

A TWISTED TALE
BOOK ONE

Entangled



R. PHILLIPS

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Entangled, A Twisted Tale #1

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Playlist

Just Like Heaven by The Cure

About A Girl by Nirvana

Elysium by Bear's Den

Wildest Dreams by Taylor Swift

The End by JPOLND

Never Let Me Go by Florence + The Machine

What's Left of You by Chord Overstreet

Something About You (ODESZA Remix) by Hayden
James, ODESZA

Hold My Girl (Acoustic Version) by George Ezra

Take on the World by You Me At Six

Cloud by Elias

For the fighters.

*The broken ones who've pieced themselves together time
and again,*

*knowing it's not about who you were when you fell,
but rather the person you become when you rise.*

*And that you do always rise,
even if it's a thousand and one times.*

“Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice
to deceive!”

-Sir Walter Scott

Important Notice

This book contains explicit content, profanity, multiple love interests, and topics that may be sensitive to some readers, such as murder/suicide. While these events do not take place during the course of this book, they are referenced in regard to the main character's childhood.

Recommended for 18+

Prologue

They say you never forget your first love. That it leaves an imprint on your brain in a way no other love does and that you go through the rest of your life chasing that feeling again and again. Seeking out similar people in a desperate attempt to recapture it. It's the ghost that haunts you, slipping around the corner and disappearing right when you think you've caught a glimpse of it again.

Depressing, isn't it? The idea that we spend the rest of our lives trying to close the wound of our first love with the stitches we take from those that come after.

And while that may be true, if you agree with the scientists, that is. I'd argue that your second love is just as important, because it's the love that reminds you that the world didn't end with the first. That what was broken can be made new and that our capacity for love is endless. In some ways, the second can shine even brighter than the first, because it brings that part of you back to life.

One shapes you and breaks you and one remakes you.

I fell in love with them thirty-five million heartbeats apart and an ocean away.

One at the scratch of a pen and the other with the strum of a note.

I used to think it was the worst kind of bullshit when someone said you could love two people at once, that they were fickle, undeserving of the love they received. I swore I would never be one of those people. Here's the thing about life though; it has a funny way of shoving the judgments you make of others right back in your face, of forcing growth upon you. The universe really is brilliant that way, pushing us to our limits just to see what cracks open from our depths.

And the truth is that I loved them both. In different ways and the same. At different points in time and in breathtaking synchronicity. Apart and together. For the way one forced me

to feel love for the first time and how the other brought that feeling back to life again.

I never foresaw our worlds colliding. How the past and present would crash together and leave us with nothing but a blinding kaleidoscope of pain. How the threads of all of our fates were already so inextricably intertwined from the moment of those first meetings. Our love grew from the roots of a tree I didn't realize was tainted until it was too late.

But even knowing what I do now... the excruciating pain, the devastating loss. I wouldn't change it. Not one thing. Because we loved each other in a way that bound us all. Never to be the same again.

And maybe my selfishness is unforgivable, of being unable to choose. But they were both selfish enough to love me too. Even when they shouldn't have. Even when they knew the secrets they kept would ruin us. Even when we lost each other.

That's what they don't tell you about love though.

That it can be a selfish thing, a beast that's never ending in its demand for more, for the infinity of that one person. Or, in my case, two. And maybe that makes it okay, or maybe it just makes all of our actions all the more unforgivable.

Maybe we all should have been better.

I'll let you decide.

Chapter 1

Present Day

I remember the moment I became an orphan. The way the stars from my night-light spun on the ceiling when the policeman woke me up in my bed. The pity on the faces of the first responders as I was carried outside. Overhearing someone whisper that it was a miracle I hadn't woken when it happened. The crack of thunder in the night that bellowed out as if the heavens mourned alongside me. But I didn't fully grasp what had happened until years later, and by then, I was thousands of miles away.

Long removed from the town that held such tragedy for me.

Pulling into the driveway of my gram's old house, I take in the small home she left me and frown despite the pretty house staring back at me. I barely remembered the place. The old yellow house, so classically Southern with a wraparound porch and a big oak tree standing proudly in the yard, evoked nothing but a blank emptiness. At least it seemed to be well maintained except for some overgrowth in the bushes abutting the front porch. I'd probably forget to but I really should thank Yvie for that.

Grams had passed about three years ago of a heart attack in her sleep but I hadn't been to her house since I was six. Since the day of my parents' funeral. The day after that, Aunt Yvie had put us on a plane to her home in California and I had never been back to Landing Point, Alabama since. Grams had always visited us, neither of them wanting to bring me back here. God only knew why she had left the house to me and even I couldn't properly formulate a complete answer as to why I was back here today.

I just knew I needed to do this. To find closure for some part of my life at least.

Putting my car into park, I push open the door with a tired sigh and am hit by the wall of humidity that is Southern air. The faint hint of salt in it tingles and makes me freeze up. Gram's house must be closer to the beach than I realized. Just

great. My luck from this past year really was holding strong. I push back against the pull of memories with an internal middle finger salute and walk determinedly to the back of my matte-black Range Rover. Grabbing my suitcase from the trunk, I close it and give the car an affectionate pat.

The car was a college graduation present from Yvie, who had been my father's older sister, my gram's daughter, and my saving grace. And while I didn't need her to buy me a car considering the sizable trust my parents had left me, I wasn't about to turn it down either. The car was just plain badass. Plus, Yvie was a highly sought after Hollywood entertainment lawyer, so it wasn't like she couldn't afford it. She had joked when she'd given it to me that I needed a sturdy SUV considering my penchant for living life full throttle and she wasn't entirely wrong. I had dubbed the car Franny the Nanny that day and the name had stuck.

I say a quick prayer to whatever gods may be that the thing doesn't split open along the way before lugging my overly full bag up the driveway and the front porch staircase. Unable to resist the urge to give the staircase a smug look in victory after I make it to the top, because you know, on the inside I'm still a five-year-old. I turn to face the door and come to a halt as my stomach gives a flip of nerves.

It's just a door. Just a house.

I stare at the white paint that's faded at the edges from years of use and remind myself that my parents didn't even live here when it happened.

It's Gram's house, El. No ghosts live here.

Steeling myself with a deep breath, I dig into the back pocket of my cutoff shorts and pull out the key that's been embedding its shape permanently into my ass the whole drive out from California. I quickly unlock the door and push it open, forcing myself forward and ripping the Band-Aid.

The stale air of the house greets me and I look around curiously, seeing a small living room to my right with a plain couch and two chairs. No TV in sight. A square-shaped kitchen lies to my left with white cupboards and a small

breakfast table, while a narrow hallway shoots straight down the center of the house, leading to what I'm guessing are the bedrooms. I leave my suitcase in the entry and walk aimlessly into the kitchen, opening the fridge out of habit, unsurprised when nothing but empty shelves stare back at me. Yvie had warned me that while she had hired someone to maintain the place, everything had been cleared out after Gram's passing.

My phone vibrates in the back pocket of my shorts and I pull it out, lips twitching when I see who's calling.

"What, did you have this place armed with motion sensors or something to alert you when I arrived?"

"No. That's a great idea though. Wish I would've thought of that," Yvie greets me cheekily. "I might have calculated your estimated arrival time using Google maps."

"May I remind you, dear aunt, that you let me lounge away in Costa Rica last summer, then bounce all over Europe for the rest of the year and weren't the least bit concerned about my safety," I tease. "I'm pretty sure I can handle Landing Point, Alabama. The town has like four stoplights, in total."

"Ha. Ha. Very funny, El."

"Seriously, I think it'd be impossible to get lost here even if I tried."

"I know, I know. I keep reminding myself you're twenty-three and fully capable of taking care of yourself. It's just... this is different."

"I know." My voice softens in understanding as I walk aimlessly from the kitchen to the living room, eyes wandering. "But I'll be okay."

"Plus, I knew Stef was keeping tabs on you all last summer before he and the guys met up with you in Europe."

"Dammit." I sigh dramatically. "I knew he was ratting to you."

"Are you sure you want to do this? Be there?"

"Yes."

Asked and answered for the millionth and one time, Yvie.

Turning to the fireplace, my gaze locks onto the picture sitting dead center on the mantel. “I need to do this for me.”

Why the hell did Grams keep that thing?

“Okay.” Tense silence sounds through the phone for a beat. “Call if you need me though, promise?”

“Promise,” I lie, ending the call before she can get a second wind.

What my aunt didn’t know couldn’t hurt her, and after all that she had given me, given up to raise me... I wasn’t about to be the one to let her know all those hours of billable therapy might not have had the outcome she desired.

I stare at the picture on the mantel, eyes narrowing on it as I try to find any little clue and an uncomfortable mix of feelings rises within me. Too many for me to name even if I stood here for an hour, not that I’d care to. They look so happy, my parents. My mother Nadia, with her pert nose and full lips. Light-golden skin glowing on her willowy frame and platinum hair lifted by some breeze that faded away to nothing long ago. Looking at her is like looking in the mirror, warm and familiar. But it’s my father Cane’s eyes that make me pause. Those are my eyes. The huge round shape and steel-gray color an exact replica of my own. Their smiling faces are pressed up against each other as if they hadn’t a care in the world, a small pink bundle of a baby tucked between them.

And maybe they had been happy in that moment, or maybe it had been just as utterly deceptive then as it had turned out to be in the end.

I jerk my gaze away from the picture, hurrying away from the ghosts haunting the living room and back into the kitchen.

God, I needed to get out of here for a while. Find some food and liquid courage.

Not necessarily in that order.

Otherwise my ass might hop back into Franny and drive right the hell back out of town.

Looking down at the time on my phone, I see that it's almost half past seven despite the streaks of summer light lingering in the sky. That settles it. I'll find a grocery store tomorrow... and a bar tonight.

Apparently, the town of Landing Point was sorely lacking in the area of alcohol and food establishments. After a quick Google search, I discovered that the town had a total of four restaurants and three bars. Not willing to risk going to a place that might not have a liquor license, I quickly focused on the bars. Two out of the three had only foggy pictures on their Google tab, making me think I was more likely to get salmonella at them than a good time. So I had chosen the third, a bar called Adam's Place.

I walk up the steps of the white plank building and spot a ramshackle sign that lets me know I'm in the right place before pulling open the door. The smell of beer and cigarettes hangs in the air as I step in, scanning the space and seeing the bar sitting along the back wall. I quickly make my way to it, weaving my way through the scattering of tables situated throughout the space and noting the small stage that sits to my right. The place definitely wasn't anything like what I'd find in LA, but it's clean and after the two-day drive I just endured, I can make it work.

I feel eyes follow me from every direction as I head to the bar at the back, my pin-straight platinum hair trailing behind me. The place isn't packed yet but the locals here have already spotted me and know I'm not one of their own. Looking from side to side with a small smirk, I seek out those eyes, loving the thrill I get when the onlooker's eyes dart away, embarrassed at having been caught.

Come on now, guys, if you can't look me in the eye then you shouldn't be looking at all.

Taking a seat at the bar, I eye the selection of liquors in front of me, ignoring the tequila as if it's poison and waiting for a bartender to appear.

Vodka or gin, vodka or gin, vodka or gin.

My mind mulls over the question while I wistfully regret not having snagged a few of my bold California cabs out of Stef's cellar before making the trip out here. But then, I'd probably be at Gram's house drinking alone and even I knew that wasn't a good idea under my current circumstances. A door opens behind the bar drawing my gaze and I see the bartender finally appear, lugging a keg over to the taps.

I run my eyes over him in appreciation and am surprised as hell when I feel attraction flare to life at the sight of him. He's tall, really tall, probably six-three, with a body covered in suntanned skin and crowned by dirty-blond hair that's pulled back into a messy bun, a few strands escaping at the back. His build is lean and athletic, broad shoulders tapering down to a slim waist. A swimmer's body if ever there was one. He's dressed casually in faded jeans and a plain blue T-shirt, giving off a careless vibe. As if he knows he doesn't have to put much effort into looking good. And to top it all off, an intricate tattoo winds up his right arm, almost covering the skin completely in black ink.

Small towns had gorgeous bartenders apparently. Who would've thought?

Point one for Landing Point.

He doesn't notice me at first, focused on the task of hooking the keg up to the tap, which is fine by me. All the more time to ponder this surprising development. When he finally lifts his head and scans the bar, he stills when his eyes land on me.

"Be right with you," he calls out, eyes lingering for a moment before returning to his task.

"No need to rush on my account. I've been enjoying the view."

The words leave my mouth without thought, again, surprising the hell out of me, and I see his lips twitch in response.

It's been so long since I flirted with anyone that part of me is genuinely shocked that I said anything at all, much less that it came again so effortlessly. That part of me that had loved to

tease, to flirt, to play had died last summer on a beach in Costa Rica and I hadn't really felt the urge since. Until today. Maybe my abused heart had finally healed enough to decide it was time to move on... or maybe it had finally withered away and died completely. At the moment, I didn't particularly care which.

I watch him closely as he finishes hooking the keg up, wondering what makes him so special besides the obvious looks factor he has going for him.

He walks over while wiping his hands with a towel, lips pulling up into a welcoming grin. "What can I get for you?"

The moment our eyes meet, I feel the attraction spark between us, but then my mind stutters to a halt. The breath leaves my body as I stare into the depths of eyes so damn similar to *his*. Memories flood, pulling me under as waves crash through my mind.

"To drink?" he prompts, grin growing and dimples flashing at my apparent inability to form words at his appearance.

"Vodka soda. Two limes," I rattle off quickly, trying to shake off the sense of *déjà vu* as we continue to eye one another. My attraction reluctantly grows as I take in the rest of his face now that I've made it past the shock of his eyes. High cheekbones sit underneath his playful almond-shaped eyes while blond brows just a touch darker than his hair rest above them. His lips are a warm-rose color, the definition around them impossible for most girls to achieve with liner. A well-defined jaw and nose that looks like it might have been broken at some point only serves to accentuate his face even more. Everything about him screams carefree sensuality, evoking thoughts of deliciously unhurried pleasure.

And while every female part of me was responding to what I saw, that wasn't necessarily a good thing. The last thing I needed during this trip was another ghost haunting me. I had enough of them here already.

Pulling my eyes from him somewhat reluctantly, I search the counter for a menu while scoffing at myself internally. Of

course. Of course the one guy I was actually attracted to after my year of celibacy had to have eyes that reminded me of *him*.

I really was a therapist's wet dream.

"Does this place happen to have a good burger?" I ask, coming up empty in my search for a menu and trying to distract myself from the direction of my thoughts.

"The best in town."

"Great, I'll take one of those too."

"You are twenty-one, right?" He eyes me in a speculative manner, hesitating as he reaches for the vodka.

Probably because of my damn meltdown at seeing his eyes.

You cannot go through the rest of your life having a breakdown every time you meet someone with green eyes, El.

"Twenty-three actually." I throw him a bratty smirk. "And didn't your mother ever tell you it's rude to ask a woman's age?"

"She did." He shrugs, flashing those dimples at me again. "But you look just on this side of being a coed, so I had to ask."

"And how old are you?" I retort dryly. The guy doesn't look a day over twenty-eight.

"Twenty-five, if you must know." His eyes drift to mine again while he fills the mixer with soda. "No need to worry about me being legal," he adds with a playful wink.

"Hmm," I drawl out, looking him up and down as he makes my drink. "And here I would've guessed thirty."

"Ouch, Blondie." He laughs lightly, the sound melodic as he places the drink in front of me and drops in two limes. "Well, my high-maintenance coed... hold tight and I'll get that burger right out to you."

I narrow my eyes at him and cock my head to the side defensively. "What makes you think I'm high maintenance?"

He tosses me a grin over his shoulder while walking to the door behind the bar, eyes dancing with mischief. “The fact that you ordered two limes.”

Chapter 2

One Year Ago

Waves crash in the background as I stand at the counter of the small but lively beach bar in Jaco, Costa Rica. I was four days into the postgrad tour I had gifted myself and so far I had done nothing but pat myself on the back for the brilliant idea. That was probably the only perk of being an orphan. I could do pretty much whatever I wanted and as long as I didn't go too crazy, Yvie didn't hassle me too much over how I chose to spend my funds. In fact, she had been ecstatic to hear I was going on this trip. A chance to grow as a photographer, I had told her, to work on my portfolio in a different atmosphere. Along with basking in the sun and drinking questionable amounts of tequila, but I had figured it was best to leave that part out.

And so far... it was bliss.

Being here, thousands of miles away from anyone who knew my name, my story.

Granted, no one back home in LA had known about my past before Marcie, that bitch, had Googled me and outed it to the whole school in seventh grade. After that... well, no one had been able to look at me without that lingering pity peeking through the backs of their eyes. A part of them always remembering the sad little girl who had been orphaned by her parents' murder-suicide. Even in college, all it had taken was a handful of my old classmates and the next thing I knew, it seemed like there was always one person around who knew what had happened to me. The only exception had been Stef and the guys. The way they looked at me had never changed. Heathens that they are.

So I had learned to own myself, building up all of the pieces of me into something impenetrable. I had become the embodiment of life, burning so bold and bright that most of the time, it seemed to others like the shadows of the past couldn't touch me. But here... I was truly anonymous, a woman reborn, and I was embracing it. The opportunity that

came with travel to step into a whole new world and throw off the shackles of familiarity.

Which was how I had ended up in my current predicament, whose name was Tim. I had been at the expat bar near my hotel for all of sixty seconds before he had come up to me, asking if he could buy me a drink, and while he looked a little more preppy frat boy than I typically went for... I figured one drink couldn't hurt.

That had been my mistake.

I stare blankly and sip my añejo as he regales me with stories of his victories on the rowing team. Apparently, I was supposed to be impressed. Tim was an East Coast, Ivy League boy, and fit the stereotype perfectly. So much for originality. But he had bought me a drink so I figured the least I could do was finish it before I informed him that this love connection was, sadly, not going anywhere. I look down to see how much tequila I have left in my glass when the bodies in the bar suddenly shift and someone stumbles into me from behind, cold liquid pouring down the back of my arm and soaking the side of my long white sundress.

“Shit. I’m sorry,” a deep voice says, the rough tone of it pulling at me, demanding my attention.

I turn my head and my eyes trail up an impressively broad chest covered in a plain white T-shirt, the fabric a striking contrast against the dark-olive color of his skin. But it’s when I make it to his face that I pause, eyes locking with the deep-forest-green pair of the owner, struck speechless at the harsh beauty before me.

His face is a mosaic of harsh lines and forgiving curves, the lighting of the bar throwing it all into shadowy planes. Hooded green eyes sit between cheekbones that could cut glass and an unforgiving brow. The strength of his jaw ceding to the lush fullness of his lips, a perfect Cupid’s bow sitting dead center below his straight nose. His head is covered in short, dark-chocolate hair that’s carelessly tousled. The combination of his height and wide frame leaves me feeling tiny even though I stand at five foot eight.

There's something more to him though, as if you could put all of his features on someone else and it wouldn't have the same effect. He just has that *presence* about him. A dark kind of arrogance seeping from his skin.

But his eyes... they're what really pull me in. I've never seen eyes like that before, forest green flecked with pure night. Like looking through the leaf-covered branches of a forest at midnight.

His pupils dilate as he looks back at me, eyes rolling over my face as he takes me in, wearing an expression as surprised as I'm sure mine is.

I clear my throat to recover my voice and reach for some napkins. "No worries."

"At least it was beer." He lifts the bottle in his hand and his lips seem to ghost up as he takes a step toward me. "Nothing sticky to deal with there."

"No." I feel my own lips twitch in response. "Only the lingering smell of a brewery to deal with."

The dark in his eyes sparks with amusement at my comment and they flick down to my near-empty glass. "Let me make it up to you and buy you a drink."

I open my mouth to respond and pause, intuition whispering through me.

"I got her covered there, bud," Tim chimes in from behind me.

Shit. I had completely forgotten about him.

His eyes move over my shoulder to Tim and narrow, a look of dark humor filling them as they give him a once-over before coming back to rest on me. Waiting for my decision.

I've already made it.

But in spite of that I shrug and tilt my head in the quintessential what's a girl to do move. Fighting a smile when something like surprise flashes on his face. I could go with him now, give us both what we want, but the game is never fun if it's made too easy, it's gratification too quick. Everyone

wants to feel like they've won something at the end of the day. The pleasure that comes from the build far surpassing that of an easy conquest. It was a lesson I learned young. The amount of time I devoted to analyzing the inner workings of people's minds, their motivations, far surpasses that of my peers.

He conceals that flash of surprise quickly, face falling back into an arrogant look. His eyes linger on me for a moment as if he's not quite sure what to do now before darting to where Tim stands over my shoulder. That ghost of a smile pulls at his lips as his eyes come back to land on me and he leans down suddenly, bringing his head alongside mine.

His breath fans across my ear and I feel his fingers lightly brush my waist. "When you decide you're tired of playing with the children here... come find me."

My stomach flips as he stills, lingering, undoubtedly breathing me in, his body close enough now that I can feel the heat pouring off him. His fingertips caress my waist, leaving tingling trails in their wake and the sandalwood scent of him hits me full force when I breathe in.

There's nothing but dark heat in his eyes when he finally lifts his head and my own blood rushes in response, anticipation spreading through my veins. My body is mourning the loss of his heat already and part of me wants to say to hell with it but... all good things come to those who wait. I remain silent as he gives me one more look before reluctantly breaking our gaze and walking away.

Sometimes, when you meet someone, you just know the sex is going to be good. Right now, I'm pretty sure it's going to be earth shattering.

I watch from the corner of my eye as he walks to the other side of the bar and takes a seat at one of the tables along the wall. Leaning back in his chair and stretching his legs out, body completely at ease as his gaze drifts around the bar aimlessly and he sips at his beer. Seemingly unbothered by the fact that he's sitting alone. But there's a sharpness to his gaze that belies his casual pose.

Vaguely, I hear Tim start to talk again about rowing, or his fraternity, or something I could really care less about. My mind has completely checked out. In spite of that, I drag my eyes back to him though, not wanting to look too obvious. I sip my añejo and try to appear interested, making the appropriate noises of affirmation to whatever it is he's talking about. Knowing that this is how the game is played. And it doesn't take long before the feel of a gaze from the other side of the bar hits me like a weight against my skin.

I fight the urge to look. Stubbornly ignoring the pull that demands my attention. But after several minutes, I'm unable to stop myself from trying to sneak a peek. The anticipation building is too much for me to resist. I let my gaze drift casually across the bar in his direction and it doesn't take long before my eyes find his night-forest ones looking directly back at me. As if he knew it was only a matter of time until he caught me.

My lips pull up into a smirk and his eyes narrow on me in consideration, his own lips twitching in turn. He breaks our gaze and raises his beer to signal a passing waitress, talking to her for a second before nodding to me. The waitress raises her head and looks at me, a smile flashing on her face before nodding her head in agreement to whatever it is he said. Their whole exchange has excitement filling me as I wonder what his play will be. I watch the waitress as she goes over to the radio behind the far side of the bar, scrolling through the out-of-date iPod hooked up to it before pressing play.

A few seconds later, I hear the first notes of upbeat '80s rock fill the air and my eyes fly back to find him across the bar. A savage kind of smirk on his lips as his eyes drill into me. He arches a brow at me in question as the first words of "Just Like Heaven" by The Cure play loudly through the bar and I can't help but throw my head back as laughter bursts from me.

If I wasn't a strictly no relationship girl, I might have said I had met my match. And apparently, my non-match match has great wit and taste in music. I throw him a quick wink and drain the last dregs of my añejo while catching the bartender's

eye. The croon of The Cure still playing in the background as I dig some cash out of the pocket of my white sundress.

Thank God for dresses with pockets. I'd be lost without them.

"Hi," I greet the bartender brightly as he stops in front of me. "Can I have the rest of that bottle of añejo, please?"

At his look of hesitation, I slide the cash in my palm across the counter.

"This should cover it."

A smile spreads on the bartender's face as he pockets the cash, both of us knowing I easily just gave him twice what the bottle is worth. He drops it in front of me a few seconds later without a word. Grabbing the bottle from the counter, I turn to Tim, who is uncharacteristically silent for once.

"Listen, Tim, I'm sure you're a great guy but you're not for me," I tell him with a small smile, trying my best to be gentle even though it's not a strong suit of mine. "However, I wish you all the best and that you find the love of your life and make lots of little rowing team champions with her."

With one last apologetic shrug, I turn and start to walk across the bar, quickly locking eyes with my target. His intense gaze runs up and down the length of my body as I make my way to him and I feel it like a caress on my skin. As I come to stand before his table, our eyes remain locked and I feel something there between us, a pull that leaves me fighting the urge to step closer.

I take the seat across from him and fight the twitch of my lips, keeping my voice serious as I quote the song. "So are you going to show me that trick now?"

"The one that makes you scream?" he asks with equal gravity, leaning back in his seat. "Or the one that makes you love?"

"Well if you manage that second one, I'd consider it a miracle and tell you to call the pope. Then I might just run away with you."

A low, dark kind of laugh leaves him at my comment and he holds out his hand. “Coop.”

I take it, letting him enclose my hand briefly in his heated grip.

“Nice to meet you, Coop.” I nod to the bottle of añejo on the table. “I hope you like tequila.”

“It’ll do.” That savage smirk spreads across his ridiculously full lips again. “Although I thought I was supposed to buy you a drink.”

I shrug and stand. “Well I figured if we were going to drink I might as well make sure it’s something I like.” Grabbing the bottle from the table, I take a few steps toward the side of the bar that’s open to the beach before pausing to look back over my shoulder at him. “Coming?”

He eyes me for a moment, gaze considering before his lips ghost up and he stands. Shaking his head as if he can’t believe my blatant invitation.

The sound of his footfalls close in on me as I step out onto the beach and leave the bar behind. “You didn’t tell me your name.”

I throw him a bratty smirk over my shoulder and cock a brow in challenge as he comes up beside me. “Impress me and maybe by the end of the night I’ll tell you.”

Chapter 3

Present Day

I'm in the midst of sipping down the last dregs of my now watery vodka soda when the tempting bartender reappears from the back with my burger in hand. I keep my elbows on the bar and lips lowered to the straw, watching with narrowed eyes as he swaggers toward me, the easy confidence in his stride screaming that he's all kinds of trouble.

He sets my plate in front of me with a flourish and a grin, flashing those dimples. "Enjoy."

"Thanks," I mutter, lips still around my straw.

He stares at me with an amused expression for a moment before flashing those dimples again and swaggering down to the other end of the bar, greeting a few people who've arrived in his absence.

What the hell kind of bartender is actually that cheery? The only bartenders in LA that are that cheerful are either coked up or baked. But considering the fact that he's not talking at a hundred words per minute and that he hasn't fucked up my order up to this point I'm guessing he's neither. That only leaves two options. He's either one of those people who shits unicorns or he's trying to get in my pants. And from the spark I've seen in his eyes when he looks at me... I'd bet a whole hell of a lot on it being the latter.

I turn to my plate with a sigh of frustration and begin to pick at my fries. My mood circling the drain right along with my appetite as I try to ignore his presence at the other end of the bar.

Normal me, or normal for me, me. A year ago me. Well, that girl would have been totally on board with the idea of spending some time between the sheets with the tempting bartender. I mean, the guy is rocking a sexy man bun and that ink flowing up his right arm is just plain lickable. The problem is... well, the problem is *him*.

And my self-imposed celibacy.

I tried. I really did try to move on like a normal person. About six months after I left that beach in Costa Rica, a more than respectable amount of time to wait before forcing yourself to move on in my opinion. I tried to sleep with this guy I met in Norway, Joaquin.

Joaquin should have been the answer. He was good-looking with an accent, had brown eyes and was nice in a rich party boy kind of way. Pretty much everything about Joaquin was the polar opposite of *him*. I should have been jumping at the chance to get under his foreign body and put the past to rest. But much to both mine and Joaquin's horror, after numerous shots and a hot and heavy car ride back to his place... Well, I ended up in my bra and panties, sobbing over him in his bed and blubbering on about stars and oceans.

I woke up the next morning after that decidedly mortifying night and decided two things. One, me and the guys were getting the hell out of Norway, and two, my vagina was officially shut down. Indefinitely.

That's what you get for falling in love, El.

I really should've known better. Like... really.

All of which was why I was now avoiding the bartender like he was a rattlesnake as opposed to a man. I couldn't afford to have another semi-naked breakdown before I got what I came here for. Or well, ever. Breakdowns just really weren't my style... and neither was self-pity or cowardice, for that matter. My brows drop at the thought and I allow myself to sneak a peek toward the other end of the bar.

Screw it.

I definitely needed another drink before going back to Gram's house tonight, and at the very least my year of celibacy had earned me some eye candy to go along with that drink. Who knows, maybe the bartender was so cheery because he really was magical. He was the first guy to really spark something in me since he who shall not be named and at this point, my vagina was growing cobwebs.

I could just pretend his eyes were brown.

Problem solved.

Raising my empty drink, I catch his eye from where he stands chatting with customers at the other end of the bar and earn a nod of understanding along with a slight lift of his lips. I take advantage of my view and his distraction to skate my eyes down his body to where his faded jeans sit low on his hips, totally checking him out. He reaches up to grab a bottle from the top shelf and his shirt lifts just enough for me to see that slice of skin above his jeans. Dear Lord, I didn't think *V* cuts like that existed in real life. My stomach gives a little flutter right before his shirt drops down and I jerk my eyes back up to find his amused gaze on me. I see him hide a grin before swaggering back toward me, bottle in hand.

"I thought I'd break out the good stuff for an out-of-towner such as yourself." He comes to a stop in front of me with eyes full of mischief and places a bottle of Belvedere on the counter. "Unless something else caught your eye, that is?"

Tilting my head to the side, I cock a brow and pause in purposeful consideration. "To be decided," I quip.

He braces his hands on the bar, leaning in toward me. "I always have loved the satisfaction of a hard win."

Our eyes lock and playful energy winds through the air between us, making me feel lighter than I have in a long while. I lose the fight against the twitch of my lips and shake my head in reluctant amusement.

"Fine." I nod at him. "But if I'm drinking the nice stuff, so are you. So pour two."

"Done." He grabs two shot glasses from below the counter and pours the vodka for us.

"So tell me." I bring the vodka shot to my lips and throw it back before continuing. "What gave me away as being an out-of-towner?"

"You mean, besides the fact that I know the first and last name of every girl I've gone to school with since kindergarten?" He lifts his own shot to his lips and follows my lead in throwing back the whole thing.

“Yeah, besides that,” I drawl sarcastically, rolling my eyes and using an elbow on the bar to prop my head up in my hand.

“Well.” He braces his hands on the bar again and leans in toward me. Creating an intimate atmosphere despite the fact that the bar is beginning to fill up. “No one around here has quite the same look in their eyes as you do. We’re all pretty friendly, have known each other practically since birth, but you...”

He pauses and leans in even closer as if he’s about to share some great secret, bringing his face in close enough that I can see the brilliant gold flecks lighting up his green eyes like fireworks against an emerald sky. His close proximity drenches me in his scent and I’m hit by the smell of sea and something like spring. He smells like clean sheets blowing dry at the beach. The combination is refreshing, rolling over me like a cleansing breeze.

“You have city girl eyes,” he finishes with a low voice and a slight lift of his lips. “Confidently suspicious of the world around you. I’m betting one of the big ones, West Coast by the look of you and the lack of southern twang in your voice.”

His answer makes me pause and I rake my eyes over his face with new appreciation. Impressed by his insight despite the unease skirting through me at being read so easily.

“Well aren’t you just full of surprises,” I finally tell him, noting the clever glint in his eyes that belies his playful demeanor.

His hands slide wider on the bar as he dips his head and brings his mouth to the shell of my ear. “I always aim to both surprise and please, Blondie,” he whispers, voice melodic with the sensual promise, shocking the hell out of me and causing my breath to stutter.

I pull back and meet his playful eyes, feeling life spark deep inside of me, in a place that I thought was long dead and buried.

“Is that a promise?” I throw him a bratty smirk, noting the flash of surprise on his face.

“Always.”

“Then by all means... pour me another.”

Guilt threatens to rise and I push it back down with a forceful fuck you. I wasn't the one at fault here. The fact that I was here, that I was alone...

Shockingly, that wasn't on me.

A brilliant smile flashes across his face as he rises back up and grabs the bottle to pour us another shot. That smile really is something else. All disarming innocence and panty-dropping charm rolled into one potent package.

Pure trouble, that's what he is.

The kind that leaves a girl dazed and begging for more weeks later.

But maybe... maybe after spending a year trying to piece myself back together, maybe I had earned the right to enjoy a little trouble. And after last summer, well, I don't think there's anything left of my heart to risk at this point anyway.

I bring the shot to my lips and sip it, mild curiosity stirring at his lack of attention to the rest of the bar. “Do you typically ignore all your other patrons this way?”

“Not typically, no.” He flashes those dimples. “But Tiff and Kim got here while we've been talking so...” He trails off, nodding toward two women working their way through tables scattered around the bar as he does and I shoot my eyes their way. One is a short, middle-aged woman with red hair, while the other is an attractive brunette girl who looks a bit younger than me.

“Plus...” He shrugs in a self-deprecating sort of way. “I run the place for my aunt so I can enjoy a few liberties here and there.”

“Like breaking out the good stuff to flirt with a pretty girl?”

“When an opportunity I can't pass up presents itself... hell yeah.”

I snort a laugh and feel my tongue loosen up as the vodka hits me. “Good to know nepotism is alive and well even in small-town America.”

“Good to know not all city girls are so desperate for compliments they can’t call themselves pretty,” he fires back at me.

“What can I say?” I lean back in my chair and strike a confident pose. “I’m nothing if not a realist.”

A light laugh leaves him as his eyes roll up and down my body in appreciation.

“Yeah.” His brows lift. “You’re definitely not from around here.”

“LA.” The words pop unbidden from my mouth and my brows drop just a bit as I try to figure out why.

“What?”

“I’m from LA.”

“Ah, so I was right.” His eyes shine with triumph, a grin splitting his face in delight.

“Pretty much spot on,” I confess with a half shrug.

“And what the hell is a girl from LA doing in Landing Point?” he asks, open curiosity filling his face.

I briefly consider lying to him before discarding the idea and letting out a weary sigh of resignation to my fate. Unfortunately for me, if any of the Netflix shows about small towns I’ve watched are correct... The entire town of Landing Point will know a Delacroix is back in town by the lights on at my gram’s place before my head hits the pillow tonight. Plus, withholding information from a guy I met in a bar didn’t turn out so well for me last time.

“Looking for the answers to secrets that are probably better left buried for questions that should never be asked,” I finally tell him, noting the way his eyes brim with curiosity at my response. I can practically see him turn each of my words over in his head before he responds.

“That sounds a little dark for a coed, Blondie.”

A humorless laugh escapes me. “You have no idea.”

“So you’re going to be in town for a while then?”

I give a half shrug. “As long as it takes to get the answers I’m looking for, I guess.”

“Well, in that case.” He grins wickedly, holding a hand out across the bar to me. “Jace Dawson, at your service. Hopefully that is.”

My lips twitch up at his ridiculous charm and I pause for just a moment, relishing the moment, the spark in his eyes. There’s a good chance that once he learns who I am, he won’t be quite so interested anymore... but I don’t shy away from the judgments of others. Even after everything last summer, that part of me has remained the same.

“Eleanor Delacroix,” I tell him confidently, raising my hand to his. “But the people I actually like call me El.”

I see the moment he puts two and two together. The shift in his open expression from playful to shocked. His eyes roam over my face, searching every corner of it as if he’s looking for something he lost. But when his gaze finally returns to mine, I find nothing but warm affection in it.

Huh. Maybe he really does shit unicorns.

“Well then.” He clears his throat. “You’re definitely a little more than just a coed.”

A genuine laugh bursts from me at his response and I feel the eyes of a few nearby patrons land on us.

“Just a bit,” I tease, not pulling my hand from his despite the fact that this handshake has stretched far past the point of what’s socially acceptable.

“I’m sorry.” He cringes as his thumb begins to lightly brush over the back of my hand in a soothing gesture. “That was rude of me.”

“Not nearly as rude as I’ve encountered before,” I tell him honestly, amused at watching his charm momentarily falter.

“Jace!” a harsh voice calls from the other end of the bar, jolting us both and causing our hands to drop away from one another. I turn my head to see the middle-aged bartender tapping the watch on her wrist with a firm expression. “Quit your flirtin’ and get up on that stage before we have a riot on our hands, boy! It’s damn near nine o’clock.”

“Stage?” I cock a brow in question as the man in question groans. There are few things I love more than a good live performance.

“Yeah.” He sighs. “I got up once like five years ago on my twenty-first birthday and ever since then they’ve insisted it’s a weekend tradition whenever I’m in town. Which, for the past few years, has been pretty much every weekend.”

“You must be good then.”

“I’m not bad,” he admits with a small grin.

“You must be really good then.” I roll my eyes at him, calling him out on his bullshit.

His eyes turn playful and he grabs the vodka bottle to pour me another shot.

“I’ll make you a deal then.” He slides the shot to me from across the bar. Charm back in full force. “Stay, watch me play and afterward I’ll let you be the judge of just how good I am.”

I narrow my eyes at him and pause in faux consideration just to keep him on his toes.

Surprise though... I’m definitely staying.

He just launched himself right through the stratosphere with that music bit in my book.

“I’ll even sweeten the pot,” he barter, leaning toward me across the bar again. On the edge of invading my personal space again and drenching the air with his sea and spring scent. “You can pick the first song.”

I meet his firework eyes and smirk. “And where would be the fun in that?” I muse, cocking my head to the side. “No, I think I’ll let you decide.”

Placing my hands on the bar, I lean in, bringing our faces alongside each other and my mouth to his ear.

“But Jace,” I whisper, pausing, prolonging the moment. “Be sure it’s a good one.”

I feel numerous eyes on me as I drop back into my seat but I don’t bother dimming my smug grin one bit. If I’m being honest with myself, this is the most fun I’ve had in ages, so fuck ’em.

“Damn,” he mutters, eyes filling with heat as he watches me bring the shot to my lips.

“Mmm,” I drawl back in agreement.

That brilliant smile flashes across his face and he shakes his head. “Always did love a challenge.”

“Jace!” the middle-aged bartender hollers from down the bar again, this time with a beat-up-looking guitar in her hand. “Sometime today would be nice!”

“Right.” The smile falls from his face as he turns, taking a step before stopping and turning back to spare me a glance as if he’s worried I might disappear. “Don’t move.”

My lips twitch up into a grin as I watch him walk away, grabbing the guitar on his way out from behind the bar. The lightness I’m feeling has me wondering if this one really is miraculous. Or maybe all I needed was time and to stop pressuring myself. Either way... I’m all in for where tonight leads. It’s long past time to pack away the damage of last summer and maybe a little orgasmic distraction while I’m here wouldn’t be the worst thing. God knows whatever I find out here is most likely to be depressing as fuck. I’ll probably need all the endorphins I can get.

“How y’all doing tonight?” Jace’s voice comes through the mic and draws my attention to where he sits on the stage.

I take in the guitar slung across his body as I turn in my seat to get a better view and find his playful eyes already on me from where he sits on a stool in front of the mic. Making sure I don’t move.

Oh, yeah. Definitely miraculous.

“Now I know it’s not a regular crowd favorite but I’m going to start off with something a little different tonight,” he continues, dimples flashing as his gaze sweeps the bar. “You see, there’s this girl I’d like to impress and well... let’s just leave it at that.”

Jace’s eyes come back to meet mine and I feel the gazes of the entire bar rest on me for a moment before returning to where he sits on a stool in front of the mic. He turns to his guitar then and proceeds to pick at a few strings as if checking their tune before giving a solid strum. I watch in fascination as he nods to himself before launching into the song he chose to impress me.

He’s not even ten seconds in before my entire body freezes. Even in acoustic form, I’d recognize those chords anywhere. That lightness that was just filling me turns into a feeling of pure gravity and I slowly exhale all the breath from my lungs, trying to alleviate some of the weight pressing on my chest.

This can’t be happening.

The universe cannot be this cruel.

But if anyone should know better... it’s me.

And as he sings those first words, they hit me like a blow, each word causing further and further damage until my mind checks out. Some rational part of me that looks on at the situation like a bystander recognizes that Jace is good. But I’m not here, not really. I’m a thousand miles away with the waves of the past pulling me further under by the second.

It still amazes me, even with the way my life started out... the way simple words, a single person, a unique moment with a song can cause the most excruciating pain. An unbearable physical ache in your heart. All of *his* words rise at the sound of that song and I feel that pain try to gain a foothold in me to spread.

I have to get out of here.

I stand suddenly from my chair, almost toppling it over in my rush to escape. Digging into the back pocket of my shorts,

I pull out enough cash to cover my tab and slam it down on the counter before turning to walk as fast as I can from the bar. Avoiding every questioning gaze along my way. Hoping that if I flee fast enough I can outrun the past trying to drown me. And though I feel one particular set of eyes burning into me as I make my escape, I don't look back. My only focus is on getting the hell out of there before the memories win and pull me under completely.

Chapter 4

One Year Ago

I take a sip straight from the bottle of añejo as we make our way down the beach. Let it never be said that I'm not classy in my tequila preference... maybe not so much the form in which I drink it though. I meet Coop's amused eyes and pass the bottle over to him, watching as he brings it to his lips. The act entirely too erotic for someone taking a simple sip of tequila.

He's been quiet since we left the bar. I'm used to guys trying to talk their way into my pants at a mile a minute, but not him. I've felt his eyes like a current running along my skin with every step and the silence has proven to be more seductive than any pretty words he could give me. Up to this point, I've been content to ride the wave of anticipation... but now he seems to be holding my tequila hostage.

"You planning on giving that back to me anytime soon?"

He arches a brow at my question, so similar to the way I do that for a moment it's a bit disconcerting.

"I figured holding on to it was a surefire way to get you to talk."

I cock a brow of challenge in return. "You could have asked me a question."

"You didn't answer my last one."

"Technically, you didn't ask, just stated a fact."

"And yet, you didn't tell me your name all the same."

I stop, planting my hands on my hips and tilting my head back, looking him full in the face. "So you resort to tequila-napping?"

An unconcerned shrug rolls off his wide shoulders and he takes a step closer to me, night-forest eyes flowing over my face. "Just working with what you've given me."

"Well I'm taking it back."

“Not that easy.” His lips twitch up and he starts to walk again, leaving me with little choice but to trail after him, prickling with irritation despite what he’s doing for my libido.

“What do you mean ‘Not that easy?’”

“Let’s play a game.” His darkly mischievous gaze meets mine as he taps the bottle. “A sip for an answer.”

“Let me remind you, I bought the tequila.” I reach out and grab onto the hand holding the bottle, bringing him to a stop. “Tell me why exactly I would play a game to drink what’s rightfully mine.”

He reaches out and gently grasps the arm hanging loosely at my side. “I would have happily bought you ten bottles of tequila if that’s what you had wanted. But we both know that’s not what you had in mind when we walked out of that bar.” Grip loosening, he trails his fingers up my arm lightly as he steps in, bringing his mouth to my ear. “As for why, exactly, to play my little game. If I’m going to do half of what I’m imagining to you tonight, I’m going to at least need to get to know you a little first.”

Well... fuck. I mean, he’s right, but... fuck.

His words leave the neurons in my brain misfiring and it takes me a couple breaths to realize he’s started walking again. I turn to catch him, slightly unsettled by the shift in our power dynamic. But that’s okay... I’ll let him think he’s getting what he wants for a while and then turn the tables on him. The prospect of the game sends excitement shooting through my veins and I realize it’s been forever since I’ve played with someone so equally matched.

“Fine,” I agree, coming up beside him. “But the same deal goes for you.”

“Done.” He nods in agreement and passes me the bottle. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-two.” I take a small sip and pass it back to him. “Like the Taylor Swift song. You?”

“Twenty-five. Three years past her prime.”

I snort a laugh at his words and see his lips twitch in turn, humor peeking out from his eyes.

“Where are you from?”

“LA, you?”

“A little bit everywhere recently. Work keeps me moving around a lot. But whenever I’m not working, Costa Rica is my home base.”

“What do you do?” I ask, rolling my eyes at him when he gives me the side-eye for asking a question out of turn.

“I’m a project-based consultant for businesses in need of specialized services. What I do varies from project to project.”

“Okay, nonanswer.” I scoff. “Remember that one when I give you an equally vague response to one of your questions.”

“It’s complicated.” He shrugs. “What about you?”

“Fortunately for you, my answer to that is straightforward.” I throw him a bratty wink. “I’m a photographer, or that’s the plan at least. This is my first stop on a postgrad trip to expand my portfolio. Next up is Peru, then Rio, and last is Chile.”

“Such a baby.” That low, dark laugh leaves him as his eyes run the length of me. The sound is captivating, like the hushed moans of forbidden trysts uttered deep in the night.

“You’re only three years older than me.”

He brings the bottle to his lips and takes a quick sip before answering.

“True. But a number doesn’t always equal what someone’s learned in life. Age doesn’t always bring wisdom.”

“True,” I agree softly, his words striking deep at the core of me.

I tense at the feel of his questioning eyes on me, not wanting to go anywhere near questions that could lead down the rabbit hole of my past. Time to change the subject.

“So if you’re always on the go for work, what brought you here?”

I feel his probing eyes linger on me for a beat before he passes the tequila back and answers. “I have some business to wrap up here in Jaco and then I’m headed to a little shack I have on the beach in Cahuita for some downtime before my next project.”

“You know...” I take a sip and tilt my head at him. “I think that might be the most words you’ve said since the bar.”

He scoffs. “Brat.”

“And don’t you forget it.” I smirk at him unapologetically.

We walk in silence for another moment before I look back and deem we’re far enough away from the bars that we can’t be seen, the faint lights barely twinkling at me from a few miles away. I tap his arm to grab his attention and sit, wedging the bottle in the sand as he joins me.

His brows dip slightly as he looks out at the crashing of the waves. “I guess I have more to say when it’s about something that matters to me.”

“And I’m guessing this little shack in Cahuita matters?” I take advantage of my view to admire the strength of his profile. The dark lashes sweeping out from his eyelids are long and striking at this angle. He really is an Adonis come to life.

“It’s probably the only place I feel at peace.” The words are said quietly, almost guiltily, as if my presence was momentarily forgotten in the depths of his mind.

“Well.” I clear my throat. “Sounds like a hell of a place.”

His eyes meet mine and clear, lips ghosting up as he leans back and eyes me speculatively. “Why a photographer?”

“Because sometimes life makes more sense from behind the lens of a camera.”

“Explain.”

I sigh at the demand in his voice, resisting the temptation to throw out some witty remark or grab for the tequila and try to find the right words.

“When you’re taking a picture, you’re choosing what to capture... pain, love, death, life. The decision and degree of which is entirely up to you. You choose what message you want to relate without having to explain anything more than that. Life, people, are layered with stories... but in a photograph the only thing that matters is that moment. There doesn’t need to be anything more than that. There’s a simplicity, a purity to the one moment over the many.”

“You’re in control.” His eyes narrow in thought. “Of all the variables in the story, at least for a moment.”

I give him a short shrug in response. “I suppose.”

“Interesting.”

The quiet way he says it leaves me feeling entirely too exposed for my liking, as if that one answer gives him entry into the inner workings of me. Time to shift the focus.

“What else do you love?” I tease, purposefully brushing my body against his as I lean back beside him.

His eyes drop to my lips and linger, darkening with desire before coming back up to rest on mine.

“That moment somewhere between midnight and morning when the whole world falls away and you’re left with this vivid clarity.”

I stare into his eyes silently in response, feeling that pull wind through the air between us again. That was not what I had been expecting him to say... and yet now I couldn’t imagine any other answer leaving his lips. He leans into me, bringing our faces a hairbreadth apart and causing my lips to part as desire spreads through my veins.

“One last question.” His voice is low, eyes intense. “What’s your biggest fear?”

“My mother,” I answer automatically, so lost in the haze of lust that the words leave me before I think to censor, like I normally would.

“Your mother?” Harsh brows draw tight over his hooded eyes.

I clear my throat and lean back. Answering him honestly but diverting from the truth all the same. “Becoming my mother. Isn’t that a fate a lot of girls fear?” I throw him another bratty wink, hiding my damage behind a wall made of shine and snark.

His eyes narrow on me as if he’s trying to fit the pieces of a puzzle together without having ever seen what it was supposed to be. “Is that the truth?”

“Of course.”

“But not the whole answer?”

“Also a truth.”

“That’s not how this game is played.”

“And tell me...” I bring my face in close to his again, turning the tables. “What are you going to do about it?” I dip my lips to his ear and whisper. “Make me scream?”

Drawing back, I meet his heated gaze and cock a brow in challenge.

I trail my fingers over his shoulder and stand, delicious tension drenching the air between us. Breaking our gaze, I grasp the fabric of my dress and slowly inch it up my body before lifting it over my head at an unhurried pace. The humid night air hitting my bare skin as I drop the dress at my side, all of me exposed except for a scant few inches over my pussy that’s covered by a barely there thong.

I loop my fingers through my thong and push it down, letting it drop at my feet as I begin to walk toward the beckoning waves. I don’t look back to see if Coop is following and my heart beats a rapid pace in my chest at not being able to see what he’s doing, anticipation ratcheting up in me to a near painful degree.

As my feet hit the cool water and a thread of warning flows through me, self-preservation cautioning that swimming in a foreign sea at night won’t be the wisest decision I’ve ever made. I quickly push that thread of warning aside though, discarding it as easily as I did my clothes and wading out

deeper. The promise of what this could bring luring me out like a siren on the sea.

My nipples pebble as the water reaches them and I start to lazily tread water, the lull between waves offering moonlit peaks of what lies beneath. A few minutes later, I feel movement in the water as Coop comes up behind me, the current causing our naked skin to meet for an instant before I'm pulled away. I still won't look back at him though. The thrill of what's happening is too seductive a spell to break. But his body was solid in that moment of contact so I'd wager he's still standing. I feel his fingers trail across my shoulder as he sweeps my hair to the side and drops his lips to my ear.

"You're being reckless." His tone is dark and scolding.

"So?" I provoke.

His fingers thread through the hair at the base of my neck and tangle, pulling gently as his teeth come down on the lobe of my ear with pressure that's just a touch past gentle.

"Don't," he whispers, lips kissing a trail down to the base of my neck as he brings his other arm around, circling my waist and pulling me to him.

The feel of his hard body hits me like lightning on the sea, electrifying me as his cock brushes against my ass tauntingly. His teeth gently nip at the curve where my neck and shoulder meet and my breath hitches in response, need pulsing through me when he brings his hand up to knead my breast. I bring my hands up to clutch at him, gripping the arm around my waist and looping the other around the back of his head, using my newfound leverage to push back and roll my hips against him.

"Fuck," he gasps as a tremor runs the length of his body.

The hand at my breast drops, playfully trailing over my stomach before dropping lower. He runs two fingers over my bare pussy and down through my slit, quickly finding my clit and slowly circling. I spread my legs wider for him as my whole body draws tight with pleasure and a breathy sound escapes me. The hand in my hair pulls gently, tilting my head and bringing us eye to eye as his fingers delve deeper and

begin to teasingly circle my opening. The need coiled inside me is reflected back in his own eyes, lighting up the dark in the stars through the tree canopy.

“What?” I whisper huskily when his fingers pause.

His eyes rake my face for a moment before coming back to land on mine with a wary kind of wonder. The hand in my hair loosens as he brings it up and runs his thumb along the curve of my cheek.

“Just...” he mutters, brows dropping slightly. “Just thinking that you’re a dangerous thing.”

And with that, he crashes his mouth down on mine, sliding two fingers deep inside me. I gasp into his mouth at the sudden intrusion and he sweeps his tongue in. The kiss is harsh, demanding, but I match him at every turn with my own greed for more. He tastes like salt and tequila and something more too. Something deeper and filled with heat.

His cock gives a twitch of demand against my ass and I can’t wait anymore. I need to feel him. I drop my hand from his head and wedge it between us, closing my fingers around him as his curl inside of me.

Fuck, he’s big. My fingers barely close around him. I give an experimental stroke and a harsh sound leaves him in response. He drags my bottom lip through his teeth and my stomach flips in anticipation, leaving me fighting the urge to turn around and impale myself on his cock right there and then.

He breaks our kiss, staring into my eyes as he rolls his thumb over my clit, his fingers picking up their pace inside of me and causing my muscles to lock up. I drop my head back onto his chest as the pressure builds and my nails dig into his arm as he works me over. He drags his fingers over that sensitive spot inside me again and again, thumb circling hard in demand for my pleasure.

I’m so close, ecstasy within reach as the stars swim above me, the ocean wrapped around us. And for a moment I’m filled with awe. It feels as if we’re two gods at the edge of the

world, completely lost in the thrall of our own desire. Content to let the universe fall into chaos as long as we can remain here in a needy embrace.

Coop drops his mouth to the curve of my neck and sucks hard on the skin, marking me as he pulls his fingers from me. I barely have a second to utter a cry of protest before he reaches up, pinching my clit and I come on a scream with a force that leaves me shaking. His fingers thrust back into me, pushing deep through the resistance and picking up a lazy pace. Seeing me through to the other side until I'm left boneless and quivering.

“To answer your earlier question...” He drops a light kiss to the mark on my neck, smug satisfaction dripping from his voice. “Yes, I'll make you scream.”

Fuck me. He really is something else.

I turn in his arms and loop my hands around his neck, bringing my legs around to lock behind his back and pushing myself right up against his massive cock. The current has me moving against him with the rhythm of the sea as he brings his hands to my ass and presses me in harder, dropping his forehead to mine.

“Were you a Boy Scout?” I quip breathlessly.

“What?”

“Do you...” I drop my head and press a kiss to the side of his neck. “Have something in those shorts you left on the beach that would label you as prepared for this situation?”

His lips pull up into that savage smirk. “Scout's honor.”

He drops his lips to mine and turns, walking us through the water and back up to the beach. Kissing me as if he's determined to own every inch of my body. And just for that I nip at his bottom lip. Nobody owns me but me. He chuckles darkly against my lips as he stops and drops to his knees, lowering us onto what feels like our clothes and holding himself above me.

That indefinable thread of something pulls tight between us as our eyes meet and a foreign kind of nerves invades me. For

a second I almost bail, the feeling inside is so unfamiliar that I'm not quite sure what to make of it... and it's not like I've exactly been a saint in my life. But then he drops his head to my breast, sucking my nipple deeply into his mouth as his other hand trails down between our bodies to play with my clit and the idea flies from my mind.

I wrap my legs around his waist and lift my hips, urging him to hurry things up. Needing to feel his cock inside me... like yesterday. He lifts his head from my breast, looking to the side before pulling his hand from my clit and reaching over. A moment later he rises above me with a foil packet in hand.

His eyes search my face. "Are you sure?"

I reach up and take the foil packet from him, tearing it open and holding it out.

"Does that answer your question?" I cock a brow and give him a bratty smirk.

His eyes turn dark as he takes the condom from me, rolling it onto his impressive shaft and my pussy clenches at the sight. I'm so wet for him already it would probably be embarrassing if I wasn't so fucking turned on. He drops two fingers to my entrance, pumping them into me a few times before grasping my hip and dropping back down to hover above me as he lines us up. I feel the thick head of his cock at my entrance and reach up, wrapping my hands around his shoulders.

I lift my hips, pushing him in that first bit and he hisses a breath above me. "Now, Coop."

He arches a brow at my words, eyes rolling over my face. "I do want that name."

He reaches down and hooks his arm around the back of my knee in the next instant, spreading me wide as he thrusts into me with one hard, powerful stroke. Seating himself to the hilt in an instant. I cry out from the intrusion, nails digging into his back as my body fights to accommodate the size of him. I take a few deep breaths and Coop's eyes flick over my face in concern as he holds himself perfectly still. Allowing my inner muscles a chance to adjust even though I can feel how every

muscle in his body is locked tight with the effort it's taking him.

I roll my hips against him when I feel my muscles relax, driving him impossibly deeper and causing a harsh breath to escape him. He pulls out almost completely before driving back into me slowly, allowing me to feel each incredible inch of him. I've never felt so full before and I can't get enough of it. I dig my nails into his shoulders and press the heel of my foot against his ass, letting him know I can take it, and he thrusts powerfully back into me halfway and then hesitates. I pull his head to mine, biting down hard on his lip as I jerk my hips up. Impaling myself on his cock to really drive home the point and I feel the tension leave his body as his control snaps.

