

To hate her,
is to love her.



The girl I once loved

USA TODAY & AMAZON BEST-SELLING AUTHORS
C. R. JANE & IVY FOX

The Girl I Once Loved

Love & Hate Duet

C.R. Jane

Ivy Fox

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To second chances.

The ones we give others...

And the ones we give ourselves.

The Girl I Once Loved

Someone once told me that there's a fine line between love and hate.

They forgot to mention how that line, once broken, can never be mended.

Skylar Ames.

My stepsister.

The very embodiment of all I've ever desired.

She'll forever hold my heart in her hands.

I played my part and pushed her away, preferring to sacrifice my dreams,
for hers.

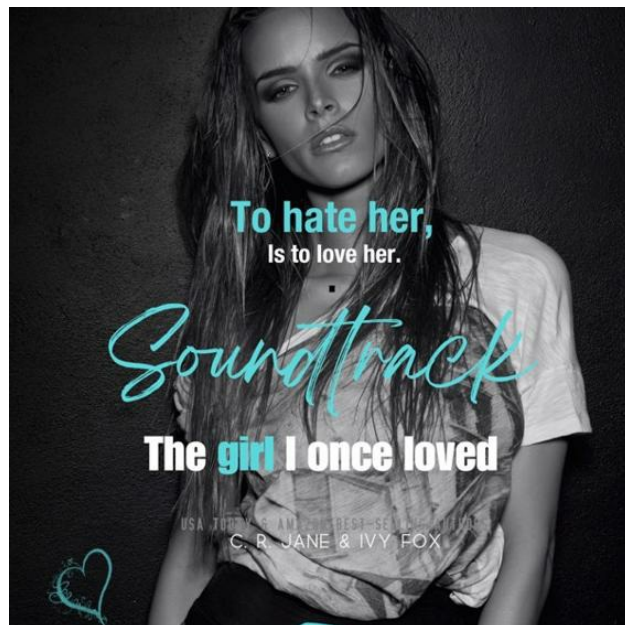
But now she's back, and that girl who'd ruined my soul...

She's now a woman set to finish the job and take it for good.

And I just might let her...

Because of the girl once loved, I'd never be able to love again.

TGIOL Soundtrack



Fell in Love with a Girl
The White Stripes

Just Breathe
Pearl Jam

The Chain
Fleetwood Mac

Snow on The Beach
Taylor Swift Ft, Lana Del Rey

Try a Little Tenderness
Otis Redding

Movement
Hozier

No Sound but The Wind
Editors

happiness
Taylor Swift

Fade Into You
Mazzy Star

Cosmic Love
Florence + The Machine

Skinny Love
Bon Iver

All These Things That I've Done
The Killers

Motion Sickness
Phoebe Bridgers

Timeless
Taylor Swift

Listen to the full playlist [here](#).

“Hearts are made to be broken.”
— **Oscar Wilde, De Profundis**

Part 2

Prologue

Noah



I once knew a girl with such fire running through her veins that I was positive she could scorch me to ash with just one word uttered by her luscious lips. The arduous passion and fight in her voice had the power to turn me into a weak and foolish mess.

For she knew the truth that lived and breathed inside me.

Those smoldering silver eyes could stare right into the confinements of my deformed soul and see my every hidden secret, challenging them to come into the light. She was the only one who ever truly saw my ugliness, my darkness, and was never scared that it had the potential to swallow her whole. She bated me at every turn and goaded my deviant monster to do its worst with a mocking grin to her lips.

And more times than not, her resilience and strength were the only things that kept my head above water.

Knowing she would always be there to coax me into feeling *something*, no matter how vile and awful that feeling could be, served as a reminder that I was still capable of emotion. That I hadn't given in to the numbness completely, even if my soul bared its hideous teeth marks. With her taunting me, my melancholy never stood a chance.

I won't lie to you.

Before her, my life was empty and void of all feeling.

She found me at a time where death would have been a merciful blessing. Ironic how the bane of my existence became my sole reason for living. The thing that made me want to wake up in the morning and not give in to the abyss that called out my name. Instead of giving in, I sought out her light knowing it would show me the way out of the deep black pit that summoned

me.

I fed on her anger.

I relished in her fury.

Until I found I was no longer satiated with her fight but craved something else so much more.

Her heart.

Like a lovesick fool, I gave into temptation and eagerly took everything she was willing to give me, letting that be my reason for being above all things. And for a while, life didn't feel so suffocatingly cruel. Not when I had her in my arms, looking at me like I hung the stars in the sky just for her.

And God, for her I would, if I could.

There was nothing I would deny her.

Not when she had taken my cold dead heart in her hands and breathed life into it with just one kiss.

Stupidly, I thought I could keep her, that somehow she was my karmic reward for all of my suffering. I had lost so much that I thought her a miracle. That the heavens had opened their gates to give her to me just to make up for all the pain and misery I had endured.

What a fucking idiot I was to think I deserved her.

I didn't.

No one does.

And I curse the man who tries to keep her in the end.

He will be an even bigger fool than I ever was.

Because the asshole will never know that the girl I once loved will never be his entirely.

A piece of her will always be mine.

Just as my heart will always be hers.

Chapter One

Skylar



A loud and obnoxious ringtone shatters the silence of my bedroom and successfully cuts through the tranquility of my deep sleep. My eyes struggle to open, as my face contorts in confusion and annoyance from being so rudely awakened. Groggily, I lift my head off the pillow, desperately scanning the room for the source of the aggravating loud music. Gael is sleeping soundly beside me throughout the whole chaotic mayhem, making me envy his dead-to-the-world slumber.

Thankfully, after a few seconds, my mind clears enough for me to logically pinpoint that the sound is coming from my phone that is currently perched on the nightstand beside me, vibrating and flashing away with the blinding screen.

“What the...” I grumble as I stretch my arm and clumsily grab my phone, knocking my notebook and pen to the floor.

“Argh,” I groan, struggling to unlock the damn thing as my vision adjusts to the sudden unwelcome brightness.

Who could possibly be calling me at this ungodly hour?

“Hello?” I greet drowsily, my eyelids still weighing a ton.

“Hello to you too, hot stuff!” a familiar overexcited voice responds.

“Daisy?” I croak, pulling my phone to my face to see what time it is. “It’s three in the morning.”

“I think what you meant to say is happy birthday, big sis,” she singsongs, elated.

“You know it’s custom for people to call the birthday girl, not the other way around.” I chuckle, pulling my arm over my eyes to block the phone’s light from my vision.

“I couldn’t wait! Besides, I have some amazing news to tell you.” She squeals with glee.

“Can’t it wait until...oh, I don’t know...when I’m at least awake enough for you to tell me?”

“Oh, believe me, you’ll wake up after I tell you this. You might want to sit down.”

“I’m still in bed, Daisy. Like most normal people are at three in the morning.” I yawn exaggeratedly to make my point. “Just come out with it already so I can go back to sleep.”

“Have it your way, but I doubt you’ll get any sleep tonight after I tell you my big news.” Daisy giggles. “You ready?”

“Yes, Daisy. Out with it.”

“Hold on to your hat, little sis, ‘cause your big sister is getting married!”

“You’re what?!” I blurt out, rising from my bed, fully awake now. Gael stirs in his sleep with the sudden loud outburst.

Shit.

“Give me a sec,” I whisper to her, and then nestle the phone to my chest to muffle Daisy’s excited laughter.

Ever so carefully, I slide out of the bed and rush to the living room so I don’t wake my boyfriend up while I talk to Daisy. Once I’m there, I sit on the armrest of the couch and take a deep breath before pulling the phone back up to my ear.

“Did you just say you’re getting married?” I ask, unable to mask my astonishment.

“Yep! Derrick asked me to marry him, and I said yes! Can you believe it?!” she screams happily.

“No. Not really,” I choke out, trying to make sense of what she’s saying.

“Jesus, Sky. I thought you’d be more excited for me,” she retorts, sounding hurt that I’m not throwing fireworks after hearing such an announcement.

“I am excited for you. Truly, I am. It’s just not what I was expecting,” I confess, trying my best to sound upbeat and failing miserably.

“Not what you were expecting?!” she counters, confused. “Derrick and I have been dating since high school, Sky. Sooner or later, this was bound to happen.”

“Yes, I know. I just never thought you were the marrying kind. You always said that it was an archaic institution created by the patriarchy,” I

explain, trying to defend why I'm shocked by this news.

"I know, and I still believe that. Before I met Derrick, I never saw myself walking down the aisle for any man. But for him..." she sighs dreamingly. "I love him, Sky. I want to be his wife more than anything in this world."

"Of course you do. I'm sorry. You just caught me off guard, that's all. I'm happy for you, Daisy. Really, I am," I tell her and mean it.

"You better be, since I need you here to plan this wedding with me." She giggles. "Thatcher's Bay will be talking about this wedding for years to come."

"Daisy—" I start to protest but my sister is having none of it.

"Nope. Don't Daisy me, Sky. This is my wedding we're talking about. I want you here and that's the end of it," she states, leaving me little room to argue with her.

"Can I at least think about it?"

When the line goes quiet, I know I've hurt her with my hesitance.

She was so excited to tell me her big news and here I am pissing all over it.

God, I suck.

"Sky, I want you to listen closely," she starts, her tone dead serious. "I love you. I love you with all my heart. So much so that I didn't complain or give you a hard time for not coming home these past seven years. I didn't give you any grief when you skipped out on all the Thanksgivings and Christmases over the years, preferring to spend it with Dad on the mainland. I didn't say a word when you didn't come home for the summer holidays either. I was the first to back you up with Mom when you said that you needed to work through those months. I've always respected your choices and supported you through and through." She lets out a dispirited exhale. "But this is my wedding, Sky. *My wedding*. No excuse you could ever give for not coming will ever make it right with me. I need my sister. I *miss* my sister. So take your time and think about it if you want, but if your answer is anything but yes, then I'll never forgive you."

Fuck

Fuck.

Fuck!

"Daisy—"

"The wedding will be in two months," she interjects in an even tone. "I've made Derrick wait long enough for me over the years. I refuse to make

him wait any longer. I want you here to help me plan this wedding, Sky. I want my sister to share in my happiness as I would be honored and grateful to share in hers if the tables were reversed. If you can't do that...if you can't stand by my side on what should be the happiest day of my life...then I guess you're not the sister I thought you were."

And with that threat, she hangs up.

Pissed with myself more than I am at Daisy for giving me such an ultimatum, I throw my phone across the room, slamming it loudly against the wall and shattering it completely.

She's right.

If I had called her up in the middle of the night, telling her I was engaged, Daisy would be on the first flight to Boston. She wouldn't think twice about being by my side, elated that I finally found the happiness she always wished for me.

And what did I do in return?

Shit all over her news.

"Goddamn it!" I curse in frustration, punching the headrest of the couch.

"Bad news?" Gael asks behind me, wiping the sleep away from his eyes.

"Shit. I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

"Little bit." He smiles warmly, wrapping his arms around my waist and bending down just low enough to hide his face in the crook of my neck. "Everything okay?" he whispers lovingly.

I shake my head.

"I figured as much. Want me to make you some tea or something?"

"I think I'll need something stronger than that," I admit, my shoulders sagging in defeat.

"Vodka it is then." He smiles into my neck and then places a tender kiss on my cheek.

Gael releases me from his comforting hug and walks over to the kitchen to grab me a stiff drink. I slide down onto the couch and grab a pillow to hug. When Gael returns to the living room with a tall glass of vodka on the rocks, I eagerly grab it from his hands and take a large swig. I watch him sit on the coffee table across from me, waiting patiently for me to tell him what's wrong.

I take another two sips of the hard liquor and force the words out of my mouth.

"Daisy's getting married."

When Gael's expression doesn't change, my stomach churns.

"But you already knew that. Derrick told you, didn't he?" I ask, unable to hide the accusation in my voice.

When he nods, my anger surfaces.

"Thanks for the heads up," I seethe through gritted teeth after drinking the rest of the clear liquid in one full swing.

"Don't be angry with me, babe. All I knew was that Derrick was going to propose to your sister on her birthday. He made me promise not to tell you, fearing you'd ruin the surprise. Besides, I had no way of knowing she would actually say yes. This is Daisy we're talking about. She's always been a bit of a commitment-phobe." He shrugs unapologetically.

"Of course she was going to say yes! She's crazy about him," I defend, not liking anyone talking smack about Daisy even if it's true.

"You're angry," he states, as if he's telling me something I don't know.

"What gave it away?" I scoff.

"Maybe we should talk tomorrow when you're calmer," he says while getting up to his feet.

"I hate it when you do that," I mumble under my breath.

"Do what?" He arches an inquisitive brow.

"Act like you're the adult in this relationship," I rebuke with a bite to my voice.

"Stop acting like a spoiled child and I won't have to be," he says defensively, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

"Wow. Condescending much?" I counter, cutting my eyes to him.

Gael drags his hand over his face, his tell-tale sign that he's becoming frustrated with me.

"It's late, Skylar, and it's obvious you're looking for a fight. I'm not going to give you one."

"Surprise, surprise." I roll my eyes at him.

That's how it's always been with us.

Anytime we're about to have a fight, Gael always finds a way to recuse himself from said confrontation. He only resurfaces when he's sure that the tension between us has subsided for us to have a civil conversation, always needing to be the pacifist in our relationship.

When we first started dating after I graduated from Dartmouth and moved to Boston, I found his way of dealing with conflict refreshing. I'd had plenty of boyfriends and hookups back in college who loved nothing more than

creating a bit of drama to keep things interesting. Usually when that happened, I made sure to break things off since I had more than enough drama in my teen years to last me a lifetime and had no interest in repeating those old toxic habits.

Gael was different.

I liked how he preferred for us to talk about our problems when neither one of us was angry or upset. I liked how he was vulnerable with his feelings and allowed me room to be vulnerable with mine, giving us both a safe space to talk about our issues and confront them with a cool and collected level head. But after three years together, his passive way of dealing with me whenever I'm in a mood has only served to annoy me. Sometimes I wish he would stoop to my level and argue with me, lose all control and curse and fight and fuck.

Maybe if he did that, I wouldn't feel so alone in my darkness.

I've come to realize that Gael isn't capable of such a thing though.

Gael is light. Sweet and tender. He's the embodiment of good.

But me?

My insides are a mangled mess, hungry for the comforting taste of misery and pain.

Only in the dark do I find solace.

It's that same darkness that runs through my veins now and coaxes me to follow Gael as he retreats back into the bedroom.

"What's so bad about wanting to fight? Maybe fighting with the person you're in a relationship with is a sign that you still give a fuck?" I shout at the top of my lungs.

"I hate it when you're vulgar. It's beneath you, that type of crass talk." He shakes his head, disappointed.

"Well, I hate your holier than thou attitude."

"Are we really doing this, Skylar?" he asks, his warm brown eyes saddened. "Is this really what you want? To fight with me?"

"I don't see anyone else around." I shrug.

"I refuse to be your punching bag just because you're angry with yourself."

"Me?" My eyes widen. "Why would I be angry with *me*?"

"Because your sister just called to say that she was getting married, and you have no idea how to get out of it without breaking her heart. That's your baggage, Skylar. Not mine," he snaps, going straight to the route of my pain

before grabbing his discarded pants and putting them on.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” he rebukes. “I’m going home before you say something we’ll both regret.”

I jump to the bed and snatch his shirt away from him before he has time to put it on.

“No. You’re staying here so we can talk,” I order furiously.

“We’re not talking, Skylar. You’re yelling and I’m trying very hard not to.”

“Then yell! Shout! Show some kind of emotion!”

“Why would I when you have more than enough for the both of us,” he replies, grabbing his jacket and putting it on, forgoing his shirt. He then begins to look for his shoes and socks, sitting on the bed after he finds them to put them on.

I sit back on my heels on top of the bed and just stare at his back.

“God. You really don’t have it in you, do you? Is there nothing that sets you off?”

Gael stops what he’s doing and turns around, grabbing my face in his soft hands.

“You want to know what sets me off, Skylar?” he says softly, staring deep into my eyes. “The fact that my girlfriend of three years still refuses to live with me sets me off. Or the fact that the woman I love still can’t say she loves me back. And don’t even get me started on how angry I am that we’re fighting right now just because you need someone to put your frustrations on, just because you’re too scared to go back to Thatcher’s Bay. For a reason I still don’t fully understand. All those things set me off, Skylar. But I’m fucking *here*. I’m fucking doing the work to keep our relationship going.”

My throat burns at the way his eyes water in suffering—suffering that I’ve caused him.

“If it’s this hard for you, then why are you still here?” I ask bitterly, hating that I’m pushing him away instead of easing his pain.

“I ask myself that question every day,” he confesses despondently. “I was hoping one day you’d prove to me that this was all worth it.”

The love in his eyes strangles my heart to the point of pain.

“Maybe I’m not worth it,” I whisper, the fight in me long gone.

He leans his head into mine and breathes me in.

“You’re worth it, Skylar. But I’m starting to realize that maybe you don’t

think that I am.”

He presses a kiss to my temple and then abruptly pulls away and stands up.

“Gael,” I begin to plead softly, my rage completely extinguished. I open my mouth to tell him not to go, but he beats me to the punch and pulls the rug right out from under me with his next words.

“I think maybe we need a break.”

“What?” I croak out in disbelief.

Gael runs his fingers through his disheveled hair, gaining courage to continue.

“I’ll probably regret this in the morning, but something is off between us. And if I’m being truly honest with myself, it’s been off from the get-go. I tried to make excuses for your inability to commit to me. That it’s an Ames sisters flaw, sprung up from your parents’ divorce. I kept telling myself that you were hurt once before and that it would take time for you to trust again. But I’ve been here, Skylar. I’ve been here waiting for you to let me in. To be in this with me,” he says, letting out an exhale. “But I’ve always felt that I got the ghost of you. Just a sliver of what your love could actually feel like. I’m tired of dating a ghost, Skylar. I want a woman who loves me as much as I love her. And though I love you with every fiber of my being, I don’t think you’ll ever be able to love me the same way.”

We stare at each other for what feels like an eternity. I know he’s waiting for me to deny everything he just said. On bated breath he waits, and my heart breaks as I watch Gael clinging to hope, holding on to it so tightly that if he lets go, he’ll shatter into a million pieces.

If I tell him that I love him, he’ll stay.

If I tell him that I love him, he’ll come back to bed and hold me tight, promising to never let me go.

Just say it, Sky!

Just tell him that you love him.

But the words remain lodged in my throat, unwilling to come out.

Because I know the truth.

Gael is a gentle wind determined to breathe life and light into the world, while I’m a furious storm intent on destroying everything in its path.

Gael would never survive me.

When he realizes that I’m not going to say anything, he bows his head and takes in a fortifying breath before meeting my eyes again.

“A break will do us both some good,” he says, trying to convince himself more than me. “It will give us some perspective.”

The only perspective Gael will get from time apart is the realization that he’s too good for me.

“For whatever it’s worth, I think you should go to Daisy and be at your sister’s side. You’ll regret it if you don’t,” he adds solemnly, and when he begins to pass me by, I jump off the bed and step in his way to stop him from leaving.

“Gael,” his name comes out desperate and wrong. “Don’t do this.”

He cups my cheeks in his palms and broken-heartedly looks me in the eye.

“I love you, Skylar. So much. But I need more. I need more than you’re willing to give.”

“What if I can’t?” I choke on a sob.

“You can. I know you can. I just wish you could with me.”

He then leans in and softly brushes his lips to mine. It’s only as I watch Gael leave my apartment, that I admit to myself that I’ll never be able to love him like he deserves.

I’ll never be able to love like anyone.

And that all comes down to *him*.

The reason why I never intended to return to Thatcher’s Bay.

Not even for my sister’s wedding.

After all these years, *he* still manages to ruin every good thing in my life.

Spoiling every memory. Every hope and dream.

How I hate *him* for it.

But Gael is right.

If I miss Daisy’s wedding, she’ll never forgive me. My relationship with my mother is already strained enough, with me not coming home and preferring to spend my holidays either working or at my father’s in Falmouth.

But if I miss Daisy’s wedding?

I’ll end up losing my whole family for good.

Silent tears stream down my cheeks, as I walk around my living room in search of my phone. With a self-deprecating chuckle I pick it up from the floor, staring at the cracked screen as if it’s mocking my current circumstance. I let out a relieved exhale after determining that the phone, although battered and bruised, still works. I pull out the thread of messages between me and Daisy and begin to write.

Me: I'm sorry.

It takes just seconds before I get her reply.

Daisy: I know.

Me: I'll be there.

Daisy: I'll believe it when I see it.

Me: I said I was sorry.

Daisy: You have until the end of the week to get here. Don't break my heart, Sky. I'm counting on you.

Me: No pressure.

Daisy: Where's the fun in that? Luv u

Me: Love you too.

After I've made sure that I've patched things up with Daisy, I go over to the kitchen and grab the vodka bottle out of the fridge. I then go back to the living room and grab my laptop to book my flight home.

Home.

I've lived most of my life on the mainland, but anytime I think of home, my mind always travels back to Thatcher's Bay.

They say that home is where the heart is.

They're not wrong.

Thatcher's Bay is where I left mine.

And I've been living perfectly content without it ever since.

I have no desire to visit its deformed existence or retrieve it from the villain who butchered it.

But I guess I don't have much of a choice.

I'm going home, whether I'm ready to or not.

I'm going home.

For Daisy.

Chapter Two

Skylar



I stare at the phone on my cluttered desk, my finger hovering over the call button, as I consider my options. I need to tell my editor, Eliza, that I'll be gone for a few months, and right now, I'm wondering how best to go about it. A text would do the trick...but a part of me is hoping that if I call her with the news, she'll throw a huge fit and tell me there's far too much work to be done for me to leave for that long and with such short notice. Yup

Maybe Eliza is the key to giving me an excuse to stay away from Thatcher's Bay.

The number on the screen is familiar, etched into my memory like an old scar. I finally muster up the courage to press it, bringing the device to my ear. Each ring feels like an eternity, my heartbeat thudding in my chest.

"Skylar?" Eliza's voice, sharp and business-like, cuts through the silence.

"Hi," I reply, my voice trembling.

"How's my favorite protégé today?"

I take a deep breath, fighting back the shame that always seems to coat my chest whenever she greets me that way.

Protégé. What a word.

Certainly not one often used to describe a person who spent most of her young life hiding perpetually in the shadows.

Certainly not something used to describe...me.

"Daisy's getting married," I murmur in reply, preferring to rip the bandage off quickly.

"Oh! Well, congratulations! That's wonderful news. She's been dating her boyfriend for quite some time, right?"

"Yeah," I respond noncommittally, not wanting to think about just how

long it's been. Because it's hard to think about Daisy and Derrick...without thinking about *him*.

"You don't sound awfully excited. Is everything alright?" Eliza questions, sensing my uneasiness.

"Yes, everything is fine. It's just that Daisy would like me to help her with the wedding preparations. That means I'll be gone for close to three months. The whole summer in fact," I tell her simply, because the truth is far too complicated to get into. Eliza doesn't know just how messed up I really am. And it's probably best for my livelihood that it remains that way.

"The whole summer, huh?" she repeats pensively as if listing the pros and cons in her head to see if she's on board with me being absent for so long. "Well, good for you," she finally says, having made up her mind on the matter. "It will be just the nice little break you need. You've been working so hard these past few years, you're due a vacation."

"Oh no. I'll still be working," I quickly correct her. "I'll just be doing it from Thatcher's Bay."

But just saying the name of the small fishing island makes my throat tighten...makes it hard to breathe. To think.

"Don't be silly." Eliza's tone softens. "Take advantage that you're in between projects at the moment and enjoy yourself. Just take some time off and relax a bit. You've earned it."

"I...I need something to do to keep my mind off...things," I reluctantly admit. "Work will be good."

There's a moment of silence on the other end, and the next time Eliza speaks, I can tell she's measuring her words carefully. "Skylar, if you have to work, why not write something...for yourself? Like we talked about. Maybe it's time you wrote something of your own. Like I've said numerous times before, I'd be glad to help you in any way I can with your debut novel."

The suggestion hits me like a punch to the gut.

"No," I reply flatly. "I'm not ready for that yet, Eliza. I like being a ghostwriter. I thrive in the shadows, crafting words for others. Writing something of my own...it's not something...it's not something I'm interested in at the moment." I add the last part more for her benefit than for mine.

Eliza has no idea I've been suffering from severe writer's block. Writing someone else's story, I'm completely at ease with. But writing my own story? Not so much. It's a sore spot I have, knowing that before, I used to write like the words were coming directly from my fucking soul. That the

stories flowed out of me, filling my head every hour of every day. That I had notebooks and notebooks filled to the brim with them and there weren't enough hours in a day for me to purge them out onto paper.

But that all changed.

He sucked them all dry. Every last one.

Leaving me with nothing except to mourn the ashes of my words.

"All I need is a project. Any project, Eliza, to occupy my time."

"Hmm. I think I'm starting to understand." Eliza's voice comes out gentle now. "It isn't easy going back home. I can sympathize with that since my own family is hard to swallow at times. Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays are all I'm able to stomach, if I'm being truthful. But sometimes, going back home can be good for the soul, too. Sometimes, it forces us to face our own inner demons, which can be very therapeutic. Better than any three-hundred dollar an hour therapist," she adds light heartedly. "I guess what I'm trying to say with this, Skylar, is that maybe it's time for you to look deep inside yourself and share whatever story you've been hiding...with the world."

I shake my head, even though she can't see me, my eyes welling up with tears.

"I'm good, Eliza. Right where I am. As a ghostwriter."

As a ghost...

Eliza sighs again, this time with a tinge of disappointment.

"Think about it, Skylar. Thatcher's Bay might be the perfect place to find the inspiration you need. And maybe, just maybe, you'll realize that it's time to step out of the shadows and into the light where you belong. Remember that you are a strong independent woman. There is nothing you can't overcome. Even going home."

Easier said than done.

"I'll think about it," I lie, sensing Eliza won't drop the subject any other way.

"Good," she says, pleased. "Well, have fun this summer. And congratulate your sister on her upcoming nuptials for me. Take care, Skylar."

I hang up the phone, the weight of Eliza's previous words sinking in. Right now, I feel as far away from the light as you can get. It takes courage and strength to finish those unfinished sentences that have haunted me for seven long years.

And I don't seem to have any left over.

I stare out my window at the bustling city, and I can't help but feel a mix

of fear...and anticipation. Three months in Thatcher's Bay. Three whole months to face all the ghosts of my past. To maybe lock them away for good.

My phone buzzes and I glance down at it.

Gael.

How are you? he writes, and even through a text I can taste the melancholic edge in his words.

Can we meet? I ask, instead of answering his question.

I don't want to admit that I haven't been obsessing over our 'break' like I'm sure he has. Your heart can only be truly shattered once in a lifetime.

And mine's already happened.

Our coffee shop? he asks, and *that's* when a tear slips down my cheek. Because it hits me that if this turns into the end...it's the end of everything about my life as I know it. It's the end of 'our' and the coffeeshops, restaurants, parks, slow walks through the familiar streets, cheap wine while I read with my head in his lap...that the word belongs to.

I slide to the floor, thinking about all that will have to be rebuilt.

Everything but my heart, I think.

And that's the hardest thing to deal with out of everything.

Realizing that I'm broken. Permanently, it seems. That something's wrong inside of me. Something I can't fix. My inner fabric is too scarred up to ever be whole again.

It's raining outside when I finally leave my apartment to meet up with Gael. Uncaring to turn back to grab an umbrella, I walk through it, taking in every drop until I'm standing at the door of 'our' coffee shop, sopping wet.

Like I expected, Gael's already there, sitting at a table with two drinks, one that I know will have my cinnamon vanilla latte with almond milk, because he's thoughtful like that.

He doesn't see me at first, which I use for my own advantage just to stand there in the rain, staring at him. Wishing that I could love him. Want him. Need him.

I know one of the reasons I'm suffering from writer's block is because there's nothing left in me. I can't write for myself because it's too personal. You can't slice open your wrist and drip onto the page when there's nothing in your veins to start with.

Gael will be a regret I'll have to carry with me forever if I can't get over myself.

I just hope he's not too heavy to carry.

Finally, I open the door and walk in, his head turning up towards me in an instant. I can see it so clearly in his eyes... how he forgets everything and everyone around him, even if just for a second, excited to see me.

Like he always is.

But with every step I take towards him, awareness comes back to him as he remembers the reality of us.

The sparkling light in his eyes begins to dim, taking small sips at my soul as I watch it fully disappear.

But it still doesn't *hurt*. Not like *him*.

The rain drums a depressing rhythm on the windowpane behind me, and I'm tempted to dash back through the door, escape this before it even starts. But I force myself to take each step until I'm standing by our usual table, and then sitting in the chair across from him, soaking in the atmosphere heavy with tension.

He looks...exhausted, like he hasn't slept all night. His dark hair is disheveled, and his usually bright brown eyes are clouded with uncertainty. I'm responsible for this turmoil...his pain. After all, *I'm* the one who can't seem to let go of the past, who can't fully commit to a future with him.

I take a sip of my coffee, and it doesn't taste as sweet as it normally does. In fact, its bitterness mirrors the ache in my heart.

I should say hello. I should ask if he's slept. But instead...

"Gael, we don't need a break," I immediately say, unable to keep the words in, my voice shaking. "I just...I need some time to get my head on straight, to figure things out. I don't want to lose you."

It's not a lie.

Even if it's also not entirely the truth.

He leans forward, his elbows on the table, his fingers tapping nervously on the surface. "Sky," he murmurs, closing his eyes like he's in pain. I shudder when he opens them again and I see all the hurt in their depths. "We can't be a never ending circle. You won't let yourself fall for me, and you won't let yourself love me. I'm hopeful—" he stops and drags his hand down his face. "I'm hopeful that a break will let you find yourself...so you can find me."

I lower my gaze, unable to meet his intense stare. "I don't need to find myself, Gael," I murmur. "I just...I just need time."

"And that's what I'm giving you," he says, lifting his chin.

I know if I could say those three little words, he would melt. He would

forget about the break. Welcome me back with open arms.

It would be so easy. People say them every day.

They say they love their friends, or someone's hair, or the fucking weather.

It's just not something *I* can say easily.

I open my mouth and he stares at me—hopeful. "I—" I begin, willing myself to get them out.

But just like I can't get *my* story on paper, I can't get *my* words across my tongue.

Gael sighs and stares away, before his gaze comes back to my face, like he can't help himself.

He reaches across the table, his hand covering mine, his touch lacking the warmth and reassurance it usually has. "I can't keep waiting for you to decide if you want this or not. It's not fair to either of us."

I feel tears welling up in my eyes, and I blink them away. "I know, Gael. I know I've been difficult, and I'm sorry for that. But please, just give me some time. I promise I'll work through my issues, and we can be happy together."

I'm begging at this point. And it's embarrassing and...unnecessary. But I can't seem to help myself.

He sighs, his thumb gently caressing my hand. "I want to believe you, Sky, but you've been saying this for so long. I don't want to be stuck in a relationship where I'm constantly wondering if you're going to pull away."

"I won't," I whisper, my voice breaking.

He just stares at me silently. Because we both know every word coming from my lips is a lie.

The weight of us... hangs heavily between us. We sit in silence, both lost in our thoughts. The coffee shop buzzes with the usual sounds of conversation, all of them oblivious to the storm between us, the one that echoes the storm outside.

Finally, Gael breaks the silence. "I'll be at the wedding. I want to be there for Derrick on his big day," he murmurs. "I guess...I'll see you there."

It's not a surprise he doesn't want to go as my date, but it still feels like a knife in my ribs. Gael's always been my buffer, the one to smooth out my awkward edges.

It's bad enough that I'll be going to the wedding at all. But now I'll be going alone, facing two men who give me nothing but regrets...even if they're for very different reasons.

"I understand," I finally say. Because what else can I say? Except...

"It feels like...forever."

I know he understands the words as soon as they pass my lips because there's a knowingness in his eyes today. Like he's trying to come to terms with the inevitable. Accept what I'm still unwilling to let go of.

"I would keep you forever if you let me," he murmurs sadly, before pushing away from the table. His fingers thrum on the table before he puts his hands in his pocket.

Tears spill down my cheeks, and I wipe them away as I stare up at him. There are some people staring at us now. But like usual, I can't find it in me to care.

He reaches down to catch a tear, his touch tender and filled with heartbreaking devotion. "Just a break," he says before he strides out of the shop, pausing at the door to stare back at me longingly.

I pretend not to notice though, and it's not hard. Because I'm trying to trace all the wrong turns in my life, how I ended up here, in this coffee shop. Alone as my dream man walks out into the rain.

It's a million little choices, and one big one that led me here. Is it like this for everyone? Are they unable to outrun the past until it's battering at their defenses, clawing at their insides and ruining their heart for everything else?

Or is that just me?

I sip my coffee, a thousand broken dreams hovering heavily in the air.

When I leave the coffee shop, the rain has stopped, the sun peeking out from behind the clouds. I should be basking in its warmth, but to me, the world still feels gray and heavy.

But I make a little promise to myself, that I'll at least *try* to escape the demons that wait for me back in Thatcher's Bay.

And maybe I won't do it just for Gael.

Maybe I'll do it for me, too.

Chapter Three

Skylar



I can't delay anymore, Daisy's imposed deadline beating over my head. Seven years is a long time, but it's enough to know I need to take her words seriously. To know that she wouldn't forgive me if I didn't show up. So here I am, white knuckling my seat as the tiny prop plane makes its way over to Falmouth. I stare out the small pane of glass, watching the world pass below.

I don't bother looking at the other passengers.

There would've been a time where I would have. Where, by the end of the flight, I would have come up with a million different stories for all of them. It's a strange thing that I don't do that anymore.

"Do you have family in Falmouth?" a kind, warm voice asks from next to me. I inwardly sigh and glance over, because one of my pet peeves in life is chatty seatmates. My annoyance immediately softens though, when I see the sweet white haired woman who'd smiled at me as she sat down an hour earlier. There's a twinkle in her eye, and golden wrinkles etched on her face, ones I get the feeling she's proud of, because it tells of a life well lived.

"Thatcher's Bay, actually," I answer quietly, and she tips her head to study me in a way that feels far too personal from a stranger.

"Did you grow up there? That's where I met my husband, Johnny. I went there to nanny for the summer, and on a night off, I walked into a dancing hall, and there he was." Her eyes took on a dreamy look, and I'm jealous of her. Because I haven't had a dreamy look like *that* for quite some time.

"I went to high school there," I say, deciding not to comment on the story she's just told. I don't want to hear about a Thatcher's Bay love story.

Not when my own ended with tragedy.

"When was the last time you went back?" she asks, and I tense in my seat.

"Seven years," I finally murmur in a choked voice.

Her eyes widen imperceptibly and she keeps studying me. "Thatcher's Bay has a way of dragging you back, doesn't it? Kind of like there's magic in its sand."

More like misery is what I want to say. But instead, I just give her a polite smile. "Something like that."

She mercifully stops talking to me until the plane is touching down at the tiny airport. The wheels roll on the tarmac, finally coming to a stop. In the distance I can see the gleaming ocean, a siren call that I dread with everything in me.

The plane door opens and I click off my seatbelt, preparing to leave. She pats my hand before I can stand up.

"The trick to Thatcher's Bay is that you have to let the magic in, dear girl," she says with a gentle smile, before withdrawing her hand and standing up.

I shake my head at her words, knowing very well that you can think some things magic until it bites you in the throat.

* * *

Although I struggle with all travel, there's nothing quite like being on the water. That fear I'd had since I was a little girl... It had never gone away. Even now, just waiting at the dock, while the waves lick at the shore, I want to run in the opposite direction. It's really too bad that the only way to get to Thatcher's Bay is by boat. Just another reason in my never to return column.

We load onto the ferry and I normally would huddle in the inner cabin of the boat. But today, there's too much anxiety biting at my heels. If I don't get some fresh air, I'll end up puking everywhere...or passing out. The anxiety rises up inside me like fresh bile, and I curse its existence. I keep thinking that one day I'll wake up and not hate the water, but apparently almost drowning as a little girl leaves an indelible mark.

It's a crazy thing, the effect our childhood has on our lives. Just a brief few years can stretch through an entire lifetime.

It's ridiculously unfair if you think about it.

That a moment in time can change everything.

But I guess I know all about that.

The wind whips my hair into my face and I brush it back, taking big inhales of the salty air as the ferry takes off across the water.

Seven years.

Seven years of making excuses.

Seven years of not answering phone calls.

I'd been to Falmouth to spend some holidays with my dad. And Daisy and Mom and Curt had managed to pop in for visits whenever I was there, visiting Boston a few times as well.

But not once had I set one foot back home.

Home.

I hate that word now. I hate that it somehow still belonged to a tiny island instead of the places I'd chosen to live all these years.

I just hope like a fool that this trip will cure me, and I can finally move on.

The water is a stormy gray color, the day dreary. It seems fitting. You shouldn't have to hate a sunny, perfect day. I already had plenty of those to hate in my memories. Blissful, seemingly perfect days, with clear skies that stretched on forever.

I slump over the railing, forgetting for a moment how much I hate the water. How was it that seven years later, the memories could haunt me as if they happened yesterday? And not just the bad ones...The ones that really got to me, that kept me awake at night...were the perfect days. The ones that I'd never wanted to end. The ones I'd never been able to replicate with anyone else no matter how hard I tried.

Last night I'd imagined Gael, tangled in the sheets with another woman.

And it had stung.

But it hadn't wrecked me, not like it did every time I allowed myself to think of that night with Noah. Or to think of any nights since then.

Fuck.

I want to scream at the sky, at the water, at everything.

And my mood doesn't get any better as the island rises out of the mist, like a glorious specter.

My knees threaten to buckle, but somehow, I manage to stay upright, clinging to the railing as the island gets closer and closer.

And suddenly, I'm here. Thatcher's Bay.

It feels...anticlimactic. Nothing catastrophic happens. I'm still the same

person as I was across the Bay.

Noah hasn't leapt out from behind from the dock...everything is as it was.

The dock is weathered just like it was seven years ago, like it's been caught in time and it's no better and no worse than it was before. There's still the same moss clinging to the rocks along the shore, the same salty, musty smell in the air. Up ahead is the town and it too looks like it's been preserved in time.

Seven years feels like forever in my mind, but staring around, it's like it's been nothing more than a day.

"Sky!" I hear Daisy scream, and I glance down the dock where she's literally sprinting towards where I'm getting off the ferry. I brace myself as she gets to me, throwing her arms around me so tightly it feels like she's not just hugging my body, but my very soul.

I inhale, breathing in her familiar scent and it's just another way that it feels like no time has passed.

I may have seen Daisy over the years, but it hasn't been often. We used to know everything about each other, see each other every day, and now half a year goes by between visits. We try and talk as much as we can, but if I'm honest with myself, I'd admit that I purposely have avoided her calls. Because hearing her talk about her life means I have to think about the life I've lost.

And I spend enough time thinking about that as it is.

I'm losing the ability to breathe, and I make a fake choking sound so she loosens her grip. Her eyes are teary, her blonde hair hanging down in waves. She's more polished now, refined. I guess years of being a millionaire's girlfriend will do that to you. I can still see it in her eyes though, those sparks of life that Daisy's always had. The kind that I've never possessed. My sister has just grown more beautiful with time and my insides ache as we stare at each other...because I've missed her so fucking much. I've missed out on so much time with her by avoiding this place all these years.

I make another vow to myself not to waste any more time, and I promise myself I'll make the most of the next three months with her.

"I'm so glad you're here," she cries in an emotion filled voice, shocking me when she throws her arms around me again and buries her face in my neck, her whole body racking with sobs. There weren't that many people on the ferry, but there were enough that they give us looks as they pass. As usual, Daisy could care less. She's always possessed that confidence, that 'I

don't give a fuck' attitude about anyone else's opinion.

After all these years, she's still my hero, she's still who I want to somehow be if I ever can come into myself.

It's a losing battle, but that's okay.

"I'm so glad to see you too," I murmur, feeling the exquisite thread of affection burning through my insides.

This is home.

Daisy.

Maybe this visit won't be so bad after all.

Eventually, she loops her arm through mine as we wander down the dock to the parking lot.

"Not much has changed," I comment, and she nods and stares around at everything fondly.

It's still a strange thing, to see what love has done for my sister. She was the first person I would've thought would leave here out of anyone that I knew. I saw her exploring the whole world, lovers in every city, living the life of a wanderer. But instead, she's been with Derrick, and I've never heard her complain about that, or want anything else. She seems completely at peace with her life, and I wonder if she's ever touched by regrets.

I think if that night had never happened though, and I'd given up Dartmouth to stay here, I don't think I would've had any regrets either, not if life had continued with Noah how I thought it would.

The melancholy is so sharp in my gut that I wince and she gives me a concerned look.

I plaster a fake smile on my face and she examines me.

"My sister's the most beautiful girl in the world," she says. I roll my eyes, because that title has always belonged to her.

After all these years, I'm finally okay with that. Daisy's not the shadow I'm living under anymore. She's the sun that I haven't let myself bask in. And it's taken all these years to finally realize that.

Daisy chatters about the wedding, telling me what colors she's thinking about, which wedding planner she likes, and the dress appointment we have coming up. It all sounds dreadfully boring — and un-Daisy like — but I smile and nod, acting like I'm just as excited as she is.

"When is Gael coming?" she finally asks as she pulls out of the parking lot in her sparkling, fancy sports car that Derrick gave her as a Christmas present last year.

My insides clench and I stare determinedly out the window. I'm not sure why I'd hoped I'd have a couple more minutes to avoid that question. Gael and I have been dating for a long time, so of course she was going to ask.

"I'm not sure," I say vaguely. And it's the truth. He certainly isn't spending the summer out here. I assume he'll fly in for the wedding festivities and then leave again.

"Is everything okay with you guys?" Daisy asks carefully.

I bite down on my lip, surveying the familiarity of the town, my gaze not hovering on anything for too long, just in case I get a glimpse...a glimpse of him.

"We're on a break," I finally whisper.

There's a moment of heavy silence. And because she's Daisy, she presses forward.

"What happened? I thought you guys were talking about moving in with each other?"

I chuckle to myself, even though nothing about the situation is funny.

"That's kind of why we're on a break. Because I can't commit. I can't say I love you. I can't move in with him. I just...can't."

I'm shocked at myself for being so honest, but then again, Daisy's always possessed a special talent for getting words out of me. The words that I can't give anyone else. Heck, if she asked the right questions, maybe I could actually write my own damn book.

"Do you love him?" she questions.

"No," it's an easy answer that slips from my tongue. Maybe not the whole answer, but the answer nonetheless. I love him for him. I love him as a friend, and I respect him as a man and a person. But when I compare it to the love I felt in the past, it doesn't even come close.

It's strange to think I've been in mourning all these years. I stare out the window at the town that hasn't changed, wondering how it is that it could be completely untouched by my heartache. The moments that have inscribed themselves into my soul, rewritten my whole life, and every action that's happened...there's no sign of it.

I watch people smile and laugh on the sidewalk of the small town, and I want to yell at them. Scream. Ask them how dare they laugh? Don't they know that *this* is where my life was ruined?

Fuck. I should've gotten that therapist after all.

"Well, fuck him," Daisy suddenly growls. I startle and glance over at her,

because I was caught in my own little world.

"I think I'm the bad guy in this situation..." I remark.

She shakes her head emphatically and slaps the steering wheel. "A man should wait forever for you, Sky. There's no one else like you. He'll regret that forever," she says emphatically.

I grin at her fondly. She's always able to see the best in me. Even when I can't see it in myself.

Once again, guilt floods my chest, thinking of all I've missed out on with her all these years.

Today is a new day though, I tell myself.

I can be better.

Daisy turns left and I frown, staring at the road we should have taken. "Um, isn't this the wrong way?" I ask, motioning in the direction of where the bed and breakfast I booked is located.

Daisy shakes her head. "Mom *may* have canceled your reservation..." she says in a guilty voice.

My eyes widen, sudden anxiety spiking through my veins once again. "*May* have? Or she *did*..."

Every drop of blood inside me is waiting for her response.

"So she *did* cancel the reservation. We both want you to stay at the house!" She sees the panic all over my face though and grabs my hand. "But you don't have to worry...Noah doesn't live there anymore."

My anxiety dissipates a little bit with that statement, and I steadfastly ignore the disappointment floating in my insides too.

"Oh?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

She shoots me a look as she turns down our street, like I'm not fooling her at all.

"Yeah, he lives above the garage now."

Before I can say anything, we're pulling up the driveway of the house, and I catch a glimpse of a black helmet being pulled down, tips of long blond hair peeking out from under it.

He guns the bike and backs out, racing past us. I duck down in the car seat, just in case he looks over.

I'm incapable of facing him. Not yet. It's going to take a bottle of vodka before I do that.

Noah Fontaine.

Fuck.

I'm sixteen all over again.

Chapter Four

Skylar



I don't need to look at my sister to know that she's judging me with those big blue eyes of hers, staring at me indignantly as I remain hidden from view. Even though I feel like a coward with each second that passes by, it's only when I don't hear the roar of an engine's throttle that I straighten up in my seat.

"What?" I grumble at my sister, no longer able to stand the weight of her reprimanding stare.

"You have got to be kidding right now," she chides with her perfectly manicured eyebrows raised up high on her forehead.

"I have no idea what you mean," I retort, feigning ignorance, pressing my lips into a fine line.

"Right, because hiding away from your problems is a perfectly healthy reaction. So happy to see you've grown into a well-balanced adult after all these years," she reprimands as she opens her side door to furiously step out of the car.

I follow her lead and get out too, only to glare at her from across the roof of her car.

"I don't appreciate the sarcasm, Daisy. You're the one who insisted I come back to this place, remember?" I bite back with a snark.

"This *place* is our home," she scolds accusingly, slamming the car door with all her might. "And though you might not like it, Noah is family. You don't hide from family, Sky."

"I'm here, aren't I?" I exclaim, slamming my door with equal force.

We continue to stare at each other, the fist around my heart tightening at the way my sister is looking at me like she doesn't even know me anymore.

When I left Thatcher's Bay all those years ago, I left more than a broken heart behind. I left my entire family, and my relationship with my sister ended up suffering for it. Sure, we've tried to talk on the phone and tried to facetime as much as possible, but even with today's technology, there is something to be said about not being with a person in the flesh. Daisy's strong influence on me began to fade with time, and I'm not sure if I'm better for it.

Not with how she's looking at me now with such disappointment in her eyes.

I take a deep breath to calm my temper and walk over to her.

"I'm sorry. It was just a knee jerk reaction, that's all," I try to explain.

She offers me a clipped nod, but I can still see the hurt in her blue gaze.

"I said I'm sorry, Daisy. What more do you want from me?" I ask, throwing my arms in the air from pure exasperation.

I mean, I came when she asked. I put my entire life on hold to be by her side in the last place I ever wanted to return to. What more does she expect from me?

"I want you to be here. I mean *really* be here, Sky," she explains disheartened, answering my unspoken question. "This is probably one of the most important events in my life, and I want to share it with my sister."

"I know. That's why I came," I retort, still not understanding what more she wants me to do.

She shakes her head and slumps her shoulders in defeat.

"You don't get it," she rebukes, turning her back to me to walk up the driveway towards the house. But before she's able to get far, I hurry after her, pulling her by the arm and turning her around to face me.

"What don't I get?" I ask frustratedly.

"Do you love me?" she asks out of the blue, making my eyes widen at the unexpected question.

"Of course I do. What kind of question is that?"

"An honest one," she exclaims, lacing her hands with mine. "I've missed you, Sky. So much. But if you're unable to put the past behind you long enough to be here for me on my big day, then maybe...maybe you coming home was a mistake after all."

My cheeks heat up as if she just slapped me across the face with her words.

"You don't mean that," I choke out.

“That’s just the thing, Sky. I do mean it. You haven’t been around for ages, and I feel that with each passing year that you’re away, the distance between us only grows. I was hoping that maybe with you helping me plan my wedding, we could somehow reconnect. Get back what we lost.” She sighs, tightening her grip on my fingers. “I miss you so much. I miss my sister. But I won’t let you ruin my wedding because of an old grudge that happened when we were kids. I won’t. It’s not only my big day but Derrick’s too, and I won’t let you spoil it for us because you can’t stand to be in the same place as our stepbrother.”

I can’t help but cringe at the word, and to my chagrin, Daisy has a first-row seat to my repulsion.

“You have a choice to make,” she adds steadfastly. “You can either woman up and get past your shit for the next couple of months, or I can drive you back to the dock and put you on the next ferry back to Falmouth. You decide.”

My jaw clenches at the new ultimatum she’s imposing on me.

“You’re choosing *him* over me?” I ask, *him* being the bane of my existence that I refuse to name outright.

I haven’t said *his* name in years, and I refuse to do so now.

“I’m choosing happiness over bitterness. I want you here. I really do. But if you can’t promise me that you’ll put your animosity and resentment aside long enough for my wedding to go off without a hitch, then you leave me no choice.”

Crap.

I haven’t even fully laid eyes on the asshole yet and already he’s ruining everything by inserting a wedge in between me and my sister.

But this isn’t about him.

This is about Daisy.

And her wedding.

A wedding that I would very much like to be a part of.

She’s right.

No matter how much I loathe the bastard, I will not be responsible for ruining my sister’s big day, by any means. It’s a milestone that I want to witness first-hand. Just one of many to come. If I bail on her now, then I can kiss goodbye to being a part of all the other amazing events that will occur in my sister’s life. I missed more than enough as it is. Because of my decision to run as far and as fast as I could from Thatcher’s Bay, I ended up losing my

family, my dignity, and my pride; he managed to take that away from me.

I won't let him steal this from me too.

With a newfound resolve, I give my sister's hands a light squeeze and stare into her expectant, hopeful eyes.

"I'm sorry. I really am, Daisy. It won't happen again. From here on out, I'll be the best bridesmaid you could possibly hope for. I promise."

"Bridesmaid?" She smiles softly. "No, you'll be the best maid of honor this island has ever seen."

My heavy heart soars in equal measure of relief and happiness as I pull my sister into a hug.

"I was starting to think you'd never ask," I say with tears in my eyes, hugging her tightly.

"Like I'd ever ask anyone else. It's you and me against the world, remember?" she says, hugging me just as fiercely.

"I've missed you so much," I admit, letting a few stray tears flow through me.

"Me too," she retorts, unable to keep her own tears at bay. "I really am happy you're here, Sky. So happy."

"Same," I tell her and mean it, even if only because of her.

When we pull apart and begin to wipe our tears away, Daisy is back to her jubilant self.

"Watch out, Thatcher's Bay! The Ames sisters are back, baby!" she shouts, making us both burst out in laughter.

"You two about ready to come in now?" I hear Curt's voice coming from the porch.

Still laughing, we both turn towards the house and find our stepfather chuckling at the top of the stairs waiting for us. We start walking over to him, and the heavy pressure on my chest lightens further at the sincere smile that's stretched on his lips.

"You have no idea how happy I am to see you," Curt utters cheerfully as I bridge the gap between us. And when he opens his arms, I fall into him and give him a huge hug. "So happy," he mumbles into my hair, hugging me tightly.

"Me too," I reply, feeling safe in his arms.

I always liked Curt, especially with how he doted on my mother, but it took me leaving to really appreciate him. When I left for Dartmouth so abruptly, my stepfather didn't need to make an effort to build any type of

bond between us. Since I was no longer living under his roof and was, for all intents and purposes, an adult now, there really was no need for him to go out of his way to have any type of relationship with me. But to my surprise, and regardless of the fact that I wasn't his flesh and blood, Curt did his best to be a constant presence in my life. He texted me every day, wanting to know how school was going and if there was anything I needed. And when I graduated and got a job at Rosewood Publishing, he was the first to congratulate me for the accomplishment. He tried his best to fill in the role of a father figure even when I was supposed to already have one in my life. It's true that my biological father stepped up when I needed him to, but he never really made the effort to know me. Not like Curt has done over these past few years.

One thing I really appreciated was the fact that he never talked about his son. His focus was solely on me and my wellbeing and how I was coping living so far from home. His concern for me was genuine and akin to what any protective father would have for his daughter. I'm not sure how I would have coped alone in college those first few years if I didn't have his unwavering support.

"Can I get one of those too?" My mother interjects from behind him, pulling my attention towards her.

Reluctantly, I pull away from Curt's embrace and step towards my mother.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi," she replies with a smile, before wrapping her arms around me.

I nestle my chin into her shoulder as she embraces me, but I don't feel the same love and tenderness that I felt in Curt's arms. This hug feels forced and rigid.

Unlike Curt, my mom never forgave me for leaving.

It's always been there between us.

The resentment.

The disappointment.

I guess if my child had decided to pick up all her stuff and leave home in the middle of the night without so much as a goodbye, I'd be pretty pissed too. Especially since I left to live with her estranged ex-husband before going off to college. It's been seven years now, and I can still feel the unspoken tension between us. She's unable to relax or just be herself with me. It's like she's become this whole other person I no longer recognize. One that keeps me at arm's length, fearing that if I get too close, I'll see the truth of how

deep her resentment for me truly is.

Or maybe it's just me.

Maybe I'm the stranger here.

Maybe she senses that I'm no longer that wallflower that was content to hide in the corner, happy to keep her mouth shut just to make her life easier. But that girl died a long time ago, and I have a feeling my mother still mourns who I used to be, unhappy with the woman I've become.

Unsurprisingly, my mother is the first to pull away from the embrace and step back, seeking refuge beside her husband.

"I made lunch. You must be starving." She grins, zigzagging her gaze between me and my sister, unable to meet my eyes for more than a few seconds.

"I could eat," Daisy singsongs, upbeat.

"Good. Good. Come in. Both of you," she urges, opening the front door and ushering us in.

But as I step into the house, all the memories I've tried so hard to keep locked away in the confinements of my soul surface to the forefront of my mind, like a tidal wave intent on drowning me whole.

Nothing's changed.

Everything looks exactly the same, and a pain so severe hits me like a ton of bricks, making my knees almost buckle. The familiar smell of salt and sea breeze invades my senses, making my stomach churn as I take everything in. The same flowery curtains hang on the windows. The same old couch and lounge chair remain at the center of the living room, facing a television set that is as outdated as the décor around it.

Memories of how I used to lay on that couch and write all my thoughts and dreams about a blue-eyed boy whose smile lit up my world forms a knot in my chest. The girl who lived here had been so cavalier with her heart, completely oblivious to the danger it was in. Wide-eyed and lovestruck, she willingly stepped into the flame, uncaring if it would turn her heart to ash. All because his touch set a fire inside her, that no one has ever been able to match since.

Being in this room is so overwhelming that I have to outstretch my arm to grab hold of the wall, just so I don't stumble and fall.

"Home sweet home," Curt says proudly, squeezing my mother's shoulders affectionately.

The lump in my throat prevents me from saying anything as I slowly

follow everyone into the kitchen, finding that it too remains just as I left it.

“I made your favorite. Fried chicken and macaroni and cheese,” my mom announces proudly.

“Actually, I’m a vegan now,” I explain while sitting down, thankful that I didn’t faint from all the memories bombarding me all at once from just being inside this house.

“Since when?” My mother’s brows pull together.

“Since her freshman year in college,” Daisy says, placing a comforting hand over my mother’s on the table. “Sky did that whole exposé about how the meat industry is responsible for a big part of ruining the environment for the Dartmouth newspaper. Remember, Mom?”

Doubtful.

We’ve hardly talked about any of my accomplishments back at school. Aside from the weekly obligatory phone call to see if I was still alive, there really hasn’t been much we’ve discussed over the years, so I’m not even surprised with the meal she’s prepared for me.

“Oh, right.” My mother nods sullenly. “It must have skipped my mind.”

“It’s fine. I’ll just have the salad,” I tell her, not really eager to get into a fight with my mother on my first day back.

My mother sinks into her chair, while doing her best to keep a brave face.

Sensing the tension in the room, both Daisy and Curt begin to talk about her wedding plans, including me and my mother into the conversation as best as they can. But it all feels strained and awkward, and I hate that I’m the cause for such uneasiness.

But then again, I could be having lunch back at the bed and breakfast in town if my mother hadn’t so rudely canceled my reservation there. I really should call her out on it, but then I remember that I promised Daisy that I’d be the best maid of honor she could ever hope for. Causing a fight with our mother would defeat that purpose.

“Do you want to come into town with me after lunch? Mom and I are going to look at some table linens and napkins for the wedding,” Daisy asks between bites of her macaroni and cheese.

“Would you mind if I go with you another time? I’m still tired from the flight and think maybe I should lay down for a few hours and take a nap.”

If I’m to fulfill my promise to my sister, then it would be prudent to limit my time with my mother while in Daisy’s company. I know that sooner or later I’ll have to have a serious conversation with her, but I would rather do

that when Daisy isn't around. Maybe I'll only broach the subject after Daisy has gone off on her honeymoon. That way, there is no risk in me pissing my sister off any more than I already have.

"Sure. No problem," Daisy replies with a genuine smile. "How about I pick you up tomorrow a little before noon so we can have lunch at The Scarlet Letter Café for old times' sake?"

"What do you mean pick me up?" I ask, confused. "Don't you live here, too?"

"Actually, your sister has been living over at Derrick's since he popped the question," my mother explains, sounding not too happy with my sister's new living arrangement.

