



We Were Once

New York Times Bestselling Author

S.L. SCOTT

WE WERE ONCE

S. L. SCOTT

[S.L. SCOTT](#)

Copyright © 2020 by S. L. Scott

All Rights Reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the written permission of the author. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental. Published in the United States of America
ISBN: 978-1-940071-94-7

Cover Design: RBA Designs
Photographer: @ChrisandRuth

Becca Mysoor, Developmental Editing at Edits in Blue
Jenny Sims, Copy Editing at Editing4Indies
Kristen Johnson, Proofreader
Marion Archer, Editor at Making Manuscripts
Beta Reader: Andrea Johnston

CONTENTS

[Also By S.L. SCOTT](#)

[In the know](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[You Might Also Enjoy](#)

[Missing Grace](#)

[Ben Edwards](#)

[Spark - The Crow Brothers](#)

[Jet Crow](#)

[Also by S.L. SCOTT](#)

[FOLLOW ME](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

Also By S.L. SCOTT

To keep up to date with her writing and more, visit her website: www.slscottauthor.com

To receive the Scott Scoop about all of her publishing adventures, free books, giveaways, steals and more:

[CLICK HERE](#)

Join S.L.'s Facebook group here: [S.L. Scott Books](#)

[Audiobooks on Audible - CLICK HERE](#)

Complementary to We Were Once

[*Missing Grace*](#)

[*Until I Met You*](#)

The Crow Brothers (Stand-Alones)

[*Spark*](#)

[*Tulsa*](#)

[*Rivers*](#)

[*Ridge*](#)

[*The Crow Brothers Box Set*](#)

Hard to Resist Series (Stand-Alones)

[*The Resistance*](#)

[*The Reckoning*](#)

[*The Redemption*](#)

[*The Revolution*](#)

[*The Rebellion*](#)

The Everest Brothers (Stand-Alones)

[*Everest - Ethan Everest*](#)

[*Bad Reputation - Hutton Everest*](#)

[*Force of Nature - Bennett Everest*](#)

[The Everest Brothers Box Set](#)

[DARE - A Rock Star Hero \(Stand-Alone\)](#)

The Kingwood Series

[SAVAGE](#)

[SAVIOR](#)

[SACRED](#)

[SOLACE](#) - Stand-Alone

[The Kingwood Series Box Set](#)

Playboy in Paradise Series

[Falling for the Playboy](#)

[Redeeming the Playboy](#)

[Loving the Playboy](#)

[Playboy in Paradise Box Set](#)

Talk to Me Duet (Stand-Alones)

[Sweet Talk](#)

[Dirty Talk](#)

Stand-Alone Books

[Missing Grace](#)

[Until I Met You](#)

[Drunk on Love](#)

[Naturally, Charlie](#)

[A Prior Engagement](#)

[Lost in Translation](#)

[Sleeping with Mr. Sexy](#)

[Morning Glory](#)

[From the Inside Out](#)

In the know

To keep up to date with her writing and more, visit S.L. Scott's website:

[CLICK HERE](#)

To receive the newsletter about all of her publishing adventures, free books, giveaways, steals and more:

[CLICK HERE](#)

Prologue

I've never died before, but I recognize the feeling.

1

Chloe Fox

“Promise me you’ll protect Frankie with your life, Chloe.”

Glancing sideways, it’s hard to take this seriously. “Um . . .”

My mom hugs Frankie to her chest like the son she never had. “You’ll give him a good home, feed him, and nurture him?”

I think this is taking it a little too far. “It’s a plant, Mom, not a human.”

“It’s not just a plant. It’s a bonsai tree. They’re fickle creatures—”

“Technically, it’s not a creature. It’s a miniature tree.”

“Creature or not, promise me you’ll take care of it, Chloe. This isn’t just a plant. This little guy can provide harmony and calm to your place.”

“Mom, I got it.” I attempt to pry the potted plant from her, but when she resists, I ask, “Do you want to keep Frankie? He’d love New York City. You can take him to Central Park or a show on Broadway. A quick trip to MoMA or the Statue of Liberty—”

“Very funny.” She shoves him toward me. “Take him. I bought him for you.”

“We can set up a visitation schedule if you’d like?”

That earns me an eyeroll that’s punctuated with laughter. “You might think I’m being dramatic, but I can already tell this is what your apartment is missing. I wish you’d let me decorate it more. So, mock me if you must, but that little guy is going to bring balance to your life.”

“It’s a lot of pressure to put on a plant, don’t you think?”

“Little tree,” she corrects stubbornly as if I’ve insulted the thing. Crossing her arms over her chest, she raises a perfectly shaped eyebrow. “You want to be a doctor, Chloe. Treat it like a patient. Water, attention, and care. The basics.”

Holding the plant in front of me, I admire the pretty curve to the trunk and branches. It’s easy to see why my mom picked this one. “I’ll try not to kill it like the plant you gave me last year.” I set the plastic pot down on top of a stack of textbooks on the coffee table. “But you have to admit that I gave that ivy a great send-off.”

“You did. Right down the trash shoot.” She laughs again, but I hear the sadness trickling in.

“Why are you getting upset?”

The green of my mom’s eyes matches the rich color of the leaves when she cries, just like mine. “I think the bonsai has had enough water for one day. Don’t you think?” I ask teasingly to hide how much I hate the impending goodbye.

She laughs, caressing my cheek. The support she’s always shown me is felt in her touch. “I’ve had the best time with you over the past few weeks. I’m going to miss you, honey.”

Leaning into it, I say, “If everything goes to plan, I’ll be in the city next year and we can see each all the time.”

“You’ve worked hard. Now it’s time to enjoy your senior year.” Her departure pending, we embrace.

“I enjoy working hard, and my grades still matter this year if I want to get into med school.”

A sympathetic smile creases her lips when she steps back. “I’m sorry you feel you have to be perfect all the time or that you feel medical school is the only option for you. It’s not. You can do—”

“It’s what *I* want.” This subject was the final blow to her marriage to my dad. They disagreed about a lot, but my schooling and future were the sticking points. I don’t want to relive it.

Moving to the couch, she fluffs a pillow, but I have a feeling it’s only out of habit. “Seeking perfection is the easiest way to find disappointment.” She eyes the pillow, satisfaction never reaching her eyes. Standing back, she swings her gaze my way. “Happiness is a much nobler mission.”

After she divorced my father, she put it into practice. After leaving Newport for Manhattan two years ago, she’s happier than ever. “I know you have big plans, Chloe, but you’re only young once. Go out with Ruby. Have fun. Kiss boys. You’re allowed to do what you want instead of what others want for you. You’re allowed to be you.”

Be me? The words strike me oddly. “Who am I?”

“Ah, sweet girl, whoever you want to be. New experiences will allow you to see yourself through a new lens.”

I sit on the couch, blocking her view of the pillow she just fixed. “Is that why you left Newport?”

“Yes, I wanted to discover me again. In Manhattan, I’m not Norman’s

wife, or the chair of the preservation society. I'm not running an eight-thousand-square-foot house or hosting garden parties. In New York, I get to be Cat Fox and Chloe's mother. Those are my favorite roles I've ever had."

Working with my father might have been great for my résumé, but back home, I'll always be compared to the great Norman Fox. I'll live in his shadow if I return to Rhode Island and won't ever stand on my own accomplishments. So I understand what she means a little too well. She seems to think she was saved. *Is it too late for me?*

"Do you know who you are?"

"I'm learning every day. All I'm saying is life is happening all around you. Look up from the books every now and then."

Turning around, she takes one last glance around the apartment. "You need a pop of color in here. I can send sofa pillows."

I get what she's saying. She's the queen of décor and has strong opinions regarding my life. She'd love to not only throw some pillows on my couch but also put a man in my life.

She never understood that good grades are much more rewarding than spending time with boys who want nothing more than a one-night stand. "Don't send pillows," I say, grinning.

A sly grin rolls across her face. "You can snuggle with them, or a guy—"

"You want me to date." I sigh. "I get it."

"College guys aren't the same thing as high school boys." She takes her purse from the couch and situates it on her shoulder as she moves to the door.

I roll my eyes. "Could have fooled me."

"You just haven't met someone who makes your heart flutter."

"You're such a romantic."

Kissing my cheek, she opens the door, and says, "Take care of yourself, honey. I love you."

"Love you, too." I close the door and rest against the back of it, exhaling. After two months working at my father's clinic and then staying with her in the city for the past two weeks, I'd almost forgotten what it was like to have time to myself, and silence. Pure, unadulterated—*Knock. Knock.*

I jump, startled from the banging against my back. Spinning around, I squint to look through the peephole, and my chin jerks back.

A guy holding a bag outside my door says, "Food delivery."

"I didn't order food," I say, palms pressed to the door as I spy on him.

A smirk plays on his lips. Yup, he flat out stares into the peephole with a

smug grin on his face. Plucking the receipt from the bag, he adds, “Chloe?” The e is drawn out in his dulcet tone as if it’s possible to make such a common name sound special. He managed it.

I unlock the deadbolt but leave the chain in place. When I open the door, I peek out, keeping my body and weight against it for safety.

Met with brown eyes that catch the setting sun streaming in from the window in the hall, there’s no hiding the amusement shining in them. “Hi,” he says, his gaze dipping to my mouth and back up. “Chloe?”

“I’m Chloe, but as I said, I didn’t order food.”

He glances toward the stairs, tension in his shoulders dropping before his eyes return to mine. “I have the right address, the correct apartment, and name. I’m pretty sure it’s for you.” He holds it out after a casual shrug. “Anyway, it’s getting cold, and it’s chicken and dumplings, my mom’s specialty that she only makes on Sundays. Trust me, it’s better hot, though I’ve had it cold, and it was still good.”

He makes a solid argument. All the information is correct. I shift, my guard dropping. I’m still curious, though. “Your mom made it?”

Thumbing over his shoulder as though the restaurant is behind him, he replies, “Only on Sundays. Me and T cook the rest of the time.”

“Who’s T?”

“The other cook.” He turns the bag around. Patty’s Diner is printed on the white paper. Then he points at his worn shirt, the logo barely visible from all the washings.

“And Patty is your mother?”

He swivels the bag around and nods. “Patty is my mom.”

My stomach growls from the sound of the bag crinkling in his hands, reminding me that I haven’t eaten in hours, and chicken and dumplings sound amazing. Only “culinary cuisine,” as my dad would call it, was acceptable when I was growing up. Comfort food didn’t qualify because anything with gravy instead of some kind of reduction was a no-no.

Grinning, he pushes the bag closer. “As much as I’d love to stay here all night and chat about the mystery of this delivery, I have other food getting cold down in the car. You’re hungry. Take the bag and enjoy.” He says it like we’re friends, and I’m starting to think we’ve spent enough time together to consider it.

I unchain the door and open it to take the bag from him. Holding up a finger, I ask, “Do you mind waiting? I’ll get you a tip.”

As if he won the war, two dimples appear as his grin grows. The cockiness reflected in his eyes doesn't take away from the fact that he's more handsome than I initially gave him credit for.

Handsome is a dime a dozen in Newport. Good genes passed down long before the Golden Age run in the prestigious family trees of Rhode Island. So good-looking guys don't do much beyond catch my eye.

He says, "I can wait." I pull my purse from the hook near the door and dig out my wallet. He fills the doorway, snooping over my shoulder. "Where are you running to?"

Huh? I look up confused by the question. "Nowhere."

Following his line of sight, I realize what he's referring to just as he says, "The treadmill. That's the point. You never get anywhere."

"It's good exercise."

"Yeah," he says, his tone tipping toward judgmental. "You're just running in a circle. Stuck in place."

"I'm not trying to go anywhere. I'm—"

"Sure, you are."

When I answered the door, I wasn't expecting to have my life scrutinized under a microscope. "Why do I feel like you're speaking in metaphors?"

"I don't know. Why *do* you feel like I'm speaking in metaphors?" His tongue is slick and his wit dry, which is something I can appreciate, even when it's at my expense.

Handing him a ten, I say, "Hopefully this covers the therapy."

He chuckles. "I'm always happy to dole out free advice, but I'll take the ten. Thanks." Still looking around, the detective moves his attention elsewhere. "Nice bonsai."

"Thanks. My mom gave me Frankie."

"Frankie?"

I tuck my wallet back in my purse and return it to the hook. "The little tree?"

Eyeing the plant, I can tell he wants to get a closer look by how he's inching in. He says, "Bonsais aren't miniature trees. They're just pruned to be that way. It's actually an art form."

"You seem to know a lot more about it than I do," I reply, stepping sideways to cut off his path. "Are you a plant guy?"

"I like to know all kinds of things about plants. Mainly, the ones we eat. I wouldn't suggest sautéing Frankie, though."

“Why would I sauté Frankie?” I catch his deadpan expression. “Ah. You’re making a joke. Gotcha.” I laugh under my breath. “You’re referring to food.”

“Yeah.”

I take the door in hand as a not so subtle hint. “I should get back to . . .” I just end it before the lie leaves my lips. I have no plans but to study, and that sounds boring even to me. “Thanks again.” I’m surprised, though, when he doesn’t move. “Don’t let me keep you from those other deliveries.” *Hint. Hint. Hint.*

Remaining inches from me, I look up when he says, “Thanks for the tip.”

“You’re welcome.”

Shoving the money in his pocket, he rocks back on his heels. “Hope you enjoy the food.”

Pulling the door with me as he passes, I remain with it pressed to my backside. “I’m sure I will.”

“Anytime.” I barely glimpse his grin before he turns abruptly to leave. Then he stops just shy of maneuvering down the stairs and looks back. “You need balance in your life.”

Shock bolts my eyes wide open, and my mouth drops open as offense takes over. Standing in my discomfort, I consider closing the door and ending this conversation. But I step forward instead, leaning halfway out. “Maybe you need balance.”

Through a chuckle, he replies, “The bonsai. You said your mom gave you the plant. She thinks you need balance in your life. Mine gave me calm. Mom knows best. That’s all I’m saying.”

Pulling the door, I take a step back, glancing at him one last time. “Thanks, professor,” I remark.

“Have a good life, Chloe.” His laughter bounces off the walls of the hallway.

I shut the door, bolting the lock and attaching the chain, not needing the last word. “I will,” I say to myself. After a quick peek out of the peephole again to verify he left, I set the bag next to the stack of books and take a second look at the plant. “By the way he was looking at you, I thought he was going to plant-nap you, Frankie.” He sure was all up in this little guy’s business.

Must be a biology major.

I begin to unpack the bag, trying to ignore how his presence and the faint

scent of his cologne still linger, but notice how it feels a few degrees warmer. “I wouldn’t blame him,” I tell Frankie. “You’re a beautiful specimen.”

Getting up, I lower the thermostat before trying to figure out who sent the food. Timed perfectly, my phone begins buzzing across the coffee table. I race back to catch a text from my best friend: *If you hear from me in ten minutes, call me right back.*

Quick to respond, I type: *Another bad date?*

Ruby Darrow, the heiress to the Darrow Enterprises, and I have been close since we roomed together freshman year. I can’t wait for her to move into her apartment next door. Her return message reads: *I’m not sure. If you hear from me, then yes. Yes, it is.*

Me: *I’m on standby.*

Ruby: *Because you’re the best.*

I take my duties as her friend very seriously, so I set the phone down next to the bag and pop open the plasticware. When my phone buzzes again, I’m fully prepared to make the call, but this time it’s not Ruby.

Mom: *I had food delivered for you. Did you get it? Chicken and dumplings. I’m in the mood for comfort food and thought you might be, too.*

I wish I would have known ten minutes ago. Eyeing the bag, I smile. I can’t argue with her choice of dish, but I’m just not sure if the pain in the ass delivery was worth the trouble.

Even a baseball cap flipped backward didn’t hinder his appearance because apparently, I just discovered I have a type. Small-town hero with a side of arrogance. *Jesus.* This is Connecticut, not Texas.

Despite his appearance, I wasn’t impressed. Dating cute guys has not worked out well for me in the past. The local bad boy doesn’t fit into my plans or help with my “balance” as he points out I evidently need.

So rude.

I balance just fine. School. Trying to think of more, I get frustrated. I’m at Yale for one reason and one reason only—to get into the medical school of my choice, and to do that, I need to keep my brain in the game. The school game, not the dating game. “What does he know anyway, Frankie?”

Returning my mom’s text, I type: *Got it. Thank you.*

Mom: *Promise me you’ll live a little, or a lot, if you’re so inclined.*

She’s become a wild woman in the past two years. I’m happy for her, but that doesn’t mean I have to change my ways to fit her new outlook on life.

As I look around my new apartment, the cleanliness brings a sense of

calm to me. After living in my parents' homes over the summer, it feels good to be back at school and on my own again.

Me: *That's a lot of promises. First, caring for Frankie, and now for my own well-being.* I laugh at my joke, but I know she'll misinterpret it, so I'm quick to add: *Kidding. I will. Love you.*

Mom: *Hope so. Live fearlessly, dear daughter. Love you.*

Feeling like I dodged another lecture on "you're only young once," I smile like a kid on Christmas when I find a chocolate chip cookie in the bag. With just one bite of the food, I close my eyes, savoring the flavor. "Patty sure knows how to cook."

I click on a trivia game show and spend the time kicking the other contestants' butts as I eat.

Soon, I'm stuffed but feeling antsy about the dough sitting at the bottom of my stomach, so I get up and slip my sneakers on before hopping on the treadmill. I warm up for a mile with that bag and the red logo staring back at me, so I pick up the pace until I'm sprinting. "I'm not trying to go anywhere. It's good exercise," I grumble, still bothered by what the delivery guy said. A bleacher seat therapist is the last thing I need.

I start into a jog and then a faster speed, though my gaze keeps gravitating toward the bag and the red printing on the front—Patty's Diner. The food might have been delicious, but I can't make a habit out of eating food that heavy or I won't be able to wear the new clothes my mom and I just spent two weeks shopping for.

I barely make four miles before my tired muscles start to ache. I'm not surprised after a day of moving, but I still wished I could have hit five. I hit the stop button and give in to the exhaustion.

I take a shower and change into my pajamas before going through my nightly routine—brushing teeth, checking locks, turning out the lights, and getting a glass of water. I only take a few sips before I see Frankie in the living room all alone. My mom's guilt was well-placed. I dump water in the pot and bring it with me into the bedroom. "Don't get too comfortable. You're not staying here."

Returning to the living room to grab my study guide for the MCAT, I hurry back to bed and climb under the covers. But after a while, I set the guide aside, behavioral sciences not able to hold my attention against my mom's parting words.

Classes. Study. Rest. Routines are good. They're the backbone to success.

I click off the lamp, not needing my mom's words—*live fearlessly*—filling my head. Those thoughts are only a distraction to my grand plan. *Like that delivery guy.*

2

Chloe

Sunshine floods the apartment, waking me. I avoided it temporarily around seven o'clock with a pillow over my head, but an hour later, I'm wide-awake. Opening my eyes to Frankie greeting me, I smile despite the hour. "Your grandmother will kill me if I don't take care of you, so I think we're going to have to come to some arrangement."

I sit up and then climb out of bed. "I may not need the sun this early, but you might like it, little fella."

Carrying him into the living room, I decide to set the small black pot on the windowsill. Patting the top, I say, "Have a great day," and then get dressed for my errands.

When my bag is packed, I lock the door and head downstairs now that the shops are open. Something red grabs my attention on the stairs between the third and second floors. Bending down, I pick it up. The safety pin on the back is bent on the name tag.

Joshua.

Patty's Diner.

My neck jerks back as if the guy from last night is here in person, his words stuck in my head again—you *need balance*. Still offended, I consider dumping the tag in the nearest trash can, but since I'm not near one, I drop it in my bag instead and go about my day.

The weather is stuck in summer for a few more weeks—sunny, blue skies, and a gentle breeze. It's exciting to explore my new neighborhood after living on the other side of campus last year. Ruby found the apartments—a small building with eight units—and we were lucky enough to get the two apartments that take up the third floor. I can't wait to spend time with her again.

Our relationship is so different from the people I grew up with. My last name gained me entrance to parties back in Newport, but my lack of interest in petty gossip showed me the exit.

I traded friends for grades. That paid off for me, but thank God, I found

Ruby. She's the one person, other than my parents, who has become a constant. I don't know how I would have survived college without her. Coming from a similar background, she understands the pressure that is inherited with a well-known last name.

I take a breath, keeping my dreams locked safely inside. I don't have to decide now, so I let it be, not wanting the confrontation that lies ahead to ruin today. Closing my eyes, I inhale deeply and smell the last day of freedom, trying to focus on the positive of my good friend returning.

I browse five stores unsuccessfully, not finding any curtains I like. Continuing to walk down the street, I've covered quite a few blocks and begin to feel lethargic. Caffeine wouldn't be bad either.

A text from Ruby comes in as if she knew I needed an injection of happy:
Miss me?

Me: *Get here already.* I giggle as I wait for her next text.

Ruby: *If it were up to me, I would. The going away dinner I didn't want is tonight. And being a Darrow means nothing less than fancy and over the top. My mom decided she couldn't do pizza and a movie like I wanted. Nope. All of her friends and their kids must come over. I don't think they'd even notice if I wasn't there. Oh! You should come. Hop on a train and save me, Clo.*

Me: *As delightful as that sounds, not, I don't have anything to wear to a Darrow affair. Also, I'm getting a jump on the syllabus and plan for a quiet night of studying. Thank you, though.*

Ruby: *Lucky. Gotta run, but I'll see you soon.*

Me: *Have fun tonight.*

Ruby: *Oh, yeah. Sure. Rub it in.*

I tuck the phone in my back pocket and continue my search, switching gears from curtains to caffeine. With no sign of a coffee shop on this block, I settle on a diner up ahead. Diner. The name tag . . . *Joshua.*

More importantly, coffee.

Yep, according to the red logo on the door, here is the infamous Patty's Diner. Just underneath that, another sign reads come on in, so I do.

When the waitress calls from a table in the back, "Welcome to Patty's. Sit anywhere." Scanning the place, I see it's fairly packed. Since I need my coffee to go, I hustle over to the counter, getting out of the way of the door.

I take a seat at the end, hanging my bag on a hook under the counter, and wait. I swivel a few times before pulling out the MCAT guide to make use of the extra minutes for studying. Setting it next to the menu pulling double duty

as a placemat, I start eyeing the pictures of food, suddenly hungry.

Nope, that's not why I'm here. Coffee is good. I'll do my good deed for the day, and then I can grab a sandwich at home. Stick to the plan.

A bony finger that has years of life creased into the knuckle points at the right side of the menu. "These are the specials," says the waitress who greeted me. When I look up, her dark eyes look tired but still welcoming. Gray and blond strands fall from the clip she has loosely secured at the crown of her head. Despite the other servers wearing jeans and matching T-shirts, she wears her white shirt with a denim skirt instead. "What can I get you?"

"I'm just here for coffee. To go please." Remembering the name tag, I dig it out of my bag, and add, "Oh, and I found this, so I thought I'd return it."

She takes it from me and a gentle smile comes over her as she strokes the engraved name.

"Joshua's lost a million of these." She leans against the counter, seeming ready to share more. "I think you should try the chili."

"Oh, um . . . I was just going to have—"

"It was very sweet of you to bring this by." Holding the tag up, she says, "Chili's on me."

"No, you don't have to do that. It was the right thing to do. I don't need anything in return." I start to feel bad for almost throwing it away when it means so much to her.

Tapping the counter twice with the tag, she sets it down and gets a determined look in her eyes. "I insist." Rushing off, she pushes through a swinging silver door.

I swivel to look around. This diner is like the ones I've seen in movies. It's comfortable with a homey feel to it. Warm wood tones in the booths are offset by black and white tiles on the floor in a bold pattern.

There are no metal spatulas hitting the grill or orders being shouted, but it's noisy from conversation and the music wafting overhead. Sounds like jazz but it's hard to hear. The waitress returns with a mug and saucer in one hand and a coffee carafe in the other.

She sets it down and starts to fill it. "Cream or sugar?"

"Black is fine. Thank you." It's already full before I realize it's not in a to-go cup. I'm thinking she was serious about the chili. I don't remember the last time I had chili if I have ever.

Silverware rolled in a napkin is placed on my mat before she disappears again into the kitchen. Flipping my guide open, I turn to where I left off last

night and read the next question. My mind is either rusty or I need a caffeine IV to get me going.

A bowl is set next to me, and yep, that's chili with shredded cheddar and a dollop of sour cream on top. "Do you like jalapeños? I can get some," she says.

"I can't eat spicy food." I rub my stomach with psychosomatic symptoms while eyeing her name tag. "Thanks, though, Barb."

Laughter rings out, and a smile invades her expression. Covering the name tag, she leans in. "My name's not Barb. The rules state we have to wear a name tag, and I forgot mine at home, so I borrowed Barb's. She's off on Mondays." Resting her hands on the counter like she intends to spend a little time here, she says, "I'm Patty."

"Patty as in Patty's Diner?" I ask dumbly.

"One and the same."

"It's very nice to meet you. I had your chicken and dumplings yesterday. They were very good."

"Oh, you did, did you? Dumplings yesterday and back today, but only for coffee? I'm not sure if I'm doing something right or wrong."

"Right. My stomach growled when I walked in, and the chili looks really good." I don't mention her annoying son since he's no concern of mine any longer. The badge has been returned to its rightful place. Now, I just get to enjoy the meal.

I take a sip of coffee while she fills a mug two stools down. Leaning against the counter with the carafe in hand, she asks, "Are you a freshman?"

I laugh, a lot lighter than hers from a moment ago but entertained all the same. "I'm actually a senior this year."

"You are? My son's a senior this year. What's your name, hun?"

"Chloe."

"Nice to meet you, Chloe," she says with a kind smile. When a server cuts behind her, she surveys the counter. "I should let you eat before it gets cold. Let me go check on that cornbread."

The chili will be heavy enough. Now she wants to add bread into the mix? I'm stuffed just thinking about it. "You don't have to worry. I don't need it."

"It's the best part." Too late. She's off again.

I spoon a bite of chili and then blow on it, watching the steam dissipate when I hear her say, "Perfect timing." I look up. She's not speaking to me,

but to the man with the plate of cornbread heading my way. Patty detours into the dining room, leaving me to plot my own escape.

“Oh, God,” I mumble under my breath as soon our eyes meet. If nothing else is confirmed from seeing this guy a second time, that he’s cocky as all get-out is.

“Well, well. Well. If it isn’t Chloe with the bonsai.”

I huff. “He did nothing to you, so kindly leave Frankie out of this.”

He chuckles. “Frankie is feminine.”

“Can you be more offensive?” I turn in annoyance, unable to look at him.

His laughter picks up. “You don’t understand. Bonsai plants don’t have genders. Their shape determines in generally accepted terms if they’re masculine or feminine.”

Staring him down, I tilt my head, trying not to let the irritation he brings out in me surface. “And mine is feminine?”

“Yes. Thin branches, a curve to the trunk. I’m no expert, but Frankie is feminine, in my humble opinion.”

“Why do I get the feeling nothing about you is humble, especially your opinion?” I hate that I notice that his hair isn’t hidden under a cap, and with an unruly cowlick, his dark hair keeps falling in his face, drawing me back to his eyes.

He smirks.

I roll my eyes and tap my book. Scrunching my nose, I say, “If you don’t mind,” and then take another bite.

“I don’t at all. How’s the chili?”

Patty comes around the counter. Not all heroes wear capes. Some have coffee. “You met Chloe.” She picks up the tag and hands it to him. “She was sweet enough to bring this back to you.”

“Oh, she did, did she?”

Ugh. And here I thought Patty was here to save me, not throw me under the bus. “I found it in my building and just happened to be in the area doing some shopping.”

“Shopping, huh?”

“Does everything you say have to be in the form of a question, or is that something you enjoy doing?”

Patty says, “Guess you two know each other.”

“Nope,” he replies. “Just met last night.” Those dimples of his are really annoying—*ly* distracting.

“Could have fooled me.” Turning to me, she says, “Your mother placed that order for you. She wanted to send you something comforting.” Holding up a finger, she adds, “I steered her toward the special. Nothing makes me feel better than home in a bowl.” She looks at her son. “Right, Josh?”

His eyes shoot back to mine after dipping lower. “Couldn’t agree more.”

Patting the top of my hand, she lowers her voice. “I’ll let you eat. Enjoy the meal and don’t worry about the bill. It’s covered.”

“You really don’t have—”

“Eh,” she stops me. “It’s my pleasure, but make sure to stop in again sometime. Josh, cover the counter. I need to check on my orders.”

His attention stretches the length of the counter and then follows her. “Covered.”

As soon as she walks away, I say, “Don’t think I didn’t catch you checking me out.”

He remains leaning against the counter, making himself at home just as he did last night. “Figured it was only fair since you did the same to me.”

Fine, I gave him a once-over. So he’s right. It’s only fair. “Your arrogance is a turn-off.”

“I didn’t realize my job was to turn you on.”

“Don’t twist my words. And ew, I’m trying to eat here.”

Despite the arguing, he doesn’t seem bothered by me. Quite the contrary. He appears intrigued. Twisting the tag around in his hand, he says, “Of all the diners in New Haven, you walk into mine.”

“Your mom’s, actually, and I was returning the name tag that you carelessly dropped.”

“Maybe I wasn’t being so careless.” Bending down eye-level with me, he says, “Maybe I left it on purpose.”

“Well, if that’s the best you got . . .” I shrug. “Your method needs some work.”

“Does it?” He holds out his hand, and that damn wry grin reappears. “We never did officially meet.”

Angling my chin up, I reply, “I guess it’s good to get to know your enemies, Joshua.”

“Is that what we are, Chloe? Enemies? And here I was starting to think we we’re soul mates.”

3

Joshua Evans

It's not often that I run into the people I deliver to, but apartment 3B was hard to forget.

Good tipper.

Stack of medical textbooks.

Bonsai tree named Frankie.

I'd almost forgotten the hard time she gave me. That's not entirely fair since I'm the one who pushed every one of her buttons.

"Soul mates," she scoffs with the devil in her eyes. It's a different look from last night when she held more of an air of superiority. Either way, she's hot.

Those green eyes, like her mouth, make it hard to look away.

The girl likes to argue, and there's something about her that pushes me to engage.

Standing back up again, I ask, "So, tell me something, Chloe. Why'd you really come by?" I waggle the name tag in front of her. "Because I have a feeling it wasn't to return a cheap name badge."

"You're right." She holds her hands up in surrender. "You busted me." Reaching for the mug, she adds, "What can I say? I came for caffeine and stayed for the chili."

"I thought you'd stroke my ego and tell me you stayed for the company."

Shaking her head, she laughs. "There will be no stroking of anything between you and I."

"Me."

"What?" She cocks an eyebrow, and there's something incredibly sexy about the arc of it. Not that I'll tell her. She doesn't seem to want my input.

I give it to her anyway. "It's you and *me*. Not you and *I*. So, the correct way to say it would be: there will be stroking between you and me."

She starts laughing. "I see what you did there."

Shrugging, I begin laughing as well. "I tried." I clear dishes from the other end of the counter and then stand around like a fool. My mom looks

busy, and T's covering the kitchen, so I guess I'm stuck here. Might as well see what other reactions I can get out of her. It's Chloe or Mike. And Mike only talks about his glory days back in high school. I've heard every play he ever ran. *Chloe, it is.* "Do you go to Yale?"

"Yes." She takes another bite with her eyes glued to the study guide.

"If I hadn't seen medical books at your place and the MCAT guide you brought here, I would have guessed poli sci."

"Why would you think that?"

"You like a good debate." I deadpanned it, but it's really the truth.

That makes her laugh. "I actually don't. There's just something about you that brings it out in me." Closing the book, she says, "You're not going to let me study, are you?"

"Most think I'm pretty good company."

I've made her roll her eyes so much that I'm starting to worry about her. She tucks the book in her bag and then sighs. "You know what I think?"

"I have a hunch you're about to tell me."

She sets her napkin beside the bowl. "I think you're used to getting a lot of attention, so when you don't, you crave it. Are you an only child or just had that ego of yours stroked too much?" Highly amused by herself, she continues to laugh while I clear the rest of the counter. Bringing a bin of silverware and napkins with me, I make use of the time I'm stuck here babysitting my mom's new friend. "Do you know anything about that?"

Luckily, I'm not that sensitive. "Clever," I allow her. Highly amused by herself, she continues to laugh while I clear the rest of the counter. Bringing a bin of silverware and napkins with me, I make use of the time I'm stuck here babysitting my mom's new friend. "Do you know anything about that? Ego stroking?"

It's never happened to me. I have to earn every accolade." Sitting back, she doesn't cross her arms, surprising me. "But we're not talking about me. I'm still searching for balance, remember?" She cracks a smile and picks up the spoon again.

"Touché. How's the chili?"

"It pains me to tell you this . . . but it's delicious."

I tuck the napkin into the fold. "It doesn't pain me to get the compliment. You should try the cornbread." Crumbling a piece into her chili, she takes a bite and savors it. I laugh because I can see the irritation. "I know. It's good, too."

“There’s that humility again.” She sips her coffee, and then asks, “How about you? Are you in school?”

“I am.” I rub chin. “May not look like it, but I go to Yale as well.”

Her expression can’t cover the interest I’ve piqued. When her shoulders ease, she says, “It’s very admirable how you balance school and work.”

Nothing she says comes without thought. “It’s not by choice, but most things in life aren’t.”

“Speaking of balance, what else do you know about bonsai? I’m worried about caring for Frankie properly.”

“You should mist the leaves regularly.” I wrap more silverware while trying to remember more of what I read because she seems genuinely interested. “And they can outgrow their pot. Frankie looked like she might need a little more room.”

“I can relate.” Rubbing her stomach, she says, “How’d I eat the whole bowl?”

“Because it was good.”

Her guard lowers, and I get a peek at the softer side when she smiles. “It really was.” She starts digging in her bag and pulls out her wallet. “I should go.”

I like that she holds her own; her confidence is appealing. She seems to know exactly what she wants out of life. “It was just getting fun.”

Flipping through a stack of large bills, she tugs out a twenty. “As fun as it is bantering with you, I have a lot to do to prepare for school tomorrow.”

So do I, but I need to finish my shift first. She pushes the money across the counter just as I was reaching to stop her. When our hands collide, they both stay. My heart picks up, and I swear for a second that I can feel everything. Our eyes latch, and though there was a spark that would normally cause me to pull back, I fight the urge, enjoying the contact. Lowering my voice to a whisper, I say, “Like my mom said, it’s on the house.”

Before she has a chance, I move away, giving myself much-needed space.

With the money between us, she remains seated, staring at me in what appears to be a battle of wills. My eyebrows tug together as I try to figure her out. Like I don’t have anything better to do.

“Josh?” I look back at the kitchen door that’s propped open. The other cook, T., says, “I’m drowning back here.”

I hadn’t noticed how the lunch crowd had filed in or how my mom and Trina have been running around. *Shit*. I nod to him and follow, pushing the

door open. “I have to go. I’d say maybe we’ll see each other around, but it seems we’re on two different paths.”

All the hurry she had in her earlier has subsided, and she sighs. “You’re probably right, so I guess have a good life still stands.”

Turning around, I feel the door swing against my ass, making her smile. “Seems so.” I’m not sure why this girl intrigues me, but she’s definitely more interesting than ladling chili all day. I want to know what makes her tick.

“Don’t you have to go?” she asks with a smile.

“Yes. Right. Gotta go.” This time, I don’t wait around. I wash my hands and return to the grill to start on the next ticket.

It only takes a few minutes before my mom finds me buried behind a stack of plates that should have gone out already. I’m also wise enough to know that’s not why she’s back here, though when she sees me still plating the food, she’s more than happy to wait by that smile on her face. “She’s sweet.”

“Who?” I play dumb, keeping my eyes leveled on the grill. I knew I’d eventually see her snooping around, digging for details. No way can she let the encounter go. At least, she never has before. “You know who. Chloe.”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t do anything out of line. I delivered the food. That’s all.”

“Tell me something. Did you leave that name tag there on purpose? I wouldn’t put it past you. You’ve been known to raise a little hell.”

Spinning the spatula in my hand, I tap it twice on the cooktop. “Just like my mama.”

She’s laughing when she comes around to whack to my arm. “Don’t ruin my reputation, kid. It’s taken me years to get a little respect in this town.” My mom was a wild child growing up. From what I hear, if there was trouble, she’d find it, and then she’d get a tattoo to commemorate it. Our laughter dies down as she returns to the other side and grabs the plate I just set down for delivery.

“I’ll keep your secret.”

With the plate in hand, she looks at me, not in expectation but examination. I hate being under her microscope. That means the conversation isn’t over. She’s always been intuitive, and if I forget to set a face of indifference, she’ll call out that emotion. “All I’m saying is that must have been some delivery.”

“Yeah, normal.” I laugh. As much as I can respect her solid comebacks,

the girl keeps a lot hidden inside. That's not my usual type. "Nothing special."

"Nothing special, huh? Okay. If that's how you're going to play it. It looked like something more than nothing to me." The door swings closed.

The next thing I know, I'm running out the back door and up the alley to the sidewalk.

"Ah!" I crash into someone who screams, and grab hold so we don't fall.

Leaning back, I'm pleasantly surprised. "Hey."

"You scared me, Joshua." Pushing off me, she readjusts her bag on her shoulder.

"Sorry. I was trying to catch up to you."

Her hands land on her hips as she glares at me. "Well, you caught me."

I don't know what it is, but I'm so damn tempted to kiss her, to hold her face between my hands and feel her lips against mine.

What am I doing? I run my hand through my hair, and say, "Uh. You need to submerge Frankie's entire pot under water once a week. When the air bubbles stop, you can take it out. They have unique care."

"Do you know this much about all plants or just bonsai trees?"

"It's a loose knowledge. Like I said, I got one a few years back, and it's taken a lot of trial and error and searching online, but mine's survived."

She shifts, her hands lowering to her sides. "Is that why you wanted to find me?"

"No, I also wanted to tell you that tomorrow's special is my favorite."

She peers down and smiles, but I can tell there's no irritation left in her, not even a little banter. "Oh, yeah? What's tomorrow's special?"

"Grilled cheese and homemade tomato-basil soup."

"That sounds good." She moves her wavy brown hair over her shoulder.

"We serve it every Tuesday if you're in the neighborhood. Sometimes, we have enough staff for delivery if you prefer to eat at home."

"I'll keep that mind."

"I hope you do." Just when she turns to leave, I add, "Say hi to Frankie for me."

Her feet stop on the pavement, and she looks back with a smile. "I will. Bye, Joshua."

"Bye, Chloe."

I don't know what the hell I'm doing, but I like the feeling. I try to slip back inside undetected, but I suspect my mom can sense me in the area

because she's right back in here. Most of our conversations are interrupted by orders needing to be delivered, and she picks up where she left off earlier. "Look, Joshua, I know you're around a lot of rich kids, and you got into an Ivy League school. Our home wasn't expensive, but it's ours. You're not less than anyone, but some people in this town will look down on you because you're my kid, or you're a townie to the upper New Haven folk. Money doesn't make them better."

"It only makes them richer. I know, Mom. I've heard this a thousand times. Don't worry, I'm sticking to my own kind."

I see how unsettled the conversation makes her. She was burned by rich kids attending the university, including the man who donated his sperm to make me. He used to tell me to call him Dad, and although it's descriptively close to what he is, the name never feels right. Neither does calling him David, so I'm fucked either way. Though I can surmise that the little taste of his good life I've had also added to my bitterness. I don't want to be in that world anyway.

Chicks don't care about my baggage. Most people don't even know. They have issues of their own. But that doesn't mean it hasn't fucked with my head. It's easier to mess around casually than to commit and be abandoned again.

"Your kind is whoever you want it to be. Just be careful when you start mixing with those who make you feel less," Mom says.

"Don't worry. She didn't make me feel anything," I lie, feeling more interested than I've been toward anyone else in a while. "I delivered food to a girl. So what? There are a lot of hot girls in this town. I'm not marrying her and I'm not fuc—"

"Zip it. Don't talk like that. It's beneath your intelligence and disrespectful to a girl I can tell you dig."

Dig? I roll my eyes. "You swear."

A grin sidles up one of her cheeks, the lines deeper these days. "Do as I say, kid. Not as I do."

Saluting her with my spatula, I say, "Aye aye, captain." I plate two dishes and hand them to her. "Best served hot."

She winks, seemingly satisfied with my answers, and walks out of the kitchen. I glance over at T, who's grinning, but I know that smile. "Don't even say it, T. My mom's bad enough. I don't need your teasing."

"Doesn't matter how old you get, Josh, you'll always be her baby."

“Times like these, I wish I had siblings to take some of the heat off that mama bear attention.” Chloe’s probably right about me craving it. I just don’t want it from my mom anymore.

That keeps him laughing, and having a good time while spending hours over this hot grill is the only way to get through a long shift. After putting a pan of cornbread in the oven, I move to the swinging door and peek through the porthole to where Chloe was sitting.

Good-looking is an understatement, I finally admit. But judging by that fancy looking bag she had clinging to her shoulder, my mom’s right. She’s out of my league. Not that she was saying that, but I get the drift of “don’t mix.”

The rich college kids like to toy with the townies. Doesn’t matter if you’re born in New Haven or from the outskirts of the suburbs. Locals will never be considered equal in their eyes. So it might be fun to banter with her but getting closer will only get me burned.

I’ve seen it happen enough to others not to test the fates. I’m just curious why I’m suddenly willing to test that theory with her?

Pursuing anything with her would be a bad idea because I’ll be the one who pays the price. I’m not in her league, so what would a girl like her see in me?

Anyway, I know damn well that dating from the other side of the tracks isn’t my scene. *So why am I still thinking about her?*

4

Chloe

“I told him in the ass!” Ruby giggles, barreling over in laughter on the other side of the couch from me. “How was I to know he meant a location like a kitchen or something boring like that when he asked where’s the craziest place I’ve had sex?”

“You actually said that?” I ask wide-eyed.

“You should have seen his face, Clo. Priceless. Who said New Yorkers are jaded?”

“I don’t think anyone’s prepared for you, my friend, but I’m glad you had a good time, even if it didn’t work out.”

Ruby’s antics make me think about the past two days. Overanalyzing both exchanges, I’ve come to the conclusion that Joshua doesn’t know what he’s talking about because he doesn’t know anything about me. Sure, he’s quick to throw in his two cents, but that doesn’t mean that opinion should be taken into consideration.

I have a feeling he got what he wanted—more of my time.

“You should not let me drink on a school night,” Ruby says.

“A case of wine was the first thing you moved in, so I don’t think I could have stopped you if I tried,” I reply, teasing.

“I’m glad you didn’t try.” She kicks her feet up on the coffee table, her arms going wide. “My body hurts from laughing. It’s good to hang out again.”

“I’m glad you’re back, too. All I did was work this summer. It’s good to hear that one of us had fun.”

“You could have fun if you wanted, Clo.”

“Fun is for when you’re dead, according to The Great Dr. Fox.”

“So it sucked working for your pops?”

“The clinic was good experience and exposure to operations, but nothing between my dad and I has changed. He sees me in one way, and if I try to have fun, I’m told my mom is to blame.”

“I’m sorry. I was hoping it would get better.”

I hate admitting it out loud, but my boring life back home makes me feel unwanted. It's Ruby, though, and she already knows most of my secrets. "I went to the beach once and ran into Trevor."

"Trevor League?" If there was a family that held more prestige than the Foxes in Newport, the Leagues were it. Trevor has continued the playboy reputation he built back home and developed it in Connecticut. "How'd that go?"

What my father has built as a surgeon, Trevor's father has built a bigger fortune in finance. It was only natural, considering our families' ties, that one day, Trevor and I would have a relationship. We went to homecoming together freshman and sophomore year. I didn't put out, so he dropped me for a senior who was happy to sacrifice her virginity at the altar of the arrogant sophomore for a shot at League family money.

I never felt an obligation to give two damns about him or their standing in the community. My goals were bigger than the Leagues because my goals don't rely on money. They rely on healing and making a difference in people's lives.

"He sat next to me like we're old friends and told me I was 'looking good these days.' Those were his exact words, Ruby, as he lowered his sunglasses to get a better look at my cleavage. He'll never change. He's still cocky as ever."

"Considering how hot he is, he has a right to be. The real question is, how cocky is he?" she infers all the dirty with just those few words. Her hands spreading wide wasn't necessary.

But since they're hanging in the air, I push them together and break out in laughter. "I wouldn't know, but rumor has it, not cocky enough down there to back that ego."

"Damnnn. Girl's got some bite." Pushing my arm, she adds, "I always did like your feisty side." After drinking her wine, she then spins the stem between her fingers. She suddenly sits up and pours more wine into her cup. "You need more play to balance all the work. Work. Work."

"You sound like my mom."

"Your mom is awesome. Listen to the woman and enjoy life before you get stuck working seventy-two-hour shifts and falling for a dermatologist because medical people are the only ones you interact with."

The word "stuck" has become one of my least favorites as it climbs under my skin from the other day—stuck in place. I shake my head, but when I see

Ruby watching me, I say, “For the record, dermatologists are highly regarded professionals.”

She fake yawns. “Boring.”

I know what will sell her. “They make a ton of money, and I bet the wife of a dermatologist has amazing skin. And they can give you free Botox.”

“Sold. Where can I get one?” I thought that might pique her interest. “Medical school.”

A light laugh is followed by her mindlessly scrolling on her phone. “I think I’m going to change my major from premed to visual arts tomorrow.”

“Really?”

“I spent the summer working on my photography portfolio and just decided I love it enough to pursue it professionally.”

“I can imagine that didn’t go over well with the Darlings.”

“They don’t know. The original agreement was that I get a degree. I guess they figured I couldn’t get creative at Yale. Silly parents. I proved them wrong.” Before I can ask more questions, she pivots to food in one quick change of topic. “Are you hungry? I’m starved.”

“I’m good, but you should eat.”

While she grabs a salad from the fridge, I lie back, looking around her place. Tiny bells are strung across the top of her window, a purple paisley blanket is draped over the couch, and a rug that has every color running through its fibers anchors the living room. The coffee table is scratched by years of use, and she hasn’t bothered to unpack any dishes to fill the cabinets. Hence the throwaway cups we’re using for wine and boxes filling half of the kitchen floor. I imagine the lack of burden to bear conforming to society’s expectations must be freeing.

I’ve worried a few times about a fire starting because of the yellow scarf draped over the top of a lampshade, but this all fits her free spirit ways. It makes me wonder what my place says about me.

My path has been set since the day I was born, and my boring apartment is proof of the lack of life I’ve explored. The decisions I’ve made have never been about what my heart wants. It’s all about my head and what looks good on a college application or a résumé.

Plans give security. There’s nothing wrong with knowing what you want to do with your future. Though, it does beg the question if it’s worth sacrificing today for tomorrow?

“You sure are quiet. What’s on your mind?” She tucks her toes under my

legs. “Need more wine?” Staring at me long after she stopped talking, I know what’s going to happen. *Sex talk*. This is her foreplay when she wants to get personal. If I had to boil Ruby Darrow down to one philosophy, sex is the answer to everything.

Got a broken heart?

Heal it with a one-night stand.

B on a biology test?

Sex with the TA.

Car needs a new radiator?

Get down and dirty with a mechanic.

It’s her M.O. and works for her more than not. And although I love her dearly and cherish this friendship, I’m not Ruby. Sex isn’t something I treat lightly, or at all, since it hasn’t happened yet. Those arrogant little dimples populate my head, causing me to shiver. Just no to him. Although . . . he has been helpful when it comes to Frankie when he didn’t have to be. “I’m good on wine,” I reply, sipping slowly so it doesn’t go to my head.

Wiggling her toes, she says, “You told me you ran into Trevor, worked too much, and had no social life. I’m assuming that means no dates either?”

Considering the amount of time I spent with a delivery guy is the most time I’ve spent with anyone of the opposite sex in months, I don’t think I have much to offer on the subject. “Dating was nonexistent, per usual.”

She falls back against the cushion dramatically with her forearm attached to her head. “Tell me you at least had a toy to keep you company.”

I won’t be able keep her off the no-sex acts talk for long, so I try to think of a bone I can throw. Nothing comes to mind, though. And here we are, like I knew we would be.

Three.

Two.

One.

Sitting up, she asks, “Please tell me you have something to help release the tension.”

I raise my chin and smile. “I have books. Romance. History. Textbooks. Classics. Dirty books.” I add the last to save some face. It’s embarrassing to be a virgin at my age. “Yes, Ruby. You were the one who got me the magic bunny for my birthday last year.”

With a wink, she asks, “It’s the best, right?”

“It’s the only, so by default, it’s top-notch.”

Sighing contentedly, she exhales. “Good. I always worry about you.”

“No need to worry, Ruby. I know how my vagina works.”

“You’re so technical. I bet you’re hot in bed.” Crossing her hands over her chest, she dips her head back. “Oh yes, touch my vulva, baby.”

I push her playfully. “No one’s complained yet.”

“That’s uncharted territory, woman. No explorer has been there before,” she says, righting herself. “But before you turn even redder, one of my favorite things about you is how sweet *and technical* you are.”

“Why does that sound like an insult wrapped in sugar?”

She grabs her food container from the table and starts with a large bite of lettuce. “I don’t know how you stay so thin. Still running?”

“A lot.”

“Because you need to work out that sexual tension.” She shoves another dressing-laden bite in her mouth. Although her attention is on the TV, her comment remains.

If I were being honest with myself, she’s right about the tension—stress and sexual. I stand. “I’m going home. We both have a big day tomorrow.”

Kicking her feet up, she lounges across the couch, hogging the cushion I vacated. “I can’t believe summer is already over.”

I open the front door and lean against it, facing her. Not able to stop my smile, I say, “Senior year.”

“We have to make the most of it.”

“Definitely.” I laugh lightly. “Good night.” As soon as I shut the door, I stop when I see a small box on my doorstep. Peeking down the stairs, I don’t see anyone, and I don’t hear footsteps.

I approach the box with caution and stand over it, smiling when I realize what’s inside. Kneeling, I pick it up and carry it into the apartment. I sit at the far end of the couch, close to Frankie, and say, “Seems you got gifts today.”

Picking up the small misting bottle, I hold it up. “Guess whose leaves are getting pampered? A new pot. Look how pretty.” The blue ceramic pot is rectangle-shaped and will be a huge improvement over the current little plastic one.

I leave the Ziploc bag of soil in the box and pull out the note before setting the rest aside. I unfold it and read: *Hope Frankie enjoys the new home.*

He doesn’t sign it, but I know who it’s from, and I grin while reading it aloud for my tiny roommate. Then I realize I’ve been talking to a plant,

making me roll my eyes at myself.

I'm not sure if this is what my mom meant to happen when she put me in charge of Frankie's well-being, but taking care of her has started to become fun.

Replanting the tree in the pot doesn't take long but taking his advice I don't get to bring her into the bedroom since she'll be soaking overnight. I click out the lights after I'm done and say, "Good night."

5

Chloe

I've never felt in between. The first day of classes can be overwhelming or a breeze. Fortunately, being prepared made me feel confident starting this year. That's why when I see Patty's Diner sign two blocks down, I make a detour.

My confidence remains out on the sidewalk when I enter the diner. I can turn around and walk back out. No harm. No foul. Saving face before this gets out of hand. Yes, that's what I should do.

But that bell ringing overhead draws attention again when I open the door to leave. "Chloe?"

I close my eyes, reprimanding myself for getting into this sticky situation in the first place. It could be worse. It could have been Joshua who caught me trying to sneak out.

Turning around, ready to greet Patty, I still on the spot when I see her son standing next to her. He's grinning . . . smirking really, giving me the cocky one that seems to be his specialty. With a slight lift of his hand, he says, "Hi."

I tuck the hair that's fallen from my ponytail behind my ears and then straighten the straps of my backpack. "Hi. I was just in the area and thought I'd try the special." With an extended hand, I add, "It comes highly recommended."

Patty looks pleased and comes around to greet me. "I'm glad you came by. Joshua was just about to take a dinner break. Maybe the two of you can eat together . . . in that booth . . . in the back corner."

"Oh, um." I glance back at the brown eyes tracking my every move. "I wouldn't want to intrude. He might have other plans—"

"I'll get the food," he says while Patty waves her hand at me like a tattooed fairy.

Following Patty to the booth, I mumble, "Right."

She stands, waiting for me to slide in, so I take my backpack off and dump it on the bench. "Thank you."

"I'm glad you came by again. We were just talking about you."

"Oh, yeah?"

Leaning against the other side of the booth, she looks around conspiratorially, and then says, “Josh mentioned your passion for plants.”

I tweak my neck when I restrain the surprise from jerking me back. Rubbing the back of it, I ask, “He did?”

“Said you have a bonsai tree like his.”

I smile. “Yes. My mom gave it to me as a housewarming gift. It’s supposed to help me find balance between school and life.” It’s pretty adorable that’s what he thinks of when he thinks of me. Not that I’m a Newport Fox or about to graduate from Yale with honors. To Joshua, I’m Frankie’s mom.

“I gave Josh his bonsai when he was thirteen. I hoped he could find inner peace and calm through some turbulent times.”

“I’m sorry to hear he had struggles.”

She laughs. “Don’t we all? But some things happen for a reason. We just have to look for the rainbow after the storm.” She glances up when the door opens. “What can I get you to drink?”

“Water is good. Thank you.”

Patting my shoulder when she passes, I can’t help but feel her kindness every time I see her.

My phone rings, and I’m quick to grab it from the front pocket of my bag, and answer, “Hi, Dad.”

“Chloe. I wanted to call to see how the first day went.”

“Fine. It’s going to be a tough semester, but nothing I can’t handle.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Make sure to keep ahead of the syllabus so if questions arise, you have time to get answers.”

“I will.” I lower my head, wondering when he’ll trust me to take care of my own life. “Are you still working?”

“I had dinner brought in, and I’m catching up on some research. Education never ends in our profession.” He still refuses to discuss a different medical path than the one he’s taken, and his expectation for perfection weighs heavy on me.

“Glad to hear you’re taking time to eat.” Making sure Joshua won’t show up with me on the phone, I add, “I’m about to eat and then head home, so I should—”

“That’s good.” He pauses before his tone turns serious, not that he has a carefree tone in his arsenal. “We haven’t always gotten along . . .”

We’ve struggled through the divorce because he felt like I was siding

with my mom. I wasn't. Being there for her isn't siding with her, but he's never understood that. There were conflicts over my high school courses and the fast track he wanted me to take. He won. I graduated in three years and went to Yale just as he wanted, much to the dismay of my mom.

"I want you to know how proud I am of you, Chloe."

Adjusting the phone in my hand, I close my eyes and angle toward the wall for privacy. "I know, Dad, but it means a lot to hear it."

He clears his throat, the gruffness returning. "Good talk."

The lump in my throat is swallowed down, and I reply, "Yeah, good talk."

"Good luck this year. Make me proud."

"I will. I love—"

The line goes dead.

Him never telling me he loves me used to bother me, but he always said words are worthless. It's actions that matter.

"Miss me?" Joshua sets a plate and bowl of soup in front of me before sliding in across from me. "Guess our paths aren't so different, after all."

Dropping my phone back in my bag, I say, "Especially when they intersect at the same place." I'm not sure when the glasses of water arrived, but I feel a little embarrassed at the thought of Patty overhearing my dysfunctional call with my dad. I take a sip of water to cool my self-consciousness. But seeing Joshua staring at me with a lopsided grin doesn't help. "What?"

"You."

I tilt my head and raise an eyebrow. "Care to elaborate?"

"You couldn't resist, could you?" He has the biggest, dumbest, hottest smirk on his face right now.

"You're right. Busted me. I love grilled cheese sandwiches." I take a big bite to stuff my mouth enough to justify not talking more.

Chuckling, he picks up one of the diagonally cut halves and takes a huge bite. He's a big guy with an appetite to match, judging by the two sandwiches on his plate. "You know what I'm talking about, Chloe. So you can hide behind the specials or just fess up and admit you stopped by to see me."

"Pfft. I didn't even know you were working. Anyway, I let my growling stomach lead the way."

"Okay," he says, dunking a corner of a sandwich in the soup. He holds it up. "It's best when eaten together. I'm surprised a girl like you would even

eat a grilled cheese, so dunking it might be too much for you.”

My shoulders drop, and I give him a pointed glare. “I may be from Newport, but I can get messy like the best of them.”

“Two things,” he starts. I’m figuring he’s going to talk my ear off at this point. “First, you’re from Newport?”

“I am. So say what you want to say, and then let’s get on with the second thing you feel the need to share.”

Shrugging, he acts innocent with wide eyes and his attention planted on the bowl of soup. “I wasn’t going to say anything other than . . .” His eyes lift to mine—brown warming my greens. “I’m not surprised.”

“Well, what does that mean?”

“It means I’m not shocked.”

“I know what surprised means. I want to know why I fit right into some box that apparently doesn’t surprise you?”

“Well, you tell me.”

“Oh, my God. You’re so infuriating.”

His lips scrunch to one side as if he hates being the bearer of bad news. “I’m just saying, you’re uptight.”

“I am not.”

“Okay.” One sandwich has been demolished, and he starts on the next.

“What does okay mean?”

“Do you want me to define okay for you?”

I grip the edge of the table to keep from smacking him. “Do you give all your dates this hard of a time?”

His eyes fix on mine, the wry grin sifted away. Leaning closer, he whispers, “No. Only the ones I like.”

I have two things to list myself.

1. Joshua just confessed he likes me.
2. I said we’re on a date, and I know he’s about to have a field day with that slip of the tongue.

Now I’m holding the table for an entirely new reason—to brace myself for the verbal onslaught heading my way. *Not really.* I shovel soup in my mouth instead.

Leaning back with a self-satisfied grin, he says, “Don’t worry, Chloe,” dragging out that e again with a drawl that’s definitely not from around these

parts. “Whether I like you or not, I always leave my dates happy.”

The spoon drops from my hand, clanging against the bowl and landing on the placemat. The ruckus earns unwanted attention. Waiting it out, I cross my arms over my chest, trying to level that smirk into smithereens. “Do I even want to know what that means?”

“Trust me. You want to know.”

There’s so much conviction in his tone that I’m starting to believe him. Before I get too wrapped up in my imagination, I ask, “What exactly does this happy ending consist of?”

“Would you like me to show you?”

“No. We’re not on a date. That was a slip on my part.” Waving between us, I give in just a little because his ego may be the most dominant part, but I kind of like the other side he shows me every now and again. “I wasn’t looking for a friend, but for some reason, I find you, when not utterly incorrigible, mildly entertaining.”

As if he just won the lottery, his whole expression changes as that ego is fed once again. “It’s probably best if we’re only friends.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t think you could handle—”

“Your ego.”

“You’re so fixated on my ego. But by how you walk around studying like you’re above it all—”

“I study all the time because I have to. How much do you study?” Maybe, I cut him off again, but he knows exactly how to push my buttons.

His silence keeps me fixated on him, the way he suddenly appears to want an out, has my curiosity going wild. No shame covers his face, and he doesn’t seem to be searching for an excuse. Then it dawns on me. My mouth falls open as I find fault in my own abilities in direct comparison. “Oh, my God. Tell me you have to study. That you do it every minute you’re not in class or at work.”

The tilt of his head sends strands falling in his eyes. That’s when I notice he’s not wearing a cap like he was when I walked in. I swear his shirt was blue, but now it’s red. Occasionally, I get a whiff of the clean scent of soap, and considering he’s a cook, he almost appears freshly showered. Like, maybe, he was hoping I’d come in tonight. *Maybe.*

Stroking my hands over my head, I pull the elastic from my hair and collect all the loose strands. All the while, we’re looking at each other as

though we're more than friends. I hadn't noticed my heart beating so heavily in my chest or that my breathing had shallowed—until now—and the beat's so loud that he might hear.

In the strangest turnabout, I've gone from feeling defeat from being outdone collegiately to feeling alive from his proximity. Dipping my hands to my yoga pants, I slide my clammy palms down the tops of my thighs.

"I wouldn't say I have a photographic memory since I haven't been officially tested, but I wouldn't say that I don't either."

Why are his lips suddenly the most fascinating thing about today?

I don't know if I hate myself for suddenly finding him so attractive or should congratulate myself for sitting through this meal. I take a few more bites of soup to ponder this precarious situation. "I have to work for every grade. My memory isn't bad, but I wish it were better."

"Whatever you're thinking, and it seems like there's a lot by how tight your grip is on that spoon, don't discount me."

"Discount you? I'm envious. Maybe if I didn't have to study so much, I could get the life everyone tells me I'm missing out on."

"It seems you already know what you're missing. Now, it's just a matter of doing something about it." Resting his forearms on the table, he asks, "What are you going to do about it?"

I like to think that I'm quick on my feet with the correct textbook answer to anything. Short of going to finishing school, I can make small talk with the best of society. But when someone asks about me, I'm blank. "I don't know," I answer honestly.

"That's okay. We're young. We have time to figure it out."

We? I distinctly caught a we in there. "Said like someone who knows exactly who he is."

"Said like someone who had no choice but to grow up fast."

The lighter, more jovial side has disappeared, and the words of his mother come back to me—*I hoped he could find inner peace and calm through some turbulent times*. Now doesn't seem like the time to ask him deeply personal questions, though I remain curious as to what happened. "I wanted to thank you for Frankie's housewarming gifts." Fine, I give into this silly mess. "She loves them."

A smile more genuine than before appears. "I'm glad to hear."

"She'd turn tricks with those leaves for a good misting." I laugh. It's his laughter that has the joy reaching my eyes as well. "So I guess it's official."

I'm part of the bonsai club."

"Yale has one."

"Slow down. Baby steps."

He checks his watch, and says, "My break is ending soon. How about a lightning round of get-to-know-you questions?"

"I'm game. Can I go first?" When he nods, I ask, "Age?"

"Twenty-two next month. Age?"

"Twenty-one." I don't know why I lie. He's given me no reason to, other than I don't want him to treat me differently. People always do when they find out I skipped a year or can't go to bars with them like I should be able to.

"We're the same age—"

"Major?" I ask, moving past that topic as fast as I can.

"Economics. Premed for you?"

"Yes." A joy fills my chest. Although I have all kinds of questions about his major, I go easy. "Favorite food?"

"Cooking or eating?"

I giggle. "Figures a chef would get that specific. How about both?"

"I'm a cook, not a chef. As for food: Eating—fresh caught catfish after a day on the lake. Cooking? Hmm . . ." He rubs his chin. "Maybe omelets. You can make them a million different ways. Kind of simple, I know, but it matches me, I guess."

"I don't find you simple at all." The ball sort of drops, and I wish there were takebacks. But since it's already out there, I follow up with, "I think you're rather interesting, Joshua."

"Enough to want to share another special someday?"

"Someday." I can't give in that easily. Where's the challenge in that?

Pushing off the table, he stands and begins collecting the dishes. "I need to get back to work. The dinner crowd is already piling in."

I look around, and despite a bell above the door, I never noticed the restaurant is now full. "Of course. I can leave money on the table."

"Now why would I let you do that? This is a date, remember?" He punctuates it with a wink.

Looking down when my cheeks feel hot, I smile to myself. I peek up at him under my lashes. "I remember."

When he takes the dishes, I slip my backpack back on. It gets lighter, so I turn around to find him adjusting it. "Don't want to hurt your back carrying all those books around. Not sure if you know . . ." His tone drips in sarcasm.

“But everything you need is online these days. You don’t actually have to carry books.”

“And here, I was starting to think I wouldn’t get another of your smart-ass comments. Thanks for coming through for me.”

Snickering, he replies, “You’re welcome.”

I start for the door and notice him behind me. “It’s okay. I can see myself out.”

His shoulders hit the bottom of his ears. “Yeah, no worries. I was just coming to get fresh air.”

“Ah. Right.” I laugh. On the sidewalk, I stop awkwardly, looking down the street, and then turn back to him. “So, I’m going. Thanks for dinner.” I have no idea what I’m doing, which seems to be a running theme when I’m with him. But I do it anyway. “You know how you told me to tell Frankie hi?”

The laugh rumbles through his chest as he runs his thumb over a plush lower lip. “Yeah.”

“I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

“I was thinking you could tell her yourself sometime.”

He tries so hard to restrain his smile and fails. I’m fairly certain it’s the only thing he fails at. “I could do that. I’d have to check my schedule. Maybe I can give you my number, and you can send me a text sometime.”

“Absolutely. Frankie will love the visit.” I pull my phone out and hand it to him.

As he types, he says, “Anything for Frankie.” When he hands my phone back to me, he pulls his from his pocket with my number flashing on the screen. “Hope you don’t mind me sending a text to myself. Now, I have your number.”

“Text me the specials.” I start to back away in the opposite direction, and say, “You never did tell me about that happy ending.”

“Like I said, it’s something I have to show you.”

“Maybe next time.”

He reaches for the door. “You got it.”

I don’t know why my feet feel like they’re full of lead, but every step I take is painful. My phone buzzes in my hand with a message from him: *I forgot to tell you something.*

Me: *What?*

Joshua: *The second thing.*

I turn around to find him standing in the middle of the sidewalk with a grin that makes me weak in the knees because I'm the one who put it there. I raise my arms out, and from half a block down, I yell, "What?"

"My last name is Evans."

Realizing that all the things instilled in me growing up flew out the window the day I met him, I start to wonder if *he's* what's been missing from my life. "Joshua Evans," I say well out of his earshot, just liking the sound of it. But my feet are moving, and although he said I had to trust him on that happy ending one day, it's too late for propriety. I feel alive. I want another taste of that happiness today.

I run with my backpack bouncing, slipping it off and dropping at his feet as I fly into his arms. Our lips meet in pure passion, pushed to the brink by flirty banter as foreplay. With his arms wrapped around my middle, his body is pressed to mine with no room left for misinterpretation.

My arms tighten around him, and all I feel is his heat against my lips, between my legs, and in this kiss. Our lips part, and our tongues meet, embracing like a familiar lover from the past. When all the air is empty from my lungs, I kiss him longer, breathing him in instead.

This time when our lips part, he doesn't set me down but looks at me eye-level. Breathless and panting, I say, "Chloe Fox. That's my name."

And suddenly that smirk isn't offensive or arrogant. It's infectious, causing me to display one of my own. "It's nice to meet you, Chloe Fox."

"It's nice to meet you too, Joshua Evans."

6

Joshua

Kissing Chloe Fox has become my new favorite pastime.

I don't know what happened at the diner earlier in the week, but the moment our lips met, some kind of kiss and attack game began. I didn't take her for spontaneous, considering her type A personality, but on Wednesday, we discovered we both have classes near Kline Biology Tower at two. Let's just say we were *almost* late to our next classes after making out in an empty lab room for a half hour. If I've learned anything about her in the past week, it's that she's regimented. Pushing her boundaries might be my second favorite thing right now. Thursday, though, I was the one to blame. It killed me to have to stop kissing her in the photography section of the art gallery before racing to work. Everything about her calls to me. She's smart and soft.

I've been dying to touch her all day, feeling the itch in my palms, so this time when I spy her refilling her bottle at a water fountain, I stand behind her and pretend to wait my turn. This was my first mistake.

Turning to dash back down the hallway, she runs right into me, her hair swinging wide around her shoulders as water splashes across my shirt. "Oh, no!" She gasps in horror. Her gaze glides up my chest and then a little mischievous smile appears. I see when the devious cogs start to turn. Rubbing her hand down my shirt, she says, "I am so very sorry about that," not sounding sorry one bit.

"I just bet you are." My abs start tightening from the cold water pricking my skin, and I take her by the elbow, moving her off to the side. "It's funny how we haven't seen each other in the three years we've been here together, but now we're running into each other everywhere."

"True, but I wasn't looking before." The space between us is too far, and knowing we both have class soon, I get to what's been on my mind. "I've been thinking you—"

"Good thoughts or bad?"

"Why would I have bad thoughts about you?" The little scalloped edges of her white top highlight an innocence, matching her face, but then she

wears tight black pants with it, keeping me guessing. That's just it. I can't get a solid read on her.

She seems to be good deeds and sin, carefree but measured. She's become a riddle I want to solve.

Her eyes follow the people walking behind me when her shoulders pop up and then drop. Her eyes come back to me, and she says, "I don't know. I don't know you well enough to know what you think about me."

"That's just it. I want us to get to know each other better." She rocks back, so I take her wrists and move closer. "I like making out with you—"

"Hey, Josh."

Shit. Talk about bad timing. "Hey," I mumble, catching Trish's eyes still on me when she passes. One date two years ago didn't lead anywhere, but that never looks good to other women, which usually ends badly for me.

But Chloe's standing there like we weren't interrupted. As much as that fascinates me, we're running short on time.

"You were flattering me with sweet nothings of I like making out with you. I'm sensing a but coming."

"But I want to spend more time with you."

Smiling, she moves in even closer. Her lips so close, our height difference the only discrepancy. "That's a good but."

I've been dying to touch her all day, feeling the urge to wrap myself around her—feel her against me. As I take hold of her hip, we both shift our middles closer, and an urge begins to churn deep inside. Fuck me, she's driving me wild. I have to use my head, but my heart is suddenly going crazy in my chest—nerves kicking in. What if she says no? What if making out is all she wants from me? What if we're only hooking up, and I'm reading this all wrong?

Her chest rises and falls, each breath seeming to anticipate what I have to say.

Fuck. I gulp so embarrassingly loud. I'm either doing this, or I'm not. Spit it out, Evans. "I have to work tonight, but I was wondering if you'd like to get together this weekend?"

"You're asking me out?"

"*Or in.* Whatever you like. I just want to spend time with you."

I'm fairly certain I hear her gulp this time as she takes hold of a dry part of my shirt with her free hand, holding me closer. Blood pumps through my veins like a race car. Judging by the lust in her eyes, I'm thinking I didn't

fuck this up entirely. “I’d love to spend more time with you, Joshua. We should kiss on it.”

“Stop stealing my lines, lady.” Before she tries to control this like the other times she so sexily stole my lips for her own purposes—completely to my benefit, I might add—I kiss her. I want her to feel how she’s made me feel this week—alive and not shy to show affection to someone I’ve started caring about. I want to be the one who kissed her right here for everyone to see, to show her what she means to me. She’s not just another girl; she’s the one who has captured my imagination.

I kiss her again. And again, as I run my hands over her ribs, touching, exploring, memorizing how much space she takes up—*not much*—her body slacks against mine. Her lips soften in greeting and then firm when she kisses me, her tongue exploring my mouth as much as I taste the heat of what’s in store the next time we’re alone.

Pushing her hair back, I deepen the kiss, making sure that every part of her remembers me. If she deserves anything from this, it’s to be kissed like we’re the only two people in the world.

The sound of shuffling feet behind me signals that our time is up. She lowers down, flat on her feet, and whispers, “I need to go. I have to run to class.”

I don’t want her to go. I want to spend time with her right now, but I know it’s impossible. Exhaling a deep breath, I put space between us and nod. “So do I.”

“I’ll see you this weekend?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

Lifting onto her tiptoes once more, she kisses my cheek, her lips searing my skin so I won’t forget how this felt either. “Bye, Joshua.”

“Bye, Chloe.” I watch her walk away, occasionally glancing back until she turns a corner after a little wave.

I go to the fountain and splash my face, needing to cool down. My mind has kicked into overdrive, wondering why everything feels so different with her . . . this year.

Somehow, I hadn’t noticed how heavy my thoughts had become until the lightness she brings swept through me. But as much fun as it has been kissing Chloe, I kind of want to know everything about her. I want to know what she eats for breakfast. I want to know what she wants out of life. What would she bring to a desert island? This is the shit that fills my head, and I want to know

everything. *All of it.*

She goes against everything I figured she would be, yet she's exactly who she says she is. The facts are that I know little about her other than she's a senior from Newport who has a bonsai tree. Having two out of three in common doesn't justify how I'm starting to feel about her. I mean, shit, before we kissed outside the diner, I thought the girl hated me.

I've spent more time with her in my head than I have in person, so none of this makes sense to me. Like why does it seem like she just discovered the joys of kissing? Like she's never known what it feels like to lose your body in someone else's. For us, every brush of our lips is a bit or piece of us sharing something more. Or maybe she's wild like a preacher's daughter—prim and proper on the streets and a vixen in the sheets.

My gut tells me that's not the case, but what do I know these days? I've been skating by on charm and half-assing it for the past year at Yale. I have to get my act together.