He drags my bottom lip through his teeth as he pulls back and then powers into me, driving us into the sand and leaving my pussy clenching around him greedily. Unwinding his arm from my leg, he plants his hands in the sand and breaks our kiss to drop his head to my breast, scraping with his teeth as he pulls my nipple into his mouth. I wrap my legs around his hips and lock my feet together, holding on as he drives into me again and again, each thrust causing a breathy sound of pure need to escape me. He moves his mouth to my neglected nipple, biting down with just the right amount of pressure and starts to roll his hips with each thrust, dragging his cock over that sensitive spot inside of me and I feel the start of that glorious ascent.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” Each curse escapes me on a harsh breath in time with his thrusts. “I'm so close.”

I look down when I feel his lips leave my breast and find his hooded, night-forest eyes on my face with enraptured intensity as he kisses a path back up to my neck. His hand moves to my hip as he grinds his pelvis into mine, sliding his cock right over my clit with each thrust and causing my nerves to short-circuit. I feel my inner muscles begin to clench around him and I can't help how my nails drag down his back.

The intimacy of the moment sneaks up on me as he brings his head back to hover above mine and we lock eyes. His gaze demanding that the sanctity of the moment be acknowledged.

That he'll accept nothing less. He brings his hand up, running his thumb gently over the curve of my cheek again, so at odds with the power of his thrusts that it knocks the breath from me.

“Come for me, Princess,” he whispers.

And as if my body was waiting for his command, I do, shattering into a million pieces like the stars scattered above us. A harsh cry leaves me as my whole body tenses, shaking as my inner muscles lock around him so tightly I'm not sure he'll ever be able to escape. He thrusts into me a few more times before following me over the edge, a deep groan leaving his lips as his body tenses and he pushes deeper into me. I can feel his cock jerk inside me as he comes, setting off a fresh wave of pleasure through my nerves.

His body drops to mine and we stay that way, hearts racing, breaths heaving as our orgasms slowly fade. I trail my fingers up and down his back mindlessly as we bask in the afterglow and his breath fans across my skin from where he rests at the crook of my neck. After a while he brings a hand up and begins to draw patterns against my skin in a way that's too freaking adorable for me to acknowledge. This guy is just a case of contradictions.

“I think...” I clear my throat when my voice breaks. “I think you ruined me.”

His breath tickles against my neck as he chuckles. “In a good way, right?”

“Uh, yeah. You could say that.” I laugh lightly.

He rises up and looks down at me for one more moment before pulling out and turning to dispose of the condom somewhere I couldn't care less about right now. When he turns back his eyes roam over my body in appraisal before taking advantage of my boneless state and dragging me to him, nestling me right up in the crook of his body. My head ends up on his chest and he hooks his hand behind my knee to drag my leg over him.

Aw. I feel my lips twitch in amusement. The dark prince likes a little postcoital snuggle.

“So did I earn my reward?” His chest vibrates underneath me.

“What reward?”

“Your name.”

I open my mouth to respond and then hesitate. I don't know why I don't just tell him. It's not like he'll know who I am. Not a big deal at all... but for some reason, I find myself clinging to my newfound anonymity.

“In a bit.”

He brings a hand up and lightly taps my bare ass. “Did I not impress you enough already?”

I flick my eyes up to him and smirk. “Oh you more than impressed me. Just... in a bit.”

“Okay, Princess.” His brows dip slightly. “We'll play it your way. For now.”

I roll my eyes at him and look back to the stars as he brings his hand up and starts to draw patterns on my back. Sinking into him as the steady thump of his heart sounds under my ear. It's words, I realize drowsily after he draws a particularly obvious “at” on my spine. He's not drawing senseless patterns but words on my skin. I start trying to figure out what the words are he's writing, but the stars start fading in and out like a snapshot with each blink and the next thing I know the sky goes dark.

I open my eyes to see the first rays of light breaking over the sea and sit up in alarm. My mind still groggy but alert enough to know that I'm about to be nakedly waiting to greet all the tourists of Costa Rica for the day. And while I'm all about that pura vida life... I'm not sure that law enforcement will be on the same page. I look down at Coop, my eyes snagging on the little red half-moons on his forearm that my nails dug last night and how his impressive cock is alert and at attention, ready to greet the day. One of his hands rests near the curve of my ass while the other is still holding on to my leg.

I watch the steady rise and fall of his chest and know I should wake him.

But... after one short night, I think I know enough about Coop to know what will happen if I do.

He's going to want to walk me back to my hotel. Hell, we'd probably spend the day going for rounds two through ten and while that in itself is a special kind of temptation...

It's dangerous.

I'm not an idiot. I know guys like Coop don't come around often, but that indefinable thread of something between us makes me nervous in a way I've never felt before. It's that damn pull to each other.

So I do the smart thing.

I smoothly slide my leg out of his grasp, standing and gathering up my dress from underneath me. Quickly checking the pockets to make sure I have all my belongings before pulling it over my head and giving a cursory sweep for my underwear, coming up empty. I look down at Coop one last time, allowing myself a moment to appreciate the harsh beauty of him. He's even more magnificent in the light of day. I force myself to look away, knowing that if I don't do it now, he's going to wake soon and catch me. As I move to step around him my eyes snag on his wallet and phone lying by his side and I pause.

It really would be rude to just leave him here...

I step my way over to his side as quietly as possible and grab the ancient-looking flip phone, quickly pulling up an empty message and leaving the recipient blank.

Names are so ordinary. This way, I'm unforgettable.

It takes me forever to type out, having to hit each of the keys a million times for one letter, but I finish the text and leave the phone open at his side. I stand and begin to hurriedly walk back down the beach, an uneasy feeling spreading with each step I take. I push it away though, knowing I made the smart call, because that pull between us is dangerous. That kind of pull can turn into feelings, can turn into enchantment,

can turn into love. And I am intimately familiar with just how destructive love can be.

I didn't lie to him last night when I told him my biggest fear was becoming my mother. That love turned out to be deadly. I won't take a chance on the same thing happening to me.

Chapter 5

Present Day

My eyes flutter open, each blink causing a dull ache to pound through my head as I'm filled with the feeling of confusion that comes with waking up in a new place. I sweep my gaze across the room, brain struggling for a moment before I remember. That's right. Landing Point. Gram's house. Otherwise known as the town of ghosts. Snapping my eyes shut at the realization, I roll over and try to reclaim a few more minutes of sleep before facing the day ahead of me.

But right when I'm on the edge of sliding back into the blissful ignorance of sleep, a pair of firework eyes flash through my mind and cause my eyes to snap back open. Embarrassment and regret fill me as the memory of last night takes over, the weight of it settling like a pit in my stomach.

I've never been a big fan of shame. It was never something I had allowed for in my life. I learned pretty early on that the world would tear you to shreds if you lived for the placation of others. So I never did. Stunning those around me with my disregard of their opinions. My longest-lasting therapist theorized that this particular trait was probably a defense mechanism due to what happened to my parents.

But personally, I always thought whatever higher power exists just built me that way. Lacking any apology for who I am or the choices I made. The span of any one life is so infinitesimal when compared to the history of the world that I never understood why the hell anyone would live their life in constraint. Which meant regret was a bit of a foreign concept to me.

And before last summer, I'd never been the girl so broken that a simple song could send me fleeing from a bar. Left feeling painfully embarrassed the next morning. So the pit in my stomach right now really doesn't sit well with me. It's appalling, actually.

I watch the blades of my gram's white fan turn against her outdated popcorn ceiling and feel that pit in my stomach sour

with anger as the cause of this change within me inevitably comes to mind.

Yeah... fuck you too, Coop.

And not in a good way.

Reaching over to grab my phone from the nightstand next to the bed, I check the time, not surprised to find that I've slept the morning away. I haven't woken up before ten in nearly a year. Pushing up in the bed, the covers fall from me as I take in the room under the light of day. I'd hardly paid attention to a damn thing last night once I'd made it back to the house. Only pausing long enough to make sure the room I'd made it into at the back of the house was Gram's and *not* my father's before stripping off my clothes and curling into a ball of unacknowledged misery.

Gram's room immediately battles back against my rising anger, the airy energy it exudes combating the turbulent emotions within me. It's all whitewashed furniture topped off with creams and a few touches of sage here and there. I look down at the floral cream patchwork quilt pooled around my waist and let out a breath of release.

Yeah, definitely not bringing any cabernet into this room.

I throw back the covers and stand from the bed, my head giving a more insistent throb with the movement. Sending me immediately to the kitchen on a desperate hunt for caffeine. Surprisingly, I had never been a coffee drinker like my peers growing up. High on life and well, maybe the occasional delightful sativa, that was me. But several months ago in one of the most idyllic cafés in Italy that had all changed.

Now, I was the proud owner of a shirt that declared I was not fit for public consumption before caffeine. So my frustration twenty minutes later as I sit on the kitchen floor with only a box of chamomile tea in hand is pretty freaking understandable if you ask me. Every cabinet and drawer is open and staring back at me mockingly.

"Fuck!" I groan out loudly, causing the throb in my head to quickly morph into a harsh pounding.

I really should have just gone to the damn store last night.

Setting the useless box of tea down on the kitchen table with more force than necessary, I walk over to where I dropped my suitcase in the entry yesterday and throw it open. Not caring about the location. It's not like I'm expecting an abundance of company today anyway. Grabbing my toiletry bag along with whatever shirt my hand lands on first, I head to the little bathroom nestled next to my gram's room and quickly go about the business of making myself at least moderately presentable.

Ten minutes later my teeth are brushed, my platinum hair thrown up into a messy bun, and I'm stepping out the door in Converse-clad feet wearing last night's shorts and one of my favorite Bon Jovi concert tees. Yvie had just about fainted when she had seen I made it into a crop top a couple years ago. It was sacrilege apparently.

Hopping into Franny, I pull up my phone and search for a local grocery store, coming up with exactly one result. Perfect. At least that saved me from the surely arduous decision-making process of having to decide between two grocery stores. Beggars couldn't be choosers though and at this point I'd settle for gas station coffee. I roll my eyes as I plug the address into my GPS and crank up the AC. Popping my oversized sunglasses on as I pull out of the driveway.

Six minutes later, I'm pulling into a parking spot in front of a sandy brick building with large red signage above it proclaiming it as the *Local Mart*. And I know it was exactly six minutes because I watched the clock on the dash as my fingers tapped away with agitation during the two stoplights I sat at for the majority of the drive. Landing Point really was the definition of a small town. Blink and you'd miss it. The heat of the sun hits me like a brick wall as I get out of the car and I can't help but stretch my hands over my head. Unable to resist momentarily basking in its delicious warmth despite my headache.

Not that it didn't have its place when it came to Christmas and everything but seriously... Fuck the cold. Give me a sun-drenched place to bake in on any day.

I walk through the parking lot, grabbing a cart and popping my sunglasses on the top of my head along the way. The cold of the AC raises goose bumps on my skin as I step into the store and pause, taking in the lay of things. My eyes sweep the length of the small grocery store, seeing that the produce and meats are to my left while aisles run the length of the rest of the store to my right. Just as I'm about to turn my cart toward the aisles, I spot a tiny little pink sign at the back of the store with the word *Bakery* written in neon script.

Oh, thank you, universe. Maybe they have coffee.

I head to the bakery section at a pace that is just short of frantic and quickly find myself engulfed by the smell of butter, sugar and cinnamon. Looking around at all the delicious treats, I can't help but snag some blueberry scones and cinnamon rolls, dropping them into my cart without an ounce of remorse. But alas, no coffee or clerk to get me coffee is in sight. I sigh in disappointment and head back toward the front of the store. Stopping in front of an orange bin with a firm reminder to myself that I don't want to get scurvy. I'm in the midst of grabbing a few oranges when a loud voice booms out, causing me to jump.

"Blondie!"

Oh god, no. I freeze in place, orange held uselessly in hand at the midpoint between the shelf and my cart.

No freaking way. This can't be happening.

"Blondie!" That delighted voice calls again and I cringe in response.

Turning my head to look toward the front of the store, I see Jace swaggering toward me with that brilliant smile on full display and an empty grocery cart in hand. His hair is damp, hanging messily around his shoulders and he's wearing a loose white tee that looks like it's about one wash away from falling apart with a pair of men's joggers slung low on his hips. The shirt is hiking up a bit with his hands on the cart, flashing little peeks of his *V* cuts to God and everyone with each step that he takes. Or I guess just to me considering the store is all but empty but seriously...

Fuck my life.

He brings his cart to a stop beside me and drops down, resting his forearms on the handrail and putting us at eye level. His close proximity makes it impossible not to notice the way his shirt is sticking to his skin in places that must still be wet.

“Hey... you,” I drawl out awkwardly. Not even close to being prepared to deal with this situation so soon after last night and in my uncaffeinated state, no less.

His eyes dance with amusement at my obvious discomfort and I can't help but notice they're a little more hazel than green under the light of day.

“So I guess you didn't like the song?”

“Uh, yeah,” I stutter, feeling totally out of my element here. “It's just...”

I've always been the girl who's the best at this game. Not to mention I've never had to explain breakdowns over an ex to someone before because, well, I've never had an ex before.

I give a helpless shrug. “Bad memories.”

So lame, El.

“Too bad,” he murmurs, eyeing me intently while bringing a hand up and running his thumb back and forth along his lower lip.

My eyes dart down, following the path of his thumb with rapt attention as desire pulses through me. Even his damn hands are pretty, nails clean and trimmed, a decidedly undervalued trait among men in my opinion. I jolt when something crashes somewhere in the store and snaps me out of my naughty reverie. Quickly jerking my gaze back up, I find a far too pleased expression on his face for my liking.

Bastard did that on purpose.

“And to think...” His voice drops intimately. “The night held such promise.”

“Yeah...” I clear my throat and look down in an attempt to regain my bearings, realizing as I do that my hand never

unfroze and I'm still holding out an orange like an offering for the gods. Rolling my eyes, I drop the orange in my cart and look back to him.

"This is weird." Best to just cut to the chase before this mortifying experience goes any further.

Expression softening, he shakes his head. "It doesn't have to be."

"But it is."

"Listen..." A soft sigh escapes him. "It doesn't have to be. We can start fresh if you want."

He lifts his brows in question at me when I don't respond immediately. "Keep each other company while we grocery shop maybe?"

I narrow my eyes at him in consideration and cock my head. "What are you even doing here?"

"Grocery shopping. I thought that much was obvious."

"Well yes, but really? At the exact same time as me?"

"Wow." He scoffs. "Someone definitely thinks highly of themselves."

"And why are you all wet?"

"Okay, Nancy Drew." He rises off the cart, rolling his eyes at me along the way. "If you must know, I went surfing for a few hours this morning, like I do most mornings, so nothing suspicious or out of the ordinary there. Then on my way home I remembered I needed to go to the store today." Dramatically tilting his head to the ceiling in consideration, he continues. "So I thought to myself, you know, Jace, if you really hurry and go straight there, that pretty girl you met last night might be there. Ripe and ready for stalking."

He drops his head back down from the ceiling, lips twitching as he takes in the unamused expression on my face.

"Satisfied?"

"Marginally." I shrug at him and turn my nose up haughtily. Eternally ready to give as good as I get regardless of my

mental state. “I always knew I was stalkable.”

His eyes flare with surprise and a light laugh of disbelief leaves him.

“Great. Glad we got that squared away. Can we shop now?” He reaches down into the top basket of his cart and pulls out a travel mug from within its depths, taking a sip. “Maybe spark a titillating conversation over the eggplant selection?” Wide eyes and long lashes blink at me with purposeful innocence.

I stare at him, momentarily speechless.

“The eggplant selection?” I deadpan.

He cannot be serious.

His eyes widen impossibly further in fake bewilderment. “What? No eggplant parm for you?”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to respond with a firm no when he takes another sip and I catch a faint yet unmistakable nutty scent. My brain practically leaps from my body, lunging for the caffeine particulars lacing the air and I find myself leaning in closer to him. My eyes glued to the travel mug in his hand.

“What have you got there?” My voice comes out breathier than I’d like and laced with need but I can’t fucking help myself at this point.

I should’ve never gone into that café in Italy.

“This?” His brows drop, perplexed eyes quickly darting to the mug in his hand before coming back to rest on me in consideration. Taking in what I’m sure is the positively desperate expression on my face.

Those dimples quickly flash across his face before he hides them, but unfortunately for my sanity... I’m too far gone to care. My sole focus is on the cure in his hands to the pounding in my head.

“Oh, it’s nothing.” He pulls the mug farther away with a look that screams *gotcha* and I have to clench the handrail of my cart to keep from reaching for it. “Just some French-pressed coffee I made this morning before hitting the beach. It’s not even really that hot anymore, more lukewarm now.”

Dear Lord, did he just say French pressed? “Oh.”

How do you ask someone for their coffee? Should I just politely ask for a sip to sample what the local brew tastes like and then chug the whole thing? Is that weird?

Definitely weird, El.

Maybe I should just grab the mug out of his hands and make a run for it. At least he should be used to it after last night.

“You know,” His voice draws me back to the present and away from my daydreams of coffee robbery. “This is already my second cup of the day. I could be persuaded to share... for the right price, of course.”

“I’m not having sex with you for coffee.”

“Not the price I had in mind.” He grins, shaking his head. “Plus, we’ll get back on track to where last night was headed without any bribery on my part.”

I sigh in defeat. “What do you want?”

“Go grocery shopping with me.”

“That’s it?”

“And come to a bonfire some friends and I are throwing tonight at the beach.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“Please.” He pouts, dragging out the word like a three-year-old.

“Counteroffer.” I cross my arms, ready to get down to business and get my hands on his... ahem, mug. “I’ll shop with you and consider the bonfire if I have time.”

“Booked solid already, Blondie?”

I narrow my eyes at his disbelieving tone. “Take it or leave it, Dawson.”

“Done.”

He passes the mug over to me with an ease I can’t possibly fathom and I greedily snap it out of his grasp. The mug is

already halfway to my mouth when I pause, an unsavory thought filtering through my frenzied brain.

“You don’t have any diseases, do you?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“When you say aware...”

“Seriously?” An expression of dismay transforms his face. “I’m pretty positive we almost spent last night banging each other’s brains out and you’re the one bartering your time for coffee in the grocery store like a caffeine-addicted fiend. Drink the damn coffee, El.”

I cringe slightly at his words and have to admit to myself he makes a fair point there. Maybe I should rethink the whole tea thing... but that’s a battle for another day.

Bringing the mug to my lips, I take a large sip and can’t help the moan of satisfaction that leaves me. It’s good. Really good. You can taste that the beans are freshly ground making it worlds better than your average store-bought coffee. All rich and bold. And it has a heavy splash of cream... Just how I like it.

I sigh happily and raise the mug to take another sip, pausing when I see the stunned expression on Jace’s face. “What?”

“Can I make you coffee every morning?”

“What?”

“Will you make that sound every morning if I make you coffee?”

Rolling my eyes, I ignore his question and take another sip, blessedly feeling my headache begin to fade away.

Jace shakes his head as if to clear it from a fog and begins to push his cart forward, leaving me with little option but to trail along beside him given our deal.

“Never mind,” he muses, leaving me with the impression that he’s more so thinking out loud than talking directly to me. “I’ll use a far more... physical method to get you to make the

noises I want. And I'll still make you coffee anyway. Always been a giver like that."

I scoff and keep my eyes trained away to avoid looking at him. The last thing I need is to get all hot and bothered in the produce department. Again.

"You might be the most ridiculous person I've ever met."

"Don't worry. In time you'll come to love me all the more for it."

Not touching that one with a ten-foot pole.

We lapse into companionable silence after that as we dive into shopping. Me, sipping away at his coffee and grabbing anything I think I might need off of the shelves. Him, grabbing significantly more items than I do and tapping out a beat on the handrail of his cart, humming a tune I can't quite place. His voice melodic and soothing as we walk side by side.

It's surprisingly enjoyable actually... natural feeling even, I suppose.

And that realization alone causes an uncomfortable twist in my gut, filling me with the need to break whatever spell we've fallen under.

I peek at him out of the corner of my eye, watching as he grabs some pasta from the shelf. My eyes sweep down the length of his arm and trace the lines of the beautiful tattoo covering it, marveling at its intricacy. A single anchor hangs low on the inside of his wrist, the chain rising into the crashing waves that cover his forearm. A lone sailboat starts at his elbow, the bulk of it almost completely surrounding his bicep while the sails disappear underneath the sleeve of his shirt.

"So what's the story behind the tattoo?"

He spares me an amused glance as we round another aisle. "There has to be a story?"

"There's always a story."

"Ha." A soft scoff leaves him as he reaches up to grab a can of tomatoes. "Ain't that the truth."

“So what’s yours?” I press.

“Well.” He starts slowly, pushing his cart farther down the aisle, grabbing more items as we go. “About three years ago I got out of the Navy after finishing my term and this was my celebration present to myself.” He flashes me a quick grin. “Nothing too shocking.”

Quickly doing the math in my head, I cock a brow at him. “So you were, what? Eighteen when you joined?”

“Yep,” he answers casually, avoiding my eyes and not elaborating.

Which, of course, just sparks my curiosity more.

“You don’t really strike me as a military type of guy.”

Observation of the century right there, El.

He makes a sound of affirmation and points out the coffee section to me, succeeding in temporarily distracting me while I weigh my options. Not that I really have a whole lot of options to choose from. There was no coffee maker at Gram’s, which pretty much limits me to instant or instant. Sighing in resignation, I throw a container of it into my cart and pin him down under my gaze again.

“You’re really not going to give me anything else here?”

“What more do you want?”

“To know what you’re being cagey about.”

“I’m not being cagey.” He shrugs, seemingly unbothered by my questioning. “It’s just a story best left for another day.” Those firework eyes twinkle playfully as they meet mine. “Plus, my mama always told me to maintain some mystery if I wanted to keep them coming back for more.”

“Hmm,” is the only response I give him. Best to keep things ambiguous here.

“You got any tattoos, Blondie?”

A lie sits on the tip of my tongue, ready to be spoken into being, when the ink below my left breast burns in response. As if it knows I’m about to deny its existence. “Just one.”

“Feel like sharing?”

“Hmm.” I throw him a bratty smirk. “I think that’s a story best left for another day.”

He laughs openly in response to my snark, bringing us around the last aisle of the store before pausing to look down into my cart in confusion. “Luckily for you, what I really want to know right now is what the hell are you making?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve been through this entire store and the only things you have in your cart are baked goods, oranges, avocados, cabbage, ranch dressing, bread, peanut butter, pretzels, coffee and toilet paper.”

“Cabbage?” I murmur, looking at what I had been sure was a head of lettuce.

His face scrunches up in confusion for a moment before transforming into a look of genuine horror as his eyes flick between me and my cart.

I cross my arms defensively, standing firm against his judgment. “It looks just like lettuce.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Shut the fuck up.” I push my cart toward the checkout. “You’re the one who wanted to shop with me.”

“Next time I should probably just shop for you,” he mutters under his breath behind me.

Bringing our carts to the checkout, I spend the next twenty minutes filled with irritation as Ms. Mabel, the painfully sweet elderly cashier, takes her sweet time checking us out. Using the opportunity to fawn over Jace and cast suspicious glances my way every sixty seconds. As if I’m the bad influence here. I’m finally able to escape after Jace, the sweetheart, just promises to try and make it to her Sunday school class this week that he hasn’t attended since *fifth grade*.

I come to a stop on the sidewalk outside the store and shoot him an annoyed look. “I was about two seconds away from

asking if you would take me to Sunday school too just for the sheer amusement I would get from forcing you to go.”

His eyes widen in horror at my threat, mouth dropping open as he brings his cart head-to-head against mine. “Vicious.”

“Always.”

“Noted.” Lightly bumping his cart against mine, he eyes me intently. “So, you going to come to my bonfire tonight?”

“Oh, so now it’s your bonfire?”

He flashes those dimples and shrugs. “It’s a concerted effort.”

A soft sigh leaves me as I stare at him with no answer and nothing but confusion filling me. The problem is a part of me actually does want to go. Part of me really does like him with his ridiculous charm and playful eyes. And that part, well it scares me even more now than it did last summer. Scared isn’t even the right word, what I used to be was scared, what I am now is downright terrified.

Could I keep things purely physical? Probably. Most likely.

I’d had no trouble keeping things casual with the string of guys before Coop.

But something in my gut tells me Jace Dawson is a master at slipping through the cracks in people’s walls. And I just can’t afford another hostile invasion that ends in nothing but tragedy. Last night did nothing but prove that to me.

“I’m not su—”

“It’s only like four blocks from Mrs. Delacriox’s place,” he cuts me off, sensing the direction I was headed in. “You could literally walk there, pretty much a straight shot.”

“How do you know where my gram’s lived?”

A roll of his eyes is followed by an amused shake of his head. “Small town, Blondie. Small town.”

My brows drop as I look down to the ground for a moment, gathering my thoughts before tipping my head back up at him.

“Jace...” I start, feeling oddly guilty, like I’m letting him down even though he’s a virtual stranger. “It’s not that I don’t like you. It’s just that I’m kinda m—”

“Jace!” a girly voice calls from the parking lot, breaking the moment and drawing both our gazes.

I watch the girl coming toward us, quickly placing where I know her from as she makes her way through the parking. She’s the cute brunette bartender from last night. But what I had mistaken for brunette is actually stunning auburn waves under the sun and her body pinup-girl perfection.

“For fuck’s sake,” Jace mutters on a harsh exhale.

She comes to a stop in front of us, seeming oblivious to my presence she bounces lightly on the balls of her feet. A hyper energy pours off of her and makes me think someone definitely had one too many Red Bulls this morning.

“What are you doing here?” Bright-blue eyes filled with idolization are locked onto the man across from me. “I thought you said that you had just been to the store yester—”

“I had to grab a few things,” Jace cuts her off, wary eyes shooting to me.

“Oh, cool.” She sighs happily and takes in her surroundings for the first time, eyes passing over me before darting back to do a double take. “Oh my god. You’re her.” A gasp leaves her mouth as it drops open and she stares openly.

After an uncomfortable moment passes within which the girl continues to stare at me, not saying a word. I clear my throat awkwardly as it continues. It appears I’ve broken her. But why...

It hits me then, why she’s gasping and staring. She must know who I am. Jace must have told her *who I am*.

Betrayal washes through me. It’s not that I’m ashamed of who I am, my story... but it’s mine to tell. No one else’s. So seriously, fuck him and the surfboard he rode in on.

“Yeah,” I drag out, bringing my eyes back to Jace’s and feeling the heat of my anger in them. “I think I’m going to

have to pass on that party.” Pushing my cart, I lower my voice and whisper as I come alongside him. “Not really down to be the tragic local celebrity at your disposal.”

I tune out whatever the girl is finally saying now that she’s regained the ability to speak and haul ass out of there. Making it halfway across the parking lot before a loudly muttered “Dammit, Tiff!” reaches me, followed by the sound of a grocery cart ripping its way across the pavement.

“El!”

Hear no evil...

“El!”

Surely if I ignore him, he’ll just disappear.

“Blondie!” I hurry to unlock Franny, quickly hauling the trunk open and practically throwing my groceries in.

“Don’t think you’re getting out of here without letting me explain!”

See no evil...

I slam my trunk shut and send my cart flying toward the parking space next to mine before running to the door, not the least bit ashamed by it. I launch myself inside, victory within my grasp, but just as I reach out to grab the handle of the door Jace brings his cart to a screeching halt beside me and slams his hand on the door to keep it open.

Quelling a groan of frustration, I collapse back into the seat and turn, seeing the way his chest is heaving with soft pants. I give him a glare and make sure my voice drips derision when I speak. “I have nothing to say to you, asshole.”

So much for speak no evil.

“That’s fine,” he pants. “Just listen.”

I watch with condemning eyes as he braces his other hand against Franny’s doorframe before dropping his head and sagging slightly.

Who’s the smarter shopper now, asshole? I just smoked your ass.

He tries and fails to start talking a few more times as he pants and I have to bite my tongue to keep from lashing out with this irrational feeling of betrayal.

“It’s not...” Pant. “What you think.” Pant. Pant.

He raises his head, firework eyes imploring me to listen.

“I didn’t tell Tiff who you are, or well your name. The Delacroix thing.” His eyes search my face, as if he’s trying to gauge whether I believe him or not so far.

I cock a brow but make sure to keep the rest of my expression firmly in check. Not giving anything away.

“It’s just...” He tips his head to the ground and sighs in frustration before looking me in the eye again. Lifting a hand, he pushes his long hair back in agitation. “Fuck. It’s hard to explain.”

Bullshit.

I quickly reach out for the handle of my door, trying to tear it from his hand but he quickly redoubles his efforts to keep it open and my failure sends me right over the edge.

“I’m pretty sure this is considered kidnapping!”

“Definitely not kidnapping, or would it be womannaping? Personnaping? I’m not sure—”

My mouth pops open in disbelief. He cannot be serious right now.

“Never mind. You’re right. Not the point.” He eyes me nervously as if he’s mildly concerned for his well-being before he leans in a little closer to me. “I didn’t tell her your name. Tiff’s my cousin and after the show we put on last night at the bar, then you running out like that.... Well, on a normal day she’s at a ten so last night was about a twenty.” He heaves a breath and tips his head a bare inch closer, voice coming out soft when he speaks. “All I told her was that I was pretty sure I had just met the girl who was going to turn my world upside down.”

His words hit me like a Mack truck, causing my eyes to widen and a sharp exhale of breath to leave me in a puff. The

honesty in his eyes leaves me rudderless and floundering. Whatever he sees on my face must encourage him enough that he plants his hands on either side of me and leans in close. Invading my space and bringing us eye to eye, surrounding me with his sea-spring scent.

“Come to the beach tonight, Blondie.”

I open my mouth to respond by telling him this is not a good idea but he cuts me off again.

“Don’t answer now. Just come,” he whispers, eyes running the length of my face and making me feel entirely too exposed.

Those dimples flash across his face when I remain silent and he reaches up, plucking my sunglasses off the top of my head and popping them on for me. A weirdly endearing gesture that soothes the already fading feeling of betrayal in me.

He starts to lean back and the lingering question at the back of my mind pops out. “Did you really have to go grocery shopping today?”

His eyes flare wide and he stills for a second before a careless shrug rolls off of him. “I didn’t not have to go.”

“So that’s a no?”

“Let’s just say...” Eyeing me playfully, he drags his bottom lip through his teeth. “I might have been driving home when I saw this badass Rover in the parking lot that practically screamed LA.” That blinding smile spreads right before he dips his head to my ear. “And Blondie, I wasn’t going to miss taking my shot.”

He rises and gives me a searching look before nodding to himself in satisfaction and stepping back. Closing my door, he gives Franny’s roof a gentle pat before pushing his cart back toward the other side of the parking lot. I track his progress in my rearview mirror, watching as he stops beside an older model white Jeep Wrangler and begins to load his groceries inside.

I shake my head to clear the daze and quickly start my car, not wanting to be caught sitting here when he leaves. Trepidation and attraction fight for dominance inside of me as I pull out of the parking lot, running everything he said through my mind and trying to find some clarity.

I'll give it to him though, he's a clever bastard.

And trouble, so much damn trouble. For me.

Chapter 6

Present Day

I look out at the bonfire on the beach and don't know what the hell I'm doing here.

By the time I had gotten home from the store today I was determined to ignore Jace's invitation and get down to the business of why I had come to Landing Point. I had unloaded my meager groceries, rolling my eyes when I picked up the cabbage. Still didn't know what the hell I was going to do with that. Then I had slapped together a peanut butter sandwich, made another, decidedly less delicious cup of coffee, and sat down on Gram's couch to come up with a plan of action.

And then I had hit my wall, because I knew what my next step should be and it caused nerves to flood through my body. If I wanted to figure out where my parents' relationship had gone so horribly wrong, what had caused them to reach that breaking point, the most obvious place to start was their home. Yvie had let me know that after the incident, as she liked to refer to it, the house had been cleaned and abandoned. She had someone check once a year to make sure everything was still in order but that was it. The only reason we still owned the house was because it was in my trust and I had never felt like dealing with the headache of selling it.

Not like a lot of people were going to jump at the chance to buy a house where a murder-suicide took place anyway.

So I had marched outside and gotten in my car, all hot air and determination... and then I had run back inside, locking the door as if the hounds of hell were chasing me.

Definitely not my finest moment.

In hindsight, it was undoubtedly stupid on my part not to expect how the reality of going back to their house would shake me. I thought I'd be fine because I barely remembered anything about the place, about them... but it seemed my subconscious remembered enough to send me running at the

prospect. Trauma was finicky that way. Right when you thought you had beat it, it reared its head.

So I had compromised with myself in an attempt to salvage some of my dignity. Maybe starting at the beginning, before my parents had met, would give me some answers. So I had gone into my father's childhood room to see if I could unearth anything. Any signs of the person he would become. And then I would conquer my parents' house tomorrow.

But four hours later I sat in the center of his bed feeling as if I had been royally mindfucked.

There was nothing. Well, there was plenty, but nothing to indicate that he'd even had an anger management issue. The people in his yearbooks had adored him, going on at length about what a good person he was. He had awards for debate club and acts of community service. He had been student body president and even the freaking prom king. I had never asked Yvie about him at length growing up, so my cumulative knowledge about him up to this point had pretty much consisted of that he had been a lawyer who had killed my mother and then himself.

So learning all these new aspects of him... it left me feeling like I was on an alien planet. Trying desperately to grasp onto what I knew was real as it slipped through my fingers in light of a harsh new reality.

How the hell did the smiling guy with trophies on the wall go on to commit such a horrendous act one day?

I had still been blankly staring around the room when a sharp knock at the door sounded around seven. When I opened the door it was the big-haired, smiling face of Doreen, my gram's longtime neighbor, waiting to greet me. Doreen was exceedingly nice at first, even at the sight of my open suitcase in the entry. Apparently she had gone to school with Yvie and with the casserole she brought I felt obligated to at least invite her in. But thirty minutes later I was deeply regretting that decision, knowing that if I had to put up with one more probing look out of the corner of her eye while she covered it

up with a “bless your heart” pat on my hand... Well, I might very well give her something to report to the town about.

And it wouldn't be anything good.

So I had told her I had somewhere to be and quickly ushered her out of the house in a decidedly less neighborly fashion than I had welcomed her in. The slamming of the door behind her was quickly followed by the realization that I actually had to go somewhere or else the nosy neighbor would definitely know I had been lying. And *bless her heart*, Doreen had been oh so conveniently watering her plants when I had gone to leave.

I had been sure to give her a bratty wave.

Which is how I had ended up in the small parking lot adjacent to the beach, looking out at the bonfire like a moth drawn to a flame.

What the hell was I doing here? This was probably the worst idea I'd had since...

Nope, not even going there.

Just pull away, El. Jace will never even know you were here.

Be smarter than you were before.

Decision made, I nod to myself and go to put my car in reverse when a loud knock sounds against my window, causing my heart to damn near jump from my chest.

Jerking my head up, I look out my window and am greeted by the sight of Jace's smiling face framed by the hood of a white sweatshirt like he's some sort of angel. As if.

Dammit. So much for my quick escape.

I throw open my door and step out, scowling furiously at him along the way.

“What the hell, Dawson?!” My voice whips out and his grin falters. “You can't just sneak up on someone like that!”

“Uh. Take a breath, Blondie.” He takes a step back and raises his hands in surrender. “I was heading down to the beach when I saw you sitting here all sullenly so I thought I'd

stop and see if you were planning to go down at some point or if you just wanted a good view to watch the festivities.”

I cross my arms and stare up at him, shifting uncomfortably. “I wasn’t sitting here sullenly, I was just contemplating—you know what, this is not about me.” I lift my hand and poke him in the chest for emphasis. Not at all noticing how firm it is. “You can’t sneak up on people like that. What if I had thought I was being carjacked and pulled a gun or something?”

His eyes widen, expression morphing into an uncomfortably curious look as he shoves his hands into the front pocket of his hoodie.

“You own a gun?”

“What?” I snap, bewildered by the sudden change in topic.

He shifts awkwardly on his feet. “I just thought... given your history...”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“I just meant—”

“I know what you meant.”

“No, no, no,” he rushes out, lifting a hand as if to reach for me before thinking better of it. “That’s not what I meant. It’s just people who lose a loved one to gun violence tend to come down on the gun control side of things.”

“Right,” I draw out in disbelief.

“Seriously. If you own a gun, I’m all for it. Hell, I’d take you to the shooting range myself and we can see who’s the better shot.”

My head jerks back in surprise. “You own a gun?”

He cringes openly in response to my question before opening and then closing his mouth as if deciding it wiser not to answer.

“Can we start over?”

I narrow my eyes at him and stay silent, quickly sorting through my options. I could be a bitch, play that he had hurt

my feelings, get in my car and leave. The excuse was ready-made now. Problem was... I didn't genuinely think he had been questioning my sanity when it came to owning a gun, not that I did, and... fuck it all to hell but part of me didn't want to leave now that he was standing in front of me.

There was something about him, a lightness that spread out to me when he was around. It lured me in, driving away the shadows that had followed me around for the past year and brought to life a part of me that had been lost. And I liked it. I liked him. It would be nothing but foolish of me to try to deny it any longer. Better to just face up to it. The question was... if things progressed, could I keep them purely physical?

A casual shrug rolls off his shoulders in response to my silence. "Or we could just stand here debating the merits of gun control all night... whatever you want."

"Oh shut the fuck up," I huff, walking past him and heading toward the beach. "You make me need to drink."

He catches up quickly and smirks down at me from inside the shadows on his hood. "That can be arranged."

"Uh-huh."

The cold ocean air hits as we walk down to the beach side by side and causes an involuntary shudder to run through me. Damn, I really wish I had rethought my shorts and crop top outfit before walking out the door.

"Here." Jace stops, ripping his hoodie off and pulling it over my head before I can utter a word of protest. As if he knows I never would have accepted had he simply offered it. "Forgot to mention it gets pretty cold out here at night." He gives me a grin, left standing in a long-sleeved gray thermal that clings to him. His hair once again pulled back again into a messy bun crowning his head.

I slip my arms into his hoodie and nod my silent thanks, rolling the sleeves up as we resume our pace, relishing the lingering warmth as I'm engulfed in his sea-spring scent. The desire I feel to sink farther into his hoodie, into the heat and smell of him leaves me with an uncomfortable feeling. The

last guy to care for me like this was Coop and the painful familiarity of it strikes so deep that for a moment I seize up. My step faltering for a second before I push through, forcing it down as we come up on the bonfire.

A small group of people eye me curiously as we make it to them, conversations halting at our arrival and leaving nothing but the sound of music playing from a speaker. From the looks of things, this is more of a hangout than a party though and that suits my mood just fine. I stand tall, shoulders back in a confident pose. Exuding an air of indifference as I weather their once overs with a small smirk. Social anxiety has never been a hang-up of mine. People either like me or hate me and I've never particularly cared enough to sway those who fell into the latter group.

Thankfully, Jace wastes no time in breaking the awkward silence and making introductions.

"Everyone," he calls the attention of the group to himself as he steps behind me, bringing his front up against my back and wrapping an arm loosely around my chest, tucking me under his chin. "This is El." The casual squeeze of his arm around me as he says my name screams possession. "She's new in town."

Smooth, Dawson. I keep my eye roll internal and force my body to stay relaxed seeing as we are in front of his friends but really, he might have saved time if he'd simply taken a Sharpie and written *Mine* on the front of his hoodie before we walked up.

Who would've guessed? Mr. Carefree had a possessive streak.

"El." Jace lifts the hand he doesn't have wrapped around me and starts pointing out people as he introduces them. "This is Zane, the asshole who just happens to be lucky enough to be my best friend, and the girlfriend he stole from me in junior high, Andrea." A scoff leaves the dark-haired, heavily tattooed guy sitting on a blanket to my right as he waves, the sleek redhead snuggled up in his arms laughing lightly while giving me a nod of greeting. "This is Tommy, he's a few years older

than us, but we let him hang out with us because his best friend is rarely in town and we feel sorry for him.” The clean-cut blond guy sitting in a camping chair to my left rolls his eyes and raises his beer at me in welcome. “That’s Sam over there giving you the mean mug but don’t mind her, she’s just mad she has a boy’s name.” He points to a gorgeous brunette girl across the fire from us who looks like she could be on the cover of sports illustrated and is undoubtedly glaring daggers at me. “And of course, you met Tiff already, but that’s her and her boyfriend Jared over there next to Sam.”

“Hi!” Tiff excitedly exclaims, practically bouncing in her redheaded boyfriend’s lap from where they sit in a camper chair, making him look seriously uncomfortable. “Sorry about this morning but I just kinda had a meltdown after running into you after last night. It was all anyone could talk about after you left and oh my gosh you’re just so pretty.” She cringes slightly as if just realizing what she’s said. “Okay, I’m going to shut up now.”

I can’t help the soft laugh that leaves me at her exuberance.

“It’s okay. I kinda had a meltdown myself so no worries.” I shoot her a quick wink, hoping she gets that I’m referencing the way I stormed off and her delighted smile is all the answer I need.

“Drink?” Tommy asks, opening the cooler next to him and holding out a ranch water to me.

“Please.”

Jace grabs the drink with his free hand and pops the top before passing it over to me.

Someone’s pulling out the big guns tonight apparently.

“So, El, are you from around here?” Andrea’s soft voice draws my attention back to her.

“Uh, no. Not exactly.” I take a sip of my drink to stall before my family history inevitably comes out. “I grew up in LA.”

“Then what the hell brought you down here?” Zane asks curiously, echoing his best friend’s question to me the night

before.

“My family is from here. My grams passed away a few years back and left me her house. Figured I should probably get down here and see the place before a hurricane swept through and blew it away.” I shoot him a bratty smirk and shrug my shoulders, feeling them move against Jace’s warm chest.

“No shit?” Zane laughs. “Who was your grams?”

I allow myself to lean back the barest inch for a moment, relishing the undeniable comfort I feel at having Jace, quite literally, at my back. Then I remind myself just exactly who I am, shoving steel into each vertebra of my spine as I force myself to push away.

“Elise Delacroix.” I meet Zane’s gaze head-on and see the slow realization dawn on him. The laughter fades from his expression and he eyes me consideringly, but I don’t back down, I don’t break his gaze even though I can feel the eyes of the rest of the group on me.

“But Ms. Delacriox only had one kid so that would make you...” Tiff’s voice pulls at me from across the bonfire as she trails off awkwardly.

“Eleanor Delacroix.” Finally breaking my eyes away from Zane’s, I answer her unspoken question with a small smile. “But like I told Jace, the people I actually like call me El.”

“El,” she echoes, her answering smile tinged with awkwardness but no less welcoming.

Jace gives me a gentle squeeze as the silence drags on. The group looking anywhere but at each other or me, awkwardness hangs heavy in the air, but I do nothing to break the spell. I am who I am and I owe them no explanation for that.

Tommy clears his throat next to me, breaking the tension and drawing my attention. “Ms. Elise was a good person. I was sad to see her go.”

“Thanks.” I give him a soft smile. There was no one around in LA to mourn for Gram’s besides Yvie and me after her passing, so I’m grateful to hear that her loss was felt here.

“She made my birthday cakes every year.” Andrea reminisces with a nostalgic smile. “Practically everyone’s in town. Elise’s homemade cakes are legendary around here.”

“Mine too,” I tell her, feeling my lips pull up at the memory. “She used to fly out every year and make a big deal out of it.”

“So why the hell would you come back here?” A queen bitch voice interjects from across the fire.

My eyes meet Sam’s dagger-filled gaze and I feel the tension of the group rise, their eyes bouncing back and forth between us.

I cock a brow at her in challenge. “Pretty sure that was asked and answered already.”

“Hmm,” she drags out snarkily. “Pretty sure if my parents had died like yours, I wouldn’t ever set foot back in the town where it had happened. But maybe you’re here to do some documentary thing for publicity? I mean, you are from LA.”

I feel Jace lock up against my back, his mouth opening as if to interject before I squeeze his arm in warning. I can fight my own battles and appreciate how he’s let me handle my introduction to his friends up till this point. No need to deviate now. Plus, I have a sneaking suspicion that her animosity has nothing to do with who I am and everything to do with the guy at my back.

“It’s a good thing I have bigger ovaries than yours then. Otherwise I never would have met this guy at the bar last night.” I reach my hand back and cup Jace’s face where it rests on my head, sending her a vicious smile when her eyes turn murderous. “Don’t worry though, the camera crews are only a day or two behind me.”

Don’t think you can out queen bitch me, little girl.

Zane’s snort of laughter into his beer is echoed by Jace’s quiet chuckle as he buries his head in my hair.

Sam opens her mouth as if to shoot something back when Andrea sends her a warning look. “Take it down a notch, Sam,” she scolds.

Sam snaps her mouth shut and looks into the fire with a narrow eyed gaze, probably envisioning all the ways she can bring about my untimely end.

Jace brings his mouth to my ear and whispers. “Take a walk with me?”

I nod my head in answer and he steps away from me to grab a couple more ranch waters from the cooler, letting the group know we’ll be back later. I can’t resist the temptation to twist the knife a little as we walk away though.

“You know,” I say loudly, making sure everyone can hear me as I come to a stop next to Sam. “If I had known you were such a true crime fan, I would have brought a pen so I could give you an autograph.” Looking her up and down, I smirk as my eyes land back on hers. “Let me guess, you’re a signature on the boobs kinda girl, right?”

Her gaze turns livid and Jace snorts a laugh, grabbing my hand to drag me away before what I’m sure would be an epic showdown occurs. Tiff’s wide-eyed, open-mouthed face stares at me from behind Sam and I shoot her a wink before allowing myself to be pulled away.

Jace continues to chuckle quietly as we walk down closer to the water and I shoot him an unamused look.

“I can’t believe you brought me to a bonfire where you knew your ex would be.”

“Sam isn’t technically my ex,” he reasons, tilting his head this way and that.

“Have you had sex with her on a continuous basis?”

“Well... yeah, but not for like—”

“Then she’s as good as an ex.”

“In my defense.” He laughs as we walk farther down the beach. “It’s a small town. There probably aren’t a lot of places we could go that one of my... exes, wouldn’t be.”

I meet his playful eyes and fight to keep my expression scolding. “You’re incorrigible.”

“Ahh, when you say it like that—”

“And a manwhore.”

“Hey, now.” Jace’s voice is filled with mock defense as he stops and drops down. “This good?”

“Sure.”

He watches as I plant my ass next to him before pulling a weed pen from the pocket of his shorts and taking a hit.

“You smoke?” he asks, holding the pen out to me.

“God, yes.” I take the pen and sigh happily. Damn Southern states are so stingy about the stuff I wasn’t sure if I was going to be able to find any while I was here.

We sit there in companionable silence while we pass the pen back and forth, sipping our ranch waters and watching the waves crash in an infinite stream. I take one final puff of the pen before passing it back and lie back to look up at the stars, feeling more relaxed than I have since I got here.

Thank you, Mary Jane.

Jace pockets the pen and drops back onto his elbows, giving me an amused look. “Don’t even lie. You loved that shit with Sam.”

“I kinda did,” I admit with a grin.

He chuckles softly, firework eyes sparking as they dance over my face in appreciation. “You’re trouble, Blondie.”

“Funny. That’s exactly the word that comes to mind when I think about you.”

“You think about me, huh?” He flashes those dimples and brings a hand up, playing with the ends of my hair where it falls over my shoulder. “Knew it.”

The connection between us pulls taut as our eyes lock, causing my heart to beat a faster pace in my chest and my stomach to flip wildly. The thread of anticipation in the air is palpable and I know what’s about to come next. And some part of me wants it to happen, knows it would probably be mind blowing based on the chemistry flying between us... but

a bigger part of me doesn't want to spoil what's actually turning out to be a pretty good night with a possible breakdown on my part. So I break our gaze and look back up at the stars before he can make his move, sighing in both disappointment and relief when I see him dip his head back to do the same.

I feel a twist in my gut as I look up at the unfamiliar constellations, knowing deep in my bones that I'll never again be able to look up at the stars without being filled with some degree of pain. Not after last summer. Not after Coop.

Trying to fill the silence, I ask the first question that pops into my brain. "Do you believe in fate?"

"I believe..." Jace starts slowly, as if he's ordering his thoughts. "That it's more complicated than simply having a singular fate. Think of our collective existence like a lake, right? You throw one rock and it can cause a ripple that affects the whole thing. I think that our decisions are like rocks, each of them causes a ripple, and then someone else's decision can affect our ripple. Everyone's course affects the whole thing and is affected in turn. All of it building into a never-ending action and reaction of our life." He drops down from his elbows to lie in the sand next to me and I turn my head, eyeing him doubtfully. "But I do think there's some higher power looking down on the lake, occasionally dropping a rock of their own when the whim strikes to change the course for someone."

"So the short answer would be..." I squint my eyes at him teasingly.

Turning his head to look at me, a soft laugh leaves him at my expression. "Yes and no, I guess. I believe that our fate is as much up to us as subject to the decisions of others. But that there is some overall brilliance to the ripples, a higher power dropping rocks here and there. Some things are just too coincidental for there not to be." He pauses, playful eyes turning more serious. "Take you for example."

"What about me?"

"Did you know... that our moms were friends?"

“What?” Shock runs through me at his words.

“I wasn’t sure how much you remembered from before...”

“Almost nothing.”

“Right, well, yeah.” He takes a breath and looks up. “So I can’t speak for your mom, but mine always said Nadia was her best friend. That it was like finding a long-lost sister when she moved here with your dad. I’m a couple years older so I probably remember more than you.”

I’m almost too scared to ask, to hear whatever memories he has. As if he’ll speak her into being and make the whole tragedy more real. But after a moment the quiet question is pulled from me, the need to know more about the woman who gave me life winning out.

“What do you remember?”

“I remember...” He smiles softly and pauses for a moment, eyes flicking across the sky as if lost in memory. “Our moms were always hanging out, sitting on the front porch, having a glass of some pink wine and talking for hours.”

“Rosé,” I whisper softly.

“Yeah. Rosé, I guess. Which meant I was forced to put up with you a lot of the time.” He turns his head back to me, raising his brows and giving me a look. “And you were a little terror, constantly bugging me to play with you and following me around, much to my horror at the time.” Reaching up, he tugs at my hair playfully. “I remember this one day, you walked in when I was playing with some army men and I told you that you couldn’t play with them because they were boy toys. You looked down your little nose at me, called me a misogynistic asshole and walked right out, leaving my seven-year-old self sputtering.” A quiet, melodic laugh leaves him. “Of course I ran straight to our moms, because while I didn’t know what misogynistic meant I knew you had said a bad word and I figured now was my moment to finally do away with you. They called you in there and you didn’t even deny it, just said that’s what your daddy called the boys who wouldn’t play with you. My mom just looked at me and told me if I

didn't want to be called a misogynistic asshole then I shouldn't be one."

A shocked laugh leaves me and Jace joins me with a chuckle of his own as I relish the story of an apparently happy childhood I never knew existed. The story leaves me with a sense of longing I've never experienced before and part of me is hungry for more.

"I'd love to meet her," I say once the laughter fades. "Your mom. To hear more stories."

A deep kind of sadness fills his eyes at my request and I brace myself, knowing whatever he's about to say isn't good. "I'm sorry, Blondie, but you can't. She passed away when I was in high school. Breast cancer."

"I'm sorry," I whisper, reaching over to grab his hand in the sand next to mine.

"Don't be, the years I had with her were good ones and she more than left her mark on me." His thumb moves in small circles against the back of my hand and he gives me a small grin. "But laughter, that's what I remember. They were always laughing."

"Thank you," I tell him, voice breaking slightly at the preciousness of the gift he just gave me.

"Don't mention it."

The silence that follows pulls at me, his confession earning one of my own.

"I couldn't go to their house today."

"Your parents'?"

"Yeah." Sighing, I look back to the stars, not wanting his eyes on mine for this part. "I want to know why it happened, where it all went so wrong for them. I got in my car... but I just couldn't do it. I couldn't make myself go."

I feel his concern like a weight against my skin in the silence that follows.

“I could go with you,” he offers smoothly. “Pick you up in the morning and drive you out there. At the very least bring you a decent cup of coffee and save you from that shit one I saw you pick up at the store today.”

Silly boy. As if making the offer sound casual makes it any less meaningful.

“Plus,” he adds. “I’m pretty sure if I didn’t watch out for you while you’re in town, my mama would strike lightning down on me from the heavens. Even if thinking I need to watch out for you makes me a misogynistic asshole.”

And even though I shouldn’t, even though I’m the dark eclipse to his shining sun and the truth is if I were a better person I would deny him for both our sakes... I don’t, because the uncomfortable truth I hate to admit is that sometimes we just need someone to weather the storm with us. Someone to lean on for just a moment.

So I give him the answer he wants, the answer I hate to need.

“Okay,” I whisper softly, feeling as if I’ve just stepped off a precipice, diving headlong into a course of fate that can’t be changed.

Or maybe that’s just the weed talking.

Chapter 7

One Year Ago

It's been three days since I left Coop on the beach and I've done everything in my power to push him out of my head since. I'd gone to the beach and flirted with any guy that caught my eye. I'd spent an entire day with my camera up at the abandoned El Miro hotel, snapping hundreds of pictures of the graffitied ruins. I'd drank and shopped in the open-air markets, chatting away with the locals in a mix of my limited Spanish and their English. But still... I couldn't shake him from my mind.

Every guy at the beach had the wrong color eyes. Every click of my camera brought our conversation to mind. Even at the busy market, I found myself thinking I had caught him out of the corner of my eye though I knew he was probably already long gone to Cahuita. Apparently, my subconscious had not gotten the memo that this was one of the few times I was letting my self-preservation win out.

And I was fucking annoyed with it by this point.

Today was my last day in Jaco and I was determined to drive any lingering thoughts of Coop from my mind before I left for Monteverde tomorrow. I had signed up for a waterfall hiking tour last night with that goal in mind, figuring the physical exertion would be a great way to work him out of my system.

As I walk up to the front of the tour company's storefront, the cute Costa Rican tour guide checking people in catches my eye and I pat myself on the back for the good idea. Physical exertion, indeed.

I plant myself in front of him and flash a dazzling smile. "Good morning."

He returns my smile with a knowing grin of his own, brown eyes sweeping down the length of my body as he passes the tablet to me for check-in. The workout shorts and top I'm wearing leave little to the imagination. "Hola, preciosa."

I quickly work my way through the consent forms, tapping the screen to sign my initials wherever needed then handing it back to him when it returns to the welcome screen.

I cock my head at him flirtatiously and reach up to twirl the end of my ponytail. “So will you be leading this tour today?”

Sure, maybe it’s overkill, but at this point I was a woman on a mission.

“Sí.” He drops his head and leans in flirtatiously. “Would you like to walk up at the front with me?”

I move to take a step closer and answer when I feel a tug on the small backpack I’m wearing, stopping my forward momentum as a demanding voice speaks.

“Ella es mía.”

The beautifully accented words snap through the air like a whip and the cute tour guide looks behind me, eyes widening considerably as he takes a respectful step back.

I whip my head around and meet a pair of night-forest eyes that spark with irritation. Coop’s words reverberate through my head and even with my limited Spanish vocabulary, I manage to translate.

She’s mine.

Motherfucker. Who does he think he is?

Narrowing my eyes at him, I step to the side, bristling with frustration as someone steps around us to check in.

What the actual fuck is he even doing here?

I cross my arms and stare at him, seeing the way his eyes narrow in response to my pose. “That was rude.”

He arches a brow at me. “So?”

My own word of disregard from our night together rings through my head along with the realization that he’s clearly throwing it back at me.

A fierce kind of energy rises between us as we eye one another silently, both alluring and combustible, thrumming

with defiance and desire. He takes a step closer to me and I have to tilt my head back to keep his eyes in my sight. The frame of dark lashes around them is even more dramatic in the daylight and only serves to pull me in.

“You didn’t hold up your end of the deal, Princess.” His voice is low and threaded with warning.

My eyes drop to his ridiculously full lips as he speaks and stay there, the desire in me momentarily winning out. But when his lips twitch at the corners I dart my eyes back up and find his arrogantly amused gaze waiting to greet me.

“So?” I toss out carelessly, throwing him a bratty smirk as I walk past him to the tour company’s shuttle. Acting as if his presence here doesn’t affect me in the least.

Because seriously... screw this. This was not how today was supposed to go. He’s supposed to be in Cahuita and I’m supposed to be well on my way to moving on with the cute tour guide. A clean break, that’s what was needed here.

I walk to the back of the shuttle and take the window seat, stashing my backpack under the seat in front of me before settling in. Refusing to look out the window and see what Coop’s doing. Maybe he’ll just take the hint and go away. It really would be the best thing for both of us.

But a few minutes later, my hopes of a clean break are shattered when he begins to make his way to the back of the shuttle with his eyes on me.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. What have you gone and gotten yourself into, El?

I exhale an irritated breath and give him a dead look, just daring him to take the empty seat next to me. Which of course he responds to by shooting me that savage smirk before dropping down next to me, putting our bodies right up against each other. His sandalwood scent wraps around me in the close quarters and I’m forced to face up to the fact that I’m not going to be able to escape this.

