaches back for the straps of her bra.

"Yeah?" My voice is a rasp as I picture my hands running over her skin.

"We should definitely do it more." She says, completely oblivious to my stalking her with my eyes. She bends to pick up her dress, throwing it into the hamper and then she turns to me, freezing when she realizes I've been watching her the whole time.

My cock aches and it only gets worse as I run my eyes down the length of her, over her slender neck and breasts, over the curves of her waist and hips and then down her legs.

She's only in a pair of lace panties and one of those pretty blushes I love blooms on her cheeks.

"Come here," My voice is pure growl.

Lashes fluttering, she walks towards me and the moment she is in arms reach my hands are on her. I caress her body with soft strokes that pebble her skin with goose bumps and a breath expels from her lips.

"Kolt," She whispers my name.

"You have no idea the hold you have on me, trouble" I admit.

"Likewise," she steps closer, and I slide my hands around to her ass, squeezing before I bring her close enough, she has to get on the bed, straddling my lap. My mouth captures one of her nipples and a sweet little gasp escapes her, her hands threading into my hair.

"There is not enough time," I kiss her sternum before I move my mouth to her other nipple, "to worship you the way I want to worship you."

She rolls her hips against my hard cock, pushing her lace covered pussy down onto me. I groan at the feel of her, my hands tightening at her hips to keep her body moving over mine. She whimpers and moans, the sound only adding to my need for her.

Moving quickly, I flip us until her back lands on the mattress and I'm covering her, mouth on hers while her hands rush to unbutton my shirt and pants. I don't dare move my lips from hers as I shrug out of the shirt and help her to push down my pants, freeing my cock which is already leaking precum. I remove my mouth from hers only to grip her panties, yanking them down her legs and then I'm there, the head of my cock pushing into her, her nails scoring my skin.

Her hands roam, holding me close as I slowly fill her, teeth clamped together while I watch me disappear into her body and only when I'm fully inside, do I release the breath I was holding.

"You're so fucking perfect, trouble," I whisper against her neck as I thrust, "So damn soft," Thrust, "and warm." Thrust.

Her breath stutters as I push up into her, harder this time.

"You take my cock so well, trouble," I groan, "Look at you, filled with me."

I slide almost all the way out before I slam back in, fucking into her hard. She cries out, her eyes falling shut as her lips part on a pretty little moan.

"That's it," I watch her face as I continue to fuck her, "Let me hear you, Ness, you make the sweetest sound. Do you want to come?"

"Please," She begs, her eyes opening to look right at me.

Flipping us, she straddles my cock and begins to ride, rolling her hips to add friction to her clit, head tipped towards the ceiling, her muscles working to keep her moving, my cock thrusting into her with every grind of her body. All I can do is watch, reveling in the ecstasy of it.

"Ride me, baby," I rasp, pleasure shooting down my spine, "Fucking ride me."

"Kolt," She gasps, "I can't." Her body shakes, "I'm going to come."

"Good," I growl, thrusting up into her as her hips twitch and her grind becomes jerky, "Come for me, Ness."

She cries out as her pussy begins to convulse around my cock, but I don't stop, I fuck her through her orgasm, keeping her on her knees above me as I find my own pleasure, spilling up into her with a groan. She collapses down onto me, her breaths coming out in hard, heavy puffs as my fingers trail up her spine.

"I love you," I whisper to her, kissing her neck.



It's later that night, when the room is dark and I have her in my arms, neither of us having spoken for some time now.

"You sleeping, trouble?" I rasp into the dark.

"No," She whispers back, her fingers whispering over my chest.

"Marry me."

"What?" She jerks up.

"Marry me. Be my wife."

"Are you serious right now?" She asks.

"Very serious, trouble. Marry me." I can't see her in the dark, but I know she's staring down at me or at least trying to, "Become my wife. Be Mrs. Avery."

"Mrs. Avery-Hale," She corrects.

"Is that a yes?"

"It's a yes," She whispers, "Yes I'll marry you."

"We can get a ring," I tell her, "Whatever one you want."

"Kolt," She stops me mid-sentence. "Shut up and kiss me."

So, I do.

#### **EPILOGUE**



One year later

M y feet sink into the sand, the sun just setting on the horizon, setting fire to the calm waters surrounding Ravenpeak Bay. Music continues to play behind me but now I'm further from it, it's muffled and low. The party continues there, our wedding day coming to an end.

Vanessa had wandered off about twenty minutes ago, she'd said she needed to use the bathroom but then I'd received a text.

She'd asked if I remembered the way to the cave, which I did, and when I'd told her that, she'd told me to meet her there.

As I round the corner, I find her, her gorgeous lace dress pooled around her as she sits on a blanket with pillows piled up and a small box in front of her. Her blonde hair is pulled up into this elaborate updo, with curls and flowers pinned in and her skin glows, the summer sun giving her a tan and popping up her freckles.

"Hi," She smiles at me.

"Wife," I grin.

"I wanted a moment with you," she tells me, looking down as a blush steals over her cheeks. Going to her, I take a seat in front of her, plucking up her left hand to run my finger over her wedding band.

Mine.

She is mine.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

She nods gently, "I love you." She whispers.

"I love you too."

"This is for you," She picks up the box with the hand I'm not holding and passes it to me and when I lower her hand to accept it, she lays it across my knee, keeping the contact.

A pink ribbon has been neatly tied over the box, so I gently pull it off, lifting the lid and freeze at what's inside.

I know what it is, I can clearly see what it is, but I can't quite believe it, "Is it... are you..."

"Pregnant?" She smiles at me, "Eight weeks."

"You're pregnant?" I repeat.

"I took three," She chews her lip, "And Arryn and I took a trip to the clinic earlier this week."

That's right. She'd gone to the mainland to pick up her dress, she must have done it then.

"I didn't want to tell you until I was sure," she explains, "And I thought today would be perfect to tell you."

Silence stretches between us as I stare at the two lines on the tiny screen.

She shuffles nervously in front of me, "Are you okay?"

"You're pregnant," I can feel my heart pounding, joy and love and happiness blooming inside my chest.

"Are you happy?" There's a crack in her voice now and I flick my eyes up to her, seeing her face twisted in concern.

"Happy?" I choke, "Am I happy?"

She nods.

"I've never been happier, trouble," My eyes drop to her stomach as if she'd suddenly be showing, which of course she's not, "We're having another baby."

"Yes, Kolt."

I place the box down and gently grasp her hand again, pulling her into my lap.

"Thank you," I whisper against her lips, "Fuck. I don't know how to thank you."

"Why are you thanking me?" She asks, kissing me softly.

"For giving me a home," I kiss the edge of her mouth, "For being the mother of my children. For saying I do and becoming my wife."

"You don't have to thank me for that," she says softly, cradling my face.

"But I do, trouble, because you've given me a future I never expected to have. You've shown me what love looks like. I will never not be grateful for you, Ness."

My hand touches her flat stomach.

"You're my home, Ness," I whisper to her.

"Always."

Beneath these dark skies is where we began and it's only right, it's where I promise her my forever.

#### Thank you!

Thank you so much for taking the time to read Beneath These Dark Skies. This book is bittersweet, the final book in the Ravenpeak Bay Series. This series has felt like home for almost a year now and the love you guys have had for my Avery brothers has been overwhelming. Thank you for loving this little town and all the characters as much as I do.

So what's up next?

Well I promised you a book for Malakai and I am beyond excited to announce, Playing with Fire, a standalone, arranged marriage romance.

Let me warn you – Malakai is no hero. Red flags anyone?

Get it here!

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