After I hang up my apron and go to clock out, I find Bryant filling a cup full of soda to go while Todd swivels on a stool at the counter. Todd and Bryant have been my closest friends since kindergarten. If a fight over Becky Norris didn't break us up back in the sixth grade, no one's coming between us now. "What else is in that cup?"

"Whiskey," Bryant replies. "Did you have a doubt?" If there was one kid in school who everyone wanted to be friends with, it was Bryant Eldridge. Not because he was the star football player (*that title still belongs to me*), or could get any girl he wanted (*okay, me as well*), but because he was the coolest guy around. Friends with everyone, easily entertained, and the most laid-back person I know.

Todd says, "We're heading to the lake. You in?" Todd Berenger knows his way around this city. He's sixth generation New Haven and lives on the other side of the proverbial tracks. I'm not saying he's from money, but they're not doing too bad. His parents also cut him off financially a few years back when he decided he wanted to take some time off to figure out what he wants to do with his life. He still doesn't know.

They both deliver for the diner part time and the pizza joint around the corner. Which has me thinking about Chloe again. I haven't delivered food in well over a year, but when Todd's truck broke down, I had to cover. She was my first back in the saddle again.

I've definitely had some deeper thoughts about how that worked out, but

I'm not giving in to overanalyzing them. No good would come of it since my path was set years ago. "Who all's going?" I ask, rubbing my hand over the scruff of my face.

"Mick, Jim, Sanders—"

"Dana and those girls," Bryant adds and is promptly elbowed.

"Now he won't go, ya fucker," Todd reprimands. "We're going, Evans. The rest of them don't matter."

Seeing Dana is not at the top of my agenda. "I really don't want to deal with her tonight. If I'm with you guys, she'll be all over me. If I bring someone—"

"Who would you bring?" Bryant asks, hopping up on the counter.

"Do we know her?" Todd chimes in.

I chuckle. "I said if and I'm not going. I have some things to take care of."

Todd is a shark who's gotten a taste of blood. "Would one of those things be a girl you met?"

In no mood to lie to them or hide what I'm thinking, I lean against the wall and kick my foot up on the side of the counter. "I actually met her when I was covering for your ass last Sunday."

"Damn, for real? Is she hot?"

I level him with a glare. "Of course, she's hot, or why would I bother?" I sound like an asshole, even to me. How she caught my eye the first time we met has become secondary to how she makes me think and makes me feel around her. I can't rest on my laurels with her like I do with everyone else. She won't let me, and I like that. She's holding me to the standard my mom also believes in me. But yeah, I don't need to overthink a good time or have it ruined by these guys. Next, they'll want to see her, and I'll never hear the end of it.

"She goes to school with me. It's . . ." How do I describe what Chloe and I are? "New."

Bryant is a lot easier to slip stuff by because he doesn't generally care about much, but Todd, on the other hand, is the one who will see through a lie. New isn't hearts and flowers, but it's not a lie either. I feign indifference for my own benefit. He asks, "Like it's becoming a thing?"

"How'd you get there from me calling it new?"

"Because you've never said that before. If you're just hooking up with her, you'd say so."

I reply with a shrug, striving to maintain a lack of care and failing. “I don’t know much about her yet.”

Disinterested, Bryant stands and waves us toward the door. “It’s getting late. Let’s go.”

We head for the door. “See ya, T.”

“Have a good night, Josh,” he calls from the kitchen. I lock up and follow the guys to the truck.

The driver’s side window slides down, and Todd leans his arm over. “Don’t go falling in love, Josh. I made that mistake for all of us.”

The grin that works its way across his face is something that took a long time to see after his bad breakup last year. A girl from Yale broke his heart, leaving us to sweep up the pieces. It hits close to home for some reason. Kicking his tire, I then back up onto the sidewalk again. “Just having fun, my friend. Have a good night and don’t call me for bail money.”

“We wouldn’t. You never have any money.”

I chuckle, walking to my Bronco parked in the back. Between the guys harassing me about not going and my mind dwelling on a certain pair of green eyes, I climb into the cab and sit back.

Mulling over the last week, I purposely let Chloe lead. It was her who pulled me into the lab and kissed me like we were about to get caught. She loves to control everything, including our meetups, which makes me think she’s gotten away with it for too long. Does no one in her life challenge her? She’s whip-smart and her humor is as dry as a desert and always makes me laugh. She can hold her own, dish it out, and take it.

With that killer body, she’s basically the perfect woman.

So why is she single?

There’s so much left to discover about the divine Miss Fox, but I’m still left wondering what happens when she loses the upper hand.

Guess there’s only one way to find out.

7

Chloe

Slipping on pajamas, I whip my hair into a towel on my head and brush my teeth before settling on the edge of the bed to slather on lotion. My gaze darts to the clock on the nightstand. You would think I had coffee tonight by how wide-awake I am. I'm usually in bed by now. Instead, my mind is wired.

After wasting an hour daydreaming about a certain guy's lips, tongue, and the way he holds my waist like I might slip away has caused my thoughts to deviate from my routine, so I took a room temperature shower in hopes to cool off without getting too cold.

It didn't take my mind off him, though. It only made matters worse. I'm starting to sound like Ruby. I need to get my mind off sex and back on my goals. Graduation. Med school. Columbia. *Focus, Chloe.*

But kissing him amongst the photographs at the gallery had me feeling powerful and naughty, something I've never felt before. And I liked it. I still do. I've started devising plans, excuses really, to kiss him again. Like a multitude of plots to have those lips against mine as soon as I can.

I'm starting to wonder what sleeping with him would be like.

One word—*combustible.*

I huff, lying on the bed, utterly frustrated with myself. I've lost time that I didn't have to spare, and I'm pretty sure I've literally been objectifying him. I'm a terrible human. I'm glad Frankie can't read my mind.

Oh, good God. *What have I become?*

I'm not too far gone. I can name at least three other qualities that I've begun to admire about Joshua Evans.

1. Although it was a box of dirt, the gift for Frankie was one of the most thoughtful I've ever received.

2. The camaraderie between him and his mom is quite endearing.

3. He doesn't pretend he's something he's not. Though I could argue that you get more than what you see.

And for the bonus round, the way he lives—*fearlessly*—is enviable. He makes up his own rules. Does it count for me finding balance if I find

someone who balances me?

Too tired to deal with drying my hair, I get up and wander into the living room with the towel stacked high on my head. In the kitchen, I could kick myself for not going to the store today. With a carton of eggs, cheese, and olives, I don't have much of a selection. Olives it is. I pull the jar out and try to cram my fingers in when a slew of rapid-fire texts send my phone buzzing across the coffee table.

Abandoning the olive jar, I hurry over. My suspicions that it's Ruby on another bad date are wrong.

There on my phone is the word *Soulmate* staring back at me above the text messages.

Who's Soulmate?

The moment I say it, I know who it is. Well, that and the message clued me in: *I miss your lips on mine.*

Grinning ear to ear, I type: *Who is this?*

My phone rings. Acting oblivious to the previous texts, I answer, "Hello?"

"What do you mean who's this? How many strapping, six-foot-two guys are you kissing these days?"

I'd laugh but torturing him is more fun, so I hold my reaction steady. "Six foot two? Are you sure about that?"

"Positive—"

"I'll pack a measuring tape in my backpack for the next time I see you—"

Knock. Knock.

I practically jump in giddiness that he's come to see me until I realize that I'm in my pajamas without a stitch of makeup and a towel twisted around my wet head. I panic and run around the apartment, but there's nothing to clean.

Remembering how Ruby's life is seen in her décor from the tiny bells above the window to the colorful cushions. I look around mine and it has no life. This is not the apartment of a co-ed who is fun and flirty, doing exciting things, and has stories to share.

This place fits me to a T—*boring*. And Joshua is about to find that out firsthand. Doesn't matter that he was here before. He was in the doorway, not spending enough time to psychoanalyze my neat freak tendencies.

I pull the mug from the cabinet and leave it on the counter next to the olives. Inspired, I hurry under the sound of another rap on the door to my closet and pull a red scarf I've never worn and place it over my banker's

lamp in the living room. I don't have time to overthink it, which is probably a good thing.

There's not enough time to continue panicking before he knocks again. Resolved, I straighten my cotton top and tug down my shorts, hoping they cover my ass, and go to the peephole. With him looking down the hall, I'm given a porthole view of that great jaw of his. The ticking muscle is a bonus. "Who is it?" I giggle, slightly out of breath.

"Hi."

"I didn't order any food." The whole setup is the gift that keeps giving.

He holds up a bag. "That's too bad. I had a special delivery for Chloe Fox."

I don't keep him waiting. I open the door and tilt my head sideways under the chain to see him. "You play dirty."

With one hand pressed to the doorframe, he leans in with a big juicy grin and says, "I play to win."

God, I want to kiss his face. Or smack the smirk right off, but kissing it is more fun. I undo the chain and step aside. "Entrez-vous?"

"Oui. S'il vous plait."

I do a double take. "You know French?"

"It's shoddy at best." I catch his arm and pull him back before he passes, welcoming him with a quick kiss. My lips tingle like little fires ignited beneath my skin. When I free him, I slide my tongue over my bottom lip to dampen the flame. Like he mentioned, I want to get to know him. It may be tough to resist those magnificent lips, but I have no doubt it will be worth the wait.

Closing the door, I lock it and lean against the back of it. "For someone so cocky, sometimes you can be really self-deprecating. It's pleasantly surprising."

"Glad you noticed, but more importantly, which side of me do you like best?"

"Your backside. It doesn't talk back."

"Good to know you noticed my ass." He stands there shamelessly looking me over from head to toe.

"Well, I wouldn't go that far." I shrug. "But there might be some truth to that. Make yourself at home."

Moving closer to the couch, he scans the place like it could take all day. "Your place is so clean."

With his back to me, I shuffle a flip-flop into the walkway to add to the mess. “Eh.”

Peeking back, he asks, “You live alone?”

“Yep.”

Giving himself permission, he glances around the room. “Nice building.”

“I like the location. My friend Ruby found it.” And then because he doesn’t say anything, I keep rambling, “I can walk to school, and I’m close to shopping.”

“It’s a great location.”

“Ruby lives next door.”

His interest is piqued when he turns back to me. “Oh, really? Why don’t you live together?”

Now I’m searching the apartment for answers because I’m unsure what to say. “Never thought about it.”

“It’d save some money.”

“More importantly,” I start while picking up my phone and holding my phone screen so he can see it. “Can you explain this to me?” His whiskey-colored eyes can’t hide his inner thoughts. Neither can his smile. “I must have missed the part where you labeled yourself as Soulmate in my contacts.”

Moving toward the window, he peers down one side of the street and then another. “Understandable. You were distracted by the potential of a happy ending.”

“I was not.” I sound petulant even to me.

With a raised brow, he looks back at me. “You sure about that?”

“Honestly, no,” I say, crossing my arms. “I’m not.”

Laughter rumbles through his chest. “At least you’re honest.”

Most of the time, I think, thinking about the lie I told about my age.

Kneeling, he prods the dirt in the pot. “Frankie looks good in her new home. She likes the window.”

I sit on the couch and watch him stare at this plant like it’s a patient of his. The sweetness isn’t lost on me. Neither is the fact that Mom told me to do the same thing. “She’s a diva. She’s been preening for you all week.”

Standing back up, he’s smiling, and I just flat-out like it. “You’re funny, you know that?”

“Eh,” I say, waving him off. “What’s in the bag?”

“It was a ploy to gain entrance because I didn’t think you’d appreciate me as the special delivery.” Slamming his hands together, he bursts the paper

bag.

“That’s disappointing.”

Concern weaves its way into his expression as he sits on the couch.

“Why? Are you hungry?”

“No. That you’d think I wouldn’t appreciate you.”

Eyeing my bare legs, he says, “C’mere, Fox.”

I push off the wood and go because it benefits me as well. As much as it’s been fun to make out all over campus these past few days, tonight feels different. It’s not about the physical, but the emotional connection. I sit on his lap, and his arms come around me so easily. I rest my hand on his cheek, noticing how my heart skips a beat.

Even in the low light, his pupils widen as he takes me in.

I give him a hard time about all the teasing, but I swear I can hear his heart beating like mine. The quieter time between us is unique, and I savor the silence as we stare into each other’s eyes. Two breaths later, I whisper, “What do you want, Evans?”

The pressure of his fingertips on my hip has my body on high alert. My breathing lags as I feel the buildup of those kisses setting in.

Nuzzling my ear, his breath warming my neck, he asks, “Why do you smell like olives?”

Like the bag, I burst, laughing and rolling closer against him. “I was just digging into a jar before I was rudely interrupted by a thread of texts and a Trojan horse food bag.”

“I’ll make you a deal. Since I tricked you into letting me invade your night, how about I make you something?”

“Make me what?”

Chuckling, he kisses my cheek. “Food. I’ll cook something, and you don’t have to do a thing but lounge here and appreciate the view.”

“I’ll be gold medal worthy with this assignment. Get to it. I’m hungry.”

“On it.” When he flips me onto my back on the couch, my feet fly into the air and the towel unravels, falling to the floor.

Looped into a fit of giggles, I flop my legs down and rest back on my hands. The distance between us gives me the breathing room I need. “What are you going to cook for me?”

Opening the fridge, he replies, “Depends on what I find in here.” He glances back over his shoulder while bent toward the open fridge. “You want to cook with me?”

“For your safety and Frankie’s, it’s best if I stay here . . . on the couch, appreciating the view.” A smile that he doesn’t want to give me can’t hide from his eyes. I grin, big and free. “Your words. Fair game. Anyway, I’m a disaster in the kitchen.”

“I’ll let you off the hook tonight, but I have a feeling that you’re not as bad as you think you are.”

“My dad could argue otherwise, but we don’t need to get into my issues.”

He goes quiet for a moment and then shuffles through the cabinets, eventually returning to the fridge to retrieve the eggs and cheese. I didn’t even know I had cherry tomatoes, but the container is set on the counter. “I haven’t shopped in a few days.”

“It’s okay,” he replies with his back to me. The muscles under the T-shirt raise and lower like the bones of a keyboard as he works through his tasks, focusing on the food.

As much fun as it is to watch a hot guy cook for me, I want to know what’s going on in his head. I pad across the floor and angle against the counter. My wet hair is a mess, but he hasn’t made me feel less than beautiful in his glances and blatant stares. “What do you want to do with economics?”

His eyes remain on the pan in front of him as he scrambles the eggs. “I’m not sure. I’ve been thinking about the restaurant side of business, some aspect of hospitality, but I’d rather be cooking than pushing pens across a desk.”

“Why don’t you become a chef?”

This time, he looks my way. “It’s not on the short list of options my dad will pay for.”

“Sounds like mine.” My stomach drops from the admission, and I turn, holding the cold stone counter behind me.

“Oh, yeah?”

Shoving off, I move to the window. I scoff, waving it off like it’s no big deal.

Behind me, I hear the click of the stovetop and the cabinet open again. Like the first time, his presence fills my space and caresses my back. But it’s not just his presence; his hands caress my shoulders, and he places the gentlest kiss on the side of my neck. “I’m not sure what the situation is between you and your dad, but you can talk to me, Chloe. You can say anything, and it will stay between us.”

“I don’t know why that made me sad. He’s paying my way so I can become a doctor. There’s nothing melancholy about that.”

When his body presses to the back of mine, I feel the heat from his exchanged. I find myself leaning back, relying on him for the support I lack. Standing there for two beats, I finally say, “If I think about it too much, I’ll fall apart, and that scares me more than dealing with it.”

“You can fall apart. I’ll pick up the pieces.” I’m held protectively, his arms wrapped around my middle like a belt. His words have me resting my head against him.

“My dad and I have similar dreams for me. It’s just the path where we disagree.”

“What does he want for you?”

“For me to follow in his footsteps. He’s a well-known neurosurgeon.”

“What do you want?”

The words strike in the chest, my heart clenching. I turn in his arms, wrapping mine around him. I whisper, “What I really want . . . I want to work in an ER.”

Large hands rub my back, and then he leans back just enough to see my eyes. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It is to him.”

“It’s sounds amazing to me.”

We might not have a long history, but I mentally note the time and date, and the way he holds me as if it’s been years and not days. I’ll remember this moment forever.

After a week of kissing, it’s been nice to slow down, the pace more my usual speed. I rock back, noticing the two plates of food on the coffee table. “We should eat before it gets cold.”

He doesn’t add any burdens or pressure me for more, just accepts me at face value. It’s intoxicating.

Sitting on the couch, we take our plates in hands and start to eat, not desperate for a distraction, but good in the peace.

As he chews, he looks around the apartment. “You live alone. You’re OCD neat, and you’re showered and dressed for bed,” he says, eyeing my laptop with a tomato on the tines of his fork. “You’re a better student than you let on, aren’t you?”

“Everyone at Yale earns good grades. That’s how they got here.” My feeble attempt to appear average . . . normal by college student standards doesn’t fool him. Everyone knows that you have to have over a 4.0 GPA and nearly straight A’s. Perhaps I have a genetic advantage, but I still worked my

ass off to get here. But then so did every other student. “True. Let me ask you, Chloe. Why don’t you have a boyfriend?”

The question mingling with the way his brown gaze delves deeper than the surface of my skin has my stomach tied up in knots of excitement. I set the plate down and get up to get water. “Guess I haven’t found the right guy.”

“You sure about that?” The comment has me whipping back to look at him. He’s caught up in those eggs like he didn’t just lay a bomb at my feet.

I hand him a bottle of water and sit down slowly, his words still wreaking havoc on my mind. I realize I’m sitting next to a guy who doesn’t know *who* I am. He doesn’t have expectations based on who my dad is. I’m simply Chloe Fox to him. It’s . . .

It’s . . . it’s awesome. I almost feel as though I should spend more time getting to know him, but it’s been years, okay, one day, since I’ve been kissed, and I’m yearning for that. *For him. Is it too forward to attack him on the couch?*

He’s not shy to show his interest through the warmth of his caramelly eyes and I’m pretty sure it’s not the food that’s doing that to him.

“Um, no?” I nod, stupidly, unable to look away. I don’t even know what I’m saying. He has my heart beating so hard that Ruby can probably hear it next door.

A deep chuckle vibrates from his chest. Setting his plate down, he moves closer, our fingers bumping into each other on the cushion. Heat zips through me, and he asks, “I’d like to apply for the job.”

“Do you have experience?” I ask, a little breathless and desperate sounding. “I’ll need to see your résumé.”

“How about I show you instead?” His hand covers mine as he leans forward and kisses me.

And there goes my heart again.

8

Joshua

Dragging myself away from Chloe Fox is one of my worst decisions, and I've made a lot of bad choices over the years. Still tasting her on my tongue, I grin.

She's one of the best I've made in a long time.

Putting myself on the line isn't easy, so in the past, I didn't do it. I like the cards stacked in my favor. *Easy*. But spending time with her has felt right from the start. Each time, even better. The kissing is great, but we've also talked. About school and life. She asked about me and growing up in New Haven. I could get used to how she looks at me. Like I'm good. Like I have something to offer the world. Like I matter instead of being looked down on as a townie, even when sitting next to them in class.

I know it's not just how she makes me feel. It's also how she keeps so much locked inside. I want to be the key that unlocks her secrets. I want to be the guy who gets to know who she really is and wants to be, to peel back the layers.

She's given me a taste, but greedily, I want more.

Sitting in my truck with the engine idling, I look up at the third-floor windows. No fucking curtains hang to protect what's inside, making my stomach twist.

The lights are still on, and I can't help but want to see her one more time. I cut the engine and honk the horn twice before getting out of the Blazer. When she doesn't appear, I honk again until her silhouette fills the living room window. I shut the door and stand there in the street with people staring as they pass, but I gave up giving a damn a long time ago.

She slides the window up and leans out. "What are you doing, Joshua? Waking the neighborhood?"

"No, just you."

"Keep it down, asshole," some guy yells from one building over. Okay, so yeah, the neighbors, too.

I move closer, looking up, and say, "I wanted to see you again."

Enough light from the streetlamp extends for me to see that sweet smile of hers. Pressing her hands to the sill, she's leaning out enough for me to wonder if I should worry. "Here I am, Joshua Evans."

Yes, there she is with her hair hanging down, a tangled mess from my hands minutes earlier, and the moon shining down on her. She's my Juliet. "I want to kiss you some more."

Resting her hands on the sill, she laughs. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

What am I waiting for? I take the stairs by two and just before I knock, the door swings open. Boxy pajamas still cover her body, but she can't hide that spark in her eyes. Holding the door open, she asks, "What took you so long?"

Wrapping my arms around her waist, I kiss her and then lean back to see those pretty green eyes. "I took a few detours in life, but I finally got here."

She cups my face and kisses me again. "Better late than never."

I kick the door closed and back her up to the couch, making out like a bandit. Our lips pressed together. Our tongues exploring. Each of us staking claims with our bodies and hands. Our hearts beating together. I don't know where I end and she begins, but when we settle on the couch, I'm quickly reminded.

The hem of her shirt is angled up, and my hand finds the soft skin of her middle. She whispers, "God, yes." A little moan follows, encouraging me. I want her. I need her so badly. Lying on the couch between her legs has my hips seeking the release I so desperately crave.

Her hands roam my back and settle on my ass as she holds me close. Thrusting through jeans is the fucking worst, but I'll do it if it gives me relief in the end. I'd fuck her in a heartbeat, but I knew that was a lie as soon as the thought materialized.

I've had sex with girls up and down this town, but she's not like them. She's not someone who came onto me at Lucky's, went to high school with me, or pursued me after eating at the diner. They don't see my test scores or my grades, or ask me about my life in any way.

I don't wear designer clothes or drive an expensive sports car. That's not what they want from me. They want to fulfill their bad boy fantasy before settling down with a guy named Chet who works on Wall Street and will eventually have a midlife crisis with their assistant who's half their age.

Chloe doesn't treat me that way. She doesn't care what I'm wearing, be it

an apron or a flannel shirt. I'm treated equally, if not given more respect than I deserve. She called me out for judging her, for placing my insecurities in her head, when I assumed, she didn't see anything beyond my appearance.

That right there tells me this is more than casual flirtations on her part. And the buzz I get when I'm around her tells me it's not different for me either.

There are definitely strings involved, which should scare me, but they don't. Chloe has me wanting to slow down, to hang out, to take her to the lake and watch the sunset.

My hips slow, and my hand slips under her shirt to feel the warm skin of her middle. I inch higher until I'm holding a breast in my hand—soft, supple, and a perfect fit for me. Each knead elicits another moan until she's grinding against me.

Her hands slide to my shoulders, hot to the touch even through the thin cotton.

"I don't want to rush this," I say, but when I reach her eyes, I still.

Her anger is readable—the ire flickers.

Happiness shapes the corners, tipping them up.

Even her curiosity has her engaged with me through touch or by how her eyes latch to mine.

Just when I think I'm reading her correctly, a new expression appears. Is it . . . trust? Trust in me? There are no doubts in her eyes, and her body is free for me to explore. Chloe's trusting me.

And for the first time, I see her so clearly, and I see us reflected back at me. Running my thumb gently over her cheek, I rest my forehead on hers, my thundering heart still loud in my ears. "You fascinate me, Chloe."

"Good or bad?"

The question pulls a light laugh from me. Can she not see how weak I am around her? How she's ten thousand miles out of my league? "Good. Always good."

"Good," she replies. "That makes me happy."

I kiss her temple just as the feel of her hand slips between us and tucks into the top of my jeans. One button is undone, causing my breath to stagnate. Another and I'm breathing double time. The third has me desperate to shed these strangling jeans. Four, and I'm rock hard for her, my hips thrusting of their own accord.

My gaze slides back to her face—pink cheeks and red lips swelling from

kisses.

I'm fast to return my hand under her shirt, wanting to push until we both find relief. "Keep going. Harder," she whispers against my ear.

So close already. I take pride in my work, but damn, even I'm impressed. I bet it's all that pent-up energy from studying. I get restless, too, and more so this week from a hunger to see her again, to touch her, to feel that electricity like I've finally opened my eyes after a long hibernation.

Cupping my face, she kisses me again as our bodies find a rhythm that's going to send me over the edge as well. She pushes my jeans down enough to scrape her nails over the fabric of my boxer briefs. The friction feels good, too good for me to focus on anything but chasing down a release.

Her head tilts back and her mouth falls open. "Yes," she breathes, her body tensing as she squeezes her eyes closed.

Watching her fall apart underneath me has my orgasm ripping from my core before I can control it. "Fuck," I grit, my forehead dropping against her neck, my body a live wire exposed to air. Losing myself, I devour the darkness that sparks to life.

And then exhaustion takes me down.

My neck is kissed, over and over again, so I lift on my forearms, not wanting to suffocate her. Her cheeks are rosy red, her lips officially swollen, but it's her eyes that drive me wild. As if she caught the sunshine inside, they sparkle like gems. "How are you?" I ask, my voice husky.

"Never better." She tries for casual like I'm not on top of her. A for effort, but I hear the teasing in her tone. "You?"

I push off and balance precariously on the edge of the couch. Holding her, I kiss her shoulder. A stupid grin crosses my face before I can wrangle it not to look like a fool who just kissed a girl for the first time, much less what we just did. "Not to be overly confident or anything, but I think I totally nailed this interview."

She bursts out laughing. Scooting to the side to get a better look at me, her arms remain loose and around my neck. "You definitely nailed it. When can you start?"

"I think I already did." I kiss her. Tired of being on the verge of falling, I move my legs down and stand. *Fucking hell.* Seeing the wet spot I left on her . . . this is just plain embarrassing. I yank my jeans up, and ask, "Bathroom?"

"In the bedroom."

Offering her a hand up, I help her land on her feet and kiss the side of her

head. “Do you need it?”

“You can go first.”

I work my way through the one-bedroom apartment, noticing she doesn't have curtains in either room. The bed is messed like she took a nap, but everything else is put away. She's the neatest girl I've ever met.

When I'm done in the bathroom, I walk out to find her wrapped in a robe waiting on the bed. “You need window coverings. People can see in.”

“You're worried about me?”

“Of course, I'm worried.” I sit next to her. “That's what boyfriends do. Hey,” I say. When she looks at me, I wrap my arm around her lower back. She rests her head on my shoulder. “I know we were playing around earlier, but what do you think about being my girlfriend?” Nerves zip through me, and everything feels so real. I'm fucking nervous, so nervous, because what if she says no. What if, even though she's never made me feel otherwise, she doesn't want me *want* me?

Her hair is still wet, though, it didn't bother us a few minutes ago on the couch. The tangles are forming, but I don't think I've ever seen her look more beautiful. Tilting her head, she takes my hand and doodles on my palm with her nail. The light tickles feel good, the attention to parts of me that never get love. Love? *Fuck*. It's too soon for that.

She says, “I'd like that.”

“Me too.” I bring her hand to my mouth and kiss her palm, hoping I can make her feel the same by giving her similar attention to her palm.

We lie back, our hands clasping together between us, and she asks, “What do we do now? Make plans together?”

I could fall asleep right here. I'm not pushing my luck by asking to stay, but after the day I've had, I scrub my face to stay awake. “What do you want to do?”

“Surprise me.” Her eyes dip closed, and I know that's my cue. I sit up and tug her to her feet.

Walking to the door with her tucked under my arm. “I checked the schedule and I'm closing the next four nights—”

“I'll wait up.”

Just like that, she's folding into my life. “Yeah?”

We stand at the door, wrapped up in each other. “Absolutely.”

And there I am molding to hers. “Okay. I can come over after?” I kiss her twice—once for me and once for her before I back into the hallway, looking

my girlfriend over. “Damn, I’m a lucky man.”

She gives me a solid once-over, leaning on the door with a smirk on her face. “Not as lucky as I am.”

9

Joshua

“How’d your week go?” my mom asks when I clock in.

“Pretty good,” I reply, not elaborating as I slip the apron over my head. She doesn’t need to hear how boring my classes are or how I’ve been spending every night of the last week at Chloe’s. She gives me my privacy—the perks of having a separate entrance into the basement where I live.

She wipes down the counter, and then says, “I need you bussing tables tonight.”

“Why?” I ask with my hand on the kitchen door.

“John called in sick. T will cover the kitchen. Trina and I will serve.”

As much as I want to argue because I never did like bussing, I do it. My mom fought for this restaurant to be a success. I’ll never cause her grief. The locals have given her enough over the years.

When folks didn’t know I was her son, I overheard the rumors. She was called names—wild and reckless—for getting knocked up and having a bastard son. A kid I went to school with repeated his mom’s term for my mom to my face; he called her trash. I was grounded for being expelled, but she never made me apologize for punching the little shit.

His family never returned to the diner, and fortunately, back then, lawsuits weren’t filed for kids fighting on the playground. Last time I saw him, he was smoking weed before a football game. Became the disappointment of the New Haven Ravens when he missed that catch.

Can’t say I felt sorry for him or for hooking up with his girlfriend later that night.

I get to work, wanting the hours to pass so I can see Chloe again.

Some college kids ramble in—loud and wanting service faster than Trina can get to them—around eight. She can usually hold her own. She’s worked here long enough to handle rowdies from the campus. “Hey,” I say, catching her fill up some soda cups. “You haven’t had a break. I’ll cover your tables.”

“Rich, college kids,” she replies, eyeing them. “I need the tip.”

“You got it. Take a break.”

As if I just made her day, she puts a hand on her hip. “You’re too good to me, Josh. Thanks.”

“No worries.”

She delivers the sodas to another table, and I wipe my hands on the rag tied to my belt loop. I learned a long time ago not to judge a book by its cover. I’m a prime example of that cliché. But I can tell by the air of arrogance that surrounds them that these guys take advantage of others who might not have the same privilege.

They’re the future assholes sitting on heads of boards in the city while everyone else does the grunt work. Reminds me of my father.

I’ve never been bitter about other people having money. I’d love the luxury of throwing some cash around like it’s nothing. Who wouldn’t? But I’ll never treat others like my mom was once treated. So despite the pastel-colored collars slipping out from under Yale sweatshirts I couldn’t afford, I ask, “What can I get you?”

“The waitress back,” says the second guy on my right in the booth. “She’s a lot prettier to look at. No offense.”

“No offense taken. It’s true, but you’re stuck with me.” They have drinks, so I prod, “Ready to order?”

A light-haired guy with slicked-back hair on my left says, “You seem to have a chip on your shoulder. We’re not here to cause trouble. We’re just hungry.”

Not looking to start a fight either, so I dust off my shoulder, and say, “It’s just crumbs from cleaning up after our guests.”

He chuckles. “Yeah. Okay. I’ll have the burger, no pickles or mayo. Hold the cheese and a salad with whatever your house vinaigrette is.”

I pull the pad from my apron, not realizing prior to him ordering how complicated it was going to be. I jot it down and then take the other orders. There’s no point in hanging around longer than needed, so I grab some silverware and set it down.

Fortunately, they don’t stay long after finishing, and Trina’s already back. On their way out, the guy who ordered the side salad stops. “Money’s on the table.”

“Cool. Thanks.”

Another guy calls after him, “Come on, Trevor.”

“Coming,” he says, pushing through the door.

I clear the table, dropping the tip off to Trina, and get to cleaning dishes.

Just shy of eleven, my mom finds me in the back. “Why don’t you head out, and we’ll finish up?”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

I’ve learned not to hang out and question too much, or I’ll end up being told to stay.

Pushing out the back door in a hurry to get to Chloe, I stop when I see two figures leaning against my Blazer in the shadows. Todd pushes off to toss me an unopened bottle of whiskey. “Gift for you.”

The adrenaline is still coursing through me when I reply, “I like gifts like these.”

Heading over to Todd’s old Chevy, Bryant says, “We’re going to Lucky’s. Time to play some pool and for you to lose some of that hard-earned cash.”

I’m not that kind of guy, usually, who brags about my girl, but I’m feeling the need to give them a heads-up. “It’ll have to be another time. I’ve already made plans.”

Todd asks, “What’s her name?”

It feels good to laugh with my friends. “Perceptive.” Neither of them feels the need to brush over it, so I say, “Chloe.”

Bryant, who’s perched on the door, looks over the top of the truck. “You only pushing her petals or getting serious?”

It feels like a betrayal to what Chloe and I are building to treat it less than what it really is in front of my friends. “It’s getting serious.”

He huffs, his hands dropping on the roof of the metal truck. I look around to make sure no one’s around or the cops might be called for being disorderly. He adds, “Well, what’d ya go and start doing that for?”

“I like her.” Popping my door, I set the bottle behind my seat in a bucket to secure it.

“Then bring her to Lucky’s,” he says, “so we can get to know her.”

“You want me to bring her to that shithole?”

Todd laughs, starting the engine. “Let me guess. Yaley? Too good to slum it with us townies?”

“She’s not like that. She likes me just as I am.”

He says, “Sounds like a fucking love song, but a word of warning, Evans. You can’t hide your roots. Bring her around anyway. We’ll play some pool and be on our best behavior.” He’s already backing out. Bryant’s arm goes

out the window, his finger flipping me off.

I return the favor before tugging my phone from my back pocket

So much weighs on me suddenly—what will they think of her? *Yaley*? That's a new one that makes me roll my eyes. I'm a fucking *Yaley* if attending's their criteria. Despite a few misdemeanors, my friends are good guys, loyal to a fault despite being stuck in a town that never wanted them to succeed. The tracks that divide this town might as well have been fifty feet tall. I only got over because of my last name. I would have never stood a chance being Patty Russo's kid. But David Evans held weight.

I'm a little anxious—two sides coming . . . maybe colliding is a better word—together. I'm pretty sure the guys will like her because I do, but what will she think of them? I have a feeling by how it never occurred to her to get a roommate, Chloe Fox isn't used to hanging out with a bunch of bums.

Do I want to give up the time alone with her, though? Simple answer—No. Seeing the taillights before they take the corner, I'm loyal to them as well. If this is going to work with Chloe, tonight will be a good test for us. I text her: *Just got off work. Want to go out?*

When I don't hear back right away, I start to wonder if she doesn't like the change of plans. Too much too soon?

Chloe: *Yes. I'll get dressed.*

The thought of her naked has me biting my fist. We're so close to having sex that the thought of detouring tonight becomes painful in my pants. The opportunity to see her in a new place, to hang out with my friends tempers it a bit.

It only takes three minutes, so I wait a few extra to give her more time. While parked out front, I look up at the building. The location alone carries a hefty price tag.

So it's easy to assume from her calling Newport home and that her parents pay for everything, she comes from money. Hell, if being an ER doc isn't good enough for her father, I'm pretty sure they're wealthy. With that knowledge kept in mind, she doesn't have to enjoy pool halls, but I sure hope she likes my friends.

I go upstairs. When I knock, it takes her a moment to answer, but when she does, my heart stops.

10

Joshua

Holy fuck.

I'd come to expect a certain look from Chloe. Casual clothes or pajamas . . . Okay, so I don't have a long history to pull from, but generally, it's no makeup to light, more natural in appearance. She got my attention the night I showed up delivering food.

That night, or any other after, did not prepare me for her to make this kind of effort for me. *But damn am I glad she did.*

Dressed in black jeans that hug her hips, she sports black Converse, which seem foreign for her from what I've witnessed. With her lithe frame those shoes put those gorgeous greens chin height. I like the difference in size. I always have. She fits in my arms, leaving room to protect her.

What. The. Fuck?

Am I already this far gone? No one I've ever dated before her has ever stirred these uncharted seas within me. First the lack of curtains, which are still not purchased, and now me protecting her?

Yep, I'm a goner.

"Are you all right?" she asks, worry wriggling into her expression.

"Fine." I run my hand through my hair. "Why?"

"You're staring at me like you're mad."

Shit. "Sorry, I'm not mad at you." Fixing my face, I grin. "Far from it. I just have a lot on my mind. That's all. You look incredible."

"Thank you." Grabbing a leather jacket from the hook next to the door, she slips her arms in and lets it settle over a loose-fitted tank top with thin straps. I'm tempted to tug on the hem of the crisp material, kind of wishing we were staying in and making out again.

Chloe Fox is stunning in any light and time of day, but damn if she doesn't look sexy dressed in leather. I kiss her because as her boyfriend—official title that shall be boldly stated on résumé—I take my job very seriously. "I think I prefer us kissing when we see each other."

She laughs. "Well, I'm ready for you."

Leaving her breathless, or egging her on for a comeback, seems to be my main goals since we met. She doesn't do anything halfway and manages to leave me breathless as well. Overachiever. I say, "I'm starting to regret that we decided to go out."

"It will be fun." She locks the door and then tucks her key and credit card in an inside pocket of the jacket. I almost stop her at the stairs and tell her I want to stay, but she looks so damn happy to be leaving.

Watching that sexy ass, I reply, "You haven't met my friends. You might regret saying yes to me." An eyebrow pushes high, but she can't hide her sly smile before she turns back around.

"Is that a warning?"

I want to touch her all over, that familiar itch I have for her needing scratching, but I show some damn restraint. Grabbing hold of a belt loop as she rounds the stairs, I pull her to a halt instead. "There's still time to save you."

Angling back, she runs her hands along my middle and under the T-shirt, then yanks me close. "What if I don't want to be saved? What if I choose you despite the warning?" Leather makes her feisty. *And I really like feisty Chloe.*

I run my hand up the side of the softness of her neck. Exposing it to me, she closes her eyes. Her willing vulnerability is served to me without conditions. So damn tempting to take her back upstairs and fuck the night away. But that's not what I want with her. I want more than tonight.

So I press my lips to her skin, inhaling the floral scent, and then exhale slowly. A shiver runs through her, causing her hold to tighten. I whisper, "I won't disappoint you."

Lifting up, she kisses my cheek. "I know." Our eyes lock, keeping us still for seconds that tick by before she starts walking again. "You're nocturnal, so I'm trying to adjust to this new schedule of staying up all hours of the night, so let's get going, party animal." *And yet she's coming out because I asked her.* I smile.

Outside, she looks around, making me realize she's never been in my Blazer. "I'm parked down here." I watch as her chin lifts, and she stares at the stars.

"It's a nice night."

"If it weren't for the streetlights, we'd be able to see more stars."

"At home, sometimes I'd set the alarm for one a.m. just so I could go outside to see the moon and stars at their brightest."

We reach my SUV. “Sounds like an escape.”

“Probably, but I want to have fun tonight. Is this your truck?” I love hearing excitement tinged in her tone.

“It is.” I proudly show her off. “She’s an ’85 Chevy Blazer.” I move around to open the door. “Looks like a piece of shit with the paint missing in some places, but she’s going to be a beauty when she’s restored one day.”

Dragging the tips of her fingers along the front quarter, her eyes take in the vehicle. “I like it.” She hoists herself up, and then I climb in behind the wheel. “You never told me where we’re going.”

“Have you ever been to Lucky’s?”

Catching her smiling, I watch as she seems to be right at home next to me. “I haven’t. What’s Lucky’s?”

“I probably shouldn’t take a good girl to Lucky’s.”

“I’m not a good girl.” She sounds offended, like a good girl would.

The rumble of the engine makes me wish I could afford to buy the rest of the parts. I don’t want to miss a word of hers. I glance over to see her watching me. “You carry innocence around like a fancy jacket.”

“What if I’m not that innocent?”

If I could, I’d be staring at her instead of the road. “Is this where you tell me you’re a bad girl who loves to break the rules to get back at her parents?”

Out of the corners of my eyes, I notice her fidgeting with the edges of her jacket. “I don’t break the rules. Nothing good would come of it if I did.”

“Rules are put in place so people can control a situation.”

“Fuck ’em.” I shift gears. “As long as we’re not hurting anyone, who cares?”

“I do,” she replies, angling away from me.

“Why?”

She seems to shake off a thought, smoothing her forehead. “I’m starting to wonder that myself.”

She turns up the music and rolls down her window. With mine down, the wind whips through, keeping us company. Near the edge of town, the crunch of the gravel parking lot competes with the engine.

I park at an angle on the side of the old converted warehouse and cut the engine. “There’s nothing wrong with breaking the rules sometimes, Chloe, but if it makes you feel better, we can start by bending them first.”

I get out and walk around the back of the truck, wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans before I help her, hoping she doesn’t notice my nerves kicking

in. Being nervous is something I'm not used to, but this meeting matters and the weight of it is felt.

Glancing up at the building, she asks, "Is this a bar?"

"Yeah." I take her hand, but her feet stay planted.

"But I didn't bring an ID."

She doesn't seem to mind when I tug her a little closer to me, though. "Don't worry about it. They don't card here anyway. It's a locals' place. Most of the kids at Yale never venture this far from campus."

The hesitancy disappears, and she says, "Might as well start bending the rules tonight . . ."

"Damn right."

The music, the billiard balls clanking together, laughter, and conversation fill the air when we step inside the musty building. Smoke permeates the walls from when it was still legal to smoke in here, and the floors are a bit sticky from spilled alcohol.

Keeping an eye on Chloe, I'm interested to see her reaction to the paneled walls and the neon beer signs, the jukebox that plays everything from Patsy Cline to the latest by The Crow Brothers. I say, "This is the kind of place where people know your name."

"Hey, Josh!" Seth, the bartender, calls while filling a pitcher of draft beer.

She laughs, and then asks, "Did you pay him to do that?"

"I'll tip him extra." I spot my friends at the far side of the bar. "Come on. I want to introduce you to my friends."

For me, it's weird to have her in my space. I don't bring girls around to my regular haunts. But Chloe has me wanting to take her everywhere, show her off, and have her meeting the people who shape my life. She's met my mom, even Barb, so this meeting tonight is long overdue.

Leading her through the bar with familiar eyes on us, I ignore the regulars, not caring what they think. I just hope Todd and Bryant like her. If they don't, they've been good friends because after kissing Chloe, I'm too far gone.

I chuckle, bringing her closer. "Chloe, this is Bryant and the other asshole is Todd."

"Hi." She smiles politely. "It's nice to meet you." I'd already gathered a dive bar isn't her regular scene, but I bet she makes great small talk with those manners, impressing parents and the country club crowd.

I bump fists with Todd and move around to shake Bryant's hand with a

flip-off flair ending we've been doing for years. He sits on a barstool, leaning his back against the wall. "No wonder Josh has been MIA. It's good to meet you."

She sets her purse on the table and shrugs. "You, too."

Holding a glass with a solid gulp left up, he says, "You're buying the next round, right, Josh?"

Todd's never been as boisterous as Bryant, but he values a good game of pool. "Hey," he greets Chloe, handing her a stick. "Want to play?"

"Absolutely." She takes the stick and works her way around to the table to chalk the tip. "I'll break."

Turning slowly toward me, he struts to get another pool cue. "Well, damn. Evans doesn't mess around when it comes to bringing the big guns."

"If you'd like," Chloe says, laughing, "I'll let you rack."

He replies, "Ladies first."

"Next round on me." I back toward the bar and point at her. "What are we drinking?"

Under long lashes, she eyes me while bent over. Her laughter reaches me like music in the busy bar just before she breaks, a loud crack following. "Whatever you're having."

"Gotcha covered." I watch her from across the room, how she hangs with the guys like she's known them a while. I'm thinking she just took the lead because Bryant high-fives her. She's made herself at home at that table, and seeing them get along wipes away any worries I had.

I turn to order, not having to keep my eyes on the guys. They've been known to get crude. I'm usually just as guilty, but they appear to be on their best behavior.

When I return, I set everything on the table. "A round of whiskey."

"I've never done a shot of whiskey before."

I'd like to say I'm surprised, but I think I'm getting used to these little bombs she drops. Handing her one, I say, "Tell me more about that not being a good girl again?"

To be honest, I deserved the punch to the arm. Flexing my bicep, though, I'm more concerned about her hand. I kiss it to make it all better and then hold up the glass. "What should we toast to?"

It doesn't take long for a wry grin to make an appearance. "Breaking the rules. Again," she replies so innocently that I'm drawn in to kiss that grin right off her face.

I don't. *Not yet.* But I get close, almost touching mine to hers, and whisper, "And here I thought we were just bending them?"

"What's the fun in that?" She taps her glass against mine and tilts it back, closing her eyes and emptying it. A harsh breath is fired off as she grabs her throat. "That burns."

After emptying my glass, I chuckle and then kiss her. The intoxicating mix of her lips dipped in whiskey makes me wonder if she's ever had sex in a parking lot. Because fuck, she turns me on. Pushing up against me, she drags the bottom of my shirt down, stretching the cotton. How can I care about the shirt, though, when the brush of her fingertips against my skin has my stomach muscles contracting? Every touch a shot of adrenaline heading south. I suck in enough to keep my abs hard before weaving my fingers with hers and kissing the top of her head. Then I settle on a barstool.

Bryant passes around four more shots, and says, "Another round is due. Cheers."

Holding the glass, she says, "I've been known to get a little wild when tipsy. You sure you can handle me?"

Slipping my hand under her jacket, I dip just under the top of her jeans and hold her close. "Don't worry, baby. I can handle you." The secrets held in her eyes begin to unravel as she leans against me. Tapping her glass, I add, "Bottoms up." Dirty images come to mind as our eyes stay locked while the liquor slides down.

Catching the notes of a song she likes summons a smile right before she sets her glass down and starts swaying her hips. I like watching her move like she's alone, dancing for herself. It's still controlled, but it's gaining as she moves between my legs and closes her eyes. Her hands rest on my thighs, grounding her to me, to this earth like she's close to floating away.

She slowly opens them and catches me staring. I slide my hands over her hips and then tuck into her back pockets. "You called me baby. I've never been anyone's baby before."

My gaze dips to her lips, remembering the way they take mine when she leads and how I can feel the passion she puts into every one of our kisses. Dragging my tongue along my bottom lip, I then ask, "How do you feel about being *my* baby?"

The lift of her eyes and the hope I see inside has me moving to hold her around her lower back. She kisses my chin and then her lids dip closed as she kisses my mouth. With our lips still together, she whispers, "Like I'm living

in a dream.”

“It’s real, baby. Just like we are.” I could draw a map of her body from memory, but, God, I want to know everything else about this girl. “Tell me about you getting tipsy.”

Laughing as if an entertaining memory returns, she says, “Ruby and I get tipsy off wine, but we never drink the hard stuff. This one time she visited me in Newport, she fell into the water trying to get the motor started on this little boat we borrowed from the neighbors.” She giggles.

“Borrowed? I think that’s called stealing.”

Todd yells from across the table, “We playing or what?”

“Give her a minute. I want to hear this story.” Returning to her, I add, “Maybe I misjudged you. I mean, if you’re willing to break the law, what’s a few little rules?”

Taking the stick in hand, she walks around it once. She’s a tease, but I’m still not sure if she even realizes it. “I told you I’m not that innocent.”

If she knew how much I’m already into her, she wouldn’t have to sell me. I’m already buying. I touch her, tug her in quick, and whisper in her ear, “And here I thought I was trouble.”

“You are trouble, Joshua Evans.” She runs her hand up my arm and around to my back. “You’re just the kind of trouble I need.”

“He’s trouble, all right.”

Fuck me.

I should have known Dana would show up. Leave it to her to ruin a good night.

11

Chloe

I've seen enough movies to know how this goes. Joshua is a local with a reputation built long before I showed up in this town. Every girl in here has been eyeing him since he walked in and staring daggers at me. So, I think it's safe to assume that this woman is one of many who have had their heart broken. *By him*, still remains to be seen.

His hand hasn't left my hip, but his irritation from the intrusion is written across his face. He says, "I'm not looking for a fight, Dana."

With her hands up in surrender, she says, "Geez, just stopping by to say hi." If the tight smile didn't do it, the death glare my way contradicts the nonchalance she's trying to portray. It doesn't take a psychologist to figure out she suffers from lingering feelings.

"Hi," he replies, glancing at her.

"Haven't seen you in a while. Where you been keeping yourself?" When she steps closer, I feel oddly possessive and lean against him.

The heat of his hand is felt through the denim as he slides it across my lower back and anchors it on my waist. "School started, working . . ." He eyes me. "Spending time with my girlfriend."

I notice how polite and steady his voice has remained despite her trying to get a reaction from him. I still don't like being in the middle of this.

"Girlfriend? That's new for you."

He stands, and says, "If you'll excuse us . . ." We move to the other side of the table, and he leans against a column. I pretend to watch Todd take the shot, but I keep my eyes on the other woman as she tries to hold a conversation with Bryant, who appears disinterested. Annoyance eventually gets the better of her, and she leaves, blond hair swinging.

I'm glad we moved. Joshua's discomfort was becoming mine. He says, "It's your turn."

"Motherfuck," Todd gripes. "I sank the cue ball."

My attention returns to the green felt, and I wiggle my shoulders in celebration. "I'll take the victory."

Joshua laughs, but I know he's still dealing with the aftermath of that confrontation by how it doesn't reach his eyes. "One for Fox."

Todd asks, "Another game?"

"Happy to kick your ass twice." I take the stick and chalk up again while he racks. I come back to Joshua, and ask, "Want to play?"

"I'm enjoying being a spectator. You're good."

Without the distraction of the other woman, the sweet way he called me baby has me floating on cloud nine. "You know it, baby." I wink, serving that sweetness right back.

Todd looks at me. "Ready to break?"

"Trying not to," I reply offhandedly.

He doesn't get it, but I'm thinking Joshua does because he pulls me back against him, curled around my backside. "Have you been hurt before, Fox?"

I spin around in his arms. "Hurt feelings sure, but not a broken heart." I shake my head ever so slightly. "I've not been lucky enough to experience that kind of emotion."

Gently pinching my chin, he stares into my eyes. He inhales, drinking me in with his mocha eyes. I never thought I'd be the kind of girl who uses food or weather to describe features of another, but here I am, feeling the steam weaving between us from the embrace. The seriousness dissipates and his eyes narrow as if I'm speaking a foreign language. "Not getting a broken heart is lucky?"

"No. I've just never experienced feelings deep enough to damage me when it ends." Realizing, with him, the potential is there, I catch my breath, trying to regulate it. "I must sound crazy."

"You don't." Dipping down to eye level, he says, "I'll let you in on a secret." My heart is beating on the edge of each breath when he lowers his hands to my hips, tucking his fingers into my belt loops. He has me right where he wants me, right where I want to be. "I haven't felt that way about anyone either."

"You haven't?" I whisper. "What about—"

"No one."

Ending my curiosity with two words, I'm starting to believe we're in this together.

"Check this out, Josh," Bryant says.

He doesn't move a muscle as if I'll lose faith if he does. I won't. I'm already in too deep. I say, "Tell me something. If everyone calls you Josh,

why have you never corrected me from calling you Joshua?”

After a quick sweep around the room, he flattens his hands around my waist, his thumbs touching the skin at the top of my jeans and sending a thrill through me. “I like the sound of my name when you say it.”

The cue chalk bounces off his shoulder. Following the path where it came from leads us to Todd, who shrugs. “Let her go, man. It’s game on.”

I’m about to take my turn, but I’m caught by my wrist and pulled back. Kisses cover my neck. “Kick his ass. Again.”

“Will do.” I saunter to the other side of the table while Bryant and Joshua start a game of darts. I lean down to line up my shot. I pop the ball, blowing it. “Dammit.” I stand back so he can take his turn.

Glancing up at me, he says, “He likes you.”

Although his honesty is refreshing, I wonder why he’s telling me. “I like him.”

He sinks a ball and then sets up his next shot. Todd’s good at not shining a light too bright on the conversation, keeping it low-key. Bending over the table, he turns back to glance my way. “He’s never brought anyone like you around before.”

“Like me?” I hold my anger in, giving him the benefit of the doubt.

When he misses the next shot, he comes to stand next to me, keeping his eye on the felted table. “Josh isn’t like the rest of us.” No matter how he phrases it, I know I’m not a part of the “us” he means.

After a casual game of pool and a few shots, it was easy to pretend I fit in, but I have a feeling it’s not me who notices the differences, but them. Is this a warning without Joshua hearing? The lump in my chest is growing, but I try to hide the insecurity. Leaning against the edge of the table, I ask, “What is he like then?”

“You.” Grabbing his beer, he takes a sip, then continues, “He’s so fucking smart.” Relief washes through me. This is unexpected. “But he never acted differently. His mom and him have always struggled to make ends meet. Both work their asses off for whatever they want. They earned every fucking thing they have.” A quick scan around us ends on me. “Except when it comes to school. That kid never studied. He didn’t have to. He even got his acceptance letter to Yale early. Never bragged or made a big deal. Bryant and I knew he’d get in, but to a lot of the locals, he was just another hell-raiser.”

Chuckling to himself, he continues, “Don’t get me wrong. He’s raised some hell like the rest of us, but I wish he would have left this town. Too

many people are waiting for him to fail.” The pointed look he gives in Dana’s direction isn’t missed.

I’ve dealt with a lot of insecurities over the years about my place in Newport. Were people friends with me because I’m a Fox or because I’m me? But I never felt like anyone wanted me to fail. I felt the opposite. They want me to succeed to hold my coattails. Well, my family’s coattails, technically.

When I return my gaze to Joshua, everyone I’ve seen him interact with likes him, so it’s hard to understand why anyone would want him to fail. “That’s envy,” I reply.

He says, “Sounds like you know the feeling.”

A waitress sets down two more shots. She says, “Seth sent these over.” Todd holds his glass up to the bartender.

“I didn’t fit in at home either,” I say, taking advantage of the opportunity and drinking it. This one slides right down.

“Sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay. I fit in with—”

“Bryant has no dart skills,” Joshua says, dragging a stool over. “It wasn’t even a challenge. Are you stripes, Chloe? You’re doing good.”

I caress his cheek, the lightness disappearing as his features soften for me. “I fit in with you.”

“You do. We fit together.”

Nodding, I then kiss him. “Why haven’t you been in love before?”

The question seems to catch him off guard. Chuckling, he asks, “Why haven’t you?”

“Touché.” Knowing it’s my turn, I study the table, trying to figure out a calculated move that will lead me to another victory. Squinting an eye, I’m tempted to test the wind. Who am I fooling? I just play for fun.

“Hey, Chloe?”

“Yeah?” I reply, lifting my gaze from the table to Joshua.

“I don’t want to land lines with you. I want to know how someone so beautiful and fun hasn’t been snatched up by the wrong guy?”

“What makes you think I’d fall for the wrong guy?”

Smirking, he shoves his hands in his pockets. I like that there’s confidence with a hint of uncertainty. I feel that, too. He says, “Because you said yes to me. Also, you never answered my question.”

“You never answered mine.” I hit the ball.

“Tease.”

I burst out laughing. “Now that’s something I’ve never been called before.” With his eyes on mine, a look that undresses me set in the fire inside, has me thinking I’m ready to spend time alone with him. But first, I must win. I take my turn and sink three balls before Todd pockets four.

The competition is stiff, but a beer that Joshua brought over keeps me from getting upset. I’m quite the opposite, in fact. I scratch, losing to Todd. “Shallow victory.”

He volleys back, “It wasn’t shallow when you won the same way.”

“That’s because I won.” I laugh, and then tell him, “Good game.”

“You too, Fox. If you ever want to play, hit me up.”

“Hey. Hey.” Joshua steps up with his arms open wide. “In case you didn’t notice, I’m standing right here.”

He may only be teasing, but I love seeing him jealous over me. Is it bad that it turns me on? Whoa, it’s definitely time to go. Pressing against him, I whisper, “I’m ready.”

His hand plants on my ass, his thumb rubbing along the middle seam of my jeans. “Ready for what?”

The connection has my heart racing and my body tingling. I don’t think anyone’s touched me so intimately, and my body is on high alert, reacting to his electricity. “Ready to be alone.”

Butterflies in my stomach, heart palpitations, and slight lightheadedness. The symptoms lead me to believe I’m either giddy or having a heart attack. I’m hoping it’s the former. I giggle, whiskey making my head swim.

“You’re reading my mind.” His tone is filled with innuendo, and I’m here for it.

How? How is it possible to have blooming feelings for this man I barely know? *How?* Despite my head, I take his hand, my heart ready to follow him anywhere.

12

Joshua

What am I doing? Although the hunger to have sex with her is overwhelming, I want to do this right for her. It's been a struggle not to touch her—her face, those lips, her hands. I could have mauled her back at Lucky's if she would have let me.

A smile graces her lips—a perfect day reflected on her beautiful face. She sticks the key in the lock, letting a giggle slip out like she's never had the chance to laugh like that before. *Why?*

I have so many questions for her, a deep-seated desire to know who Chloe Fox is and how I'm the one who gets the pleasure to discover this gem.

What is she thinking when she purses her lips to the side? She jiggles the lock. “The key gets stuck sometimes.” Okay, that answers that question, but I want to know the secret behind every one of her smiles.

Ambition doesn't motivate her. It's a goodness that's built inside her, one of my favorite of her traits. She makes me feel like a better person just from being near her. Don't get me wrong. I'm no angel, but with her I'll try to be on my best behavior.

The door down the hall opens, and a girl with dark hair and a long T-shirt crosses her arms as she leans against the frame. “Well, well, well, if it isn't the infamous Joshua Evans.”

“You must be Ruby.”

The side of her mouth rises with a raised eyebrow. “You've heard of me?”

I glance at Chloe who's beaming, whether from happiness or whiskey, I'll take it. She says, “Ruby Darrow, this is Joshua—”

Ruby asks, “The *infamous* Joshua Evans?”

I ask, “So, *you've* heard of me?” and chuckle.

With a shrug, she replies, “Chloe talks.”

Tapping her fingers, she pivots her eyes to Chloe. “You were right.” When her gaze comes back to me, she adds, “I'll admit I was starting to think she had given her vibrator the name.” Chloe and I haven't exactly been quiet

the past few weeks, but damn, this chick is not shy. *Duly noted.*

As she laughs with cheeks flaming red, Chloe's eyes go wide. "Oh my God, Ruby. That is too much information. We'll keep it down."

Not giving a damn, her friend makes herself at home out here in the hall. "Please don't," Ruby replies with a wave of her arm. "It's the only action I'm getting these days, so carry on so I can live vicariously."

The bolt clicks, and Chloe opens the door. "*Annnnd*, on that note, we're going in."

I say, "Good night."

"Night." Before our door closes, Ruby says, "I'm going to need every detail, Chloe. *Every. Detail.*"

"Good night," Chloe calls from inside her apartment, yanking me inside. "I want you, Joshua." Her lips are on me, her hands roaming as if she's searching me. I'm tempted to resist just to see if I'll get handcuffed.

Catching her wrists, I hold them between us. "I'm not going anywhere."

Holding tight to my shirt like she'll lose me, she asks. "Are we moving too fast?"

"We can slow down—"

"Sorry," she says with a light laugh. "I'm nervous. I don't want you to be a one-night stand."

"If we're numbering our dates, this won't be the first one."

She tilts her head, amusement reaching her eyes. "How do you figure?"

"I've been over here at least seven or eight times. You've been to the diner twice. There's Lucky's tonight. The Art Gallery. Kline building, and the time I caught you by the water fountain. That's . . ." I think that's it. "Am I missing anything?"

With her arms tightening around my neck, she says, "I'm going with thirteen then."

"Exactly. Technically, this is a thirteen-night stand."

"Lucky number thirteen."

"The luckiest." I don't say that's me because I plan to show her tonight. I lean down to kiss her, missing those frenzied kisses.

Pulling back quickly, she presses her finger to my lips. I pretend to bite it, being careful. She says, "It's never been about the quantity but the quality, and you give excellent quality."

"I'll take the compliment. But I want you to remember, this between us may be fast for some, but we set our own pace. So if it feels good and you're

happy, I'm happy. Just say the word if you ever feel otherwise."

"You make me happy. Also . . ." She kisses my chin. "I've never had thirteen dates with anyone."

"Their loss. My win."

"Kiss me, Joshua?"

I release her hand to caress her cheek. "It's all I've wanted to do all night."

"It is?"

"I haven't stopped thinking about you since I stood outside that door with a delivery."

Her lids slowly dip down, and the smallest smile, one that seems to exist for me, appears. When she looks up, long lashes tipping near her brow, she breathes a sigh of relief. "Me too."

Holding her closer, I lean down, closing my eyes, and pressing my mouth to hers. It takes all my willpower to pull back instead of taking this further, though. This time I groan and rest my head against hers.

She whispers, "What's wrong?"

"I need a sheet."

"Huh?" Her eyebrows crease just a little and I just want to kiss it away.

"The window. I don't want anyone watching us."

"No one's out there," she says with a laugh, walking toward it, sliding the jacket down her arms. It falls to the floor, and she reaches for the hem of the top.

"Oh, no, no." I rush over there, blocking the window with my body.

The shirt is left on as her shoulders shake with her head tilted back in laughter. I say, "Anyway, we can't do anything with Frankie watching."

She spies the plant behind my leg, still laughing. "She doesn't mind, but if it will make you more comfortable, we can move into the bedroom."

"It will." I follow her into the dark room.

With the lights off, I walk to the window and look down one side of the street and then the other. It's a quiet street, considering how close we are to some of the popular hangouts.

She comes to rest against my back, the feel of her chest and her cheek pressed to my skin. I reach an arm around to hold her to me, realizing she's bare. Turning around, I whisper, "You started without me." I bend down and lift her up. Our lips meet in fiery passion while her legs wrap around my middle.

Her thighs grip, lifting her higher. The scrape of her nails along my scalp feels so good, but I know it's not just her nails. It's her. She feels so good. I can't do this to her against a wall.

Sliding my hand up her spine, I move to the bed in two big steps and send us toppling over. In a fit of laughter, she says, "That was the twist I didn't see coming, and so sexy."

"I'll show you sexy." I jump up and then pop the top button of her jeans before pulling them off in one swift motion. "Oh fuck, you showed me." I rip my jeans down because the sexiest woman I've ever seen is lying in front of me, summoning me to bed. *Vixen. Goddess. Mine.*

By the back collar, I tug my shirt off over my head and drop it as I work my jeans off as fast as I can. She scrambles up toward the headboard, then tucks her legs under the covers.

Once the sheet covers her chest, she rubs the mattress on either side of her, looking proud as a peacock. "Come here, baby," she purrs with a mischievous grin.

Fuck the jeans. With my ankles still trapped, I dive right the fuck onto that bed and maneuver over her, pinning her to the headboard with a kiss. Kicking at my jeans, I finally free one ankle and shuffle out of the other. *Thank fuck.*

Not that I minded the way she grips my shoulders, urging me for more. We've done practically everything we can with clothes, even when minimally dressed, to this point. Seeing her shoulders exposed, though, reminds me that we won't be making out. We'll be making love. I kiss her neck, a battle raging between instinct to rush forward and taking it slow and romantic.

I pull back to stare into her eyes. "Is this what you want?" I need that yes, that she's where I am with us—ready to not only share our bodies, but a bed that I can go to sleep and wake up with her next to me. I probably shouldn't want that as much as I do, but I want it with her.

"We are. I want you."

"Everything that comes with dating you, I want that. I want you, Chloe." I kiss her deeper than we did at the door before we move down the mattress together, only a blanket and underwear between us.

The delicate pulse in her neck has me pressing my lips to it, wanting to feel every part of her. Her fingers slide through my hair, and she whispers, "You're going to be so bad for my plans." Caressing my cheek, she gets my attention. She kisses me, letting her lips linger against mine. "But so good for

me.”

Slipping my fingers into her silky locks, I kiss her, and roll her to the mattress beneath me. “I’ll make sure I’m good for both.”

“Don’t stop kissing me.”

I don’t.

I couldn’t.

Until she asks, “Joshua?”

I move to the side of her and turn my head. With the moonlight streaming in, I see the sweetest little freckles sprinkled across the apples of her cheeks. My gaze dips to the bow at the tip of her lips and how they’re parted just slightly. Caressing her face, I rub my thumb lightly over her skin. She’s stunning in every light, but the need to have her in my arms takes hold.

Her long hair, darker in the soft light, fans across the pillow. She rests her melodic sighs, and soft smile, the weight of her trust bearing down on me.

“Yeah?”

She rests her hand on my chest, and whispers, “What are we doing?”

“Falling for each other.” Maybe I should have hesitated, but it wouldn’t feel right to deny my own feelings.

“This is what it feels like?”

“Yes,” I confess, kissing her until a spark reignites the heat between us. But it’s not my mouth I’m worried about. It’s the fire she lit in the belly of my soul.

13

Chloe

The weight of his body, the flexing of his muscles when I run my fingers over them, his lips on mine like they've become one—Heaven is found in Joshua Evans's kiss.

Despite the alcohol trying to dull the edges, there's no way I couldn't feel alive in his arms as every nerve in my body sparked to life. This is the magic I've heard about—this sense of abandoning my life for something that feels so right.

He feels so right.

I sigh, releasing my mind from overthinking and instead focus on feeling. Freedom is found in the falling.

Wild abandon for this man courses through me.

As if a checkered flag was waved, he moves in to kiss me with an unquenched passion. Our tongues mingle as we explore new territory—our hearts bonding together with each sweet embrace of our tongues.

New territory, new world . . . *ours*. The one we created together when we thought it was just fun.

Together.

It was always such a foreign concept, lost in days and years. Joshua inspires me to feel every second, to languish his arms and in his touch. I want to talk in bed all night and sleep in with him. I never saw love coming, but I feel it sweeping in like a summer thunderstorm—the dewy scent, the change in air. I want to dance in his rain, to become one with this man. *Laugh. Love.*

Everything. Everything. I want everything with him, even the one thing that's felt forbidden. I don't want to hold back.

I don't want to hold onto something that feels like it was meant for him all along. This is the man I want to remember for my first time. "You feel so good."

With a knee, he spreads my legs apart and kisses me as he settles between them. His breath hits the wet trail that he left from my mouth to my ear, sending shivers through my chest and down my arms. I buck against him,

wanting the friction. Needing so much more of him.

“It hurts,” is whispered in my ear.

“Real pain?” I ask, my eyes opening.

He chuckles. “No. I was going to say I want you so much. So, no need to call 911, Doctor. There are natural methods to cure me.” My cheeks flame from embarrassment. He doesn’t miss a beat, and adds, “You’re the cure for my ailments.” A wry grin situates itself on his handsome face.

Putting my dirty doctor cap on, I continue to role-play. “What else ails you?”

“My heart, Doc. It races when I see you. It’s heavy in my chest when we’re close.” I hear his gulp, but he doesn’t hold back. “It feels like it’s going to beat out of my chest.”

“I suffer from the same condition, the side effects of being with you.”

“Can we be saved?”

I don’t hide my wicked grin. “No, I’m sorry. It’s too late for us.”

“I was afraid of that.” Jokes are set aside as he caresses my face, looking at me like I hung the moon. Truth dots his irises like stars blanketing a Newport night, convincing me that I did hang the moon for him. Just as he placed the sun in the blue skies for me.

We’ve been each other’s days, but we don’t end in sunsets or only exist come sunrise. We’ve become the hours in between—twilight and dawn, the brightest noon, the darkest midnight, the golden hours. Together, we’re all hours with hearts on fire.

Joshua is a silver lining that just appeared out of nowhere in time to throw me a lifeline. I didn’t even realize I was drowning. “Me too.”

Holding my face between two hands with no wiggle room, he kisses me and then leans his forehead against mine. “I . . . *I care about you*, Chloe.”

Eyes open, the pain in his voice is evident, but it’s heard as if he’s given in to something he never saw coming. I understand, swept into a soul mate fate I never expected to find, much less at this age.

Soul mate.

Maybe he did see us coming.

Lifting up, he searches my eyes, needing my words as much as I need his. “I care about you, too,” I say. As my heart tethers to his, I love you is tacked on silently for only me to hear, but my weakness is revealed as a tear slips down my cheek.

The pad of his thumb collects it and brings it to his lips, his tongue

dipping out to taste my vulnerability. “I promise I’ll never hurt you. No more tears.”

I nod, never feeling safer than I do in his arms. To him, I’m Chloe—not of the Newport Fox dynasty, not future surgeon, not Yale legacy. I’m the one he relaxes with after a long day, prefers kissing to studying, and I don’t need a pedigree for him to love me. He laughs at my bad puns and happily plays along with my sexual innuendos. Whether I’m a student or his girlfriend, *he sees me* and who I am on the inside.

That’s empowering.

I dip below the covers, taking him in my hands first and then my mouth. Deep and slow, just how the videos taught me. He fills my mouth, and I focus on breathing as well as his reaction to guide me.

When his hands cover the back of my head, there’s no pressure to them but a need to be touching me. It spurs me on, making me want to please him, to give him all he needs. This is not submission. He’s giving me his strength and bowing at my feet.

The power is intoxicating.

I move quicker, suck harder until his fingers fold into my hair, and the moans are loud. “So good.” Everything he gives of himself—his trust, care, and honesty—I take and swallow it down.

We lie next to each other, still and quiet, recovering. Kissing me once and then again on the chest, he keeps moving lower, making my breath catch from the thought of him down here and the feel of his lips.

Taking a deep breath, I run my fingers through his hair. I won’t hide from him despite some unexplained shame I keep buried inside. Embracing life means embracing Joshua, and that look in his eyes that tells me how beautiful I am without words gives me insight to who he thinks I am. *Why would I hide from that?* I butterfly my right thigh, opening up for him, *to him*.

He pushes down the covers, the air-conditioning whipping over me as his eyes trace my breasts, my belly, and my body. “Do you know how beautiful you are, Chloe?”

I’m not drunk, but he makes me feel that way. My breasts are exposed, the cool room hardening my nipples. Leaning down, he kisses each of them and then lower to my belly.

My inner thigh.

My knee.

Shin.

The top of my foot.

I'm covered in kisses until I'm utterly jelly in his hands. We've been fast in every other way but slowing down makes sense. I want to feel each part of my body awakened by his lips.

He backtracks up the other leg. I had thoughts of this happening, deep down wishing it would when I wore that outfit for him, and now that I'm bare before him, I have absolutely no regrets. "So sexy," he murmurs as he kisses the mounds of my breasts.

Maple syrup eyes hold a sweet appreciation when they peer up at me, watching my reaction. My middle winds tighter, my lips part, my lids heavy with desire. His hands cup me without reserve, squeezing, kneading, lightly flicking my nipples before covering them with his mouth.

My back arches, and I gasp when his teeth tease the buds. "God, how I want you," I say without hesitation as I lock my hands together at the back of his neck. He feels too good to set free. With him repositioned between my legs and his hardness pressing against me, I rock my hips, pushing against the fear that I have with this being my first time. I welcome him. "I want to feel you inside me." My throat is raw like the words, an unsatisfied need making me thirsty for more. Lower, the sound of begging riddles my mind, the words on repeat as need floods my veins.

The familiar exhilaration I always feel with him takes over, and as if my body is not my own, I move my hips with his. His mouth is on my shoulder, but I feel the connection on every inch of my skin.

"Do you have condoms?" he whispers.

"In the drawer," I reply as if I've said it before.

I watch the muscles in his arms on display and reach over to touch. He sets two on the bed without a second thought and moves to hover over me again. I push the hair that's fallen down over his forehead to the side, and then lightly push on his shoulders. As much as I love him looking from above me, I want to try something new.

When I move on top of him, he runs his hands over my breasts and cups my shoulders, bringing me to him to kiss. Kiss until we're out of breath. Kiss until my body craves more. "What do you want, baby?"

"You," I reply.

Strong hands slide down my arms, covering me in goose bumps.

"I'm right here."

Reading between the lines, he wants me, but he wants me to lead. I've

never been a follower. *Shy?* Sure. But I know anatomy, and he is a perfect specimen.

I move back just enough on his thighs to have his erection in front of me as he takes me in, studying me with the intensity of an artist. I have flaws, but you'd never know by the way he gazes upon me. He reaches for me. "C'mere."

As soon as I'm tucked neatly under the blanket and sheet with him, he presses against my side. "Do you feel what you do to me?"

"Yes," I reply breathily, reaching my hand down to touch him. I've made out with him, but this time is different. I should be nervous, but I'm not.

His full lips press to my mouth once, and then as if he can't decide where to kiss me next, he lands on the corner of my mouth. Moving my hand, I keep a firm grip. My heart beats fast and hard in my chest as he struggles to concentrate.

Momentarily losing himself, he rushes his body, pushing against me.

"Fuck," he utters under his breath.

My hip is abandoned. His hand doesn't slip but purposely claims the apex of my legs. Cupping. Teasing. Slipping a finger inside me. "Ah," I moan, forgetting everything I was doing.

"Don't stop, okay?" he says.

I take the long way to the tip of his erection and back down leisurely again. "Okay."

But the tip of his finger has me on the edge of burning in ecstasy. "Joshua . . ." The back of my head digs into the pillow.