“What are you even doing here?” I snap out, eyeing the casual way he rests his head on the back of his seat, tipped

back with his eyes closed. “Aren’t you supposed to be in Cahuita?”

“I like to hike,” he states simply without opening his eyes, an unconcerned shrug rolling off his shoulders.

“And they don’t have hiking in Cahuita?”

“Not with the same views.” His lips ghost up at the corners and I hear the innuendo in his voice loud and clear. “I never knew princesses liked to hike.”

I have to bite my lip to keep the sound of frustration from escaping me.

“Cut the princess shit, Coop.”

“Then tell me your name.”

“No,” I answer stubbornly, just to spite him.

“Then Princess it is.”

I can’t stop the angry scoff from escaping this time and his amused chuckle only serves to fuel my irritation.

Two can play this game though.

I reach down and snag my backpack, digging through the front pocket for my phone and earbuds. Popping them in, I open Spotify and set it to shuffle on one of my favorite playlists, cranking up the volume until it drowns out everything. Determined to ignore the frustrating bastard next to me.

Surprisingly, he lets me.

The first hour or so of the drive passes without so much as a breath from him in my direction. But when the shuttle hits a sizable pothole in the road heading up the mountain and we jolt up in our seats, his arm lands halfway on top of mine on the way down. I stare at it for a moment, waiting for him to politely move it, but of course he doesn’t. Which leaves me with no choice but to forcefully jerk my arm out from under his. My annoyance with his disruption of my plan for a clean break obvious in the move. But when his arm drops down and his hand lands just above my knee I realize I’ve miscalculated.

I turn my head to check if he's even awake and find his eyes open and waiting to greet me, dark humor swirling in their depths. His other hand darts out and plucks my phone from my grasp before I even have the chance to process what's happening. He glances at the screen and surprise briefly flashes across his face.

I pluck one of the earbuds out of my ear and make sure to speak in a bored voice. "What?"

He lifts his eyes to mine, lips twitching. "Never knew princesses liked Nirvana either."

"Are you really surprised after I knew The Cure the night we met?"

"You also referenced Taylor Swift for your age so I was reserving judgment."

"I guess my taste is varied." I roll my eyes at him. "And Taylor Swift is epic, no matter what you say."

He huffs a quiet laugh, eyes rolling over my face. "Taylor Swift and Nirvana. Aren't you just full of surprises?"

Our eyes lock and I know he's referencing how I left him on the beach that morning. I sigh wearily and look down, noticing for the first time that sometime during the span of our short conversation his hand began to trace words on my knee. And that without consciously realizing it, my body answered by relaxing a little more into him. An uncomfortable feeling of defeat rises in me at the realization that he's too good at getting me to drop my guard and I'm too comfortable with him already.

"What are you doing here, Coop?"

I look at him when he doesn't answer right away and find his eyes on me, gaze intense with a hundred hidden thoughts racing behind his night-forest eyes. The shuttle jerks to a stop suddenly and his eyes clear, sweeping around to take in our new surroundings before returning to me.

"Just take a hike with me, okay?" He swallows visibly. "Save the rest for when we get to the top."

I let him sweat it out for a moment before answering, but really, he's already here, what does he expect me to do? Demand he stay on the shuttle while the rest of us hike?

As if he'd listen.

I guess I could roll the dice. Maybe even tell the tour people he's a stalker, which given this morning he very well might be. A very sexy, mind-blowing-between-the-sheets stalker... but a potential stalker all the same. It's probably the smartest course of action.

But instead, I just grab my backpack from the floor and give him a shrug. "Fine."

A whisper of warning works its way up my spine and I curse myself the entire way off the shuttle. Dangerous. So fucking dangerous. I'm already giving in when I should be doing nothing but shutting him down hard.

Stop playing with fire, El.

Once everyone is off the shuttle and gathered around, the cute tour guide quickly runs through the three-hour hike we'll be taking today. Making eye contact with everyone in the group but me. I don't even need to look to see the smug look on Coop's face. I can feel the satisfaction pouring off of him at my side.

Asshole.

I peek at him out of the corner of my eye as we start up the mountain, taking stock of his white linen button-down and black shorts. Unable to stop the snicker that escapes at the sight. No backpack, no water bottle. The only part of his outfit even remotely appropriate for hiking is his sneaker-clad feet.

"What are you laughing at?" he asks, eyeing me warily.

"Nothing." I snort. "Just admiring the outfit you picked out for this hike you were planning to take today."

"Yeah, clothes were never really my strong suit," he agrees with a good-natured shrug as his hands go for the top button of his shirt. "Guess I should fix that."

I watch him unbutton the first half of his shirt before whipping my eyes back to the trail. My breathing way too fast for having quite literally just started the hike. Dammit. I just couldn't keep my mouth shut.

“Mind stowing this for me?”

I glance at him and keep my eyes carefully trained away from his body, only allowing myself to look at his face and the shirt he's holding out.

“Fine.” I grab the shirt from him, wanting to end this quickly so that I can keep my focus on the trail and not on his half-naked body next to me. “But don't come crying to me when you're dying from dehydration.”

I quickly swing my backpack around and shove his shirt inside unceremoniously while that dark, quiet laugh leaves him.

“I'll be fine.”

I keep my mouth shut in a show of rare restraint, not wanting to prolong the conversation considering his current state of undress. The hike quickly becomes grueling after that, demanding all of our attention and not allowing for conversation, which suits me just fine considering I'm not quite sure what to do with him at this point. Most guys would have been happy to wake up and realize their one-night stand wasn't going to hang around and ask for more. Even considering how epic the night had been. But my intuition knew it then just like he's proved it now. Coop isn't most guys... which is why I'd tried to avoid this situation in the first place.

We're about two hours in when we reach a steep incline with high rocky boulders blocking the path and Coop wastes no time in stepping in front of me. I take advantage of the opportunity to look without him knowing it, allowing my gaze to devour his body as he lithely lifts himself up onto the first boulder. A tattoo marks his back that I never saw during our night together, considering that for most of the time, I either had my back to him or was, ahem, on my back.

He turns around, holding his hands out to me, and I take them without hesitation. My muscles burning too badly for me to be stubborn and put up a fight, whereas he looks like he's hardly breaking a sweat. As we make our way up the boulders, him going first and then turning to pull me along, I'm able to piece together the free-flowing script that starts at the base of his neck and spans his entire back.

*We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.
Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.
We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask.*

The words speak to me and I look at him consideringly as we make it to the top. It's deep and dark and fucking impressive and I hate him just a little bit for it. It draws me to him even more than I already was and makes me think maybe we're more alike than I realized. Because no one without damage would mark their body with something like that.

“See something you like?” He arches a brow at me as we walk side by side and I realize I've been staring at him.

“Your tattoo,” I tell him honestly, figuring it can't hurt at this point.

“Ah.” He nods in understanding. “It’s Dunbar.”

“It’s beautiful.” I clear my throat awkwardly as nerves shoot through me at the confession and his lips quirk up in response.

“Not the typical reaction to that particular poem but I guess that’s par for the course with you.”

“Ha.” I scoff. “Thanks.”

“No tattoos for you?”

“Nope. Pretty sure you would have found them the other night if I had any.”

“True.” He chuckles darkly. “Why not?”

“Guess there’s never been anything I loved enough to permanently mark my body with.”

I shrug as we crest the top of the trail, coming to a stop at the sight of the high cascade of water waiting to greet us. The people who made it here ahead of us are already making their way down to swim in the pool surrounding the waterfall. I quickly drop my backpack at the base of a nearby tree and slide my shoes off while Coop sits down to unlace his sneakers methodically. As I scan the pool, my eyes snag on a beaten down path leading farther up toward the falls and exhilaration shoots through me. I quickly walk over to where the cute tour guide stands, ignoring his nervous glance in Coop’s direction.

“Is it safe to jump from the top?” I ask, because despite what people might think about me being reckless. I don’t have a death wish. Just the opposite in fact. I want to feel painfully alive for every moment of my time here on earth, because you never know when your time is up. Doesn’t mean I’m in a rush to meet my end though.

The tour guide nods in answer as if he’s worried opening his mouth will make him look guilty of something. But that’s good enough for me. I take off for the path without missing a beat.

“Where you going, Princess?” Coop’s demanding voice calls out behind me.

I ignore him, steadily making my way farther up the path.

“Dammit.”

I hear his muttered curse and a smile tugs my lips up in response, guessing that he’s already making his way over to catch up. I’m halfway up the path when I hear him and glance over my shoulder, his unamused expression causing a light laugh to leave me.

“I would have been more than happy to offer up my services if the hike wasn’t exhausting enough for you.”

“Come on, Coop.” I reach out to grip a nearby tree branch, steadying myself as I climb. “You said to save the rest for when we got to the top. Technically we’re not at the top yet.”

We reach the end of the trail a few minutes later and step out onto the small rocky area abutting the fast stream of water falling over the ledge. I heave a breath of exertion and sit down on a nearby rock, looking out at the endless stretch of the green rain forest below us in appreciation. Coop takes a seat next to me and we sit in companionable silence for a moment, catching our breath and taking in the view.

“Tell me something.” I break the silence first, eyeing his imposing form next to me in order to get a better read on him. “How’d you find me today?”

“Luck.” He shrugs, turning his head to meet my gaze. “After you left me on the beach I figured I’d stick around for a couple days and see if I ran into you again. I was going out for breakfast this morning and saw you walking down the street. Paid that idiot tour guide more than I should have for him to let me come today.”

“Why?”

“Why, what?”

“Why stick around to find me? Why pay the tour guide?”

“Because.” He pauses, eyes raking my face. “I told you the other night... you’re a dangerous thing and I’m not done with you yet.”

Fuck me.

I don't say anything to him for a minute, so caught up in the pull of his night-forest eyes and the thrum of energy between us. I realize it's what I had felt like was missing these past few days and sent me endlessly searching, but everything I'd found had just brought him to mind. I'm not the one who's dangerous here... he is, this living entity between us is.

I sigh and shake my head, speaking softly. "If you're looking for something more here, Coop... I'm not your girl."

He tilts his head in consideration, eyes narrowing just a bit. "Why?"

"Because I don't do complicated. And more is always complicated."

He nods, looking out over the rain forest for a moment and I can practically see the wheels turning in his head.

"You like me, right?"

My lips twitch against my will at his question, it's such a girl thing to ask. "Yes."

"And I'm ninety-nine percent sure that the sex was just as good for you as it was for me."

"Pretty sure that was obvious," I answer, rolling my eyes at him.

"Then I'm not asking for anything more than to spend some time with you."

"I leave for Monteverde tomorrow."

"Don't." He takes a breath. "Come to Cahuita with me instead."

My mind races as excitement and trepidation at the prospect rise within me with equal ferocity.

"What do you have to lose?"

Everything.

I have everything to lose here. All it would take would be one misstep with him, one drop of my guard too low, one crack of my wall in just the right place and I would fall. I

know it, can practically see it. And here's the thing about falling... you always hit the ground at some point.

"Let's play a game." I stand, echoing his words from the other night to buy time before making a decision.

That savage grin flashes across his face. "What game do you have in mind?"

"I'll give you an answer to your question," I tell him, letting my eyes drift over the pool below as if in thought before I back up a step and cock a brow at him. "But first you have to catch me."

With that I turn and launch myself over the side of the waterfall. Heart hammering as the feeling of weightlessness takes over for those few precious seconds. The water slaps hard against my feet when I hit, wrapping around me like a cool second skin. I let myself sink for a few seconds, eyes open in the underwater world, waiting to see what he'll do. The explosion of water not far from me a moment later has me smiling and I start to kick my feet.

I break the surface to the hollers and applause of the other hikers in our group and give them a wave as I tread water. About two seconds later, Coop's strong arms wrap around my middle and he pulls me to him, turning me along the way so that we're face to face. I wrap myself around him without hesitation, letting him take my weight and dropping my forehead to his. My grin wide as I ride the wave of exhilaration and look into his narrowed eyes.

"Are you trying to kill us?" His voice drops low but I feel him start to harden against me despite his reprimanding tone.

"Nope. Just the opposite." I can't help but roll my hips against him, breath hitching as I do. "Showing you how to really live."

"Trust me." His lips ghost up. "I need no instruction in that department. Allow me to demonstrate for you."

He lets us sink below the water and I unwrap my body from his as he grabs my hand and tugs me along. I quickly realize where we're going when the water in front of us turns white

with the pounding it's taking from the falls above. Tensing my body, I kick hard to make it through, the tug Coop gives on my hand helping considerably. I come up on the side and inhale a deep breath, eyes scanning the shadowed cove hidden behind the waterfall.

Coop lets go of me to brace his hands on the rocky ledge and push himself out of the water before turning to help me do the same. I plant my foot on the ledge for leverage and push as he pulls, coming up to land hard against his body. He lowers his hands to my hips, running his thumbs along the waistband of my elastic shorts as he turns us and backs me up against the rock wall.

He drops his mouth to my ear. "You going to break this deal too, Princess?"

The taunt in his voice is apparent and his eyes are dark when he lifts his head to look at me, every bit of it sends fire racing through my veins in anticipation.

And despite the alarms blaring in my mind, I decide to give him an inch because this temptation... it's the apple in Eden. Impossible not to take a bite.

"There would have to be rules."

"Undoubtedly." A low sound of amusement leaves him as his eyes flick down to my neck and he brings his hand up, running his thumb against the spot where he marked me. The bruise almost completely healed now.

"I'm serious, Coop," I scold, trying to grasp onto some form of control.

Bringing his hand up, he threads my ponytail around his fist and meets my gaze. "So am I."

He drops his mouth to mine and kisses me with that demanding dominance of his and I meet him with my own desperate need. Fuck, I've never experienced something like this before. I've had great sex, sure, amazing sex I might even argue. But this... need for someone else, like everything in the fate of the universe is subject to their next move is completely foreign to me.

I go to wrap my leg around his hips, wanting to feel him against me, but he stops me with a hand on my knee and lifts his head from mine.

“There’s something I didn’t get to do the other night that I haven’t been able to stop thinking about since.” He brings his head down to my neck, gently kissing his way up to my ear and whispering. “Can anyone see us?”

My eyes scan the fall of water in front of us, trying to peek through the occasional flash of the pool beyond.

“I-I don’t think so.” My pulse pounds in time with the echo of the waterfall, stomach fluttering with excitement.

“Good.” He drags the lobe of my ear through his teeth before dropping to his knees.

Coop’s hands go to the waistband of my shorts and he drags them down my legs, holding on to my hip as I step out of them and making sure I don’t fall, which is probably for the best considering that my body is practically vibrating in anticipation. I’m bare to him now, my elastic shorts not allowing for underwear. Not that I’d wear them anyway. Elastic shorts basically are underwear.

He loops one of my legs under his arm and drapes it over his shoulder, kissing his way up until he makes it to the dip between my leg and pussy. Stopping, he lightly drags his teeth over the sensitive spot before lifting his head to look up at me. There’s something so inherently powerful, sensual about having a man on his knees for you and I’m filled with awe as I look at him. It’s an addicting feeling.

He places a kiss right above my slit, chuckling darkly as my body jerks at the teasing touch. Then he drops his mouth to my clit, swirling his tongue around it a few times and flicking it once on his way down to my entrance. His tongue thrusts deep inside of me and he gives a groan of satisfaction, the vibration of his mouth forcing a desperate kind of gasp from my mouth as I wind my hands through his short hair. Trying to pull him impossibly closer.

He trails his free hand up my leg, bringing two fingers to my entrance and replacing his tongue with them. They curl inside me, dragging over that glorious spot as he swoops his tongue back up, mouth open, seeming determined to leave no inch of me untouched by him.

He's devouring me. There's no other way to describe it.

And it is... so. Fucking. Hot.

I reach behind me and try to grasp onto the rock, searching for some purchase as short, gasping moans leave my mouth. My hips jerk against his mouth at what he's doing to me and I widen my leg on his shoulder as much as I can to grant him even further access. He responds by letting go of my leg then bringing his hand up to grip my hip forcefully, holding me still as he zeroes in on my clit.

"Oh fuck. Coop. Yes."

The words are torn from me as my body fights his hold, desperate to move as his tongue continues to flick over my clit. My whole body is shaking, tightening, a wave of pleasure rushing at me more forcefully than the water cascading before me. He rolls his tongue, pushing down hard on my clit as his fingers thrust deep inside of me and my eyes screw shut as I break apart under his mouth with a cry.

A surge of wetness drenches my pussy and he drops his head, leveling open-mouthed kisses on me that cause little twinges of pleasure to shoot through me as my orgasm subsides. I open my eyes and watch as he turns his head to kiss the inside of my thigh softly before tilting his head up to look at me, satisfaction shining from his eyes.

"Come to Cahuita with me." He rises up and presses another soft kiss to my stomach, eyes never leaving mine. "Because I'm not done with you... and I don't think you're done with me either."

And just like that, he had me.

Chapter 8

Present Day

A loud banging jerks me from my sleep and I sit up in the bed instantly, brain struggling to figure out where the noise is coming from. The sound abruptly stops as I squint my eyes, sweeping them across the room and looking for anything out of place. Did a pipe burst or something? What does a pipe bursting even sound like? Surely there would be water or some other evidence if that was the case. Maybe it was just a raccoon or some other kind of woodland creature digging through the trash. That's probably it, I reason, adrenaline fading from my veins.

I'll wait sixty seconds and if I don't hear anything else... I'm going back to sleep. I count down in my head, allowing myself to lie back against the pillows when I reach the thirty-second mark. Eyes sliding closed from drowsiness at the fifty. But right when I allow myself to fully relax that damn banging starts up again and I jerk back up. Someone's knocking at the front door, I realize, able to identify the sound now that I'm more awake.

I scowl at the noise and throw the covers off, looking at my phone to see that it's seven freaking thirty a.m. before heading toward the door. Stumbling down the hall, I promptly stub my toe on the open bathroom door and bite down on my lip as I hop in silent pain. I clutch the wall for support and limp the rest of the way to the door, officially ready to tear into whoever is banging away on the other side.

God help her if it's Doreen. She can just go ahead and stick her bless your heart where the sun don't shine.

It takes me two tries but I finally manage to pull open the door, revealing Jace's grinning face.

"Morning, Blondie!"

I open and close my mouth like a fish, eyes blinking fast as I try to process what's happening. "What are you doing here?"

His eyebrows pull down slightly as he takes in my face, voice becoming unsure. "Taking you to your parents' place?" He drops his gaze, eyeing my obvious tank top and shorts pajama combination. "That's what we agreed last night, right? To go this morning?"

"Well, yeah!" I splutter. "But not at seven thirty!"

"What time did you have in mind then?" he asks and even through my sleepy eyes, I can see he's fighting a grin.

"Like eleven?" I pause, reconsidering. "Thirty?"

He rolls his eyes at me and gives up the fight against the grin. "That's barely morning." Reaching down, he snags two thermoses that sit beside the doorframe and shoves one into my hand. "Come on, El. The sun is up, it's a bright new day. Time to get moving."

And with that he walks right past me into the house, leaving me looking back and forth between the porch where he just was and the kitchen he's walking into, wondering what the hell just happened to my morning.

Slowly closing the door, I narrow my eyes and trail after him.

"You're unnatural," I surmise, watching him inspect the space. "Who the hell is happy at this time of day?"

He turns and leans against the kitchen counter, eyeing me playfully. "Take a sip of your coffee."

Part of me wants to refuse just because he told me to... but apparently I'm a weak caffeine-addicted bitch because I raise the thermos to my lips and take a sip, closing my eyes in bliss.

"Better?" His amused voice rings out.

I open my eyes, haughtily dragging them up and down his T-shirt and jean-clad body. "Only slightly."

He rolls his eyes again. "Go get ready. I'll be here when you're done."

I pause for moment, debating whether to go along with this or tell him to fuck off so I can get some more sleep and he

rises from the counter at my hesitation, seeming to read my mind.

“Unless you’d prefer to go back to bed?” He lifts his blond brows in question, sensual energy in full force as he walks toward me. “Because that’s an idea I could get on board with.”

“Oh shut up,” I snap, spinning around and heading out of the kitchen. Not allowing myself to dwell on how good that idea actually sounds as his amused laughter follows me.

I almost make it into my gram’s room before remembering my suitcase is still in the entry and sigh in defeat. Turning around, I head back down the hallway, holding up a finger of silence to Jace along the way. “Not a word, Dawson!” His laughter redoubles but he remains silent and I count that as a win. I search through my clothes and snag some underwear before taking stock of the outfits I packed.

I’m going to need some armor for today.

I settle on an oversized Seether concert tee and a pair of skinny jeans, bundling it all up in my arms and walking to the bathroom without a glance Jace’s way. Firmly scolding myself that I *will* take my suitcase into my gram’s room when I get back today. And just to spite him for waking me up at such an ungodly hour, I take as long as possible to get ready. Dragging out what is usually a fairly quick process for me.

I wash and condition my hair twice because.... Rinse and repeat, right? I use a sugar scrub that is probably a year old and until this day has remained unopened, pondering why I even brought the damn thing. I shave my legs and the, ahem, intimate parts of my body with the utmost attention. When I finally emerge from the shower, I check my phone and smirk when I see that an hour has passed. I pull on my clothes and yank a brush through my hair before sliding on my Converse and taking a sip of my lukewarm coffee to celebrate the victory.

But instead of being greeted by Jace’s irritated face like I expect, when I open the door I’m engulfed by a medley of scents that are most definitely not my sugar scrub. I walk toward the kitchen in confusion with my thermos in hand and

come to a screeching halt at the sight that greets me. He made breakfast. And not like slapping together a sandwich like I would... but actual food. There's two paper plates set out on the counter with a piece of avocado toast and a scone on each.

Where the hell did he find paper plates?

A grin lights up his face when he notices me. "Figured I'd make breakfast since you were taking forever."

"Oh."

"Unless you're not a breakfast person?"

Well, when left to myself I'm not really a meal person outside of takeout but this... maybe I should invite him over and take ridiculously long showers every day.

"No. No. This looks great," I rush out, walking the rest of the way into the kitchen. "Thanks," I tack on awkwardly, not quite sure what to do with my bratty self now.

"Great." Jace scoops up the plates and hands one to me. "Figured we could eat on the way."

"Okay."

He moves to walk out of the kitchen and I know I should follow but my feet are rooted in place.

"Blondie?" he questions, turning when he gets to the entry and notices I'm not behind him.

"Yeah?" I turn my head, meeting his unusually solemn gaze.

He walks a few steps back toward me, eyes searching my face. "You sure you want to do this?"

"Yeah." I nod, assuring myself as much as him.

"Okay, then." He holds out his hand to me. "You've got this."

I stare at his hand for a moment before forcing my body into action and taking it, letting him gently pull me out the door. Taking comfort in the feeling of his hand in mine, in not being completely alone in this. When we reach the driveway, he pauses, tilting his head down toward me.

“Your car or mine?”

“Mine.” I exhale a deep breath. “I want to know how to get back there and I’ll remember better if I drive.”

“Okay.” He nods and lets go of my hand, heading to the passenger door as I open the driver’s side and slide in.

Setting my plate on the center console, I grab the avocado toast and take a bite. Knowing that I should eat even though it settles like a lead ball in my stomach. I start the car and pull out before flicking my eyes to Jace.

“Where to?”

“Head to the main road and turn right. It’s about twenty minutes down the road.”

I nod in response, following his directions and pulling out onto the main road as I take another bite of the toast and force it down. Setting it down, I reach for my coffee in the cup holder and turn onto the main road. Silence reigns in the car as I drive. The nerves filling my stomach making it impossible for me to even put on music, much less spark a conversation. We’re a ways out of town with nothing but tree-lined fields on either side when Jace raises his hand and points to a gravel road coming up on the left.

“Turn here. The house is a couple minutes up the road.”

Curiosity momentarily wins out over my nerves as I make the turn. “I’m guessing everyone in town knows where their house is?”

“Yeah.” His voice is quiet, reserved. “It’s... I guess you could say it’s pretty well known.”

A quiet, humorless laugh leaves me. “That’s a nice way to say it.”

The road winds down before cresting slightly up on a curve with an old, two-story southern plantation home sitting at the top. I can see the white paint of the house is dirty and peeling even from the road, the black shutters around the windows missing a few planks here and there. It would make the perfect haunted house. The whole place just run down enough to leave

you wondering what happened to make someone abandon what was once a clearly magnificent home.

The road winds up in front of the house before curving back and I park Franny right in front of the porch steps. I move my plate on the dash and open the center console, grabbing the key for the house that Yvie had given me before I left. Jace is quiet next to me as I take a deep breath and push open my door, forcing my body all the way as if I'm moving through quicksand. I step out of my car and slowly walk around to the steps, stopping as my eyes snag on the black door with a large brass knocker.

“Daddy! Lift me!”

The memory crashes through my mind and knocks the breath right out of me. A giggling, carefree girl asking her father to lift her so she can reach the door knocker. Something that had been lost to recesses of my mind brought back to life by the house in front of me. What other memories will I find here? What skeletons are lost within the depths of my own mind? I push through the trepidation trying to paralyze me and take that first step, knowing that the first step is always the hardest.

Jace trails behind me, a quiet presence at my back, there if I need him but letting me lead the way. I push the key into the lock and turn it with a resounding snick, the sound making me feel as if I just opened Pandora's box. Pushing open the door, I hesitate for only a moment before stepping over the threshold and into the foyer. My eyes scan the space and I'm struck by the randomness of my memories from here.

My mother bringing out cookies for me from the archway beyond the stairs that I somehow know leads to the kitchen. My father at the bottom of the stairs, arms open and waiting to catch me as I race to him when he gets home from work. Sitting at the low table in the living room to my right and coloring while my parents fought in the other room, angry voices hushed in an attempt not to reach me. A strange mishmash of memories barreling down on me.

That's the funny thing about memory though. Some of the things you'd give anything to remember fade so quickly while other seemingly random events refuse to budge. You can tell yourself to remember something, try as hard as you can to burn it into your mind and it still fades. Lost among the neurons in your brain, buried in the gray matter.

I had a lot of memories like that with Coop, ones I secretly would have given anything to remember. Random occurrences that I felt were so important now, right on the edge of my memory, taunting me with how they were just out of reach. The masochistic part of me would give anything to be able to remember everything from last summer. To be able to string all our little moments together and create a never-ending fantasy I could live in.

The side of me that cared about my well-being is happy some of it has faded.

The house looks as if they just left to go on vacation. All of their belongings are still here. A set of keys on the hook beside the door. Family pictures dotting the wall of the grand staircase leading to the second story. If it wasn't for the musty smell and feeling of absolute emptiness, you would expect them to come walking back through the door any minute now.

"How the hell did this happen here?" I whisper, giving voice to the thought running through my mind.

Jace sighs sadly beside me. "I don't know, El. I don't know."

"Where do you think I should start?"

He pauses, hesitating as if he doesn't want to offer up the suggestion that popped into his mind. "Their bedroom?"

I look up to the top of the stairs and a visceral reaction takes hold at the thought of stepping foot into the room where they died. My heart thunders in my chest and I'm paralyzed, breath coming fast, hands shaking at my sides. Voice caught in my throat with that horrible feeling of being unable to speak. My mind may not remember what happened that night, whether I

really did sleep through it or wake. But my body knows nothing but horrible things lie at the top of those stairs for me.

“Or,” Jace continues when I don’t respond. “Did your dad have an office here?”

I force myself to take a few deep breaths, air hissing through my clenched teeth as I try to calm myself down before replying. “Yeah. I-I think so,” I stutter out, flicking my eyes to him. “I vaguely remember some filing cabinets in a room that looked out on the backyard.”

“Okay.” He tilts his head toward the back of the house. “Let’s start there, and then...”

“Yeah.” I nod, not needing him to continue. Knowing I’m going to have to face their room at some point today.

Jace reaches over and threads his fingers through mine, taking the lead and gently leading me toward the back of the house. And I let him because at this point I’m not sure I could go another step without it. We cross under the archway and through the kitchen, the thick coat of dust covering everything visible in the light streaming through the windows surrounding the space. There’s a hallway shooting off to the right and we take it since it’s the only available option, quickly coming to a door on the left. Jace pauses, looking the door up and down before reaching out and opening it.

I was right. There’re filing cabinets lining the wall behind a giant carved walnut desk that sits looking out at the backyard. The tree swing that hangs off a giant oak visible from the window. As if my father used to sit and watch me play while he worked.

How?

That one word plays on an endless loop in my head as I walk farther into the room. I don’t understand it. My memories, this house, all of it speaks of love, not madness.

I clear my throat to battle the tightness climbing up it and look up to Jace. “You want to take the left side and I’ll take the right?”

“Sure, Blondie.” His lips pull up into a soft, reassuring smile. “Whatever you need.”

We set out then, combing through our assigned sides, pulling out drawers and shuffling through the filing cabinets. Trying to find anything that would provide a clue or answer as to what caused a seemingly sane man to snap. I open a filing cabinet and find a stack of invoices from a private detective. Quickly leafing through them and sighing in defeat when I come to the conclusion that they were all for his clients. I still snap a picture of one with the plan to follow up though. Hoping that maybe whoever this is might be able to shed some light. After an hour though, Jace and I are forced to stop when it's obvious there's nothing to be found here besides random bits leftover from my father's legal practice.

There's no avoiding it now. I have to face their room. See if it holds any answers. I bring my eyes up to where he stands across from me, both of us silent as we try to avoid the inevitable for a few seconds longer.

You can do this, El. After last summer... you can survive anything.

I lift my head, reminding myself of that fact over and over again as I speak. “Upstairs, then?”

He nods silently and I take that first step to leave the office.

I walk without really seeing, through the hallway, out of the kitchen, the staircase coming too quickly. My body screams for me to leave as I take that first step up, misplaced adrenaline flooding my veins the higher I climb. By the time I make it to the top, my hands are shaking at my sides, somewhere between tingling and numb. A long hallway stretches out before me, two doors on my left, one on my right, and a lone door sitting at the end.

The lone door that I know leads to my parents' room.

You can practically feel it. The sorrow and agony leaking from the door palpable, as if it's slowly winding tendrils of misery out toward us. Curious as to who's come to disturb its

peace. I press my lips together as tight as I can to quell the whimper trying to escape.

You can do this. You will survive this.

Jace glances at the first door to my left. “Do you want to—” He pauses, clearing his throat awkwardly. “I mean, one of them is yours. Do you want to see it?”

I shake my head jerkily and loosen my lips. “No.” I exhale a deep breath. “No, let’s just get this over with.”

As I walk toward their bedroom door, a blessed numbness begins to dampen my hypervigilance to something more manageable. My mind shutting down partially to save itself now that it knows there is no escaping this reality. I pause when I get to the door before reaching out to grab the brass knob, turning it and pushing open the door without stepping in.

The sight that greets me is nothing like what I expected. I guess some part of me had expected there to be remnants of what had happened that night still here. But as my eyes scan the room I see that the space is spotless. No bloodstains mar the wood floors. No splatter across the yellow walls. Yvie and Grams must have hired someone really good to come clean it up for there to be this little evidence left behind. I feel a hint of the tension locking my body up fade at the realization and rally enough to step into the room.

Jace follows me over the threshold and once again we stop once we’re inside the room, neither of us speaking as we take in the malignant space. Something is off though... I dart my eyes around, trying to figure out what’s setting off my senses. The bed is stripped bare, nothing but a four-poster bed frame left to show where they once slept but that’s not entirely surprising. Everything else seems to be innocuously in order though, so what...

I breathe in again and it hits me.

There. Underneath the layers of must, the smell of dust and decay, is bleach. So incredibly faint that you have to breathe deep to pick it up. But with the way I’m trying to keep my

breathing steady, trying to take deep, calming breaths... it's undoubtedly there.

Oh my god. It's bleach. My chest heaves rapidly at the realization. It's from the cleaner. It's what they used to...

I can't keep the whimper from escaping this time.

Jace is in front of me in an instant, threading his fingers through mine, his eyes flicking back and forth between mine as if he's not sure which one will tell him the truth of my current mental state.

Uh, that would be fucking disastrous.

His forehead creases in concern as if he heard the thought run through my head. "Do you want to leave?"

I consider it for a moment. I really do.

I could leave this place and never come back. Never have to face the horrible reality of what happened here. I might even be better off for it.

But... fuck.

I just need some kind of closure. I need for something in my life to make sense after last summer. And since I can't solve that...

"No," I finally tell him, my voice coming out rough. "But could you—" The words catch in my throat and I swallow down that horrible feeling of tightness. "Do you think you could take the bedroom and I'll take the bathroom and closet?"

"Of course."

I slowly unwind my fingers from his, hating that I hate to do it, to lose that anchor he is.

Our fingers gently brush one another's as I start to walk toward the door on the left side of the bed frame. I open the door and see that it's pretty much a standard master bath setup, the only thing standing out is the gorgeous claw-foot tub that's all-white porcelain with intricately curved feet.

Shame. I used to like claw-foot tubs before today.

I start to search the space, once again pulling open cabinets and opening drawers. It doesn't take me long to realize there's nothing to be found here either. Not unless you're interested in secrets of whether she was born with it or not from Maybelline eighteen years ago. I sigh in defeat and walk toward the closet door, opening it up and flipping the light for the switch beside the doorway. Harsh light floods the dark space and I take in the collection of my father's suits on the left and my mother's assortments of dresses and shirts on the right.

Perfectly ordinary. Everything in this house is just so perfectly fucking picturesque.

I begin to frustratedly work my way through the clothes, starting with my father's and digging through all of his suit and pants pockets. Finding a few random business cards that I slide into the back pocket of my skinny jeans just in case. I stick my hand into all of his shoes and thoroughly dig through his socks despite the fact that it gives me the heebie-jeebies. But I'm not a newb at hiding places and I know where I kept my loot back in the day when I still had to hide it from Yvie. Finding nothing more on my father's side, I turn to my mothers and start the whole process over again.

I make it through her clothes and kneel down to start going through her shoes when I see something that makes me pause. All of her shoes are resting neatly on shoe racks running the length of the floor below her clothes, the racks staggered two deep. Except for four pairs of heels that sit slightly higher than the rest toward the back. I pull out the shoe rack in front of them and my eyes land on a large black wooden box, the gold keyhole at the front staring out at me tauntingly. I sweep the heels off the top of the box and pull it out, the heaviness of it surprising me. My palms are sweaty with anticipation as I try to pry the lid open but it won't budge.

Of course the fucking thing is locked.

"Jace!" I call out, hearing him head my way immediately. "Any chance you found a key out there?"

"What? No. Why—" He cuts himself off as he steps into the closet and sees me, eyes zeroing in on what I hold in my

hands.

“Shit,” I mutter. “I guess we could take it back—”

“Hold on.” He shakes his head, disappearing back out of the closet door.

I hear him opening up drawers in the bathroom and riffling through them for a moment before he walks back in, holding up a couple bobby pins to me in victory.

“Scoot over.” He nudges me slightly to the side and drops down in front of the box, taking the bobby pins to the lock and finagling it.

I eye him next to me in surprise. “You can pick a lock?”

“Some locks.”

“Where’d you learn that?”

“That, Blondie.” He grins in victory when the lock turns with an audible snick. “Is a story for another day.”

“You seem to have a lot of those.”

“All in good time.” He slides the box over to me.

I reach out to flip the top, nerves racing through me. Unsure of what, if anything, I’ll find inside. But the sight that greets me is just as unexpected as the rest of this house. Row after row of black, leather-bound journals lie inside. There must be around twenty of them in total. I reach out and snag one at random, too keyed up to even hesitate or think twice about it.

I flip open the journal and a harsh breath leaves me at the sight of line upon line of messy handwriting. “Holy shit.”

“Are those...”

“She kept journals,” I finish for him softly.

My eyes run the length of the page, picking out random words here and there. Eventually realizing the journal I chose must be from shortly after she moved here with my father. Part of me wants to sit here and devour all of them without moving... but a greater part of me wants to escape this place

and drag them into the light of day before spilling whatever darkness eventually flows from their ink.

I snap the journal shut, turning my head to look at Jace next to me. “Carry them to my car for me?”

His eyes turn playful for the first time since we stepped into this place. “See, I knew you would need me for something.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I feel my lips twitch just a bit in response. “You proved your worth, Dawson.”

I lead the way out of the house, hurriedly shutting off lights and closing doors behind me. I found what I needed for the day and now all I want to do is get out of this place as fast as my feet can carry me. Hoping that I never have to enter here again.

Jace follows me as we go and I breathe a deep sigh of relief when I finally close the front door behind us. Shoving my key into the lock and turning it quickly, trying to trap all that dark energy inside and to keep it from seeping out. Not wanting to admit to myself that I’m scared of it following me home.

I run down the stairs and throw open the trunk for Jace, waiting for him to load the box up before slamming it shut. We stand there silently staring at each other and appreciating the horror we just survived under the harsh light of day. I can see his firework eyes lightening by the second and eventually my body sags in relief despite the harsh pounding starting up in my head.

He takes a step toward me, flashing those dimples and bringing his hands up to cup my face. “You’re kind of a badass, you know?”

“That’s what they tell me,” I quip with a halfhearted shrug.

“Seriously.” His fingers brush my hair softly. “Not many people could have...”

He pauses, brows pulling down slightly, eyes flicking to mine before he drops his lips to the top of my hair with a soft kiss and continues speaking.

“You should be proud. Not many people could have faced what you did today, myself included.” With that he steps back and gives me a small grin before turning to walk to the passenger side of the car.

Oh, yeah. So not equipped to analyze that one in my current state of mind.

But as I walk to the driver’s side of the car, I can’t help the soft smile that pulls at my lips because of the happiness his words spark inside of me.

Chapter 9

Present Day

The drive back to Gram's is as silent as the ride out to my parents was. Me, silently processing everything and Jace being that calming presence by my side. My body feels drained and energized all at the same time. As if I've run a marathon and then been pumped full of speed. It's a terrible combination, leaving my thoughts sluggish but unable to stop churning.

To put it simply, I'm a wreck.

I pull into the driveway and glance at the dash, surprised to find that it's almost one p.m. Putting the car in park, I turn it off but don't open my door, fidgeting with my hands as I'm struck by the unsureness of what to do now. Fuck, as much as I hate to admit it, I don't want him to leave. It's terrible but after what I just went through... I don't want to be alone and haunted by all the ghosts I faced today. It's such a foreign experience for me that I don't know how to handle it.

I've always been fine being alone.

You have to say something, El.

"So—"

"What—"

We both start at the same time and look at each other, quiet laughter escaping us both and I watch him duck his head, reaching down to pull on the lip of his brown boot before turning to grin back at me.

"You want me to take those in for you?" He nods his head toward the back of the car.

"Please," I answer, grabbing our leftover breakfast plates before pushing open my door.

I walk to the front door of my gram's house and unlock it, running in to throw away the trash before coming back to hold the door open for him as he brings in the black box.

Ha. Black box. Fitting considering it probably contains all my mother's secrets.

Jace sets down the box in the entry beside my suitcase and stands, brushing his hands against his jeans and tilting his head at me. "You planning on diving into those now?"

I hesitate, taking stock of my mental state before shaking my head. "No... no, I think I've had enough for today." I give him a small smile. "Plus, if I've learned anything recently it's the importance of taking things one day at a time. Her secrets will still be there tomorrow and I'll be more ready to hear them then."

He nods, leaning back against the wall and eyeing me consideringly. "And look at that. She's wise on top of everything else."

I can't help the laugh that escapes and cock a brow at him, pushing away the twinge in my heart his words bring. "Now that's something I haven't been called a lot in my life."

"Doesn't mean it's not true."

"No." I sigh. "Probably just means I'm finally learning actually."

"Want to tell me more about that?"

"What do you mean?"

He pushes off the wall and takes a step toward me, reaching up to tug at my hair in that playful way of his, as if we're still children. "Feel like coming over and hanging out? I would say we could stay here but..." He raises his brows. "I'm hungry and your inventory leaves something to be desired."

"True." I grimace.

I really should look into taking a cooking class or something once I get back home.

"Come over and I'll make us lunch." He gives my hair another tug, eyes lighting up as they lock with mine. "The bar is closed Monday through Wednesday so I have nothing big planned anyway."

“Done.” I throw him a bratty smirk. “But only because you promised to feed me.”

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

“I’ll take it.” He flashes those dimples as we turn back toward the door. “Want to follow me over there?”

“Yeah. Sounds good.”

I lock the door behind me and get back into my car, apologizing to Franny about my driving habits of late as I start her back up. Jace starts to inch forward on the road, waiting for me to catch up and I pull out. Following him down to the main road and turning in the opposite direction from which we just came. He heads down to the road abutting the beach, taking a left on it and we drive for about ten minutes before pulling into the parking lot of a marina. I pull into the parking lot and see that it’s nothing more than a few docks jutting out into the ocean.

But still, he definitely left something out here.

I park my car next to his and push open the door to find him already waiting by the back of the parking space.

“I thought you said we were going to your place?”

“We are.” He grins and starts to walk backward toward one of the docks, lifting his brows comically. “Come on, you’ll see.”

I shake my head, fighting the twitch of my lips as he turns, leaving me to follow along after him. The dock sways with movement as I step onto it and my feet grip for a moment, finding a balance. Jace leans us all the way to the end of the dock before turning back and throwing out his arm in presentation, flashing that brilliant smile of his.

“My humble abode.”

I look to the large white boat trimmed in royal blue next to us, something of a cross between a fishing and pleasure boat. A trawler, I think it’s called. There’s a small deck wrapping around a large cabin with another level sitting above where you can climb up to steer the boat or lounge under a canopy.

My lips twitch at the sight of the boat's name emblazoned in large, royal blue letters across the side, the *Miss Fortune*.

"You live on a boat?" I snort, answering my own question before he can. "Of course you do."

He tilts his head at me in question.

"It fits." I shrug in answer, giving him an ironic look. "Should've figured the surfer boy would live on a boat."

He hops up on the deck and turns back to hold out a hand to me. "Happy I could live up to the stereotype."

I smirk, grabbing his hand and stepping up. "I didn't say it was a bad thing."

"Well, at least we're agreed on that." He grins down at me and slides past, brushing our bodies against one another's along the way and causing my breath to halt until he passes. "You want a drink or something?" He turns his head back toward me as we come to the cabin door. "You've definitely earned it after today."

"Sure." I lean against the doorframe and my eyes sweep over the interior of the boat, seeing that the entire space is covered in teakwood except for the cushions of a small sitting area beside the tiny kitchen. There's a captain's wheel to my right with a small coffee station set up beside it, leaving the living quarters to encompass the back of the boat. Sitting area and kitchen first, leading to what I'm guessing is a bedroom.

"How does a bartender swing this?"

He laughs at my question. "My aunt had been desperate to get rid of the thing for forever and I made her an offer when I got out of the Navy." I watch him pull open the small fridge and eye the contents before tilting his head back toward me. "I have beer or wine. The beer I can vouch for but the wine is a hit or miss considering Tiff left it here the last time she was over."

I cock my head playfully, voice coming out teasing despite the lingering pounding in my head. "I've always been one to live dangerously."

“I knew I liked you, Delacroix.” His light, melodic laugh rings out as he grabs the bottle of white wine and turns to grab a corkscrew from a drawer. Twisting it in, he pulls the cork out, forearms flexing in a way that has me running my eyes along him appraisingly. I eye the tattoo running up his arm and the hair pulled back on top of his head as he grabs two glasses from a cabinet and pours us both a glass, attraction flaring to life inside of me.

“Here you go.” He passes me a glass and I dart my eyes back to his to find a knowing look in them.

Yeah. He totally knows I was checking him out.

“If you want you can take that up to the deck while I heat up the food.” He points to the level above us. “It’s a pretty day so I figured we could eat outside. You good with leftovers?”

“Fine by me.”

I take a sip of my wine and turn to head up to the deck, pleasantly surprised when the taste of a decent sauvignon blanc rolls over my tongue. Climbing the short staircase, I see that he has two lawn chairs set up in front of the lounge space by the other captain’s wheel and take a seat in one of them. Making myself comfortable and taking another sip of my wine before tilting my head back. I close my eyes as the sun hits my face, welcoming the warmth with a much-needed exhale of relief, letting myself really relax for the first time today.

I did it. I made it through what will probably be one of the hardest steps of this trip with all my parts intact.

The salt-laced ocean air tickles my nose and Coop inevitably comes to mind, ruining my newfound peace. It would almost be funny if it wasn’t so cruel. I used to think that being at the beach was one of the most renewing things for the soul. And then I loved it because, in a way, the ocean and the stars became a representation of us to me. Now... Well, now it’s all muddied, just like so many other things we shared.

I wonder if he’s out there right now, feeling the same thing or if—

No. Don’t go there, El.

Don't go down that rabbit hole of what-ifs and misery.

I hear Jace making his way up the stairs several minutes later, interrupting my pity party, and open my eyes, blinking against the sun. Lifting my head, I see him stepping onto the deck with two plates of pasta and the wine in hand.

Oh thank God. He brought me carbs. Carbs heal all wounds.

“So some would argue that reheated pasta isn't as good as fresh.” He gives me a grin and passes over a plate. “And they would be right. But I figured you might overlook it just this once given your obvious culinary skills.”

“Ha. Ha.” I roll my eyes at him and set my glass down on the deck.

He takes the seat next to me and swirls his fork into the noodles, voice coming out serious. “How's that cabbage doing?”

I swirl some of my own noodles, recognizing the dish as carbonara, and hum in thought before answering. “I've named her Jacky and decided she's going to replace you as my friend here.” I throw him a bratty smirk before popping the noodles into my mouth.

Damn, that's good. Even reheated.

He swallows his food and chuckles. “Is that what we are? Friends?”

I lift a shoulder in a half shrug, finishing off another bite. “Would you prefer childhood enemies?”

“I guess not,” he muses, eyes crinkling at the corners in amusement. “Friends it is. Although, we were never exactly enemies. More like sib— Actually, not at all like siblings. Let's go with forced playmates.” His brows pull down just a bit and he pauses, fork held midair. “I remember asking about you... after. Even though I considered you the bane of my existence when you were here, I missed you after you were gone. That much I know.”

I look away and finish chewing my food slowly before answering him honestly. “I wish I could remember. It's just all

these tiny snippets of memories.”

He looks at me consideringly for a moment. “Could be better that you don’t.”

I eat a few more bites before reaching down to pick up my wine and taking a sip. “Maybe.”

Probably.

“So tell me, Eleanor Delacroix. What have you been up to since you were five years old?”

I snort a laugh at his question, tilting my head back and rolling it toward him. “Would you like the whole story or just the highlights?”

“Mix it up a bit for me.” His eyes twinkle. “I’ve never been a vanilla kind of guy.”

I quickly lose the fight against the twitching of my lips, something about his playfulness calling to mine. “Of that I have no doubt, Dawson.” Sighing, I look back up to the sky. “Let’s see. I moved to LA with my aunt Yvie, had a pretty standard upbringing there. Was a little bit of a heathen growing up with my three best friends, Stef, Mac, and Kai. They’re really like my family though.”

“Wait,” he interjects, voice full of curiosity. “You have three guy best friends?”

“Yes.” I give him a warning look. “And no, I haven’t slept with any of them, not that it’s any of your business.”

“I wasn’t implying that.” He sets down his plate and grabs his own glass of wine. “I could actually see that given your uh, sparkling personality.”

I narrow my eyes at him, forcing my face to stay serious. “Asshole.”

He chuckles as I lift my head and pop one last bite of food into my mouth before setting my plate down on the deck.

“No. No. It’s a good thing. Please.” He waves a hand. “Continue.”

I give him another scolding look before continuing my narrative. “Went to Berkeley. Majored in photography. Graduated last year and...” I pause, halting at my summer in Costa Rica, figuring out the easiest way to gloss over it. “Spent my summer lounging around on the beach and working on my portfolio before heading to Europe for the rest of the year. Then I went home for about a month and came here.”

“Where’d you go in Europe?”

“The better question is, where didn’t I go?” I smile softly, remembering the crazy times with the guys fondly despite the pain threaded throughout them. “I started in Berlin and after that it was pretty much a different city every week.”

I had fled after the way everything with Coop had ended and the guys’ answer to my heartbreak had been the absolute debauchery of Europe.

Had it worked in the beginning? Not really.

Had one of them, mostly Stef or Mac because Kai couldn’t handle it without crumbling himself, had to keep me company while I drunkenly cried a lot of nights for the first half of it? Undoubtedly.

Had I managed to stitch myself back together somewhere in between it all? Somewhat.

Had it been one hell of a ride? Absolutely.

“Sounds like you were a woman on a mission.” Jace’s voice draws me back to the present.

I look up, meeting his too perceptive eyes. “Something like that.”

He tilts his head at me. “Want to tell me what taught you to take things one day at a time?”

I cock a brow of challenge. “Want to tell me why you were in the Navy and can pick locks?”

His firework eyes spark with appreciation and those dimples flash. “Fair enough, Blondie. Fair enough.” He leans back and lifts his hands, reaching up to rest his head in them. “Ugh. I guess you could say I fell in with a bad crowd after my mom

died. Bottled up all that anger and pain from her death and found the most destructive outlet for it.” A weary sigh leaves him and he darts his eyes away before bringing them back to mine. “A couple years of that ended with me being hauled before a judge and given two options. Either enlist and serve my time doing something for the betterment of the county or spend that time behind bars.” He shrugs. “It was an easy choice.”

My eyes roll over his face as I consider what he told me. Trying to imagine the laid-back guy in front of me as the angry teenager he described and having trouble reconciling the two.

“Did you resent it? Your time in the Navy?”

“At first?” He huffs a quiet laugh. “Absolutely. But it wasn’t like I could do anything about it and eventually, I realized that holding on to all those negative feelings was what got me into trouble in the first place and then... I don’t know, I guess I found my peace. Knew my mom wouldn’t have wanted me to live that way.”

“And then you became the zen master,” I surmise, lips twitching and a surprised laugh leaves him.

He nods, amused eyes meeting mine. “And then I became the zen master.”

Our eyes lock and hold, playful energy and attraction threading the air between us. Brushing over my senses like a teasing caress and breathing life into me as I’m struck by the beauty of him. He’s breathtaking, sitting there, lying back with the sun highlighting his golden hair and glimmering on his tanned skin. Mischief and sensuality pouring out from his almond-shaped green eyes. Everything about him shining like the sun.

And I want to bask in his warmth. Really, truly, bask, for the first time in a year.

I tip back the last of my wine, finishing off the glass and eyeing him consideringly when he moves to pour me another. Trying to figure out how to broach the topic on my mind.

“You haven’t been as... flirty or overtly forward with me during this meal as usual.”

His surprised eyes meet mine for a second before he drops them to recork the wine, setting it aside and pulling on the lip of his boot in what I’m coming to recognize is a nervous habit.

“You.” He sits back in his chair and meets my gaze. “You’ve had a kind of a big day.”

“Still.” I take a sip and peek out at him over the rim of my glass. “Usually it’s all eggplants and innuendo.”

He looks down into his own glass, swirling the wine. “I didn’t want to add to it. Didn’t want you to have to worry about anything else today after...”

He really must shit unicorns.

“Thank you,” I tell him softly.

“Don’t mention it.” He brings his eyes back to mine. “I meant what I said at the beach last night. I’m here for you while you’re in town. Whatever you need.”

And as I stare into his eyes, everything that’s been taken from me comes to mind. The happy childhood that was taken from me by my parents’ deaths. The invulnerable girl that was dimmed somewhat by what happened with Coop last summer. And I want to take some of it back, if only for a moment, to be what I once was. Undaunted, brazen, bold. I want to be that girl with Jace again. I need her right now.

After everything today, I need to feel like myself again.

Decision made, I slowly set my wineglass down on the deck and stand.

Chapter 10

Present Day

Jace's eyes track my every move as I close the distance between us with two steps, the tension in the air palpable. I slide my legs onto either side of his chair, straddling him and settling into his lap, hearing the way his breath hitches as I do. Looping my hands around the back of his head, I look into his wary eyes that are filled with equal parts want and hesitation.

“What are you doing here, Blondie?” he asks, voice coming out a touch rougher than usual.

I cock a brow and give him a small smirk. “I don't entirely mind the eggplants and innuendo.”

He looks down and brings his hand up to the ends of my hair, playing with the strands for a moment before speaking. “I don't want to add to it.” His conflicted gaze rises to mine. “I can see it there, lingering in the back of your eyes, whatever happened to you. It's more than just your parents and I don't want to add to it. I don't want you to regret this.”

He's too damn perceptive for my own good.

“I might be a little bit broken.” I give him. “But this is what I want, Jace.”

His hands drop to my hips and begin to gently massage. “I know this is probably just about you needing someone and that I should probably turn you away after the day you've had...”

“But you won't.” I dip my head closer to his, bringing our lips a hairbreadth apart. “Because this is about needing someone and right at this moment I trust you enough to be that someone and trust... is not something I give easily. So be that someone for me, Jace. Please.”

I watch his eyes flick between mine, churning with indecision for another second before they lighten and settle. “Blondie, you never have to say please to me.”

He grips my hips, closing the distance between our lips with a soft kiss and I loop my hands around his neck as he teases

my lips apart. The wine and light taste of him hits me as we explore each other. He tastes like everything warm and soothing and all the more powerful for it. He lets go of my hips to slide his hands around, inching them under the back of my shirt and I pull back, looking him in the eye as I reach down and lift my shirt off. Dropping it onto the deck beside us carelessly.

Jace's eyes spark as they land on my breasts and he brings a hand up, running his fingers along the edges of my black lace bra in a featherlight caress. I lift my hand to the back of his hair and tangle my fingers, drawing his attention back up and dropping my mouth to his. The soft teasing kiss turning desperate as I feel him harden underneath me. I roll my hips against him, trying to find some friction to feed my growing need and feel his shoulders tense up as I do.

"Fuck," he groans into our kiss. "I have to get you inside. Now."

I laugh lightly into his mouth as he drops his hands to grip my ass and stands. Locking my legs around him, I bite at his lower lip, eliciting another groan as he holds me and navigates the short ladder leading to the main deck. He fumbles on the last step and almost sends us careening against the side of the boat before shooting a hand out to steady himself. We both lift our heads, soft laughter pouring from our mouths as our eyes lock and spark with desire.

And looking at him, letting myself be caught up in this moment, I realize I haven't felt this light in ages.

Jace carries me the rest of the way inside the cabin, walking through the living quarters and pushing open the door that leads to his bedroom. Somehow managing to finagle us through the tight space. He stops at the end of a navy-clad bed that's almost taking up the entire room and tosses me onto it, causing a surprised sound to escape my lips as his eyes twinkle down at me mischievously. He reaches out and quickly unlaces each of my Converse-clad feet, pulling the shoes off before reaching for the bottom of his shirt and yanking it over his head.

I prop myself up on my elbows to get a better look at the deep cuts of his swimmer's body, rolling my eyes over him in appreciation as he slides his boots off. There's the faint line of a scar on the left side of his torso but I'm quickly distracted by that fucking lickable V cut disappearing into his jeans, desire thrumming through my veins. My gaze moves lower to the hard bulge in his jeans before I jerk my eyes back up, breathing hard as I meet his heat-filled gaze. Anticipation pulses between us as we eye one another and he stretches his arms out, coming over me, moving slowly as he drops his lips to mine in a teasing kiss. He moves his mouth lower to trail along the edge of my bra and then down between my breasts, pausing when his eyes land on the tattoo of script under my left breast.

He brings his hand up, fingers tracing the lines. "That's one mystery solved." His amused eyes dart to mine. "It's beautiful. Who's it by?"

"Someone who's lost to me."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." I try to give him a smile despite the pain his question spurs. Not willing to let the past steal this moment from me. "You're here."

His gaze lingers on the words for another moment, brows pulling down slightly before his expression clears and he continues kissing his way down over my stomach.

He reaches the edge of my jeans and lifts his head. "You with me, Blondie?"

"I'm with you, Dawson."

He stares into my eyes for another moment, as if making sure of what he sees there before bringing his hand up to flick open the button of my jeans. Drawing the zipper down slowly. He threads his fingers under the top of my jeans and underwear, pulling them down my legs, baring me to him. I unhook my bra from behind my back and toss it to the side as he drops my jeans at the foot of the bed and stands there not

moving. His eyes dart over every inch of my body as if he's not sure where to look first.

“Goddamn.” He exhales deeply, darting his eyes up to mine. “You’re fucking breathtaking.”

I swallow down the whisper of feeling working its way up my throat, not sure what to do with his words, what to say. And I’m saved from having to respond when he reaches out and pulls me to the edge of the bed, dropping to his knees. He throws my legs over his shoulders and drops his mouth a bare inch away from my pussy, blowing a soft breath against the sensitive skin that immediately has me digging my heels into his back. He moves an arm to rest over the top of my hips and brings his other hand up to run his fingers through my slit. Opening me up before his eyes. I grip at the comforter, unable to stop my squirming as he blows another breath against me before dropping his mouth to my clit.