"I'll come back the week before the wedding. I just want to enjoy this honeymoon stage we're in," Daisy explains with a whimsical tone.

"Silly me. And here I thought the honeymoon stage was only supposed to happen *after* a wedding took place." My mother pouts.

"Since when have you become so old-fashioned?" I can't help but interject, astounded by my mother's displeasure that Daisy is living with her fiancé, of all people. It's not like Daisy hasn't spent most of her nights with Derrick anyway.

In my mind, they should have been living together ages ago. I never understood why Daisy preferred to live in this house and not with the man she loved. Then again, Daisy has always marched to the beat of her own drum, doing things her way and refusing to succumb to society's expectations.

"I know it's been a while since you've been home, but Thatcher's Bay is a small island and people talk. I just don't want anyone to think that your sister is marrying Derrick for his money, or worse, that this is a shotgun wedding."

Though it takes immense effort on my part to ignore the jab my mother just took at me, it's her hypocrisy that I'm unable to stomach. Especially since everyone on this island believes that she and Curt had an affair long before his first wife passed away and she's never done anything to deny it. I may not be one for gossip, but that tidbit is much more scandalous than my sister shacking up with her boyfriend of over ten years could ever be.

"Like I give a rat's ass what people think." Daisy laughs. "People will believe whatever they want to in the end. It's not my job to enlighten them. I'm going to live my life how I want to live it. If the island wants to gossip

about it, it's their prerogative. Not mine."

My heart warms at how my sister is still as fearless as she's always been. Many things may have changed since we've been apart, but knowing that Daisy is still Daisy eases whatever trepidations I might have at being here.

"Will I see you tonight though?" I ask, excited at the prospect of reconnecting with my beloved sister.

"I'm having dinner with Derrick's parents tonight, but I can pop in afterwards if you want?"

Suddenly, the idea of being all alone in this house without her feels like the worst decision I could possibly make. It's my sister's hopeful smile that keeps me from saying as much and conceding to the idea of living here for the summer. I can always book a room in town if it gets too much for me.

"No, that's okay. I'll probably just work tonight anyway. I'll see you tomorrow." I force a smile. "Thank you for lunch, but if it's quite alright, I think I'll go and lay down now," I add, excusing myself from the table.

"Of course. Your room is ready for you. Just go on up," my mother says while quickly picking up my plate from the table and putting it in the sink, still unable to make direct eye contact with me.

I throw Daisy and Curt another smile as I turn my back and walk out of the kitchen to head upstairs. But the minute I grab hold onto the handrail and start walking up the flight of stairs, old ghosts of the past trickle into my subconscious again.

I see a younger version of me hiding at the top of the stairs, eavesdropping on conversations that I had no business listening to and what happened afterwards. I try to shake the memories away, but it's a difficult feat to accomplish, especially when I reach the long hallway on the second floor. Each step that brings me closer to my bedroom feels like I'm being pulled back into that painful past, the walls behind the closed door having borne witness to the whole fucked up ordeal.

'There. It's done. Now what, you lunatic?'

'Aw, baby. Giving me pet names already? I think you can come up with better than that.'

'How about psycho? I think it fits you perfectly.'

'If I'm a psycho then that officially makes you my little stalker.'

I swallow dryly, doing my best to ignore the memory but when I finally reach my room, it's that same recollection that propels me not to walk in yet. Instead, I find myself turning my back to my own bedroom and staring at the

closed door in front of it. All of me shakes as I grab the doorknob and swing the door open, only to find *his* room bare, completely empty of everything he once held dear.

I'm not sure why finding the room empty feels like another reason for me to hate him, but it does.

It's that blinding hatred that has me hurriedly stumbling back from the bedroom door's threshold. With gritted teeth, I slide down the opposing wall, unable to pull my sight away from the empty room, now void of every memory that once transpired there.

It's all gone. Every last moment vanished into thin air.

But then again, nothing real ever happened inside of those four walls.

It was all just a game to him. A game created by his boredom and callousness, with the sole intent of making a fool out of me, making sure I'd never recover from such cruelty.

I'm still seething at how I could have been so reckless and naïve with my own heart, when I hear a soft thud coming from the end of the hallway.

"Déjà vu," my sister utters, wide-eyed and pale, with my suitcase at her side.

In my haste to come upstairs and get some much-needed distance from my mother, I totally forgot about my luggage and how I left it in Daisy's car trunk. But it's not the sight of my sister pulling the suitcase towards me that grabs my attention—it's her soft spoken 'déjà vu' remark that unsettles me.

"What did you mean by that?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing." Daisy shrugs off. "I guess seeing you here in this hallway caught me by surprise. Must have brought up old memories. That's all," she lies with a sheepish smile.

"You're lying. You know I can tell." I frown. "What did you really mean by that? Tell me," I insist.

When she finally reaches me, she slides down the wall and sits cross-legged beside me.

"Are you sure you really want to know?" she asks with concern, squeezing my knee.

I nod, fearing the worst.

"When you left, I would catch Noah sitting right there in that exact spot in the middle of the night," she points to the wall opposite me, "just staring into your bedroom. It was like he wanted to go in but was too afraid to do so." She sighs sadly. "Every night when I came home from being either at

Derrick's or from a night shift at work, here he'd be, just staring into the abyss. After a year or so of doing that, it probably got to be too much for him, and that's when he began to clear the loft of Curt's fishing supplies above the garage so he could move in there instead."

I hug my knees to my chest, unsure of how I should feel about what my sister just confided to me.

"Why didn't you ever tell me this?" I hear myself asking.

"Would it have made things easier for you to know that he was hurting too?"

I shake my head. It would have probably only fucked with my head even more. But unlike Daisy, I don't believe for one moment that Noah was hurting in any way. He was probably just pissed that his favorite plaything wasn't around for him to torture anymore.

"He screwed up," Daisy says after a long pause. "And though he might have felt guilt over it, I understand why you can't forgive him for hurting you the way he did."

"You forgave him," I say, ashamed of my accusing tone.

"Not for hurting you. I never forgave him for that," she affirms, wrapping her arm over my shoulder, to which I lean in and lay my head on hers. "But that doesn't mean I don't understand him. Sometimes people sabotage their own happiness because they believe themselves unworthy of it. Trust me. I know what I'm talking about."

I crane my head back just enough to look at her face and see the truth in her eyes.

Daisy has always been very private about her relationships, especially with Derrick. But you'd have to have been blind not to know they have had their ups and downs over the years, the downs most probably provoked by my sister's stubbornness and hot temper. I am happy that she's managed to get out of her own way and finally accept that she too deserves to be happy. I know that Derrick will do everything in his power to make it so.

"I owe you an apology, Sky," she adds with a shy smile. "I shouldn't have demanded that you get over all the pain you went through in this house just for my sake. Even though that shit went down when we were kids, it doesn't mean your feelings are any less valid. I guess I was just hoping that if you came home, it would be cathartic for you. Maybe finally get some closure and move on with your life."

"You mean move on with my life with Gael?"

“You don’t need a guy to move on with your life and be happy,” she explains assuredly. “Sometimes the best person you should be focusing your love on is yourself. Give yourself some grace, sis. The rest of the pieces will fall into place.”

“That’s easier said than done,” I mumble, my eyes going straight to the source of all my pain—his empty room cruelly mimicking how empty I feel inside.

“We have all summer,” Daisy retorts hopefully. “You’re here now. Consider it the first step of your rehabilitation journey.”

“You’re making me sound like an addict or something.” I can’t help but chuckle.

“We all have our vices.” She shrugs. “Holding onto hate feels like a pretty big one.”

I take in her words and truly let them sink in.

Maybe Daisy is right.

Maybe me being back at Thatcher’s Bay is a good thing. Cathartic even, just like Daisy said.

Maybe this is what I need to put old ghosts to rest.

But if coming here is my first step, then I know what the second one needs to be.

I’ll have to confront my sickness head on.

Daisy was right in comparing me to an addict.

I can already feel the adrenaline pumping in my veins with just the idea of getting another hit.

Another hit of his ruthless hate.

And how I’ll savor it.

Chapter Five

Noah



“**H**ow come I just knew I’d find you here on your day off?” Derrick greets with a smug smile as he steps onto the deck of the monohull.

“Hmm, I don’t know, D? Could it have anything to do with the fact that I need to get the Royal Shank ready for the big Fourth of July race you’re organizing in two weeks?” I reply, not lifting my eyes from the clipboard in my hands, too absorbed with the giant list of things I still have to do to get this boat ready in time.

“Nah, that’s not it,” he muses with a smirk. “This beauty is a winner. She doesn’t need any more bells and whistles than she already has,” he adds assuredly, running his fingers through the smooth varnished rim before plopping onto the white leather two-seater. “All this baby needs is a good captain with his head on straight, to win the trophy and the hundred-k prize money that comes along with it.”

“Then maybe you should leave said captain alone to handle his business instead of disturbing him with your unwarranted advice,” I retort, annoyed that he’s determined to pull my focus off my list of chores.

“I see that you’re in a mood,” he states, his scrutinizing gaze eyeing me up and down.

“I’m always in a mood. Part of my fucking charm, D. You should be used to it by now.”

“True, but today your inner asshole is coming out extra potent. It wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain someone being back on the island, would it?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I grumble with a clenched jaw, doing a piss poor job of pretending I have no clue what he’s referencing.

“Right,” the fucker has the audacity to chuckle.

I swear, if he wasn't my best friend, I'd have sucker punched the rich prick a long time ago.

When his intrusive stare starts to get under my skin, I have no choice but to pull my gaze off the clipboard and onto him.

“Why the fuck are you here, Derrick? Is it only to bust my balls, or does this visit actually have a purpose to it?”

“Can't a guy just pop in on his friend to see how he's doing?”

“If this was a chick flick, sure. But since it's not, how about you make yourself useful and help me with the pile of things I still need to do to get ready?” I throw him the clipboard, making sure it lands on his lap with a harsh thud.

Derrick doesn't so much as flinch at the small aggression, easily discarding the clipboard to the side, his stare never wavering from mine. I stay rooted to my spot as he leans forward, with his hands clasped in front of his knees, as his light green eyes take on a darker, more serious shade.

“All work and no play makes for a dull life, Noah,” he says, his previous playful tone nowhere in sight. “I'm worried about you.”

“Are you worried about me or your investment?” I arch a brow defensively, crossing my arms over my chest to look impervious to his concern.

“I could give two fucks about my investment in the Royal Shank, and you know it.” He frowns, displeased that I would suggest such a thing. With a scowl to his face, I watch him lean back onto the seat and spread his arms to each side. “FYI, I still hate the name you gave her. Royal Shank. The fuck does Royal Shank even mean?”

“I quite like the name.” The corner of my lips lift up knowingly. “It suits her just fine.”

“I disagree, but since it has never been my place to tell you what to do with your own boat, it will have to do. Even if the name you gave the poor girl doesn't do her justice.”

“*Our* boat, remember?” I interject. “She is as much yours as she is mine.”

“We both know that isn't true,” he quickly says with a frown. “All I did was cough up the money to buy her. You're the one who dotes on her and spends all his free time making her shine. Money doesn't compare to the love you shower her with. I find that's the case in most things in life.”

It's his deep frown that unsettles me.

“Looks like I’m not the only one in a mood.”

“I guess you can say that.” He snorts sardonically. “But unlike you, I face my shit head on and do something about it,” he adds with a familiar expression on his face that tells me that I’m the problem he needs to sort out.

“What’s this all about, D? Why are you really here? Are you here to check up on the boat or is there something specific on your mind you want to talk about?” I ask him point blank.

“Grab us a beer, why don’t you, and take a seat,” he orders in that stern tone of his that always means business.

Seeing as I’m not going to get any work done while he’s here, I do as he says and grab two beers out of the cooler, throwing his in the air for him to catch. I then stroll over to sit beside him and quickly open my beer to take a swig.

I usually don’t like to drink before noon, but fuck it. Today, I’ll make an exception.

I’m halfway done with my beer while Derrick continues to sip away at his, taking his sweet ass time to tell me the real reason why he’s come to the dock this Saturday morning.

Because with him, there is always a reason.

I’ve known Derrick Monroe for most of my life. Everything he does is purposely calculated. He doesn’t do anything without having put some thought behind his actions or choices. And seeing as these last few years he doesn’t leave Daisy’s side unless he’s absolutely unable to avoid it, is all I need to know that this unexpected visit of his isn’t just your run of the mill buddy check.

Then again, Daisy is otherwise occupied this morning to pay him much mind, so maybe Derrick did just pop over to kill some time while she’s busy with her own guest.

Afterall, Daisy has plenty of sisterly bonding to catch up on.

They both do.

As quickly as the sullen thought slithers inside my brain, I push it away and stash it in some dark corner of my mind, not wanting to go there just yet.

Today is going to be hard enough for me as it is without my somber thoughts getting in the way. Hence why I promised myself I’d keep busy the whole day just so I’d have something to do instead of obsessing over the prodigal daughter-slash-sister’s return. And Derrick’s mere presence is fucking up my carefully laid out plans of ignoring the reality that’s waiting

for me back at my own damn house—his stilled silence not making it any easier on my frazzled nerves.

“The suspense is killing me, D. Just come out and say what you need to, so I can get back to work,” I order, unable to withstand the silence any longer.

“Have you ever loved someone?” he asks out of the blue. “I mean *really* loved someone... more than you ever thought possible? More than yourself even?”

“Fuck. It’s official. I *am* stuck in a fucking chick flick. Are we going to start braiding each other’s hair and painting our nails, too?” I snap sarcastically, drinking the rest of my beer and strangling the can into a pulp before throwing it in the trash.

“Stop being an obtuse fuck and answer the fucking question,” he demands in that assertive tone that has been passed down to him by every Monroe generation that came before him.

After an uncomfortable pause, I reluctantly answer the fucker and nod.

“Then you know that there isn’t anything you wouldn’t do for that person.”

“Is there a question in there somewhere?” I chastise, getting up from my seat to grab another beer.

If I’m going to endure this type of interrogation, there’s no way I’ll be doing it sober.

Fuck him and fuck that.

“Nope.” The arrogant prick has the nerve to pop the p in the end as if pissing me off is just another pastime for him. “I’m merely having an honest conversation with my best friend. A friend who has been a brother to me.”

I turn around to face him as I crack another can open.

“That’s kind of an incestuous thing to say considering I used to date your sister in high school,” I goad, trying to lighten the mood, but to my bitter disgruntlement, Derrick is having none of it.

“She wasn’t the only one you dated,” he says, running his thumb over his beer can’s rim.

“True. I dated plenty of girls back in the day,” I affirm nonchalantly, leaning against the rail, intent on keeping a healthy distance between us.

“But you only ever loved one,” he deadpans.

This mother—

“I’m getting bored with this conversation, D,” I say with a bite. “Just say

what you have to say and be done with it.”

“Very well,” he says, placing his can on the deck floor to look me dead in the eye. “No use beating around the bush. I’ll come right out and say it then.”

“About fucking time,” I grumble, taking a huge gulp of my beer since something tells me I’ll need the liquid courage just to hear him out.

“As you know, it’s taken me almost a decade to get the woman I love to agree to marry me. Ten fucking years, Noah.” He lets out an exhale before running his fingers through his dark hair. “Now I’ve been patient through all of it because Daisy deserves that from me and a whole lot more. She deserves someone who won’t bail on her at the first sign of trouble. She deserves someone who will love her for the free spirit woman that she is and cherish every little thing about her. I *am* that man, Noah. And I’ll prove to her time and time again that there is nothing I won’t do to ensure her happiness.”

“Again... I don’t hear a question in there, D,” I provoke with a flare to my nostrils, already sensing where he’s going with this.

“By the end of this summer, I will marry the love of my life, and nothing, and I mean *nothing*, will fuck that up for me. Is that understood?” He cocks a menacing brow.

“Is this your way of telling me that you’re worried that somehow I’ll ruin your wedding day for you?” I ask with a chuckle. “I’d be more concerned about the flight risk that is your fiancée. Or do you honestly believe that Daisy won’t get cold feet and try to run away before the big day?”

“Oh, I’m counting on it,” he states with a confident grin. “But I also know my girl. No amount of cold feet will stop her from walking down the aisle and becoming my wife. Besides, I’m more than man enough to warm her up when she starts to get chilly. Don’t you worry about that.” He winks.

“Dude, that’s my sister you’re talking about,” I groan at his not-so-subtle innuendo. “I don’t need to hear that shit.”

“Yeah, well, payback is a bitch.” He grins, pleased with my disgusted scowl. But his cheerful mood quickly reverts back to the serious one he’s so intent to keep plastered to his face. “I’m not going to sit here and pretend that I’ve been clueless to the fact that the past few years have been hard on you. I know they have. But my empathy for your struggle will only go so far if you do anything to jeopardize my wedding. Daisy deserves to have the best fucking wedding Thatcher’s Bay has ever seen, and I’m not going to let anyone fuck it up for her. Not you. Not anyone.”

I bite the inside of my cheek and stare daggers at him.

“I wouldn’t do that to Daisy,” I mutter, my back molars grinding so hard I’m surprised they don’t break. “I love her too, asshole. I wouldn’t hurt her like that.”

Derrick glares at me for the longest time, but then relaxes when he sees I’m telling him the truth.

“Good. I’m glad to hear it,” he says, getting up from his seat. “Then I guess I only have one more thing to ask of you.”

“And what’s that?” I bark angrily.

But to my surprise, Derrick places his hands on my shoulders and smiles.

“That you be my best man.”

“What?” I blurt out at the astonishing request.

“You sound surprised.” He chuckles, giving my shoulders a comforting squeeze.

Maybe because a few seconds ago he looked like he’d have my balls if I did anything to tarnish his big day, but I keep that remark to myself.

“I wasn’t bullshitting when I said I considered you like a brother to me. Not only that, but you’ve been one to Daisy, too. You’re family, Noah. Not sure why me asking you to be my best man is such a surprise to you.”

“I don’t know, D. Wouldn’t you prefer to ask one of those Harvard assholes you call friends? I know your parents would.”

He pulls his hands off me and shakes his head.

“It’s *my* wedding. Not my parents’,” he answers sternly. “Besides, those guys don’t know me like you do.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea, all things considered. I’m sure Daisy has asked—” but I’m unable to finish my sentence.

Derrick saves me from the awkwardness of saying *her* name out loud and ends my thought for me.

“She has. Or at least that was Daisy’s plan for this morning,” he confides with a warm smile. “But I’m hoping that won’t dismay you from standing by my side.”

“If I say yes, will we stop with this touchy feely shit?” I groan.

“Sure.” He chuckles lightheartedly.

“Fuck it. Then I guess you got yourself a best man,” I concede with a shrug.

Derrick’s smile stretches as he pulls me into a hug, honestly grateful that I gave in to his request.

“Yeah, okay. Enough of that,” I mumble, pushing him off me.

“Otherwise, people are going to think that we’re the ones getting married.”

“You think our bromance is ready to take that next step?” he jokes, giving me a light punch on the shoulder.

“Bromance?” I arch a brow. “Jesus-fucking-Christ, Monroe, you have got to stop watching those fucking romcoms with Daisy. She’s a bad fucking influence if she’s got you swinging out words like bromance.” I laugh, feeling a bit lighter than I did before he stepped onto my boat.

“Trust me, I’m as much of a bad influence on her as she is on me.” He wiggles his eyebrows suggestively.

“Again, save me from the sordid details.” I roll my eyes. “Now, if you’re quite done, how about you help me out this morning? I’d welcome another pair of hands to get the Royal Shank ready.”

He looks around the deck and starts pulling up his sleeves.

“Why the hell not? It’s not like I have anything better to do today.”

I offer him a smile, grateful for his company, more than I am for his help.

Surprisingly enough, the rest of the day flies by without a hitch, and it’s only when the sun begins to set over the tranquil oceanic horizon that I realize I’ve survived most of it without my mind trickling back to the real reason why I decided to spend my day off on this boat.

Not that I thought I had much choice.

I hardly slept last night, just thinking about how I’d react when I saw her again. Would I play it cool and nonchalant, or would I completely lose my shit the instant our eyes met? I went back and forth all night just thinking about us finally being in the same room together, ultimately deciding that I wasn’t mentally prepared to handle such an ordeal. So when I heard Daisy’s car drive up, I picked up my shit and got the hell out of there.

A coward’s choice, for sure, but the only one I could make regardless.

“Shit! Is that the time?” Derrick groans after a quick glance at his Rolex, successfully pulling me out of my reverie.

“Bailing on me already?” I ask when he starts fixing his clothes and hair to look more presentable.

“Daisy and I are supposed to have dinner with my parents tonight,” he explains with a grimace. “The three of them are probably already waiting for me at the restaurant. Goddamn it.”

“I’m sure Daisy can entertain herself just fine without you for a little while,” I tease him. “She’s a big girl and can take care of herself.”

“I know that. I just don’t like leaving her alone with my parents, that’s

all.”

My brows knit together at the way Derrick suddenly looks on edge, so in contrast to his usual cool and collected demeanor.

“Your parents still not on board with the wedding?” I ask, going to the root of his problems.

“I couldn’t give a rat’s ass what they’re on board with or not. Never have, never will.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Daisy.” He sighs in frustration. “You know how important family is to her. She’s determined to win them over for my sake, even though I’ve repeatedly told her that they’re not worth the hassle.”

“Hate to break it to you, D, but when Daisy gets something into that thick skull of hers, not even the Almighty himself can change her mind.”

“Don’t I know it.” Derrick chuckles proudly. “Anyway, you good here?”

“Yeah. Go and deal with your shit. I’m just going to hang here for a bit longer.”

But instead of leaving, Derrick throws me an inquisitive look.

“You’re not going home?”

“Actually, I was thinking of crashing here tonight.”

“Is that what you were thinking of doing?” he says with a frown. “And will you be sleeping here for the entire summer too?”

“Haven’t decided yet,” I quip, pretending that the gleam of disappointment in his eyes doesn’t faze me in the least.

“You’ll have to go home eventually.”

“Eventually doesn’t mean tonight, now does it?” I retort while making myself comfortable by grabbing a beer and lounging on the helm seat.

I’ve lost count of how many beers I’ve had today, but apparently, they weren’t enough if Derrick’s scowl can so easily dampen the light buzz I got going on.

“Isn’t there some place you need to be?” I ask when it looks like he’s no longer in such a rush to leave.

“Yeah,” he mumbles under his breath, finally turning his back to me to make his quick getaway.

Unfortunately, Derrick doesn’t so much as take two steps before he’s turning around to face me again, obviously not done with giving me a hard time.

“Shit. I shouldn’t be telling you this,” he starts hesitantly, “But you’ll find

out eventually. Might as well come from me.”

“What are you on about now, D?” I ask, feigning boredom.

“They broke up.”

“Who broke up?” I parrot, confused.

“Take a wild fucking guess, asshole,” he chides with a poignant look.

Suddenly, the clarity of what he’s trying to convey slaps me across the face and sobers me up, better than a hundred cold showers ever could.

“Not sure why you would think I’d be interested in knowing that,” I explain with a bored expression stitched to my face, but even I’m not buying the bullshit I’m selling.

“Right. Why would that interest you? My bad,” he says, his sly grin just another rude insult to the open wound that is my fucking heart.

“You still here?” I counter, making a show of stretching my legs, so he can see that I’m not one bit rattled by the news.

His teasing smile drops from his lips and is replaced by one of brotherly concern and affection.

“Go home, Noah. Don’t pretend you don’t want to. You might not get another chance like this one again. Just...go home.”

And with that parting advice, he goes off into the night, leaving me to stew in my seat.

Fucker.

I’m of two minds to pick up my phone and text the prick that he should find himself another best man for his wedding just to fuck with him since its apparent he takes great joy in fucking with me. First, he orders me to be on my best behavior and not do something stupid—like mess with his fiancée’s maid of honor—only to tell me hours later that she’s back on the market, knowing full well what that would do to me.

They broke up.

They fucking broke up.

How is that even possible?

Fuck.

What did that dipshit Gael do to you, baby, for you to end it with him?

I know it had to be you that called it quits, because no sane man would ever let you go.

Did he not love you enough, little stalker?

Or understand all your awkward quirks and eccentricities?

Did he not make you feel like a goddess amongst men like you deserved?

Did he hurt you, baby?

Did he?

Like I hurt you?

My hands ball into fists at the painful thought, making me hurl my head back onto the headrest. I stay there for what feels like forever, just staring up at the vast moonlit sky, wondering what could have possibly happened for their relationship to come to such an abrupt end.

Gael doesn't seem the sort to step out on my girl.

I knew from the moment I laid eyes on him at that godforsaken Christmas yacht party that he was one of the good ones—a threat to my heart, if I ever saw one. And from the few photos I let myself see of the happy couple over the years, they were enough to convince me that Gael would never wander or stray from her bed.

Like me, he only had eyes for her.

Not that I was able to stomach seeing more than a few pics of them on Instagram.

Fuck.

I don't think I've logged online since I saw that shit.

But I needed to know if she was happy.

That's all I needed to see. That someone was loving her, protecting her—cherishing her. Once I was certain that she was in good hands, I didn't need to see anything else. Especially since I knew what type of pictures would eventually follow up next.

A post revealing them moving in together, a spectacular home with a picket fence in the background.

Another announcing their engagement, a large diamond ring on her slender finger.

A wedding picture, the designer white dress hugging her body, as heart-stoppingly beautiful as she is.

Maybe a sonogram or two, their clasped hands lovingly cradling her bump.

Yeah. My sanity couldn't take seeing that shit.

Knowing that she found happiness was all I could muster.

I didn't need that happiness to be shoved down my throat though.

A broken man can only handle so much.

'Go home, Noah. Don't pretend you don't want to. You might not get another chance like this one again.'

Derrick's words begin to poke holes in my resolve to spend the night on the Royal Shank. I had promised myself that I would make myself scarce while she was back in Thatcher's Bay, not wanting to make this visit of hers any more difficult for her than it necessarily needs to be.

You mean you don't want to make things harder for you.

She's moved on. You're the one still hung on what could have been.

I grit my teeth and curse out all the twinkling stars that decided to come out tonight just to celebrate her return. They mock my suffering just as much as her indifference always has.

Because her apathy is all I have now.

It's the only plausible conclusion I can make from someone who, in the last seven years, felt no need to come home.

Not once.

Not for birthdays or holidays.

Not for lazy summer days or cold winter nights.

She made her life, not giving me a second thought. I was just a mistake she made when she was a teenager. Women of her caliber don't waste time thinking of the past, too focused on enjoying their present and eagerly anticipating the bright future ahead.

I'm the fool who is stuck in the past.

Not her.

So why the fuck am I the one hiding here if she doesn't give a fuck either way?

"What the fuck am I doing here?" I say out loud. "Fuck this."

Not wanting to talk myself out of it, I grab my stuff and jump to the dock, racing all the way to my bike just so I don't have time to second guess myself. Once I'm on the road, I floor it and ride like the wind, eager to get home. But as I drive up the driveway and see that my childhood home's windows are pitch black, I realize that I waited too long.

Everyone is asleep.

Even her.

My heart sinks to the pit of my stomach, that familiar feeling of loss strangling my chest, making it hard for me to breathe.

"Snap the fuck out of it, you pussy," I curse, revolted that I'm back there.

Back to when loss was all I knew. All that I would ever know.

Thankfully, it only takes me a few seconds to get a handle on the myriad of emotions I'm being bombarded with, but then again, I'm not surprised I'm

able to recover so quickly. I've had loads of practice in burying shit down deep. So deep that not even my masochistic subconscious can find it.

With a drooped slope to my shoulders, I slowly wander my way behind the garage and walk the flight of stairs leading up to my loft. But just as I insert my key into the lock and twist it open, heat begins to crawl up my spine with the scent of cherry blossoms hitting my senses. Before I even flick the light switch on, I already know what I'm about to find.

No.

Not what, but *who*.

"Didn't anyone ever teach you it's rude to break into people's homes... Sky?"

Her name rolls off the tip of my tongue, like a forbidden secret I was supposed to keep locked away in the dormant ridges of my heart. The sound of it flowing from my lips is so overpowering that it takes me a minute before I have the fortitude to turn around and face my uninvited guest.

But the minute I do, I know I've made a vital mistake.

Nothing and no one could have prepared me for this.

Prepared me for her.

They say time heals all wounds. That a heart, even if once broken, can be mended with time. Whoever *they* are have never faced this fucking gorgeous creature that is currently sitting on my bed before me now. If they did, they would see that no amount of time would ever be enough to diminish the hate imprinted in her steel glower.

In fuck-me heels that could pierce a dime-sized hole in any man's chest, Sky crosses her long legs as she continues to eviscerate me with those stunning silver-plated eyes of hers. The sudden movement has my eyes drifting to her legs for a split second and onto the alluring sliver of skin of her outer thigh that her pencil skirt is unable to keep hidden. Though I've missed all the curves and valleys of her body, it's her heart-shaped face that still haunts my dreams, hence why my stare eagerly returns to it. Her long chestnut hair is tightly bound into a sleek bun, purposely done to showcase her long slender neck, forcing my eyes to linger at its slope before landing on blood-red cupid's bow lips. Her sharp high cheekbones and thin-slit gaze are determined to make her look menacing, but they fail their mission as that is not what I see when I look at her.

I see a woman who has transformed herself into becoming the epitome of elegant poise and sophistication, light years away from the girl who used to

prance around our home in provocative shorts and oversized hoodies, unaware of the havoc she was wrecking on my heart.

That girl tempted the devil inside of me.

This woman has just managed to resurrect him.

“Noah,” she greets coldly, my name sounding like a curse falling from her luscious lips.

“Skylar,” I retort just as arcticly.

Though my loft isn’t large by any standards, there is still a huge distance between us, even if it feels minuscule to me right now. Especially since neither one of us wants to break this staring contest we’ve got going.

And why would I when I’m loving the view so much?

Skylar sitting on my bed is like a fantasy waiting to happen.

Fuck.

I can see it all so clearly.

Me walking over to her, hovering just so, until I hear that familiar catch of her breath, telling me she’s just as desperate for me as I am for her. I’d run my thumb over her painted lower lip, and release her hair from its constraints, freeing her long locks so they could flow down her back and shoulders. With her eyes locked on my every move, I’d kneel at her feet, spreading those long legs of hers apart just so I could smell her arousal. I’d lose myself in between her thighs, and after she belted out my name in that sweet mind-blowing way of hers, I’d tackle her to lie back on my bed and fuck her until I’d made sure that every memory of all those motherfuckers who ever dared to touch her in the same way, would simply vanish—as if they never existed—and all that was left, was me.

I stifle the groan that wants to come out with the tantalizing picture I planted in my own head and lean against the small kitchen counter that rests next to my front door, fully aware that the best thing I can do right now is keep this safe gap between us.

For both our sakes.

“Do you need something?” I ask when the craving to hear her voice again is louder than the silence presently presiding in the room.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” she answers, keeping to her aloof tone. “As you well know, I’ll be living here for the next couple of months, and I thought it would be best to set some ground rules while I’m here.”

“Ground rules?” I arch a mischievous brow, crossing my arms against my chest.

“Yes,” she counters stiffly.

“Fair enough. I’m curious to hear what you have in mind,” I reply with a smirk, but it seems that my smug grin no longer has the same effect on her as it once did since she proceeds with her rant, completely undaunted by it.

“It’s no secret that there is no love lost between us and that neither one of us is happy I’m here, but alas, Daisy is getting married and therefore, my presence back in this godforsaken island couldn’t be avoided.”

“Alas? Throwing out those big words bought with that Dartmouth education of yours already, I see,” I can’t help but tease.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Do you need me to dumb it down for you?” she asks, her tone overly sweet as she exaggeratedly bats her eyelashes at me. “My apologies. It’s been a while since I had to talk to someone whose idea of reading consisted of the daily comic strip that came in the newspaper.”

Fuck, she’s sexy when she’s cutting me down to size.

“As I was saying,” she begins, lowering her penetrating stare from mine, pretending to flick invisible lint off her skirt.

It’s in this fraction of a second, that I let my impervious mask slip off my face and reveal the chokehold this woman has me in.

She’s still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.

So fucking beautiful that it physically hurts to look at her.

When her stoic gaze returns to me, my mask swiftly locks back into place.

“Daisy’s wedding is a big deal, as it should be. And I have promised her that I will do everything in my power to guarantee this monumental event in her life will surpass all her hopes and dreams, giving her the wedding she so richly deserves.”

My smile only widens with each word that comes sprouting out of her mouth since it looks like I wasn’t the only one who was warned to be on their best behavior. Seems like Daisy had the same conversation with her sister, as Derrick had with me.

“That’s why I thought it would be prudent for us to come to an agreement where we can act civil with one another while in our family’s presence. As our brother, I’m sure you can agree that our animosity towards each other shouldn’t dampen our sister’s celebration.”

“Stepbrother,” I’m quick to correct, her lips immediately frowning at the rectification.

“I really couldn’t care less how you’d like to be referred to. All I care

about is Daisy,” she explains sternly, pinning me with just one look.

When I don’t add anything to the conversation, she stands up and squares her shoulders, looking like she’s done with her warning.

“Don’t get in my way and everything will go smoothly. I hope I made myself clear.”

She then struts in my direction, towards the door beside me, thinking this discussion is over.

But it’s far from being over.

The instant she’s within arm’s reach, I pull her by the waist and slam her body against mine. And when I hear that unmistakable catch to her throat, my cock springs to life.

There you are.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asks, appalled, trying to break free from my grasp.

“You said what you needed to, so it’s only fair that I have a turn, don’t you think?”

Her nostrils flare in fury but she’s smart enough to stop wiggling around and keep still. Thank God for that small mercy, since my cock couldn’t handle any more of her rubbing up against it in her quest to break free from my hold.

I scan her face, my eyes going every which way at once, needing to take inventory of all her flawless imperfections. Of all the changes that I missed out on. And when she stares back at me, looking like she’s doing the same, I let her have her fill.

“You’re right,” I finally say after a pregnant pause, her big gray eyes widening incredulously. “This wedding is a big deal and Daisy deserves that nothing fucks it up.” I then lean into her ear, my cock hardening at how close we are.

“But if you think you can come into my home and make demands of any kind, think again. You don’t scare me, little stalker,” I whisper, smiling when I see the goosebumps rise at the nape of her neck. “In this house, I’m the big bad wolf. Don’t forget that.”

She places her palms on my chest to pull just an inch away, uncaring that we are now breathing in the same air.

“Don’t delude yourself. In what world could you ever scare me?”

I lick my lips and cock a wolfish grin.

“Ah, Sky. You shouldn’t have said that. You know how much I’ve

always loved a challenge.” I then lower my head just enough for our lips to be a hair's breadth away from each other. “Run, little stalker. Run on home before I change my mind and prove to you there is no challenge you can give me that I can't win,” I whisper before releasing her from my grip.

Sky lets out a loud scoff as she eagerly steps back away from me.

“How disappointing. And here I thought you'd grown out of such silly games.” She tsks. “Guess I was right after all. You did peak in high school. Shame.”

Pleased with how my smile is now lying flat on the floor for her to walk all over, she reaches for the door to make her grand exit. But before she can get away, I grab hold of her elbow and pull her back against my chest for another word of warning.

“Don't fucking come into my loft uninvited again. If you do, I guarantee you that you'll spend the rest of your stay in Thatcher's Bay on your back with my cock inside you.”

Her eyes widen in alarm as a flush of crimson rises from her heaving chest all the way up to her cheeks.

“Now who looks scared?” I provoke as I kick open the door for her. “Goodnight, Sky. This was fun.”

Nostrils flaring and seeing every shade of red there is, Sky storms out without another word. It's only when I hear the front door of the house slam shut that all my bravado leaves me.

My fists clench to the sides as I walk over to my bed and sit in the precise spot she was in. My palms brush over the warm duvet as I breathe in the lingering remnants of her perfume, feeling a sense of calm wash over me.

I should be a fucking mess right now. I should be curled up in the fetal position, crying my goddamn heart out after such a shitshow of a reunion.

But I'm not.

And that comes down to one thing.

Sky is not indifferent to me as I convinced myself she was.

She fucking hates me, and hate is as far from a sentiment of indifference as there can be.

I can work with hate.

Because her hate has always tasted a lot like love to me.

Yeah.

I can definitely work with hate.

Chapter Six

Noah



It's been years since I've been in this place—the heart of the underground street racing scene in Thatcher's Bay. The dimly lit alley reeks of gasoline and anticipation, and the familiar revving of engines creates a cacophony that drowns out the world. I stood amidst a sea of racers, my fingers gripping the handlebars of my motorcycle, feeling the vibrations of the powerful machine beneath me.

The last time I'd been here, I was a reckless teenager with nothing to lose, desperate to get some money to pay my mother's debt. Now, I was a man burdened with the weight of memories and regrets, haunted by the ghost of a love lost—by Sky.

I'd told myself I'd never come back to this place, that I'd left it all behind. But tonight, I needed something to drown out the relentless thoughts of her. The ache in my chest, the way her memory haunted my dreams—it was a torment I couldn't escape. I needed this race, this rush, to remind myself that I was still alive.

I glance around at the other racers, their faces obscured by helmets, their bikes gleaming in the dim light. Some were old faces, others new, but they all shared the same hunger for victory, the same desire to prove themselves in this unforgiving world.

"Hey, Noah," a voice calls out from behind me. I turn to see a racer I vaguely recognize, his helmet adorned with a skull motif.

"Long time no see," he continues, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

I nod in acknowledgment, not in the mood for small talk. "Yeah, it's been a while."

"You're not the king of the streets anymore," he says, a hint of challenge

in his voice, even though I had definitely never called myself that.

I clench my jaw, memories of my past glory flashing before me. "That was a lifetime ago."

He chuckles, a dark and bitter sound. "Well, things have changed. There are new contenders now, and they're hungry. It's not the old days anymore."

I don't respond, my focus on the race ahead. I'm not here to prove anything to anyone else, and certainly not to some fuck head I can't even remember. I'm here for one thing: to drown out the memories of Sky that are literally chasing me from my bed.

I can't get it out of my head...the way she'd responded to me in my room. The flash of her eyes. The exhale of her breath. The feel of her pressed against me.

It's everything I've been obsessing over, every single fucking day. Everything I couldn't forget.

The signal's given, and we're off, the roar of engines and the screech of tires filling the air. The world around me blurs into a frenzy of lights and shadows as I tear through the streets of Thatcher's Bay. The adrenaline surges through my veins, and for a moment, all thoughts of Sky fade away. There's only the race, the rush, the thrill of pushing my limits.

As we speed through the winding streets, I find myself neck and neck with another racer, his bike a sleek machine of power and precision. The corners come fast and sharp, and I lean into them with a practiced ease. My bike's tires squeal in protest, but I hold my ground, refusing to yield an inch.

We race through narrow alleyways, dodging obstacles with a reckless abandon that comes from years of experience. The memories of my past victories and defeats come flooding back, and I embrace them, drawing strength from every one.

The race continues, a relentless battle of wills and skills. I push my bike harder, faster, determined to maintain my lead. The other racers are close behind, their engines roaring in my ears, but I refuse to let them catch up.

In the final stretch, I surged ahead, my bike's engine screaming in protest as I push it to the limit. The finish line is in sight, and victory's within my grasp. The world around me fades away, leaving only the road and the sensation of speed.

As I cross the finish line, triumphant and victorious, a surge of adrenaline and emotion washes over me. I pull my bike to a stop, the engine still revving as I bask in the familiar rush of adrenaline. The onlookers who have gathered

cheer, their admiration and awe palpable. It was a heady feeling, one that I only got nowadays when I was out on the water.

As I dismount my bike, the other racers approach, their faces a mixture of respect and envy. "Good race, Noah," one of them says, extending a hand.

I shake it, the rush of victory still coursing through my veins. "Thanks."

Another racer claps me on the back. "You've still got it, man."

I smile, a sense of pride swelling within me. "Yeah, I guess I do."

But even as I revel in my victory, the memory of my little stalker creeps back into my mind. I can't escape her, no matter how hard I try. She's like a ghost, haunting me, taunting me, refusing to let go.

I needed something more than a race to forget her, something more permanent. But for now, I would take what I could get—the rush of the streets, the thrill of victory, and the knowledge that I was still alive.

Even while knowing that there's no adrenaline rush...no high on earth, that compares to loving her.

I don't head home after the race. Instead, I take a loop around the island, tracing the familiar contours of the coastline. The night air is cool against my skin, and the sound of the ocean waves crashing against the shore fills my ears. It's the same as always, the same as it's been for years, but everything reminds me of her.

She was only around for four years, but it's like she imbued herself into the very essence of this place. Every corner, every curve of the road, every hidden cove along the coastline—it all echoes with her memory.

As I ride, I can't help but think of her the night of prom, standing on the beach with the wind tugging at her hair. She had this way of looking at the world, like she saw something beautiful in every moment. It was infectious, and for those four years, I felt a certain privilege to be able to see the world through her eyes.

I pass by the lighthouse, its beam of light cutting through the darkness. It was our spot, Skylar's and mine. We used to sneak out here at night, away from prying eyes, away from the judgment of the town. We'd lie on the grass, our fingers entwined, and talk about our dreams, about the future.

But the future had other plans for us. It tore us apart, like a storm sweeping across the sea, leaving nothing but wreckage in its wake. I can still hear her voice in my head, the way she said my name with that soft, teasing lilt. It haunts me, like a melody that I can't forget.

I take a turn onto a winding road that leads up into the hills. The scent of

pine trees fills the air, and I can almost imagine her sitting behind me on the bike, her arms wrapped around my waist, her laughter carried away by the wind.

The road leads to a secluded spot, a cliff overlooking the ocean. Skylar and I used to come here to watch the sunset, to feel like we were the only two people in the world. The memories flood back, and I can almost see her standing there, her hair catching the last rays of the setting sun.

I dismount the bike and walk to the edge of the cliff, the ocean stretching out before me, vast and endless. The moon casts a silvery glow on the water, and for a moment, I can almost convince myself that she's still here with me.

But she's not. She's gone, and all that's left are the memories. The memories of her smile, her laughter, the way she used to curl up against me on cold nights. The memories of our fights, our misunderstandings, the way we pushed each other away.

I sit down on the edge of the cliff, my legs dangling over the side. The wind tousles my long hair, and I close my eyes, trying to hold onto the feeling of her presence, even if it's just a ghost of a memory.

I can still see the tears in her eyes, the disbelief there too, because she'd believed in me, like no one else ever had.

She'd become someone else outside of Thatcher's Bay, but the Sky I'd known was still there. She'd proven that to me tonight.

I open my eyes, and the tears sting. I wipe them away with the back of my hand, angry at myself for still holding onto her, for still letting her haunt my every thought.

But I can't help it. Skylar was my first love, my only love. And no matter how hard I try to move on, how many other highs I chase, she's always there, in the back of my mind, in the depths of my heart.

I take a deep breath and stand up, the wind whipping around me. And then I race back to the place that only feels like home now that she's returned.

* * *

I get home, my footsteps muffled by the carpeted hallway as I make my way through the darkened house. It's been a long night, and the memories of the race still swirl in my mind, but they're overshadowed by the memories of her. She's all I can think about, and I can't escape the pull of her presence.

I find myself outside her bedroom door, the door that I used to sneak into when we were in high school, just like I'm doing now. It's as if the past has come full circle, and I'm back to where it all began. I listen through the door, my ear pressed against the wood, straining to hear any sign of life.

But there's nothing, just silence. She was always a deep sleeper growing up. And I'm hoping that hasn't changed. I try the door, and it clicks open with a soft, barely audible sound. I slip into the dark room, my eyes adjusting to the faint light filtering in from the window.

And there she is, lying in bed, her features bathed in the soft glow of the moonlight. She's beautiful, more like a dream than a real human being it seems. Her chestnut hair spills across the pillow like a silken waterfall, framing her delicate face. The curve of her cheek, the long sweep of her eyelashes, the gentle slope of her nose—it's all so achingly familiar and perfect.

I approach the bed with a heavy heart, my eyes fixated on her peaceful form. She's so still, so fragile in her slumber. My gaze falls to the open bottle of sleeping pills on the nightstand. Hmmm. She never used to need those growing up. I wonder what keeps her from sleeping nowadays.

I can't help but hope it's me.

But just as the thought crosses my mind, so does my guilt.

Fuck.

I hope it's not because of me she needs those wretched pills.

I sit down softly on the edge of the bed, my heart pounding in my chest, and reach out to touch her cheek, my thumb tracing the curve of her lips. She stirs slightly, a soft sigh escaping her parted lips, but she doesn't wake.

I'm a desperate, foolish man as I lower my head to kiss her forehead, my lips trembling against her skin. She's so precious, so fragile, and it's torture to be this near to her.

I can't help myself. My lips brush against hers for a moment, and I slide under the covers and wrap my arms around her, pulling her close. She fits against me as if we were made for each other, and for a moment, it's like we're back in those high school days, when we thought we could conquer the world together.

I lay there beside her, the minutes stretching into hours, watching my Sky sleep. I'm entranced by the delicate lines of her face and the soft curve of her lips. My fingers tremble as they brush against her cheek, the sensation of her skin sending a rush of warmth through me. She's perfect, so perfect, and it's a

stark reminder of just how much I've missed her.

My heart aches with a love that's never waned, a love that's only grown stronger in her absence. I can't help but think of all the moments we've lost, all the years we've spent apart, and it feels like a lifetime of regret weighing me down.

I've missed her laughter, the way her eyes would light up when she was excited about something. I've missed the feel of her hand in mine, the way she used to fit perfectly against me. I've missed her, every single day since she walked away.

But as I watch her now, her breathing steady and calm, I wonder if there's a chance to get her back. The thought lingers in the corners of my mind, a flicker of hope. Could we ever find our way back to each other? Could we heal the wounds of the past and start anew?

But then I brush the thought away, reality crashing down on me like a tidal wave. I hurt her, deeply and irreparably. I broke her heart...and if her feelings were anything like mine were...I broke her soul too. I can't just *erase* the pain I caused. There's no way she'll forgive me, no way she'll want me back in her life.

I continue to touch her, to stroke her cheek with the lightest of caresses, savoring the feel of her under my fingertips. I commit every detail of her to memory, as if trying to capture this moment forever. The way her hair spills across the pillow, the way her lashes rest against her skin, the way her lips part in sleep—all of it is etched into my heart.

As I lay there with her, I realize how desperately I want to protect her, to keep her safe and happy. I want to make up for all the times I failed her, all the times I let her down. I want to be the person she can rely on, the person who makes her smile, the person who loves her with a depth that knows no bounds.

But for now, all I can do is watch over her, be here in this moment, and hope that one day she'll find it in her heart to forgive me.

As the first faint light of dawn begins to filter through the curtains, I know I have to go. I press a gentle kiss to her forehead, my lips lingering for a moment as if trying to convey all the words I can't find. Then, with a heavy heart, I slip out of bed, careful not to wake her.

I close the door behind me, my steps echoing in the empty hallway as I make my way out of the house. The weight of the night hangs heavily on my shoulders, and my body feels feverish...crazed from being that close to her. I

wince as I adjust myself, feeling like my dick could batter through a wall.

As soon as I get up the stairs to my room, I'm in my small bathroom, turning on the water to scalding hot. I stand there, my dick throbbing, my nerves burning with restless energy. I've been getting off to the memory of her for years. But seeing her again...touching her skin...taking in her beautiful face....fuck, it's so much better. My hand wraps around my dick, stroking it root to tip as I think about her kneeling in front of me—those ruby red lips wrapped around my dick, her hair slicked back, drops of water coating her perfect breasts. It's the hottest fucking thing I'd ever seen. In my mind, it's her hands stroking my cock, exploring me as she sucks on my head. Her rosy nipples peek out from under that stunning chestnut hair.

Fuck.

She slowly slides her hands up and down the length of me. And I'm going to die of agony. The smell of her is still coating my skin, even in the shower, like it's permanently etched into me, like a tattoo.

“Noah,” she whispers, and my breath is coming out in gasps.

“It's so good, baby,” I murmur as her lips move up my dick. Her pace increases, and I'm moaning her name as I fall over the edge, pumping hot cum into her mouth, so much that it drips out of her red lips, spilling down her chin and onto her breasts.

I cry out her name as I come for real, ropey cum hitting the wall of the shower in thick strands.

I haven't had an orgasm like that since she left.

Fuck.

I don't understand much about life or love.

But one thing I do understand...I'm never going to be over Skylar Ames.

And I don't want to be.

Chapter Seven

Skylar



It's a gorgeous day, like the sky wanted to be as perfect for Daisy as I do as we step into the quaint little bridal boutique in town. It's a charming space with ivy-covered walls and large windows adorned with delicate lace curtains. The scent of fresh flowers fills the air, and I can't help but smile at the cozy, inviting atmosphere. It's Daisy's first dress appointment, and I'm here to support her along with our mother.

Daisy could have easily flown in a designer dress from Paris with the endless resources at her disposal, thanks to Derrick's wealth. But at some point over the years, she fell in love with Thatcher's Bay, and she insisted on having her dress made by a local designer.

Considering how small the island is, the bridal shop is actually a treasure trove of gowns, each one more exquisite than the last. Rows of elegant dresses in various shades of white and ivory beckon to us, like a chorus of whispered dreams. Soft music plays in the background, adding to the enchanting ambiance of the boutique.

Daisy's eyes sparkle with excitement as she approaches the racks of dresses, her fingers delicately tracing the fabric of one gown after another. "I can't believe I'm getting married," she whispers, her voice filled with a mixture of joy and nervous anticipation as she sips on the very expensive champagne Derrick sent over for the appointment.

I sling my arm around her waist and lay my head down on her shoulder. "It's going to be perfect, Daisy. You're going to be the most beautiful bride."

"I'm not worried about that part," she says with a wink, and I bark out a laugh. Because of course she would say that.

Mom chimes in, her eyes misting over already—probably over the fact

that Daisy is standing in a wedding dress shop at all. "My baby girl is all grown up."

My mother wraps her arms around Daisy's other side in what should be a tender family moment. But beneath the surface, there's still that ever present tension simmering between my mother and me, a weight that drags down the good feelings I have for Daisy. It's a tension that hangs in the air like an unspoken truth. We used to be so close, but now our relationship feels like a delicate glass sculpture, one wrong move away from shattering into a million irreparable pieces.

And I have no idea what to do about it.

I may have left under bad circumstances, but I've accomplished a lot over the years. I graduated from an Ivy League with great grades, I have a good job...I had the perfect boyfriend.

None of that is enough to erase my flight in the night apparently.

One of the employees gives us a brief overview of how orders work and how the final fitting will be done at their sister boutique in Falmouth, gushing appropriately over Daisy the entire time, and then we get started.

"Okay, each of us will pick out three dresses to start with, and I'll try them on," Daisy directs, flipping through the gowns.

My mother and I both nod, not making eye contact with each other. I take the task seriously, carefully selecting three dresses that I think will be perfect on Daisy. There's no doubt about it though, Daisy could make a paper sack look good.

The first gown I select is a classic A-line dress with a modern twist. It has a sweetheart neckline adorned with intricate lace appliques that cascade down the bodice. The skirt is made of layers of soft tulle that create a dreamy, ethereal effect. The back of the dress boasts an elegant illusion lace panel, adding a touch of sophistication. I imagine Daisy walking down the aisle in this gown, her grace and elegance captivating everyone in attendance.

For the second choice, I opt for a more bohemian-inspired gown. It's a flowy, off-the-shoulder dress with a delicate lace overlay. The sleeves are long and sheer, giving the dress an airy and romantic feel. The A-line skirt flows effortlessly, perfect for a beach wedding—the kind of wedding I once dreamt of. The dress is simple yet striking, and I think it would suit Daisy's free-spirited nature beautifully.

Finally, I select a timeless mermaid-style gown for the third option. This dress hugs the body in all the right places before flaring out dramatically at

the knees. The bodice is adorned with intricate beadwork and sequins, adding a touch of glamor to the overall look. The back of the gown features a dramatic train that would make for a stunning entrance. I envision Daisy in this dress, exuding confidence and sophistication as she walks down the aisle.

Daisy begins trying on the dresses, each one more stunning than the last. When she steps out of the fitting room in the mermaid style dress, I gasp at the sight of her. She looks ethereal, like a fairy-tale princess, and a tear escapes my eye.

"You look absolutely breathtaking," I tell her, my voice filled with genuine awe.

Daisy blushes and twirls in the gown, the train swirling around her like she's some kind of moviestar. "This is a good option."

"Derrick will be blown away. You'll be the most beautiful bride he's ever seen," Mom gushes.

I nod emphatically, but Daisy just gives us a wink. "My man would think that no matter how I showed up."

My heart squeezes at that comment. Because I could have had that...I did have that.

If only I wasn't so fucked in the head.

Daisy continues to try on more dresses, her confidence shining through with each one. She radiates beauty and grace, and I'm amazed at her...as usual. "You look stunning, Daisy," I say with genuine admiration as she models each gown.

Daisy grins and twirls again, her eyes sparkling. "I can't believe I get to wear one of these on my wedding day."

As the day unfolds, Daisy finally settles on the perfect dress—a stunning ball gown with intricate beading and a long, flowing veil. When she looks at herself in the mirror, her eyes fill with tears of joy, and I know she's found the one.

Our mother can't hold back her emotions either and wraps Daisy in a tight embrace. "I'm so happy for you, my love."

Daisy smiles through her tears, her happiness radiating from her like a beacon of light. "Thank you, Mom."

I watch the exchange between my mother and sister, feeling like an outsider in my own family. But I force a smile on my face, happy for her even if I'm not happy for myself.

We've gotten so many dresses out that my mom and I start to hang them

back up so the employees don't have to do it all on their own.

"Wait, you should try that one on before we put it away," Daisy gushes suddenly as I go to hang up the A-line one I'd picked in the beginning. She's still wearing her dress as one of the employees works on her measurements for alterations.

"What? No way," I snort.

"Please. Just try it on. Just for fun. Pleaseeee."

I roll my eyes, but I've never been able to say no to Daisy, so I slip into the dressing room and yank the dress up, thinking how stupid it is the entire time.

As I slip on the silk gown, a sense of trepidation washes over me. The delicate lace appliques and flowing tulle skirt envelop me, and I can't deny that it's a beautiful gown. But as I look at myself in the mirror, I'm reminded of the dreams I had as a teenager—the dreams of a perfect love. The dress is a symbol of everything I once dreamed of, everything I believed in, and everything that ultimately slipped away. I know I shouldn't let it affect me like this, but I can't help it.

Daisy's voice breaks through my reverie. "Skylar, you look absolutely stunning!"

Our mother joins in, her voice filled with pride. "That dress suits you so well, dear. You're radiant in it."

Their words warm my heart, and I force a smile in response. I don't want to dampen Daisy's excitement or overshadow her joy with my own insecurities. Today is about her, and I'm here to support her in every way I can.

But as I stand there in the bridal gown, I can't help but confront my own doubts and regrets. It's been seven years since I left Thatcher's Bay, leaving behind not only my dreams but also the people I loved. The ache in my heart is a reminder of all the choices I've made and the paths I've taken.

Gael's face fills my head.

He'd give me the wedding of my dreams in this dress...he'd even try his best to give me a happily ever after. If only I would fully embrace the love he offers.

The problem is...that as I stare at myself in this gown, I'm reminded of... Noah.

And Gael doesn't deserve that.

As I stand here, caught between the past and the present, I wonder if I'll

ever find the courage to fully embrace the love Gael offers me. I know I can't keep living in the past, but letting go of those memories is easier said than done.

As we drive home, with the lazy sea breeze brushing over my skin through the open window, I can't help but let myself drift into a daydream, one I'd had countless times in high school with Noah.

I'm standing on the shores of Thatcher's Bay, the waves gently lapping at my feet. The sun is setting on the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over everything. I'm wearing a flowing white gown, the fabric billowing in the breeze. My hair is loose and tousled, adorned with delicate wildflowers.

And waiting for me at the end of a makeshift aisle, his eyes filled with love and longing, is Noah. He's dressed in a simple suit, his light hair ruffled by the wind. The sight of him takes my breath away, just as it did all those years ago when we were young and foolish and in love.

As I walk toward him, each step filled with anticipation, my heart flutters in my chest. Noah's gaze never wavers from mine, and I can see the depth of his feelings in his eyes. The world around us fades away, and it's just the two of us, lost in this moment of pure, unadulterated love.

Just as our hands touch, and my mouth opens to say my vows...I'm jolted back to reality.

I'm not on a picturesque beach.

And Noah is not waiting for me.

The distance between us is not just physical but emotional, too great to bridge to attempt to cross.

I open my eyes and take a deep breath, banishing the fantasy from my mind. The ache in my chest remains, a reminder of the love I once had and the choices I had to make. I know that Noah is a part of my past, a chapter that can never be rewritten.

But my heart doesn't seem to get the message.

Chapter Eight

Skylar



An incoming text wakes me up from my restless sleep the next morning. Since I've been home and back in this room, it's fair to say that a good night's sleep just isn't in the cards for me. Not when memories of every little thing that transpired on this very bed insist on keeping me alarmingly awake for most of the night, haunting me at every turn.

Needing a distraction from my current predicament, I stretch out my arm to pick up my phone on the nightstand, hoping it's my boss with a new assignment for me to keep me busy, only to feel a pang to my chest when I find that the text came from Gael.