Scooting higher on the mattress, he kisses my exposed neck and abandons me. My head shoots up to see where he's going. "What are you doing?"

"I want to take care of you."

"You were." I don't mean to snap, but I'm wound so tight it makes me anxious.

A roguish grin slides in with amusement. "With my mouth."

"Oh!" I lie back with no argument, but my eyes are wide open and my body is stiff as a board.

It must be obvious because he chuckles. "Do you want me down here?" I nod, and his palms slowly spread my legs. "Relax for me. Okay?"

"Okay," I manage to mutter, releasing the grip I have on the sheets and stretching my fingers. Wedging between my legs, he takes control of my body with a simple kiss between my legs, his mouth firm and determined.

Medically speaking, I know how my body works, but I didn't know it could purr until now. His tongue dips inside, and I moan in response, my back arching.

Swirling my fingers through his hair elicits his own response. The sounds of his heavy breath and hot heat wafting across my skin send me over the edge. An orgasm hits fast, and I fall hard before sinking to the mattress.

Reaching for a condom, he doesn't bother with words, but the pressure of his hand on my stomach keeps me from drifting too far away. Every touch to my body, every kiss, lick, and bite is filled with confidence, building my anticipation.

When he's covered, his muscles are tense as he moves over me again. Dragging the tips of my fingers over the dips and peaks of his biceps has me breathing deep, ready, so ready to have him inside me. I close my eyes—

“Look at me, Chloe.”

I do only to be greeted with an intensity that he's barely holding on.

“Stay with me,” he murmurs.

The light in the room drowns in his soulful eyes, and my heart squeezes under the weight. If I couldn't feel every millimeter of where his body touches mine, I'd believe he was holding my heart in his hands. Taking ownership, possessing me.

He pushes, enough to cause my mouth to fall open and suck in a breath. Kissing me again, his hips push forward, his body one with mine again as he steals my breath like he stole my heart last night.

The stretching.

The burning.

My heart racing toward an imaginary finish line.

I'll take it all if I get him in the end. I was worried about pain, but it's different than I expected. I welcome the burn, wanting to feel all of him.

Strong fingers run along my jaw, followed by kisses. “Breathe, Chloe.”

The soothing tones of his voice calm me, and I find a rhythm with him as our breath mingles and our hearts pound. Everything is felt in the gentle thrust, his whispers coating my skin like a sin being washed away. I tilt into him, letting him claim parts of me—body and soul—that were made for him, waiting for him.

Joshua Evans marks every inch of me—inside and out—with a tattoo of my choosing that will remain long after tonight.

With my arms around him, I lift my hips, meeting his. With one thrust, he

steals my breath and heart away. But who cares about those things when I think I've died and gone to heaven?

"You feel too good," he whispers against the shell of my ear before kissing my shoulder. "I don't know if you're an angel sent to save me or a reckoning for my sins. I only know that it doesn't matter. You do. This between us does."

I'm so close to giving him every piece of me, the parts that others don't see and the ones that only exist for him. I need this acceptance, to drown in his words, his arms, and be pulled under with this bliss. I need him like he needs me. The headiness has me wanting to feel this way forever.

Thrust after thrust has us holding on together until his hand dips between us, and he rubs me so right that I fall under his spell again. Another kiss is placed on my neck as the fullness overwhelms me.

The soft light that dips in through the window gives me the gift of him when I open my eyes. A vein in his forehead revealing the intention he's seeking. Tightening my hold around his neck, I press my cheek to his and angle my middle.

"So good, Chloe," he pants with a jagged breath.

With every move, thrust, and kiss, I enjoy his passion for me and revel in mine for him. His moans gather as our bodies push and pull, tease, and pleasure. His groan of completion drags me from my release in time to catch his—his head dipping and the stubble scraping my skin. Our bodies are covered in a sheen of sweat when his weight releases down on me.

I hold him, loving the feel and tucking my head into the nook of his neck. I'm caught between sleep and the aftermath of giving my whole soul to this man, and my heart confesses—*I love you.*

14

Joshua

She could easily become an addiction . . . *she has already.*

The fading scent of perfume lingers on her skin—citrus and flowers—mixed with sweat and sex. I take my time to appreciate her lips properly—how they feel against mine, moving with me, against me, making me crave her in ways that might not be the same as a nice guy.

I try to be nice for her. She deserves that, and don't I deserve something good? *Someone like her?* If I've done anything right, I hope it's gaining her trust. I kiss her until we're wrapped up in each other again. But the night's been long, and we've earned some rest as exhaustion sets in. She curls into the nook of my arm.

She's so small in my arms that I have to fight against my Neanderthal urges to protect her because she's capable of taking care of herself. She's proven that time and again, so I don't understand why I'm suddenly wanting to do it for her. "I've never met anyone like you, someone I want to spend every minute of every day with and can't stop thinking about when I'm not with you."

Laughter wriggles out of her. "I'm so glad I'm not alone. I think I'm obsessed with you. You're just so . . ." Dropping her head to my chest, she sighs happily. "Everything I could ever dream of."

Maybe because it's two in the morning and I'm exhausted, but I try to see the logic. "This is fast."

"People will call us crazy."

"Maybe we are, but . . ." I rub the back of her head until she looks up. "But it doesn't seem there's another way for us."

A yawn escapes her, and she says, "We'll be crazy together."

I'm quick to dispose of the condom and drop back down next to her. "It's been a long day. From school to work to Lucky's." Checking the time, I add, "I'm glad we get to sleep in."

She kisses my chest and then puts a little distance between us. "Joshua?" In the low light, I can see her eyes on me. "I need to tell you something."

“We’re already sharing.” I kiss her forehead. “Lay it on me.”

“This is big.”

I could counter with the conversation we just had being pretty damn big, but I can tell by her hushed tone it’s not the same. “What is it?”

“I was a virgin,” she blurts out.

I can pinpoint the exact moment I stopped breathing. It was just after her admission that she was a virgin. Yep, the woman I just had sex with like we’d done it a million times before hadn’t ever done it at all. As if I’ll scare her with any fast movements, I shift my arm down and push up to look at her. “You’re a virgin?”

“No,” she says, smiling. “Not anymore. Thanks to you.”

I’m struggling to rationalize what just happened through her big smile and the giggle that escapes her, but the wink sent it over the top. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t think it was necessary information.”

Moving up the bed, I rest my back against the headboard. “How would it not be necessary information?”

“Biologically speaking, we fit together the same whether I’m a virgin or not. It’s not like I’ve never had an orgasm, as you’re well aware of, or clinically speaking, my hymen was intact.”

“No. We’re not doing medical speak.” Maybe it’s the early morning hour, the whiskey from earlier, or having sex for the first time, but it’s the most relaxed I’ve ever seen her. She slides up next to me with gentle laughter vibrating through her. “We just made love.”

“We *did* make love.” Her voice is effervescent as if she’s been waiting for this moment all her life, and it lived up to expectations.

“Made love,” I repeat for myself as much as for her. Already feeling so much for her, if I’m not careful, those three little words will slip on my tongue and slide right off.

Normally, I’d pat myself on the back under the accolade of getting her off, but it’s different with Chloe. I don’t want to gloat about some feeble achievement. She has a right to come just like I do. I shouldn’t get a participation award for doing the right thing. But I’m not letting her sidetrack me again.

“It sounds like a *but* is in there somewhere,” she says, searching my eyes for an answer I’m not sure I can explain.

“No but, this time. An epiphany.” She’s suddenly very interested, so I

confess, “I don’t think I’ve ever made love before.” Can she hear the tenuous tone as I step into the unknown? *Will she think less of me for it?*

Delight sparkles in her eyes. She’s shameless, but I don’t blame her. I’m not ashamed of a damn thing we just did. I just need a minute to not feel like I just took something that wasn’t mine to steal. She leans her head on my shoulder. “Maybe I should have told you. I didn’t know you’d mind.”

I’m being fucking ridiculous. I earned her trust, if not through words then through my actions. “Hey?” Her eyes find mine again, and I say, “You don’t owe me an apology or an explanation. It was yours to do as you please. But —”

“I knew there was a but!” She laughs, poking me in the chest.

“No harsh *but* coming. I wanted to thank you for choosing me to share that with you.”

“Aww. That’s so sweet.” Her hand covers mine as I rest it on the side of her neck. “There’s no one else I’d rather share my first time with.” She smiles, admiring me with the happiness that has laughter shining in her eyes. “We should be tired,” she says, patting my chest. “Should we sleep?”

“We should eat. I’m starving.”

“Great minds.” She throws the covers off and slips into the bathroom. Not taking long, she comes out tightening the belt of her robe around her waist. We kiss as we pass each other.

After slipping on my boxers, I find her standing in the kitchen. Taking two bottles from the neat rows on the counter, she tosses me a bottle of water. I twist the lid and sip, looking around—beige couch, blue pillows, and those giant-ass textbooks.

“It’s not a fancy omelet, but I have chips,” she says.

“Chips work.”

“I’m so hungry,” she replies, pulling a bag of chips from the fridge.

It takes a solid second, but my mind finally catches up with the fact that she keeps water on the counter and chips in the fridge. “Why do you keep chips in the fridge?”

“They stay fresh longer.” She doesn’t feel the need to go on although I kind of need her to.

“I’ve never had a bag last long enough to worry.” I drink half the water while letting my gaze bounce around the room again. “Do you always leave New Haven in the summer?”

“Yes.” I catch her eyeing me, but she’s quick to turn back around and eat

a few chips. Holding the bag out, she offers, “Chips?”

I take the offer, shoving my hand in the bag in search of whole chips. With a few in hand, I say, “Thanks.” Leaning against the counter, I find the sparsely filled room doesn’t tell me anything about her, though it might represent her ambition. She’s amazing—attentive, funny, and focused.

Guess I’m just used to my mom’s place, which after twenty years of living in it, has tchotchkes and framed photos of our lives. I cross the room to mist Frankie, then press my finger to the soil. “You’re taking good care of her.”

“It’s a kind of a hassle. Bonsais need a lot of attention.”

I return, leaning the counter next to her. “They do. It’s supposed to be a Zen activity.”

“It’s stressful. I find myself thinking about her when I’m in class, worried I’m going to kill her.”

Rubbing her shoulder, I say, “I’ll make sure you don’t.”

“It’s good to have backup. Peanut butter and jelly?”

“Protein and flavor all in one. The perfect food.”

She pulls the jars and bread out. Dipping into a drawer to get a knife, she says, “Glad you approve.”

So meticulous, she covers every millimeter. “You’re going to be a great doctor.”

Laughing, she says, “Hope so.”

When she finishes, she lifts half over her shoulder, letting me bite most of it before turning to face me and eating some. I finish my sandwich about ten bites before she eats hers. She says, “You eat too fast.”

“I got a bit of size on you, baby. If my mom didn’t own a diner, she’d be broke from feeding me.”

“I like your size.” Her hands run over my shoulders, feeling me before wrapping around my neck. “A lot.”

“I like you a lot.” I dip my head ready to kiss her neck, but then hear her breath catch. Staring at her creamy skin, I can almost see the pulse dancing for me. Closing my eyes, I breathe her in, filling my lungs with her scent before I run the tip of my nose from the curve of her jaw and behind her ear.

Her breathing quickens as I wait to kiss her, to taste her the way I want. Sweet teasing torture appears to be the way to her heart.

Braver than before, she runs her hands over my ribs and then lower and around to the top of my ass. I attack her neck with kisses and then under her

ear. She whispers, “You didn’t hurt me if you’re worried.”

“I was.” The night replays how I wanted to protect her earlier. Again, proving she doesn’t need that from me. She just wants me. Despite my lack of finances, she has never looked at me less than worthy.

My heart clenches, and we head back to bed.

Her smile only wavers under a yawn when we drop back in bed, sleep catching up with us. Pulling the covers over her shoulder, she cuddles against me, and asks, “Should I be this tired?”

“Yes,” I reply, arrogance seeping in.

“And sore?”

Now I feel bad. “Sorry.”

“It’s a good sore. Like a solid workout for muscles that are never used.”

I yawn, my own muscles begging for rest. “Looking on the bright side?”

“Is there any other way to see it when I’m happy?”

Lying next to her, I already know my world’s been rocked onto a new axis, one that aligns with hers. She’s captured more than I thought I had to give, and I’ll let her keep it, keep all of me because she’s given me a newfound peace I never knew until we met.

Kissing her head, I close my eyes and bury my nose into the back of her hair and inhale. “Sweet dreams.”

I start to let fatigue drag me into sleep when I hear her whisper, “Sweet dreams.”

15

Chloe

Joshua Evans is no boy.

There's not one thing about him that isn't all man. Holy moly, he makes my heart spin and my body feel alive. He's a drug, an addiction. He's everything I never knew existed. All that goodness and handsome package of sunshine dimples, molten chocolate eyes, and a body that embraces me like the world's on fire and I am the last drop of water he needs for survival. What is it about him that makes me feel this way?

I can think of a million things, but the way he's sweet to me and looks at me—really looks at me and sees beyond my name, beyond my face—makes me feel special.

Maybe I shouldn't have fallen so fast or so hard, but he has a way of making me feel like a new version of me. I've always had a one-track mind for my future profession, but he's shown me I can be more than a career. I can also have a life. My mom and Ruby were right, but until I experienced it firsthand, I didn't understand. Now I do, and I'm liking this new me.

Delirious and tired after the best weekend of my life, I catch myself smiling in the middle of a lecture. I just can't stop thinking about him. My eyes remain glued to the chalkboard in front of the auditorium, but I hide my mouth behind my hand. I think I'm doing a fairly good job of keeping this happiness contained until a giggle gets me shushed.

Me? Shushed.

The teacher's assistant glances my way, and the professor stops reading from the book on the lectern.

Yikes. I'm pinned to my seat with a glare.

What am I doing? I grin.

I don't disrupt my classes.

I don't step outside the lines.

I don't break the rules.

At least I didn't used to . . .

I've always done what I'm supposed to do. Right now, that means

listening to Professor Tracey. But dating Joshua is much more interesting. For him or because of him, I'm blurring the line between my old and my new life.

My phone screen lights up with just the name invading my day. *Soulmate*. He makes it easy to believe in such things. I move the phone to my lap to try to read the text covertly: *I can't stop thinking about you*.

I type: *Same for me. Best. Weekend. Ever!*

Joshua: *I vote for a repeat*.

Me: *I'm in*.

Joshua: *Macroeconomics and finance forecasting don't hold a candle to eating cold chips and drinking warm water with you*.

Euphoria consumes me, and for the first time, I understand why the Greeks called love the madness of the gods. Is that what I'm doing? After one date and a few texts telling me I'm better than his major? Am I . . . is this? Sliding down in the chair, I bite my lip, feeling this craziness take over, and I willingly let it.

Love isn't a science or something I can dissect. It's an emotion that overwhelms and can't be explained. It can only be felt. And I'm feeling something I've never felt before. It's like my brain's been rewired to take direction from my heart.

Confidence matches the high. I flirt right back, and type: *And here I was thinking about the sex*.

Joshua: *Lol. It's worth a repeat as well, though I'm surprised you have the energy. #insatiable #harder #faster #alldemands #vixen*

Laughter bellows from my gut. *Oh, crap!*

I'm given the evil eye from pretty much everyone but the guy sleeping two rows down. Seconds later, I'm saved by the class's dismissal. As I float down the auditorium stairs, my mood is hijacked when the professor calls me, "Chloe?"

I step to the side. "Yes?"

"Outbursts are unacceptable in my class. Please keep the distractions out of this auditorium."

"Yes, ma'am." She turns away, moving to raise the screen. I hurry, realizing even getting in trouble for the first time in my life didn't dampen my great mood. Stopping in the sunshine, I tilt my head up to the blue skies.

"Chloe?"

Geez, suddenly my name is the most common word in the English

language. This time it's Ruby, though, so I don't mind. "Hey. Heading home?"

"You will not believe what just happened."

We start walking together. "What?"

Showing me her cup, she says, "So I'm standing in line for coffee at Perky Beans, and this hot guy is behind me. I'm next to order, and he starts chatting me up about not being able to drop a class but seeing me has his day looking better."

Joshua makes my days—and my nights—better. I can't imagine anyone dreamier than that man, but she doesn't need to hear me talk about him.

"Chloe!"

"What?" I glance next to me to find her not there. Stopping, I turn back.

With her hands on her hips and her brows knitted together, I don't need the glare to tell me she's irritated. "Are you even listening?" She's happy to tell me herself.

"I'm listening. Hot guy. Black coffee. Sophisticated. Got it."

Huffing, she rejoins me, adjusting her backpack and picking up where she left off. "So, I said, hey, we just ordered the same coffee. Caramel macchiato with coconut milk and an extra shot of espresso. Like, how is that even possible?" Bumping into me, she giggles. "Romantic. Like destiny."

"Soul mates, for sure." I bump right back and laugh. I don't dare mention my love life, or she'll fixate on it, and I'm not ready for that. I do, however, find her line of thinking utterly fascinating.

"Do you believe in fate?" she asks.

"Fate has always had such a negative connotation to me. Destiny sounds more hopeful."

She presses the button at the crosswalk, and as we stand there, she says, "There's an argument for both, but let's go with hope. What do you think?"

"Are you asking me if I believe that you'll start dating this guy, fall madly in love in a whirlwind romance, jet around the world after graduation fulfilling your tremendously cool dreams, and then one day look at each other and decide to settle down, have two point five kids, a three-car garage, and a little piece of paradise in Connecticut?"

"Yes."

I shrug. "Maybe. Do you need a three-car garage?"

That makes her laugh. "I was thinking four but thought I'd sound pretentious if I voiced it."

The pedestrian sign comes on, and we cross the street to our block. Wrapping my arm around her, I say, “Never.”

This has me thinking about my parents’ marriage. They thought they’d be married forever when they tied the knot. Little doubts start to populate. How will it be different for me? Are we being naïve by thinking our love is different? No.

I’ve studied every part of the anatomy. The two most powerful organs are the brain and the heart. No matter which leads you, the other follows. So even though our hearts are leading this charge, I know we’re thinking rationally.

Anyway, a mistake would never feel this good.

I open the door to my apartment and stop—my feet, my heart, my breathing. And stare, trying to process how there’s a sexy, shirtless guy standing on my windowsill. “Hello there.” I set my bag at the foot of the couch. Joshua doesn’t react, but then I see the earbuds tucked in his ears.

He’s quite the sight, and I don’t want to miss a second of this. Not making a noise, I curl up on the couch and watch with rapt interest as he hangs a towel over my window. His backside is a thing of beauty. The muscle definition would make a Greek god jealous.

The best part? *He’s mine.*

“I’m pretty sure you weren’t looking for my eyes, but just in case,” he says, pointing at the most heart-stopping beautiful brown eyes. “They’re up here.”

My gaze selfishly drifts lower again and this time continues to that firm ass. “I’m good.” I giggle. “You can continue whatever you were doing.”

“All done. When’d you get home?”

Home.

I grin.

“Not long enough to appreciate you properly. You stole a towel for privacy?”

“I did,” he replies proudly. Tugging lightly, he appears impressed with his handiwork. “Should hold until you get blinds. I can also hang those for you. I used a sheet in the bedroom.”

“You don’t seem apologetic at all, so you’re lucky you’re hot or I might be mad. So tell me more about this being a handyman business. It’s a whole new side of you.”

“I’m handy all right.” He comes to the couch and sits next to me. We come together and kiss. “Good to see you.”

“Good to be seen by you, especially since no one else can now.” I signal toward the window. The right side of my mouth tips up. “Feel better?”

“Yes, regarding the windows. No, because I need to go to work.” Joshua’s eyes are kind as he looks into mine. “Wish I could stay.”

“Me, too.”

He steals another kiss and then pulls his shirt over his head. I kick back with my hands behind my head. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m not complaining. Just curious why you were shirtless hanging the towel?”

A small shrug hits under the smile on his face. “Figured you’d be home soon.”

I chunk a pillow at him. “Tease.”

“If you got it, flaunt—” I pop him with another pillow and then kiss his arm as I go to Frankie. “The violence around here is intense,” he adds, chuckling.

“I think you can handle a few pillows.”

He hooks the corner of the towel on a nail, a nice detail to the makeshift covering. I lean against him, not wanting him to go. “Clever.” Picking up Frankie, I carry her to the sink for a good soak. “What does your bonsai look like?”

“Dwayne Evans? He has a strong trunk and straight, broad branches.”

“Sounds like someone I know.” I turn on the water. Look at me nurturing my plant. My mom would be so proud. Like how Joshua is looking at me now. “But let’s get back to the Dwayne Evans part.” I raise an eyebrow, wholly entertained by this name.

“He’s named after The Rock.”

“That makes a little more sense.” I turn off the faucet and return to the couch. “Yet not entirely. I’m going to need more information.”

The ridiculousness of our conversation isn’t lost on him, but something darkens his expression. “When I was twelve, I used to stay up all night on the weekends watching his movies. He seemed like a real-life hero to me. If we want to delve deep, I wished he was my dad but not because of fame or money. He was funny and badass, equally. Just seemed like a good dad to have if I got to choose one. My tree reminded me of him—tall and bulky, upstanding, so I named him Dwayne but kept my last name.”

There’s a lump in my throat, and I didn’t realize I was gripping my hands together so tightly. When I release, my fingers are stiff. I get up and hug him. Not sure if he needs it or even wants it, but his arms come around me, and we

stand there in the quiet. I'm not sure what to say, so I fall back on what made us fall for each other in the first place. "So, we're going with the double-barrel name?"

He starts chuckling. "Yes. Dwayne Evans is a formal kind of bonsai." I love his laughter. Releasing me, he says, "I need to get going."

"As much as you're gone from your place, maybe you should consider bringing Dwayne Evans over here. He can spend time with Frankie."

When I open the door, he leaves his backpack on the floor as he exits. "That's a bit forward. I mean, I can ask him." Another shrug comes with a heaping helping of a wry grin. He taps the tip of my nose. "But no guarantees. He's quite the ladies' man."

I tap his nose right back. "He's not a man at all, actually."

"You know what I mean."

I'm kissed—not reflective of any of the joking we've been doing—his lips relishing mine and me returning the favor. The struggle is heard in a heavy sigh when he forces himself to walk away. I feel that sadness corroding my stomach as well. I ask, "Hey, how'd you get in anyway?"

"I have my ways, Fox." Just before his head is out of sight, his eyes meet mine, and he adds, "I'll add another later."

"Ah." He picked my lock. His skills extend way beyond a college classroom. "Keep me posted on Dwayne Evans."

His laughter echoes through the stairwell. "I will. See you later."

Returning inside, I flop back on the couch, needing to reevaluate the path I'm choosing versus the course created by others and the life everyone expects of me.

I've had the same goals since I was fifteen, and then I met Joshua Evans. Now I'm coloring outside the lines for the first time. Staying up late and experiencing what it's like to share my nights.

Chloe Evans does have a nice ring to it.

Heat sweeps across my cheeks because yes, I just did that, and I like the sound of it. Since I'm already chartering a new course, I can play with the title of Mr. and Mrs. in my head. Of course, for me, *Dr.* Evans has a much better ring to it.

My heart pulses with a joy I've never felt before. I'm happier than I've ever been, and it's because of the man who just hung a towel over my window to protect me. A charming devil of a catch and I caught him. I think I'm going to love walking on the wild side if I'm walking it with him.

16

Joshua

“Josh?” my mom calls from the front of the diner.

The dinner rush hasn't kicked in, so I push through the kitchen door to find her. She's in the main area, but I see why she called me. “Service around here sucks.” Bryant smacks his hands on the counter where he and Todd take up space

“Fuckers. Don't say that. It makes my mom look bad.”

She returns, giving them that don't-test-me-glare that told me I was in trouble when I was younger. Still works on me. I chuckle, knowing she's giving them shit, though. She can't hold that look for long, always liking my friends. She asks, “What are you troublemakers up to today?”

Todd replies, “Checking on our boy. Other than the time he and his lady graced us with their presence at Lucky's, he's been MIA for most of September, including his birthday.”

“We're also hungry,” Bryant adds, never one to turn down a free meal. “But what Todd said, too. First birthday we haven't drank down by the lake in years.”

I can't tell them why I couldn't go but remembering how dirty we got in that shower of hers leaves no room for anything less than a guilty grin.

My mom asks, “You took Chloe to Lucky's? Not the classiest place, Josh.”

“Cheap drinks and pool tables. We don't need much. Anyway, she had a good time.” I try to hide my grin as I think about how that night ended—sex and snacks. *Good times.*

“I don't even want to know why you have that smirk on your face.” I get popped with a towel, causing me to laugh. Turning back to the guys, she asks, “Burgers?”

“All the way, Ms. Russo.” Todd rests his arms on the counter.

“I'll cover them, Mom.” Spinning the spatula in my hand, I cock a brow. “I think I know how you like your burgers. I've made enough over the years to pay for Yale. If I'd been paid, that is.”

We head back to the kitchen because I know my mom would rather us take our foul mouths out of hearing range from paying customers. I slap patties on the grill as they come around from washing their hands. Across from me, they lean against the sink. Todd starts, "Let's talk about Chloe Fox."

"How about we don't?" I reply, knowing full well that's not going to satisfy him.

"Nice try," Bryant slaps back.

This conversation is long overdue, and I can't say I blame them for being curious since I've been spending so much time alone with her. "My time with Chloe has been good. *Really* good."

"Really good, huh?" Bryant laughs, nudging Todd. "I think our boy's done for."

Cooking allows me to avoid their judging stares. I dunk the fries in the fryer. Todd finally cuts to the chase, and asks, "You've been together a while now. Is it more than good?"

"Always the detective." I glance up. "You've hung around her enough to see why I like her."

"You mean at Lucky's like a month ago, and then when you stopped by last week to collect that forty bucks I owed you. If that's the baseline, then sure, she seems cool the two times we've hung out. Do you love her?"

Is it wrong to admit it out loud to them before I say it to her? *Probably*. "I, uh . . ." Returning to the grill, I poke around making a lot of noise for nothing. "We're getting there."

Laughing, Bryant cups his ear and leans over. "Say it louder for the people in the back."

Todd shoves him. "He doesn't have to. The master of avoidance can't avoid admitting the truth. He loves her. Shit, that's a news flash I didn't see coming."

"Whatever, man. Can we drop this?"

"We're giving you a hard time," Todd says, grabbing a stool and sitting down. "But so you know, if you like her, love her, whatever. We're good."

Bryant punches my arm. "She's cool, but man, I never thought I'd see the day that you were off the market. Chloe Fox lives up to her name, by the way."

Shaking my head, I know they're not going to let this lie. "Go ahead and get it out of your systems."

I chuckle until Bryant adds, “Did you know that she’s Newport’s medical phenom in the making after her dad. It’s next level, brah.”

“I know that’s what he wants,” I reply defensively, not liking they’ve been searching for dirt on her. “You know how? I asked her. How do you know?” Tossing cheese on the patties, I work on plating the food. The meal may be on the house, but I still care about the presentation.

He replies, “I was bored the other night. Just in case she didn’t tell you this, Daddy Fox is not just filthy rich. He’s fucking wealthy.”

“Her coming from money doesn’t scare me.” Chuckling, I ask, “And the distinguishing factor between those two are?”

Todd says, “Old money.”

“So?” I shrug. “That’s half of New Haven.”

“But we’re on the other half,” Bryant adds. “Except this guy.”

He thumbs toward Todd, who says, “But I got here as fast as they could cut me off.”

“You know what I got?” I start, “I got the talk from my mom already, so you don’t need to worry about me.”

Todd says, “Don’t forget she’ll be leaving after graduation, so don’t go running off and getting married anytime soon.”

After putting fries on their plate, I retrieve the burgers and then add the toppings. Some things I want to keep between me and Chloe for now, like discovering stuff that I learn from her and not the internet. “Thanks for the advice,” I reply dryly.

Bryant always has to get in the last word. “For the record, we were disappointed to find so little on her. She is who she says she is. Graduated from high school early and now she’s a Yale student. Boring stuff.”

“She’s anything but boring to me.” Handing them the plates, I stop. His words playing back. “What do you mean graduated early?”

“Yeah,” Bryant says, not picking up on my concern. “You’re lucky you didn’t get busted at Lucky’s.” Grabbing the plate with one hand, he rubs his stomach with the other. “I’m starved.”

“Yeah, lucky.”

We return to the front and they sit at the counter as I get their drinks, Chloe’s age still on my mind. I thought for sure she said she was twenty-one. I was distracted by everything on our first date at the diner. With my mom trying to dote on us to her, Barb, and T doing golf claps where Chloe couldn’t see. Thank God. That would have been more embarrassing than it already

was. I still don't think I heard Chloe wrong. While the guys eat, I grab the dish tub and start clearing the vacated tables, feeling bothered. *I have a pretty good memory . . .*

"How about a lightning round of get-to-know-you questions?"

"I'm game. Can I go first? Age?"

"Twenty-two next month. Age?"

"Twenty-one."

"We're the same age—"

Right. I even noted how we were the same age. I'm certain she said twenty-one, but I'll ask her about it anyway.

After dumping the dishes in the back, I return to the counter. My mom pats my shoulder. "Thank you, son." She reconciles their bill, and asks Todd, "You're delivering for me tonight, right?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be back at six."

Bryant says, "I'm on in the morning. I can open if you want to sleep in, Ms. Russo."

I hit him with a dirty glare. "Stop flirting with my mom, dude!"

He chuckles, but I don't. My mom on the other hand, giggles. *Giggles!* She says, "I appreciate the offer, but Barb is opening for me the next two mornings." Setting napkins on the counter, she adds, "Just be on time. I need you tomorrow for the brunch crowd."

"Will do." He flips me off when she goes to check on customers, and mouths, "Your mom is hot."

I punch him. "Fucker."

They're still laughing when I get back to work in the kitchen, needing to get going on the prep for dinner. I start the hot water just as my phone buzzes in my pocket and tug it out. Doesn't matter what I felt two seconds prior, I'm smiling the moment I see her face on the screen under the name—*Soulmate* . . . If the shoe fits, and it's a perfect fit for Chloe.

Chloe's face is contorted, but she can't hide her beauty behind silly faces. The text reads: *How do I look?*

I type: *Frustratingly gorgeous.*

She replies: *It frustrates you that you find me gorgeous?*

Me: *It frustrates me that I can't be with my gorgeous girlfriend.*

Chloe: *Send me a photo of what you're doing right now. I want to see my sexy boyfriend.*

I hold the phone above me so she gets a good visual of how sexy I can be

and take the pic.

Chloe: *A man doing dishes—be still my beating heart. I have some things you can wash.*

Me: *Some things . . . like you?*

Chloe: *What time do you get off?*

Me: *That's up to you.*

Chloe: *Naughty. Naughty. *ponders the possibilities**

Me: *Don't start without me, baby. I'm leaving here at eleven.*

Another pic of her lying on the bed—her hair a mess and swept over the pillow—a strap clinging to her shoulder and the other tipped over. As sexy as she is, my chest tightens just looking at her. I'm at a loss of words that fit how stunning she is.

Me: *I . . .*

I delete and lick my lips although it's my throat that's gone dry staring at her. Me: *Thank you.*

Chloe: *For what?*

Swallowing down the lump in my throat, my fingers hover over the screen. I want to tell her so many things, but my heart clenches that I might not get more than this year with her. I hate the seed of doubt the guys planted. I want a future after graduation. A life together. I want to tell her. Me: *For the photos. They'll be all I think about during my shift.* I chicken out.

Chloe: *My pleasure.*

My phone rings. Turning my back to the door for privacy, I whisper, "Hi."

She says, "The pleasure's been mine. I've been the happiest I've ever been with you."

I take a breath, the earlier conversation with Todd and Bryant trying to run its course.

"Joshua, are you there?"

"I'm here. What are we doing?"

"I was studying. You're working."

Looking around to make sure no one can hear, I whisper, "I really care about you, Chloe."

"I care about you, too." Her laughter comes over the line but then quietens. "Wait, is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. That's what I've been thinking about. It's been good."

Softer laughter returns. "I can't reason through it myself. I'm as lost as

you are, so I'm following my heart instead."

Dishes clang in the sink, causing me to look up. "It's getting busy here."

"If you need to go—"

I sigh, wishing I could spend time with her. "I do, but I want you to know that I'm in this with you."

"Don't get too sentimental on me or we'll both be saps. I need you to be the strong one."

She's the strongest person I know, holding her own under a mountain of expectations, and knowing she graduated a year early is incredible. "For you, I'll be the strong one." Chuckling, I push off the wall. "I'll see you after work."

"Have a good night."

An idea strikes a second too late. Since we already hung up, I send her a text: *You up for an adventure?* I know she'll ask what she should wear, so I add: *Casual clothes.*

I don't expect her to say no since I've completely annihilated her routine the moment we started dating. Chloe's text appears on the screen: *I need my beauty sleep.*

Me: *Trust me, you don't. You're beautiful inside and out.*

Chloe: *Fine, ya big charmer. I'll be ready.*

My mom pushes through the door, and I fumble with my phone. Catching it, I tuck it into my back pocket. She so knows I was up to no good. "Do I need to worry?"

"Nope. Nothing to worry about."

Plugging the order into the ticket clip, she says, "Good. Turkey BLT, light on the toasting."

"Professor Carroll?"

"Yes." The math professor has crushed on my mom since he got tenure four years ago. He even celebrated at the diner. That soft spot he has for her is good for business, but I think it's going to take more than catering a party to get her to cross that line.

"One day, he's going to get the nerve up to ask you out. What will you say?"

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. As for you—you're too young to settle down. Date. Love. Have fun, but don't make the same mistakes I did."

"She's not a mistake."

"That's not what I said. I adore Chloe. I love seeing you so happy, and I

can tell she's the reason for it. And for that I'm grateful." She turns with the door pressed to her back. "Just don't—"

"I know."

She takes me in for a long moment and then smiles. "Love you."

"Love you."

The door is left swinging behind her. She always did have a way of reading my mind. My mom might know me better than I do—seeing my thoughts about Chloe and dragging them into the light. I have a feeling it's because she's been here before. I can only hope that Chloe and I have a better ending.

Spinning the ticket wheel, I grab the food and get back to work. "Turkey BLT, coming up."

Working through a long shift is a breeze when I'm busy, and Chloe's smile is a great distraction from cooking the same special over and over again. I'm not sure which smile of hers is my favorite. The soft smile she has when I catch her sleeping, or the tilt of the mischievous one I caught when she beat the guys at pool—Wait. *I know!* My favorite still might be the one she had when she ran to kiss me the first time on the sidewalk. Nope. I'm partial to her grin after sex. That's my favorite . . . wait, is it? Fuck, who am I kidding? All of them are perfection.

After work, I pop into the corner store to grab a couple of packs of condoms. Chloe and I have chemistry that we can't deny. Doesn't matter the day or time, one or both of us wants sex. I thought I'd be the instigator, but I was wrong. She holds her own and slinks around in next to nothing to get me into the bedroom. Dirty tricks, man. She knows I can't resist, even after a long shift.

The virgin thing still clouds the edges of mind. I guess if I would have known, I would have done things a bit differently. Been slower, gentler, romanced her more. Is it too late? Better late than never. Tonight is a good night to make things up to her.

Tiny yellow flowers border the store parking lot. They're pretty, dainty like her. Walking to the side of the building where the grass isn't trampled, I find the perfect patch and pick a bunch. I find an old wire from a ripped out cassette deck behind my seat and wrap it around the stems, then set the flowers on the seat next to me.

It takes a few cruises up and down her street before I find a spot down a few from her building's front door. I double-check all the supplies I got and

then head to get her. The door flies open, and she comes rushing toward me with a big smile and open arms. I catch her, spinning under the stars in a passionate embrace. Lips pressed to mine, she holds me around my neck with her legs wrapped around my middle. *Heaven in my arms.*

“Miss me?” I ask when our lips come apart, not wanting to put her down just yet.

“So much.” When her feet touch the ground, she jumps giddily. “Where are you taking me?”

“It’s a surprise.” I take hold of her hand and lead her to my truck. “Top secret location.”

“I hate surprises.” She doesn’t sound mad, though, which is a good sign. “But I love secret spots.”

“I think you’ll like this one.”

As soon as I open the door, she gasps. Reaching in, she takes the flowers. “Are these for me?”

“They are.”

A gentle sigh is released as her smile softens. “They’re the prettiest flowers I’ve ever received.” Lifting up, she kisses me again. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I’ve never seen someone, other than my mom, so happy to receive handpicked flowers. Most chicks I’ve dated want the expensive red roses, the mass-produced ones with no scent. Like it’s a status thing or something. I’m guilty of giving them, but they’re not what I would ever send Chloe. She deserves wildflowers, colors that match spring, pink like her lips, green like her eyes. Yellow like the sun.

She deserves something that’s outside the norm . . . like me. Those other rich guys can shower her in flowers, but I want to give her something they’d never give—something for her, not them. My heart is in her hands as she admires them.

I love her.

God, how I love her.

While she climbs in, I say, “Chloe?” She looks out at me before she buckles in. What am I doing? My heart is in my throat, and talk of the future balances on the tip of my tongue. I have no idea how to do this, never wanting to be this open, this up-front, this honest with anyone. Then I hear my mom’s words . . . *As for you—you’re too young to settle down. Date. Love. Have fun, but don’t make the same mistakes I did.* So, I hold back. “I missed you, too.”

The moon shines in her eyes, stars in her smile.

I was wrong before.

This. This is my favorite.

17

Joshua

“No way!” Chloe states defiantly and then takes a few steps away from the edge, turning her back to it as if that will make it disappear. Crossing her arms over her chest, she shakes her head in protest. Over her shoulder, she tosses me a glare that could level an average man. “You want me to go in there?”

Good thing I’m not an average man. “Yes, I do,” I speak to her back. “Come with me. You’ll be fine.”

Her huff hits her shoulders for extra dramatics. Peeking back at the lake, she eyes the waves that softly lap the rocky beach. “I didn’t wear a swimsuit. You didn’t tell me we were going swimming. You said to dress casual!”

“It’s not a conspiracy, Chloe.” I really wish I could stop chuckling, but she makes it so damn hard. Hard all over if I’m being truthful. “No one’s around in the middle of the night and look at that lake—”

“I have and I can’t believe you want to go in there, and naked to boot.”

The food has been picked over and the bottle of wine emptied. Red Solo cups and the remaining Hostess cupcakes are on the blanket spread in front of the SUV. It’s just us and the night. “I don’t need a lake to want you naked. C’mon. It’ll be fun.”

Glancing back, she asks, “What’s in the lake?”

“Sharks,” I deadpan.

“That’s what I’m worried about. What about snakes?”

Although I’ve never worried what’s around me at the lake, she has me taking a look around at the tree line. “I’ve never seen a snake. Anyway, you grew up in Newport. There’s water everywhere. Do you swim?”

“I swim. But during the day and in water I can see through, if I have a choice.”

“You don’t swim in the ocean?” Please tell me she’s experienced real water in nature.

“I prefer Bermuda or the Maldives, not the Atlantic, and I haven’t been in a lake since I was ten at summer camp. A fish touched my leg, and I never

went back.”

“To camp or in a lake?”

“Both.”

I already stripped my clothes off and am standing waist deep. “I can’t promise a fish won’t find you interesting, but I’ll do my best to protect you.”

Her gaze lowers, eyeing the gentle wave wide-eyed. She even dips a toe in, and then her whole foot. Every time we’re together, she becomes bolder, not inclined to hide what she likes or doesn’t.

I fucking love it.

What I don’t love is the distance between us. I’m ready to feel that rush that only touching her will give me. I hold my hand toward her, silently begging her to join me. If she does, the victory will be so sweet. “Trust me, Chloe.” Yes, that’s a lowball thing to do to her, but I threw trust out there anyway because I’m an asshole.

The debate in her eyes reaches her lips when she troubles the lower one with her teeth. “I’m not a strong swimmer. I’m scared.”

Winning her trust in new situations is an aphrodisiac. “I’ll be right here. I’ll hold you. We don’t have to go any deeper than this.”

Despite voicing her fears, she doesn’t appear to be scared when she walks deeper into the water, eventually taking my hand. “You won’t let go of me?”

“I’ll never let you go.” Spoken from my heart to hers.

She nods and then reaches for the clasp of her bra. I should note that getting her shirt and jeans off were the easy part. That’s before she knew I wanted her to come swimming. I’ll take mostly naked with her over fully dressed any day.

“What if we get caught?”

I shrug. “Then we get caught.”

Her hands fly to her hips. “Not funny, Joshua.”

I’m chuckling because I know there’s no one around this part of the lake. There shouldn’t be. “It’s private property.”

“That’s my point. Getting caught and breaking the law weren’t a part of my plans tonight.”

“I didn’t know you had made plans tonight.”

Worry creases her forehead. “For real, Joshua. I don’t want to get in trouble.”

Music drifts through the open windows of the Blaze, joined by a chorus of crickets and the sound of nature. “We’re fine.”

She puts on a good show but even the thought of getting caught didn't keep those clothes on. "Then why are you nervous? Have you ever been skinny dipping before?"

"It's almost October and cold, but besides that, you act like you have me all figured out, Evans."

The curve of her waist reminds me of a crescent moon. As much as I want to hold her close to feel the heat we create together, I'm not going to force her to go deeper. "I'm pretty confident I do."

Every step I take, she follows, the water lapping her hips and causing her to shiver. "It's cold."

"You'll get used to it. If not, I'll warm you up."

Taking baby steps as she goes deeper, she releases my hand. "The bottom of the lake is muck and gross."

"Doesn't bother me. I grew up swimming in this lake."

Getting waist deep, she asks, "Tell me what you've figured out about me."

I smirk. "You're my sweet and innocent girl."

"You always say that." My gaze skims over her curves and lands on her eyes, the low light glistening in them. My gorgeous girlfriend. The Goddess Aphrodite.

Once she eases in, she swims a bit until she reaches me. Moonbeams dance across her skin, nipples firm from the cool water, making me want to touch her. "You're not that guilty either. You could have traveled the world for all I know, but you're entertained by me, my run-down truck. Fascinated by the lake and sex."

Shock spikes her expression. "I am . . ." She seems to catch herself, her eyes lifting to the sky in thought. When they return to mine, a mischievous smile lies across that sexy mouth of hers. "Fine. I enjoy sex," she says pointedly. "It's more fun than I thought it would be." Climbing into my arms with her legs wrapped around my middle, she laughs. "I can even go as far as to blame you for that fascination."

"I'll take the credit, but it's good because it's us together." Holding her by the ass, I say, "This is where trust comes in."

"I trust you to keep me safe from the lake sharks."

I chuckle. "Of course, but I was referring to the fact that I'm the reason sex is so good."

I'm whacked, and she pushes off me. Going underwater, she swings her

feet up like a mermaid fin before her head breaks the surface again. “You’re ridiculous, you know that, Evans?”

“I do.” I swim closer as she teases me by swimming backward. “You’re a natural. What were you afraid of?”

“Life.” Treading water, she lets me catch up to her. Our knees, feet, and hands occasionally bump under the water, but we keep a small distance between us, our heads the only part exposed.

Blaming the moon and some romantic notion that’s snuck in, I confess, “I love you, Chloe.” I don’t say it lightly, and I’ve never said it to a woman I’m dating. I’ve fallen for her as if I were her anchor, so putting myself on the line doesn’t feel so risky.

That is, until a tear slides down her cheek, and she snuffles, making me worry it was too soon. I swim to her, capturing her in my arms again. “What’s wrong?”

“You just . . . you said it without warning.” She sounds mad.

“Because I felt it.”

She leans into my embrace, holding me tight. The air cool, but her body hot. “I love you, too, Joshua,” she whispers with her cheek pressed to mine.

Comfort isn’t just found in her arms, but in her words, allowing me to breathe easier. I could swim an ocean on this adrenaline. “You mean that?”

“So much.” Although her eyes are more striking when she cries, I never want to see that shade of green if pain is the cause. “Then why are you crying?”

“I’ve never said those words to anyone with the same meaning behind them, but they don’t feel like they’re enough to explain how I feel for you.”

“They’re enough,” I reassure, kissing the trail the tears left behind. I spin in the water, holding her tight. “You’re all I need, Chloe.”

Am I insane for confessing so much? Doesn’t seem I’m alone, which is reassuring. Instead of sharing the thoughts rushing through my veins, I just want to feel them quietly for a while. This desire to give her everything she could ever want, or need, is something new for me.

With a good grasp on her, enough that she lies back spreading her arms wide, floating on the surface. Breasts free for the air to kiss and the stars to view.

I turn, swaying her through the water in front of me, droplets rolling across her creamy skin in the moonlight. When I pull her upright, I kiss the soft mounds, then take a nipple between my teeth. My body aches for her, to

be inside her, to see her fall apart under the stars, but that might have to wait until we're warm inside the truck again.

Her arms return to loop around me, her eyes closed momentarily as soft mewls fill the air. When she lifts up, she looks into my eyes, and says, "And just so you know, I will never tire of this lake, that old truck, or sex with you, because you, Joshua Evans, have stolen my heart."

Leaning my head against hers, I confess, "Our backgrounds don't matter, and the past is left for our memories. You're more than I could have asked for. The other half of my heart that I've been missing."

While her fingers slide into my hair, she sighs. "I feel empty when we're apart."

Like that. "I feel just like that." I add, "You're my one and only."

My cheek is kissed and then my chin. Another follows right where I want her mouth—on mine. Our lips come together and our hold on each other tightens while our tongues embrace.

I engulf her lithe body in my arms, wishing she was about two inches lower—*Never mind*. She hits the spot, grinding against me, her breath stealing mine in the process. I crave that completion, never wanting us to be apart.

Her hair shimmers on the clear night, causing me to stare, admiring her delicate features. We dip under together and then come back up for air. When the water strays from her eyes, leaving dark lashes still wet, she asks, "Have you had sex in a lake?" When I hesitate, her mouth falls open. "You have?"

"No," I say, chuckling. Reaching behind her and down, I get a solid hold of her fine ass again. "Are you hitting on me?"

She replies, "More than hitting. I'm full-on rubbing."

Leveraging her thighs around me, she lifts, looking down over me. I kiss her collarbone before lowering her into the water again. "You don't have to rub." I have a box of condoms in the truck, but there's no way I'm fucking her in the lake. At least not tonight. Tonight is about romance, but shivering isn't romantic. "Let's go." I nod toward the truck. "We can use the blanket to dry off."

We move through the water toward the shore, and I rush to get the blanket for her, shaking it off. Even though I wrap it around her shoulders, it doesn't stop a shiver that was already working its way up her spine, but hopefully, it will keep any others at bay.

Gathering our clothes, I slip on my jeans before picking up everything

else and loading it into the back of the truck. Chloe's still standing near the water, and says, "Look out there." I look past her, following her gaze as it skims across the lake. "That's mangata."

"What is?"

"See the streak of moonlight across the top of the water? A silver road leading to the moon. That means moon street in Swedish."

"Mangata. I've never heard of it."

"No matter where in the world I was, if I was near water, I could pretend to traipse across the water to some magical land." Embarrassment takes over and she dips her head with a grin still on her face. "Silly, but some nights it was nice to have an escape."

Leaves crinkle under my feet as I move in front of her. When she looks up, I cup her face, leaning my head against hers. "If I could make a wish, I'd wish that one day you don't need an escape."

"Like now," she replies with watery eyes staring into mine. "Like the past month with you."

I nod and lean down to kiss her—slow and sweet—like she needs in the moment. Like I need from her. Our lips part, but our heads remain together. With my eyes closed, I breathe her in, the sound of the water nearby, and the night that should be winding down but feels like we're suddenly given limitless opportunity. "Chloe," I say just wanting to feel the shape of her name on my tongue again.

She opens her arms and brings me into her fold with the blanket wrapping around me. "Joshua," she whispers.

Branches crack under tires right before the headlights catch us. "Fuck," I grind between gritted teeth.

Clinging to me, she peeks over her shoulder. "Are we going to be arrested?"

"No," I say, recognizing the truck when it comes through the clearing. "He's an asshole, though. Don't say anything. Okay, Chloe?"

"I'm scared."

I tuck her behind me, leaving my hand on her hip. "Don't be. I'll handle it."

Her blanketed arms are around my middle as she whispers against my back, "We can't be kicked out of school. It's our last year."

Turning to her, I give her hand a squeeze. "It's going to be fine. I promise. Just let me do the talking."

The truck door creaks open, needing a good oiling, and the driver gets out adjusting the Red Sox baseball cap. Hitting the Blazer as he passes, Jon Dwight says, "Should have known it was you. Thought we had an understanding, Josh?" He cocks an eyebrow when he sees Chloe. "Trying to impress some girl on my time? I was knee deep in the Notre Dame game and had to drag my ass out here."

He always did support the wrong teams, like being on my dad's payroll. I was hoping he'd be taking the night off or sleeping on the job. Figures that he'd get wind of me down here and want to give me a hard time. "From what I remember, the agreement was that you'd stop harassing me, Dwight."

"You're trespassing. I can call the cops if you'd like them to settle this." Jon glares over my shoulder and the gall that he thinks he has a right to even look at Chloe has me fisting my hands. "Or your da—"

"Call the cops if you want." My hard glare has him stopping that train of thought. Jon knows better than to laud my dad over my head. That he's doing it now makes him more of an asshole than he already is. The last thing I want is for Chloe to learn about my dad from this idiot.

Chloe's shivering body presses against me. "Don't say that." Glancing at her over my shoulder, I see her eyes cast down. She whispers, "Let's just go."

"Listen to her, Josh."

Leading her to the passenger's side of my truck, I open the door. "Warm up." She holds the blanket closed at her throat, nodding. She's not shivering anymore, but I can see the concern in her eyes.

I return to the front of the truck and grab the rest of our clothes. Putting on my jeans, I ask him, "You gonna stare like a fucking perv?"

You'd think he was the police by how he plants his hands to his sides and looks down on me. "I could end this cushy setup you got going. I suggest you show a little more respect, kid."

"You can't end shit, *kid*," I volley back since he's my age. "You're a lackey at best and a guard dog at worst. You were hired to piss me off."

He laughs. "It's working."

I pull my shirt over my head but bust him eyeing Chloe. "Eyes over here, fucker."

"You think you own this town, but Evans doesn't mean shit around here anymore."

"Tell that to my father."

"A one-night stand may have given you that last name, but you'll never

have the clout that precedes you.”

I don't need clout and I don't care about the reputation my dad left behind. I'm my own man. “Fuck off, Dwight.”

“I will when you get the fuck out of here, *Junior*, and stop trespassing.”

I'm not in the mood to argue with an asshole from high school getting a taste of power. I want to get Chloe out of here, so I take our stuff to the cab and get in.

Through the open window, I hear him say, “Have a good night, Evans,” but the sincerity is seriously lacking in his tone.

I start the engine and back up, getting back on the path we drove in on. Flipping him off, I reply, “Fuck you very much, Dwight.”

Chloe remains quiet until I pull onto the main road. “An old friend of yours?”

“No.”

I'm about to set the record straight, but then she says, “I've never been more attracted to someone than I am to you right now.” *Huh?* “You were just so . . . *Gah*. So hot. I thought you might end up in a fight.”

“Wait, I'm confused.” Glancing over at her, I ask, “You wanted me to get in a fight?”

“No, not at all, but seeing you ready to protect me is the sexiest thing I've ever witnessed.” She's squirming in her seat as if she can't control the adrenaline, or maybe that's desire I see lit in her eyes.

I pull off to the side of the road and shift into park. “I'd fight for your honor any day.”

She shifts closer. “I'm so turned on right now.”

“This is what happens when you have the best sex. You crave it.”

“I'd roll my eyes, but you're right. Kiss me, Joshua.”

I lean over and bring her closer. Just before our lips meet, she says, “Wait.”

“What?”

“We're not in trouble, right? Like our names aren't on the bad list, are they?”

“Bad list?” I cock an eyebrow and smirk. “Fuck yeah, your name is on the bad list. You're a bad, bad girl.”

Her mouth crashes into mine, force and intention driving her. Ripping herself away from me, her breath is heavy and loud like mine. That fire in her eyes an inferno. “I want you,” she purrs.

“Now?”

Nodding excitedly, she commands, “Now.”

“Here?”

She looks around at the cars driving by, the thrill in her eyes beginning to dim. “No,” she replies under nervous laughter. “Somewhere no one can see us.”

I pull back on the road and detour down the first dirt road I find and shift into park. “How’s this?”

Her seat belt flies off and she’s coming for me. “Shift the seat back.”

It doesn’t go flat, but it’s down enough, and I’m lying back in less than two seconds. Flipping the blanket from her shoulders, she’s still bare on top, but the wet panties are gone. “You’re a goddess.

“Pants off.”

“Fuck me,” I groan, so ready to be buried deep inside her.

“That’s the plan, hottie.”

18

Chloe

“I knew there was a bad girl under those good girl clothes.”

Opening my eyes, I sit up, resting on my elbows in the back of the Blazer. There wasn't enough room in the front for us to do things properly. “What exactly are good girl clothes?”

With the tailgate down, I can see almost all of him—all the good stuff at least. Joshua pulls his jeans up, leaving the trail that leads lower exposed. “Those sweet sweaters you wear. The pearl earrings and diamonds. The shoes you have in all the colors.” Grabbing his shirt, he pulls it down over his head. His hair is a sexy mess with the soft wave more defined after swimming. “They're more conservative. More Rhode Island.”

“Connecticut isn't exactly wild, so what are you saying?”

“I like when you wear jeans and your sneakers, that leather jacket you have, and I don't know. Don't take it wrong. I like the good girl clothes on you, too. I like everything on you. *And off.*”

Grabbing my bra and T-shirt, I start getting dressed. “Don't worry. I'm not offended. I see the way you look at me when we go out, when my clothes are tighter or more revealing. I wear what makes me feel good, but that look—the one that you wear around me—that makes me want to be very bad.”

A wry grin reduces the air in the vicinity. He has a way of stealing my breath without even trying. “I like you bad, Chloe, but you can be whatever you want to be with me.” Setting his shoes on the bed of the SUV, he climbs in and right over my body. “Clothes don't matter to me. You do.” He kisses me slow, the scent of me still gracing his lips, and then sits back, putting his socks and shoes on.

He's given me pure, unadulterated happiness. “Joshua?”

“Yeah?” he replies without looking back as he finishes up.

I reach forward and touch his arm, waiting until his eyes find mine again. When they do, the corners soften. I say, “I love you. Those words will never be enough for how I feel about you, but know the meaning is there inside them.”

“I love you. Bigger than the sky.”

My swallow is too loud when I let my mood dictate the sound. I kind of hate how my heart pounds so heavy for him. It makes me feel weak, vulnerable in ways I’ve never felt. And there doesn’t seem to be a remedy for it other than being with him. I fumble to get dressed, letting that moment drift into the trees where the crickets sing.

Situating ourselves in the front seats, he rolls down his window and starts the engine, so I crank mine down as well. He pulls onto the highway with his hand resting on my leg. My heart is not my own, but his, the weight of him keeping me as if I’ll vanish if he doesn’t hold me here. “Do I fit into your world?”

“You are my world. You’re different, Chloe,” he says, seeming to finish our conversation from earlier. “Life hasn’t burned you or buried you in some hole that you’ve had to dig yourself out of.” He rubs my knee. “It’s a good thing. You’ve been fortunate in life and not left with emotional scars.”

I think about the wounds he can’t see, the ones that have held me back from experiencing life to some degree. A lack of real friends until I met Ruby, and distrust was always an ally. He says, “Don’t overthink it. It was an off-the-cuff remark.” My knee is gently squeezed. “You’re not damaged. That’s a good thing. It’s fun to see the world through your eyes.”

When the wind whips through the window, it feels good against my skin. I lean into it with my eyes closed as the smell of fall sneaks in, rain hovering in the clouds that have drifted overhead. I open my eyes unable to see the moon, but I can see Joshua in the faint glow of the dashboard. Resting my arm in the opening of the window, I say, “I’m not a Goody Two-shoes.” I hate the way I sound so immature and swipe the flyaways from my forehead.

His eyes are on the road, but his mind is somewhere else entirely. I’m tempted to speak and fill in the empty space between us, but I want to know what he’s thinking and that means giving him the room to sow his thoughts. He finally asks, “Why do you care what anyone thinks?”

“I don’t,” I say, tasting the lie. I’ve put so much time and energy into caring what *everyone* else thinks—my father, my mom, so-called friends in school, teachers, my professors, and now Joshua. It’s not fair to put that burden on him. He’s shown me I can be me in whatever form I want to be with him, and that’s enough.

“You sure?”

My shoulders reveal the weakening of my stance as I slink down in my

seat. “Everyone cares to a point.”

“They do, but you should only care about the opinions of people who matter to you.”

The injustice placed upon him starts eating at me. Of course, he’s right, but why didn’t I realize that with anyone in the past. I lean over. I could kiss him if this seat belt had more give. “Like you. Your opinion matters to me.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” He grins. At a light, he stretches across the empty space between us and steals a kiss. He didn’t have to steal it, though. I would give him whatever he wants. “Your opinion matters to me, too.”

While I riddle through the changes I’m making in my life, he’s already reached the destination, so sure of who he is. It’s enviable. And attainable, especially with him having my back.

“Good,” I reply, returning to my side of the SUV. With all this honesty, guilt resurfaces. Why’d I ever lie? I should have just told him in the first place and at the very least, when I confessed my virginity. Here I am in the same situation, but this time, he has a right to be mad. “Joshua, I’m . . .”

Turning onto my street, he drives slower, and glances over. “You what?”

“I’m twenty,” I say, ripping the bandage off.

His expression remains steady, and he turns back to pull into a parking spot. After he cuts the engine, his eyes begin to narrow as he stares ahead, seeming to digest the admission. Then his head angles toward me. “I know you are.” His eyes leave me as he looks out the windshield, resting his forearms on the steering wheel. “Why’d you lie?” His voice is deep, his words coming slower.

I hate when I can’t read him. First, his expression and now, his tone. As I stumble through the reasons, none seem legit enough to justify it anymore.

He says, “I’ve taken you to Lucky’s. That’s not bending rules, Chloe. That’s breaking the law, so I’m trying to figure out why you’d let me. You lied about being a virgin and now—”

“I didn’t lie about that. You didn’t ask.”

Wringing the steering wheel, he sends a hard look my way. “Why would I?”

“Exactly. It didn’t cross your mind that I might be.”

He sighs, sitting back. “Look, that is what it is. If I could go back, I might have done things differently armed with the information I have now. For you. But I like our first time, and you seemed to like it too, so I’m not trying to dwell on the act of what we did. But why does it seem like you’re hiding stuff

from me? That's the part I don't understand." When his eyes return to mine, he says, "I could have been arrested for giving you alcohol in Lucky's."

Wringing my hands, I start to panic, but then seeing his shoulders relax has me easing in response. He says, "I've been drinking since I was seventeen, but it bothers me you didn't tell me important details about you. It makes no sense why you lied about your age."

"I felt you wouldn't look at me the same, just like before."

"The same as?"

I need to remember he's always taken me as I am, at face value, trusted me, and now empowered me with the opportunity to explain my side of things. "How you're looking at me now."

"That's disappointment."

"I know. I'm very familiar with being on the receiving end with my father. I can bear to see it on him. I can't bear it with you."

Guilt shadows his eyes, and I feel I'm losing him. His hand rubs my leg, and he leans over with a gentleness taking over his expression. "I'm sorry."

"You don't need to be. You did nothing wrong. I'm the one who's sorry."

"So, when you said you didn't have your ID, you meant you didn't have a fake one, right?" I nod, guilty as charged. He adds, "That makes sense."

He pops the door and comes around to open mine. "Look, I want you to know that your age doesn't change anything other than maybe we don't hang out at Lucky's until your birthday. There's plenty to do legally until then." His eyes flick up to the building beside us. "How about we start over and not lie to each other anymore?"

I get out and lean against the closed door. "I won't."

His hand covers the miles of my waist. "The truth is, whether you're twenty or twenty-one, I love you, Chloe. I'm on your side."

"I love you, too." I fist the front of his shirt, pulling him closer.

"With all this love between us . . ." Swept up, I'm tossed over his shoulder, my voice going hoarse from laughter as I reach down to smack his ass.

"What are you doing? You're going to hurt yourself, Evans."

"You're light as a feather, Fox."

Carrying me to the door, he adds, "I have lots of ideas, but none of them include being down here."

I finally catch my breath, my cheeks hurting from smiling so big. We make it to the second floor before I'm righted onto my feet. Starting up the

next flight, I shrug, poking him in the chest when I pass. “And here I thought you worked out.”

“I’ll show you a workout,” he says, chasing me up the stairs. “As soon as we get in that apartment.”

I run faster. “You have to catch me first.”

He does too. Just as I reach the door, I’m spun, my back pressed to the wall, his lips on me. Despite the searing kiss, his hands are gentle, dragging along my arms until he reaches my wrists. Pinned by his middle, he brings our palms together high against the wall.

As he tilts his head to the side of mine, his breath is harsh against my ear. I turn to plant soft kisses on the corner of his mouth while my arms come down and around his neck.

“Chloe?” His breath is still jagged, the darker pupils overruling the molten chocolate when he stares into my eyes.

Kiss.

Kiss.

I wrap myself around him. “Yes?” I whisper, the question only a breath.

“I never want to be without you. Not ever.”

It’s not his tone, but the sincerity and the intensity in his eyes that have me believing him.

19

Joshua

The door down the hall opens, and just as Ruby catches us in action, I'm tugged inside.

Ruby yells, "You're no fun, Fox."

"He's for my enjoyment only, Darrow. Find your own hot chef." She kicks the door closed.

"Cook," I correct, kissing the soft skin of her neck and moving lower.

"Everything you cook is amazing." Pulling back, she cups my face. "If you wanted, you could be the greatest chef the world has ever known."

The significance of her belief in me is bigger than she realizes. Like how my mom supports me; it means a lot that she believes in me. As a disappointment to my dad, I can only hope she never sees me as the bastard kid no one cares enough about to want to succeed. I'm about to get mushy, but fuck, she's distractingly sexy. "Now, where were we?"

Excitement flickers through her eyes. "Love. We were saying how much we love one another." She tugs me hard, so close until I'm pressed against her, causing the door to rattle on its hinges. "And this."

We kiss, and when I start to lower, our mouths unwillingly part. I unbutton her jeans and tug them over her hips, kissing her hip bone and then across her stomach. Flipping off her shoes, she wiggles out of the denim while balancing on me. I hold the bow of her hips, putting enough pressure to keep her still as I kiss one inner thigh and then the other before moving to the apex.

When I glance up, her eyes remain on mine. So much beauty in such a small package. Kissing her soft center, I then prop her knee over my shoulder and take it deeper with my tongue, wanting her to fall apart for me like she did in the back of the Blazer.

She's utterly distracting in the best of ways—her body pliable and welcoming, her moans of pleasure as she wriggles in reaction. How she tastes. Fuck, I can't wait for her to take me in that sweet mouth of hers.

Her body tremors, my name coming in waves off her tongue as she comes

on mine. Her hands tap once against the wood before they whiten from the pressure. Standing, I collect her in my arms and carry her to bed.

She lies back on her elbows with her legs hanging over the edge, steady breath just out of reach. Watching me undress, she says, “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“It’s not wise to wear your heart on your sleeve.”

“Even if I only wear it for you?”

I shift onto the bed and lie back next to her. “Yes.” With her curled against my side, the quiet of the room has me thinking about being at the lake. It’s then that I realize I’ve done the same thing I’ve accused her of—lying by omission. I kiss her head, and my arm tightens around her. “You know, I haven’t exactly told you my life story, have I? I was bothered because you concealed part of your past, but now I see that if I’m asking you for the whole truth, and to trust me, then I need to do the same.” I take a deep breath, exhaling the darkest part of my life, “My father is in my life, but few people know.”

Her shirt hangs off her shoulder as she pushes up on her hand and looks over at me. “He is?”

“Barely, but he’s a ghost that hangs around, haunting my life. I’m told by my friends and other people that I should be grateful, but I’m not. I’m bitter even though he’s financing my future.”

“I had no idea.”

“He’s nothing more than a stockbroker keeping track of his investment.” I shrug. “There’s no emotional attachment or anything. According to him, I need to be fixed. I’m a problem left unsolved.”

“I don’t understand, Joshua.” She sits up again, pressing her hand to my leg to still it. I didn’t even fucking know it was bouncing. Even tics that usually stay buried can make appearances without permission when triggered. My father is that trigger. “Fuck. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No, I’m glad you did,” she replies, lying back down next to me. Our bodies aren’t touching, and I don’t like the distance. “It’s weird how pain stays with you, almost tricking you into believing you’re still living life as normal.”

I take her hand from resting on her stomach and hold it. We don’t have to touch for sex, but in the time that exposes us, it’s nice to feel her heat. “You say that as if you’ve experienced firsthand.”

“Admitting the pain sometimes helps to keep me grounded in reality.”

She looks at me. The love we spoke about earlier still shines in her eyes. “I never thought I’d meet someone who makes me want to share my secrets either.”

Either.

It’s a small slip that encapsulates the sentiment.

We’ve been in this relationship, inside a perfect bubble and untouchable by the problems of our pasts. Maybe that was a mistake. Seeing each other with flaws, scars invisible to the eye but have shaped our lives, will only deepen what we already share.

“Fear and pain feel the same these days,” she says, “I used to fear upsetting my dad. Now I fear losing you.”

I have that same fear. I told her she is my world, but how do I fit into her world back home? It’s not wrong for her dad to want the best for his daughter, and I’m not the best. He’ll see through me the minute we meet.

That won’t deter me from loving her. I’ll love her until the day I die. “Don’t live in fear. Live in love.” Her right cheek kicks into a grin. Taking her hand, I hold it between us, and say, “If it makes you feel better, I’m in just as deep.”

“That might be bad for you, but it’s good to hear.” She finds comfort, resting her head on the pillow next to me. “What contact do you have with your dad?”

“Not much beyond the usual birthday card, Christmas money. I went to visit him once.” I glance over to see her eyes locked on me in full attention. I return my gaze to the ceiling. “He lives in the Hamptons most of the time, but keeps an \$8 million dollar apartment in Manhattan for when he has ‘work obligations’ at the office.” I can’t help but shake my head every time I think of that. “The man is loaded. Hence, paying for my school, but even I know it’s only because I bear his last name. He probably loses sleep over the thought of me tarnishing it.”

“Do you know this or—”

“I went to visit one summer when I was thirteen. I was told to keep my shoes outside the front door and my clothes packed. I was supposed to be there for a month to get to know him.”

Her arm drapes over me protectively as if she can keep the pain away. “It didn’t go well?”

She’s right—I’m carrying these hard feelings around like I owe them money. They may have kept me grounded, but they’re not good to hang onto.

“No. I overheard him tell his wife that my mom was a gold-digger. He just wished he had listened to his parents back then. He wouldn’t be in this mess if he had.”

Her soft sigh is followed by a kiss to my shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. The truth only motivates me.”

“What did you do?”

I chuckle. “Hitched my way back to Connecticut. My mom was worried sick, but I had a good three-hour head start before my dad even noticed I was missing.”

Sitting up abruptly, she covers her mouth, a look of horror working through her expression. “Oh my God! Are you crazy?”

I roll on top of her. “Crazy for you.”

“And horny. Always so horny.”

“Says the horniest girl I know.” I’m pushed away and left laughing. She adds, “And strong.”

“Dang straight.”

“I kind of adore your version of swearing.” I continue chuckling. Her own laughter lightens, and I watch as the sympathy enters her pupils and spreads. That’s the last thing I want from her. I roll to my back. “Don’t do that. We were having fun. It’s fine. Don’t feel sorry for me.”

Her touch is tentative but with no less purpose than when she hugs me. I won’t move away from her, but I’d like to hide from this conversation, regretting bringing my dad up at all.

She says, “My heart hurts for you, Joshua, but I don’t feel sorry for you. I’m proud of you.” My gaze returns to her. “You made the best of a bad situation while still doing well in school.”

Fine. I give in. It’s easy to do when I have the best girlfriend in the world. “C’mere.” She does, laying her chest on me and keeping her eyes locked on mine. I ask, “Do you know how amazing you are?”

“You’re making this about me, but I’m so amazed how you’ve overcome so much.”

“Me talking about how incredible you are doesn’t change—” The pad of her finger presses to my lips.

“No. Don’t. I hate being the center of attention.”

I kiss her fingertip. “Can I share one thing, and then we can drop it?”

Rolling her eyes, she sighs. “Fine. One and that’s it.”

Weaving my hands into her hair, I angle it so I can see those emeralds

sparkle for me. Tucking hair behind her ear, I love seeing her full face free of makeup. So goddamn gorgeous. “You make me want to be a better man, Chloe.” Rubbing my fingertips over that smile that makes my heart beat, she bites me lightly. “And you’re feisty.”

My finger is released as a kiss lands on my cheek. “For what it’s worth, you are already a better man than any other I know.”

Her hair is still damp when I slide my fingers above the nape of her neck. Doesn’t matter how we look, though, or what has brought us to this moment in time. It only matters that we got here. “One day, I’m going to marry you.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“Don’t you worry about that, baby.” Pressing my palm to her chest, I feel the rapid beat matching mine. “I always keep my promises.”

20

Chloe

“How did you talk me into this? I look a mess,” I say, whipping my hair into a knot on the top of my head.

“A beautiful mess.” He takes hold of my hand, and we step closer to the counter as the line moves forward. Although we’ve been together a while, my hand is held without hiding it from anyone, though I’d almost understand if he didn’t. Despite our declarations privately, we’re still new to the rest of the world, our innermost circles the only ones privy.

As he kisses my hand, the hunger for each other earlier still permeates the connection. He asks, “What would you like?”

While he stares up at the chalkboard menu, I stare at him. I want him. I want this. I want my world to be making love at night, and coffee and muffins in the morning.

“Chloe?”

“Yes?” I don’t care that my voice is wistful as I admire him. I’m sure he’s used to it anyway.

He chuckles. “We’re up.”

The girl behind the counter doesn’t look as amused as he does. I search for something that sounds appetizing. “Black coffee and a blueberry muffin.”

Joshua says, “I’ll have the same.” Before I have time to open my purse, he’s handing her money. “I got it.” He kisses my neck, and my eyes fall closed to enjoy the sweet sensation. He kisses me from pure desire, staking claim to my heart in front of everyone.

When I open my eyes, I find other people’s attention trained on us, including familiar ones. Ruby waves from a table by the windows. She has her laptop out with the largest coffee mug I’ve ever seen—empty, and a plate with crumbs remaining.

I run my hand along Joshua’s bicep, feeling extra all around—physically and emotionally—with this man. “Ruby’s in the corner. I’m going to visit with her.”

Taking the receipt, he turns back to me. “I’ll come over when I get the

order.” When he moves to the other end of the counter, I hurry to Ruby’s table.

“I didn’t know you woke up before noon?” I tease, sitting across from her.

“First of all, no, we aren’t talking about me when you’re walking around town with the hottest guy ever on your arm like it’s no big deal. Just look at Josh.” She sighs dreamily, letting her gaze stay fixed on my guy.

I giggle because she’s right. Turning around, I get a good look at him while he waits. “I don’t even know what to say to that, so I’ll let you stew in your feels for him for now.”

“It’s my feels for you I’m stewing in. It’s called jealousy.” If it weren’t for the huge grin, I’d think she was being serious. When her eyes return to me, she pops upright, her spine stiff as a board. “Oh, my God! I almost forgot. How is the sex going? Sounds like it’s going well from my side of the wall.” Glancing over at Joshua, she eyes him from head to toe. “I’d give up my virginity right here for him, if I still had it.”

She laughs, and continues, “Would have beat Newman Howard sophomore year in the cabana of his parents’ Hamptons house.” Grabbing hold of my wrist, she’s still talking a mile a minute. I’m not sure she wants to hear from me but prefers the excitement of living vicariously. “So, tell me. How do you manage to get out of bed some days when you have that hunky piece of man-meat lying next to you? Also, other than an ‘it was good,’ I never got the juicy details of your first time. I have a million questions.”

I look around, feeling eyes on us. Ruby doesn’t understand the use of an inside voice. “Sorry,” I mouth to a woman nearby feeding her toddler. Leaning in closer, I whisper to Ruby, “It was better than I expected and nothing like I read online. If you insist on hearing a detail . . . I feel empty without him. Even sitting here.”

“Without him inside you? Girl, you’re making me miss that new relationship sex. It’s so different than one-night stand sex.”