He rolls the sensitive nub under his tongue teasingly, with practiced ease, giving me exactly what I need for a minute before moving his mouth to explore some other part of me. Then doing it again, and again. I drop my head to the bed and gasp, unable to keep myself propped up any longer as he fucking plays with me.

I should have known he was going to be a little shit about it.

He drops his mouth to my opening and pushes his tongue inside, tasting me. Pushing down against my hips as they jerk at the intrusion. A moan escapes me and I try to lift against his mouth, desperately searching for that peak that he’s keeping tauntingly out of reach. He brings his mouth back up to my clit, pushing down on it harder than before and starting to hum as he does. Sending the most delicious vibrations racing across my skin. And it only takes a few more flicks of his tongue to set me off like the fireworks his eyes always hold.

A scream rips from me and my hips jerk wildly as I come. He keeps that humming up as tremors rack my body, the feel of it against my sensitive nerves damn near sending me over the edge again. My pussy is drenched and quivering by the

time the orgasm starts to fade, leaving me breathless and yet still feeling empty, needing more.

I feel him grin against me before he lifts his head, lips glistening from my wetness. “Told you I was a giver.”

A surprised laugh bursts out of me and I roll my eyes at him. “You really are incorrigible.”

He gives me a wink and stands, hands moving to the front of his jeans. “You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

I watch him push down his pants and underwear in one swoop, revealing a more than impressive cock and—

“What the fuck is that?”

He flashes me that brilliant smile and grips himself, giving a lazy stroke, ending with his fingers playing with the barbell at the head of his cock. “What? This?”

“Is-is that—”

Holy shit, I can’t get the words out.

“A piercing?” he teases, lips twitching. “Yes, El. It is.”

“Holy shit.”

I mean... I’ve seen a respectable amount of, uh, male anatomies in my short life but...

“Don’t worry.” His eyes shine down at me wickedly. “It only hurts a little at first.”

I narrow my eyes at him in warning. “Shut the fuck up, Dawson.”

That melodic laugh of his trickles out as he drops down over me, dipping his head to nuzzle at my neck and putting us skin to skin. I wrap my arms around his neck and he circles a hand around my waist, hauling us up the bed until I feel my head hit his pillow. The sea-spring scent of him completely enveloping me as he lifts his head and looks down at me. This carefree playboy who cares, an enigma of a man with eyes filled with heat and light and concern. And all of the sudden I feel excruciatingly vulnerable, uncharacteristically shy in a way I never have before.

He must see the shift in my eyes because the next thing I know he's rolling us over, putting me on top and reaching to massage my hips. "You okay?"

I drop my chest against his and fold my arms, resting my chin on them. "Yeah." I nod my head. "It's just—" Fuck, I hate this. "Just been a while is all."

"You know we can stop, right?"

His eyes show me the truth of his words and I bring my lips up to his in a soft kiss.

"I know." I drop my hips down, sliding my wetness against his hard length, feeling the metal at the tip. "But I don't want to."

I roll my hips again and he groans, reaching a hand over to flip the lid of the one of the compartments lining the walls of the boat. He pulls out a foil packet, tearing it open and I rise to give him the room he needs to roll it on. Dropping his head back onto the pillows he reaches for my hips again, sliding me along his shaft and lifting his eyes to mine. But when he doesn't make a move to take it further, I realize he's waiting. He's letting it be my choice.

Giving me exactly what I need to quell any of the lingering hesitation.

I reach down to grip his cock, moving him to my entrance, inner muscles stretching and spasming from a year of neglect as I start to sink down. His piercing drags over my sensitive flesh with the most amazing sensation that has my breath hitching in my throat. And through it all, our eyes remain locked, right up to when I seat myself on him to the hilt.

He closes his eyes as I give myself a moment to adjust to the feeling of intrusion. The piercing at the end of his cock hitting deep inside of me, proving too much of a temptation for me to keep still for long. I roll my hips experimentally and his hands tighten on my hips in response, causing a smirk to rise to my lips.

His eyes pop open as if he can sense my amusement and an answering grin lifts his lips. "You playing with me, Blondie?"

I lift up almost completely and slowly lower myself back down. “Never,” I gasp.

He lifts off the bed, bringing us face to face and pressing our chests together, circling his hands around to my ass. “Why not?” He presses me down onto him and lifts his hips, pushing in even deeper.

His words have another soft smirk rising to my lips as I give in to the playful game. Lifting my hands to tangle in his hair and dropping my lips to his as I start rolling my hips in earnest. Rising up and down, feeling his pierced cock drag against me in all the right places. Our kiss is as playful as the game, all teasing strokes and give-and-take. He starts to thrust up into me from below, meeting me at every roll of my hips and harsh, breathy noises start to escape me.

He moves a hand up to my back and rolls us, dropping me down to the bed. Breaking our kiss as he slides his hands down my legs and spreads me wide. He pulls out almost completely before thrusting back into me, that damn piercing of his hitting my clit at a truly incredible angle as he does. I drop my hands to his shoulders, gripping frantically as he repeats the move, my whole body twitching at the contact.

Oh god. Oh god.

I realize my words were not internal when he drops his mouth to my ear. “I take it you like the piercing?”

I gasp when he powers into me, hitting everything harder than before and picking up the pace of his thrusts. Driving me higher and higher toward a special kind of ecstasy. He lifts his head to look into my eyes and everything in me starts to tighten up at a rapid pace, my pussy drenching with need. I feel my legs shake, inner walls starting to spasm around him as the orgasm barrels down on me. And it only takes a few more thrusts with that piercing hitting my clit before I shatter.

“Oh my—Jace!”

I scream his name as I come, closing my eyes and curling my body around his. Desperately searching for some kind of anchor to hold on to as the tide of pleasure pulls me under. I

feel him thrust into me once more before he drops his head to my neck and gasps against my skin. His entire body tightens up under my grip as he pushes in deeply and follows me over the edge. We stay that way, locked in an embrace, feeling the answering tremors in one another's bodies until the tide slowly lets us surface.

“How—” I try to steady my breath in order to get the words out. “How the fuck did you end up with a pierced cock?”

A surprised laugh leaves him and he trails his lips along my neck. “Lost a bet with my cousin.”

I scoff and he lifts his head, happily dazed eyes landing on mine. “That must've been one hell of a bet.”

“It was.” He presses a soft kiss to my lips before rising and pulling out of me. Moving to the end of the bed, he stands and goes to the door before looking back over his shoulder and throwing me a wink. “Never been so happy to lose one. Eventually.”

A smile spreads on my face and I lift my eyes to stare at the ceiling, heart still racing in my chest as I catch my breath. Feeling the gentle sway of the boat now that I'm not otherwise engaged. A thread of guilt starts to wind its way around my heart and I remind myself of all the reasons I'm not in the wrong here. I was perfectly within my rights to do what I just did. And what I just did... Well, I'm still trying to break through the post-orgasm haze enough to figure out what about it is leaving me so edgy.

Jace walks back through the door naked as the day he was born and launches himself onto the bed next to me, distracting me from my thoughts with his exuberance. He leans over, eyes filled with mischief as he drops his mouth to my neck, pressing a soft kiss to it before swiping his tongue out and licking the length of my skin.

“Ah!” I dart my hand up to swipe at the spot. “Jace! Gross.”

He lifts his head and grins down at me wickedly. “I licked it so it's mine.”

I roll my eyes at him, fighting the twitch of my lips. “As if, Dawson.”

He flashes me that brilliant smile before ripping the covers out from underneath me and pulling them back up over us both. Reaching over, he snags his guitar from where it hangs on the wall of the boat and props himself up before turning to me with an amused grin.

“Let’s try this again, shall we?”

He gives an experimental strum and his brows dip in displeasure at the sound. I roll over and nestle my head down into his pillow, watching as he picks at the chords for a moment while turning the tuners until a satisfied expression fills his face.

He tilts his head down toward mine. “Any preference? Don’t want to send you running again.”

I give him a one-shouldered shrug. “Anything but The Cure and Taylor Swift.”

His lips twitch. “That I can do.”

He places his hand along the neck of the guitar and takes a breath before starting to pick at the strings intricately yet somehow slow and soothing. Perfectly suited to the mood.

“What is that?” I interrupt, the curiosity in me winning out.

He pauses, giving me a warning look with eyes that are anything but. “‘Elysium’ by Bear’s Den.” He drops his lips down to mine with a quick kiss. “Now no interrupting the performance.”

Leaning back, he starts to play the song from the beginning again, continuing past the point of my interruption this time. His voice fills the room as he sings those first words and the sound of it rolls over me like honeyed bourbon. It’s a soft croon at a pitch lower than I expected. Perfectly suited to the acoustic notes he plays.

And the words of the song... they’re exactly what I need. Soothing me into peaceful tranquility with the promise of

better days. They're the hope, the light, that moment of standing in the sun after the darkest day.

Just like him.

I realize it then, as a lone tear falls from my eyes that are drifting closed, what had me so edgy before. It was that I had expected sex with him to be good, amazing even, and it was. But I had never expected it to feel like more.

“Jace, man!”

The voice rings through the boat and has my eyes springing open as Jace gives a groan, tightening his arms around me as his naked leg moves higher between mine.

“Come on, man, where the hell are you?” that voice calls out again. “Andrea’s all pissed at me and I need to drink.”

I drowsily realize we’re spooning and roll over in his arms to find his sleeping face drawn tight against the voice intruding on his sleep. Fuck, he’s cute in his sleep. He must have let his hair out before joining me for nap time because it’s all messy and undone, hanging around his face. His sensually arched lips are parted, slightly open in sleep.

But seriously, despite how cute he is... he needs to wake the fuck up now.

“Jace.” I push at his shoulder and he gives another sleepy groan. “You have to wake up.”

His eyes flutter as that voice I now recognize as Zane’s calls out again, closer than before. “Why the fuck did I find a Seether shirt on your deck?”

Oh, shit. Forgot about that one.

Jace’s eyes pop open, filling with panic as he untangles our limbs and jumps from the bed. Slamming his shoulder against the door just as the knob turns.

“What the fuck?” Zane’s perplexed voice calls from the other side of the door.

“Just uh—” Jace swipes at his face. “Just give me a minute.”

I push back the covers and stand, working my way around the bed and gathering my clothes up.

“Dude.” Zane laughs. “Are you jacking off?”

“Just give me a fucking minute,” Jace snaps while pulling on his boxers and causing Zane to laugh harder.

But the sound of his laughter fades farther away as I pull my underwear up and hook my bra. Turning to grab my pants, I find Jace holding them out to me with searching eyes.

“Thanks.” I take the pants from him with a small smile, darting my eyes away from his and pulling them on. Not ready to think too much about what happened today now that the moment has passed. I pat my back pockets, finding my keys quickly but coming up empty in the search for my phone.

“Blondie.”

I lift my eyes to Jace and find him flipping my phone in his grasp.

“Yeah?” I dart my eyes between him and my phone, knowing he’s holding it slightly out of reach to get me to talk.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

He takes a step toward me, eyes filling with concern and crinkling at the corners. “You sure?”

I take a deep breath and meet his eyes, trying to muster some of my usual bravado before throwing him a bratty smirk. “Of course.”

His eyes roll over my face, his expression letting me know he’s not buying one bit of the shit I’m selling. But he doesn’t push it, simply nodding once before bringing my phone up and holding it out for me to unlock the screen.

My brows drop down in confusion. “What?”

“I’m giving you my number.” He rolls his eyes at me. “Now unlock the phone, Delacroix.”

“Oh.” I dart my hand out, punching in the code. My stomach filling with all kinds of nerves as I watch him navigate the screen and add his number to my contacts before sending himself a message.

Clever boy.

He passes the phone back to me and runs a hand through his hair. “Listen, I meant what I said earlier and before that. I’m here for you. Even if it’s without all—” He waves his hand to the bed. “Without all this. I-I like you, Blondie, okay?” Stepping even closer, he grips my hips, playful eyes locking with mine. “I mean, I’m not opposed to all this. But I want to spend time with you. So don’t be a stranger, yeah?”

I pause for a moment, not knowing whether I’m speaking the truth or telling a lie as I nod and reply. “Okay.”

He drops a soft kiss to my lips before lifting his head and flashing those dimples. “Want to borrow a shirt?”

My lips twitch and I tilt my head back and forth in consideration for a moment. “Nope. I think I’ll shock him a little and go get mine.” I slide on my Converse. “Payback’s a bitch.”

A soft laugh leaves him as he reaches down to pull on his jeans. “This I gotta see.”

I throw him one last smirk and reach for the door, not waiting for him to get his shirt on before walking out. Itching for some space after everything despite the lightness his presence seems to bring. I walk out of the cabin and see Zane leaning against the railing of the deck, lifting a cigarette to his mouth with a tattooed hand. My shirt draped carelessly over the railing beside him. His eyes flare with surprise when they land on me and he starts coughing up the puff of smoke he just inhaled.

I cock a brow at him and reach for my shirt, feeling Jace come up behind me. “That’s a nasty habit.”

He stems the tide of his coughing as I pull on my shirt, his eyes filled with curiosity as they flick between Jace and me. “That’s what my girlfriend tells me.”

“Is that what your fight was about?”

“Yeah.” He brings the cigarette to his lips again, drawing in harshly. “Says she’s not going to stay with someone who’s going to die of lung cancer by the time he’s forty.”

I give him a shrug. “She’s right. You should at least vape.”

“How very LA of you.” He grins and my lips twitch, Jace’s soft laughter sounding at my back.

“We’re all about that clean living,” I joke, taking a step and turning to meet Jace’s eyes. “I’m going to head out. Thanks for coming with me today.”

“Of course.” He looks down at me with searching eyes while reaching up to tug at the end of my hair. “Remember what I said, okay?”

“Yeah.” I give him a small smile before turning, nodding goodbye to Zane and ignoring his curious gaze as I make my way off the boat.

The urge to flee rides me hard as I walk hurriedly down the dock. I don’t regret what happened between us. I had wanted it, needed it to heal some part of me. But it was that feeling of more that left me twisted up inside.

I didn’t think I was capable of it. Not anymore.

Chapter 11

One Year Ago

We're an hour into the four-hour drive to Cahuita and so far, I've been making Coop listen to Taylor Swift the entire time. I'm actually starting to run out of songs at this point. Shame. Guess I was going to have to start repeating my favorites soon.

After the hike yesterday that had ended with me coming apart under his tongue and agreeing to go to Cahuita with him... I had desperately needed some space. Sure that I had just sealed myself into the worst kind of fate. So I had made the excuse of having to pack and get some things in order to give myself some time alone to get my thoughts in order.

And despite the feeling of panic working its way up my throat, I had been outside my hotel at eight a.m. this morning as planned, suitcase in hand when Coop had pulled up in an old Bronco. I had left him to get my suitcase and hopped in the car. Quickly plugging my phone into the aux and powering up the music. When he had joined me in the car and arched a brow at the sight I had told him this was the first rule of our little arrangement. I got to pick the music on any road trip.

I needed the nonstop music to stem any conversation for a bit and drown out the thoughts of doubt racing through my mind. My choice of Taylor Swift was purely to make him suffer alongside me. I was guessing he had sensed my mood because he hadn't put up much of a fight and there wasn't even that signature narrowing of his eyes as the first song came on. Or the second. Or the tenth. But now I was definitely starting to see some tension on his face, faint lines bracketing his mouth as if he was having to physically work to keep the words of insult inside.

I, on the other hand, was having to work really hard to keep the laughter working its way up my throat contained. This was just too much damn fun. The tension bled from my shoulders as I relaxed into the game.

I was going to have so much fun fucking with him for a few weeks.

“You doing okay over there?” I ask, making sure my tone is the epitome of politeness.

Coop gives me a sidelong look that says he knows exactly what I’m up to before his gaze returns to the road. “Wonderful.” He scoffs. “Pretty sure I’ve been thoroughly educated on every emotion a girl experiences between the ages of fifteen and thirty at this point.”

“Ah. Don’t worry.” I laugh lightly. “There’s still a few left for you to learn.”

“Can’t wait.”

“So is this car yours?” I’m curious to know more about him despite my nerves and since I am going to be spending the next few weeks with him it’s probably best to do at least a little due diligence.

Although maybe I should have thought of that before I got in the car.

Oops.

“Yeah. I keep it with a guy in San Jose and pick it up when I fly in there.”

Curiouser and curiouser.

“So you come here a lot?” I ask, answering my own question as he nods. “I mean I guess you would have to if you have a place here.”

“Work keeps me in Central and South America for the most part so I’m able to make it out here every month or two.”

“Okay, now you really have to explain to me what you do.”

His lips ghost up at the corners before he schools his face. “I told you, I’m a consultant for people in need of specialized services.”

I roll my eyes at his response. Again. “And what the fuck exactly does that mean?”

“It’s complicated.” A sigh leaves him as he flicks his eyes to mine briefly.

“Well un-complicate it. Pretty sure I’ll be able to keep up.”

His answering silence drags on and I begin to hum the *Jeopardy* tune to spur him along.

“Basically...” He pauses, looking over his shoulder before he changes lanes. “When something is stolen or a person is in need of being located, the company I work for is contracted to do the recovery, or at least that’s the role I typically play.”

“So like a private investigator?”

His lips twitch at my question. “A little more high stakes than that.”

“So like...”

“The company I work for is called Bainbridge International.”

My brows dip as I try to work out where I’ve heard that name before. “Why does that sound familiar?”

“We do a lot of work for various governments and it makes it onto the news sometimes.”

“So like... a spy?” My stomach flutters in a way that is not at all conducive to my self-preservation.

“More like a mercenary.” He shrugs casually, as if being a mercenary is the same as telling someone he’s a plumber.

“Well, that’s certainly...” Fucking hot. “Interesting.” And it explained the ridiculously good shape he’s in.

I have to cross my legs to ward off the arousal shooting straight to my core.

“Yeah. I like the work. It’s definitely never boring.” He shoots me that savage grin and I have to press my legs more tightly together. “Although I can’t tell you much more than that because of our confidentiality policies.”

“And how exactly does one become a mercenary?”

“Uh, they found me actually. Bought me out of a contract I was tied up in with another company in return for me finishing out the time with them.” He shrugs. “It was a good fit so I

stayed on after that was done on a job-to-job basis. Now tell me what your other rules are.”

“What?”

“You said there would have to be rules for this, apparently the first one of which is cruel and unusual punishment via your music selection so what are the others?”

“Oh. Yes, the rules.” My lust-filled brain scrambles to catch up as I pack away my fantasies to mull over another time. Preferably with a battery-powered friend in hand.

Focus, El.

I had actually spent the majority of last night tossing and turning in bed as I thought over this topic, the best way to keep him and this pull between us from becoming too deep. “No names beyond what we already know.”

“Why am I not surprised?” He laughs darkly. “So you want to stick with Princess?”

I play around with a few possibilities in my mind before answering him.

“Della.” As in, Della-croix. I throw him a bratty smirk, basking in my cleverness. “Or Princess, the power of it has kind of grown on me.”

“Della.” He rolls the name over his tongue as if testing it out. “Is that even your name?”

“In part.”

“Fine. Next rule.”

“No talk of our pasts or deep emotional conversations. This is strictly a fun summer thing.”

He arches a brow at me. “I’m starting to feel a little used over here.”

“You volunteered as tribute,” I remind him with a light laugh.

“True. Any more?”

“One.” I take a deep breath before laying the last rule out there. “The minute either one of us starts to really fall... we call this off, right then and there.”

I meet his gaze across the car. His eyes brimming with questions as he looks away from the road for probably longer than he should.

“What if I already like you?”

“Liking is fine. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t like you too. But anything more than that, anything deeper and this has to stop.” My tone is resolute. I won’t budge on this. I have to protect myself or else the danger of falling will become a reality.

I watch his ridiculously full lips tighten as he thinks it over.

“One question.” His night-forest eyes flick to mine. “And I’ll go along with your rules.”

I feel my shoulders draw up with tension, but although he pursued this... I agreed to come. The least I can do is answer one question. “That’s fair.”

“Why?”

I know what he means without asking for clarification. Why the need for the rules? Why is all this necessary? Why keep him at a distance?

I give him the only answer I can.

“Because you’re dangerous too.”

A minute passes before he nods. “Okay.” His lips ghost up. “We’ll play it your way... Princess.”

My lips quirk and I exhale a deep breath of relief at his acceptance.

“Okay,” I echo, yawning through the word, my mouth stretching wide.

“You tired?”

“Yeah, I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Sleep,” he orders, the demanding tone of his voice in full force. “It’ll still be a few hours before we get there. You might as well get some rest.”

“While I can, right?” I tease, cocking a brow and feeling far more relaxed now that there are some clear boundaries to our little arrangement.

That low, dark laugh leaves him. “Exactly.”

I lean back, getting as comfortable as I can in my seat and close my eyes. Falling asleep to the steady sound of his breathing and the low drone of Taylor Swift. The last thought running through my mind is that although I just met him... I feel incredibly safe.

“Sleeping Beauty.” A hand trails lightly through my hair and down the side of my face, tickling me awake. “We’re here.”

My eyes open to the sight of Coop’s face framed by the lush green rain forest waiting to greet me. His eyes are soft, lips pulling up just a hint on one side. The open passenger door he stands in is letting in a humid breeze and I can hear the sound of soft, crashing waves.

“We’re here?” My voice is groggy in my own ears and I struggle to sit up against my seat belt before realizing I need to unbuckle it.

“Yeah.” He chuckles. “I already took your suitcase inside. Tried to let you sleep for as long as I could. You were out cold.”

“Thanks.” I go to step out of the car and he takes my hand to help me like I’m really the princess he’s always calling me. My eyes sweep across the lush rain forest surrounding us before landing on, well, a shack. He definitely wasn’t lying about that. The building is small, the size of most people’s apartments and made out of brown wood topped with a metal roof that was probably silver at some point but has dulled by age and the elements to a dark, spotted gray. A dark-red front door sits between two picture windows.

“Sleeping Beauty?” I look up at him feeling my lips twitch.

He shrugs his broad shoulders and starts to walk toward the front door. “I have a little sister. Had to watch more princess movies growing up than I care to admit.”

I trail along after him up the dirt path leading up to the house. “I bet you’re a good brother.”

“Not always, but I try my best now.”

Coop opens the front door and walks in before standing back so I can follow him. I can feel his eyes on my face, watching my reaction as I step over the threshold and take in the space.

The entire back of the house is open, folding glass doors pulled back and allowing you to walk right out onto the sand. The view of the crystal water brings me to a halt and the warm ocean breeze spills over me in a caress to my senses. Spanish tiles lie under my Converse-clad feet, covering the entire space in an intricate gray design. The front door opens up into a small kitchen with a retro-looking fridge and a tiny kitchen table while the back of the house is filled with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves covering the walls. A desk is set toward the folding glass doors at an angle so you can see out onto the beach.

And right there in the middle of the space is... one massive bed.

My eyes snag on the bed and stay there, taking in the soft-looking white bedding and anticipation begins to thrum through me. The bed is situated so that you wake up to the view of the waves and the whole thing is just plain decadent. I feel Coop’s presence behind me right before he dips his head to my ear.

“What do you think?”

“It’s stunning,” I tell him honestly. Impressed by the whole setup of the place, along with the view. It’s also incredibly clean and organized for a bachelor pad, which makes me think the sneaking suspicion I’ve had about Coop being a control freak is probably spot on. And while I might have my own

issues when it comes to control, I don't think I've ever been called tidy in my life, so this should be interesting.

"I'm glad you like it." He kisses my neck gently and I drop it to the side to give him better access as his hands come up to grip my hips.

"So the mercenary business must pay pretty well, huh?" Not many twenty-five-year-olds could afford to buy any type of place, much less one in Costa Rica.

"I won't be retiring anytime soon." He laughs lightly against my neck. "But I do well enough that I was able to afford this place last year."

"Hmm."

His hands begin to inch underneath the tank top I'm wearing and as much as I want to give in right there and then... my bladder is practically screaming in protest after the four-hour car ride with no bathroom breaks. So you know, priorities.

"Bathroom?" I ask, tilting my head back to meet his gaze.

His eyes flash with amusement and he steps back, pointing me to a door on the right. "Right there."

My phone vibrates in the back pocket of my cutoff shorts as I make my way to the bathroom and I pull it out as I lock the door, checking the message.

Stef: Are all the boys of Costa Rica under your thrall already?

A grin splits my face at the message and I type out a reply before I relieve my bladder.

El: Something like that. I'm shacking up with a guy I met in Jaco for a few weeks. He has a place in Cahuita. The view is breathtaking. Wish you were here... but like maybe a house or two down the beach.

I finish up and watch the three little dots as I wash my hands, waiting for his reply before leaving the bathroom.

Stef: Name and address?

Rolling my eyes, I walk back out into the living space, looking for Coop and finding him standing against the folding glass doors, the beer in his hand hanging down at his side.

“Hey, what’s the address for this place?”

He cocks his head at me in question as I walk over to him and I point at my phone. “My hover-mother best friend wants to know.”

“Ah. This place is pretty off the beaten path so an address won’t do you much good but I can tell you the GPS coordinates if you want.”

“That works.”

He rattles off the GPS coordinates and I quickly type them out along with his name and wait for Stef’s reply to make sure he got it. The three little dots appear quickly and I don’t have to wait long.

Stef: Be careful, cara.

El: Me? Always.

I add the wide-eyed emoji to the message before setting my phone down on the desk beside me with a smile, imagining him, Kai and Mac already searching for the place on Google maps while lounging by the pool. Looking up, I find Coop’s eyes on me and filled with interest.

“Good friend.” I can tell from his tone it’s a statement and not a question.

“The best.” I turn my head from his to look down the beach, not finding another soul in sight. “How far are we from town?”

“It’s about a thirty-minute drive.”

I look back to find him setting his beer bottle down on the tile with a soft clink. He lunges forward before I realize what’s happening and scoops me up, throwing me over his shoulder and bringing his hand down on my ass with a soft smack. I can’t help the giggle that falls from my lips as he carries me to the bed and tosses me onto it.

“What exactly do you think you’re doing?” I cock a brow and widen my legs teasingly, lips still pulled up into a grin.

His gaze devours me as he rips his shirt over his head, putting all that gorgeous olive skin on display. “It’s been five days since I was inside you, which is entirely too long in my opinion.” He unlatches the button of his shorts and pulls the zipper down, dropping them to the ground. I can see the hard outline of his massive cock through the black boxer briefs he wears. “I plan to fix that now.”

The only thought running through my mind as he comes over me and drops his lips to mine is that I might already be in way too deep.

Chapter 12

Present Day

I'd been avoiding Jace for five days.

After that day on the boat with him, I had locked myself inside my gram's house and dodged the few texts he had sent since. Giving him the lame excuse of a headache to the first one asking if I wanted to hang out and not replying at all when he asked if I was okay and alive. The truth was I didn't know anymore. That part of me that had been broken on the beach in Costa Rica still ached, but... it had lessened, healed just a bit since Jace had come into my life and that left me floundering.

The sense of déjà vu between this summer and the last had overwhelmed me into locking the door and living in my pajamas while I drank shit instant coffee. Switching between reading my mother's journals and watching Netflix on my laptop when I needed a break from her inner workings. I had decided to read them in order. I knew the answers I wanted were clearly going to be toward the end but... the little girl in me who had secretly dreamed about the mother she lost wanted to know who she had been before facing her end.

The journals started shortly after she had come to America at the age of nineteen and I wasn't quite sure what to make of her if I was being honest. On the one hand, I was impressed by her. She had been born an orphan and saved up for years to come to America in pursuit of a better life. She had taught herself English before moving here and put herself through culinary school in New York. She had used the journals as a way to fine-tune her English writing and expand her vocabulary. Her drive and determination was immense, more than I was sure even I possessed. And she wrote occasionally about a *him* she had left before coming here so I assumed she had been in love at least once before meeting my father.

But on the other hand... she was shallow, selfish. She often wrote about how she enjoyed the attention of men and she always had an angle when it came to them. Whether it was her career or materialistic things. All that mattered to her was what

they brought to the table in her pursuit of a better life. She would spend her half of the rent money on clothes or shoes. Knowing she could charm her roommate into covering for her when she was short.

And yet she still sent money every month to the orphanage she had grown up in.

I quickly realized that my mother was... a complicated person, to say the least. Not exactly the fairy-tale figure I had dreamed of growing up. But I tried to remind myself that I had never known the loneliness and poverty she had endured. So really, who was I to judge?

The part that got to me was the things about her that I didn't particularly like, but that nonetheless reminded me of myself. Not the debt part or the using others part. I never allowed myself to be in the debt of others and I wasn't capable of pandering on my best day. But the liking of attention, the over-the-top attitude... Well, I guess some things really were genetic. The whole thing left me filled with melancholy and entirely too self-introspective for my liking.

I had made it to the part where she met my father at the age of twenty-one and closed the journal. Knowing I needed a break before reading about how their story began, I had lain on the couch and watched a couple episodes of the new season of *Bridgerton*. Because apparently, I really was a masochist before all the love and happy family dynamics had me snapping my laptop shut. My stomach had chosen that moment to give a grumble of protest, and after looking at the barren contents of my fridge, I had been forced to go on a search for food.

Which was how I ended up pulling back into the driveway in a barely presentable state. A sad-looking sandwich in tow that I had only cared was ordered from anywhere that was not Adam's Place to find Jace Dawson's face staring back at me from where he lounged on my porch steps.

"Fuck."

I stare back at him for a moment from behind the safety of my tinted windows, debating whether I can just pull out and

pretend I didn't see him. But his expression quickly morphs into a look of gotcha, clueing me in to the fact that my windows were apparently not tinted dark enough. Definitely going to have to remedy that when I get back to LA.

"Fuck," I mutter again, grabbing the take-out bag on my passenger seat and pushing the door open.

He watches me walk toward him silently. Eyes working their way from the top of my messy bun to the T-shirt and pajama shorts I'm wearing then down to the flip-flops on my feet. As if he's checking to make sure all my parts are intact.

Mostly, Dawson. Mostly.

I drop my take-out bag onto the porch steps and take a seat beside him, knowing there's no escaping and strangely lacking the desire to try now.

We sit in a weirdly comfortable silence for a good while, watching the daylight slowly fade to dusk before he turns to me. "You avoiding me, Blondie?"

I heave a weary sigh before turning to look him in the eye. "Kind of."

"Why?" He tilts his head questioningly.

"Because..." I shrug. "Because I'm kind of a mess, in case you haven't noticed."

"This have to do with you taking things one day at a time?"

"Yeah."

"Was it a guy?"

I drop my gaze for a moment, running my fingers along the hem of my shorts before bringing my eyes back to his. "Yeah."

He nods in understanding before his lips twitch. "I kinda figured."

A soft laugh escapes me, and I reach up, giving his shoulder a push. "Ass."

"We've all been there." He grins, eyes filling with humor. "Everyone except me, that is. Girls generally find me pretty

irresistible.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” I roll my eyes at him, lips twitching as I turn my head back toward the dusk-filled sky.

The sound of cicadas fills the air for a moment before he speaks. “He’s an idiot, for what it’s worth. Whoever he is.”

“Thanks.” I clear my throat against the feelings his words bring before turning back to him. “I’ve been reading her journals.”

For better or worse, he’s in this with me now, since that day in the house. And I feel like I owe it to him to offer the information if he wants to hear it.

His brows pull down. “How’s that been going?”

“It’s been going...” I give him a small smile. “I’m not sure how I feel about her yet. I started at the beginning and she was a complex person, to say the least.”

“The best people typically are.”

I eye him doubtfully, cocking a brow. “I think that’s debatable.”

“Probably.” He grins at me unashamedly. “I was just trying to make you feel better.”

Another soft laugh leaves me and I shake my head at him. “You really are something else.”

He holds up a finger to me. “Now keep that thought in mind while I ask this next question.”

“Oh god.”

“I liked those words a whole lot better the last time you were saying them.”

“Spit it out, Dawson.”

He tilts his head and pulls his bottom lip between his teeth before exhaling a deep breath. “Come to family dinner with me?”

“Wh-what?” I sputter. That was definitely not even close to what I was expecting. Although I never quite knew what to

expect from him.

“Just hear me out.” He leans forward, bracing his arms on his knees. “So Tiff told my dad that you were in town and my dad obviously knows who you are because of our moms. Then she told him we had been hanging out and he told me to invite you to dinner. And I couldn’t very well tell him you were avoiding me because we had fuc—” He catches himself, eyeing me nervously. “Uh, taken comfort in one another after a hard day. So here I am.”

I give him an unamused look. “You sound like a twelve-year-old girl.”

He cringes. “It’ll only be my dad and Tiff. And my dad’s an even better cook than me.”

“You can use the word fuck.”

His face turns hopeful. “So you’ll come to dinner?”

I throw back my head with a laugh before looking back to him. “No way.”

“That was mean, Delacroix.” He gives me a sullen expression. “Please. It will make up for you ghosting me. That was a really big hit to my self-esteem, you know.”

I pat his shoulder consolingly. “I’m sure you’ll survive.”

“Not so sure about that.” He eyes me consideringly. “You know, my dad was around a lot when our moms hung out back in the day. He might remember something about what was going on there at the end.”

My mouth drops open and I stare at him, stunned into momentary silence.

“Are you really using potential information about my parents’ deaths as leverage to get me to come to family dinner with you?”

“Me?” He raises his brows. “Never.” His lips tighten briefly in what I’m guessing is a fight against a grin. “Just pointing out the possible benefits of attending is all.” He leans in closer, firework eyes twinkling down at me as his voice drops intimately. “Plus, I’ve kinda missed your mess.”

Fuck.

I feel myself wavering and can't help but scold myself for being the girl reduced to crumbling at the sight of a pretty face and a little bit of attention.

Stop lying to yourself, El. You know there's more to it than that.

His voice is painfully sincere when he speaks. "Please, El."

Oh how the mighty have fallen.

"Fine," I grumble, standing from the steps as he flashes me that brilliant smile in victory. "Give me ten minutes to change."

Chapter 13

Present Day

Jace pulls to a stop in front of a low-slung plank house about ten minutes from my gram's place, parking halfway in the grass along the road. He turns the car off and pushes his door open, jogging around to open mine as I reach for the handle. I let him pull the door open for me and step out of his jeep, taking in the house, seeing a long porch running the length of it and a beat-up-looking blue Ford truck in the driveway. You can definitely tell that a woman is not in residence even from the outside of the house but it still seems to be in good shape. He holds out a hand for me to grab as we hop over the drainage ditch at the front of the yard, then lets go and gives me an unsure look.

“So my dad might be a little uh—overexuberant about your appearance tonight.” His eyes dart away from mine nervously. “He tends to get pretty excited about anything that reminds him of when my mom was... When she was still here.”

“Hey.” I reach over and grab his hand again, giving it a squeeze. Incapable of not offering him comfort at the rare show of nervousness. “It'll be great.” I throw him a smirk. “You're feeding me, remember? I'm bound to have a good time.”

A hesitant grin pulls at his lips. “Right. Forgot about that part.”

I hold his hand the rest of the way to the front door before letting go as he pushes it open.

“Yo, Pops?” He steps into the house and calls out, turning to close the door behind me. “Where you at?”

“Kitchen!” a low, gravelly voice hollers in response.

My eyes scan the space as Jace leads me through the entry and living room, seeing the tackle box in the entry and the lazy boy chair in front of the TV. It would be the quintessential bachelor pad if it weren't for the little pops of femininity here and there. A random porcelain bunny along the windowsill

looking out into the backyard. An out-of-place music box on the mantel above the fireplace. I stop when a picture on the living room wall snags my gaze.

A golden-haired woman with forest-green eyes stares out at the camera, laughing with a little boy tucked in her arms, who's staring up at her in adoration. And I know it's Jace and his mom without needing to ask. The similarities between them are striking, even at his young age. They have the same playful almond-shaped eyes. The same coloring and sensual lips. I can see the love between them in the picture and my heart aches for Jace as he halts beside me.

"She was beautiful," I tell him softly, pulling my eyes from the photo to see a small, sad smile on his face.

"She was." He nods, voice wistful. "She had this way of lighting everything up around her. She always made everything seem better, no matter how bad, right up until the end."

I nudge his shoulder with mine, hating the mournfulness on his face. "Sounds a lot like someone else I know."

His eyes flare in surprise as a soft laugh escapes him. "Maybe." He nods his head toward the kitchen. "Come on, he's been dying to see you all day."

Jace leads me to an archway in the living room wall that lures me in with the most delicious smell of creams and spices and I step into a small kitchen, seeing a middle-aged man a little shorter than Jace stirring a large pot on the stove. He's dressed in a short sleeve, button-up fishing shirt and cargo shorts. His skin weathered and his short brown hair messy on his head. He has the same laid-back air about him that Jace gives off, but that's where the similarities start and end. Jace's features are definitely all his mom. A sharp contrast to his dad's more rugged look.

He looks up as we enter and smiles warmly at his son, stepping away from the stove to enfold him in a quick hug. "See you found your way back."

“Always do, Pops.” Jace slaps him on the back before stepping away.

His dad turns to me and the smile on his face spreads even wider. “Damn, Eleanor. You’re a bit taller than I remember.”

I give him a small smile and shrug. “That tends to happen from what I hear.”

He laughs openly and comes over, enfolding me in the same warm hug he just gave his son. “You used to call me Uncle Jack but I think Jack will do just fine now.”

“Jack,” I echo when he steps back, lips twitching as I cock a brow at Jace. “Jack and Jace. That’s adorable.”

His dad chuckles under his breath and returns to the stove without comment while Jace rolls his eyes at me, reaching a hand over to mess up the hair on top of my head. “Shut it, Blondie.”

A soft laugh escapes me. “It really is.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he mutters, walking over to the fridge and opening it, scanning the contents as his eyebrows pull down. “Tiff bringing the wine, Dad?”

“Yeah.” Jack nods, stirring the pot on the stove and tasting a bit before grabbing for one of the spices he has lining the countertop. “But don’t tell your aunt. You know how she is about it since Tiff is still underage. Although what store that girl manages to charm into selling to her is beyond me.”

“How old is Tiff?”

“Nineteen,” Jace answers me, closing the fridge and his voice turning unusually sarcastic. “And will the sheriff be joining us tonight?”

“You know better than that, boy. Woman’s always working.”

I cock my head at him in question. “Your aunt is the sheriff?”

“Yeah.” He nods. “Tiff’s mom. No blood relation to me though, thank God. That woman is way too high strung.”

“Jace,” Jack scolds quietly.

“What about the aunt who owns the bar?”

“One and the same. Not that she ever steps foot in the place. Pretty sure the only reason she lets me manage it is because she dislikes us both equally. It was her husband’s before he passed away.”

“So wait—” I shake my head, confused as to their convoluted family tree. “How are you related?”

“Tiff’s dad and my mom were siblings. Although both of them are no longer with us. You know about my mom and Tiff’s dad passed away when she was tiny.”

“Gotcha.”

“Alright, Jace,” Jack interjects. “Go ahead and set the table. Dinner is almost done and Tiff should be here any minute.” He turns, giving a warning look to his son. “And don’t you dare con Eleanor here into helping you.”

Jace rolls his eyes as I flash him a smug look, making my way to the stove beside Jack to peer into the pot. The yellow soup wafts up and has me fighting the urge to snag a spoon and steal a bite.

I turn to Jack with a smile. “This smells amazing by the way.”

“Ain’t nothing but a little corn chowder with crab, darlin’.” He pats my back before reaching down to turn off the stove.

“You know, Dad,” Jace calls from where he’s laying silverware down on the kitchen table. “Eleanor is quite the cook herself. Maybe y’all can trade recipes after dinner if she likes it?”

I whip my head around and narrow my eyes at his amused face.

Bastard.

I mouth the word at him behind Jack’s back and he just grins wickedly back at me.

“Well, now—”

The front door opens at that moment and Tiff's exuberant voice calls out, saving me from having to admit to my culinary ineptitude. "I come bearing the vino!"

She walks into the kitchen like a whirlwind with a ridiculously bright smile on her face, and a bottle of white wine in each hand.

"El!" She leaps forward and wraps me in a tight hug as if I'm some long-lost friend.

Wow. They really are an affectionate bunch.

Jace comes up and takes the wine bottles from her hands where they're still wrapped around me, giving me an amused look as if he read the thought running through my mind before turning to set them on the counter. Tiff lets go of me and wraps her cousin in a side hug while he digs through a drawer and pulls out a wine opener before turning to give her uncle the same treatment.

Tiff hops up onto the counter beside Jace, her face brimming with excitement. "I was so happy when Uncle Jack told me you were coming to dinner. You should have heard Sam at the bonfire after you and Jace—"

"White or white, Delacroix?" Jace cuts her off, shooting a nervous look at his dad's back.

"White is fine." I grin at him.

"Anyway." Tiff scowls at Jace, watching him pour the wine into three glasses before grabbing one up. "Like I was saying —" She brings the glass to her lips just as Jack walks by and snatches it from her grasp, handing it over to me. "Hey!"

He gives her an admonishing look and I take a sip of the wine to hide my grin.

"Your mama would skin me alive, girly."

"But I brought it!" she argues indignantly.

"And that's all you'll be doing under my roof until you're twenty-one." He turns to me and I see Jace pass Tiff his glass behind his dad's back, sneaking her a large sip. "Now dinner is

ready, Eleanor. Bowls are by the stove and these two miscreants can wait while you help yourself.”

“Thanks.” I give him a smile and turn to the stove, feeling all kinds of nostalgia at their family dynamics as I fill my bowl, missing Yvie and the guys. I may not have grown up with a traditional family and Yvie worked late a lot during the week. But the guys and I ate together pretty much every night and Yvie had always made sure she was there for Sunday night dinners.

I walk to the kitchen table and take a seat, watching Jace and Tiff shove each other over who gets to go next before he lets her win. Tiff quickly ladles the soup into her bowl and scurries over, sliding into the seat next to me.

“You know.” She leans in and drops her voice conspiratorially, peeking over her shoulder to where Jace stands at the stove. “I’ve never seen my cousin chase a girl before. Much less through a grocery store parking lot.”

Tiff leans back and gives me a smile that says she’s already picking out wedding invitations but I just roll my eyes at her and take a sip of my wine. Unwilling to dampen her fantasies with my reality. Jace joins us then, taking the seat across from me and casting a curious look between the two of us while his dad sets a breadbasket down in the middle of the table before sitting down next to him. Everyone starts to dig in then without any prompting so I take that as my cue, grabbing a piece of bread from the basket and drenching it in the soup before bringing it to my mouth. Corn, cream, crab, and spices explode over my tongue in a symphony of flavor.

“Holy shit. That’s amazing.” I moan before catching myself. “Shi-uh, sorry.”

Jack and Tiff laugh as Jace’s eyes catch mine and I can practically see the naughty thoughts playing out within their mischievous depths when he grins.

“It’s really good,” I surmise, spooning the soup up and bringing it to my mouth as I steadfastly ignore Jace’s foot now messing with mine under the table.

“I’m glad you like it.” Jack smiles, leaning back in his seat and eyeing me as he picks up his glass of wine and takes a sip. “So tell me, Eleanor. What brought you back to town?”

“She prefers El,” Tiff interrupts, curious eyes catching mine before dropping back down to her bowl.

“El, then.” Jack nods.

“Uh—” I take another bite of soup and try to stomp on Jace’s foot when he runs it up my calf. “I—”

How am I supposed to focus like this?

“Jace,” Jack’s voice snaps out. “Stop playing footsie with the girl and let her speak.”

Jace’s foot drops instantly and his expression turns contrite. “Yes, sir.”

As if.

“Now go ahead, El.”

“Thank you.” I throw Jace a smug look before continuing. “I guess there’s really no nice way of putting this but I’d like to know what happened between my parents, what led to their uh—their deaths.” I look down into my bowl, swirling my spoon a few times before bringing my eyes back to his. “I was actually wondering if you remembered anything weird or I don’t know. Anything from back then.”

Jack gives me a sympathetic look. “That was such a long time ago. Let me think...” He takes a sip of his wine, eyes becoming distant with memory. “I remember Anna, Jace’s mom, saying that Nadia seemed distracted or distant those last few months. She wasn’t coming around as much as usual. Had only dropped you off a few times while she went to run errands but...” He shakes his head. “I don’t remember much more than that. I’m sorry. I wish I did.”

“No. No.” I give him a small smile. “That’s more than I remember, so thank you.” Taking a sip of my wine, I steel myself against the next question. “And my father... was there anything—I mean, what do you remember about him?”

“Cane...” He sighs and sets his glass down. “The whole town was shocked when it happened. Cane was just about one of the nicest people you’d ever meet. Now don’t get me wrong, no one wanted to have to face him in the courtroom and he was a tough bastard to play football against.” He gives me a sad smile. “And I speak from personal experience on that one since we played on the same team in high school. But that... no one ever saw that coming.” He shakes his head again. “The apple couldn’t have fallen further from the tree where Cane was concerned.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that he never showed any sign of being like his daddy before that night.”

I cock my head at him, brows pulling down in confusion. “I don’t understand. My grandfather? He died when my dad and Yvie were little in an accident, right?”

Jack pauses, giving me a considering look before speaking. “Elise and Yvie never spoke about him?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I think they were happy to leave everything to the past and in their defense, I never asked too much about it before now anyway. What happened with my grandfather?”

“It could be Yvie doesn’t remember. She and your dad were both pretty little when he passed.” He looks down at the table for a moment before bringing his eyes back to mine and holding up a hand. “And I don’t mean to speak ill of the dead but from what I know... your grandfather was a mean son of a bitch. Drunk more often than not and gambled away every dime that came his way. He eventually rolled his truck driving home drunk one night and I believe that came as somewhat of a relief to your grandmother. There were rumors she often took the brunt of his temper.”

I stare at him in shock for about ten seconds trying to contain my reaction and then I can’t help it... I burst out laughing.

“I’m s-s-sorry.” I gulp, trying to quell the laughter at the sight of Jack and Tiff’s shocked faces. “I’m sorry.” I take a deep breath and see the grin pulling at Jace’s lips across from me, causing a whole new round of giggles to grip me. “It’s just —” Jace starts laughing softly across from me, drawing Jack and Tiff’s confused eyes as I fight to get the words out. “The Y chromosome really didn’t fare well in the Delacroix line, did it?”

I reach out for my wineglass, taking a sip to stop the inappropriate reaction as Jack’s surprised eyes come back to land on me and turn amused.

“No.” He gives a harsh chuckle. “No. I suppose it didn’t.”

Swallowing down my wine, I lean back in my chair with a sigh before lifting my eyes to Jace’s across the table. Voicing the question that’s been churning around in my mind for a few days.

“I’ve been thinking. They were a ways out there. No neighbors, really. No one to hear what happened.” I wait for him to give me a nod of agreement before continuing. “I remember the police getting there and waking me up. But if I didn’t call the police and they couldn’t have called the police then...”

His eyes spark. “Then who called the police?”

“Exactly.”

“You should talk to my mom!” Tiff exclaims, causing me to jump and turn my head to her. “I watch true crime and they’ve got to have those records somewhere still. You should talk to her and see if you can get the old police files.”

My lips twitch up into a grin at the sight of her overly enthusiastic face. “That’s actually a really good idea.”

“Well look at that,” Jack interjects, getting up to grab the bottle of wine from the kitchen counter. “Dinner and a mystery. Next time we should just invite the whole town over for the show.”

Tiff throws him a winning look. “I’m all for it if it means I get to drink wine!”

I sneak a peek at Jace next to me as he walks me up to the door after dinner and find his eyes waiting to greet me.

“Thanks for coming tonight.”

“It was nothing.” I shrug, climbing the porch steps as he stops, staying at the bottom. “I had a good time actually, despite my... earlier reluctance. Your dad is great.”

“It wasn’t nothing to him.” He rests one foot on the bottom step and looks down for a beat before bringing his eyes back to mine. “Or me. So consider yourself invited on a weekly basis from here on out.”

I cock a brow at him. “I might just take you up on that, considering my inability to feed myself.”

“Please do.”

Silence falls as we lock eyes and that playful energy threads the air between us, causing my stomach to flip. Fuck, but he’s cute. Standing there all effortlessly sensual, hair pulled back into a messy bun and staring at me with wicked mischief in his eyes. Scaring the shit out of me with that feeling of something more between us since the boat. And I must be a special kind of stupid because I want to invite him in despite the vulnerability within me bucking against it.

That might be what I hate Coop for most of all.

For forcing the realization on me that I wasn’t untouchable. Not in the end anyway.

But Jace... Damnit. Something about him just makes it so hard to say no and turn him away. He was turning me into a marshmallow with his playful eyes and the constant care he showed where I was concerned.

And my god but the things that piercing could do.

I nod my head toward the door. “Want to come in?”

He steps up onto the bottom step fully, bringing us eye to eye. “You going to disappear on me again?”

“Maybe.” I shrug, giving him a small smirk. “I told you. I’m kinda a mess.”

“Yeah, well.” He reaches up and tugs at my hair in that playful way of his, dimples flashing as he drops his lips a breath away from mine. “I licked you, so I guess you’re my mess now regardless.”

Chapter 14

One Year Ago

Coop and I were a little fucked up.

We've been in Cahuita for almost two weeks and during that time we've fallen into a rhythm with each other. He pushes, I push back, and so the game goes, both of us locked in our weird battle of wills. Fighting for control and against it.

We get in bed at night and I lie on my side, he waits approximately ten minutes then pulls me over to cuddle. We have ridiculously earth-shattering sex. I go back to my side, he pulls me back over to cuddle and so the endless cycle goes. And somehow, I always wake up in the morning wrapped up in the stubborn bastard's arms.

He asks me a question about my past, I remind him that's against the rules. He asks the same question in a more roundabout way, I throw him a bratty comment. Etc., etc., etc.

The part that has me really questioning how deep my damage goes was that I was enjoying it though. I mean, I had always liked to play the game. But this was a higher-stakes version of it than I ever had before and with a more worthy opponent. And I was loving every moment of it, waking up wrapped in his arms, dodging his questions, all of it.

I was loving every moment with him... which was exactly the reason I had pushed him so hard last night.

For the most part, we had lain on the beach, spent our days exploring the small town of Cahuita, or hiking in the national park nearby. I let Coop do the cooking for the most part when we didn't go to town to eat. Granted, his skill seemed to be limited to chopping fruit and sautéing chicken, but still, it was edible, which was far better than I could do. And of course, my favorite part was that we spent a good portion of each day devoted to learning each other's bodies until we both were close to knowing each other like the back of our own hand. I knew that he just about died a small death when I dragged my

teeth along his hip bone and my god the man had learned fast how to fuck me just right from behind.

But every couple days, we went out to a little hole-in-the-wall bar in town for dinner and drinks. The owner was a former military expat named Jeff, who Coop knew and clearly liked and I had grown quite fond of the gruff bartender myself. His no-bullshit attitude made him the kind of person that I vibed with right off the bat.

And last night we had gone out to the bar... and that was where the trouble began.

I felt the charge of trouble in the air the minute we walked in and saw the group of college-aged guys standing at the bar. How Coop watched how they looked at me with narrowed eyes. It was the kind of attention I usually reveled in, but that feeling of satisfaction was dulled a bit with him by my side and that, well, that filled me with nothing but terror. So when my second tequila of the night had been empty, I had gone up to the bar to get a new drink, and I had flirted. Right there in front of him. Practically throwing it in his face when I stayed and sipped the drink I had ordered while the group of guys vied for my attention.

If I was being honest with myself, I had expected him to come up and intervene. But he hadn't. I had felt his dark gaze on me, could practically taste his displeasure with every sip of my drink, but he had stayed in his seat. So I had finished my drink. When I had come back to the table, his night-forest eyes had been filled with anger, but he had simply asked if I was ready to leave.

He hadn't spoken a word to me since.

The whole way home I had tried to rationalize away the guilty pit in my stomach. It was a feeling I didn't have much familiarity with and quickly realized I didn't like much, as in, at all. The fact that it had only grown when we had gone to bed and he hadn't tried to cuddle me once was something I was having trouble coming to terms with. I had still woken up in his arms this morning, but his silence had remained.

I knew why I had done it. Because I was comfortable here, because I liked him more than I should, and because I could feel my edges beginning to fray. So I had reminded both him and me of the rules. That this wasn't a permanent thing. That we were just two ships passing in the night. That we had to keep each other at a distance. The light of day brought what some would refer to as self-sabotage but what I would call self-preservation into harsh clarity.

It was nearly noon now and the only company I'd had so far was the scratch of his pen against the journal he was always scribbling in and the quiet anger sucking all the air from the room.

To put it simply, I was about to die of guilt and boredom, which was definitely not on my list of preferred ways to go.

He hadn't even fed me this morning.

Screw this. If he wouldn't speak up... I would force it out of him.

Although why I wasn't just packing my bags and hitting the road like a smart girl, I didn't know. I just knew I couldn't deal with this suffocating silence between us for a minute more.

I drop the book I've been pretending to read on the bed beside me, sitting up and casting my gaze to where Coop sits at his desk, checking to see if I garner any reaction.

Nope, nothing. I narrow my eyes on his bowed head and watch as he continues to write in that damn journal. Time to resort to extreme measures to get him to snap out of it.

I get out of bed and walk to the folding glass doors, pulling them back and grabbing one of the beach loungers from where they sit propped against the house. Popping the longer up a few feet from the house, I make sure it's in plain view of his desk before walking back inside and heading straight for the bathroom. I strip off my clothes and stack them neatly on the table beside the walk-in shower to appease the neat freak in the other room, ignoring the bikini hanging on the back of the door as I open it. Not allowing myself to glance Coop's way

even once, I hold my head high and walk through the house in all my naked glory.

The halt in the steady scratch of his pen as I come alongside his desk has me fighting hard against the smirk pulling at my lips and the urge to stick my tongue out at him. I continue outside to the lounge and lie down on it, basking in the warmth of the sun as I close my eyes. It takes a moment for that incessant scratching of the pen to start back up but I just smirk to myself and settle in to wait, determined to win this battle.

He'll break. If there's one thing I've learned about Coop and I since arriving in Cahuita, it's that the pull between us has quickly turned into an addiction for each other's naked skin too. As time ticks by though, I begin to relax, the steady beat of the sun on my skin and the cadence of his pen lulling me into a light doze.

I startle awake when I feel Coop's body brush against mine as he takes a seat on the lounge beside me. The first thing I see when my eyes open is the glass of ice water hanging loosely in his hand before I lift my gaze to his face and take in the shuttered expression there. Neither of us speaks for a beat as we eye each other and I decide to break the silence. He's here and I'm the one who pushed. The least I can do is speak first.

But that doesn't mean I can't fuck with him a little.

I cock a brow. "Are you done with your temper tantrum?"

A low, dark laugh lacking any humor runs through him and his plush lips tighten. "Am I done?" He pauses, finger tapping against the glass at his side. "Not even close." I watch as he sets the glass on the ground and dips two fingers in, plucking out an ice cube. "But I've decided to fight with you in the language you seem to communicate best in."

My heated skin prickles with anticipation as I watch him roll the ice cube between his fingers before bringing it up the curve of my neck and running it down to my collarbone, dragging it slowly along both sides. The harsh contrast of the ice on my sunbaked skin is electrifying to my senses. The little

drops of water running down my skin have me fighting against the urge to squirm and press my legs together already, but I won't give him the satisfaction. Not yet.

“So I'm going to play.” He drags the ice cube down to the center of my chest and swirls it. “And we're going to have a little talk.”

Lifting his hand, he discards the nearly melted cube with a flick of his wrist before reaching down for a fresh one. He brings it to my breast, eyes tracking the path it takes along the top curve of it. “And you're going to open up, just a little bit.” He dips the cube down to the top of my nipple and I tense as my nerves ignite with pleasure, both my nipples hardening instantly. “For once.”

“And if I don't?” I challenge him.

He flashes me that savage grin, ratcheting up the swirling anticipation inside me another degree. “Then I'm going to keep playing until you do.”

He drops his hand down and quickly runs the cube up my slit, ripping a gasp from my throat and he chuckles darkly before bringing it back to my neglected nipple.

“So what's it going to be, Princess?” He arches a brow at me, the other side of my insolent coin.

I jut my chin out defiantly and force the rest of my body to relax as if I'm utterly unaffected by our game when in reality it's giving me the most thrilling kind of high, far surpassing the nervousness skirting up my spine at his demand for more. “Do your worst.”

His eyes fill with heat, the forest green almost completely disappearing as his pupils dilate and his nostrils flare. “Stubborn.”

“Ass,” I taunt.