I stare apprehensively at his simple three-worded text, asking how I'm doing, in the same way most authors tremble at the sight of an empty page. I'm at a complete loss for words as to what to reply, which is ironic since words are supposed to be my bread and butter.

What should I do?

Do I give him the usual non-committal response of telling him that I'm fine, or should I be honest for once and tell him the truth? That since I left Boston, I've reverted to being a hot mess of a woman, and that my predictable easy-going day to day life is now infused with such chaotic confusion, that I'm no longer able to distinguish up from down anymore. But I know Gael.

If I go with the truth, then he'll want more of it, and I'm not in the right frame of mind to have that difficult conversation with him yet—if ever. Hence why I'm not surprised that in the end, I chicken out, and give him the bland reply of I'm good.

When he quickly messages me back to say he misses me, I have to curb

my knee jerk reaction of asking why.

How can he miss someone who never truly existed?

The Skylar he knew was a fabrication I made up. One that was strong and independent, uncaring of anyone's opinion but her own. A woman who was so focused on succeeding in her professional life that her emotional one took a back seat to everything else. I made her up, and for years I deceived myself into believing that was who I really was, and I was just fine living someone else's life.

Gael had been right when he accused me of being a ghost.

I was a ghost.

I've been one for years now, just going through the motions, and never letting myself truly suck in the marrow that a full life has to offer.

Oh, I pretended to.

I did a bang-up job of pretending to be wild and free in college, going to parties and hooking up with total strangers just for the hell of it. I went through fuckboys faster than most people go through Kleenex reading ugly-cry books. And when that got tedious, I flipped the switch and became the perfect girlfriend to the most wonderful man anyone could ever encounter.

But even then, I was still just playing a part.

None of it was real to me.

For it to be real, it would mean I'd have to open myself up and be vulnerable. Truly vulnerable. Let someone else in and entrust them with my heart. I'd have to cut myself open and show all the ugly dark parts of my soul, trusting they would accept me for who I was, warts and all.

But I had made that reckless mistake once before and vowed never to make it again.

And because of that decision, Gael ended up being punished for it.

He doesn't deserve half a life.

He's good, and kind, and so damn in tune with his feelings, that he puts my unwilling attempts to shame. He's one of the most incredible, decent men I have ever met.

He deserves more.

More than I'll ever be able to give him.

And because I know this, I vacillate texting Gael back with an 'I miss you too', preferring to stick to callous ways of leaving him on read instead. Whether we are on a break, or we're officially no longer together, he doesn't deserve to have his feelings played with. Even if I miss him, it wouldn't be

fair of me to say so.

And I do miss him.

But selfishly, for all the wrong reasons.

I miss how he calmed me. How his influence steadied me. He was able to tame the violent storm that lived and breathed within me, giving it a safe port to seek refuge in. It took me returning to Thatcher's Bay to see how I took that calming influence for granted.

Maybe there is a lesson here.

A lesson on how it feels to have someone love you so unconditionally when your heart is incapable of loving them back. But if that's the case, then it's a pretty fucked up way to go about it.

Besides if anyone has a karmic teaching coming to them, it sure as hell shouldn't be me. Noah is the one who karma should pay a visit to. That bitch should be banging on his door nonstop instead of wasting her time with me.

But then again, life is never fair.

Sometimes the bad guys win in the end.

And the good ones never measure up.

"Nope," I say out loud into my empty room. "This is not how I'm going to start my morning."

My stepbrother doesn't get to ruin my day when it's barely started.

Determined to ignore the chaotic whirlwind that is Noah Fontaine, I lift off the bed and cross my legs, placing myself in a meditative pose. I close my eyes and pull in a deep breath and then exhale, forcibly pushing every wayward thought out of my head, focusing only on my breathing.

Ten minutes later, it's in this meditative state that my sister finds me.

"Well, this is new," Daisy singsongs, pulling me away from the only moments of peace I've had since I came back to this godforsaken island.

"I see you still don't know how to knock," I chastise, shaking my head disapprovingly while keeping my eyes shut.

"What can I say? Old habits are hard to break," she teases, jumping onto my bed behind me.

"Kind of busy here, Daisy," I mumble when I feel her getting comfortable, stretching her legs on the duvet until her bare feet graze my knee.

"Don't mind me. Just do your thing, squirt. I'll wait."

I bite down on my bottom lip, forcing myself not to say anything in return, determined to finish my meditation in the hopes that it will balance me

out for the day ahead.

But when I hear a familiar flick of a page, all my senses skyrocket in alarm.

“Hey!” I exclaim in outrage after catching my sister reading the notebook I always keep on my bedside table. It’s the same one I scribble on in the middle of the night when my thoughts and ideas get too loud for me to sleep, needing me to purge them out of my brain and onto a blank page. “Don’t read that!” I order, pulling it out of her grabby hands. “That’s private.”

“Sooooorrrrry!” she says exaggeratedly. “It’s not like it had a ‘don’t touch me’ sign on it. Geez!”

“It doesn’t need one. This is still my room, Daisy, which means everything in it is hands off.”

But instead of getting upset with me, Daisy bursts into a fit of giggles, leaning forward on the bed just far enough to place her chin on my shoulder, and hug me from behind.

“I know it’s silly, but I missed this. I can’t remember the last time you told me not to touch your stuff.”

A warmth spreads through me at her innocent confession, destroying whatever furious indignation I had before. I cover her clasped hands with mine and tilt my head to the side to gently press against her temple.

“I missed it, too.”

“Yeah?” she whispers expectantly.

“Yeah.” I nod.

The beaming smile she offers me in return works better than any meditation possibly could. If I wanted to find some solace, an inkling of peace, I should have known I’d find it in my sister’s company. Daisy is still that ray of sunshine that has the power to cast away any stormy cloud. It shames me how much effort I had put into forgetting that about her.

But then again, it was never her I wanted to forget.

It was him.

“You’re here early this morning,” I state, not wanting that sullen thought to ruin the perfect moment we’re having.

“I know. I thought you might like to come to the farmer’s market with me this morning.”

“Farmer’s market?! Who are you and what have you done with my sister?” I laugh.

“Stop.” She giggles, hugging me tighter. “I know it’s not my thing, but

it's for a good reason. Tonight is the big Fourth of July party on Main Street, and Derrick signed us up as volunteers to tend to the corn on the cob booth. Can't have that if there's not enough corn to sell. That's why I need to go to the market this morning and buy some more, just to make sure we have enough for tonight. And since Derrick is busy with today's big boat race, I could use another pair of hands to help me out. What do you say? Want to come with me?"

"Sure. Why not? Sounds like fun. Let me just grab a quick shower and get dressed, and then we can go on your corn hunt. I'm curious to see my big sister try to haggle an ear of corn from one of the vendors."

"It will be like stealing candy from a baby." She beams, releasing her grip from me so she can lean back on the bed, holding herself up by her elbows. "All I've got to do is flash one of these," she points to her wide grin, "or flash them one of these," she adds mischievously, shaking her shoulders in a way that has her breasts doing a little dance.

"I very much doubt that your fiancé will be thrilled to learn that his soon-to-be-wife is shaking her goodies for a discount." I giggle teasingly.

"Nah, Derrick won't mind. He knows it's all harmless fun, and that at the end of the day, no matter who I flirt with, I always end up in his bed. It's been that way with us since the very start. Trust me, Derrick is used to it by now." She grins with a wistful sparkle in her blue eyes, as if reminiscing about those first few romantic encounters between them.

I won't lie. I've always been curious about how Derrick and Daisy ended up together in the first place. Not that I've had much success in figuring it out. Daisy has always been a private person when it came to her love life, but with Derrick, she's like a locked vault, keeping every little nugget to herself, not wanting the outside world to influence them in any way. I've only ever been able to catch a few little breadcrumbs here and there over the years, but I don't need to know the whole story to know they are meant for each other. They might be polar opposites, but somehow, they make sense. Most importantly, Derrick has a knack for always putting a smile on my sister's face. He makes her happy, unabashedly so, and that's enough for me.

"Hmm, I don't buy it. Are you saying Derrick doesn't get jealous? Ever?" I ask with an arched brow, calling bullshit on that scenario.

"Oh, he gets jealous alright," she admits with a hooded gaze. "But that's half the fun. Because when D gets jealous, then Big D comes out, and he's very possessive, if you get my drift." She wiggles her eyebrows suggestively.

"Ew. I don't want to hear how you two freaks get it on. Not before I've had my morning coffee at least." I laugh.

But before Daisy is able to open her mouth with one of her witty comebacks, she's interrupted by the sound of our mother's boisterous laughter coming from outside our front yard.

"I guess you're right. Some things never change around here. Looks like Mom and Curt still go at it like a pair of teenagers," I state evenly.

"Nope, it's not Curt. He left early this morning on an errand. It's probably just Mom and Noah goofing around." She shrugs like what she just said is a common occurrence and not the earth shattering revelation that it is.

Did she just say Mom and Noah?

Together?

Without being forced?

What the hell.

Needing to see this with my own eyes, I jump out of bed and rush over to my window, sliding my curtain to the side.

My frown deepens when I see my mother on her knees tending to the garden, laughing away at something Noah just said. They look completely comfortable with each other, their back-and-forth banter feeling like someone just punched me in the gut. And when Noah helps my wide-grinned mother to her feet, pressing a tender kiss to her cheek before giving her a hug, my jaw slams to the floor.

It's official.

Hell has frozen over.

And the devil is currently hugging my mother with a fucking smile on his face.

"What the fuck?!" I growl, unable to keep my temper at bay.

"What? What's going on?" Daisy asks worriedly, rushing towards me. When she spies over my shoulder and sees the same scene I am, her curiosity morphs into confusion.

"Jesus, Sky. You startled me. I thought something was wrong."

"Doesn't get any more wrong than that. Seriously, *that* doesn't bother you?" I point at Noah and our mother being all...all...caring with each other, like they're friends or something.

No.

Like they're family.

"Why would it? Nothing I haven't seen before." She shrugs, unfazed,

walking back to the bed to sit down at its edge. “Those two are inseparable. I swear they even have their own language, always whispering in the corners. If I didn’t know Mom loves us to death, I’d swear she would have preferred having sons to daughters. And Noah loves the attention she dotes on him. Don’t tell him I said this to you, but the dude is quite the momma’s boy.” She laughs, unaware how those words strike such a painful chord inside me.

Yes.

Me, more than anyone, knows just how much Noah has always craved motherly affection. Guess he finally found it. Not sure how I feel about it though, given the fact that it’s *my* mother showering him with it. The same mother who has shown me nothing but her cold shoulder since I left home.

“When...” I croak, unable to get the words out, “when...did...they become so close?”

Daisy’s expression turns pensive, as if trying to recall exactly what catalyst event could have brought these opposing forces to unite.

“Hmm, maybe after you two graduated from Bayshore High. No, wait... maybe it was when you went off to college or when Noah started working with his dad. Honestly, I’m not sure when they ended up gravitating to each other. One day they were still using monosyllabic sentences, and the next, they were spending hours sitting at the kitchen counter just talking to each other. I think they both needed someone to just vent with and ended up finding each other. I don’t know. It was so long ago. I can’t even remember a time when they weren’t mother and son.”

Mother and son.

This time, I feel the metaphorical punch to my stomach so strongly that I need to physically wrap my arms around my waist to keep the pain at bay.

“Babe, are you okay? You look pale,” Daisy states worriedly, springing to her feet and hurrying to me.

“I’m fine,” I lie. “Just a little lightheaded all of a sudden.”

“You know what this is? Hunger pains. You should eat something,” she says. “Grab your shower and I’ll make some breakfast for you. Do you still like toast with sprinkled cinnamon on top?”

My beloved sister having to ask me that question, like I’m a stranger to her, only increases the pain I feel inside. Not having the strength to dive into why that is, since I know damn well it’s my fault we’ve been out of sync for so long, all I do is nod.

“Okay then. I’ll wait for you downstairs, sis.” She smiles, planting a kiss

to my cheek before skipping out of my room.

But instead of getting ready like I should, the masochist in me has me turning towards my window again, just to watch Noah with my mother. My brows furrow when I see that their prior light conversation has turned serious, my mother saying something to him that has them both looking lost and upset. Curiosity gets the best of me as I find myself inching closer to the window, silently opening the latch, hoping that their voices might be loud enough to carry up to me so I can eavesdrop on their conversation.

Unfortunately, it's a futile attempt since they keep to their hushed tones—so no such luck there.

But then my shock of seeing them together increases tenfold when they both stop whatever they are talking about to stare up at my window, making me drop to the floor like a thief caught with their hand in the cookie jar. My heart drums in my chest, so loudly that I'm positive they can hear it all the way outside in the yard. It's only when I hear the familiar sound of a bike's throttle speeding away from the driveway that I bravely rise from my hidden position.

Am I losing my mind, or did I just catch Noah and my mother talking about me?

I mean, why else would they simultaneously look up to my room, mid conversation?

If I want answers, then the logical thing to do is go straight to the source. And seeing as I want to limit any, and all, interactions with Noah, having a stern word with my mother will have to do. I'm not sure how I'll bring the conversation up with her without causing a fight, but I'll think of something.

Unfortunately for me, it will have to wait.

I promised Daisy I'd spend the morning with her, and seeing as today is the Fourth of July, I'm sure my mother will also be busy for most of the day. Though she doesn't need a national holiday as an excuse to always keep herself busy with something or other. It hasn't been lost on me how she hasn't been eager for us to have some mother-daughter quality time together since my return.

Then again, neither have I.

Until now, that is.

Now, I want answers.

And my mother is going to give them to me.

* * *

“Why is everyone staring at us,” I mumble uncomfortably, holding onto the crook of my sister’s arm for protection against the wandering eyes on us as we stroll through the market situated in Town Square.

“Can you blame them?” she laughs. “I mean, look at you. This is a farmer’s market, not a fashion show.”

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” I ask, insulted.

When I left the house in my white buckle belted flare pants and dark blue top that fell to the left side with golden imprinted roses trickling down on it, I thought I looked pretty good in my chosen ensemble, but now with everyone staring at me, I’m wondering if I didn’t make the wrong choice.

“Don’t get me wrong. You look like a million bucks. It’s that usually people who look like you live on the other side of the island and never come down here to do their own shopping,” Daisy explains, giving my arms a comforting squeeze.

“Hmm. I think you might be right. I forgot how divided Thatcher’s Bay is. Maybe while we’re here in town, I can drop in on a few shops and buy some new clothes that have more of the island’s vibe.”

“You don’t have to change to please anyone, Sky. Just hold your head up high and own it. You’ve come a long way from that shy, awkward girl you used to be. No shame in showing everyone how much you’ve grown. You shouldn’t let anyone dim your light just because it’s too damn bright for them. If anyone gives you a hard time and has a problem with it, then they should just buy some fucking shades, or look the other way.”

God, I’ve missed her.

Daisy always has the right words to say to get me out of any funk.

And right now, her words mean more to me than she’ll ever know.

“What? Why are you looking at me with that goofy face of yours?” She giggles.

“It’s nothing. Just glad to be home, I guess.” I smile meekly.

“Well, thank fuck for that. It will be easier to convince you to help Derrick and me volunteer at the corn booth tonight. You up for it, squirt?”

“Sure.” I laugh. “But if I’m going to do that, then I’d really like to buy a few things. Maybe a few T-shirts and shorts. Just to be more comfortable.”

When her brows begin to furrow, I quickly ease her protective concern.

“The new clothes will be for me, Daisy. Not for them.” I add assuredly.

After all, my sister's right.

Be it good or bad, I have come a long way, and I shouldn't hide who I am from anyone.

"Okay, then," she says with an easy grin, only for it to falter from her lips seconds later. "Shit. This is not how I wanted this to happen."

"What?" I ask, confused. "What are you talking—" but before I have time to finish my sentence, an annoyingly high pitched shriek stops me in my tracks.

"Daisy! Skylar! Hi!" Stacy Monroe shouts at us, waving like we're best fucking friends and not mortal enemies. But it's not the shock of seeing Stacy that's frozen me to the spot—it's the baby stroller she's holding onto.

"Come on," Daisy mumbles under her breath, forcibly dragging me to cross the street with her.

Before I realize what my sister is doing, I'm already face to face with the girl who tried to kill me in high school.

And no, I'm not being dramatic.

Stacy really did almost kill me with that pecan stunt of hers.

Huh.

What do you know?

This bitch wanted nothing more than to make sure my heart stopped beating back in the day.

And in a way, she got her wish.

Kudos to her.

But if I thought seeing the girl who made my life a living hell in high school was bad enough, then the way my sister warmly gives her a side hug only pours salt to the wound.

"Hi, Stacy," my sister greets with a sincere smile.

"Hi," she greets, eyeing me nervously. "Welcome home, Skylar."

"Thank you," I reply dryly, purposely keeping my 'fuck you' expression in place.

"I...uh...," she stammers before giving her head a little shake, as if she needed those extra seconds to compose herself. "Derrick told me you might be here this morning." She grins at my sister. "Since it's such a nice morning, I thought I'd bring little Joshua for a little stroll on the beach."

"And how is my little guy?" Daisy coos, kneeling down to the stroller and finding a sleeping baby boy with hair as crimson red as his mother's cheeks.

I don't know why I do it, but I let out a sigh of relief when I see his hair,

expecting it to be blond instead.

Thankfully, neither woman catches the faux pas, as they are too busy gushing over the little guy. I, on the other hand, am painfully aware of how awkward I'm being. After all, it's only normal that my sister be on good terms with Stacy. In a few months, she'll be her sister-in-law and part of Stacy's family. Which means, in a way, she'll be part of mine too.

Fuck.

I've been so in my head that I didn't even realize that this woman will be in my life for the long haul. She'll be as much an aunt to my sister's future kids as I will be. I make a mental note to spoil those kids rotten and be the cool aunt. Like hell I'll let her turn them against me.

Goddamn it.

I'm already amped up to go to war with this woman over my nephews and nieces, and they haven't even been born yet.

I don't even know if my sister wants kids.

I mean, she never wanted to get married before she met Derrick so I'm sure she's probably changed her mind on that front too.

It's not even noon and I already have a headache.

I stand there silent as Stacy and Daisy talk about some wedding preparation, counting down the seconds until they've said all they need to say for us to be on our way.

But just as I think that they are finally done, Stacy shocks the hell out of me with her next words.

"Daisy, would you be a dear and take Joshua to his dad so me and Skylar could have a private word? Micheal should be in there somewhere," she points to the crowded market.

'Don't do it, Daisy! Don't you dare leave me with this woman!' my gaze begs, but apparently my sister either doesn't see the plea in my eyes or ignores it completely.

"Sure. After you're done, you know where to find me, Sky. Okay?" She arches a stern brow.

Fuckity fuck.

She wants me to play nice.

With Stacy fucking Monroe!

Is my sister high?!

"Why the hell not?" I answer with a bitter tone, uncaring if my sister likes my attitude or not.

She throws me a displeased frown but takes hold of Stacy's stroller and begins to walk the opposite way into the large crowd of people, without so much a goodbye.

Not liking the position she's put me in, I cross my arms and stare daggers into Stacy as she tries to find the words to say to me.

"God, I've thought so long on what I would say to you when this moment came, I'm a little lost on where to start," she says nervously.

"An 'I'm sorry' would be a good start," I quip back with all the venom I have running through my veins for her, but it doesn't seem to dismay her in any way.

"You're right. I am sorry. I wasn't very nice to you when we were kids. In fact, I was a total bitch to you. I know that. And I'm sorry if I ever did anything to cause you any pain. It was never my intention."

Is this woman for real?

"You're joking, right?" I scoff. "You and I both know that it was always your intention to hurt me. Or do you think I've forgiven you for sending me to the hospital almost at death's door? How about how you almost drowned me? How you made me the laughingstock at school, and how you and your asshole friends bullied me every day. Trauma like that isn't so easily swept under the rug and forgotten, you know?"

To her credit, her eyes lower in shame, as if embarrassed of the things she did to me.

And as I scowl at her lowered gaze, I'm not blind to how she carries herself differently. She looks softer, kinder even, but I'm not fooled. I've been on this merry-go-round before, where people aren't exactly as they seem. They say one thing but do the opposite.

No.

I don't care if Stacy believes she's changed.

A snake may shed its skin, but they are still cold-blooded predators, ready to jump at you the minute you've lowered your guard to pierce their fangs into your flesh and poison you from within.

And Stacy is a snake if I ever saw one, and not her, or anyone else will change my mind on that front.

"You're right," she repeats sullenly. "I know you're right. I did do all of those things. And that's why I wanted to talk to you. I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry and that I hope that maybe one day we can put the past behind us and be friends."

Scratch that.

Daisy isn't the only one that's high around here.

Stacy must be on some very powerful hallucinogenic drugs if she thinks we'll ever be friends.

"I know it will take some time, but I honestly believe we can get there. I mean, we're about to become family after all."

Oh, no she didn't.

"Listen to me very closely, Stacy." I seethe through gritted teeth. "We are not family. Not now. Not ever. There is no written rule that says just because Daisy is marrying your brother, we have to be close. I can be civil, for my sister's sake, but don't expect me to be your friend, much less your family," I explain arctically, doing everything in my power not to drop her here where she stands with just one punch.

Stacy might have spent time wondering what to tell me if our paths ever crossed again, but so have I. And in all the scenarios I played in my head, she was on her hands and knees with a bloody lip after I sucker punched her to the ground.

I'd love nothing more than to see her bleed.

Considering this bitch has nicked me more times than I can count.

"Look at me, Skylar," she insists, with a heartfelt tone worthy of an Oscar. "I know I hurt you, but what I'm trying to tell you is that I'm not that person anymore. I'm someone's mother. Someone's wife. I'm happy. Too happy to dwell on the stupid shit that went on in high school. Aren't you?"

I stand there amazed at her brazen disregard for what she did to me.

"I mean, out of the both of us, I was sure you'd have matured into seeing things differently by now. But from what I can tell, you're still stuck there—in the past where only heartache lives. You have to let that pain go, Skylar. For your own sake." She sighs, as if genuinely worried about me. "I see that no matter what I say, you'll never believe me. But I can assure you this much. I do regret many things that I did back in the day, but not all of them. Because they were all lessons in disguise, and I grew from those mistakes. Without them, I wouldn't be the person I am today. And I like who I've become. You might not, and that's okay. Because the people who love me know my worth and see me for who I am."

"Are you done?" I all but bark at her.

"Yes." She sighs. "I guess I am." She then gives me a disappointed look before turning around to leave in search of her family.

It's only when her back is turned that I find my voice and say the one thing I shouldn't.

"I loved him. And you...you...ruined it," I choke out with closed fists, my nails biting into my palms.

She halts her step with those words and turns her head over her shoulder to look at me, complete sadness marrying her features.

"You forget that I loved him too. There was nothing I wouldn't have done for him. Nothing. Even lie."

And with that ominous remark, she walks away, disappearing into the crowd, leaving me in shambles in the middle of the street.

Chapter Nine

Noah



“Congratulations, Noah!”

“The Royal Shank blew them all out of the water!”

“Next year you’ll be a shoe-in to win the New Zealand Grand Prix!”

These are the cheered remarks I’m flooded with as I walk down Main Street with my dad and Clara at my side. I just nod and smile, letting complete strangers pat me on the back, because I know today’s win means something to all of them too.

No one expects a kid who was born and raised on the poor side of the island to amount to much. At least nothing that doesn’t involve putting on gray PVC-coated polyester overalls every day. In their eyes, I’ve become the exception to the rule, a source of hope that maybe their own sons and daughters may grow up to have a better life than the one afforded to them.

But while they praise and cheer my accomplishment in winning today’s race, all I can think about is how I’m one step closer to leaving them all behind.

As much as I hate to admit it, I’m going to miss Thatcher’s Bay.

I’ve spent so much of my life brooding and lamenting on how I’d be forever shackled to this island, that now that I’m months away from leaving it for good, a sense of melancholy washes over me. All that I’d ever dreamed about doing is within my grasp, and yet I find myself mourning the loss of the life I thought I was destined for.

How crazy is that?

Maybe it has to do with the fact that this island holds my most treasured memories and that is why I’m so reluctant to bid it goodbye.

But in a few months, that's exactly what I'll do.

After the Royal Shank wins Derrick's Labor Day boat race, I'll have enough money to get it ready for the trip of a lifetime. From here, it will take me thirty days to reach the Panama Canal, then another fifty to sail off to New Zealand for the annual Grand Prix, stopping in Hawaii and Fiji along the way to refuel and restock.

If I want to make it there before March when the race takes place, then I'll have to leave by the end of October, early November at the latest. Which works just fine, since the southern hemisphere will be enjoying its summer months down there, so it will be smooth sailing all the way.

This opportunity is everything I could have dreamed of when I was a kid, and yet, there is something missing. Something that doesn't allow me to fully enjoy it.

Who am I trying to fool?

It's not something. It's *someone*.

Because what is a life, if you can't share it with the person you love?

"Noah? Are you okay? You've been awfully quiet," my father asks worriedly beside me. "Is this attention getting too much for you, son? We can go home if you want."

"It's fine, Dad. *I'm* fine. Just tired," I explain, forcing a smile to my lips to ease his concern.

"I knew this was a bad idea bringing you out tonight. You should be resting. Not strolling through Main Street for everyone to fawn over you." My father shakes his head.

"And miss the fireworks?" I arch a teasing brow. "No way. Besides, who says I don't like the attention?"

"Me. Your father, that's who," he retorts protectively. "We should go home. You can see the fireworks just fine from our porch without half of Thatcher's Bay gawking at you like you're some exotic animal in a zoo."

"Leave the boy be," Clara quickly comes to my rescue. "He knows his own mind by now. If Noah says he's fine, then he is." She throws me a conspiring wink, knowing the real reason why I was eager to tag along with them tonight instead of staying back at the house.

My father frowns disapprovingly but is smart enough not to say anything since he knows when he's outnumbered, two to one.

Not that it's anything new to him. It's been like this for a while now in our household. When it comes to me, Clara always has my back, making a

point of supporting me at every turn, even in the most mundane of decisions. A fact that hasn't been lost on my father over the years.

Hell, it might even be the reason we're as close as we are now.

Somewhere along the line, my father and I laid down our weapons of mass destruction and past resentments and started communicating—really talking and listening to one another. Maybe it was being out at sea with him for long spells of time where we couldn't avoid each other and had to learn to trust each other again to ensure our own survival that shifted something inside us. Made us heal all the grudges we once had. All that pain.

Not that I made it easier on him, or anyone else for that matter.

And though it wasn't pretty in the beginning, and it took time, somehow we both managed to weather the storm and come out on top anyway. It didn't hurt that we both had Clara to lean on for support, either. And in those early days where my pain was louder than reason, a sensible shoulder to cry on was exactly what I needed. Instead of giving myself to my grief and anger, as I was prone to do, I found myself leaning on them both for grace and guidance.

I'm not sure I would have survived any other way.

As if sensing where my head is at, Clara hugs my arm and gives it a little squeeze.

"How about we go and find the girls before the fireworks start?" she asks, unable to hide the hope flickering in her eyes.

I give her a clipped nod, since unlike her, hope is a luxury I can't afford to have. All it will do is fuck with my head, and I do that just fine on my own.

Still, I can't help but recall our earlier conversation on our front lawn before I left for the boat race this morning. How Clara still holds out hope that fate and destiny might have a few tricks up their sleeves for me—and for her daughter.

"Remember what I told you? If it's meant to be, life will find a way to bring you back to each other? Maybe this is that chance. A gift to heal all the misery you both had to endure."

"I know your heart is in the right place and you mean well, Clara, but you're being delusional right now. Sky has made it very clear she wants nothing to do with me. She hates me."

"Does she? I'm not so easily convinced that's how she feels about you." She sighs, saddened. *"One thing is certain, though. My daughter is unhappy. If I'm being completely honest with myself, I doubt she's experienced one*

moment of true happiness since we pushed her away. And knowing you've been just as miserable... well... I live with that guilt every day."

"Don't. You didn't make her leave—I did."

"And you did that because I meddled. Because of me, my daughter is a shell of her former self, and my boy has closed his heart to the world for good. Tell me, Noah, how am I able to live with that guilt?"

"You were just looking out for her best interest. We both were," I try to comfort, but Clara's eyes begin to water regardless, just proving that I wasn't the only one in this house who suffered from Skylar's absence.

"For years, I convinced myself of that same thing, but now..." she stammers, quickly wiping away the errant tears in her eyes before a stream of them follows. "Now, I'm not so sure. Maybe we were wrong. Maybe the best thing for my Skylar was to stay here in Thatcher's Bay with us. With her family. And with the boy she loved with all her heart."

It's at this moment that Clara wistfully looks up towards Sky's room, my gaze all too eager to follow her direction.

"No use dwelling on the past. It's done. Can't turn back the hands of time anymore than you can erase it," I mumble, staring at the blank space of her bedroom window, watching as the sweet summer breeze blows its way inside, taunting me with how easy it is for it to get close to her, when I've been ordered to stay away.

"You're right. We can't change the past," Clara says, giving my hand a light squeeze, "But that doesn't mean our future is set in stone. You, more than anyone, know how if we put our mind to something, there isn't anything we can't accomplish."

"And just exactly what do you expect me to do?" I ask outright, feeling my Adam's apple bob with constricting emotion as I keep staring at Skylar's window, wishing I could catch just a quick glimpse of her.

"I expect you to do what you always do." Clara smiles meekly. "Just follow your heart, Noah. The rest will come easily enough."

Follow my heart.

Ironic that would be her advice to me since following my damn heart is what fucked me over in the first place.

Nevertheless, it's her counsel that drove me to come here tonight. I may not be able to force Sky to open her heart to me again, but that doesn't mean I'll make it easy for her to forget me—forget how I once owned that very heart she keeps bolted up under lock and key and hidden away from prying

eyes.

If I have to stalk her just to get my daily fix of Sky, then so fucking be it. I've lived without her light for long enough.

If hate is all she's able to give me, then I'll happily drink every last drop of it.

I'll let her hate fill the gaping hole in my chest, until it no longer feels unbearable to live with.

Love may no longer be in the cards for me, but her hate will do just fine.

"There they are!" Clara waves over to a booth on the other side of the street.

"Here comes Thatcher's Bay golden boy!" Daisy shrieks, jumping over the counter to hug me. "Derrick hasn't stopped telling us how you blew everyone away! Three whole minutes ahead of the runner up! That's amazing! I'm so fucking proud of you!" she exclaims, holding me so tightly my lungs constrict for breath.

"Easy there, petal. Don't break him just yet. I'm going to need him to win another race for me this summer," Derrick interjects with an amused chuckle, gently pulling Daisy off me to give me back some breathing room. With a demure smile, he wraps his arms around her waist before greeting our parents. "Mr. Fontaine. Mrs. Fontaine. How are you this fine evening?"

"Derrick," my father retorts with a clipped tone. "In all honesty, I could be better after hearing how you continue to have your priorities in check. One of them being making a fast buck off my son's hard labor."

"Noah has never seemed bothered by our arrangement," Derrick defends stoically. "But if he ever does, then he knows he can come to me anytime. I won't let something as silly as money come in the way of family."

The jab hits my father's stern demeanor right in the chest, making his jaw clench up with all the words he'd like to say, but can't, or he'll bear the wrath of both Daisy and Clara alike.

It's no secret Derrick isn't my father's favorite person. Though most of Thatcher's Bay would disagree with him, since everyone on both sides of the island regard Derrick as being their favorite son, my father has never quite seen the appeal of him, nor has he fallen for his charms.

I guess I'm a little to blame for that.

Especially since most of the trouble I got in with the law in my teenage years could always be tracked to either a drag race or fight that Derrick had organized. My father's dislike of the Monroe heir tripled, though, when

Daisy announced that the two of them were dating.

I can still remember how that shitshow went down.

Dad thought that Derrick was somehow going to corrupt Daisy, only to leave her heartbroken afterwards. But if he had paid attention to the women living under his roof, then he would see that Daisy was far from being corruptible. In fact, if there was any such debasing being done at all in their relationship, my money was on Daisy.

“Argh. I still can’t believe you’re organizing another race for Labor Day weekend no less,” Daisy pouts, playfully slapping her fiancé’s broad forearm. “That’s the last weekend we’ll have before the wedding. You’re going to be busy with that, while I’ll still be freaking out with all the wedding preparations.”

“We have more than enough time to get everything ready by then. Isn’t that right, Curt?” Clara assures, trying to ease her eldest daughter’s anxiety, while simultaneously trying to pull her husband’s deadlock stare away from Derrick.

“Hmm.” My father groans non-committedly.

But while the four of them are occupied with their own shit, my attention is solely and fully on the girl who remained inside the booth, greeting customers one by one with a wide smile and a light laugh.

Fuck.

Since Sky’s returned home, she’s always dolled up in fancy clothes and makeup that you would expect to find in those girly fashion magazines Daisy likes so much.

But not tonight.

Tonight, my girl is wearing a simple cut off the shoulder t-shirt that rises up every time she has to lean out over the counter to hand out change, completely oblivious that she’s showcasing her flat stomach and tantalizing midriff with the innocent exchange. Paired with jean shorts that fully expose her long legs—the same legs that I once used to lose myself in—and I’m a fucking goner.

If this is her way of fucking with me, then she’s won.

Because as of this moment, she has never looked more beautifully unattainable to me.

So fucking close and still lightyears away from where I need her to be—in my bed and in my arms.

“The fireworks display should be starting any minute now. Do you have

to stay here and tend to the booth, or can we all go to the pier together and watch? As a family?" Clara asks, her gaze discreetly searching for her youngest daughter's approval.

But when Sky doesn't so much as look her way, Clara lowers her head to hide her pained expression.

"Sounds like a plan to me. Give us two secs," Derrick says, going back to help Sky with the remaining customers so he can close up shop.

Ten minutes later, the six of us start walking towards the beach, but due to the large crowd that is also heading in the same direction, we split up to walk in pairs. My father and Clara lead us in front, followed by Daisy and Derrick behind them, leaving a disgruntled Sky to walk side by side with me.

Since Sky is determined not to acknowledge my presence, we walk in utter silence, as she pretends to look every which way but at me. Usually that type of stunt would piss me off, but tonight, I'm actually grateful for the reprieve. I'm not sure I could handle striking up a conversation, even one meant only to provoke her, when the back of our hands keep softly brushing against each other, as if they have a mind of their own and desperately need the connection. Every light touch feels like I'm being struck by lightning, making my heart thrum madly in its ribcage, threatening to break every bone in my body just to break free.

I sneak a quick glance over to her, my foolish heart desperate to see if she's having a similar reaction, only to find her cheeks painted pink and her lips parted for breath. I watch her squint with every light graze, as if my touch is as torturous to her as it is to me.

Instinct, more than bravery kicks in, when I find myself inching closer to her side so that my fingers can lightly caress hers at will. They run up the smooth slope of her arm, and then slowly back down again, leaving a thread of goosebumps in their wake. Eyes hooded, she lets me swirl the pad of my thumb on the inside of her wrist, my own breath hitching at how smooth and perfectly flawless that tiny bit of skin is.

It takes her a few seconds to remember herself.

Remember how she should despise my touch.

Sky's eyes widen in fabricated appalled shock, her gorgeous lips slinging open, ready to curse me out. But all it takes is for me to lace my fingers through hers and give her a little tug until she's almost on top of me to shut her up.

"You don't want to make a scene, now do you, little stalker?" I whisper

in her ear, loving how her entire body shudders up against me.

“Let. Me. Go,” she says, low enough for Daisy and Derrick not to hear.

Not that they could. The rambunctious crowd around us is loud enough to keep our little conversation private. A fact I fully intend to exploit.

“And why would I ever do that?” I smile triumphantly.

“I swear to God, Noah, if you don’t let me go this second, I’ll scream,” she threatens through gritted teeth.

But instead of taking her on her word, I snake my arm around her waist, keeping my hand firmly on her hip.

“Then scream,” I whisper, my eyes locked on hers as my thumb grazes the sliver of skin hidden under her shirt.

Her silver gaze turns liquid fire, and if she could, I’m sure she’d happily drown me with it. I’m tempted to lean in closer, just to test its scalding waters. To feel the burn of her hate pull me under into those gray pools she has for eyes. But all too soon that option is taken from me, when some spectator from today’s race grabs me by the shoulder to congratulate me, successfully releasing Sky from my iron grip.

Sky quickly takes advantage of the mishap and all but runs to her sister, latching on to her arm for protection. Derrick takes a step back to give the two girls a moment, eyeing me suspiciously as he falls in step with my strides.

“Little rusty, are we?” He cocks a knowing brow.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Right, sure you don’t.” He chuckles. “Just remember, don’t do anything to fuck up—”

“Your wedding,” I finish for him with a deep-rooted scowl.

“Exactly. Glad to see we’re still in sync.” He grins, patting me on my back.

“Hmm,” I groan, my gaze never leaving the back of Sky’s head.

Okay, maybe once or twice my eyes do leave her head just so I can watch her mouthwatering ass sashay in her shorts as she strolls down the busy street, but give a guy a break. I’m only human.

“Hey,” Derrick mumbles beside me, pulling my attention off the amazing view. “You know that if you ever want to go solo, you don’t need my permission, right? I mean, I’m more than happy to use my name and wallet to open doors for you, but you won’t need any of that once you win the Grand Prix. If after this summer, you want to do your own thing without me, I’m

good with that. You know that, right?”

“I see my father has gotten into your head.” I chuckle, happy that I’m not the only one suffering tonight.

“Yeah, well, your dad has a point. At least from his perspective, he does. I get where he’s coming from,” he frowns pensively. “He’s just trying to look out for your best interests.”

“Jesus, what has gotten into you lately? Every time I talk to you, I feel like I’m being pulled into a John Hughes movie.”

“That’s your takeaway from the serious conversation I’m trying to have with you?” He jokes half-heartedly. “That I sound like an old eighties movie? And why the fuck John Hughes? Aren’t there any chick flicks from this decade you could have mentioned?”

“Try growing up with two teenage girls obsessed with everything vintage and you’d understand.” I laugh.

“You forget I grew up with a sister too.”

“Yeah, well, Stacy was more into being Regina George from Mean Girls, than Molly Ringwald from Pretty in Pink.”

“And I’m the one with a testosterone deficiency?” He cackles.

“Fuck off.” I fake punch him in the gut. “Speaking of which, you got my money? I’m due to pay your sister a visit tomorrow at her office in Falmouth.”

“Yeah, I got it,” he says with less humor in his tone, pulling a white envelope from his inside pocket and handing it to me.

“Thanks,” I say, before storing the wad of cash safely in my pocket.

“Don’t thank me. This is all you,” he mutters, still not happy with our *original* arrangement.

“Baby, come quick! It’s about to start!” Daisy exclaims, making Derrick fly like the wind and push everyone out of his way to be at her side.

With everyone lined up on the beach and pier just to watch the fireworks, I have to push my way towards my family to grab a space for myself. Luckily for me, I find one right next to Sky.

I feel her body stiffen at my proximity, but she doesn’t make a move to switch with anyone else. Mostly because I think she’d rather not have to explain why just standing next to me is unbearable for her. But just as the first spark of color tries to reach the heavens, her annoyance of standing beside me, takes a back seat to the incredible view above.

“I forgot,” Sky mumbles under her breath as she watches in utter awe as

the night sky bursts into a rainbow of colors and lights.

“What did you say, honey?” Clara asks beside her.

“Nothing,” Sky replies with a curt tone.

Clara all but shrinks, holding onto my father for support, just so she can pretend her daughter’s icy demeanor doesn’t hurt her in any way.

I wish Sky would lighten up on Clara, but I also understand why she’s unable to. Clara’s guilt has driven a wedge between them, and regrettably, it has only festered with time. I’m not sure how they will ever be able to mend fences without the truth being revealed. If maybe Clara could forgive herself for the part she played, then maybe they could find their way back to each other.

But it’s the lie that’s holding her back.

That one lie that ruined everything.

“What? What did you forget?” I whisper next to Sky after everyone is back gawking at the fireworks.

Her expression morphs into one of such sadness, that it physically hurts to look at her.

“How beautiful it is here,” she whispers back. “How happy I once was. Pick one. They’re both true.”

She then turns her head upwards, a single tear trailing down her cheek as the sky continues to shower her with color.

This time, when I lace my fingers with hers, she doesn’t recoil.

Instead, we just stand there, tightly holding each other’s hands, painfully aware that the kids we used to be no longer exist.

Like a spark, we burned as bright as we could, until we couldn’t.

Until reality set in and forced us to come crumbling down, falling... falling...

And in a blink of an eye, we vanished.

Never to crest the night sky again.

* * *

“I saw Skylar in town yesterday. She looks good. Different, yet still the same, if that makes sense,” Stacy says, scanning my face for a reaction.

“Hmm,” I mumble non-committedly as I scribble my name on her ledger before handing the white envelope to her.

“That should be the end of it. We’re square now.”

She nods, defeated, storing the envelope in her desk drawer and locking it.

“You didn’t have to do this, you know? You didn’t have to pay me back. I was happy to help.”

“We had a deal,” I retort. “I’m honoring that deal.”

“You mean the one that destroyed you?” She frowns, running her manicured nail over the name Monroe that’s branded on the leather cover of her ledger.

Since I’ve heard this rant before, I stand up from my seat, ready to leave.

“Noah,” she calls out before I take another step. “Don’t you ever regret what we did?”

“No,” I deadpan. “What I do regret is always having the same conversation with you. It’s done. It’s been done. Why can’t you all just get over it?”

“All?” She arches a curious brow, but I’m quick to stop her in her tracks before she gets carried away.

“Look, Stacy. Can’t we just celebrate the fact that I was able to pay you at all? I mean, I was sure I’d be gutting fish for the rest of my life and still not making a dent in my debt. Can’t I just have this win before you go trudging through shit that should be left in the past?”

“But it’s not the past, Noah. Your past is here. Living back in her old bedroom. In your childhood home. Don’t you think you owe it to yourself to find out if there is anything there worth saving?” she presses, concern marring her features.

“Like I said. It’s the past. No use in crying over it now, especially since I don’t regret any of it.”

“You’re lying. If not to me then to yourself,” she accuses, unhappy with my reply.

“I did what I had to.”

“Did you?” she counters, saddened. “I’ve seen what these past years have done to you. I’ve seen you wither away because of that one choice.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I rebuke, turning my back to leave.

“Yes, I do!” She slams her fists to the table, stopping me from moving an inch. “Because I was right there with you. I regret my part in the damage I’ve done. I regret it, Noah. If I knew it would have changed you this much, I

would never have gone through with your plan.”

“Just stop, Stacy. Just...stop,” I plead, my shoulders slumping.

“Look at me, Noah,” she orders, her voice barely above a whisper.

I turn around because Stacy deserves that of me. She was there when I needed her.

The least I can do is hear her out now.

She lets out an exhale before pushing herself away from behind her desk, to lean in front of it.

“I’ve spent many nights thinking about what we did. Even to this day, sleep doesn’t come easily to me. I stay awake thinking of my baby boy, Joshua, and how heartbroken I’d be if anyone had done something similar to him. I think of my husband, Micheal, and how lost I’d be without his love if I had been placed in the same position you were and had to make the same decision you made. And then I think of you.” She sighs. “My first love. My childhood best friend. I think of you and how you deserved so much more than the life you gave yourself. Because you do, Noah. You are deserving of happiness. You both are. So please... don’t make the same mistake again. Don’t watch the love of your life leave this island without telling her the truth. You will only regret it if you do.”

“You forget. I don’t do regrets.” I shrug.

“No, dear friend. You do. You do regrets better than anyone I know.”

Sensing that she’s done wreaking havoc on my sanity, I start walking towards the door again, only to stop before I reach her office door.

“You were never a meal ticket for me,” I say, throwing my head over my shoulder and catching her wiping the tears from her eyes.

“What?” she asks, confused.

“That night. You told Sky that you were my meal ticket. I never saw you like that, Stacy. Not once.”

A timid smile crests her lips.

“Thank you for saying that.”

“Hmm.” I nod and leave before she has time to say another word.

As I walk out of her office building, I try not to dwell on Stacy’s words of advice.

I’m not sure why all the women in my life have suddenly decided to bust my balls, but between Sky, Clara, and now Stacy, it’s getting a little tiresome. Daisy is the only one not giving me a hard time, but then again, she’s far too busy with her wedding to bother.

That, and the fact she has no clue what I've done.
I could never tell her.

If I did, she would snitch on me to Sky so fast it would make my head spin.

But as I walk onto the ferry that will take me back to Thatcher's Bay, the memory of the night I forfeited my soul for her happiness comes to me in tumultuous waves.

"Dude, just stop moping around my house and go and talk to your girlfriend already," Derrick groans frustratedly, kicking me in the shins to drive his point home. "I can't deal with you being all Debbie Downer and shit when your girl is literally still sleeping right across from your bedroom. It's really starting to get on my nerves."

"Thanks, D. I'm glad I can count on your shoulder to cry on," I mumble, pinching the bridge of my nose, unable to ease the tension there.

"Fuck. Fine." He grumbles, plopping beside me on the couch and stretching his legs on the coffee table. "You want my advice, then here it is. As I see it, you only have one option here," he says calmly. "If the girl you love has a chance to go to the college of her dreams, then pack your shit up and go with her."

I scoff at what he calls advice.

"You forget that I can't just drop everything and leave Thatcher's Bay to move all the way to New Hampshire. Unlike you, I don't have a trust fund to lean on and pay my way. And Dartmouth would laugh in my face if I even tried to apply there, much less try and get a grant."

"All I've been hearing coming out of your mouth these past couple of days is problem after problem. What you should be focusing on is solutions. Not how fucked up your life is," he says while running his fingers through his dark hair, apparently frustrated with my response.

"That's just the thing. My life is fucked up, D. I'm either about to lose the love of my life, or selfishly keep her here, only to have her resent me in the future. So how about you give me less attitude and a little bit more understanding, huh?"

"You have no idea if she'll end up resenting you or not."

"She will," I state with such certainty it makes me sick to my stomach.

"You can't predict the future, man. You're not that clever," he teases, giving me a nudge to lighten my foul mood, but it fails to do the job.

"I don't need to be clairvoyant to know that if Sky stays with me, she'll be

kissing her future goodbye. And she'll eventually hate me for it."

"You don't know that."

"Oh, but I do. She might not think so in the beginning. Not while she's occupied with community college on the mainland. But when she's finished with that, and is living in a shoebox all alone, working at a menial job just to pay the rent while I'm off at sea for god knows how long, she'll start wondering... what if. What if she had taken that grant? What would her life look like as a Dartmouth graduate? What if she had chosen her dream of being an author instead of being with me? And when that happens, those what ifs will start to consume her every thought, until only one certainty remains—that she's made the wrong choice. And it would fucking destroy me watching her fall less in love with me each passing day. In the end, I'm going to lose her either way. And if I have to make a choice, I'd rather lose her now while she still has a chance at becoming someone and being happy, then later down the road when she's so miserable she won't even recognize her own reflection."

"Fuck. That's... pretty... heavy shit," Derrick stammers, stretching his arm to grab the whiskey bottle from my hands to take a swig.

"Welcome to my fucking life. It's never been easy. Why should falling in love be?"

"So what are you going to do?"

"End it." I choke out the words. "Somehow."

"Shit."

"Yeah...shit," I grumble, laying my head back on the headrest of the sofa.

"Hmm, I don't know. If Skylar is anything like Daisy, she won't take you breaking up with her lying down. She'll fight you on it."

"Are you speaking from experience?" I arch an inquisitive brow.

"That's my business," he retorts evenly, with that tone of his that says stay the fuck out of his business.

"Fair enough. Then tell me. How would you go about it then?"

"Like you said, we're not the same. I'd follow Daisy anywhere she went. She wouldn't be able to get rid of me so easily."

"Well, I don't have that option."

"Are you sure?" he presses. "I know you don't have a lot of money, but you could still follow Skylar to Dartmouth if you wanted to. I mean, the girl is willing to go to community college in Falmouth, for crying out loud. Why wouldn't you make the same sacrifice for her? Get a part time job to pay

your way in New Hampshire and be near her.”

“Not going to lie, I did think about it. Just say fuck it to my old man and leave with her. But I can’t do that to him. My father needs me here. He won’t be able to pay my mom’s health bills on his own. We’re scraping by as it is. Besides, with me in New Hampshire, it would only serve to distract Sky from school. No. She needs to be focused if she’s going to live up to her potential.”

“What about your potential?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Bullshit, Noah,” he curses. “That shit might work on everybody else, but not me. You forget that I know you. I know how you yearn to sail the ocean and make a life at sea. Don’t minimize your own dreams just because reality right now doesn’t give you any hope to accomplish them. Things change. Life is always evolving. You can’t give up on it.”

“What kind of life could I have without Sky?! Huh? What kind of life would you have without Daisy if the roles were reversed? Would you be spouting that shit to me then? Would you be focusing on your future if you knew Daisy wouldn’t be a part of it?”

His expression turns lethal, and I know I’ve hit a chord.

“Daisy is my future,” he says, nostrils flaring.

“Then you got lucky. Because Sky can’t be mine.”

He sits silently beside me for a while, ruminating on everything I’ve just told him. I know I’m being a prick to him, but I’m fucking hurting, and need someone to hurt with me. I just need someone to share in my misery and fuck it if I care who that is.

“I can help you,” he finally says, splitting the silence in half.

“Yeah?” I sneer. “How?”

“I can ask my father to dip into my trust fund to help you pay your mother’s debt.”

I shake my head immediately.

“No. I don’t want a handout.”

“Good, because I’m not giving you one, asshole. I know you’re good for it. Besides, it’s not like I’ve never made money off of you before. Or do you forget how much money you’ve made me all these years with the drag racing and fights?”

“Yeah, well, that shit isn’t going to happen anymore once I start working for my old man. I can’t risk getting myself arrested. So I’m not sure how you expect me to pay you back.”

“Don’t you worry your pretty blond head about it. I’ll find a way for you to make some extra cash.”

“Legally?”

“Legally. Just give me some time to think it over. I’ll come up with something. I always do.” He smiles smugly like the cocky asshole he is.

Still, I have my reservations.

“Hmm, I don’t know, D. I don’t think your dad will be happy that you’re touching your trust fund to save my ass. He’s made it very clear that he doesn’t like me much.”

“The fucker doesn’t like anyone from the other side of the island, so don’t take it personally.”

“Kind of hard not to,” I mumble. “But that only proves my point. Why would he let you help me?”

“Daddy wouldn’t. Not unless I ask him to,” Stacy says strutting into the room, revealing that she’s been listening in on her brother’s and my private conversation. “And before you say anything to the contrary, dear big brother, you know I’m right. Daddy loves telling you no, while with me, that word isn’t even in his vocabulary.”

“Stacy, now is not the time for you to flex how you’re a daddy’s girl. We’re kind of busy here.”

“So I’ve heard,” she muses, eyeing her nails. “You want to help Noah with his money problems, and I want to help him with his girlfriend problems.”

My back snaps to attention, not liking the mischievous gleam in her eyes.

“Stacy, I’d be very careful with what you say next. I still haven’t forgiven you for that fucking stunt you did on Sky last year.”

“You didn’t seem so upset when you came to our Christmas party,” she pouts.

“I went because Derrick invited me, and I needed some place to go that wasn’t my house to think shit over. I didn’t go for you,” I explain with a stern tone, so she knows I’m not fucking around.

“Ouch,” she feigns being hurt by placing her hand over her heart, but I can see in her green eyes that what I just said really did hurt her, no matter how hard she’s trying to put on a brave face to hide it.

Derrick must see it too, because his brotherly instincts quickly kick in.

“Maybe you should go back upstairs, Stacy,” he says affectionately.

“Fine, have it your way. I’ll go. But you two numbnuts need me. I can get

Daddy to agree to give Noah the money if I ask for it. And I can also make sure that Skylar goes off to college like you want without putting up a fight. But if you two are too damn stubborn and proud to ask for my help, then I guess my time is wasted here.”

But just as she’s about to storm out of the room, I stop her from taking another step.

“Wait!” I blurt out.

Stacy makes a show of slowly turning around, keeping her hands on her hips.

“How?” I finally ask.

“How what?”

“How can I make Sky leave?”

“Are you sure you really want to know? Because it won’t be pretty.”

“I really want to know.”

The smile that crests her face creates knots in my stomach.

“Easy. All you have to do is break her heart in a way that she’ll never be able to forgive you. There is only one thing a woman won’t tolerate and that’s being made a fool of by the one person she trusts most.”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Derrick mumbles beside me, but I’m too interested in what Stacy has to say to pay him any mind.

“Go on.”

“If we make it so that Sky finds you in bed with me, for instance, she’ll never look your way again.”

“No,” I all but shout. “Fuck that. I’m not touching another woman that isn’t Skylar.”

“Noah,” Derrick reprimands when his sister’s eyes widen to two large saucers at my outburst, but I’m still too angry at her solution to give a shit about her hurt feelings.

I don’t cheat.

Aside from a stolen kiss in Derrick’s bathroom with Sky one year—which I immediately told Stacy about—I’ve never cheated on anyone. Not even throughout all the years Stacy and I were together, did I even think about cheating. And I didn’t even love her.

Like hell, I’d ever do it to the girl I am in love with. Fuck that.

Unsurprisingly, Stacy regains her composure faster than I can.

“I know, okay? I know you would never cheat on Skylar,” she spits out my girlfriend’s name like a curse. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t fool her

into believing you have. All you have to do is follow my lead, and I'll have her thinking the worst. You won't even have to do much. Maybe kiss me, but that would be the extent of it, if that. Do you think you can get off your high horse and manage to do that at least? For her sake?"

I know nothing Stacy is planning is with Skylar's best interest at heart. All she cares about is humiliating Skylar, since in her mind, she was the one who stole me from her.

The thing is, I was never Stacy's to begin with.

And after being with Sky these last few months, I doubt I'll ever be anyone else's ever again.

We stare at each other for the longest time, and after a long tense-filled pause, I nod.

"Yeah, I'm out. I don't want to be here for any of this," Derrick says, getting up from his seat.

"Where are you going?" I ask, confused as to why he needs to bolt out of the room so fast.

"Anywhere but here. This is a bad idea, Noah. A bad fucking idea. You will never be able to come back from this. I hope you know that."

I do.

This wouldn't be breaking Skylar's heart. It would be eviscerating it.

"It's your fucking funeral," Derrick adds when he sees my mind is made up. "The less I know about whatever stunt the two of you are planning, the better. Daisy loves her sister, and no way do I want to be an accomplice to her pain. If you need me to, I'll front you the money for your family's debt, but that is as involved as I want to be. Understood?"

Derrick then walks out of the room, leaving me and Stacy to hash out our plan.

The very one that would end up breaking me in ways I'd never fully recover from.

Chapter Ten

Skylar



The day of Daisy's bridal shower has arrived, and I can feel the tension in the air as we get ready. Daisy has been on edge ever since the invitations went out. The event is being thrown by Derrick's parents, who have made it abundantly clear that they disapprove of Daisy because she doesn't come from a long line of blue-blooded socialites like they do...or at least that's my guess. It's not like I've asked his parents why they don't like my perfect sister.

Daisy, determined to win them over, has been practicing her polite smiles and polite small talk. She's peppered me with questions over the years about the rich friends I'd met at Dartmouth, and asked if I'm sure about her dress choice a million times.

It's unnerving to see her like this—unsure of herself. She's had years of attending fancy soirées with Derrick, and going on vacations with his family. But evidently, nothing she's done has worked to get their approval.

As we sit in her room, surrounded by dresses and makeup, I take her hand and look into her eyes. "Daisy, you know you don't have to try so hard for them, right?" I say softly, my concern evident in my voice. "Their approval isn't going to change Derrick's opinion of you."

Daisy turns to me, her eyes filled with determination. "Skylar, family means everything to me. I want Derrick's parents to accept me as a part of their family, just like I want my family to be a part of our lives."

I couldn't argue with her sentiment. Daisy's unwavering love and dedication to her family had always been one of her most endearing qualities.

But it also had guilt threading through my veins, because I'd completely deserted my family all these years. I'd once thought family meant everything

to me too. And look what I'd done.

"I understand, Daisy," I reply, my voice tinged with regret. "I just don't want to see you change who you are to please them. You're amazing just the way you are."

Daisy smiles warmly and throws her arms around me, squeezing me tight. I love how Daisy hugs me with her whole self. No one else gives hugs like that. "Thanks, babycakes. I won't change who I am, but I'll always try to make a good impression."

I nod still feeling uneasy about the event. I'd be seeing Stacy again too. After our last disastrous conversation, I'm sure it's going to be a pleasant experience.

Not.

What is it about this place that I've come home and immediately felt like I've been thrown back in time?

We finish getting ready, and Daisy looks absolutely stunning. Unlike her wedding dress...this dress *was* flown in from Paris. It's a gorgeous white lace dress that embodies elegance and simplicity. The bodice is fitted, accentuating her slender waist, and the skirt flows gracefully to just above her knees. It perfectly showcases Daisy's natural beauty and radiance.

Her hair is styled in loose, romantic waves that cascade down her back, and she wears a simple pearl necklace and matching stud earrings to compliment the dress's timeless charm. It's much more proper than my sister usually dresses, and for a second, it feels like I'm looking at a stranger.