Resting my forearms on the table, I’m now here for this discussion. “How?”

“If you know it’s a hookup, it’s like *The Fast and the Furious*. Relationship sex varies from making love to fucking to learning what the other likes and gets off on.” She shrugs. “Trust me, it’s all good. A one-night stand never left me feeling like I’m missing a part of myself, though.”

That’s it. I glance back once more to make sure Joshua doesn’t overhear

us talking. “Yes, that’s exactly how I feel.”

“Aw, Clo. I think it’s more than sex. I think you’re in love.” She reaches out, nudging my hand. “That’s the sweetest thing ever.” Sitting back again, she adds, “Now please tell me he goes downtown.”

“New York?”

Snapping her fingers, she then aims them down. “Your vagina, Chloe.”

“Ruby.” I hide my face between shielding hands. “Topic change. How was the donut?”

She’s a tough opponent with a steadfast stare and unrelenting spirit. “Don’t toy with me, lady. I need the details.”

“Fine. Yes.” My giggle extends beyond our table. “He goes downtown.”

“Downtown New Haven?”

I cringe when I hear his soothing tone—so innocent to the conversation at hand—that I stare at Ruby between pinched eyelids. She replies to my unspoken question. “Yes, he’s behind you.”

Well then, since he heard already, *overheard* that is, I might as well be honest. “We were talking about my vagina, Joshua.” I receive two offended glares from the older couple one table over.

“Ah,” he replies, taking the chair next to me. Setting the coffee on the table, he grins to himself. “I would offer to let you guys finish this conversation without me, but what’s the fun in that?”

Ruby’s hand flies out. “Exactly. And by the way, I like you.” Joshua’s eyes bulge until she adds, “Not like that. Well, like that, but I don’t mess around with my friends’ S.O.’s.”

His arm comes around me as he kicks back, making himself at home. “Am I your significant other, Chloe?”

“Why do I feel like you two will get along like a house on fire?”

That leaves them laughing, and although we came in here to pick up our order and go, we stay. The coffee is unloaded from the tray, and the blueberry muffins are pulled from the sack. As I pick off little bird bites, Joshua doesn’t hold back and takes large chunks out of his muffin, finishing it in a few bites.

Pulling my chair closer, he kisses just beneath my ear, causing me to giggle and blush. It’s so different being free in front of others like we are when we’re alone together.

A heavy sigh from Ruby gets my attention. “This living vicariously isn’t as fun as I thought. I need to find myself a man. The hookup apps for this town suck.”

“I have friends,” Joshua says, “who’d be happy to help you out. Actually, you’d be doing them a favor.”

Laughing, she says, “Thanks for the offer. I’m not quite there yet, but I’ll keep you posted.”

I’m enjoying my closest friend and boyfriend getting along, but I’m beginning to feel guilty for taking time away from my studies. “I have so much research to do. My dad would flip out if he knew I’d blown off the morning.”

Contentedly slumped against the wall, Joshua slips his hand to my lower back, his thumb rubbing the skin just under the hem of my shirt. “Why is he so tough on you?”

“Because Foxes don’t fail.”

“They don’t even make B’s,” Ruby inserts.

His eyes haven’t left mine. I’m not sure I see empathy buried in them, but I definitely see curiosity. “Do you always make straight A’s, Chloe?”

“Yes,” I whisper as if I’m ashamed. My dad is hard on me, but I know it’s because he loves me. I can’t imagine not having him in my life. I’ve never felt shame over my achievements, so why do I now?

His hand slides around to my leg, and he says, “I find your intelligence incredibly sexy.”

I think I melt into my chair, becoming a puddle of mush in his hands. “I’ve been told I can be intimidating.”

“Being smart isn’t intimidating. It’s a turn-on.” He always makes me feel special, like the center of his galaxy.

Waving hands grab our attention. “Helloooo,” Ruby sings. “I’m still here.” Happiness bubbles inside me. I’ve never had this before—this feeling of acceptance and that I’ve found my tribe—until now.

Ruby rests back, and continues, “She’s smart and sexy, yada yada. Back to me. I have a ten-thousand-word essay due before the middle of next month. I can barely keep up with my other classes this early into the semester, and then the prof throws this into the mix.” Her eyes fix on Joshua. “Are your professors all assholes, too?”

I’m interested to hear about his school as well. “How are your classes going?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary to report. School. Work. Chloe. It’s not been so bad this year.”

Bumping into his arm, I just coo because I have nothing smart aleck to

say about that. “Todd once said that school was always easy for you, and that you never had to study, even back then.”

He side-eyes me. Not upset, but entertained. “Todd doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

Intrigued, Ruby rests her arms on the table, and asks, “So he’s wrong?”

I rub the soft, worn-in material shrouding his arm and the hard muscle underneath. “He’s not wrong, but it doesn’t come as easy as he thinks. I study when I have to. Finance isn’t my dream, but I want a good job, so I follow the money. It helps that I have a good memory because it doesn’t interest me.”

Ruby rests her chin on her hand. “You’re lucky. I have the worst.”

Testing the waters, I throw out, “You’d make a great chef.” That seems to be the dream he never admits.

“There’s no money in the restaurant business unless you find a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. It’s rare.”

“Speaking of no money, I’m hoping to get out and take pictures later.”

“Ruby is an amazing photographer.” When she waves me off for the compliment and then signals me to continue, I giggle.

Joshua asks, “Do you want to do that professionally?”

“I struck a deal with my parents. I’ll get a degree, but then I get one year off after to pursue photography. If it doesn’t work out, I have my backup plan.”

It’s moments like these that I don’t understand why my dad insists on my being just like him. Working the emergency room is still being a doctor.

Joshua asks, “Which is?”

“Marketing. I never did change it.”

Placing his crumpled napkin back in the bag, he nods. “I made a similar deal, but mine doesn’t allow a backup plan. There’s only one plan. Me working in finance after graduation.” He smiles, but it’s not the one I usually see, the one that has happiness built inside. “Sometimes we do what we have to do to survive,” he adds as if he has to justify the previous comment.

“What about your happiness?” I ask.

His gaze is soft when it lands on me, his hand firm when he holds my hand under the table. “Does that matter if what you’re doing gives another person happiness?”

“Yes. You can’t sacrifice everything that matters to you to make someone else happy. That’s a temporary fix—”

“Take your own advice, Clo.” Ruby’s impatient fingers tap up and down as she slings the words in my direction.

Shooting her a hard look, I grit, “Point taken.”

She stands. “I’m going to get another coffee, but know that I said what I did because I care. We all have sacrifices to make, but we also only get one life. We need to live the one that makes us happy.”

I know she means well, but she’s also well aware of the pressure my father puts on me. I don’t need any extra, though I appreciate that she’s willing to defend my dreams. “We do,” I start. “We’re going to take off. I’m already ready for a nap.”

Out on the sidewalk, Joshua says, “It’s good to have friends who support you no matter what.”

“It is.” We cross the street, but I can’t let something go, so I pull him into the doorway of a bank that’s closed.

With his back pressed to the window, the urge to kiss him is too strong to be appropriate. “What are we doing, Chloe?”

“I, uh . . .”

A playful grin sets itself right on his handsome face. Taking me by the hips, he slips his hands around to my backside, holding me right where I want him. My heart races as I stare into his eyes, my breathing shallow and my hands . . . well, I want to touch him, feel him, grab him, and kiss him.

So I do.

I kiss him, and when I pull back, I add, “Your happiness matters, Joshua. It may not matter to your dad, but it does to so many other people. You’re not less than anyone, so you need to get that out of your head.”

“You’re very convincing, Miss Fox.” Appearing impressed, he looms back with a wry smile. “It’s not too late to go into law.”

“Not interested in law. Only interested in you.” Squeezing my arms around him, I savor this moment that feels stolen on a busy street. “I hope it will be like this forever.”

“It will.” His response comes quick and firm as if he already sees our future together.

I hold onto the same faith. “Nothing can touch us.”

“Not ever.”

21

Chloe

We slip deeper into October and like the weather, the change in Joshua and me, as a couple, is evident. Our lives are lived in a bubble of our own making.

I didn't realize how tenuous that bubble could be until I received a text last night.

"I'm the one who should be stressing, so why are you worried?" Joshua asks, running his hand through his hair for like the tenth time since he parked around the corner.

"I've never introduced someone I love to my mom before." I halt on the sidewalk and turn to him. "How do I look?"

"Beautiful. Be honest, Chloe." He fidgets with the hem of my sweater. "How is she going to feel about meeting me? I'm not some fancy Newport . . ." His hand waves aimlessly between us. "Whatever fancy people are in Newport. I'm from the wrong side of New Haven, and it's going to show."

Lifting up, I cup his face, my anxiety turning into excitement. "You earned your spot at Yale, so you don't owe any explanations. As for my mom, she's going to love what makes you different."

"What's that?"

"Your thoughtfulness and most importantly to her, how well you treat me."

When he kisses me, it feels like more than Sunday brunch is on his mind. Unlike the weather, we get steamier the more time that passes. And I'm here for it, kissing him right back and deepening it.

A clearing of the throat draws our attention. When I see my mom standing not ten feet away, clutching her black YSL purse, I clear my own throat in response, take two steps back, and nervously tuck my hair behind my ear. "Mom," I say, internally beating myself up for sounding like a ten-year-old who got caught playing dress up in her jewels.

"Hi." The twinkle in her eyes reveal she absolutely caught everything. Coming forward with her hand out, she says, "You must be Joshua?"

“I am, ma’am,” he replies. A crack in his tone has me restraining a laugh. Poor guy. I’ve never seen him nervous before this morning. I take his free hand, not afraid to show support for him in front of my mom. “It’s very nice to meet you, Mrs. Fox.”

“It’s *Ms.* Since the divorce, but you can call me Cat.”

I’m quick to add, “She insists on ‘*Cat Fox*’ these days.”

Shrugging unapologetically, she says, “I was Catherine Fox for more than twenty years of marriage back in Rhode Island. Now that I’m in Manhattan, I feel more like Cat.”

I think we got the point without the claws. “She’s gotten very sassy since she moved to the city.” The fact she hasn’t ventured far from her St. John’s wardrobe still makes me giggle, though. Always a classic despite the change in name and location.

“It’s not sass.” She caresses my cheek. I have a feeling she’s admiring her work—*me*. “It’s freedom, darling, and it tastes divine.”

Joshua tries to suppress his laughter, failing miserably while I embrace her. “It’s good to see you, Mom.”

“You, too.” Then she whispers, “He’s cute,” but I have an inkling not low enough when I see him smugly smiling as he brushes his nails across his shirt.

Cocky.

Sexy.

Swoony.

Now it’s me struggling not to laugh. “Forgive my mom. The single life agrees with her.”

“No apologies necessary. We only have one life. We should live the best one we can,” he says.

“Oh, I like him, Chloe.” My mom thumbs toward him before looping her arm with his. As they walk toward the café, she asks, “Isn’t my daughter beautiful? And so smart.”

“She is.”

They seem to forget I’m here, but that’s okay because it appears, she approves. When he holds the door open, I poke his hard abs as I dash into the restaurant. I feel guilty for not eating at Patty’s, but Joshua didn’t want that either. He said his mom would probably run home to grab the baby photos if we let her.

Out on the patio, time flows into another hour, and we’ve put a good dent

into a second pitcher of mimosas without my mom saying a word about me drinking the champagne cocktail. Laughing over shared stories of Joshua's and my childhoods, and her adventures in New York. I could have done without the mention of my "awkward stage" junior year in high school, though. "In my defense—" I start.

"Catherine? Chloe?"

I know the voice before visually confirming it. Reflexively, I take hold of Joshua's hand before looking over my shoulder.

Surprise angles my mom's face. "Trevor, what are you doing here?" *Mom has never liked him.*

"Brunch with friends."

She replies, "I forgot you attended Yale."

"I do. I didn't expect to see the lovely little Foxes—"

He reaches down to hug her and then turns to me. "Good to see you, Chloe."

"You too," I reply automatically. Twenty years of programming is hard to fix.

The table goes quiet as Trevor seemingly just notices Joshua. "Trevor League."

"Josh Evans," my guy replies.

Remaining tableside, Trevor continues staring. "You look familiar. Have we met?" Recognition colors his expression, and he snaps his fingers and points. "Wait. Aren't you the waiter at that diner downtown?"

"I cook and deliver, too." I hear a note of pride despite Joshua's temperament hardening.

"He's also a student." I'm quick to add.

Putting his hands in his pockets, Trevor makes himself too comfortable for my liking as he asks, "Oh, yeah. Where?"

My mom replies, "Yale."

Before Trevor can right his surprise, I bump into Joshua. "He's an economics major, like you." The pride I feel for him courses through me as well. "And legacy, like me."

Trevor's demeanor shifts like he walked into a secret society with a golden invitation. "Legacy, huh? Why are you working down at that dump if you're legacy, man?" I cringe, feeling sick for Joshua, as Trevor reaches to shake hands as if somehow being legacy earned Joshua the respect he should have been given from the beginning.

Joshua stands still holding my hand. “That dump is my mother’s restaurant. It’s a landmark in this town that she’s busted her ass to run for the past ten years. I’m a student, like you, but I’m also a proud townie. So tell me again how you really feel.”

I stand. “Joshua—”

“Joshua,” Trevor mimics as if he’s memorizing everything about him down to our bonded hands. “You and Chloe are dating?”

“We’re in love,” I blurt before remembering my mom is sitting across from us.

Trevor’s jaw hardens, and then he turns away. “I have friends waiting inside. It was good seeing you again, Catherine.”

“Ms. Fox.”

And that is why my mom is my *she-ro*.

With a scowl, he glances at Joshua once more, and then me. “Have a good lunch.” He’s quick to disappear. *Good.*

Palms smack down on the table, rattling the silverware. “Well, that was a bunch of hooey.” Nailing the levity, my mom starts topping off my glass. “He’s an asshole. No wonder you didn’t date for very long.”

“I’m surprised you would date him at all.” Joshua chuckles, but detecting the lack of lightness to his tone, I know it’s for my mom’s benefit. “So, he was . . . typical?” Joshua asks.

I reply, “Yes, for Newport, but he’s not my type.”

My mom adds, “He’s just like his father when we were Chloe’s age. Arrogant snobs, so full of themselves. Only thing that’s changed is the first name, which reminds me why I left that life behind. I’m even more happy that Chloe has.”

She’s not wrong, but I’m not sure I’d realized how right she is. *That’s not who I am anymore, or ever was. And I can see why it’s a good thing I’m leaving.* Joshua’s hand is still wrapped around mine when he glances over. “I’m glad she has as well.” Shifting, he says, “I need to head to work. I’ll see you later?”

“Yes. Definitely.” I don’t want him to go. I wish he didn’t have to, especially so soon after Trevor’s departure.

My mom gives Joshua a big hug. Then he kisses me before getting up. “Love you,” he whispers.

He remains bent down as I hold him to me. “I know you’re not asking, but I want you to know. It was two dates, and then we were done.”

His smile warms me over. “Good to know.”

“Love you. Say hi to your mom.”

“I will.” When he smiles, my lungs feel lighter, and I breathe easier. *God, I love this man.*

My mom and I return to my apartment, though I’m trying to recall the state I left it in. I grab Joshua’s cap from the couch where it had fallen off when we kissed for hours last night. My underwear is scooped from the floor where they came off shortly after. At least the towel is gathered to the side, giving us natural light.

She sets her bag on the coffee table and looks around while I sneak into the bedroom to hide the evidence in the hamper. When I return, she’s looking out the window, but she hears me, and her eyes connect with mine. “Maybe I’m late to figuring this out, but seeing you together and kissing on the sidewalk is not the same impression I had of the relationship. You’re in love with him.” There’s no accusation, only curiosity in her expression. “How long *have* you been dating?”

“A while.”

“You mentioned seeing someone, but what I saw today has grown beyond that.”

I lean against the arm of the couch. “It’s become serious.”

She moves to the couch and sits, adjusting the cushion behind her. “I can see how much he cares for you. It was hard for him to keep his eyes off you. You know I’m happy you’re finding balance in your life, but how does this relationship work into your plans?”

“I’m confused. You wanted me to date, and then when I do, you want me to study?” Pointing at Frankie, I say, “I’m nurturing the plant. Is that not enough?”

“It’s enough. You’re doing a great job with the plant and your life. What I’m trying to say is that I know school is handled. I also know that you are a driving force when it comes to your goals. Is he coming to New York with you?”

“We have time to figure it out. If I get accepted, I don’t have to be there until August.”

“You’re not concerned about such a loose plan for the future?”

I get two bottles of water from the cabinet. “You’re sounding a lot like Dad.”

“Your dad . . .” She stops, seeming to bite her tongue. When I look back

at her, concern has her reached the corner of her downcast eyes, weaving worries into the soft lines of her forehead.

“Mom?” I sit next to her, putting the bottles on the table. “What is it?”

When her eyes return to mine, she says, “Your dad came to see me in the city last weekend.”

“He did?” I fidget with my shirt. “He hates New York.”

“I didn’t want to lie to him, but I didn’t tell him much, Chloe. He knows you’re seeing someone, but I kept it light, which was all I knew at the time.”

“He wanted dirt on me?”

“No,” she replies, shaking her head. “He’s concerned.”

Frustrated, I cross my arms and sink back. “Why? I’ve given him no reason.”

“You know he wants you focused on school.”

“He’d be happier if I were a nun. Or sticking to his plan. Any deviation comes with repercussions.”

That makes her laugh humorlessly. “Maybe not a nun, but he’d be thrilled if you didn’t date until you were thirty.”

“It took twenty years, but I finally managed to disappoint him.” I’ve never been able to disappoint either one of them without guilt swiftly kicking me back in line. What about this time? Joshua? New York? The ER? Tugging my bottom lip under my teeth, I begin to worry.

Reaching over, she pats my leg. “He’s not disappointed. I think he’s more curious if this will stop the big plan he has for you.”

“That’s just it. It’s *my* plan now, and Joshua’s a part of it.”

Her hair briefly covers her eyes when she looks down as if the realization just hit her. Tucking her hair behind her ears, she sighs, a grin returning as she rests back again. “I can’t stay much longer, so I’d love to hear about you and Joshua concerning that plan.”

My heart beats to life from the mere mention of him, a memory of being with him at the lake and the way he looked at me that night racing back. I smile, not hiding it, but letting it match the afternoon sunshine streaming through the window.

Instead of playing down how important this relationship is to me, I free my heart to confess all the secrets I’ve kept to myself. “I’ve never met anyone like him.” Although I feel as transparent as cellophane, the urge to put words to these feelings overwhelm me. “We . . .” Doubt creeps back in, thickening my throat, hoping this doesn’t sour our conversation.

She embraces my hands and says, “You can tell me anything, sweetheart.”

“I had, *have* sex with him. We make love, and I feel it. I feel how much he loves me deep inside.”

The smile never wavers, but the corners of her eyes soften, like her tone. “I think you’re confusing sex and love, honey. Both can be very overwhelm—”

“I feel it when we’re not together that way, too.” Her smile allows me to drop my defenses, and the rush of relief is welcome. “Though now I know why people fixate on it. Studying it is way different from the act itself. Do I sound silly?”

“No. Not at all. It’s a beautiful way to connect with someone you love, and it sounds like that’s what it is for you. Seeing you two together, there’s no hiding the love you share.” Our hands entwine, and she adds, “It’s written in every glance.” Her smile is gentle and sincere.

“You’re not mad?”

“Why would I be mad? You’re twenty years old and a senior making straight A’s at an Ivy League university. You’ve found someone who treats you like you deserve, someone who makes you smile from within, and someone who supports your dreams. Joshua talked about you more than himself. What more could I want than for you to be with someone who treats you like a priority?”

I get up to hug her. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Just make sure you’re using protection.”

“Ugh. I knew it was too good to be true,” I reply, horrified as I settle across from her.

Shrugging unapologetically, she says, “I wouldn’t be a good parent if I didn’t at least say it.”

“You’ve always been a good parent, Mom.”

“Thank you. Now about your dad—”

Worry clenches my gut. “If it’s okay, can we not talk about him right now? I just want to enjoy this time with you instead.”

“Of course.” Leaning over, she rubs my arm. “I’m so happy for you, Chloe. I just have one question.” I wait for her to ask, “Why is a towel hanging over the window?” I start laughing, wholeheartedly.

Knowing she supports not only me but also Joshua and me as a couple has me feeling lighter. I was prepared for her to react to me being in love, to

dating a man who has become a part of my plans, but what I never expected was to find an ally, and today we did.

22

Chloe

A few months was all it took for this little apartment a few streets from campus, the shops, and the diner to morph from *mine* into *ours*.

I'm not sure when he stopped returning to his mom's, probably when Dwayne Evans moved in. He found a new home next to Frankie on the windowsill, and Joshua found one with me. It probably happened quick, like we fell for each other. We were caught in the tide and pulled out to sea before we realized how deep we had gotten. We lost our bearings as we lost ourselves in each other.

I don't have one regret.

Except one that forms a lump in my throat as I report to the front of the auditorium after class as requested. Again. Gripping the straps of my backpack, I say, "Hi, you wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes," Professor Tracey says, appearing frazzled as she flips through her bulky bag. Finally looking up, she stills her hands. "I was surprised to see the last assignment you submitted. It wasn't up to your usual standards."

Panic sets in as I ramble off an excuse, "I fulfilled the essay requirements. I even went over it twice."

"I've not known you to settle for the bare minimum and wanted to check in with you. Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine." My voice squeaks defensively. "I thought the requirements were met."

"I give a lot of room for interpretation in the requirements of my class, but your grades have been slipping with each assignment." She pulls a folder from the bag. I recognize it instantly by the title as mine. Although we submit projects online, she's old-school and prints everything out. "Actually, you're missing the key sheet, which was vital to the explanation of the topic you decided to pursue. Due to that missing element, I've had to fail you on this assignment."

My gut twists. "Fail me?" I ask, staring at the red F marked on the front.

"There's time to bring it up. I suggest you spend more time on the

remaining syllabus and making sure you're better prepared for the tests."

Wrapping my arms over my stomach, I feel my legs go shaky underneath me. "Can I still get an A for the class if I do that?"

Her shoulders fall, matching mine. "This particular assignment was weighted heavier than the remaining ones. So unfortunately, no. You can earn a B if you work hard, though."

"B? But—"

"That's all, Miss Fox." Her attention pivots to another student waiting a few feet away, leaving me standing there.

With the folder in my hand, I walk toward the door, numbness setting in. My steps are slow at first and then pick up until shame drives my motivation to get home.

The door has barely shut when my phone rings, giving me time to collapse and process this. Dropping my stuff on my desk, I dig out my phone and pause. *Dad.*

That's odd.

It's about to go to voicemail, and I'm tempted to let it. The timing couldn't be worse, but I have a feeling it can't be better for him. I answer because I know he won't stop calling until I do. "Dad, hi?"

"Glad I caught you, Chloe."

Heading into the kitchen, I stop to ask, "What's wrong?"

"I have a consult in five minutes, but this is the only break I have. Busy day."

He's a workaholic, another reason for the marriage to my mom failing. "Aren't they all?" I try to humor him, but it doesn't work, so I add, "What's going on?"

I smile when I see the bonsai trees sitting next to the sink. Joshua takes such good care of them. I pick Frankie up in one hand and return her to the sill.

"Your score arrived today," he replies.

"What score?" I retrieve Dwayne Evans.

"The MCAT practice test you took last month." My feet stop, leaving me shocked between the couch and the coffee table. *Oh, crap.* How could I forget the scores are sent to permanent addresses. He continues, "I'm concerned, Chloe. You only have a few months before the test. With this score, you'll be lucky to get accepted to any of the top medical schools."

"It's that bad?" I ask, setting the plant down on the table and then pacing

the length of my living room. I stumble over the toe of Joshua's sneaker left behind the couch. Recovering, I bend down and pick it up to return it to its partner by the door.

"Worse. I'm worried. I really expected more." His disappointment resonates through the line. "I've emailed you a copy. I suggest you spend time figuring out what went wrong. If we need to hire a tutor, we will."

Beyond being hit sideways by this news, I'm not sure what to say. I have no excuse other than I didn't study as much as I should have. "I'll study more. I'll study all Thanksgiving and Christmas break as well. You don't need to worry—"

"It's too late for that. You handle this, or I will."

Readjusting the phone to my ear, the shell starting to ache from the pressure, I huff. "I'm a senior in college. I think I can handle—"

"Then do it!" The pounding of his fist against that mahogany desk I was scared of sitting on the other side of growing up still triggers fear. "This is not the time to throw away a lifetime of hard work for some boy who doesn't care about your future."

Stunned, my feet grow roots to the wood beneath them. My breath is shallow as my mind reels from his words. "He cares." The tremble overwhelms my voice, but I push forth. "This is not about him. He wants nothing more—"

"Then to catch a Fox."

"That's not true," I reply, shaking my head. "You don't know Joshua. He likes me for me. He didn't know my last name when we met. He didn't know about you or our family when we started dating."

"Then what does he know?"

"He knows *me*, Dad."

"I don't believe that's all there is to it. Don't be naïve. They always want something." They? Joshua, the love of my life, has been relegated to a "they." If the bad grade didn't make me feel sick, that does. I pause to take a deep breath, needing the moment to control the emotions that want to rage. "Chloe?"

"He wants me. I know it's hard to believe, but that's all." Swallowing pains my throat. I move to the window and look out, wishing he was coming home after class instead of going to work. "Nothing more."

His heavy breath is heard through the line before he says, "Do you not understand that you are a Fox through and through—the money, the

reputation, the properties, the future? If he gets you, he gets everything.”

My knees waver under me, so I grip the corner of the wall and slide down to sit on the floor, my chest as hollow as my legs right now. I don’t have words or explanations. Nothing will make him understand how Joshua and I feel about each other. He’s never looked at me with dollar signs in his eyes. He sees me in the sunrise a new day brings—hope for the future—and love in the present. “You have a consult,” I remind, needing to end this before he hears me cry.

“Keep your goals in focus,” he says, his tone calm but firm. “The finish line is within sight, Chloe.”

“Okay.” It’s all I can muster.

“You’re signed up for another practice test when you’re home for the holidays. Prepare for it. We’ll talk soon.” He disconnects, leaving me hanging in the silence.

I sit there staring at the phone in my hand for I don’t know how long, and I start to doubt myself and my decisions. I haven’t lost my drive, but I’ve lost my routine.

Stress lodges in my chest before the sunsets and remains until it’s pitch black in my apartment.

Maybe running will help alleviate it. That’s what I used to do. Before Joshua. Changing my clothes, I then tighten my laces and turn on the treadmill. I’ve stopped using it every day, and I know I’m going to be punished for it before this session is over. I want to be, though. I want to feed the stress inside me through every footstep.

The first mile is hard, the drag on the belt beneath my feet noticeable compared to the lightness of running outside with Joshua on the weekends.

An F.

I push through two miles.

A bad test score.

Three miles.

Defeat from disappointing my father sinks in.

Tears form in my eyes on mile four, my failures sliding down my cheeks.

By the fifth mile, I’m angry again.

At myself.

At Joshua.

At my dad.

At the damn pressure he puts on me.

At everything.

I'm losing my edge, my drive. The top of my workout pants dig into the soft flesh of my waist. Bad grades *and* I've gained weight. I guess I noticed a few things were tighter, but I thought it was bloat, not weight gain. I'm not sure when that happened, but I have a feeling I know when it started.

I don't quit. I run faster, pushing myself harder until my lungs burn and my throat goes dry. I hit the stop button before I fall apart. On the verge of collapsing, I welcome the pain, the fight to control my breath, and the emptiness I feel in my belly knowing I was all in on hitting a goal again.

This is how I need to face every obstacle.

Although I've tried to come to terms with my changing body and being happy over burning through my feelings, none of that fixed my slipping grades or served me well on the test. Nor will anger, but it will help drive it. Getting back to my old habits is the only way to save my GPA.

Just after eleven thirty, I look up to the sound of the key entering the lock. I watch as Joshua sneaks in. "Hi."

When he discovers me on the couch, he says, "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

Something in the air between us has changed. I'm not sure if it's my mood, the phone call, or the bad grade, but I can feel it infiltrating our space. "How was work?" I watch as he sets down another white bag, just like the others he brings home after each shift. Anger toward him teeters on my tongue, so I bite it.

Scrubbing his face after locking up, he replies, "Long. Why are you out here? Why are you still up?"

"Studying."

His eyes stay steady on me for a long moment. I'm sure he's searching for the source of the irritation he hears in my voice. The apartment has become his in all senses of how he eases into his nighttime routine. Getting a glass of water from the tap. Unpacking the bag. He moves around like he owns the place. Holding up what looks like soup, he asks, "Want some?"

I didn't realize I was staring through him until my eyes started to burn. I blink rapidly and turn back to the F on my essay facing up on the table. "No."

"You seem upset."

"You think?"

"Hm." The short reaction has me looking at him again. "Did you eat tonight?"

“Food? That’s what you’re asking me about?”

He sets the container down. “Yes.”

I narrow my eyes, my gut twisting. “Food. Food. Food. Is that all you care about?” I slam my hand down on the papers, but no satisfaction is found. Pushing up, I storm into the bedroom.

“What’s wrong, Chloe?”

Anger spirals inside me, whipping me around. “You don’t ask about my grades. *Or, or, or* my plans.”

Confusion runs through the lines of his forehead as his brows tip together. “We talk about school.” He starts toward me but is smart enough to keep some distance. “All the time.”

“Not enough,” I reply, rolling my eyes as my hands plant themselves on my hips.

“We don’t talk about it enough? For who? You? Your dad? We study every fucking night.”

“Don’t turn this around on us. You’re to blame.” This time, his head jolts back. “You blindsided me and—”

“Because we met?” The confusion is wiped clean by an ember from my fire sparking one inside his eyes.

“Yes. I had a plan—”

“You still have it, Chloe.” He asks, “Let me guess, you got a bad grade, and you’re blaming me? That’s rich.” He scoffs. “You’re starting a fight with me to take the blame off yourself.” His arms go wide. “Go ahead, baby. Hit me with your best shot.”

Frustration strangles my rationale, and I angle my chin up, glaring at him. “You think this is about you?”

“I have no idea what this is about.” A dull chuckle follows, breathing life into his anger. “But you need to grind this out on someone, so go for it. I’m right fucking here.”

Fisting my hands, the invasion of his wrath unwelcome, and there’s no peace going to be found on this battleground. “This is pointless.”

“What does that fucking mean?” he asks, trailing me. “What are you actually mad about?”

Standing in the bathroom, I yell, “Don’t swear at me!”

“Then don’t take your bad mood out on me. You’re looking for a fight, and you found one, but I’m tired, and I want to go to bed. If you don’t want me here, then I’ll go to my place.”

A gasp burns my throat. “Just like that? You leave at the first sign of trouble?”

“There’s no trouble, Chloe. I just don’t know what the fuck we’re fighting about. I came in and asked if you wanted some fucking soup.”

“Maybe it’s the way you were judging me in your tone with your ‘hm.’”

“My *hm* was too judging?”

“This is what I mean. I can’t think logically around you.”

“I can’t either, but I’m okay with it because I love you, and we don’t have to make sense up here,” he says, tapping my head. “Because in here, we do.” He taps my chest. His sweet words lessen the tension inside me, but when he moves closer, there’s still more fight running through my veins, so I pull back. “Tell me what happened. Get it out, babe.”

“All this food you’re bringing home is making me fat.”

Silence fills the space between us, and after a beat of us staring at each other, he looks down, rubbing the bridge of his nose. When he finally lifts his eyes to mine, his expression isn’t tight, but patient—the opposite of what I expect from anyone in his position. He licks his lips, and then says, “You’ve never failed at anything, and you apparently got a bad grade. It’s screwing with your head.” His touch to my cheek is cautious as he closes the distance. “You’re not fat. Don’t put how you see yourself on me. I think you can afford to eat dessert or carbs or whatever you want for dinner, lunch, or for breakfast. You need new eyes. You’re healthy.”

Kissing my hand, he adds. “You’re intelligent.” His hands slide over my hips. “Sexy.” Lips at my ear, he whispers, “Caring,” softening my stance. The scrape of his scruffy cheek against my sensitive skin sends goose bumps across the tops of my arms as I shed the armor and lay down my weapons. “You don’t have to be perfect at everything. You’re already perfect to me.”

The hurricane inside me dies down as fast as it grew. I rest my palms on his chest and finally look into his eyes, feeling like crap for starting this war. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be. We’re on the same team. So next time, how about we talk about it instead?”

Slipping my arms around him, I rest my head on his shoulder. I feel awful for so many things today, but for picking this fight with him tops that list. Tilting his head to the side, he lifts my chin with his finger and then kisses my wobbling lower lip. “Don’t cry. I’m not mad.”

“Everything is neat and orderly in my life,” I say, sniffing, “except you,

but you know what? I wouldn't want it any other way."

"We never have played by other people's rules. I like us how we are. Let's not change for anyone."

My body begins melting from how good this man is. He loves me, and I love him. "Okay."

Rubbing his thumb over my cheek, he asks, "Tell me what happened today?"

"You called it. I got a bad grade, and I need to study more."

"Then we'll study more."

I could go on and tell him about my dad, but what's the point in upsetting him more than I have. We'll just have to prove that our love won't ruin my plan but improve my life.

Hugging him as much as I can, I need to feel him, feel our hearts beating together once again. "Thank you."

"I'm always on your side. Don't lose sight of that, even if you're mad." Taking my hand, he kisses each knuckle before turning it to place a kiss on my wrist. With his head bowed and his eyes closed, his lips remain against the soft, pale skin. "I've been thinking about getting a tattoo."

I didn't expect this admission, but I find relief from the change of topic. "Oh, yeah? What design?"

"An anchor. It's for you."

"Because I drag you down?" It might have been too soon for jokes, but his smile reassures me. Our fingers fall together like laces. "You're my salvation, Chloe."

A confession so direct might intimidate some, but I hold onto it like a lifeline. My heart is never prepared for the sweet things this man says to me. Visions of an anchor on him have my gaze rolling over his skin. "And you're my hope." Getting a tattoo is already crossing my thoughts. "What if I got one too?" Something totally for me. Something no one can take away or use as leverage against me. "Something for us," I say, staring at our hands bonded together. "Two halves of one anchor on the inside of our fingers where they touch now."

"Together they complete the big picture."

"Destiny."

My dad was wrong.

Joshua's here for Chloe, *not* Chloe Grace Fox, helping me discover who I am while complementing the dream I've always had. Now I'm more

determined than ever to make my dream come true with his support and putting the work back into my studies. Because of the unknown ahead, and despite the fight, he's given me something to hold onto—*himself*. I smile, not nervous or scared. *Excited. Exhilarated. Hopeful.*

Most of all, I'm certain about one thing. Joshua is integral to my new plan, and I'm willing to ink my skin for him.

23

Joshua

The second the needle touches her skin, her phone buzzes and panic enters her eyes as she stares at the screen. “It’s my dad.” Her hand begins to tremble to the point that the tattoo artist stops. Looking at me to assuage her fears, Chloe asks, “What do I do?”

“What do you want to do?”

“I don’t want to talk to him right now.”

“That’s your right.”

She lets it go to voicemail with a halfhearted grin. Chloe letting go of things that upset her has been a big step for her. Our fight opened my eyes to the stress she keeps inside. It opened her eyes to the idea that *finding balance* isn’t just a phrase, but something she has to seek out. We’ve been studying more the last few weeks, setting timers, and then taking well-earned breaks, like this one to the tattoo parlor.

The artist continues, but less than a minute later, she wipes a stain of blood away, and says, “I’m done.”

“That was fast,” she says. I help her sit up, but she’s going to be a doctor, so I should have known she’d be fine.

Holding my finger to hers has her smiling. “No regrets?”

“None whatsoever.”

I pay and when we walk out, I ask, “Are you going to call your dad back?”

“No.” Her answer sounds so final, almost unlike her, or maybe this is a new side of her. When we get in the truck, she adds, “I don’t want you to change, Joshua.”

A little lost why this conversation detoured, I reply, “Don’t worry. I’m stubborn.”

Humor goes a long way, and she smiles. “When you come to Newport to visit, don’t be someone you’re not when you meet my dad. Let him see who you are with me when you come to Newport. Okay?”

“Good or bad, baby, I’ll still be me in three weeks.”

She leans over and gives me a kiss. “Being your amazing self will win him over. That’s enough. You’re enough.”

I start the Blazer and glance at her once more before backing out. “I’m going to make him fucking love me.”

Giggling, she runs her fingers through the hair at my neckline. “That’s more than I can ask for.”

* * *

Bryant and Todd aren’t the only ones who can do research.

I’ve had six days without Chloe and no clue until we were apart just how dependent I’d become on her. Not in a negative, crazy way, but I’ve missed my friend. I missed the life we’ve been building with each other—waking up to her, kissing her, having sex with her, and falling asleep with her curled to my side. Studying and homework aren’t my favorite things but doing it with her makes it less painful.

I miss the random conversations we have and watching movies with her. Cooking for her is something I look forward to. The simplest dishes always earn rave reviews. Errands or running together, it’s all just better because I’m with her.

With her in Newport for the holiday, I’ve had too much time on my hands to dwell on the warnings she’s given in regard to her dad. “*Don’t be someone you’re not when you meet my dad. Let him see who you are . . .*” Those words have stayed with me. I didn’t spend much time googling, but I did enough to know that Norman Fox, her father, is exactly as predicted—brain surgeon, bigwig in the medical world, superstar in Newport, and fucking rich as fuck. Chloe and Cat may have welcomed me with open arms, but I have a feeling Dr. Fox will be another story altogether.

Norman Fox is driven by ego and money. His expectations are unattainable, yet everyone has to abide by his rules. God, he reminds me so much of my father. If there is one thing I’ve noticed since I met Chloe, is that she started to spread her wings. Is there a way where I can ensure he won’t drag her back down? It’s not going to be easy, but I’ll do whatever I can to win him over if that keeps her soaring.

Walking outside the airport, the overcast sky makes it easy to find the only ray of sunshine I need. Dressed in an orange skirt and white sweater

with little white sneakers, she lowers the sign she's holding for me the moment we lock eyes, and she runs. My suitcase is forgotten as I catch my girl, arms embracing and lips locking.

My heart beats strong, fresh air invigorating me, and life feels complete now that I'm with Chloe again. Setting her down, I look into her bright eyes and grin because I'm with my girl again. "I missed you so much."

"It's only been a week."

"I never want a minute without you in it. Happy Birthday, baby."

Sagging against me with a sweet smile I put there, she leans her head on me, arms tightening, her heart beating wild. When she takes a step back, she holds up the sign in front of her. "Damn right," I say and then kiss her again.

She sucks in a breath, leaning back with the "Soulmate" dropping to the ground. "That was quite a kiss, Joshua."

"Like I said, I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too." Grabbing the sign, she then tugs me toward the vehicle. "Ready? We're over here."

I reach for the suitcase, but it's gone, already being loaded in the back of a shiny black car parked at the curb. The driver is dressed in a suit topped with a hat. So this is how the other half live?

I pull out my wallet, but he holds up his hands. "Thank you, but no tip is needed, sir."

"Really?"

He chuckles. "Really."

I shake his hand just as Chloe calls from the back of the car, "Come on, Joshua." Returning to the open door, I dip inside, sitting next to Chloe. Even in the shadows of the tinted windows, she shines—gorgeous in her happiness.

"I've never been picked up from the airport before." I rub the soft leather of the seat. "I can get used to this."

That makes her laugh, the sound music to my ears. We talked every day, multiple times a day during the Thanksgiving break, but nothing replaces being with her.

She slides across the seat, practically climbing onto my lap. Her arms looped around my neck as she gazes into my eyes. The shine in her eyes reflects the love in mine. "Did you have a good flight?"

"I did. Thanks for the ticket." A part of me feels embarrassed she had to buy it. The other part just wants to be with her, and if that means she buys me an airline ticket, then I'll take it. "You didn't have to do that."

“You’re here for me. That’s the best birthday present I can ask for.”

“How’s the family?”

“Thanksgiving was interesting. My parents still wanted to be together for me, and as you know, my mom has never cooked a turkey before. We sent a gift basket to your mom. She was a lifesaver and so sweet to walk us through the recipe.” She laughs to herself.

“I heard it turned out great.”

“It was so good. My dad didn’t give her any credit, but that’s typical. You would have been proud of me for helping. It was actually kind of fun.” Gazing into my eyes, she says, “I bet your meal was amazing.”

“The diner is always packed on Thanksgiving, but everything turned out. Nothing like a home cooked meal to serve everyone.”

“How’s your mom?”

“All caught up in the professor.”

Kissing my jaw, she whispers, “I understand the feeling.”

I tighten my hold around her waist and kiss her—deep—memorizing the shape of her mouth and the feel of her lips, which I so foolishly didn’t do before she left. She’s breathless as the tips of her fingers touch my lips. “You did miss me.”

“I did. Let’s not do that again.”

“Kiss?” she asks, surprise widening her eyes.

“No. Be apart.”

Resting her head on my shoulder, she takes my hand in hers, our tattoos pressing together when we fold our fingers together. “Never.”

Chloe lies back, dragging me with her by the front of the shirt. “What are you doing, sexy girl?”

Her hair is splayed across the leather, the hem of her skirt riding up her thighs to expose that skin I love to kiss. I was hard from the sight of her, but fuck, she’s going to drive me wild. Running her fingers under my jaw, she replies, “Showing you how much I missed you.”

Her lips are only pressed to mine for a second when I pull back just enough to glance at the driver in the front seat. “With an audience?”

“Don’t worry about Kenneth. He’s paid for his discretion.”

Discretion is such a dirty word. *He’s paid to keep quiet?*

It’s hard to care about him when this gorgeous creature is kissing me not so discreetly. *Fuck it.* I’m not letting anyone keep me from reconnecting with my girl. Not this guy and not her father.

Pressing my hands to the seat on either side of her head, I kiss her how I would if we were home on the couch, appreciating the curves of her lips molding to mine and the way her hands grope under my shirt like she has no self-control. We're both guilty.

"It's been too long since I've been inside you," I whisper, dipping down to her neck and restraining the urge I have to mark her for everyone to see. Especially the guy in the front seat who seems to be giving us privacy like she said.

I'm so caught up in her, losing track of the miles traveled and time passed. A week is too long not to feel her moving under me, like she is now, her body begging for mine. While I'm memorizing the inside of her mouth, tracing the lines, I hear a throat clear, and the car suddenly comes to an abrupt stop.

The door is opened before I can get up.

"Daddy!" Chloe scrambles to sit as I grab her hand to pull her upright with me. We move quickly, but it's too late to undo the damage.

Fuck.

"Get out of the car, Chloe," he says, his voice stern and glare unbending from me.

Swinging her legs out, she straightens her skirt and tugs her sweater as she takes his hand.

I cringe. This wasn't the first impression I wanted. Not by a long shot. Yep, I've royally fucked this up. When I start climbing out, he remains, imposing his tall frame when we come face to face. He's not taller, but he holds his own, briefly reminding me of my own dad. Again. "It's good to meet you, Mister—"

"Doctor. Dr. Fox."

"Yes. My apologies, sir." Since he's unwavering, I move around him, hoping to get this train wreck back on the tracks. "It's nice to meet you, Dr. Fox. Chloe's told me a lot about you. It's great to meet someone of your esteem." I see more Chloe in Cat with their matching green eyes and height than her father.

The gray hair that covers his sideburns blends into a fairly full head of brown hair. I'm guessing a casual jogger by his build. Fit, but not overly so. The tan forearms and pale hands from wearing gloves might have me betting he's a golfer as well.

"Like what?" he asks, finally shaking my hand.

“What?” My eyes dart to Chloe for help.

“What has my daughter told you about me?”

Wrapping her arm around his, she turns him toward the house. “I was telling Joshua how you caught a swordfish last summer in Bermuda.”

“It was a Blue Marlin,” he corrects, looking back at me before they take the steps.

I exhale, shaking my head while standing in front of the grand mansion. My mouth falls open as I realize I’m so out of my league, more than I initially thought. “Holy shit.”

The driver says, “Yeah. It’s quite a house.” I glance over at him, and he rubs his fingers together. “Money. Money. Money.”

By looking at this property, I agree. And here I thought my dad was loaded.

Chloe calls for me, “Come on, Joshua.”

“Take care, man.”

He leans against the car. “Good luck.”

I grab the case and dash up the steps to catch up with them. Her father asks, “Do you fish, Joshua?”

“It’s Josh.”

Shooting Chloe an irritated glare, he returns his gaze to me with curiosity. “Then why does Chloe call you Joshua?”

“It’s a funny story.” I grin because Chloe can barely contain her laughter. “She thought that was my name because—”

“It’s not?” he asks, not the least bit amused.

“No, it is.” Giving up on explaining this, I say, “You can call me Josh or Joshua. And yes, I do fish. We have a great lake, well, not one of *the* Great Lakes since it’s Connecticut, but it’s a damn fine fishing lake just outside of town. Bass, carp, catfish, yellow perch are the most common caught.”

We follow him inside. Bending toward Chloe, I whisper, “I’m fucking up big time.”

She shakes her head and rubs my shoulder. “You’re doing fine,” she whispers.

I stop at the entry to the living room, setting my suitcase down while they walk into the largest room I’ve ever seen in a house. The ocean is set across a vast lawn as a backdrop. Wow. This place is incredible.

This house makes me feel small and insignificant, like my father’s house in the Hamptons. I wonder how it makes Chloe feel. Her father stops in front

of one of the windows and says, “We haven’t had snow yet. It’s unpredictable this time of year, though I suspect we won’t have any while you’re visiting.”

“That’s okay,” I say, and then clear my throat in an attempt to smother the sinking feeling I get being here, triggering insecurities my dad instilled. Am I going to be enough for either of them? “We get our fair share in New Haven.”

“Yes, I remember. I need to get back to work.” Turning to his daughter, he says, “You’ll show our guest around?”

“Yes,” she replies, returning to me.

Turning toward me, he shakes my hand again. “I hope you enjoy your stay. My daughter’s birth is always worth a celebration. She’s going to make an incredible surgeon one day and save many lives.”

Chloe’s face is one of indifference to the most. To me, disappointment shadows the gold centers. “Thank you for the invitation.”

When he disappears down a dark wood paneled hall, Chloe moves in the opposite direction. “I’ll show you to your room.” She swings around the banister and starts up the stairs. “Chloe?”

She turns, looking back at me with the railing between us. “Yes?”

Covering her hands on the wood, I ask, “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she replies, plastering on a smile I imagine visits this house regularly.

Coming up the stairs, I stop two down from her. “It doesn’t matter what he says. You’ll save lives working in the ER too. It’s not about fame for you but the ability to serve.” I take another step, then slide my hands around her waist. “And though it’s just me, and I’m not sure that it holds weight with your dad, but I think you’re already incredible.”

She cups my face and kisses me. “Thank you.” Her eyes brighten again, and my job here is done. “Come on. You’re going to love this room.”

“Why is that?”

She dashes up like a kid on Christmas making a run for the presents, and I’m the gift at the top of her wish list. “Because I’ll be in there naked.”

“Naked, huh? I’m in.” I grab my carry-on and hurry after her. I’m given a quick tour of the location of her door before she’s off again. I find her lying across the bed in the last room on the right. A sexy vixen looking to do more than bend some rules.

“Shut the door and lock it,” she says.

Doing as I'm told, I then walk to the edge of the king-size bed. Even a bulky sweater doesn't deter the dirty thoughts I'm having about her or the desire to lick the curve where her waist meets her hips just under the hem. "Seducing me with your daddy downstairs, Miss Fox? You're a very bad girl."

Stripping off her sweater, she tosses it, hitting my face, and then reaches into her pocket and tosses two condoms on the bed in front of me.

"Big plans there, cowgirl?"

Scooting closer, she rubs against my growing erection. "It's big all right." I'm pushed backward, and she climbs over, straddling me. The tip of her finger runs down the bridge of my nose and then stops at the center of my mouth. "Do you think we can keep our voices down?"

"We can try."

She slides off the bed, and her skirt comes down as do the rest of her clothes. Mine are yanked off right after. When the condom is tossed onto my stomach in a not so subtle hint, I'm happy to oblige, already so ready for her, and slip it on. Sitting up, she drags her tongue over that sexy lower lip and then rubs her hands over her fantastic tits, teasing me and herself. It's a gloriously sexy sight to see.

Positioned over me, she latches her eyes onto mine with her palms pressed to my chest, slowly sliding down my length. But the sensation overwhelms, causing her head to fall back and her mouth to drop open. I understand because my eyes close, and I savor the feel of her riding me.

Wrapping my arms around her, I sit up while she moves to her own rhythm on top of me. She caresses my face, letting little moans escape along with breaths against my skin. I've learned her wants and needs. She likes eye contact at first and then a little hair tug that exposes her neck. Her desire has me craving more.

Taking me deeper, she lifts and lowers, her fingers twisting into my hair. I grab the back of her head and bring her mouth to mine, our tongues tasting the pleasure we each offer. "Joshua," she moans on the cusp of ecstasy. I slide my hand between us and circle her clit while kissing her neck. A harsh breath is taken before her body begins to tremor with my name on her lips. "I love you." Breathless, she falls right after.

We lie together under the covers, staring through the picturesque windows. A sheen of sweat covers us despite the weather turning blustery on the other side of the glass. "I should probably leave before somebody notices

I'm gone." Turning to look up at me, she says, "But you make it hard to leave this bed."

"Good." I hold her tighter, not ready for her to go. "Stay. We can nap."

She wiggles, pushing up to rest on her elbows. "I need to shower and meet up with my mom. She should be home, and I'm helping with the final party prep." Pointing toward the bathroom, she adds, "I got you something for tonight."

"You got *me* something for your birthday? I think you're confused with how this works," I say through a laugh.

"Well, you barely even let me celebrate yours at all and refused to let me get you anything."

Waggling my eyebrows, I smirk. "I got something all right, better than any present you could buy."

"If you consider sex a present, then I'm happy to spoil you rotten. As for the one in the bathroom, I hope you like it anyway." Under musical laughter, she smiles and then kisses me on the chest before climbing out of bed. "Knock on my door at six, and we can go to the party together."

"Why does this suddenly sound like a bigger event than I thought?"

"You've met my mom. She doesn't do anything low-key."

She slips on her skirt and then the sweater.

"A few balloons and a cake and boom, you got yourself a party." I start resting my eyes, but then I get the hint, sitting up abruptly. "Wait, is this a big party or like a normal get-together for your family?"

Carrying her bra and panties toward the door, she laughs. "This is a Fox party."

I'm not sure what that means, but being around enough rich kids at Yale, I'm figuring this won't be your average townie kegger.

24

Chloe

“Love suits you, Chloe.”

I look back at my mom as she arranges the flowers in a large vase on the kitchen island. I’m not sure how she managed to find peonies in November, but the vase is full of my favorite flower in various shades of pink. At the mention of love, I have a feeling my cheeks match the darker blooms.

“The past two months have been a whirlwind,” I admit, moving next to her, away from the caterers. It feels natural to see her working at the island, but then I remember she has a new life, the complete opposite of this one, running parallel in New York. It’s been nice to have her here for me, but I hope she’s happy. “Do you think I’m too young to be this in love?”

“Do you?” As soon as she spots me gnawing on my bottom lip, she says, “Grab a coat. Let’s take a walk on the lawn like we used to.”

After putting on our coats, we slip outside onto the veranda, and across to walk down the steps. After taking in the crisp air, she smiles at me. “I miss the smell of the ocean, but I enjoy the vibe of the city.”

“I’m glad you’ve found a place that feels like home.”

“You’re my home, Chloe.” We start walking toward the far end, and she asks, “How do you feel about the relationship?”

“I don’t regret a second I’ve spent with Joshua, but after your visit, I’ve started worrying about leaving for med school. I think he’s still unsure what he’s doing after graduation. He’d probably come to the city with me, but I know he’d never ask me to stay. He’d sacrifice us if it benefitted me.”

“That’s noble.”

“I find it heartbreaking actually.” I want to see the good in the gesture, but pain seeps in just from the thought.

“Because you’re afraid to lose him?”

I nod, not wanting to voice the thought out loud. I’m not superstitious, but I’m not willing to put that out into the universe. “But I don’t want to lose myself either.”

She says, “It sounds like you’re on even ground, trying to balance this

change in your plans. Balance.” Nudging me, she smiles softly. “There’s nothing more I’d wish for you in a relationship than someone who treats you as an equal or better. It’s something I never had, so if you’re comparing our relationship to yours because of the similar ages we got together, wipe that thought away.”

“But you fell for him—”

“At seventeen. By your age, we were married. I’ve never blamed your father for my choices. I blamed him for the demise of our marriage. He told me to live life before settling down. He wanted me to experience dating and develop friendships outside of him, but I just didn’t listen. I was young and naïve.” We stop at the edge where the grass meets the beach. “You’re smarter than I am.”

“I don’t know how to navigate the dreams I have and the relationship I want. Graduation will be here before we know it, and I don’t like the unknown.”

“You never have. If you could control your whole world, you would, but that doesn’t leave much room for discovery. Or love. Or Josh.” Staring across what appears to be the entire ocean and a million memories, she adds, “He’s your first love.” Turning to me, she takes my hand. “He may not be your last, but you can’t live in fear of that. You shouldn’t question what feels right. Just experience it for what it is—wholeheartedly.”

When we both lived here, we weren’t like this. I was always studying, and my mom was . . . moving through life with no real spark in her eyes. That dark cloud has lifted since the divorce. She takes responsibility, but I also blame my dad for abandoning her and their marriage. Yes, he provided *financially* for us both. But my mom is vibrant, a romantic, and passionate about experiencing life to the fullest.

And because of how open she is now, she’s become someone I confide in. I know she wants what’s best for me professionally and personally, not only as my mom, but also as my friend. Continuing, she adds, “I said love looks good on you, but maybe it’s the happiness that shines in your eyes. I’ve never seen you look more beautiful than watching you become the woman that you love. Whether alone or with him, love the life you’re in.”

That does it. Now I’m officially mushy. With tears welling in my eyes, I hug her, resting my head on her shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Happy Birthday, sweetheart.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Turning around together, we head back to the house before the cold reaches our bones. Just inside the door, I give her one more hug. “It means a lot to me to know you’re on my side.”

“Always.” Swatting me off, she says, “Better get ready. The guest of honor can’t be late to her own party.”

“I thought it was fashionable to be late to events?” I tease.

“No, just poor etiquette.” She grins, but I know deep down, she believes that. Even though she’s making a new life for herself, some things will never change. She always errs on the side of propriety.

“I’m going. I’m going.” I dash up the stairs tempted to keep going to the far end of the hall, but I also don’t want to wake him. Joshua’s going to need the energy for the long night in bed I have planned after this shindig.

* * *

“I’m so late,” I mumble two hours later, poking the stem of the earring into my ear. I screw the back on and add the other. Getting one last look, I touch the ends of my hair, loving how the stylist gave me old Hollywood glam soft waves on one side and pinned the other back with crystal-encrusted hair pins.

It’s a different look for me, but I only turn twenty-one once, and my mom was right. I look like a starlet on the red carpet in this dress she found for me in the city.

It’s not low cut in the front and actually hides all my cleavage, but the dress was made for a special occasion. Spaghetti straps that lead over my shoulders crisscross until the fabric resumes just above the dimples of my lower back. The fabric is flowy, and the color dreamy in a rich purple. I’m not sure how my dad is going to feel about it, but I feel amazing.

The one carat earrings in each ear add just enough sparkle not to compete with the gorgeous silver shoes covered with Swarovski crystals. The smoky eye makes the green of my eyes pop and as I run my hand over the front of my body, I’ve never felt sexier or more grown up.

A knock on the door pulls my attention from the mirror. “Chloe, are you in there?”

“Yes, coming.” I swing the door open excited to see him, but gasp when I do.

Joshua Evans is many things, including handsome, intelligent, charming,

and oh so sweet to me. But holy hell, I was not expecting this. His chin is tilted down, a shy spark in his eyes as he looks at me. “Wow,” he says, running his hand down the back of his slicked back hair as his gaze sweeps over me. “You look . . .” He sounds choked up when he says, “You look gorgeous, Chloe.”

“Thank you.” Now I’m the one who feels shy, not only from the compliment, but that he looks so incredible in a suit. I kiss his delectable lips, and then adjust the knot of his tie. “You look very debonair.”

He brings me closer under his admiration. “How am I going to keep my hands off you?”

“You don’t have to. You’re my boyfriend. Perks of the job.”

Heat penetrating from his large hands can be felt through the thin silk caressing my ribs as he holds me close. “I like the perks of the job when it comes to you.” Dipping his head, he kisses my neck. “I could devour you. You look so good.”

“I’ll take you up on that offer later.”

Whipping upright, he chuckles. “You’re naughty in Newport, Miss Fox.”

“Thanks to you, I’m naughty in New Haven as well.”

“Very true.”

“Anyway, it’s my birthday. I can be dirty if I want to,” I sing-song. I grab his ass, keeping him pressed to me. My body craves him as much as my heart. He was the key to awakening me, showing me the world through new eyes. I never want to go back to life before him. “I’m also utterly in love with you, Mr. Evans.”

“Such sweet words from a sexy mouth.” We kiss, and then he whispers, “Didn’t anyone ever tell you that it’s dangerous to wear your heart on your sleeve?”

“Yes, you, but I still can’t resist you, so I’m throwing caution to the wind and choosing you anyway.”

“I like you choosing me.” Our fingers may have healed, but the connection sparks through my veins when our hands bond and our lips meet. Like our hearts, we’ve become one again.

“Are you ready?”

His elbow comes out when he moves to the doorway. “Born for it.”

You can hear the party in full swing—conversations, laughter, crystal glasses clinking—before we reach the top of the stairs. Taking our time, we stroll down, the featherlight fabric floating behind me. I stop him when he’s

one step lower, still hidden from the guests, and say, "I love you, Joshua."

I know he can hear the concern in my tone by how he's searching my eyes for the hidden meaning. Reassurance enters his, and he says, "I love you, too, birthday girl."

"Bigger than the sky."

Kissing me again, he whispers, "Bigger than the universe." My heart starts racing, but I'm not sure why. I hate being the center of attention, but it doesn't feel like that kind of dread. Walking across the black and white marble, I feel a disconcerting sensation wind through me. "Here goes nothing."

The room breaks into applause when they see us. I'd like to say I'm surprised that all of Newport appears to be here, but this party is standard fare for the Foxes. I find confidence on Joshua's arm, allowing me to enjoy the moment instead of hiding from it.

He asks, "Ready for your first drink?" Sarcasm sneaks in as he winks.

"Yes, I'm so curious what this alcohol is you speak of," I joke but manage a straight face. A waiter has impeccable timing and swoops by with two glasses of champagne. Tapping them together, Joshua says, "Happy Birthday, baby."

"I'll drink to that." I take a sip and look at the pretty flowers adorning the vases around the room and the golden chandeliers dripping with crystals. "It's so beautiful that I feel like a princess."

"No expense has been spared."

"Is it weird that I feel like I've waited my whole life for this day?"

"Be careful what you wish for. Being an adult isn't all it's cracked up to be." He pokes me playfully in the ribs, making me laugh.

"It's supposed to be rainbows and hearts, wild nights and adventure-filled days. Don't ruin the illusion before the party's over." I grab his hand, and we start through the great room toward my parents. "Give me one night to believe that the rest of our lives will be filled with beautiful parties. Me in a pretty dress and you in a suit."

"I'll give you everything you ever dreamed of." When I look into his eyes, I believe him. He'd do that for me. He'd do anything for me like I would for him. He tugs at his lapel. "I didn't thank you for this."

All the people in this room could disappear, and I would be content in this man's arms. He's a dream come true that I never knew I needed. Now I can't imagine life without him. "You don't need to." When I start to walk again,

my hand is stalled, causing me to turn back.

“I know you don’t expect me to, but I want to. Thank you.”

Despite the well-wishers vying for my attention, I return to him. “You’re welcome.” Squeezing his hand, I add, “Now stop messing with your tie, and let’s go have a good time.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“It’s sexy when you go Southern gentleman on me.” The moment the words leave my mouth, I realize how I set him up. “Don’t say a word.”

With his hands up in surrender, he replies, “I wasn’t.” But then he runs one under my hair, sending goose bumps down my spine, and laughs. “But now I will. I’m more than happy to be on you, Southern or Northern, East or West Coast-wise.”

I roll my eyes even though I won’t admit that my mind is happily remembering our time in bed earlier today. But yeah, this is neither the time nor place for those delicious memories.

Setting our glasses down on a passing tray, we reach my parents. I greet my dad with a kiss on the cheek. The ice in his glass clangs against the crystal walls, the amber liquid mostly gone. “That’s quite a dress,” he says, disapproval still managing to break through the monotone.

I look down, taken back by his blatant disregard for my feelings. Though maybe I shouldn’t be anymore. Joshua takes hold of my hand, giving me strength. I catch my breath and stand my ground. “I love this dress.”

“I think you look beautiful, Chloe,” my mom gushes, her sweet admiration barely restrained. “Happy Birthday.”

“Thank you, Mom.”

My dad finishes his drink, and then says, “You shouldn’t be encouraging her to dress scantily. She’s going to be a doctor, for Christ’s sake.”

“Dad, stop.” He not only planted the seeds of my insecurities, but he watered them daily, encouraging them to grow. God, I’m so over it. I will never win with him. “It’s my birthday. One day a year. Let me enjoy it.”

My mom waves him off and then hugs me. “Ignore Mr. Grumpy and try to have a good time.” Coming around me, she hugs Joshua. “You look very dapper, Josh.” He returns to my side, slipping his arm around my waist while she adds, “You two make such a beautiful couple.”

Joshua says, “Thank you, Cat.”

But my dad cuts in, “Mrs. Fox.”

“Dad,” I caution, surprised by his demanding demeanor. “Joshua is a

guest.”

“Respect should be given to his hosts,” he gripes.

My mom snaps, “Cool it, Norm. I asked him to call me Cat.”

Covering Joshua’s hand with mine, I hold it right where it’s pressed to my skin. The verbal tennis match between my parents is something I never want with my partner. I glance up at Joshua. His lips are tight until he sees me and then a small grin appears. His fingers caress with gentle pressure, and something tells me we’ll never be like them.

More grumblings from my dad are peppered in, and then he asks, “What’s this Cat business anyway?”

Mimicking my earlier eye roll, my mom says, “I need champagne. I can’t with you.”

“Can’t *what* with me?”

She turns to leave but turns back full of fire. “I swear you’re a dinosaur.” Not only is it funny, but I like her moxie. Standing up for herself is something she didn’t do when they were married. It’s a nice change.

I tug Joshua away, using their bickering as an escape. As we walk to the bar, the perfumed air reaches my nose—flowers and candles mingling through the room. Scanning the party, I see plenty of friendly faces, just not *my* friends.

Reading my mind, Joshua asks, “Is Ruby coming?”

“She’s stuck in Manhattan.”

Dad’s colleagues and the bluebloods of Newport aren’t my idea of a good time. “I think some of this crowd came over on the *Titanic*.”

I’m starting to realize this was an occasion for my dad, who insisted on the big event, to rub elbows with the rich of Rhode Island. I’ve always been the perfect daughter, an excellent student, and well-rehearsed in my role as Dr. Fox’s legacy.

Screw their expectations. It’s time for me to step out of the shadows of the famous neurosurgeon and be a woman of my own making. Today isn’t just a day to celebrate my birth, but my rebirth.

25

Joshua

Sometimes drinking your troubles away is the best thing to do. Not the sagest advice for the liver long term, but a bottle of whatever I could get my hands on got me through a few hard times.

So judging Chloe for wanting to do the same isn't something I can do. "Why won't you drink with me?" she asks, her swan-like neck on full display as her head tilts back, her body loose from too many cosmopolitans.

This tie of mine that she cared so much about an hour ago is currently twisted around her wrist and wound through her fingers as she holds me close. "One shot, Joshy. For me. It's my birthday."

Joshy? How is she this drunk? I grin because she's also adorable.

She takes a shot from the bar and hands it to me, and then gets the other. "To—"

"To you," I say, toasting our glasses together. We both down the amber liquid without so much as a care, the cinnamon not my favorite but whiskey is whiskey and goes down smooth. Maybe not as smooth for her, judging by the face she's making. Then the mystery unriddles. "Did you eat today?"

"No time." And she wonders why I ask . . .

Returning the glasses to the bar, she twirls, taking hold of her skirt. Revealing her sexy legs is a happy side effect. "I had to look pretty for you." A pouty bottom lip sticks out. "Do you think I'm pretty?"

"You're always gorgeous to me, baby." Kissing that lip, I add, "But you need food."

"Chloe?" Her name is followed by a squeal of birthday proportions.

Throwing her hands in the air when she spots Ruby rushing through the crowd, Chloe screams in excitement. They embrace each other, spinning around in a circle. I take the opportunity to sneak behind her to tell the bartender, "Make her drinks a little weaker, or we'll be cleaning her off the floor."

"Will do," he replies, catching my drift.

"What are you doing here?" Chloe asks Ruby.

“I wouldn’t miss your big day.” Stepping back to get a good look at her friend, Ruby exclaims, “Holy cow, woman. You’re a queen slaying this birthday. This dress better come back to New Haven with you. I’ll find a party just so I can wear it.” Ruby knocks into me. “Your girl cleans up well.”

Smiling with pride, I know Chloe doesn’t need fancy dresses. I love her no matter what she wears. It’s the girl inside the clothes that won me over. “She does.”

With a side embrace, Ruby and I hug. “Good to see you.”

She grins. “You too, stud.”

I’m happy to stand back and let the friends catch up. Just as I take a drink, my shoulder is bumped. Normally, it wouldn’t bother me. It’s a big party, after all.

But this time, it does.

Pushing past me, Trevor presses his whole hand to Chloe’s bare back as if he has that right. He’s lucky I don’t fucking punch him. Fortunately for him, I don’t have to. She’s quick to duck out from his touch and latch onto me. “I didn’t know you were here.”

The cold greeting is punch enough for me.

The rejection doesn’t sit well, judging by the ire in his eyes. “I came over to wish you a happy birthday,” he says, ignoring me.

“Thanks,” she replies more cordially than I’d be.

“I was in town for Thanksgiving, and my parents are here, so I came along.”

Angling us away from him, I’m digging her not-give-a-shit attitude. “Thank you for coming. Have a good time.”

Determination enters his eyes, and he says, “Some of the gang are out back on the veranda. They’ve been looking for you.”

“I’ve been right here in the same place for the past hour.” Her tone is firm, but I can see the way her shoulders have started to fall. I reach over and wrap my finger around hers.

He continues, “Well, you know how they hate hanging out at these things.” One look at her and anyone who knows her can tell she’s hurt.

I’m about to step in to end this, my heart hurting for her and angry that he’s so blind to how she’s feeling, but she says, “Do you remember my sixteenth birthday, Trevor?”

He at least gives her the courtesy of pretending to attempt to remember. “I don’t.”

“That’s okay. I do. You and ‘the gang’ stopped by.” He actually appears pleased with himself, as if he did her a favor. “I went to tell the caterers we needed more food, and when I returned to the pool house, everyone was gone.”

His smug smirk falls. *Good.*

He says, “I’m sure we thought—”

“No,” she says, raising her hand. “I’m not trying to make you feel bad for leaving back then, but don’t feel you have to stay tonight. I’m sure you have much better things to do than celebrate my special day.”

I’m probably mistaken, but is that remorse written on his face? “Chloe—”

She smiles. My kindhearted girlfriend gives him what he never did for her—she lets him off easy. “Thank you for coming. I hope you enjoy the party.”

Holding my hand, she pulls me closer, rejoining Ruby at the bar and leaving Trevor standing there like the asshole he is.

Guys like him don’t take rejection lightly. He doesn’t disappoint.

Bumping against me again, he stops, his eyes forward. “You can wear a rented suit, but that won’t change who you are or where you come from, Evans. Everyone knows you don’t belong here.” He turns his scowl on me. “You don’t belong in her world. Get out before you take her down with you, *Townie.*”

He can’t crack the foundation Chloe and I built. We’re solid. Angling my head to see him over my shoulder, I reply, “I’m sure your advice is given in the best interest of Chloe and not yourself.”

He takes a drink from his glass and then crunches on the ice. “Of course.”
Fucker.

I’m glad when he’s gone. His ego was sucking the oxygen from the air. Dr. Fox taps a glass across the room, grabbing everyone’s attention. The conversations slowly die down, and he asks for Chloe to join him.

Giddy, she jumps excitedly. “I’ll be back,” she says, rushing across the room. She’s absolutely stunning in her happiness, the pink of her cheeks and the gleam in her eyes when she looks into mine.

Ruby comes to stand beside me, and says, “You make her happy, Josh. I always saw who she was, but now the rest of the world gets to see it, too. She’s going to do great things in medicine, but you’ve given her a life outside that.”

I nod, my gaze staying with Chloe. “Thanks, but if I can give her an ounce of how she makes me feel, I’m doing a good job.”

While Chloe blows out the candles on her cake, I'm reminded of how different our worlds really are. My birthday was a cake my mom would bake, and she'd let me frost and sprinkle. They always tasted the best with sprinkles.

That cake in front of her probably cost a thousand dollars and doesn't have one sprinkle on it.

Screw the cake, Chloe's father doesn't waste time presenting her with a diamond bracelet. Dangling a key fob, the light gleams off the Mercedes symbol when he says, "I decided to give you your graduation present early. Happy Birthday, honey."

I've never known her to ask for anything, so I always considered her the last person who needs or wants extravagant gifts. She's the most content person I know, but maybe that comes with being able to afford anything you want.

"Thank you," she says, kissing his cheek as applause echoes around us.

I clap slowly, watching her weave her way back to me. Ruby says, "Girl doesn't need another Mercedes."

"What does she need?" I voice before I think twice.

She sips her champagne. "His approval."

Ruby hits the nail on the head, but it wouldn't be right to confirm it. Rushing to me, Chloe tosses me the fob. "Want to go for a ride?"

I've never driven a Mercedes, so the desire to drive a high-end car is tempting. "What about the party?" Her eyes are glassy, making me glad she gave me the key.

"Just a quick ride," she says, grabbing my hands and pulling me toward the front door. "We'll be back, Ruby," she says over my shoulder.

Ruby leans against the bar when I look back. She says, "Have fun. I'm going to see if this cutie is single."

Chloe's already dragging me toward the front door. "Come on."

"I'm right here with you, babe." Though I'm starting to wonder if this is a bad idea. "How about we go see the car and then go upstairs?"

"What's up there that we can't do in the car?" Oh, she's good. Quicker than most, considering the amount of alcohol in her system. Pushing herself against me, she says, "We can christen the car." I think she believes she's whispering, but by the horrified expression of an older lady nearby, she's not. And it's fucking delightful.

"We can do that too," I start, entirely amused by her passion for this

excursion. “But maybe we should do it tomorrow when you’ll remember.”

Still trying to detour her, I bring her closer to the bottom of the stairs.

“I’ll remember. I can still feel the stretch of my body from earlier.” She nibbles on my chin, her hands roaming my ass. “You’re so big, Joshua. I feel empty without you.”

Ruby comes behind her. “Okay. Time to move the sex show to another room. You’re scaring the guests.”

I take a more direct approach and take Chloe’s hand. “Come on. Let’s go upstairs.”

Her eyes pivot to the stairs before she looks back at the party. “Take me for a ride, Joshua. We’ll be back before anyone notices.” My willpower escapes me, weakness for her overtaking my better sense. She knows her methods are working because she works me even harder. “The sun set, but the moon is still rising. It’s gorgeous from the cliffs. If we hurry, we can catch it before it settles above for the night.”

“Watching the moon rise will make you happy?”

The times she talked about mangata and finding comfort in staring out her window . . . I thought it was normal stuff, chick stuff. I’m starting to realize the moon might have been her friend, the one that kept her loneliness at bay. And that breaks my fucking heart.

Her body’s loose, rebellion glistening in her eyes. “It will make me so happy. Please.”

So I can’t say no. Kissing her hand, I hold it tight in mine as we head for the door. “Let’s go chase the moon.”

“Onward ho we go. Chasing the moon.”

Ruby remains in the doorway after we exit. Cupping her hand to the side of her mouth, she calls, “Be safe.”

Chloe’s hair whips around as she turns back with sass in her step. “Never,” she teases.