Push, push, push, El. One of these days, it's going to bite you in your ass.

I watch as Coop plucks a fresh cube from the glass, body thrumming as he brings it to my ankle and slowly runs it along

the curve of my leg to the back of my knee. My legs open for him slightly when he begins to drag the cube up my thigh and I couldn't stop the reaction even if my life depended on it.

“Let me make something abundantly clear.” He drags the ice up my leg, running it along the dip between my thigh and pussy before bringing it to my hip bone. Teasing me. “I don't share.” He drops his hand down and swirls the cube around my clit before bringing it up and running along my other hip. “Not ever.”

I bite my lip and take a few deep breaths through my nose to get my neurons firing again. “You're forgetting the rules, Cooper.” Tagging on his full name to really drive the point home.

“I'm not forgetting your asinine rules.” Another drop of that cube I'm already starting to hate through my slit. “I'm amending them.” He brings his hand back up and starts to draw words with the cube on my stomach. “For as long as whatever this thing is between us lasts. You're mine.” The ice has melted to nothing but water on my skin as he trails his cold fingers down to my clit, sliding through my folds easily with how drenched I am for him already.

“And I think at least this part of you would agree with me.”

I fight for clarity as he begins to roll the sensitive nub under his fingers relentlessly, dipping his head to my chilled nipple and pulling it into his hot mouth. The harsh contrast of hot and cold all over my body has me quivering as a wave of need rages inside of me. He releases my nipple with a pop and lifts his hand, leaving me having to bite my lip again to quell the scream of frustration working its way up my throat.

“That's bullshit.” My voice is rough with need as I watch him fish another cube from the glass.

His eyes drill into me as he brings the ice up and swirls it around both of my nipples. “You made it necessary.”

Anger and frustration edge away some of the lust fogging my brain. “You wanting to change the rules means you've

already broken them. And you know what happens if that's the case."

I see the anger flare in his eyes at my threat and he does nothing to hide it from me. "Guess what? You broke your own rules last night." Dropping his hand, he swirls the ice around my clit before running it up and down my slit, then repeating the whole process again. "You feel something between us and it scares the shit out of you." My legs open wider for him, desperate for the pleasure he's holding just out of reach despite the battle we're locked in. "You gave yourself away last night, throwing yourself around, lashing out against your own fucking fear."

My temper flares at his words, the whole mix of feelings and sensations creating an inferno inside of me. "Fuck you, Coop." I bite the words out.

"Yeah." He pauses with the cube on the tip of his fingers at my entrance. "Right back at you, Princess." He pushes the ice inside me along with his fingers and I damn near lift off the lounge completely, hips bucking as I try to get closer and farther away all at the same time.

"Admit it." He drags the cube along that glorious spot inside of me with unerring accuracy.

"No." I gasp, reaching up to clutch at his shoulder.

"Admit it." Another drag.

"No."

He pumps his fingers inside of me deeply, dragging them over that damn spot again and again before pulling them out just as my inner muscles begin to tighten. Denying me the pleasure I'm desperately searching for. The ice is gone, melted away and leaving nothing but his chilled fingers as he brings them to my clit. I dig my nails in as he begins to drive me higher again, pulling him closer out of sheer desperation despite holding back the words he wants.

Coop dips his forehead to mine, his eyes softening as we stare into each other's eyes. "Stop pushing me away so damn hard."

I'm near sobbing as my body begins to tighten up again, screaming with need, right on the precipice of another orgasm... and I know I'm going to break.

"I don't know what to do here." The rough, whispered confession is torn from me, the need for release overpowering every other instinct inside of me. "I'm scared. Of you. Of this."

His eyes soften impossibly further as he brings his other hand up, running his thumb softly along my cheek. "Me too, Princess. Me too."

Dipping his head, he presses a soft kiss to my lips before rising and lifting one of my legs so he can settle between them. He plunges his finger deep inside of me and drops his head to my pussy, sucking at my clit hard. That's all it takes to set me off. I come on a sob and a scream, his mouth like lava against my chilled skin. Waves of pleasure wrecking me, endless in their assault on my body. And just when I'm sure my heart is about to give out, it starts to fade, leaving me a shaking mess as Coop kisses his way over my hip.

He stands and quickly discards his clothes before reaching down to gather me up in his arms. I'm boneless as he carries me inside the house and gently lays me down on the bed. I part my legs for him without hesitation and he comes over me, his hard cock resting right up against my opening. Coop props himself up on his elbow and trails his fingers over the side of my cheek, eyes shadowed with worry as they search my face.

"Don't let the fear win. Don't let it take this away from you, from us."

I don't say anything because I don't have an answer for him. This is new and uncharted territory for me and even those few words I gave him have left me feeling panicked, like they left a pressure on my chest. But he was right, I do feel something for him that I've never felt before, and now that it's been acknowledged some small part of me doesn't want to turn away from that. So instead I reach up and grab the back of his head, dragging his lips to mine and trying to tell him everything I can't say in that kiss.

It's not long before I'm writhing underneath him again and he's pressing into me demandingly. Our need for each other never ending. I can taste myself on his lips still and it does nothing but ignite me further, causing me to moan softly into his mouth. He nips my bottom lip, spreading my legs wide and lining himself up with my entrance.

He pauses. "Fuck. Condom."

He goes to move away and I pull at the back of his head, halting him. "I'm on birth control." I swallow and clear my throat awkwardly, so out of my depth here. "And I get tested regularly, and I've never... you know. Not with anyone before."

I can give him this because he does mean something more to me. I may not be able to give him everything he wants... but this, I want to give him this.

He looks down at me with some unknowable feeling pouring from his eyes that has me turning my head to the sea. Not quite able to make myself face the depth I see there. But he quickly brings his hand to the side of my face, tilting my head back and I'm met with the sight of a rare, breathtaking smile transforming his face.

"You do like me." The smug satisfaction in his voice has me rolling my eyes.

"I take it back. Go get the condom."

The head of his cock nudges at my entrance and I suck in a breath of anticipation as his face turns serious.

"I'm clean too." He presses in another inch. "And I would never put you at risk."

He sheathes himself inside me with one powerful stroke and my whole body curls around him in response. I pull his head back to mine and the kiss is as lazy as the pace we begin to fuck at. Something about it feels new though, as if we're discovering each other's bodies all over again. He grinds against my clit with each slow stroke, taking me higher and allowing me to relish the feel of each delicious inch of his hard cock. The feel of having him bare inside me, nothing between

our most intimate skin is mind blowing. I lightly drag my nails down his back before rolling my hips against him and taking him even deeper, feeling the muscles under my hands shudder in response.

Breaking our kiss, I trail a path up to his ear with my lips. “You feel so fucking good.”

He rewards me with a strong thrust, grinding down harder on my clit than before. Lifting his head, he brings his hand to the back of my head and threads his fingers through my hair. His pace falters as he looks down at me with that same unknowable feeling in his eyes.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he whispers softly, gaze raking my face as if he’s trying to commit it to memory as his lips ghost up into an almost smile.

He resumes our lazy pace and I roll my hips to meet him at every thrust. Soft, gasping moans begin to pour from my mouth and I feel myself start to tighten around him with delicious tension. He drops his mouth to that space between my neck and shoulder that he seems to obsess over, dragging it through his teeth before trailing light kisses down my chest. I thread my fingers through his hair and drag his mouth back to mine, kissing him hard as I reach the peak of our indulgent climb.

The orgasm hits as lazily as our pace, gently pulling me under before drowning me in pleasure until I’m left a quivering mess as soft, helpless noises escape my lips. Coop’s whole body tenses when he thrusts into me again and I dig my heels into his ass, pulling him deeper as he spills himself inside me on a harsh groan. The feel of his cum deep inside of me sends little aftershocks of pleasure through my inner muscles and I feel his cock jerk in response.

He lifts his head, bringing the hand at the back of my head up to run his thumb across my cheek and we stay there for a long while. Staring into each other’s eyes, locked in an embrace, a whole universe of unspoken feelings between us. The feeling of painful vulnerability grips me tight and he must

see the panic start to fill my eyes because he drops his forehead to mine.

“Me too,” he reminds me softly as I run my fingers through his hair.

Feeling entirely too exposed and needing something from him in return, I ask the question I’ve been biting my tongue against for two weeks. “Tell me what you’re always writing in that journal.”

“Thoughts.” He drops his lips to my neck and presses a kiss to it. “Words that need to escape me.”

I grip his short hair as best I can and tug in warning. “Tell me something you’ve written.”

“Who’s the demanding one now?” He laughs softly, breath tickling my skin.

“Tell me.”

“Fine.” Lifting his head, he looks down at me with mischievous eyes. “Let’s play a game.”

“That’s what you’ve written?” I pull a disbelieving face, tone pure sarcasm.

“No, brat.” He nips at my bottom lip playfully. “Once a day, I’ll tell you something I’ve written in exchange for you answering a question honestly.”

Trepidation threads through me, but I fight it. In part, for some reason, because he’s asked and in part because I really want to know what’s in that journal. “Deal. But no questions today. I’ve already earned this one.”

“Done. Let me think...” His eyes cloud over for a moment in thought before he brings his hand up and runs his thumb along my bottom lip with a featherlight touch as he speaks. “*It’s those 11:11 sighs, stolen feelings hard to describe. Where I sink into this dream of mine.*”

My breath stalls at the poem and I have to force myself to inhale again as I analyze every word. Suspecting it’s about us... knowing it’s about us.

“That’s poetry,” I state stupidly. Apparently, my brain decided to check out for the day somewhere between ice cubes and forced acknowledgment of feelings.

He shrugs one shoulder nonchalantly. “I suppose.”

“It’s beautiful. How long have you been writing?”

His expression shutters. “About a decade, I guess.”

No way. If I don’t get to close off, neither does he. “Why not be a writer?”

He hesitates, shadows filling his eyes. “You’re not the only one scared of becoming one of your parents.”

I say nothing, simply running my fingers through the back of his hair and gently bringing his mouth to mine. Kissing him softly before pushing at his shoulders, encouraging him to roll over and he follows my lead, quickly switching our positions so that I’m straddling him. I feel him begin to harden inside of me again and roll my hips, dropping my lips to kiss a soft path down his neck. I say nothing, because sometimes, a hurt can run so deep that no matter how many millions of words are heaped upon it in an attempt to heal, they do nothing but settle like salt on a wound. Sometimes, it takes a different form of understanding, of giving a bit of yourself to another, to ease their pain. Of one soul letting the other know, they are not alone in their suffering.

Chapter 15

Present Day

The chime of my phone wakes me up a few hours after Jace slid from my bed at an ungodly hour this morning with the whispered words that he had promised to meet Zane for some bros' surfing time. Whatever that means. It was our third night in a row together and we had fallen into the start of a routine. We did our own things during the day but when he was done at the bar for the night he would call to ask what I was doing and I would bullshit him for a bit before eventually telling him to come over. Then we would wake up and go for coffee and breakfast at his place, along with some more mind-blowing sex, before going our separate ways and starting the routine all over again.

And yes, he did get me to make those noises for him every morning without the help of caffeine.

The whole thing made me unbelievably nervous and yet... I wasn't quite sure how to stop it now either. Or if I even wanted to. I had been right, Jace Dawson was a master at slipping through the cracks in people's walls and I could already feel him starting to finagle his way through mine.

I reach for my phone with a sigh and unlock the screen, pulling up my messages. There're a few notifications in the group message I have with the guys from early this morning, as in two a.m. early. I click on it and play the drunken video Mac and Kai sent me last night with a grin splitting my face as they dramatically demand I abandon my trip and come home. Kai claiming he's lost without me while Mac just threatens to start drinking my stash of wine if I don't comply. I close out of the video and scroll down to see the messages Stef sent a few minutes after their video.

Stef: Ignore the idiots but don't forget our club opens at the end of July and I would like you there.

Stef: Please.

Stef: Nona's banquet is that week too.

Stef: Miss you more than the idiots, cara.

I quickly type out a reply that I'll be there come hell or high water, knowing what a huge deal it is and that people will expect to see me with my guys at such big events. Especially considering I invested a sizable chunk of my inheritance when we came back from Europe with the idea for the club and am the owner of twenty-five percent of it. I press send just as a message from Jace comes through.

I tap on his message, fighting with everything in me against the smile trying to break free on my face.

Jace: Whatcha doing, Blondie?

I stare at the message for a minute, losing the battle against the twitch of my lips and type out a reply.

El: Just woke up. About to get ready and go see the sheriff.

The three little dots start and stop a few times before his message comes through.

Jace: Best of luck with that. Come to the beach after? The spot where we had the bonfire.

El: Will there be any ex-girlfriends around this time?

Jace: No ex-flings in sight.

El: Shame. Guess I'll have to think about it then.

Jace: Mhm. Watch your step as you leave.

I quickly jump from the bed and walk to the front door, pulling it open to see a thermos on the front porch mat waiting to greet me. The clever little shit brought me back coffee at some point so I didn't have to drink my instant one. I reach down and grab the thermos from the mat, staring at it for a moment as my heart gives a little twinge of happiness before closing the door. Popping the top on the thermos, I take a sip as I walk back to the bedroom that I've now successfully moved my suitcase into with a full-fledged grin on my face. Knowing that I'm going to the beach after seeing the sheriff today... and not just because he brought me coffee.

Fucking Jace Dawson.

I walk through the front door of the sheriff's station, scanning the space and seeing an elderly woman sitting at the reception desk in front of three cubicle-like desks with a glassed-in office behind them. There're a couple police officers at the desks who raise their heads at my entrance, giving me a curious glance and I try to give them my best harmless smile. Apparently, I'm not all that convincing though, if the way their eyes narrow in suspicion is any indication.

Wonderful.

I walk up to the elderly receptionist and try again, forcing my smile even wider and reminding myself I need answers from these people.

"Hello."

Her sharp eyes snap to mine from behind a pair of reading glasses and narrow. "How can I help you?"

So much for that.

I drop the fake smile from my face. "I was wondering if I could speak to the sheriff or maybe you can help me?"

"The sheriff is a very busy woman, young lady. What is it you need?"

"I need a police file from about eighteen years ago."

"Well you can't just walk in and get one of those." She draws herself up, shoulders stiffening under a sweater that has no business being worn in this heat. "You would either need a court order or have to be a family member. Are you a reporter?"

"No." I shake my head under her disapproving gaze, barely resisting the urge to roll my eyes. "I'm a family member."

"What file are you looking for?"

"It would be for—"

“Eleanor?”

The soft voice comes from behind me and I turn, seeing who I’m betting is the sheriff coming to a stop just inside the door. She has the same blue eyes as Tiff, and her hair is similar but more coppery in color and pulled back into a tight bun on top of her head. Her build is slighter than I expected and she’s actually very pretty in a classical kind of way. But there’s something about her that pulls at me, taunting me like puzzle pieces I can’t quite make fit.

“Yeah.” I shake off the weird sense and take a step toward her, trying for a smile again. “Are you Tiff’s mom?”

“I am. Tiff told me you would be stopping by.” She gives me a tight smile in return. “You can call me Leah or Sheriff Reynolds, whichever you prefer.” Holding out a hand, she gestures to the glassed-in office toward the back. “Why don’t we step into my office?”

“Perfect.”

We stare at each other for a beat, but when she doesn’t make a move, I get the clue and start to walk to the office at the back. Reminding myself again that I need something from these people and now is not the time to get into an epic showdown regardless of how much I dislike the feeling of someone I barely know at my back. Law enforcement or not.

That’s not entirely true though, is it, El?

I push down the spark of memory and take the seat in front of her desk, watching as she closes the door, trying to figure out what’s causing my gut to pull with unease. She takes a seat behind the desk and gives me another tight smile. An aloof energy pouring off of her and clueing me in as to why Jace and her probably don’t vibe very well. I couldn’t imagine a person further on the opposite side of the spectrum from Tiff if I tried.

Man. I’d love to be at a family dinner where she joined the table.

She places her hands on the desk, eyes rolling over my face before coming back to mine. “You really are the spitting image

of your mother.” A soft, humorless laugh leaves her. “For a minute there, I thought it was Nadia’s ghost when I saw you.”

I muster up a friendly voice, trying to keep things amicable but not finding any humor in the topic like she apparently does. “Did you know her well?” I ask, sliding my eyes across her office and noting the multitude of accolades.

“No.” She shakes her head. “No. Not really. Anna was the one who was closest to her.”

“Right,” I mutter, more than ready to move things along. “So did Tiff tell you why I was stopping by?”

“She did.” Nodding, she leans back in her chair and tilts her head at me in consideration. “You want the police file on your parents’ deaths, correct?”

“Yes. If you still have it, that is.”

“We do.” She dips her head once. “It would be up in central storage in Mobile but, yes, I could get the file if you want it.” She pauses, eyeing me critically. “But Eleanor, I have to warn you. That file is, well, a grisly thing. I’m not sure you really understand the graphic nature of it. The photos, descriptions, I was on call that night and... I wouldn’t want my child seeing that if it were me.”

Shock runs through me and my voice comes out quieter than I would like. “You were there?”

“Yes.” Her lips purse in displeasure at the memory. “I was only a junior deputy but with a station as small as this, everyone was there.”

“Can you—” I clear my throat. “Can you tell me who placed the 9-1-1 call that night?”

“If I remember correctly, it was an anonymous call.”

I cock my head at her and narrow my eyes. “And no one found that strange?”

She gives me a brittle smile. “It was clear what had happened from the scene. No one felt the need to chase down one loose end. I’m afraid if you’re looking for a different story here, you won’t find one.”

“I’m not,” I snap, done playing nice. It’s not like I was ever any good at it anyway. “I’m just looking for answers. So can you get me the file?”

“Yes,” she responds icily. “I’ll put in the request today but it’ll probably take them a month to process the request and dig out the file since it’s from before we digitalized everything”

“That’s fine.” My lips twitch up into a bratty smirk that drips attitude. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She gives me another brittle smile. “Good. Now that’s settled, do you need me to walk you out?”

“No, thanks, Sheriff. Pretty sure I can find my way.”

I pull into one of only two gas stations in town on my way to meet Jace at the beach, still trying to shake off the lingering edginess from my meeting with Sheriff Reynolds. Totally understanding Jace’s obvious dislike of the woman now. Frigid and uptight are putting it mildly. That one short meeting has me feeling like I need to smoke a blunt and dance naked on the beach if only to remove the stick that was probably inserted into my ass just from being in her presence. Tiff must have had a hell of a time growing up with that woman. I hop out of my car and swipe my card to pay, musing about Tiff’s psychological makeup and giving her the honorary diagnosis of overexuberant by way of a frigid mother.

I’m so lost in thought that it’s not until I’m already pumping the gas that I notice the guy staring at me from across the pump. And not in the polite, hi, this is awkward forced proximity, but we’re going to smile than avoid eye contact kind of way. This guy won’t look away from me and something about it sends tendrils of warning racing along my spine.

Watching the numbers tick by at what feels like a snail’s pace, I try to get as good of a look at him as I can without clueing him in as to what I’m doing. I can see his blond hair out of the corner of my eye, almost as light as mine but more yellow in color, like he dyed it out of a box. There’s a scar

digging deep into the side of his face, starting below his temple and working its way up before it disappears into his hairline. He looks a bit older than me, but not by much, and his features say he should be attractive, yet he somehow falls flat. As if there's no life to him.

A nasty kind of chuckle leaves him as he stares at me and that right there is enough to set me off in my current state.

Wrong fucking day to mess with me, asshole.

I jerk my eyes to his and clench the gas pump in my hand, wholeheartedly prepared to spray him down with the gasoline if he makes an aggressive move. "Can I help you?"

His brown eyes drill into mine and he smiles with cruel amusement. "Nice ride you got there."

"Right," I drawl out with acrid sarcasm, narrowing my eyes on him.

I dart my gaze quickly to his car, that looks as if it's hanging on by a thread, and see the outline of another person in the passenger seat.

Fuck, not good. One guy I could maybe get away from but two...

My stomach flips with fear, confidence fading as I internally berate myself for not just keeping my damn mouth shut.

"Hey." His raspy voice draws my eyes unwillingly back to his. "Haven't I seen you around town with Jace Dawson?"

I lift my chin and cock a defiant brow at him, hearing Stef's voice in my head from the countless lectures he gave me about what I should do in any precarious situations.

Never let them see your fear, cara.

"And you care why?"

That nasty chuckle rolls off him again and he takes a step closer, reaching up to lean a hand against the gas pump. "Oh, Jacey boy and I are old friends." The click sounds signaling my tank is full and he hits the gas pump lightly before

stepping back. “Tell him Trey Morrison sends his regards through his girl.”

What the actual fuck?

He gives me one last cruelly amused look before turning and walking to his car, getting in and peeling out without another word. Leaving me to jerkily shove the nozzle back into the gas pump and force my fingers to unclench from it one at a time. My hand shakes as I hurriedly turn the knob to close my tank and slam it shut. I dive into Franny and lock the doors, breathing a deep exhale of relief as I take off toward the beach. I’m probably just overreacting about the whole thing due to my already off mood from meeting the sheriff but still...

What a weird fucking morning.

Chapter 16

Present Day

I park in the same spot as the night of the bonfire and see Andrea sitting on a blanket in the sand with her red hair blowing in the wind while Jace and Zane sit on their surfboards out in the water. Gorgeous bodies and tattoos on full display for all to see as they wait for just the right wave. I grab my camera from the center console with a smirk and get out of my car, breathing in the cleansing ocean air as I make my way down to the beach. Coming to a stop beside the blanket, I tilt my head down at Andrea, drawing her surprised eyes to me.

“Room for one more?”

A smile quickly fills her face. “Hey, girl! Yeah. Make yourself comfortable.” She scoots over. “I’m glad you made it, Jace said he wasn’t sure.”

I plop down on the blanket and stretch my legs out, throwing her a smirk. “I like to keep him guessing.”

She laughs softly. “Good for you. He could definitely use some more of that in his life.”

“Hmm,” I answer noncommittally before nodding to the boys and bringing my camera up, checking the focus. “What a view.”

“That they are. Jace said you’re a photographer, right?”

“Yeah, hopefully one that actually makes money someday.” I lower the camera and give her a grin. “How long have they been at this now?”

“Long enough that they should be mermen by this point.”

“Insanity.”

“Absolutely.” She smiles softly despite her words. “They do this from time to time. Battle it out over who can catch the best wave and end up stuck out there all day. Typically only after Zane and I have a fight or there’s been a prolonged separation like when Jace was in the Navy.”

“And since I’m assuming you and Zane made up.” I turn my head and cock a brow at her. “What’s the occasion today?”

Another soft laugh leaves her. “Heard about that, did you? Serves him right, thinking he can die on me one day.” Andrea turns her amused eyes to me. “I’m guessing you’re the occasion today.”

My brows pull down in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Typically, those two are tied at the hip so tight that I have to put my foot down to get some alone time with Zane.” Her lips pull up into a grin and she waves her hand at me as if the answer is obvious.

“But not since I came to town?” I guess.

“Precisely.” She nods. “I should actually be thanking you. It’s been great for my sex life. Except when Zane starts wondering about what’s going on with y’all like a girl afterward.”

A surprised laugh leaves me and I stumble out my words. “Yeah, but surely, I mean, I don’t really see Jace as having a lack of playmates.”

“That’s true,” she agrees, looking out to the man in question before bringing her eyes back to me. “But I’d wager he’s a little more invested than usual.”

I break our gaze and look out to the water, remaining silent. Unsure of how to respond. I’ve never been great at the friends-with-girls thing, to begin with, and what is probably a normal topic for most girls is a bit more of a sensitive one to me. Jace hasn’t noticed I’m here yet and I take advantage of his ignorance, simply enjoying being able to watch him. Totally creeping. I can see the mischievous tilt of his head and when Zane dips a hand down into the water to splash him, I know he’s out there riling him up. Being his usual playful self. I bring my camera up just as Jace throws back his head with a laugh and my lips twitch up at the sight as I snap the picture. I can practically hear the melodic sound of his laughter trickling to me over the waves.

“You look a little bit smitten.”

Andrea's voice pulls me from my trance and I lower the camera, turning my head to meet her happily knowing eyes.

Shrugging, I dart my eyes back to the water and decide maybe I should try out this female friend thing now that I'm past the battleground of junior high. It would be nice to have a friend who I don't know, got a period, and it's not like she doesn't know my past already.

"Maybe a bit." I give her.

"Don't worry." She bumps my shoulder with hers. "I think the feeling is mutual."

"Yeah." I sigh, brows pulling down as I dig my flip-flops into the sand and wiggle my toes.

"So why the long face?"

"It's..." I turn to meet her questioning eyes and fight the urge to just spill the whole terrible tale right then and there. "Complicated." I shrug again, keeping my thoughts to myself, knowing it's best to leave those scars unopened.

The only person who knew the real truth of what happened in Costa Rica, all the sordid details, was Stef. And that was only after he swore on my life to never speak of it to another soul and forced it out of me one night over numerous bottles of wine in France while I bawled my eyes out on the lock bridge. Not even Mac and Kai knew the whole story and Yvie knew nothing at all.

Andrea nods her head in understanding after it becomes clear I'm not going to elaborate. "Then I'll only say this." She jerks her head toward where Jace sits in the water. "He's got the biggest heart of anyone I've ever known when it comes to the people he cares about... including Zane, but don't tell him I said that." I bring my eyes to hers and she smiles jokingly before continuing. "But he hasn't let many people into it since his mom, not really, and his sense of self-preservation kind of sucks. So be careful with him, yeah? He's kind of special to us."

I give her a meaningful nod before dropping my gaze to my camera, seeing the picture of Jace's laughing face shining back

up at me and it hits me then. Why I'm so reluctant to put a stop to this. He reminded me of all the best parts of myself without the shadows of the past and I was starting to cling to him because of that. To the life he was bringing back to me day by day. It made me incapable of hurting him in the way I had been because I knew that pain. It would be like inflicting it on myself all over again in a weird, twisted kind of way.

Fuck. I should have never dragged him into my mess.

Andrea reaches over and pats my leg consolingly right before I hear Jace's voice yell over the water.

"Blondie!"

I lift my head, catching sight of the brilliant smile he flashes my way before turning his surfboard and paddling toward me through the water. Leaving Zane to trail behind. Jace makes it up to the beach and carries his surfboard as he walks toward us. His hair is loose, wet and hanging around his face and there's water dripping down his suntanned skin. The drops slowly wind trails down to that Adonis belt I licked my way clear across last night and I bring my legs up, pressing them together in an attempt to ward off the need shooting straight to my core at the sight of him.

He digs his surfboard into the sand in front of us and flashes those dimples at me. "So the temptation of me alone was enough to get you to come?"

I lift my head haughtily, unable to resist our easy play. "I figured I would grace you with my presence as repayment for the coffee." I throw him a bratty look. "It was the least I could do."

Zane comes up and digs his surfboard into the sand, nodding his hello as Jace walks over to me. He drops down into a squat right in front of me, playful delight shining in his gaze as he brings us eye to eye.

"Oh, so this is just about repayment for the coffee?" He drops his eyes quickly to my camera and I clench it in my hands, seeing the wheels turn in his head.

I cock my head at him, keeping my expression flat as I discreetly press the button to black out the screen. “Precisely.”

“Nothing to do with wanting to see me?”

“Nope.”

“Not even shirtless?”

“Definitely not.”

“And wet?”

“I’ve seen better.”

I fight against the twitch of my lips, feeling Andrea and Zane’s eyes ping-ponging between us as we volley back and forth in our verbal play.

“Hmm.” Jace’s eyes narrow just a bit before a wicked grin fills his face, giving me about a one-second warning before he launches himself at me.

He tackles me down into the sand, laying his wet body on top of mine and grabbing for the camera as I lift it above my head, trying to keep it out of his reach.

“Not the camera, Jace! It’s expensive!” I laugh as he tries to pry it from my grasp, long hair dripping water down onto me. “And you’re all wet!”

“Pass it over and no one gets hurt, Delacroix.” He dips his face down to my neck, nuzzling at it and dropping his voice intimately. “Plus, around me you should always expect to get wet.” He follows up the naughty comment by swiping his tongue out and licking my neck, surprising me into letting go of the camera.

“Ugh! I hate it when you do that.” I bring my hand down to swipe at my neck as he raises his head, grinning down at me smugly.

“No you don’t.” He drops his head to the other side of my neck and gives it the same treatment as I protest, bucking up uselessly underneath him to the sound of Andrea and Zane’s laughter.

He lifts his head and clicks on my camera, expression clearing for a moment as he looks at the screen before a small, happy smile pulls his lips up. Setting the camera down next to us, he cages me in with his arms and brings his firework eyes to mine.

“Just about the coffee, huh?”

“Absolutely.”

A smirk pulls at my mouth right before he lowers his head and drops his lips to mine. Kissing me teasingly, gently pulling at my lips for a moment before raising his head back up to look down at me.

“You’re such a liar.” He grins, dropping one more quick kiss to my mouth before lifting off of me and standing.

“Aww,” Andrea teases, grinning like a fiend, eyes bouncing back and forth between us. “Y’all are adorable.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jace pushes at her head jokingly as I rise, a smile on my face despite the flutter of nerves in my stomach at the public display.

Zane drops down on the other side of Andrea and slings his arms around her neck, curious eyes on me. “Leave ’em alone, babe.”

Jace walks over to a cooler beside the blanket, grabbing a water bottle and chugging it down before bringing his eyes back to mine. “How was the sheriff?”

A light scoff leaves me and I shrug. “Interesting, I guess? I understand your sentiments about the woman now. We definitely rubbed each other the wrong way. I’m still trying to figure it out, but she’s getting me the file, so whatever.”

“Hmm.” He makes a sound of affirmation and looks out at the waves. “I thought it might go something like that given your sparkling personality.”

Zane chuckles softly. “Don’t worry, she leaves most people feeling the same way.”

“Hey,” I call out to Jace, drawing his eyes back to mine and tensing at the memory. “The weirdest thing happened when I

stopped to get gas afterward, though.”

He tilts his head at me in question. “What’s that?”

“There was this guy across the pump staring at me. Anyway, I might not have been the nicest, considering the fact he was giving me total creeper vibes, so sorry if he’s really a friend of yours.” I take a breath before continuing as Jace’s eyes narrow. “But he told me to tell you that Trey Morrison is back in town and sends his regards through your girl, whatever that’s supposed to mean?”

I watch the blood drain right out of Jace’s face as his expression goes slack and his whole body tenses. His eyes lift from mine to quickly scan the length of the beach behind me before dropping his gaze back to mine.

“What did he look like?”

I shrug nervously. “Shitty blond dye job, brown eyes, and a scar running along his temple.”

Jace’s hand clenches around the water bottle he holds, causing it to crackle at my description.

“What?” I question, stomach churning at the sight. “Who is he?”

I can see the thoughts flying behind his eyes at a rapid pace when he brings them back to me and walks over, dropping down onto his knees in front of me. “Did he touch you?” he asks, voice low and serious as his eyes rake over every inch of my body. “Did he say anything else?”

“Wh-What?” I stutter. “No, he didn’t touch me. I would have given him a face full of gasoline if he tried and been in a decidedly less calm mood when I arrived. Who is he?”

Jace’s eyes flick to Zane’s and I turn my head, seeing the tense looks on his and Andrea’s faces. Watching the silent conversation play out between the two guys that has Jace’s jaw clenching.

“Jace, who is he?”

He brings his uncharacteristically serious eyes back to mine, unclenching his jaw. “How did he know you’re my girl?”

“I don’t know!” I burst, nerves riding me hard and done with his non-answers. “He said that he had seen me around town with you. Now who is he?”

“Fuck,” Jace mutters the word, brows pulling down as he stands. He turns toward the ocean and raises his hands to grip the back of his head. “Fuck!”

I dart my eyes to Andrea and see her cringe but when she and Zane offer no answers, I stand. Walking around to where Jace stands, I see the way his chest is rising and falling at a rapid pace, tension locking up his whole body.

“Who is he?” I ask him quietly.

He keeps his narrowed eyes on the water. “My past catching up with me.”

“I’m going to need you to explain that one, Dawson.”

He drops his eyes to me and I see the concern and fear radiating out of them. “It’s complicated.” He pauses. “I don’t want to involve you, it’s... fuck you’re already—”

He cuts himself off, heaving a breath as he looks back to the ocean and I realize something in that moment. He may be scared for me, or about involving me, but I am done having any kind of secrets between my bedmates and me. I am learning and I won’t make the same mistakes I did last summer. I won’t allow someone close again without knowing their first and last name, past and present address of residence, whole freaking family tree, and everything in between. I foolishly believed I was invulnerable before, that I could weather any storm, and I won’t be that stupid again. If he wants to keep winding tendrils through my walls then he can very well explain.

I cock my head at him, copping an attitude and crossing my arms. “Well un-complicate it for me.”

He waits a beat and then drops his eyes to me again, lips pulling up into a small, fake-ass smile. “Just stay away from him, okay?” He reaches up and tugs at my hair like he didn’t just freak out. Trying to smooth things over and appease me. “Promise me if you see him, you’ll call me?”

Uh, no. Sorry, Dawson. You may be clever but you would be shit at poker.

“Um, yeah. No.” I take a step back and narrow my eyes on him. “Trust me, I’m definitely not inviting them over for Christmas but you’re going to need to explain—”

“Them?” he cuts me off, face dropping back into that tense, freaked-out expression again. “You didn’t say anything about them before.”

I roll my eyes at him in irritation. He’s going to give me fucking whiplash. “I don’t know! There was another guy in the car but I didn’t get a good look at him.”

“Fuck,” he mutters, bringing a hand up and running it down his face. Totally zoning out as he looks away from me.

Yeah, screw this.

“You know what?” I take a step back and move to walk around him. “When you get over your freak-out and feel like explaining, come find me.”

He darts his hand out and snags my elbows, eyes bleeding his panic all over me. “You can’t just leave by yourself. Not after—”

He cuts himself off again and I rip my elbow out of his grasp, throwing him a mocking look. “I can do whatever I damn well please until you explain to me why the fuck that’s not the case.”

I take off up the beach, ignoring Andrea and Zane when they call out to me, anger fueling my fast pace as I march through the sand.

“Fuck!”

Jace’s curse sounds through the air behind me but I don’t stop, despite the twinge of pain in my heart. I may have fought Coop at the beginning, but in the end, I trusted everything he said implicitly, and maybe he was telling the truth. Who knows? Not me. That’s the worst part. The not knowing whether it was real or not. But I do know I can’t let myself be dragged into something blindly again. Let myself fall so hard

like I did before when, at the end of the day, I really didn't know anything at all. I wouldn't survive it a second time.

But seriously... fuck this day.

Chapter 17

One Year Ago

The soft sound of waves crashing pulls me from my sleep and I crack my eyes against the light spilling in from the open folding glass doors. My gaze lands on Coop's tattooed back where he leans up against the side of the house, phone to his ear, a loose pair of black basketball shorts slung low on his hips. His voice is hushed, too quiet for me to hear what he's saying over the sound of the waves, but from the way his shoulders are tight with tension I'd wager he's not too happy about whatever the conversation is. I flip over to snag my camera from the nightstand where I left it last night after snapping pictures of sea turtles returning to the ocean and pause, eyes landing on the neatly folded piece of paper sitting atop it.

Ever since the ice cube incident, Coop had been leaving little poems for me to find every day. A note under my bottle of tequila, a torn page from his journal laid out on the passenger seat of the car. They've ranged from painfully personal to humorlessly inane to ridiculously sexy, and I've been hoarding them all. Tucking each of them away with care in the hidden zipper compartment of my suitcase. I snatch the poem off the top of my camera and open it greedily.

She's like the cat, she prefers things in her own time.

My lips quirk up into a silly grin at the poem, eyes tracing the elegant lines of his script. His words chip away at the hard shell of me a little more each day, and for every poem he asks a question in return, ranging from my favorite color to food to season. Orange, Indian, and summer. Always summer. All of his questions up to this point have been light and easy, but I know the day is coming soon, where he's going to push for more. It was what he did and yet... I didn't fight it like I used to because so far, he was everything I had expected him to be and more than I could have ever foreseen. And fuck me but I was falling for him hard.

And if I was in the mood to be brutally honest with myself, which typically only happened around seven a.m. when I woke up in his arms and watched the way his brow was drawn tight with tension even in his sleep, I had a painful suspicion I had already fallen. That the mark he had left on me was already too deep to ever be rid of even if I were to cut ties with him today. It was two weeks past what was supposed to be a few weeks in Cahuita and neither one of us had broached the topic of moving on. Me, content to live in the blissful, unacknowledged oblivion and him knowing... well, that maybe I am like a cat.

Carefully folding up the poem, I set it on the nightstand and grab my camera, turning back in time to see Coop pocketing his phone and blowing out a deep breath. Lifting the camera, I adjust the settings, bringing his magnificent body into focus, his profile just visible against the sun and snap the picture. The moment too precious to let pass without capturing it. The click of the shutter sounds loudly and he whips his head around, lips ghosting up when he spots me.

“Sneaking pictures, Princess?”

“Maybe.” I set the camera down on the nightstand as he walks over and lies down beside me in bed, both of us turning on our sides to face each other. “Probably going to sell that one to some housewife back home for a few grand.”

“Brat.” He props his head up in his hand, night-forest eyes dancing with humor.

“Yeah, but you—” love me. “Would get a commission out of it too. Don’t worry.” Fuck. I cover up the witty retort and clear my throat. It was something I would have shot back at Stef or the guys without thought. A natural reaction that makes my stomach flip. His humorous eyes scan my face suspiciously as if he’s about to call me on my bullshit and I change the topic.

“Who was on the phone?”

The humor leaves his gaze in an instant. “My mother.”

“Not a good call?” I reach up, running my thumb along his brow to relieve the tension there.

“It was fine. Just checking on my sister because she hasn’t picked up lately.”

“And how is your sister?”

“Good. On some trip with her friends apparently.”

“Why so tense then?” I venture, curious about his family dynamics. About him.

“My mother and I...” He sighs, eyes flitting away from mine. “Have a complicated relationship, you could say.”

“Not a good mother?”

“She would say yes, in a lot of ways she would be right.” His eyes find mine again, a deep kind of sadness radiating from their depths. “But me and her... there’s a lot between us and some things can never be overcome.”

“I’m sorry.” I tell him softly, wrapping my arms around him and tucking myself into his body.

“Don’t be.” His hard words come out on a soft scoff as he begins to trace patterns on my back, lulling me back into a sleepy state.

“I did get another call this morning.”

“Hmm?”

“From work. I need to go meet a coworker of mine in San Jose today to pass on some information about a project he’s taking on.”

I snuggle in deeper to his warmth and hitch my leg over his hip as if I can keep him from moving. “Email?”

His chest vibrates under my head with a deep chuckle. “Very hackable.”

“Can’t you just tell him over the phone?” I yawn dramatically for emphasis.

“Phones aren’t always the most secure, not even burners like mine.”

Well that answers the question of his antiquated phone choice.

“He’s also just being an ass because this was supposed to be my project.”

I still, not even breathing as I tilt my head back to look at him, any lingering sleepiness instantly gone at his words. “And you’re not going?”

He nods in confirmation. “And I’m not going.”

“Why?”

The question is soft, pulled from some deep part of me that I’ve never allowed voice to until now.

“Because, it would be at least a couple months long and,” He brings his thumb up and runs it along my bottom lip. “There’s this girl I like and... I’m not done with her.”

“Oh.” My stomach is a swirl of nerves, the implications of this too much to process after just waking.

His lips pull up a bit on one side in a half smile. “Yeah, oh.”

“Can you really just do that? Not take the job?”

“It’s a contract-based company, so technically I can.”

“But what about like money? Or... I don’t know, job security?”

“I have enough saved up that missing out for a while isn’t going to hurt me and besides... it’s done.”

“Oh.”

“Your eloquence this morning is overwhelming.”

I reach my hand up and tug at the hair on the back of his head in reprimand. “Guess you better hope that picture goes for more than a few grand.”

That savage grin flashes on his face as he dips his head to mine. “Right now... I’m feeling pretty confident.”

The kiss is as deep and demanding as usual, branding, as if we’re both scared every moment with each other will be our last. I feel him harden against me and hitch my leg higher on his hip, opening up myself as much as possible, already slick with need. He grinds against me and I breathe a moan into our

kiss as his hand drops to the front of my panties, nudging the fabric aside and plunging two fingers into me.

He groans into my mouth and breaks the kiss, dipping his head to my neck and sucking the skin into his mouth. Hard.

He presses his lips to the spot in a soft kiss. “Always so fucking wet for me.”

“Always fucking leaving marks on me.”

I dig my nails in, scraping them up his back in warning and his answering chuckle is pure insolence as he brings his thumb down on my clit, causing my whole body to jerk against his in search of more. He lifts his head and looks down at me with heated eyes, continuing to roll my clit under his thumb as he speaks.

“Come with me today?”

“Uh—” I gasp as he pumps his fingers inside of me lazily. “To San Jose?”

“Yeah.” He dips his head to my chest and drags my tank top-covered nipple through his teeth gently. “Alec is an ass but he’s also a good friend of mine.” He moves his head to my other nipple, giving it the same attention and I grind my pussy against his hand in response. “And he wants to meet you.”

My hips still, and he sighs, lifting his head back up to mine. “You told him about me?”

“Yes, Princess.” He presses a soft kiss to my lips. “He asked why I was passing on the job so I told him about you.”

“Oh.”

“There’s that eloquence again.” His full lips ghost up, eyes amused. “You told your friend about me too, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Okay, so stop freaking out about it.”

He shrugs his shoulder nonchalantly and starts to play with me again, thrusting his fingers inside of me and dipping his lips to mine. And although some part of me whispers that this isn’t the same thing, I decide to ignore the unease skirting up

my spine in pursuit of more pleasurable things. Pushing at his massive shoulders, I roll him onto his back, bracing myself above him as his fingers slip from me and he moves his hand around to grip my ass.

“Okay.” I break our kiss and roll my hips, grinding down against him. “I’ll come.”

He arches a brow at my innuendo, lips pulling up. “Good. He and I both wouldn’t have been too happy if you hadn’t.”

“Well, then.” I cock my brow and roll my hips again. “Who am I to disappoint?” I slide my body down his and hook my thumbs inside the top of his shorts, pulling them down to free his impressive cock and dragging my teeth over his hip bone along the way. I take him in my grip and pump him once before throwing him a wink. “But first...” I dart my tongue out and lick the bead leaking from the head of his cock. “Priorities.”

His harsh groan fills my ears as I wrap my lips around him, his fingers threading through the back of my hair. No encouragement is needed though, I sink my mouth down eagerly and swallow him whole.

“Tell me more about your job.” I play with Coop’s hand in mine, looking down at his scarred knuckles and running my thumb over them in thought as we approach the outskirts of San Jose.

“What do you want to know?”

“You said before that you locate people or things for clients. But what does that really mean? How does that work?”

“A lot of it is research, on people, their patterns. Going through their lives and figuring out what makes them tick. People are puzzles, you figure out how they work and you can predict what they’re going to do most of the time.”

I hear the disconcerting echo of my own thoughts in his words and my stomach flips as I raise my eyes to his face. “And the other?”

“Typically...” He hesitates, flicking his eyes to mine. “After the research period... I would insert myself into their lives somehow and try to recover whatever it is I was hired for.”

I quickly work through his words in my head. “So you go undercover?”

“Yes.”

Dropping my eyes to our linked hands, I run my thumb over his scarred knuckles again and a sense of foreboding fills me. “Does it ever get violent?”

I feel his eyes on me and look up to meet his gaze. “Sometimes... yes.”

Of course it gets violent, you idiot. He's a fucking mercenary, El. What did you expect? Are you seriously just working this out now?

Apparently, I'd been having too much sun and sex and not enough thought.

I bite my lip against my next question, stomach flipping at the thought but am unable to let it go.

“Have you—” I clear my throat, forcing my voice to be strong and clear. “Have you ever killed somebody?”

His jaw tightens and he keeps his eyes on the road, making a turn off the highway before flicking his eyes to mine. “Do you really want to know the answer to that?”

I pull my hand from his as my guard shoots straight up. “Yes, Cooper. I do.” I answer him in a hard voice.

A beat passes before he answers with quiet reluctance. “Once.”

I swallow down the sick feeling working its way up my throat. “What—what were the circumstances?”

“Are you asking if it was self-defense?”

“Yes.”

“Would that make a difference to you?”

“Of course it would.” I scoff in disbelief.

His eyes find mine, searching for something in them. “Why?”

“Because... because...” Because I don’t think I could bear the thought of a world without you in it. “It just would. Obviously it would.”

Fuck, this was twisted.

I break his gaze when he doesn’t reply and look out the windshield, war waging within my mind. He was a killer. Even if it was self-defense, he had taken a life. The very thought of it did nothing but bring my father to mind and all thinking about him ever did was make me want to vomit. And yet... if that person had been trying to hurt him... well, what the fuck was I supposed to do with that? The thought of something happening to him was unimaginable to me and I was left with no answers. Mind whirling in a never-ending stream of contradictions.

Coop pulls into the parking lot of the restaurant and parks the car, letting a moment pass before he answers me. “It was self-defense.”

The car is filled with nothing but heavy silence and neither of us makes a move to get out. Eventually he reaches over and takes my hand again and despite everything between us, I let him. It terrifies me, this indefinable something, this pull between us. That I could accept the fact he had taken a life simply because of the fact it was *his* life that had been at stake.

“Della?”

I keep my eyes on the windshield, staring out without really seeing, my mind snagging on how odd it is to hear the fake name I gave him come from his lips. It’s always Princess or Brat, never Della. As if he won’t speak the lie between us.

“Look at me, please.” Coop’s voice is a soft command and I turn my head at the sound of it, unable to deny him. My eyes take in his concerned expression but I keep my face carefully blank.

“This is not something I enjoy talking about.” He heaves a breath and swallows visibly. “But he was a bad guy. I’m not

saying that to make you accept it but... he was a bad guy and he was trying to hurt people I care about. So I won't lie to you either and say I'd make a different choice if I were put in the same situation today. I will always do whatever it takes to protect the people I care about. That's just who I am."

I try to quell the tumultuous wave of emotions inside me and think through his words rationally. Contrasting the differences between Coop's action and my father's. What my father did was... well, evil, either that or pure insanity. There was no other way to look at it. But Coop... what he did was born out of necessity to keep those around him safe, to stop the evil thing. To stop someone who, for all intents and purposes, was probably somewhat like my father.

"Princess?" His voice snaps me out of my trance. "You know I would never hurt you, right?"

I pull my bottom lip into my mouth, biting down on it hard in silent response. The trust, which is so easy for most people to give the hardest thing he could ask of me.

At the look on my face, he untangles his hand from mine and unhooks my seat belt, reaching over to lift me out of my seat with his considerable strength and settling me onto his lap. Reaching up, he cups my face, invading my space, his intense night-forest eyes finding mine.

"Listen to me." He runs his thumbs along my cheekbones in a soothing gesture, voice quietly serious. "I would never hurt you. The thought of it is just... unimaginable, sickening to me." His comforting sandalwood scent wraps around me and his lips ghost up. "Now I can guarantee you will want to hurt me at some point. I will fuck up, it's inevitable and I know I already have even. But it has never and will never be my intention to hurt you. Okay?"

I dip my head once in acceptance of his words, because I know he believes them, but something about his wording has my intuition spiking and he must see it on my face.

"Have you ever, for one second, felt unsafe with me?"

"No," I answer without hesitation. "Never."

“Okay, then.”

His night-forest eyes stare intently into mine, that thread of darkness that I’ve always seen in them up front and center. The only difference now is I know just how deep that thread goes... but maybe, maybe not all darkness is evil. Maybe sometimes it’s what scares the greater monsters away.

“Okay.” I echo on a deep exhale.

He dips his forehead to mine. “You need a minute?”

“No.” I shake my head against his, clearing the lingering nerves and pulling my armor firmly back into place. “No. I’m good.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” I press a quick kiss to his lips. “I’m good. Just took me by surprise, is all. Should’ve thought it through before now.”

His lips pull up on one side, eyes filling with humor. “We had other priorities.”

A soft laugh leaves me at his words and I cock a brow, feeling more like myself again. “True.” I wrap my arms around his neck. “Why don’t we get this over with so we can get back to those?”

“Sounds good to me.”

He lifts his hips against me and I laugh again, reaching to open the door and stepping down as he lands a playful swat on my ass. My short sundress brushes against my thighs as we start to walk and Coop wastes no time in hooking an arm around my waist, pulling me to him. The restaurant is colorful and the scents of Spanish cuisine wash over me when we walk in. I’d wager it’s usually a pretty popular place because of the lively atmosphere but in the late afternoon it sits mostly empty.

Coop steers me toward the back and I spot who we are meeting without needing any direction. He stares out from a booth in the back, dressed head to toe in black, eyes flicking back and forth between us with interest. His short platinum hair is a mirror of my own and surprise filters through me at

seeing the unusual color on someone else. I'd guess he's in his late twenties and when we come up to the table he stands, both him and Coop breaking into wide smiles as they grab each other's arm and go through the motions of that universal male greeting.

Coop squeezes his shoulder as they pull away. "How the fuck have you been, man?"

"Good." A faint hint of an Eastern European accent colors his smooth voice. "You know I always love doing a job back home but I'm glad it's done."

He turns his head to me and the beauty of him hits me in full force as his brown eyes rake my face.

"And I guess I don't have to ask how you've been doing."

Coop's hand returns to my waist as I hold out my hand. "Della. And you're Alec, right?"

He takes my hand and lifts it to his lips with a devious grin, eyes intense as he presses a soft kiss. "The one and only."

I feel a tug on my waist and Coop shoves his friend lightly on the shoulder, making him drop my hand.

"Cut the shit, Romeo."

Alec's eyes linger on me for a second longer before he snaps his gaze away, an easy smile on his face. "You know me, Cooper. Never one to let an opportunity pass me by." He waves his hand toward the booth. "Come on, let's sit. Eat. Drink. It's been too long."

I scoot into the booth first and Coop follows me in, the waitress coming over quickly to take our drink order. Once that's done the guys start talking about work in what amounts to Chinese to me, which I'm sure is on purpose but doesn't bother me in the least. It gives me more time to assess the man sitting across from me.

What the hell are they doing at Bainbridge? Growing them in a laboratory and splicing their DNA to perfection?

Discreetly eyeing him as best I can, I notice a thread of similarity running through our features. The only difference

is... he's *too pretty*. Painfully beautiful in a way that's hard to look at.

And he rubs me all sorts of the wrong way.

The waitress arrives with our drinks and I take a sip of my water, trying to figure out why. He sits relaxed, leaning back and totally at ease. A lot like the way Coop did that first night I met him at the bar actually. He smiles and laughs and it seems like him and Coop are as thick as thieves. Hell, they probably have pretended to be thieves together for all I know. But there's something...

It's his eyes, I realize when they flick to me again. While Coop's eyes may hold that thread of darkness, his are alive, I can feel his spirit when I look into them. But Alec's, nothing but cold indifference radiates out of them when he looks at me. And still there's something more, something I can't put my finger on that nags at me.

"I'm sorry if this is rude," I interject when there's a lull in the conversation as the food arrives. "But where are you from?"

"New York," he answers with that easy smile, digging his fork into the food on his plate. "Ever been?"

"Once. I was too young to remember though."

"Shame."

"You have an accent though."

"I do." He nods as if I just stated the sky is blue and nothing needs to be said beyond that.

I narrow my eyes and have to remind myself that this is Coop's friend so I should probably be polite in my push for information to some degree. "And, uh, where does your accent come from?"

There you go, polite.

He leans back in his seat, narrowing his eyes in return and tilting his head at me.

"Why so curious?"

“Why so secretive?”

“I don’t make it a habit of sharing personal information.”

“I’m not asking for your social security number.”

“Yet.”

I open my mouth to retort and Coop quickly waves a hand between us. “Alright. Alright, back to your corners.” He shoots his friend a look of reprimand. “Don’t be an ass, man.”

I lean back and smirk smugly, causing Alec’s eyes to narrow on me further until they’re nothing but slits. Coop turns his head to look at what I’m doing and I wipe the expression from my face but he still squeezes my knee in reprimand. “You too, Brat.”

Alec and I continue to sit in narrow-eyed silence for a moment before he speaks. “I spent the first seven years of my life in an orphanage in Slovakia before a couple from New York adopted me.”

“Oh.” I nod, trying to be nice as a piece of his puzzle slots into place. “My mother was from the Czech Republic. I was just curious because, well...” I wave my hand between us in explanation.

“Yes.” His narrowed eyes pick apart my face. “We do share some similarities. Not all that uncommon for the people from that region.” He turns his head to Coop, effectively shutting down our conversation. “Do you have the drive?”

“Yeah.” Coop pulls a small external hard drive from his pocket and slides it across the table. “Everything you need is ___”

He’s cut off by his phone ringing in his pocket and moves to pull it out, brow drawing down as he looks at the screen. “It’s my sister, I’ve been trying—”

“Take it,” I tell him, tagging on a playful wink. “We’ll be fine.”

His eyes move between Alec and me in warning as he exits the booth. “Play nice. Both of you.”

“Of course, brother,” Alec answers with a smile, pocketing the drive and spreading his arms wide on the booth behind him.

As soon as Coop walks away the good-natured friend act is gone with my playfulness right alongside it. Alec’s eyes turn cold as we look across the table at each other and I lift my head in challenge. His dead gaze slides along my skin, taking in everything that’s visible above the booth and making me feel all sorts of uncomfortable before he lifts his eyes back up to meet my narrowed ones.

He smiles viscously. “I do get it.”

“Get what?”

“The allure. The thrall he’s in with you.” He leans forward and rests his elbows on the table, eyeing my face in consideration. “You’re a different kind, aren’t you? Dangerous and seductive. Eyes filled with secrets and a face to launch a thousand ships. Beauty to rival that of the gods.”

I cock my head at him. “And that’s a bad thing?”

“Not always, no.”

“Then what?”

“And yet... when I asked, he didn’t tell me your last name.” He pauses, searching for a reaction and I make sure to hold myself perfectly still. “Which tells me one of two things. Either you’re of a bad sort that he’s fallen in with or he doesn’t know because you’re playing games.”

“What exactly...” I lean forward and bring my arms up to rest on the table, not backing down. “Have I done to make you dislike me?”

“Nothing.” The laugh that leaves him drips with condescension. “But I’ve worked with Coop since he started with Bainbridge and he’s never turned down a job. Hell, I’ve never even seen him go on a date.” He dips his head, nodding down at my neck. “And that pretty mark he put on your skin to scream his possession at me and make clear who you belong to tells me that my boy isn’t messing around.” He pauses, tilting

his head at me. “So tell me, Helen of Troy, what are you doing with him?”

My silence is deafening, sounding as loud as a scream between us and I hate it. I hate it so much because I don’t know. I don’t have an answer for him. I had rules, I had a plan, and somewhere along the way I lost all of my carefully laid boundaries.

One kiss. One laugh. One ice cube. One poem. One chip at a time.

He nods once at my answering silence and leans back in the booth. “For all her allure, do you know what Helen of Troy left in her wake?”

The sound of my own angry breathing sounds in my ears as he continues.

“Death and destruction.” He smirks coldly. “Try not to do the same.”

My nails dig deep into my palms on the table. “Screw you.”

My anger must be written all over my face because the next thing I know Coop is there, sliding into the booth next to me and sending his friend a dangerous look.

“What did you say to her?” His voice is low and lethal.

Alec turns his head and eyes Coop calmly, opening his mouth to answer.

But I won’t let him win. I won’t give him the satisfaction of seeing how he got to me.

“Nothing,” I interject, forcing nonchalance into my tone and body. “He was just telling me about some local history.”

I see the flash of admiration in Alec’s eyes from across the table before turning my head to meet Coop’s disbelieving gaze. Reaching up, I run my fingers soothingly through the back of his dark-chocolate hair and force my signature bratty smirk to my lips.

“It was nothing.”

Chapter 18

Present Day

“Come on, El!” Jace hollers, knocking on the door like he’s been doing for the past ten minutes. “I know you’re in there.”

Leaning up against the kitchen counter, I take a sip of the well-earned cabernet I picked up on my way home from the beach today and watch the clock tick by. Waiting for him to leave. It’s ten fucking p.m. already, it’s not like he can stand out there all night. You’d think he would’ve gotten the hint from the multitude of calls I already ignored from him today. He had pissed me off and I wasn’t sure what to do with him now. My heart...

Nope. No. My heart could go jump off a cliff for all the good it had done me already.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“That sexy ass Range Rover of yours is sitting out here in the driveway, Delacroix. You’re not fooling anybody.”

Sip.

He can fucking wait to explain to me until morning. I’m enjoying my wine and respite from this crazy-ass town tonight.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“I’ll do that thing with my mouth you love.”