But maybe *I'm* the stranger in this scenario. Because if I'd been here, I would have seen my sister become this woman who's just as at ease in a ballroom as she is at a beach.

We step out of the room and head towards the front door...right as Noah opens it up. He stops in place and stares at me. I'm in a simple blue dress but the way he's looking at me...

You would think I was someone special...someone awe inspiring.

"Excuse me, sir. But I'm here too," sasses Daisy, and the effort it seems to take for Noah to drag his gaze from me to Daisy...a girl might think you were in love with a look like that.

Noah grins at Daisy, brushing his long hair out of his face. I pretend to ignore the way his muscles bulge as he moves his arm.

Why does he have to be so fucking hot? Seven years could have made him ugly.

Instead, he's turned into a god.

If you gathered up all my ideal dream physical traits in a guy and rolled them all up...Noah would be the result.

"Beautiful as always, Daisy," Noah drawls...but then his gaze comes back to me. He takes his time, his stare licking across my skin, leaving a trail of heat so intense, I feel like I'm burning alive.

He doesn't say anything about the way I look.

But then again...he doesn't need to. Because it's written in the hunger of his gaze. Like he might die if he doesn't fuck me against the wall right fucking now.

He passes by us, his fingers trailing against mine briefly before he disappears out of the room.

Daisy stares at me and fans her face, mouthing "oh my gosh" dramatically.

I think about socking her in the arm, but because I'm a mature adult now...I manage to hold myself back.

"Want to tell me what that was about?" Daisy asks, as we get into the car that Derrick sent over to take us to the shower.

I roll my eyes at her and shrug.

"You've got that look again," she sighs.

"What look?" I ask innocently.

"The one that tells me you want to fuck Noah Fontaine..."

"Daisy!" I whisper yell in horror, staring up at the driver who is staring steadfastly in front of him, pretending to ignore us.

"What? I know a good "fuck me, please" look when I see one. Next thing you know, you're in handcuffs and he's calling you good girl."

I groan and flop back against the seat. "Think it. Don't speak it, woman."

She leans back too and grabs my hand. "I'll support you in whatever you want to do," she murmurs more seriously.

I bite down on my lip and glance away from her, staring at the ocean as the car curves around the coast. "That's never going to happen," I tell her emphatically. But every word of that sentence feels like a lie. And judging by the way I can feel Daisy's eyes boring into my skin...she knows it.

I'm saved by the appearance of Derrick's parent's house appearing in front of us.

The mansion sits majestically atop a hill, overlooking the breathtaking expanse of the coast, reminiscent of the glamor of a Kennedy compound. The

sprawling estate exudes opulence and refinement, its pristine white walls contrasting beautifully with the deep blue of the ocean beyond. As we approach the entrance, I can't help but be awed by the sheer grandeur of the place.

Of course, I'd seen the place in high school, but after all these years, I'd forgotten just how gorgeous it was.

The driveway leading up to the mansion is lined with meticulously manicured gardens bursting with vibrant blooms, adding a splash of color to the otherwise pristine landscape. Towering palm trees sway gently in the coastal breeze, their fronds rustling like a soothing lullaby.

The mansion itself is a masterpiece of architectural elegance. Its white facade is adorned with regal columns, evoking a sense of timeless charm. The windows, framed in intricate gold trim, catch the sunlight and cast a warm, inviting glow.

"You're going to be fucking rich," I murmur in awe, it hitting me for the first time just what kind of family Daisy is marrying into.

"They're rich. Not me. That's not going to change." I shoot her a look because Derrick's place that she's moved into is nothing if not ridiculously fancy as well, and she wrinkles her nose at me.

We pull up in front of the house and the driver hops out and opens our door.

The front entrance is adorned with a grand staircase, leading to double doors that open into a spacious foyer. Crystal chandeliers hang from the high ceilings, their brilliant facets scattering light throughout the space. Marble floors gleam beneath our feet, and the walls are adorned with classic artwork and family portraits that tell the story of generations past.

I waggle my eyebrows at Daisy, mouthing "rich" to her, and she makes a slicing motion across her throat. I snort, taking in the old-world charm. The decor is a perfect blend of classic elegance and coastal comfort, with plush furnishings in shades of ivory and gold. The living areas are spacious, yet cozy, inviting guests to relax and enjoy the breathtaking views of the ocean beyond.

From the mansion's vantage point, we can see the expansive grounds that stretch out before us. A meticulously landscaped garden extends to the cliff's edge, where a picturesque view of the rugged coastline unfolds. The sound of crashing waves below provides a soothing backdrop to the grandeur of the estate.

As we enter this world of privilege and tradition, I can't help but feel a pang of nostalgia for the simplicity of our own upbringing. Our home felt like a home. This place feels like...a museum.

It's hard to picture my sister walking these halls. Not because she isn't a goddess, but because I'd be scared to touch anything if I lived here.

The theme of the event is white and gold, evident in the decorations that adorn the living area that looks out to the coast. A white and gold archway marks the entrance, and crystal chandeliers hang from the ceilings, casting a soft, golden glow over the rooms. The tables are covered in white silk cloths, and golden chairs surround them. Even the place settings are meticulously arranged, with gold-rimmed plates and fine china.

I gaze around the room, my eyebrows high. "This is nice..."

I'm suddenly glad that Derrick's parents are hosting the shower. Daisy deserves a perfect day like this. I would have done my best. But I do not have the party skills that these people do, that is for sure.

"Daisy," a cool voice calls from behind us. We turn and see Derrick's mother, Nadine, coming down another staircase. Coming down might not be the right word. She appears to be floating...in that rich person way that they must teach you as a child since they're so good at it.

"Hello," Daisy says, her voice smoothing into a more genteel version of how she normally speaks as Nadine air kisses her cheeks. I smirk at Daisy over Nadine's shoulder and she glares at me, warning me not to say anything.

"Oh! This must be your sister Skylar. It's so good to finally meet you. Gael's parents have told me a lot about you over the years, so I feel as if I already know you," Nadine says, turning to me.

She scans my features and I hold my head up high, like I learned back in college when mingling with my friends' rich parents—and especially with Gael's parents. They were always looking me over, judging whether I was good enough to be in their children's lives. If she knows or remembers anything that happened between her daughter and I, she gives no sign.

"Everything is gorgeous," I tell her.

She smiles. "Yes, the party planner did a great job, didn't she," she murmurs, and it's not a question because she knows it's all great—she's not the type that would have settled for less. "I'm just going to go check on the catering, but sit back and relax, guests should be arriving at any time now." She whisks away in a cloud of perfume, and we don't speak until she's out of sight.

“Does Derrick have a brother?” I joke, and it takes me a second to realize what I’ve just said. I hold in my inner flinch when I remember that the closest person to a brother Derrick has...would be Noah.

Daisy smirks as if she can read my mind. But before she can tease me about it, a bell echoes through the rooms, presumably meaning the first guests have arrived.

Nadine appears a few minutes later, and then guests start to be led in by house employees. Daisy is greeted with warm smiles and congratulatory hugs. Some of the guests I know, but a lot must be from Nadine’s circle, because I’ve never seen them before. They ooh and ahh over Daisy, and I pretend I’m not uncomfortable by stuffing my mouth with the delicious food that’s being served.

Later, I watch Daisy and my mom interact with Stacy. I wish it wasn’t so weird to have to see how close they seem. That it didn’t feel like betrayal.

But hate is a hard emotion to forget.

Almost as hard as love.

The wounds from Stacy’s betrayal have never healed. And I don’t think they will.

Going to make for a really awkward life having to see Stacy at any significant events in my sister’s life.

I watch Stacy bounce her child on her hip. She had seemed so contrite the other day, but I can’t help but wonder if it’s all an act. Can someone truly change, especially after causing so much pain?

There’s no sign that Daisy’s nervous during the shower. She focuses on the guests, profusely complimenting Nadine’s party skills. I don’t see any hint today that Nadine doesn’t accept her. She hovers by her side, proudly announcing her as her future daughter in law.

My mother sitting next to me interrupts my people-watching.

“This is nice,” she says, awkwardly.

I give her a false grin and nod, studying her face. She’s aged over the past seven years, as we all have. But you can tell it’s been the good kind of aging. The lines around her eyes and her mouth are the result of smiling, which wouldn’t have been the case before she met Curt.

“I’m—I’m glad you’re here,” she murmurs, biting into a macaron that I would bet came from a bakery in Paris.

I can tell she means it, but she won’t make eye contact with me, and the stiff way she’s holding herself...it’s just hard to bear.

This isn't the time or place, but I can't help but say something. "Are you ever going to forgive me?" I whisper, pretending to take a sip of my drink.

My mother flinches, and she actually looks at me.

"What do you mean? Forgive you for what?"

I hold in my eye roll. "Forgive me for leaving. All these years...we haven't been the same. And I'm just wondering when you're going to forgive me. Recognize everything I've done over the last few years."

Her eyes are sad, her lips pursed as she takes me in. "There was nothing to forgive, Skylar. I've missed you. I've wished you would come home, but that's all it is."

I keep my face blank. But I'm frustrated, because I know that's not true. Daisy clinks her spoon on her glass to make a toast though, and I remember to not make a scene.

I focus on Daisy, but I can feel my mother's gaze on my face for the rest of the party. I stay until the end, but I catch a ride back with a neighbor instead of riding back with Daisy or my mother.

And as I lay in bed that night, I wonder if there's *anything* from my past that I can fix...or move on from.

Chapter Eleven

Skylar



*“B*aby,” Noah whispers with hushed awe as his fingers trace my skin. He pulls my hair tie loose and my hair spins down my back in messy waves. “That’s better,” he purrs as his fingers massage my head.

He brushes a kiss against my lips. “I’ve been desperate for this.” I breathe him in and his scent washes over me.

I need more.

Noah brushes his lips against mine again and I gasp, because I’m feeling so much.

Noah eases my mouth open, parting my lips with his tongue. The taste of him, like his scent, is everything. It’s like no time has passed at all. I’m right back to wanting him desperately...more than I’ve ever wanted anything before. His tongue slides over mine, feeding a sweet surge of lust into my entire body like a heady flood. I open to him willingly, needing more.

“Fuck, Skylar,” he groans. “You taste so fucking good. I thought I’d imagined this. This perfection...”

I feel utterly powerless, as if there's an invisible force binding me to Noah. It's as though the universe itself conspired to bring us together...like our love story is written in the stars...and I can't resist its pull. We were made for each other, like two cosmic souls fated to collide.

Every moment apart from him feels like an eternity of emptiness, a void that only his presence can fill. I can't fight this yearning in my soul, this magnetic force that keeps drawing me back to him.

Noah and I are meant to be, our love an unstoppable force of nature.

His kiss turns wilder, more demanding and aggressive than I know what to do with. Noah’s iron-strong hands pull me against the dizzying hardness of

his body. My urges uncoil, opening to him. I reach up to weave my fingers through his thick hair. It's the only soft thing about him. He makes a low, tortured sound, lifting me and carrying me over to the bed.

"Noah," I whisper. I don't know if I'm trying to slow this down or if I'm pleading for more.

"Let me have you. Please," he begs.

He lowers us onto the bed, placing me on his lap so I have to straddle him. One of his hands sinks into the hair at the nape of my neck, gripping tightly. He gazes into my eyes, challenging me.

"Tell me you're mine," he growls, and I whimper, feeling the hardness of him between my legs.

He kisses me and I don't have it in me to do anything but fall.

I don't know how I ended up here.

But I'm so in love with him.

My legs are spread and my wet, softening pussy is pressed up against the gigantic ridge inside his jeans. The only barrier between us is my very wet thong.

Noah pulls me forward, his hands pushing up my dress and sliding along my bare ass. He squeezes my cheeks, thrusting me harder against his bulge. I moan into his mouth as I move against him.

I cry out as we move together, dry humping like we're teenagers all over again. Noah licks at my mouth, kneading my ass as he pulls me into him in a steady, deliberate rhythm.

"Fuck. Look at you. You're a fucking dream."

His fingers slide beneath my thong, lazily gliding through my folds until he reaches my clit. His thumb presses down expertly as his other fingers dip into my core and...

I wake up to my hand between my legs, my skin on fire, my core pulsing.

I can't help but find my clit, pressing on it just how I'd dreamed Noah had. I should think about anyone but him, but my body has other ideas. One hand plays with my breasts while the other plays with my clit, slipping through my folds...

I orgasm faster than I have in years.

And when I'm done...my body is still achy...feverish...desperate.

My head might not want Noah Fontaine.

But there's no doubt that my body does.

Fuck.

* * *

After taking a cold, cold shower that does little to ease my suffering, I walk to get something to eat. But I freeze at the threshold of the kitchen, my heart racing in my chest.

Noah is there, shirtless, leaning against the counter and fiddling with his phone. Panic surges through me, and I turn, desperate to retreat and slip away unnoticed. But before I can make my escape, his teasing voice cuts through the silence.

"Hey there, little stalker," he drawls from behind me. "You wouldn't be running from me, would you? You know I love a good chase."

I'm caught like a deer in the headlights. Turning back seems inevitable now, and with an exasperated sigh, I slowly pivot on my heel and walk back into the kitchen. The room suddenly feels too small, too suffocating, with Noah's shirtless allure.

His grin is sly, like he knows exactly what happened in my bedroom this morning and he's here to torture me over it. He's still leaning against the counter, his playful smirk making my heart race even faster. It's hard not to notice the way his toned muscles glisten in the soft kitchen light, and I mentally kick myself for getting caught staring.

"What are you doing here, Noah?" I finally manage to ask, trying to sound composed despite my racing pulse. "Don't you have work?"

He chuckles, pushing himself off the counter and sauntering over to me with a playful glint in his eyes. "It's storming outside," he says, his tone dripping with mischief. "What have you been doing that you haven't noticed?"

I try to keep cool, but it's a losing battle as my cheeks flush with embarrassment. "I just got up," I tell him loftily, moving to go around him to grab some almond milk from the fridge.

But he steps in front of me.

"You know, it's an interesting thing, Sky," he says, his voice low and teasing as his gaze trails down my body. I'm just wearing a tiny pair of shorts and a tank top since I thought everyone would be at work, and I'm well aware that my nipples could cut diamonds through my shirt.

Noah's well aware of it as well, judging by the way he's staring at my chest.

He grins, his gaze lingering on me as if he's enjoying my discomfort a

little too much.

“What’s interesting?”

“I walked down the hall to see if you wanted some coffee and there were moans coming from your bedroom.”

I pale and he steps forward, so close that my breasts are pressed against his bare chest. There’s a dull roar in my ears, and I think I might die of embarrassment.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I tell him, but my voice is rough and thick...with desire.

Every pass of my breath rubs my sensitive tips against his chest, and I need another change of underwear because my panties are soaked once again.

“Oh, I think you do. Now, I know you didn’t have a man in there with you. So tell me...what kind of vibrator are you using nowadays?”

“I wasn’t using a vibrator,” I quickly object, and his eyes flash. It takes me a second to realize what I’d said. I had denied using a vibrator...but I hadn’t denied getting myself off.

He leans close, his lips brushing against the edge of my ear. “Hmm, I wonder who you were thinking of that could get you off with just your fingers?”

I shivered and he chuckles lowly. His fingers trail across the skin showing between my tank and my bottoms.

“No one,” I whisper.

“Should I call you “little liar” now?”

I can’t concentrate, because it seems like his fingers have some kind of magical power and every pass over my back has my clit throbbing.

“Noah,” I whisper, and I’m trying to warn him away, but it just comes out breathy and embarrassing.

“Noah. That happens to be what I heard you moaning in your room.” His tongue brushes against my chin and a soft whimper slips from my lips.

“Missed you moaning my name, baby,” he purrs.

I yank myself away, walking backwards until I hit the back wall of the kitchen, my breath coming out in gasps.

He crosses his arms over his chest and my gaze gets caught in the way it makes his biceps bulge.

“You know you don’t have to rely on dreams, Sky.” He reaches over to the counter and grabs his mug of coffee. “You can have the real version whenever you want.”

My cheeks heat as memories of my dream flood my thoughts.

“Tell me you’re mine,” he growls, and I whimper, feeling the hardness of him between my legs.

He kisses me, and I don’t have it in me to do anything but fall.

I don’t know how I ended up here.

But I’m so in love with him.

“I’ll pass,” I spit out. “STDs aren’t on my to-do list for my visit to Thatcher’s Bay.”

His mouth tightens and his gaze goes dark and stormy, mirroring the storm raging outside.

“I think, of the two of us, I’m the one you have to worry less about that,” he snaps, stalking away before I can say anything else.

What had he meant by that?

And why do I care?

I suddenly have absolutely no appetite, and I flee back to my room, ready to hide away until my mom gets home from work.

It’s a secret I’ll take to the grave that I get myself off one more time...to Noah’s face once again.

Chapter Twelve

Noah



As I step onto the porch of my childhood home, my lips hike up at the corners when I hear Daisy shouting some incoherent thing in utter glee, her contagious jubilant excitement piquing my interest. What could have possibly happened for her to be so giddy this early in the day?

When I enter the small kitchen, I find Daisy jumping up and down, a red-faced Skylar hiding her embarrassment behind a coffee mug.

“Do I even want to know what all this is about?” I tease, going to the cupboard to grab my own mug.

“My baby sister is a New York Times Best Seller!” Daisy shrieks enthusiastically, pushing her phone right in my face. “Look! See? That’s her right there! That’s Skylar!”

Excited to see this for myself, I swiftly put down my mug on the kitchen counter so I can give Daisy’s phone screen the attention it so richly deserves. But my pride in Skylar’s accomplishment dies an excruciating death when I see that it isn’t her name on the prestigious listing, but some soap opera actress’.

“No, Julia Crawford is a New York Times Best Selling author, not your sister.” I point to the screen before handing the damn thing back to Daisy. “Isn’t that right?”

Skylar’s crimson cheeks turn even redder, only this time it’s not from shy embarrassment but from unadulterated rage.

“Don’t be a dick, Noah,” Daisy quickly defends. “Skylar was the one who wrote the book, word for word. I doubt Julia Crawford even knows how to string a sentence together, much less be credited with being a bestselling author.” She scoffs, rolling her eyes.

“Doesn’t matter. It’s her name on the listing. Not Skylar’s. As far as the world is concerned, your sister didn’t write jack shit. Tell me I’m wrong?” I demand, piercing Sky with my penetrating gaze, feeling her anger starting to match the one starting to bubble inside me.

“Geez, Noah. Stop raining on Sky’s parade. This is a huge deal. Ease up, will you?” Daisy rebukes with a warning tone, telling me she’s seconds away from wringing my neck if I so much as say another word.

“Fine,” I grumble in defeat. “Have at it then. Celebrate someone else’s accomplishments for all I care. Be my fucking guest. I need to take a piss anyway.”

Without a further word, I turn my back on the two stunned sisters and storm upstairs, knowing I need a safe space to cool down before I do or say something I’ll eventually regret. With my temper skyrocketing as it is, it’s a fucking miracle I have the frame of mind to keep my distance. If I hadn’t and stayed a second longer in that damn kitchen, I’d just end up running my mouth and escalating things to the point of no return.

But to my dismay, Sky isn’t as eager as I am to let shit go.

My fury increases as the familiar scent of cherry blossoms follows me up the stairs to the second floor, announcing that Sky is right at my heel. And when she pulls me by the arm, forcing me to turn around to face her head on, I reluctantly oblige.

“What the fuck is your problem?” she whisper-yells, keeping her voice just low enough for Daisy not to hear us fighting.

“Isn’t it obvious?” I sneer. “You’re my problem, Sky. You’re always my fucking problem!”

“God, you’re an asshole!”

“Trust me, sweetheart. You’re no prize either.”

Her silver gaze flashes with burning rage, and to my chagrin, it only amps up my own fury.

“You really are still the same arrogant asshole you’ve always been, huh?”

“And you’re still that scared little girl who likes to hide in the shadows, instead of owning up to who she really fucking is!” I bite back.

“Keep your fucking voice down,” she snaps, her attention split between arguing with me and worrying that her sister might hear us and come upstairs to stop us mid feud.

“Fuck this,” I curse, grabbing Sky by the elbow and pulling her into her bedroom.

“Let me go!” she seethes, slapping my hand off her.

“Gladly!” I yell, releasing my grip from her to slam the door behind us.

“God, you’re a piece of work,” she pants furiously.

“Ditto, baby,” I retort, turning my back at her outrage and hurrying over to her closet.

Before she even knows what I’m up to, I reach up to the high shelf in her closet and pull down every notebook I can grab—every last single story that Sky’s imagination was able to materialize into beautiful prose during the years she lived under this roof.

“And just exactly what do you think you’re doing with those?!” she accuses, wide eyed in shock when I spread the notebooks on her bed. “Those are not yours to manhandle!”

“You’re right. They’re yours!” I throw my arms in the air from pure frustration alone. “Every last word written in those pages came from you. It came from your incredible mind. It didn’t have to be dictated by some B-list actress!” I yell. “But it’s clear as day that you need me to refresh your memory, since it’s fucking apparent you forgot every dream you ever had. Forgot how fucking talented you are. Too fucking talented to be writing anything that doesn’t come straight from your heart.”

“Noah—” she starts to stutter, my strangled name a plea on her lips, but I’m too far gone to turn back now.

Her whole body trembles with pent-up rage and shame as I start sorting through her books, making sure to pick the ones that mean the most to her.

“Let’s take this story right here, shall we? The one about Pirate Barbosa and his prim and proper captive, Lady Jane. On the surface, it sounds like every other pirate book ever written, but when you delve into its pages, you see it’s so much more than that. It’s about freedom and redemption. You were able to give Barbosa something to aspire to that didn’t include lining his pockets with stolen gold—the love of a good woman will do that to a man. Then, if that wasn’t enough, you gave a gilded-cage aristocrat like Lady Jane something she never dreamed possible—the freedom to use her own voice in a world where a woman was forbidden to have one.”

I go into a tangent, pulling book after book from her bed, and doing a fucking synopsis of all her stories, before I throw them back onto the forsaken pile.

“You...you...read my notebooks...,” she stammers, her eyes starting to water. “You...you...you had no right.”

I shake off the tinge of guilt that accosts me with how vulnerable and raw she looks right now. Like a piece of fragile glass ready to shatter if I so much as touch it. In her mind, I've crossed some invisible line reading her notebooks without permission, completely unaware that her words were the only things that kept me going all these years. They were the precious gifts she left behind that kept me from losing myself entirely.

They gave me solace when her absence only ever gave me despair.

"Why shouldn't I have?" I rebuke callously. "You didn't take them with you. You discarded them like day-old trash."

"That isn't fair. I didn't have time to—"

"Oh, that's right. I forgot. You didn't have time to pack up your most prized possessions because you were too busy running away from your problems like some coward. The same coward who is now hiding behind other people's names instead of being brave enough to use her own. You're right. I'm the asshole here. A fucking idiot for thinking you'd ever change."

"That's not fair! *You're* why I left! *You're* the reason why I had to leave everything I loved behind! Don't turn my actions against me when you were the one who provoked them in the first place," she reprimands with such loathing that I feel the full brunt of her hate in that one arctic stare.

"Is that what you tell yourself?" I scoff sardonically. "That I'm the reason why you chicken out? Spare me, Sky. You alone made your choices. I had nothing to do with them. You were given a chance. A chance to be something great. And you fucking took the coward's way out. Sacrifices were made for you to be goddamn extraordinary, like you were always meant to be, and you just pissed all over them."

"What sacrifices?!" she yells at the top of her lungs, no longer caring if we're heard or not. "I'm the only one who sacrificed EVERYTHING! I left my family because of you! I left a sister who I adore more than anyone in this whole world because of you. I destroyed my relationship with my mother because of how I left. Because of you, she can't even look me in the eye anymore. To have suffered all of that, only to have to come back home to face you... don't talk to me about sacrifice, Noah. You have no idea what that word even means."

"You think I don't know sacrifice?" I shout, blood pumping furiously in my veins.

"I don't think. I know," she snarls with balled fists at her sides.

Nostrils flaring, I charge at her, making Sky quickly backpedal away

from me until her back is flush against the wall.

I grab her throat and pin my chest against hers.

“You have no idea what I sacrificed. You have no clue.” I breathe out heavily, my eyes scanning every inch of her perfect face. “You could have brought the world to its knees, but instead, you waste your talent with this superficial drivel. Why? Just tell me why?”

She scowls at me, turning her head to the side, but like hell I’ll let her evade the question. I grip her chin and force her to look me in the eye, her gaze throwing silver bullets in my direction.

“Was it all because of the money? Is that why you did it?” I ask, needing to make sense of it all. “Because that isn’t you. It never was.”

“You don’t know me,” she spits out, her chest heaving up and down, panting for breath. “You don’t know the first thing about me.”

“But that’s just it. I do know you, little stalker. I might be the only one who truly does. And that fucking kills you.”

Eyes locked, we both gasp for air, the electric tension in the room stealing all the oxygen out of it.

“Tell me I’m wrong,” I whisper, gently strumming the back of my knuckles on her cheek.

“Fuck you.”

“You first.”

And before I can stop myself, my lips brutally crash with hers.

Sky lets out a wanton moan as my tongue dives into the deep crevices of her mouth, desperate to swallow up all the hate she has reserved just for me. She wraps her arms around my neck, tugging at my hair as I reacquaint myself with her ardent kiss. In our crazed, frenzied state, our mouths devour each other’s, needing to suck out the venom from our lips, until all that is left is the agonizing truth neither one of us wants to voice.

Fuck.

Her lips are still the sweetest thing I’ve ever tasted.

I deepen the kiss as I pull her leg up to nestle around my waist, needing to press my hardened cock into the heat in between her thighs. Her pliant body eagerly follows my every command, molding beautifully against mine. Fantasies about fucking her right here against her bedroom wall torment me, tempting me to give in to my desire, and fuck the consequences. My hand gently tightens around the softness of her throat, needing her to stay still just to keep me tethered. If she so much as touches me in any way, I won’t be

responsible for my actions.

I want to taste every inch of her body, mark it with my teeth and cum. But if my lips leave hers, even for a little bit, I risk us both coming to our senses and stopping whatever this is before it's even begun.

So I just kiss her.

Kiss her like I've dreamt of doing for the past seven years.

And with each kiss, I divulge all my silent secrets.

How I fucking missed her.

How her name is branded on my heart.

How my world doesn't make sense without her.

But Sky is too lost in her lust-filled desire to hear the subliminal message my heart is so desperate to divulge.

I have to stop.

I have to.

Because if I don't stop this now, then when she leaves at the end of the summer, I'll be right back to that cold unforgiving place—where darkness rules and bitter loneliness prevails. I'll drift away, completely lost at sea again, because when she leaves... she'll take with her the only light that ever showed me the way home.

Because no matter what she was led to believe, Sky is home to me.

She always will be.

Begrudgingly, I break away from her and take two wide steps back, not trusting myself with the temptation still laced in her hooded gaze. We just stand there staring at each other, our heavy breathing a testament to what we let transpire. Hating the stilled silence between us, I open my mouth to say something, only for Sky to beat me to the punch.

"You should go."

I swallow dryly and give her a clipped nod.

"Right, because why stay and fight when it's so much easier to walk away?"

The words feel like poison rolling off my tongue as I march out of her bedroom, fully aware of how unfair I'm being to her right now.

Sky didn't run away—she was pushed.

I fucking pushed her.

So why am I so surprised Sky has chosen to play it safe in all areas of her life, when I'm the reason behind such decisions.

I sacrificed my happiness, thinking it would give her the world.

But in the end, all it gave us was a world filled with regrets and withered potential.

Chapter Thirteen

Skylar



I twist and I turn in bed, unable to silence his words. Viciously, they claw and scratch around the edges of my brain, leaving ugly scars, demanding they be heard, until I have no choice but to confront them head on.

Although I hated every word that came out of Noah's mouth earlier today, I can't deny there was some truth in them.

I have been hiding.

But contrary to his belief, it hadn't been purposely done at first.

I had planned on writing my own stories when I first graduated, but for that to happen, I knew I needed a job that would enable me to pay my bills and still leave me enough time to write. Getting accepted at Rosewood Publishing as a ghost writer seemed to fit that need perfectly.

It was just dumb luck that my first assignment was an autobiography of a famous chef, who wanted to up his celebrity status by giving the world a tell-all book about what really happens in a Michelin star restaurant. When the book came out, it was such a success that Hollywood came knocking to turn the book into a T.V. series, one that eventually would win Emmy after Emmy.

After that, the ghostwriting autobiography jobs just kept on rolling my way, and I was all too eager to accept them, completely putting my own dreams of writing fiction to the side. It had been so easy for me to get pulled in and distracted from my original objective. And though Noah accused me of being a cowardly sell out, my decision to continue on the path I was on hadn't been entirely about the money.

Although I must admit, the five to six-figure paycheck at the end of each project didn't hurt either. The more prestigious the celebrity was, the more I

was paid for my discretion.

Still, that's not why I kept at it.

Even from an early age, I had been fascinated with people's interactions and lives. How they thought, acted, and felt. While before I had to eavesdrop to get my fix, my clients now shared their personal stories with me willingly. Through them, I got to experience all sorts of things. How it felt to climb a mountain in the worst weather conditions, or the adrenaline pulsing in a singer's veins when she stepped on stage to be greeted by thousands of her loving loyal fans. It was all so captivating and exciting for me to hear these stories first-hand that somehow it felt like I had been a part of it. A part of their journey.

Though I would never have the recognition of writing such tales since I was legally bound to never take credit for one word that was written, it didn't matter to me. In the end, I didn't feel like I should be credited for any of it anyway, since all I did was narrate the lives of people who couldn't do it for themselves. I was happy just to be a part of their experience and felt humbled they turned to me to help them share those intimate memoirs with the world.

But in the back of my mind, there was always something missing.

A nagging sensation that would tug and pull every so often.

That, while I was busy writing everyone else's stories, I wasn't living mine.

Noah had been right on another account too.

It was comforting hiding behind someone else's name.

There was no pressure or high stakes for me if the book didn't do well.

But his callous accusations made something else even more transparent to me.

That while my clients opened up their hearts and showed me true vulnerability, I didn't have to reciprocate in any way, shape, or form. I could still keep my walls raised up high while they poured their hearts and souls out to me, sharing their best and worst moments, hoping I'd see the humanity in them and have the grace to write down their successes, as well as pain, in a dignified manner.

Yes.

It had been all too easy for me to write such books, since I didn't have my own skin in the game.

Because in the end, that is what writing is all about.

Showing the world what your insides look like and praying they don't

judge you for it. You share your traumas, hopes and dreams, bleed them onto paper and then hand them off to complete strangers, hoping they will see the beauty in your words. I don't think there is another job in this world that forces a person to be that vulnerable. To be that raw and honest. Especially with yourself.

So is it any wonder that I have hidden behind my anonymity?

That I have taken the easy way out instead of being brave and putting myself out there?

Instead of writing my truth?

Of course, it had to be Noah Fontaine to cast a spotlight on my insecurities and bring them into the light. Though the irony isn't lost on me how the person who broke my trust and confidence in the first place is also the one who is disappointed in my cop out. That he feels he's entitled to an opinion on how I conduct my life and make any sort of demands is beyond me.

But that's exactly what he did.

Make the demand that I live up to the potential he sees in me. That I once saw in myself.

God, how I hate him!

But just as I think this thought, my lips burn at the memory of his mouth on mine. How they molded perfectly to me. How his body pressed up against mine, ignited something inside me that no one else has ever managed to coax out. How every touch, every bated breath, every whispered taunt, sets me aflame with desire, kindling a fire in me that I was sure had burned out years ago.

With just one kiss, he managed to tilt my world on its axis, and make me second guess every decision I've ever made.

Argh!

Unable to sleep, I turn on the light on my bedside table and get up from my bed. I then begin to manically pace my bedroom, left to right, like the unhinged woman he's turned me into. With just a few words and a fucking kiss, he's awakened things in me that should have stayed dormant. Feelings that have no business resurfacing.

It's his fault I'm like this.

He was the one who broke me.

How dare he demand anything of me?!

And suddenly the itch to write down how much this man has scarred me,

how much his cruel ways have damaged the course of my life, becomes too unbearable to withstand.

My gaze flashes to the closed laptop on my desk and then to my closet, the latter beckoning me towards it, forcibly pulling me in its direction.

Fuck him.

He wants my words?

My truth?

Then so be it.

I'm very aware that logic and reason have officially left the building when I rush to open my closet doors, dropping to my hands and knees to find a piece of my past that I had no intention of ever touching again. Safely stored behind shoe boxes and textbooks, I pull out a box that contains the laptop Noah gifted me before he turned my whole world upside down.

Before he broke my heart.

Holding the box close to my chest, I jump onto my bed, hurriedly pulling the laptop and cord out and plugging it in. When the laptop miraculously comes to life, I don't hesitate, I just react, bringing forth the story that has been trapped inside me all this time.

The very one my step brother so tragically inspired.

And so I write.

I once knew a boy whose stormy eyes stole my very breath away just by looking directly into mine. Either in fear or morbid fascination, he always managed to captivate me. Too young and dumb to know any better, his stare was enough to leave me an emotional wreck. I was either intoxicatingly enamored by his tumultuous sea of blue or overwhelmed by the notion that diving into such deep waters would be my ultimate ruin, drowning me once and for all.

From the tender age of fifteen, his eyes promised me so much.

Promised me pain, suffering, and almighty misery.

And for years, he made good on all his promises.

He became the bane of my very existence. The boy that sought me out, only to torment me, purposely casting a shadow on every joyous moment I had in my pathetic life.

I'm not going to lie to you, my life was definitely an endless ocean of dullness.

Especially considering the only rush that excited me—the only thing that made me feel alive—was taking him on and provoking his wrath at every

turn. I never shied away from his bullying. I didn't curl up into the fetal position and take his abuse. Oh no, I always fought back. I made it a point of showing him he could never break me, no matter how ingenious his attempts were. My world could have been falling on top of me and I still would've mustered the strength to give him the same hell he showered me with.

And what glorious battles we had.

I thrived and yearned for them.

But not once did I think I'd lose the war.

It never occurred to me what his true end goal was—that somehow, against all odds, he'd be capable of stealing something as precious as my heart.

Like a fool, I gift wrapped it for him, naively believing that somehow it would be safe in his malicious hands.

He played the long game, I'll give him that.

So much so, that right up until the very end, I never saw it coming—how deviously cruel his black heart really was or how calculating he'd been from the start to make me fall the way I did.

He played his part beautifully, and like a sucker, I fell for it.

Kudos to him.

He really did a number on me.

Because of the boy I once hated, I'd never be the same girl again.

Chapter Fourteen

Skylar



I sit at the small desk in my old room, the laptop screen casting a faint blue glow on my face. My fingers dance across the keyboard, putting the finishing touches on a chapter. The words have been pouring out of me since that fight with Noah, the characters coming to life like never before, no sign of my writer's block anywhere.

Maybe it's because the characters are us. A story that I've been replaying in my head all these fucking years.

The intrusion of the door slamming open yanks me back to reality, and I can't help the sigh that escapes my lips. It's Daisy, of course, bursting into the room with that energy that's her trademark. She's practically vibrating with excitement, and I wish I could muster up any of it.

"Skylar, why aren't you ready?" she practically squeals, her eyes wide and filled with anticipation.

I look up from my laptop, the reluctance evident in my expression even though I'm trying to hide it. "Sorry, I just got caught up with work."

I haven't told her, or anyone for that matter, that I'm writing a book for myself yet. Mostly because I'm not sure it will ever see the light of day since it's so fucking personal.

She pouts and strides into my closet, rifling through my clothes.

"This is perfect!" she says as she comes out holding a long, strapless sundress.

"Awesome," I say in the fakest voice imaginable.

And Daisy knows it's fake.

"It's just a pre-wedding party, Skylar," she says in a coaxing voice. "Booze. Food. And Noah half naked. It's a dream."

I shoot her an annoyed look because ever since that moment at the door before her bridal shower, she can't let go the idea of Noah and I reuniting.

Or at least using each other for hot sex.

Which I definitely have not been thinking about. Dreaming about. Or obsessing about.

Apparently she's forgotten the whole speech she gave me about making her wedding perfect.

Because the combination of Noah and I is the opposite of that goal.

Daisy holds up her hands innocently. "I'm just saying."

I close my laptop with a resigned sigh and stand up, pushing my chair back. "I'm getting ready. But only if you promise not to say anything about Noah and sex for the rest of the day."

Daisy's face lights up with a mischievous smile. "I don't recall mentioning anything about you, Noah, or sex, baby sister."

I groan, and she laughs like a freaking hyena as I slip on the sundress.

As we leave my room, I can't help but feel a sense of dread settle over me. Nothing good for me has ever happened on a boat.

Except that one time...

Nope. Today is not the day for going down memory lane.

I'm doing enough of that while writing.

We drive to the parking lot adjacent to the marina, anxiety bubbling inside me like a fizzy cocktail. The sun hangs lazily in the sky, clouds dipping across it and casting shadows across the waterfront.

Even if I hate the ocean, I can't help but admire the picturesque scene. The marina buzzes with activity, boats of all shapes and sizes bobbing in the water, their masts swaying in the gentle breeze. We step out of the car, the salty tang of the sea air immediately filling my senses.

As we approach, I catch my first glimpse of the boat—a vessel that exudes an effortless charm, its white exterior gleaming in the sunlight. The deck, with its inviting lounging areas and a beautifully set dining table, looks like a scene from a dream. My eyes take in the exquisite details—the polished chrome railings, the rich mahogany accents, and the plush white leather seating. It's different from the yacht Derrick used for parties in high school. This one's at least twice as big. Not as big as the yacht the Monroes use for their famous Christmas parties, but still very impressive. It does leave me to wonder though just how many yachts Derrick's family even owns. I wouldn't be surprised if they owned most of the boats docked in this marina.

My awestruck admiration of the boat is interrupted when I see him.
Noah.

Standing on the deck, shirtless, his hair casually tied back in a bun. Tendrils of hair escape and frame his rugged features, and a pang of... yearning coats my insides.

Noah has always been handsome, but the years have only enhanced his allure. His tanned skin glows in the sunlight, and the play of muscles beneath his skin is a captivating sight. The ocean breeze softens his masculine features, making him look like a character from a summer romance novel.

I can feel my heart race, my mouth suddenly dry, as I find myself practically entranced by his presence. Daisy, of course, notices my reaction and smirks knowingly.

"Skylar, I'd almost think you're checking out our brother," she teases, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

"Stepbrother," I growl. "And you promised no more teasing."

"Fine. Fine. Eye fuck our stepbrother all you want."

I slap my hand across her mouth as she giggles furiously. Derrick comes out to greet us, an amused smile on his lips when he sees what's happening.

"Uh, oh. Is my gorgeous fiancée already causing trouble?"

Daisy softens, staring at Derrick in a lovestruck haze, and I remove my hand from her mouth. Now that Derrick's here, I bet she'll forget all about Noah and I.

"Never," she purrs, and I clear my throat, just in case they forget that our parents are around and they can't start fucking on the dock.

Derrick leads us onto the yacht, and I steadfastly keep my gaze away from where Noah is drinking a beer by the railing.

I sure can feel his gaze on me though.

Is this some kind of game for him? Because the way his stare is caressing my skin, I'm going to go insane.

And I really need to order a vibrator to take the edge off soon.

There's a full bar set up even though it's just the immediate family on the boat today, and I hover over to get a drink.

Comfortably numb is my hope for the day.

"Slow down, little stalker. I don't want to have to carry you home tonight," Noah drawls from next to me. I take an even bigger gulp of my drink because, of course, he's not going to stay away.

He's trying to ruin me.

I try to keep my voice steady as I greet him. "Hello to you, too, Noah."

His hand drags across the bare skin of my back as he passes behind me to get another beer from the bartender.

Goosebumps cascade across my skin, and my panties are all of a sudden wet.

Stacy chooses that moment to arrive with her husband and child though, and I'm reminded just why it's so imperative to stay away from Noah.

Any more heartbreak from him just might kill me.

I walk over to where Daisy and my parents are talking to Derrick's, and listen politely, pretending to give a crap about what they're saying.

Curt throws an arm around my shoulders and smacks a kiss across the top of my head.

"Glad you're here," he says with a smile, and a surge of affection rushes through me.

"Me too," I say, and despite Noah, and Stacy, and the awkwardness with my mother...for a moment, I am.

Everyone engages in a lively conversation about the plans for the day, but I find myself struggling to focus. Noah's proximity is a constant distraction, and I can't help but steal glances at him when I think no one is looking.

* * *

The gentle sway of the yacht as it sails over the calm waters provides a welcome respite from the bustling activity below. I had sought refuge on the top deck, needing a moment of solitude to collect my thoughts and escape the prying eyes and curious conversations that swirled around me. The expansive sea stretched out before me, its horizon seemingly endless, a vast expanse that matched the questions and uncertainties filling my mind.

As I lean against the railing, staring out at the tranquil waters, the rhythmic sound of footsteps approach, and I know without looking that it's him—Noah. I can feel his presence, an almost magnetic pull that has a way of drawing me in, whether I want it to or not.

He settles beside me, his gaze fixed on the horizon, and we stand in silence for a moment, the only sounds the gentle lapping of waves against the yacht's hull and the occasional laughter of our companions drifting up from below.

"I hope you've been happy," he finally says, an ache in his voice that makes my heart race. "Even with what I said the other day...I hope everything's been okay. Better than okay..."

I turn to look at him, his profile illuminated by the soft glow of the setting sun. "Happy?" I echo, completely caught off guard.

Noah nods, his eyes still fixed on the horizon. "Despite everything that happened...I hope you've found happiness."

His words hang in the air between us, and I struggle to find an adequate response. Noah has always been a complex enigma, a puzzle I can never quite solve. His genuine concern for my well-being, after all these years, leaves me feeling both vulnerable and cautious.

I clear my throat, finding my voice at last. "I'm not sure I actually know what happiness is anymore," I admit, and I wince because why on earth am I telling him that?

His eyes meet mine, and for a moment, it's as if time has stopped. I can see the traces of the boy I once loved in the depths of his gaze, and it hurts, because I loved that boy so fucking much.

"What about that boyfriend?" he asks casually, as if inquiring about the weather. "He's not making you happy?" His eyes gleam at the question, and I blush for no reason at all other than he's looking at me.

"We're on a break," I tell him carefully.

There's no reaction and I scoff. "But you knew that already, didn't you?"

Noah's lips curl into a wry smile, and he takes a slow sip from the beer in his hand. "Yeah, I did."

I sigh, my shoulders sagging with the weight of Gael. "It's...complicated. We both needed some space." It's not quite the truth, but I can't give him *that*.

Noah raises an eyebrow, his gaze searching mine. "Space from what?"

I hesitate, my emotions swirling like a storm within me. How could I explain to him that I can't commit. That I'm breaking Gael's heart because I'm still obsessed with a memory...*his* memory. That he gave me scars I can't get rid of?

"Space from...everything," I finally reply, my voice barely more than a whisper.

He nods, a silent acknowledgment of the complexities of life. Noah doesn't press for further details, and I'm grateful for that, even though that gratefulness is tinged with an air of melancholy. Noah takes another sip from

his beer, his gaze returning to the sunset. The silence stretches between us, but it's...comfortable for once.

We stand side by side, lost in our own thoughts, the past and present colliding in a way that neither of us can fully comprehend.

Noah's gaze remains fixed on the horizon, his profile illuminated by the softening light. The sea breeze ruffles his hair, and tendrils of it fall across his forehead, giving him a rugged, enigmatic look. His bare chest, bathed in the warm hues of the setting sun, revealed a well-defined physique, and my traitorous heart skips a beat as I notice the new tattoos etched into his skin.

I swallow hard, my eyes tracing the lines of his face, the curve of his jaw...his lips. He's so fucking beautiful. And beneath the physical allure, there's something deeper, something that has always drawn me to him—the familiar warmth in his gaze, the way he makes me feel seen and understood, as if no time had passed at all.

As the yacht continues its journey across the tranquil waters, I can't escape the feeling that our reunion, however uncertain, is a turning point in our intertwined stories. The sun dips below the sea, casting the world into shades of orange and pink. In that fleeting moment, as the sun kisses the sea and the stars begin to emerge in the darkening sky, I allow myself to believe that perhaps, just perhaps, there's a chance for us to find closure, to heal old wounds, and to navigate the turbulent waters of our shared history.

Maybe it's possible for us to finally find...peace.

* * *

The phone rings, startling me from my thoughts. I glance at the caller ID, and my heart skips a beat. It's my editor, Eliza. I quickly pick up, my voice a mix of anticipation and anxiety. I'd sent her the first couple of chapters of my book, getting more nervous every day when she hadn't said anything.

"Skylar, darling," Eliza's voice comes through the line, brimming with enthusiasm. "I've just finished reading the chapters you sent, and I have to say, they're absolutely brilliant. I'm gushing over here."

I can't help but smile at her words, a faint glimmer of hope flickering within me. "Thank you, Eliza. I'm glad you liked them."

"Liked them? Skylar, these are some of the best pieces of writing I've seen in years," she gushes. "When do you think you'll have the whole

manuscript ready? Our readers are going to adore this."

I hesitate, my fingers nervously tapping on the edge of the desk. "I'm not entirely sure if I want to publish this book yet," I tell her, my voice trembling slightly

There's a moment of silence on the other end of the line, and I can almost feel Eliza's surprise and confusion. "Skylar, darling, you must be joking," she finally says, her tone a mix of disbelief and concern. "You've poured your heart and soul into this. It's a masterpiece."

I sigh, feeling the weight of uncertainty pressing down on me. "I know, Eliza. But it's...personal. More personal than anything I've ever written before."

Eliza's voice softens, understanding seeping into her tone. "Skylar, I've seen you grow as a writer over the years. You've always had the talent, but now you have something more—depth, emotion, vulnerability. It's what sets this manuscript apart. You have to share it with the world."

I run a hand through my hair, torn between my desire to keep this story hidden and my editor's unwavering belief in its potential. "I need some time to think, Eliza. It's not an easy decision for me."

Eliza sighs, and I can sense her disappointment. "I understand, Skylar. Take your time. But remember, sometimes the stories that scare us the most are the ones that need to be told."

As I hang up the phone, the weight of my decision hangs heavy over me. Eliza is right, as she often is, but the thought of exposing my innermost thoughts and feelings to the world fills me with a deep sense of vulnerability. It's a battle between my desire for anonymity and the potential for connection that comes with sharing my truth. And for now, I'm left with the agonizing uncertainty of which path to choose.

* * *

The rain falls steadily from the darkened sky, the gentle pattering of droplets on my umbrella creating a soothing rhythm. The morning had disappeared, chapters flowing out of me for hours. The book is easy to write...but it's also painful. So a break is in order.

With no particular destination in mind, I let my feet carry me through the familiar streets of Thatcher's Bay. The town wears a different face in the rain,

softer, more subdued. The cozy coastal cottages appear even more inviting, their window panes shimmering with the warm glow of lamplight.

As I wander aimlessly, my thoughts inevitably drift to Noah. Our previous encounters have left a lingering tension in the air, a thread of attraction I'd been desperately trying to deny. It's as if he has the power to pull at my very core, awakening emotions I've long buried.

Without realizing it, my steps lead me to the cemetery where Noah's mother rests. The wrought-iron gates creak open as I enter, and the raindrops dance on the gravestones like tears from the heavens.

I walk along the winding paths, past rows of markers, until I find her grave. The headstone is a simple one, adorned with a delicate bouquet of fresh flowers. My heart clenches as I recognize Noah's handwriting on the small card tucked into the bouquet.

The rain continues to fall, soaking through my clothes, but I don't care. I crouch down in front of the grave, my fingers tracing the letters of her name etched into the stone.

"Annabelle," I whisper, the word a bittersweet melody on my lips. "What would you think of the mess we've made, I wonder?"

The sound of the raindrops on the umbrella is the only response, but in this quiet moment, it feels like she's listening, her presence lingering in the air.

I sit there for a while, lost in thought, my heart heavy with memories of the past and the uncertainty of the future. The rain seems to wash away some of my doubt, cleansing me of the burden I've been carrying.

"I hope you're at peace," I murmur, placing a hand on the grave.

As I rise to my feet and turn to leave, I notice a solitary figure standing not far from me, beneath an ancient oak tree. It's Noah, his shirt soaked through from the rain, his hair clinging to his forehead. He's been here, watching me silently.

I approach him, my heart pounding in my chest. There's something in his eyes, a vulnerability I haven't seen in a long time. "Noah," I say softly, not sure what else to say.

He doesn't respond, his gaze locked onto his mother's grave. The rain continues to fall around us, but in this moment, it feels like the entire world has faded away, leaving only the two of us.

"I still come here all the time," he finally says, his voice low and filled with emotion. "To talk to her, you know?"

I nod, understanding the need to connect with the past, to seek solace in the presence of someone who's gone but not forgotten.

Noah turns to look at me, his eyes searching mine. "Sky, there's so much we haven't said to each other, so much that's been left unsaid."

I swallow hard, the weight of our history pressing down on me. "I know, Noah. But sometimes, some things are better left in the past."

He reaches out, his fingers brushing against mine. "Maybe. But maybe some things need to be said, too."

I can feel the pull between us, the unspoken desire, but I'm not ready to face it, not now. "Noah, I need time. Time to figure things out."

He nods, his expression filled with understanding. "Take all the time you need, Sky. Just know that I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere."

As the rain continues to fall, I realize that some things are beyond our control, like the raindrops that keep on falling, bringing both solace and uncertainty. Annabelle's grave stands as a silent witness to the love and loss that has defined our lives, a reminder that the past is never truly buried.

With a final glance at Noah, I turn and walk away, the rain washing away the tears on my cheeks and the weight in my heart. The road ahead is uncertain, but it's a strange thing...every day that passes back in Thatcher's Bay...I'm a little less afraid of the unknown.

Chapter Fifteen

Skylar



“**Y**ou look drop dead gorgeous!” my sister squeals, eyeing me up and down with awe-struck appreciation. “You are going to give me a run for my money on my wedding day, squirt.”

“I very much doubt that.” I smile, happy that she’s pleased with how the dress looks on me.

“Don’t just stand there! Give us a few twirls,” Daisy insists, stepping back to sit down on the white plush sofa next to our mother.

“I’m only doing this because you’re the bride-to-be and apparently, I should encourage your every whim and fancy,” I joke, giving her the twirl she asked for.

“Again!” She starts clapping excitedly, coaxing me to whirl around in circles like some off-balanced ballerina.

“Okay, that’s enough,” I say once I start getting dizzy.

I’d be absolutely mortified if I fainted in the changing room of this high-end couture shop. When we first went to pick out our dresses in that dainty cute boutique back in Thatcher’s Bay, I had no idea that it was linked to such a prestigious store on the east coast. When we entered the shop earlier, I had to do a double take, thinking we must have been in the wrong place, since there was no way Daisy could possibly afford to have her wedding dress made here. But then I quickly remembered who she was getting married to—Derrick Monroe, one of the heirs to the Monroe billion-dollar fortune. Once that realization kicked in, my anxiety settled somewhat. I guess I should be happy that all we had to do was take the ferry to Falmouth for the last fitting and not a plane to Paris. I’m sure if Daisy hadn’t insisted on using a designer from our quaint little island, Derrick would have been more than happy to

charter a private plane to fly us across the pond for our dresses.

But then again, Daisy was never one to want for much—her pride made sure of that.

Still, I am happy she's allowed herself to enjoy some of the perks that marrying into wealth provides. This dress alone must cost a pretty penny. The soft cream-colored material perfectly hugs my body in a way that is to be expected from a hefty price tag. Daisy did a good job in picking such an elegant dress.

In all honesty, I wasn't sure how my sister envisioned her wedding to be, since it wasn't until very recently that I discovered that getting married was even on her radar, but I'm mildly surprised she took the sophisticated-elegant route. But then again, I shouldn't be shocked with anything Daisy does anymore. Like a box of chocolates, you never know what to expect from her. It's one of her most endearing qualities.

"What do you think, Mom? Doesn't Sky look breathtaking?" Daisy continues to praise.

My mother looks me over again, with the same affectionate smile stitched to her lips.

"She really does. Absolutely beautiful," she says, and I can see by the overcome emotion in her eyes that she means it.

"Thank you," I smile gratefully.

When Daisy told me a few days back that she decided to make our last fitting day, a mother-daughter extravaganza, I was a little apprehensive to say the least. My relationship with my mother hasn't exactly been smooth sailing as of late, but all in all, today has been lovely.

We started off going to our favorite brunch café near the park, the same one Mom used to take us when we were but knee high and stayed there for hours just reminiscing about the good old days when our little family consisted only of the three of us. I had forgotten how close we three had been when Daisy and I were growing up. And somewhere along the line, I also forgot how many sacrifices my mother had made to save enough money to do these little types of surprises like take us to brunch just to put a smile on our faces.

Looking back now, not once did I hear my mother stress or complain about money, nor did I ever feel less than compared to the other kids at school just because I lived in a one-income home. Somehow, Mom always made sure we had the essentials, and most importantly, that we felt supported

and loved.

Of course, after Mom married Curt and we moved to Thatcher's Bay, our dynamics did shift somewhat, but even when she was living in her honeymoon bubble, I knew my mother loved me with all her heart. That there was nothing she wouldn't do to ensure my happiness. It pains me to see how far we've drifted away from each other, but after today, my heart begins to cling to the ribbons of hope that maybe there is time for us to find our way back to each other.

Having had enough of being on exhibit, I step off the small circle pedestal and walk over to my sister, pulling her up from her seat.

"Enough of Mom and I doing a fashion show for you. Now it's your turn. I'm dying to see how your dress will look on you after the finishing touches."

Daisy's blue eyes sparkle as she offers me a small nod.

"Okay."

She lets one of the attendees lead her back into the changing room, while my mother and I wait for her, drinking champagne, compliments from the groom.

"The dress really is lovely on you, Skylar," my mother says after a long bout of silence.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," she retorts, defeated, as if wanting to strike up a conversation with me, but not finding the right words to do it.

I chew on my lower lip, wondering if it's wise to broach any subject with my mother. In all fairness, today has been so amazing, I would hate to spoil it in any way. Especially if it will only bring up old resentments.

Still, there are a few questions I'd like some answers to, especially the one concerning my mother and Noah's unexpected comradery. Seeing as my mother and I are rarely in the same room alone together, now is as good a time as any to bring the subject up. I just have to ease into it without causing a fight.

Daisy would not be happy with me if I ruined such an important day with my pettiness.

"It's been nice being back home," I say, splitting the awkward silence in half.

"It's been nice having you here," my mother retorts with a shy smile.

"It's amazing how everything is exactly the same and yet different."

"Different?" She arches a curious brow. "How so?"

“Well, for one, I’ve noticed that you and Noah are now on good terms. If I remember correctly, that wasn’t always the case.”

“Hmm,” she hums non-committedly, giving me absolutely nothing in return.

Okay, Mom.

I can play hard ball too.

“I mean, Noah was never outright mean, but he never quite accepted you, either. I’m curious as to what changed,” I add before taking a sip of my champagne, pretending the small talk topic I chose to have with my mother doesn’t faze me one bit.

“Does that upset you? That we’ve found enough common ground to be more than just civil with each other?” she counters with a gentle tone, making it very hard to be upset with her.

“Why would it upset me? Like I said. I just find it curious. Peculiar, even.”

“I’m not sure peculiar is the right word to define our friendship.” She grins sheepishly. “But you’re the wordsmith in our family, not me.”

Gosh darn it.

The woman is good at evading my attempts to get to the bottom of things.

Now I kind of see where I got it from.

“Maybe if I understood how it all came about in the first place, I’d understand it better,” I insist, careful to keep my tone calm.

“Fair enough.” My mom nods. “I guess it happened organically over the last few years. But then again, life has a way of sneaking up on you like that, and what is true one day, doesn’t mean that it will remain so forever. A person’s life is like the seasons of the year. Ever changing. Ever evolving,” she explains, looking deep into my eyes as if searching for something. “In Noah’s case, I believe he finally made peace with his grief and realized that to honor his mother’s memory, that didn’t necessarily mean he had to keep me at arm’s length or even hate me. I think when he managed to let go of his pain on that front, he was able to see the love that had always surrounded him and finally accept me as part of his family. Because that’s what we are. A family who cares for each other and always will. A family who forgives and accepts us for who we are inside.”

I’m unable to hide the hurt in my gaze at how my mother so easily found it in her heart to repair their relationship, when she’s made no attempts to mend ours. But as she continues to stare deep into my eyes, I wonder if her

rant about Noah was also directed at me.

If I'm completely honest with myself, today has been the first day where I haven't kept my guard up around my mother. Maybe it had something to do with us visiting our old haunts on the mainland, or maybe she's as desperate as I am to reconnect.

"Are you ladies ready?" the store attendee asks, pulling our attention away from each other to focus on my sister. From my peripheral, I don't miss how my mother's shoulders sloop a tad, as if disappointed we weren't given enough time to continue on with our conversation.

But all those lamentful thoughts go out the window when Daisy walks into the room and steps onto the pedestal.

My heart stops.

My mother grabs my hand and gives it a tight squeeze, suffering from the same reaction.

"Daisy," my mother coos, her eyes watering.