Laughter trails from the house. “Have fun, you crazy kids.”

Twirling away from me, Chloe raises her arm into the air, and then she spins back in. “We will.”

A red bow as big as the hood makes finding her present easy among other cars.

Convertible top.

Sleek silver that shines.

Light tan interior.

Leather seats.

Custom chrome wheels.

I run my finger along the door before opening it for her. “Nice car.”

Ripping the bow from the hood, she tosses it onto the lawn. “It’s beautiful, but unnecessary.” She slips inside the car, then runs her hands along the dashboard. “What will I do with it in New York City?”

“Good point.” I get behind the wheel and start the car, the engine purring to life. “Damn, that’s a sexy sound.”

“It is. Let’s enjoy it before I return it tomorrow.”

Stunned, I do a double take. “Why would you return it?”

“This car is his way of suggesting I go to school where he wants me to, which is not Columbia.” Cruising the long driveway toward the gate, I wouldn’t put it past him to try to manipulate her. She’s not the naïve little girl he believes her to be. She sees his flaws and loves him despite them. That’s what he should appreciate.

I don’t understand how forcing his will on her won’t push her away. Fuck, it’s not like I don’t want to keep her to myself, but thoughts of her choosing to be with me over forcing the issue is much more tantalizing.

She adds, “He thinks he can buy me things and change my mind.”

“My mom has always said—don’t trust people who can buy their way out of anything.”

“I adore your mom.”

“She adores you.”

The chill of the early evening has me braking before we leave the property. I reach to raise the roof, but her hand lands on my forearm. “I want it down.”

“It’s cold, Chloe. You’re in next to nothing.”

Resting her head back on the seat, she eyes me never looking happier. “It feels good to feel so much.”

My ego doesn’t like the hit. “I thought I did that for you?”

With her hand still on my arm, she says, “You make me feel everything good. The cold in Newport awakens my veins.”

I’m pretty sure there’s a lot of psychology stuff behind that sentiment, too deep for me to decipher on a moment’s notice, so I start working my way out of my jacket. “Will you wear this?”

She takes it, not arguing. Tucked inside it, she hums, and then whispers, “Chasing the moon.” Contentment.

Sending me in the right direction, she adds, “Follow this road until you see the sign for the cliffs.”

It’s cold, but she slides the slit of her dress apart and pulls her phone from some secret compartment near her stomach. “You’re like a secret agent. What else you got hidden in that dress?”

Sitting back, she says, “You’re welcome to find out.”

“I would, right here on a dirt road if we were in New Haven.” I’m a cad because there’s so much truth in that statement.

She reaches over and runs her hand along the inside of my thigh. “You turn me on.” Maybe I’m not so bad after all.

I stroke the back of her head, preferring to look at her instead of the road. “Remember when we had sex near the lake?”

A smile beams on her face, her eyes filled with light from the moon. An eyebrow cocks. “We can do that again. We should.”

Although she’s curled on her side, bundled up, the wind whipping through her hair makes it a fiery hurricane around her head. Through quick glances, I can’t see much of her face, but I can just make out the pretty smile. Thoughts of kissing her, and more, keep me focused on reaching our destination. “Are you too cold?”

“It’s freezing, but I’ve never felt better,” she says, her words disappearing into the wind. “Why is that?”

“Because you’re living for you now.”

“Experiencing life on my own terms.” Closing her eyes, she inhales the freedom that set that smile in place. Her hand finds mine, and our fingers weave together. She says, “Life is perfect. Promise me life will always be this good, that we’ll always feel this wild in love, Joshua.”

Bringing her hand to my lips, I kiss it, lingering there. “I promise to always love you as much as today and let it grow each day after.”

She smiles so bright the rising moon breaking the top of the tree line can’t compete. Unbuckling her seat belt, she moves closer. “I don’t deserve you.”

“You have that all wrong, baby.” I squeeze her knee gently. “Want to put your seat belt back on?”

“No,” she replies, the devil caught in her eyes. Her hand goes straight for the goods, landing a little too roughly on my dick, so I grab it quick and lift. “Steady there.”

“Sorry,” she says, moving in to take my earlobe between her teeth. “Wouldn’t it be crazy if we had sex while driving?”

“Yeah, it would be,” I remark, her drunken emotions taking her on a roller coaster ride I can’t slow down. “Crazy.”

Her chest heaves against my arm. “Fuck me like you don’t love me, Joshua.”

I pull back, needing to see her eyes because I’ve never heard her talk like that. “You don’t know what you’re saying, Chloe.”

“I do. I want you.” Her eyes latch onto mine as she shivers. “I want you to show me how that feels, what a one-night stand would feel like.”

I’m all for fucking, but I can’t fuck her like she doesn’t matter to me. I look in the rearview mirror, wondering if I should turn back. It might be time for her to go to bed. “I need you to believe me when I tell you I love you. I can’t show you what sex without emotion or at the hand of someone who doesn’t care about you would be like. I’m not capable of switching off my feelings to fuck you carelessly.”

She pulls back, not overreacting, but the change is subtle as it washes through her expression, worry vanishing from her features. She smiles, still staring at me as she rests her head on the leather seat. “I believe you.”

My gaze volleys between the road ahead and her beside me. The tips of her fingers run through the hair at the nape of my neck and I lean into her touch, needing it, wanting it more than she realizes in the state she’s in. But I still need her to be safe. “Will you hand me the seat belt, Chloe?”

As calm rolls through her drunken veins and the turmoil dissipates, she finally pulls the seat belt over her shoulder for me to take. “I love you bigger than the sky, Joshua.”

I snap it into place with one hand and steal one last glance her way. “Bigger than the universe.”

In an instant, her smile disappears as her arms fly forward. “Watch out!”

26

Joshua

My head throbs to a familiar chime I can't place—the sound or the song. My eyes sting as I squeeze my lids closed to make the pain go away. But even that can't fight the dull ache, so I venture to find the light and track down that fucking sound.

Opening my eyes is a struggle and my right eyelid doesn't seem to want to cooperate. As life comes into focus, the chime becomes a dinging.

Fear quickens the beat of my heart when I realize I'm in the dark of the car.

Car . . .

The door.

The Mercedes key fob.

The steering wheel that should be in front of me.

Nothing's where it should be.

The ding from an ajar door gets louder as the fog clears. *Shit!* I grab the side of my head as a sharp pain shoots through my temple, causing me to close my eyes again. Visions flash through the darkness . . .

Her smile.

Thump.

Those eyes that see beneath the townie.

Thump. Thump.

A deer. Her scream.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

When I look down, red stains the leather, which has me lifting my hand to my head again. I thought it was sweat running down my cheek. Sweat when my body shivers from cold? It takes a second for me to realize that doesn't make sense.

Why is it red?

I push my palm to my forehead, the ripped sleeve drooping down, and pull back with blood coating my skin. My lifeline becomes a shallow river clinging to the liquid. "Chloe?" I call again, my pain becoming secondary as

panic sets in. “Chloe?” My voice is weak, but my determination is strong.

My neck tweaks when I look right too fast. I’m greeted with a tree branch where Chloe should be. *Oh, fuck.* I try to push up, but my hand slips against the seat, and my body protests. “Chloe?”

A shattered windshield.

Broken glass. Shards glisten against my skin.

An ounce of relief is found in a small detail—I can feel my legs pinned beneath the airbag though the memory of what happened is failing me.

Her Mercedes.

Her birthday.

A missing heart holds no beat. My chest is hollow as I search the car for the only thing that matters—her. Her name comes in waves of shallow breaths being exhaled.

The car is crushed, so I start praying that she’s alive. I search for a way out, for a way to find her. “Chloe?” My voice is scratched, the sound not traveling to where I need it to be.

Leveraging my arm against the middle console, I put all my weight behind the effort. Fuck pain. Fuck tears. Fuck this whole world if I can’t get to her. “Can you hear me, Chloe?”

My heart. My whole fucking life. My soul. “Please answer me, Chloe.”

Wedging my way out from under the airbag, I fall out of the car, my back hitting the frame before I land on the gravel. “Fuck!” I cry, squeezing my eyes closed to stave off the pain. I don’t have time to waste, groaning until my legs fall beside me. *Where is she?* “Chloe?”

I hold on to one ounce of hope—my phone. I pat my pockets but come up empty. The gravel cutting into my back doesn’t bother me. Not knowing where the fuck Chloe is does. “Chloe?” No response in return messes with my head. I fight. I push the fuck up and crawl to the front of the car.

Pain can’t stop me.

Blood running down my face won’t.

I have to find her, to get to her. To save her.

“Chloe? Answer me, dammit!”

A phone rings in the distance—her ringtone, not mine. “Fuck.” I scramble to stand on my feet and then cover the ground that separates me from the lit-up screen. Not a car passes, no signs of life anywhere. I’m barely here, but I manage to yell, “Help!” hoping to hear it echo to someone else’s ears.

Stumbling down to my knees, I land in front of the phone. “Ruby?” I

answer, repeating the name on the screen. “Help. Call 9-1-1.”

I hold the phone to my ear, searching for any sign of Chloe.

“Josh? Josh, where are you?”

“Call an ambulance.” I wrestle the words out, my vision fading.

“Where’s Chloe?”

It’s such a simple question. One I should easily know the answer to. I’ve failed her, cost her a life, a future . . . Tears stream down my cheeks as I search frantically in the area.

A vision of her content and whispering *chasing the moon* cuts through my mind, keeping me from thinking coherently. “Help me find her . . . There was a deer—”

“Where are you?” Her voice pitches, hurting my ear.

“I don’t know. I can’t find her, Ruby. I can’t find her.”

My mind spins, lightheadedness setting in while the muscles in my arm give way, and I hit the ground. The phone bounces out of reach, but I can hear Ruby’s voice still calling me. “Josh? Josh! Stay on the line.”

It’s not the phone that gets my attention, though. Something sparkles nearby. “Chloe?” I rush, fighting against my body wanting to stall. Just beyond the shoulder’s edge, drenched in moonlight, I find my sweet angel. “Chloe. *Chloe*. Can you hear me?”

Her breath is even, her expression fixed in peace. If I weren’t mistaken, I’d think she was asleep, but my eyes must be playing tricks on me. I caress her, taking in the blood streaking her face and then kiss her forehead, nose, cheek, and lips. Her eyes don’t open as I scan for the source of blood smeared across her skin. A cut below her eyebrow appears minor, but her unconsciousness has me worried.

Leaning down again, I hold my ear under her nose just to feel her breath again. “Chloe?” I whisper, silently begging her body with no life inside to wake.

A tear drips from my chin onto her cheek as I repeat her name through my punctured pleas.

Pressing my ear to her chest, I can hear her heartbeat. It’s subtle but there. “Baby. Chloe? Hang on. Please stay with me. Please,” I plead to whatever will bring her back to me. I’d make a deal with the devil if he let her live.

Sirens ring through the trees, the distant sound still too far to count on. The dark night surrounds with little light to keep us company. Worried I might hurt her more than she is already. My ripped jacket is still protecting

her torso, so I straighten the fabric to cover her leg, and I lie down next to her.

Taking her hand, I weave our fingers together, the act so simple, but when the anchors press together, I can feel her with me once again. The guilt that bears down clenches my heart as I look up at the stars. I try to speak, but liquid filling my throat has me coughing. I've never died before, but I recognize the feeling. *Why does it have to happen when I'm finally happy?*

The sirens sound closer but still too far for my liking. With my heart beating outside my chest, the dull thrum fills my ears. I lift myself onto an unsteady elbow. Beauty like hers should never be touched by fingers with grime under the nails, but I lean over and kiss her, trying my best to breathe life into her again.

“We almost made it. We almost caught the moon.”

The ambulance arrives, and chaos erupts. Stuck in the blinding brightness of the headlights, I whisper, “Hold on for me, baby. Hold on.”

A paramedic has me lie back just as everything goes black.

* * *

My eyes open, and I gasp for air, needles pricking the rawness of my throat. My heart is heard outside my body, sending a rush of fear through my veins.

“You're awake, Mr. Evans.” A nurse pushes through the door and rubs her hands before messing with the knobs on the monitor. “This is good news.”

“I—” Speaking hurts, and the attempt sends me into a dry coughing fit. I look around the hospital room, and the blue blanket covering me, trying to tamp down the panic coursing through me by grabbing my throat.

She's quick to grab the pitcher beside the bed and pour a glass of water. Tucking the straw between my lips, she says, “Drink slowly. Coat your throat.”

I swallow several sips before she returns the cup to the tray. The small action even hurts before she takes a gentle hold of my arm. “Be careful not to pull out the IV when you move.” Her voice is kind, her eyes matching her tone.

She's not that tall, but her hair stacked in curls on her head gives her a few extra inches. “Dolly,” I read her tag aloud.

Tapping it, she smiles. “I’m Nurse Dolly.”

Despite feeling like I’ve been run over by a truck, I ask, “Where’s Chloe?” The tone of my voice sounds foreign, so I try to clear it unsuccessfully.

“Miss Fox is stable—”

“Thank fuck.” I gently scrub my hands over my face, wanting to wipe away the murky brain. Seeing her disapproving twist of lips reminds me of my mom. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Her eyes do a scan of my face as her fingers rub over a small bandage I can feel tugging next to my eye. “Don’t worry about Miss Fox. She’s got the best care. Just like you.”

“Can I see her?”

Sympathy shapes her smile. “You’ve both been through a lot.” She pats my leg. “Try to focus on your healing first. Your mom just stepped out for coffee.”

When she turns to leave, I push up, but my strength escapes me, leaving me pressed to the bed without control of my muscles. “I need to see Chloe.”

“You need food, liquids, and healing. That’s the best medicine to recover. I’ll have a meal brought in.”

“She’ll want to see me too. She’s probably worried.”

“I’ll let the doctor know you’re awake. You can discuss this with her.”

Frustration tenses my hands, and I slam down a fist. “Make sure she knows I need to see Chloe.”

She never deviates from goodwill—in expression or tone. “I’ll let her know.”

“Dolly?”

Stopping with the door in her hands, she asks, “Yes?”

“Where am I?”

Kissing Chloe.

Holding hands.

Pain . . . everywhere.

“Newport Regional.”

An ambulance.

“Rhode Island?”

Chasing the moon.

A nod of her head is the confirmation I need, but I’m still struggling to remember how I got here. The doctor doesn’t come right away. And even

though I put my best efforts into trying to stay awake, I'm too tired to fight the heaviness, so I let my body sink into the mattress, hoping to wake with less pain.

"Joshua." My name comes in sobs while my hand is squeezed. "Sweetie. Mama's here."

I bear the weight of my eyelids and open them to find her standing above me crying. I reach for her hand latched onto the rail. "Mom—" But I forgot how much speaking hurts. She's there to help me, letting me sip from the straw. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Sorry for what?"

"I remember I wrecked her car. The insurance will go up."

Her eyes go wide. "You almost died, and you're worried about my insurance?" A soft smile lies across her lips. "Don't worry about that. I'd rather pay a higher premium and still have you."

I try to sit up, angering my tender body as her words begin to populate a distant memory.

Chloe's brown hair woven into the gravel.

A broken phone.

Tree branch through the windshield.

An airbag.

Oh, fuck. "Did you say died? I almost died?" Her tentative touch isn't reassuring. "Just tell me."

"Yes. The broken windshield penetrated your side. Glass had to be removed through surgery. You don't remember?" She bursts into tears before I can reply. I shake my head, the words not coming. "You lost a kidney, honey. A few inches higher and . . ."

Covering her hand pressed beside me on the bed, I say, "Don't cry. I'm alive."

"I've never been so scared in my life. I can't lose you, Josh."

"I'm fine," I lie, my body hurting like a bitch just from breathing, much less moving. "But I need to see Chloe." Her eyes lower. The avoidance causes my gut to twist. "Mom?"

"You can't see her right now. She's in the ICU."

"What?" I try to push up, but pain strikes my lower back like a bolt of lightning. "The nurse said she's stable."

She starts a steady pace bedside, gnawing on the inside of her cheek. "She is stable, but you need to keep your stress down because healing is

important.”

“So is seeing Chloe. Can I visit her in the ICU?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

I reach for the call button. “Where’s the doctor? They’ll let me in.”

“Josh?”

The morbid sound of her tone stills my arm from reaching any farther. When I turn to look at her again, she says, “Chloe’s in a coma.”

Joshua

The metal is bent in seven places, making me wonder how that happened. Fight between family members? Orderlies restraining an abusive spouse? Someone sobbing over the death of a loved one?

Fuck, my mind goes to the dark too fast these days.

These days.

I'm not even sure what day it is or how many I've been here. I only know that I've been successfully kept from Chloe.

"You need to eat, Joshua."

Even though it's my mom, I hate hearing my full name from anyone but Chloe. *Chloe*. What I wouldn't give to hear her say it. Closing my eyes, I bargain with the devil.

My soul for hers.

Take me and let her live.

"Any word?" I ask, my eyes returning to the damaged blinds blocking the window.

"No," my mom says, returning to my side. Her fidgeting—with the blanket, my gown, the room—is getting on my nerves. I struggle not to take my anger out on her. It's not her fault.

It's mine.

"I took my eyes off the road, Mom. It was only a split second."

She sighs and then fluffs my pillow. "You need to stop saying that."

Her tone catches me off guard. "Why?"

"Because you're in enough trouble." Leaning down, she whispers, "The police will be taking another statement from you, but I overheard . . ." She pauses, looking over her shoulder and then back to me again. "They're looking to pin this on you."

"There's no one else to pin it on. The deer—"

"There was no deer at the scene."

"I swerved. I missed it."

"That's not important. It was an accident. You said so yourself, Josh."

Panic rises in her voice. “You need to keep saying that. You have to insist.”

“It *was* an accident.” My throat thickens as the air in the room goes stale. “That’s still the truth.” It only takes me a few seconds of silence to start connecting the dots. “You would tell me if something happened to her, right?”

“Chloe’s alive. That’s all they’ll tell me.” Squeezing my hand, she adds, “We’re not in New Haven, sweetie. We have no allies here—not your friends, or Barb, T, not even the professor, but he said he’d help if he can.”

“He teaches history.”

I didn’t think her face could fall anymore, but the professor seemed to hold the last string with her hope attached. “They’re looking for someone to pay.”

Although the headache has subsided after a few days, my body is sore, insisting I limit my movements, or it protests in pain, so I remain still. “They’re looking at me?”

The nod is slight, but I catch it. “I can’t lose you, Joshua.”

The dots scatter again, and I can’t seem to collect them. “What are you saying?”

Sitting down next to the bed, she lowers her head, making it hard to see her over the bedrail. “Dr. Fox is pressing charges based on the statement you already gave. The county would anyway. Reckless driving with alcohol in your system. Stealing a car. Kidnapping.”

“Kidnapping? No.” Maybe the concussion was worse than they thought because I can’t seem to comprehend what she’s saying. Yet I know. I’m not sure how long I stare at her head, but it’s long enough to cause her to look up. “I’m missing the part that makes those charges reality. That’s not what happened. Chloe didn’t confirm it either. There’s no way she’d say those things. She’ll clear this up. We just have to wait for her—”

“*If* she recovers,” she snaps, sending my heart plunging to the pit of my stomach.

“If?”

“You can’t wait for her to come to your rescue, Josh. She’s in a coma, so you have to listen to me.” Conspiracy worries her gestures, and she looks at the door again. Whispering, she adds, “Her dad has the hospital wrapped around his finger. I’ve witnessed it. They don’t budge until he gives them the go-ahead.”

“Find Cat, Chloe’s mom. She’ll talk to us.” She glances toward the

window, strain working its way into the creases at the corners of her eyes. I hate what this is doing to her, the trouble I'm causing her. "I'm sorry you had to come here, Mom."

When her eyes return, she tries to smile, but I can tell it's only for my benefit. Her heart is still burdened. "I'd go to the moon and back for you."

Moon?

Some fuzzy memory of a moon I can't reach shelters in the back of my brain.

"You won't want to hear this, Josh, but it's best if we put distance between you and Chloe. And we should call your father."

"My father?" Disgust penetrates the words. "Why the fuck would we call him?"

It's the first time she doesn't correct my swearing. That's when the gravity of the situation sets in. "Your dad can afford a lawyer."

"I need a lawyer?" A pang hits when I shift too quickly, reminding me of the recent surgery. Restless in this bed, I feel stuck and completely helpless.

"You need someone who can protect you. And as much as it breaks my heart, I can't." Dropping her face into her hands, she breaks, her soft cries overwhelming her.

Fuck the pain. Moving closer, I lower the rail and rub her back. "Don't cry, Mom. It will be okay. *I'll* be okay. You're not going to lose the diner."

She looks up with tear-filled eyes. "I don't care about the diner. I don't care about our home. None of that matters if something happens to you."

Fear drops an anchor in my chest as flood waters rise above my head. I would normally go for a run, run as fast and as far as I can before dropping to my knees. Or drink until I pass out. But neither is a possibility. Chloe was my hope, my savior, and my haven. Now she and my mom are suffering because of me. "Mom?" Her eyes lift to mine. I ask, "Will you help me see her?"

Her head is already shaking before her anger comes out. "Your entire life is on the line, and you're still worried about Chloe?"

"Yes. If I can talk her, she'll help—"

"She's in a coma! I know you believe that your presence will wake her, but—"

"I need to." I don't blame the anger she's feeling. It's born of grief. Her concern is valid and should worry me more. But how can I when I haven't talked to the one person who can save me, the one who already has once before?

Searching my eyes, she shakes her head again and then sighs. “You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

“No, I’m not going to let Chloe go.”

“Even at your own expense?” My stubborn silence is the only answer I can give. “I’ll see what I can do.”

My mom leaves shortly after seeing things my way. Although my phone was crushed in the wreck, I still reach for it out of habit and come up empty. It’s frustrating sitting here with nothing to do but stew in the stress brought on by the thought of my dad being called in like the cavalry. No fucking way will I let him step in like a fucking hero. I’ll fix this before it comes to that.

The monitor spikes, so I take a deep breath before I cause Dolly to check in on me. As I close my eyes, an image of Chloe lying in my arms back home in New Haven helps me sleep.

* * *

“Wake up, Mr. Evans?” A muffled voice drags me kicking and screaming from my dreams.

The harsh return to reality has me trying to push up, the IV stabbing internally. *Motherfuck*. “What are you doing here?” I ask, my voice harsher than intended when I see the man beside me. “Is Chloe all right?”

Norman Fox is in his white coat with a stethoscope around his neck. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was here to check on me. His tone tells me otherwise. “You put my daughter in a coma, so no, she’s not *all right*.”

Putting what my mom told me aside, this man is my link back to Chloe. “Is she stable? How long will she remain in a coma?”

“Her heartbeat is steady, and her brain function appears to be how it should.”

I ease back on the bed. “Thank God.”

“No, thank me. I’ve been overseeing her recovery.” He moves to set a medical file down on the tray and then returns to the end of the bed. “Let me get to the point. You stole her car, forced her to go God knows where, and then tried to kill her.”

“No, she—”

“Quiet.” He begins to pace with his hands clasped behind his back as if he intends to stay a while. “There was a struggle by the way the seat belt cut into

the skin of her collarbone. Was she fighting to escape?”

"There was no struggle . . ." A vision of buckling her back in flashes. "I didn't kidnap her—"

"She didn't stand a chance against your recklessness." As he glares at me, hatred lines his bloodshot eyes, but the words lack emotion and truth. His voice is steady like his hands. Maybe that's what happens to someone when they gain knowledge but lose their soul.

"I would never hurt her. You know that."

"I don't know that. I only know the facts that the evidence supports, and there's enough of that to put you behind bars. So, I'm thinking we can come to an agreement, Mr. Evans."

Fuck. I take a breath, keeping it restrained to hide the panic twisted in fury hidden from him. "And that is?"

"I'm giving you an opportunity, a future to make your mother proud, your father content with his bastard son, and to give yourself a way out of the life you're living."

My spine bristles from the mention of my father, reawakening the pain from surgery.

"Let me get to the point, *Joshua.*" *Finally.* "I won't risk all we've invested, the time and effort my daughter has put into creating her future. She's inheriting a practice I've spent thirty years building. Chloe is brilliant. She's momentarily sidetracked by you. Yes. I grant you that, but the best thing a parent can do for their child is to get them back on the right path."

"The threat doesn't have to be spoken to be heard."

"Chloe said you were clever, and you don't disappoint."

"Don't fuck with me."

"That sounds distinctly like a threat."

"It is. You can sugarcoat yours, but I'm not doing this dance."

He walks around to the side of the bed, smart enough to keep some distance. "I've tried to tell Chloe who you really are, but she's young and impressionable, blossoming into an outstanding woman. I think we'd agree on that."

"She's also an adult and can make her own decisions. I thought you were getting to the point?"

"Ah, yes. I should. You're going to be discharged in the morning and will return to Connecticut."

Crossing my arms over my chest, I ask, "Who says?"

“I do. In the meantime, my daughter should make a full recovery once we bring her out of the coma.”

“What do you mean bring her out?”

Can he not see the pain he’s instilled in me while my heart fights for its life somewhere else in this damn hospital? Or does he not care that I love her with every fiber of my being? As he peeks behind the bent blinds, I’m once again disgusted by the lack of compassion. It’s a real disservice to his patients. He says, “A medically induced coma was the best path to decrease the swelling in her brain.”

His head tilts down, a long exhale following. When he rubs his temple, it’s the first time I see a break in his steadfast demeanor.

As much as I hate this man, he’s a brain surgeon, and the best advocate Chloe could have, so I won’t argue with her care. I drop my guard to get as much information as I can from him. “Is she going to be okay?”

He seems to have found some empathy in the quiet room and tosses me a bone. “It will take time. She won’t be returning to school this semester. That’s what you’ve done. She was so far ahead and now she’ll have this setback to overcome.”

“I love her,” I say, the words needing to be voiced, for him to hear and to know if he didn’t already. “I would never intentionally hurt her.”

“But you did, so I had papers drawn up to protect my daughter’s future.” Here it comes. I brace myself, keeping my expression indifferent like she did with him the day I arrived. “Go home. Help your mom run her restaurant, get your degree. Live your life, Josh. Just live it without Chloe.”

“That’s the offer?” I look down and pull a loose thread just as the folder from the tray lands on my lap. And here I thought that was a medical file. How could I be so naïve? “You’re asking me to move on with life without her?”

“I’m not asking, Mr. Evans. You lost a kidney, not your heart. Be grateful, but more importantly, be smart.”

“And if I’m not?”

“I’ll press charges, the police will take you into custody, and you can spend the next three to five years fighting for your freedom through the court system.”

There’s no choice for me in these options. Either way, I lose because he knows I could never drag Chloe down with me. But this can’t be what he’s wanting. “I stay by Chloe’s side not bowing to your commands and have my

life destroyed, or I leave the woman I love like she doesn't matter to me . . . and *live my life* without her? Those are my choices?"

"Yes."

"You make it sound simple." My body's exhausted, and my mind is not as quick as I'd like it, making it hard to unpack emotionally.

"It is simple." I find relief when he walks toward the door. "You have the papers."

"You're assuming I'll sign." *Fuck him.*

With the door in hand, he says, "You're a smart kid, so you clearly understand that dating a woman out of your league isn't worth losing your freedom, or your mom losing her diner. Anyway, Chloe would eventually see you for the man you are, a pest beneath her feet. Trust me, Mr. Evans, you'll thank me one day for saving you both the trouble."

I throw the first thing I can find, the TV remote shattering as soon as it hits the back of the door. "*Fuck you!*"

Threatening me is one thing.

Threatening my mom's livelihood, a whole other.

Smug fucking asshole.

It took hours for my blood pressure to go down. Now I'm stuck in the dark listening to my heartbeat. I can't sleep a wink with the offer trying to suffocate the best part of me—my relationship with Chloe. *Fuck him and his scheme.* I've gone around and back again, wondering if the threat is empty. The problem is, I don't know unless I choose an option to find out.

I love her more than anything, but will loving me ruin her life?

Am I willing to gamble both of our futures on a risk and a prayer?

Wanting to get it over with, I pull out the deal he's offering and start reading over the details.

My mom overheard the charges, and Dr. Fox confirmed his intentions. But how do I walk away from Chloe? She's as much a part of me as my own soul.

If it were only me to consider, I'd take the risk of being with Chloe without a second thought. She's the reward I never deserved. Is that where the truth is found? I never deserved her in the first place?

My dad is from this world, this level of wealth. Yet he didn't want me, so why would she?

Norman Fox has me trapped, and I can't disappoint my mom. She worked too hard to get me here. I can face the courts, letting the truth come out, and I

would walk free at the end of the day, but not without dragging my mom through heartbreak and a financial mess that would have her lose the diner.

The longer I sit here, staring at this contract, the more my shoulders sag against the mattress. Whether I like it or not, I know what I have to do. I can't put my mom through this just as I can't make Chloe choose between me and her family.

I can't.

I won't.

I pull the pen from the envelope.

The only escape from this nightmare is not only breaking my heart but also hurting the woman I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with. I can't imagine a day without her. She's my other half. My one love. But I also can't risk that she won't get everything she's worked so hard for.

I'll do anything for you, Chloe, including this. With a shaky hand, I sign my heart away, giving her the life she deserves instead.

28

Joshua

I glance at the paper my mom handed me the moment I was discharged.

Third floor.

Hall B.

Room 314.

I'm not exactly stealth, considering the recent surgery to remove my kidney. I was told to take it easy, and I will, but there's one last thing I have to do before leaving Rhode Island.

I owe Chloe more than an apology. I have to explain my side of things before her father bends her ear and fills it with lies. She may not be awake, but I know she'll hear me.

Discovering the room without staff or her family around is a miracle. I steady my nerves and open the door. The blinds are closed, the lights dim. Chloe's eyes don't greet me. Cat's are—similar in so many ways, but not the balm I need to heal my breaking heart. She stands. "Josh?" Rushing toward me, she asks, "How are you?" keeping her voice low.

Cat helps me inside the room, and although she's asked me something, I can't keep my eyes off Chloe. Serene, making me wish she was in my arms again. It's hard to tell she's in a coma, but she doesn't stir this time, my proximity undetected, which for some reason adds salt to the wound. I'm not crazy to think I can wake her just by being here, but hope had thrived this whole time that I didn't realize I was setting myself up for failure all along.

When I finally turn to Cat, I whisper, "I . . . I needed to see her."

"Of course." Red rimmed lids underscore tired eyes that I hadn't noticed when I walked in. Cat's features are usually alive with color and animation but not now. Grief has a way of taking hold and sucking the life out of you.

The signs may not be as visible on me, but I relate inside. "They're bringing her out of the coma tomorrow, I believe. If you want to be here—"

"I can't."

With her hand steady on the bed rail, she lets her sadness take over. Her voice trembles matching her hands. "I understand."

I glance at her. “You don’t, but . . . I hope you will one day.”

“You’re leaving?” she asks, offense taking over her tone.

“Discharged. My mom is driving us back to Connecticut.”

When she looks at her daughter, the tears are substantial. “I’m sorry to hear that.” Catching herself, she turns back to me. “I didn’t mean—It’s good you’re healthy enough to go home, but she’ll ask about you. What do I say?”

I run my hand through my hair, not sure how to answer. I do the only thing I can, and lie, “Tell her I’ll see her soon.”

Coming around the bed, she touches my cheek and then hugs me gently. “Take care of yourself, Josh.” She knows. She knows I’m walking away, leaving Chloe when all I should be doing is staying. Cat’s granting me more compassion than I’m granting her daughter.

The truth of what I’m doing is destroying me. I want to kiss Chloe, to feel her lips against mine one last time, but it’s wrong when my intentions aren’t pure. “You, too.”

“Do you want a minute alone with her before you go?” Cat asks.

Nodding, I wipe away the water that’s gathered in the corners of my eyes.

She adds, “I need coffee anyway. I’ll be back in five minutes or so?”

The question is left hanging in the air. I’m starting to think she doesn’t know about the offer from Dr. Fox, considering she’s giving me an opportunity to say goodbye. “Hey, Cat?” When she looks back, I say, “Thank you.”

Her head lowers as the door closes.

Moving to the side of the bed, I lean down, wanting to smell her again, to inhale Chloe’s love into my lungs, hoping to survive off that for as long as it takes to get over the loss.

It’s an impossible task.

The reality is, I’ll never get over her.

She came into my life when I thought I didn’t matter to the world. I was a disappointment to my dad, and I’d never be able to live up to my mom’s dreams for me, or outgrow New Haven. I couldn’t change the hand I’d been dealt, but I was still playing like I had a chance to win. *Fucking foolish.*

The bruising on her beautiful face can’t be ignored. The deep pink skin screams of the trauma she sustained. I did that. I should have kept my eyes on the road and my hands on the steering wheel. I should have never looked away.

Not when she was tempting me.

Not when she kissed me.

Not for anything.

Careful not to hurt her now, I touch her neck gently, not wanting to leave a single fingerprint of evidence that I was here. I hold my cheek against hers, my lips a breath away from her ear. “I’m sorry, baby. So sorry.”

Her floral scent is gone, replaced by the sterility of the room. Tears seep between us just as I kiss the corner of her lips. Hopeful, I look up, expecting to see her pretty greens staring back at me. But that’s not what I get. It’s my tears that trail down her skin. It’s my heat that puts the pink on her cheeks.

I’m the one to blame for what happened, so I beg for the mercy I’ll never show myself. “Please forgive me. *Please.*”

Though she’s not mine to love anymore, I do anyway. I love her in spite of what I’ve been forced to do.

Staring at her, I memorize every detail. Unable to resist bonding our hands once more, I complete the tattoo that forever anchors us together. “I love you.”

One breath.

Two . . .

I walk away, swinging the door wide open, and leave this place, and her, behind.

Just outside, I cut the corner of the building and fall against it, needing a moment in the sun to wash away the bitterness before facing my mom. It doesn’t work.

How can it?

My hands are dirty with the deed I’ve done when all I wanted was her to cleanse them. Seeing Chloe didn’t do the trick. It made it worse. I break down, letting the anger own me. I fucking hate her dad. I hate this world for giving me a taste of a life never meant for me. I fucking hate everything.

I didn’t sign our relationship away on the dotted line. I made a choice to give up on us when she’s fighting to live. How is that right? How is that fair? I’m returning to my life as if our lives haven’t been changed forever, and I hope she hates me for it. Like I hate myself.

“Josh Evans?”

My gaze angles toward the entrance of the hospital to see a cop standing with his hand ready to draw his weapon. Confusion has me pushing off the brick wall. Old habits have me glancing over my shoulder for Todd and Bryant like we’re outrunning Old Man Sanders for trespassing to steal beer

from his barn. *Do I make a run for it?*

He comes closer. "Don't make this harder than necessary."

I square my shoulders, fighting the need to cower as a blaze of physical pain scores my insides. "What are you talking about?"

"You're still recovering, so I recommend you go willingly."

"Go where?" I could make a run for the vehicle, but then I'll be involving my mom, and I can't do that. Where would we go? They know who I am. Where we live. Though I can't stop my mind from spinning through optional scenarios, I know there's no way out.

I'm not sure why sympathy enters his eyes, but I'll take it. "I have a warrant for your arrest."

A warrant? I sour in the words, knowing I've been had. "I signed the paperwork. Dr. Fox got what he wanted."

He rattles off a series of charges. Although some I already heard when it was a threat, they don't sit any better now than they did.

This isn't New Haven where the Evans last name holds the weight I always complained about back home. Owning an immense amount of property has cemented his place. Here, I have to be strong because I'm not dealing with small town security guards like Dwight. This is Dr. Fox's doing.

Fucking backstabber.

My instincts told me his word was no good, but as Chloe's father, I trusted him. Being trapped makes you do stupid shit. Signing that contract was the dumbest one yet.

A fight rages inside my muscles, but this is a no-win. I'd die fighting, and what good to my mom will I be then? "It's bullshit, and you know it."

"It doesn't matter what I know. You signed a confession." He pulls the handcuffs from his loop.

My legs wobble as my head lightens, trying to process what he just said. "What confession?"

Suddenly, the sympathy makes more sense. "Were you under duress when you signed the paperwork?"

The beat of my heart rattles against my rib cage, shaking hands ready to fight for my freedom. "That wasn't a confession. It was—"

"Put your hands behind your head," he says, moving in. "And get on your knees."

"No."

Pulling his gun, he aims it at my chest. I duck my head and drop to my

knees as blood rushes through me, the sound in my ears making me squeeze my eyes closed.

Forget the pain, the visions of happier times, of mangata. Forget the sight of Chloe bare beneath me, her laughter filling my ears and her smile gentle like the breeze reminding me I'm alive.

"I didn't sign a confession." Tears fill my eyes unexpectedly. "I swear to God." I slowly put my hands behind my head. My injury flares with fire licking up my back and side.

My wrists are twisted down and snapped into metal cuffs. It's not the pain that gets to me and not the nosy people who've gathered to watch this arrest go down. It's my mom when she discovers what's happening. Her tears and cries as she comes running.

A look of utter devastation on her face is the last thing I see as I'm being driven away, breaking every promise to stay out of trouble that I made to her. But sometimes life doesn't work out the way we plan.

29

Chloe

There's a state of unconsciousness when you waver between lucidity and dreaming. The always felt presence of my mom and the faintest scent of her Chanel perfume fragrant the air. But it's not her that kept my mind at peace while asleep.

It was Joshua.

I can feel him around me as if his arms are holding me. His lips kissing me as he whispers, "I love you," in my ear. He's here even when I can't respond. I feel him, a dream so real that the heat from his cheek still warms mine. So real that I rush through the fog to find him.

Disappointment greets me when he doesn't. Too dark to see much, my eyes go to the light sneaking in under the door.

My body hurts, needing a good stretch from lying around too long. I never did like lazy days unless I was being lazy with Joshua on the couch or in bed. That's my favorite way to spend my time, the days when neither of us had to leave for hours. Giddiness slinks up my spine, and I smile.

Wanting to find him, I flip the blanket from my waist, but pain grapples its way up my arm when the IV is tugged. I stare at my hand, the bruising that blotches the top, and the needle. *Why would I . . .* My eyes begin to adjust and then go wide as fear grips me. Monitors on my left, an unfamiliar window on the right. Bed rails keeping me contained. Voices on the other side of the door.

My heartbeat spikes as alarm rings through me.

The door flies open. My mom rushes in with a nurse, both of them on a mission. "Honey, you're awake!" Tears spring to my mom's eyes as her voice trembles in relief. Patting down my hair, she kisses my head. "I've been so worried."

Gently reaching as not to anger the IV, I hug her. "I'm okay, Mom." My voice is cruddy, so I peek over to see if there's something to drink.

"Water?" She pours a cup, and I sip, holding the rail next to me. "Do you need more? Are you hungry? How do you feel?"

The lights are brightened but kept at a comfortably dimmed setting. I'm dodging questions until my throat feels coated enough to ask, "I'm fine. What happened? Why am I here?"

"You were thrown from the car during the accident."

Accident? I'm staring at her, waiting for more, something that can lead me to a place where what she said makes sense. But it's not her words that give me a clue. It's when I shift. "My legs?"

The nurse comes around the bed, angling it up. "How's that?"

The points of pain are too vast to keep track of. "Why do I hurt everywhere?"

Standing back, she says, "The doctor will be in shortly. Let me know if you need anything." She hands me the call button. "Just push this." She sees herself out, quietly closing the door behind her.

My heartbeat has settled, but my mind is still racing. I've ignored the throb in my head, not realizing until now that it's not just a headache. Touching the side, I ask my mom, "Thrown from the car? Do I have a concussion?"

Although she appears relieved to see me, my mom harbors concern in her eyes. "What's the last thing you remember?"

I stare at an empty corner of the room, trying to summon my memories. Opening that door has Joshua filling my brain. "Chasing the moon," I reply, lost in the feel of freedom but unable to make sense of it.

My mom's head tilts as she asks, "What is chasing the moon?"

"I have no idea. It just came to me. Other than that, I remember Dad giving me the car. Where's Joshua?" I cover my stomach, trying to settle the churn. "I want to see him."

The remote to operate my bed suddenly becomes the most interesting thing she's ever seen, avoidance at its worst. "Are you comfortable? Hungry?"

My chest squeezes. I touch her forearm in a silent plea to look at me. When she does, I whisper, "Was he in the accident? Is he okay?" I'm not sure I even hear myself as fear runs through the question.

"He's fine, Chloe." With my fears confirmed, I watch as she slumps. It's an odd sight from a woman who's always poised. "I checked with his nurse several times when he was in recovery. He's strong. He's a fighter." Resting her hand on my leg, she adds, "You shouldn't worry about him. You need to focus on your own recovery."

“There’s nothing to focus on but lying here, Mom,” I lie, knowing there’s underlying issues—little aches inside every time I take a breath, fire burning through my ribs on the right side. I don’t want to be the cause of worrying her more than the obvious exhaustion already tugging at the corner of her eyes.

I can’t think clearly as I try to whittle through what she seems willing to share when it comes to Joshua. Nothing makes sense to me, except him. But my emotions are burning through my energy reserves, and I start to fight against the inevitable sleep. I need answers. “If something’s wrong, I need to know.”

“I don’t know the details.” She brushes it off.

It’s not like her to be evasive, but I don’t have the strength to piece the puzzle together. “Mom, please, just be honest with me.”

Staring into my eyes, I see the debate in hers. “I don’t agree that you need to be focused on his recovery instead of yours, but I understand why you are.”

I find little comfort in her words, craving to hear him tell me not to worry instead. My stomach is tied in knots when I look at her, and ask, “Where is he? I need to see him.” Pushing off the bed again, I say, “I’m going to find Joshua. I don’t care how much pain I’m in, everything hurts worse without him.”

Every movement—big or small—is a reminder how my body is betraying me, leaving me trapped in this bed and worried sick. *An accident . . .* that I have absolutely no recollection of being involved in has put me in the hospital. *What did it do to him?* I cover my face as the tears flood forth, my shoulders shaking from the pain in my body and the ache in my heart.

She takes my hands and holds them. “Chloe, I need you to listen to me.” I look at her through my tears. The reality of what happened still escapes me, but the repercussions embed themselves deep inside me. “Your condition is delicate. Try to remain calm.”

“I’ll calm down when I see him.”

“He’s been discharged.”

“What? When?” I ask, searching the table and tray for my phone but not finding it. Her silence is telling, so I glance up. “He’ll want to hear from me. Where’s my phone?”

“Honey, he left.”

“He left?” My hand covers my chest to keep my happy heart from beating wildly. “That’s great news. He’s doing well. Thank God.” Patting my hair, I

add, “Will you help me shower? I bet I look awful, and I know I smell.” The laughter trickling through me feels like much-needed medicine. “Can I borrow some lipstick?”

“Chloe?”

“I want to look nice for him when he comes to see—”

“Chloe!”

I startle. Even that hurts. “What?”

“Josh returned to New Haven five days ago.”

The bomb is dropped, my thoughts scattering in the aftermath. “Five days ago?” Swallowing hurts my throat, so I sip more water, trying to come to any conclusion in my favor that would have him leaving while I’m still here. Her tone . . . The empathy in her eyes . . . Turning toward the window, I say, “He didn’t abandon me if that’s what you’re thinking.” He wouldn’t. I can still feel him holding my heart in his hands.

“I’m not insinuating anything,” she replies, dragging my attention back to her. She drops her gaze, not able to look at me. “Chloe . . .” Her readjusting the blanket becomes a distraction for both of us, so I clamp my hand down on hers to still it. Her eyes carry the pain I feel inside. “You need to think about you right now. School is back in session, but your recovery isn’t going to be quick. This will put you a semester behind, if not more, if you don’t heal.”

Heal? Her tone twists my emotions while my head swims in a million thoughts about Joshua and why he’s not here. His healing is important, but he wouldn’t leave me without saying goodbye. He wouldn’t let me take a breath without testing to make sure it’s clear. He loves me like I love him, and there’s no healing without him here.

This doesn’t make sense. “You say that like I’ll never see him again. Why?”

She’s the one looking toward the window as if it will shed light on the situation. “I don’t know, honey.”

That’s it. That’s all I get. Maybe it’s all she has to give. Maybe it’s the truth. Maybe he left without thinking twice about me? My heart would know, so I don’t think so.

She won’t, or can’t help me, so I’ll do what I can to bring her peace and then suffer in silence until she leaves. “Don’t worry about me or school. I’ve missed what? A few days?” I shrug nonchalantly, fighting the ache to keep a straight face for her. “I’ll contact them and make up the work. My professors will understand.”

I take the opportunity to leverage my dad's connection for the first time, but on my terms. "And if they don't, Dad can call. You know him. He'll convince them."

Seeming to surrender, she sighs. "You're just like him. Determined to your own detriment." A kiss to my cheek is given. "You need rest."

I nod. "Do you mind getting me a phone?"

"I'll pick one up tomorrow."

"Thank you."

When she leaves, I carefully hold my side where I can tell I've broken a rib. My breaths are shallow, and I can feel my toes.

I'll survive.

I'll heal.

I'll be back on track with my life soon enough, except for the seed of doubt nagging the back of my mind. Joshua wouldn't leave me. Him being home is a good sign that he's not badly injured. That's great, actually. I hold up my hand and look at the tattoo—it's ours. Binding us together forever. That can't be removed . . . the tattoo . . . *or our love.*

We're forever.

With confidence that I'll get to talk to him tomorrow, I close my eyes, feeling his love comfort me back to sleep

30

Chloe

He hasn't answered his phone for five days straight. *How is that possible?*

I've made almost as many calls to the diner, but I'm told he's not working, and his mom isn't available. Why hasn't he called me back? *Why hasn't Patty?*

Not a text or call. No letter. No contact at all.

It doesn't make sense.

"Patty has to answer eventually," I convince myself, listening to the ringing on the line one more time before hanging up disappointed again.

I lean against the molding that frames the windows and stare into the distance, quietly summoning my phone to ring in my hand. *Please. Please, call me.*

The sun shines through the shutters of my childhood room, the ocean close enough to lose myself in the roll of the waves. Throwing the stupid phone to the bed, I open the window to hear the sound of the roar, hoping it drowns out the sadness I feel.

My phone rings, and I dive to answer it, instantly reminded of my broken rib. *Holy damn.* It doesn't deter me from answering. "Joshua?" The desperation comes through.

"You still haven't heard from him?" Ruby usually has me smiling, but even she can't turn my mood around today.

"No. Any word there?"

"I drove by the diner. There's a sign on the door with odd hours. Sorry for the inconvenience. *Blah.* Temporarily closed."

"That is odd. Nothing else?"

"No, but I can track down his friends." I hear her snapping her fingers in the background. "Didn't you say they hang out at Lucky's?"

"Oh God, no." Humiliation seeps into my bones just from the thought. "That would be just . . . What if Joshua is ghosting me? I'd look like a crazy ex-girlfriend. No." Vehemently shaking my head, I add, "No."

"Yeah, that would be embarrassing, but at least we'd get an answer."

“No, Ruby.”

“How about I cruise by Josh’s house tomorrow?”

Such a simple offer that complicates things. I feel shame for admitting it, but I say, “I don’t know where he lives. He . . .” A lump in my throat forms, making it hard to speak. “He lived with me.” He still takes up space in my heart free of charge.

She says, “He’s not been over there. I would have heard. I can hear everything through these walls and vents.”

That gives me pause, embarrassment topping all my other emotions when I remember how she once told us she could hear even our most intimate moments. Then I cringe, dropping my head forward. “I can’t have this conversation with you, Ruby.”

“Then we won’t, Clo. I’ve been watering your plants.”

I’d forgotten we exchanged keys when we moved in. But that I had forgotten about Frankie and Dwayne Evans . . . a lump forms in my throat because that’s all that remains. “You said plants? Both of them?”

“Yes.”

He wouldn’t leave me and his bonsai behind. *Would he?*

Tears well in the corners of my eyes when I realize that maybe it’s a parting gift since there isn’t anything else there. No Joshua. No me. Nothing of us, and I didn’t get so much as a goodbye. “I don’t understand. Please help me understand, Ruby. How could he do this to me?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry. Guys are so dumb.”

“I wish so badly that I could remember.”

“Do you not remember anything about the accident?”

No. I don’t remember anything except that Joshua was driving. We were laughing . . . “I remember feeling happy. I can’t describe it better than that. I sound like a fool.” Frustrated, I shift the phone, lowering my head. “We were laughing. We—wait. Ruby, why would there be odd hours at the diner? Where’s Patty? Why won’t she call me back?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been able to ask anyone that. But I’ll try to, okay?”

“Please. I just can’t believe he’d leave me like this. My heart hurts worse than my wounds.” *Every part of me is in pain.*

“I know, Clo. I’m so sorry.”

Laying my head down, I close my eyes. “Help me. How do I make the pain go away?”

“It won’t stop hurting until you come to terms with the truth.”

“And that is?”

“He left. That fucker left with his tail tucked between his legs, sneaking off in the night when things got heavy.” I hear a harsh breath through the line. “Here’s the good news, Chloe. Now you know who he really is, and as much as it hurts right now, he’s saving you heartache later.”

Sitting up, I move to the end of the bed, defeated in so many ways. “I just . . . I can’t wrap my head around him leaving me while I was in a coma. What did I do wrong?”

“It’s not you, girl. It’s him.”

Reaching for something that will help makes sense of this, I ask, “What if something’s wrong? He’s injured or—”

“No. Don’t do this to yourself. Josh being MIA from your life speaks volumes. It’s time you listened.” I know she’s only looking out for my best interest, but her advice doesn’t reach the part that needs to hear it most—my heart.

I switch the phone to my other ear and lie back on my bed. “I’m returning tomorrow. My professors have been understanding to this point, but I need to be present.”

“I knew you wouldn’t sacrifice the credits.” She laughs. “You’re the most ambitious person I know.”

“I’ve worked my whole life for this.” How did I become so utterly distracted by a man that I lost track of that? He hasn’t even checked on my well-being since I came out of a damn coma. *Did I know Joshua Evans at all?* “It means a lot to know I have a friend, Ruby.”

“I’ll always be there for you. And for real, I’m happy to go look for him or his friends—” she says, but mumbles, “the lowlifes—when you get here.”

“I appreciate that. I’ll text you when I’m back.”

“Hang in there.”

“I will. Take care.” Hanging up, I hold the phone to my chest. As much as I appreciate her, the weakness I feel for him makes me angry. Why did things go bad? Does he blame me for the accident? After days of overthinking this, it’s all I can come up with. But I’m still so foolish. “Call me, Joshua,” I pray in a wish that slips out to sea.

Hours pass as I sit at the window, staring until the moon reflects off the surface of the furious ocean. I understand the rage. I feel it inside, the grief drowning in the anger.

How can he do this to me? How can he walk away? Does he not feel the searing pain I feel inside?

Did he not love me the same?

* * *

I knock.

And then again.

I won't leave New Haven until I get answers.

A soft knock becomes banging to match how crazy I feel inside. Movement stills me, fists still pressed against the glass. The familiar face has my heart racing. "Patty!" I tap the door anxiously. "Patty!"

Sadness drags her eyes down as she works her way around the counter toward the door. Taking on her pain, I feel my stomach tighten in worry.

She unlocks the bolts and pulls the handle. "What are you doing here, Chloe?"

I was ready to throw my arms around her, but I suddenly feel uncomfortable, the desire for flight heavy in my belly. Looking back at the car waiting for me, Kenneth is scrolling through his phone oblivious to the fact that I'm crumpling here on the sidewalk. When I turn to Patty, I reply with a shaky voice, "I'm looking for Joshua?"

Her tears fall as if the name alone caused them to flow, her petite frame almost lost in the doorway. Hollow eyes. Deeper defined cheekbones. The signs of distress are apparent. Gripping hold of the door, she leans on it for support. "You don't know where he is?"

"No." This conversation is all wrong, my bones laden with dread of the outcome. Holding my phone up, I reply, "He won't answer my calls."

"Josh is in jail," she bites, her tone sharp.

"I don't . . . what?" I wade through her anger but still can't piece the words together. "He's in jail?"

In my mind, the past six days I've been awake stream on replay—no calls or texts, leaving me to wonder what happened when I needed him most.

He's in jail? "Why?"

"How do you not know?" Bloodshot eyes stare at me as if I have an answer.

"I'm sorry, I . . ." I stumble over the words when I realize she's mad at

me. "I'm confused, Patty. Is he okay?"

"No." She runs her hands over her eyes just as she starts crying. "How will he survive this? How will I? What will I do without him?" Her voice raises with every question she asks. I stand there dumbly not understanding. "What will he do when he gets out? Your dad is destroying his whole future!" she shouts. "Why?"

"My father? What does he have to do with anything?"

Her hands fall to her sides, and she stares at me in disbelief. "Do you really not know?" Shaking my head again, she continues, "Your dad didn't tell you how he had my son charged with stealing a vehicle, reckless driving, kidnapping, for God's sake, and a whole other slew of charges?"

Breathing becomes difficult, so I cover my injured rib to steady the broken bone. "They wouldn't do that. Not to me. Not to Joshua."

"They did!" she yells. "Leave, Chloe. Unless you're going to fix this, leave me alone. But more importantly, leave my son alone." Stepping to the side, she adds, "You've already ruined his life. Don't torture him anymore." The door is slammed in my face, leaving me stunned.

Ruin his life?

Oh God. He's in jail . . . her words replay. "*Your dad didn't tell you how he had my son charged with stealing a vehicle, reckless driving, kidnapping, for God's sake, and a whole other slew of charges?*"

No. No, my dad wouldn't have done that. Would he? Why? It doesn't make sense.

Tears fall once again, my heart broken. I thought I knew what pain was. But this . . . for my father to hurt me so deeply . . . Would the man who can't tell me he loves me go out of his way to destroy the man who can?

Whether he intended to destroy me or not, he just did.

31

Chloe

I told myself I'd hold it together. I'd be strong and control my emotions like I used to do before I met him. But two hours aren't enough time to cry myself out of the guilt I feel.

I've left messages for my dad, but he's in surgery.

My mom insisted on coming to New Haven with me. I told her no because I didn't want her to witness Joshua breaking my heart, if that happened. I wish I had let her come, after all. Although I haven't told her about Joshua being in jail, I don't think I can. I have to do this alone.

After finally figuring out where Joshua is being held, I sit here, waiting, struggling to restrain the pain, the guilt, the confusion I feel for him.

Our eyes meet the moment the door opens, and all that I've repressed comes flooding forward. Seeing the man who has been your strength, the blood that flows through your veins broken is devastating for the hope held inside. I stand, my hands pressed to the glass, hoping to feel his heat and our connection coming together once again.

The kind eyes I fell in love with are harder, the future I once saw inside now gone. Joshua's hands align with mine, grappling for the same things I need—the life we once had. Tears fill his eyes as he stares into mine. Dropping his head, I see the shame he carries, the shame my family put there.

I'd break this glass if I could take it away. Helplessness feeds into desperation and I move as close as I can, pushing my cheek to the unyielding surface. When he does the same, my strength is regained.

We both pick up the phone, our eyes locked on each other as we sit. "I would never hurt you, Chloe," he says with a shake to his tone I've never heard before, as if he has to convince me of his innocence. "Not on purpose."

"I know . . ." My hand returns to the glass, silently begging him to return his. "I know you wouldn't."

The tears are gone, another emotion taking over, one I've only witnessed one time before—when we had a fight over . . . I don't even remember all of it. *My grades. My dad. My bad mood.* I didn't want him to walk away. He

stayed. He was there for me when I needed him most. But in the moments prior, when I thought I was losing everything, the life, the love left his eyes. “But I have to now.”

My hand slides down the glass, the resistance the only tangible thing I can hold onto. “What?”

“I need you to leave, Chloe, and never return.”

“Need?” My hands start shaking, the receiver not safe against my ear. Surely, I heard him wrong.

“Want.” The response is clear. True to his expression and unbreakable glare, the black swallows the warmth I always loved. “I *want* you to leave.”

“*Leave . . . Leave you alone?*” I’m spiteful of the petty tears that reveal the weakness bleeding into my tone. He doesn’t mean it. I repeat in my head. He’s mad. I’m hurt, but we didn’t cause this mess. “I’ll fix this, Joshua. I promise. I’ll get you out. I’ll do whatever I have to. This is a mistake. Everyone knows that.”

“No one knows it. That’s why I’m here.” He rubs the bridge of his nose, and his hair falls over his forehead, the soft waves I always loved harsher, hanging straight down. “It was a mistake to date you. It was a mistake to pretend we could be together, like we were special, and our worlds wouldn’t collide in tragic ways, in ways I was warned about.”

Warned about? He was warned about dating me? “You don’t mean that.”

Anger causes his chest to rise and fall rapidly. “It was a mistake to love you.”

“But you do. You love me. And I love you, Joshua—”

“It’s Josh, for fuck’s sake!” he yells.

The guard taps the divider with a baton. “Settle down or—”

“I got it.” Joshua—*Josh* snaps back, sitting again. “It was fun, but nothing more. Love isn’t real. I’ll prove it to you. Go to school. Go home. Become a doctor. Find the man worthy of you. That’s not me. I’m just the fucking delivery guy, but I won’t be at your beck and call anymore.”

His best efforts to make me hate him won’t work. That’s his defense, but I see through him. He’s caged and lashing out. I won’t let anyone take away the man I love. “I’m on your side. I’ll always be on your side. Just like you’re on mine. Remember? I love you, and you love me, so spew all the hate you want, but I won’t believe it.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you believe, Chloe. You need to leave me the fuck alone.”

I fight through his hateful words to find the man who he is underneath.
“And if I don’t?”

He slams the phone on the hook and drops his head into his hands. Running his fingers through his hair, he tries to steady his breath, but I can tell he’s struggling to walk away from me. I’m the woman he chose to move in with. The one he shared his bonsai with, shared his secrets when I asked . .

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“It’s not wise to wear your heart on your sleeve.”

“Even if I only wear it for you?”

“Yes.”

I don’t let that memory derail me. He didn’t mean it. I know he didn’t.

He finally looks up and takes the receiver again. “Listen to me. You’re a good girl, Chloe, but you’re not the one for me.” He can’t look me in the eyes when he continues, “I know you want to believe in fate, but you’re not my destiny. Go back to Yale and have a good life.”

“A good life? Without you? How is that even an option?”

“It’s the only you have. I go before the judge tomorrow, so unless you’re willing to argue in my defense, I have no other options than to plead guilty.”

“No, you can’t. Fight the charges. Fight for a trial.” The sound of the chair skidding behind me when I jump up echoes in the room, the palms of my hands hit the glass to get to him. “Fight for us. I’ll fight alongside you.”

For a split second, an ounce of hope returns to his eyes. “If you’ll fight for me, then why did you say no before?”

“To what? When?”

Looking away in thought, he shakes his head. The momentum we were building, coming back together, is lost in confusion. “My lawyer contacted you—”

“He didn’t. I’ve had my phone the whole . . .” *Oh my God!* “I got my phone six days ago . . .” I drop back into the chair, not wanting to see the truth for what it is. Could my father really have gone to these lengths? My hand starts to tremble when I ask, “Did he call before then?”

“Your phone was on the ground. I found it. He called,” he starts, searching his thoughts. “Ten days or so ago. If you didn’t have your phone, who did?”

We both know the answer, so I don’t voice it. A mixture of guilt and helplessness shreds the prospect of fixing this. “I had no idea you were here.

You have to believe me. Not until I saw your mom a few hours ago. No one told me, or I would have been here as soon as I could.”

The bob of his Adam’s apple is heavy, like the reality we’re facing. “But that doesn’t matter now.”

“Yes, it does. We can fight this. Together, we can.” I show him my tattoo. “We’re anchored together, remember? Forever. I’m your anchor. I’m your other half. You’re my hope, and I’m your salvation. I’m yours, and you’re mine.”

“Together forever?” The words come out as if it’s bitter to the tongue. “The tattoo is meaningless if I’m fighting to stay alive. Whether your dad fucked you over by taking your phone or not, you didn’t bother to find me when you woke up. Look at you. You’re well enough to travel to be here—”

“I woke up to find out you had left five days prior. I was devastated and in pain everywhere, but the one thing they couldn’t fix hurt the most. My heart.” I look into his eyes, and it’s as if he doesn’t believe me. “I thought you hated me. I thought you wanted nothing to do with me anymore because my recovery was going to be too much to deal with.” I get choked up and try to catch my breath.

“I was arrested outside the hospital when I was told to leave and not come back.”

My heart plummets to the pit of my stomach. “I didn’t know. I called you, and as soon as I was well enough to travel to New Haven, I did. I went to your mom’s diner, Joshua . . . *Josh*,” I sob. *I can’t be strong. I can’t keep my tears from sliding down my face.* “But now I know the truth. I knew you wouldn’t leave me. I’ll submit a statement. Whatever you need, just tell me. Just tell me what happened. I’ll say anything, anything you want me to.”

The warmth he once shared in his soulful eyes, ices over. “Anything I want? The truth, Chloe. You just have to tell them the truth.” A pinched wrinkle runs through his forehead. “What do you remember happening?”

I hate that I’m disappointing him, so I tug every memory I’ve managed to pull from the deep well of my brain over the past week. “I remember the party. Drinking with you. Making love with you—”

His hands grip the edge of the counter, seeming to keep him from leaving. “You don’t remember, do you?”

The heartstring tethering us together snaps. I’m losing him. I can feel it. My plea comes fast as if time is running out. “I’ll find a doctor to help me, but that will take time. If you tell me, it might trigger the memories.”

He pounds his fist down, and I watch as frustration courses through his handsome features. “This is my life! Not some fucking fairy tale. I’m looking at three years if I plead guilty.”

“Don’t plead guilty. I’ll help—”

“You can’t even fucking remember. So unless you talk your dad out of pressing these charges and now the county that’s siding with him, I’m going to prison tomorrow. What happens to my mom, Chloe? What happens to her diner? What happens to the dreams *I* fucking had?”

One more time. One more to reach him. My hand goes to the glass as if I can reassure him, as if he’ll feel how much I love him, will feel it through the cold division. “I’m sorry. I’ll talk to him. I’ll do anything you need me to. Just tell me what to do.”

“Get me out.” His hand ghosts mine through the glass. “Please.”

“I’ll fix this.”

“I have until morning to accept the plea deal.”

In the darkest hour with two inches of glass between us, I feel his love again and cling to it. “I promise, Joshua.”

By the time I reach the car, my legs falter under me, and the adrenaline draining from my body causes me to slump against the door. Kenneth comes around, wrapping his arm around my waist, and helps me inside. “You’re not well, Chloe.”

“I’m okay.” I slide in, holding my midsection. My rib and body ache in recovery. My heart breaks from reality.

From the front seat, Kenneth looks back, and asks, “Where do you want to go?”

“Newport.”

Chloe

I'm kept waiting, left alone pacing in my dad's office. Every minute that ticks by increases my anger.

This clinic, and his office specifically, used to feel like a second home. It's where we'd bring my dad dinner if he had to miss holidays because of an emergency. It's where I brought my letter when I got accepted to Yale. It's where I interned last summer.

I stand at the window not able to enjoy the memories because I can't seem to reason through the lies to find the truth.

The door opens, catching me off guard, but I'm still ready to explode. "Chloe? This is unexpected," he says, not bothering to look up from the messages his receptionist must have handed him before he walked in. "You're supposed to be in New Haven. Don't tell me I wasted my time making those phone calls?" He dumps the papers on his desk as he moves around to sit. He finally looks at me. "You look pale. Are you not feeling well? Do you need me to examine you?"

No greeting or how are you? His greeting lacks the sincerity of a father happy to see his daughter who wasn't killed in a car accident. I barely receive the courtesy of good bedside manner, but maybe he lacks that as well. "What did you do?"

"What?" he asks, typing on the computer. When I don't respond, he adds, "I'm extremely busy, Chloe."

"I just came from the jail."

That gets his attention, but he rights his expression, making me realize he's a master of disguise. "Are we playing this game all day, or are you going to tell me why you went to the jail?"

"Did Joshua's lawyer contact you?"

His chair swivels in my direction, and he sits back, clasping his hands on his lap. "Yes. He left a message."

"Did you return it?"

"No. My attorney advised me not to. He did, though, and told him to stop

calling. The damage may be done, but there's repercussions that come along with trying to hurt my family."

Standing abruptly, I press the tips of my fingers against his desk until they whiten. "He was calling for me. You know he was. My boyfriend is in jail because of some crazy story you told the police. Joshua didn't steal the car, and he wasn't kidnapping me."

"Can you attest to that under oath because I was at the scene of the accident after the ambulance arrived? Let me tell you, no parent should see their child broken on the side of the road and bleeding. Josh Evans is reckless and a bad influence. But worse is that he has you convinced he's a saint."

"He is," I say, pointing at my chest. "He loves me, Dad, without care of what I can afford him or because I'm a Fox of Newport. Don't you see? He would never purposely hurt me. Never."

"Then tell the police your version of the story. That should fix any damage done."

He's playing games and I need the space. I move behind the chair, standing my ground from a new place. "You know full well that I can't remember, but my heart will never forget how much he loves me or how much you've hurt me."

Waving his hand dismissively, he returns his attention back to the computer. "Pull yourself together. Hearts detour you down dead ends. Your relationship with him is going nowhere, Chloe. Let it go and let the courts deal with him."

Squeezing the back of the chair in front of me so hard, I might break it, I lean over, and say, "You mean let him go to jail for what I know he didn't do? I wouldn't be that callous even to my enemy."

"You don't know what he did or didn't do. I do. I saw the spite in his eyes when you got your car at the party. I've seen that look my whole life—jealousy and revenge."

"Revenge?" I feel like a crazy person talking to a wall. Pacing again, I say, "I have no idea what you're talking about. Why would he want revenge?"

"Open your eyes! Revenge against me, your life, what I've been able to give you. He may look away, but he's always aware of what he's lacking, what his father never gave him. He's from a broken home from even more broken parents—"

"I'm from a broken home!" I shout, frustration taking hold.

“He confessed. Full. Stop.” A current of anger lies under his steady tone, his patience run dry. “What more proof do you need?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. He would never confess to charges that aren’t true. He would never hurt me. He loves me, Dad, and I love him. If you don’t drop these charges, then you’ll lose me in the process.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Why would you throw everything away when you’re so close to getting what you want?”

I reach the window and whip back. “*I want him!*”

The slamming of palms on the desktop startles me. He’s on his feet, anger burning through his unblinking eyes. “You don’t get him!”

“You don’t have a say.”

While his fingers dig into the wood, his gaze bounces back and forth between my eyes in an attempt to intimidate. “Do not insult my intelligence, Chloe. You will not threaten me in a childish tantrum to get your way with a boy who’s unworthy of you.” Parting the air, he shoves a finger in my direction. “And don’t ever act beneath the Fox name. You’ve been given every opportunity others only dream of having. Don’t throw it away in a shortsighted threat that could cost you everything.”

Months ago, I would have cowered under his warning, done everything in my power not to disappoint my dad. I would have closed my mouth and left with my tail tucked between my legs.

No more.

Seeing the man I love with tears that I caused, standing on the other side of a wall that your father put there has changed me forever. I see through his lies, and I’m willing to let him call my bluff.

Controlling my tone, I’m determined and unafraid. “If you don’t drop the charges and set him free, our relationship is over.” I walk to the door, the threat of me leaving is the only way to change his mind.

“If you walk out that door, I won’t welcome you back.”

I stop with the doorknob in my hand, caving in hopes of appealing to his softer side, if that even exists anymore. “Will you drop the charges? Will you help me? If not for him, for me, *please?*”

“No.”

I open the door. The finality of our conversation hitting my back, the end of our relationship only steps ahead of me.

“This is your last chance, Chloe.” Hearing him say that, I wonder if he gave my mom a similar ultimatum. Was she forced to leave him, too?

I look over my shoulder. “No, Dad. This is *your* last chance. You already lost Mom, and now you’re willing to lose me as well. Enjoy your name, your throne, and your wealth. *Alone.*”

I reach the other end of the hall by the time the door to the office clicks closed. He doesn’t come after me. And I don’t wait for the impossible to happen. I get in the car and ask Kenneth to drop me off at a motel close to the jail.

The day is already drifting away, the moon starting a slow slide into the sky. My call to Ruby goes unanswered, and there’s no reply to my text: *I need you*. Sitting in a dark room, my hope begins unraveling like my sanity as I try to remember the night of the accident.

Making love in the afternoon.

Purple dress.

Trevor trying to ruin the party.

My birthday gifts.

Joshua—dark blue suit. Soulful eyes. Kindest heart. I love you’s shared in the middle of the night. That smile . . . the smirk that he still used when he wanted his way. He got it, every single time.

Staring at photos of us on my phone does nothing to remind me of that night. *Did I not take pictures? Not share anything on social media?*

Just after nine, my phone buzzes on the pillow next to my head. I sit up when I see who’s calling, frantically answering through my sobs, “Ruby, I need your help.”

That’s all it takes to have her coming to my aid. She’s here before midnight, making calls that all go to voicemail but making the effort anyway. Comforting me the best she can, she tries to help me remember, but nothing works. “The kidnapping is a bogus charge,” she says, lying next to me on the bed. “He wasn’t drunk. They’re not going to drop reckless unless you remember otherwise.”

“But reckless is minor compared to the other charges.”

“And you don’t know who his attorney is?”

“No.” I feel sick that he doesn’t have someone defending him who has Joshua’s best interest in mind. He’s another case. Another number. Just another . . . *Not to me*. He’s my everything.

She turns to me, holding my hand. “We’ll go tomorrow. I’ll take the stand as a witness, and we’ll get the charges reduced. He’ll probably get probation, but that will be a win.”

I try to find reassurance in her words, in her commitment that this will work, but doubt has a vise grip on my stomach as all the what-ifs play through my head. “If he gets probation, he’ll be free, and I get him.”

“I hope all that happens for both of you.” Her gaze falls to her lap. “I’m sorry I misjudged him like the guys I’ve dated. I know he’s different. I just wish I could make it better for you, but I believe in my heart that everything will work out how it’s supposed to.”

Daylight sneaks through the musty drapes, waking me. I don’t know when I fell asleep, but my body aches as much as my head, my eyes swollen from crying and chest heavy with the fate of Joshua today.

Ruby is already dressed when I get up. She says, “Thought you could use the sleep.”

“What? No!” I check the time. “Oh my God, Ruby. We have to go.” I refuse to let him go through this alone. I’ll stand by his side today and every day after.

At the courthouse, we check in, nervously waiting in the courtroom for him to be brought in. I keep looking around, expecting to see at least one familiar face if not three. “Why isn’t Patty here? Or Todd or Bryant?”

She side hugs me as we wait in the room full of strangers.

I’m not sure how much time passes, but I finally stand between cases. “Something’s wrong. I can feel it. I want to check the docket.” She follows me out, and we find it hanging on the wall. Running my finger down the paper, it stops when I find his name . . . *scratched out*. “That’s not right.” I hurry to a nearby desk, and ask, “My boyfriend’s name is scratched out? On the docket? There’s a line through his name?”

I don’t even know what I’m asking, but she seems to understand. “Yes, some cases were heard earlier this morning.” She smiles. “The judge’s wife is having a baby today.”

“No.”

“Yes, she is.” She nods politely. “It’s a scheduled delivery.”

Tapping her desk, I lose my patience. “No, I mean, what happened to him, to my boyfriend. Joshua Evans.”

She starts typing, staring at the computer screen. “It’s a matter of public record. He pleaded guilty.”

“But he’s not. I’ve been here, waiting. I’m a witness. Ruby’s here as a witness as well. He’s not guilty.”

The shrug she gives isn’t cruel, but it feels as hopeless as I do. “I’m sorry.

I don't know what to tell you. The plea was entered on record."

That's what is wrong, what I felt deep inside. Clamping my eyes closed, I can see him so clearly in my mind. *Why would he do this?* Why would he confess to something he didn't do?

Why can I only remember *chasing the moon*?

I take off running, but don't get ten feet before I feel faint. I'm still recovering, and my stomach's empty. Dropping against the wall, Ruby wraps her arms around me. "You can't run, Chloe."

"I have to." Holding the side of my head, I say, "I can stop this. I can stop him from going to jail. We just have to tell them what we know." Looking into her tear-filled eyes, I beg, "Help me get there."

Hobbling together, we cover the block and push into the jail. I've become familiar with the routine of signing in, submitting my ID to be checked, and the process of entry to the visitation room. That hour doesn't help my anxiety. It makes it worse, not sure how he's going to react to me.