Sip.

“Shit. Doreen is out on her porch staring at me. Pretty sure she heard that by the look on her face.”

Eye roll and sip.

I’m already well into glass number three and the idiot definitely doesn’t want me to answer the door right now after his asinine behavior today.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“Do you want me to hold up a boom box over my head and sing?”

Sip.

“Because I will. Just say the word.”

Idiot. I’m wearing my underwear and baggy T-shirt. I’m not answering any door.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“Come on, Blondie. I have your camera out here and I’m not giving it back until you at least let me explain.”

That little shit.

I set my wineglass down on the counter before stomping my way to the front door and turning the lock. Throwing it open, I see the hopeful expression dawn on his face and narrow my eyes in return before promptly snatching the camera from his hands and slamming the door in his face. I flick the lock and walk back into the kitchen, setting the camera down onto the counter gently and picking my wine back up.

Idiot.

Sip.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“Please, El.”

The plaintive note in his voice hits me deep inside, softening my resolve and making me waver. I set my wineglass down with a sigh.

Fucking Jace Dawson.

I hop up and down to try and shake the urge to go to the door, internally berating myself for being such an idiot in getting mixed up with another guy for anything beyond a one-night stand. But after a few more hops, I lose the battle and decide to blame it on my curiosity as to what he has to say for himself. I mean, I do need to have all the facts in order to properly guard myself.

There we go. Nice and neat, tied with a bow on top and everything.

And when exactly do you plan to stop lying to yourself, El?

Yeah, yeah.

I roll my eyes at my own internal commentary and turn to walk to the door, coming to a screeching halt when Jace rounds the corner and stops at the sight of me. He darts his eyes from side to side, the guilty look on his face making him look like he just got caught sticking his hand inside the cookie jar.

“Wha-You—” I sputter before putting two and two together. “Did you just pick my fucking lock?”

He tilts his head and squints his eyes at me like he’s trying to guess at the right answer to a math problem. “No?”

“Jace!” I march forward and smack his arm. “You can’t pick my lock if I won’t talk to you!”

“I’m sorry!” He holds up his hands to ward me off. “I’m sorry, okay?! I heard some kind of banging and might have gotten a little carried away.”

Oh. My hopping.

“Regardless!” I give his arm another smack for good measure before walking back to the counter and picking up my wine.

“I’m sorry, okay?” He sighs and drops his hands, eyes shining with concern. “I’m a little edgy right now and I was worried.”

I narrow my eyes and take a sip of my wine, letting him sweat it out for a minute and see the way his eyes drop to my bare legs. “Eyes up here, Dawson.” I snap my fingers by my head. “So since you’re here, are you going to explain?”

That hopeful expression fills his face again and he takes a step toward me before I narrow my eyes further in warning and tilt my head up, letting him know he’s not getting back into my good graces that easily.

Jace comes to a halt midstep and sighs again, bringing a hand to the back of his head and looking down to the floor. “I didn’t want you to ever be involved in this. My past.” He lifts his eyes back to mine, expression pained. “I thought it was done... that I had closed that chapter and left it behind me.”

I cock a brow at him. “I’m pretty sure the fact I’m standing here is proof that the past is never really gone for good.” Setting my wine down, I cross my arms. “Plus, I think it’s pretty clear from today that I’m already involved no matter whether you or I want me to be.”

“Yeah.” He nods and swallows visibly. “Yeah. I realize that now and I’m sorry for the way I acted today. That wasn’t fair to you, and I should have been more considerate of your feelings. I just... freaked out.”

I fight against the twitch of my lips and lean back against the counter. “How much of that did Andrea tell you to say?”

He cringes. “A good bit.”

“Listen,” I sigh, bracing my hands on the counter behind me. “If anyone understands what it means for the past to hold power over you. It’s me.”

“That’s not how I live though. Not what I believe.”

“That may be.” I give him a nod. “But it still shaped you into who you are today. Even if you don’t let it hold power over you because you’re some kind of zen master the rest of us can only aspire to be.” A small grin pulls at his face and I let my lips twitch up just a bit in return before continuing. “But you still have to be real with me. You can’t just shove it to the side. Especially when it’s coming full circle and now concerns me. I can’t...” I dart my eyes away, taking a deep breath to center myself. “I can’t trust you, can’t let you in without understanding all of your pieces. I need an explanation, Jace.”

“That’s fair.” He nods. “More than fair.” He pauses, eyeing me for a minute in consideration. “But does this explanation thing go both ways? Because I’m not the only one holding out here, Blondie.”

I look into his uncharacteristically serious eyes and know I'm going to have to give a little bit of my terrible tale. He's right. It's only fair since that's what I'm asking for from him. But I'm still a little injured, a little broken where my story is concerned and I selfishly need to know his pain first, need to know it compares.

“Eventually.”

A small grin flashes across his face before he dips his head in acceptance. “Alright, Delacroix. We'll play it your way.”

His words spark the memory of another time, another place, another man agreeing to play it my way and I shove the sense of *déjà vu* away. Reminding myself that this situation is entirely different. I'm entirely different this time.

He lifts his brows and nods toward the living room. “Want to sit for this?”

“Sure.” I grab my wineglass, taking one last sip before setting it down and walking to the living room to take a seat on the couch.

Jace sits down a little bit away from me as I bring my knees up, settling in and getting comfortable. He's just far enough away that we're not touching and as I see his eyes shoot nervously to the empty space I know the move is intentional. He's respecting my boundaries and giving me the space to decide his fate once I hear his explanation.

“So,” he begins, reaching down to tug on the lip of his boot before leaning back into the couch and bringing his eyes to mine. “I told you I got mixed up with a bad crowd after my mom died, right?” He waits for me to nod in confirmation before continuing. “Well, Trey Morrison was one of the people in that crowd, along with his older twin brothers Kyle and Kurt Morrison. The Morrisons were always bad news, everyone in town knew it, but they quickly pulled me and my cousin in deep and in the end... we were the ones at the core of it.”

My brows drop in confusion. “Tiff?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “No, her older brother.”

“I didn’t know she had an older brother.”

“Yeah... it’s a bit of a touchy subject. He—” Jace shakes his head as if reordering his thoughts. “That’s a story for another time though. Back to this story,” He sighs and looks toward the fireplace, lost in memory. “We ended up getting in pretty deep with some bad people. And when I say bad, I mean they’ll bury your body somewhere no one will ever find it kind of bad. My dad was beside himself, kept trying to reel me back in but I was so far down the rabbit hole by that point there was no getting through to me. I couldn’t or wouldn’t see a way out. Just knew what I was doing was keeping me from feeling everything surrounding my mom’s death and that was all I cared about.” He pauses, running his hand behind his head before bringing his eyes back to mine. “The Morrisons had a boat and we started doing smuggling runs with them. One day... we picked up this shipment with them and were supposed to deliver it to the people we were mixed up with down in Florida. And the rule was, we were never supposed to look at what we were delivering, right?”

“Right,” I answer, unable to help the sarcasm in my voice despite the levity of the topic. “I would assume that’s rule number one of being a smuggler.”

“Right. Should’ve been idiot proof.” Jace huffs a soft laugh. “I’ve never been great at rules though... so that day I looked.” He pauses, his eyes pinching up as they dart to the fireplace. “It was the drugs I figured would be there, which held little interest for me considering it wasn’t pot. But there was also cash... thousands upon thousands of dollars of cash and that well... for a kid who was dying to escape Landing Point at that time, that was too tempting to pass up.”

“You took the money?” I guess softly.

“Yeah.” He brings his eyes back to mine and I see the guilt and shame filling them. “Yeah. I took some of the money.” He clears his throat. “Barely a drop in the bucket considering how much was there. I figured they wouldn’t even notice because of that... I was a fucking idiot. But when we dropped the shipment off, they noticed right away and I froze. Couldn’t say a word. Knew if I copped to it that I’d never see the light of

day again. Things went bad quickly then.” Dropping his elbows to his knees, he looks down and heaves a breath. “Shots were fired from both sides and the next thing I knew, Trey Morrison was dead at my feet. The cops showed up and arrested us all after that.”

“Wait.” I interrupt in shock. “I thought I saw Trey Morrison today?”

“It was a message.” Jace answers softly, bringing his eyes up to mine. “I’m guessing from his brother Kyle based on your description. They blame me, and rightfully so, but they’ve been locked up since it happened. They had priors that caused the judge to not be as lenient with them, plus, even though I may not like her, my aunt had some pull in getting me the deal I did. This is the first I’ve heard from them since... I guess they finally got out and are looking to get even. It was a warning using his name the way they did.”

“Against me?” I ask, stomach somersaulting with fear at how close these guys already got to me today.

“I’m guessing so.” His jaw clenches, shoulders tightening up with tension and I see the wheels turning in his mind as he looks away. “Tiff is the sheriff’s daughter so they won’t risk going near her, Zane and my dad might put up too much of a fight to be worth it, and Andrea, while I care for her, is too far removed. But you...” He scoffs a humorless laugh. “All they would need to see was us together one time and they would know how to get to me. You’re the perfect target.”

Jace nods his head and brings his fearful eyes back to mine. “By using Trey’s name and saying he was sending his regards through you... it was a threat. One against you to get to me. And it worked. I fucking lost it after you left today.”

I drop back against the arm of the couch, leaning my head back and staring at the ceiling. “Well, fuck.”

Inappropriate reaction thy name is El.

Silence falls for a moment as I process everything Jace just told me before I hear him take a deep breath and start to speak haltingly.

“You-you should leave town. I fucking hate it but I went round and round today and... I don’t know how else to keep you safe.”

He’s right. I should leave. If I had any good sense of self-preservation I’d be packing my bag right now and halfway out the door. But there’s still so much... unfinished here. I guess I could read my mother’s diaries from LA as easily as I’m reading them here, even though they’ve been boringly bland since she met my father. I could have the sheriff send me the file once she gets it. But it doesn’t sit right with me. I came here looking for answers and to just up and leave now before I found them... everything would just feel so unfinished, including whatever this is happening between me and Jace.

But are you really willing to put yourself at risk for that, El? A smart girl would leave.

Painful memories strike at the thought and I quickly squash the idea. I won’t let myself become a quitter just because of a little fear. I won’t let that emotion rule my life anymore. Plus, Jace has brought a bit of that reckless girl I used to be back to life and she was never one to turn down a fight.

“I’m not leaving.” I sit up with the announcement, looking him in the eye and letting him see my determination. “I still have too much to do here. To figure out. So fuck them and their threat.”

And apparently I have literally zero sense of self-preservation when it comes to the guys I fall for... am falling for? Fuck.

Jace searches my eyes for a moment and I see the conflict in his own gaze. The battle taking place within him. He wants me to stay but not if it means I’ll be at risk. Finally, he gives me a slow nod. “Then I’m going to need you to stay close to me... or Zane if I’m not around, just while I figure this out. Okay?” His eyes dart down suddenly and he hurries to add. “Only if you want to, if you still want to be around me that is... if not, I don’t know. I’ll figure something else out.”

My lips twitch up at the sight of his nervous vulnerability and I reach a hand out, placing it on his arm and closing the

distance between us.

“Jace,” I call his name softly, drawing his eyes back to mine. “It’s clear to me you’re not the same guy today that you were back then. Outside of your lock-picking proclivity, that is.” I throw him a smirk and shrug. “I get it. We all deal with our pain differently. That doesn’t make what you did right... but you made it to the other side.”

“Thank fuck.” He heaves a deep breath and collapses back against the couch.

My brows pull down as a loose end from his story snags in my mind. “Hey, whatever happened to your cousin?”

“Oh.” His lips twitch as he slides his eyes back to mine. “Last I saw him, he was headed back home to the love of his life so I’d say he fared alright.”

“Oh.” I nod. “Good for him.”

A hint of playfulness winds back into his firework eyes as he lifts his brows at me in question. “So are we good, Blondie?”

I cock a brow at him. “Are there any other big secrets you’re keeping from me?”

“None.” He flashes those dimples, lifting a finger to his heart and making a cross. “Promise.”

Chapter 19

One Year Ago

It's been four days since we met Alec, or as I like to refer to him in my head, the fucker, and his words have plagued me since. The constant buzz of them pressing against me like ants running under my skin. I lie in bed, staring out at Coop's bookshelves as I've been doing for the past hour since my eyes first opened. The sky outside is dark and downcast, promising a storm and doing nothing to improve my mood.

My eyes scan the titles lining the shelves, picking them out at random. His collection is littered with autobiographies, classics, bestsellers, poetry, and everything in between. Yet if you search long enough, in the midst of all those titles is a sprinkling of the great romances. *Romeo and Juliet*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Anna Karenina*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Antony and Cleopatra*. All the great and tragic tales of love.

Fucking doomed, all of them, and Coop would throw our lot in with theirs if he had it his way. I know he would, deep down in my gut, I know it. Doomed or not.

He's a lover of the tragedies and I'm the greatest tragedy of all. The girl who thought she was too mighty to fall. I knew he would be dangerous to me, and I still dove headlong into it, into him, thinking I could control all the variables. Arrogantly assuming that I was stronger than the pull. I was as much of a fool as all the characters in those fucking tragedies. I should have left Costa Rica the day I met him and never looked back.

I feel him lift the arm hooked around my waist and start to trace those damned words against my back. "What's going through that head of yours this morning?"

"Nothing," I murmur.

"Really? Because you've been stiff as a board since you woke up."

"Just leave it alone, Coop."

He pauses, finger halting midword on my back. “What did Alec say to you?”

“I told you. Nothing.” I flip the covers back, popping out of bed and walking to the kitchen, feeling as if I’m going to combust on the spot if I don’t get some space.

“Bullshit.”

I hear him get out of bed and walk up behind me as I pour myself a glass of water.

“You’ve been off since then. Tell me what he said.”

“It’s not important.”

“Obviously it is if you’re—” He goes to put his hand on my shoulder and I jerk away, spinning around to face him.

“Can’t you just fucking leave it alone for once?”

My voice whips out at him, chest heaving as if I just ran a mile and he takes a step back in surprise. His eyes narrow on my face, searching every corner of it for answers and his shoulders tighten up in preparation for the fight we can both feel coming. I cross my arms and lean back against the kitchen counter, not giving an inch as we wage our silent war.

“I’m cashing in my questions.” His voice is deep and filled with frustration when he speaks and takes a step toward me. “All of them.” I tilt my head back to keep his eyes in my sight, seeing the way the little flecks of night in them are sparking with anger. “Tell me what made you this way.”

I snort a laugh of derision. “It doesn’t work that way.”

“I don’t care.” He braces his arms on the counter, boxing me in. “Tell me.”

His words of demand settle like a weight on my chest and I just can’t. I can’t take any more pressure. “Take a step back,” I tell him with quiet anger.

“No.”

I see the determination in his eyes and feel the panic inside start to take over, bucking against his demand for more of me.

Deadening my eyes, I tilt my head closer to his, voice coming out soft and vicious.

“I didn’t come here to play house and talk about our feelings, Cooper. If you wanted someone to get all deep with then you should’ve picked a different girl.” I drop my eyes purposefully to his black boxer briefs and cock a brow. “There’s only one kind of deep I’m interested in and it involves your cock inside of me.” I throw the words out to inflict damage, to push him away, trying desperately to hold on to some part of myself still. To keep something from his grasp.

I see my words hit their mark as the hurt flashes through his eyes before it quickly turns hot and he drops his hands, fists clenching at his sides.

“What the fuck did he say to you?”

“God!” I push past him. “Would you just let it go? This has nothing to do with Alec.”

I walk toward the folding glass doors, practically shaking with the need to escape this space.

“You’re right,” he calls out after me. “This has to do with you and the fucking fear you let control you.”

I spin around at his words. “Nothing controls me,” I spit out at him, stomach twisting. “As much as you wish you could.”

“Oh, right,” he scoffs darkly. “Because this is about me and not the girl who fakes being fearless when really she’s the most scared of us all.”

I shake my head, hot with anger at his accusation. “You don’t know shit about me, Coop. Don’t act like you do.”

“Because you won’t let me!” he shouts, brows tight with tension, voice quieting as he continues. “If there’s something about you I don’t know it’s because you won’t let me.”

“Don’t make this into something it’s not,” I grind out. “You knew what you were signing up for. A fun time in Costa Rica, nothing more. You don’t even know my fucking name.”

His nostrils flare with anger and his eyes narrow on me dangerously. “Don’t you ever get tired of being such a fucking coward?”

“Don’t you ever get tired of fighting for someone who doesn’t care? It’s fucking pathetic.” I wield the words like a knife, twisting them deep. Feeling the blade drive into us both. I see his eyes shutter and dread settles into a pit in my stomach.

“You want space, Princess?” He takes a step forward and points a finger to the door. “There’s the damn door.”

His words hit my chest like a sledgehammer and I feel something deep inside of me crack. Anger courses through my veins and pain radiates from my chest with every breath I take as I turn to find my shoes. The pricking starting up behind my eyes making it damn near impossible to see and locate what I need to. My breath is already hitching from the effort of keeping my cries inside when I see my shoes by the bathroom door and make a move to grab them.

Coop’s quiet, humorless laugh sounds behind me. “And of course, she’s leaving. Guess I should’ve taken note the first time. That’s what you do best, right?”

I halt at his words, feeling whatever shreds of control I still hold on to splintering under them. Turning to face him, I hold my arms at my sides and let him see all the pain brimming inside of me.

“You want to know why I am the way I am, Coop?” I whisper, voice growing stronger as I speak. “You really want a Ph-fucking-D in me?” I laugh darkly, dangerously close to the edge. “Be sure because it’s not something you can come back from.”

He keeps perfectly still, not speaking, as if he can sense how I’m toeing the line of hysteria and I see the anger fade in his eyes as he dips his head once.

I march over to his bookshelves, grabbing one tragic love story after another as I speak and tossing them at his feet. “Because of love.” Romeo and Juliet. “Because love can turn

into a deadly thing.” Heathcliff and Catherine. “Just ask my father.” Anna and Alexei. “Oh wait, you can’t.” Jay and Daisy. “Because he’s dead.” Antony and Cleopatra.

I look up at him as the last novel lands with a resounding thud, eyes filled with unshed tears, my whole body brimming with pain. “Shot himself right after he shot my mother. There’s love for you.” I scoff and swallow a sob. “Fucking magical, right?”

Heavy silence reigns between us at the end of my tirade, laced and tainted with all the poison spewed between us. Coop’s eyes reflect my own pain back at me with a blinding empathy, his expression crumbled. He goes to take a step toward me and I hold up my hand, stopping him.

“Don’t.” I swallow another sob and look down. “I think this has made it abundantly clear that things have gone way further than they were ever supposed to. I’m going to take a walk and then...” I force my eyes back up to his, seeing the undiluted terror in them at my words. “Then when I get back, I’ll pack my—”

“Don’t do this,” he interjects softly, voice rough with feeling. “I lov—”

“Don’t,” I interrupt quickly, knowing the words he was about to say and not being able to bear hearing them. “Don’t you dare say those words.”

They would obliterate the last wall standing between him and the last part of me.

I wave a hand at the books at his feet. “This, more... was never our story.” My lips pull up for a second in a sad smile. “I told you from the start... I don’t have it to give.”

With that I quickly walk and grab my shoes from where they lie, fleeing this pain-drenched space. I don’t allow myself to look at him as I head for the door, knowing that if I do, I run the risk of breaking completely. The door shuts behind me with a resounding click and I feel that damn pain redoubling from the center of my chest as I slide my shoes on and march out onto the dirt road.

I manage to make it out of sight from the house before the first few tears slide down my cheeks. It's such a foreign feeling. I haven't cried in longer than I can remember. So carefully wrapped in the armored cocoon of my own making. So sure life had already taught me to be smarter than all the others.

I've had enough therapy to rationally understand that love doesn't equal death. But it's an undeniable fact that it makes you vulnerable. Opens you up to a person in a singular way, your heart laid bare before them, theirs to cherish or abuse. And this is the result of such vulnerability. Pain. Even if it's not intentional, even if we try our hardest not to. And maybe Coop's right, maybe I am a coward for not wanting to feel that pain.

But fuck him for making me face it. Fuck him for forcing me to unearth all the tragic pieces of me. For taking more of me than I was willing to give. Hollowing me out with his words, and demand, and fucking love until there wasn't one part of me he hadn't touched in some way. Threading himself into each piece of me until I was desperately holding on to the last sliver that was still only mine.

Fuck him for making me love him too. And fuck me for not fighting it harder.

I brought this on myself, all of it. Even all the poison spewed today.

And I hate myself for it.

The sky opens up with a crack when I make it to what I'd guess is the mile mark, the rain mixing with the tears streaming down my face until there's no discerning between the two. And I welcome it. The cold water slicks down my body and quickly soaks my clothes, leaving me shivering. I stop to welcome the numbness it brings. Wanting it to wash away these past weeks and leave me with nothing. No feelings. No love. No pain. Only blissful oblivion.

But as the tremors start to rack my whole body, the numbness still doesn't reach the place I need it to. The ache in my heart is a physical thing trying to claw its way out to

escape its misery. A full-body sob breaks free and I fold over, resting my hands on my knees, breathing slow and deep, trying to keep the cries at bay as I watch my shoes slowly sink into the mud the road has turned into. The flood of headlights washes over me two seconds before I hear Coop's Bronco tear up the road and I turn my head as he pulls to a stop next to me.

He throws open the door, eyes spitting dark fire and pissed-off energy pouring off of him, wearing nothing but a pair of basketball shorts that look like he threw them on in haste. I stand as he charges toward me, trying to muster some sort of attitude to cover up how broken I really am.

He comes right up to me, standing so close I can feel the heat pouring off his body as he dips his head and invades my space. His jaw clenches, teeth grinding, and I force myself to meet his gaze, soaking up all the pain there, adding it to my own. He stares into my eyes for the longest time and the pull that is singularly ours flows between us as if it were its own entity, trying to mend the damage we've inflicted.

He unclenches his jaw to speak. "You don't get to leave."

I scoff quietly. "You were the one who showed me the door."

The anger fades from his eyes. "I was just trying to—" he cuts himself off and heaves a weary sigh, shoulders dropping. "Just get in the car. Let's talk about this at home, please."

Home.

He came after me and now...

Home, as in, ours.

"No." I shake my head stubbornly. Knowing that if I get into that car with him right now, that will be it. There will be no going back for me. He'll have all of me, every little jagged piece.

His eyes narrow at my refusal and run the length of my body. "You're fucking shaking. Get in the car."

"No."

I take a step back from him in retreat and his hand shoots out, wrapping around my arm in a vicelike grip and stepping into me. Putting us skin to skin with each other.

He drops his head down close enough that I can see the darkness slowly cloud over his eyes. “Get in the fucking car.”

“No!” I shout, yanking at the arm he holds, my breath heaving in panic.

“I love you, now get in the fucking car!” he roars, reaching up to snag my other arm, but there’s no need. The fight leaves me at his words and I shake my head against them, terror blanketing me.

“You can’t.” My voice cracks as I fight for breath.

“Too. Bad.”

Something inside of me snaps and I push at his chest. “You can’t!”

He pulls me right back against him, voice coming out low. “Too fucking bad. I love you.” Dropping his head, he brings our faces a hairbreadth apart. “And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

A sob racks my body and I push at his shoulders again and again, each hit harder than the last. “You can’t. You can’t. You can’t!”

Before I even know what’s happening he hooks his foot behind my leg and my body crumples as he takes me to the ground. His arms come around me protectively, one hand cupping the back of my head, softening the blow as we hit and he uses the weight of his body to cage me in. He holds himself above me, keeping his massive body from crushing me as we sink into the mud. I look up into his determined night-forest eyes and feel fresh tears leaking from my own.

“It’s against the rules,” I whisper brokenly, trying desperately to clutch at anything to keep him at bay. “You can’t,” I plead.

“Fuck your rules.” He drops his forehead to mine. “You don’t get to run because you’re scared. You don’t get to push

me away. You think you're the only one who's scared here, Princess?" He lifts his head at the question, letting me see the torment playing out on his face. "You turned my whole damn life on its head. You fucking terrify me. My days, my decisions, my whole damn world begins and ends with you now and it's so far out of my fucking control that I couldn't change it even if I wanted to. So you don't get to run because you're scared and damaged." A breath stutters out of him, his eyes pouring his feelings right out onto me. "We're all damaged. Every single person who walks this earth is broken in some way. And maybe you won't tell me your name..."

He brings his hand up to cup my face and runs his thumb across my cheek with the utmost care, as if I'm infinitely precious to him. "But I know that you hog all the covers when you first fall asleep and then kick them off by morning because you have nightmares you'll never acknowledge or admit to." He dips his head and drops a featherlight kiss to my cheek, whispering. "I know that you can be reckless because you're so fucking scared that the moment you don't feel alive is the one you're going to die in." He slides his face along mine, bringing us nose to nose. "I know that you push and push and push at me because you're terrified the moment you give yourself to me I'll turn into some horrible person or walk away, but all some small part of you inside wants is for me to prove you wrong and stay."

A sob racks my body at his words, a never-ending stream of tears falling from my eyes and he kisses them from my face, voice choking as he continues. "And I know that your broken parts fit mine, which is so fucking rare. Most people go their entire lives without finding it. So ignore it all you want. Bury your head in the sand for however long you need to be okay with it. But you don't get to run. I won't let you." He brings his lips right up to mine, kissing me softly. "I fucking love you and I don't give a shit what your rules say about that."

Great, body-racking sobs start to flood out of me and Coop gathers me up in his arms, rolling us so that I'm lying on top of him and holding me tight as he makes soft, soothing noises. It feels as if my heart, my soul, my entire being has been cracked wide open, purging years of fear and pain and fury

from my being. The steady stream of rain hits my back, washing away the mud and darkness, leaving me feeling exposed in a strange, new way.

My sobs eventually quiet, leaving my body softly shivering, curled into Coop's warmth and I realize that somewhere during the span of my breakdown he's started whispering the same words to me over and over again.

"I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you." He speaks it like a reverent prayer, pouring his love into me as if the words alone will ease my pain.

And maybe they can't. Maybe I'll always be a being whose pieces are threaded together by tragedy. But I do know one thing.

I lift my head, pressing my hands against his chest to get him to loosen his grip on me and he complies, giving me just enough room to bring my face up to his without letting go completely. His night-forest eyes bleed with worry as he looks at me and I lift my hand, running my fingers up gently to thread through his hair, mixing right in with the mud and earth below his head. I drop my lips and kiss him softly, barely brushing our lips together and whisper the words every part of me demands be said.

"I love you." I feel his breathing halt and press another soft kiss to his lips. "I love you too."

He brings his hands up and cups my face, pulling me in and kissing me as if he can pour all of himself into my being with the act alone. And for once, I do the same. Giving him everything in me without reservation, unable to hold any part of myself back now. And I can practically feel it, taste it. The way our hearts and souls yield to one another, twisting round and round until we're inextricably entangled, no beginning or ending to be found between us. Simply one being. A never-ending infinity of us.

I wrap my arms around him, holding this new being of us together and he drops his hands to grip the back of my knees, bringing my legs up around his hips as he rises off the ground. We stay locked in our embrace as he walks to the car, only

breaking apart when he lets go and my body slides down his as he opens the passenger door.

His eyes are alight with feeling, the lightest I've ever seen them. "Have to get you out of this fucking rain." His lips ghost up as he grabs my waist and lifts me into the Bronco, quickly closing the passenger door.

I take stock of myself as he jogs to his side and hops in, throwing the car into reverse and turning us around before taking off back down the road to... home. I'm covered in the remnants of mud, my clothes sticky with grime and clinging to my body. I can feel the dirt caked to the back of my head and casting my eyes Coop's way, I see that he looks even worse off than I am. Hardly any part of him left untouched by our tumble in the mud. He pulls up in front of the house and parks the car, both of us exiting and meeting at the front of it.

The edges of his lips twitch in amusement as he looks at me and holds out his hand. "Come here."

I take his hand, my voice rough coming out from all the abuse it's taken today. "You don't look much better, in case you were wondering."

"Of that I have no doubt." He chuckles as he pulls me into the house.

Coop leads me through the house to the bathroom, letting go of my hand to reach in and turn on the spray of water in the walk-in shower. I slide off my shoes as he comes back to me and hold up my arms, letting him pull the concert tee over my head. Mourning its loss from the mud. Sliding my arms around his neck, I press our naked chests together as his fingers hook in my shorts and underwear, pushing them down over my hips. He quickly pushes out of his shoes and discards his shorts and underwear as I press soft kisses to his chest.

His hands move to my ass, scooping me up and I tangle my legs behind his back as he walks us into the hot spray, not stopping until my back meets the tile of the shower wall. I can feel him pressing against me, hard with need, but he doesn't make a move for more and we stay that way. Foreheads dropped against one another, eyes locked in our newfound

universe, breathing in sync, hearts thudding away in an answering call through our skin.

Eventually, the mix of the hot water running down my skin and the need building in my core has me making a move. I roll my hips against him, dropping my mouth to drag his bottom lip through my teeth, and he answers by lifting me higher. Lining up his hard cock with my entrance and slowly thrusting inside of me, kissing me deeply as he drags on the feeling of glorious invasion.

My pussy is quivering around him by the time he seats himself fully inside me and breaks our kiss, pulling back to look at me with eyes so full of love they verge on pain.

“I love you.”

I could say it back. It'd be easy at this point. I'm so full of the feeling that it's shining light into all the dark and damaged corners of me that I've never even cared to explore before. Or I could give him more.

“My name—” My voice breaks and I clear my throat. “My name is Eleanor Delacroix.”

He's silent, eyes clouding over for a minute before he drops his mouth to mine in a gentle kiss. “That's a pretty name.” He pulls back, lips ghosting up. “Nice to meet you, Eleanor Delacroix. I'm Cooper Monroe.”

Chapter 20

Present Day

If I never set foot in Adam's Place again, it would be too soon. Jace had dragged me to the bar with him every night this week, saying that he didn't want to leave me alone so soon after the Morrison brothers had sent their threat. And while I appreciated his concern and most definitely did not want to end up as some lost and forgotten girl on a *20/20* documentary, if I had to sit inside that bar one more night and chunk quarters into a glass whenever I wasn't reading my mom's journals... I was going to lose my mind. I mean, the food was great and I loved watching him sing, but a girl could only sit on the same barstool for so many nights in a row.

It was now Sunday and I had told him enough was enough, that if I didn't get a little me time to Netflix and chill... Well, I would happily march naked into town and play the bait just to lure the Morrison brothers into making their move.

So despite his sullen look, I had sent him off to work with a smile and a promise to lock the door, not answer it for anyone but him, and absolutely not watch *Bridgerton* without him.

We had been switching off nights between his boat and Gram's place ever since the day of the threat and I had put the show on one night despite his groan of protest. But color me shocked, after only one episode he demanded I go back and start from the beginning of season one so he could understand *the backstory*. I had cocked a brow and thrown him a disbelieving look at the explanation but kept my mouth shut. Not needing to say what both of us knew.

The little shit was hooked.

But one could only be so strong in the face of regency romance temptation, especially in the midst of season two when things were just starting to get good, which was why I was watching Anthony capital R rake *Bridgerton* chase after....

Shit. Was that the front door?

I slam the laptop closed on the bed, eyes darting around my gram's room nervously. But the front is locked so...

My stomach churns as I push back the covers, trying to move as quietly as possible. If it is an intruder, I don't want to go banging around and alerting them of my location. I press the tips of my toes to the floor first and hold my breath as I stand, eyes scanning the room for any kind of weapon and coming up empty.

Fuck. I was such a brat. Why didn't I just go to the bar tonight like any rational person would've done?

I hear the floor creak in the other room and my heart races as I stare at the partially open bedroom door, waiting to see if it moves. Grabbing my phone from the nightstand so that I have some kind of lifeline, I clutch it tightly in hand and flick my eyes between the only two available hiding places in Gram's room. It's either the closet or under the bed. Two equally horrible options as hiding places but the only ones I can get to without leaving the room.

Closet. Definitely closet. I'm not getting dragged out from under the bed by my feet, thank you very much. That was a trauma I'd never recover from, even if I survived.

Just when I've finally worked up the courage to take a step toward the closet, the door bursts open and a golden-haired form launches through it, quickly snatching my laptop from the bed and opening it. I'm pretty sure my heart stops completely at his abrupt entrance and it takes me a few tries to draw a breath as I watch Jace open my laptop.

"Aha! I knew it!" He turns his head to me, face victorious as he holds the laptop aloft. "You little liar! You watched it without me."

I take a few measured breaths, watching his expression fall as he notices the look on my face.

"Let me explain something to you, Dawson." I take a step toward him, tone low and threatening. "If you ever pick my lock again. Not only will I never sleep with you again. I will pepper this town with flyers saying that you have a multitude

of venereal diseases and find a way to tattoo Blondie Was Here First on your dick while you sleep as a permanent reminder of me.” I cock a brow and cross my arms. “Capiche?”

Jace cringes and starts to reach down as if to cover himself before dropping his hand lamely to his side. “Call it even?” He holds the laptop out to me with a winning grin.

“Hmm.” I narrow my eyes on him and tap my foot, not feeling the least bit benevolent after he scared the life out of me.

“So.” Keeping his eyes on mine, he slowly places the laptop back on the bed and stands. “I realized tonight that I’ve never actually taken you on a proper date.”

Bringing my foot to a halt, I cock my head at him. “And?”

“And.” His eyes turn playful as he reaches out to tug at my hair. “Go put a dress on. I’m taking you out.”

I give him a confused look before deadpanning. “It’s almost midnight.”

“Exactly.” He grins delightedly. “It’s the perfect time to go.”

“Go where?”

“It’s a surprise.”

I open my mouth to retort before closing it and narrowing my eyes on him again. Totally at a loss as to what to do here. I want to go, but... what the hell?

Laughing softly, he tugs on my hair again before turning to walk out of the room. “Go put a dress on, Blondie.”

I give him back a doubtful look and call out as he shuts the door. “Just so you know, this is highly suspicious!”

That damn melodic laughter trickling in through the door is his only response.

I stare at the door for another minute in dubious contemplation before shaking my head and turning toward the closet. Pulling open the doors, I stare at my clothes now hanging there, the multitude of shirts and shorts I packed far

outweighing the few dresses. I didn't exactly think I'd have a lot of reasons to wear them down here and my options reflect that, leaving me with a formal black dress that would be better suited for a court date than a *date* date. A sexy gold number that screams LA club life, and a pretty emerald sundress with a mauve and peach floral print that I had wistfully packed at the last minute. It had called to me, telling me it was just too pretty to leave behind, and it had been right.

Sliding the dress off the hanger, I lay it out on the bed and begin to undress, trying to remember the last time I had actually been on a date and coming up empty. It had been a long time, to say the least. I forgo a bra because of the low back and pull the silky green fabric over my head, letting it settle lightly against my skin. Walking to the bureau that sits against the wall, I use the mirror to tie the strap hanging across my back and pull at it nervously. The steady flutter in my stomach ratchets up a bit as I pull a brush through my hair and take a step back to stare in the mirror.

Come on Delacroix, you can do better than that. I did say surprise, didn't I?

It's Jace's playful voice I hear in my head, causing my lips to twitch and prompting me to make a run for the bathroom. I pull my makeup bag from the drawer, quickly applying a light smoky eye before swiping a light pink color across my cheeks and lips. Grabbing my favorite perfume from the bag, I spritz a few puffs into the air and walk through it before shoving all the items back into the bag and zipping it up. Opening the door just a bit, I peek out to make sure Jace can't see me before darting back into the bedroom and putting on one of my favorite pairs of strappy sandals.

Standing back from the mirror, I cock a brow at myself in inspection and find that I'm pleased with the result despite the rare feeling of flutters filling my stomach.

God. He's turning me into such a girl.

Shove some steel back into that spine, El.

I take a deep breath and walk to the door, pushing it open and seeing Jace waiting in the entry with an oversized bag in

hand. His eyes devour me as I walk toward him, working their way from the top of my head to the tips of my toes and he swallows visibly when I come to a stop before him.

His gaze returns to mine, dimples flashing as he steps in and reaches out to grip my hip. “You’re fucking stunning, Delacroix.” He drops his lips to mine, pulling at them teasingly.

When he ends the kiss, I throw him a bratty smirk to cover up how his words affect me. “Thanks, Dawson.” I look down to the bag at his side. “What’s in the bag?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.” He drops his lips to mine again with a quick kiss before opening the door and holding a hand out for me to go first.

I walk out the door and to his jeep, fighting a ridiculous grin all the way. He reaches out for the door before I can, dipping his mouth down to my ear as he opens it.

“Just so you know... you’re still going to rewatch those episodes with me tomorrow.”

Rolling my eyes at him, I get into the car and swipe my dress up, making sure it doesn’t get stuck in the door as he closes it. Trying to calm the riot in my stomach by reminding myself that I have actually been on a date before and it’s not like I haven’t already had sex with him. Multiple times. I watch him walk around and stow the bag in the back before hopping in the driver’s seat, eyes dancing with mischief when they meet mine.

He puts the key in the ignition and starts the car, pulling out of the driveway. “Are you ready to have your world rocked, Blondie?”

“Well, I don’t know. You asked me that the other night and then it turned out you meant by watching *Bridgerton* so if it’s that kind of rocking...” I trail off teasingly.

He whips his head around to me, mouth dropping in shock before turning his head back to the road. “That was, that was, you can’t expect me—I had to know how Daphne and Simon’s story ended!” He shoots me a glare. “Plus, I seem to remember

you thoroughly enjoying us acting out a few of those scenes later that night.”

I fight the twitch of my lips and fake a dejected sigh. “I suppose.”

“Loudly,” he emphasizes.

Laughing under my breath, I reach across and grab his hand, bringing it to my mouth to playfully bite at his knuckles. “Alright. Alright. Are you going to give me any clues about where you’re dragging me out to in the middle of the night?”

He shoots me a petulant look. “No, I don’t think I will.”

“Ah... come on, Jace. Don’t be like that, you’re a more than adequate lover.” I pause purposefully. “Most of the time.”

I can’t help it. It didn’t take long for me to realize his ego in bed is monumental, which just makes him oh so easy a target.

His jaw drops again and he narrows his eyes at me warningly before snapping it shut. My shoulders shake with silent laughter as he turns his head back to the road and I can hear what I’m pretty sure is his teeth being ground into dust. There’s a good chance he’s rethinking this date thing right about now.

“I’ll show you adequate, Delacroix,” he promises quietly. “Just you wait.”

We fall into companionable silence for the rest of the short drive after that and before I know it, we’re pulling into the familiar marina parking lot. He parks the car and gets out, opening up the back to grab the bag and I take that as my cue to follow. I open my door and slide out of my seat, walking around to the back to meet him. The delighted mischief has returned to his eyes and he grabs my hand, starting to pull me down the dock toward his boat. And despite my growing confusion, I bite my tongue against the question wanting to pop out.

I’ll wait and see where he’s taking this. For now.

But when we make it to his boat and he hops up, setting the bag down before turning back to hold out a hand for me, I

can't contain myself anymore.

There's not even twinkle lights set up or anything.

I cock my head at him in confusion. "You're taking me on a date on your boat?"

"Oh ye of little faith." He grins, snagging my hand when I hold it out and pulling me up beside him. He presses me into the side of the boat with his body and drops his mouth to my ear. "I know your fancy LA ass intimately by now... And I know exactly what kind of treatment it likes. Just be patient, you'll get your shock and awe."

My stomach flips with a whole different kind of excitement as he steps away, grinning wickedly and keeping a couple of his fingers looped through mine as he leads me into the cabin. He sets the bag down on the small table and turns, flipping a few of the switches and knobs of the boat that I've never paid close enough attention to when he explained them to learn what they do. The lights come on throughout the boat and the engine rumbles below my feet as he turns back to me.

I'm too curious to keep quiet. "What now?"

"Now." He steps close, staring down at me with those firework eyes. "Now, you go to sleep."

What the fuck?

My brows drop down, voice coming out perplexed. "What?"

"I'll wake you up when it's time."

I repeat. What the fuck?

"What?"

He shoots me a grin and lifts his hands to my shoulders, gently turning me around and walking me into the bedroom. My mind is whirling with possibilities as he pushes me onto the bed and I sit, watching as he walks back to the door. He stops to give me one last soft look.

"Good night, Blondie."

I narrow my eyes at him. “This is by far the strangest date I’ve ever been on.”

He rolls his eyes at me dramatically. “I’ll see you soon.”

And with that, he flips the light switch, plunging me into darkness, and shuts the door.

Chapter 21

Present Day

I thought I'd never be able to fall asleep. When I'd felt the boat pull away from the dock, I'd been sure that I was doomed to spend the next however long staring up at the dark ceiling while my mind ran in circles pondering the possibilities. But the next thing I know, Jace's soft voice is waking me up after what felt like only minutes of being asleep, his body a comforting weight on the bed beside me.

"As tempting as you are right now." I feel his fingers softly push the hair back from my face. "It's time to wake up, pretty girl."

Cracking my eyes, I roll over and snuggle into his warmth, groaning groggily. "Ugh. What time is it?"

"The right time." He laughs softly, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

I squeeze my eyes shut against his words. "Then why do I feel like it's still dark outside?"

"Come on." He trails his hand down to lightly tickle at my side. "You can come back to bed as soon as we're done."

Pausing for a moment, I try to muster up some kind of willpower to rise.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

He drops another kiss to my head and whispers. "I have coffee waiting for you."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

I take a few more breaths and almost slide back into sleep before his fingers tickle my side again, making me groan. "Ugh!" I force myself to sit up and shoot him a glare. "Fine."

A soft laugh escapes him as he grabs my hand, pulling me from the bed and opening the door. I squint my eyes against the light trickling in from the windows, clueing me in to the fact that it's not actually still nighttime and step into the cabin. The boat sways under my feet as I follow Jace to the deck and come to a halt when nothing but the sight of endless ocean greets me. The sun is just cresting the horizon, drenching everything I can see in soft orange and brilliant red. Lighting the entire world around me on fire and driving out the dark night, fighting zealously to bring about a new day.

Jace tugs on my hand gently, prompting me into motion again as he leads me to the staircase heading up to the second deck before standing back so I can go up first. I give him one last questioning look, to which he only replies with a grin before turning to climb the stairs. As the deck comes into sight, I see a folding table set up between the two lawn chairs with a small cooler beside it and a bottle of champagne peeking out. But when I make it to the top of the deck and the table comes fully into view, shock stops me in my tracks as I take in the breakfast spread laid out on the table.

There are homemade waffles and whipped cream, strawberries drizzled with chocolate, a frittata topped with bacon, and what I'm pretty sure is grits drenched in butter. And most importantly, coffee. A whole freaking carafe of it sitting right there in the middle of the table beside the coffee and champagne glasses.

Holy shit. Between cooking and piloting the boat... He must have been up all night.

The gesture alone is thoughtful, but the effort he put in, the effort for me, sends my stomach somersaulting and well and truly twists me up inside. Shaking out my unacknowledged feelings for him to the forefront of my mind. Forcing me to own up to the fact that I'm pretty sure I've gone and fallen again. The realization leaves me fighting against the terror trying to lock me up as I try to figure out exactly how and where it happened.

But the truth is, I don't know. I have no freaking clue. There isn't one moment I can point to. I only know that he picks

locks. He picks locks and is ridiculous and clever and shines like the sun while doing it. And I think he started to pick mine somewhere along the way more than I noticed. Somewhere along the way, it stopped being about needing someone and became about needing him.

I wiggle my fingers and take an unsteady breath, turning my head back to look at him. “How in the world did you do this? You were at work all night.”

He gives me a small grin and grabs my hips. “Tiff might’ve helped me out with that part. I sent her to the store when we were at the bar last night.”

I snort a laugh and step forward, taking a seat. “I’m sure she loved that.”

“Uh, yeah. That would be an understatement.” He takes the seat across from me, eyes darting around the table as if checking the placement of everything before lifting to mine. “Do you like it?”

My lips twitch up and I cock my head at him, his obvious nerves making me feel better about my inner meltdown. “Are you nervous, Dawson?”

He shrugs and grabs the champagne bottle from the cooler. “I promised shock and awe.”

I let my eyes drift for a moment over the fire-painted ocean and sky surrounding us, the brilliant horizon an infinite line locking us in our own private world. My lips lift up into a small smile as I bring my gaze back to his.

“Consider my world rocked.”

His playful eyes crinkle around the corners, voice dropping intimately as he pops the cork on the champagne. “And to think this is only breakfast.”

A soft laugh leaves me as I watch him pour us champagne and coffee. I reach out for my coffee first, of course, bringing it to my mouth and blowing softly on it before taking a sip.

“So.” I cock a brow at him and smirk playfully. “Is this where you bring all the girls to impress them?”

“Um.” He laughs nervously, “No.” Grabbing a waffle, he puts it on his plate and adds some whipped cream to the top while speaking. “Have I brought other people to do this? Yes. Family, friends.” He tilts his head from side to side with a small grin. “And maybe a couple flings have tagged along with the group throughout the years. But not like this...” He waves his hand at the table between us. “This is new for me.”

I grab a strawberry and pop it into my mouth to get away with not replying, still trying to come to terms with my feelings for him and unsure of what to say in response to his own revelation.

He swallows down a bite of waffle and grabs his champagne, taking a sip before his eyes lock with mine. “I call it chasing the sun. Most of the time, when I’m not trying to impress a certain girl, I’ll just point the boat toward the direction the sun is rising and keep going till it’s up. Started doing it after my mom passed. I would steal my dad’s boat in the middle of the night and come out here. It was probably the only time I felt some kind of peace.” He leans back in his chair with a shrug. “Then, when I was in the Navy, I’d wake up before everyone else and go up on deck. It just... I don’t know. It gave me hope. This promise from the universe, a certainty that no matter how dark things got, the sun would always rise. That one constant in a world full of ever-changing variables.” He shrugs again, a small grin playing at his face. “It’s really all you need. To know that no matter what happens, there’s always the promise of a new day, a fresh start, a whole world on the precipice of possibility.” Bringing his champagne up, he clears his throat and takes a sip. “I wanted to share it with you.”

His words hit me hard, causing me to dart my eyes down and shovel food onto my plate without really paying attention to what I’m getting. Not quite knowing how to respond when faced with such blatant hope and optimism.

Jace Fucking Dawson. What am I going to do with you?

I shove some food into my mouth, chewing slowly and enjoying the explosion of flavor before swallowing and looking back to him. “Well thank you, Yoda.” I grin.

“Seriously, this is amazing. I only wish I had brought my camera to capture it.”

“Don’t mention it, my Padawan, and there’s always next time.” He throws a strawberry into his mouth, dimples flashing. “So how have the journals been coming? You haven’t said anything in a couple days.”

“That’s because there’s nothing to say.” I roll my eyes and grab my champagne, taking a sip while settling back into the chair. “They’re boring.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“For most people, probably not.” I sigh. “But I’m all the way up to a year after I was born and... they’re just boringly ordinary. There’s nothing. I mean, I don’t think my dad was exactly some epic love for her but she did love him in her own way. The life he gave her. They were happy.” I shrug, a little bit at a loss these days when it comes to how I feel about both my parents. “From everything she writes, he was a pretty calm guy, a good husband. The most exciting thing I’ve read about recently was how I was apparently a hellacious baby who screamed all the time.”

“Now that I can believe.”

“Shut it, Dawson.” I laugh. “Maybe I’ll start making you screen them for me because I just learned a whole lot about their post-baby sex life that I would have been quite happy having never known.”

“Uh.” He squirms in his chair. “Yeah, no thanks. I mean, I’ll do whatever I can but... just not that.”

I narrow my eyes on him.

“Please.”

“Mhmm.” My lips twitch up and I take a sip of my champagne. “She did love your mom like a sister though. She writes about her a lot. How much Anna’s friendship meant to her.”

He nods. “I’m glad the feeling was mutual.”

“I just...” I look out to the sun as my shoulders droop under the weight of all the unanswered questions in my life. “I don’t get it. They seemed happy.”

Jace is silent for a minute before speaking softly. “I don’t know. I wish I had an answer for you but... I guess we all wear masks from time to time.”

His words hit me like a slap in the face and I whip my head back around, breath stuttering out of my chest as I stare at him in shock.

“And what mask do you wear, Jace?” I snap, regaining my ability to speak and knowing I’m being unfair but... fuck, I can’t stand those words now.

He leans his head back in surprise, eyes searching my face. “Well, that hit a nerve.”

I lift my chin in stubborn challenge and his eyes narrow on me.

“Alright, Delacroix. We can go there if you want.” He rolls his shoulders, resituating in the chair. “I like you, El. Probably more than I should, considering I don’t even know how long you’re planning to be here. And definitely more than you would want me to considering that panicky little look you get any time things start to verge on the topic of an us. But I do.”

“Jace...” I try to interrupt, but he holds up a hand to me.

“You’re not just some summer fling to me or a way to pass the time. I like you, Blondie. A lot.”

I stare into his open eyes, feelings right up front and center for me to see, and know it’s truth time. Time for me to open up some scars and give him a bit of my terrible tale. I hate it, but whatever this is with him can’t go any further until he understands some things. Some of the reasons behind the fear and brokenness he’s slowly worked his way through.

Be smart, El. Don’t let him think you have something to give when you already gave it away.

I take a sip of champagne, trying to fortify myself about what’s about to come. “You need to understand, Jace, if you

want things between us to go any further..." I dart my eyes away at my spectacular failure to make the right words come out and sigh before bringing my eyes back to his curious gaze. "There are parts of me. Some things that I will never be able to give you. That, for better or worse, I already gave away."

He stares at me for a minute and I can see the wheels turning before he asks softly. "What happened?"

"As I'm sure you can imagine... I was already a little bit damaged by what happened with my parents. And that was before." I give him a humorless smile. "I didn't really believe in relationships. Ran scared at the mere thought of them actually. But last summer... I finally fell for someone, and I fell hard. It was, god." I shake my head, remembering all those little moments with Coop. "It was an all-consuming kind of love. The kind that makes you overlook everything besides a need for more of that one person. He broke down my walls and what we had... it was epic. I thought it would last forever. That he was my forever. And not in the stupid, silly way a lot of girls do. But in the way that—it's just—I suck at this." I suck in a breath. "It's just, for better or worse. He will always have a part of me that I'll never get back, that I lost." I finish softly and give him an apologetic look. "I'm sorry. I'm not trying to like, reminisce with you about it... I just, you have to understand—"

"No, no. I get it," he cuts me off, shaking his head. "But what... what happened, between y'all, why did it end?"

I take a sip of champagne to fight the tightness clawing its way up my throat. "The truth is... I don't know, I guess. It just did." I give him a sad smile and shrug. "But the point is, you have to understand. I can't be broken like that again, Jace. I'm not sure I'd survive it."

He stares at me for a long time, brows drawn down in thought before speaking. "You would, Blondie." He clears his throat. "Survive it. Just so you know."

I shake my head. "I don't know."

"You would. You're a survivor." A grin pulls at his lips as he relaxes back into his chair. "You may bitch and groan about

it a little along the way, but you are. So don't let the fear of what happened with him keep you from embracing that moment in the sun with me."

I cock a brow at him. "And what if this all goes to shit too?"

He shrugs, seemingly unconcerned. "That's just a part of being alive. Pain is going to find you in life whether you seek it or not. Better to experience the high and be a little bit broken from the story than spend your whole life fucking starving."

I open my mouth to respond but stop, simply staring into his firework eyes. Realizing that Coop doesn't even come to mind anymore when I look at them.

All I see is Jace.

It was strange, this feeling of letting go, of being put back together.

Equal parts guilt and elation as I began to really fall again. Fall hard for him.

His eyes turn soft. "But I am sorry that happened to you, and I can promise I have no intention of hurting you, El."

"Yeah." I sigh wearily at the familiarity of his words. "The thing is, I'm not sure he did either."

"Yeah." He flashes me those dimples, grinning wickedly. "But he's not here, is he? So obviously, as I've said before, he's an idiot... but all the better for me."

My lips twitch up despite the heavy topic and I shake my head. "Fucking trouble, Dawson. Knew it from the minute I met you."

He shoots me a wink and takes a sip of champagne. "Right back at you, Delacroix."

Chapter 22

Present Day

Jace made good on his promise to let me sleep when we were done with breakfast, sending me down to the bedroom as he took us home. I had felt guilty leaving him but it wasn't like I could do it either. So I had told him to come join me as soon as we were back, stripped off my dress and got into bed. When I felt him come join me later, I had wrapped myself around him until we were well and truly tangled up. His warmth an intoxicating cocoon as he pulled the blankets over us and nuzzled my neck, kissing me softly as we both drifted back off to sleep the day away.

It was different now, between us, after everything I had told him this morning.

I knew that. Even in my sleep.

The sound of my phone ringing wakes me up some hours later and I reach under the pillow, intending to ignore the call but pause when I see it's Yvie. I already hadn't returned her last call because of everything going on and I hate to make her worry. Sliding out from Jace's arms, I grab one of his T-shirts off the floor and throw it on before slipping quietly from the room.

Pressing the button to answer the phone, I bring it to my ear and make my way out of the cabin. "Hello, dearest aunt."

"Oh, thank God." She sighs in relief. "I was beginning to think that town had finally gone and outlawed cell phones or something."

"Nothing quite so extreme," I joke, closing the door to the cabin behind me and walking toward the front of the boat. "It's not actually that bad here, despite my first impression of the place."

"Mmm. That's because you didn't grow up there wanting nothing more than to make it to the big city."

“Well you did,” I remind her, looking out to the ocean and seeing the hues of evening coloring the sky.

“True. So how is it going there?”

“Interesting.”

I try to decide what to tell and what to wait on until I know more.

“Did you know Sheriff Reynolds back in the day?”

“Leah Reynolds?”

“I guess.”

“Yes. I remember her, she was right between Ca—” She stops, and I know it’s hard for her to say his name, even to this day. “Between your father’s class and mine. Why?”

“I met her the other day, that’s all. She’s the sheriff now, so I went to see if she knew anything. We didn’t exactly, uh, vibe, you could say.”

“That’s strange.” She pauses. “I remember her being nice, but I didn’t know her well, so I can’t tell you much more than that.”

“Yeah, it’s no big deal. Just thought I’d ask.” I brace my arms against the front railing of the boat.

“So do you plan on coming home anytime soon?” She sighs irritably. “Because if I have to deal with Kai staring at me with puppy-dog eyes, Stef looking like someone stole his favorite toy, and Mac trying to act like he doesn’t miss the shit out of you at one more Sunday dinner I didn’t plan on having, I’m going to ship them all down there to you myself.”

“Eventually.” I laugh. “I still have some things to... finish up here.”

“Well have you at least made any friends so that you’re not sitting alone every day?”

“Um.” I pause before deciding I should fess up, just a bit at least. “Yeah, actually.” I hear the door to the cabin open behind me and tilt my head back to see Jace peeking out at me, all shirtless perfection as he steps out in nothing but a pair of

boxers. His hair half up in a messy bun at the back of his head. “I’ve been hanging out with Jace Dawson some. Apparently our moms were friends.”

She pauses and I can practically feel her curiosity through the phone. “Jack and Anna’s boy?”

“Mhmm.”

“I remember him. His family was at your parents’ house a few times when I visited.” She pauses again and I can tell she’s trying to figure out whether to push or not. “He was a cute little kid, a bit of a shit but cute, and his mama was a stunner.”

“Really?” I turn around with a smirk as Jace comes up, caging me in against the railing while dropping his mouth to my collarbone, kissing lightly and no doubt eavesdropping. “You don’t say.”

“So...” She trails off purposefully.

Jace begins to trail his fingers up the inside of my thigh and I can’t help the hitch of my breath as my pussy gives a throb of need.

“So...” I respond, trying to keep my breathing even as he makes it to the top and slides his fingers under my panties, running them along my wet slit.

“Is he still cute?”

Jace lifts his head from my neck at her question, eyes dancing with mischief as he looks down at me and thrusts his fingers up into me while bringing his thumb down on my clit. I have to bite down on my lip for a second to keep from making a sound before replying, making sure to answer for his benefit and not my aunt’s.

“Not at all.” I gasp, biting my lip again as he presses down hard on my clit in retribution before turning me around. He presses my front to the railing and brings his other hand up to grip my hip before grinding against my ass.

A long pause comes over the phone as Jace begins to circle my clit again tauntingly.

“I’m not sure I believe you.”

“Wh-why?” I manage to stutter out.

“I’m going to tell Stef.”

“No.” I press my lips together as Jace pulls down my panties in the back and grips my ass underneath his oversized shirt. “No, don’t do that.”

Don’t bring the Godfather into this yet.

“Why not, Ellie? If he’s not cute and nothing is going on?”

Damn lawyers. Fucking nosy as shit.