"Too much?" my sister asks, pointing at the small tweaks she made to her dress that somehow managed to make it even more breathtaking.

"No words. I'm speechless. You're beautiful," I choke out, feeling my own tears burning at the corner of my eyes.

"Do you...do you think he'll like it?" she whispers while staring at her own reflection.

"Derrick?" I ask, wiping away my tears. "I'm sure he'll fall even more in love with you than he already is."

A shy smile crests her face.

"I still can't believe it. My baby is getting married." My mother sobs beside me, unwilling to let my hand go, needing me to keep her from losing it completely.

"Neither can I," Daisy jokes, her own blue eyes starting to water.

"That boy better treat you right. I won't be responsible for my actions if he doesn't," my mother warns between sobs, her protectiveness shining through.

"I know just the spot to bury his body if he even thinks about not treating our Daisy right," I pile on, wrapping my arms over my trembling mother's shoulders as we continue to be in awe of Daisy in her stunning white gown.

"You two have nothing to worry about. Derrick would never dream of hurting me. In all honesty, it's a wonder he wants to marry me at all after everything I put him through."

“Love is more powerful than reason, sweet girl. Derrick loves you. And take it from me, when a love is that strong, that pure, it always finds a way,” my mother says, and this time when she gives my hand a squeeze, it feels as if those words were meant for me as much as they were directed at my sister.

I hold onto my mother’s hand and don’t let her go, as her words begin to sink in down into dark corners of my soul that I’ve desperately tried to stay clear from.

* * *

After a day spent on the mainland, I’m actually happy to be back in my old room, writing up a storm. After the wonderful drama-free day the women of this family shared, inspiration kicked in, bringing me back to those first few days when Daisy and I suspected Mom had met the love of her life.

How ironic that it took one wedding to initially bring me to Thatcher’s Bay and another for me to return to it?

I’m mid chapter when the sound of loud music coming from downstairs starts trickling into my room, my mother’s laugh ringing out just as loudly.

Curious to see what’s going on, I close my laptop and walk downstairs, immediately shocked at what I find.

“What is going on here?” I laugh, watching my mother and Curt dance like lunatics to Otis Redding’s ‘Try a Little Tenderness.’

“It started with your mom offering to help my dad practice his father/daughter dance for Daisy’s wedding, but as you can see, things have gotten a little out of hand,” Noah chuckles.

“Yes. I can see that.” I giggle as the pair continue to dance.

“Don’t knock it until you try it, kid.” Curt gives me a wink, twirling my mom in a full circle. “Your mom and I used to love going out dancing when we first started dating. I think it might have been my dancing that made her fall in love with me.”

“Your two left feet had no influence on the matter. But making me laugh did help you along,” my mother teases.

Watching them dance away like no one is watching is nauseatingly sweet.

“Well don’t just stand there, you two! Join us.” My mom giggles as Curt tries to dip her.

“What do you say?” Noah extends his hand out to me. “Want to teach

them how it's really done?"

With both our parents staring at us, I'm unable to turn his offer down. It might be naïve on my part, but the time I spent with my mother earlier today has left me in such high spirits, not even Noah Fontaine could ruin it. Watching her smile ear to ear, as she waits expectantly for us to join her and Curt on the makeshift dance floor in the middle of the living room, is the reason why I place my hand in Noah's, letting him lead the way.

But then Noah does the darndest thing.

Once we're standing right beside our parents, he lets go of my hand and breaks into a goofy dance, mimicking his father's.

"Please tell me you guys aren't going to dance like that at the wedding?" I giggle, watching father and son cut a rug in the most dad-like way possible.

"What? Don't you like our moves?" Noah jokes, shimmying his shoulders next to his father's.

"Atta boy, son. Show Sky how it's done." Curt laughs, coaxing his son to do his worst.

"You two are idiots." I laugh as they both pretend to do the running man.

"No one can say the Fontaine family won't be the life of the party on Daisy's big day," my mother chimes in, pinching the bridge of her nose and wiggling to the floor.

It's official.

My family is bonkers.

I laugh away as she pulls me to mimic her dance moves in tandem with Curt's and Noah's. I'm laughing so hard my stomach hurts. Curt and Mom belt out the chorus of the song, urging Noah and I to do the same. Before I know it, we're all dancing like crazy people, belting out the lyrics louder than Otis himself.

Once the song ends, we're all on the floor, laughing away at our childish antics.

"You all have to promise me you will not dance like that at Daisy's wedding." I point to the three of them, panting for breath brought on from laughing so hard.

"No promises, kid. Besides, those stuck up Monroes need a little flavor to their parties," my stepfather retorts. "Isn't that right, son?" he adds, ruffling the top of Noah's hair.

"Sky... is... right," my mother stutters, still trying to catch her breath. "We don't want to be cause for embarrassment to Daisy."

“We all know Daisy doesn’t embarrass easily,” Noah adds his two cents. “That girl is made of Teflon.”

“True,” Curt snickers proudly. “But Clara is right. We should at least try, for Daisy’s sake. One song at least. Help me up, son,” Curt asks Noah, stretching his arms for him to take.

My forehead wrinkles at how Curt needs Noah to help him back on his feet.

“Are you okay?” I ask worriedly.

“I’m fine.” Curt smiles. “Just an old back injury that comes up every so often. It’s the price of getting older. Your mind might still be as quick as a whip, but your sore bones and limbs aren’t as forgiving.”

“Maybe we should rest?” my mother says, concerned.

“None of that. I need to make sure I give Daisy the best father/daughter dance she could possibly wish for.”

I see it in his eyes that he means it.

It’s an honor that he wants to do justice to. He knows that Daisy could have easily asked Grant to walk her down the aisle and have this dance. But then again, Grant has never been my sister’s favorite person, so I wasn’t surprised she didn’t even invite him to attend, much less hold the honors the father of the bride should have.

When I asked Daisy if she wanted me to at least call him up and ask him to come, her answer was a strong clipped no.

“He wasn’t there for me in my worst times. Why should he get to celebrate my best ones?”

And that was the end of that discussion.

I can’t say the same though.

Grant stepped up when I needed him to. It was only that one time, but I’ll be forever in his debt regardless.

My mother then chooses a slow song from their playlist, and they begin to sway along to it. Taking a cue from our parents, and before I’m able to stop him, Noah places my arms around his neck and snakes his arms around my waist. I tongue my cheek as we sway left to right, glancing over to Curt and Mom every so often, seeing that they are now deep in their loving bubble, completely oblivious to anyone around them.

Even after fifteen years of marriage, they are still as in love as they were in the beginning.

Love always finds a way.

My mother's words come back to me now, and as I take them in, I realize how easy it is for my mother to believe in such a thing. After all they had to endure, after a failed first marriage and the death of a first love, fate would still be kind to them and give them one more shot at true love.

But what if my shot already happened?

What if the love my mother was talking about already happened to me and it slipped through my fingers?

In a blink of an eye, I not only lost the one person I loved most in this world, but myself too.

"What are you thinking about?" Noah asks hoarsely, searching my eyes.

You.

"Nothing," I mumble instead of telling him the truth.

"Liar," he accuses, his hold tightening around me.

I lift my chin up and hold his gaze with mine.

"Takes one to know one, doesn't it?"

His ocean blue eyes dim with sadness, coaxing my own to come forth in thunderous waves. I swallow dryly and turn my head to the side, only for Noah to gently push it to nestle against his chest. I'm about to push myself off him, but then catch my mother glancing over at us, a tender smile stretched on her lips, unknowingly forcing me to stay exactly where I am.

"I deserved that," Noah whispers pained in my ear. "Fuck, I more than deserve that."

All I can do is nod, feeling as if my heart might leap out of my throat if he forces me to say even one word. I let him run his fingers through my hair, my breathing starting to come out in spurts with how gentle he's being with me.

But still, I don't push away.

Instead, I continue to dance with him. I try to focus on the sweet melody of the song, but all I can hear is the drumming of our synced heartbeats—Noah's and mine.

A lapse in judgment has me gripping onto his neck tighter, loving how his long wild hair brushes up against the back of my hands.

"You let it grow out again," I hear myself whisper as if my heart has decided it needs a turn to do the talking now.

"Hmm."

It takes three heartbeats for me to ask, "Why?"

His shoulders sag, and I hear him take in a deep breath, as if he's trying to summon up the courage to tell me the truth.

“You know why.”

My eyelids close on their own accord as I hear the truth in his confession, making the pang in my heart hurt that much more. Not happy with the turmoil he’s induced with those three little words, he kills me with his next ones.

Noah lifts my chin with his knuckles, gently coaxing me to look him in the eye.

“I’ve missed you.”

It’s in this instant that I gain the strength to pull away, turn my back, and leave the room.

Because if I had stayed, I’d have to admit to him how much I missed him too.

How I’ll probably never stop.

Chapter Sixteen

Noah



Even though the rain is pouring down hard when I leave the house to sprint over to my loft, it does very little to cool my feverish skin. Once I get inside, I race over to my bathroom and turn the shower on, in the hopes that it will have better success in cooling me down.

But as my head falls under its cold sprays, my palms spread out against the tile to keep me tethered, it doesn't stop my mind from wandering back to Sky.

All I can ever think about is Sky.

There was a moment there as we were dancing together with our parents, where her cold façade broke, revealing the face of the girl I fell in love with. The girl who still has her name carved into my chest, the one who branded me hers, unsuitable for any other.

There she was, in all her spectacular glory...happy.

Truly and irrevocably happy.

But the instant we started dancing together, that happiness evaporated like a puff of smoke. She looked up at me with such torment in her silver gaze, such anguish, that it took my very breath away.

I've seen that pain in the mirror every day since she left me. I have lived and breathed that misery for so long, that when I saw that it lived inside her too, something in me just snapped, needing to erase all of her pain away.

So I held her close. I let myself pretend that she was mine, and I alone had the power to erase such suffering from within her.

And before I knew what I was doing, I told her the one truth that should have never left my lips. Selfishly, and with no regard for her pain.

And if that wasn't bad enough, I told Sky that I missed her.

“You fucking idiot,” I curse at myself, turning off the water since it’s doing nothing to ease the knots in my stomach.

I step out of the shower and wrap a towel around my midriff, catching my reflection in the mirror. My hands grip the edges of the sink as I take a good hard look at myself, scornful accusation staring back at me.

What the fuck are you doing?

Why can’t I just leave her the fuck alone?

Do I care so little for my sanity? Am I so eager to have my fucking heart broken again?

What?

What the fuck is wrong with me?

Between my self-loathing and the rain tapping ferociously at my window, it’s a wonder I even hear the light knock at my door, pulling me away from my troubled thoughts.

It’s probably Clara wanting to check up on me to see if I’m alright. She saw how close to the edge I was. How easily I was about to shatter in her daughter’s arms. And then again with how my face fell when Sky pulled away from me to run back to the safety of her room.

Fuck.

I’m not in the right frame of mind for another lecture. Or worse. Clara whispering words of hope in my ear, when we both know there is none to be had.

Determined to send her away, I walk over to the door and open it, shocked to find a drenched Sky waiting there for me. Rain pours down on her face and body as she just stands there, silently waiting for me to invite her in or ask why she’s here. Not wanting her to catch pneumonia waiting for my brain to catch up with my mouth, I swing the door fully open and pull her quickly inside.

“What—”

“No.” She shakes her head, pressing a finger to my lips to shut me up. “I don’t want to talk.”

My throat dries instantly at the intensity in her eyes.

Ever so gently, I brush her finger away, only to lace my hand with hers.

“Then what do you want?” I ask gruffly, feeling every inch of me burn with desire.

“You.” The word has barely left her lips when I feel them pressing against mine.

I don't think. I just react, letting her take whatever she wants from me. Like Sky, her kiss is demanding, breaking through any resistance I could possibly have. All my previous worries and concerns fly out the window as she wraps her arms around my neck and walks me across the room, over to my bed.

"Sky," I beg when I feel like I'm losing it.

"No talking," she orders in between kisses. "No words. Just this. Just us."

I groan into her mouth as she presses her hot core into my hardened length. I bite and nibble at her fat bottom lip, as her arms fall away from my neck so she can run her hands over my bare chest. Every light touch she makes with her fingertips feels like a torch to my insides. I let her burn me alive, hissing when she snaps my towel from my waist and drops it on the floor. She then pushes me onto the bed, leaving me wanting and crazed for her next move.

I hold myself up by the elbows, as her eyes scan every inch of my hardened body, my cock bobbing away with just one hungry look. My chest tightens as she grabs the hem of her soaked t-shirt and pulls it over her head, her eyes always locked with mine. My hands fist the duvet at my side to keep me in place as she kicks off her sneakers and begins to taunt me by slowly shimmying her shorts down those fucking long legs of hers. Left in only a pink bra and lace panties, my restraint starts slipping at rapid speed, as does my resolve for letting her take the lead in what's about to happen next.

"Sky, you have exactly ten seconds to take those off and sit on my lap. Any longer and I'll fucking rip them off you."

I know I just broke her sacred rule of not talking, but like hell I'm going to keep quiet now.

The little brat just cocks a mischievous brow at me, making no move to abide by my demand.

"Ten," she mocks, running her hands seductively up and down her body to torment. "Nine," she whispers, cupping her breasts in her palms, giving them a good hard squeeze. "Eight," she continues to taunt, leaving a hand firmly attached to one breast, while the other begins to travel south...until it's right there...stroking the lace of her panties.

"One," I belt out, lifting off the bed just enough to pull her by the hem of her panties so she's trapped in between my thighs.

"You cheated," she pants, running her fingers through my wet hair. "You said until ten."

“Fucking sue me, Sky.”

Ten seconds was too long to wait anyway.

I’m surprised I survived to the count of eight with the show she was giving me.

I start peppering the flat of her stomach with butterfly kisses, as my arm stretches at her back to unhook her bra, inhaling her arousal like its fucking oxygen. Once I help slip off the straps, I perch my chin on her belly button to look up at her face, completely in awe of how beautiful she looks.

Her eyes are two fine lines, hooded with the same desperate need that is currently taking over all my senses. Never leaving her sight, I lean down and run my nose up and down her slit, the sound of a gasp leaving her parted lips becoming the sweetest song I could ever hope to hear. I lick my lips hungrily, as in one quick pull, I rip her panties at their sides, revealing a shaven mound for my mouth to devour.

“Grab my shoulders,” is all I have the fortitude to say before my mouth latches onto her pussy.

Obediently, Sky does what she’s told, holding onto my shoulders for dear life, her nails sinking into my flesh with each long stroke of the tongue.

Fucking heaven.

Every lick feels like I’m finally coming home, as if this is where I should have always been—in between her thighs, licking her clean until I have her body withering and shuddering from an orgasm only my tongue can provide.

My girl must have been suffering from the same ache inside me because it doesn’t take her long to reach the precipice, eager to fly off it. So when I order her to cum with my tongue on her apex, she does with beautiful abandon. Just like the good, obedient girl she is.

Before she’s able to fully come down from her nirvana, I grab her by her fine ass and pull her onto my bed, her warm body molding itself perfectly underneath me. My lips find hers again, as my fingers play with one nipple, her soaked pussy pressed up against my cock, making it that much more difficult to slow this down.

I need her now.

“Do you have a condom?” she rasps, just as eager, kissing my neck, burning me alive. “Do you?” she insists when I take too long to reply.

I grab her chin.

“Fuck that. You want me? Then you’ll have all of me.”

The hesitation in her eyes kills something inside me. No way do I want

any more barriers between us than the ones we already created for ourselves. It would also be futile trying to explain to her that I haven't been with anyone since she left me.

What would be the point?

She wouldn't believe me anyway, and admitting to her that just the thought of touching someone that wasn't her physically made me want to hurl, would just open Pandora's box, and you don't need to be a genius to tell that Sky isn't ready for that...yet.

"I'm clean," I finally say, the only truth I can muster admitting to, without opening that can of worms.

Thankfully, my admission must be enough for her, since she hooks her legs around me, her heels pushing me to where she needs me more.

"So fucking greedy," I groan, biting down on her neck as I position my crown at her center. The heat of her core has me losing my god damn mind, so much so that in one hard thrust, I'm inside her.

FUCK!

This.

This right here.

This is what I've been dreaming about for years on end, and yet, no fantasy could ever compare to the reality of it.

"Look at me," she pleads on bated breath, the small sheen of sweat to her brow making her look even more sinful.

Like I'd want to look anywhere else but at her beautiful face as I'm loving her.

Ever so slowly, I drive myself inside her, our sights deadlocked on the other. My heart drums madly in my chest as Sky begins to whimper, her wet pussy strangling my cock in the most spectacular of ways.

"I gotta move, baby. You with me?" I choke out when the slow tempo begins to be too much to bear.

"Yes," she says on a soft wail, her fingers tugging at my hair.

My thrusts pick up speed, pounding into her pussy like a man on a mission. Like someone who wants to erase all the memories of her former lovers. Every touch. Every kiss. All of them purged from her brain until all that is left is me.

"Noah—" she starts to beg, but my name spilling from her cupid-shaped lips only drives me more insane.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Her little wails of supplication, the way her body is withering underneath me, paired with how her pussy is swallowing my cock like it was always hers to begin with, is too fucking much for me to take. Like this... fucking the love of my life raw as she looks at me with nothing but love in her eyes, is too much for any red-blooded man to withstand.

“Come, Sky. Please, baby. I can’t—”

But just as I find myself pleading for mercy, Sky’s eyes roll to the back of her head as she shouts out my name, her pussy squeezing my cock with her orgasm, and I have no choice but to follow her over the cliff.

Not that I’m surprised.

I’d follow Sky anywhere given the chance.

I let my head fall to her chest, leaving my cock inside her, even as I feel my cum starting to drip down her thighs and onto my bedsheets. Her rapid heartbeat matches my own, and for a few seconds I just lay there, feeling the sting of hot tears threatening to come out.

Because in this very second—I’m whole.

I’m not broken or lost.

I’m not living with half a heart.

I’m complete—because of her—my Sky.

“Noah?” she whispers after both of us have caught our breath.

I lift my chin up and instantly frown when I see the wheels in her head have begun to turn, second guessing herself, and most likely, regretting her impulse—regretting what we’ve just done.

“No,” I demand. “Don’t. Don’t do that. Not now.”

She turns her head to the side, tears starting to swell at the corner of her eyes.

Gently, I grip her chin and pull her to look at me.

“No words. Just this. Just us,” I choke out, using the same words she did when she stepped into my loft.

“No words,” she whispers back hesitantly.

“No words,” I repeat softly. “Don’t overthink this.”

Her jaw goes agape for a split second but then closes into a fine line.

“I said stop.”

“You can’t order me around, you know?” she counters, making my tense muscles relax instantly when I hear the familiar hint of our old ways.

This type of banter is good. Means that she doesn't regret what we just

did.

And if I play my cards right, she never will.

“Are you sure about that?” I arch a teasing brow.

“Very,” she quips.

“Hmm. A challenge.” I grin, sliding down her body ready for our second round since our first went faster than I would have wanted it to.

This time, I’m going to take my time. I’m going to run my tongue over every inch of her skin, nibble her flesh with my teeth and mark her as mine.

I start to kiss a trail down her chest, but before my mouth can latch onto her pink nipple, Sky grabs me by the scruff of my chin and pulls my gaze onto hers.

“No words. Just us. Just this,” she says steadfastly, making sure I understand the true meaning behind her chosen phrase.

In other words, her body might be on the table—but not her heart.

That remains off limits to me, and most likely, always will be.

I’m just an itch she needs to scratch.

To her, fucking me is like a proverbial walk down memory lane, instead of the earthshattering thing it really is.

And the masochist in me is all too happy to accept her terms.

Because while we stay in this limbo, we can play pretend. Pretend that every touch isn’t an I love you. That every kiss isn’t laced with a pain that we both need to heal, knowing that can only be done by sharing our bodies, even if our hearts aren’t ready to do the same.

Even if this ends in tears and heartbreak, I’d rather hold onto this small piece of paradise while in her loving arms, than have nothing at all.

Chapter Seventeen

Skylar



No words. *Just us. Just this.*

It's my refrain over the next week.
As Noah and I...fuck constantly.

"Kiss me," he demands as his hands cradle my face. It feels far too intense, him staring at me like this, so I close my eyes.

He pulls gently on my hair. "Eyes open, baby," he orders, and I can't help but listen.

Noah's lips close over mine, his tongue dipping in and tangling with my own. Fuck. I missed the taste of him.

I don't know how I've lived without it.

I feel lightheaded when he pulls away, the room spinning around us. There's an empty ache inside of me as he leans forward to taste me once again. I whimper, pulling at his hair as I move against his leg, trying to get some type of friction to ease the pain.

I'm desperate for him. It's been like that since the beginning though, hasn't it? I just expected time would change that.

How foolish was I to think that if I showed up at his door, and just fucked him once, it would be out of my system for good. A final goodbye that we never really had.

I'd been such a fool.

Noah deepens the kiss, holding me in place as he licks at my mouth. His other hand has moved to my ass, and he's kneading it possessively as he rocks my body against his. There's no hesitation in his touch. Every graze of his hands feels like he's staking his claim. Making me his.

And I don't know what to think about that.

So I'm not thinking about it at all.

No words. Just us. Just this.

His hand slides between my legs, his fingers rubbing against the seam of my leggings. "Fuck, you've soaked your pants. What a good girl," he purrs.

And another gush of wet heat floods my panties.

"Tell me you want me, and I'll let you come," he growls as his hand pulls my leggings down.

I'm up against the wall in my bedroom. He'd come home for lunch and apparently the only thing on the menu he craved was me.

"I want you," I cry out as his fingers slide over my panties, massaging my clit. He bites down on my ear and I moan, leaning my head back against the wall as he licks and sucks from my ear, down my neck, until his tongue is tracing the lining of my shirt.

"Please, please, please," I beg, and he pulls away to grin at me wickedly.

"Arms up," he demands, and like a puppet, I follow his command. As soon as my arms are up, he's sliding my shirt off and unhooking my bra so my breasts spill out.

"Fuck, these are perfect," he rasps as his lips immediately latch on to my nipples. His mouth closes over one, sucking hard. I buck backwards from the sensation, a small orgasm fluttering through me.

"Yes, Yes, Yes," I chant as he moves to the other breast. His teeth lightly bite down, and I'm not sure I'll survive the pleasure.

Noah reaches between us and unbuttons his pants, and then he rips away my tiny thong like it's nothing.

I don't care that I'll have to go underwear shopping after this week. He can rip away as long as it leaves me feeling this good, every time.

His lips release my nipple and then he positions his wide crown at my opening, maintaining eye contact the entire time he's pushing inside me. His hands hold my hips in place so I have no choice but to feel every glorious inch of him.

"Noah," I cry out as I take him deeper.

"Fuck," he groans as if he's in physical pain. "You're taking me so good."

Another push and he's flush against me. With this angle, I can barely breathe with how full I feel. Full of him.

It's the best feeling on earth.

"Please fuck me," I whimper.

“Whatever you want, baby,” he says roughly as he withdraws slightly before thrusting inside me hard. I whimper, and the sound seems to egg him on. His grip tightens on my hips and he starts fucking me with a desperate hunger...a hunger that echoes my own. Each impact reverberates through my entire body. His face is strained...determined as he pulls in and out.

His gaze catches on my breasts again, and he leans down to suck on my nipple while he continues to fuck in and out of me. Noah gives it a few more licks before his hand takes over, cupping and kneading my chest, his thumb teasing my sensitive nipples.

“You set the pace, sweetheart. Fuck me just how you want,” he urges as he stares down at me, his hand continuing to work magic on my breasts.

At this point, my legs are wrapped around his waist, his free hand holding me up by my ass.

His grip loosens and I start to ride him, using my legs to fuck myself on his perfect dick.

“That’s my girl. Use me. Fuck that tight pussy on my cock.”

His words, his dick...him...have me absolutely dripping, and I scream as I come, the pleasure almost violent, because it’s so good.

“Fuck,” Noah groans. But he doesn’t come. I’ve learned this week that, like in high school, his stamina is absolutely incredible.

I don’t want to think about how that is.

His mouth engulfs my nipple, sucking even harder as I start to work him in and out of me once again.

Every pass of his dick inside of me is exquisite torture, every nerve ending on fire. His cock rubs perfectly against my clit every time.

My hips thrust recklessly as he continues to mouth dirty words against my skin.

“Baby,” he rasps, before suddenly halting me in place. He catches my cries with a kiss and carries me over to my bed.

Noah hovers over me, his cock still firmly sheathed inside my core. He smooths sweaty hair from my face and places a soft kiss against my lips that has my heart squeezing in my chest.

It’s not supposed to feel this way.

It’s not supposed to feel like we’re drowning in each other.

Like we’re two halves of the same whole.

It’s not supposed to feel like we’re in love.

He spreads my knees wide, so I feel the stretch, before he pushes further

inside. At this angle, it's almost too much, and my head thrashes back and forth as I lose the ability to breathe.

"Breathe, sweetheart. I've got you," he growls as he pushes in and out of me. "You're so fucking tight."

His lips mold against mine, our breaths one as he moves.

"It's too much," I cry, a tear sliding down my cheek.

"I know, baby. I know," he cajoles as he kisses away my tear. "Eyes on me, Sky."

My gaze snaps to his, flinching at all the emotion in their depths. I don't want it to be like this.

I can't have it be like this.

But what do I do with the fact that it already is?

How am I ever going to live without this again?

And it's not just the sex. It's the back and forth of our breaths, the way my soul is finally sitting calmly in my chest after years of hurting and wanting him back.

"Baby, just let go," he whispers, his hand holding my neck loosely, his thumb tracing against my fluttering pulse. He feels so tight inside me. So good. Like all the emptiness I've had all these years has finally been filled.

And there's the fact that we haven't used protection once this week. And we haven't talked about it once since that initial "I'm clean" conversation.

I'm old enough to know better.

Just because I'm on the pill and he is adamant that he's clean, doesn't exactly mean I'm safe.

But I can't find it in myself to care.

I cling to him, taking in his scent, the feel of his skin against my hands, the brush of his hair against my face as he fucks into me.

Except it feels a lot less like fucking at the moment...and a lot more like...

No—I wasn't going to go there.

"Get out of your head, little stalker," he growls as he bites down on my lower lip. "Rub your clit. Get yourself there."

I immediately obey his order, my hand slipping between us, rubbing at my clit, and pleasure bubbles up inside me. He glances down between us, watching as if entranced as his dick slides in and out, my core sucking him in deep every time.

Noah's expression is determined, focused, like he's trying to memorize

the sight of our bodies becoming one.

“You fucking own me,” he growls, the veins in his neck pronounced as he starts to thrust harder, like he’s trying to imprint the feel of his dick in my womb.

I wish I owned him.

Like how he seems to own me.

The thought is terrifying. So like everything else I’m feeling at the moment...

I push it away.

“Come for me, baby,” he says roughly, and within seconds, my insides are tightening around his dick, an orgasm spiraling through me, so intense that the edges of my vision darken as the pleasure overcomes me.

“Oh fuck!” he cries out, suddenly pulling out of me. His hand works his cock furiously, and a second later, hot cum is shooting out, spraying all over my belly and breasts.

Noah’s chest is heaving as he takes it in, a dark, possessive gleam in his gaze. He rubs the cum into my skin, spreading it all over until my entire chest...my entire stomach, is covered in him. Noah takes the last remnants of it and pushes it inside me, sending little tremors of pleasure pulsing through me as his fingers fuck in and out of me lazily.

He leans forward and brushes a soft, tender kiss on my lips that’s at odds with how intense everything was just moments before.

Noah collapses next to me, his fingers still inside me for a few more moments before he pulls them out, brings them to his lips, and while still holding eye contact with me—licks all of me...and some of him...off.

“Wow,” I mutter, unsure why that seems so freaking hot to me.

“Wow is right. You taste delicious,” he grins, looking so handsome, it feels like my heart is breaking just staring at him.

It’s not really fair to my heart that my vagina can’t get enough of him.

“Tell me about your favorite memory from the last seven years,” he suddenly says, and I blink in surprise...and wariness.

This is supposed to be about sex. Talking about...things...seems like a dangerous path.

He has one hand propping up his head, his muscles bulging, and his finger is softly tracing my skin in a lazy, smooth pattern.

Nothing about his gaze is lazy though, he’s staring at me with so much interest, so much care, that I can’t help but talk.

“Hmmm. My favorite memory...that’s a hard thing to decide on.”

“So tell me a couple,” he says.

“Well, there was freshman year Homecoming. All the freshmen would paint their faces, and wear green and white, and then we’d run around a giant bonfire while the upperclassmen cheered and yelled at us.” I giggled as I thought about that night. “It sounds silly, but it was the first time at school that I really felt a part of something. I swear they brainwashed you that night because you bled green from there on out.”

“I bet you looked cute,” he murmured, his attention still rapt on me.

“I didn’t look cute afterwards, when I got so drunk at one of the frats that I threw up all over myself.”

He snorted. “Hard to imagine Skyler Ames drinking herself silly.”

The grin on my lips fades. Because at one point, I thought we’d share all our memories from there on out. And yet, here we were, seven years later... practically strangers.

Except when we were having sex, a little voice nags. Because our bodies sure remember how to do that.

“Okay you said you had more,” he prods, his tone almost urgent, like he can sense the direction of my thoughts and is trying to distract me.

“What’s another memory...maybe initiation night at my sorority.”

“Ahh, yes. Who knew you’d be a sorority sister,” he teases.

“Were you keeping tabs on me, good sir?”

His eyes flash with something that looks an awful lot like...pain. “When I could bear it,” he finally admits on a whisper.

Now I’m the one hurrying on, not able to bear the ache in his voice.

“They woke us up in the middle of the night and shoved a blindfold over our eyes, and then they took us to do all these random things around campus, until we ended up in the house basement, Madonna’s *Like A Prayer* blaring as we had a massive dance party. A night you would never forget.”

My smile is fond as I go down memory lane. College was about breaking free from the box I’d put myself in while growing up, and all through high school. I was able to be anyone I wanted to be. Not Daisy’s sister. Not Noah...something. Not a bookworm. Not a wallflower.

Something new.

And I’d taken advantage of it. I’d gone to the parties, I’d been a part of the clubs, I’d done a foreign exchange semester in Barcelona...I’d even joined a secret society.

Leaving college, I'd actually been proud of who I was.

Not something I had experienced much growing up.

"I lied the other day," he says, pulling me forward so that I was lying on his chest instead of looking at his face.

"Lied about what?" I ask warily.

"About how fucking proud I am of you. An Ivy League Graduate. Tons of successful books under your belt. Making your own money. Paving your own way."

My cheeks grow warm at his compliment, because compliments from Noah...well, he doesn't give them often. It feels more significant than compliments from other people because of how rarely he gives them.

"Thank you," I whisper, nuzzling into his chest, wishing that it didn't feel so right, so perfect, to be in his arms.

"You were right though," I muse, copying him by tracing a pattern across his etched abs...abs I'd run my tongue over several times this week.

"About what?"

"I thought I left being scared behind. But really, I've still been hiding all these years. I'm—I'm trying to work on that."

"I'm still trying to work on shit too," he replies, and there is that ache again.

No words. Just us. Just this. I chant in my head, trying to ingrain it in my spine, so I don't get too attached, so I don't forget how much he hurt me.

But as I lay there on his chest, our hands running hungrily over each other's bodies, I'm afraid that my heart has decided not to listen to any goddamn order I give it.

Chapter Eighteen

Noah



We're at where we first began...The Scarlet Letter Cafe...and it feels symbolic really. The place holds some big memories for us, awkward—in the case of my blowjob escapades—and bittersweet—courtesy of what feels like a million nights spent just like this, sitting with our family, enjoying dinner. It feels like no time has passed at all as I sit across from her, playing footsie with her under the table, our family none the wiser.

Okay, maybe Daisy suspects something's going on. It's always been hard to get anything past that girl.

Skylar's doing her best to pretend to ignore me, but I won't let her. Not when I'm currently dying inside because all I want to do is spend every second of every day by her side.

She's so hard to read. There's moments when I'm inside of her, and I see something in her eyes, something that tells me she's feeling this too—this thread between us that's never faded. But then she blinks...and her emotions are hidden from me again, leaving me cold and hopeless.

One thing's for sure though, after the past week spent touching her, loving her, breathing her in...I can't let her go.

Skylar Ames has to forgive me. There's no other option.

I won't survive any other way.

She orders a salad, since there's not really anything else on the menu that qualifies as vegan, and the server has the nerve to flirt with her. He's a few years younger than us, but I recognize him from school. He stares at her like he's in a trance, his gaze flicking to the way her t-shirt strains against her breasts, making me want to kill him.

Sky pushes away her chair, like she can sense I'm nearing the edge of

insanity—the one where I leap across the table and stab him in the eyes with my dinner fork for lusting over what’s mine.

“I’m going to use the restroom,” she says, avoiding eye contact with me. The server stares after her longingly.

I wait about thirty seconds, and then I decide I don’t give a fuck and push away from the table too.

“Be right back,” I say with my most innocent look, trying to avoid Daisy’s questioning gaze that’s bouncing back and forth between me and where her sister’s just left the room.

I wind my way through the restaurant, but instead of taking a left into the men’s restroom...I take a right.

Sky’s standing in front of the mirror, not doing anything, and I decide it’s a good thing I followed her. She’s off in her head right now, and I can’t let that happen. Nothing good can come from her thinking too hard. Not until I have time to make up everything, to explain why I ruined us all those years ago.

I don’t let myself wonder if she’ll forgive me. Like I said...there’s no other option. I won’t stop trying until she’s forgiven me and we’re riding off to the sunset together...or whatever the equivalent looks like for me and her.

I don’t care about the end destination, I just want her.

“Noah! What are you doing here?” she hisses as I close the door to the bathroom and snap the lock into place.

“I decided I’m hungry for something else besides food,” I growl, stalking towards her. She backs away, like I’m a lion and she’s the lamb. But she should know after this past week...there’s nowhere I won’t follow her.

“Sky,” I murmur as I corner her against the wall. My voice comes out thick and heavy, because I can’t even say her name without it being blazingly, blindingly obvious that I’m in love with her.

I can’t stop looking at her. Every time I do, I see something else I’m crazy about. From the dusting of freckles that’s new since she arrived, courtesy of weeks spent under the sun. Or the flicks of dark silver in her gray gaze that I’d forgotten about. Or the way she scrunches her nose, like she’s doing now, whenever I get caught up staring at her because I’ve never seen anything more perfect than her.

I want to scream that I love her. I want to yell it from the rooftops. Hell, I’ll even take whispering it in her ear.

But I can’t yet. Because she’s not ready. My secret is hovering between

us, just waiting to be uncovered.

And I'm the wimp who just hasn't found the courage to let that secret out yet.

"Little stalker."

She hums, a slight smile on her lips. "Who's the one stalking who right now?"

I grin unrepentantly, because I do feel like her stalker since she's come back into town. I just can't stay away.

"Mine," I growl, biting down on her neck almost savagely. She moans, and I grin against her skin because her body knows that truth even if her heart isn't on the same page yet.

"I'm going to fuck you in here, baby. Make sure my cum is running down your thighs when we return to the table." Just the thought of that has my cock rock hard in my pants.

Her eyes are wide and shocked as she stares up at me. She looks like a hot librarian today, her hair pulled back in a prim bun, a tight pencil skirt running over her curves.

Fuck, she's going to be the death of me.

"I'm not sure that's great for dinner conversation with your dad. 'Oh, by the way, your son's cum is running down my legs.'"

"I don't see a problem with that," I tell her innocently as I unbutton my jeans and stroke my length root to tip. Her gaze flicks from my hand to my face, like she's not sure which one she likes better.

I feel the same way...I can't decide what I want to fuck first. Those perfect lips, or that cunt that takes me so perfectly.

I want that ass too. But that can wait for another day.

I sink to my knees in front of her, pushing up her skirt as I do so. Her breath is coming out in gasps as she stares at me, a faint flush to her cheeks that tells me she's just as turned on as I am.

I lick the dampened silk between her thighs, and she moans as I push her panties aside and trace my tongue through her folds, spearing it into her slit, taking in the delicious scent of her.

I'm so gone for this girl. I'll never get enough. I groan as I lick and suck, massaging her clit as my fingers scissor into her. I could do this for hours... for days...I'll never be tired of it.

Her core spasms around her fingers as she comes, and I give her one more long lick, trying to capture every drop of her essence.

It's my favorite thing. And it's only gotten better over time. I swear she's the best thing I've ever tasted, and it's all I can do to rise off my knees so my aching cock can get some relief.

I slide my dick through the soft heat of her sex, brushing against her clit. I watch her obsessively, like a man possessed, looking for every cue I can get to make sure that it's the best experience possible. I push up her shirt, needing to get to those hot as fuck breasts. I take her nipple into my mouth, sucking and licking at her rosy tip so she's shuddering against me.

I should probably wonder how much of the restaurant can hear her cries, but I can't get myself to care that much. I half-heartedly place my hand over her mouth though, knowing that while I won't care—she will. At least once she's past the orgasmic haze.

I leave her breasts wet and red from my tongue and teeth and then I push into her, inch by inch, until we're completely sheathed together. It feels so fucking good.

For a second, I can't think, I can't breathe...all I can do is feel.

"You are mine," I growl. I don't think she understands how serious I am with that statement, but she'll understand in time.

My fingers dig into her soft flesh as I lean back, watching my cock spread her open as I make little thrusts inside her.

A helpless noise leaves her throat, and I tremble as she clenches around me.

"So hot and tight around my cock, sweetheart." My eyes close as I try to regain my composure, wanting this to last as long as possible...even with our family right outside.

When the chaos inside me has settled a little, I open my eyes, watching her closely as I pull out and thrust back in.

Her eyes are half lidded, her lips parted as she stares up at me. She's making those sexy little noises that never cease to drive me crazy. Her hands grip the back of my neck, pulling me to her chest. I catch her nipple in my mouth, suckling and drawing it in with long hard pulls as I fuck into her.

Fuck, she's literally strangling my cock.

"Yes, yes, yes," she pleads, her sweet voice needy and fueling me on. I give her nipple a parting nip and then I fist her hair, claiming her lips in a hungry kiss. My tongue dives in, licking her mouth in time with my hips.

"Come on, sweetheart. Come on my cock," I breathe into her mouth.

"Harder, Noah."

I pull her close, thrusting deep in a pulsing rhythm as she whimpers. Her nails dig into my skin and I welcome the bites of pain, because when she leaves a mark, it can remind me where I've been.

Home.

"Noah," she cries out as her body starts to shake, her perfect cunt milking me relentlessly.

I come with her as her pussy clamps down tight. It's a high I'll never recover from, and I hope she never recovers too. While I work on her heart, I'm going to make sure that her body is as addicted to mine as mine is to hers.

I fucking love Skyler Ames. And I'll love her, forever.

* * *

"What is it with you and this bathroom?" she teases as I pull out with a low groan and tuck myself back in.

I huff out a laugh.

I wish I hadn't left my phone at the table. I want to capture how she looks right now, her cheeks flushed, her hair fallen out of her bun in sexy, messy waves around her beautiful face, her lips swollen from my rough kisses. She covers her breasts and I immediately miss the sight of them...as ridiculous as that sounds.

"Great, I have to walk around with wet underwear for the rest of the day," she complains as she grabs a paper towel, wets it in the sink, and then wipes between her legs.

"Give them here," I demand, snatching her panties from her hand and pocketing them away to be added to my treasure trove of favorite mementos of my girl. "Next time don't wear any. Problem solved." I grin, already thinking about the next time I can get her alone.

She rolls her eyes, but there's a small smile on her lips.

"Okay, you go out first," she orders, pushing me gently towards the door.

It's going to look suspicious as fuck either way, but what can you do?

I unlock the door, a little disappointed there's no line waiting outside, no witnesses to our little rendezvous. I want everyone to know that she's mine, but I guess I can be a little more patient. I've waited this long, after all.

I slip to the table and Daisy shakes her head, wide-eyed. Glancing down at my phone, I see that we were in the bathroom for at least twenty minutes...

whoops.

"Are you two serious?" she hisses in my ear, and I just give her an unrepentant smile, because those were some of the best twenty minutes of my life.

"Everything okay, son?" Curt asks, staring at me suspiciously.

"Yep, everything's fine."

My fingers drum on the table while I wait for Skylar to return.

After what seems like forever, she finally does. She's managed to smooth down her hair a little bit more, and put it into a clip, so she doesn't look like she's just been fucked hard.

I'm incredibly disappointed by that.

She won't look at me as she sits at the table.

"Was there a long line?" her mother asks, and Sky can't help but blush.

"I just got a call from my editor," she says after a second.

Little liar.

I'm still grinning at her, and she finally glances at me, her cheeks darkening even more by the smile on my face.

The waiter returns with the food, and although he still tries to flirt with her as he sets down the plates, I'm not quite as annoyed by it.

Because now I know my cum really is dripping down her thighs as she sits there and talks to him.

Daisy leans over while our parents are distracted. "On the phone with your editor, huh?" she teases.

"Yep," Sky reaffirms, pretending to flick imaginary lint off her shoulder.

"What she'd do, call you by payphone? Your cell was sitting on the table the entire time."

Sky's eyes grow wide and frantic. She stabs at her salad, shoveling a huge bite of lettuce into her mouth so she doesn't have to respond.

Daisy beams, throwing me a complicit smirk and a knowing wink to boot. If I didn't already fucking adore my stepsister before, I do more now, seeing as she doesn't seem upset about this new development in the least. Then again, Daisy had a front row seat to my goddamn misery for the past seven years. Even though she's repeatedly reminded me that I was the one who fucked up, I know she wants to see me happy.

But most importantly, she wants Sky to be happy.

Unfortunately for me, rocking her world in the bathroom didn't have the effect I wanted since Sky becomes awfully quiet for the rest of the meal,

while the rest of the table chats.

Once our meal is over and done with, we walk outside under the hot sun, and I tangle my hands with Skylar's, not giving a fuck who sees. I just need to touch her, keep her by my side.

My tense muscles instantly relax when she doesn't pull her hand away, and instead tightens her hold on me.

It's amazing how the world seems to have changed now that she's let me at least a little back in. The sky seems brighter, the sun more intense. The colors are exaggerated, like some kind of Disney movie. It's all because the thick fog of sadness that I've lived with all these years has finally started to lift.

I can't imagine what the world's gonna look like when she lets me all the way in.

I'm a fucking simp, and I couldn't care less. I sneak a kiss on her cheek and she gives me a cute, chastising glare. I just smile at her gleefully, emotion stirring inside me when I see her look soften.

I'll make you so happy, I promise.

After all these years, I kind of believe it. I never thought that I was good enough for Skylar. And that's still a universal truth.

But I also know that my girl's been miserable all these years too, and maybe, it's because I'm the only one for some reason that can make her happy.

Or at least that's the mantra I'm going with.

Whether it's true or not, it's going to be *my* truth from here on out.

And I'm going to spend the rest of the day trying to do just that.

Chapter Nineteen

Skylar



“We really should do something about this hair. Maybe after I come back from Daisy’s bachelorette party tonight, I’ll give it the cut it deserves,” I coo, running my fingers through Noah’s long locks, as his head remains perfectly nestled on top of my bare chest. “I doubt the Monroes would appreciate you showing up at the wedding with this lion’s mane. Not exactly wedding album material.”

“I could care less what they think, but if you don’t like it, then why wait for tonight? Maybe after today’s race, you can give me a cut,” he drawls, kissing the swell of my breast. “I’m good with whatever you want.”

I try to ignore the warmth that spreads over my body with how willing he is to submit to anything I ask.

Truth be told, I love Noah’s hair just the way it is. Wild and free, just like him.

It reminds me of better days.

It reminds me of a life I thought I’d have.

“Speaking of the race,” I gruffly choke out, needing to move our conversation onto a safer topic than his hair, “shouldn’t you have left by now? I’m sure there are many things you need to do to prepare for such a big event.”

“All taken care of.” I feel him smile onto my skin. “I’d rather spend the last few hours I have in bed with you than anywhere else.”

That stupid warm feeling spreads through every limb in my body again, making sure to tug at my heartstrings. So much so, that I start to shift from under him, preparing myself to make a quick getaway before my heart begins to believe things that aren’t there.

“I will not be responsible for you losing this race because you preferred to have a lazy morning in bed. Derrick would kill me,” I joke, but Noah is having none of it, lifting himself just enough to plant his palms on each side of my face on the pillow, trapping me with his strong masculine body as it hovers over mine.

“Don’t even think about it. You’re not going anywhere.” He throws me a mischievous smile. “Not until I get my fill.”

“And when will that happen?” I ask, my breath hitching when I feel his hard length press up against my sensitive clit.

“Never,” he whispers so softly I almost miss it.

Before I’m able to say anything in return, he flips us over on his bed, until I’m straddling his waist.

“Enough talk, little stalker. If you’re really concerned about me winning today’s race, then be a good girl and put me inside you. I want you to ride my cock until you see God himself. That’s the only way either one of us is getting out of this bed this morning.”

“Always with the orders,” I taunt, snaking my hand in between his thighs and wrapping my hand around his girth. The way he hisses with just my delicate fingers around him emboldens me further, giving it a little squeeze.

“Fuck. Enough fucking foreplay, baby. Just show me what you’ve got.”

This I can handle.

This type of carnal banter.

It’s astounding how easy it is for me to share my body with this man, feel as if I was born for it even, but whenever we get close to talking about feelings, my knee jerk reaction is to run the other way.

“Sky,” he starts to pant as my hand strokes his hard cock up and down my slit, just prolonging his agony.

“Yes?” I feign ignorance, knowing full well the effect I’m having on him.

His eyes squint in pain, as his fingers dig into my flesh with each stroke of his cock. It’s such an euphoric feeling, having this much power over him, that instead of showing him the mercy that he so craves, I begin to kiss his hard abs and shimmy down his body until I’m face to face with his engorged cock.

Noah lets go of his grip on me, preferring to bite on his fisted knuckles as my tongue swipes the precum off his head. The salty sweetness bursts along my taste buds, making me ravenous for more. I hear him punching the mattress as my lips wrap themselves around him and suck him in until I feel

his crown hit the back of my throat.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Sky. You’re killing me,” he moans, lifting his waist to meet my tempo.

I smile inwardly at the compliment, but my own lust for him begins to take charge as he pounds into me. Noah threads his fingers in my hair, keeping me exactly where he wants me, ruthlessly fucking my mouth until I’m withering with need, my pussy feeling devastatingly empty without him.

“Baby, if you don’t want me to come in your mouth, then you have exactly five seconds to put me inside you,” he forewarns gruffly.

I take him at his word, plopping his cock out of my mouth and quickly positioning myself until his cock is teasing my breach. I stare at his face, so tragically beautiful and vulnerable, as I sink myself to the hilt, both of us letting out loud groans as my pussy strangles his cock. I begin to rock myself on him, slowly at first, needing to prolong this sweet torture, loving the sound of the soft moans that slip out of his mouth.

“Is this what you had in mind?” I whisper breathlessly, my nails biting into his abs as I use his chest to keep my balance.

“Fuck, yes,” he grunts, unable to keep his cool composure.

My own breathing comes out in spurts as I ride his cock like a woman starved. Instead of using my words to show him how he makes me feel inside, I offer up my body as sacrifice instead. My rhythm increases as I drive myself up and down his cock, loving how he’s able to fill the emptiness that dwells inside my soul. His gaze burns into me, his mouth parted open as if needing me to kiss his suffering away. Without a second thought, I submit to his silent request and lean down, Noah quickly grabbing the back of my neck so he can crash his lips to mine.

We get lost in our passionate kiss as our joined bodies continue to sing their song.

“Tell me I’m not dreaming,” he begs in between kisses and thrusts. “Tell me you’re really here. That I’m not alone in this.”

I swallow up my replies, unable to give him what he wants, but in my head, I tell him everything he longs to hear.

You’re not dreaming, Noah.

I’m really here.

You’re not alone in this.

Instead, I lean back and break our kiss, planting my hands on his chest as I jump on his cock with reckless abandon.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he praises. “A fucking dream.”

And when I feel his thumb lightly caress my clit, a flicker of white light begins to crest my vision, my mouth gaping open as I let its blinding warmth spread throughout me.

“That’s my girl. That’s it, baby. Look at you come on my cock. Fuck, but you’re beautiful,” he continues to worship, slamming himself inside me so viciously that my orgasm topples over, giving way to another.

“Oh, my god!”

“That’s it. Shit. Just like that,” he taunts, hitting the walls inside me in a way that has me losing my mind.

“Noah!” I scream out, uncaring who may hear, too overcome with the sensation that is taking over my body and mind. Pure unadulterated ecstasy runs through my veins as I let this orgasm heal wounds I thought could never mend.

“Sky,” he chokes as he follows me off the cliff’s edge, increasing my euphoric state.

It takes me a while to come back to earth and force my eyes to open, but when I do, I see droplets of blood on his chest, caused by my nails digging into his flesh.

“You’re bleeding,” I gasp in horror.

“Consider them battle wounds,” he teases lightheartedly, his face soft and loving. “Scars that I’ll treasure forever.”

My forehead wrinkles, not happy that I’ve made him bleed.

“What’s that face?” he asks, running his knuckles softly on my cheek.

“I’m not sure if it’s a good omen to have you bleed before a big race.” I chew on my bottom lip.

“Careful there, Sky. You’d think you were worried about me.” He smirks.

I roll my eyes and slap his chest, pretending that could never be the case.

But I am worried.

There are a myriad of things that can go wrong in a race like this. I’m no expert, of course, but anything to do with the water heightens my apprehension.

“None of that,” he says softly. “You can’t look worried for me when my cock is still inside of you. It will only encourage it to fuck you again.”

The tension in my shoulders relaxes at his attempt to lighten the mood.

“I’m sorry. I don’t think you were paying attention. If I’m not mistaken, I fucked you. Not the other way around.”

“My deepest apologies,” he feigns chivalry. “What type of poor excuse of a man would I be if I didn’t return the favor?”

He flips me over on my back and gives me that blinding smile of his that screams out love and happiness.

“Stop.” I giggle as he begins to pepper kisses all along my body until he’s right at my apex. “You don’t have time for this. You have a race to win, remember?”

“The Royal Shank will just have to wait. This takes priority.” He grins, his head falling in between my thighs.

“Royal Shank... What a peculiar name to give a boat,” I moan out when his tongue flicks my clit.

“It’s an anagram,” he unknowingly admits, too wrapped up in lapping my pussy clean with his tongue to realize the lapse he’s made.

“Anagram? Anagram of what?” I whimper, but Noah’s mouth is just too busy eating me out to pay me any mind.

It’s only after he’s successfully rocked my world and has left for his Labor Day boat race that the jumbled letters begin to take form.

Skylar & Noah.

The Royal Shank is an anagram of our combined names.

The realization of that brings forth too many questions, leaving me and my feelings even more confused than they already are.

* * *

It’s one in the morning and Daisy’s bachelorette party is still going strong. Seeing as Daisy used to work at The Scarlet Letter Café and is still regarded as one of the best employees the establishment ever had, management was all too happy to close its doors tonight to host her party.

All of Daisy’s friends from school are dancing their asses off, drunk with glee that their friend is finally going to tie the knot with Thatcher’s Bay’s most beloved son. Unlike her bridal shower, the festively uninhibited environment is more my sister’s speed. I’ve seen more dildos and penis paraphernalia tonight to last me a lifetime. But Daisy is having such a fun time, that I don’t have the heart to slip away and go home like I want to, knowing that Noah is counting down the minutes for my return.

The least I can do is send him a text not to wait up for me. If Daisy has it

her way, this bachelorette party is sure to last until dawn.

“Just where do you think you’re running off to?” she asks with an ear-to-ear grin when she catches me trying to sneak off the dance floor just so I can text Noah.

“Just going outside for a breath of fresh air. It’s too hot in here. I’ll be back in a jiff,” I promise her.

“Want me to go with you?”

“No.” I smile back. “You just keep having fun. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Okay, babe.” She smiles, continuing to dance the night away with her friends.

I swerve my way through the crowd and let out a relieved exhale when I finally manage to step outside, the cool sea breeze kissing my cheeks and cooling me down. But my relief is short-lived when I see someone else had the same idea of getting a few moments to herself and some fresh air.

“You’re still here. Thought you’d be gone by now,” Stacy stammers when she sees me, and I can smell from her breath that she’s had a few too many vodka cranberries.

“Sorry to disappoint.” I scowl. “I know how badly you want to see me gone.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

To her credit, Stacy looks somewhat ashamed of my accusation. Doesn’t make it any less true though. But as the awkward silence between us lingers, I start to become uncomfortable with the way she just stands there...staring at me.

“Well, I would say it was nice bumping into you, but we both know I’d be lying,” I say dryly, turning my back to go back inside.

“Enough, Skylar,” she belts out before I’ve taken a step.

“Enough?” I turn to her with a raised eyebrow. “You don’t get to tell me when it’s enough.”

Her cheeks turn red, and the familiar disdain that she showered me with back in high school comes tumbling through those deep emerald eyes of hers.

“I never did like you,” she admits with a slur.

“Likewise,” I retort, crossing my arms over my chest.

“You probably don’t even know why I didn’t like you.”

“I can take a wild guess.” I throw her a mocking grin.

“You’re right. I never gave you a chance because of Noah.” She shrugs unapologetically, admitting what we’ve both known all our lives. “The way he looked at you back then...I knew you were trouble.” I keep my mouth shut, not willing to take the bait. “You were different than the others. I knew it the first time I saw you. You were different.”

“Guess I must not have been if he cheated on me with you. But then again, you probably had more experience on that front that I had. Once a cheater, always a cheater, isn’t that how the saying goes?” I sneer at her.

She stares me down for a beat, and then shocks the living daylights out of me when her head falls back in a cackle.

“God, you’re clueless. You think Noah cheated on me? Never, Skylar. He’d never do that to me. Anytime he hooked up with some rando, we were never together. Aside from a kiss *you* stole from him at my pool party junior year—which he told me about the minute it happened—Noah always made sure to respect me by staying loyal.”

“Well, congratulations. Apparently, I wasn’t as deserving.”

But just as the words are out of my mouth, I see her flinch, guilt written on her forehead. She starts looking up and down the street as if she’s suddenly afraid to be seen with me. And when she grabs onto my wrist and pulls me into a dark alleyway, all my hackles rise.

“Let me go, Stacy, or I swear to God, I’ll claw your eyes out,” I warn through gritted teeth.

If Stacy Monroe is too drunk off her rocker to believe I won’t slap the bitch, she’s got another thing coming.

“He’s going to hate me for this, but I can’t live like this anymore,” she mutters under her breath, letting go of my wrist.

“Who’s going to hate you?” I ask, puzzled by this weird turn in our conversation.

“I wanted to tell you back on that day at the Farmer’s market. I had gathered up all my courage to confront you, but to my shame, I chickened out. Deep down, I knew he wouldn’t allow it,” she states frantically.

“Who wouldn’t allow it? What are you talking about, Stacy?” I almost shout, nervous energy running through me.

“Noah. I’m talking about Noah.”

I take a step back away from her, as if his name uttered by her lips puts the fear of God into me.

“You know what? I don’t want to know. Whatever game you’re trying to

pull won't work. I'm not that stupid girl anymore. Go and play with someone else. I'm done here," I tell her, needing to get as much distance as I can from this snake.

"Wait, Skylar. You need to hear this," she pleads frantically.

I shake my head with my hands up.

"Whatever you have to say to me, I don't want to hear it. Especially if it has to do with him."

"Stop being so goddamn pig-headed and give me a second to explain. Believe me when I say you are going to want to hear every word."

It's my curiosity more than anything that has me rooted to the spot, wondering what Stacy could possibly have up her sleeve. No matter how much she's trying to portray that she's changed, I'm not buying it. So it's with a grain of salt that I listen attentively to whatever gibberish she's about to lay on me.

"Before that night," she starts hesitantly, referring to the night she ruined my happiness, "Noah was spending a lot of time at my house, talking shit through with Derrick. He didn't know it, but I eavesdropped on them both any chance I could get."

"Classy," I reprimand, hating that I was guilty of doing the same all my life.

"I'm not proud of it, but it was the only way I could think of to still feel like I was part of Noah's life. By then, I had already lost his heart, but I thought that maybe there was a way I could still keep him as a friend. Only years later did I realize his heart was never mine to begin with. Still, at the time, I didn't know any better. I needed Noah in my life, no matter what."

"I'm failing to see how this is any of my business, Stacy," I state flatly.

"Give me a second, will you? It's hard enough having to admit what a shitty person I was back in the day without your scrutinizing commentary."

"If you want absolution, find yourself a priest, Stacy. You'll get none from me."

"I don't expect any from you." She lets out a solemn sigh. "I don't care if you hate me. I don't even care if after I tell you the truth, you do nothing about it. I just want to be someone my son can look up to. And that will never happen if I don't at least try to right the wrongs I've done in my life."

As much as I hate the woman staring me in the eye, I hear the truth in her words. Apparently, motherhood has done a number on Stacy, forcing her to reflect on everything she's done. It takes courage to admit when you're

wrong. It takes even more courage to face the people you've hurt. That is the only reason why I don't leave and stay firmly to my spot to listen to all she has to say.

That and the fact that whatever is weighing on her soul has to do with Noah.