As soon as I'm seated on the other side of the booth, what little adrenaline I used to get me here begins to dip, my heart beating out of my chest as fear courses through me.

The shame I saw in him yesterday is now fully owned on my side of the barrier. I've failed him, but if there's a way . . . if it's not too late, I'll help him however I can.

When he enters the other side of the room, neither of us rushes to pick up the receiver. Instead, our hands press together. Despite the small gesture, I don't get his tenderness or reassurance. I get detached, everything we used to be, gone in an instant.

"I'm sorry," I say through shuddering cries and thick glass. I know we're over before his hand slides down, and he pulls back. Wishing never did me any good before, but I wish we could have stayed in our own little world, the one we built together. I look into his eyes, and just like the memories that escape me, we're already in the past.

He stands. "Don't come back, Chloe."

My arms collapse to my sides as his words sink in. *No. Please God no.* I try to reach him once more before we succumb to our fate. "I'm sorry." He turns his back on me and leaves.

That was the last time I saw Joshua Evans.

33

Chloe

Chasing the moon.

The ethereal phrase still floats around like a figment of my imagination.

Even after six years.

Fortunately, it's easy to avoid moons and stars inside an ER, especially working the overnight shift. It's taken me years to learn, but I now pocket my emotions. It helps me to deal with the pain I see on a daily basis.

A bonus side effect to the past trauma—I don't cry anymore. I lost enough tears over the years to last me a lifetime. One day, they just stopped flowing. It was around the same time I stopped counting heart beats that seemed to only flutter for one man.

That same man once told me love is found in contentment. I believed him because we were young.

We were naïve.

And we were so in love.

These days, I live by another phrase of his—*Love isn't real*—but we were once . . .

34

Chloe

“Are you up?”

Peering at the glowing digits of my watch, I quickly close my eyes again not wanting to awaken more than necessary. I shift the phone to my other ear. “It’s only one, Mom. I thought it was the hospital calling.”

“I thought you were off night shifts this month?”

“I was, but I volunteered because another resident went into labor. And Friday the thirteenth is as bad as full moons in the ER. I didn’t want to leave them short-staffed.”

“You’re running yourself ragged, Chloe.” Concern coats her statement. She stopped beating around the bush a few years back when it came to tiptoeing around my feelings. I had tortured myself mentally for far too long.

A therapist taught me to grieve. Then I learned to forgive my role in how things played out. The only thing I never did was make amends. I couldn’t. There was no way I could ever see him again. Not after he broke my heart like he did.

I find exhaustion better than living with the emptiness. At least, I feel something. That feels like progress.

“It’s just this week,” I say, rubbing the corner of my eye. The room is still dark, though the sun is fighting to break in and rob me of sleep. Blackout curtains are the best money I ever spent. “Then I’ll be back to my normal rotation.”

“That’s good to hear. Have you heard anything more about being brought on after your residency?”

“Mom, I’m tired. I’ve only had four hours sleep. You know I love to hear from you, but I have another long shift tonight and I’d really like a few more hours, if possible.”

“Okay. Okay, honey. Call me when you have some time off, or the minute you hear anything. Love you.”

“I will. Love you, too.”

Setting the phone back down, I close my eyes again, my lids begging for

more rest, but my brain kicking into gear, wide-awake. I roll to my other side and pull the pillow over my head. Snuggled in, I exhale, sinking into the couch cushions though I'm not finding the same satisfaction.

Turning over, I lie on my back, adjusting the pillow under me to give it one last solid effort, but aggravation starts setting in. I sit up and punch the pillow as if it's the cause of my sleeplessness. It's easier to blame than the schedule I personally agreed to. I know getting up now will make the night feel like it's lasting twice as long, but I might as well make the most of the day.

I shouldn't find as much pleasure as I do when I open the curtains each day, but when I see Frankie and Hemsworth, I can't help but smile. Bending down, I say, "Good afternoon. How are you today?" I give each of their trunks a little stroke and then dip my finger into the pot to check the soil.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Frankie, but you're a little on the dry side, and I think you've outgrown your pot. Again. You're almost as tall as Hemsworth and he's standing straight up."

Carrying the two plants to the sink, I let them share their weekly soak. Since bringing them together six years ago, they've been inseparable ever since. Mainly due to the fact that they're plants and have no choice but to humor me with their presence. But I don't dwell on negativity, if I can help it.

After I get them sorted out, I double knot my laces, and I'm on the treadmill before I have time to second-guess if I should try sleeping in my bedroom instead. I blow that idea off. I haven't slept in there for months. Drowning out the noise after a long shift is best done in front of the TV. Any movie will do and I'm out before the first commercial break.

I increase the speed and run. I run so hard that when I cross forty minutes, I've almost covered seven miles. I slow the belt down and hold my sides that ache with a cramp. Memories of my broken rib come back, and I'm swift to move my hand. No good will come of me revisiting memory lane. I hit the stop button and step off.

After downing a glass of water, I wipe the sweat rolling down my forehead and then the back of my neck while staring out the window. I refill my glass and drink while examining the lives inside the tiny New York fishbowl apartments across the street. Mine's no bigger, but it's way less interesting.

There's the balding guy who wears Hawaiian shirts and nothing underneath three windows over and one down.

And then there's the apartment directly across from mine. He rides his Peloton like he's in the Tour de France after a long day wherever he works that requires tailored suits and expensive watches. I might have pulled my binoculars out once to properly inspect the situation. What can I say? I may have sworn off dating, but I'm not a nun.

He's too angry to keep track of anymore. Cute, but yells into his phone a lot.

The four-lane street below is wide enough to give people a false sense of security that they actually have privacy. Or maybe they just stopped caring like me. It's easy to believe you can disappear in the city. I doubled down and vanished from my own life. I'm only now starting to see a semblance of the life I used to have before the accident.

I go to work, come home, burn off the stress on my treadmill or with a run in the park, and sleep, not giving myself time to miss anything I used to do, *or have*. It's not an exciting life, but it's mine, the one I chose to create for myself. The one that keeps my body and mind too busy to think about what's missing—friends, my dad, the life I knew growing up, Ruby when she's not in town, a significant other, Jos—I stop myself before the name escapes my thoughts.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I try my best to forget the life I only had a taste of before having to give it up. It's selfish to indulge when he faced horrific consequences from being with me. I drown the memories under the warm water pummeling my shoulders, begging to have one day that doesn't have my mind drifting to a past I'm not even sure existed. Today, apparently, is not that day.

To please my mom, I get dressed and get out. If I don't have an alibi of living a "fuller" life as she calls it, the harassment will be insufferable. Sipping coffee at a corner restaurant may not be exciting, but it will appease her. *For now*.

I should really get out of the hospital more often, to see the good that is happening all around, instead of placing the burden on others to make me happy. I did that once and was burned. My heart feels lighter hearing laughter instead of cries. Seeing smiles instead of tears. Life goes on around me even if mine stopped in so many ways.

To cement my case, I take a selfie of me about to bite into a cherry Danish as evidence and send it to Ruby and my mom with the message: *Look at me living the high life. #straighttomythighs*

My mom replies first: *#worthit* She's so hip with the hashtag lingo. She used to tell me to live fearlessly.

I did that once.

Now she tells me to live without regret.

I'm doing my best.

Ruby's message comes shortly after I finish my coffee: *This might be my favorite photo of you ever.*

Grinning from the text, I type: *Coming from a professional photographer, I'll take the compliment.*

Ruby: *I'm paid well for my eye. How much to get that photo framed to hang in my gallery?*

Seeing the crowds filing in for their late afternoon caffeine fix, I grab my stuff and vacate a table. On the sidewalk, I stand off to the side, and type: *Where are you? Miss you.*

Ruby: *Flying home in a few days. Dinner when I get back?*

Me: *For you, anything.*

Ruby: *That's my girl.*

My stomach twists from the phrase, but I try not to let it get me down. Clouds have swept in, and a breeze blows down the street.

Ruby: *I'll let you know when I'm home. Gotta run.*

Me: *Take care. Love you.*

Ruby: *Love you, too, friend.*

I look at the half-eaten pastry in my hand and throw it away in a nearby trash can. With a few hours left before I have to get ready for work, I walk the streets, looking up, waiting for the moon to come out. I never did figure what that phrase meant, but I still search for its meaning every chance I can.

The pretty weather should brighten my mood, but I'm not just tired. Something else has taken over the air around me, something heavy that's escaped my heart that even sunshine can't shake.

I toss my coffee cup, not sure why I feel I have anything to prove. That I'm living? Thriving, surviving? If I don't know, one photo won't sell the idea any better.

Finding an empty bench is like winning the lottery. The people watching in Manhattan will never get old, and the hustle and bustle on the sidewalk gives my busy mind a reprieve. But I get antsy when I see all the families, so my adventure out of the house is wrapped up after a quick trip to the corner store for basics. It's not exciting, but food doesn't have to be interesting or

creative. It can be just fuel.

But hearing the voices in the back of my mind that still try to get me to color outside the lines has me tossing in a pint of cherry chocolate ice cream. Walking on the wild side doesn't have to mean trespassing and skinny dipping. That didn't work out, so why tempt fate again.

With my mind caught up in things it shouldn't be, the only way to distract me from my life is by focusing on others, so I after a quick pit stop at home, I change clothes, pack a dinner, and head into work.

Before I have time to put my stuff in a locker, my side is flanked by Julie. Our pace is never interrupted as she fills me in while walking down the hall. "Three minor injuries in two, eight, and . . ." She taps the screen of an electronic tablet. "Five. Two with alcohol poisoning in one and nine."

Not only does she excel at her job, but she's become a good friend. "And three, four, six, seven, and ten?"

"Brainiac. You're too fast for me," she says, grinning. "I was just getting to those five rooms. They're already cleaned and prepped for incoming patients. It's been light, considering."

"Considering it's Friday, the thirteenth?"

Holding the tablet to her chest, she replies with a half-grin. "Yep."

As she remains back at the nurses' station, I keep walking. "Thank you, Julie."

"You're welcome, Dr. Fox."

We spoke too soon. As the night extends, our wish for a light load isn't granted, and past trends fall into place again. I like being busy, but the suffering in a packed waiting room makes it hard to concentrate. I hate to keep people waiting, so I skip my break, hoping to see patients sooner. I'm given the chart for room five just as I pull back the curtain. "A lacerated forefinger," I read aloud as I scan the chart. Age. Blood pressure. Temperature. Standard with no concerns. "You're a cook, Mr. Evans—" I choke on the name when my eyes meet his.

Those brown eyes I still see in the sweetest of dreams look back into mine.

The slight wave to his brown hair has softened, but the scruff on his face has darkened. My heart is about to come up my throat.

I hope the lines that reside beside his eyes were formed from laughter and not hardship. But that's a wish I have no right to make since I'm responsible for his past pain.

At a loss for rational thought, I stand there dumbly, still staring at the man who once held my heart in his hands. He says, “Chef, actually.”

“Chef?” He’s smiling, pride seen in his eyes as I try not to die on the inside.

Just breathe. Clear your head. Don’t focus on the way your heart races. Ignore that organ that decided to join the party like it’s beating for the first time, a heavy-footed throb setting in.

For God’s sake, look away. My eyes go to his hand, and the injury that brought him to the ER. *My ER. In my city.*

How dare he show up here? I was supposed to be safe. I had successfully disappeared from every part of my old life except for three. My plants, my mom, and Ruby. “My apologies. I didn’t realize the difference.”

“I started out as a cook at my mom’s diner in New Haven years ago,” he explains as if we’re total strangers getting to know one another. I’m not entirely upset by the charade. What we were once is not what we are now, so there’s no sense in pretending otherwise. “Now I’m a chef.”

Despite staring into the eyes that once made me feel whole, the ability to feel anything soul deep was lost when I lost him. I won’t let him turn on the faucet where my feelings once flowed free. “*Don’t ever come back, Chloe.*” Five words I’ve heard over and over again for the past seventy-two months. I won’t let him in again. “Why are you here?”

“Doctor,” Julie remarks. The harshness of my tone takes me by surprise, so I know it does her. “A laceration—”

“Right. The chart,” I mutter distracted.

Tapping her tablet, Julie asks, “His vitals are good. When I examined the injury, the cut’s deep enough to warrant sutures. I can do that if you’d like, Dr. Fox.”

I keep my eyes on her. It’s easier to find words without seeing Joshua Evans staring at me like he’s seeing a ghost. “Thank you, but that won’t be necessary.”

“If you’re set, I’m needed at the nurses’ station.”

He says, “We’ll be fine. Right, Dr. Fox?”

“Yes, fine. I’m fine. Totally fine.” I sound like a crazy person. I hate the way he’s shaken my foundation.

Julie’s eyes go wide, silently asking me something I can’t decipher. “Thank you for setting up the tray. I can take it from here.”

She nods and leaves.

Setting the chart down, I check his stats on the monitors before asking to examine the wound. He holds his hand up for me.

I've never hesitated. Not in medical school, or with a patient. Not ever.

With him, I do.

I know when I hold his hand in mine and see that tattoo, it won't matter how well I pretended to move on with my life. I'll be transported back to a time I refuse to believe ever existed. Looking at him now, I taste the bitter truth.

Joshua Evans is what I've been missing all along.

Joshua

I can't stop staring at her.

God, I never thought I'd see Chloe Fox again, and here she is, holding my hand with her half of an anchor I'm more than familiar with still there. I smirk, feeling a small piece of ownership over that ink, even if I can't call her my girl anymore.

My girl . . . wow. She's no longer a girl, but a woman who's grown into her own body and self-worth by how she carries herself. Her focus was always an enviable trait, and it's on full display, just not for me. It's who she's become, which is everything she wanted to be.

It's impossible not to acknowledge that she manages to make that boxy white lab coat look good. Bare lips are licked, drawing my attention. Taking the moment of silence, I trace over her appearance. A small section of hair is pinned on top with a ponytail collecting the rest. I'd wager it looks longer than she used to wear it. She's wearing makeup, yet that doesn't distract from her natural beauty.

By how she's using such a light touch, this must be a delicate operation. I won't break. I already did that years ago, so it's too late to worry about me now. But she's still being careful with every glance and word spoken between us. Controlled. Neutral. Like we don't know each other at all.

I'm thinking we're supposed to be enemies, but I never did listen to reason, especially when it came to Chloe. "Thanks for doing this."

With her eyes on the needle, she concentrates on the task at hand. "It's my job."

"I would think the nurse could have handled such a small emergency."

"Friday the thirteenth always packs the ER. Julie is needed elsewhere."

"Aren't you?"

Her lashes lift, tapping her brow. I don't remember them being that long, but it wasn't her lashes I was staring at. Her green eyes—a fire lit glows bright inside—glare at me. I start to wonder how many people have been willing to get burned just to be near her over the years. She always was the

most gorgeous girl I'd ever seen. Still is, though now she's a woman, and I can't complain about my current view.

It wasn't her face, though, that had me tripping over myself too naïve to know better. It was the way she saw me as a better man than I was and treated me as such. Seeing myself through her eyes became addictive. There was such an innocence about her back then that was easy to feed off of. Nothing was impossible when we were together. But life has a way righting its course, and damn, did it ever.

So I couldn't have predicted I'd be sitting here with her searching for the remains of a heart she used to wear on her sleeve. Outwardly, I don't find anything that makes me think she's that same girl.

She replies, "Yes, I am," and then returns to sealing the cut, ending the nonsense going on in my head. I'm not even sure what she's responding to anymore. But I wholly recognize that even through latex gloves, I can feel the heat of her hands. "I'll wrap the wound to get you through the night."

"Okay."

Each of her glances is felt, dipping into my chest, and squeezing my heart. Ironically, that's not an organ I've been in touch with for a while. But right now, it's beating hard, strong, making a whole show of it for her. "You became a doctor," I say as if I have a right to share in that pride.

"I did." Her voice is softer. "Do you feel any pain?"

"A lifetime's worth."

She looks up as her hand stills. "I was referring to your injury."

"Right. No. I'm completely numb just how you wanted me, Doc."

A sigh comes with an unreadable twist of her lips. "I understand too well. Sometimes . . ." She clears her throat gently. "Injuries take longer to heal than we expect." A smile matching her demeanor appears. "That shouldn't be the case this time."

This time.

So much could be said about that simple phrase. But I don't go down winding alleys that lead nowhere—verbally or in life—any more. "Good to know."

"Are you returning to work or going home?" She finishes dressing my finger and starts returning the supplies to the tray.

"I didn't know we were getting personal." My smirk comes naturally when I flirt, but why the fuck am I flirting with her?

When I don't get so much as a facial twitch in response, that settles it. I

clamp my mouth shut, hoping to regain my better senses. She says, “Change the dressing after a shift, or if you’re going home, this should hold for the next twenty-four hours unless it gets wet.” She effectively shuts me down while running the tip of her finger down the length of mine. “Make sure to keep this area clean. If you see anything that looks out of the ordinary, you can call me.” She seems to catch herself when the words are already out of her mouth. “Contact the hospital, I mean, and someone can help you.”

The slightest of pink colors her cheeks, and I soak it in, finding comfort in the semblance of familiarity. I start to wonder about her life outside this room, but I bite my tongue. This is not the time or place, but will I have another chance? *Ah, fuck it.* “You’re not married?”

A match of disbelief is lit. “That’s none of your business.” Standing abruptly, she sinks the chart in the slot just outside the door. She was never halfheartedly in our relationship like she’s standing in the doorway. “We’re done.” Another phrase thrown out that I could add so much to the ending, but I hold my tongue instead. Turning on her heels, she says, “Nurse, please tend to the patient.”

I hear the nurse telling her about someone in nine with a fractured wrist.

Six years ago, I let her go when she wanted to stay, so I have no right to barge into her life now. So, what the fuck am I doing? Stepping beyond the curtain, I call, “Dr. Fox?”

Chloe looks across a row of open doors, her expression unbiased like her tone after she corrected it. Although everyone around is moving quickly, the sound of a hospital at full volume between people and machines, I hear her ask, “Yes, Mr. Evans?”

I’m at a loss for what to say. Anything I want to voice shouldn’t be heard by strangers. Holding my hand up, I say, “Thanks,” like an idiot.

I hate the disappointment that comes over her when she looks down and nods. “You’re welcome.” She disappears into the room in front of her, leaving me standing here staring like she might magically reappear. Spending only a few minutes with her has me wanting to see her again. We could talk about life, what happened, and the pain sustained that a hospital can’t fix. Knowing the truth of how we played out, I struggle to stay mad.

“We’ll go over here, Mr. Evans.”

When I’m finally free to go, I leave the ER with the doors sliding closed behind me and stop on the rubber mat. I look back. The area Chloe works in can’t be seen from here, but by instinct, I take the chance, just in case, to steal

one more glance.

Then I leave because again, what the fuck am I doing?

Chloe Fox is my past. The five months I spent with her were only a dream, and a small cell doesn't offer much room to hold onto things that weren't real. I've built a life without her. A good life. It may have cracks and empty spaces, but dwelling on her won't make me whole again. I spent years with only memories to keep me warm under a threadbare blanket. Like all dreams, one day we wake up to reality. I woke up, and reality is where I've planted my feet.

I don't get far when I hear my name being called down the congested sidewalk.

Stopping under the white and red awning, I turn back. Her hair has escaped the ponytail, and her white coat flaps open as she hurries to catch me.

I've become so aware of my heart and the emotions tearing through it. All of a sudden, it's willing to forget the past like it didn't happen. Anger that she didn't fight harder for me. Pain that streaks through me when I let the memory of how we ended perform an encore.

Holding her hand out, she says, "I figure you're probably going back to work, so just in case you don't have any at the restaurant . . ."

Five latex finger protectors fall into my open palm, allowing disappointment to set in. *This is it?* This is the way we end, again? As heartless as before? "I have some."

Discomfort works its way into her features, and she shakes her head just enough to make me think she feels the same disappointment. "All right. Just wanted to make sure." She backs up and gazes straight into my eyes before turning away, as if one more look will tide her over.

Good luck with that. When it comes to her, it never worked for me.

But now I'm feeling a ridiculous rush to get her attention again. "Chloe?"

Her feet stop, a jolt hitting her shoulders. She turns around, and this time, she's not the doctor she was inside. She's the person I met many moons ago—lowered chin, shy eyes, her frame carrying emotional baggage she can't hide. "Yes, *Joshua*—Josh?"

I regret that my words from so long ago continue to burden her, even if I understand it too well. In her best interest, I hate it for her. "It was good to see you again."

"You too," she replies with the smallest of smiles. Still standing there, we

let awkwardness sneak in, both of us waiting for the other to . . . *to what?* Make small talk? Catch up like old friends? Pick up where we left off, be that with a fight or a reunion. My mind plays tricks on me like it has all along. *Love isn't real*, I remind myself. If it were, Chloe would still be my girl.

I don't know how long I stand there with the ghost of our past keeping me company. For someone who doesn't put stock in feelings deeper than puddles, I'm starting to consider the concept that I might still have unresolved feelings for her.

Needing to get back, I finally drag my ass away but find myself taking the long way to stew in my own misfortune a little longer. Feelings and the sort aren't usually something I put stock in, but that's easy to say when you're desensitized to so many things.

Clearly, I'm not numb to Chloe. Does she feel anything, or is she numb to me?

Pushing through the back door, I set these fucking feelings aside. I have other more prevalent concerns when I enter this kitchen.

I've been gone from the restaurant long enough for the dinner rush to end. Cleaning up isn't a hardship after a long shift. I let some of the other guys go home to their families, girlfriends, or waiting beds. I don't mind the chores.

The kitchen in jail was my safe place. My thoughts, my feelings, whatever was troubling me was worked out while scrubbing dirty pots and pans. Scouring the grill top is a good way to relieve stress, wearing my muscles out while my mind works through what happened.

What just happened?

Chloe Fox just happened like she happened six years ago.

She's coincidences and destiny, our lives entangled in ways that can never be fixed. I didn't look her up over the years, not to see if she graduated or what medical school she attended. Weddings and obituaries were never checked. Yet there she is just like she always said she would be—a doctor working the ER against her daddy's wish.

Fuck Norman Fox.

That is definitely not a memory lane I'm traveling down tonight. I may have almost cut my finger off, but the outcome wasn't so awful. I'm not letting him back in to ruin it. *Again.*

Exhausted, I fall into bed just after three. I never liked the hours of working at a restaurant that stays open late, but it's kept me out of trouble. The kidnapping charge was dropped, but I still served over almost three years

for reckless driving and stealing a car, keeping me locked up long enough. So I need to be on my best behavior. The record will follow me forever, and the lessons learned have been ingrained.

Even after probation, I walked a straight line on the legal side. Busy is the best way to forget your troubles. Keeps your mind on the task at hand instead of the things we lost control of.

Like the situation that landed me in jail.

I scrub my hands over my face and close my eyes. Doesn't matter how tired I am, Chloe's touch is felt on my hand, in the wound, and deep inside my chest. "What a bizarre night," I grumble, rolling to my side.

Sleep doesn't come easy, but it hasn't in many years. When I find it, I relive the life I used to have, the one when I wasn't as tough as I am now, not so hard, not full of the anger that I keep hidden inside most of the time. At one time, I had options, opportunities, and the future of my choosing.

I no longer worry about what everyone else sees for me and follow my own path. At least that's what I tell myself. It's the only control I have these days. That and how I run my kitchen.

It's not needed as much anymore, but tonight seems justified to revisit old habits. Climbing out of bed, I pad my way across the oak floors into the living room. The dim light of the moon peeks in at the corners of the shades illuminating the shelf where I keep the liquor. Two fingers of my old friend, Jack Daniel's, fills the glass, and I shoot it all before I talk myself out of it. The burn down my throat reminds me it's been a while since I've drowned my sorrows. Though drowning might be an extreme.

Relaxing fits better. I return to bed to do just that.

Seeing Chloe Fox again has my mind wired and my body tense. Visions of her crying, apologizing the last time I saw her still invade my thoughts frequently. Didn't matter if I was drowning in liquor or women or escaping in the kitchen of a restaurant that needed saving as much as I did, nothing has managed to erase the accident and her tears from my brain.

Grabbing the other pillow, I shove it on top of my head. Fucking hell. *Go to sleep, Evans.*

Go to sleep and forget that tonight ever happened.

Forget those eyes that used to sparkle like jewels.

Forget that smile that unlocked yours.

Forget the way she made you feel alive from her touch.

Forget everything about her, especially that you know how to find her

again.

Forget that once she was your anchor.

36

Chloe

Joshua Evans isn't the same boy I once knew.

He's a man who's lived a life that has changed him. His jaw was harder. His eyes were more piercing. The softness that once lightened his expression has matured. I'm not sure if jail or life or both is to blame, but I wasn't exactly an angel the way I was ogling him.

Did he notice me when I stared too long? When I bit my lower lip while taking in his handsome face? Every fiber of my being was awakened when he looked at me. And he seemed pleased to know I followed through with my plans. *Why?*

Shouldn't I be despised?

He dumped me. The hate I saw in his eyes at the jail frequents my nightmares, so I shouldn't justify the kinder ones I saw earlier. He hurt me, and I hurt him. I could live with the consequences of my own failings but living with the aftermath of failing him was unbearable. It's a vicious cycle we're living in.

"God, stop it, Chloe." I dry off, slip into my pajamas, and head back into the living room almost tripping over a sneaker. A memory is triggered of tripping over one of his shoes when my mom was visiting me at Yale. My stomach clenches. *Redirect.* Focus on anything but him.

It's impossible. The shortest time in my life consumed my future in the smallest of details. A shoe? Really, Chloe? Looking around, I realize how tidy I used to be. Being messy is a downfall of rarely being home at all. The past doesn't matter. The present does.

I switch on the TV to cut through the white noise of my brain. I need my mind to stop spinning over a man who left me reeling for years. I lost everything that day when I lost him. The only thing I could do to survive was to create a new life as far from the old one as soon as I could. *As far from him*

...

* * *

“What happened yesterday?”

Turning back to see Julie a few feet behind me on the sidewalk, I grin before letting my laughter weave through my words. I wait for her, glad our breaks have aligned. “And what pray tell are we referring to, Nurse Hidalgo?”

She flanks my side, and we both continue walking toward the corner coffee shop. “Oh, no. You’re not getting out of it. The hottie with the cut finger. Oh no, Nurse, you’re busy.” She raises her voice two octaves in a sad attempt to sound like me. At least it’s entertaining. “I’ll personally tend to this injury.” She winks twice, passing me as I hold the door open for her. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you smitten, Dr. Fox.”

The shock of her comment stuns me until the door hits me in the ass, scooting me into line next to her. “Smitten? *Me*? Pfft. No way.”

“No way?” She laughs. “Who says that?”

Keeping my eyes on the menu ahead, I start debating if I want to step out of my comfort zone and get a sugar-loaded coffee concoction to keep me on my feet through the night. “Me. I do.”

“No, guilty people do.”

“Ugh.” I roll my eyes. “You’re talking crazy. I wasn’t smitten, and I’m perfectly hip with the lingo.”

“Hip?”

Defeat burrows in my shoulders. “I’ve officially become my mom. She’s rubbing off on me. Save me, Julie.”

“There’s no saving you from what I witnessed yesterday. At least where that hot guy is concerned.” We shift forward with the line. “When was the last time you went on a date anyway?”

I abhor this question. Every time it’s asked, which is more than should be legal, my answer is less than notable and worse as time passes. But I still struggle to lie with true intent. “Two years.” The truth is horrendous, though.

“Two years? Wow, Chloe. I had no idea.”

“I don’t advertise it, but I’m truly okay with it. This residency doesn’t allow much free time. It’s sleep or dating. I choose sleep.”

“But what about sex?”

My cheeks flame, and I cover my hospital ID badge so no one will remember that I was a part of this very loud conversation in a public place.

“Everyone’s obsessed with my sex life.” I’ve spent a few happy hours with Julie. She’s a friend, so it doesn’t bother me that she threw it out there. It bothers me that I don’t have a better answer. “So, to set the record straight, I don’t have one.”

“What?” We reach the counter. “You’re . . . well, you.” Her hands roam a hands-length away from my body. Then she turns to the barista. “She’s hot, right? And she’s a doctor.”

He grins all lop-sided, staring at me. “I’d date her.”

“Geez, thanks. Can we order please?”

Julie scans the board hanging above his head. “Extra-large matcha green tea fusion over ice.”

When she steps to the side, I order, “Small black coffee please. And I’ll cover both drinks.” As he rings us up, something in the glass cabinet catches my eye. “Is it too late to add a blueberry muffin?”

“That one’s been sitting there all morning.” The barista leans back and yells to a co-worker, “Do we have more muffins?”

“Coming out of the oven,” a shaggy-haired guy calls from the espresso station.

Conspiratorially, he leans in, and whispers, “I’ll give you a hot one if you want to give me your number.”

I covertly kick Julie’s shoe since she’s clearly to blame for the unwanted attention I’m receiving. “The old muffin works, and I’ll pay, thanks.”

He shrugs like it’s no big thing. “Your loss.”

“Or my gain since I get the muffin sooner,” I reply, swiping my card and then dragging Julie to the other end of the coffee bar. “Can we not have sex conversations in public, or at all? A horny teenager flirting with me because my friend can’t keep her trap shut about my pathetic sex life is the last thing I want right now.”

She’s laughing behind her hand, but then it drops to her side, mimicking her jaw. Signaling behind me with her head, she taps her finger, and then mouths, “Behind you.”

What in the world is she doing? “Did I ever tell you I’m horrible at charades?”

“No. And I’m sure your sex life can’t be that bad.”

Hearing the dulcet tones of a voice that used to comfort me has my breath catching in my throat. I grip the counter to secure my normally steady hand from shaking, and ask my friend in front of me, “You didn’t learn how to

throw your voice, did you?”

Lips tight to restrain her smile as amusement glimmers in her eyes. She shakes her head and points over my shoulder. “No, and I wouldn’t be able to get it that deep either.”

I had a feeling we weren’t alone in this conversation. When I turn around, I don’t lock eyes because memory reminds me that I tend to get lost in his. I stare at his chest instead. Quite impressed by how broad and how fit he is. He always was.

His arms. *Defined and strong.*

His jawline. *Wonder if that scruff is rough enough to cut my tongue.*

What am I doing? My gaze snaps to his smirk and the cocked brow that tells me I’m caught. *Caught in the act of ogling my ex-boyfriend.* Lock me up and throw away the key because I’ll make no apologies.

Joshua Evans has only gotten better with age. I may not be a lawyer, but I could argue all evidence is duly on his side, and that, in fact, he is downright gorgeous. “Hello, Dr. Fox.” His gaze pivots past me. “Nurse.”

“Julie, Juliana,” she says, tapping her name tag with a huge grin and giggle. “You can call me Julie.”

“It’s good to see you again, Julie. I’m Josh.” Are you kidding me with the blushing? She’s shameless.

Those warm browns still hold the same soul that extends beyond mere mortals, and he aims them at me. “It’s nice to run into you again, Dr. Fox.”

My cold hands clamor to cool my own heated cheeks. *Damn him.* “We didn’t really run into each at the hospital. How’s your finger?”

A barista leans over the counter near us, and calls out, “Small black coffee and a muffin. Josh.”

Julie taps her chin and grins. “Well, lookie there. You have the same order.”

Joshua says, “Quite the coincidence.”

“Not really.” I mentally work out the odds. “Coffee without all the crap is probably more common than we expect. As for the muffin—”

I’m elbowed in the back of the ribs. That devious grin of Julie’s has been replaced with silent disappointment. She whispers, “Do I have to do everything? Because I will.” With the most angelic smile plastered on her face, I see right through it. Much louder for him to hear, she adds, “I just remembered that I already had my break today, and I need to get back. Hate to leave my gorgeous and single doctor friend here. Maybe you can keep her

company, Josh?”

“Subtle,” I say, shaking my head.

“My pleasure,” he responds. His voice is as rich and smooth as the coffee I ordered.

“Thanks. Bye.” She zips through the shop toward the door. “Oh, and I’m glad your finger is better. You’ll be back to fingering things before you know it—” Realizing what she just said too late, she bolts out the door, leaving a line full of dropped jaws and me to deal with the mortification.

Thank the coffee shop gods for shaggy-haired baristas with perfect timing. My order is placed beside me, and he says, “I heard you like hot muffins.”

Good lord. Get me out of here. “I’m good. Thanks.”

Taking the tray, I step out of the way, not sure what I should be doing or saying to Joshua . . . Josh, or whatever I should be calling him.

He takes the initiative. “She reminds me of Ruby.”

“She does,” I reply, picking at the raw edge of the cardboard tray in my hands. The drinks wobble even though I’m trying to hold them steady.

“Do you still talk to Ruby?”

I look at him, tired of feeling intimidated . . . though if I were honest, it’s shame and guilt that keeps my eyes down around him. The last thing I ever said to him was I’m sorry. I owe him a million more, but I’m not sure that’s what he wants to hear. What does he want from me? “Are we making small talk, Joshua—” I sigh, lacking the energy to play this game of old friends catching up. “I don’t even know what to call you anymore, much less what this is. I’m sorry.” I leave the shop, not able to wrap my head around the myriad of emotions he draws out of me—anger, abandonment, brokenhearted, frustrated from my empty memories of the accident, and guilt for the pain I caused him.

I leave him with my apology for walking out of the coffee shop.

Out of the jail that day six years ago.

Into his life so many months before that.

And for allowing his heart to imprint on every part of my life and being.

I’m sorry. *So sorry.*

Joshua

Chloe Fox is a conundrum.

I should despise her. No one would fault me for it. Not even her. Yet with every justifiable reason I have to hate her, I can't seem to. I never could, so I can't be entirely surprised. But I am.

Fuck.

Just like back in college, she's messing with my head.

I remember when I used to have game, could form complete sentences when talking to a chick, never had to ask for anything and still got it. Girls were easy back then.

Except for her.

But that's what made her different. She wasn't putting up with my bullshit. If I was sarcastic, she'd snap right back. With her, I played by her rules and lost—my freedom, my Ivy League degree, and my bonsai tree. If losing Chloe wasn't hard enough, I hate that I let Dwayne Evans down. I can only hope he had a proper burial.

The thing I still can't seem to wrap my head around is the fact that I held on to the hope of us one day being together again even after telling her not to come back. How does that make any sense? It doesn't. You'd think I'd be wiser now. I'm not.

I have the photo of her that served time along with me still tucked into the back of my wallet. Didn't matter if I was bloodied and broken in jail, I knew I'd return to my memories and that photo to get me through.

She was the only fucking reason I signed those papers. So maybe that's the reason I find myself running after her. "Chloe?"

Stuck at the corner waiting for the crosswalk sign to cooperate, she lowers her head. I always fucking hated that. She's giving in to the negative thoughts instead of remembering who she is.

The crowd starts walking just as I catch up to her. "I don't know why I'm talking to you. Why I'm running down the street to tell you this shit. It makes no sense to me."

Stopping in the middle of the crosswalk, she asks, “Then why do it? Why not forget we met—back then and again last night? Why not carry on with your life and let me live mine?” A car horn startles us, the tray falling to the ground and splashing at our feet. “Shit!” she shouts.

I don’t think I’ve ever heard her curse. It sounds strange and packed with meaning. I’m glad I’m not on the receiving end.

The light is still red, and the asshole has the nerve to poke his head out the window, and honk at her again. “Pick it up, sweet cheeks. Show me what you got.”

I bend down to grab it, but she beats me to it, the mostly emptied cups still clinging to the holders. Her anger is palpable as it rolls off her shoulders and embeds itself into her rising and falling chest. When the guy catcalls her, she throws the tray, nailing his windshield with the remaining liquid. “Screw you, sweet cheeks!” she yells back at him.

Holy shit.

That’s not the same shy girl I met at Yale. The guy pops his door open. “What the fuck, you crazy bitch!” He slams the door and starts toward us.

Dumping my coffee, I hold my hand out, and tell her, “Run, Chloe.”

She squeaks, grabbing hold of my hand without hesitation, and we take off running. Weaving through the crowded sidewalk, we run until we see an opening in the doorway of an ice cream shop. Swinging her into the shadows, I move so close to hide her that I feel her breath on my chin. Her hands land on my chest, fisting my shirt. Her frame fitting against mine so perfectly that I can protect her from the world if needed. She always did fit into my world, into me, and into my arms, at least back then for a short time in our lives. And now I know she’s single . . . Is that why my heart has started beating so heavy in my chest again?

“I don’t think he’s following us,” she says, whispering.

“We should probably wait a few more minutes, just in case.” The top of her head is pressed against my cheek, and I shouldn’t like how she makes me feel—alive again, and hopeful.

She starts to laugh. Squeezing out from under my arms, she straightens her shirt and the little badge hanging from her belt loop. “I think it’s safe.”

Just as she backs onto the sidewalk, she’s eclipsed. I yell, “Watch out!”

* * *

Her smile is better than any ice cream . . . *that she could put on my face.* “Maybe strawberry will work better,” I remark, squinting under the Ziploc bag of creamy confection.

I didn’t see the blow coming, acting on instinct to get Chloe out of the way. It doesn’t escape me that I repeated the same phrase she did that day that changed everything. *Us. Her. My life forever.*

Sitting in an ice cream shop after being punched in the face is not how I saw this day going. Being here with Chloe, even less expected, but I’m not complaining. Admiring her is the last thing I should be doing, but it’s good to see her mood less intense than last night in the ER. She may be rolling her eyes, but she can’t stop laughing. “I would have bet my house on the chocolate.”

I feel fine, but I don’t mind her attention. She’s a good doctor. I’m completely at ease in her capable hands. I ask, “Bet your house or bet on the house?”

Mulling over the question, she puts the ice cream pack in the bowl and dabs a napkin to the side of my eye. “I’m not a gambler, so I’m going with my house.”

“Do you have a house?” I know. I shouldn’t have asked, but the opportunity presented itself and call me a cad, but despite setting her up, I still take it.

The smile almost all but disappears. “I’m sorry.” There’s that apology again, souring my mood. “I can’t do this with you, Josh.”

“You can call me Joshua.”

“No, I can’t,” she says the words strangling on the tip of her tongue. Sliding out of the booth, she picks up the bag and returns it to the employee behind the register. “Thank you.” Pulling her credit card out, she adds, “Please let me pay for it.”

Although they seem to be insisting no again, she eventually wears them down and pays. They both return to the booth. The woman leaning over, studies my face as if it’s been infected and needs to be amputated. Eyeing me cautiously, she says, “I don’t have insurance. You’re lucky you know a doctor.”

“I am lucky to know her,” I reply, moving to get up. My brain swims when I stand too quick, and Chloe’s quick to grab me and prop me up against her. I could really use this to my advantage, but I don’t. And it’s not just for her benefit; it’s for mine.

It's been . . . I'm not sure if the right word is fun, but that's all that comes to mind, to see her again. Irreparable damage has been done, though, and at the hands of her father. It's probably in my best interest if we don't make this a habit.

She asks, "Are you okay? We can go to the ER and run tests—"

Pushing off the back of the booth, I slow my steps as I move toward the door. "No. I need to get to work."

"You might have a—"

"No," I snap, refusing to let her look down on me. I turn back to catch whatever candle she was burning in her irises snuffed out. "Thanks for the help, Dr. Fox, but I'll be fine."

Stepping back outside, I find the street noise a welcome retreat to the silence between Chloe and me in the store. But my feet don't seem to want to move. *Walk, fucker.*

I stand there long enough for the door to open behind me and for me to feel her presence at my backside. "Are you sure you're okay?" Her voice is so damn soft, lyrical in the notes.

Why can't I just leave? Just leave her in the past.

A hand with the lightest touch comes to rest on my shoulder. I feel her, her soul dipping into mine, wreaking havoc on my heart, but this time, I know how it ends.

I shrug out from her hand and step onto the busy sidewalk, getting lost in the crowds and not looking back. She's right. We can't *do this*. We can't *re-do* us. I was wrong to pursue her today, to want her close to me for one more moment. *It's history and will never be repeated.*

The restaurant's not far enough to recover from the encounter with her. Fuck the swelling around my eye. My heart has been battered by the mere presence of her in my vicinity. Don't even get me started on how I can still feel the heat rolling off her when we were pressed together.

Fucking single. That was like waving a checkered flag. Julie knew what she was doing.

Swinging open the kitchen door to Salvation, I spy my longtime friend, my ally, my co-worker, through thick and thin, and push Todd in the back when I pass behind him. "Showing up early, huh? Trying to impress the boss?"

He chuckles. "I haven't impressed you in twenty years. Not sure I can at this point."

“Sure, you can,” I say, washing my hands. “Get the orders right and don’t fuck with me. Easy.”

“Says the chef. Anyway, I’m a pro at messing with you—Oh, shit!” Guess he’s pulled his eyes off that grill long enough to get a good look at me. “What happened?”

Chloe Fox happened.

I don’t say it, but it would be the truth. It’s not worth the fuckery I’d have to put up with though, so I go with what works best for the time being. “Some asshole decked me out of nowhere.” See? That’s the truth. No lies told today.

“It wouldn’t surprise me in New York.” He flips two chicken breasts and then asks, “But out of nowhere?”

My story isn’t sticky enough for him with the lack of details. He knows me too well. “Come on,” I say, slipping on my chef’s coat. “You know me. He was fucking with me and decided to introduce me to his fist.”

I scan the kitchen, ready to have the crew prep the stations for the dinner rush. Clapping my hands, I ask, “What are we waiting on? When we’re slammed? Get busy, people.” After getting the crew going, I move to the cooking stations to start the specials for the night. Todd eyes me long enough for me to know he’s on to me. He says, “I do know you. This is the old Josh, not the new. What really happened?”

Concern from my friends is the same as disappointing them, and I don’t like either. Todd took a leap of faith and came to New York City with me to go to culinary school. Cooking wasn’t his dream, but it’s been a steady gig for him. What he lacks in skills, he makes up for in style and commitment. That made it easy to get him hired at Salvation, especially since it’s my restaurant. I took my inheritance and sunk it in my dream.

Todd’s the only one who works here that knows I own it. Lola was hired and built the front of the restaurant team, none the wiser. With a degree in hospitality and training under some of the most revered restauranteurs in the city, she brought what I lacked. We stick to our fortes, but our paths cross at every turn.

“You’re going to scare the customers, Josh,” she says, her tone light as she pushes through the door. Her black dress is skintight, short, and the heels give off a maneater vibe. She can back it. She’s not shy, but a bull in a china shop when she’s passionate about something.

Chopping asparagus, I reply, “That’s why I plan to stay back here.”

She comes around, her long black hair swinging to the side as she leans against the metal cabinet next to me. Plucking a piece from the board, she plops it in her mouth, and asks, “What happened?”

“A fist ran into my face.”

Running her fingertips over the small bandage, her expression is critical. “Did you do this?”

I duck out of her reach, not wanting to replace the earlier touch that cared for me, and tack on a gentle but firm response, “No.” I have no desire to share more about the situation, steering as clear as I can from Chloe. That would be like feeding red meat to a tiger. I’m not in the mood to go through the details of my life that don’t concern the restaurant, or her. I almost made that mistake once. I won’t put myself in that situation again. “I heard the house is packed.”

“We are.”

“Good.” I go to the walk-in to pull out the ingredients for the special. The freezing air feels good against my bruising skin. When I return, she’s vacated the kitchen.

Todd plates two dishes, and then asks, “Why aren’t you fucking her again?” The other guys start chuckling, except for Karen, but she never laughs about anything. “She’s all over you, and damn, she’s hot.”

I’ll be an asshole to get the attention off me. It’s a skill I honed in jail. “Because she’s already all over me. Imagine how’d she be if I gave her the goods.” I fall short of grabbing my dick. I don’t because I’m not fifteen, but really, it’s because I like Lola. Who says men and women can’t be friends? I don’t view her as more than that, which is why nothing ever happened between us.

“It’s not an image I want in my head, but a solid point.”

Using a butcher knife, I slam it down. Sure, it’s for show, but it’s a great tool to use to lay down the law as well. “Less talking and more cooking.”

Todd laughs. “You used to be fun.” *He’s not wrong. But for two years and seven months, I had to be angry. Sullen. Intense. Aggressive.* It was the only way to survive behind bars.

I used to be a nicer guy too, but with all the shit I’ve been through, I lost that side of myself.

Chloe

I've spent the past month taking breaks at the coffee shop down the street too often, eyeing the ice cream parlor like I might catch him still in there, and nervously expecting to see him behind every curtain in the ER.

I thought healing from the accident was hard but surviving Joshua Evans has been a whole other level of recovery. Trying to salvage my heart, I'm moving on the best I can.

Just as I settle on Ruby's couch with a glass of wine, there's a knock on the door. "Are we expecting company?" I call over the back of the sofa. She has a doorman, so surprise visits aren't really a thing in this building. When she doesn't return, I get up. "Do you want me to answer it?"

"Yes," Ruby shouts from the bedroom. She has to shout. Her apartment is the size of four of mine. A lot has changed in Ruby's world. She may come from family money, but she makes her own these days. Her college years were colorful and designed in whimsy. She took a year off to pursue photography and became a sensation in the fashion world. She's talented with models, but I still prefer her landscapes. She still manages to fit shoots in during her travels.

She makes money by the bucketloads, but I love that she stays true to who she is. Over the past few years, her taste has turned to cleaner palettes, but the starkness of this apartment has me missing the girl who used to drape scarves over lamps. I ask, "What are you doing anyway?"

"Getting dressed." She looked fine in the sweats and tank top she was wearing, so I don't get why she's changing clothes.

Swinging the door open, I see the familiar face of my mother. *Huh?* I guess I stare too long because she enters the apartment. "Guess I'll invite myself in." She kisses my cheek before she passes. "Hello, by the way." She's developed a nice portfolio of sarcasm over the years. It's usually appreciated, but I'm still confused about why she's here.

"Hi, Mom." I snap out of the shock of seeing her at my best friend's apartment. "Sorry. I didn't expect to see you."

Setting down her purse, she replies, “Ruby invited me over. We were chatting about a girls’ night—”

“What? When?” I’m still standing at the door like an idiot, my mind boggled while my mom makes herself at home. Pushing the door closed, I say, “I seem to be missing something.”

With a grand entrance, Ruby comes from the bedroom in a deep red-colored duster unbuttoned to reveal a skintight, black leather bodysuit underneath. I do a double take. With her hair bordering on the deepest of black these days, she’s quite the bombshell. “Wow!”

She spins for us, arms out, full smile, and confidence built into her small frame. The heels allow for some of the height she’s missing when standing barefoot next to me. “You like? I got it in Dubai. It cost me a full paycheck, but I’m not regretting the purchase.”

I say, “I’d pay more to look half as good.”

My mom peers on like a proud parent. “You look fabulous.”

They embrace, and Ruby replies, “It’s so good to see you again, Cat.”

Skeptical, I ask, “What is going on?”

Scooping up the wine from the dining table, Ruby moves into the kitchen, the deep plum liquid sloshing up the sides and then falling. “We ran into each other last week at Zabar’s.”

They laugh like they’re old friends, tag-teaming the story. “She tried to steal the last chocolate Babka.”

“You’re a terrible tease, Cat.” Returning her eyes to me, Ruby says, “I gave her the Babka. Anywho, we got to talking about you—”

“Me?” My interest is piqued even more. *Oh, great.* Nothing brings two people together like the desire to coordinate the dating life of a third. *I’m the third.*

“Yes, I thought it would be fun to have Cat surprise you and join us.”

“Do you not want me here?” I swear to God my mom’s bottom lip pops out just a little when she asks that.

While Ruby fills another glass with red wine, I sigh, tilting my head and inwardly rolling my eyes. “Of course, I want you here. I’m glad you came.” I hug her, resting my head on her shoulder briefly, finding comfort in the embrace.

When we part, I notice their outfits are very similar, which has me wondering . . . “Why are you both dressed up?” I glance down at my baggy jeans and floral sweatshirt, tugging at the hem like I can hide my lack of

fashion. There's no point, though. They know I never have time to shop. I'm lucky my socks don't have holes while they look like they're ready for a night on the town. "Wait a minute. *Oh, no.* Nope. Not going to happen. This was supposed to be a night in, watching a movie and ordering food delivery."

Ruby sits at the other end of the sofa from the spot I reclaim, curling my legs under me in defense. Watching my mom sit on the edge of the leather chair while Ruby crosses her legs with sky-high heels on, I know they are absolutely up to no good.

I finish my wine, hoping it saves me from the nightmare I see coming. My mom says, "We really did run into each other at Zabar's, but we also thought it would be fun to surprise you."

"Surprise!" Ruby adds with flair and a roll of her wrist. "More wine?"

Seeing my mom gulp hers down, I hold up my glass, thinking these two schemed way before now. "Seems I'll need it, considering how the fish next to me is downing hers." The glass is swiped from my hand as Ruby cuts between me and my mom to refill it. "And don't be skimpy."

She laughs. My mom, not so much. Nope, she's focused on flattening a wrinkle in her shirt that had the nerve to embed itself. "Mom?"

"Hm?" Her eyes are still cast down.

I press her, "What is this about?" Ruby returns with a glass so full the wine runs over the side when it's handed to me. At least it's white wine and won't stain. Not that I'm that concerned about my jeans. I have other worries, like the story they're trying to hide. "I'm glad Zabar's didn't turn into Babkagate, but it feels like there's more to this story. Just tell me what's going on."

Ruby sits back down, too glamorous for the situation. With her arm draped along the back of the sofa, she says, "We're worried about your sex life."

"What? No." I push up, ready to leave in a great wave of my arms in annoyance. "You do not get to lure me here with expensive wine and Mexican food, then start in on me like Julie does at work. Do I never get a break from everyone's concern for my vagina?"

My mom chokes on her wine. Under our attention, she clears her throat, and says, "That's not how this was supposed to go. We're concerned about your social life." Glancing at Ruby, she adds, "Not your sex life."

"I'm socializing right now with the two of you." At the receiving end of a pointed look, I hold up my finger while I gulp more wine. Clearly, my commentary isn't going to end this. "Okay," I say, lowering my hand. "You

may continue.”

Wasting no time, she digs in. “You don’t date—”

“I’m twenty-seven, Mom, not ninety. I have time to find a partner. Anyway, Frankie and Dway—Hemsworth keep me plenty busy. You wanted me to nurture the plant, and I have been. I take care of two. They’re very needy trees.”

Ruby, highly amused, adds her two cents from two cushions away. “First of all, Frankie and Hemsworth are plants, not people. We let you carry on about them like they’re actual humans, but, Chlo, they’re not.”

My mom says, “I gave you Frankie to help you find balance with your studies. Now you’re using those poor plants as excuses not to have a life outside the hospital. If it’s not one extreme it’s another.”

Her words open an old wound. Not about the plants, but about a part of me that I thought I’d left behind. “One extreme or another,” I repeat quietly to myself. My chest aches under the realization. “I’ve become Dad.”

Not missing a beat, Ruby adds, “You stole my second point.”

“Have I become Dad?” I ask, staring at my mom whose gaze extends out the window.

“I would never wish that life on you for all the money in the world.” When her attention returns to me, she says, “I don’t hate your father for the choices I made. I hate that he gave you no choices at all. What good is all this money if you’re not happy?”

I argue out of spite, “I don’t need a man to complete me.”

My mom exhales heavily. “You’re right. You are amazing, have an incredible career, and . . .” A little smile appears. “Have plants that rely on you. When you’re home, do you get lonely? I do. I miss having a friend who shares my daily life, someone I can confide in, a lover, someone to spend time with when my daughter is busy at work.”

Honestly, yes. Am I comfortable admitting that? No. Staring at the stark white piece of art hanging in front of me, I say, “The work I do fulfills me.”

She adds, “When it comes to a career, there’s nothing more I’d wish for.”

“But when it comes to the other half of my life . . . I understand what you’re saying. My trees can’t replace relationships with other humans.”

My mom sips her wine, and says, “It doesn’t have to be a romantic relationship, but one that offers you support beyond us, Frankie, and Hemsworth—friend or otherwise.”

“I have Julie—”

“I love Julie. She has a killer sense of humor, but I have to side with your mom. It’s about companionship. And now let’s loop back.” Ruby asks, “What about your sex life?”

“Geez, give a girl some warning. The machinery works just fine. Can we move along?” But then it happens. Without my permission, an image of Joshua sneaks in. Training my eyes on anything to replace how he looked at me that day in the ice cream shop, like there is still a possibility for us, a future, still in love, *so in love* . . . I give in. “Fine. Say what’s on your mind.”

My mom taps my knee, bringing me back to her. “We thought it would be fun to go out and explore a new restaurant. We’re done with this conversation. We don’t have to talk about men at all. Are you up for some fun?”

“Not dressed like this, I’m not.”

Ruby hastily stands. “Don’t worry. I got you.” She rushes to her bedroom and then returns with a garment bag. “I brought you a gift from Dubai.”

* * *

I’m not exactly tugging at the pants that are glued to my hips or arguing about the low-cut top with the chiffon sleeves that tighten around my wrists, but it’s been a hot minute since I’ve worn heels this high . . . or heels at all. It’s a big jump from sneakers to four-inch stilettos. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” they both reply.

Ruby smacks my ass. “If I had your body, I’d dress like Britney Spears’ backup dancer and show off the goods for free.” I’m used to scrubs and a white lab coat these days, but I know I’m going to lose this argument, so I suck it up and hope I don’t fall flat on my face. Ruby says, “Stick out those tits, for God’s sake. You got ’em. Use them.”

“And what exactly am I using them for?”

“Your own benefit. Trust me on this.”

My mom pretends she doesn’t hear this conversation and opens the door to go inside the restaurant. “This place had rave reviews last week from *The Daily*,” she says over her shoulder.

“And we got reservations?”

“No, but the person who answered my call told us we might catch a cancellation, so Ruby and I figured it was worth a try.” She turns to the

podium and starts talking to the hostess.

Ruby passes behind her, grabbing my hand, and pulling me toward the bar. We snag the two seats available and order a round of cocktails while waiting for my mom.

She arrives just as the drinks are set down, and I hop off the stool so she can sit down. “There are no reservations available.” Taking the drink we got for her, she sips before adding, “To a fun night anyway.”

“To a liquid dinner,” Ruby adds. Our glasses ring as they tap together, and we all drink to that.

The laughter is strong, medicine to my soul for the next few hours, the most fun I’ve had in a long time.

“We searched all the suitcases for the buzzing noise,” Ruby continues a story that has me laughing so hard my side hurts. “Go figure. It was in my carry-on all along.”

“Why’d you carry on your vibrator?” My mom giggle-snorts because she was two sheets to the wind two cocktails ago. Even though she’s seated, I’m surprised she’s not flat on her ass, considering I’ve had to practically prop her up for the last hour. I don’t mind because she’s having a great time.

Ruby shrugs. “A mile-high fantasy.” The tab is set down, and Ruby is quick to slap a card down. “On me, ladies.”

After paying, we stumble out of the restaurant onto the sidewalk. My mom looks up at the surrounding skyscrapers, and says, “I don’t even know where I am in the city.”

Wrapping my arm around hers, I pull her left. “Don’t worry. We’ll get you home.”

Ruby throws her arm up in the air as she leans forward, teetering on the curb. “We can share a cab. I don’t mind the detour.”

The valet flanks her side. “If you’d like to wait over there, I’ll get you a cab, ma’am.”

“Ma’am?” she replies, horrified. Finding us over her shoulder, she asks, “Oh God, when did I become a ma’am?”

My mom giggles and hiccups. “It’s not so bad, Ruby. It’s a sign of respect.”

Returning to where we’re standing, she stomps her foot. “Maybe I do want to be someone’s ma’am. Respect on the streets. Disrespect in the sheets. That’s the kind of guy I’m looking for.”

We move against the building, leaning against the brick wall for support.

“I can’t take you two anywhere.” I laugh, but then a burning question from earlier returns, and ask, “Did the fantasy come true?”

Looking left and then right, Ruby then leans in. “Let’s just say that the co-pilot knows how to land his plane.”

“It’s not called a cockpit for nothing,” my mom remarks, leaving me staring in shock.

Ruby is laughing, but as if the memory is fresh enough to relive, she shares, “He was the sexiest man I’d ever seen.” Then her eyes go wide. “Except for him. *Sweet. Jesus.*”

My mom looks past me, and her mouth falls open.

Feeling left out, I follow their gazes to get a good look at what has them gawking, the name falling from my mouth like it’s the owner, “Joshua.”

39

Joshua

Like a lightning strike out of the blue, I didn't expect to see Chloe again. The passion in her heart was always seen in her eyes, and tonight is no different. My gaze follows the lines of her hair that flow over her shoulders and the graceful collarbone exposed that I used to kiss.

That connection that refuses not to exist has me flexing my fingers to keep from reaching out to touch her again. Seeing her dotting my life in the most unexpected places, and knowing she's not mine to kiss, has become my true punishment.

Gripping her purse in one hand and by all appearances a drunk Cat in the other, she's staring at me like I materialized out of thin air.

"Chloe," I reply, a few awkward beats later. No questions. No statements. Just her name making its way into the fresh air. It feels good to say it again. It's even better seeing her.

"Josh?"

I force my eyes from her only to find another familiar face. "Ruby?"

"Yes. Wow, Josh Evans right here on the streets of New York." She loops her arm with Chloe, the two women standing alert at her side. "What are the odds?"

Chloe speaks out of the side of her mouth, "Better than you think," loud enough to hear, leading me to believe that she's not entirely upset to see me again.

"Josh?" Confusion ripples through her expression and then softens with defeat taking over. I still want to correct the name, but she only changed it because I told her to when I was in jail. Chloe remains standing quietly as if saying my name was all she could bear. I relate all too well.

She continues to stare at me as if I'm a mystery she can't figure out, and then says, "You're here." But before I can say anything else, she asks, "What are you doing here?"

I'm not sure what to say.

I work here.

Coincidences happen.

It's a free country.

When she looks at her mom, her mom's expression is unreadable from where I'm standing. I say, "I work in the city." I could have pointed out that they're currently standing in front of my restaurant but giving up these details in the current climate of the moment seems ill-advised. It's good to keep a few secrets. That's something she knows well.

Ruby jolts in surprise, raising her eyebrows. "You live here?"

"Yes."

Cat's loose demeanor has changed into protective mother mode, taking her daughter's hand in hers. "Chloe—"

"I'm fine, Mom."

Ruby says, "The cab's here." Even Ruby can't dismiss the awkwardness by the way sympathy rearranges her face. I'm starting to wonder if she doesn't hate me. Rich people are usually better at hiding their evil side.

I hate myself for even thinking they could be that cruel, but I lost trust in words a long time ago. Now I judge others by their actions.

The heavy breath that escapes Chloe has her shoulders lowering, and she nods while I stand unsure of how I'm feeling about seeing her, them, and having another fated run-in. It's a lot to process. I say, "It was—" I stop myself from telling her how good it really is. I can't. After being given three opportunities, I still can't manage my emotions with a clear head, and my heart is too cloudy.

A plea enters Chloe's eyes, her lip momentarily tucked under teeth. "It was what?"

Ruby walks around Chloe, taking Cat's hand. "We'll wait in the cab."

Looking at Chloe, Cat whispers, "I think you should come with us."

The debate is written in the worry creasing her brow. She nods, and for a brief second, I think she's been convinced. Then she asks, "Can I have a minute, Mom? Ruby?" Her need to please shining through.

I could give her the benefit of the doubt instead and acknowledge that she's taking their time into consideration, but that would require me to be the bigger person right now, and I don't know, she's fucking with my head. Why am I still here waiting for her to make up her mind about something when I'm not given the same consideration?

Screw this.

I'm late from my break. The guys will be looking for me if Lola isn't

already. Running my hand through my hair, I start for the corner to go around back.

Chloe asks, “Can we talk? The cab’s waiting, so I won’t keep you long.”

My feet stop with my back to her. Do we really have anything more to talk about? I felt like it was left pretty fucking cut and dry.

But when I turn back to her, my eyes land on the Salvation sign above her head. I’m not one to believe in signs, but if there was ever a time to, this is it.

I glance down at the tattoo on my finger, the other half of the one that still scars her body. *Salvation*.

Call it grace coming over me, but in regard to the future, I start to rethink my position on the damage she’s done. Maybe she didn’t ruin it. Maybe she righted it.

She deserves to be heard, to get a few things off her chest that might also give me the peace I’m seeking. It’s a chance we never gave each other with guards standing by and thick glass dividing us. “Sure,” I reply, leaning against the brick wall. I blame the chip on my shoulder for standing there and making her come to me. She doesn’t seem to mind and moves closer. She always was better than me.

The slight wobble of her ankles has me studying her body language. With her hands out to give her balance, I realize she’s been drinking. Heavily.

“Are you drunk?”

Holding two fingers close together, she eyes me through the small space. “A little, but I still want to talk.”

All the mercy I was giving now seems like a bad idea. Nothing good ever comes from drunken confrontations. Rivers of emotions are hard enough to steer before alcohol drags us into deeper oceans. “I don’t think this is a good idea, Chloe.”

She moves closer, and then her eyes close as she savors the moment—a small smile on her face and a deep inhale. “I always loved the way you said my name.” It was something I loved that she did as well . . . maybe I still do. She looks back at the cab, and then to me. “I want you to know that—”

A horn blasts through our conversation, and Ruby leans out the window, “Come on, Chlo.”

Being on borrowed time makes me anxious, so I ask, “That what? What do you want me to know?”

Staring into my eyes, she takes another step closer, leaving little room for misunderstanding. “Joshua, I’ve been thinking about what happened, and I’m

just so—”

“Hey Josh? What are you doing out here?”

Shit.

I push off the bricks and tilt my head covering the distance beyond Chloe to find Lola at the front door. When it comes to me, her curiosity usually gets the best of her. It’s no different for her now as she glances back and forth between me and Chloe. “I’ll be right there, Lola.”

Please go back inside, I silently beg.

Chloe turns to look, and I see the chance we’d been given drift away. Lola nods before returning inside. “Don’t be long.”

When Chloe’s eyes meet mine, the light that shone has faded along with the smile she was trying to confine just seconds prior. “I won’t keep you,” she says, standing steadier on her feet. The other side of my life is exposed in a sobering reality.

Rushing between her and the taxi, I say, “We can still talk.”

“You’re wanted inside.” Pushing past me, she stumbles from those damn shoes, her arms flying into the air.

I reach out to catch her from falling. Our breaths come heavy as I remain wrapped around her from the side, holding her still. When she tilts her head up, I’m covered in her hair. Taking advantage of the situation, I inhale her into my lungs once again. Floral with hints of vanilla. It’s been too long, but the scent awakens my body, and my heart starts thudding in my chest.

Despite the noisy street, I bet she can hear it. I help her stand upright, righting her on her feet. “Are you okay?”

Flipping her hair out of her face, she raises her chin, pride keeping her from laughing, or crying, about it. I can’t read her and that fucking pisses me off. “I’m fine,” she says, untangling from me. “Just fine, Josh.”

Josh . . . that name is not right coming from her mouth, but I have my own shit to deal with. This landslide of fucked feelings has become an avalanche that’s too late to avoid. I move away from her, needing the space and clarity I still can’t seem to find. “Good.”

“Good?” Her eyelids dip closed as she struggles to catch her breath. “Right.” Thumbing behind her, she says, “They’re waiting.”

“Yeah.”

Her gaze darts from me to the door and back again. “And Lola’s waiting on you.”

Why does this make me feel worse than I did before? *Fuck.* I hate leaving

things like this, but I have to. “I need to get back.”

A self-righteous, “Good luck,” is tossed my way as she opens the door to the taxi.

“For what?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs. “Just seemed like something nice to say to someone you’ll never see again.”

“You sure about that?”

Her face tightens in thought. With a twist of her lips, her hand finds her hip. “Yes. I’m sure it’s a nice thing to say.”

Her pussy is still cute even though her anger comes with a side of claws. *Fuck me.* I can’t afford to get caught up in her again, so I say, “I was talking about the never seeing me part,” and head for the restaurant.

“I’m not worried about that,” she shouts defiantly.

Shaking my head, I know I shouldn’t do it. She’s drunk. She’s talking shit like she knows what the hell she’s talking about. *Fuck it.* Against my better judgment, I engage. “Out of eight million people, we’ve run into each other three times in recent months. That’s practically a statistical anomaly.” Infuriated, I fling my arms out from my sides and grit my teeth. “Yet here we are, proving those statistics wrong.”

“Technically, the statistics are higher than you think. I researched it.”

“Of course, you did.” I leave that little sarcastic bomb at her feet just to see what happens.

She scoffs, shooing away the possibility that something bigger might be at play, and states, “Years ago, I might have believed you, but fate isn’t based in science for a reason. There’s no proof it exists, so if that’s what you’re using as your baseline, you’re dead wrong.” She ducks into the cab like that tattoo means nothing and slams the door shut.

“It was good seeing you again,” I say tight-lipped with a flick of my wrist. “Good luck.” Fine, I’m being petty by letting her get to me, but what-the fuck-ever. *Why do I care?*

With the window still down, I hear Ruby squeal, “Again?”

The car pulls away from the curb, but I see Chloe’s eyes following me inside. Because, like her, I couldn’t leave without one last look. The door to Salvation doesn’t have a chance to close before Lola asks, “What’s going on?”

“Ran into an old friend.” The lie fits better than the truth where Lola’s concerned.

“She wasn’t that old by the look of her, and she sure is pretty.” I appreciate the lack of jealousy to her tone. It could have gone either way really.

“Yes, she is very pretty.”

Leaning on the podium, studying me, she whispers, “I heard shouting.”

“It’s just something we do.”

“Can you do it somewhere else next time? A table by the window complained.”

“Then comp them.” I walk through the dining room, thinking about Chloe as I make my way back to the kitchen. Unfortunately, she’s too pretty for me to ignore. But it’s not her looks that have me wanting to see her again. It’s that connection we share that has never gone away.

40

Chloe

“What did he mean by ‘seeing you again?’” Ruby is not going to let this go. She’s tipsy, loud, and fixated on me. She also gets the primo seat to this investigation since she’s sitting in the middle of the back-seat bench.

I shrug, hoping she believes it’s no big deal. “He came to the ER a while back, and I treated him. That’s all.”

“As a patient?”

“No, as my ex who’s come back from the dead to haunt me,” I snap. “Of course, as my patient.”

“Why didn’t you tell us? I think seeing Josh Evans is worth a mention.”

My mom starts rubbing her temple, and then says, “I think Ruby’s right, Chloe. Seeing Josh again is a very big deal, considering the past, but to see him twice . . . well, I worry about you. It took you years to get over him. You went to therapy—”

“I also went to therapy because my dad betrayed me.”

She concedes. “That’s understandable, but I want to focus on Josh. He was your first love. Your first everything.” The placating tone does me no favors. It actually does the opposite and riles me up. I’m tempted to tell them this is the third time since we’re all up in this situation—back in the day, we would have calculated that it was our third date . . . *How can I remember that small detail and still not remember the accident?*

Now I’m rubbing my temple as the beginning of a dull throb joins this party.

I keep the details of Josh and me a secret. They’d blow this up even more, so I need to calm down and keep my wits to avoid an argument that doesn’t need to happen. “I know. You don’t have to remind me.” Scanning the street, I’m tempted to escape the back of this cab, to just open the door and run. Run as far as I can. My feet ache being in these shoes, though, so I say, “I’m fine.”

Ruby sits back. My mom sighs, and then says, “You’re doing so well—great job, steady income. I worry that seeing him again might set you back or

throw you off the track you're on."

My mouth drops open. "Wait, let me get this straight. Hours ago, you ambushed me with an intervention concerning my sex life—"

"Social life," my mom corrects.

"Either way, *my* life. You drag me out on the town apparently for my benefit, and now you're telling me my life was fine in the first place. I can't keep up with your standards for *my* life. Just tell me what you want from me, and I'll do it like I've always done?"

"This isn't an attack," Ruby says, reaching over and rubbing my arm. "We want you to be happy. That's all we've ever wanted for you, Chlo."

"It's all you ever wanted but have you bothered to ask me what I want?"

Two pairs of eyes, unblinking, stare back at me before my mom's start welling with tears. "I'm so sorry. We've behaved terribly. I thought . . ." Her profile is silhouetted by the bright lights on the other side of the window and remorse takes over her tone. "What I thought doesn't matter. You do. If you're happy, there's nothing more I can want for you."

Guilt sets in like it always does, and I reach over to touch her shoulder. "I didn't tell you that to make you feel bad. I only wanted you to know that I'm okay." The alcohol is making my thoughts fuzzy and my tongue harried. I sit back to try to stop the spinning.

Ruby says, "I'm sorry, too."

"I know you care about me, and I appreciate it. I just want to feel like I'm not failing someone for one night."

Leaning her head on my shoulder, Ruby says, "You're not failing us. I hate that we made you feel that way." Wrapping her arms around me, she adds, "I'm in awe of you, Chlo. You're the smartest person I know. Beautiful inside and out. You run an eight-minute mile on a bad day, and you still hold the title of favorite subject out of my photography career."

She tilts her head back, and my mom leans forward. "You are the light and love of my life, Chloe." Reaching across Ruby's lap, she takes my hand in hers. "You're brilliant, and I couldn't be more proud of who you are and all you've done to make your dreams come true. And from now on, I will be the best grandparent that ever was to those plants."

Ruby laughs. "You're a grandparent to that little bundle of grandplants."

Honestly, I love them too much to keep fighting. "Fine, you won me over with the compliments." I shrug. "I guess I'm easy like that." I also know that they've always been in my corner. "This just got blown out of proportion

because we've been drinking. I'm not mad at you guys. I'm mad at myself, and I don't know why." I owe them so much. They were the ones who bore the brunt of my pain back then. The tears that no longer came were replaced by silence that I mistakenly considered stoic. It wasn't.

I'll blame the drinks in the morning, but tonight, I want to cry. Since the tears won't come, I shed them through a confession. "My head is throbbing, but you know what hurts worse? My heart."

Closing my eyes, I cringe, waiting for the world to end. That's the only logical reaction to me admitting that Joshua Evans still fills that little compartment of a heart that's beating wildly in my chest.

I don't die, though, and the world doesn't end. They both lean over, and I lean in for a group hug. My mom says, "What can I do to help you?"

"Seeing him . . ." I get choked up thinking about Joshua. Saying his name feels too good but comes with so much pain. I suck in a jagged breath as *she* comes to mind—*Lola. Red lips. Legs for days.* The most gorgeous woman I've ever seen. She may be an innocent bystander, but I already hate her. "My heart still wants to love him."

I throw the truth into the universe, hoping it doesn't boomerang and take me down again.

At that moment of stifling silence, the car comes to a stop outside my building. I look up and then back to them, not making a move to leave. Even they don't know what to say, but the worry is threaded through their expressions. My mom finally says, "Some part of it always will. You were never supposed to end that way."

The words are a blatant reminder of what should have never happened. But I'll never recover from the fact that Joshua and I were never supposed to end . . . at all.

I'm hit with a strong gust of wind, sobering me to the fact that I'm returning to an empty apartment where the only life that exists comes from my plants. I'm barely living, so I'm not sure that counts.

Sitting in the dark of my apartment with my back against the wall. I run my finger around the rim of a water glass. Looking up over my shoulder, Frankie and Hemsworth are enjoying the moonlight while I'm struck by a tidal wave of sadness. Like an old adversary, I remember it well. I lived with this feeling for years, unable to recall the life before it settled in my soul. I won't give it freedom to regrow. No, that's not a darkness where I want to live.

I get up and drain my glass before undressing and stepping into the shower, letting the water rain over me like the tears I used to cry.

When I drag my hand down my throat, the feel of his body wrapped around me is still so palpable. He caught me when I was falling . . . *falling*. I squeeze my eyes closed, wishing I could still feel his heartbeat against my side or hear the way he gulped so close to my ear.

I didn't acknowledge how I felt protected, even cherished, in his arms, or how when I turned, the connection rushed my veins, and for those few seconds, I felt alive again. My knees went weak when he inhaled the scent of my hair as if he needed one last souvenir. As much as I want to forget how his hands on my body felt like he still loved me, I know better than to tangle my dreams in him again.

Joshua will always be my first love.

I just don't have the energy to hold onto these feelings anymore. He's moved past me. So maybe I need to give serious thought to what my mom and Ruby said. It was never a matter of filling holes he left behind. No. If I were to admit the truth, he's still taking up space without paying rent.

It's time to date. Maybe someone else can crowd him out from owning so much of my heart's expanse.