“Umm...” Jace starts to run his bare cock against my ass teasingly and it takes everything I have to not moan right then. I need him inside of me. Right now. “Uhhh...”

“Yes, Eleanor?” My aunt’s humorous voice sounds on the other side of the phone, letting me know she probably has a good guess as to what’s causing my abrupt loss of speech capabilities.

“Okay, fine. He’s cute and we’re, um, I don’t, hanging out? Maybe I’ll bring him to LA for the club opening in July. Okay? Love you. Bye.”

I pull the phone from my ear and end the call before dropping it onto the deck and turning my head back to look at Jace with narrowed eyes.

“You are in so much trouble.”

I grind my ass against his cock though, despite my words. Uncaring of the fact that we’re out where anybody could see. I’ve been to the marina enough times now to know that people rarely venture down to where he docks his boat and even then... I’m just too far gone for it to matter.

“Ah, come on, Ellie,” he says, using the name I only allow my aunt to call me that his eavesdropping ass clearly overheard. “I just wanted to play.”

He turns me around and hitches my leg over his hip, pushing my panties to the side and running his bare cock against my pussy. That piercing teasing the hell out of me as it

spreads my desire between us. All of it keying me up so much I'm nothing more than a tight ball of need.

"Fuck. Okay." I gasp and drop my head back to look at him. "I'll forgive you but only if you're inside of me in the next two seconds."

He laughs and pulls his bottom lip through his teeth. "Sorry to disappoint, Blondie. But we have to go inside. I didn't bring a condom with me."

I pause, considering where we stand with each other and the trust he's built with me.

Wanting to really feel him inside of me with nothing between us.

"It's fine." I reach up and gently run my thumb over one of his dimples. "I'm on birth control and... I trust you."

Because I do. It's scary and almost paralyzing, especially after everything I went through with Coop, but I do.

He's earned it.

And I want my moment in the sun with him.

"Plus..." I throw him a haughty look when he looks at me, all soft and caring. "If you give me anything from your manwhore days, I won't tattoo your dick, I'll chop it off."

"Understood, Ellie." He flashes me that brilliant smile while kneeling to push my panties down my legs. "I had all that checked out when we started messing around. I'm good."

I narrow my eyes at him and step out of my panties. "You're not allowed to call me that."

"Hmm." He lifts his hands to the inside of my thighs, pushing my legs apart. "We'll see about that."

He brings his mouth up to lick at my slit teasingly, tongue circling my clit before dropping down to my opening to taste me. Moving his hands to the back of my ass, he presses me hard against his mouth and thrusts his tongue into me at an unhurried pace, as if he has all the time in the world to simply enjoy me. I drop my head back and grip the rail tightly when

my legs begin to shake as he starts to slowly work his way back to my clit. He begins to flick his tongue over the sensitive nub, making my whole body twitch, each little pass causing my breath to hitch as a needy sound escapes me. And when he starts to do that damn humming, I can't take it anymore.

I'm already riding the edge and I want him inside of me this time.

Reaching down, I grip at his hair and tug gently. "Now, Jace."

He gives me one last lick before lightly trailing his fingers over my ass to grip at my hip with one hand and lift the shirt of his I'm wearing with the other. Lifting his head, he presses the barest hint of a kiss to each of my hip bones and then the center of my stomach before looking up to me. His firework eyes filled with an ocean of feeling when we lock eyes, the care I see there just about bringing me to my knees right alongside him.

"In case I didn't make it clear earlier." He presses another kiss to my stomach, melodic voice unusually raspy. "I'm already a goner where you're concerned." A small grin plays across his face as he stands, moving his hands to my waist. "Ellie."

"Fine," I grumble, looping my hands around his neck. "But only in bed, okay? I have a reputation to uphold."

"Mmm," he answers noncommittally, dimples flashing as he lifts me up and sets my ass down against the top of the deck railing.

I tighten my hold around his neck at the precarious position, heart hammering away in my chest as he pushes his boxers down and moves in closer. Hitching my legs up around his hips, I lock my legs around his back and watch as he lines us up. That piercing at the tip of his impressive cock glinting in the fading sunlight of the day. But as he begins to thrust into me, that glint disappears and I dig my fingers into his back at the feeling of the skin-to-skin intrusion.

Jace brings a hand up to my chin, gently lifting my head until our eyes meet, keeping our gazes locked while he seats himself fully inside of me. The feeling of him inside of me with that piercing nudging at the deepest part of me while his eyes hold me captive is almost too much for me. His usually playful gaze holds nothing but soft reverence as he looks at me. The moment painfully intimate and infinitely special as he drops his lips to mine, pulling at them teasingly while he brings his hand back to my ass and begins to thrust inside of me. I can taste myself on his tongue and it only adds to the intimacy of the moment as he exquisitely fills me up with each thrust. He uses his grip on my ass to press me harder against him every time he powers into me and his piercing drags over my inner walls. Running over that glorious spot inside of me and causing my pussy to become impossibly more slick with need.

Feeling my eyes start to prick, I break our kiss and bury my head in his neck, breathing in the sea-spring scent of his skin. I wrap my whole body more tightly around him as my legs begin to shake, inner walls twitching at each pass of his cock inside of me. A soft moan escapes my lips as I ride the edge of ecstasy. Jace brings his hands around to grip my hips, fingers digging in hard enough to leave bruises as he picks up the pace. I can feel the metal of his piercing bumping up against the deepest part of me with each hard stroke and it only takes a few more thrusts before my inner walls clamp down around him. He pushes into me one more time, seating himself impossibly deeper and grinding against my clit as we both fall over the edge together.

The orgasm has tears leaking from my eyes against his skin that I know he can feel as I clutch him, gasping against his neck. His own groan of release sounds as his cock twitches inside of me, filling me up and setting off more shocks of pleasure throughout my pussy. I listen to the fast pace of his breathing, softly trembling against his body as I start to come down from the high. He brings a hand up after a minute and starts to soothingly run his fingers up and down my spine. Caring for me, comforting me as he gives me a moment as I come to terms with the reason for my tears. And I know what

it is, deep down in my soul, it's the act of letting go. I don't need to ponder or analyze to figure it out, it's an instinctual kind of knowledge.

It's the letting go of a shattered dream to make room for this new person winding their way through my being.

And in a way, they're tears of relief.

Jace drops a kiss to the side of my head after another moment and brings his hand up to tug at my hair, checking to see if I'm okay in his own way.

I press a kiss to his neck in response before biting down lightly on the spot.

Don't worry, Dawson. I'm still with you.

I feel as much as hear the soft melodic laugh leave him with how tightly I'm still wrapped around his body. "So you're taking me to LA with you?"

I smile against the curve of his neck and speak into his skin. "Probably."

Chapter 23

One Year Ago

Coop and I had spent the rest of the day worshipping each other's bodies after our tumble in the rain, followed by the most restful sleep I could remember having in years. We had woken to find the rain still coming down and after coming up empty in our search for breakfast, had quickly run into town to restock our food supply. And ice cream, I had told him, lots and lots of ice cream, it was necessary for rainy days. When we had gotten back, Coop had turned the giant monitor on his desk around to face the bed and we had climbed back under the covers, powering it up. Both of us were so happily relaxed after exorcising our demons yesterday that he hadn't even noticed when I queued up the first episode of this season's *Keeping up with the Kardashians* and pressed play.

That was four hours ago.

A long, suffering groan sounds next to me after a particularly catty comment from Kim and I feel him turn his eyes on me. "I can't, Princess. I tried but I just can't. How do you watch this shit?"

I dig the spoon into the carton in my lap without looking down, attention rapt on the screen. "The family dynamics fascinate me," I tell him honestly, plopping the scoop of dulce de leche ice cream into my mouth.

He returns to his silence long enough for me to get dragged back into the show and his question surprises me when he speaks again.

"Were you lonely? Growing up?"

I turn my head and find a rare look of unsurety on his face, as if he's worried that he's crossing some invisible line that will have me pulling back again. But after yesterday... Well, there really are no lines between us anymore, and I'm done pretending there are.

"Not really." I give him a small smile and pause the show. "I had my aunt Yvie, who is amazing. And Stef, his nona, the

guys.”

“Wait.” His brows drop sharply. “Is Stef the friend who wanted to know where this place is?”

“Yep.”

“And he’s a guy?”

I roll my eyes at him. “Yes, Stef is a guy.”

His eyes darken possessively and I roll my eyes again, digging out a scoop of ice cream and popping it into his mouth when he opens it to speak. “Stefano and his nona moved in next door the summer before we started junior high. Mac and Kai came with him... they were always just there, kind of a package deal. Anyway, they used to climb over the hedge and bug me to use our pool because Stef’s was still under construction and I don’t know. We just kinda became a family of sorts.” I cock my head in thought, looking back on those early memories and trying to decipher when exactly I let them in. “I think I was still too young to really have the walls I do now, so it was easier for them to get close to me. Plus, Stef wouldn’t take no for an answer, bugged me every day and took on the role of big brother when he realized we went to the same private school.” I shrug, returning my eyes to his. “I guess the bonds forged in youth held strong because he and the guys have been my family ever since.”

“Stefano?” he questions, dark look holding.

I smirk in amusement, dipping my head and dropping a quick kiss on his lips.

“He’s fucking Italian?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I cock a brow, laughing openly at his growl of frustration.

His hands launch out and snag me around the waist, pulling me to him while I desperately try to save the carton in my lap. “Not the ice cream!”

He snags the ice cream from my grip and sets it on the bedside table before rolling me underneath him, pinning my arms above my head in a tight grip as I chortle. I can’t help it,

it's just way too fun to get under his skin. He dips his head and drags the skin on my thoroughly marked neck through his teeth in reprimand and I try to quell my hysterics with only slight success.

“Yes. He's Italian. Moved here in elementary school.” I fight hard against the laughter pulling at my lips before adding the next part. “He calls me cara.”

He presses his hips into mine, eyes dangerous as his voice grinds out. “Princess.”

“What does that mean again? Dear, in Italian?”

“You're about two seconds away from having my handprint permanently embedded in your ass.”

“And that's supposed to be a deterrent?”

“Eleanor.”

The sound of my real name from his lips, the use of it with that demanding tone of his softens some of the need in me to tease him further. I love the sound of it.

“Stef and I have never had anything more than a brother-sister kind of relationship. He is my best friend, my family, but nothing more. Same with Mac and Kai.” I quirk my head at him playfully. “I actually think you'd like him. You remind me a bit of him.”

His eyes flick over my face, reluctant amusement in his gaze. “You really are going to be the death of me.”

I lift my head, pressing my lips to his as laughter starts to escape me again. “Oh, but what a death it'll be.”

His lips twitch as he shakes his head. “You're something else today.”

He releases my wrists and I wrap my arms around his shoulders instantly.

“What can I say? Love looks good on me.”

“Hmm.” He murmurs, eyes bright with satisfaction as he drops his lips down to skim up my neck, breathing me in as I

run my hands along his back, fingers brushing against the raised skin of his tattoo.

“Why this tattoo?”

“You mean the poem?”

“Yeah.”

He sighs, rolling onto his side and propping his head up in his hand. Reaching down, he slides his hand underneath my T-shirt and rests it against my skin, eyes shuttering as he stares at the spot. His thoughts indecipherable to me.

“I lost my dad when I was eight. Car accident.”

I reach down, winding my fingers through his and squeezing tightly. Heart hurting for his familiar pain. “I’m so sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Still.”

He’s silent in response and his eyes are lost in the past, looking without really seeing and I think of the time he told me I wasn’t the only one who didn’t want to be like my parents.

“So the poem’s for him?”

“No.” Conflict plays across his face. “I don’t know.” He brings his eyes back to mine and they roam over my face before he speaks again. “My dad was a writer, among other things and he... he kept a lot of secrets. And I guess, in a way, when he died, they became my secrets to bear.”

I allow him a moment before my curiosity wins out. “What kind of secrets?”

He sighs, darting his eyes away from mine. “He had an affair.” The words are quiet, laced with anger and shame.

“And you knew?”

“Found out right before he died.”

I reach my other hand up, running my fingers through his hair soothingly and hitch my leg over his hip. Bringing us

close and offering what comfort I can.

He looks down and a deep kind of pain radiates from his night-forest eyes when they land on me, his expression crumbling. “He destroyed a lot of lives.” The whispered words are filled with torment.

I lay my head down against his chest, the sound of his heartbeat thundering under my ear as I breathe in his sandalwood scent. “Parents...” I start after a moment, “have the unique gift of having the greatest influence and impact on our life for a long time. It’s biological, innate. They are the first people to hold us, to hopefully love us, to shape those first moments of our lives. But I’ve realized something pretty recently.” My lips pull up against his skin. “We don’t have to accept what they create. We don’t have to be the sum of their mistakes. We can choose what to keep, what to learn from, and what pain to discard for something greater.” I tilt my head back, looking into his eyes. “For someone greater.”

He lifts the hand on my stomach, threading it through the back of my hair and his lips twitch. “Look at you, being all wise and philosophical.”

“It’s all these damn books you surround me with. Something was bound to sink in.”

“Have to do something to counteract the trash TV.”

I laugh openly, burying my head in his chest and feeling it rumble as his own deep laughter fills my ears. When the laughter subsides, I peek up at him to find shadows of the past still lingering in his eyes and give him a confession of my own in turn. Hoping to drive away some of the memory clinging to him.

“I was never lonely,” I start, my smile fading. “But I did wonder from time to time...”

“What it would’ve been like.”

“Yeah,” I answer softly. “I think I would have liked to have had siblings, someone to play with when I was little.”

His lips ghost up and he runs his thumb along my cheek. “You would have been a little dictator. Teaching them all sorts

of naughty things and having them carry out your misdeeds for you.”

A surprised laugh escapes me at the picture he paints. “Probably,” I concede.

He dips his head and kisses me deeply then, slowly, with this newfound reverence we discovered down in the muck of the earth yesterday. Beautiful in its love, its purity. When my body starts urging for more, I pull back though, despite the need already building in me. Everything south of my shorts is aching after last night, deliciously so, but still, the man had found a limit I didn’t even know my body possessed.

“I...” How to say this delicately... “I think we might have to visit an ER if your cock comes anywhere near me today.”

A quiet laugh leaves him, the smug grin on his face the embodiment of male satisfaction. “I figured.” He presses another soft kiss to my lips. “You want your poem for the day?”

I cock a brow. “Are we still doing that?”

“Maybe not with the same stipulations as before...” That thumb on my cheek. “But still, my words will always be yours.”

I nod quickly. “Then yes, of course. I’m ready.” I smirk like the brat he calls me. “Worship me with your words.”

He shakes his head at me, smile still on his face as he reaches over and opens the bedside drawer, pulling his journal from its depths. I roll onto my stomach, crossing my arms and dropping my chin onto them while he flips it open and leafs through the pages until he finds the one he wants toward the back. His eyes move across the words on the page as if checking for errors before he speaks.

“These stars of ours were written in darkness and bound with light. Ensuring my soul would seek yours for eternity. Forever lost to this captivating insanity of we.”

His words reach right in and grab hold of my heart, leaving it achingly full of love and my eyes pricking with feeling.

Lifting his head, his lips pull up at the corners when he finds me peeking up at him with a rare, silly smile on my face.

“When did you write that?”

“A few days ago.” He shrugs.

“You know you have my heart, right?” I tell him, that damn pricking behind my eyes causing my voice to quietly break. “It’s yours, battered as it may be.”

He scoots down the bed and lies right next to me, night-forest eyes soft on mine.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Read some more to me?”

“Always.”

I open my eyes with the instinctual sense telling me that it’s late at night. The darkness filling the house confirms my suspicions as I search for what woke me. I flick my eyes to the end of the bed and look out the folding glass doors, finding nothing amiss there. Coop’s arms are wrapped around me, just like always, but when I turn my head to check on him, I find his eyes alert and already on me.

“What is it?” I ask, nerves thrumming through my veins as I roll over to face him.

He’s quiet for a minute, eyes raking over my face with alarming intensity.

My worry grows the longer he remains silent. “Coop, what is it?”

“Marry me.”

My mouth drops open and I stare at him, sure I misheard.

He arches a brow at my silence and I snap my mouth shut, finally regaining the ability to speak.

“Wh-what?” I stutter out.

He reaches a hand up, the picture of calm, and runs his thumb along my cheek, his eyes following the gesture before

returning to mine.

“Marry me.” He echoes confidently. “I want thousands of days with you. Days like today, where you make me watch trash TV or listen to Taylor Swift until my brain bleeds.” His lips twitch up. “But it’s worth it, because I get to be with you, to see that softer side of you where you’re all curled up under the covers eating ice cream. The side so few do.” He reaches down and grabs my hand, twining our fingers together. “I want to spend the rest of my life peeling back your layers, getting to know every facet until I know what you’re thinking before you do. I may not have the answers for everything yet... But I know that I will never stop loving you.” He exhales a deep breath, bringing our intertwined hands up and pressing a soft kiss to mine. “You had me, that very first night, with that cocked brow and smirk of your lips, I was yours. And I meant what I wrote in that poem, my soul will still be seeking yours even after the end of everything. Marry me.”

I let his words wash over me as I take a few steady breaths, their heartfelt caress enrapturing me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. Mind, heart, soul, and all the indefinable things that are the makeup of me in between. And I already know my answer, because I realized something out there in the mud and rain with him yesterday. He will forever own a part of me no one else has ever reached.

“Yes,” I answer without fear or hesitation, lifting my lips to his. “Always, yes.”

Chapter 24

Present Day

Jace and I hadn't seen or heard a peep out of the Morrison's in two weeks and I think we were both starting to relax. He was no longer dragging me out to the bar with him every day and we had even spent the night apart the other day when Zane had put his foot down and said enough was enough. He needed a boys' night. I had laughed my ass off at the sight of his sullen expression but happily sent Jace on his way and enjoyed a bottle of wine with Andrea on the porch before calling it a night. But I couldn't lie to myself, it was a bit weird sleeping without him after all those nights spent together and I'd say the feeling was mutual considering his enthusiastic sunrise wake-up call for me the next morning.

That damn lock picking was going to be the death of me.

Maybe in a good way though.

This week at family dinner, though, Tiff had let me know that Sam had been slyly poking around at the bar since I wasn't there as much. Trying to make some passes at Jace, to which she assured me he had turned down. Rather rudely apparently, clever boy that he was. And while I trusted him and enjoyed my nights away from the bar... It also didn't hurt to make my presence in his life known either.

Which was why I was now driving over to Adam's Place a good hour before it was supposed to open for the night with very little underwear on to ensure we both wore a well-fucked expression when Sam showed her face tonight. Nothing quite said back off, bitch, like that wonderful post-orgasm glow. Although I still wasn't actually sure what Jace and I were to each other. We hadn't talked about it and God himself knew it wasn't in my nature to bring that kind of stuff up.

We were more than we were before but not quite what Coop and I had been either... which left us, left me, as a girlfriend, maybe? My lips twitch at the idea as I take a turn onto the main road. I'd never been a girlfriend before. Me as a girlfriend should be an interesting experience for us both, to

say the least. Regardless, I knew we were both on the same page about this being something we were both all in for these days.

Just had to figure out that small little issue of us living in different places.

My phone rings through to the Bluetooth in Franny and I see Stef's name flash across the screen, bringing a smile to my lips as I answer.

"Are you calling me from the airport about to launch a rescue mission?"

"Almost." He scoffs. "We miss you, cara. Your absence is harder on us all after spending pretty much every day of the past year together. We worry about you when you're not with us."

"I know. I miss you guys too," I tell him softly, aching at the loss of my little family. "And how are my guys?"

"Ah, you know them." He laughs in that deep baritone of his. "Kai has been locked up in his studio for the past three days in protest, only coming out for mealtimes. And Mac is... Mac is Mac. Unbearable."

I laugh openly at his accurate description.

We all had a role in our little mishmash of a family. Stef was the older brother, always looking out for us, checking in, making sure everyone was alright. Kai was the one we all treated as the youngest, despite the fact he was the same age because he was the most sensitive and, therefore, the one we were all the most protective of. But Mac...

The other two referred to us as the twins and it was an apt description, not only because we could pass for blood relations. Out of us all, Mac and I were the most alike. We were the reckless avoiders. Burying our damage under an air of indifference, constant forward motion, and a delightful little sprinkling of self-destruction just for shits and giggles. Our thought processes and way of handling things scarily similar. Which meant if you left us alone together, you would come back to one of two things. Either we would be at each other's

throats or the whole freaking place would be lit up like Vegas, bottles popping and all.

And yet... Mac understood what I truly needed better than the other two in some ways. Not what I wanted, but what I actually needed.

When I had finally broken down and tried to find Coop one day in Amsterdam after getting quite literally baked out of my mind with Kai. It was Mac who had found me, as if he could sense what was happening. He had lain down beside me in bed, slid my phone from my hand after I had made it to around Google page twenty, and just held me for a few hours while we breathed together. Then he rolled me over, cupped my face, and told me it was now time to pick myself up and rise because we weren't little bitches who crumbled.

Stef babied me, Kai worried about me, but Mac and I were the same.

Things had gotten better for me after that day.

"Hmm. I can imagine." I tell him, brows pulling down in worry. "Has he been putting you guys through hell?"

"He's been working out all day and pushing us to go out every night, so you know, he's dealing in his own way. But... he misses you." Stef pauses and I can hear the concern in his tone mirroring my own. "It'd be good if you came home soon."

"I'm working on it. I'll definitely be there for the club opening." I sigh, pulling into the parking lot at Adam's Place and parking Franny at the front. "I'm just waiting on a file from the sheriff and have—" I clear my throat. "Have a couple more things to get squared away."

"Do these couple more things go by the name of Jace and Dawson?"

Yvie, that little traitor.

"I was going to tell you."

"I know." He laughs. "Don't worry. We've all stalked his social media and prepared a list of questions for when we get

to meet him. Mac plans to take him surfing.”

Holy shit. Not good.

“Stefano...”

“We love you, cara. You’re our sister. Don’t begrudge us the chance to protect you this time when we couldn’t the last.”

Well fuck when he puts it that way...

I give a bratty groan to cover up the tightness in my throat.
“Fine.”

“It’s true then, you’re bringing him here?”

“Yeah. I think so. For the club opening at least... after that, I don’t know. We haven’t talked about it yet.” I sigh, sinking into my seat at the weight of reality. “I just know I don’t want it to be like last time. If I’m going to have someone in my life, someone that really means something to me... I want it all to be in the light this time. You know?”

“Agreed.” He pauses. “Well, you sound better... than before, which I’m guessing Jace Dawson has something to do with so I’ll try to hold Mac at bay when he gets here.”

“Thanks, Stef.”

“No promises though,” he whispers right before I hear Mac’s voice yell in the background.

“Is that my fucking twin?”

“Yes, Macallan,” Stef drones.

“Good,” Mac yells irritably. “Tell her that I’m bored out of my fucking mind and going down to the cellar to drink her stash of Caymus. Starting with the oldest year.”

I gasp at the threat. “You tell that little asshole if he touches my Caymus, I’ll pour his oldest whiskeys down the drain and make him watch.”

Stef sighs wearily. “Come home, cara.” I hear a door slam in the background over the phone. “Shit, he really did go down to the cellar. I have to go stop him.”

I push open the door to my car, switching the Bluetooth over to my phone. “Thanks, Stef.”

“Anytime.”

“Tell Mac that I expect an epic party to be planned for when I get back, okay? It’ll give him something to focus on.”

“Will do.” Stef laughs. “Tell Jace we said hello.”

A smile pulls at my lips as I roll my eyes and look down to hang up the phone, pushing the door to the bar open and walking in. A heavy silence greets me, tension hanging in the air and causing my intuition to scream a warning that something isn’t right before I even lift my eyes. Jerking my head up, the first thing I see is Jace standing in front of the bar, his firework eyes filled with pure terror as he looks at me. I watch the shock play out across his face for a second before his expression turns pained.

He didn’t know I was coming. I’m not supposed to be here.

“Well, well, well.” A raspy voice sounds to my left, drawing my eyes to Kyle Morrison. “What do we have here?”

“Eleanor Delacroix, from what I hear around town, brother.” A voice to my right answers, jerking my gaze to who I’m guessing is Kurt Morrison based on his similar features. The only difference between them is the long, stringy brown hair Kurt is rocking.

Guess he opted to skip the bad dye job.

They stand on either side of Jace, caging him in against the bar, both carrying a metal baseball bat in their hands and looking at me like they just won the lottery.

My heart races in my chest and adrenaline pounds through my veins, urging me to take action. But I fight it, staying perfectly still, trying to work through what my options are here. Knowing that whatever my next move is might be the most important one of all. I grip my phone tightly in my hand but they’re watching too closely for me to get away with making a call. Jace practically forgotten now that they have their prize within sight.

I understand it on a psychological level, what their terrible, twisted logic is. They want him to feel the pain they did, and that only happens if they take someone he cares about from him.

Not a good day to be me.

“Eleanor Delacroix.” Kyle swings the bat at his side in a careless loop as he says my name and cocks his head at me. “Now aren’t you the girl whose daddy shot your mama then himself?”

I muster every bit of false bravado I can and manage to twitch my lips up into a small smirk. “That’d be me.”

No point in denying it and the longer I can keep him talking... the longer he’s not beating the shit out of me or Jace.

“And what the hell did you come back to this town for, girl?” Kyle laughs nastily. “You’d think you’d have figured out Delacroix’s don’t fare too well here.”

“Apparently not.”

I flick my eyes to Jace, trying to figure out any way out of this for us but his expression gives me nothing. Kurt is watching him closely again, baseball bat propped up on his shoulder and eyes narrowed as if he’s trying to work something out.

“I remember...” Kurt starts, drawing all of our gazes to him as his eyes move between Jace and me. “You talked about her. One night after we got wasted together. You knew her when you were little, talked about how you always wondered what had happened to her. That you hoped she was happy.”

I watch Jace’s expression fall at Kurt’s revelation while his brother gives a groan of satisfaction.

“Well this just gets better and better, don’t it? Looks like Jacey boy finally went and fell for the girl he always wanted.”

Jace turns his head to Kurt, eyeing him hard. “This isn’t you, Kurt. Maybe Kyle... but you never enjoyed the violence like he did. Come on, man. We were friends once.” His voice turns pleading and I can tell he’s trying to grasp at any straw

he can. “She’s a girl, Kurt. You don’t want to beat up a girl. You don’t want to be that guy. She doesn’t have anything to do with this, let her go, man.”

Kurt turns his head toward me and I can see the conflict in his gaze as we lock eyes, and for a moment hope fills me but then he shakes his head slowly and turns back to Jace.

“Sorry, Jace. You brought her into this and what happened with Trey... someone has to pay.”

Kyle barks a laugh and gives his brother a nod. “Attaboy, Kurt.” Turning his eyes back to me, he leers at me, eyes running the length of my body and making me fervently wish I had worn something more than cutoff shorts and a tank top today. “Shame though.” He takes a step toward me. “You are a pretty little thing. Maybe I’ll drag it out, enjoy you for a bit first and make Jacey boy here watch before I finish you off.”

My stomach seizes up painfully at his words and I have to swallow down the bile trying to work its way up my throat, trying to force myself to keep breathing.

Jace takes a step forward, halting Kyle’s forward motion and drawing his gaze, voice coming out vicious when he speaks. “I don’t care how many times you swing that bat, Morrison. You touch one hair on her head and I will fucking end you.”

My heart clenches painfully at Jace’s words and I know they’re true. He would sacrifice himself to save me in a heartbeat.

We have to figure a way out of this now or else, no matter how hard Jace fights... we’ll be screwed.

The door isn’t that many steps behind me and I could try to make a run for it. But there’s a solid chance they’ll catch me before I ever make it to the car and even if I do... what then? I leave Jace to the mercy of their anger and bats?

No.

I can’t leave him.

I just can’t. I’m incapable of it.

I watch Kyle flick his eyes to the door behind me, the same thought having occurred to him and he begins to slowly circle around, putting him on the direct path to come up behind me.

“The thing is, Jace... you don’t really have the upper hand here, do you?”

I watch him slowly walk, baseball bat swinging back and forth at his side as he reaches into his back pocket, pulling out a knife. Flicking it open, he reveals a long, razor sharp looking blade that has my breath stuttering with panic.

Oh my god. We’re going to die.

We’re going to die here on this dirty bar floor, surrounded by the smell of beer and cigarettes.

I’m never going to make it home. I’m never going to make it back to the guys, they’ll crumble, absolutely crumble if this happens to me and they weren’t here to protect me. I’m never going to make it home with Jace. I’m going to die in this town, just like my parents.

My head starts to feel fuzzy, blackness creeping into the edges of my eyes and some removed part of me realizes that I’m hyperventilating. But I’m being pulled too deep under the tide of panic to do anything about it. Well and truly lost as my brain shuts down under the duress of the situation. Trying to save me from the horrible fate awaiting.

“Hey, Blondie.” Jace’s calm voice breaks through my panic, drawing my eyes to him and I see that flash of dimples despite the situation we’re in. “Come here, yeah?”

Everyone stops at his words, Kyle and Kurt darting their eyes between us as if unsure what to do with the odd request, whether to allow me closer to him or not.

But why... why would he want me to come to him? It’d just put me closer, right in the middle of things, that much easier for the bats and knife to reach.

“Trust, right? That’s what we’re all about. That moment in the sun together.” His eyes drill into mine, silently begging me to come to him. “You remember the first time I convinced you to do something? That night you came to the bonfire? Man.”

He shakes his head, making sure to keep his eyes on mine. “It might not have shown but I was so nervous. You were standing there looking all kinds of gorgeous and then I went and fucked it up and we bickered right away. I was terrified you were going to leave right then and I would never see you again. But you didn’t. Remember that?”

Of course I remember. We bickered right off the bat because his dumb ass had questioned my competency when it came to...

When it came to having a gun.

“Come here, Ellie,” he softly pleads. “I want to kiss you like I did last week when you came up here.”

But last week...

Last week he had taken me to the office in the back and propped me up on his desk before playing with me for a solid hour despite Tiff’s shouts of protests from outside the door.

We had fought about guns and he had taken me to the office in the back.

Holy shit.

I try to keep my expression blank as I put the pieces together. He has a gun in his office. He must, and he’s trying to get me to come to him so that I can make a run for it.

But a gun.... My hands start to shake with fear at the realization and I clench the one not holding my phone into a tight fist to hide it. I don’t know shit about guns and that would leave him here. Alone and at their mercy.

Stupid, self-sacrificing, clever boy.

But it’s also the only way I can see out of this for us.

Taking a breath to steady myself, I take a hesitant step forward and Kyle lifts his bat in response, pointing it at me.

“You don’t fucking move.”

I freeze, eyes zeroing in on the bat he’s holding and the rage in his eyes, not knowing what the right move is, whether to keep moving or hold still.

“Promises, Ellie.” Jace’s melodic voice pulls at me, making me turn my head back to him. I can see the love shining from his eyes and mine start to burn in response, because it is love that he feels for me. Some part of me has known it for a while now. “I always keep mine, right? And Kurt here is going to let you come to me so I can say goodbye.”

I flick my eyes to Kurt and he pauses for only a moment before giving a nod. “Go on.”

“Kurt!” Kyle’s enraged voice sounds from the other side of me but I only turn my eyes back to Jace.

“Just let him say goodbye, man.”

I run forward at his words, closing the distance between us and launching myself into Jace’s arms, burying my head in his neck as silent tears stream from my eyes.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I can’t lose him. He’s my sun.

“Hey, hey.” His fingers trail up and down my spine before reaching up to tug at the back of my hair, making me lift my head from his chest and look at him. A small, sad grin pulls at his lips. “In case I don’t get to say it later... you know I love you, right?”

I nod my head quickly, fresh tears leaking at his words. “I know,” I whisper, heart twisting up painfully that I can’t give those same words back to him, even now. I just can’t make them come out.

“Good.” He nods, bringing his hands up and cupping my face as he drops a kiss to the top of my head. “I just needed you to know.” Dropping his hands, he wraps his arms around me and holds me tight. Pressing our bodies against one another’s and dropping his head beside mine, whispering so low I can barely hear. “Now, go. And try to be quick about it, yeah?”

Jace steps away slightly as if ending our goodbye before he quickly grasps my waist and practically throws me over the bar. I scramble over the bottles on the other side and land hard, hearing the shouts of both Morrison brothers behind me. But I don’t stop, quickly popping up and throwing myself through

the door leading to the kitchens without looking back. I run through the kitchen and hold on to the wall as I come up on the hallway where the office is, whipping around it and powering back into a sprint. It only takes me five more strides before I make it to the office and dive through the door, slamming it shut behind me. My fingers fumble for the lock, shakily turning it as the sound of yells filters back to me.

I have to be quick. I have to be quick.

Scrambling forward to the desk, I drop my phone and start ripping drawers open at random, riffling through the contents in a desperate search. Each second feeling like millennia as I come up empty again and again. Reaching down, I pull open a bottom drawer and rip the paperwork out of it before coming to a halt when I spy the small black gun within. I recoil at the sight of it, unable to stop the gut reaction, paralyzed and hearing my pulse pound in my ears.

A loud crash sounds from the bar, making me jerk my head up and stare at the door as the unmistakable sound of Jace's voice yells before trailing off into a groan. I reach down and grab the gun without hesitation, gripping it tightly in my hand to cover up my tremors as I walk back to the office door. Flipping the lock, I throw the door open and march back through the kitchen in determination.

I won't lose him too.

I lift the gun in front of me as I come up on the door leading to the bar and grab the handle, pulling it open and stepping through. My eyes quickly find Jace, seeing how he's down on the ground, holding his side defensively while Kurt stands above him, bat in hand and Kyle grins maniacally on his other side. A table is overturned near them and chairs are scattered from the fight. Kyle lifts the knife to strike, not having noticed me yet and I point the gun at him.

“Stop.”

Everyone pauses at the sound of my voice.

Both brothers turn their heads toward me, shock filling their faces at the sight of the gun. But it's the sight of Jace lifting his

head to give a small grin before bringing his hand up as he coughs that gives me the courage to continue. I dart my eyes quickly between Kyle and Kurt before lifting my head in stubborn challenge.

“Leave. Now.”

Kyle chuckles nastily. “And if I don’t? What are you going to do about it, girl?” He shakes his head. “Nah. I don’t think you have it in you.”

“Really? You don’t?” I lift the gun higher, trying to make sure I’m aiming for the center of his body and take a step forward. “Maybe I’ll drag it out, make Kurt here watch, enjoy it for a little bit before finishing you off.” I give him a savage smirk. “Not so fun when the tables are turned, is it?”

His eyes turn livid at my words and he goes to take a step forward before Kurt darts out a hand, grabbing his brother’s arm and stopping him.

“This is done, man.” Kurt shakes his head, darting his eyes to me nervously. “Come on. We need to get out of here before someone else shows up.”

Kyle doesn’t move, just continues to stare at me with loathing and Kurt steps over Jace to push at his brother. “Save it for another day.”

I keep my eyes locked with Kyle’s as Kurt pushes him from the bar, gun held aloft and aimed at them even after the door closes behind them. Not moving, hardly breathing as the adrenaline still holds me tight in its grip. I notice Jace standing from the floor of the bar and flick my eyes to him, checking to make sure he’s not bleeding and watching as he slowly limps around the bar to me. Unable to speak to tell him I just can’t move.

He comes up next to me, soft eyes raking me from top to bottom in assessment before coming back to land on mine. “You with me, Blondie?”

I jerk my head down in a nod, keeping my eyes on his.

“Good.” He moves behind my body, raising one hand to my elbow and gripping my hip with the other. The sea-spring

scent of him cutting through some of the panicky fog in my brain. “Wanna go home? Smoke a little and then bang each other’s brains out? It’s kinda been a hell of a day.”

Something between a sob and a laugh rips out of me at his words, the absurdity of them in this moment.

“Yeah,” I answer, voice cracking, tilting my head back to meet his eyes. “Yeah, Dawson, I do.”

“Good.” He slides his hand up my arm, folding his fingers over where mine rest on the gun. “Feel like letting go of this yet?”

“I—I’m not sure I can.” I try to flex my fingers and fail. “My fingers won’t move.”

“That’s okay.” He flashes those dimples at me. “I got you.” Bringing his other hand up, he stabilizes the gun and gently pulls my fingers from it, sliding it from my grip. “I kept my promise, right?”

I jerk another nod as he pulls the gun from my view, tucking it away somewhere I can’t see.

“But next time, try to remember to take the safety off before you come to my rescue, yeah?”

His words hit me as the adrenaline fades fully from my veins and I collapse right there on the floor of the bar, sobs ripping from me at all of the horrible almosts of today.

Chapter 25

Present Day

I stare at Jace while he sleeps, feeling the waves slowly rock the boat back and forth while I watch the steady rise and fall of his chest as if it's the single most comforting thing in the world. And right now, with the bruises still purpling his ribs from where the Morrisons took a bat to him... it is. Somehow, he's still been sleeping like a rock these past few nights while I've been tossing and turning my way through nightmares. So I wake up and stare at him, just watching him breathe. Totally giving in to my inner creep in order to reassure myself that we're both still here.

The BOLO his aunt put out for Kyle and Kurt can't find them fast enough for me. Apparently, threatening people with bodily harm when you were fresh out of jail was a bit of a parole violation, go figure. And Jace... well, as soon as we were done with the police he drove us to his boat, took us out to sea, and we've been chasing the sun every day since. He still hasn't said those three little words to me again but I know it's not because he doesn't feel them. It's because he's trying to give me the time I need without any kind of pressure.

Because that's just who he is. Who we are together.

I watch his eyes dart back and forth under his lids, expression soft and open, completely at ease with his lips edging up a tiny bit at the corners. As if even in his dreams he's playing at some mischievous game. And for a moment, I can't help but compare him to what Coop used to look like in his sleep.

They were such a striking contrast, one the dark night and the other a brilliant sun. And yet... there were these moments, inexplicable little instances where something would hit me and make me feel like they were one and the same. A careless gesture or a playful phrase. The arching line of a cheekbone or that pull around the eyes. Some indefinable essence of them that would strike, and just for a second, it would feel like they were made up of the same matter.

It was a weird feeling, to say the least. Those little moments of déjà vu.

I drop my eyes back down to the bruises coloring his side and my stomach turns at the sight. The impressions of the bat are fully visible with the blanket lying low on his hips and the scar framed within their midst draws my gaze. I lift a finger to it, running it along the neat line with a featherlight touch, wondering if this scar too is from some horrible instance of violence like the other day. A deep yawn leaves him and draws my eyes up to see his fluttering open.

A soft smile fills his face when his sleepy eyes land on me and he reaches over to slide the ends of my hair between his fingers. “Hey, you.”

I try to twitch my lips up into a smile for him but only get about halfway there. “Hey.”

“How long you been up for?”

“Not long.”

His eyes search my face for a moment, brows dipping. “Liar.”

I shrug in response, knowing it’s going to take me a minute to get over how close we came to losing each other when I’m just starting to come to terms with how much he means to me.

Dropping my eyes back down to the scar on his side, I slide my finger over it again. “What happened here?”

“Hmm.” He reaches over and loops his hands around my waist, pulling me against him and sliding a leg between mine. “I got in a car accident last year on my way to NOLA for a buddy from the Navy’s bachelor party.”

I meet his eyes, stomach twisting up again at the thought. “Was it bad?”

He opens his mouth but hesitates and I can see that he doesn’t want to scare me any more after everything we just went through.

“It was bad?” I guess.

“Yeah.” He nods. “It was bad. An eighteen-wheeler T-boned me at an intersection. Broke my arm, fractured my skull and femur. I was in a coma for a couple days from the internal injuries and woke up with half of a brand-new liver.” He flashes those dimples and drops his lips to mine. “So I guess, in a way, I made out because I kinda got to start from scratch there, right?”

I narrow my eyes at him in warning. “Don’t try to make light of this. You only have half a liver?”

He tilts his eyes up in dramatic thought. “By now it’s probably regrown to about seventy percent of a liver so... basically a whole one.”

“Not. Funny.” I smack his arm with each word to drive home the point. “You drink too much for someone with only a partial liver!”

A soft laugh leaves him as he tightens his arms around me. “It was back to normal function about a month after my accident. I’m totally fine.”

Throwing him a dubious look, I bring my hand up and run a thumb over one of his dimples. “You need to take better care of yourself, Dawson.”

He drops a quick kiss to my lips, eyeing me playfully. “You going to make me, Delacroix?”

“If I have to.”

“I like the sound of that.” He slides his leg up higher between mine, pressing it against me and dropping another kiss to my lips, all slow and teasing this time. “Happy Fourth of July, by the way. You ready to party?”

I pull back from his lips and roll my eyes. “I still think it’s a terrible idea.”

“It’s the perfect idea,” he argues, perfectly mimicking our debate from last night as he slides his hands down to my ass.

It was not only the Fourth of July today, but it was also Tiff’s birthday, which meant there was a huge party planned at the beach. Well, a huge party by Landing Point standards that

was. I had a sneaking suspicion that Jace was going to be a bit shocked when we got the LA. Regardless though, I thought putting ourselves out in the middle of a party after what had happened at the bar was a terrible idea. Jace disagreed.

Using his grip on my ass, he pulls me higher on his thigh. “What time is it anyway?”

“About two,” I grumble. “We’ll already be late.”

“Come on.” He nuzzles his head down into my neck. “Every cop in town is looking for them and we need this. To let go and just have fun. They won’t do anything with so many people around.” Lifting a hand, he pushes my hair to the side and starts to slowly kiss his way across my collarbone. “I’ll even stay, uh, mostly sober, so you can drink to your little heart’s content.” He pushes his cock against me, voice coming out soft. “Please, Ellie... come play with me today.”

“Ugh! Fine.” I groan. “But only if you stop calling me that insufferable name.”

He flashes me a wicked grin, flicking those playful eyes up to mine. “Never.”

I walk through the sand on the beach, surrounded by more people than I thought existed in the entire town of Landing Point. Tiff literally must have invited everyone within a decade of her age. The revelry is already in full swing with kegs strewn along the beach, coolers open with bottles of liquor peeking out, and music blaring from a speaker somewhere. I feel a group of guys’ eyes on me as I walk by in my white high-leg bikini and cock a brow of challenge at them, just daring them to say something.

Zane had stomped up immediately when Jace and I got here, demanding to know what the fuck was being done about the Morrison brothers. So I had volunteered to go find Tiff and let her know we were here. Sweeping my eyes across the crowd, I spy auburn waves a few groups of people away and start to head in that direction. Working my way through the crowd and

having to turn my body sideways to make it through a pair of what have to be linebackers before spotting my target.

Coming up behind her, I put my hands over her eyes. “Guess who?”

A squeal pierces the air as she whips around, throwing her arms around me. “You made it! I was worried after what happened y’all wouldn’t come.”

“And miss your birthday?” I scoff guiltily. “Never.”

It really was a good thing Jace didn’t listen to my bitching and groaning.

“You have to do a birthday shot with me!” She hops up and down, blue eyes lit with excitement and already glazed. “Or two!”

“Of course.” I laugh. “But then I promised to deliver you to Jace.”

“He can wait.” She gives one more hop before turning to the cooler.

Taking in the rest of the group, I nod a friendly hello to Jared and Tommy, then skip over a few people I don’t know before my eyes land on Sam. She stands across the group from me, glaring loathsomely in her red string bikini, hip cocked and generous assets on full display. I throw her a bratty smirk and wiggle my fingers in hello, taking entirely too much pleasure in the angry flush that rises to her cheeks.

“Tequila, okay?”

Bringing my eyes back to Tiff, I pause for only a second before giving her a small smile. “Yeah, tequila’s great actually.”

She hands me the shot and we clink our glasses together before I throw it back, appreciating the earthy taste all the more after such a long absence.

Tiff’s eyes meet mine as we finish, full of mischief and reminding me of her cousin for a moment. “Another?”

“Another.” I grin.

Jace did say to my heart's content after all.

Jared comes up and slings an arm around Tiff's neck as she pours the shot. "So how have you been liking Landing Point, El?"

"Jared's the mayor's son." Tiff giggles tipsily. "So he thinks it's his duty to ensure every new person is enjoying the town."

"It's great." I answer him honestly. "Far better than I originally expected."

"Really?" Sam's snarky voice sounds. "Because I heard you almost got Jace killed the other day."

Turning my head toward her, I rake my eyes down the length of her body. "Did you?" I tilt my head in faux consideration. "That's interesting. Thanks for the update."

I grab the shot out of Tiff's hand and throw it back without saying anything else. No need to give her more information and add to the town gossip. Plus, I don't exactly want to relive the experience.

Setting down the shot glass on top of the cooler, I loop my arm through Tiff's. "Come on, your cousin is waiting."

Tiff rises up on her toes and plants a kiss on Jared's cheek. "I'll be back."

Keeping my arm looped through hers, I start to backtrack to where I left Jace. The art of working my way back through the crowd taking a bit longer with another person in tow now. We eventually make through the oppressive swell to the path leading back to Jace and Tiff sighs wistfully.

"You know, I always wanted a sister." She bumps my hip with hers, almost stumbling. "But I'll settle for one badass cousin-in-law."

I roll my eyes at her, making sure we step around a bottle lying in the sand and mutter uncomfortably. "Don't get ahead of yourself."

"Oh come on!" she groans. "Y'all are perfect together. Like these little beach versions of Barbie and Ken I had when I was little."

“You’re ridiculous.”

“It’s happening.” She claps her hands together, jerking my arm. “Did Jace bring his guitar? I told him the only thing I wanted for my birthday was for him to play later.”

“Yeah, he left it in the—”

My words cut off and I come to a halt as Jace comes into view, head thrown back in laughter as a perky little blonde number with ringlets lifts her hand to his shoulder. Zane and Andrea are standing a bit away, propping up chairs in the sand. Narrowing my eyes, I watch as Jace immediately takes a polite step back and lets her hand drop smoothly from his skin.

“Who is that?” I ask Tiff, nodding my head toward them and watching as the girl smiles, lifting a finger to play with one of her ringlets.

“Oh, that’s Alyssa, Jace and she used to—” She stops. “Uh, used to hang out.”

Hang out with his pierced cock inside of her, I’m sure.

Turning into the possessive type now, El?

My brows drop as I start to walk again, annoyed by the abundance of his past *flings* and the possession filling my chest. Jace notices me immediately and turns away from the perky blonde, taking a step toward me and flashing those damn dimples as he drops a kiss to my lips. I flick my eyes to the blonde as he lifts his head and wraps an arm around my shoulders, pulling me in and tucking me under his chin. Her expression quickly turns crestfallen and I can see the confusion in her eyes as she looks at us.

Jace reaches over and ruffles the top of Tiff’s hair. “Happy birthday, cousin.”

“I’m so happy you came!” Tiff exclaims. “How are you feeling?”

I feel him shrug against my back. “No worse for wear. And I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.” He presses a kiss to the top of my head. “El, this is Alyssa. Alyssa, this is El.”

What the fuck?

El? Just El? That's really all I get?

"Nice to meet you."

The perky little blonde smiles at me and I manage to twitch my lips up into some semblance of one in response. "Likewise."

"Alyssa lives in the next town over," Jace explains. "Our schools were actually big rivals growing up."

"Hmm. That's nice."

I narrow my eyes on the girl as awkward silence falls and after a second she starts to squirm under my gaze. She's definitely not a Sam and seems like a perfectly nice girl but... I just don't really care. She touched him, they have history, and she needs to go.

"Uh... so," Tiff starts lamely. "El said you brought the guitar, Jace?"

"Yeah..." Jace clears his throat, catching on to the tension in the air. "Yeah. I did."

The perky little blonde fidgets in the sand for one more second before cracking. "Okay, well, I guess I'll see you around later, Jace?" She turns to Tiff. "Happy birthday, by the way!"

Tiff accepts her hug, shooting her eyes nervously at me. "Thanks."

"See you around, Alyssa."

No, you most certainly will not, Jace Dawson.

I watch Alyssa walk away while Tiff picks up the nervous shuffle in the sand where she left off, looking everywhere but at Jace and me. As soon as the last little blonde ringlet disappears into the crowd, I whip around and step out of Jace's arms, glaring at him.

"El?"

He tilts his head at me in confusion. "Blondie?"

“El?!” I push at his shoulder. “You’re a fucking idiot, Dawson.” With that, I turn and stomp toward Andrea and Zane, like the five-year-old I am, leaving Jace to figure out why exactly he’s an idiot with his cousin.

Zane and Andrea are sitting in their pop-up chairs, eyes on me, and I’m guessing having caught what just went down by the fact they look entirely too amused for my liking.

I stop in front of them, taking a few deep breaths and raise my head, trying to maintain some shred of dignity. “Do you happen to have tequila?” I was not this girl. I had never had an issue with being possessive in my life and it was leaving me feeling all out of sorts.

“We do.” Andrea gives me a small smile, popping the cooler next to her and passing me the bottle.

My brows shoot up as I see the bottle is a nice añejo, and I am thoroughly shocked. “I’m impressed.” I tilt the bottle toward them in thanks before twisting the cap and taking a swig. “Añejo usually isn’t someone’s first choice.”

Andrea brings her cup up in an attempt to hide the smile on her face at my behavior. “Zane is the tequila drinker.”

I hold the bottle out to him, offering a sip and he takes it, cocking his head at me. “What’s the occasion?” His voice comes out amused, and unlike his girlfriend, he’s doing nothing to hide the smile on his face.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Your best friend is a manwhore.”

He laughs and takes a sip. “I believe he would prefer the term reformed manwhore now, and you already knew that.”

“Don’t get logical with me, Zane.” I take the bottle when he passes it back and spy a new tattoo on the inside of his hand, a firecracker in midexplosion. “Appropriate.” I scoff, nodding my head at the tattoo. “When’d you get that?”

He opens his hand and looks at the tattoo while I take a sip before bringing his eyes back to me. “Did it a couple days ago.”

“As in... yourself?”

“Yeah.” He nods. “I’m pretty much the only tattoo artist within a hundred miles of this place so it’s a nice side gig.”

I run my eyes over the multitude of tattoos covering his body, some decidedly less professional looking than others, and give him an amused grin. “Well, that explains a lot.”

“Hey,” he grumbles. “Don’t judge. It’s not like there are people lining up down the street to be your canvas when you’re first learning.”

Huffing a laugh, I take another sip and give him a nod. “I would imagine not.”

I pass the bottle back to Zane and feel Jace come up behind me, gripping my hips and dropping his head down next to mine. “Are you jealous, Blondie?” he whispers, voice teasing.

I turn my head to meet his eyes and give him an irritated look. “No. But the abundance of your past flings.” Bringing my fingers up, I throw in some bratty air quotes. “I have to deal with is starting to become a tad annoying.”

“Ah, come on.” He flashes those dimples, eyeing me playfully. “Alyssa isn’t that bad.”

I push out of his arms and give a humorless laugh. “Are you kidding me right now?” He did not just say that.

Jace narrows his eyes on me, taking a step forward and closing the distance I just put between us. “So you’re telling me when we go to LA in a couple weeks, we won’t have any run-ins with people you used to sleep with?”

I hear Zane choke on something behind me before muttering. “Bad move, bro. Bad move.”

Taking a deep breath, I step even closer, lifting my head with a vicious look. “I hate you right now.”

His firework eyes drill into mine for a second before a grin pulls at his lips and he shakes his head. “No, you don’t.” He presses our bodies up against one another’s, dropping his mouth to my ear. “Want to lick me so they know I’m yours?”

“Ugh!” I push at his chest. “You’re insufferable.”

Jace turns his head to Andrea and Zane. “We’ll be back in a few.” Then he leans down and shocks the hell out of me by throwing me over his shoulder and calling out as he starts to walk away. “Blondie here needs to cool down.”

Chapter 26

Present Day

The sound of people hooting and hollering fills the air as Jace's shoulder digs into my stomach. "What the fuck do you think you're doing, Dawson?" I gasp.

"We're taking a time-out to figure out what's really got you all worked up."

"Like hell we are." I reach down and smack his ass, kicking my legs uselessly, trying to get him to put me down as I hear the waves coming closer.

He reaches up and smacks my ass in turn. "You're right, Ellie. We are."

"You don't get to call me that!"

"Yes, I do." He smacks my ass again and I bite my lip to quell the scream of protest trying to escape, having to settle for glaring at the sand in retribution.

I watch as the sand under his feet turns into silty water when we hit the ocean, but still, he keeps going. Not stopping until the water is just below my head and hitting him high on the waist. Only then does he lift me back over his shoulder and slide me down his body, hooking his hands under my knees to hold me against him.

I cross my arms and glare at him. "Cool down, very funny."

"I thought we could use some privacy." His lips twitch and he dips his head down close to mine, eyes soft and searching. "Now are you going to tell me what really upset you back there? Because I know you and it's something more."

I drop my eyes from his to stare at the water, feeling as if my heart is shifting uncomfortably in my chest. "I don't know how to do this." I finally admit with a sigh.

"What do you mean?"

"Last summer..." I shake my head and bring my gaze back to his while looping my arms around his neck. "Last summer

was anything but a normal relationship and before that I'd never been in one so I don't know how this is supposed to work."

He pulls his bottom lip through his teeth and I can see the grin he's trying to hide. "You're going to have to give me a little more to go on here."

"You—" I start and then roll my eyes at myself, heaving a breath. "You introduced me as El."

"Yes?" He draws out the word, tilting his head at me in question.

"Just El."

I see the moment it dawns on him and his expression goes slack. "Oh."

"It's just—three days ago you said, you know, those words, which I know you meant." I rush out. "Mean. And I'm not asking you to say them again, that's not what this is about. But then today I was just... El."

"I see." That flash of dimples strikes for a moment before he can hide it. "Listen... you're not the only one new at this. I didn't think to—I'm sorry, I should have told her you were my girlfriend?" he guesses.

I give him a nod and dart my eyes away, entirely too embarrassed by this entire ordeal.

He lifts a hand to my chin, bringing my eyes back to his. "I still mean them. Ya know? Those words. I'm just trying to give you..."

I nod and press a quick kiss to his lips. "I know." Because I do, I see it every time he looks at me, cares for me, plays with me.

"It is nice to know you care though." He gives me a wicked grin. "It's kinda hot, seeing you get all possessive."

I stare at him in affront. "Of course I care!"

But you haven't exactly been vocal about that, have you, El?

“Good.” He brings his lips back to mine, pulling at them teasingly and dropping his hands to my ass, pushing me against him. Letting me feel exactly how hard he’s becoming as I grip his shoulders and grind myself against him. He lifts his head, looking down at me with eyes of pure mischief before running a hand down to slide his finger back and forth over my pussy. “Wanna be a little reckless with me?” He dips his lips to mine again, sliding his fingers underneath my bathing suit and thrusting two inside of me. “Cause a little scene?” I gasp as he runs his teeth along my jawline, bringing his mouth to my ear while pressing down on my clit. “Show them exactly who I belong to?”

I lift my hands to his hair, tugging and making him lift his head enough so I can give him my own brilliant kind of smile. “Always, Dawson.”

“Fuck.” He groans, eyes sliding over my face with a wondrous look before he lifts the hand from my pussy to reach down between us and loosens the strings on his bathing suit just enough to free his cock. He quickly nudges my bathing suit to the side and I feel him move his cock to my entrance seconds before he thrusts into me hard. Slamming home in one powerful move that leaves me gasping and clutching at his shoulders. I bite my lip as my body struggles to adjust for a moment in the best kind of way. Flicking my eyes over his shoulder, I see the people along the beach casting us curious gazes, but they’re too far away and I’m too lost in the haze of lust to care to place them.

Jace rolls his hips up, thrusting into me again and dropping his mouth to my ear. “Are they watching us?” His voice comes out low and intimate as he grinds against me, pushing deeper, letting me feel his piercing bump up against the deepest part of me.

“Y-yes,” I stutter as he brings both of his hands back to my ass before using it as leverage to slam back into me this time. “Fuck! Yes.”

“Hmm.” He thrusts hard again and drops a gentle kiss to the skin below my ear before sliding his hands into the back of my bathing suit. Trailing his fingers down over my bare ass, he

presses in with one, nudging it against my tight entrance. “Do you like that?”

“Oh my god,” I moan before biting down on my lip again. I do, but fuck, I’ve never...

He grinds into me again, sending pleasure sparking from my clit as he applies pressure with that finger. “Knowing that everyone on that beach is probably guessing that my cock is inside of you right now?”

I bury my head in his chest, so coiled with need that I’m damn near shaking. “Fuck, yes.” I clench my inner muscles around him in reprimand and rake my nails down his back. “I love it. Okay? All of it.”

A light laugh runs through him and he lifts his finger, sliding his hand back to grip the flesh of my ass. “We’ll save that for another day.”