"Anyway, one night I heard Noah tell Derrick about his family's money problems. How his mother's hospital bills were still draining their resources. That didn't surprise me though. I suspected as much when Noah insisted that my brother sign him in on any drag race or underground fight Derrick was organizing. Money was always a sensitive topic with Noah, so I never broached it with him, but I heard it in his voice how concerned he was that he'd never be able to pay it off no matter how hard he and his father tried."

I don't add anything to her statement, since she was apparently more in tune with Noah's hardships at the time than I was. It's always been a sore spot for me how I had no clue what was happening under my own roof. I was so happy living in my bubble that I didn't see the signs of how my family was struggling financially. I thought it was normal for Curt never to have a day off, always out at sea whenever possible. I never questioned why my mother sometimes needed to work double shifts, or how Daisy was always complaining about how broke she was, even when she was working her ass off waiting tables.

I just thought it was the normal everyday struggles of any family living in Thatcher's Bay.

How wrong I had been.

"And then Noah confessed something else to my brother—how proud he was that you had gotten a full ride to Dartmouth—" she starts to say, but I quickly stop her before she says another word.

"Wait? What?" I interject, confused. "That never happened, Stacy. Noah didn't know about my grant. I didn't tell anyone," I call her out on her lie.

"You didn't, but your mother found out and told Noah about it," she explains, guilt-ridden.

"That's a lie, Stacy. A fucking awful lie." I shake my head, not wanting to let her lies sink into my brain.

"Look at me, Skylar. I'm not lying," she says steadfastly. "Your mom did tell Noah about the grant and how you had kept that news from them, telling everyone you didn't get in much less get a full ride. They knew the only reason why you would have kept the truth from everyone was because you

were going to turn it down just to stay in Thatcher's Bay. Just to stay with Noah."

"I...I..." I stammer, wide-eyed and frantic.

It's true.

I didn't tell anyone about the grant, not even Daisy, because it killed me just thinking about leaving Noah. I couldn't do it. I loved him too much. He was my world. Dartmouth had nothing on him.

"I think I need to sit down," I stutter, feeling like the rug has just been yanked from underneath me.

"Come with me," Stacy urges, pulling her car keys out of her pocket and pointing to a brand-new silver hybrid parked on the other side of the street.

I don't fight her on this, and walk across the street with her, slipping into her car, doing my very best not to lose my shit.

"Are you okay?" she asks worriedly.

"Just fucking tell me the rest. Just tell me..." I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying as best I can to keep my wits about me. "Just tell me all of it."

When she grows quiet, I have to grab her hand and look her in the eye to force her not to stop now.

"All of it, Stacy. Don't fucking keep anything from me now. You owe me that much."

She gives me a clipped nod and takes a deep breath, as if needing to muster all her courage to continue.

"Noah knew you'd never leave him willingly. He knew the only way he could get you to leave Thatcher's Bay was if he hurt you. He just didn't have the courage or will to do it. That's when I came into the picture and offered him the help he longed for."

"Right," I rebuke sardonically, imagining how eager she was to have a hand in ruining me.

"Like I said, I'm not proud of my actions, but at the time, you and your feelings were the last thing on my mind. I thought I'd be doing myself a favor. That if I got rid of you, then Noah would come back to me. How stupid I had been. I guess I was just as clueless to the truth as you were," she laments.

"Stacy—" I grind my teeth, needing her to continue on with her tale instead of explaining how little she cared for me. I got the memo just fine back in high school. I don't need a reminder.

"Right... sorry," Stacy hiccups with a sheepish grin, reminding me that

she's two sheets to the wind. "Where was I?"

"You were just telling me how you offered Noah your gracious help to get rid of me," I seethe.

"Oh, right. Well, that turned into a shitshow right quick, didn't it?" She blinks apprehensively, and I can tell she's rethinking having invited me into her car, worried that I might hit her or something.

"I'm not going to hit you. We're adults, for crying out loud," I tell her in the hopes to ease her concerns.

When before I wasn't above kicking Stacy's ass for her part in tragically ruining my life, now it feels pointless.

"You know what they say?" She tries to lighten the tension between us. "You can take the girl out of Thatcher's Bay but not Thatcher's Bay out of the girl."

Tell me about it.

"We don't have all night, Stacy. Out with it." I snap my fingers in her face to sober her up just enough to keep her talking.

"Right. So we set off on concocting a plan. One that would make sure you took your one shot out of Thatcher's Bay and never looked back. I planned a party and invited anyone I could think of so our plan would look legit. Noah made sure to arrive early and began to drink his weight in alcohol, hoping that it would give him liquid courage to do what had to be done."

"To sleep with you, you mean. That was your big plan, right? Me catching you two in the act," I end her thought process for her. "Bravo. You played your part beautifully in ruining my life."

"Trust me, it was no picnic for me either. Can you imagine how humiliating it was for me to do that? To act like I was okay and that it didn't hurt me to know that Noah would move heaven and earth to make sure the girl he was actually in love with could have a chance at a better life than the one he could offer her?" Stacy defends ardently.

"Don't talk to me about sacrifice." I scoff.

"Why not? I made mine for the boy I thought I loved. Noah made his for the girl he *did* love. What did *you* do? You ran. You ran away, Skylar. It didn't even occur to you that it was all for show. It's like you didn't know him at all. Noah isn't a cheater. He would never cheat on anyone. Especially you." She shakes her head, looking me dead in the eye like she can't believe how stupid I am.

“It was all a lie? You didn’t...” I stammer, not believing what I’m hearing.

“Sleep together?” She shakes her head. “Noah never touched me. You saw what you needed to see that night. That was all.”

“You’re lying! You have to be!” I shout, trying to make sense of everything she is telling me. “That night you told me you paid off his mother’s hospital bills, and I know you did, because any time I tried to help Curt or my mom out over the years, they told me they didn’t need it. That they were financially stable.”

Hadn’t that been the reason why I was keen on believing Noah had chosen Stacy over me?

Because she could offer him money when all I could give him was my heart?

“That part was true,” she explains, slumping her shoulders back to her seat. “Derrick and I did dip into our trust fund to help Noah out and clear your family’s debt. My father wasn’t too happy about it, but both Derrick and I felt it was the right thing to do. Of course, Noah never did like handouts, so he only accepted our money under the strict condition that it was an interest free loan. Over the last seven years, he’s worked hard to pay us back every last dime, which he has. Every bit of it. I donated my share to Falmouth Hospital and their hospice ward where Annabelle lived her last days. And while I’m not sure what my brother did with his share, I’m pretty certain he used it to buy Noah his monohull—the Royal Shank—so he could also live out his own dream.”

Gobsmacked, I just sit there in the dark, taking in every word of her confession, unable to move or say anything.

It was all a lie.

My life was completely altered and irreparably scarred because of one lie.

“You’re quiet. It’s very unnerving,” Stacy says after a few minutes have passed in total silence.

“Believe me, my silence is your friend right now. You don’t want to hear all the shit that’s running through my mind at the moment.”

“What are you going to do?” she asks worriedly.

What am I going to do?

Guess there’s only one thing I can do.

“First, I’m going to drive you back to your place since you’re too drunk to drive, and then you’re going to let me borrow your car so I can go home.”

It's time Noah Fontaine and I had a very serious conversation.

Chapter Twenty

Noah



I smile at my reflection in the bathroom mirror as I rake my fingers through the short ends of my hair. It's going to take me a minute to get used to this new cut since the last time I had it this short I was still a lovestruck teenager—though if I really think about it, not much has changed since then.

Deep down, I knew if I ever cut it off again, it would need to be by her hand and no one else's.

As I watched my hair fall to the floor of my loft earlier this afternoon, it felt like Sky was finally giving me permission to let go of our past. With each precise cut of the scissor, she began to heal the cracks of my soul, making sure to bind it to hers.

It feels like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

To let go of all that pain, all that agony I had been carrying with me for these last few years, feels optimistically like a new start. Like there is still hope for us. Hope for a new beginning.

I turn off the bathroom light and hurriedly tread into my room, picking up my phone off my bedside table just to see if there are any texts from my girl. I can't help but feel a pang of disappointment when there's nothing there.

It's close to two in the morning and still no sign of Sky.

I tell myself that she's probably having too much fun over at Daisy's bachelorette party and must have lost track of time. That I shouldn't take it personally, and that I should be happy she's enjoying herself. If by chance she doesn't make her way into my bed tonight, I shouldn't read too much into it.

I've spent many nights alone in my bed, after all.

One more won't kill me.

But as I slip under the sheets, I can't help but hate how cold my bed feels without her in it. How empty and hollow it is without her warm body pressed up against mine. Her cherry blossom perfume clings to the pillowcase beside me, making me inhale her sweet scent, hoping it's enough to ease the melancholy her absence always seems to provide.

Yeah.

I'm not going to be able to sleep a wink tonight.

Not without her anyway.

This last month or so that we've been sharing the same bed has spoiled me, and now I'm addicted to falling asleep with the sound of her soft breathing in my ear. The day could have been shit for all I care. I'd still be wearing a fucking smile on my lips knowing that I'd end the day with her in my arms. Just knowing that I had Sky to come home to made all the difference. I don't think I've been in a foul mood since she started creeping into my bed at night, leaving only when the sun was high in the sky.

And by Clara and my father's not so discreet glances towards us over the breakfast table, they know exactly what we've been up to in my loft. I was sure my father would say something to the sound of not messing around with my stepsister, but if he has any reservations about it, he's kept his opinions to himself. Maybe Clara has finally gathered the courage to tell him about our sordid past. Or maybe he's known all along. I can't be sure since my father can be very hard to read at times.

Still...I hope he's on board, because there is nothing and no one that will tear me away from the woman I love again.

My thoughts are interrupted, though, when I hear the sound of a car engine driving up the driveway, alerting me to someone's arrival home.

Sky.

Ever so eagerly, I jump out of bed and run towards my door, ecstatic to welcome my girl back home, only to find Sky getting out of none other than Stacy Monroe's car.

Shit.

This can't be good.

My muscles tense up as I watch Sky slam the car door shut with such force, I'm surprised it doesn't wake up the whole neighborhood, much less our parents. I swallow dryly as her penetrating gaze pierces me to the spot, as she slowly walks up the flight of stairs towards me.

I don't so much as move as I watch her take one step at a time, anger mixed with hurt coating her beautiful gray eyes. My chest tightens when I see that her armor is also fully on display, letting me know that whatever happened tonight was enough to undo all the work we've accomplished.

Fuck.

"Rough night?" I ask when she finally takes the last step.

She cuts her eyes at me and marches inside, her anger so palpable I almost choke on it.

I take a fortifying breath and gently close the door behind her, not sure if it's the wisest thing for me to do, considering Sky looks like she'd rather murder me than talk to me.

I cross my arms over my chest, inwardly preparing myself for more heartbreak. It's so fucking clear in her gaze how she's about to end me, right here and now. I was a fool to have believed the past wouldn't rear its ugly head and destroy everything we were just starting to build.

What the fuck could have happened with Stacy tonight for Sky to be like this?

But just as the question pops into my brain, so does its chilling answer.

She knows.

"Sky—" On instinct, I open my stupid mouth to justify my actions, but my girl holds out a menacing finger at me, stopping the words from coming out.

"No. You don't get to talk right now. Not yet."

She begins to frantically pace the floor, left and right, as if trying to get a hold of her anger long enough to have a conversation with me. Reluctantly, I leave her to it, even though with each second that passes by, my fear and apprehension hike up to skyscraper heights.

I can't lose her again.

I fucking can't.

I won't survive it this time.

I'm watching my whole world begin to crumble around me, and only Sky holds the power to stop it from completely withering away.

As if she knows I'm close to losing it, she stops in the middle of her tracks and faces me head on.

"Is it true?"

My knee jerk reaction is to open my mouth to give her some wisecrack comment or tell her I have no idea what she's talking about since I'm not a

mind reader. But my heart won't let me do it. We've both suffered enough with our lies and evasions of the truth. One of us needs to be brave now, and it might as well be me since I'm responsible for all the anguish she's currently suffering.

"Yes."

Her eyes instantly well up with tears, but her expression remains as lethal as ever.

"You're not even going to ask me what I'm referring to? Or how I know?"

"No."

The loud scoff she lets out feels like tiny paper cuts slung at my soul.

"You really are something," she says, nostrils flaring. "I thought for sure you'd deny it. That maybe you'd even try to defend your actions. But here you are. Head held high like it doesn't affect you in any way."

"You want the truth, then I'll give it to you, Sky. All you need to do is ask. But don't assume you know how I'm feeling right now. You have no idea," I tell her in earnest.

"Fine." She throws her hands up in the air. "Tell me then. I want to hear it from your mouth how you viciously set out to destroy me. How you planned and plotted the perfect way to hurt me. How you made sure that, because of you, I'd never have a normal relationship again. Because of you, I'm damaged goods now, unable to open myself up to love even when it was within my very grasp. Because in the back of my mind, I could never truly trust my instincts since they had so miserably failed me with you."

With two large strides, I eat the distance between us, making Sky have to take two steps back to keep me at arm's length. I bite into my cheek but make no move to get closer.

"If you're referring to that goodie two-shoes of a boyfriend, Gael, then you know as well as I do, that I'm not the reason you were never able to fall in love with him. You can't give your heart to someone when it already belongs to someone else."

I try not to flinch with the way she stares daggers into me. Her rage is so evidently clear, it's all I'm able to cope with right now, placing my own suffering on the back burner.

"I'll tell you all that you want to know, if you answer me this one question. Why did you lie to me about Dartmouth? Why did you let us all believe that they turned you down? Answer me that, Sky? You want the truth,

then by God, I'll give it to you. Just know you can't lie to me either."

Sky takes another few steps back, turning her head to the side so she doesn't have to confront her part in her own tragic past.

"No. You don't get to do that. You don't get to use my actions to defend yours. No." She shakes her head, her entire body trembling with rage and grief.

"Fuck, Sky. This is it. This is the moment where we can be honest for once. Don't hide from this. Let's confront it. Together. That's the only way we're going to make it."

"Make it?! Make it?!" she repeats, wide-eyed and astounded. "Do you honestly believe we can recover from this? That there is even an *us* to save?"

"Yes!" I shout out just as ardently. "Because we're no longer those scared kids we used to be. Because we've learned from our mistakes. Because we deserve some fucking happiness in our lives after all the shit we went through."

Sky grows eerily quiet, her silent tears the only testament to her pain.

"Just tell me what you need me to do? Do you want me to grovel? I'll do that and more if I have to. Do you want me to say I'm sorry, then yes, I'm fucking sorry how I went about it. I wish I had found another way back then to force you to take that grant and follow your dreams. Tell me what to do and I'll do it. But don't stand there with accusation in your eyes when all I tried to do was give you a better future. A future I could never give you in a million years, even if I wanted to."

"You took my choice away," she quickly retorts. "I'll never forgive you for that."

"But that's where you're wrong. You see it as a choice, when in reality, there wasn't much of one. Tell me. What was I supposed to do, Sky? Would you rather I'd have been a selfish prick and kept you in this dead end of an island? Would you have rather given up on all your dreams to stay with me? Could you have loved me through that, or would you eventually fall out of love with me, resenting me for all the paths you didn't take? You think I stole your choice? Fuck, Sky. What choice did I have?"

"I loved you!" she shouts. "And you broke us!"

"No! Don't you dare fucking do that. Don't you dare come here demanding the truth from me only to lie to my face," I exclaim with steel resolve. "Don't say you loved me when we both know you still do. Don't say that the feelings you had for me are in the past when I can fucking taste how

your love for me still lingers on your lips. Don't say you *loved* me, Sky, when I never fucking stopped loving you. Don't...please just don't," I start to plead, manic. "Just tell me the truth. Just say what we have been skirting around all this time, pretending not to see it since the minute you came back to me. Just say that you love me. Because I fucking can't stop being in love with you. I'll never stop, Sky. Never."

The sight of every tear streaking down her face feels like a slow torturous death.

Ever so slowly, I walk over to where she is currently frozen on the spot, needing to be near her as humanly possible, as I bleed at her feet and pour my heart and soul out to her.

"I never wanted to hurt you, Sky. Believe me, the last thing I ever wanted to do was give you pain. But I didn't know how I could save us and still make sure you followed your dreams. I didn't know. I was an eighteen-year-old messed up kid who found his fucking soulmate in his stepsister and had no idea how best to love her. I thought if I did this one unselfish act that I would be okay with loving you from afar. That I'd be just fine. But I wasn't. I've never been fine, Sky. You say I broke us that night...that I broke you...well, I died that night. You, being back here, is the first time I've been alive in years. Please, don't let the pain of our past damage the future we can still have together. Please."

I'm begging.

I'm fucking begging.

And I'll beg every day of my pathetic life if I have to.

Because without her, my life has no meaning.

Without her, I'm nothing.

I've been nothing for the past seven years, and like hell I'll go back to that without putting up a fight.

"Look at me," I plead, inching close enough to softly slip my palm to her face and caress her cheek. "This is it, little stalker. This is where we need to be. I'm all in. Every part of my heart is yours and will always and forever be yours. Now you have to make a decision. Do you want the past to dictate our future, or will you be brave enough to take this leap with me? To be in this with me. You accused me of taking your choice away, well, here you have it back. You alone have the power to command how we go from here. You know where my heart is at. If I could, I'd cut the damn thing out of my chest and give it to you. Because it's yours. It will always be yours."

You have all my forevers, Sky.

All of them.

Please see that.

Please remember that.

She pulls away as if my touch physically pains her to bear for more than a few seconds.

“I can’t...I just...I can’t,” she stammers looking around the room and being bombarded by all the recent memories we made together. “I just can’t...I can’t be here right now.”

And with those cryptic words, she runs out the door, not even giving me a parting glance back.

Fuck.

She’s going to leave me.

Again.

She’s going to leave me and I’m at a loss of how I can stop her.

Like Sky earlier, I begin to pace my floor, tugging at my blond strands until I manage to pull a few out of their roots. When my gaze falls onto the empty ruffled bed, the same one that still smells of her, my heart more than reason pushes me out the door and has me running towards my childhood home. On featherlight feet, I quickly walk through the house, up the stairs, and down the hallway that leads to her bedroom. I let out a relieved exhale when I find her door open, and slide into the darkness of her room, Sky’s soft whimpered sobs splintering my heart in two as I lock the door behind me.

I wait for her to tell me to leave.

To demand I leave her alone.

But when she remains completely silent to my presence, I walk over to the empty spot in her bed and slide in against her.

“Noah—” she begins to protest as I wrap my arms around her and pull her head to nestle in my chest.

“No, Sky. If you need to hate me, then go for it. Hate me with all your heart. Curse my name and my very existence if you need to. But I’m staying right here. You need to know that I’ll never abandon you. Through the good times and the bad, I’ll be right here. Loving you. Always.”

As if my words were exactly what she needed to hear, she lets go and feels every ounce of her suffering and pain, making sure I bear witness to all of it.

She cries until there are no more tears in her to shed.

She curses me out, until her voice is too weak to utter another word.

She hates me with every breath in her being, until hate becomes too heavy a burden for her to carry alone.

And all the while, I hold onto her, as she falls apart in my embrace.

I tell her that I love her, even as I cry for what could have been.

I tell her that I'll never stop loving her, even when the future still remains unclear.

And as her pain takes its toll and lulls her to sleep in my arms, I promise never to let her go again.

That I will keep her heart safe even at the risk of mine.

Chapter Twenty-One

Skylar



I lay in bed, cocooned in darkness, my eyes fixed on the wall as if it holds all the answers to the questions that have plagued me for years. It's a cold and unforgiving space, just like the void that's taken up residence within my chest.

Seven years. Seven long, agonizing years of heartache and pain. Seven years of believing the worst about the man I loved, the man who had once been my everything.

The revelation had come crashing down on me like a tidal wave, sweeping away the fragile remnants of my trust and leaving nothing but shattered fragments in its wake. Noah hadn't cheated on me; he'd sacrificed his own happiness to ensure mine. He'd faked infidelity to push me to leave Thatcher's Bay, to pursue my dreams at Dartmouth. He'd thought it was what was best for me.

But the best intentions had paved the road to hell. The truth had left me drowning in a sea of regret and despair, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd lost something irreplaceable.

Nights spent alone, the darkness as my only confidant, had become all too familiar. I'd told Noah about some of the fun memories from college, but there were a million more that had been laced with sorrow. Where I'd chosen to spend my time alone in my room, mourning lost love rather than living. I'd been hurt, and I'd hurt others in return...all because of my heartache. Each tear that slipped down my cheeks was a testament to the hearts I'd inadvertently broken along the way, all because of Noah's lie. Regret weighed on me like a heavy shroud, and I couldn't help but dwell on the choices I'd made, the words left unspoken, and the pain I'd caused. Friends and men who

had seen something in me that I couldn't see in myself. Their love had been genuine, their affection unwavering, but I'd pushed them all away, convinced that I was doing them a favor because of the scars that Noah's lie had left behind.

All this time I'd believed that I was doing the right thing, protecting myself from the anguish of heartbreak that Noah's deceit had led me to anticipate. I'd held back, built walls around my heart, and refused to let anyone get too close. I told myself that it was self-preservation, that I was shielding myself from the inevitable pain that came with love.

But the truth was, I'd become a prisoner of my own fear, a captive to the past that haunted me.

Because of this lie, this all encompassing lie, I'd been my own worst enemy, sabotaging my chances at happiness because of the misguided belief that I was protecting myself.

I'm lost in my thoughts when I feel the bed dip beside me. My breath catches, and I turn to see Noah's familiar silhouette in the dim light. He moves closer, his arms enveloping me in a warm, reassuring embrace. His scent, so achingly familiar yet foreign after all these years, wraps around me like a lifeline.

"Sky," he murmurs, his voice a soothing whisper against my ear. "I'm so sorry."

His words are like a dagger to my heart. Sorry can't undo the past, can't mend the shattered pieces of my trust, can't erase the years of pain and loneliness.

I turn to face him, my eyes meeting his in the dim light. "Seven years, Noah," I whisper, my voice trembling with a mix of anger and despair. "Seven years we could have had together."

He doesn't offer excuses or explanations, only a heartfelt apology that hangs heavy in the air. He knows as well as I do, that no words could make amends for what has been lost.

Noah pulls me closer, his fingers gently tracing patterns on my back as if trying to ease the pain etched into my soul. "I'll wait," he says, his voice filled with unwavering determination. "However long it takes, Sky. I'll wait for you to forgive me."

His words are a balm to my wounded heart, but forgiveness feels like an impossible mountain to climb. How can I possibly forgive him for the years of heartache and longing, for the memories that have been stolen from us?

Tears continue to well up in my eyes, and I let them fall unchecked, the salty droplets mingling with the whispered promises we share in the darkness.

The weight of the truth presses down on me, each revelation carving a deeper chasm of despair in my heart. Noah just holds me, his arms an anchor in the turbulent sea of emotions that threatens to drown me. His presence offers solace, but it can't erase the years of pain and questions that have festered in my soul.

"Sky," he whispers again, his breath warm against my skin, "I never wanted to hurt you. You have to believe that. I thought I was doing what was best."

His words are like a knife twisting in my chest. Believing him is a battle, one that is waged against the ghosts of my past, the scars that run deep, and the agony of knowing how much we've lost. How much I've lost.

I pull away from him, needing space to breathe, to think, to process the torrent of emotions that rages within me. My gaze meets his, and in his eyes, I see regret, remorse, and an unyielding love that hasn't wavered, despite the years of separation.

"Believing you is not the issue," I tell him, my voice trembling with pent-up anger and sorrow. "It's what believing you entails."

Noah's face contorts in pain, as if my words are a physical blow to his heart. He reaches out to touch my cheek, his thumb brushing away the tear that has escaped my eye. "I know," he says, his voice thick with emotion. "I know what it means, and I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you, if you'll let me."

The room feels too small, too suffocating, so I rise from the bed, needing space to think. To breathe. I pad over to the window and stare out at the night, the stars glittering in the sky like distant memories.

"Seven years, Noah," I murmur, my voice barely audible. "Seven years of thinking you'd betrayed me. Seven years of wondering why. Why would you hurt me like that?"

Noah stands up and approaches me cautiously, as if I'm a wounded animal ready to bolt at any moment. He doesn't touch me, but his presence is a comforting weight at my side.

"I thought it was the only way," he admits, his voice raw with the truth. "I thought if you believed I'd cheated on you, it would be easier for you to leave Thatcher's Bay, to chase your dreams. I didn't want to be the reason you

stayed."

His words pierce my heart like a jagged knife, and I turn to face him, the pain and confusion etched into my features. "You should have let me make that choice, Noah," I say, my voice trembling. "You should have trusted me enough to make it with you."

His gaze bores into mine, a mix of sorrow and longing. "I know that now," he says, his voice heavy with regret.

The room is heavy with unspoken words, with the weight of what could have been. Forgiveness feels too distant in the horizon, one that might never come into full view. But for now, there is something else that needs to be said.

"Noah," I begin, my voice shaky, "I can't just forget the past seven years. The heartache, the loneliness, the memories we'll never get back."

He nods, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I understand, Sky. I don't expect you to forgive me overnight. But I want to make things right. I want a chance to build a future together, even if it means starting from scratch."

My heart aches at his words, the desire for a fresh start warring with the scars of the past. "I need time," I explain, my voice barely above a whisper. "I need time to heal, to figure out if I can ever trust you again."

Noah steps in closer, his fingers grazing my cheek, his touch gentle and filled with longing. "I'll wait," he promises again, like he has been over and over again since the truth came out. His voice is a solemn vow. "I'll wait as long as it takes, Sky. Just know that I love you, and I'll do whatever it takes to make things right."

The tears flow freely now, mingling with the unspoken pain and the flicker of hope that dares to ignite within me. As I gaze into Noah's eyes, I see the love and remorse that mirrors my own emotions.

As the night stretches on, Noah holds me close, knowing that the road to healing will be a long and treacherous one. But in this moment, with his arms wrapped around me and his heartbeat echoing in my ears, I allow myself to hope that maybe, just maybe, there might be a sliver of a chance that we can find our way back to each other.

* * *

Healing comes in phases, it seems. And tonight, healing has come in the form

of getting shit-faced drunk at this bar.

The bar is a dimly lit haven tucked away in a quiet corner of the town. The soft murmur of voices and the clinking of glasses create a soothing backdrop when I enter, needing to seek some kind of solace in the warm embrace of anonymity. I settle onto a vacant stool at the worn wooden bar, its surface etched with years of tales untold, and beckon to the bartender.

She appears, her eyes curious yet welcoming, as she places a coaster before me and leans in to listen to my order. "What can I get you?" she asks, her voice carrying a hint of familiarity, as though she could tell I was a newcomer.

"Just a whiskey," I reply, the words slipping from my lips as easily as the tears that had threatened to spill earlier.

The bartender pours the amber liquid into a glass, and I watch as it swirls, the refracted light dancing through it like memories long past. She slides the drink toward me, her eyes assessing, and says, "I haven't seen you around here before. New in town?"

"Not really," I murmur, not bothering to explain. I had never frequented the bars in my time in Thatcher's Bay due to being underage...and a shy little mouse. So I *would* be new in this place. And I like that.

I take a sip of the whiskey. And then another. It burns as it goes down, a welcome distraction from the ache that seems to have become a permanent fixture within my chest.

I signal to the bartender for another drink, my voice barely above a whisper as I order another round. She nods in understanding, her experienced eyes catching the glint of sorrow in mine. She pours a generous amount of amber liquid into a glass, sliding it toward me with a sympathetic smile.

As the evening wears on, the world around me starts to blur, the edges of my vision softening by the alcohol coursing through my veins. The room sways gently, and I can't help but lose myself in the comforting numbness it brings.

A stranger sidles up to me, his intentions clear in his eyes as he leans in a little too close for comfort. His words slur together as he tries to strike up a conversation.

"Hey there, beautiful," he mumbles, his alcohol-laden breath washing over me.

I squint at him. He looks like he's in his late thirties, his disheveled hair slicked back in an attempt to appear more put together than he actually is. His

unbuttoned shirt reveals a glimpse of a faded tattoo on his chest, and his scruffy beard is peppered with gray hairs. The dim lighting masks the wear and tear on his face, but his eyes bear the weight of years of regret.

As he leans in, there is a moment—a fleeting, desperate thought. A thought that maybe I could drown my sorrows in the arms of a stranger, if only for a night. It's a tempting escape from the chaos that has become my life, an opportunity to momentarily forget the pain that has gripped my heart for far too long.

But as quickly as the thought emerges, I push it away. I can't do it. I can't lose myself in someone else when I'm still hopelessly obsessed with another man. It's a mistake I've been making for seven years.

And it hasn't gotten me anywhere.

The stranger's hopeful eyes meet mine, but I can see the emptiness hidden beneath his desire. I shake my head and turn away, choosing to face the relentless loneliness rather than trade it for something even more hollow.

I turn to face him, my gaze unfocused but firm. "Go away. I'm taken. By an asshole," I spit, my words tinged with bitterness.

The stranger seems taken aback, his confidence momentarily shaken. He hesitates before shuffling away, leaving me to my thoughts and my ever-persistent solitude.

"You seem like you've got a lot on your mind," the bartender observes, coming to stand in front of me. Her gaze is steady and compassionate.

I can't help myself. The words spill forth, unburdening the weight I've carried for far too long. "It's because of him, you know. The love of my life."

Her brows furrow slightly, as though sensing the turmoil in my voice. "Tell me about it," she encourages.

I down the rest of my drink in one go, feeling the warmth and the truth surge within me. "He pushed me away," I say, my words slurred by the alcohol and the emotions that threaten to choke me. "Said it was for my own good, so I could go to school and be fucking happy, whatever that is."

The bartender nods, her expression sympathetic, and refills my glass. "Sounds like he cared about you a lot."

I scoff, bitterness seeping into my words. "I hate him," I declare, my voice trembling with anger and pain. "He let me go, let me live out my dream, but I would have stayed. I would've done anything for him."

She leans in closer, her eyes unwavering as they meet mine. "Seems to me he might have gotten the raw end of the deal. You're out there in the big

world...he's left home pining over you," she suggests softly. "Sometimes, people make sacrifices because they believe it's the right thing to do, even if it tears them apart inside."

I shake my head, the tears I'd held back for too long now escaping, tracing salty trails down my cheeks. "It doesn't matter," I whisper, the words choked by the sobs that wrack my body. "I can't go back. It's too late."

The bartender reaches across the bar and places a gentle hand on my shoulder, a silent gesture of comfort. "It's never too late," she says, her voice tender. "Life has a funny way of bringing people back together when the time is right."

She goes to help another patron, leaving me with her words dancing around in my head.

As the minutes tick by, I continue to nurse my whiskey, the amber liquid providing a temporary escape from the torment of my thoughts. The bartender comes back and is currently trying to cajole me into drinking some water.

I'm having none of it though.

"Why'd he do it?" I slur, my words heavy with frustration. "Why did he let me go?"

She leans in closer, her voice gentle. "Sometimes, people make choices they believe are for the best, even if it hurts them in the process."

My head spins with a mixture of alcohol and emotion, and I slam my glass down onto the bar. "But it wasn't his choice to make!" I protest, my voice rising. "He had no right to decide what was best for me."

The bartender sighs, as if she'd heard this story a hundred times before. "Love can be messy," she admits. "Sometimes, people do things they think will protect the ones they care about, even if it means sacrificing their own happiness."

I shake my head vehemently, the tears returning with a vengeance. "I didn't want his sacrifice," I say, my voice cracking. "I wanted him."

She reaches for the bottle of whiskey and pours me another drink, her movements slow and deliberate. "You loved him that much, huh?" she asks softly.

I nod, my throat constricting with the overwhelming weight of my emotions. "More than anything."

The bartender sighs again, and for a moment, there is a look of sadness in her eyes. "You know, sometimes it's easier to hate someone than to admit you

still love them," she tells me, her words a painful reminder of the turmoil within me.

I swirl the whiskey in my glass, my vision blurred by the tears that refuse to stop. "I wish I could hate him," I whisper. "It would make all of this so much easier."

She rests a hand on my shoulder, her touch a comforting anchor in the sea of despair. "You don't have to have all the answers right now," she tells me. "Just take it one day at a time."

But I can't help but feel like I'm drowning in a sea of regret and heartache, the weight of my past mistakes and lost love pressing down on me with every passing second. The bartender's words are a lifeline, but I'm not sure I have the strength to hold on.

As the night wears on, I continue to drink, each sip of whiskey fueling my inner turmoil. I ramble on, my words a tangled mess of love and pain, longing and despair. The bartender listens patiently, offering me small words of comfort and understanding.

"Maybe you'll find your way back to each other someday," she says, her voice filled with a quiet hope that I can barely hear over the cacophony of my own thoughts.

I continue to drown myself in whiskey. Each sip burns like liquid fire, searing away the pain and regret that has taken root in my heart. I don't notice the time passing, lost in the haze of alcohol and misery.

But then, a voice cuts through the fog of my thoughts, pulling me back to reality. "Time to go home, little stalker."

I blink, my vision clearing just enough to see Noah standing beside me. His presence is like a shock to my system, and for a moment, I can't find my words.

Noah's eyes are filled with concern as he looks down at me. "Come on, Sky. Let's get you home, baby."

I can't help the bitter laugh that escapes my lips. "Why?" I slur, my words heavy with the weight of my pain. "It's not like there's anything waiting for me at home."

Noah's expression softens, and he reaches out to gently cup my cheek. "I'm your home, Sky," he says softly. "And I always will be."

Tears well up in my eyes as I look up at him, the pain in my chest threatening to swallow me whole. "You shouldn't be," I whisper. "You should hate me."

He shakes his head, his thumb brushing away a tear that has spilled onto my cheek. "I could never hate you, Sky. That would be like hating the best part of my heart."

I lean into his touch, unable to resist the comfort and familiarity of his presence. "You're so pretty," I mumble, my words barely coherent.

Noah chuckles, a warm and affectionate sound that sends a shiver down my spine. "And you're still the most beautiful girl I've ever met," he replies.

The bartender, who has been watching our exchange with a knowing smile, speaks up. "You take care of her, you hear me?" she says, her tone firm but kind. "She's had a rough night."

Noah nods, his gaze never leaving mine. "Always," he replies.

With his help, I manage to stand, though my legs feel like jelly. Noah flings my arm over his shoulder, supporting me as we make our way out of the bar.

The night air is cool against my flushed cheeks as I step out onto the sidewalk, my steps unsteady as I make my way through the darkened streets.

As we walk, I can't help but ramble on, the alcohol loosening my tongue and inhibitions.

"You know," I start, my words coming out in a jumble, "I really did love you. Probably since the very moment we met."

There is a voice inside my head telling me I need to shut up, but I'm far too drunk to listen to any sense at the moment.

Noah chuckles again, his laughter a soothing balm to my wounded soul. "I know," he says. "And I've been in love with you just as long."

I blink up at him, my heart pounding in my chest. "Really?"

He smiles down at me, his eyes warm and full of affection. "Really."

The realization hits me like a ton of bricks, and I can't help the tears that spill over. "I've missed you so much," I whisper.

Noah's grip on me tightens, and he presses a gentle kiss to the top of my head. "I've missed you too, Sky. More than you could ever know."

I stop suddenly in the middle of the sidewalk, my stomach churning, bile rising up.

"Oh shit," I groan as I lean over and throw up all over the concrete, narrowly missing Noah's shoes.

I'm a mess when I get done retching up whiskey, tears and snot on my face.

And then, to make it even better, I start sobbing.

“Baby,” he whispers, sweeping me into his arms, not seeming to care that I’m a gross, pathetic mess.

I sob into his chest, letting him put me in the car and drive me home, and not objecting at all when he takes me up to my room and tucks me into bed.

“It’s going to be okay, baby. I promise I’ll make our life so good that it will make up for all of it,” I think I hear him whisper.

But I’m slipping into a deep, chaotic sleep.

So I can’t be too sure.

* * *

I wake up feeling like I might die.

Sunlight streams in through the curtains, casting a harsh, unforgiving light on my throbbing head. A relentless drumbeat of pain pulses behind my temples, and my stomach roils with nausea.

With a groan, I push myself up from the tangled sheets, feeling disoriented and heavy. The room spins briefly as I try to regain my bearings. The memories of the previous night flood back, an embarrassing reel of slurred words and blurry faces. I’d drowned my sorrows in a sea of alcohol, seeking solace in the bottom of one glass after another.

Regret washes over me, a bitter tide that leaves me with a sour taste in my mouth. I’ve been drowning my sorrows in more ways than one, and I know it’s a futile attempt to escape the painful truths that have resurfaced in my life.

Glancing over, I see a glass of water and some Advil sitting on the nightstand next to the bed, a thoughtful gesture from Noah. I take a few sips and down the Advil, hoping it can give me some quick relief.

As I stumble out of bed and make my way to the bathroom, the sight of my reflection in the mirror is far from comforting. My eyes are bloodshot, the dark circles beneath them betraying my restless night. My hair is a tangled mess, and my skin looks pale and drawn.

The cold water from the tap is a shock to my system as I splash it on my face, hoping to chase away the remnants of the alcohol-induced haze. It’s a vain attempt to clear my mind, to erase the haunting memories of my drunken confessions and reckless decisions.

With a sigh, I dress in comfortable yet disheveled attire, not bothering with makeup or any semblance of effort. The day stretches ahead of me like

an endless expanse of uncertainty, and I'm not sure how to face it. The throbbing in my head has transformed into a relentless drumbeat, pounding out a rhythm of regret and self-recrimination.

Stepping into the kitchen, I debate whether coffee or more water will be the more effective remedy for my hangover. In the end, I settle for a cup of coffee, hoping the caffeine will reinvigorate my wilted body. The simple act of sipping the hot liquid feels like a small step toward recovery, a feeble attempt to reclaim some semblance of control.

I can't help but reflect on the choices I made the night before. It was a desperate act, a futile attempt to escape the pain that resurfaced from finding out the truth. But as the harsh morning light illuminates the consequences of my actions, I know that I can't drown my sorrows or erase the past.

Unfortunately, I have to face the fact that the path to healing will be a long and arduous one. I have to confront my past, my fears, and the unresolved emotions that have haunted me for years. There's no easy way out, no shortcut to absolution. It's a journey I have to undertake, step by painful step.

I open up the front door, bringing my mug with me as I step outside into the morning air hung heavy with a sense of unease. I sit on the porch, sipping my coffee in the early morning light. I'd always been an early riser after nights when I drank too much—a weird thing wired into my DNA.

The rhythmic sound of crickets fills the silence, punctuated by the occasional rustle of leaves in the gentle breeze.

Curt, my stepfather, emerges from the house, his footsteps barely audible on the wooden porch. He settles into a chair across from me, his own steaming cup of coffee in hand. Neither of us speak, content to share the quiet companionship that has grown between us over the years.

But eventually, the unspoken weight in the air becomes too heavy to bear, and I break the silence. "Curt," I begin hesitantly, my voice barely above a whisper, "did you know?"

He looks at me, his eyes reflecting the somberness of the morning. "No," he replies softly, his gaze distant. "Noah told me the gist of it last night when he brought you home, but I have to admit I had my suspicions. You see, I not only love my wife very much, but I know her heart. There had been something off about her when you left for college all those years ago. And when I saw how frightened and guilt-stricken she was every time she picked up the phone to call you, I knew that there was a story behind there

somewhere."

I lower my gaze to my coffee cup, my fingers tracing the rim as I absorb his words.

"I have to be frank, though," Curt continues, his tone laced with regret. "I never knew that Noah was at the center of it. Or that you two were in love. I feel like a fool for not seeing the signs earlier."

Tears well in my eyes, and I blink them away. It wasn't Curt's fault; he had only known what he had been allowed to see. The depths of my feelings for Noah had been a secret I had guarded fiercely, even from those closest to me.

"It's not your fault," I whisper, my voice catching in my throat. "I kept it hidden from everyone, even myself sometimes."

Curt reaches across the small table between us, his hand gently covering mine. His touch is warm and reassuring, a silent acknowledgment of the pain that had been buried beneath the surface for too long.

"We all have our secrets," he says softly, his eyes meeting mine. "But sometimes, it's the sharing of those secrets that helps us heal."

I nod, my throat tight with emotion. For years, I had carried the weight of my past. But now, sitting on the porch with Curt, I realize that maybe it's time to start sharing those secrets, to confront the pain and loss that has shaped my life.

Tears well up in my eyes as Curt's words wash over me like a soothing balm. Gratitude swells in my heart, a deep well of emotion that I can barely contain. I reach across the table and squeeze his hand, my voice trembling with sincerity.

"Thank you," I whisper, my voice choked with emotion. "Thank you for being there for me all these years, even when I pushed everyone away."

Curt offers me a warm smile, his eyes filled with understanding and affection. "It was my privilege, Skylar," he replies, his voice gentle yet resolute. "To be your father, to watch you grow into the remarkable woman you've become—it's been an honor."

I can't hold back the tears any longer, and they spill down my cheeks as I nod in response. I had been blessed with a stepfather who had stood by me through thick and thin, who had loved me unconditionally, even when I couldn't love myself.

"I want you to know," Curt continues, his grip on my hand firm and reassuring, "that I will always be here for you, no matter what happens with

Noah. You don't have to face this journey alone."

His words are a lifeline, a promise that I would never have to navigate the turbulent waters of my past alone. I lean forward, wrapping my arms around him in a heartfelt embrace, seeking solace in his presence.

"Thank you," I whisper once more, my voice barely above a breath. "For everything."

Curt holds me close, his embrace a symbol of unwavering support and love. In that moment, I realized that no matter what lay ahead, I had a family that would anchor me. Which is more than I would have said before I returned to Thatcher's Bay.

I guess I was healing in more ways than one from my time on the island.

* * *

The next day, I'm outside, the sun bathing the garden around me in a warm, golden glow, casting dappled shadows among the vibrant blooms that adorned the carefully manicured beds. My mother had developed a new love for gardening in the years I'd been away, and that love had transformed the backyard into a breathtaking oasis of color and life. Roses climbed trellises, their petals a riot of reds and pinks. Delicate lilies swayed gracefully in the breeze, their pure white blossoms standing out against the lush greenery. The air was filled with the sweet scent of flowers, and the gentle hum of bees provided a soothing backdrop to the tranquil scene.

I sit on a weathered wooden bench beneath the shade of a sprawling wisteria vine, my fingers absentmindedly tracing the grain of the wood. My mind was a tumultuous sea of thoughts and emotions, and I sought solace in the beauty of my mother's garden.

As I contemplate the events of the past seven years, my mother emerges from the house, a tray of freshly brewed tea in her hands. She approaches me with a tentative smile, her eyes filled with a mixture of sorrow and regret. Setting the tray down on a nearby table, she gestures to the empty spot beside me on the bench.

"May I join you, Skylar?" she asks softly.

I nod, and she settles onto the bench beside me. Pouring tea into two cups, she hands one to me, and we sit in silence for a moment, sipping the fragrant brew.

The warmth of the tea spreads through me, chasing away the chill of the past, and I can't help but feel a pang of nostalgia for the simple, comforting moments I had shared with my mother when I was a child.

Eventually, my mother breaks the silence with a sigh. "I'm sorry," she says, her voice tinged with sadness.

I turn to look at her, my eyes searching her face for sincerity. "For what, *Mother?*"

Her expression is pained, and she seems to choose her words carefully, fearing my reaction to anything she has to say. "For the way I handled things with Noah. For convincing him that you leaving Thatcher's Bay to follow your dreams was the right thing to do."

I feel a lump form in my throat, and I turn my gaze back to the garden. "How could you do it, Mom?" I whisper, my voice barely audible. "How could you make him believe that I was better off without him?"

She reaches out and places a hand on my shoulder, her touch gentle and reassuring. "I thought I was protecting you, Skylar. I thought I was doing what was best for you and your future."

I pull away from her touch, unable to mask the bitterness in my voice. "And what about what I wanted? What about what Noah and I had? Did that mean nothing to you?"

Tears well up in my mother's eyes, as she looks down at her hands, which are folded in her lap. "I didn't understand then, Skylar. I was so afraid that if you stayed here, you would end up throwing your future away. I didn't want you to make such a mistake."

I turn to face her, my anger and hurt boiling over. "You don't get it. You don't get any of it. Noah *was* my future. He was my happiness. And you took that away from me."

She reaches out to wipe away a tear that had escaped down my cheek.

"I know that now, Skylar. In fact, I've known since that poor boy sent you away. I watched his misery for these last few years, and I prayed that you weren't suffering as much as he was. That my meddling to ensure you achieved all your dreams, didn't end up hurting you, more than it did protect you. But each time I talked to you on the phone, and I heard your voice, it broke something inside me. Because I could hear your sorrow, your grief, even when you were telling me life was wonderful. I knew then and there what a huge mistake I had made. I realize how much you loved him, and I'm so sorry for what I did."

I shake my head, unable to hold back the tears any longer. "Sorry isn't going to give me those seven years back."

My mother wraps her arms around me, pulling me into a warm and comforting embrace. "I know, sweetheart," she whispers. "I wish I could change the past, but all I can do now is be here for you and support you in whatever way you need."

The tea grows cold, but neither of us cares. We just stay there, in that peaceful garden, lost in our own thoughts. My mother's apology had been a long time coming, but it's the necessary step I need towards healing the fractured pieces of our relationship.

Finally, I find the courage to speak, my voice tremulous. "I missed him, Mom. Every single day, I missed him."

My mother nods, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I know you did, Skylar. And I'm so sorry for the pain I caused you."

The garden seems to come alive around us as we sit there, bathed in the soft, fading light of the setting sun. My mother's hand remains firmly wrapped around mine, a silent promise of support and understanding. I can't deny that her apology has stirred something within me, sparking a glimmer of hope that had long been buried beneath layers of pain and resentment.

As I gaze at the riot of colors and shapes that surrounds us, I can't help but be amazed at the transformation my mother has achieved. Each flower, each blade of grass, seems to be bursting with life, thriving under her tender care. It was a stark contrast to the barrenness that had settled in my heart over the years, a stark reminder of the love I had lost.

"You've done an incredible job with the garden, Mom," I finally admit, my voice tinged with genuine admiration.

She turns to me, a mixture of surprise and gratitude in her eyes. "Thank you, Skylar. It's been my way of finding solace and beauty in the midst of... life."

I nod in understanding, realizing that my mother needed an outlet for her own grief and regret. It was something we had both been grappling with in our own ways, and perhaps, this garden was her attempt to make amends as well.

The air is filled with the gentle sounds of nature—the chirping of birds, the distant hum of insects, and the rustling of leaves in the breeze. It's as if the world itself is trying to comfort us, to remind us that healing is possible, even in the face of heartache.

I look at my mother, her eyes watering, and I can't help but feel a sense of empathy. I wasn't the only one who lost something precious. She had lost something too—me. She had lost the chance to have me as a part of her life, to watch me grow and change. Her actions had been driven by fear, by the desperate need to protect her child, and in doing so, she had unwittingly caused us both immense pain.

"I know you were just trying to protect me," I say softly, breaking the silence between us. "But I wish you could have trusted me to make my own decisions, even if they meant making mistakes."

My mother's grip on my hand tightens, and she nods, her voice thick with emotion. "I should have, Skylar. I should have had more faith in your judgment."

The sun has dropped even lower on the horizon, casting long shadows that stretch across the garden. The world seems to slow down around us, as if it were offering us a moment of respite from the chaos of our lives.

"I don't know if I can ever forgive you, Mom," I admit, my voice raw with honesty. "But I want to try. I want to find a way to move forward."

My mother's eyes shimmer with unshed tears, but there is a glimmer of hope in them too. "That's all I could ever ask for, Skylar."

We sit there, in that tranquil garden, bathed in the fading light of day, and for the first time in a long time, I feel a sense of peace beginning to take root within me. The wounds of the past will take time to heal, but maybe, just maybe, forgiveness is possible.

As the sky deepens into shades of purple and blue, I allow myself to believe that this garden, with its vibrant blooms and lush greenery, is a symbol of the new beginning that lays ahead of us. And in that moment, surrounded by the beauty my mother had created, I allow myself to hope that I could find my way back to love and happiness once more.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Skylar



Over the past few days leading up to Daisy's wedding, I've taken to wandering around the island. Trying to think through everything with the ocean breeze brushing against my skin.

Tonight, my path is alive with the soft, silvery glow of the moon, casting an enchanting spell over the world. I don't know why I chose this particular place; maybe I'm a sucker for torturing myself, but nevertheless, I follow the winding trail like a woman possessed.

The trail is still bordered by "No Trespassing" signs that had been there when I'd come with Noah. It's a path of memories, a trail through my past that leads me closer to the ocean. My heart races with anticipation as I venture deeper into the darkness.

The path opens up to a small parking lot, barely more than a patch of gravel, and I walk along its edge, my footsteps soft against the rough ground. The sound of the ocean grows louder with each step, a soothing symphony of waves crashing against the shore. The moonlight paints the world in shades of silver and blue, and I feel like I have stepped into a dream.

As I continue along the edge of the lot, my eyes catch sight of the narrow, moonlit path leading down towards the water. It's a hidden trail, one that Noah had carried me down once upon a time. The memories of those nights come flooding back—of secret escapades and stolen kisses, of laughter and our bodies exchanging whispered promises that were still ingrained in my mind.

I follow the path, the cool sand giving way beneath my feet as I make my way down to the beach. The sound of the waves grows even louder, more intimate, and soon, I find myself standing at the edge of the shore. It's a

secluded cove, surrounded by towering cliffs that stretch up to the heavens.

There is no one else here, just me and the vast expanse of the ocean. I walk closer to the water's edge, the cool, salty breeze tousling my hair. The moonlight dances on the surface of the sea, creating a mesmerizing display of silver and indigo. The waves lap gently at the shore, a tender caress that speaks of both solitude and solace.

I sit down on the sand, my legs crossed beneath me, and I simply stare at the ocean.

Though I'd wanted to come here and find that it wasn't nearly as magical as I'd remembered it, to my chagrin, that wasn't the case.

It's like the sand and the water hold memories of those nights. And I'm forced to face the memory of them. I can't help but wonder if this place holds any answers, any clues to the path that lays ahead.

Noah floods my mind, and I don't try to hold back the memories. I remember the way his eyes always sparkled in the moonlight, the warmth of his touch, the taste of his lips. We had been young and in love, and nothing had seemed impossible back then.

I sigh, my breath mingling with the salty sea air. How had it all gone so wrong? How had we let something so beautiful slip through our fingers?

I know that Noah had his reasons, but I can't seem to let go of all the time we'd lost. What if I had never returned to Thatcher's Bay? What if, because of my refusal to come home, I'd never found out the truth? What if I'd had to hold onto that fake betrayal for my entire life?

That was the hardest part to forgive—not the lie itself, but all the time that was wasted. Life is fleeting. Over before you know it. And we'd lost so much of it. The ache in my chest is still there, a constant reminder of what might have been.

But as I sit there, alone with my thoughts and the gentle rhythm of the waves, I finally begin to accept that I can't change the past. I can't erase the pain or the mistakes. All I can do is move forward, step by painful step, and try to find a way to heal.

I close my eyes, letting the sound of the ocean wash over me, and I whisper a silent prayer to the universe. Maybe, just maybe, there is still a chance for us, a chance to rewrite our story, to find our way back to each other.

But even if that chance never comes, I know that I will carry the memories of our love with me, like a beacon of light in the darkest of nights.

And as I sit there on that secluded beach, I make a promise to myself—to never stop hoping, to never stop believing in the power of love to heal even the deepest of wounds.

"Just trust me."

"I do," I immediately say. And I realize that it's true. I trust him more than anyone else in my life. It's a scary thing.

He takes my hand and we walk along the side of the parking lot until we get to a small path illuminated by the moon. Taking it down, we make it to a small beach enveloped by cliffs. There's no one else here, and no lights.

"This is old man Winter's private beach. But he doesn't come here this time of year so we'll be totally fine."

Noah suddenly looks lost as he stares at the ground.

"Fuck, I didn't bring the blanket I keep in my saddlebag, I really didn't think this through."

I press myself up against him. "Just lay your jacket on the ground. That's good enough for me. I just want you," I whisper.

He groans as he captures my lips in a supple kiss, his hot, wet tongue sliding into my mouth, tasting me.

His tongue takes deep long licks, and it feels like he's fucking my mouth the same way that he does other parts of me.

Finally, he breaks away, his mouth moving to my ear. "You're so fucking beautiful," he murmurs. "And I'm so in love with you."

I hear footsteps behind me, and I don't have to turn my head to know who it is.

Noah.

Our souls seem to have a bad habit of reaching out and touching no matter where we are.

Noah sits next to me in the sand, his presence beside me casting a warm and reassuring glow despite everything. It feels almost like destiny as we sit there, as if the universe has conspired to bring us back together in this place of memories and regrets.

"I'm beginning to wonder if you have a tracker on me," I finally tease, a playful glint in my eyes.

Noah chuckles softly, his gaze fixed on the horizon. "I don't need a tracker, Sky. I know you better than anyone."

His words hang in the air, carrying a weight that is both comforting and painful. I have always believed that Noah understood me in a way that no one

else could, but it was that very understanding that had torn us apart all those years ago.

"Why didn't you trust me to make the decision all those years ago then?" I ask, my voice barely more than a whisper.

Noah turns to look at me, his eyes filled with a mixture of regret and longing.

"Because I knew you would sacrifice everything for us. And you're too bright, too big for that to happen. You're a star. You've always been a star. And I couldn't hide your light. You might have said you were happy, but you would have always had a 'what if' in the back of your mind, and so would I. What would you have become if I wasn't in the picture? That question would always haunt us."

The words hit me like a tidal wave, crashing over me with their painful truth.

"Thing is, I know the answer to that question. Miserable, I'd be miserable without you," I admit, my voice trembling. "I *have been* miserable without you."

Noah reaches out and gently cups my cheek, his thumb brushing away a stray tear that had escaped my eye. "Baby, me too."

His touch sends a shiver down my spine, and for a moment, it's as if the years apart had never really happened. I lean into his hand, closing my eyes and savoring the warmth of his palm against my skin.

"I'm so sorry, Noah," I whisper, my voice filled with the weight of all the years of longing and heartache. Because I need to apologize too.

Maybe that night I'd believed his betrayal so easily because I'd been waiting for something like that to happen all along. Maybe I'd never believed in us like I should have.

He doesn't say anything in response. He doesn't need to. Instead, he leans in closer, his lips meeting mine in a kiss that is both gentle and filled with a hunger that mirrors my own.

As we pull away, our foreheads resting against each other, I know that the road ahead will be filled with challenges and uncertainties. But I also believe that maybe we can be on that road together.

The ocean whispers its secrets to us, its waves singing a lullaby of love and possibility. And as we sit there, wrapped in each other's arms, I can't help but feel that, perhaps, the universe is giving us a second chance—to rewrite our story.

But I don't tell Noah that.
At least not yet.

* * *

I wake up the next morning with a crazy idea.

And for some reason, Noah has decided to go along with it.

The water stretches out before us, a vast expanse of shimmering blue under the midday sun. We stand at the edge of the dock, our small boat bobbing gently on the surface. I clutch the edge of my life jacket, my heart pounding with a mix of excitement and fear.

"Noah," I say, my voice trembling, "I want to try it. I want to conquer this fear."

Noah turns to me, his eyes filled with concern. "Sky, are you sure? You don't have to do this."

I shake my head, determination burning within me. "No, I need to do this. It's like my fear of the water is holding me back in life, and if I can face it, maybe I can figure everything else out too."

It sounds crazy coming out of my mouth, but something in my brain is insistent that I'm right about this. That I need to face my fears one at a time. Why not start with this one?

Noah reaches out and squeezes my hand, his thumb tracing comforting circles on my palm. "I'll be right here with you every step of the way, Sky. You're not alone."

With a deep breath, I step onto the dinghy, feeling its familiar sway beneath me. Noah follows, his movements smooth and confident. He casts off the dock lines, and we slowly drift away from the safety of the shore.

The water around us is a stunning shade of azure, the sunlight dancing on its surface like a million diamonds. I gaze out at the horizon, feeling a mix of awe and trepidation. It's as if the water holds all the answers, and I'm determined to uncover them.

Noah pilots the dinghy with ease, his gaze never leaving me for long. He knows how much this means to me, and he's there to support me every step of the way. The wind ruffles his hair, and the sunlight plays on his skin, casting him in a golden glow. He looks like a guardian angel, ready to catch me if I falter.

We reach a calm, open stretch of water, and I take a deep breath, trying to steady my racing heart.

"Stop the boat," I say suddenly, surprising even myself as I unzip my life jacket like a woman possessed.

Noah raises an eyebrow but complies, shutting off the engine and allowing the boat to come to a standstill. I know he's concerned, but he doesn't protest.

I climb to the edge of the boat, my knees shaking as I stare down at the water below. It's so clear, so inviting, and yet, it holds the power to terrify me like nothing else.

Without giving myself time to overthink, I take a deep breath and jump. The shock of the cold water hits me like a bucket of ice, and I gasp as I resurface. Panic surges through me, and I flail for a moment, fear dragging me down.

Noah's voice rings in my ears, calling my name, but I can't hear him over the roaring in my head. It's like all my fears, all the times I've been scared in my life, were converging on me in this moment.