The effects of alcohol are wearing off, and my mind clears. The only way to know if I can find a love that lasts a lifetime is by giving someone else a chance. That means instead of no, I need to start saying yes.

41

Chloe

“I’ve been dying to hear about your girls’ night out for weeks.” Julie sets her fork down, the metal clanging against the porcelain.

The nice weather had us choose a sidewalk café for our break. “It’s been a while since our schedules were in sync.”

“Tell me about it before you get a text and have to leave.”

I set my glass down after sipping the water. “I was set up. I thought it was a girls’ night *in*, but they had nefarious plans that included going out to a hot new restaurant. The only thing is they didn’t have reservations. It was still fun because we enjoyed the bar at Salvation instead. But let me tell you, we’re a bunch of lightweights and should have eaten more than a shared appetizer of poutine.”

Even though she’s met Joshua, there’s no need to mention him. Like Ruby, she’ll fixate on that one detail, and I’m not looking to relive that part of the night.

I take another bite of my salad when she says, “I heard that place is amazing, but yeah, you have to have connections to get a reservation or book way in advance. Good to know you could stay at the bar. Maybe I’ll see if Roger from admin can get me in. He loves to brag about his connections.”

“And he has a sweet spot for you.”

“I had sex with him—”

“What? When? I thought you didn’t like him.”

She shrugs unapologetically. “I blame the steak and wine. What can I say? He knows the way to this girl’s heart.”

Laughing, I say, “If it makes you happy.” I sound like two other people I know. Stuffed, I push my plate away and angle my face to enjoy the last bit of sunshine of the day. Looking back at her, I say, “It’s good to be outside.”

“Chloe? Chloe Fox. Wow, it’s really you.”

I look toward the sound of the male voice that’s fast approaching only to land on a face I never thought I’d see again. “Trevor?”

In a city of millions, Joshua Evans is literally served to me on a silver

platter—three times. So Trevor League, sure. *Why not? Though, I guess it isn't that surprising since his family's company is here in the city. But still . .*

Not looking much older than the last time I saw him, he might have broader shoulders and his hair a shade darker blond than he used to be. He always did know how to wear a suit. As for his personality—that's where we had issues.

Even so, I can't hide the scrubs I'm wearing, and I don't bother to fix the scrub cap hair. Suddenly anxious, I start flattening the wrinkled cotton anyway like it will make a difference. I'm not sure why his presence has me falling into a role I once abandoned.

He says, "My mom told me you were working in the city."

"Yes, at City Medical a few blocks from here." The way he looks at me is like he's seeing an old friend. We were never that close, and a few dates in high school won't change it now.

"Your dad must be proud."

Newport loves to gossip. There's no way he doesn't know about the famous falling out of the Foxes, but I'll give him the benefit of the doubt. "We no longer speak."

"I didn't want to bring it up, but I was sorry to hear that." I stop the eye roll because his words sound genuine. He looks up as a group of boisterous guys pass by the patio area. When his gaze slides back to me, he says, "I've been working abroad for the past three years, so I've lost touch with the old crew. It's really good to see you again."

Julie asks, "Where were you working?"

Smacking my hand to my head, I say, "I'm sorry for not introducing you. This is my friend, Julie. If the outfits didn't tip you off, we work together."

Curiously, the wall I used to raise around him doesn't shoot up like a red flag. I watch as they shake hands and how the arrogance he once carried around like a badge of honor is nowhere to be found. Something's humbled him—*life*? I'm not sure what it could be, but it's an unexpected and pleasant turnabout.

He takes a step back, and says, "I should let you finish your meal."

Julie says, "Oh gosh no. Stay. We were just talking about Chloe going to Salvation, that new—"

"I've been to that restaurant." His eyes light up as if he's grateful to have something to add. "It was really good."

Julie adds, “Chloe didn’t get to eat—”

“I told you,” I say tight-lipped, “I had the poutine.” I know what she’s doing. The last time she tried to set me up, it didn’t work out so well. I shoot her a glare that Trevor doesn’t catch. “Don’t,” I mouth.

He says, “I haven’t tried their version.”

“We couldn’t get a reservation, so my mom, friend, and I shared an appetizer at the bar.” I sound more pathetic by the second, wishing I could leave my body now more than ever.

His hand touches my shoulder, the feel of him all wrong. He says, “I can get a reservation for tomorrow night.” Both happened too fast for me to stop him. Covertly, I angle out from under him. He’s none the wiser, and grins, but I’ve clearly sent the wrong message because he continues, “Would you like to go with me, Chloe? It’d be great to catch up.”

“I, uh.” My foot is kicked, causing me to glance at Julie, who is shaking her head yes so hard it might fall off. But when I look at him again, he seems sincere. Maybe this will be a good trial run of spending time with a man and building my confidence in dating again. That is if he’s not the same jerk he used to be under that expensive suit.

I promised myself to say yes more often, and he’s the first guy in line. “Sure. I’m off work tomorrow. I can meet you there.”

“I’ll text you the details.” Holding his phone up, he says, “I still have your number.”

“From high school?”

“Yep. I never delete a contact. You never know when you’ll need them again.”

I already said yes, but that alone makes me want to pull out of this date, but he’s already returning to his table.

Julie rests her chin on her hand and says, “He’s dreamy. What is it with you and all these hot guys who can’t seem to take their eyes off you? I’m so jealous.”

“There aren’t ‘all these hot men,’ first of all. And if you only knew the half of it—”

“I don’t even know a quarter of it, but I’m all ears.”

The check is set down between us and I grin smugly. “Too bad break’s over. Back to the real world, and Roger.”

“I sort of hate you right now,” she teases with laughter.

* * *

I don't know why I said yes.

Not only is dating out of my comfort zone, but Trevor is especially. To help ease my nerves, I text Ruby on the car ride over: *If you hear from me in ten minutes, call me right back.*

Ruby: *Oh my God! You're on a date???????*

I giggle that one question mark wasn't enough, and text: *Yes. Why am I doing this?*

Ruby: *Because one day you're going to fall in love and wonder why you waited so long.*

That's a lovely notion, but I did experience love once, and it wrecked me in the end. Is it possible to find my forever this time around? Me: *I think that's your dream. Not mine.*

Ruby: *What's mine is yours. Have the most fun and call me tomorrow.*

Me: *A call and not a text?*

Ruby: *This is definitely worth calling about. Have fun and have sex!*

I roll my eyes, and then an image of Trevor getting his hump on flashes. *Ugh. No sex! Me: Yeah. Yeah.*

Though by how I dressed for the night, I seem to be betting that she's right, or I wouldn't have made the effort. I do want love in my life . . . love to replace the other. I get out of the cab and walk into the restaurant. It's too late to turn back now. I see him the moment I walk in.

Greeting me with a glass of red wine, he kisses my cheek. "You look fantastic, Chloe."

"Thanks." We shuffle to the side out of the way from the entrance, and I ask, "What's the wine?"

"It's a Syrah from this quaint little winery in the Rhone Valley of France. I discovered it while on a weekend getaway with a girl I met at Yale, actually . . ."

Letting him ramble on, I take a sip, though I'm not much of a red wine drinker. I have a feeling I'll be drinking a lot to drown out the image still stuck in my head. "That's so interesting." I have no idea what he said, but my answer seems to fit, so we'll go with it. "You said you know someone here?"

"The manager." He looks around like he might be looking for his friend. Leaning down, he says, "We met at a party in the Hamptons and hooked up in the city."

“Fast friends. You must have hit it off with him.” A little paranoid, I scan the room but don’t see Joshua or Lola to my relief, but still sip the wine to take off the edge.

I know it’s stupid to worry about such things. *What are the odds that I’ll ever see them again, much less here at Salvation?*

“It’s not a him. It’s a her.” His tone lightens as his gaze works into the distance. “We hit it off all right.”

What a weird response—*oh!* “Ew! Why would you tell that story to someone you’re on a date with?”

Nudging me with his elbow, he laughs. “We’re not high school kids. We’re adults, Chloe. Single, attractive, and successful professionals. Lighten up and enjoy life.”

I sigh; my hopes that he could change dashed in less than five minutes. I’m thinking it’s time to cut my losses and leave when the hostess says, “Your table’s ready. Right this way.”

I might be walking, but it’s definitely time to text Ruby. She can save me with one quick call. But when I arrive at the tiny table in the middle of the restaurant, I can’t resist. I burst out laughing. This has to be the worst table in the restaurant with no privacy and potential for waiters to bump into us. Still laughing, I say, “You might not have ‘hit it off’ as well as you thought.”

He scowls, pulling out my chair begrudgingly. “Trust me, you won’t be complaining.”

“No, trust me. I won’t be hitting it off with you either.” I sit because for the first time in my life, I’m in the power position. And selfishly, I’m not only starved, but I want to actually try the food here at Salvation.

I’ve lived a sheltered life, partially because of my upbringing and then because of my school and career keeping me busy. No more. I will live my life on my terms, not anyone else’s. So if he’s looking for a battle of wills, I’m ready to take him on.

I tuck my phone away and order the lobster and champagne because tonight just got interesting.

42

Joshua

When I see the fish plate slide back into the kitchen line, I ask, “What’s this?”

Tyler, a newer waiter in the restaurant, says, “The customer said he wanted it deboned.”

“No.” I push it back down the line. “That’s not how it’s served.”

Picking up the plate, he says, “I’ll tell him.”

“Some fucking nerve,” I grumble, covering the sauté station tonight for a cook who called in sick. I call to the back line, “Check the souffles!”

Todd says, “Settle down. You’ve been on a rampage all night. Not getting laid?”

“I’m preparing food the way I created the dish to be served. I can’t deal with picky eaters tonight.” He’s just pushing buttons since he knows I can get laid if I want.

The reason I’m choosing not to is the part he’s not aware of. Since this damn city has brought Chloe and me together again, her face would be the only one I’d see if I went home with someone else, her body the one I’d wish I was touching. That’s not right to do to another woman.

Lately, I’m seeing my memories as clearly as I once did. The anger that used to drive me was formed out of necessity to move on, but now the candle I held deep inside is lit with the flick of her wrist, and I feel her taking over parts of my heart again.

It makes me realize I was never standing on solid ground when I was holding her accountable. I can twist the truth in my head, but Chloe is a blaring reminder of what I did. Even if she never remembered how the night actually went, I was the one responsible for driving her car. I accepted my role in this catastrophe the day I signed those papers, but it’s funny how sometimes it’s easy to forget.

Am I ready to forgive her for listening to me? For doing what I told her to do—*don’t come back*?

If she knew that I did everything for her, would she forgive me? Does my

sacrifice even matter now?

Nah. She's doing what she always wanted. Her dreams have come true, but in a weird twist of fate, so have mine. I just wish I could stop thinking of how she felt in my arms—comfort of a long-forgotten home, a good memory that makes you smile, love that never left a heart you thought was vacant. A rush of reminders told me I should have been holding her all along.

Saving her from falling had her gripping my arms that were tight around her waist. She didn't fight against me to leave. She leaned into the embrace, taking advantage of the moment like I did, her sweet scent taunting me to kiss her.

One more time.

One *last* time.

Until I can get my head straight, I don't return the late-night texts from others, and I leave the calls unanswered when they ring. I know it's the right thing to do, but my ego still has me playing into Todd's hand. "It's not for lack of options." I'm hoping it will get him off my back.

"The answer is no then. You are not getting laid."

Well, that didn't work. "How about less talking and more cooking?"

His laughter has me turning back to see what's so funny. "You used to say that back at the diner." He's bent over, arranging the Hasselback potatoes with meticulous attention to detail before sending two plates my way to finish. "A lot has happened since then. I think we've aged two decades in the past six years."

I still dream about the mundane things—walking around campus, mowing the lawn, hanging out at the lake. "It was another life."

"Have you thought about going back for a visit?"

"I go back."

"You go straight to your mom's place or the diner." As if he can read my mind, he says, "I'm talking about spending time there, drinking beer with Bryant, or maybe go visit the property?"

We're obviously spending too much time together for him to read my inner thoughts so clearly. But the lake never felt right after I got out of jail. Standing on the shore, all I saw was the way the moon danced across the droplets clinging to Chloe's skin. I felt the heat of her body against mine and missed kissing her in the moonlight. Being free, young, and careless.

I saw the whole world in her eyes and the same reflected back to me. I remember how my heart beat so fast around her that I thought I couldn't

breathe. It didn't matter. Only she did.

"Josh, plate the mushrooms."

Looking up, I realize my mind went for a drive down memory lane and shift into overdrive. Admiring the delectable masterpiece and hoping to get focused, I step back, crossing my arms, and examine the dishes properly. "Now that is a thing of beauty."

Todd calls out, "Order twenty-four is out the door."

When Tyler pushes into the kitchen with the same fish dish, I ask, "What?"

"He said it's too salty, and he'd like the New York strip instead. Cooked well done."

My eyes bulge. "Well done? Not in my fucking kitchen."

Stepping back like he's afraid to be attacked, he delivers the final blow. "Lola had me ring it in already."

Lola knows how to work around my bad mood. Sometimes, she ignores it altogether, making me more dissatisfied with the arrangement of her not knowing who I am behind this restaurant as time goes on. "Did she taste it?"

"She did," he replies, nervously.

"And?"

"She said it was perfect, but the customer's always right."

"Bullshit." I stand in my own pomposity for a good few seconds. "Fuck it. This is not the battle I want to fight. Make the steak," I call out. Seeing Tyler loitering is pissing me off. "Stop hanging around my kitchen."

He grabs the plates and hurries back out. With my mood overpowering the good smells of the food cooking, everyone is smart enough to leave me alone. Except Todd. "Let me ask you something, Josh. What battle are you wanting to fight? Because it's clear you're looking for one if you don't already have one in mind?"

My team of cooks, dishwashers, and chefs are one in a million. They don't deserve for me to go Gordan Ramsey on them. I knock the chip off my shoulder and hope confessing gets this burning irritation off my chest. "I saw Chloe."

The oven door slams closed behind me, getting everyone's attention. When the others get back to work, Todd stands there silently with oven mitts on and stares at me. I say, "Chloe Fox." You know, just in case he's not sure who I'm talking about.

His eyes pinch at the corners, and the disappointment isn't hard to

decipher. Leaning against the counter, he looks down, shaking his head. “Chloe Fox from New Haven?”

“Technically, she’s from Newport, but yes, the Chloe Fox I went to school with—”

“The same Chloe who put you in jail?”

“Again, technically—”

“Fuck the technical shit!” Tossing the mitts on the counter, he takes an angry breath, and then turns back to me. “She’s just as responsible when she didn’t show up to defend you.”

We still have jobs to do, but I pull the pan off the heat so we can deal with this mess. “How was she supposed to defend me if she couldn’t remember?”

“That was real fucking convenient, wasn’t it?” A humorless laugh follows the sarcastic remark, causing me to keep my eyes on the grill.

There’s no room to let him explore the anger he feels when I’m not open to listening. “Don’t do that.”

“It’s your life, Evans, so what-the fuck-ever.”

With my back to him, I take a breath that has me lowering the temperature of my mood. My voice lower, I say, “She’s an ER doc like she always said she would be.” Turning back, I lean against the butcher block. “Sewed my finger right up.”

“Do you have to say it with such pride? Have you forgotten what the Fox family did to you?”

“No, I haven’t. I’ll never forget, as you know, but she’s not to blame for my sentence. I made the mistake of trusting her father.”

“You’re really going to stand in front of me and say shit like that, like it didn’t matter?”

“It was my life. But fuck, Todd, I told you I saw her. I’m not dating her.”

“Then why do I get the feeling your intentions toward her have changed?”

“You don’t know anything about my intentions.” I grab a plate just to keep my hands busy.

“That right there says it all, now doesn’t it?” He comes over with another potato, and this time he doesn’t give a shit about anything he filters onto the plate. So, I clean up the mess.

Tyler comes to take the dish, but I raise the plate. “I got this one. What table?”

He steps aside. “Eight.”

I shove the kitchen door open with an ax to grind. Holding the plate in front of me, I weave through the dining room, and then stop, almost tripping over my own feet. My heart rate spikes, but then the opportunity I’ve been given sinks in and a smirk creases my left cheek. “Well, what do we have here?” I’m suddenly feeling a lot less pissed off, that is, until I realize I had blocked out the other side of the table.

Irritated, a growl rumbles through me as I make my way over.

Friend? Co-worker? Client? Boss? A thousand guesses cross my mind to who he is, and I plead to a higher power that it’s not her boyfriend. Just in case, I steal myself for the worst and deliver the dish. “Your steak.”

Don’t look at her. Not even for a second.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three. I give myself permission and instantly regret it as my chest tightens and my stomach clenches. *Why does she have to be so goddamn breathtaking?*

With her eyes fixed on mine, I let my gaze take a vacation over the beauty of her landscape. Her body rising and falling with the rolling hills of her chest. As if she can feel me like I feel her without a single touch shared between us, a shiver runs up the river of her spine. Goose bumps pebble across the tops of her arms, the delicate hair standing on end as she shifts in her seat.

I drag my hand back to my side when I find it lifting to touch that spot near her ear—a high-pitched scrape of the blade against the plate ends the peace I’d found with her in my head.

Turning to her date, I recognize him the minute I see him, but I can’t say he recognizes me. *Why would he?* I was nothing to him. “It’s good,” he says, with meat stabbed on the tines of the fork.

“Good?” I know I’m supposed to hold my tongue, but I also know that’s the best goddamn steak he’s ever tasted, even if it is cooked by a townie.

He nods. “Yeah, thanks.”

“Trevor,” Chloe cautions.

Trevor. That’s right. The name alone makes me want to punch him in the face. Some feelings never die. I’ve done my best to keep from touching Chloe, but I can’t promise he won’t meet my fist. *What the fuck is she doing here with him?*

Holding his water glass up to me, he says, “More water.” Not a question. A demand.

Years later, he’s still treating people like they’re beneath him. It’s no skin off my back. Doesn’t even ruffle a feather. The only thing that bothers me is that Chloe’s with him. Panic rises in her eyes and meets her tone. “You’re being rude to the chef.”

I’d like to reassure her, but that’s not my role to play. To him, I say, “I don’t have a problem getting anyone water, bussing tables, or cooking a meal to someone’s satisfaction. What I do have a problem with is disrespect.”

“Is there a problem?” Lola presses to my side, resting her hand on my shoulder as she looks back and forth between Trevor and me.

Trevor says, “Your cook seems to have an attitude problem. What happened to the customer is always right?”

Lola scans the table, and then says, “You’ll eat on the house, and we’ll get you more wine to go with your meal.”

When she turns to flag down Tyler, Chloe tosses her napkin on the plate and stands. “I don’t need more wine. I’m done here.”

Looking around as if he’s embarrassed, Trevor then leans forward. “Sit down, Chloe.”

The harsh words smack her in the face, and she jolts. She leans forward, her hand gripping her purse, and says, “Don’t you ever tell me what to do, and lose my number forever.”

Standing, he says, “Your dad said you’d be a handful.” The mention of her father has me bristling, and her stopping altogether, her head lowering. He continues, “Keep her happy, he said, but break her spirit. That was his advice to me.”

My hands fist at my sides, rage in her defense getting the best of me. The instinct to fight her battle rages inside me.

She takes an evident breath and then starts walking again. As if he hadn’t hurt her enough, with his arms wide like he’s a fucking catch, he adds, “You walk away, Chloe, and that’s it. This is your last chance.”

Her pace never falters. *That’s my girl.*

Trevor tosses the napkin on top of the steak, and then looks at me. “That steak sucked. You’re a lousy cook.”

My fist flies up, but then I manage to restrain myself as the coward ducks in fear. “For fuck’s sake. I’m a chef. Get it straight.”

Lola shoves me toward the entrance. “Go,” she says as if she had to tell

me. "I'll handle this mess."

The door Chloe ran out of is still open, and I take off, weaving to reach her.

I'll run this city if it means I get two more minutes with her again. Just outside, my eyes narrow on the brunette. "Chloe?" When I catch up, my heart is thudding—not from the short run to the corner, but from her and the close proximity.

If she only realized how I feel her in my bones, her words whispering *I love you* through my veins. How the memory of holding the world in my arms for such a short time has haunted me for so long. I flex my fingers, unable to control the need to grab onto her like a lifeline once again.

"What is it, Joshua?" I expected to see tears from Trevor's spiteful words, but that's not what I get. Her arms being crossed over her chest make me want to untangle them and hold her hands. Sorrow shifts through her eyes and it pains me to witness.

I've been lying to myself. *And I can't continue to live in this deception.*

"We were real." Running my hand through my hair, I pace with anxiety coursing through me. I'm never going to be able to express what she meant, what she still means to me, so I continue confessing my darkest secret, "And I can't stop thinking about you. I never could."

"No." She steps away. "You can't say that!" Shaking her head, she continues to back away from me. "Not now. Not ever." When I move closer, unable to stop myself any longer, her eyes turn glassy, and she pleads, "Why are you doing this to me?"

I hate the tremble to her voice that jumps from her throat to mine. "Because I should have told years ago. I should have checked in on you. I should have—"

"You have a girlfriend," she yells, her temper flaring as she points at the restaurant. "Who probably eats grilled cheeses with you and never gains an ounce. So why are you out here telling me you can't stop thinking about me when you're not available?"

I stop and look back at the restaurant like that might give me a clue about what she's referring to. It doesn't. I'm still confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Her!" She stabs her finger in the air while tears wobble on the edge of her lower lids. "Lola's in there hanging all over you—"

"Lola?" My head jerks in response. "I'm not dating Lola."

That seems to stun her. Her arm finally lowers, and her brows pinch together. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m not dating Lola.” I scoff from the thought. Not because she wouldn’t be great for someone, but she’s just not *the* someone for me. She’s not Chloe. “She’s the manager. Why would you think we’re dating?”

She looks away, the pain, the confusion, the anger dissipating. A light laugh escapes under her breath as she dabs the inner corners of her eyes. “Because the other night she came out . . . *huh*.” A harsh breath is sucked in, and her eyes go wide. She comes to me and taps the embroidered logo on my chef’s coat. “She works here? At Salvation?”

“Yes.”

Her smile blooms like I’m sunshine after a storm. “And you work here, too?”

“I do.” I find myself much closer to her without realizing I’ve moved. It’s impossible to keep even the smallest of distances from her when my body yearns to feel her heat.

“But you weren’t wearing this jacket the last time I saw you?”

“I took it off for my break. I don’t like bringing the outside into my restaurant.”

“But you’re wearing it outside now?”

If I could touch her, feel the beat of her heart, I bet it would match mine. “Because I had to catch you.”

The invisible bars that have long divided us even after serving my sentence disappear. She asks, “*Had to?*”

“I had no choice. I never have with you.”

“You work here,” she says, now smiling as if it’s finally sinking in.

Shrugging, I feel the final belt of tension release into the air. “I’m the executive chef here.”

“That’s amazing.” Her voice is softer, her features gentler, as the rest of the world starts to invade our space once more. “Congratulations.” She fights against the infiltration, reaching for me. Her hand rests on my chest and I cover it, welcoming the connection, the tethers, the risk, the lust, and the red-hot desire to kiss her.

What am I doing?

So caught up in my head, I’m beginning to lose sight of what’s right in front of me. My mind spins through a million scenarios of how this will end badly, but for me, I’ve known all along that there can only be one outcome. I

move in cupping her face. “I want to kiss you again, but I know it’s wrong
—”

“It’s right, Joshua,” she says with full intention. How did I ever foolishly believe I could move on when everything we share feels the same as it did before?

This could never be wrong. “We will always be right.”

43

Chloe

With hands caressing my face that would never let me fall, Joshua Evans kisses me like time, miles, and tragedy never separated us.

I kiss him again just to savor the feeling. My lips against his. To feed the craving and indulge in something that used to mean the world to me. Arms around his neck with my middle pressed to his, I lift up to relish the roughness of his chin scraping mine again, loving how we come together so easily.

We share a bond that has weathered emotional hurricanes. My fraying ends find his and we kiss. The pressure intensifying as my world is tilted on its axis, *righted*, after years of being off kilter. Our lips part, and our tongues embrace.

It's been too long, *so long*, since I've been kissed like I'm someone's everything. *Since him*. The universe whirls around us, stirring up the past but laying the first brick in the foundation of a possible future. We pull apart, lost for breath, and I open my eyes to find his already on me.

Staring at the man in front of me, my heart beating for the first time in years, I start to believe we might have a second chance. A tear slips down my cheek, and when he catches it on his fingertip, I start to cry in laughter. The rattle of my shoulders set free to shake as I delight in the feel of having emotions again.

He asks, "Are you all right?"

I nod like a fool because three things just made this the best night ever:

1. *Joshua Evans is single.*
2. *Joshua Evans still makes me weak in the knees when he kisses me.*
3. *And I've never felt a kiss travel from my lips down to my toes except when I'm kissing Joshua Evans.*

"I'm better than all right." Throwing my arms around him, I kiss him again because of those three things. I feel the heavy warmth of what we were—what we are—in my veins. Because I feel alive in his kisses. Because I can. Maybe one kiss doesn't mean anything, but one kiss with him always

meant it all. And that just makes me feel a little less crazy.

Everything inside this act of passion comes complete with heart palpitations for this man. A horn from a passing cab startles us, bringing us back to the bustling Manhattan street. And we even receive a round of applause from a woman smoking nearby. Before we have time to take a bow, I hear, “Well, shit. I didn’t expect this.”

It’s been years, but I recognize Todd by face and voice. He comes closer, but Joshua remains as we both lower our arms to our sides. The grin on his face is as youthful and full of resolve as it ever was, but also genuinely happy. “Hey, Chloe. It’s good to see you.” We hug like the friends I always considered us to be back then. “Josh and I were just talking about you.”

My gaze moves back and forth between the old friends, and I say, “I hope all good.” Eyeing his jacket and realizing their friendship endured long past us doesn’t make me sad, but happy for Joshua. To know he had support during . . . those years, makes me happy for him. “You work here as well?”

A thumb is stabbed toward Joshua. “Yeah, I’m this guy’s sous chef.”

“That’s amazing.”

Joshua says, “Through thick and thin.”

Todd crosses his arms over his chest. “I know you have other priorities right now, but you also have a kitchen to run that was already a cook down. What’s the plan, Chef?”

Reality isn’t just found in street noise and busy sidewalks. It’s found in obligations and commitments. “It’s okay.” I touch his fingers while our hands stay apart. “You go to work, and we can see each other another time.”

“That’s not what I want at all.” He’s not shy about holding my hand. The heat exchanged is just as fiery as it ever was between us. Where our tattoos come together is an added inferno I’ve only felt with him. Together, we were always so combustible.

And I guess one day, we did just that.

Backing back toward the alley, Todd says, “I need to get back in there. I’ll hold down the restaurant.”

The strain of debate isn’t only heard in Joshua’s voice but seen in eyes. Running his hand through his hair, he finally says, “I know you can handle the kitchen, but Lola will flip out.”

“Don’t worry. I got your back.” Just before he disappears into the alley’s shadow, he says, “Go. I know how to handle Lola.” Pointing at Chloe, he adds, “Good to see you again.”

“You too,” I reply, turning to the man next to me. “This makes no sense.”

When Joshua turns back to me, his eyes start mapping the features of my face. “We never have.”

He’s right. It was never about locking us into expectations of others. We existed almost to defy them. How we felt about each other back then was overwhelming. There were no easy answers to us because we never knew the question. We only knew what we felt, and what I felt for this man was everything. If I can recapture what we were for just one night, I’ll take it. “What do you think about having one night without our past coming back? What if—”

“Kind of wild, don’t you think?” A smirk slides into place as his hand takes ownership of my waist, making me want to be reckless with him at least one more time. This line of thinking goes against everything I was taught, against everything I’m used to. But it’s right in line with the best time in my life. *My happiest time.* “Tonight isn’t about the past.”

“It’s about right now.” Right now, the loneliness I try to hide inside isn’t lying in wait to hit me when I’m down. I don’t feel it at all. That’s not because of the lack of opportunity. Trevor proved that. It’s because the man in front of me is the only one who can make that feeling dissipate. Good or bad, Joshua Evans still owns my heart. And until the day he doesn’t, I’ll never be able to move on.

Bringing my hand to his lips, he places gentle kisses on each finger. With the warmth of his chestnut eyes on me, and his lips still pressed to my skin, he says, “We’ve gone and done it now, Doc.”

“We sure have.” Looking past him down the sidewalk, I watch as the door to Salvation opens, and then eye Joshua again. “What do we do now?”

Lola’s voice carries into the night air as she tells Trevor to get out. Grabbing my hand, Joshua waggles his eyebrows and signals to the alley. “Let’s hide.” We run to the corner, past the smoker, and duck into the shadow of the side of the building. With my back pressed to the brick and him pressed to me, our breath is shared and our faces mere inches apart. A flame burns bright in his irises. When my chest rises, his hands land above my head as if he needs to grip onto the brick to keep from doing wicked things to me. “What do you want to do?”

I’ve never wanted to sex in public, but the way he’s looking at me like he could devour me alive has me considering the possibility. Not letting the passion I have for this man overrun my better senses, I say, “I want to go

somewhere private.”

He turns, looking down the alley, and then back at me, pushing me out of my comfort zone. “A hole in the wall, a bar, a walk along 5th Avenue?”

I start to laugh. “I guess saying private can mean many things.”

“There are plenty of places to go where no one is in our business, but I have a feeling you’re thinking more lowkey than Times Square.”

Be direct, Chloe. Say what you want. It’s Joshua. The one thing I could always be with him was me. “Your place or mine?” Doesn’t matter that we’re in the city that never sleeps, my heart beats wildly in my chest, making me wonder if he can hear it. I close my eyes just long enough to take a deep breath.

His mouth caresses mine—more pressure, roaming hands in my hair and on my neck, and then he comes to rest his forehead to mine. “God, I was hoping you’d say that.” His breath slips across my skin, his whispered words an aphrodisiac of what’s to come.

Operating off an unspoken plan, we start for a cab, but I jerk him back when I spy Trevor pacing while texting in front of us. Not wanting to be the receiving end of his agitation, or to put Joshua in the middle of it, I pin myself to the wall, out of sight, again, and tug Joshua close. “Any suggestions to get out of here undetected?”

“It’s always good to have an escape route.”

“Do I want to know—”

“No.” We start down the alley as he calls for a rideshare. When our request is picked up, he says, “They’re close.” Joshua holds his hand out for me. When I slip mine in his, he says, “Come on.” We hurry to the other end and hop in the back of the waiting car. The door is closed, and the blue sedan pulls into traffic. Soft jazz fills the tight space as I sit back on the gray velour seat.

While Joshua talks to the driver, I take the time to look at him, really look at him. I got a good look in the restaurant when he came to the table, but that was before we kissed.

This is insane. Wild. Out of control. But I can’t stop looking at the man he’s become.

In the back of the car, his features aren’t harsh, but handsome, highlighted by a myriad of colors flashing by outside the window. Dealing with Trevor has his jaw ticking and anger stiffening his build. That jaw is still just as sharp around the edges as it was in the soft glow of Salvation, but the anger

isn't there. The black shadows are higher in contrast against his skin, a side effect of less days to freely spend. Instead of hanging out in the park, sunbathing by the pool, or swimming in the lake, I sleep most days so I can work nights. I imagine his schedule is similar as a chef.

Resting back, he holds my hand in his lap like we do this all the time. Like it's natural and not building excitement in my chest. Like I'm his and he's mine. As if I know what every scar on his fingers is from and every new bump. Traveling in New York City traffic is never a quick endeavor, but the quiet between us isn't so bad when we're connected. It also gives me time to process what I'm doing.

I walked out on a date with Trevor League. The gossip back home caused by this might have been a concern for me once, but I just can't seem to care now when Joshua Evans is looking at me like I just saved him. Galaxies of stars and questions, answers, and emotions lives in the depths of his vivid universe. I could stare into his eyes forever and never see the same thing twice.

His grin is contagious enough to entice mine to the surface. I say, "Never in a million years—"

"Did I think I'd ever . . .?" Troubling his brows, he narrows his eyes as he stares at our hands.

My smile falls, my heart scooting a few inches lower just in case it needs to plummet altogether. I muster the question, "Ever what?"

"I was going to say I didn't think I'd ever hold your hand again."

I see the way he peers through the windshield ahead, a little anxious even in the comfort of my company, like I am with him. Or maybe it's nerves because whether we go to his place or mine, the privacy will be about more than sex. It will also mean addressing the elephant in the room. All the hurt and pain and time between that night and tonight.

The car stops not too far from the restaurant, and the driver eyes us in the rearview mirror. "We're here."

When I look outside the window, this is not my neighborhood. It's way too nice. Common sense kicks in, and I remember that the driver never asked, and Joshua doesn't know where I live. I lean forward to get a better look at the building beside us, and then my eyes shoot to his. "Is this where you live?"

He opens the door and helps me out. Standing on the curb, I'm in complete awe of the building in front of me. From the doorman with the

golden epaulettes to the art deco architecture. “This is a historic building.” I don’t know if I’m asking or just blabbering, but I still don’t understand how he lives at such an expensive address. Who is this man and where did the boy from the diner go?

Glancing at the building, he returns his attention to me, and says, “I know this isn’t what you expected, and you probably have a million questions. Tomorrow, ask me anything your heart desires, but this falls into the past I don’t want to revisit tonight.” His tone isn’t demanding or upset. It’s small in some ways, unlike him, so I know he’s not hiding anything on purpose. His reasons are genuine.

“Okay.” Walking into the expansive lobby with crystal chandeliers hanging above our heads and marble under our feet, I realize the roles have reversed.

Holy shit. Joshua Evans is rich.

Chloe

On the tenth floor in the heart of Manhattan, I stand in front of picturesque windows staring out at a million dots of light that make this city sparkle like its own little universe. It's quiet in here, the outside kept at bay.

His soft footsteps are heard on the rich wood flooring. I see Joshua in the reflection of the glass before I feel him against my back, spiking my heart rate on contact. The thrill I feel with him has awakened a dormant side of me that I'd long forgotten. A glass of white wine comes around me, making me smile. "You remembered."

Spinning around, I wrap my arms around his midsection. The darker features of Joshua's younger years aren't as murky anymore. With eyes that shine from the moonlight streaming through the glass, so open, so clear, I'd almost suspect he still wears his heart on his sleeve these days.

When he holds his arms around me, he says, "I almost brought you whiskey, remembering how well you liked it back then."

God, it's scary just to hope, to see if we can find ourselves again. I giggle softly. "I do appreciate a good drink now and again, but wine works. Thank you." Kissing his chin, I then slip out of his arms and take the drink. With our eyes fixed, we both sip from our glasses, studying each other.

A smile wiggles into the corner of his mouth, and he says, "I never thought I'd see Chloe Fox standing in my apartment."

"That's funny because I never thought I'd be standing in your apartment." The leather of the couch is buttery under my fingertips as I meander into the living area. He leans against the bricks dividing the windows. Silhouetted with the lights behind him, I can't see his expression clearly in the dark, but I can feel his gaze moving through the room with me and exploring my body. Stopping behind a velvety soft chair, I lean against it, take another sip, and then find him through the distance between us.

Although we agreed not to bring the past into the present, at least tonight, I'm the first to break the rules. "You never took me to your place in New Haven."

He's not fazed, not bothered one bit judging by that rogue grin he's sporting. "I had a lot more pride back then. Your apartment was nice."

"You didn't have to live somewhere fancy for me to fall in love." I give the room another scan. "This place is beautiful, but the other was your home, a part of you that I never knew."

"You don't know this place."

The art isn't his taste—too abstract in all the wrong colors. The furniture is expensive but looks unloved in, unloved. Not one plant lives here, no pets, no life exists between the exposed brick walls, except for us, and we just got here. "Neither do you."

Moving, he comes around the couch to stand not two feet from me. "Tell me something, Chloe, why'd you come here?"

"I can't resist you." Even I don't believe the words. Sharing the first thought that comes to mind is a terrible side effect of nerves.

"No, you did. You resisted just fine if memory serves."

"A week, at best." *Why am I nervous, though?* Two words: Joshua. Evans. Put me in front of anyone else, and I'd be fine. His presence still consumes a room, and if I'm not careful, I'll lose myself in him.

"I'd say a day before you were sniffing around the diner." He winks. "At best."

I whack his arm, laughing. "You always did bring out the worst in me."

Reaching over, he moves close enough to rub his hand over my hip, but there's still space between us. If he only knew I didn't need any . . . He says, "I can argue against that as well if you want to go another round."

I close the gap for us, wishing we had music for the dance we're doing. Touching. Not too much. Easing into each other, old habits and new patterns. With his hand rubbing my lower back, and my arms around him again, I give in. *Why suffer for no reason?*

Like the other times we've held each other tonight, my eyes dip closed, and I breathe him in, needing his air to fill me. Whether this is the beginning or ending to something more with him, I'll survive off these moments until the last of his breath leaves me.

With only the two of us to hold each other accountable for any indiscretions, I decide to be brave. Turning with his hand in mine, I start walking. "Is the bedroom this way?"

"Last door on the right."

I peek in each room we pass. No, he's not found in the fancy furnishings

or the décor. I'm not sure what's happened.

His large hands pull my hips to a stop. I look over my shoulder. "What?"

He says, "Before we go in there, I need to set the record straight." Since we've been in the apartment, not an ounce of anxiety has rolled over his face.

I mentally brace myself, my breath caught in my chest. "What is it?" I didn't notice I was leaning away from him until his hand takes my wrist, and he brings me in, wrapping my arm around him, our fingers clasped behind his back. "Letting fear slip in is only natural, Chloe. I feel it, too, but I don't want you to feel like you have to be on guard with me. So, if we go in there, I need you to know that my heart is on the line."

The admission doesn't give my lungs the reprieve I need. Instead, it sends my heart into my throat. The hours, the days, the years that divided us have finally caught up. I hug him, my head resting on him as I close my eyes and listen to his heartbeat. The confirmation that I was right bears down on me. "You once told me it wasn't wise to wear my heart on my sleeve. Even if I only wore it for you." The back of my head is stroked with his arms holding me tightly to him and a kiss placed on top. "I didn't listen."

"It's okay. I didn't either." Tilting back, he adds, "It was shitty advice."

I swallow down the anxiety, feeling we're now on even ground. "I don't know why you're keeping me in the hallway, but I imagine things aren't that scary in that bedroom."

"Guess we'll find out."

I laugh lightly. "If this were a movie or I didn't know you so well, that comment would have me running out the door."

I turn but am brought back to him again. "Maybe you should listen to your instincts."

"You don't scare me, Joshua Evans. You were always a risk worth taking." This time, I push back and enter the room. My feet come to an abrupt stop just inside the door. Looking around, my heart fills with happiness and lifts the heavy that was beginning to set in. I smile with my hands clasped in front of my chest because this room is everything the rest of the apartment isn't—pots of plants line the windowsill from one end to the other, the nightstands hold stacks of books that overflow to the floor, the bed is a mess, and sneakers are littered around the bench at the end of the bed.

This room is everything I remember him to be—messy and more concerned with other things, like plants. Even his scent of clean soap and a light cologne permeates the air. "It's exactly how I imagined your other

place.”

He hurries past me to kick the shoes under the bench as if that will make a difference. “Yeah,” he says, standing there awkwardly, mussing up the top of his hair. “It’s a mess. Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize. I like it.” Oddly, the only thing that feels out of place is a Yale sweatshirt neatly folded on top of the dresser. It draws me in for some reason. It’s new, in pristine condition with the sticker still stuck to the care tag.

He sits on the edge of the bed, watching me snoop around the room and letting me explore on my own. Curiosity captures me, and I walk to the windows. Rubbing a basil leaf, I glance back at him. “I’m glad you’re still into plants.”

“The ones we eat more than others.”

I giggle. “I think you said something similar when we met.”

“Probably. That was a long time ago.” When I turn back to read the tags stuck in each pot, he adds, “The light’s better in here.”

Not letting me down, I find a misting bottle, exactly like the one he once gave me, the one I still have, tucked among the pots. “May I?”

“Of course.” While I spritz, finding deep satisfaction and calm come over me, he adds, “You were never that into plants from what I remember.”

Shrugging, I keep moving along the wall. I say, “I’ve gotten better over the years,” but I don’t tell him that Frankie and Hemsworth have done fine under my care. That feels like too much right now. “Have you named them?”

“That one in front of you is Basil Evans, but sometimes when I’m feeling punchy after a long shift, I call him Bah-zil just to push his buttons.”

The joke is funny, but that he still finds humor with plants cracks my smile wide open. It’s really cute. Playing along, I ask, “Does he ever get revenge?”

“No, Chloe, it’s a plant,” he deadpans. When I turn back, he’s quietly chuckling. “Just pulling your leg. I never call him Bah-zil. I’m not a psychopath.” He rests back on the bed and checks his watch. “Wow, it’s later than I thought.”

Shaking my head, I set the bottle down and check my watch. “It’s nine. Got somewhere better to be?”

The mattress bends to his will when he pushes off and comes to me. Cupping my face, he kisses me without warning. It takes a split second for me to close my eyes and take hold of his arms. As we deepen the kiss, this

one feels different from the others. This kiss fills the voids of all the ones we've missed over the years, bordering on a desperation that it might be the last. I feel it. I feel all of him and everything that this is.

Practically ripping us apart, he looks down as some other emotion takes over his features. "I couldn't waste another minute not kissing you. I'm sorry."

"No."

He looks back up, questioning me with his eyes. "No?"

Passion consumes me—not only the sexual emotions he draws out, but a tingling anger that he won't just take what he wants, take me in his arms or in bed, that he's being sweet and kind to his own detriment. I need him here with me. I need him to push this confusion into understanding before I go crazy overthinking it.

I fist his shirt, not letting him run just like he wouldn't let me and plead. "I don't want you to be sorry for kissing me like it's the last kiss you'll ever get. Don't apologize for us coming here or even for the mess you left behind because you had no plans on bringing someone home. Don't be sorry about anything tonight because there's nothing I'm sorry about." This time, I kiss him, I kiss him with every bit of pain I've felt since I left that jail, the loneliness I denied, and the pent-up, raw desire he always brought out in me.

We move to the bed, but before we fall, he dips to kiss my shoulder. When he looks back up, his eyes penetrate the last of my walls left standing. He whispers, "You used to be my angel. Now you're my reckoning."

"Equal sinner and saint. You were the sides of me that others saw, and the one I saved for you."

"I never dreamed I'd get to kiss you again."

"You said no wasting time then." I lift my shirt over my head and drop it to my side. His gaze dips, and I witness a restrained exhale before he pulls his off. We work our pants down, eyes on each other. Almost bare before him, I have no doubt I could turn back if I wanted. He'd let me, never wanting me to feel any pressure.

But stepping back enough to take him in, I admire his hard muscles, defined abs, and that damn sexy smirk. It's not just my brain he's stimulated or my curiosity in what his life is like now that brought me here. No, standing in front of this six-foot-two mountain of man, I crave him in deep-seated, carnal ways.

He's just about to say something when I jump into his arms, kissing him

while wrapped around him like a spider monkey. We fall onto the bed with him on top of me. I'd forgotten how the weight of his muscular frame used to keep me grounded, hope was found in his whiskey-colored eyes, and the way he touched me. I don't let fear of the future hold me back from opening my legs to feel him settle between them again. The reminders have me closing my eyes and feeling . . . taking everything he'll give me.

My shoulders ease, and my back molds to the mattress as he takes the sides of my panties down, leaving a trail of kisses across my belly, my hip, and lower. As much as I yearn to feel him inside me again, I won't pass up his mouth working its magic first.

It's been so long since I've lost myself in anyone . . . *since Joshua.*

As I run my fingertips through his hair, the tension from my legs disappears when his mouth touches my lower lips. *Feel.* I release another breath as the tip of his tongue slides through me and his lips kiss me as if he were kissing my mouth. It doesn't take long before a wave of emotions beckons my shores, and the tide tightens my hold on reality. His heavy breath coats me, whispering, "You're so beautiful," the words whisked away under moans of pleasure.

I succumb to the feel, the sensations of him, edging me closer to the cliff. There's no reprieve as I lose track of time and place. All that exists is the bond between Joshua and me and the stars that shine for us.

He's quick to reach into the nightstand and retrieve a condom. I move higher, resting on his pillow. The musky scent presses down on my memories, suffocating my attempt to stay here, to stay present.

He returns and repositions himself. Caressing my face, he holds me here with him. I'm kissed with need when he enters me—slow and steady. I suck in a harsh breath, forgetting how full I feel with him. A delicious stretch, that familiar burn that subsides just as quick. I push my hips to his, closing the distance between us until he's buried deep inside me.

Emotions rush through me as his whole being, his body and soul roll through me. Nothing was ever less with him; it was everything.

Everything.

Consuming me with every thrust, he places hot kisses on my neck. The groan that precariously balances between pleasure and a deep ache that comes from years of pain. Running my hands up his back, I weave my fingers into his hair and dip back to catch sight of his eyes. I'm not only exposing my body and heart to him, but my soul as he stills, open for him to

see all of me.

When he opens his eyes, I whisper, “I’ve missed you. I feel it. I feel you.” My breath stolen off my tongue as I speak . . . taken, overwhelmed from being with him again.

He drops his head beside mine, and our bodies move together as we chase what bliss tastes like. Breathing each other in instead of air. This is all I need. All I need . . . “Joshua,” is kissed from my lips to his skin covered in a sheen of sweat.

Our bodies seek the release, but my hands want more time to enjoy the size of him covering me. It’s too much to hang on, and I call his name again, the word alone a prayer echoing through the apartment until my release hits, before biting my lip and diving into a beautiful abyss.

My name whispered on the wings of his own release, leaving me floating limitless until we come down together. I could lie like this forever—our bodies sharing secrets, my bones jelly on the bed underneath him. Coherent, but weighted in us. Selfishly, I want it again. I want him.

A tear slips down my cheek to meet his pressed to mine. He looks up and kisses it. “Don’t cry, baby.” The sweetest name I was ever called becomes the one that brings gravity to fall on top of me. “What’s wrong?” Still peering into my eyes, he whispers, “You can tell me.”

I’m vulnerable to this man, my heart already losing the battle. Twisting those other three words on my tongue to snuff them out, I reply, “Don’t hurt me,” instead. My greatest fear is to have to live after losing him twice.

“I won’t.” Memories of a broken promise stay locked inside my head.

Closing his eyes, he breathes me in as if I’m air to him, filling his lungs again. But it’s the relief I see in his muscles that makes me think he’s in just as deep as I am. He rolls to the side, and with one arm over his forehead, I find the other and our fingers fold together.

We were once too young to last, but six years later, can we leave our love in the past? I know the answer already. “I believe you.”

45

Joshua

I believe you. . .

Those were some of the last words she said to me before the accident.

“I believe you . . . I love you bigger than the sky, Joshua . . . Watch out!”

That final exchange we had has played on a loop in my head. She doesn't remember them at all. I remember more than the end. I remember how her fingers rubbing the back of my neck was comforting. That sunset reflected gold in her eyes. Her laughter like distant music lost in the wind. That she looked at me like I was her home.

Bigger than the universe. No one could touch us.

Except a father's need to control his daughter.

There's so much in the past to regret, but the biggest is telling her to never come back to me. I summoned it from the hell of my soul. That was the only way to convince her to move on . . . to leave me behind. She had to . . .

My dreams were destroyed, but hers didn't have to be. She always had to leave. Or I would become the albatross around her neck slowly drowning her while I sat in handcuffs.

Not even three years later, I became a free man. I no longer carried hope like a penny in my pocket. Nah, there was no point.

Hope.

Salvation.

I held onto those for the longest time, knowing I couldn't hold onto her.

Instead, I stood at a crossroad. Neither direction led me here nor prepared me for holding Chloe again. One night has me thinking the impossible. With so much baggage between us, is this something I want to pursue? Could we ever be something real again with everything we've been through? The fall has always been greater than the climb.

Is this an obsession, or an opportunity? I know what happened that last night, but I need her to know as well.

I scrub my hand over my face, too tired to think clearly. I loved Chloe and then lost everything. I've paid the price, but this penance came with

sacrifice. I owe the devil. In a Newport jail cell, I traded one more taste of heaven for an eternity in hell. He came through, so what are my dues?

With her eyes closed, I kiss her cheek and then her temple. With her curled into me, I know it was worth it. All of it. How she changed me. How she made me live braver. She was worth it, even if this is it.

Stuck in my normal routine from the late-night shifts, it's taken a while to get tired enough to sleep. I close my eyes before the sun starts to rise and drift into the memories we just made.

* * *

“Am I crazy?”

I'm startled awake to find Chloe wide-eyed and staring at me. Am I having a heart attack? Because it sure feels like I might.

“Holy fuck.” I paw at her to push her back, so I can see her more clearly. Sitting up like she is, I try to look around the room. “You scared the shit out of me, Chloe.”

“Sorry,” she says through light laughter.

When I realize we're not being attacked, a yawn finally takes over as my heart slows down, and I rub my left eye, which is refusing to adjust to darkness. It finally opens, and I look behind me to check the time on the nightstand. 4:47. “What's wrong?”

“Tell me every girl isn't tripping over themselves to be with you.”

My eyeballs feel like they're on fire, my brain struggling to wake up. I lie back down. “I'm not up for solving riddles at four in the morning. Do you mind filling me in on what we're talking about?”

“You, Joshua. You and me. And this bed.” The words rush from her mouth as if they've been locked up all night and need to be freed. “I've never done this. I've never been with someone where it feels like my heart is going to beat out of my chest when I see you or shatter if I don't.” She huffs, her hands dropping onto the pillow she dragged onto her lap. “I mean, what the hell? How can only you make me feel like this?”

My eyes have adjusted to the low light of the room, and with a grin, I run my hand over her shoulder, digging my fingers into the hair at the nape of her neck. “Well, I can't tell you women don't trip over themselves, *your words*, *not mine*, to be with me.” I shrug unapologetically and get promptly hit with

a pillow.

Taking the pillow and capturing her, I maneuver her on top of me. “You’re not even kidding.” I double shrug because teasing her is just plain fun.

She adjusts to get comfy, straddling me with her hands on my chest. I rub the length of her arms, loving this view. She has a way of making me feel like I’m important, not just to her, but the world, making me excited to start a new day if I’m starting it with her.

“But if you’re asking me if this is different, if what we have, what we shared is special, the answer is yes. I never felt this with anyone else either.”

Her head tilts, and a soft aww is heard. Calm washes through her, and she slides down to my side again. I can’t see her face as she snuggles to my chest, but with her arm over me, she whispers, “Good. Now we’re even.”

Tilting her head up and seeing the smile I bring to her face makes me realize that I don’t care about the time if filling my nights with this bright light is within reach.

As I stare at her—peace filling her features—her smile softens, and her lids start to dip as the hand resting on my chest begins to slip.

Something powerful and strong, big like the sky that night at the lake, overwhelms me, and I hold her close, hiding my weakness for her as it takes over again. But I can’t hide the way my heart beats heavy, just like she can’t hide hers. I kiss her head, and whisper, “We’re even.”

Just when I think she’s about to fall asleep, her lids flutter open. “Joshua?”

“Yeah,” I reply, tilting back to see her eyes. Those green eyes are still calming seas to my restless sails.

“What happens tomorrow?”

Taking a deep breath, I try to regulate my heart from beating so hard. “I don’t know,” I reply honestly.

A shiver runs through her spine as if a cold breeze just caught her, and she cuddles closer. A yawn finds its way out, and then she closes her eyes again. “Sweet dreams.”

Kissing her head, I whisper something I never thought I have the chance to tell her again. “Sweet dreams.”

* * *

“Good morning.” Her sweet melody has me looking up. Chloe exits the hall dressed in my brand new Yale sweatshirt and nothing else. It wasn’t really purchased for that purpose, but she has more rights to wear it than I do, and if I ever wanted to see it put to use, damn, she can use it anytime. She adds, “Hope you don’t mind me borrowing your sweatshirt. I didn’t feel like squeezing into my jeans yet.”

“Definitely don’t want you getting dressed yet, or ever.” Holding up a steaming mug, I add, “I was about to bring this to you.”

Her long hair is a mess, the brown strands tangled in the back and sprouting out, so I can enjoy the morning-after look. She wears it well, like my sweatshirt. She says, “You should have woken me. I could have helped.”

I chuckle. “You seem to have forgotten the kitchen is my domain. So, no worries, I can manage a French press.”

Wrapping her arms around me, she spins to the other side before I can catch her, teasing me with that stunning grin that I could spend my time reveling in. She lifts up on my right and steals a kiss before taking the mug. Her happiness is infectious. “I think you saying the kitchen is your domain might be the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard.”

She’s irresistible. I don’t know if I can walk away from last night unscathed.

“Glad I can entertain you.” Ready to cook, I ask, “Are you hungry?”

“Starved. What are you cookin’, good lookin’?” She sips her coffee, cupping the mug between her hands like it’s winter in here. “You used to make the best omelets.”

“Hint taken. An omelet coming right up.” I grab my pan and move to the prep area beside the stove. As I dig in the fridge, I glance back, busting her eyeing me. “Sleep well?”

When she stretches, that sweatshirt rides high on her thighs, but not nearly enough. “Yes, so good. Your bed is a little piece of heaven on earth. Is it made of clouds?”

“Cotton candy, actually.” I laugh. “It’s a good bed. I don’t remember you sleeping that heavy in college.”

“I didn’t. I still don’t. It was probably the wine and the good food.” She sends me a little wink.

“Just the food and wine, huh? Nothing else?”

“Nothing off the top of my head,” she says, tapping her chin.

Shaking my head, I keep my wry smile under wraps. “Man, tough

crowd.”

“You never needed me to feed your ego back in New Haven. Is this a New York thing or do you just like the extra attention?”

“I needed the ego feeding. You just didn’t play along from what I remember.”

“Good point.” Giggling, she leans against the counter and ogles me. “Do you always walk around in your underwear with these big curtain-less windows?”

I start cracking eggs. “Yes. I figure if they bothered to dig out their binoculars to watch me, I owe them a show.”

“You don’t.” Wow, not even a laugh. She’s not having anything to do with my joke as she walks into the living room and stands in front of the middle window with her hand on her hip and coffee cup in the other.

And then I get it.

Moving to the island to beat the eggs, I savor the sight of her in my sweatshirt, drinking from my favorite mug, and standing in front of *my* windows. I ask, “Are you jealous?”

“Yes,” she replies flatly but angles back with a smile on her face. “Also, the sex. Compliments to the chef. See? I can give props when needed. I also give them when they’re deserved. You get both.”

Sex? I don’t remember her calling it sex much. It was making love, about the bond between us. Fuck, I’m on edge again. I’ve been trying to be cool and confident, but she turns me inside out. I start whisking . . . Now, it’s just sex. “Thanks.” I try for nonchalant and then take it out on the eggs.

I don’t notice her arrival until her hands cover mine. “I think you’re supposed to beat them, not annihilate them.” I get a good look at her. She’s washed her face clean of makeup, but her hair is still a fucking mess—literally, and my heart still insists on residing in her eyes. With an eyebrow raised in question, she plucks the knife I’d already set down. “Maybe I should cut the tomatoes while you tell me what’s wrong.”

Moving around my kitchen like she’s been here before, she takes a bowl of cherry tomatoes from the fridge, smiling when she catches me staring. She asks, “What’s going on?”

What *is* going on with me? I know, but do I want to address it? I might go crazy if I sit with my anxiety for one more minute. “What are we?”

Setting the bowl down, she starts halving the tomatoes. “We’re Chloe and Joshua.”

“True.” It’s not the answer I was looking for, but it’s the one that most likely fits. It’s also the one I need to be okay with for the time being. “Do you want cheese in your omelet?”

“Yes, please.”

I retrieve cheddar but stop to watch her knife skills. “You’re pretty good.”

“The curse of a doctor. I’m great at carving a turkey, too.”

“I should have you over for Thanksgiving.”

She laughs. “You should.” But the lightness that was finally returning is replaced by a dark cloud that’s blown in. Her sigh comes soft as she continues cutting.

“I spoke before thinking—” We’re on such shaky ground. One night together doesn’t erase six years of heartache and pain. I’m trying to live in the moment, but everything is tenuous and scaring the shit out of me.

Her hand stops, and she looks at me. “No, it’s okay . . .” With the knife on the board, she angles toward me. “Joshua,” she starts, but then tugs on her lower lip. “Please know that when I apologized, I meant it then, and I mean it now. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I know they’re only words, but if you tell me how to fix it, how to fix this fucked-up situation, I will. I’ll do anything to make this better since I can’t make it right.”

“You can’t fix it.” I temper my tone for her. Her remorse makes things worse. But anyone else would have received my wrath for daring to mention my punishment. “I served the time.”

“I’m sorry. From the core of my soul, I’m so sorry, Joshua.”

Her distress isn’t just heard in the words but felt in her touch. We were collateral damage to the decisions of her dad. I’m not sure how I forgive her father, but it would be easier if I could lay fault somewhere else. It feels possible, but it would help put things to rest.

The thoughts I had in the middle of the night come back. *Can we find our way back to each other?*

It’s time to lift this burden from our shoulders and look forward instead of back.

She begins to cut the tomatoes, and I can tell it’s a distraction from the pain. This time, I still her hands, tenting mine over hers, and take a breath. Our words have repercussions, so I can’t fuck this up. “I want you to know something.”

She looks up at me and gives the minutest of nods.

Pulling my hands back, I want to caress her face, kiss and make

everything better, but this can't be fixed like that. "Last night you accused me of something I didn't do."

Shame tugs the corners of her eyes down. "I'm so—"

"I want you to know that I did the time that your dad sentenced me to. I was punished for loving you." Her cries are silent, but the tears fall. I pull her into my arms and hold her. "We don't get do-overs. And if we did, I wouldn't erase anything because loving you then was the best thing I ever did."

Sobs wrack her shoulders as she clings to me with her face buried down against my chest. "I don't deserve you."

Rubbing her back, I try to comfort her, not because this is about her, but because she served her own sentence. She may have been walking around free, but I wouldn't wish the guilt she carried on my enemy. "It's not about deserving, Chloe. It's about knowing."

She wipes her tears on the sweatshirt and looks up again. "Knowing what?"

"That I can't play cool with you. Believe it or not, I never had revenge scenarios when it came to you. So being with you again is sort of the opposite. A dream come true." I run my hand through my hair, my nerves making my hands unsteady. "But I'm sure I'm fucking it up by coming on too strong too soon." I've never been so nervous in my entire life, not before the judge—*not ever*.

"No, you're not. We were probably fooling ourselves thinking we could treat this casually. I can't."

I smirk. "Then we're even."

"We're even."

Wiping away her tears with the backs of my fingers, I say, "So everything is out in the open, I was going to tell you that what you accused me of last night never happened." Her eyes are glassy and filled with curiosity. "From the day we met, I have never eaten a grilled cheese sandwich with anyone but you."

Hitting my chest, she looks away, determined not to laugh. She can't resist, though. "You scared me. I thought you were going to say . . ."

I take hold of her hips and swivel them my way. "What'd you think I was going to say?"

The laughter trails off, but the happiness remains. "I thought you were going to tell me we shouldn't be together."

I take advantage of the situation and kiss her again. "I could never say

that.”

46

Chloe

I thought our bubble was smaller, but between the hospital, the restaurant, and our apartments, my place is the outlier. I would have been fine taking the subway, but Joshua insisted on a car—together. Guess it saved me a walk of shame despite still wearing his sweatshirt over my outfit.

We talked. Granted, there was still a lot to be said, but this morning felt like a breakthrough of sorts. I'm not sure where we go from here, but knowing that we can talk openly and honestly makes me think that the journey is possible.

Sitting in traffic, I pull the shirt away from my chest, and say, "I'll wash it and get it back to you."

Sometimes when he looks at me, I see an emotion that teeters between entertained and grateful. This morning, I get a flash of hope in there as well. It looks good on him. "You can keep it."

"You can't give it away before you have a chance to wear it."

He spreads his legs a little wider to accommodate his size in the cramped back seat of the car. "I never planned to."

There are so many undiscovered sides to this man that I don't think I'll ever not be utterly fascinated by him. "I don't understand."

Since we'll be here a while, he seems to settle into sharing a story by relaxing back, still holding my thigh. "When I worked at the diner, kids used to come in wearing their Yale shirts and sweatshirts, the logoed stuff. The expensive shirts I could never afford. I mean, eighty bucks for a sweatshirt is fucking insane." I know what he means now, but I didn't understand then, when money wasn't something I thought twice about. Now, I relate. I wouldn't be able to justify it now on my salary. Things were different back then, though.

I pluck the front for levity. "Yet here we are." I appreciate the chuckle he sends. I may not be the funniest person around, but he's a great ego booster. I joke about his ego, but Joshua has always been good for mine. I tickle the back of his neck with my nails, and he continues that smile.

“I bought it because I couldn’t back then.” Shaking his head as if he’s embarrassed to admit that, he looks at me. “You should keep it. You earned it.”

This must be so hard for him. I can’t imagine. “You earned yours, Joshua. You were only a few credits from finishing when . . .” I clamp my mouth shut before I say too much and upset him. I don’t want to be that person to him. If that means finding contentment with the peace, I’ll do that and never bring it up again.

The car finally starts moving again, and he replies, “I broke their code of conduct. My father even called. Despite being legacy, the board wouldn’t allow me back.” His hand tightens on my leg just enough for me to notice but not enough to do any harm. The stress flows between us on the delicate subject. He continues somberly, “Yale was his redemption for the biggest mistake he ever made. It’s funny that once that dream of me getting my degree died for him, I might as well have, too.”

I rest my head on his shoulder, and his arm comes around me to hold me there. Even though he’s trying to hide it, I can feel pieces of his pain. “I’d like to say I don’t know how a father could be so cruel, but I can’t.”

“I’m sorry you can’t.” The comment isn’t said in malice, but I guess it’s something else that bonds us. The car pulls in front of my building, and we get out. Joshua spends a few seconds checking out the neighborhood and then my building. “It’s safe enough.” I shrug and walk to the door to punch in the code. Holding the door open, I say, “Come on in.”

He walks with purpose, taking the door from me. “‘It’s safe enough’ isn’t reassuring.”

We start up the stairs to the second floor. “I’m in my residency. I don’t make much to offset living in the city. This building isn’t cute like the one I had in New Haven, but it’s affordable. I’m paying my dues, but come June first, I’m done.”

“You finish in two weeks?”

Holding the handrail, I glance back when I detect a note of panic. “Yes.”

“What will you do? Where will you go?” We walk the rest of the way and arrive at my door.

I pull the key from my purse. After twisting it in the lock, I use my hip to bump the door open. “Sometimes, it sticks.”

Walking inside, I continue the conversation, “I’ve put my interest in for a position at City Medical, but I haven’t heard back.”

“What’s your backup plan?” He enters the apartment, reminding me of that first time back in college.

I shut the door and lean against it. He’s big in my apartment, taking up more space than I can afford with my couch and treadmill in here. “I don’t have one.”

His head whips around, his eyes wide. “What do you mean? You always have a plan. A to Z.”

“Not this time.” Spying the couch, I shuffle the pillow and blanket down to one end.

“Interesting.” He eyes the pile I leave behind and then the treadmill. “This is the same couch you had.”

“Yes, same everything. It all came from New Haven with me. It was in storage while I was in medical school. I wish Ruby still lived next door, but she lives uptown.”

“She’s doing well?”

“Well all around.” Tired of talking in the darkened room, I tuck the blackout curtain panels behind their hooks to let some sunlight in. Smiling, I bend down and rub my finger along the edge of the pots. “Did you guys miss me?”

It’s not until I do it that I remember I’m not alone. It’s not that care that I sound like a crazy plant lady. It’s that I remembered who it is behind me too late, and my heart rate spikes as my panic sets in.

Joshua.

With my back still to him, I stand upright in silence and try to make him out in the reflection of the window to no avail. When the quiet between us stretches, I finally steel myself and turn around. “Is that Dwayne Evans?”

“Who, that?” *What am I doing?* I’m scrambling, that’s what. *Please don’t let him take him from me.* I take a step back, each of my hands protectively covering a portion of the pot. “That’s Hemsworth and Frankie. You remember Frankie.” Yes, play it off. He’s eating it up, none the wiser.

“Yes, I remember Frankie. I can’t believe she’s alive.”

“Pfft.” I scoff in offense. “Of course, she’s alive. I’ve spent years giving her the good life. She and Hemsworth.” Guilt starts to fill me up.

He tilts his head to the side to see around me. I shift not so casually to protect my babies. “Who’s Hemsworth?” *Damn his persistence.*

There’s no use. I can’t lie. Not to him. I once made him a promise. Anyway, he’d recognize his damn plant anywhere. “Technically, Hemsworth

is Dwayne Evans.” I turn around and carefully pick him up. As if I’m presenting Simba to the pride, I hold his bonsai in the air.

Unexpectedly, Joshua plops down on the couch. “I think I need to sit down.”

The ceramic pot is heavy, so I lower my arms. And since my dramatic interpretation didn’t win any awards, I set the pot on the coffee table in front of him. “He probably missed you.”

He smiles and tugs the pot closer, leaning in to give him a once-over. “He looks a little sad.”

Defensively, I pull the pot across the table, closer to where I’m sitting. “He’s not sad. He’s happy. He loves it here with Frankie and me. He gets long soaks in the sink, and sometimes, I bring them into the bathroom when I shower so they absorb the moisture. I mean, you should have seen the condition he was in at one stage. I never judged because we were all a mess back then—”

“Why do you call Dwayne Evans Hemsworth? Not that I’m knocking Chris Hemsworth or anything. The dude isn’t The Rock, but there are worse Hemsworths to be call—”

“He’s named after Liam Hemsworth, not Chris.”

His chin jerks back as he stares at the tree. “Well, no wonder he’s sad. I’d be sad too if I were named after second best.”

“Liam Hemsworth is a great actor,” I say, nodding my head like a maniac. “And very handsome.”

Rubbing the bridge of his nose, he takes a deep breath and then slowly exhales. He reaches forward and takes the pot in hand. “I’m going to forget that Dwayne Evans was ever renamed because I’m assuming you have your reasons—”

“I do,” I reply pointedly, crossing my arms over my chest as if this man didn’t already hold so much of my heart in his hands. Joshua sits back with Hems—*Dwayne Evans*—wrapped in his arms. Not wanting Frankie to feel left out, I go get her and bring her back. Crossing my legs in front of me, I cradle her in my arms. We stare at each other. “Do you want to share those reasons?” His voice is calm, comforting.

My apartment was already my safe space and having him in it doesn’t change that. It makes it feel better, in fact. Homier, like it was missing him as much as me. “I know what he means to you, but his name hurt to say, so one day, when I was tired of feeling so much pain, so much loss of you in my life,

I decided I would change it for my own well-being. My therapist agreed.”

His hand comes to rest across my ankles, and he says, “I’m sorry for hurting you. And I’m sorry you were caught in the crossfire.”

“I wasn’t caught. I was the reason for the battle, Joshua.” I dip a foot to the floor and set the pot down. Scooting across the middle cushion dividing us, I take the pot from Joshua and set him next to Frankie. Then I climb onto his lap and wrap my arms around his neck.

“There should have never been a war.”

I stare into the clear amber of my future. “But we survived. You and I outlasted them all.” I kiss him and that leads to him carrying me into the bedroom.

As our bodies tangle, the layers fall away, allowing the seed we planted years earlier to bloom again. This isn’t sex. It never was with him. Our bodies are slick with sweat, creating love with every kiss, touch, and thrust.

Chloe

The late afternoon sun shines in the living room, but the bedroom remains dark with the curtains closed. I've drawn a million figure eights on his chest, through the hair he allows to grow naturally, over the ebb and flow of his stomach muscles, not wanting to fall asleep. Instead, I want to enjoy every minute I have with him before we have to leave for work.

In the peaceful aftermath of losing ourselves in each other again, he asks, "Do you sleep on the couch?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

The truth is the only path forward with him. "It wasn't only your bonsai's name that I struggled with. The bed . . . *this bed* . . . when I pulled it out of storage, I used to lay here just to feel you next to me again." I angle up to see his face, his reaction from my words, "I could still feel you next to me, but when I'd open my eyes, the bed was empty. I was empty." *Everything about me felt empty in those moments.*

Stroking my hair, he whispers, "At night in jail, I didn't know if the visions I'd had of you were real. They were so real I could feel the heat of your skin under my fingers. I couldn't tell if they were dreams to comfort me or nightmares to haunt me." He rolls his head to the side, his gaze finding me in the dark. "Seems we suffered the same."

"Even."

"Even." Taking my hand, he kisses my palm and then my fingertips. "I'll never take something so simple for granted ever again."

"My hand?"

His smile arrives with hesitation, giving away more than he appears to want me to know. For all that makes him tough on the exterior, there's still a boyish charm on the inside.

His incredible eyes leave me momentarily while he thinks of what he wants to share, or maybe admit fits better. "The first time I saw you, I liked your face and your bonsai." As usual, he hits me with honesty. "But then at

the diner, it was your hands.”

“So it’s been an ongoing love affair with my hands?” I hold the free one up to analyze it.

A chuckle rumbles the mattress, and then he shrugs. “You have very elegant hands.”

“Is this a sexual fetish I need to know about?” I twist my mouth to the side, but I can’t suppress my grin.

“Now that I think of it . . .” He rolls his eyes. “No, seriously. There’s a gracefulness in how you use them. Steady like a doctor’s.”

He’s speaking my love language, and I don’t want him to stop. He continues, “Caring in their touch.” I run my fingers through his hair again, scraping my nails lightly against his scalp. His eyes dip closed as pleasure takes over. He kisses my shoulder, and the feel of his lips on me sends a spark of electricity through my body.

Wriggling, I shift enough to try to satisfy the craving deep in my belly that he’s created before moving on top of him and straddling his hips. “And other than my hands and my face?” I’ve never had anyone else feed my ego, and I can’t complain. It feels pretty dang awesome.

“Your eyes. They change with the hour of day, keep your mood, and hide the words you never say.” He shifts, reaching for protection. Wrapping himself, he continues, “I try to read your emotions, but you’re protected by grassy green meadows that lead to your secrets.”

I lift and then slide down as our bodies reconnect as one soul again, a foundation built of pain from the past and hope for the future.

* * *

As I stand on the sidewalk outside the hospital, my lips are swollen, and my chin suffers from scruff burn. He holds me with one arm and an overnight bag for me in the other hand. We’ve haven’t stopped kissing, but I know I need to pull myself away and go in. “I have to go, or I’m going to be late.”

“You’re already late.”

I steal one more kiss and then push myself away, hating that I have to leave him after the most perfect twenty-four hours of my life. It would feel like a dream if I couldn’t feel our reunion in every twist of my body, the blissful ache, and thrill still running through my veins. I was no longer

surviving. I was alive for the first time in six years. The sliding hospital doors keep opening and closing because of my hesitation to walk away from the man who made my heart shift into gear.

Joshua says, “Get going, baby. I’ll see you later.”

I try for sexy, and say, “I’ll be there, waiting naked in your bed.” But a lump forms in my throat from having to part ways. I should be stronger than this—light and carefree—but I’m heavy with emotions from the past night. Trusting us after all this time is terrifying. He comes to me, kisses my forehead, and whispers, “It’s going to be all right.”

“I know.” Even scared, I do. He let Dwayne Evans stay at my apartment with Frankie. If that’s not a sign of intent, I don’t know what is. That man has loved that tree since he was thirteen. I’m still sad to leave Joshua, though, but we’re not as fragile as we used to be.

He says, “It’s just us getting used to this again. I . . .”

When I peer up at him, I ask, “You what?”

“I . . . I’ll see you after work.” His hand runs over the top of his hair.

I know that’s not what he was going to say, but I understand the struggle. I nod, turning to leave before dumping an *I love you* on him like we’re allowed to say those things. Natural or habit from being around him, those three words float around my mouth like they belong there. It’s too soon, even if I see them reflected in his eyes right back at me.

When I drag myself inside, Julie’s leaning on the check-in desk. “Ummm . . . Is that the room five, coffee shop guy?”

That’s the delivery guy who brought me food one night and stole my heart a week later. Since that’s a lot of information to dump on her all at once and because I’m fifteen minutes late, I say, “Yes, but I need to get to my rotation. I’ll fill you in later.”

“My break is at ten,” she calls when I pass.

Laughing, I’m feeling too giddy to keep this euphoria inside. To share the magic between him and I with someone else, even when scared, lights me up. “I’ll go ahead and schedule mine for then.”