But then, something shifts within me. I remember all the times I'd tried to hide in the shadows in high school, trying to avoid attention, trying not to stand out. I remember the years I'd spent ghostwriting for others instead of writing my own stories. I remember the years I'd spent being afraid of everything in general.

This fear of the water is just another layer, another barrier that's held me back for far too long.

I want to be done with all of it.

I want to emerge from this water, reborn, unburdened by fear and doubt.

With all the strength I can muster, I push myself to the surface, breaking through the water like a baptism. I gasp for breath, the air filling my lungs with newfound life. I tread water for a moment, the fear slowly receding.

As I move around in the water, my thoughts become a swirling tempest. Memories of my past mistakes and regrets churn in my mind like turbulent waves. The times I've held myself back, the chances I've missed—all of it weighs heavily on me. But here, in the water, it's like I have an opportunity for redemption, a chance to rewrite the narrative of my life.

The sensation of being buoyed by the ocean is both liberating and terrifying. It's a reminder that life is filled with uncertainty, that sometimes we must let go of the safety of the shore and venture into the unknown. It's a

metaphor for the journey I'm embarking on—to confront my deepest fears, to heal old wounds, and to become the person I've always longed to be.

With each stroke, I try to let go of the past, to release the pain and regrets that have held me captive. The water seems to absorb my fears and doubts, carrying them away with the waves. I think about all the times I've been scared in my life and how those fears have shaped me. It's as though I'm shedding layers of my old self with every movement, emerging from the depths as someone new.

The fear that initially threatened to overwhelm me now takes a backseat to a growing sense of determination. I've spent too long allowing fear to dictate my choices, to hold me back from living the life I deserve. In this moment, I refuse to be controlled any longer.

As I swim, I imagine all the missed opportunities, the moments when I hesitated or turned away from what I truly wanted. I've carried those regrets with me for far too long, and it's time to let them go. The water washes over me, cleansing my soul as I embrace the unknown.

I dip below the surface once more, allowing the water to envelop me completely. It's a moment of surrender, a symbolic act of shedding my old self. In the quiet beneath the waves, I feel a sense of peace and renewal wash over me.

When I resurface, gasping for breath, I'm filled with a profound sense of liberation. The ocean, once a source of terror, has become a symbol of my resilience and strength. I've confronted my fear head-on, and in doing so, I've reclaimed a piece of myself.

Noah had jumped into the water when I did, and he's watching me with a glimmer of pride. He reaches out, and I take his hand, letting him pull me closer.

"You did it, Sky," he murmurs, his voice filled with awe.

I nod, tears mixing with the water on my face. "I did it."

We swim back to the boat together, and Noah helps me climb back on board. I sit there, shivering but feeling strangely exhilarated. The world around me has taken on a new clarity. The sunlight dances on the water's surface, and I feel like I'm part of something greater than myself—a universe filled with endless possibilities. The fear that once held me captive has loosened its grip, and I'm determined to keep moving forward, to face whatever challenges lie ahead with courage and grace.

Noah wraps a warm towel around my shoulders, his fingers gentle as they

dry my hair. "You were incredible, Sky. I'm so proud of you."

I smile at him, feeling like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. "Thank you for being here with me, Noah. For helping me face my fears."

He leans in and kisses me softly, his lips warm against mine. "I'll always be here for you, Sky. Always."

As we sail back to the shore, I think that perhaps, this moment is just the beginning. I've taken a step towards conquering my fear of the water, and now, I'm ready to start conquering the rest of my life.

With Noah hopefully by my side.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Skylar



“**T**hese new chapters you’ve sent me are chef’s kiss, darling. My jaw hasn’t left the floor with how good they are,” Eliza praises over the phone, unable to keep her excitement at bay.

“They are still very rough drafts, Eliza, but I do appreciate the enthusiasm,” I reply, feeling a little lightheaded with her feedback.

When I gained the courage to send my editor the first few chapters weeks ago of my incomplete manuscript, it was a total leap of faith. I just needed someone who didn’t have any affiliation with my life to give me some objective and unbiased feedback. I never expected such a reaction from her though. She’s been texting me non-stop ever since.

But her reaction wasn’t as nearly as surprising as how quickly I was able to write all the chapters she craved. It felt like the faucet inside me just turned on one day, allowing me to pour out everything I had inside of me, and letting me finally speak my truth. More than Noah’s constant shadowing and attention, writing down our story and seeing the beauty of our budding love unfold has had the capacity to mend the cracks in my heart that I thought would never fully heal.

Even if this book never gets published, I at least have it partly to thank for aiding in my healing process.

“It’s just not enthusiasm, my dear girl. I know a winner when I read it, and this book has all the makings of a best seller,” Eliza explains, knocking the air out of my lungs.

“Do you really think so?” I choke out nervously.

“Darling, when it comes to the business of romance, I never kid. In fact, open your inbox. I think you’ll be very pleased with what I just sent you.”

I sit down on my desk and open my email through my laptop and see the names of the Big Five publishing houses all offering me first dibs for my book with a seven-figure advance to boot.

“But how—”

“How did they get their greedy little hands on your chapters?” Eliza finishes the sentence for me, and I don’t need to see her to hear the mischievous smile in her voice. “I might have sent them your first ten chapters to start a little bidding war.”

“You didn’t?” I squeal ecstatically.

“Oh, but I did,” Eliza retorts smugly, apparently very pleased with herself, even when I explicitly told her that I didn't know if I wanted to publish my book or not. But as I open my email box and see so many offers, I’m kind of happy she disregarded all my foolish concerns. “And now you can have the pick of the litter and go with whomever you feel suits you best. However, having said that, please see that Rosewood Publishing has also put its hat in the race by adding a couple thousand extra to the highest bidder.”

My chest constricts with so much joy, it takes me a moment to reply to her.

“You do know that there is no way I’d ever want my book to be published by anyone else. You could have saved yourself a lot of money by keeping it close to the vest.”

“And what would be the fun in that?” Eliza laughs. “I want those sons of bitches to see I bested them. And besides, this way you’ll get a contract that is deserving of your efforts. You’ve paid more than your dues. It’s time to collect the spoils.”

“I have no words. Thank you, Eliza. Thank you,” I repeat in a loop, feeling euphoric as well as an immense sense of gratitude to her.

“You know how you can thank me? By telling me if the protagonists in your story end up together or not. I swear, if you don’t give them their happily ever after, after everything they went through, I’ll never forgive you. Do tell me? Will they?”

God, I hope so.

“You’ll just have to wait and read it for yourself,” I say instead.

“Fair enough. I’ve been around writers long enough to respect their process and not insist on spoiling the ending. Just keep doing what you’re doing, Skylar. Going back to Thatcher’s Bay was definitely the right move for you.”

“Speaking of which,” I begin to say, while nervously chewing on my bottom lip. “If, for example, I wanted to leave Boston and make Thatcher’s Bay my permanent home, how would that work for you?”

“What do you mean?” she asks, confused.

“Well, if I was to move back here, how would it impact my job at the publishing house?”

“Skylar, my dear, dear girl, I don’t think it’s fully sunk in what I just told you. You no longer have a job with Rosewood Publishing. You’re a client now. Your ghostwriting days are over. You can live wherever you want. That’s for you to decide. After we publish this book, I’m sure many will follow. It will be one hit after another. I have my utmost faith in you. I always have.”

Someone pinch me.

I must be dreaming.

“I can one hundred percent guarantee you that you are not.” Eliza laughs, alerting me to the fact that I must have said the last thought in my head out loud. “Now, I’ll leave you to it and fully expect a new chapter by the end of the week. Take care, sweet girl.”

And with that, Eliza hangs up the phone.

I’m in a state of utter shock, and it’s only when I hear the faint sound of Noah’s bike engine driving up that I snap out of it, jumping out of my seat and running downstairs to give him the news.

“No—” I start to yell in utter glee but stop mid-syllable when I open the door to the front porch and realize that Noah isn’t alone.

“Looks like you have a visitor,” Noah utters with a deep-rooted frown as he eyeballs Gael getting out of his rented car.

“Gael,” I say in greeting, completely shocked to see him in my parent’s driveway.

“Hi. I hope it’s okay me showing up like this,” Gael says nervously, sensing Noah’s unwelcome reaction to him.

“It’s fine.” I force a smile.

But as I watch both men walk in tandem towards me, I’m once again left speechless with the sudden realization that slaps me right across the face.

How could I ever believe myself capable of loving anyone that wasn’t my stepbrother?

In what world could that ever be the case?

After they both take the last step on the porch, Gael just stands there,

waiting for me to make the next move. However, Noah doesn't wait for me to make up my mind.

"Have your talk, Sky. I'll wait for you inside," he says, pressing his hand on my lower back as he leans down to press a tender kiss to my lips, using his actions to stake claim on what is his—my heart.

My cheeks must be crimson red as the door softly closes behind me, leaving Gael alone on the porch.

"I...um...maybe we should sit down," I tell him, pointing to the patio furniture.

Gael nods and takes a seat on the two-seater while I prefer to sit on the chair to its side.

"I wasn't expecting to see you until the wedding rehearsal tomorrow," I croak out when Gael remains silent.

"Yes. I can see you weren't," he accuses under his breath, before running his fingers through his brown hair. "Shit. That was a shitty thing for me to say, and completely unfair. I'm sorry," he quickly rectifies.

That's Gael for you.

Even when he has just cause to hurt someone, he'd never do it. It's just not in his nature.

"So it's him, huh? Noah. Your stepbrother," he asks outright, and again, there isn't actual malice in his tone, just an urgent need to understand.

"Yes," I admit steadfastly, looking him in the eyes so he sees the truth in them.

He lets out a self-deprecating chuckle.

"You probably think I'm an idiot." He shakes his head, his knees bobbing away nervously.

"I would never think that of you, Gael. Ever."

"Why not? I feel so foolish right now. I mean, all the signs were there. The reason why you never wanted to come home on the holidays. All the excuses you made over the years for me never to visit the home you grew up in. I mean, even that first night when we met at the Monroes' yacht party, my gut told me that you two were more than siblings. But when we reconnected after college, I must have put that night in the back of my mind, unwilling to see the truth."

Sensing his pain, I lean in and hold onto his hands.

"You had no way of knowing, Gael. I spent plenty of energy and time keeping that part of my life hidden, even from myself. I'm just sorry that it

took me coming home to realize what you have been feeling all these years. I'm so sorry, Gael. I really did care for you. I still do."

His brown eyes dim as he softly holds onto my hands.

"You just can't love me."

"No." I shake my head.

"Because you love him."

It feels wrong admitting something so personal to Gael when I haven't said the words to Noah yet, so instead of saying anything in return, I just nod.

"Does he make you happy?" Gael asks, hopeful.

"He tries. He tries very hard." I offer him a small smile.

"But will he succeed? Will he be able to give you everything you ever dreamed of?"

"He already has," I admit, hating how my honesty only dulls his bright light.

"Then that's all I can hope for," Gael retorts, giving me a small smile of his own.

I really didn't deserve this man. He's too damn good.

I pray whoever he falls in love with next sees just how special he is.

Recognizes his worth.

Gael lets out a sigh and pulls his hands away so he can discreetly wipe away the tears forming at the corners of his eyes. He then stands up and eats the small distance between us, placing his palms on my cheeks.

"I have to admit that this is not the way I played all of this out in my head. I thought if I came a couple of days early before the wedding, you'd see it for the romantic gesture it was and that we might make up. I guess I should have known when you stopped answering my texts that your heart was already someplace else. With someone else. But then again, it always was with him, huh?"

Again, I nod, because saying the words out loud just seems cruel.

And Gael has never been cruel a day in his life. He sure as hell doesn't deserve me to be.

I cover his hands with mine and stare into his rich brown eyes that were once my saving grace.

"You are a wonderful man, Gael. One day you'll find someone just as wonderful, someone who is actually deserving of you. I'm sorry that it wasn't me."

"I know," he whispers. "And I also know how hard you tried to be. All I

want is your happiness, Skylar. I thought that maybe I could love you enough for the both of us, but when I saw you look at him just now...that...that is what I want. True unrequited love.”

“And you’ll find it, Gael. I know you will.”

He pulls my forehead to his and we take a minute to say goodbye to the people we were to each other.

“I really did love you. Who am I trying to kid? I still do. Just be happy, Skylar. And if he’s your happiness, don’t let him go. You deserve love too.”

My own tears begin to sting my eyes as Gael leans in and steals a soft innocent kiss, his own way of saying goodbye. He then breaks away from our rigid stance and dashes over to his car, not wanting me to see the destruction I just caused. I hold onto the porch’s railing as tears fall down my cheeks, as I watch that part of my life drive away, never to return.

Strong hands wrap themselves around my waist, Noah’s chest pressed against my back as he places his chin on my shoulder.

“Are you okay?” he asks calmly.

“As okay as can be expected.” I shrug.

“Do you want me to have a talk with him at the wedding? Maybe make him understand we’ve got history?” Noah suggests, trying to do his best to ease my guilt.

“Gael won’t be at the wedding,” I reply knowingly.

I know Gael.

He’s too much of a good man to go to my sister’s wedding, knowing his presence would only make things awkward for me.

“Hmm,” Noah murmurs before twirling me around in his arms and pinning my back to the railing. “You let him kiss you,” he adds, running the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip.

“I just broke the man’s heart, Noah. A kiss seems harmless enough in comparison.”

“Hmm.”

“Wait? Were you spying on us?”

“Not spying. Just keeping a vigilant eye on what’s mine.”

“I’m not your property, Noah Fontaine.” I cock a brow.

“Oh, baby, just because there’s no ring on your finger yet doesn’t mean you’re a free agent. Your heart, body, and soul all have my name branded on them, and don’t you forget it,” he murmurs, running his thumb leisurely down my chin and my throat until it finds the swell of my breasts above the

simple sundress I have on.

My heart is drumming a mile a minute, as I try very hard not to focus on the fact that Noah, in a few words, just told me his plans to marry me. And the little smirk that plays on his lips tells me he knows exactly what he's doing.

"You never did like to play fair," I pant as he draws little circles on my tender flesh. "I'm surprised you even went inside and left me all alone out here to talk to Gael. The Noah I knew back in the day would have planted my ass on his lap and watched every second of my breakup."

"Trust me, my restraint was solely for your benefit. And baby, promise me something? No more talk of Gael or breakups? My fragile ego can only take so much."

"Is that right?" I taunt, pressing myself against his already hard cock. "It doesn't seem that fragile from where I'm standing."

"Fuck," he moans, his ocean gaze clouding over with lust. "Where are the parentals?"

"They're having lunch with Daisy and Derrick and his folks in town. Why?"

"Because I can still see his hands on your face and his lips on your mouth, and that shit just won't do," he growls, picking me up and pulling my legs around his hips. "Now I can fuck you here, out where the whole world can see, or in your bed. Just decide quickly while I can still muster the strength not to be inside you."

I wrap my arms around his neck, my mouth right at his ear. "If I'm yours like you say I am, then I guess you'll figure it out," I whisper, before biting his earlobe.

"On the porch it is then," he groans.

And as he slips my panties to the left to thrust deep inside me right there where anyone can see us, I forget all about book deals and broken promises. I forget about wedding rehearsals and shattered hearts.

Because none of it matters in the grand scheme of things.

All that really matters is us.

And our love.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Skylar



Fairytales are only supposed to happen in books. Not in Thatcher's Bay, of all places.

Leave it to my sister to sprinkle a little bit of magic on this island.

As sunlight filters through the stained-glass windows, illuminating the grandeur of the cathedral, whispers of awe echo through the hallowed halls. The packed-to-the-brim church is decorated beautifully with warm colors and more flowers than I've ever deemed possible being contained in one place. Flowers adorn every pew and every corner, their fragrance filling the air with a delicate sweetness. The altar, dressed in ethereal white, stands proudly at the end of the aisle, awaiting the couple's arrival. I can't help but smile when I run my fingertips through the hidden daisies in the various bouquets, something I'm sure Derrick must have insisted on.

"Skylar," I hear my mother call out from down the hall, her head poking out of the changing room where my sister is currently holed up. "Did you bring it?"

"I got it, Mom." I smile, hurriedly walking towards her.

"Thank God. Your sister was just about to call the whole wedding off," my mother jokes half-heartedly, but knowing Daisy, she's probably spent the last half hour threatening to do just that.

"No need to call off the wedding just yet," I taunt, handing my mother the family heirloom that I had to run back to our house to retrieve from her jewelry box.

It's a simple pearl necklace. Nothing fancy or even that expensive, but it's been in our mother's side of the family for decades, and for some reason, Daisy demanded that it be her something old.

My mother opens the door to the room to let me in and then quickly closes it shut behind me, probably more afraid that her eldest daughter will make a run for it than she is of anyone sneaking a peek at Daisy in her gown.

My heart leaps to my throat when I see my beautiful sister in her long flowing white gown, looking like Venus herself. Her long blonde hair is up, exposing her long slender neck, leaving tendrils of blonde curls to kiss her face.

“Daisy,” I breathe out, tears starting to coat my eyes, as my mother puts the necklace on her.

“Nope!” Daisy shouts, pointing a menacing finger at me. “None of that. I’m this close to losing it already. If you cry, then I’ll cry. Then, of course, Mom will cry seeing us cry, and before you know it, all the Ames women are bawling their eyes out and ruining perfectly good makeup that took hours to put on. Don’t you dare do it, Sky,” she orders, but her voice comes out too shaky and nervous for us to pretend my sister isn’t, in fact, freaking out.

I tread ever so carefully towards her, like one would do when confronting a scared animal that is seconds away from running for cover.

“Daisy, are you hanging in there okay?”

“What does it look like?” She half-laughs, half-cries.

Yup.

It’s official.

The bride is having a total meltdown.

“Daisy, look at me,” I plead sweetly, grabbing her hand in mine and giving it a gentle squeeze. “Take a deep breath in,” I tell her while performing the action to show her how it’s done, since Daisy’s current notion of breathing is hyperventilation. “Now out,” I exhale. “Deep breath in. And then deep breath out. There you go,” I praise as she keeps at it. “Mom, can you grab Daisy some water? Maybe with a bit of sugar, please?”

“On it,” my mother retorts with pure resolve in her tone, as if fetching us sugar water was the mission she was meant to carry out as her life’s purpose.

I guess the bride isn’t the only one who’s losing it a little bit.

“You’re doing great, Daisy. So great,” I continue to reassure her.

“I don’t think I can do this,” she whispers, fear in her eyes.

“You *can* do this, Daisy. I know you can.” I smile comfortingly. “Forget about everyone who is waiting outside for you and focus on the one person who actually matters—Derrick. Can you do that for me?”

I watch my sister swallow dryly, her eyes scanning all the exits in the

room to make a quick getaway.

“Talk to me, Daisy. Tell me what you need?” I ask, needing to pull her attention away from any exit strategy she can come up with.

When her frantic blue eyes meet mine, I see such open vulnerability in them that my heart begins to chip away at its edges, needing to do anything and everything in its power to ease her anxiety.

“Tell me, Daisy? Let me help you,” I supplicate.

“What if I’m not marriage material?” She finally confesses what has been plaguing her mind. “What if...what if...I’m just like *him*?”

“Him?” I parrot, not fully understanding what she means.

“Grant. What if I’m like our father?” she whispers, low and unsure.

“You, Daisy Ames, are nothing like him,” I assure her with utter conviction. “Is that what’s been bothering you? That you might be like him?”

“Yes,” she chokes out nervously. “Everyone always keeps reminding me how alike we are. What if they’re right? What if I’m like that cheating piece of shit, too? What if I’m not cut out to be someone’s wife?”

“First of all, when did you start giving credit to anyone’s opinion but your own? And secondly, even if you do share his genes, in no shape or form does that mean you’ll end up like him. Family is everything to you, Daisy. You don’t have a selfish bone in your body. His sins are not yours to bear. You are your own person. You always have been. The best person I know,” I tell her and mean it.

Daisy has always been my hero.

So if she needs a minute to realize how amazing she is, then I’ll make sure to remind her, every step of the way.

“I do love him,” Daisy admits, her lower lip trembling. “I love him so much. I don’t want to hurt him. Ever. Derrick is everything to me.”

“Just hearing you say that means that you are lightyears ahead of being like our father. You are going to make an amazing wife, Daisy. I have no doubt in my mind that you and Derrick are going to be very happy together. You know how I know that? Because you two already are.”

Daisy takes in another deep breath and gives me a shaky nod.

“You’re right. Of course, you’re right. I’m just being silly, I guess.”

“Not at all. This is a big step, Daisy. And I’m so damn proud of you. So proud to call you my sister.”

“Hey—”

“I know. I know. No tears.” I laugh, giving her hand another soft squeeze.

“Now, are you ready to make this wedding your bitch or not?” I arch a teasing brow.

“Look at you...being all badass and cursing inside a church,” she teases back, looking more like the Daisy I’ve always looked up to.

“Just don’t tell Mom,” I giggle.

“Don’t tell Mom what?” our mother asks, reappearing next to us and handing Daisy her sugar water.

“Oh, nothing. I was just telling Sky how I fully plan to consummate my marriage with my hot-as-hell husband on our drive back to our reception,” Daisy taunts after drinking her water.

“Oh, sweet baby Jesus, girl, but must you be so crass all the time?” my mother admonishes, but there isn’t a hit of accusation in her tone.

“Well, you did ask, Mom,” I chime in with a laugh.

“You two girls will be the death of me,” our mother singsongs, pride laced in every word.

We all look at each other, the sense of love and peace evident in our individual stares.

“I love you girls so much. I could not be prouder of my girls.”

“We love you too, Mom,” I stutter, feeling overwhelmed with the weight of such unconditional love packed in such a small room.

It’s the gentle knock on the door that pulls us away from breaking down and bawling our eyes out just as Daisy predicted.

“You girls about ready?” Curt asks, poking his head inside the room. “Jesus, Mother, and Joseph,” he gawks, walking inside. “But you are a sight to behold, Daisy.”

“Curt? Are you crying right now?” Daisy asks when Curt begins to sniffle as he eyes my sister up and down.

“No, no. Just allergies,” he quickly defends, wiping away at the stray tears that cling to his cheeks.

“Right,” I tease, giving his arm a squeeze. “You Fontaine men hide it well, but you’re nothing but teddy bears underneath that alpha facade.”

“Why do you think I married him?” my mother gloats proudly.

As I look in the room, and feel all the love that lies in it, I also instantly feel Noah’s absence and how he should be here too.

“Noah’s already at the altar next to a very antsy groom,” Curt explains, as if reading my thoughts. “So is this wedding happening or not? Just say the word and we can make a run for it. I can get the car running in less than two

minutes.” He wiggles his brows at my sister.

“There will be no running,” I reprimand, slapping Curt’s forearm. “Daisy’s got this. Don’t you, babe?”

“You bet your sweet ass I do,” Daisy exclaims, head held high, her previous cold feet no longer in sight. “Go on, sis, and start the show. I have a husband waiting for me.”

“About damn time,” Curt exhales, relieved, revealing that he’s one hundred percent on board with this marriage even after he offered the bride-to-be a means of escape.

“You never fooled me, Dad.” I poke his arm before making my own retreat to the hall to start this wedding.

“Allergies, my ass! What did you say to the man, Skylar?! I can’t go out with you crying like that. Pull yourself together, dude!” I hear my sister shout and laugh behind me.

And that’s when it dawns on me: I just called Curt dad.

It just came out.

Maybe it was because I was still riding high off the special moment that me, my sister and mother just shared, that calling Curt dad just flowed off my tongue like I’ve been calling him that all his life.

Truth be told, Curt has been more of a father to me and Daisy than Grant has ever been. Though his apathy towards us used to be a sore spot for me, it doesn’t hurt as much now. Grant gave us what he could, what he was capable of giving anyone. There was a limit to his love and attention. It didn’t make him a bad person, just a bad father.

Curt stepped up to fill that role without even asking for the title.

If anyone should bear the honor of being called our dad, then I know of no better man than him.

“Is she ready?” Lucy, the wedding planner the Monroes brought in all the way from New York City to organize this shindig, asks.

I give her the thumbs up to start the show and watch as the woman gives the order into her earphones. Not a second later, the wedding march begins to sing out in the cathedral, coaxing the wedding guests to get up from their seats.

Nervous energy runs through me as I turn my head over my shoulder, wondering what’s taking them so long to come out. My mother is the first to leave the changing room, followed by a now composed Curt and my beautiful sister hanging on his arm.

“Here we go,” my mother whispers, throwing me a conspiring wink before she walks through the grand arches of the cathedral and slowly makes her way down the aisle to her seat on the first row opposite Derrick’s parents.

When I verify that she’s now seated, I turn around and mouth an ‘I love you’ to my sister and then proceed to follow in my mother’s footsteps. All eyes are on me as I walk down the aisle, while my own gaze finds the boy I used to hate up on the altar, looking every bit as handsome as the groom.

Noah smiles back at me, with a mischievous grin on his lips that tells me he not only approves of my dress, but is eager to strip it off me later tonight. My cheeks heat up at his penetrating gaze, wondering if everyone here can also read the salacious thoughts in his head as well as I can. Once I step onto the altar, I take my spot and wait for Daisy to make her grand appearance.

Five seconds later, and on cue, Daisy steps into the limelight, with a proud Curt at her side.

“Fuck,” I hear Derrick mutter under his breath, pulling my attention towards him and away from my glowing sister. “Have you ever seen anyone more beautiful?” he adds, his own green eyes starting to sparkle with unshed tears. “Pinch me, asshole, just to make sure I’m not dreaming.”

“Pull it together, D,” Noah whispers beside him, giving Derrick a good pinch at his side for his troubles. “Or Daisy will have your balls.”

“Like she already doesn’t?” Derrick retorts, wiping his tears away just so he doesn’t miss a single minute of my sister walking towards him. “I’m the luckiest fucking guy in the world.”

“Second luckiest,” Noah drawls, throwing me a wink, while the priest clears his throat, not exactly thrilled with their banter.

But Derrick doesn’t hear Noah’s last remark or the priest’s not so subtle reprimand, too busy basking in Daisy’s light to care about anything else but her.

When she finally reaches him, he quickly walks down the stairs to take her off Curt’s hands.

“Take good care of our girl, Monroe. She’s one of a kind.”

“That she is, sir. That she is,” Derrick agrees, his attention fully on my sister’s smile.

He helps her onto the altar, taking both of her hands in his as they get lost in each other's eyes.

“Took your sweet ass time to get here, Petal,” he says, lifting her hands so he can kiss her knuckles. “Was your objective in making me wait just to see

me sweat, or were you thinking of making a run for it?”

“Neither thought ever crossed my mind,” she teases him.

Derrick leans in just a bit and then whispers in her ear, but since I’m just a few steps away from the loving couple, I hear every word.

“Good. Because there isn’t a place in this whole world where I wouldn’t go to find you.”

“Promise?”

Derrick's wicked smile pulls at the corner of his lips at her reply, pressing a tender kiss to her cheek, before pulling back to give the priest the order to start.

Yep. No doubt about it.

After that little exchange, there is no question in my mind that Daisy and Derrick are perfect for each other.

He matches her crazy perfectly.

And as the priest begins to talk about love and marriage and how this new journey they are now on will be filled with highs and lows, but ultimately love and understanding, my sight leaves the two love birds and falls on the man who has been staring at me the whole time.

Noah.

Yes. Love does have its peaks.

It can make you feel like you’re flying one minute and drowning the next, but as long as the person you are with holds your hand throughout all of it, there is nothing you can’t withstand.

Noah and I have suffered our fair share of heartbreak.

But we’ve loved each other through all of it.

Even when we weren’t physically together, our hearts never allowed anything to sever our bond.

Hate couldn’t do it.

Distance couldn’t do it.

Not even time could tear us apart.

Our hearts have always been beating the same song—each other’s name.

If Derrick and Daisy have even a sliver of that same connection Noah and I share, then this wedding is just a formality.

Because in the end they were always destined for each other—come what may.

* * *

“You know they fucked already, right?” Noah leans in to whisper behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me against his chest.

“Everyone knows that. I mean, look at them? They look like they are ready to make a condom commercial.” I point to the dancing couple who just can’t keep their hands off each other.

Not even the two hundred guests gawking at them seems to cool their libido any.

When my sister teased my mom hours ago about consummating her marriage on the car ride to the reception, I really thought she was kidding.

I was dead wrong.

By how her beautiful gown is a little torn in the back and lipstick stains are all over the groom’s collar, I’m not sure they even made it to the car.

“I feel like someone should take the small children elsewhere. I’ve seen more of my brother-in-law’s tongue in the last few hours than anyone should.” I shudder.

“I don’t know,” Noah croons in my ear. “I’ve seen a lot of couples sneaking off to hook up in the bushes. Something about seeing the bride and groom all handsy has been making people horny for fucking in places they can get easily caught.”

“Noah Fontaine, if this is your way of trying to get some, then I suggest you know your audience. That is my sister and brother-in-law. Nothing about their PDA gets me hot. Gross.”

When Noah starts chuckling in my ear, I realize he’s just been teasing me.

“You’re an asshole, you know that?” I laugh, slapping his forearm.

“Sorry. I just couldn’t help it. It’s just too easy to mess with you.” He continues to chuckle, tightening his hold on me.

“Try.”

“Fine. I’ll behave,” he concedes, placing a tender kiss on my neck. “But when we get home later tonight, no promises. I fully intend to misbehave then. That fucking dress is going to look amazing on my floor.”

My cheeks heat up at his threat, which I pray he keeps. I’ve been having a hard time myself in his company tonight. Noah looking so breathtakingly handsome in his dark navy suit and tie gives a girl like me funny ideas. Ideas like taking a cue from my sister and fucking his brains out in a dark corner somewhere.

Men shouldn’t look this good.

It isn’t fair to the rest of us mere mortals.

Feeling my throat suddenly parched, I suggest we go over to the open bar and get a refill of champagne. As we sway through the crowd of guests, I am once again amazed at the beautiful wedding reception my sister's in-laws were able to provide.

Whatever issues the Monroes might have had with this marriage, they sure made up for them by pulling out all the stops.

The tent shimmers under the warm glow of elegant chandeliers, casting a mesmerizing ambiance over the grand reception. With Noah guiding me every step of the way to the open bar, my heart swells with admiration as I survey the unquestionable opulence surrounding us. Daisy's wedding reception is nothing short of a lavish paradise, a true celebration of love and prosperity.

When we first arrived at the Monroe estate and were led to the back yard, I must admit I had my misgivings, thinking that maybe they were going to snub Daisy in some way, but I couldn't have been more wrong.

Entering the tent, my senses were immediately met with an alluring symphony of fragrances. The air carried the aroma of delicate roses, while the tables were adorned with cascades of vibrant flowers in every shade imaginable. The sweet fragrance intertwined seamlessly with the melodious tunes flowing from the string quartet, creating an ethereal atmosphere that seemed impossible to escape.

The grandeur of the scene was further enhanced by the breathtaking décor. Delicate crystal chandeliers hung from the tent's ceiling, gracefully illuminating the space and casting cascades of light on the immaculate white linens draping the tables. Every inch of the reception boasted exquisite details, from the intricately carved ice sculptures to the plush, velvet chairs that beckoned guests to indulge in comfort and luxury.

As we perused the delectable array of gourmet dishes on offer, I marveled at the culinary brilliance that lay before me. Morsels of culinary artistry adorned sleek silver platters, each dish meticulously crafted with precision and care.

Dainty hors d'oeuvres teased the palate, while an array of culinary delights spanned the length of a long, decadent buffet table. It was a feast that would surpass even the grandest of feasts, a testament to the Monroes' desire to pamper their guests.

When we finally reach our destination, Noah orders us our drinks, and with each sip of champagne, the bubbles of joy tickle my taste buds, adding yet another layer of delight to this extravagant affair. I watch the bartenders hard at work making sure expensive bubbly flows as if from a never-ending fountain, promising to keep the festivities alive all night long.

In this moment, I realize that this grand celebration is not just a wedding reception; it's a testament to Derrick and Daisy's love for one another, a momentous display of affection and gratitude. The Monroes spared no expense in creating a dreamlike experience for their son's guests, and as I join in the merry celebration, I can't help but feel immensely grateful to them for giving my sister such a magnificent experience.

But just as those happy feelings for the Monroes take root in my heart, a familiar laugh grabs my attention from the other side of the bar. Stacy Monroe looks every bit the sophisticated socialite in her designer dress as she continues to talk animatedly with some of her family's guests.

"Want to go back to the dance floor?" Noah asks after he sees what has caught my attention.

"In a minute. Hold this for me, will you?" I singsong, handing him my champagne flute.

"Sky—" he starts to say, probably thinking I'm going to start a cat fight or something, but my reasons are quite the opposite.

"Stacy," I greet once I reach her.

"Skylar. Hi," she greets sheepishly.

"Do you mind if we talk for a minute?"

Her panicked green eyes scan the tent full of guests as if looking for a knight in shining armor to help her, but I quickly assure her there is no need for such a thing.

"I promise to be quick."

"Okay, then," she replies hesitantly.

We walk just far enough for her friends not to hear our conversation but not too far that we're completely alone together.

“If this is about that night at Daisy’s bachelorette party, then I have to say I was quite drunk and don’t remember most of it,” she quickly tries to defend.

“I really hope that’s not the case, since it was that talk that changed my mind about you,” I explain with a sincere smile.

“Oh?” she mutters suspiciously.

“Hmm. You see, I’m a firm believer that people never truly change. That they are who they are deep at their core. It’s up to each individual to make up their minds to accept—or not accept—that person. Having said that, I do think you’re trying to be better. Not for me, of course, since who I am bears no real importance in the grand scheme of things in your life, but because something inside you is forcing you to. Maybe it’s because life has been hard on you too, or maybe it’s motherhood that has softened you. Whatever the reason, I just want to tell you that I see that you’re trying.”

“Thank you,” she stammers, unbelieving that all that came out of my mouth.

“Now, I know we’ll never be friends,” I add, going to the crux of it. “Too much has passed between us for that to happen. We could never truly trust each other enough to be friends, but that doesn’t mean we can’t be friendly. After today, with my sister marrying your brother, we are connected and hopefully will remain so, as I’d like nothing more than to see Daisy happy with Derrick for years to come.”

“I agree. In fact, I couldn’t put it better myself.” Stacy smiles a genuine grin that makes her look ten years younger.

“So we’re agreed? We’ll be friendly from here on out?” I hold out my hand for her to shake.

Stacy eagerly shakes my hand as I watch years of guilt lift off her shoulders. But when she doesn’t let go and pulls me close, my hackles rise, even if only a little.

“Make him happy, Skylar. He’s known sadness for far too long. You both have.”

She then pulls away and gives me, yet again, one of her genuine smiles before slipping back to where her friends remain at the bar.

That shit is going to take some getting used to.

“Everything okay?” Noah asks, now next to me, making me aware that he was close by just in case I needed him.

“Everything is just fine,” I reassure him. “I mean, it was to be expected, me running into one of your girlfriends here. Thatcher’s Bay isn’t that big.

I'm surprised I haven't bumped into more," I joke, trying to ease his concern.

"Not sure why you're so surprised. I only ever had two girlfriends in my life, and I only ever fell in love with one," he retorts, nudging his knuckle on the tip of my nose so I understand that I'm the *one* he's referring to.

My forehead wrinkles in confusion with his statement.

"You mean you've never been in a relationship aside from the ones back in high school?"

"Nope." He pops the p at the end and leans forward. "I haven't been with anyone since you left. What would have been the point? I had already found the love of my life. There was no need to keep searching."

If my ovaries had an internal clock, then I think this man just turned the damn thing on in hyperdrive mode.

Uncaring of who will see us, I plant my hands on his shoulders and pull myself up just high enough for my lips to meet his. Noah doesn't hesitate and kisses me with the same ardent passion currently streaming through my veins. When we finally break apart, Noah's eyes hood instantly, his hands finding purchase on my hips.

"You sure you don't want to go for a walk and talk about it some more?" He cocks a roguish brow.

"I might be persuaded, if by talk, you really mean fool around?" I tease, biting my bottom lip.

He doesn't even offer me a reply, quickly grabbing my hand to lead me to only God knows where.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome Mr. Curt Fontaine and newly married Mrs. Daisy Monroe to the dance floor for their father/daughter dance."

"Wait! Wait!" I shout to Noah when I hear the presentation. "I don't want to miss their dance."

"This better be good, old man," Noah curses under his breath but abides by my request.

We make our way to the dance floor again, Daisy and Curt dancing flawlessly in circles, making everyone tear up a little at the sweet scene.

But then it happens.

The melodic song playing scratches and is replaced by none other than Soulja Boy's '*Crank That Soulja Boy*'. Curt and Daisy just stare at each other for a few brief seconds, shrug, and then break into the dance inspired by the song.

“No fucking way!” Noah cackles as we watch the pair get into it like a couple of teenagers after a few too many.

For the following five minutes, everyone claps and cheers as Daisy and our dad dance to the craziest songs ever expected to be heard at such an elegant wedding reception. From John Travolta’s *‘Grease Lightning’* to MC Hammer’s *‘Can’t Touch This’* to Beyonce’s epic *‘Single Ladies’*. I’m laughing so hard that I can’t keep up with their eclectic playlist or dance moves, my tears making everything too blurry to keep track of. But that’s okay because I’m pretty sure everyone with a phone is currently filming this, and it will undoubtedly be on YouTube before the night is over.

When they are finally done, and take their well-deserved bow, they urge everyone to accompany them onto the dance floor—thankfully for a slow song. Curt swaps places with Derrick and begins to dance with my mom, who is still laughing at her husband’s antics.

“This family always surprises me,” I whisper, my head nestled against Noah’s chest.

“What is not surprising is how they are still the world’s best cock blockers,” he jokes.

“Hey, be nice. That was amazing what your dad just did for Daisy. Grant wouldn’t even have bothered. Too much effort for too little reward,” I explain, my father’s words ringing out in my ears.

Noah lifts my chin and looks deep into my eyes.

“None of that, little stalker. Today is a good day. Let’s enjoy it.”

“It has been a wonderful day, hasn’t it?”

“The best I’ve had in a long time, Sky,” he whispers, love swimming in the vast ocean that is his eyes.

I’m about to open my mouth to suggest that, after this dance, we go find a place to be alone, when the couple next to us nudges Noah’s shoulders to pull his attention to them.

“Just wanted to congratulate you on last week’s race, Noah. Can’t wait to see you blow everyone out of the water at the Grand Prix next year.”

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it,” Noah replies politely.

The dancing duo go on their merry way, completely unaware that they just brought up the elephant in the room that we have been trying to ignore.

“When do you have to go?” I ask, unable to meet his eyes.

“I’m supposed to leave by the end of next month. At least, that was the plan.”

“Was?” I ask, gaining the courage to lift my gaze to meet his.

“It all depends on you, really.” He smiles sheepishly. “If you want to come with me or not.”

“To New Zealand? You want me to sail off with you to the other side of the world?” I ask, gobsmacked.

“With every fiber of my being, Sky. That’s exactly what I want.”

A lump forms at my throat at how serious he is.

“I...I...”

“You don’t have to give me an answer right now. This wasn’t even how I wanted to pop the question, truth be told. I had a whole speech with a list of pros and cons for you. But hey, that’s what I want. But if you think it’s too fast too soon, then I can hold off going to the Grand Prix next year. We can take our time. And then, when you’re ready, we can go.”

“You’d hold off following your dream for me?” I ask incredulously.

“Racing isn’t my dream. Fuck, not even sailing is anymore, and I love it with all my heart,” he replies, his gaze deadlocked on mine. “You’re my dream, Sky. You’re all I care about. The rest doesn’t even come close. Not by a longshot.”

My heart feels like it's going to jump out of my chest with how hard it's thumping as each word falls from his lips.

“I love you, Sky. Always have. Always will. I’ll take your lead on this. We have time. Time I thought we’d never have. So I’m good with whatever you decide.”

“That’s a lot, Noah. That’s a big decision to make. I don’t want you to not do something just because of me. Not only that, but both you and I know that I’m not exactly great with water, much less a whole ocean.”

After my swim the other day, I was getting better. But true comfort in the water would take time.

He runs the back of his hand up and down my cheek, looking completely relaxed and not at all freaked out. No. That’s me. I’m the one who is currently losing her mind.

“Do you trust me, little stalker?” he asks, his voice going down an octave.

“With my life,” I confess wholeheartedly.

“Then trust me when I say that I will always keep you safe. Your body, soul, and heart will always be safe with me. I love you, Skylar. Nothing and no one will ever hurt you again. Including me. I will never allow it.”

This is the second time in as many minutes that he’s said he loves me.

And every time, I remain silent.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

“I can see those wheels in your head turning so fast that I’m surprised smoke isn’t coming out of your ears,” he teases, since making a joke or wisecrack has always been our default mechanism when things just get too real. “Now, how about we sneak out of here and find a secluded spot, so I can make all the loud ruckus in your head go away?”

Sex being our other go to move when things start to be too much for one of us to deal with.

Instead of facing the issue head on, I nod and let Noah lead me off the dance floor so that my body can tell him all the words I haven’t summoned up the courage to say yet.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Skylar



When I hear my parents' truck drive up to the house, I close my laptop and peek through the window to see Noah helping Curt out the car while my mom holds onto his crutches for him.

Ever since the wedding took place a few days ago, Curt has been complaining about his ankle, always grunting and moaning whenever he took more than a few steps. It took my mother's constant badgering for him to finally see a doctor this afternoon. And by the looks of it, she was right to be concerned. As they walk up to the porch, I rush downstairs to see if they need any help.

"It serves you right, old man. Acting the fool at Daisy's wedding. You're no spring chicken to be dancing like that, you know?" Noah teases Curt as he helps his father maneuver his crutches through the living room to settle him on the couch.

"Totally worth it," Curt says proudly as Noah elevates his leg onto a pillow on top of the coffee table.

"What did the doctor say?" I ask worriedly, announcing my presence.

"Unfortunately, he fractured a few bones in his ankle. Nothing that won't heal with time, but he'll be housebound for a few months," my mother explains, squeezing her husband's shoulders affectionately.

"I think it was me trying to do the *dougie*, or it might have been the moonwalk. It was definitely not the *cabbage patch*. I nailed that one." Curt winks at me.

"No words that you just said right now is what any son wants to hear come out of their father's mouth. Just want to be clear on that," Noah taunts with a smirk.

“Always busting my chops, this kid. I have no idea how you put up with him, Skylar,” Curt teases back.

“Oh, he has his moments.” I smile widely.

If I thought Curt would object to me being with his son, I was dead wrong. At the end of the day, I should have known not to worry about that. He just wants us to be happy. And if it’s with each other, then so be it. It also doesn’t hurt that we’re both grown adults. I’m sure if Curt had found out about us while we were still teenagers living under his roof, he wouldn’t have been as tolerant. But then again, no real father ever wants to imagine his daughters in compromising positions with a boy—especially if that boy is their stepbrother.

“All jokes aside, this fractured ankle couldn’t come at a worse time,” Curt states flatly, his tone no longer playful.

“Right. The last big shrimp haul before winter,” Noah mutters under his breath, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Yep. After this month, fishing for seafood will be a no go. Just too damn dangerous with hurricane season coming. Gotta make do with cod, halibut, and striped bass, I guess,” Curt laments. “With my ankle all banged up, I don’t see another way other than to call off the whole expedition. There’s no way my crew could go out on their own without an experienced captain on board.”

“Can’t you ask one of your captain friends to fill in for you?” I ask, sensing that this fishing expedition is make or break for Curt.

“No. All of them already went out weeks ago,” Noah interjects. “Dad was the only one to postpone his, since it conflicted with Daisy’s wedding.”

“Oh.” I chew nervously on my lip.

All the years I’ve lived in a fisherman’s house, I’m still very clueless as to all the labors and hardships that go with it.

“That’s right. And because of it, now nine of my crew and their families are going to have to suffer.” Curt lets out a deep exhale. “But I don’t see any other way. This is going to hurt like hell, but it has to be done. Hand me my phone, Clara. Might as well get this over with now and let my men know they no longer have to prepare my boat. No one’s going anywhere, it seems.”

“Wait,” Noah interjects before my mom has time to move and grab Curt’s phone for him. “I can go. I can captain the boat. It’s not like I haven’t had years of practice.”

Curt shakes his head.

“No. You have your own concerns, like getting your own ship ready for your big voyage. Your days of fishing are long over, son.”

“I still have plenty of time to get the Royal Shank ready. Besides, these are people’s lives we are talking about. Your crew’s families. I know most of them need this income to make ends meet for the rest of the year. You know as well as I do that your men need this. I got this, Dad. Don’t call anything off. Consider it my parting gift to you and them for putting up with me all these years out at sea.”

Curt frowns, still looking unhappy with Noah’s resolution to his problem. And if I’m honest, I’m not too sure I’m on board with it either.

“Dad, look at me. I got this,” Noah insists, his expression dipped in steel resolve.

“I do hate letting the crew down,” Curt mumbles, stroking his chin as he considers his son’s proposition. “You sure you’re up for it?”

Noah nods.

“Then I guess it’s settled.”

“Great. When are we supposed to sail out?” Noah asks.

“You boys leave on the eighteenth, and if all goes well, you should return home by the twenty-sixth.”

“But that’s just three days from now,” I stammer, then kick myself for the selfish outburst.

What Noah is trying to do is noble. He wants to make sure that no family goes without.

And here I am, selfishly not wanting him to go just to stay with me.

If I had already decided that I’d take the leap of faith and said yes to his offer of going with him to New Zealand like he asked, then I wouldn’t feel like there was a ticking clock on our relationship. Though Noah said he’d be happy to postpone his dream voyage just so we could continue to work on our relationship, it feels unfair of me to ask that of him. Especially considering that he’s already proven to me that he’s not above sacrificing his happiness for mine. I won’t be responsible for stealing his dream of the Grand Prix just because I’m still working through my trust issues.

“The twenty-sixth?” Noah repeats, troubled, his forehead wrinkling.

And that’s when it hits me.

His mother’s birthday is on the twenty-sixth of September.

“Go,” I suddenly hear myself say. “Don’t worry about a thing. I’ll make sure to keep her company.”

“You will?” Noah asks, his gaze filled with so much love for me that even our parents have to look away, so they don’t feel like they are intruding in our moment.

“Hmm.” I nod.

“Thank you,” he whispers back.

Both our parents still have their heads hung low when Noah quickly diverts the conversation back to his father so they can go over all the logistics and plans for the expedition. Mom and I leave them to it, knowing that everything they are about to talk about will go over our heads.

While Mom goes into the kitchen to fix us dinner, I walk back upstairs to finish the chapter I’m currently writing. Ironic that it’s the one where I found a heart-stricken Noah all alone in a cemetery, rain pouring down his face to camouflage his tears. It takes me a few hours to finish the chapter as my own tears blur my vision, hurting for the boy who loved his mother so much that he promised he’d never leave her alone on her birthday. Not even after her soul parted from this earth.

“Hey,” Noah calls out, poking his head in the door. “Is it safe to come in, or are you in the zone?”

I love how he cares enough to ask, not wanting to interrupt my writing process in any way.

“I’m good.” I wipe my eyes while closing the laptop.

“You sure, little stalker?” he drawls, walking up to my seated form and tilting my head back with his gentle grip on my chin. “Your eyes look awfully red and puffy for someone who says she’s all good.”

“Tears are part of the process of writing. You can’t help but be invested in the characters. They hold a little piece of you inside them. And let’s just say, these characters’ lives hit a little close to home for me to be immune to their plight and not shed a few tears for them.”

“Hmm.” He smirks, caressing my chin with his thumb. “So we’re still pretending that the book you’re writing isn’t about us, huh?”

My jaw instantly drops to the floor.

“How did—”

“How did I know?” He smiles broadly. “I doubt there is anything in this world you could hide from me, little stalker. I know you. And I know your heart. And...well... maybe I took a little peek at it when you were sleeping.”

“You didn’t!” I slap him, laughing.

“What can I say? You’re my favorite writer. There was no way I could

hold off reading it with the rest of the masses. Besides, shouldn't one of the perks of me being your boyfriend be that I can read your books before the rest of the world gets a chance to?"

"Boyfriend? How come that name doesn't seem right for you? That the title boyfriend and girlfriend doesn't seem to do justice to what we have?" I ask adoringly, transfixed by his loving eyes alone.

"Because it's not," he retorts simply. "Because calling you my soulmate is too strong a word for society to accept even though it's true. Because the velvet box with my mother's engagement ring is still locked away in my bedside drawer instead of on your finger like it should be. But we can change all of that and find the right word for us when you're ready."

"No pressure," I croak back, the weight of his words pressing down on my heart.

"No pressure, baby. Not with us. We have all our lives to figure shit out," he says, as he presses a loving kiss to my forehead.

"I'm going to miss you when you leave," I whisper, feeling his absence already.

"Fucking hope so, since I'm going to miss the fuck out of you." Noah chuckles, tapping his finger on the tip of my nose.

"Forever the hopeless romantic."

"Who needs that shit when we got this?" he says before leaning in again only this time to deliver a deviant kiss to my lips so decadent my toes curl.

"Hmm. You've always had a way with words," I whisper breathlessly after such a kiss.

"You know what else I'm good at?" He wiggles his brows as he licks his lips. "My tongue is pretty good at other things, too. Not just talking."

"Enlighten me."

And before I know it, Noah picks me up off the chair and plants my ass on the desk, spreading my legs out wide as he kneels before me, while making a show of stripping me of my panties.

"How's this for romance?" He smirks before burying his head between my thighs.

My head rolls back as I let his wicked tongue do its worst. But with each long stroke and graze to my clit, I become a wanton mess, pulling at his hair, needing him to end my misery and fuck me already.

"Noah," I plead as he thrashes his tongue inside me. "I need you."

"I'm here, baby. I'm here," he reassures, standing back up and sliding me

off the table.

In one quick move, he spins me around and places my palms flat on the desk.

“Hold on,” he says while lifting my skirt up and positioning the crown of his cock to my soaked entrance.

I bite down on my bottom lip as he hisses while slowly thrusting deep inside me.

“Fuck. How the fuck will I’ll be able to survive the following week without this? I’m going to go fucking crazy,” he curses as he begins to increase his tempo.

“Me too,” I wail as he pounds into my pussy with total abandon.

“Are you going to miss my cock, little stalker? Miss how it fills you up? Miss how it makes you pant and moan for more?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck. Even your ass looks good for a pounding,” he grunts before slapping my ass cheek hard, making my pussy convulse around his cock.

“Argh!”

Noah pulls my hair back, so his lips are right at my ear, his fingers digging into my waist as his other hand toys with my clit.

“You’re going to have to be quiet, baby. Mommy and Daddy are downstairs. Wouldn’t want them to come up and see their precious little girl get fucked raw, now would we?”

His kinky dirty talk only inflames me more.

“Noah,” I moan, needing him to push me over the edge.

“Hmm. Are you hurting, baby?” he goads, fisting my hair.

“Yes.”

“Do you need me to take the ache away?”

“Yes, please,” I beg, so close to the edge I can almost taste it on my lips.

“Okay, baby. I got you,” he promises, biting my shoulder as his deft fingers strum my clit to perfection.

His punishing cock continues to pound inside me in ways that should be outlawed, while the sound of flesh slapping against flesh becomes my favorite soundtrack of all time. The air in the room around us smells of sex and heady desire, intoxicating all my senses, pushing me further and further, until I’m unsure where Noah ends and I begin.

“Fuck, I love you, Sky. You’re fucking perfect,” he grunts, lost in the trance of our lovemaking.

My legs begin to shake, my whole body starting to convulse as the orgasm hits me with such force that my knees threaten to buckle. Noah covers my mouth with his hand, muffling my cries of ecstasy as he thrusts three more times into me before he too falls off the precipice. We're still panting away, our bodies still feeling the effects of the earth shattering sensation that just took over us, when Noah's temple falls to the crook of my neck, holding me even more tightly from behind.

"I love you," he rasps through his heavy breathing.

I open my mouth to say I love him too, then close my lips shut when I hear my mother call us from downstairs, saying that dinner is ready, officially ending our little moment in the sun.

But all throughout dinner and for the following three days before Noah has to leave for his fishing expedition, those three little words remained lodged in my throat, burning a hole in my soul, because I'm still too in my head to say what he already knows in his heart to be true.

I love Noah Fontaine.

He was my first love.

And he will be my last.

* * *

I shiver in my jacket as a cold violent wind blows through me, flipping the pages of the paperback I brought to read and almost tearing it apart.

"The wind is starting to pick up, Annabelle," I say out loud as I store the book in my bag, my sight fixed on the tombstone in front of me. "But don't you worry. I'm sure Noah must have arrived at the dock by now. Pretty soon, he'll be here with us. He wouldn't miss your birthday for the world."

A smile crests my face when one of the last few green leaves that hasn't been tainted by the upcoming autumn perches itself on my shoulder, as if Annabelle is also comforting me that Noah will be home soon, just as I'm trying to reassure her.

Like last time, I made sure to bring a cupcake and a candle to celebrate her birthday, but I haven't had the heart to light the candle yet, hoping that Noah would make it in time. Before Noah left, he promised he'd try and get home by nightfall and meet me here in the cemetery to blow out his mom's birthday candle with me, but as the sun begins to set on the horizon, I'm not

sure he's going to be able to keep his promise.

At least he can take some comfort in knowing I spent most of the day here. It was actually quite nice. Being alone in the cemetery with no prying eyes about, I was able to talk to Annabelle and tell her what a wonderful, kind-hearted son she has. How loyal and giving he's become, a far cry from the stepbrother that used to bully and torment me any chance he got.

But as the wind starts to howl and every nearby tree begins to shake, I feel a pang at the pit of my stomach, telling me that something is very wrong and that it has little to do with the turning weather. No matter how hard I try, I can't shake this eerie feeling away. And as the darkness begins to spread out in the sky above me, so does the awful feeling begin to take root inside me.

"It's getting pretty late though, huh?" I ask out loud again, aimlessly talking to Annabelle as if she had the means to respond.

Since I'm not sure what time it is, I pick up my phone from my jacket's inner pocket only to realize that the battery is dead.

"Damn it," I curse out, then drop the phone to the ground when something shines so brightly at me that it steals my very sight. "Noah?" I call out, holding my forearm over my eyes to shield myself from the blinding light pointed at me.

But I am immediately disappointed when it's my mom's voice that replies back to me.

"Skylar! We've been looking everywhere for you," she says, panicked, as I get up from my crouched position.

"Why? Is everything alright?" I ask, but when I see Curt walking ever so slowly behind my mother on crutches, that nagging feeling that has been with me all day comes at me tenfold. "Did something happen to Noah? Is everything alright, Dad? Don't make me worry."

"I thought I told you to stay in the car," my mother reprimands when she sees him following her. "You shouldn't put any weight on your ankle."

"So you keep reminding me," he moans. "Hey, Sky, everything is fine. And no, Noah isn't back yet, but he should be any minute now. What troubles me more is you not being home when he gets there. Hate to break it to you, kid, but tonight's not the best night for you to have a sleepover at a cemetery. Best we go home now."

"But—" I turn to Annabelle's gravestone and cake.

"No buts about it, Skylar. There is a big storm coming, and the news is telling everyone to keep safe indoors," my mother chimes in. "We've been all

over this island looking for you. Just dumb luck we saw Daisy's car when we did. And thank God she lent you it while on her honeymoon, or we might have never found you in time."

I nod sheepishly because I can hear the concern in her voice, but I hate that I have to leave when I promised Noah I'd be here upon his arrival. But if my mom is right and there is a big storm coming, then he'll probably go straight home, hoping I wasn't reckless enough to stay here and wait for him.

But as I'm starting to pack up my things, Curt stops me.

"Give it here, Sky," he orders softly, pointing at the small box from a nearby bakery.

I hand him the box containing the red velvet cupcake, to which he opens it and smiles.

"Our boy found himself a keeper, Annabelle," Curt says, taking the small cake from its confinements and placing it on the ground right next to her tombstone. "I know I'm biased, since I'm the boy's father and all, but he turned out to be a wonderful young man. You'd be proud of him, sweetheart. He not only has your eyes but your good heart, too. I also know he misses you terribly. We all do," he says hoarsely as he strikes a match and lights the small candle. "I did my best, Annabelle. If it weren't for Clara and her girls, I'm not sure we would have made it. I hope that wherever you are now, looking down on us, we've made you proud. Happy Birthday, sweetheart."

The wind blows out the candle as Curt wipes a stray tear from his cheek.

"Now we can go home," he says, my mother racing to help him with his crutches.

"You might be the sweetest man ever to walk this God's green earth, you know that, Curt Fontaine?" my mother gushes.

"Remember that when I forget to place the dishes in the sink," he jokes.

"Come on," she laughs, but I don't miss how my mom discreetly turns her head towards Annabelle's grave and whispers 'thank you.'

I guess if it wasn't for Annabelle, we wouldn't have the family we have today. I think Noah's mom would have liked to know that her two men were left in good hands. Even after everything that has happened, I hope she knows how blessed we all are and what a fixture she still is in our lives.

When we get home a few minutes later, I'm disappointed to see Noah hasn't arrived yet.

"Is it normal for him to be this late?" I ask Curt. "I mean, have you heard anything from Noah or the crew?"

“Unfortunately, we haven’t heard a peep. I just hope the boy had the good sense to find a safe port and not get himself pulled into the storm just to come home,” Curt explains, sharing a not-so-subtle worried glance with my mother.

That gut-wrenching feeling at the bottom of my stomach stirs once more.

Because unlike Curt, I’m not as confident that Noah would do the safe thing instead of putting himself at risk.

Noah would brave any storm if he thought it would bring him home to me sooner.

Please, please God, keep him safe.

Don’t let him do something stupid.

Keep my Noah safe.

Please.

* * *

It’s been forty-eight hours and still no word from Curt’s ship or its crew.

But most importantly, no word from Noah.

Curt has been calling everyone he knows to learn if anyone has seen them while out in the water. My mother has been a rightful mess, taking whatever sick days she has just to stay at home, hoping Noah will walk through our door at any minute.

And me?

I haven’t left his loft since the Coast Guard sounded out the alarm that a few fishing boats were caught in the storm with no inkling to anyone’s survival. Even Curt’s reassurances that his boat’s name isn’t listed amongst the shipwrecks does very little to comfort me.

“I know my boat. I know my crew. But most of all, I know my son. They are safe. They have to be.”

Unfortunately for Curt, I’ve never been an optimist.

Why? Why, God? Why didn’t I tell him that I loved him?

Why did I keep those words to myself when they were all he wanted to hear from me?

After everything that we’ve been through... is this how it all ends?

Instead of the happily ever after I yearned to write for us, will it all just end in tears and heartbreak?

No. I don't accept this fate.

Noah and I were supposed to sail off into the sunset and live a life filled with love and joy.

This can't be how our story ends.

It just can't be.

But with each hour that passes by with no news, my dread sinks its claws into my soul, whispering in what world could happiness like mine ever be possible?

In nothing but one of Noah's old Bayshore High T-shirts and his leather jacket, I roam through his sacred space, needing to feel his presence any way I can. I call out all my memories of him, of how these past few weeks he's done everything he can to settle my uncertainties and doubts. How he gave me his love so unabashedly even when I clung to the pain of our tragic past.

But the true tragedy here is me holding onto misery when love was already at my beck and call.

What a fool I've been.

As if I can hear him whispering in my ear, another memory comes to mind. One that we shared just before he left. My gaze falls to his nightstand and ever so slowly, as if I'm being pulled in its direction, I go to it and open his drawer, finding the velvet box he told me about. My hands shake as I pull it out and open it, revealing the diamond engagement ring once worn by his mother.

Tears stream down my face as I take it out of the box and put it on, wishing he was here to see me do it.

"Please, Noah. Come back to me," I sob, sitting on his bed and staring at the ring that was always destined to be mine.

I fall back into his bed and hug his pillow, his summer scent still clinging to the fabric. Exhaustion finally has its way with me, as I cry myself to sleep, praying the next time I wake is to his beautiful face. And if not, then I'd rather not wake up at all.

* * *

"Sky...Sky..." I hear Noah softly call out, feeling his knuckles caress my cheek.

"Noah," I say, half asleep, believing him a part of my dream.

“Wake up, baby,” he murmurs softly.

“Noah!” I’m suddenly jolted awake, my eyes scanning his face frantically, praying this isn’t some lucid dream, but that he’s really here beside me. “Oh my god!” I cry, lifting off the bed just enough to hug him. “You’re here! You’re alive.”

“Of course, I am. Why would you think—”

But I don’t let him finish, because my heart can’t take another second of not telling him how I feel.

“I love you! I love you so much, Noah. It hurts to breathe without you. I thought I lost you. I thought...I love you.”

“Woah there, little stalker. Why are you crying?” he says, bypassing my declaration of love just to continue to stare at my panicked state with worry in his eyes.

“You were supposed to be home two days ago, and when you didn’t... and the storm...” I start to stutter, knowing I’m probably not making any sense with how fast I’m talking.

“I’m okay, Sky. See? Alive and well. When we were alerted that a storm was brewing, I figured it would be safer to take the long way back and circle around it. That’s why I’m late. But I’m here, baby. I’m here.”

I hold onto his neck so tightly, I wouldn’t be surprised if I’m choking him a little.

“I was so scared, Noah. We had just found each other and I thought... well, I thought...”

Noah calmly pulls my arms from his neck just to place my hands against his beating heart so that I can see that he’s really here, and that nothing bad happened to him.

“I made a vow to you, remember?” he says ever so sweetly.

“A vow?” I sob, confused.

“Hmm.” He nods as he dries my tears from my face. “I promised you that you would have all my forevers, Sky. In this life and in the next, they would always be yours. Do you really think something as silly as death would ever keep me from you?” He shakes his head. “Nothing will ever come between us again, little stalker. Nothing.”

And as he begins to mend all the shattered fragments of my heart, Noah pulls my hands to his lips to kiss and finds his mother’s ring on my finger.

His gaze flies up to mine, a vast sea of hope swimming in his eyes like never before.

“You have my forevers too, Noah. You always have. Might as well make it official.”

The words have barely spilled out of my mouth before Noah crashes his lips urgently to mine, cupping my cheeks with such reverence that I’m left completely breathless.

Because when love is this real, forever can’t come soon enough.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Skylar



My phone rings, breaking the peaceful silence that has settled in the room. I glance at the caller ID, seeing Eliza's name flashing on the screen. With a grin, I pick up the call and answer, "It's been five minutes."

Eliza's laughter tinkles through the phone. "I know, I know," she admits, cackling. "I just couldn't wait any longer. I'm so excited for you, Skylar! Everything is coming together so perfectly. We've got the final edits lined up, and by the time you reach New Zealand in March, your book will be ready for your approval. You're going to be a published author, Skylar!"

Her words make my chest burn...because a few months ago, I never would have envisioned this being my life.

"I can't believe it," I say softly, my voice tinged with gratitude. "Thank you, Eliza, for everything."

Eliza's tone softens, a hint of emotion sneaking in. "Skylar, I'm so proud of you," she murmurs sincerely. "You've come such a long way, and you deserve all the success that's coming your way."

A lump forms in my throat as I absorb her words.

With a deep breath, I reply, my voice trembling with emotion, "I'm proud of me too, Eliza."

We share a moment of quiet understanding, both of us aware of the significance of this achievement. She's been my rock, my guiding light throughout this entire process, and I couldn't have asked for a better friend and mentor.

As our conversation continues, I can't help but reflect on how much your life can change...in just a few months.

I never thought I'd be given a second chance, a chance to finally pursue my dreams while also getting back the love that had always been a part of me. The future looks magical where before...it only looked gray.

Eliza and I chat for a few more minutes about the details of the publishing process before she says, "Alright, I've taken up enough of your time. Go enjoy that hottie of yours," she teases.

Just as she says that, the door to the room swings open, and in walks Noah. A vibrant spark dances in his eyes, and he saunters towards me with an air of mischievous confidence. I can't help but admire how incredibly attractive he is. Like he was made just for me.

Noah waggles his eyebrows in a teasing manner, like he can read my mind, and his playful expression prompts a burst of laughter from deep within me. It's a laughter filled with warmth and happiness, a stark contrast to the years of solitude and longing.

"Speak of the devil," I say, addressing the unexpected but very welcome guest in the room.

Noah's grin spreads across his face, and I catch a glimpse of his endearing dimples. "Did I just get summoned by the mention of a hottie?"

I glance down at my phone, fully aware that Eliza can probably hear my delighted laughter through the line. "I'll let you two lovebirds catch up. Enjoy your time together, Skylar," Eliza chimes in, her laughter joining the joyful atmosphere.

"Thanks, Eliza," I reply, my voice carrying genuine warmth. I end the call and place my full attention on Noah.

"Couldn't stay away?" I drawl, and he prowls towards me, my insides fluttering in anticipation for what's to come.

We can't keep our hands off each other. And something tells me...that's never going to change.

We're both so grateful for this second chance. I'm never going to take it for granted.

"I decided I was hungry," he growls, scooping me off my chair and laying me down on the bed.

He yanks my leggings down and presses his nose into my covered sex, inhaling deeply. I squirm with hot need as he yanks off my panties, dragging the flat of his tongue through my folds.

"So sweet," he growls. "Exactly what I wanted."

His stubble scrapes against my folds and inner thighs, and I moan as his

teeth bite gently at my clit. Noah's tongue licks demandingly between my legs, and I cry out his name as his tongue pushes into my opening. His thumb massages my clit as I pant and thrash against the bed until his biceps tighten over my legs so I can't move at all.

I cry out again when his tongue spears into me, thrusting as deep as he can.

"Please, baby. Suck my clit," I beg, pulling on his hair. He listens to me, sucking hard. My core clenches in response, my thighs quivering as an orgasm pumps through me. He continues to lick and suck until I'm whimpering from how sensitive I am.

"Turn over," he demands suddenly. And I immediately obey.

"Get on your knees."

I do what he wants, getting on all fours. He slaps my ass and my core gushes, drops of my wetness sliding down my thigh.

"Fuck, you are so perfect for me," he mutters as his tongue licks up the drops.

He pushes one finger inside of me and I drop to my elbows, forehead pressed to the mattress.

"That's it. That's my good girl."

He eats at me from this angle, his mouth and chin covered in my wetness, my hips jerking against his face as he pushes me into another devastating orgasm.

As soon as I've come down, he slides his cock through my core, slowly pushing it inside me. I'm overstimulated and swollen from the two orgasms, making him feel bigger, harder.

"Fuck. You're so tight," he moans as he continues to push, stretching me to the point of euphoric pain.

Once he's sheathed all the way in, he pauses for a moment. I grip onto the sheets, trying to move against him.

He pulls back and then slams back in, pushing my body forward. His hands grip my hips as he slams in and out of me, forcing a cry from my lips every time.

"Fuck, baby, I love you," he swears as his tongue licks up my spine.

He continues to thrust into me, one of his hands slipping between my legs, massaging my clit. Another orgasm shoots through me, and he growls as he follows me over the edge, filling me with shooting streams of his hot cum.

I collapse onto the bed, with him still inside me, and he carefully moves

over me, until he's enveloped me in his entire body, peppering sweet kisses across my skin.

"I love you," he whispers again as he holds me in his arms.

A tear slips down my cheek, because I'm so damn happy.

I love him so much.

And this time, nothing holds me back from telling him.

"I love you, too."

* * *

The night before our departure to New Zealand, Daisy and I decide to have one last sister sleepover. We clear out my room, covering the floor with blankets and pillows, ready to relive our childhood for one more night. The room is adorned with fairy lights, casting a warm and cozy glow, just like the many sleepovers we had enjoyed growing up.

As we settle down amidst the soft blankets, playful banter and laughter flow freely between Daisy and me. We reminisce about our shared memories and inside jokes, relishing every moment.

"Do you remember the time we tried to bake that cake for Mom's birthday and you ended up covered head to toe in flour because I dropped the bowl on your head?" Daisy chuckles.

I grin. "Yeah, and then you decided it made sense to try and convince Mom that someone broke into the house, and their only crime was to cover me in flour. Made a lot of sense," I drawl with a roll of the eye.

She snorts and lays back on her pillow, staring up at the ceiling with a small smile on her face.

We have a huge spread of our favorite snacks surrounding us, and I grab some chips, stuffing them in my mouth.

"Whatcha thinking about?" I finally ask when I'm done chewing, noticing she's gone quiet on me.

She glances over.

"It feels like the end of an era," she says softly, playing with the ends of her hair, her voice tinged with a hint of sadness.

"You did decide to get married on me," I joke, staring at the new addition on my hand that signifies I'll be following her sometime soon. "And I *have* been gone for seven years."

“Yeah, but for some reason, that doesn’t seem as big as this. Maybe because I didn’t really have time to prepare for you to leave last time. And now I do.”

My immediate response is to feel guilty for the past, but I do my best to push that away. I’m a constant work in progress with that, but I am in progress.

"I'm going to miss you like crazy, Sky."

I nod, my own emotions swelling within me. "I'll miss you too, Daisy. You're not just my sister; you're my best friend."

Tears well up in Daisy's eyes, and she blinks them away. "You've always been there for me, Skylar. Through thick and thin. And I want you to know that no matter how far apart we are, I'll always be here for you."

I reach out and squeeze her hand, our fingers interlocking like they always do when we need to draw strength from each other. "I know, Daisy. And I'll be just a call or a message away. We'll still have our late-night chats, even if they're from opposite sides of the world."

Daisy smiles, but there's a hint of sadness behind it. "It won't be the same, though."

I sigh, feeling the weight of the impending distance. "I know, but we'll make it work. And just think, when I come back, we'll have even more stories to share."

Daisy chuckles, the sound tinged with nostalgia. "Yeah, you're right. We'll have a lot to catch up on."

As the hours tick away, we continue to reminisce, sharing our dreams and aspirations.

"When you come back, you're going to be a star, Sky," Daisy shrieks proudly.

I put my hand on her mouth. "Don't jinx me."

She shakes her head and grabs my hand. "You know, growing up, I used to envy you."

"What?" I ask, completely flabbergasted. "Why?"

"You're so fucking talented. The sky's always been the limit for you."

I go to tell her she's talented too, but then she's the one putting her hand on my mouth.

"I have my strengths. But not like you. And that's okay. I just wanted you to know—you've always inspired me. I'm so freaking proud that you finally decided to show the world how special you are."

A hitched sob comes out of my mouth, because my sister is just so damn wonderful.

I'm going to miss her so much.

"I always envied you too," I tell her. "Of your ability to live so freely, so unapologetically. I've tried to channel you all these years when I needed to be brave. Because you were the first person to teach me how to do it."

There are tears in Daisy's eyes now too, and we hold onto each other's hands tightly.

Eventually, fatigue begins to overtake us, and our conversation lulls into comfortable silence. We lie side by side, gazing at the ceiling, lost in our own thoughts.

Before drifting off to sleep, I whisper, "I love you, Daisy. You mean the world to me."

Daisy turns to me with a soft smile. "I love you too, Skylar. Always have, always will. You're my person."

And with those words, we settle into a peaceful sleep.

The night is a poignant reminder of the unbreakable connection between us, a bond that can withstand any distance or time apart.

* * *

The air is cool and crisp as Noah and I make our way through the quiet cemetery. The soft crunch of fallen leaves beneath our feet is the only sound in this serene place. We pass by rows of gravestones, each one a silent testament to lives once lived.

I can't help but feel a heavy weight in my chest as we approach the familiar grave, the headstone adorned with a simple inscription—Annabelle Fontaine, Loving Mother and Wife.

Noah's hand finds mine, and he gives it a gentle squeeze, as if sensing the turmoil of emotions within me. We stand together in front of the grave, lost in our thoughts, neither of us speaking a word. The wind rustles through the trees, and I shiver, feeling a chill down to my bones.

Noah clears his throat, breaking the silence. "Hey, Mom," he begins, his voice filled with a mixture of sadness and tenderness. "It's been a while. I...I just wanted to say I won't be able to visit for a while. But I wanted you to know...I'm finally...happy. Just like you wanted for me."

He glances over at me, emotion in his eyes, and I feel the weight of his words.

I swallow hard, my own emotions threatening to overwhelm me. "Hi," I say softly, addressing the woman whose memory is etched in this place. "I just want you to know I'll take care of him, just like you would've wanted. I promise."

Noah's grip on my hand tightens, and he nods, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Yeah," he murmurs. "Mom...she will."

I blink back my own tears, feeling a deep sense of gratitude towards this woman I never met. Because she gave me the greatest man I'll ever know.

We stand there for what feels like an eternity, sharing our thoughts and feelings with the woman who can no longer respond. It's a bittersweet moment, a goodbye that's much harder than I thought it would be. Noah's shoulders slump, and I wrap my arms around him, offering what little comfort I can.

After a while, Noah steps away from the grave, wiping away a tear. He looks at me with a small smile.

"Thank you for coming here with me, Skylar."

I nod, my own eyes misty. "Of course, Noah. Always."

As we turn to leave the cemetery, I can't help but feel a sense of closure. The weight in my chest has lightened, replaced by a profound sense of connection and understanding.

Noah and I walk hand in hand, leaving behind the resting place of his mother. The leaves crunch beneath our feet once more, but this time, the sound is accompanied by a faint sense of peace. We face the future together, ready to embrace whatever challenges lie ahead, knowing that the bond between us is stronger than ever.

* * *

The morning sun stretches its golden fingers across Thatcher's Bay, bathing everything in a warm, gentle light. The salty breeze carries with it the promise of a new day as Noah and I stand on the familiar dock, surrounded by our family. It's a moment filled with mixed emotions, a poignant beginning to our journey.

Daisy and I share a tearful hug, clinging to each other as we say our

goodbyes. "Promise me you'll come back soon," she whispers, her voice quivering with emotion.

I hold her close, feeling the weight of our parting. "I promise, Daisy. We'll have more adventures together, just like old times."

Our embrace lingers for a moment before we reluctantly let go, Daisy sliding into her husband's arms for a comforting hug. My mother approaches next, her eyes glistening with tears, but her smile unwavering. She takes my hands in hers, her voice trembling with pride. "You're going to do great things, Skylar. I believe in you."

Tears well up in my eyes as I hug her tightly. "Thank you, Mom...I love you."

We still have a ways to go with our relationship, but I no longer fear it won't ever be mended. Some things just take time. And I'm okay with that.

I watch as Noah shares his own heartfelt farewells with his father and my mom. Their silent understanding speaks volumes, acknowledging his readiness to embark on this new chapter.

Noah turns to me, his eyes filled with a mixture of excitement and anticipation. His hand reaches out, a silent invitation. "Are you ready, little stalker?"

Without hesitation, I place my hand in his, our fingers intertwining. "More than ready," I reply, with determination in my voice.

Noah leads me onto the boat, his confidence reassuring. As we step aboard, I take one final glance at our family gathered together on the dock. Their smiles and tears reflect the love and support that have brought us to this moment.

Noah swiftly prepares the boat for departure, and I watch as our families become smaller and smaller in the distance. The sails whip us forward, and we begin our journey away from the place that has held our deepest memories and most profound challenges.

As we sail into the open sea, the morning sun bathes everything in a soft, warm glow. Noah and I stand side by side, the wind tousling our hair and the gentle splash of seawater on our faces.

I lean against him, our hands still firmly intertwined. We both know that we're embarking on a new adventure together. The past has shaped us, but the future holds limitless possibilities. As we sail towards the horizon, I feel completely at peace. Because we're together.

I'm finally where I'm meant to be.

Noah wraps his arm around my shoulders, pulling me close. I rest my head on his chest, and together, we watch as the world fades into the distance, ready to embrace the next chapter of our lives in the morning light.

I once knew a boy whose stormy eyes stole my very breath away just by looking directly into mine.

Because of the boy I once hated, I'd never be the same girl again.

And I was perfectly alright with that.

Epilogue

Noah



A month has passed since we set sail from Thatcher's Bay, and every day has been better than the last. The worries and doubts that once haunted us have faded like distant memories, replaced by a sense of freedom and joy that I never thought possible. Skylar, once afraid of the water, now moves through it with an ease that astounds me. She's found her place on this boat, in this life, and it's a wonder to behold.

I watch her now as she stands at the bow, her hair tousled by the salty breeze. The sun hangs low on the horizon, casting a warm, golden light over everything. She closes her eyes and stretches her arms out to the sides, embracing the world around her. The sea glistens beneath her, mirroring the beauty of the sky. I can't help but smile at the sight of her, so at peace and alive.

Sky then turns to me, her eyes filled with a radiant happiness that warms my heart. She takes a few steps toward me, her bare feet making soft impressions on the wooden deck. Without a word, she wraps her arms around my waist and rests her head against my chest.

I hold her close, my chin resting on the top of her head, and I breathe in the scent of her hair. "You look so happy," I whisper.

She tilts her head back to look up at me, her eyes sparkling with affection. "I am," she replies simply, her voice soft and filled with contentment.

As I gaze into her eyes, I can't help but think of the day we sealed our love with a promise to each other—a promise we made on a beach in the Bahamas.

The sun was setting over the tranquil beach, casting a soft, golden radiance over the pristine sand. Skylar stood there, her bare feet sinking into

the soft grains as the waves lapped at the shore. Her simple white dress billowed around her, and her hair was loose, tousled by the gentle breeze.

I approached her, my heart pounding with anticipation. This was the moment we had been waiting for—the moment we would declare our love for each other in the most beautiful of settings.

Skylar turned to face me, her eyes bright with emotion. She reached out her hand, and I took it in mine, our fingers interlocking like the pieces of a puzzle. We stood there for a moment, silently taking in the beauty of the scene around us—the sea, the sky, and the promise of our future together.

Then, with a sense of determination and love, we exchanged our vows.

"Noah, from the moment we reconnected, my life has been filled with love, laughter, and an abundance of happiness. You've shown me what it means to be truly alive, to embrace the unknown, and to cherish every moment. I promise to be your partner in all things, and to support you with unwavering love and devotion. I promise to follow you anywhere. To always be by your side."

Tears glistened in my eyes as I responded, my voice steady with conviction. "Skylar, you are the love of my life, my anchor in this vast world. You've brought light into the darkest corners of my heart, and I promise to protect and cherish that light for all our days. I vow to be your rock, your confidant, and your greatest supporter. I promise to give you the greatest love story that's ever been told." She sobbed, and I squeezed her hands tight. "Skylar, you've given me the greatest gift—your love and your trust. I promise to protect you, to hold you close, and to always remind you of how strong and brave you are. You're the brightest star in my sky, and I'll never let you forget that."

Simple words, spoken from the heart, filled with promises of love, support, and a lifetime of shared adventures. As the sun dipped below the horizon, we sealed our commitment with a passionate kiss, a kiss that tasted like the salt of the ocean and the promise of forever.

Skylar belonged to me, and I belonged to her.

Forever.

Back in the present, Skylar and I stand together on the deck of our boat, the memory of our wedding still fresh in our minds. We'll have to make it legal and in the presence of our loved ones whenever we return to Thatcher's Bay, but it doesn't matter. Our love is real, and it's stronger than ever.

I lean down and kiss her, a soft and tender caress that speaks of all the

love and joy we've found together on this journey. As our lips meet, I know that we're exactly where we're meant to be—in each other's arms, sailing toward a future filled with adventure, love, and endless possibilities.

Life on the open sea has given us a sense of peace and happiness that we never could have imagined. Together, we've discovered the beauty of the world, the power of love, and the joy of living life to the fullest. And as we sail into the sunset, hand in hand, I can't help but feel like the luckiest man in the world.

Our love story is just beginning. Our journey together is filled with endless adventures, challenges, and moments of pure joy. And I wouldn't want it any other way.

Skylar's eyes shine with happiness, and she leans in to kiss me again. Our lips meet, and the world fades away as we savor the taste of each other's love. It's a kiss filled with promises and a deep understanding of the journey we're embarking on.

As we break the kiss, Skylar rests her head against my chest, and I wrap my arms around her, holding her close. We stand there in silence, watching the sun dip below the horizon, painting the sky with shades of orange and pink.

"I love you, Noah," she whispers, her voice barely audible above the gentle sound of the waves.

"I love you too, Sky," I reply, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "For all our forevers."

With our love as our compass and the endless sea as our backdrop, we sail forward into the unknown, ready to embrace every moment of this beautiful journey together.

The End

Sneak Preview

Keep reading for the complete, angsty, second chance romance, the Breathe Me Duet. Available on Amazon and KU at books2read.com/breathemeduet



Prologue

Now

Valentina

“**Y**es. I understand. I’ll be there tomorrow at ten. I’ll see you then, doctor. Thank you. Goodbye,” I reply softly, hoping Dr. Channing doesn’t hear the quiver in my voice as I bid him farewell.

I hang up the phone and place it face down on the vanity, my hands shaking so profusely, I almost drop the damn thing on the floor. My whole body can’t stop trembling. I hug my stomach and bend over in my chair, just to keep myself from falling off it, slowly breathing in and out, hoping it will settle my erratic heartbeat.

Unfortunately, even if I could steady the irregular pounding in my chest, my stomach has different ideas. The bile of despair and anguish clogs up my throat, leaving me with only seconds to run to the bathroom before throwing up. My knees slam onto the tile, no doubt leaving a bruise, as I purge all these tormenting feelings out of my system. It’s a feat of epic proportions how much vile stuff I’m able to hurl out into the porcelain bowl, since my appetite hasn’t been what it used to be. Chemo does that to a person. The treatment is meant to save a life, however, it also robs you of every quality it offers.

And in my case apparently, it was a useless endeavor, too.

Dr. Channing’s voice said it all. He might not have wanted to come right

out and say I was a lost cause over the phone, preferring to see me face to face to deliver the bad news tomorrow morning, but just by his tone alone, I know there is no room for hope anymore.

This is it.

My end.

The day I have dreaded for the past twelve months has finally arrived. After a year of being prodded, poked and analyzed, I have to face the fact that it was all for nothing. My fate has been handed out, and now it's up to me to choose how I will deal with it. Will I crawl up into the fetal position and cry defeat, or will I make the remaining days I still have left count for something?

After I've vomited up all that I'm capable of, I get up from the floor and go over to the sink to rinse my mouth off. I spit out the excess mouthwash and then rinse with water, repeating the process three times before calling it quits. It's no use. I can still taste all my sorrows and regrets on the tip of my tongue. I hold on to the sink's edges, and to my utter misfortune, catch a glimpse of my pale distraught reflection on the bathroom mirror.

Where is the girl who used to fight for what she wanted?

Where is she?

Because right now, I need her terribly.

Unable to keep looking at the mirror's image for another minute, and in desperate need to replace this foul taste in my mouth, I rush out of the bathroom and head into the kitchen. Before I even know what I'm doing, my hand is already pulling the refrigerator door open, retrieving the sealed vodka bottle inside—the very one I had bought so long ago to celebrate when I'd receive a clean bill of health. Alcohol was just one of the many things I couldn't indulge in, but that was when I still had a dog in this fight. Since I basically just received my death sentence, drinking a few shots is the least of my worries. If I'm going to puke my guts out all night, might as well blame part of it on Absolut.

I grab a shot glass and fill it to the rim, downing it in one go. The bitter liquid burns my insides, but it doesn't dissuade me from having another. My whole chest feels as if it's on fire, but it's a feeling I would rather have ten times over than the sadness looming over my head, seeping its way into my bones.

"You know what you need, Val? Rocky road ice-cream," I say out loud with a halfhearted giggle, trying hard to avoid the fact that I've succumbed to

talking to myself in my empty apartment. The vacant rooms are just another painful reminder of how I'll have to face this all on my own. "Yep, that's what you need," I mutter under my breath after drinking another shot, pushing that harrowing thought away from my head.

One pity party at a time, Valentina.

I'm about to reach for the fridge door to grab the pint of chocolate goodness when a certain image stops me in my tracks. My hand goes to the picture hanging on my fridge door, held in place by an Eiffel Tower magnet I bought off Amazon. Without regard to my poor broken heart, I trace over the three faces that once upon a time were as familiar to me as my very own. I put the bottle back on the countertop, so both my hands are free to clutch onto the memory of days where my future was still something I looked forward to. One I still joyously day dreamed about and planned for with them at my side.

Most of the pictures from that time in my life are either in some shoe box stuffed inside my closet or archived in an obscure folder on my laptop, both hidden away from my eyes, so I don't have a constant reminder of everything I lost. It's just too painful to go through the endless amount of evidence of how my life would have turned out if one choice had been made differently.

However, I could never let myself part with this picture. It was our very first after all.

I remember that day like it was yesterday, even though it feels as if it was a lifetime ago. Dad had taken it when Logan, Quaid, Carter, and I had come into each other's lives, unbeknownst to any of us how important we would become to each other. I still remember the beaming smile on my father's face as he watched us sitting on my front porch, wolfing down pizza and telling jokes. We had just met a few hours before, and yet we were so in sync, it was almost as if we had known each other our whole lives.

In the years that followed, Dad used to talk a lot about soulmates. How sometimes in life, we get more than one, and how lucky I was to have found all of mine so soon. It meant we would be able to have more time to grow and nurture our love. To see it blossom into something extraordinary and unique above all others. He didn't warn me that everything had an expiration date though. Even true love sometimes withers away. Just like how a fragile rose, once cut at the stem, loses its beauty and perishes before your very eyes. But Dad had always been a romantic, refusing to acknowledge such pessimist thoughts, and for a little while at least, I did too.

I can't help the tug of a smile that rises from the corner of my lips, as I let myself reminisce on that day, even if my heart is being gripped by a relentless fist of sorrow, telling me to tread carefully.

Logan's blond hair needed a cut that summer. It was constantly falling on top of his stellar blue eyes. Every time I saw him, he was running his fingers through it, making sure nothing got in his way when he looked at me. And Logan was always looking at me.

Quaid still had his braces on, but that didn't deter his bright smile in any way. He was either telling a joke or laughing at one, proudly showcasing his infectious metal grin at every opportunity he could find. With his deep forest green eyes and his shaggy brown hair, it was impossible not to find him endearing, even when he was curled up laughing at our expense.

And then there was Carter—the lone wolf of our little pack. He never said more than an odd word here or there, but that didn't mean he was less observant than the others—quite the contrary. There was never a moment I didn't feel his lingering stare from under his curious lids. He never said much in the beginning, but every time he opened his mouth to speak, I'd become mesmerized. Carter had that effect on people.

Hell, they all did.

Before I knew what hit me, I had fallen for the three friends—unconditionally and irrevocably. At a time where I only had my father to call my own, they crept their way into my heart and became the family I always wanted. We were all so young then, but even at such a tender age, I knew what true happiness was. In retrospect, maybe it was the innocence of youth that made me believe I would always feel that way.

Healthy. Empowered. Safe. Loved.

Deep in my heart, I know they were the reason I had so much hope to begin with. So many dreams I thought I would accomplish with them at my side. Another pained chuckle leaves me as I slide down to the floor, leaning against my fridge for support as I look at each smiling face, taunting me how when I was twelve years old, I had everything and everyone I would ever need or would ever want. I had a family.

Family.

I've heard that word a million times over in the last year. That's who everyone tells me I should rely on during this sensitive time in my life. When you're sick, people react in two ways. Either they offer their condolences, shying away from you as fast and politely as possible, or you get a wealth of

curious questions added with an abundance of uninvited advice.

“Why do you always come alone to your doctor's appointments?”

“Don't you have anyone who can hold your hand through your treatment?”

“There must be someone you can lean on during this troublesome time.”

“Don't you have any family? Friends?”

“You should seek comfort in the people who love and care for you, Valentina.”

“Now is not the time to hold on to family feuds or grudges.”

“Don't you have anyone?”

At first, when I was bombarded with such intrusive questions, I made excuses as to why I was always alone. But that was when I still had the energy to lie. After a few months of unsuccessful drug trials, the will to placate their curiosity with civil replies went out the window.

“No, I don't have anyone.”

“Yes, I am alone.”

“My family is gone.”

However, seeing their pitying looks made it so that I stopped telling the truth, too. At least when I lied, I didn't get those. I can deal with people's inquisitive natures. It's their pity that I can't handle. So now I feign ignorance to their probing glances and questions, and change the topic as soon as someone brings family into the conversation.

Family.

Yes, I used to have one. I had a father I adored more than life itself and three best friends who meant the world to me. I lived and breathed for them, until I couldn't do it anymore. My gaze falls back onto the photograph in my hand, where those same three beautiful boys were all smiles and joyful gazes, and me right smack in the middle of them with my own goofy grin shining brightly at the man behind the camera.

That was my family, and until I take my very last breath, they will remain so—even if only in my heart.

I wonder if they're happy.

If leading the lives they aspired to when we were children gave them the fulfillment I couldn't offer.

Against my better judgment and to my heart's chagrin, over the years, on those lonely nostalgic nights that I desired to feel close to them, Google had been the one friend I could rely on. It gave me small glimpses of all my boys'

accomplishments. Now men with established careers, they were able to succeed in all the goals they set out for themselves, while I failed mine so miserably. Pride and sadness breathed simultaneously in one hollowed breath as I got a small peek into their lives. Lives I had been deprived of sharing with them, because of one decision that separated us all.

God, we had so many dreams back then. A bucket list of things we wanted to do in our lifetime. I even wrote mine down and forced my three best friends to do the same, just so we could lie down on the San Antonio grass, look up at the summer sky, and daydream about our lists together. We were so confident we were going to take the world by storm, hand in hand, and that nothing would ever get in the way of our happiness.

It's funny what the memory latches onto. How it chooses to keep some memories so vividly intact, while distorting others so ruthlessly. But those summer days, of whispering our wants and desires to each other, are as much a part of me as is this disease that's killing me.

Those same ambitions seem like nothing but pipe dreams to me now—unattainable and hurtful to recollect.

As expected, the vodka is starting to do its job, pushing my mind to wallow on what could have been if things had turned out differently for all of us. Images of all the places we would have traveled to and visited together, of all the exotic foods and cultures we would experience and delight ourselves in, dance in my head as a cruel joke.

But my wayward thoughts don't stop there. As foolish as the idea is to me now, I can even see myself wearing a white coat in some prestigious hospital, treating the sick and infirm instead of being one myself. And since I've let myself fall into the rabbit hole of regret and failed dreams, another painful image assaults me—one where my belly is bigger than life and four pairs of hands cradle it. Pure love emanating from our entwined hands on the life I would bring into the world.

A drunken tear falls onto the photograph in my hand, and I wipe it off clean before it ruins this small physical memory beyond measure. Just because that life will never happen, doesn't mean I can't hold on to the keepsake that gave me hope it one day could.

Enough, Valentina. Stop wallowing on what could have been and start thinking about what still can be done, I inwardly reprimand. You want lists? Then let's make new ones.

I pull myself up from the floor, grabbing the vodka bottle with one hand

as I solidly grip on the photograph with the other, making my way to my living room. I sit at the little desk I have in the corner, pushing the medical journals to the floor to make room for what I'm about to do. I grab some stationary paper and write down everything I wanted to do in my life, adding two columns next to it with the titles 'Plausible' and 'Maybe.' I write down each and every thing I at one point in my life dreamed about, while drinking right from the vodka bottle to numb the pain those same written words provoke. I'm not sure how much time passes by, but the buzz I got is a good indicator that I've been sitting in the same spot for hours.

Once finished, I take a good long look at my list. What I had hoped would give me some sort of control and comfort, only deepens the frown on my face. As I start to draw a line over the ones I will never be able to accomplish in time, others stand out as strong candidates for what I can still do.

Visit the Louvre and eat small pastries in a café in Paris.

Dance in the rain in Prague.

Take a nature walk through the Swiss Alps.

Drink wine in the south of Spain and nap under a tree.

Eat gelato while walking through St. Mark's square in Venice.

Skinny-dip on an exotic beach in the Greek islands.

I tap the end of my pen onto the desk as images of fulfilling these dreams accost me. Yes, I want to do all these things, but I don't want to do them alone. When I craved to visit all these places and embark in such an adventure, it was in the company of the men I loved above all.

What would it serve doing any of this without them? It would be pointless and a halfhearted attempt at happiness.

Either drunk on bravery, or too out of my mind with sorrow, I pull three new stationary letters, and on each one, I write the names I haven't uttered in almost ten years.

Logan.

Quaid.

Carter.

In each letter, I write down what my heart still yearns for and end them all with one single question—one that might define the rest of my days.

“Will you let true happiness slip through your fingers a second time, or are you brave enough to take this leap with me?”

I seal each letter into an envelope with a kiss and leave them spread out across my desk. Each one surrounds the photograph of that one childhood

memory that changed my life completely. It's oddly poetic that this venerate picture, which celebrates the day all three boys came into my life, is now surrounded by the letters I hope will bring them back into it.

The only difference is that back then, they were able to kick-start my life anew, and time was a concept we had in spades.

That's not the case this time.

Time is no longer an ally of mine, and maybe it never really was. Maybe this had been my fate all along, and I was only given a small reprieve—a small window of happiness.

If they don't hear my call, at least I'll always have those memories to remind me that at one time in my life, I was whole.

I was loved.

And so were they.

1

Then



Valentina

I wipe my brow with my forearm, the August heat beginning to take its toll on me. Dad said living in Texas would take some getting used to, but I'm not worried. If the warm San Antonio weather is what I have to look forward to all year round, then I'm just fine with that. We arrived a few short hours ago, and already, I can tell how much we are going to like it here. Sure, anything compared to the gray somber streets of Detroit is an improvement, but I like the idea of actually living in a proper two-story house this time—with a back and front yard to boot—and not some shabby apartment in a twelve-floor building, where no one knows their neighbors or even cares to.

This house is a symbol of our new beginning—a place where Dad and I can actually be happy and start fresh.

When packing for our big move, I made sure that nothing in this home would make us think of Mom or her absence. I threw out every little thing that could remind us of her leaving two years ago. Dad said I'd regret not keeping at least a few photographs of her, but if I want a reminder, all I have to do is look in the mirror. I have her dark, jet-black hair, her olive-toned skin and her full, ruby lips. The only thing I inherited from Dad was his golden-hazel eyes, for which I'm thankful. Instead of seeing all the traits I got from my selfish, vain mother, I focus on his and the purity of my eyes.

My dad has the kindest eyes.

Just like the sun beaming above, his eyes are warm and true, and they always burn affectionately brighter anytime they are looking at me. Much like they are now.

“How about you take one of the smaller boxes instead, kiddo?” He chuckles with a wink when he discovers me trying to lift one of the heavier boxes from the U-Haul truck we rented out.

“If I only take the small boxes, then this move is going to take forever, Dad,” I exclaim, pointing to the endless amount of larger boxes behind me.

“It'll take whatever it needs to. We have plenty of time.” He smiles fondly, picking up the box I was trying to carry, whistling all the way back into the house and leaving me empty handed.

That's my dad for you.

Always Zen, as if he has all the time in the world, and nothing ever gets him riled up. I wish that was something else I could have inherited from him. Unfortunately, I'm more like my mother in that regard, too—always restless and fretful. Or maybe it's because of what happened to me that I always feel like I'm working against the clock. Almost as if I have a certain amount of time to do all that I want to until it runs out. It could also be the reason why I'm so excited to start this new life in a new place. Maybe now I can finally breathe and just enjoy every second, instead of worrying about if the next one will arrive or not.

Most twelve-year-olds would dread being uprooted from their childhood homes. The idea of leaving all their friends behind, having to go to a new school where no one knows your name would be daunting for most girls my age.

Me however?

I see this as an opportunity to actually have all the things I've missed out on.

Aside from the nurses and doctors, who I saw on the day-to-day basis, and the other cancer patients who got their chemo at the same time I went for my dose, I had no real friends to count on. No one to really miss me moving away to Texas. Not even my own mother.

But now that my life is finally my own, I'm going to do everything on my bucket list that I hadn't been able to do when I was sick. And if I'm really lucky, Dad will see how happy and healthy I am, and start living his own life, too. Maybe even start dating. Who knows? The possibilities are endless, and I for one can't wait for us to start living our best life, away from divorce papers and hospital rooms.

Since Dad is adamant in doing all the heavy lifting, I pile three of the smaller boxes, one on top of each other, to bring back inside. He's probably going to frown at my stubbornness, worried that I'll exert myself, but he has to get with the program sooner or later. I'm not made of porcelain. I won't break or have a seizure just because of a little strenuous activity.

That was then.

This is now.

The sooner Dad comes to terms with the fact that all our fears and worries about my health are in the past, the better. And for that to happen, he's going to have to lighten up and give me a little wiggle room to try new things that, up to this point, were unthinkable. For instance, he's going to have to let me

do chores around the house, and when I start my new school later this summer, he can't say no when I tell him I want to try my hand at sports. And he's definitely going to have to let me eat junk food like any other preteen.

I can't keep the small giggle of excitement contained at the idea of eating a juicy cheeseburger at the mall, or doing everyday tasks like washing dishes or taking out the trash. It might sound stupid to some, but I welcome the normalcy of it all.

Bring it on!

Normal never sounded so sweet.

With these enthralling mundane images dancing in my head, I jump giddy off the truck with the three boxes in tow, only for the sun's rays to blind me and keep me rooted to the spot. When my light eyes finally get used to the glare, I see two boys across the street, throwing a football from one to the other. I bite my lower lip to suppress the giggle that wants to come out, when the boy with the shaggy brown hair doesn't pay attention to where he's throwing, since he's too busy waving at me, and lands the football right into his distracted blond friend. The brown-haired boy quickly runs over to his friend, now lying flat on the grass, and holds out his hand to pull him up. They are both too far for me to be able to hear what they say to each other, but it must be funny, because they both start laughing, pushing on each other's shoulders as if nothing happened.

Suddenly a loud whistle slices through the air, stunning them into a standstill and embarrassing the hell out of me.

"Dad, what are you doing?" I ask through gritted teeth, my cheeks flushing crimson.

"Watch and learn, kiddo." He winks at me as he waves the two boys over to us.

I can't help but chuckle as I watch them try to make up their mind if they should come over or not. But it must not have been too much of a dilemma, because within seconds, they're both crossing the street and walking up my driveway.

"Hey, are you boys interested in making a few bucks?"

"How few are we talking about, Mister?" The one with the football in his hands asks with a cock to his brow.

"How about ten dollars for each of you? I'd say that's a fair amount for an honest two hours of work for helping me and my daughter unpack this truck."

The other boy, the blond one, looks into the U-Haul and then lets out a long exhale, rubbing the back of his head as he begins counting all the boxes.

“By my count, this looks more like a four-hour job for the two of us, sir. But if you throw in lunch and pay us an extra ten dollars, I can call on a buddy of ours and we’ll get this done in the two hours you want.”

“You drive a hard bargain, son. Pizza okay with you boys?”

They both nod with bright smiles on their faces, discreetly looking at me every so often.

“Oh, where are my manners?” Dad slams his open palm over his forehead.

I want to roll my eyes at him so bad, but right now, I’m too nervous to do it.

“My name is Eric Rossi, and this lady right here is my daughter, Valentina,” he announces proudly, pulling me over to him and placing both his hands over my shoulders, giving me a comforting squeeze.

“Hi, I’m Quaid, and this is my best friend Logan,” the brown-haired boy with a full metal grin splitting his face in two introduces.

Even with braces, his smile is infectious, and I can’t help my own silly grin from springing forth.

“I’m Val.”

“I said that already, kiddo,” Dad utters teasingly under his breath.

This time, I do roll my eyes.

“Nice to meet you, Val,” Logan adds, stretching his hand out for me to shake, but it’s a pointless effort, since I’m still holding onto the three boxes I took out of the truck.

Seeing the error of his ways, he rubs the back of his head again, a shy smile tugging at the corner of his lips, making him look even more endearing.

“So does your friend live far?” I ask, trying to snap out of my awkward state.

“Who? Carter? Nah. He lives right next door to you. We’ll go get him,” Quaid retorts, pulling at Logan’s elbow.

They turn around and stop in the middle of the driveway, talking a mile a minute with each other. Again, I can’t hear them, but I really wish I could, since they look like they are about to butt heads. However, whatever they were discussing so heatedly is quickly resolved, and both boys run across our yard next door in a mad dash.

“Welcome to San Antonio, kiddo. I think we just met your welcoming

committee.” Dad chuckles as he takes the three boxes out of my hands.

“Nope, that doesn’t count, since you kind of forced their hand. Offering pizza and cash. You can’t bribe kids to be my friends, Dad.”

“Ah, Val. Those boys were dying for any excuse to come meet you. I just gave them the golden opportunity they were praying for,” he teases, walking past me and back into the house with his load.

I turn to get another box from the truck, when something catches my eye from the second floor window next door. At first, it looks like a shadow lurking behind dark black curtains, but then I catch a glimpse of something shiny. Like a flash of light, it’s there, and then suddenly, it isn’t.

“Weird,” I mumble, and go back to my task, anxious for Quaid and Logan to come back.

Though Dad had a lame way of introducing us, I’m still happy he did.

Sure, when I was thinking about making friends, I presumed I’d start with girls and work my way to boys. But like every other part of my life, nothing is ever as I expect, so why should making friends be any different?

It doesn’t matter.

All that matters is that Dad and I will finally be able to live like a normal family and be happy for once.

“Welcome to San Antonio, Val,” I whisper my dad’s words back to me.

I send a silent prayer to the big guy upstairs to make this home the safe haven Dad and I always dreamed about. Let this home be filled with only love and laughter.

Lord knows we’ve both shed enough tears to last us a lifetime.

Read the rest of Valentina’s story [here!](#)

Acknowledgments

Hi.

Fair warning, this is going to be a long, not so comfortable rant, so please do not feel obliged to read it in any way.

I'm totally okay with you taking the afterglow of the happily ever after CR Jane and I just gave you and going on your merry way, dreaming about these two characters that mean so much to us.

But for those who are okay with reading a small moment of truth from me, hold onto your seats, because this is going to be a bumpy ride, and in no way, shape, or form, will I lie to you and say it's going to be pretty.

It won't be. But then again, the truth rarely is.

First of all, I'd like to take this opportunity to apologize for not writing an acknowledgement or even an author note in *The Boy I Once Hated*.

Unfortunately, at the time, like we left Sky and Noah at the end of that book, I was also heartbroken and felt too frail for the right words to flow through me, fearing that I would end up bearing too much of my truth, and exposing all my vulnerabilities.

How foolish of me to even think such a thing, since those had been left on the page—my safe space to process my grief.

You see, the Love & Hate duet wasn't just another love story for me. I was personally invested in its outcome since it came from a place of mourning and regret.

Not at first though.

At first when I started plotting out this duet, I was filled with excitement.

I always wanted to write a book about a fishing community and touch a little bit on my own heritage and ancestral background. I wanted to paint the picture of all its glories as well as its struggles and how families who made their living off the sea survived day by day.

All my life I have lived in one form of fishing community or another and have always been fascinated by it. Be it spending time with my family in the

States in New Bedford, or me growing up in my teen years on the island of Bermuda, where deep sea fishing was the norm. Or maybe my fascination went further back to the Azores where my grandfather made his humble living selling fish. Maybe that is why I always had this fascination with the ocean, needing to live close to it, sensing it was linked to me in some way, unable to go for more than a couple of days without seeing its blue waters. Is it any wonder that when I left the UK—a home also located seaside—I made my permanent residence in a little fishing village in the coast of sunny Portugal.

But even though I was excited to write this tale, I know that it didn't come without its baggage.

I knew the story I was about to write would ultimately bring up some sensitive memories from my past. I knew right off the bat that it was going to take everything in me to write it, but I was adamant if there was ever a time to do it, it was now, completely unaware of what was about to pass.

As I was writing and editing *The Boy I Once Hated*, my father passed away suddenly, and I was left with the ramification of that departure.

It was his side of the family I was basing my story on.

His experiences, mixed with my own.

You can see flashes of him in Curt.

But you can also see him in the distant, rolling stone, Grant.

He was the first man I ever put on a pedestal, but also the first to ever break my heart.

My father was a walking, talking, contradiction.

When he smiled at you, he made you feel like you were staring at the sun.

But when he took that ray of sunshine away, and made you stand under his shadow, there was no blanket in the world that could warm your bones.

He was the embodiment of charm. Worldly and extremely intelligent. There was no topic you could bring up that he wouldn't be able to debate comfortably with you. With only a fourth-grade education, his knowledge would battle that of a college graduate.

But he was also selfish, mercilessly cruel, and completely uncaring of anyone's needs but his own.

Worst of all, he could be incredibly violent when the mood hit him, something my dear mother could attest to while she was married to him. My younger brother, too.

I'm ashamed to say my father only ever hit me once, but his emotional

blackmail and manipulation left more than enough scars to make up for the beatings I didn't suffer under his hand. (As I reread this sentence, I'm astounded to see I used the word shame when admitting to his physical abuse, when it should have been him to feel it, and not me.)

But as a child, I didn't let myself see any of his flaws.

To me he was bigger than life.

I was daddy's little girl, needing his praise and approval like I needed air to breathe. And I was his source of pride, something he could boast to his drinking buddies about. Be it my stellar grades or

written essay awards that I had won, I was always something he could count on to brag about.

Because in his mind, they weren't my accomplishments. They were his.

And for most of my young life, I thought so too.

He planted sweet illusions of grandeur in my head, telling me that the sky was the limit and that everything I could ever aspire to be, was within my reach. And I believed him unequivocally. He gave me permission to dream, and it was with his blessing that my imagination soared to its highest extent, even as a child.

I have my mother to thank for keeping me grounded and inserting humbleness into me. She was the one who reminded me every day that to achieve anything in this life you must work hard for it. That nothing is ever given to you unless you put in an honest day's work and believing that anything worth having would just miraculously fall on your lap without you working for it, was not only foolish but detrimental.

My father had no such beliefs.

In fact, he believed wholeheartedly that the world owed him. That he was destined for more than what he had and envied all those around him who he believed were unworthy of living his life.

To this day, I abhor envy and jealousy and find them the worst traits any human being can have.

"Wasted potential," he often confided in me. "That's my curse. To have so many ideas and not have the means to make them true."

I honestly believe had my father had those means, he would have been a better man. Even now, and maybe naively so, I truly believe that he had the capacity for kindness and goodness. Unfortunately, all of it was overshadowed by his bitterness and frustration.

It took me having my own family to finally cut his toxic influence out of

my life.

I needed to break the cycle of abuse, and I did. Vowing never to speak to him until he took responsibility for his actions and changed his ways. I would not have my young impressionable son look up at his grandfather and see no fault in him as I once had. My sensitive boy had demons of his own to conquer, I would not let my father be another. But that's a story I'm not ready to divulge. My burst of bravery can only go so far.

I'm sure by now the phrase 'daddy issues' has crossed your mind, and self-deprecating enough, I have used many a time the joke that if you were to look up 'daddy issues' in the dictionary, you'd see a picture of me foolishly smiling back.

But then after years of not speaking to each other, my mother called me with the news that he passed away and it was a blow to my world that I never saw coming.

A blow so strong that no matter how hard I tried to bury it deep inside me, it would resurface in every aspect of my life.

I told myself that the father I had loved had died a long time ago. I told myself that I shouldn't feel guilty that even on his death bed, his pride kept him from reaching out and admitting he was wrong.

Admitting that the pain he caused his family was cruelly unjust and that he would try to earn our forgiveness.

All I wanted to hear was an 'I'm sorry'.

But now...now I wish I could have told him one more time that I loved him instead.

Not for him. But for me.

It took me a while to understand that you can love a person and not like them very much. That you didn't have to accept the person that they are, or even want them to be a part of your life, to care deeply for them. Love doesn't have rhyme or reason to it. It's just there in your heart. I can hate everything he did to us in the past, and still find love for him in my heart, if not forgiveness.

I doubt I'll ever be able to do that.

And then as if my grief wasn't debilitating enough, I got sick.

Really sick.

So sick that I was told that immediate surgery was needed or risk its full complications.

Of course, I put my whole life on hold, canceled every signing event, and

delayed every book that was scheduled, fearing the worst.

And afterwards, as the doctors began to list all the things I needed to do and the constant vigilance I would need to have from here on out, my mind went once again back to my father.

A part of me thought that me getting sick was the result of not dealing with my feelings like I should have. You see I'm the type of person who is always smiling, always needing to look at the positive and never give anyone reason to worry about me.

Miss Always-Look-On-The-Brightside.

That's me in a nutshell.

It's not all it's cracked up to be, I can tell you that.

Sometimes the best thing you can do is let yourself feel everything and all at once. Purge those feelings out and face them head on. Showing your vulnerability doesn't have to be a sign of weakness. In fact, it can be your greatest source of strength.

Hence, why I'm sharing all of this with you now.

It's me taking that step.

Letting myself be vulnerable for once without fear.

Letting you see me. Warts and all.

Thankfully I had a very patient cowriter, who was fully on board with the story I had envisioned and worked her ass off to materialize it onto the page. I don't think I'll ever have the right words to fully express my gratitude to her.

One night, in one of my most vulnerable states, CR gave me a piece of advice that I took to heart. She told me to write a letter to my father and put onto the page all the words I hadn't had the opportunity to say to him. Every last one of them, as my own form of goodbye.

This duet is that letter.

It's my own way of honoring his humbled family's origins as well as being faithful to mine.

I wrote a story about a girl who bravely faced what she deemed was her worst heartbreak and survived. Her words came back to her, and through them she was able to make peace with her trauma.

There is one chapter I wrote that hit home to me more than any other. When Sky said the following phrase, I used her voice to explain my own inner beliefs. Because in the end, that is what writing is all about.

Showing the world what your insides look like and praying they don't

judge you for it. You share your traumas, hopes and dreams, bleed them onto paper and then hand them off to complete strangers, hoping they will see the beauty in your words. I don't think there is another job in this world that forces a person to be that vulnerable. To be that raw and honest. Especially with yourself.

I hope after reading this duet, you see the beauty in the words.

They were all heartfelt.

Down to the very last line.

Much Love,

Ivy

****As I reread everything I've written down, I think it's imperative that I add the below to it.*

At the first sign of abusive in a relationship, don't walk—run the other way.

Red flags might be cute in books, but not in real life.

They will not change. They never do. They've just shown you who they really are, so please believe them.

And if you already find yourself in such a circumstance, please seek out help to get away from it.

I urge you to find safety. Especially if there are children involved.

Because trust me.

Every slap, every punch, every abusive word they hear or witness leaves a scar on their soul that never truly heals.

I've found my therapy in writing and I'm still processing things that occurred more than thirty years ago.

Please make sure you find your own path to heal such wounds.

Don't let fear keep you imprisoned to such a life.

Ask for help. And trust that it will be given.

About C.R. Jane

A Texas girl living in Utah now, I'm a wife, mother, lawyer, and now author. My stories have been floating around in my head for years, and it has been a relief to finally get them down on paper. I'm a huge Dallas Cowboys fan and I primarily listen to Taylor Swift and hip hop...don't lie and say you don't too.

My love of reading started probably when I was three and it only made sense that I would start to create my own worlds since I was always getting lost in others'.

I like heroines who have to grow in order to become badasses, happy endings, and swoon-worthy, devoted, (and hot) male characters. If this sounds like you, I'm pretty sure we'll be friends.

I'm so glad to have you here...check out the links below for ways to hang out with me and more of my books you can read!

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Books by C.R. Jane

www.crjanebooks.com

The Sounds of Us Contemporary Series (complete series)

[Remember Us This Way](#)

[Remember You This Way](#)

[Remember Me This Way](#)

Broken Hearts Academy Series: A Bully Romance (complete duet)

[Heartbreak Prince](#)

[Heartbreak Lover](#)

Ruining Dahlia (Contemporary Mafia Standalone)

[Ruining Dahlia](#)

The Pucking Wrong Series (Hockey Romance Standalones)

[The Pucking Wrong Number](#)

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[The Pucking Wrong Date](#)

The Fated Wings Series (Paranormal series)

[First Impressions](#)

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[The Fallen One](#) (a Fated Wings Novella)

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[Faded Realms](#)

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Academy of Souls Co-write with Mila Young (complete series)

[School of Broken Souls](#)

[School of Broken Hearts](#)

[School of Broken Dreams](#)

[School of Broken Wings](#)

Fallen World Series Co-write with Mila Young (complete series)

[Bound](#)

[Broken](#)

[Betrayed](#)

[Belong](#)

Thief of Hearts Co-write with Mila Young (complete series)

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[Stolen Destiny](#)

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[Sweet Destiny](#)

Kingdom of Wolves Co-write with Mila Young

[Wild Moon](#)

[Wild Heart](#)

[Wild Girl](#)

[Wild Love](#)

[Wild Soul](#)

[Wild Kiss](#)

Stupid Boys Series Co-write with Rebecca Royce

[Stupid Boys](#)

[Dumb Girl](#)

[Crazy Love](#)

Breathe Me Duet Co-write with Ivy Fox (complete)

[Breathe Me](#)

[Breathe You](#)

[Breathe Me Duet](#)

Love & Hate Co-write with Ivy Fox

[The Boy I Once Hated](#)

[The Girl I Once Loved](#)

Rich Demons of Darkwood Series Co-write with May Dawson (complete series)

[Make Me Lie](#)

[Make Me Beg](#)

[Make Me Wild](#)

[Make Me Burn](#)

[Make Me Queen](#)

About Ivy Fox



Ivy Fox is a USA Today bestselling author of angst-filled, contemporary romances, some of them with an unconventional #whychoose twist.

Ivy lives a blessed life, surrounded by her two most important men—her husband and son, but she also doesn't mind living with the fictional characters in her head that can't seem to shut up until she writes their story.

Books and romance are her passion.

A strong believer in happy endings and that love will always prevail in the end, both in life and in fiction.

Books by Ivy Fox

Reverse Harem / Why Choose Romance

[The Winter Queen Duet](#)

A Royal Enemies-to-Lovers Romance (Completed Series)

[The Privileged of Pembroke High](#)

A High School Bully Romance (Completed Series)

[Rotten Love Duet](#)

A Mafia Romance (Completed Series)

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A Forced Proximity Romance (Interconnected Standalone Series)

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[The Society](#)

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Office Romance

Cowrites And Collaborations

[Binding Rose - Mafia Wars Series](#)

Mafia Reverse Harem Romance (Completed Series)

Co-Write with C.R. Jane

[Breathe Me Duet](#)

Second Chance Romance (Completed Series)

[The Love & Hate Duet](#)

Stepbrother Bully Romance

Co-Write with K.A. Knight

[Deadly Love](#)

Stalker Dark Romance (Completed Series)