I hear her clapping excitedly behind me. I’m just about to push through the locker room when the chief of staff calls my name. I turn back to see her leaning out of her office. “Can you spare a moment before you start your rotations, Dr. Fox?”

“Of course, Dr. Willick.” I follow her into her office. Closing the door behind me, she says, “Have a seat.”

I sit when she returns to her leather chair and sits down with purpose. She steeples her fingers with a smile I can only interpret as sympathetic. I'm not sure what to think of that, so my foot starts tapping nervously. "I know I was late today, but I swear it's the first time—"

"That's not what this is about, Dr. Fox. That happens." She rests her forearms on the desk; her eyes are kind and her body language approachable.

Despite that, I don't like beating around the bush, and my foot bounces faster.

"What did you want to see me about?"

"Your father is a highly respected neurosurgeon. World-renowned, in fact." She's usually much more direct, my father being an unwelcome detour. "The bar for your career must have been set quite high."

As discomfort threads through me, I press my hand to my knee to still it. "Are you asking me?"

There's that sympathetic smile again. She replies, "No. I'll get to the point because I know you have a busy night ahead. As much as I've enjoyed working with you these past three years, we've reviewed your application and decided not to bring you on. With several doctors returning from maternity leave and another from a sabbatical in South America, we aren't prepared to offer a full-time position to any doctors from the residency program at this time."

My eyes dry from staring so hard, so I force myself to blink to appear that I'm not dying inside. "I don't understand."

"I know this must come as a shock. It's disappointing to us as well. We don't have the budget to support additional doctors at this time. I know we're losing a handful of talented medical professionals, but it's a battle I lost with the board over hospital funding."

"But—" *How can I go from floating five minutes ago to this?*

"It's not you. You are so talented, a doctor with a promising career. You have a knack not only for retaining an incredible amount of information, a dream for an ER with the fast pace of cases, but your bedside manner is also comforting to so many. I hear nothing but positive things. If you would have followed in Dr. Fox's specialty, then it might be different. We have the vacancy and funding already in place for neuro, but we don't have the same for the ER at this time."

My silent devastation must make her think she needs to fill in the rest because she says, "Fox carries weight in Newport. I'm sure they would love,

like I would, to have you join a hospital there or your dad's clinic. But we just can't at this time. Your program will complete on June first. It's been an honor to have you at City Medical. Again, I'm sorry to be losing you, Dr. Fox."

I'm numb when I walk out of the office. I do my job, bury myself in injuries and emergencies, skip my break so I don't have to face Julie, and clock out as soon as my shift ends. I call a car service and put on a brave face, so to speak, when I text Joshua on the way to his place: *Leaving work. Can't wait to see you.*

I need him. His sweet words that make me believe I can do anything. His rational side that will help me see this as a positive, maybe even as an opportunity. Yes, he'll help through this. I'll survive. *I'll be fine.*

The pep talk to myself doesn't help, but I know Joshua will.

He replies: *See you in an hour or so.*

His arms around me are the only remedy for my disappointment. Everything I've worked for has come back to my father. *Again.* It's a comparison I'll never be able to shake. Did I just lose a job I wanted because I wasn't his protégé?

Walking toward the door of Joshua's apartment building, the doorman tips his head and holds the door open for me. "Welcome back, Dr. Fox. Mr. Evans left a key for you."

"Thank you." I enter the lobby and follow him to the desk, wanting to disappear in my hurt feelings, but doing my best for a stiff upper lip until I can fall apart in private.

"You made it home just in time. Looks like a storm's blowing in."

As if cued, lightning flashes outside. "Seems so."

Inside the apartment, I set my purse down on the table in the entry. It's quiet here, dark, the lights from the apartments across the street and another flash of lightning greeting me with a loud crack shortly after. I walk down the short hall and enter the large living space, not feeling at home without him here.

Getting a glass of water, I rest my weight on the island and drink, trying to wash away the feeling of failure threatening to take over. I refill it and walk to the windows, standing with the rain pouring down on the other side.

Being in Joshua's apartment alone and soon to be jobless were never things I would have imagined a week ago.

The weather is fitting for my mood. Still unsettled, I head for his bedroom

to take a shower. While the water heats, I find my bag on the bench at the foot of the bed. Digging out the things I need, I take them into the bathroom with me, starting to find comfort in his home.

The hot water feels good on my shoulders, and though it doesn't clear my head of the what-ifs—*what if I would have become a surgeon? What if I would have gone to work for my father? What if I had listened to him?*

I squeeze my eyes closed, knowing I'll always choose the path I took because like Joshua said, there are no do-overs, and my destiny always ends with him. Standing in his closet, I see one of the T-shirts I remember him wearing back in college. The Patty's Diner logo is faded, but still evokes a smile. Closing my eyes, I hold it to my nose, feeling the soft fabric against my face before slipping it over my head. I brush my wet hair and take care of my skin, but this feeling of loss keeps returning.

Thinking I need something harder to drink to fix my mood, I pad my way back down the hall, but an open door to an office catches my attention. I shouldn't be nosy, but I'm curious why he doesn't exist in any other room of this huge place.

Rain pours down outside the small window, and I find my way to the desk, clicking on a lamp. He's a chef, so the papers strewn across the desktop are confusing. They're not menus, but contracts. Seeing his signature upside down has me curious, but I don't want to snoop. I'm about to move on until I spy my dad's signature next to it. I'd recognize it anywhere, dated six years ago.

I square my shoulders puzzled by what that could be. With a finger pressed to the document, I walk around to the other side and lean over. Each word I read brings a new misery. *Confession.*

Reckless driving.

Kidnapping.

Stolen vehicle.

Agree to never see.

Chloe.

Chloe

None of this makes sense despite seeing it in black and white. Like my memory from that night, I'm at a disadvantage. Is my brain protecting me from the truth of what happened or playing tricks on me?

I'm so angry and tired of living in the dark. I can't handle a new wave of pain today. *The truth is locked inside me but where is the key?*

Wrapping my arms around my stomach, I try to stop the pain that's beginning to course through me with each new page. Before I know I'm crying, a tear falls on the dried ink, smudging the words as I riddle my way through the betrayal.

"Hey there, beautiful," Joshua says, his voice lighthearted—so sweet, so trusting. "What are you doing?"

I look up, staring at him, my anger building. After reading what I did, I can't give him the benefit of the doubt. Holding the page with his signature, I ask, "What is this?"

The smile that matched his tone falls as if he's seen a ghost. "Chloe," he starts toward me with his hands up in surrender. *Already?* He's already surrendering.

"Only a guilty person gives up that easily."

"I'm not guilty." His tone hardens as his eyes darken.

The bottom drops out of my fairytale once again and takes my heart with it. I'm supposed to be alone. I'm just not reading the signs. There's no other way this can be explained. I will never have it all. I'll never have the guy and the dream job. I'll always be empty, just shy of those reaching those goals.

"I've read your confession." I slam the paper against his chest as I rush past and down the hall. He was so quick to deny but not plead his case. I don't care about my toiletries. I grab my bag and pull on a pair of leggings. Slipping my sneakers back on without socks, I run back out, colliding into him. The sound of the bag hits the floor between us.

He grabs my arms, catching me from falling back. "Don't jump to conclusions. I can explain—"

“I think a signed confession says it all, don’t you think?” Screw the bag. I’ll buy new things. I duck under his arm and run for the door.

His voice trails behind me. “I was tricked. I thought I was signing something else.”

His words have me coming to a stop in the entryway. I keep my back to him, refusing to give him more of my tears and anguish, hiding them behind the chip on my shoulder. Sucking in a staggered breath, I ask, “What did you think you were signing?”

It’s so quiet between us that I can hear his frantic breathing. I need him to fix this, to make it better, to make me see this was all a big misunderstanding. I finally turn around, not able to hold onto pride any longer. As if I’d placed the tears in the corners of his eyes myself, they glisten in the low light. “Please tell me I’m wrong.” Scraping his hands through his hair, the tick of his is a dead giveaway as he searches my face for an answer he doesn’t possess. I yell, “What were you signing, Joshua?”

His silence is torture. “After all this time, I would have thought you’d have the lies already lined up,” I cry, wiping away these traitorous tears. “Were you naïve enough to think I’d never discover the truth?” Tapping my hand to my chest, I ask, “How could you? How could you let me feel the burden of *your* guilt all these years? I blamed myself when you chose to hurt me.”

That lights the fuse and anger narrows his eyes toward me. “My guilt? I don’t feel guilty for anything. Everything I did was for everyone else. Everything I did, including signing that fucking piece of paper, was in *your* best interest.”

“Liar!” My life has been ripped out from under me—professionally and personally—and he’s standing in righteous indignation covering his ass. “You’re a liar! You said you loved me, but that confession says otherwise. You signed us away and got rid of me in one fell swoop of the pen.” I rush him and hit his chest. “How could you make me believe in something that was never real? When you love someone, you don’t do that. You don’t hurt them like that.”

Grabbing my wrists, he renders me helpless. Sobs escape my throat, and my emotions tornado, ready to destroy what’s left of us. I scream, “How do you hate me so much that you would sacrifice me for your greater good?”

“That’s not true, Chloe. Listen to me. I signed for you. You wouldn’t be a doctor if I hadn’t. Your father wouldn’t—”

“How dare you!” Rage roars inside me. I yank my wrists free and slap him. “How dare you take my accomplishments and claim them as your own? You’re a despicable person. My dad was right about you. You’re jealous and needed to claim a Fox to feel better about your own failings with your father.”

“Fuck your father!” I gasp, clasp my cheek, his words slapping me harder than his hand ever could. “If you’re so blind to the truth that you can’t even see what’s right in front of you, then leave,” he growls.

I turn on stubborn heels, but a loud crack rivaling the lightning has me ducking from fear. I turn back to find his hand punched through the wall. On instinct, I move to check for damage to his hand but have to stop myself. His breathing is erratic, his chest rising and falling through the anger. And if that didn’t tell me everything I need to know, he says, “Leave! Leave me alone.”

Shaken to the core from him yelling for me to go, the words from jail are summoned—*don’t come back, Chloe.*

Heading for the door, I reach the knob, and under a trembling tongue, I say, “I loved you—”

“You loved me because your daddy didn’t love you enough. I was the bad boy to piss him off.”

I swallow his insult, and spit out, “You were right. Love isn’t real.” I raise my chin in my moral outrage and walk down the hall to the elevator. His words are messing with my head and I realize he may not understand the wound he’s stabbed open. Call it spite that drives me to set the record straight, but my hand goes out to stop the doors from closing. With one foot out, I stare down the hall, meeting unfamiliar eyes to a soul I don’t recognize. “The last time I spoke to my father was the day I found out you were in jail. So yes, I chose to become a doctor. But before all of that, I chose you.” The doors push against my hands and the elevator dings. “Guess which one I regret?”

Pressing my back to the mirrored wall, I pray the doors close quick before I break down, feeling every second of this argument heavy in my chest. Just before the doors reunite, I hear, “Chloe, come back.”

I sink to the floor, puddling in my heartbreak. Ten floors to recover.

Nine.

I cradle my head between my knees.

Eight.

The tears fall heavy, dropping to the wood floor between my feet.

Seven.

My body shakes with sobs.

Six.

I take a deep breath, staring at the numbers lighting up in descending order.

Five.

Standing up, I grip onto the railing to hold me upright.

Four.

I dry my eyes with the inside of the T-shirt.

Three.

Where do I go? I forgot my purse. Dammit!

Two.

I take a deep breath, preparing to see the doorman.

One.

The doors open, and I hurry through the lobby. “Can I hail a cab, Dr. Fox?”

“No. Thanks.” I start running to beat him to the door, not wanting him to bear having witnesses to my personal tragedy.

“Good night, Dr. Fox.”

Pushing through I feel home free even without money, but stop just out from under the awning. Twenty feet ahead of me, Joshua stands in the pouring rain with his back to me and his arms behind his head in defeat. I search for an escape but am caught before I can make my getaway. “Chloe. Listen. Please.”

“I’ve heard enough—”

“I said those things to hurt you.” Remorse bleeds over his features, but my heart has already begun to close the door.

“It worked.” Keeping my hands at my side, I have no energy to fight a revolving argument. “I can’t keep going in circles with you.”

I see the way he holds his hand, and I have to fight the need to go to him, to care for him . . . to love him. “I’m hurting,” he says, his voice like gravel in his throat.

“So am I, so let’s not hurt each other anymore.” I turn, deciding the best direction is the one away from him.

“Chloe, please. *Please.*”

My feet just don’t want to listen, though I have a feeling it’s my heart calling the shots because I’m still standing here, facing the man who is . . .

was my everything, tears falling like rain down my face, giving him one last chance. He says, "If I could do anything to fix this, I would. I can't take back the past."

Still struggling against who I used to be, I realize it wasn't us together that destroyed our lives. It was tempting fate in the first place. "We were never supposed to fall in love."

"We did it anyway."

49

Joshua

“Love is real. You showed me that love is real. It’s not found in the connection of sex or fucking bonsai trees. It’s found in feeling invincible because the person you’re with makes you feel so high you can fly. It’s having you push me to be better and actually live, to experience this life.” Fuck, I’m talking nonsense. “I love you, Chloe.”

My soul stands twenty feet away, drenched under a storm that rolled in to destroy my world again and us in the process. Even drenched, she’s so fucking beautiful in her strength. She should deny me. She should walk away from me and never come back. I’ve never deserved her. I told her to find some guy and live a good life. But if I get the chance to be him, I’ll take it because I want to be the one who makes her smile. I say, “I’ve never stopped loving you.”

Dressed in my old shirt that brings us back to a time that may have been short in the grand scheme of things yet still haunts us years later, she stares at me. I feel like I’m losing her. I can’t. But I also can’t read her expression. I’ll take her hate, her ire, her comebacks, her sarcasm. I’ll take anything over losing hope, or her and this feeling of defeat. I did it once. I can’t do it again. Unsure if she heard me through the pouring rain, I repeat, “I love you.”

“We’re smoke and mirrors, Josh. Nothing real.”

“Don’t call me that,” I say, triggered from the sound of it off her tongue. I survived jail. I learned to defend myself in ways I never thought I would have to. But with Chloe, I’m at a loss. Laying down my weapons, I’m ready to fall at her feet if it would make a difference.

“I fell for it as if we were real.” She came prepared with an arsenal of her own, cutting right to the bone. My own words twisted and sharp.

“We are real,” I say, the potential loss of her catastrophic. I take a tentative step closer. “I’m Joshua. Remember the name tag, the bonsais, the lake?” Taking another two steps, I place my hand over my heart and ask, “Making love last night? Remember me?”

“I know you. I don’t know the man who would hurt with one signature

and knowingly throw me away like we were nothing.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Then we’re even!” she screams, punching her fists down.

“Even? Fucking even?” Taking another big step, I shake my head in frustration. “It’s not about being even, or if my heart or yours is more on the line. We’re not beyond reason—”

“That’s rich.” Her humorless laughter has her turning away with crossed arms over her chest.

“Chloe, don’t you see that nothing else matters? Only we do. We always did things our own way, at our own pace. So, if that means fighting this out, then we’ll fucking fight this out. If that means—”

“We don’t need to fight. This is what you wanted. When you signed that confession, you signed me away along with it. That’s the worst part. Knowing you ended us with a flick of your pen.” Anger fuels her fire, and she comes closer. “I would never sell *us* for a better opportunity for *me*.” Her feet come to an abrupt halt as if she’s about to cross an imaginary line in the sand. “My father can be very generous to get what he wants. Tell me, Josh. Did you get paid?”

“What do you think? You know I’d never take money from that asshole.” I see Fred, the doorman, nervously eyeing us from inside. I should be more dignified outside the grandeur of this historic building, but fuck that. I’m still the kid from New Haven, and I won’t let anyone ever shame me again. “I got a three-year sentence instead. You got your dreams and became a doctor.”

Affronted, she jerks. “What do I have to do with your misdeeds?”

“Everything. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.” I close another five feet. “I signed the damn paperwork because it was the only option I had.”

Her shoulders lower from her ears, and her head sags. She shivers from the rain and then squeezes her eyes closed, anguish wreaking havoc on her body. I itch to reach for her, hold her safe in my arms. She says, “I don’t understand.” Dropping her head into her hands, she cries. “I believed you.” Her eyes have lost the shine that happiness put there, and pain is all that remains. “I believed you, Joshua. You promised we were forever.”

“Believe me now. Please believe me.” I go to her, pulling her into my arms.

“You promised to marry me.”

That same promise has plagued me over the years, never thinking I’d have a chance to right that wrong. “I’d marry you right now because nothing

that has happened could change how I feel about you—not words or actions. There’s nothing we can’t overcome if we just listen to each other.”

There’s no struggle, though her body is stiff. “I chose you,” she says against my chest. “I lost everything because I chose you.”

“You only lost the things that didn’t matter, the things that came with a price too high to pay. You lost someone who only used you for gain and his own ego.”

“I lost you because you told me to go.”

There are no words left for me to say. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

We’ve stood in the rain long enough, so we move under the awning, not giving a fuck if it offends anyone in this building that we’re hashing out a past and future at the doorstep. I can’t walk away from Chloe until I know we’re together or over for good. *God, I hope it’s the former.*

Our ravaged hearts beat in sync as she clings to the man she claims to hate. “We’re not over,” I whisper. “If I’ve learned anything, we never will be.” Her chin settles against me when she looks up. Keeping my voice low, I take her hand, holding it to the wreck inside my chest. “You only lost me temporarily. I was there, but you were always with me. Always in here.”

The fight has left her muscles, and when I kiss her fingers, she lets me hold them to my lips. I memorize the softness and the way they gracefully wrap around my hand, remembering our conversation from earlier.

She takes a breath as if surrendering to something unconscionable, and her voice is steady when she asks, “Why did you sign those papers?” These are not the conditions I wanted to tell her, but it’s the only opportunity I’ll get.

“It wasn’t a confession. I signed a contract with your dad.”

When she starts to pull away, I hold her there, refusing to release her hand from mine until she hears my side. “Are you kidding me?”

I hate that she thinks I would betray her, but in light of the years of examination, that’s exactly what I did. I’m guilty as charged. But wasn’t the punishment enough? Do I have to live with this pain forever? I say, “He changed the contract. He had me sign one document, and then he changed the other pages.”

That stills her, curiosity dragging her gaze back to me. Her stance softens. “What did you think you signed?”

Fuck. I swipe my hand over my hair, pushing the water away. “It sounds bad, but I can explain.”

“Just tell me,” she says, her patience hanging by a thread.

“My mom would keep her diner, and I would be allowed to live my life —”

“And the conditions?”

“I’d live this life without you.” Although it felt right at the time, the words have turned bitter over the years along with the logic that made me agree. No matter how I twist and turn it, I signed her away. I knew it then and I feel the pain of it now more than I ever did in the time we were apart.

She turns away from me. Her shoulders shake, her heart aching so much that I can hear the pain she’s trying so hard to hide. But she never takes her hand from mine. I need to get it out, to confess all my sins and make her my judge and jury. “The other option was being arrested . . .”

Disbelief has her returning to me, fisting my shirt, and pleading, “You were arrested.”

“Being arrested *and* fighting for my freedom. Please understand I couldn’t do that to my mom. She’d lose the diner. She’d lose her home. She would sell everything to fight for me, and I couldn’t do that to her. I couldn’t put her in that position because she’d do it. I know she would.”

“You signed so she wouldn’t have to help you?”

“I signed because I was losing you either way. So I signed to get you to move on without me, and I signed to help my mom.”

Our hands come apart, and she suddenly moves away from me. “You signed to save everyone but yourself. You think it was virtuous, but all I know is that you signed *us* away in the process?”

“I’m sorry. I thought it was best.”

“For whom? Not you and not me.” More tears fall, but this time, she wipes them away. “Joshua, I understand what you’re saying about your mom. My mom would do anything for me, but you could have told me. I could have done something. I could have helped you, fought for you more somehow. I could have waited for you . . . I would have. I would have waited a lifetime to be with you again. But you signed us away before you gave me the chance. Now you stand before me wanting the same opportunity you couldn’t even give me.”

I hate the distance she’s put between us. It’s hard to tear down walls with the emotional miles keeping us apart. She looks down, and as much as I want to see her eyes again, I wait, wanting her to unburden her thoughts and words because she’s right. I lost my faith in us. I couldn’t. “You were in a coma,

Chloe. I snuck in to see you, hoping you'd wake up and make that nightmare go away."

I won't tell her she didn't because I can't have her taking the blame. That's not why I'm telling her. "I need you to know I was there. For days, I begged anyone and everyone to see you."

Touching her cheek like a memory, she lifts her gaze, her eyes searching mine. "I know." As the storm begins to pass, the words don't rush but stay locked inside as she troubles her bottom lip. "When I said I know, I'm telling you that my soul felt yours. I knew you were there." Closing her eyes, she takes a deep breath and then slowly exhales. "I remember you there, your heat to my cheek, your words whispered in my ear." Tears fall for new reasons as a small smile appears. "I remember you, Joshua." *Thank God.*

"I'm a part of you. You're a part of me. Always."

She pushes into my arms, wrapping around me. I clasp one of her hands, our fingers folding together, and hold her with my other arm.

"I know you," she says, "better than anyone."

Please forgive me.

Staring into my eyes with hers on bright again, she says, "I know your heart."

I know yours.

Bringing her hand to my chest, she releases the pain. "You know my soul."

You are my soul.

"I thought I lost you, Joshua."

"You never lost me, baby. That's what I've been trying to tell you. You were always with me. Was I with you?"

A myriad of emotions flickers through her eyes, but the one thing that doesn't happen is a denial. "You were the only thing I could never reason my way out of." Looking back as if called to do so, she adds, "We made it through the storm."

This time I put my hand out, hoping to God she takes it. She eyes it and then rests her faith with mine. We duck out from under the awning into the early morning hours. Standing side by side, we stare up at the big sky. The clouds have blown over, leaving the moon exposed for a little longer. "We never did catch the moon that night, but we can chase the sun if you're up to it?"

"What did you say?"

“What part? Chasing the sun?”

“No, the moon. What do you mean we never caught it?”

“The night of the accident. You wanted to chase the moon.”

Rubbing her temple, she clenches her eyes closed. Her breathing becomes erratic, her hand trembling in mine.

“What’s wrong, Chloe?”

“Oh, my God! We were chasing the moon.” This isn’t the look of a woman who’s seen a ghost. This is a woman who’s touched heaven and lived to tell about it. “I remember, Joshua. I remember getting into the car with you in that purple dress and laughing so hard.” She hugs me with all her strength, resting her head against me again.

I embrace her—her crazy moods, her ambitions, her kind heart, her laughter, her staring at me at close range in the middle of the night, her moans of pleasure, and her love for my bonsai. I embrace everything about this woman and kiss her head.

She jumps up, covered in goose bumps and still soaking wet, and smiles like the sun rose inside her. “I remember the night of the accident. Everything. I remember the feeling of freedom, of flying, the wild abandon, the love, God, the love I felt . . . I still feel so deeply for you.”

The tears have stopped coming, but her smile falters. Placing her hands carefully, so gentle on my chest, she says, “I remember you tried to buckle the seat belt, the deer . . .” She swallows, her eyes briefly leaving mine as if the memories are too powerful to fight. “I remember you trying to save me.”

My chest is tight as I listen to the highs and lows of what her memory returns to her. “We lived a lifetime of pain in a span of a few short years.” I hold her hands between mine and kiss the tips of her fingers. “I thought I lost you that day, and I couldn’t survive losing you again. I signed the papers that I thought would give you the life you deserved. I’m sorry for hurting you.”

With her eyes on mine, she caresses my face. “I died that day, but your love saved me.” She takes my hand and aligns our tattoos together again. “I thought you were my hope, but you turned out to be my salvation.” Lifting on her toes, she kisses me with passion, hope, and a long love that took years to grow.

Her eyes are still closed for a beat longer when I open mine. Seeing her dip down and savoring us on her lips has me ready to skip a few stages. “Maybe next time, we opt for the shortcut to get here.”

She smirks, one that she learned from the master. “What’s the fun in

that?”

50

Joshua

The doors open, and we trip our way out of the elevator, my back hitting the wall. My shirt is thrown to who knows where, the button of my jeans flying down the hall. Holding her face, I kiss her while we keep moving toward the door, bumping against walls and almost falling over.

The frenzy of heated kisses, tight embraces, and lust coursing through us as if we were pregaming with that fight and kickoff started the second we made up.

Hopping on one foot to get the wet denim off, and then the other, I'm left in my boxer briefs when I start stripping the soaking shirt over her head. Her body shimmers, her nipples hard and deep pink. Ripping our mouths apart, I hold off her groping hands. "You're not wearing a bra." I yank the shirt back down, looking around to see if anyone is around.

"I was in a hurry," she says, not giving one damn if anyone sees us.

Grabbing her waist, I toss her over my shoulder and run for the door at the far end. The door is left to shut on its own as I'm shoved to the wall. She plants her hands on my chest, as if I'd actually want to escape, and then eyes the hole in the wall next to me. "How's the hand?"

"Always the doctor." I hold it up and wiggle my fingers. In actuality, it wasn't the smartest move for a chef to punch a wall, but I was lucky this time. It hurts, and I'll have some bruising, but it doesn't seem like any long-term damage has been done.

Seeming satisfied, she puts her mouth on my chest and works lower with licks, kisses, and sucks. "Fuck," I groan. Her mouth is amazing. I was already hard, but now I'm almost painfully so as she takes my boxers with her.

"God, I love your body. You'd make the statue of *David* envious." On her knees, she looks up, my world lit like stars in her eyes. Her hands wrap around my cock, and she kisses the tip. The tease.

Fortunately, not for long.

She closes her eyes and takes me into her mouth. Scraping my fingers through her hair, I take a hold at the crown. I angle just enough to watch her

take me as deep as she can and slide back. Every part of me is alive with wanting her. Her eyes flash open, the tips of her lashes still wet as they tap her brow. I remember another time I saw the devil in her eyes, desire shaping her lids dip back down.

Holding the back of my legs, she works me with her tongue, grazing her teeth, and sucking, causing my head to fall back. The first tremors start deep in my belly and spread faster and quicker, starting to shoot through every part of my body. My intention to wait until I was taking her is blown to smithereens as my body erupts. My head hits the wall twice and then a third time as I come. “Fuck . . . *Fuuuck*.”

I open my eyes, my breathing heavy in my chest. Looking down at her with that half-smirk and arched eyebrow, I shake my head and give her the same. “You don’t know what you’ve done, baby.” I bend down to pick her up, bringing her to her feet. Feeling her in my arms is hands down the sweetest heaven I’ll ever know.

“What have I done?” she asks, challenging me.

I lift her so her legs wrap around my hips and her arms loop around my neck. Our lips crash together again in teeth and tongues, moans and mouth-fucking. Her wet clothes are fucking freezing, so I detour to the kitchen and set her on the massive island. With her heels digging into the top of my ass, I slide her ass across the countertop, the wet leggings easily slipping.

We’re hands and tangled body parts, lust and hunger. I pluck myself from her and find the waistband of her pants. Panting with her eyes on mine, she lifts her ass so I can strip them down. Tossed to the floor, I then go for the shirt. “You cold?”

Little hard buds greet me, calling my fingers to them. I rub my thumb over them and then replace my fingers with my mouth, giving each equal attention before saying, “Lie back.”

With her splayed across this marble, it’s a sight I’ll never forget as long as I live. “Fucking hell, you’re so fucking sexy.”

She licks her lips as she rests her hands behind her head. “Tell me about it.”

“I could spend days telling you about every beauty mark and the way your skin is soft behind your ear, how pink that sweet little pussy of yours is.” Taking her ankles, I kiss each one and then put them over my shoulders. “But I’m famished, and I know just what I want to eat.”

I could pretend she cares about the foreplay and niceties, the buildup, but

by how her hips are tilting toward my mouth, I'm thinking we can skip it. I kiss her where she wants me, making out with her lower lips and clit until she's squirming and her fingers are grasping against the marble to find purchase as her release grows deep inside.

When I fuck her with my tongue, she claws my shoulders, the scrape of her nails encouraging me to go deeper and harder, faster until she's spilling her release.

Her head lifts, and she says, "Now fuck me."

"Here or in the bedroom?"

Ready to do it in either place, I'm on standby for her answer. "Where's the condom?"

"Bedroom."

"There's your answer." She slips off the island and runs down the hall to my room. I'm right behind her, getting the pleasure of watching that fine ass in action. She hops on the bed while I dig a condom from the drawer.

I'm quick to cover myself and join her, but before I settle, I ask, "Top or bottom?"

"I just want to be with you, Joshua." Her eyes were filled with adoration.

"I want to make love to you."

She lies on her back, her hand resting on the crook of my neck as all the fun, games, and frenzy of before dies down. I kiss her, her lips caressing mine as she rubs my shoulders. "I love you," she says, "bigger than the sky."

Dipping my head to the side, I kiss her in that spot that sends goose bumps to pebble across her skin. "Bigger than the universe, baby."

Her knees grip my sides as I reach down and position myself. Returning my hands to either side of her, I dip to kiss her again, pushing into her white-hot heat. Her love, caresses, and faith in me wash through me, and I kiss her neck as I pull back and push into her again. It's never less than all-consuming. I want to give her every part of me, for her to feel how she makes me feel—whole as a person—content to live inside her forever.

Her quiet moans and little shifts have me dragging my hand down her body, kneading her tits before I go lower between us and rub tight circles until she's trembling around me. My name, a whispered chant against the shell of my ear. I kiss her, swallowing every word she'll give before I fall over, catching the glory of my own release. "Chloe," sounds harsh and hateful, but comes from pure ecstasy.

As much as I love makeup sex, I like creating love with her more. Our

fingers, bodies, and souls entwined, I say, “I thought you’d want to take this slow, but there’s just no going slow with you, baby. No end and no beginning.” Now I’m the one who sounds crazy. Lying next to her, I inhale her scent and run the bridge of my nose along her temple. “There’s no more just you or just me.”

Kissing my chest, she breathes, “Only us,” against my skin, her eyes closing.

“Only us.” I don’t care about sounding crazy anymore. Following my heart has never felt so right. I slip out of bed to the bathroom, but I’m quick to return and slide under the covers.

She snuggles into my side, and though we’re exhausted—bodies, hearts, and minds—from the tumultuous night, she whispers, “My position isn’t continuing at the hospital.”

I had closed my eyes but open them to seek her reaction in the darkened room. “What does that mean?”

“They told me I don’t have a job after June first.”

Maybe it’s late or I’m slow to download this information, but she’s always succeeded. She wanted to work there. She said as much. With my arm around her, I rub her bicep. “Why?”

“There’s not enough funding.” I expected her to sound more devastated. “Do you want to hear the kicker? She said I should have followed in my father’s footsteps. That’s a position they can fill.”

“Shit. How are you?” Moving her hair back, I want to see her eyes. Today was a hard day for my girl.

She slides up, readjusting until we’re eye level. “Better than expected, I guess. Losing you would be worse.”

I kiss her head. “You didn’t. You won’t. Not ever.”

“Makes losing the position easier, but you’re getting a jobless, soon-to-be homeless, and with no backup plan girlfriend.” She’s grinning, and though I’d assume from the past that she’s hiding the pain inside, her smile says otherwise. It’s genuine.

“Sold.”

Laughter shakes lightly through her. “That simple?”

“That simple.” Running the back of my fingers along her cheek, I say, “Move in with me.” I don’t have to think these things through. I don’t want to waste any more time that I can spend with you. I mean it. I want us together—messy mornings and late shared spaces, sleeping during the day and

cooking at night. I want that with you, Chloe.” I know in my soul this is it. This is our future. This is everything I’ve ever wanted.

She lifts and through a curtain of her hair, our lips find each other, and when our tongues embrace, her arm wraps around my neck. Tucking her hair behind her ear, she says, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

51

Chloe

A week slipped out from us before we knew it, and we found ourselves in June. In the past four days, I've become a lady of leisure in this huge apartment. As much as I'd love to enjoy the time off, I have that need to find my next adventure.

It's been fun moving into his apartment. I'd forgotten how incredible living in our own little world could be where we're the only ones who exist.

Well, except for Frankie and Dwayne Evans. They sit on the windowsill next to the tub because there was a kerfuffle with Basil Evans on Tuesday, and it was just easier to separate them for now.

With the bubbles dissipating faster than I'd like, I make the most of the rest of my bath and text Ruby and my mom: *I have news. Are you sitting down?*

Ruby: *Are you pregnant?*

My mom: *Did you get a new duvet?*

Me: *I don't even know what to say to that, Mom. I don't own one duvet, so I can't say I got another. And no, Ruby, I'm not pregnant.*

Though if looks could do it, the one Joshua gives me when he comes home would knock me up in a heartbeat.

Ruby: **pouts* Tell us!*

Mom: *Did you get the position at the hospital?*

Excited to share the good, I want to share my disappointment, too. I drag water over my shoulders to warm up, and then type: *No, long story short: No funding for me. It's okay. I'll find something else.*

Ruby: *I legit just checked my phone to make sure I was talking to the right Chloe. "It's okay." Is that a cry for help? Do you want me to come over?*

I start laughing.

Me: *No. I really am fine. I just thought you two should be the first to hear since you've been so concerned. My vagina is in therapy. Nightly. Sometimes twice a night. On Saturday, I saw the therapist four times. She's doing well.*

Happy as a clam. I giggle over the pun.

Since there is no immediate text returned, I add: *I'm also madly in love with Joshua Evans. I moved into his apartment last Friday. Surprise! We're back together. We're living together. We're all the togethers together.*

Heartbeats pound in my ears waiting for their response. They've been with me, loving me through it all, and yet— I'm a little scared they won't approve.

My phone rings. "Hello?" I try for nonchalant.

Ruby says, "I've conferenced Cat in. Now what the hell is happening? Have you lost your ever-loving mind?"

"Yes," I say, smiling. "I have. Maybe I'm dumb in love, but we've worked through so much. And one day, I'm going to marry him. Mainly because I want to, but also because I'm going to hold him to that promise."

Ruby laughs. "Competitive much?"

"A little."

I hear a shaky breath, and ask, "Mom? Are you okay?"

"If you're okay, I'm okay, honey. I always adored Josh. What happened with you two wasn't your fault. To know you've found your way back to each other, well, I'm happy for—"

"Your vagina," Ruby adds, bursting out laughing.

When we all recover from shock and the lightness we can joke about, my mom adds, "I'm happy for you and your heart. The right job will come along, but you two share a once-in-a-lifetime love. I can't be happier for you."

"Thanks, Mom, that means a lot."

Ruby asks, "When's the wedding. I want to be your photographer."

"Slow down. It's only been a week."

My mom says, "When it's right, it's right. Why waste time?"

It's something Joshua and I say all the time too. Seeing the time, I add, "I need to go, but maybe we can get together in the next few days?"

"I'm in," Ruby says.

My mom laughs lightly, delight coming over her. "Let me know when and where, and I'll be there. We can shop for a duvet, too, while we're out."

"Absolutely. I love you both."

We hang up shortly after, and I hurry out of the bath, excited to put my plan into motion. I dry off and touch up my makeup. Hurrying into the kitchen, I lay the towel across the island so it's not so cold this time and perch myself on top. I hear the key in the door and tilt my head back while

resting up on my hands. Quick to bend my knee, I close my eyes and wait for him, feeling as beautiful in my body as he sees me.

“Well, that is a surprise,” a woman’s voice says, startling me.

Holy. Shit. I scramble to catch myself but lose traction on the towel and slip off the side. My body thuds to the floor just as I hear Joshua yell, “Chloe!”

That’s going to leave a mark. I rise to see Patty staring at me. “Are you all right, Chloe?”

“Fine. God, so good. Fine.” I try to pierce Joshua’s heart with my glare. “I wasn’t expecting company.”

His big arms come around me and kisses my head under deep chuckles. “Sorry, baby. I didn’t—”

“Yeah, I know.” An embarrassing heat runs through me. “My cheeks probably match the beets.”

The professor is brought into the fold. “I finally found a place to park—” He stands in shock and then turns around. “What’s going on?”

Patty says, “Why don’t we go put our stuff in the bedroom?”

As soon as they’re gone, I ask, “They’re staying?”

“We have a lot to talk about, you and I. Things have moved fast.” With his arm around me, we walk down the hall. Well, I limp, but we get there eventually. He closes the bedroom door, and says, “I bought the diner.”

“What? I, uh—”

“Yeah. I couldn’t let her sell it. Now that they’re married, they want to travel the country.”

I sit on the bench, still stunned, and I’m not sure I’m grasping the concept. “But you own Salvation.”

“I do. I have investments everywhere now.”

“Okay, this is a lot. Guess that economics degree is helping you spread the wealth around.”

“One day, I’ll finish my degree,” he says with a fire under him. “I can apply with my work experience. As for Salvation, I was thinking about letting Todd take over as head chef and giving him a percentage of the profits. He’s earned it.”

Wait. Does this mean . . . ? “That’s fine. I’m sure he has, but does that mean you want to move back to New Haven?”

“It didn’t occur to me until you weren’t working at the hospital anymore. I’ve been unhappy with the hours at the restaurant for a long time. What if we

both go to New Haven?”

I lean closer, letting doubt sneak in. “Would you go without me?”

“No,” he says with a reassuring smile as he kneels in front of me. “I go where you go, Chloe. They do have great hospitals, though.”

“Yeah. They do.”

“So you’ll consider it?”

He looks so hopeful, and he’s right; I can work wherever there’s an ER. Holding his cheek, I say, “How could I not? If you want to run the diner, I’ll support you however I can. We’re a team, after all. Worst case, I’ll be your new Todd.”

When he stands, I stand, and we hug and then kiss. He says, “You looked incredible on that island, and you really nailed that landing. Todd wouldn’t have.”

“Just the sous chef part. Not the rest.” I start laughing. “I’ll be feeling that fall for days.” I go to the closet to get dressed. “So, uh, we have company, and they’re staying?”

Leaning against the doorframe, he says, “She brought the paperwork for the diner. We can stay in or go out. Whatever you want.”

“It’s good to see your mom again. I just wish it would have been under better circumstances than me sprawled out naked on the countertop.”

He’s chuckling. “She’s happy for us, by the way. Started talking grandkids already. Too soon for that.”

Pulling a blouse from the hanger, I shrug. “Maybe.” I start to get dressed under his watch. “Which room are they sleeping in? I can get it ready.”

“The master. It’s ready.”

I stop with my skirt halfway up. “I thought this was the master bedroom?”

“No, it’s on the other side of the entryway. It’s a hidden door that you have to push.”

“You have a secret room?” He nods, smiling with pride. “Then why do we sleep in here?”

The smile softens, but it doesn’t disappear. “Because my dad set this room up for me. Granted, he did it when I was thirteen, but it still works.”

Going to him, I hug him. “It works perfect.” When we let go, I say, “Let’s go out. We have a lot to celebrate.”

“A whole new life ahead.”

“New adventures.”

Chloe

Two Months Later . . .

“Don’t seek perfection because you’ll never find it. Happiness is a nobler mission.”

My mom was right.

I still have a few regimented tendencies to break, but the happiness I’ve found when I let some things go and hold tighter to what matters far outweighs the task.

Looking behind me at the plants secured with seat belts, I double-check them, *again*, just to make sure. Turning to catch Joshua’s amusement, I say, “Don’t make fun of me.”

He’s still laughing when he leans over for a kiss. I meet him in the middle. “One day, Chloe Evans, you’re going to make an amazing mother.”

Not wanting to waste another minute without each other in it, our destiny was sealed three weeks ago by the lake outside of New Haven. Holding a bouquet of handpicked flowers from Joshua, we stood with our closest family and friends and exchanged our vows, saying, “I choose you,” instead of I do.

Because that’s what we are doing. We are choosing every day—morning and night and all the hours between—to be with each other, to honor each other’s dreams, and to love each other for eternity. It was the easiest promise we ever made.

Joshua shifts the Blazer into gear, and we pull away from the prestigious address in the Upper East Side. I see him look back once and reach over to rub his arm. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. It was never really mine anyway.”

The apartment may have been Joshua’s consolation prize, but he was his dad’s, and the only member of his family to carve out time to spend with David Evans on his deathbed. Nonetheless, forty-nine was too young to die. My heart breaks for David, but also for Joshua, who seemed to believe there was hope between him and his father before tragedy struck a couple of years ago. I wish I could have been there for him back then.

I could pack a U-Haul full of regrets to drag along with us to New Haven, but instead, I live, I love, and I see each day as a fresh opportunity. We learned a lot from the fight we had last May. Like the storm, we needed to blow through our anger and get the pain out. We live with our eyes wide open, flaws, acceptance, joy, and respect. That's how teams work best. I don't need perfection. I have happiness instead because I choose it. I choose Joshua.

The apartment was sold in less than a week, freeing us to leave sooner than expected. We're not complaining. With the apartment gone and the restaurant now run by Lola and Todd, I ask, "Besides the apartment, how do you feel about leaving your baby behind?"

Cocking a grin, he says, "You're my baby."

"Charmer." I angle his way but leave my belt on, nice and snug. "You built Salvation from nothing."

"I built Salvation because I'd lost you. I put the fanciest fucking food on that menu just to prove I could do it. Doesn't matter I had the seed money from my dad. I won the critics over with the cooking. I did it. I don't have to prove anything else to the world or myself." Judging by the contentment settled into his expression, I believe him. "I'm looking forward to taking over the diner."

"A refined home cooking concept, huh? All your talents in one."

"Well, let's not go that far. I have a few other talents. A skill set that you appreciate nightly."

"Why is that so hot?"

"Because you're insatiable. Want to make a pit stop?"

"I'm not having sex in a gas station bathroom."

Chuckling, he rubs my leg. "Don't worry, I was thinking of stopping by the lake to reminisce."

Just before we reach town, he travels down a road that's off the beaten path. With the windows down, the wind whips through the cab, and I hold my arm out, feeling the freedom in the falling that I tasted so many years ago.

He puts his arm out and looks over at me, a smile that makes my heart melt and a gaze that speaks its own language to mine—telling me he loves me. He'll always protect me. He only breathes because of me. Reaching over, I take his offered hand, the connection always so strong that it takes me time to acclimate to the headiness of it.

Even now.

Seven years after the first time we held hands.

I lean forward to take in the grandeur. The trees clear, and I feel peace wash through me as I take in the rippling water ahead and the branches and leaves scattered on the ground. The rocks where I stood too scared to take a leap of faith until he taught me how to trust, how to love with my soul, how to be who I am. As if reserved just for us, there's never another soul around.

He parks the truck that holds our entire lives of stuff worth keeping in the back. We left the rest in the past. Leaning against the wheel, he stares ahead. "Mangata."

"Let's go. Let's drive straight to the moon just to say we did it."

Popping the door open, he gets out, looking across the SUV at me. "I remember a time that I used to be the more spontaneous one."

"Times change, and so do we." He comes to open my door, but I beat him to it. "Wonder if that Dwight guy still works on the property?"

"No. He was fired a few years back."

Resting against the truck, I ask, "For what?"

"Being an asshole."

I struggle to decide where to look. Both the moon and Joshua have such big and competing presences. I force my gaze to the lake. "No wonder we had the ceremony without interruption."

He peers down at me from the corners of his eyes. "Bryant now patrols. I told him we'd be here, so he'd leave us alone."

I hip bump him. "This pit stop was planned all along? So much for spontaneity."

"I can be a planner just like you." He bumps me right back.

Kicking off my flip-flops, I start taking my shorts down. "Sometimes, planning takes all the fun out of the adventure."

Not to be outdone, his clothes come off as fast as mine do. But as we stand there, neither of us rush into the water without the other because the water's cold, even for a summer night. Joshua looks at me, taking hold of my hand, and asks, "What's next?"

"We just jump right in." He still waits by my side. But I don't have those same fears I did years ago, so I take the first step and then another with him coming with me. "There's nothing to be afraid of," I say. "It's not like there are sharks in this lake."

"Nope." He chuckles as we get deeper. "No sharks." When we get waist deep, we lift our legs and swim.

Treading water doesn't bother me as much anymore. It didn't take long to find a job I'd like in New Haven, the man of my dreams next to me, and an endless lake of hope ahead. Wrapping my arms around him, I whisper, "You know, we never did make love in a lake."

His feet plant, and he holds me to him, kissing me until we both fall under, not the water, but each other once again, spellbound by one another. I'm held tight, so tight, his cheek scratches against the skin of my neck. I love the feel of him burying himself in me in ways that others will never understand.

Moving my hair behind my shoulder, he whispers, "Not a day that goes by, not a minute or even a second when you aren't at the forefront of my mind. Everything. Everything I say and breathe is because you give me the strength to do so. I will always be your strength, your shoulder, your ever after no matter what a new day brings."

Although the sound of my heart beating is lost under the lapping of the water around us, I feel it as big as the moon and as strong as a bass drum.

I thought I lost the ability to cry, but no. I'd lost him, the soul that gave me the depth of emotion. So as I start to cry, I hug him as we swim as one.

"It's funny to remember standing in your way when you entered my apartment seven years ago, barging right into my life, into my heart, and becoming the only plan worth sticking to. I realize now that I was only standing in my own damn way." Slicking his hair back, I kiss his forehead. "I'm no longer afraid to jump all the way in if I'm jumping into your arms."

"Prove it," he says, smirking.

I roll my eyes because he's so damn cocky. And handsome, and smart, and loving, and he puts up with me when my emotions spin into little hurricanes now and again. He's my salvation. He's my safe place. "I already did when I married you." I'm kissed, and then I kiss him because I'm his haven as well. I'm the one he tells everything to, who allows him to be who he is, and who loves him to his core. I say, "I love you."

"I love you, too."

We start to make love in the lake, but no, it's too murky and then a fish touches my leg, so I'm out of there. He gets a blanket from the back and spreads it out, the leaves like downy underneath. Music drifts from the speakers of the SUV as we sit down facing the lake. He says, "I was thinking we might want to live by the lake. Right here. Build a house in this very spot. What do you think?"

My gaze skims the water and I smile because it's fun to dream. "The moon lighting the back porch."

My response makes him grin. "Fresh fish for dinner."

"Skinny-dipping in summer."

"Kids learning to swim right out there." He points. "We can build a dock."

To hear him bring up the topic of kids takes me by surprise. Maybe it shouldn't since we're now married, but it's a big jump for anyone to get used to. "I like when we dream together." Taking another look at the lake, I add, "I know you have the money—"

"It's not my money; it's our money."

"But this land will cost a fortune."

"What if I told you it came as a package deal?"

I stare at him, slowly blinking, trying to catch myself up to what he's saying. "What's the package deal?"

"Everything I have is yours, Chloe. Earnings from the restaurant, money from investments, the apartment . . . and forty acres of land, this land."

Is he saying what I think he is? "Your dad owned this land?"

"Yes. I actually wanted to give it to you as a gift after the wedding, but I got caught up in you, in the ceremony and the celebration after. I forgot."

"You always were a romantic." I look out at this gorgeous view, at our land and the little piece of the lake that will always feel like ours alone. My heart starts beating hard in my chest from feeling this happy.

As I recall from the first time we were here, threats were exchanged between him and Dwight. Most details remain too vague. But if he owned it in the past few years . . . "You fired Dwight?"

"Call me petty," he says with a shrug. I can call him many things—honorable, talented in everything he sets his mind to, and passionate. Petty isn't one of them.

"And that's why we weren't arrested?" I narrow my eyes at him. "I thought we were trespassing and being rebels. I don't know, wild and spontaneous. I proved I could be a bad girl by skinny-dipping. My name was put on the bad girl list. Remember?"

"It was, and you sure did enjoy the punishment—Ow!"

"You deserved that knuckle sandwich for letting me believe I'd broken the rules. I was actually worried." I cross my arms over my chest and twist my lips to the side. "All this time, I thought I was a bad girl, but I'm still just

a Goody Two-shoes.” His chuckling becomes increasingly annoying. “Do you mind not laughing at me?”

Pulling me to him, he wraps his arms around me and kisses my head. “I’m not laughing at . . . yeah, I’m totally laughing at you. But you’re so damn cute when you’re mad.”

I pull a solid few seconds pretending to be upset before I give in and laugh with him. He finally says, “If it makes you feel better, we *were* breaking rules. It used to piss my dad off that I would come out here at all hours of the night. I don’t know why, but I found it to be a good escape. If I couldn’t have him, I could enjoy the hell out of his lake.”

Those secrets shared in moments like these always tighten the tether on our heartstrings. I can’t stay mad at him. I lean over and kiss him before coaxing him to lie down on the blanket. He takes my clothes off, and I remove his, and we lie together under another blanket. It doesn’t take long, it never does, for me to want to feel him and for him to want to be a part of me. He hovers over me as I butterfly open for him. Our eyes stay fixed, our hands bonded, as we kiss and moan, love and thrust on the first night of our new life.

I whisper, “Bigger than the sky,” because he is to me, like our love has always been.

When he replies, “Bigger than the universe,” I believe him. *Always him.*

I can blame it on the moonlight or that we’re newlyweds, but this is different, we’re different. Starting a new adventure together, we’re carving our own path along the way. Things may not have worked out how I planned, and we may not have New York, but we have New Haven and this little piece of heaven.

Under the stars in the summer air, my body is set free from the expectations of others as we chase the moon and find our release. Most of all, we find each other under gentle kisses peppering my skin until we both fall asleep to the lull of the water and under the stars. I never want to forget a moment.

When I wake up, the sun hasn’t broken the horizon. When I turn, Joshua is looking at me, and I find safety in his eyes and arms. He smiles, and it’s not arrogant or full of anything but sweetness. “Hi.”

I reach over and touch his cheek. “Hi.”

“We’re married.”

Smiling, I let this joy build, let him fill me to the brim with this

happiness. “I’m your wife, and you’re my husband.”

He says, “We can build wherever you want because my home will always be found in you.”

Swooning so hard that my cheeks hurt from smiling, I sit up, staring at the stunning view ahead. “Building our home here will be the perfect place to make memories.”

His arm comes around me, and we sit in the quiet of the morning. “The perfect place to have a long life together.”

“To raise a family.” The warmth of his hand rubbing my back is transferred, and I rest my head on his shoulder.

He kisses my head, and I relish this moment—everything about it—from him to the view, the memories and the future.

Before long, we pack up and get back in the Blazer. After spending a few minutes misting and preening the bonsais, I climb up front and buckle in. “Surely, having sex with you in the great outdoors earned me a bad girl title.”

He starts the engine and chuckles. Pulling away, he says, “Nah, that’s not the part that made you a bad girl last night.”

“Then what did?”

He cocks an eyebrow and then waggles both. “When you begged me to have sex even though we didn’t have a condom.”

“Oh, right.” Tapping my chin, I nod. “I forgot about that.”

Epilogue

Joshua

Two months later . . .

I rush in the door, expecting to see her, but I don't. "Chloe?" This apartment is tiny, so finding her shouldn't be difficult. "Chloe?" I drop the bag on the coffee table and head for the bedroom.

"In here."

Following the sound of her voice, I narrow it down to the bathroom. Passing the empty spot that used to hold her treadmill years ago, I don't miss it one damn bit. We run outside in the fresh air or burn off the calories in bed. Our love will always move us forward, never stuck in one place. That's who we are for each other, pushing each other to be better, learning to love bigger.

Moving into her old apartment building while we build our dream home by the lake made sense. I'm close to the diner, and she's near the hospital. It feels good to be in the space where it all started. Where we began.

Opening the bathroom door, I find her sitting on the edge of the tub crying. Seeing my wife in pain guts me. I go to her, kneeling, and bringing her into an embrace. "What's wrong?"

With tear-streaked cheeks, she looks at me. "Joshua, tell me you love me."

"I love you." I run my fingers over the apples of her cheeks before lifting to kiss each one. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's just all so right. We are. Our life. Everything."

As much as I try, I don't think I'll ever fully understand women. "I don't understand why you're crying then."

Her arm flies up, and she points at Frankie and Dwayne Evans. "Because that happened." I can riddle my way through this. Scratching over my chin, I turn back to her, but before I can ask again, she says, "You should see for yourself."

Standing, I move to the bathroom cabinet and see the usual stuff, except for one. "This little pot?"

"That's Frankie's and Dwayne Evan's baby pot. I'm going to try to

propagate.” She snuffles, rubbing her hand over her stomach

I’m not sure this news warranted a *get home stat* text, but I keep my mouth shut when it comes to that. “That’s cool, but I’m still lost.” Crossing her arms over her chest, she tilts her head. “I’m clearly missing the obvious.”

She nods, a restrained grin fighting to be seen. “Look inside the pot, Evans.”

A rational man might react differently, but I never claimed to be. I blink and then blink again. “What is that?”

“What do you think, *Daddy?*”

Staring down at the white stick, I read the word over and over again. My gaze darts to her again. “You’re pregnant?”

She stands and comes to my side, wrapping herself around me. “I’m pregnant.”

The tears make a lot more sense now. I swipe at my own that are weighing heavy in the corners of my eyes. I hug her, kiss her head and then caress her face. “We’re having a baby.”

A giggle escapes her. “We are.”

“I didn’t think life could get better, but you showed me.”

“Pfft. Since I couldn’t do this alone, let’s just call it even.”

“Even.” I kiss her again, letting those annoying tears fall because not only did she make me the happiest man when she married me but she’s making me a dad. “Thank you.”

Her hands cover mine, and my wife rests her head against me. “Bigger than the sky.

“Bigger than the universe.”

She says, “I also propagated the bonsai. It’s a great day all around.”

Her stomach growls. “Did I hear the crinkle of a bag? Did you bring me food?”

I chuckle. “I did.”

“You’re the best.” A kiss is planted on my chin before she heads out of the bathroom. I give Dwayne Evans a little fist bump against his pot. “Way to go, man. You’re going to be a dad, too.”

When I enter the living room, she has her nose stuck in the bag. “Smells heavenly.

“I brought you the special.”

Catching my eyes, she winks. “I thought I got the special every night.”

When she opens the container, her smile has me feeling like the luckiest

man in the world. “You brought me chicken and dumplings? Just like the first time.”

“It all comes back to chicken and dumplings.” Wrapping my arms around her from behind, I kiss her neck and rest my hands on her stomach.

She’s still working on finding balance. She doesn’t half-ass anything. But I found my inner peace when I found her.

We were once many things—young, naïve, in love, apart, together again, and the six years we pretend don’t exist. It all comes back to us because we were once, but we are again, forever. Hope and salvation for each other and *always meant to be*.

We even have the tattoos to prove it.

* * *

It’s been an honor to have you read my story. Please consider leaving a review on Amazon and Goodreads.

You Might Also Enjoy

Recommendations - Two books I think you'll enjoy reading after *We Were Once*. Both are stand-alone that will grab your heart and carry it through the story.

Missing Grace - You will be on the edge of your seat with your heart on the line as two soul mates fight for the future stolen from them.

[READ NOW](#)

Spark - Lucky's Bar was playing The Crow Brothers' music. Meet these up-and-coming rock star brothers and the fierce women they fall for. *Spark* is all the heart and passion, depth of characters, and originality of *We Were Once*.

[READ NOW](#)

Missing Grace

Copyright © 2017 by S.L. SCOTT

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Ben Edwards

He remembered, almost like it was yesterday. It wasn't, but he relived every second of that morning like it was, hoping to find the one clue he missed . . .

She opened the door, but stopped before leaving. Large tears clouded the beautiful hazel eyes he could describe from memory. Every color reflected a different emotion, and he loved that he could read her so clearly. This morning the colors were blurred like their emotions. "I've got to go or I'll miss my flight." Her tone was remorseful and hurt, and he hated it. "Are you really going to let me leave like this, Ben?" A little stupid and a lot hurt, he didn't reply. "We'll talk later. I love you."

Like his attention, he withheld something he had always given her so freely, dead set on proving a point to her. He felt weak under the weight of the argument they just had. She would hear how wounded he was if he spoke, as the sound of his heart breaking would be evident in his voice.

He couldn't have that.

Ben had never demanded it be this year or even the next. He just wanted their relationship to be a priority in her life again. It was the promotion this year, but another opportunity would come the next, and where would that leave them? He had always been supportive. He wanted nothing more than for her to have the success she'd worked so hard for, but at what price?

The life they had planned together?

Him?

This time he would hold strong and remain silent. He would let her walk out without telling her how much he loved her and watch her go to the cab. Her shoulder-length chestnut-colored hair moved over her neck when she turned and looked up. The smile was faint, but he caught it.

Guilt settled in the longer he stood there, long past when the taxi had pulled away from the curb. It wouldn't change anything if he went to work, but he went anyway.

By the time he sat down at his desk to start on a new building design in Loyal Heights, he couldn't take it. It was only an argument. That's all. There had been others, and they had always resolved and recovered in the past. He was being hardheaded and could admit it, so he got online and ordered

flowers. He wanted them waiting in her hotel room when she walked in. He wanted her to know he was sorry. She often said they had forever, and she was right. It was dumb to fight over something they had a lifetime to figure out.

They were getting married in a month. That was the continuance of the forever they already shared. She'd have the flowers for the three days they'd be apart and then he would shower her with more when she got home. She deserved it. He'd make it up to her so she felt cherished and heard. God, he missed her already.

Four hours passed.

Four hours. She didn't call when she landed, so he called her instead and left a message. "I was an ass. I'm sorry. I love you. Call me."

Four hours and fifteen minutes.

There was no use in trying to work. He couldn't focus on the blueprint in front of him, so he called again and left another message. "I'm sorry. Call me."

Five hours.

"Hey, just checking on you. I thought you were going to Chicago, but maybe I've got an old schedule. Call me as soon as you land."

Five hours and thirty minutes.

"Call me. I'm starting to worry." He had been worried, but he didn't want to sound like a psycho for worrying too soon.

Six hours.

A bad feeling sank from his heart into the pit of his stomach. Sitting at his laptop, he looked up the schedule she sent last week in an email. Locating today's date, he said, "Chicago," confirming what he thought. Plugging her flight number into the airline site, there were no delays listed. The plane, in fact, had landed on time. Landed on time, three words that echoed through his mind.

She should have landed.

She should have turned her phone on.

She should have called by now.

None of those things had occurred.

Obtaining the hotel's number from the email, he called.

"No, sir, she hasn't checked in."

The verification crushed his hope. A few excuses of consolation came—traffic was bad today with the rain and worsening conditions—but they didn't

comfort him. “We’ll give her this message when she arrives.”

Ben felt ill. Something was wrong. He knew it, felt it deep down. He needed to hear her voice . . . to know she was okay.

That opportunity never came.

She never called Ben.

Her cell phone was never turned back on.

She never checked in to her hotel room.

She never arrived to her business meetings.

Her family and best friend never heard from her again.

Grace was gone, and Ben was left to exist in what remained of their life.

She’d disappeared into thin air.

Vanished . . .

Continue Reading MISSING GRACE today. [CLICK HERE](#)

Spark - The Crow Brothers

Copyright © 2018 by S.L. SCOTT

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Jet Crow

Subtle scents of cinnamon mix with the taste of whiskey on her skin. I lick her from collarbone to the back of her ear, her moans enticing me to take more than a gentle share of what I want.

I'm well past hooking up with groupies, but something drew me to the beautiful brunette. Under the bright spotlight of that stage, my eyes found hers as I sang about finding the missing piece of me. Maybe it was the way she pretended not to care—catching my eyes and then turning away as if she was too shy to come speak to me, but too good to be bothered. It didn't matter. I was already caught up in her as much as she was caught up in me.

The set ended, and I made my way over to the mystery woman, the one who hid in the dark of the bar just as two shots were served. I took the shot of Fireball and then took her home shortly after.

Fuck. She feels good.

Hard little body, but soft in all the right places. Tits that fill my large hands and legs that spread enough for me to squeeze between her thighs. I bet she wouldn't reach my shoulders in heels. Speaking of, "Keep them on."

I like the feel of the leather against my lower back, the hard heel scraping across my skin when she tries to power play me by tightening around my waist and pulling me closer. I didn't ask her to my bedroom. I didn't have a chance. What started out as laughing while we shared a two a.m. snack of Cheetos, hummus, and whiskey turned into me eating her as a snack on top of my kitchen counter. I don't ever do that with a one-nighter, but damn if she didn't make me want to break more rules with her.

She kisses me like a woman in need of water, taking as much as she wants while pressing her heels into my ass. The heat between us emanates until I'm dragging my shirt off to try to cool down.

I knew she was different the moment she opened her mouth back at the bar. "You sing rock with so much soul. Who hurt you?"

"No one gets close enough to do me any harm."

"That's a pity."

"It's a pity I've never been hurt?"

"No, it's a pity you've never loved anyone enough to get hurt."

My heart started beating for what felt like the first time as I looked into her sultry eyes. I could blame the booze, but I can't lie to myself. She had me thinking twice about things I never considered once before.

Who was this woman?

Even with our stomachs full, we weren't satisfied. She dragged me by the belt down the hall to my bedroom. Her clothes were off and mine quickly followed before we tumbled into bed.

Fast. I want to fuck her fast and hard, but every time our eyes connect, there's such sadness found in her grays that I slow down. Wanting her to hold the contact, I cup her cheek. "Hannah?"

Her eyes slowly open, the long lashes framing the lust I find between them. "What?" she asks between heavy breaths.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm good."

"Just making sure."

She runs her hands up my neck and into the hair on the back of my head. "I'm sure." Pulling me down to her, our mouths are just a few inches apart when she whispers, "I want you. I want to do this."

Shy isn't something I'd call her, considering we were in my bed two hours after meeting. I like a woman who knows what she wants, and Hannah knows. And fuck if it isn't a turn-on that she wants me.

I nod before kissing her, getting lost in the soft caresses of her tongue mingling with mine and the feel of her nails lightly scraping my scalp as she holds me close.

We don't know each other, but I already know when I slip my fingers under the lace and into her wetness, she purrs for me. When I kiss behind her left ear, her back arches. When I press my erection against her to seek relief, her kisses become more frenzied.

When I slide my bare chest down hers, leaving a wet trail of kisses and taking the lace that divides us down as I go lower, her breath audibly catches. My body reacts—hardening for her, craving her.

Reaching over, she takes the glass of whiskey on the nightstand and sips, her eyes staying on mine as I slip the thong from her ankles and spread her legs wider. And somehow, desire replaces her sadness. In the dim light, her gray eyes appear bluer. I close my eyes and breathe her in—cinnamon.

She hands me the glass, and I take it. Finishing the amber liquid, I let it coat my mouth and burn on the way down. The ice clatters in the glass, so I

fish it out and let it roll around my tongue while she watches. Placing it between my lips, I run it between hers. Her fingers tighten in my hair, tugging, urging me for more. “You like that, baby?”

“So much.”

I crush the ice and swallow, ready to swallow her instead. I take her sweet pussy with my mouth, kissing and sucking until she’s squirming under me. I flick my gaze up and visually trace her breasts and then go higher to see the underside of her jaw as she presses her head into the pillow beneath her.

Playing her body with my tongue like my fingers play my guitar, I set her on fire, feeling the burn deep inside. “I want to be buried inside you.”

“I want that, Jet. I want you,” she says, her body sinking into the mattress as she comes back to me from the high.

I grab a condom from where I tossed a few on the nightstand when we came crashing in here on a high of alcohol to continue what was started in the kitchen. Sticking the packet between my teeth, I rip it open and sit up.

Hannah lifts on her elbows, eyeing my body unashamedly. “Three crows,” she says, eyeing my tattoos. “For three brothers.”

“We all have them.”

“They’re sexy on your bicep.” A wry grin appears. “How are you so fit if you drink every night?”

Chuckling, I continue to cover my cock and reply, “I do a lot of damn sit-ups.”

“Every last damn one you do is worth it.”

“What’s your trick for staying in shape?” I ask, bending over and biting her hip just enough to tease her into thinking I’ll break the skin. I won’t, but I like the indentation from my teeth on her body.

“I like to fuck.”

Shit. “You’ve got a dirty mouth.”

“Maybe Jet Crow’s just the one to help me clean it up.”

Positioning myself above her, I angle my hips until I’m pressing against her entrance. “I have no intention of keeping this clean when it’s so much more fun to play dirty.”

Lying back, her chest rises and falls heavy with each breath. Her words starting to stick to her throat when she speaks. “With that handsome face, I have no doubt you use your looks to get what you want.”

“I know how to use more than my looks,” I start, pushing in just enough to feel her heat wash through me, “to get what I want.” I push the rest of the

way when her thighs butterfly for me. Seated deep inside her body, I close my eyes, the warm sensations taking over. On instinct, I move, and she moans.

I pick up my pace, but when I rise up on my elbows, I pause. *Fuck.* I shake my head.

“What is it, Jet? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I’m quick to reply, hoping she doesn’t see how much she’s affecting me. What the fuck? I just met her, but when I close my eyes, it’s not just the high of good sex taking over my mind. Normally, I don’t pay a lot of attention to the body beneath me. Why should I? They only want me for one thing. But with Hannah? The girl with the haunted eyes? I want to erase the sadness. I want to replace her melancholy with other emotions.

What. The. Fuck?

Just fucking move.

We have chemistry, but I want more than just a physical connection with this woman. I want to know why she was alone tonight. Why she was drinking shots at the bar? Why she ordered me one before she knew me? I just want to know her.

Fucking move, Crow.

I do. Finally. But it’s tainted with thoughts of tomorrow and hoping she stays tonight. *Fuck.*

This is just sex. Sex. Just a good time. *Focus.*

God, she feels amazing. *Too good.* “So good.”

A warm hand caresses my cheek, and I open my eyes to find hers on me already. She smiles. “So good.” Lifting up, she kisses me, dragging me out of my head and into her world. Her mystery is an aphrodisiac, and I want to learn all her secrets. Will she let me into her mind? It’s a place I could lose myself forever in if I’m not careful.

Hannah isn’t just another pretty face. She won me over the first time I saw her with that come-hither stare and devilish tilt of her lips.

We exhaust ourselves, pouring my soul into hers while hers fills me. As I hold her in the aftermath of ecstasy, I whisper into her hair, “Stay.”

Turning her head, there’s just enough light to see a flicker of happiness flaming in her eyes. “Ask me tomorrow,” she replies with a small teasing smile as she closes her eyes and snuggles her back to my chest.

“I will.”

I did. When her eyes open the next morning, I toss my cigarette out the

window, lean forward, and ask her to stay. While she gets dressed, I tell her I want to know her mind as well as I know her body. I confess too much too soon, more than I have to anyone in years.

She listened with a sly smile peeking through, her eyes brighter in the daylight, her worries seem to have lifted. When she kneels before me, she says, “You were the best time I ever had.”

I’m tempted to tell her she’s my worst. I hate feeling this way—reliant. Somehow, I’ve kept my emotions in check, a lock without a key for years.

Then she shows up with the right bow and shoulder, her cuts and tip fitting inside, the anatomy of a key made to unlock the deepest parts of me.

My chance starts slipping away as she does. I offer her coffee, to make her breakfast, and then I offer her a ride back to her car downtown where she parked behind the small bar where we met. I offer her anything to keep her from leaving. I don’t offer my heart and I don’t beg, but I offer her what I can.

The blue electric car surprises me. I mistakenly took her for a sports car or something less reliable and more rebellious. Her sexually carefree demeanor juxtaposed against her mysterious side fascinates me. Hearing the alarm click off and watching her open the car door, I know she’s different. I felt it last night; not just in the way we connected, but in the way she makes me feel. “Maybe I’ll see you around?”

“Maybe. I just moved here.”

“I can show you around.”

“I don’t have a lot of free time right now, so I don’t get out much.”

Her jeans hug the curves of her hips, and I like the way she’d knotted my band’s shirt, causing it to hug her upper body and exposing the skin of her stomach. Those boots that rubbed against my ass last night look just as sexy on her today. “Well, if you do, maybe you can come see the band play again.”

Just before she slides into the driver’s seat, she stops and looks back at me. Resting my elbow out the open window, I watch the sway of her hips as she comes back to me. *Come back to me.*

She lifts up on her toes and kisses me, our tongues meeting slick against each other’s. Leaning back, she says, “I had a good time with you, Jet.” Lowering back on her heels, she looks disappointed, that sadness making her eyes gray again. I miss the fire of the blue.

“I had a good time, too.”

“My life is complicated. It’s really not even my own these days.”

I’m pathetic for saying anything to get more time with her, but it’s worth a shot to explore our connection from last night. “Maybe I can help uncomplicate things.”

“I wish you could. My cousin is sick, and I’m here to help her out. She needs me, but she also has a young son. His mom’s illness has taken a toll. I need to be there for him.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

When she touches me, I savor the feel of her nails trailing through my hair. For a foolish split second, I think she’s changed her mind, my chest feeling fuller as hope expands. Then the bubble bursts as she says, “If I get some free time, you’ll be the first person I look up.”

“We could make it easy and exchange numbers.”

“That comes with expectations, and I don’t want to hurt or disappoint you. If last night is all we get, it was pretty damn good.”

“Yeah,” I reply, already disappointed I won’t know how to contact her. I sit back, take her hand, and bring it to my lips. I kiss it once and then again, pressing the tip of my tongue to her skin. “Take care of yourself.”

Maybe I don’t hide my feelings as well as I thought. Lifting up once more, she kisses my temple, then whispers, “The weather is too nice for such a sorrowful goodbye.”

“Then let’s not say it at all.”

Nodding, she pushes away gently and returns to her car, opens the door, and slips in. With one foot still firmly on the ground, she looks back. “Take care of yourself, Jet.”

Continue Reading Spark today. [CLICK HERE](#)

Also by S.L. SCOTT

To keep up to date with her writing and more, visit her website: www.slscottauthor.com

To receive the Scott Scoop about all of her publishing adventures, free books, giveaways, steals and more:

[CLICK HERE](#)

Join S.L.'s Facebook group here: [S.L. Scott Books](#)

[Audiobooks on Audible - CLICK HERE](#)

Complementary to We Were Once

[*Missing Grace*](#)

[*Until I Met You*](#)

The Crow Brothers (Stand-Alones)

[*Spark*](#)

[*Tulsa*](#)

[*Rivers*](#)

[*Ridge*](#)

[*The Crow Brothers Box Set*](#)

Hard to Resist Series (Stand-Alones)

[*The Resistance*](#)

[*The Reckoning*](#)

[*The Redemption*](#)

[*The Revolution*](#)

[*The Rebellion*](#)

The Everest Brothers (Stand-Alones)

[*Everest - Ethan Everest*](#)

[*Bad Reputation - Hutton Everest*](#)

[*Force of Nature - Bennett Everest*](#)

[The Everest Brothers Box Set](#)

[DARE - A Rock Star Hero \(Stand-Alone\)](#)

The Kingwood Series

[SAVAGE](#)

[SAVIOR](#)

[SACRED](#)

[SOLACE](#) - Stand-Alone

[The Kingwood Series Box Set](#)

Playboy in Paradise Series

[Falling for the Playboy](#)

[Redeeming the Playboy](#)

[Loving the Playboy](#)

[Playboy in Paradise Box Set](#)

Talk to Me Duet (Stand-Alones)

[Sweet Talk](#)

[Dirty Talk](#)

Stand-Alone Books

[Missing Grace](#)

[Until I Met You](#)

[Drunk on Love](#)

[Naturally, Charlie](#)

[A Prior Engagement](#)

[Lost in Translation](#)

[Sleeping with Mr. Sexy](#)

[Morning Glory](#)

[From the Inside Out](#)

FOLLOW ME

To keep up to date with her writing and more, visit S.L. Scott's website:

[**CLICK HERE**](#)

To receive the newsletter about all of her publishing adventures, free books, giveaways, steals and more:

[**CLICK HERE**](#)

Acknowledgments

Thank you for trusting me with your time and your heart. I know you have so many options for books to read, so that you chose mine means the world to me.

I have an incredible team of people who help bring my books to life from listening to me rattle a million ideas to editing, covers and everyone in between. Thank you! It means more to me than you know.

I need to send my love, my heart, and my everything to my family who not only support me and my dreams, but lose endless hours as I pursue this path. You are my everything. I choose you <3

About the Author

To keep up to date with her writing and more, her website is [CLICK HERE](#) to receive her newsletter with all of her publishing adventures and giveaways, sign up for her newsletter: [CLICK HERE](#)

Instagram: [CLICK HERE](#)

To receive a free book now, TEXT “slscott” to 77948

For more information, [CLICK HERE](#)