He starts to thrust into me in earnest then, setting a relentless pace that has me gasping and cursing. I use my grip on his shoulders for leverage to bring myself down on his cock, making us both groan as we repeat the motion again and again, each time harder than the last. Everything in me is heightened by the fact that people can see us without actually being able to view what’s happening under the surface and it’s only a few more moments before I feel myself start to tip over that glorious edge. Pleasure tightens up everything in me and locks my pussy up around his cock as he whispers in my ear.

“I belong to you, Ellie. Don’t ever doubt that.” He trails his lips over my jawline. “Always have in a way.” Bringing us eye to eye, he looks at me with unusually serious eyes and runs his nose against mine. “I’m yours. No one else’s.”

I press my lips to his and cry out into his mouth as the orgasm shatters through me. Locking up every muscle in my body and setting me free with a miraculous release. I feel Jace’s body jerk against mine as he follows me over the edge a second later, emptying himself inside of me with a curse and I tighten my arms around him, holding him as close as I can. Dropping my head to his chest, I lift a hand to the back of his

hair and play with a few loose strands as our breathing evens out.

Jace brings a hand up to tug at my hair and I lift my head to see the happy grin on his face, eyes shining with delight. “I think your claim has been thoroughly staked.”

I throw him a bratty smirk, feeling all kinds of satisfied. “Yeah, I did a little more than lick you.” I lift my lips to his and he laughs into the kiss.

“That you did.” He turns and looks over his shoulder, voice coming out reluctant. “We should get back.”

“True,” I quip. “I do have some drinking to do.”

He looks back at me and lifts his brows. “Want me to carry you over my shoulder?”

I push at his shoulders with a laugh and roll my eyes. “I think I can manage.”

He drops his hands out from under me the next second, letting me fall under the water before I start to tread and come up spluttering. The sight of Jace’s head is thrown back in laughter greets me and the melodic sound fills the air as I glare at him dangerously.

“Not funny, Dawson!”

“Come on, Blondie.” He tilts his head toward the beach. “Let’s go get you that drink.”

We swim back to the beach, splashing and playing along the way until the loss of water forces us to stand. I check my bathing suit to make sure everything’s still in the right place before looking to the shore and seeing Tiff glaring at us with her arms crossed. My lips twitch up at the sight as I walk toward her, feeling a bit like an errant child about to be scolded by their mother.

“I changed my mind.” She narrows her eyes and flicks them between us as we leave the water behind. “You know what I want for my birthday? The only thing I want from you two?”

She pauses dramatically and I can practically feel the laughter that I know Jace is having to contain. Tiff’s a little

more on the conservative side and is not so fond of our afternoon quickies at the bar.

“To not have to see or hear any more of the very public sex you two like to have!” She shrieks, drawing the eyes of a few people walking by. “I could practically hear you, El! Like, everyone on the beach knew!”

Jace covers up his burst of laughter with a cough but I just cock a brow at her. “So?” I challenge, determined to blow her mind a little.

Everyone needs someone to widen their worldview, right?

“So!?” Her brows drop down and she mouths like a fish for a second. “So, so...”

I can see the moment she realizes that I just really don’t care and her jaw drops, staying there as confusion fills her face.

Throwing back my head with a laugh, I reach out to grab her hand. “Come on, Tiff.” I tug and start to pull her up the beach with me. “Let me teach you a little bit about life and sipping tequila.”

I spend the next two hours teaching Tiff how to properly sip añejo and schooling her in the art of not giving a fuck. Dragging Andrea into it by way of the fact that it is her boyfriend’s tequila and chairs I’m stealing for this little afternoon special. Plus, I like her and this newfound female friendship thing we have going on. I lose count of the number of times Tiff’s mouth pops open in shock and our laughter becomes steadily louder with the more tequila we drink.

I can feel Jace’s eyes as he keeps watch and I make sure to stay aware of where he is in case, God forbid, something goes wrong. The happy looks we shoot each other when our eyes meet through the crowd warm my soul, leaving me feeling light and relaxed and... loved. Utterly secure and loved.

Before Jace had come into my life, a part of me had been content to live in my misery. Secretly scared that if I lost that pain, I’d lose the memory of Coop completely. But Jace... He had come into my life and made it impossible to live like that. He had shown me what I was missing out on, pointed out the

path to healing, but ultimately still left the choice up to me. That was the thing about Jace that had let him slip through my walls, I realize. He always left the choice up to me while somehow making it impossible for me to choose anything but the light. But him.

Playfully picking my locks where Coop would have just kicked down my door.

I watch the crowd thin out to a more local mix and sip my tequila under the last light of the day. Silently marveling at the feeling of wholeness within me. I never thought I'd make it back here again.

By the time Tiff remembers Jace's promise to sing and pops up like a firework, she's swaying on her feet.

Oops.

"My cousin promised to sing!" She holds her hands out like she's on a surfboard while I giggle into my glass and Andrea leans her head back over the side of her chair to look at us upside down.

"Come on, El!" She waves dramatically at me to stand. "Up! Up! We have to find Ken."

Andrea darts her eyes to me, red hair hanging in the sand. "Ken?"

"Barbie and Ken, Andrea!" Tiff huffs. "You have to keep up."

Giggling again, I sip the last of my añejo before dropping the glass into the cup holder of the chair and standing. The world tilts and sways for a moment and I dig my toes into the sand until everything rights itself. Hmm. Perhaps I'm a bit more toward the drunk side of the spectrum than I thought. Spectrums, I giggle happily at the thought as Tiff grabs my hand and starts to pull me toward the bonfire the guys are building nearby. Man, I need to do a full spectrum photograph the next time Jace and I go chase the sun.

I grip Tiff's hand and stop, giving her a serious look. "I really love full spectrum photography."

Her face screws up in confusion. “That’s good?”

“Don’t you?”

She shakes her head and starts to tug me along again. “Sure. Whatever.”

I sigh wistfully. “I really need to have Yvie ship me my filters... Oh!” I stop, bringing us to a halt again a few steps away from the guys. “I can get them when I go home in a couple weeks!”

“That’s great.” She rolls her eyes at me and turns as Jace and Tommy walk up to us, pointing a finger at Jace. “Ken, you need to sing.”

I throw Tiff a glare before turning to Jace and jutting my bottom lip out. “She doesn’t care about my spectrums and filters.”

Jace’s mouth parts in surprise and his eyes flick between us. “Just exactly how drunk are you two?”

I throw him a bratty smirk and answer, “Not at all” right when Tiff leans over to grab her knees and moans, “Fuck. I don’t feel so good.”

Tommy chuckles and I look down at Tiff with wide eyes before darting my gaze back up to Jace. “Well,” I elaborate, dragging the word out. “Someone had to teach her about the whole world of birds and bees and tequila that’s out there.” I give him a winning smile. “And you did say to my heart’s content.”

Jace rolls his eyes at me before shaking his head with a grin and turning to call out over his shoulder. “Jared! Your girlfriend needs to sit down.” He turns his head back to Tiff. “And drink some water.”

Jared walks over and gives Tiff a sweet, dopey kind of look before lifting her up and starting to walk her over to a blanket in the sand. She raises her head when they get a few steps away and calls out while walking. “You have to sing, Ken! Even if I’m puking, I want to hear you!”

I giggle yet again and Jace turns his confused eyes on me. “Why is she calling me Ken?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I ask before narrowing my eyes at him. “Do you care about my spectrums and filters?”

Jace laughs lightly and walks to a nearby cooler, grabbing a water bottle from it and bringing it to me. “I always care about your spectrums and filters, Ellie.” His voice comes out husky as he drops his lips to mine and presses the water bottle into my hands. “Drink this while I grab my guitar from the jeep, yeah?” He turns to Tommy. “Keep an eye on her while I’m gone, okay?”

Tommy nods. “Of course.”

My eyes drop to the deep cuts of Jace’s Adonis belt before he turns to walk away and I sigh sadly at the loss of the view.

I’m going to lick my way clear across that fucking *V* cut tonight.

“That’s nice.” Tommy’s amused voice sounds and my eyes pop open as I jerk my head to him.

“Oops.”

“Come on.” He laughs. “Let’s find Jace’s blanket and sit.”

I take a sip from the water bottle and follow Tommy around the bonfire. Only almost stumbling once, if I do say so myself. I make sure to give Sam a bratty smirk when I pass her and stick my tongue out over my shoulder, earning a look of shock that I’m still enjoying as Tommy stops at a blue blanket. I plop down onto the blanket happily as he takes a seat next to me.

“So Jace told me you spent the past year in Europe, right?” Tommy asks, and I nod while taking another sip of water. “I did the whole backpacking thing after college too. Where did you go?”

“Hmm,” I muse, looking up and trying to remember the route we took. “My friends and I started in Berlin, then went down to Czech Republic because that’s where my mom was from, then Austria, Italy, France, and Spain before hopping over to do the UK. Then went up to Norway and Sweden

before hitting up the Netherlands.” I cock my head in thought, trying to make my brain fire through the haze of tequila and decide to summarize the rest briefly for both our sakes. “After that, we worked our way through the Eastern European countries and ended in Greece.” I bring my eyes back to Tommy’s. “It was a bit of a convoluted path, but it worked.”

He laughs and nods his head in agreement. “Damn, so you really did do it all.”

“It was a year well spent.” And much needed.

“Agreed. I loved Greece when I went. That’s a great place to end.”

“Oh yeah.” I nod. “I ate it up, there’s something about being around all that ancient history that makes your life seem... I don’t know, more manageable, bearable. It was a great place to end.” Dropping back onto the blanket, I look up at the stars just starting to come to life in the dusky sky and sigh. “But I actually started in Costa Rica, technically, I guess.”

“Really?” He dips his head to look down at me, brows dropping. “Where?”

I pause for a second in memory before mumbling. “Cahuita.”

Tommy’s silence drags for a long minute and I flick my eyes to him, finding his gaze on my chest.

Well, hello there, sir.

Propping up on my elbows, I cock a brow at him. “Tommy?”

“Uh.” He looks up at me and clears his throat. “Sorry, what town did you say?”

“Ca-hui-ta.” I sound out tipsily with another giggle and look to the fire, seeing Jace coming back down from farther up the beach. “It’s this little village on the Caribbean Sea.”

“Right,” he says softly, falling silent again and I look back to find his eyes on my chest again.

“Are you checking me out, Tommy?”

He jerks his eyes back to mine in surprise. “What?”

“Because while I do find you adorable...” I smirk and nod my head to Jace. “I’m pretty sure Jace has already called dibs... and the feeling is mutual.”

“Um. No.” He laughs awkwardly, eyes drifting down for a second before lifting. “No. Sorry.” He turns his head to see where Jace is coming up on the other side of the bonfire. “I, uh, have to use the bathroom.”

I watch Tommy get up and walk quickly around the bonfire, cutting Jace off on the other side and grabbing his arm. They’re close enough that I can see their mouths moving but too far for me to hear what’s being said. Tommy looks tense, mouth moving fast and is casting his eyes nervously my way. A few seconds later, Jace throws his head back with a laugh and I can clearly see him mouth the words “No way.” as he brings his head back down. I watch as Tommy gives him one last look before pressing his lips together, shaking his head and walking away.

Huh. Maybe Tommy is into voyeurism or something. And while Jace and I might be a little more on the exhibitionist side... Yeah, I don’t see him going for that. Or me, for that matter. Well, probably.

Jace narrows his eyes and watches Tommy walk away for a moment before shaking his head and turning back to the bonfire. His eyes find me and he stares for a moment as if lost in thought, like he’s looking at me but not really seeing me. I cock my head at him in question but he just shakes his head again, giving me a small grin and bringing a hand up to make a gesture like Tommy’s losing his mind. Giving him a nod, I watch as he comes up to the bonfire and am surprised when he sits down on the other side of it from me. He pops open his guitar case, pulling it out and picking at a few strings while getting situated in the sand.

Those dimples flash as he lifts his head, playful eyes locking with mine. “Hey, Blondie,” he calls out, pulling his bottom lip through his teeth. “You think you’re sober enough

to pay attention? Because I've been practicing this one and it'd be a shame if you missed it."

Oh. *Oh*. He's performing for me.

My lips twitch up into a smirk and I sit up, giving him my full attention. "I'm with you, Dawson." I cock a brow playfully, using our words.

He gives me one last look and pull of his bottom lip before dropping his eyes to the guitar and beginning to strum. The song is slow and steady when he starts, dropping low for a couple beats before lifting to a higher note to repeat. It's the perfect, lazily acoustic kind of song that I know he favors after spending so much time listening to him play. The sound of it is soft and intimate, perfectly suited to his low croon. He flicks his eyes to mine and I see that flash of dimples once more before he starts to sing.

And I know right away this song is only for me.

"I've been waiting for you

To come around and tell me the truth

About everything that you're going through

My girl, you've got nothing to lose."

The breath leaves my chest in a whoosh as I watch him, knowing that this is us to him. This is our song. This is how Jace likes to speak and right now he's pouring his love for me out in front of everyone. Cracking his heart open and bleeding into the sand for me. Making sure there's not a doubt in anyone's mind, including mine, that I have not only his body but his heart too. It humbles me in a way few things in my life have, that this magnificent sun would dare to break through the shadows of my dark eclipse. But that's just what the sun did, it was as natural as breathing to him.

And when he gets to the chorus... my heart cracks open in turn.

"I've got time, I've got love

Got confidence you'll rise above

Give me a minute to hold my girl

Give me a minute to hold my girl

Crowded town, silent bed

Pick a place to rest your head

Give me a minute to hold my girl

Give me a minute to hold my girl.”

I watch him sing with his golden skin shining in the fire, hair pulled back messily, eyes down as he sings. And I realize I love him too. Even if some part of me still has trouble saying those three little words, still feels like it's a betrayal for some reason.

But I do love him.

I love him for being the boy who reminded me of who I was, who chased me down in a parking lot, picked my locks and taught me how to chase the sun again. I love him for wanting me even when I wasn't so sure I wanted myself. For showing me that even the worst heartbreak can heal, and that love, in all its infinite spectrums, can always be born anew.

It terrifies me, the idea of giving another piece of my heart over when I just became whole again, but... Jace keeps his promises, right? And I don't want to miss my moment in the sun with him.

I stand and his eyes rise to me, watching curiously as I walk across to him while he starts to sing those last two runs of the chorus. But if he can bleed out here in front of everyone in the sand for me, I can sure as hell do the same for him. Fear has no place with us. It never has, really. He tilts his head back to look up at me when I make it to him and step over his guitar one foot at a time, allowing him a second to move it forward and make room before I settle into his lap.

Looping my arms around his neck, I drop my forehead to his as he sings those last lines. Letting him see all my feelings as I stare into his firework eyes, giving in to the love he's earned from me. The smile on his face turns brilliant and he drops the guitar beside us as he gets to the last run of the

chorus before bringing his hands up to cup my face. He sings softly then. Only for me, for us. For this love I'm about to give him.

When the last word trails from his lips, I drop my mouth to his ear. "I'm right there with you, Dawson. Love and all."

"Yeah?" he whispers back huskily. "Sure that's not the tequila talking?"

"I'm sure." I nod adamantly, lifting my head to look into his eyes again, seeing the fear and the hope there. "Just hang in there with me... and keep your promises, okay?"

My eyes prick as I finish and he dips his lips to mine with a soft kiss. "Always, Ellie."

I kiss him deeply then, pouring all my feelings into it. Showing him how much he means to me in the way I speak best. He drops back onto the sand, taking me with him and dropping his hands to my hips. His lips pulling at mine softly as we settle into this new symphony of us.

But just when things start to heat up a bit, I hear Tiff's voice holler from somewhere to my right. "No sex, El! No sex! That was my birthday wish." She harrumphs. "That was also the shortest concert ever. I want a do-over."

Jace and I laugh into each other's mouths as we break our kiss, staring into each other's eyes a moment. Finding our footing after stepping off the precipice into this whole new world of vulnerability. I ruin the moment by yawning and he chuckles, bringing a hand up to my spine and trailing his fingers as I drop my head to his chest.

"Can you carry me over your shoulder home?" I mumble, snuggling into his warmth and the comfort of his sea-spring scent.

His chest lightly rumbles under my cheek. "I can do that."

It doesn't take long for my eyelids to become unbearably heavy with his fingers trailing up and down my spine, and I sink into him farther. The promise of sleep luring me into that place somewhere between awake and a land of dreams. I feel him suck in a breath, then pause for a second before speaking.

“Hey.” He asks quietly, “That guy from last summer. What was his name?”

“Hmm.” I snuggle impossibly deeper into his skin before mumbling drowsily. “Coop.”

His fingers stop their trail on my spine and his body tenses below my cheek.

It takes me a minute to rouse myself enough to ask. “Why?”

There’s a long silence before his fingers start their trail on my spine again.

I hear his answer just as the tide of sleep finally pulls me under. “No reason, Blondie. I was just curious.” He clears his throat. “Go back to sleep.”

And if I hadn’t been so tipsy and sleepy, if I hadn’t felt so secure and happy and loved... I might have noticed the way his body was still taut with tension under my cheek. Because Jace Dawson would make a shit poker player, but I was just enough under the thrall of the day not to notice.

Chapter 27

One Year Ago

I'm lying on the beach, hot and frustrated in the constraints of my tank top, trying to protect the marriage vow tattoo that I got when Coop and I eloped three weeks ago. I had wanted my favorite of his words permanently inked on the skin he was always tracing them onto. The poem that he had told me the day he proposed split in two between us. And he had happily complied, going along with my idea to bypass rings in favor of something more permanent. Possessive bastard that he was. I had taken the first half of the poem about our stars and he had taken the second part that spoke of our souls and insanity.

I hadn't exactly thought through the fact that we couldn't get the tattoos wet or have them in the sun for a month... and we were in freaking Costa Rica.

Outside of that cumbersome fact though, we had been basking in marital bliss. I would've been embarrassed by how annoyingly in love we were if it wasn't for the fact that I was so ridiculously happy. It was a little insane to marry a man you had met on vacation, I knew that, but nothing in my life has ever felt so right. Our dynamics were still the same in so many ways. Me throwing bratty comments his way to rile him up while he shoved into my space with his demanding dominance. And yet, at the end of every minute, every hour, every day, there was this love that flowed between us.

But when we had made a quick trip to Monteverde last week to finally check it off my list, he had gotten a call from work he couldn't refuse. Alec had gotten himself in trouble, shocker, on the job he had taken for Coop and needed some backup. So I had come back to Cahuita alone and he had shot off to Columbia. Promising he would be back as soon as he could.

He had been gone almost a week and the separation had nearly killed us both, coming so soon after our story finally, really began. We had messaged whenever he could pull himself away but still... I had been left feeling like I was

missing a limb. And while that feeling caused a little tendril of fear to wrap around me, and probably always would, he was my heart.

Coop had walked through the door at three a.m. this morning, shocking the hell out of me, and looking like death warmed up. The exhaustion pouring off of him. And as much as I had tried to get him to go to sleep... the only thing he had been interested in was burying himself in me. Saying he wasn't about to let me go out of town for two days on my Arenal volcano tour without spending at least twenty-four naked hours with me. And the reunion had been so, so sweet. He had still been out like a light when I woke up at ten a.m. so I had snuck out of bed, pulled on a pair of bikini bottoms and wandered out here to the beach.

I feel my phone buzz in my hand and sit up, squinting down at it through my sunglasses and seeing Stef's name flash on the screen.

"Well if it isn't the devil himself," I answer, a smile spreading across my face.

His deep laughter rumbles through the phone at my greeting.

"Ah, she lives. I was beginning to think I was going to have to fly down there and make sure you weren't being held hostage if I received another one-word message of response."

"I've been busy," I dodge, knowing I need to come clean but not wanting to do it over the phone. He'll be so pissed he wasn't there when I got married. Damn Italians were so crazy when it came to those they considered family.

"Hmm. With that guy still? What was his name again? I might have to learn it if he lasts much longer. I think this might be a record for you."

"Coop." I laugh. "And yeah, I'm still with him."

A moment passes before he answers me through the phone. "You sound happy."

"I typically am with the exception of when Kai gets mopey," I tease. "But that just sets all of us off."

“No, well yeah, it does. But I mean you sound almost... I don’t know, giddy. Like a girl.”

“I am a girl.” I scoff.

“Not a normal girl.”

“True.” I sigh, knowing I’m going to give him something or he’ll never let up. “I think I’ll probably head home sometime in the next couple weeks... bring Coop so you can meet him. Make sure you guys haven’t leveled the neighborhood with your debauchery, then decide what the plan is from there.”

He pauses. “That sounds serious.”

My pause drags on as I briefly consider spilling the news to him, but... he would tell the guys because they don’t keep secrets from each other and Mac is such an instigator he would totally tattle to Yvie.

“It is,” I finally answer him.

“Cara... have you gone and fallen in love on me?”

“Maybe.” I smile, feeling Coop come up behind me. He sits down at my back and cages me in with his legs, his arms wrapping around my waist, fingers moving to caress the tattoo under my left breast. The fresh ink on his left arm standing out in contrast where it winds up around his forearm.

“Well then you definitely must bring him. We’ll take him off your hands for a night and show him the town.”

“No way, Stefano.” Coop begins to kiss a path up my neck and I tilt my head to give him better access. “I know what you mean when you say you’re going to show someone the town and it usually ends with bodily injury, and not yours. I remember my prom date, thank you very much.”

“Do you have such little faith in me?”

“No, I would just prefer to still have a h—” Husband in the morning. I cut myself off, but Stef knows me too well and the silence over the phone fills with his suspicion.

“Cara...”

“Gotta go, Stef! See you soon. Bye!” I quickly end the call, pressing the button about a million times until my phone returns to the home screen.

Coop chuckles against my neck. “I can handle myself, Princess. In case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Yes, but three against one is not a fair fight.” I turn my head to meet his happy, sleep-soaked eyes. “What are you doing up?”

“You left the bed.” He drops a kiss to my lips. “I couldn’t sleep.” His lips twitch up at the corners, dark eyes dancing. “Plus, I have a surprise for you.”

I pop up, practically knocking him back with the move. “Well why didn’t you start with that!” I wave my hand hurriedly for him to do the same. “Don’t let me stop you.”

He laughs softly as he stands and grabs my hand. “I figured you were a surprise kind of girl.”

“Point me to a girl who’s not and I’ll point you to a liar,” I tell him, dragging him along as I skip toward the house.

I bounce on the balls of my feet when we make it in the house, clapping my hands excitedly as he goes over to where he dropped his bag by the desk last night. Reaching inside, he pulls out a small black velvet box and I still.

“I know you said you didn’t need a ring,” he says, coming to stand in front of me, hooded eyes down as he fidgets with the box in his hand in a way that’s so unlike him. “But I figured this way, if you feel like it... it’s there.”

He cracks open the box and my breath stalls at the sight of the most beautiful ring I’ve ever seen. It’s gold, curling around from the bottom with two stones almost meeting at the top. A round, black diamond sits slightly below a larger, pear-shaped diamond sparkling with brilliance. The barest hint of space between them. I’m rendered speechless at the sight of the unusual ring.

“It’s called a Toi et Moi.” He clears his throat. “It means you and me and I figured Delacroix is obviously French so... I don’t know. I was just browsing on my laptop to kill time at

the airport and when I saw it, it made me think of us, the dark and the light of the stars...”

I blink down at the sparkles and open my mouth, trying to form words.

“If you don’t like it, I can—”

“Don’t you dare.” I reach out and snag the ring from his hand. “I love it. It’s perfect.” I twist the box this way and that, admiring the facets of the stones, and he chuckles.

“It’s us.”

His voice drags my eyes up to his, and my heart softens at the soft reverence in his gaze. “It’s us,” I echo.

He takes the box from my hand and gently pulls the ring from it. Reaching down, he pockets the box as he brings my left hand up and slides the ring onto my finger. He barely has time to mutter, “It’s perfect,” before I launch myself at him.

My arms wrap around his neck as I jump, knowing he’ll catch me, and I wind my legs behind his back as his hands immediately come up to cup my ass. I kiss him deeply, hungrily, as he walks us over to the bed and lays us down, not breaking our contact as he settles against me. I love the feel of him on me, the weight of him pressing against me in all the right places. Reaching down, I tug at the bottom of his shirt and he lifts his lips from mine long enough for me to yank it over his head, my eyes devouring that magnificent body of his.

He drops his mouth back to mine, tugging my bottom lip through his teeth and sliding his hand down to the strings on the side of my bikini bottoms, playfully pulling at them. I lift my hips in return, rolling them against his hard cock, impatient to have him inside of me. He lifts his lips from mine with a dark laugh and I take advantage of the opportunity to pull my tank top over my head, putting us skin to skin. I dip my head back and arch like the cat he accused me of being, rubbing my nipples against his chest, the friction causing a sigh of pleasure to escape my lips.

Sliding my hands up to his head, I tug on his hair as he grinds into me, my pussy so drenched already that my bikini

bottoms might as well have been in the water earlier. When I bring my eyes back to his face, they land on the deep bags under his eyes, giving me pause. I reach up, running my thumb under one gently as he finally pulls that string loose, causing my bottoms to fall open to him. He looks down, cupping my pussy, and as much as I want to shove it aside, I can't let go of the question nagging at my brain. Knowing that I'll only be half here until it's answered.

“What are you going to do about work?” I ask softly, causing him to pause and lift his eyes to mine. “I mean... I can handle it, the separation, if it's still what you want to do but...” I trail off.

“Are we speaking our language now, Princess?” He smirks in that savage way of his and runs a finger down my slit. “I've already thought about it.”

“And?” I ask, breath hitching when he does it again.

“I set up a meeting to talk to my boss tomorrow. Tell him I either need to be able to only take shorter jobs or I'm going to have to look elsewhere.”

“Are you sure? I don't want you to ever have to give up something you love for me.”

He drops a kiss to my lips. “There is nothing I love more than you.” Lifting up, he pushes his shorts down his hips and kicks them off the bed before running both of his hands up my legs, spreading me wide and nudging at my entrance with his impressive cock.

“Besides.” He drops back down, dragging his teeth down the mound of my breast to my nipple. “I'll probably have to figure something else out eventually anyway.”

I arch under his mouth as he sucks my nipple deeply into his mouth. The feel of him teasing my entrance driving me crazy. “Why?” I gasp.

He releases my nipple with a tug. “Don't you see it?” Trailing his lips over to my other breast, he rakes the nipple through his teeth with just enough force to have me lifting my

hips up, futilely trying to drive him deeper as he holds himself just out of reach.

“See what?”

“Us.” He finally pushes in that first inch and my breath hitches, inner walls beginning to stretch at the invasion. I reach down and grab his hips, trying to pull him in farther but he holds himself still, laughing that damn low, dark laugh.

Arrogant bastard.

I narrow my eyes at him. “I’m going to get this tattoo removed if you don’t fulfill your husbandly duties here pretty quick.”

The dark in his eyes sparks with amusement. “So impatient.” He drops his head to my neck, kissing a path as he pulls back before driving forward, impaling me with one gloriously hard thrust that has him bumping up against the end of me. A gasping cry is ripped from my throat as my inner walls spasm around him and he gives me a moment to adjust to the intrusion, continuing to speak. “I figure after we get tired of living like nomads, we’ll get some boringly domestic little two-story, probably in LA so you can live by that goddamn Italian and the rest of them.” I wrap my arms around his shoulders, nails sinking into his skin and the picture he paints. “I’ll put a lock on the picket fence around the yard so we don’t have to worry about the kids running into the street.”

“Kids?” I ask incredulously.

“Oh yeah.” He pushes impossibly deeper. “Two or three. So they can have siblings.”

I reach up and tug on his hair in teasing reprimand as he gives me a shallow thrust. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, husband.” But my heart is so full it almost hurts at his remembered words for me.

He arches a brow, lips ghosting up playfully. “I’m already working on it.”

I laugh as he pulls back and hooks one of my legs around his arms, the sound turning into a moan as he thrusts back into me powerfully.

“We’ll have to get takeout a lot, because neither of us can cook worth shit.” Another powerful thrust that has me reaching out to anchor myself on the bed frame. “But that’s okay, because it’ll save us from having to do dishes anyway.”

He grinds his pelvis against my clit before reaching down to grab my hips and flip me over. I drop onto my elbows on the mattress, pushing my ass up toward him, greedy with need as he grabs my legs and pushes them wide, thrusting hard back into me. I throw my hair back for him in the way I know he likes and he winds it around his hand. Pulling my head back and dropping his chest to my back as he whispers in my ear.

“All the other moms will hate you because you’ll be a brat who wears your concert tees with a husband who fucks you senseless every night, but you can take it because you never give a shit what anyone thinks anyway.”

He drags his teeth along that spot at the base of my neck he loves to worship, his cock taking me higher with every glorious thrust as anticipation starts to tighten throughout my body. I reach my hand back and grab his thigh when he thrusts into me again, keeping him there as I jerk my hips back onto him, wanting him deeper, farther. Until he’s so far into me, a piece of him will never escape. He threads an arm around my chest and rises up, taking me with him, the angle making everything tighter and pressing his cock at a whole new angle inside of me.

“And we’ll bring them here, our kids.” He gently massages my breast as his other hand slides down to my clit, rolling his fingers over it with unerring accuracy. “Tell them the story of how we fell in love.”

I turn my head to meet his heated night-forest eyes, cocking a brow.

“Maybe not everything.” He chuckles darkly.

I reach back and wrap my arms around his head. “Okay,” I sigh dramatically, voice catching with need. “I guess we can have kids.”

“Brat.” He smiles that rare, breathtaking smile right before he pinches my nipple and pushes down on my clit.

I squirm against him as his assault on my clit continues and he rolls his hips into me again and again, causing his cock to rub against my walls with delicious friction. My whole body starts to shake and I feel as if my skin is about to split right open about two seconds before I come, crying his name loudly as my pussy convulses around him. He brings his hands to my hips, grinding into me farther and my upper body drops to the bed.

My heart races as I plant my hands, trying to catch my breath as he drops his lips to my spine, kissing his way up as he begins to move inside of me again. He wraps an arm back around me as he presses his chest fully into my back, gently gripping my chin and tilting my head to meet his gaze. Dropping his lips to mine, he kisses me fiercely, intensely, and I meet his demand with my own, the kiss becoming a thing of clashing teeth and gasps as he pulls back and slams into me.

His lips lift the barest centimeter from mine. “Do you see it?” he whispers huskily.

I open my eyes, finding the love edging through the darkness of his own, and give him a nod of response. Incapable of speech as he continues to thrust hard into me, another orgasm already bearing down on me.

And I do. I see it all.

The house, the kids, the nights spent lazily making love to each other after the kids are in bed, voices hushed so we don’t wake them. The love, the laughter.

The millions of cherished moments we’ll have in our lifetime.

And him.

I see him by my side every step of the way.

Holding my hand as our kids come into the world. Bitching about feeding the dog I’m going to make him get. Building fires in the fireplace when it’s barely cold out because he knows I can’t stand anything but oppressive heat.

I see all of it. All because of a guy who wouldn't take no for an answer. A man who saw how precious what we have is and fought for it. Fought me for it. And I'll love him forever for that. For his darkness that calls to mine, his words that slay me, his playfulness that makes an appearance at just the right time.

He's the other side of my insolent coin and I can't imagine my life without him. We fit each other, our jagged edges forming this magnificent unification of us.

He slams into me and I cry out, walls slamming down around him as I come, imagining it all in painful reality, tears sliding onto my cheeks. He groans and thrusts deeply back into me, holding himself there and I feel his cock jerk as he pours himself inside of me. We stay that way for a while, both of us gasping for breath, high on each other and our shared dream.

Eventually my hips start to complain though and I push at his arm, hating the feeling when he moves and slides out of me. He drops onto his back and I go willingly when he pulls me to him, tangling our bodies again as we bask in the afterglow. The softness in his gaze pulls at my heartstrings as he brings a hand up and runs his thumb along my cheek. I'm not ready to be apart from him again so soon.

"Sure you don't want to come on my volcano tour with me? I have a feeling we could make that very interesting."

"Without a doubt." He huffs a laugh before his brows draw down. "But I can't. I have my meeting and you need to actually have the space to take some pictures."

"True." I sigh. "Well, don't worry too much about your meeting. You can still be a mercenary in the suburbs. I'm sure the PTA would find a use for you." I smirk. "I hear they're quite cutthroat."

A surprised laugh bursts from me as he rolls us over, pressing his weight into me as he tickles at my sides. "You just think you're so funny, don't you?"

“I am,” I gasp through my laughter. “You’ll just have to learn to keep up.”

“Hmm.” He stills his hands, dropping his lips to mine with a lingering kiss. “Maybe I’ll work on that while you’re gone. It’s only two days, right?”

“Right.” I reach up and thread my fingers through the back of his hair. “Hey, Coop?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you,” I tell him. “For fighting for us. For not letting me leave.”

His lips ghost up. “Always, Princess. Always.”

Chapter 28

One Year Ago

I close the door of the taxi and walk up to the red door of our house, a giddy smile on my face despite the fact I still smell like dirt and ash from the volcano tour. Turning the handle, I push on the door excitedly, surprise filtering through me when it doesn't budge. Coop and I never lock the door.

Maybe he went to the store.

I drop my bag and dig through it, eventually locating the extra house key he had given me for just-in-case situations like this. Shoving the key into the lock, I turn it and open the door. Grabbing my bag from the ground, I walk into the house and kick the door shut behind me on my way.

I make it all of two steps before grinding to a halt. Knowing something is off that I can't quite place.

"Coop?" I call out.

But stagnant silence and the feeling of emptiness are the only things to greet me.

My eyes sweep the space and I call out again. "Coop?"

Perfectly made bed, folding glass doors shut, no dishes in the sink.

I force myself forward, heart thundering and my stomach dropping with every step I take. Making it to the bed, I drop my bag and spot a note lying on top of the white comforter. I pause for only a second before snatching it up, eyes flowing along the lines of Coop's familiar script.

Family emergency. Had to leave right away. Will call as soon as I get Stateside and update you. Hope you had a good trip, Princess.

Love you. Even after the end of everything.

- Coop

My body sags as relief pours through me, fingers and toes tingling as my breathing evens out. For a second there.... No,

he would never, not Coop. Concern follows quickly on the heels of my relief and I dig through my bag for my phone. God, I hope nothing happened to his sister. I could tell how deeply he cared for her from the way his voice got all soft when he talked about her, and I hadn't even gotten to meet her yet.

Finally fishing my phone from the bag, I quickly pull up Coop's contact and hit call. Lips twitching a little at the thought of his antiquated phone ringing. It rings through to voice mail and I end the call without leaving one. My stomach swirls with anxiety and trepidation, but I tell myself he's probably just still on the plane.

It doesn't hit me till an hour later that his phone would've gone straight to voice mail if that was the case.

I've waited five days for Coop to reach out and he hasn't called once. I called him that one time on the first day. Two times on the second. And three on the third, along with every hospital within a ten-city radius, garbling on in a mishmash of Spanish and English asking if anyone that fit his description had been admitted.

They had not.

Yesterday, I had finally broken down and called his phone so many times I lost count, my panic growing with every unanswered call. I had been frantic, my movements jerky, riding the edge of hysteria as I paced for hours last night before grabbing my bottle of tequila and drinking a healthy amount to get to sleep. I woke up this morning to find the sun streaming through the folding glass doors, and with it, the realization that he was gone.

He was gone.

I sit in the middle of our bed, holding my knees to my chest and staring out at the sun. Unable to move as the words play on a loop in my head. He wasn't injured, lying in a ditch somewhere. He wasn't not returning my calls because of a family emergency.

He was just... gone.

I snatch the bottle of tequila from the nightstand where I left it last night and gulp it down, the burn doing nothing but punishing me further. That's what I want though. That's what I need because I'm the worst kind of idiot. I went and fell in love with a fucking stranger and never even asked where his family was from. An insane laugh bursts from my mouth at the thought. In reality, I wouldn't even know where to start even if I wanted to find him. Even if he wanted to be found.

I was a fucking moron.

I take another sip of the tequila and swipe angrily at the tears that fall. The reality sinking in that If he wanted to talk to me, he would've by now.

He left me and he's not coming back. He's gone.

The pain starts in my chest and slowly spirals out until it radiates through my whole body. Why? Why would he do this? Why would he fight so hard only to leave? I look around the house, seeing nothing but memories of our time here. The ghosts of us playing and fighting and fucking. Loving. And I hate it, I hate the memories and I hate this place. This place that finally convinced me that love could be a beautiful thing, even when it was threaded with darkness. I hate every single inch of it and its owner most of all.

Rage begins to burn in my chest, adrenaline coursing through my bloodstream. And as I stare out at the neat perfection of the home he keeps, we kept, I can't stand the sight of it. I stand up, swigging back another gulp of tequila before turning the bottle over and letting it pour onto the bed as I walk around it. Leaving no inch of it salvageable. He doesn't get to keep the place where he filled my head with our future. It can die right along with the dream inside of me. I place the bottle gently on the nightstand when it's empty and turn my eyes toward the bookshelves behind his desk.

Walking over to the bookshelves, I stand there and simply stare at his books for a minute. My heart thundering in my chest as if I'd just run a marathon instead of simply walking across the room. Romeo and Juliet catches my eye and my

chest tightens at the memory it brings. I start there, furiously snatching the book off the shelf and throwing it behind me before I start on the rest. I tear every volume from the shelves as if I was tearing into him instead, flinging them behind me with every ounce of my strength, using them as an outlet for my pain. Uncaring of where they land or what they hit. Whether I damage them or not. I want these books to reflect the brokenness of my heart, my soul, my entire being. I want them to be as torn and bloody as I feel so he can't avoid the truth of what he's done when he returns to this place one day.

So that he feels it. So that maybe it breaks him too.

I'm panting by the time I empty all of the bookshelves in the house, my body shaking from adrenaline and exertion. The nails on my fingers are torn and bleeding, pulsing in pain, and I welcome it. When I finally turn and see the disastrous reflection of me, I fall to my knees. The books are splayed out across the middle of the house, filling the space between the walls, littering the floor with a kaleidoscope of words and colors and pages. Some are torn, some are broken, and all of them reflect my rage.

Why? How?

I feel like I can't draw enough breath into my lungs as great, body-racking sobs start to pour out of me and I fold myself over. Head bowed, forehead pressed to the ground and hands splayed on the pages covering the floor. He could've let me go so many times. I begged for him to let me go. To not love me. To not be my cause of more pain. Why would he do this to me? Or did he die somewhere along the way? Did he never make it to his family?

Does it matter?

He's gone all the same either way.

I lie there, sobbing for longer than I ever thought possible, pouring every one of our memories out onto the pages beneath me. Heart bleeding from my chest as I let go of every word, every promise, our entire beautifully imagined future. I lie there and become a ghost of the girl I became with him, or even the one I was before. Lost and floundering in this new

world of vulnerability. What am I if I can't be what I was and I can't be what I became?

Who is this new being?

Eventually, my body gives out and my sobs subside. Exhaustion weighing on every part of me, physical and immaterial. I turn my head to the side, staring at the bed where he forced his way into my heart with eyes so swollen that I can barely see. The glint of the ring on my left hand catches my eye and I'm left with one resounding reality.

I hate him. Dead or not. I hate him for showing me what paradise could be and then damning me to hell.

God help Cooper Monroe if I ever see him again.

I'll leave him as nothing more than ash in my wake.

I force my body up, fighting against the bone-weary exhaustion because I can't stand to be in this place a second longer. I head to the bathroom and push open the small closet door, tearing my clothes from the rack. Grabbing my suitcase from where it rests below, I start to shove them in without care. And with every piece of clothing I pack, I use the pain inside from every broken word to wrap myself in shining, barbed, brilliant new armor. Armor forged from all of the heartache and fury suffocating me.

And in place of who I was, or who I became, a new creature is born. One who is half as reckless as I once was and more jaded than even my tragic past had ever managed to create. One who is excruciatingly aware of the fact that I am not as mighty as I once believed myself to be.

Yanking the suitcase out into the living space. I reach down for the hidden zipper compartment and pull out all of the poems he wrote me. They rest in my hands like lies and poison and broken things and I want nothing to do with them. Walking over to the bed, I set them neatly in the center, in the exact same spot his note was. And then I take off my ring and leave it dead center on top of them.

I want nothing to remember this place by. If I could erase him from my memory at this moment, I gladly would.

I pull out my phone, calling the local taxi to the house before grabbing my suitcase and marching out the door. When the fresh air hits me in the face, I realize I haven't been outside in days and that I have no idea where I go from here. My future just vanished between the span of a rising sun and destroyed pages. But I know I can't go home yet. I'm not ready to face the stark loss of the invulnerable girl I believed myself to be before him and I don't know enough yet about the person I've become without him.

I scroll through my contacts, hesitating for only a second before I press call.

Mac's rough voice answers on the second ring. "Els?"

It takes me a moment to find my voice, to figure out what words to say to explain this pain. "I need you," I choke out brokenly.

His voice is instantly alert. "What happened?"

"It doesn't matter," I whisper. "Not anymore. But I'm not ready to come home yet."

"What do you need?" he asks quietly, and I hear Stef and Kai in the background, asking him what's wrong, the sound of their voices rising in agitation when he doesn't respond.

"Let's start with Berlin."

Chapter 29

Present Day

I glare at the journal lying on the deck of the boat below me as I've been doing for the past hour. After I chucked it down there in a fit of temper upon reading the last page.

Fucking useless. All that time spent reading them, wasted.

Well, I guess not totally wasted. They had allowed me to get to know my mother more intimately than most people ever had, but still, at the end, her journals proved just as mysterious and contradictory as her life had been. Leaving me with no more answers than I'd had at the start. The last journal had ended about a year before she had died with her writing about how she had taken me to the park that day and made a new friend.

Fucking fascinating.

I sigh in defeat and stand, heading back down and picking up the journal resentfully along the way to the cabin. Needing to crawl back into bed and snuggle up in Jace's arms for a while. To get some much-needed comfort despite the fact that he's been acting a little weird this past week. I can't put my finger on it though. It's not like he's pulling away at all, if anything, I feel like he's holding on to me tighter. But that playful light in his eyes has dimmed and I can tell something is on his mind.

I'm guessing it's the conversation we need to have about what happens after our trip to LA in a little under two weeks. The pressing weight of our time together ticking down without having talked about what our plan for the future is. But that's going to have to wait until later today... After my surprise for him.

Plus, I just need him to hold me right now.

I drop the journal on the table in the cabin and walk to the bedroom, pushing open the door and walking to the bed on silent feet. My lips twitch up at the sight of him all splayed out in sleep and I pull back the covers. Sliding into bed, I wrap my

body around his and lay my head on his chest. The smell of his sea-spring scent making me immediately feel lighter. A moment later I feel him begin to twist under my cheek with movement but I tighten my arms around him and he immediately stills.

He brings his hand up to tug at the bottom of my hair in question, trying to get me to tip my head up and look at him. “Ellie?”

I keep my eyes on his chest, staying silent for a long while before answering him. “The journals didn’t have any answers. They ended a year before it happened.”

“Oh, Ellie...” His voice comes out pained and he drops his hand to wrap around my back, pressing me farther into him. “I’m so sorry.”

“How the fuck does that happen?” I ask, voice cracking against my will as I finally look up into his concerned eyes.

“I don’t know, Blondie. I don’t know.”

I feel his fingers start to trail soothingly up and down my spine and voice the question I almost can’t bear to speak. “What if there’s no answer, Jace? What if the police file doesn’t have anything either?” I gasp at the unexpected pulse of pain in my chest. “What if sometimes people just leave and there’s no explanation good enough for those of us left behind?”

He swallows visibly, eyes turning pained. “Then it becomes a choice.” His voice comes out gravelly. “You have to choose it. What to let go of because you can’t bear it. What to keep because it’s intricate to you. What future you’ll choose. To make peace with the demons and then overcome them. To choose not to let it hold power over you anymore. To shine in spite of it all.”

I drop my eyes from his and let the sound of his heartbeat soothe me while I think over his words. A small smirk pulling at my lips when I realize that I recognize a bit of myself in them.

“Okay, Yoda.” I sigh and press my lips to his chest. “I hear you.”

“Good.” He tickles at my side, making me laugh as I bring my eyes back to his. “When did my aunt say she’d have that file for you?”

“Should be any day now. I was actually planning on stopping by the station today and paying the delightful Sheriff Reynolds a visit to check on that.”

“I can do that,” he offers quickly, flashing those dimples. “Probably best to keep you two in your separate corners.”

“True.” I scoff. “Anyway, that will give me plenty of time to run my other errand.”

He tilts his head at me in question. “Which is?”

“A surprise.” I fight against the twitch of my lips. “But I think you’ll like it.”

“Hmm.” He pulls me up by the waist and presses his lips to mine. “If it’s anything to do with you, I’m sure I’ll love it.”

I lift my head and give him a haughty look. “True.”

He laughs lightly and tugs on my hair. “Want to meet back at your gram’s place? I can cook dinner.”

“Sounds good to me.” I cock a brow teasingly. “I would say let yourself in, but you always do.”

I pull into the driveway of my gram’s house and see Jace all leaned back on the steps of the front porch, picking the strings of his guitar with two glasses of wine by his side. His head lifts at my arrival and I give him a grin, putting Franny into park and turning off the engine before pausing to look down at my right wrist. The fresh black ink there stands out in harsh contrast against my skin, the edges still a bit red and angry looking.

I hear Zane’s voice in my head from earlier today as I look down at the tattoo.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Yeah.” I give him a small smile and nod. “He’s earned his piece of my skin.”

Pushing open the door, I hop out of the car and slowly amble up to the porch steps with a mischievous look, making sure to keep my wrist turned away so that Jace can’t see it yet. He watches me with a soft grin, continuing to pick at the strings of his guitar and nodding his head to one of the glasses of wine beside him when I sit.

“Dinner is in the oven.” He looks back down to his guitar, picking a string and twisting one of the tuners.

I use my left hand to pick up my wine and take a sip. “And what are we having tonight?”

His lips lift, playful eyes flicking to mine. “Cabbage.”

I narrow my eyes at him in warning. “Very funny.”

That melodic laugh leaves him, joining the sound of cicadas in the air. “I thought so.”

“What’d the sheriff say today?”

“Besides how happy she was to see me?”

“Yes.” I roll my eyes. “Besides that.”

“The file will be there on Friday.”

I suck in a breath as trepidation flips my stomach. “Good.” I nod, more to convince myself than him. “That’s good.”

“So what’s the surprise?” He sets his guitar down on the steps beside us, picking up his wine to take a sip.

“You have to find it.”

“Find it?” He lifts his brows, eyes turning delighted at the game.

I lean back on the porch steps, giving him a teasing look. “Mhmm. If you can.”

“You know me, Blondie.” He flashes those dimples at me. “I love a challenge.”

He scoots down to the step below me and grabs my ankle, bringing it to his lap before trailing his finger slowly from the

bottom of my leg to the sensitive skin behind the knee.

He turns his head to me. “Am I close?”

“No.” I smirk. “Higher.”

“Such a shame.” He flashes me a wicked grin and trails his finger up the inside of my thigh, pausing at the bottom of my shorts before moving higher to brush back and forth over my pussy with a featherlight touch. “Now?”

“Unfortunately, not.” My breath hitches as I speak. “Higher.”

He slides his hand underneath my shirt. “Under here?”

“Nope.” I laugh, taking a sip of my wine.

“Hmm.” His eyes narrow, sliding over my body before zeroing in on my right arm. He reaches out for my hand, looping our fingers and turning it over.

I watch his expression go slack as he sees the tattoo there.

“Oh, Ellie.” His voice comes out rough, eyes crinkling at the edges with feeling. “It’s...” He flicks his eyes to mine and I can see the hesitancy in them, the worry that he’s jumping to conclusions.

“You were right.” I give him a small smile. “That first time we chased the sun together. About not letting myself starve from fear of the pain. About taking a leap in order to feel the brilliance of the light again. I needed to hear that.” I nod down to the tattoo of the rising sun on my wrist. It’s a simple thing. Not fussy or overly done. Just a half circle with lines of varied lengths coming off it, cut off by a straight line at the bottom to represent the horizon. “And even if this all goes to shit too... you, this summer, the way you helped me to heal... Jace, it will always be infinitely precious to me. More than you know. You—” I clear my throat. “You brought my heart back to life again when I didn’t even want it at all. And I will always, always, love you for that. You will forever be the rising sun that I chase.” Giving his fingers a squeeze, I throw him a bratty look. “Although I have no intention of this going to shit as long as you can excuse my occasional self-sabotage.”

He laughs lightly and brings my wrist to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to the sun there. “I love it.” He clears his throat, eyes meeting mine and brimming with tenderness. “Love you.” A flash of dimples. “Self-sabotaging tendencies and all.”

“Good to know.” I smirk, taking a sip of my wine and watching as he drops his eyes back to the tattoo.

“Maybe I should get one for you now.”

The wine catches in my throat at his words and I choke, coughing up my response. “Not necessary.”

His playful eyes rise to mine, expression amused. “Maybe some stars? Or a moon?”

I scrunch up my nose, stomach giving an uncomfortable twist. “Not stars.”

“Hmm,” he muses, running a thumb over the tattoo. “What about the sky? The keeper of it all.”

His words strike deep and it takes me a minute to muster a small smile and answer. “Maybe. Not sure how you’d do that though.”

“I’ll have to give it some thought.” He grins, grabbing his wine and taking a sip.

I cock my head at him, his response prodding me toward the conversation we’ve both been putting off.

“What’s your dream, Jace?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...” I sigh, floundering as I try to figure out the right words to use. “I mean, what do you want for your life? Where, where do you see it going?”

Could you sound any more like a girl interviewing someone on a date, El?

Damn, but I really do suck at these conversations.

“Is this...” I wave my hand out to the space surrounding us. “Landing Point, the bar, what you want?”

He takes a sip of his wine and looks down, swirling it around in the glass for a minute before answering. “I’ve actually been thinking about that lately... I think—” He blows out a breath. “I think I want to go back to school. Become a doctor maybe, probably for people with cancer like my mom. I want to help them beat what she couldn’t. I actually did pretty well in school despite my delinquent tendencies.” He shrugs, bringing his eyes back to mine. “Figured I’d apply to some schools in LA.”

I stare into his eyes, hardly daring to believe before asking softly. “LA?”

He nods. “I want a life with you in it. That much I know.” His lips pull up into a grin. “Plus, I’m going to need to make more than a bartender’s salary to maintain that fancy-ass car of yours.”

A wide smile breaks free on my lips as I dip them to his, raising a hand to the back of his head and kissing him deeply for a moment. Heart so full of happiness it feels as if all the blood in my body is rushing to it at once. Pulling back and breaking the kiss, I bring my hand around to run a thumb over one of those dimples. “I can maintain my own car, Dawson,” I tease. “But I do appreciate the thought and I might even know of a new club you could work at if you want.”

“That’d be great, Delacroix.” He scoffs a laugh. “Because med school is expensive as shit.”

I laugh and take a sip of my wine as he reaches up to tug at my hair playfully. “Listen though, this town, these people... they’ll always be home to me. So maybe, I don’t know, we find a way to split time or something when I’m not in school?”

I give him a soft smile and drop my lips to his again. “Absolutely.”

It dawns on me then, as I stare into his contented firework eyes reflecting my own happiness back at me. That I need to tell him the truth about Coop. The whole horrible truth about the one thing I might never be able to give him. I had been content to let Coop be one of the ghosts haunting me before. But now, with Jace... if we were going to have any kind of

future, I'd have to be honest with him. And I might even have to find Coop. You couldn't exactly divorce a ghost.

But... fuck. I can't, I don't know... how I'd even be able to face him without shattering all over again.

The ideas of divorce and trying to find him twist my stomach up into a painful knot that's only made unbearable when followed by the thought of not being able to find him because he's not even here anymore. Not alive to find.

So instead, I lean back on the steps and take a large sip of my wine, pushing the thoughts aside and avoiding it all like I do best. Basking in the last sun of the day and leaving the shadows for the night.

Dipping my head to the side, I cock a brow and smirk playfully. "Hey, Jace. Do you think you could play me some Taylor Swift?"

Chapter 30

Present Day

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come over?” Jace’s voice sounds through the phone pressed to my ear as I nudge the door to Gram’s house open with my hip. The heavy weight of my parents’ police file held against my chest.

“I’m sure.” I walk into the living room and set the file down on the couch before turning to look out the front window, seeing brilliant red streaks of evening coloring the sky. “I need to climb this mountain alone, Jace,” I tell him softly.

Plus... if I freak the fuck out, which is probably going to happen at some point, I want to have at least a minute to pull myself back together before he sees me.

A heavy silence comes through the phone and I know what I’m asking goes against the grain for him. “Enjoy your boys’ night with Zane.” I laugh softly. “God knows he would throw a fit if I changed my mind at this point.”

“He would understand.”

“Still.” I take a breath, nerves filling my stomach at the task that awaits me. “Just no tattoos, okay? Not without running them by me first.”

That melodic laugh comes through the phone. “Promise.”

“Good.”

“Promise to call if you need me?”

“Promise,” I answer truthfully.

“And we always keep our promises, right?” he teases.

“Always.” My lips twitch up into a small smile. “Go have fun.”

“Okay.” He sighs. “But call me if anything weird happens, I don’t think Kyle and Kurt are still in town, but you never know.”

“Don’t worry, Dawson.” I roll my eyes, walking to the front door and turning the lock. “The door is now locked and all is quiet on the home front. Talk to you in the morning, okay?”

“Alright... hey, Elle.” He pauses, voice becoming soft when he speaks. “You know I love you, right?”

My heart gives a little flutter of happiness as I walk back to the living room. “I know.”

Heavy silence sounds from the other end of the phone before I hear his breath hitch as if he’s about to say something but the words never come.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah.” He clears his throat. “Yeah, everything’s fine. Just call when you’re done, okay?”

“Will do. Tell Zane I said hi.”

I pull the phone from my ear and end the call, setting it down on the arm of the couch and digging my keys out of the back pocket of my shorts to drop there as well. Sitting down, I bring my knees up to my chest and loop my arms around them, looking at the large file sealed in a clear evidence bag next to me. It’s bigger than I expected, a thick thing with the Landing Point police department crest across the front and my parents’ names along with the date of their death below it. I can see a multitude of papers and photographs sticking out at the edges and it’s bound inside the evidence bag with some tightly wound rubber bands.

It intimidates me, the size of it. I’m not sure what I expected or if I had even really thought it through but there are clearly hundreds of pages within. My eyes zero in on the edge of one of the photographs peeking out, seeing the pool of blood standing out against the wood floor and my stomach clenches up painfully at the sight of it. I stare at the reflective burgundy pool, wondering which one of my parents it belongs to, and feel a flood of saliva in my mouth as my stomach turns and my pulse pounds in my ears. Swallowing down the excess saliva, I reason with myself that I’ll look through the paperwork first,

and then, if that doesn't hold any answers... I'll face the photographs.

It's just like their house, El. One room at a time, yeah?

I clench my teeth and take a few slow breaths through my nose, allowing the thought to calm me down enough to reach forward and break the seal on the evidence bag. Pulling the file out, I twist off the rubber bands and make sure to grip it tightly as I do so that the contents don't fall out everywhere. I place the rubber bands on the arm of the couch next to my phone and settle in, crossing my legs before pulling the file into my lap and opening it up.

The first page is a police report filed by the deputy who had first arrived at the house that night, citing that he had responded to an anonymous call made about hearing shots fired from the Delacroix home. My brows drop down at the description and I narrow my eyes at the page, rereading the description. It makes no sense. No one could have heard shots fired with how far they were out there. And just like Leah Reynolds had said, no one had traced the fucking call. There wasn't even a phone number listed.

I look up to find the deputy's name and see that it's Garret Simmons. I just might have to look up Deputy Simmons and see if he's still around to answer some questions about who was on the other end of the call that night. Dropping my eyes back down to his report, I read that when no one answered the door, he had proceeded to perform a wellness check, during which he found my parents' bodies upstairs in their bedroom. He had called in the cavalry at that point and then checked out the rest of the house.

Where he had found me. Fast asleep in my bedroom.

I had never spent much time thinking about it, who had found me that night, who had ushered me from that place of horror and tragedy. But this...

I run my fingers over his handwritten note where he describes finding me asleep in my room, waiting with me until the other officers arrived and then picking me up and taking me from that place. And all of a sudden I feel some kind of

kinship with this unknown officer who watched over me for a short time. Gratitude that he was there to save me from waking up and finding my parents that way. Even if I'm about to dive headlong into the trauma now. At least he had sheltered me from the worst of it for a time.

Clearing my throat to ease the tightness in it, I flip to the next page and find the then town sheriff's notes on what they had found that night. My mother, shot in the chest and splayed out by the door. My father, fallen at the foot of the bed with that brilliant mind exposed to the world. The gun that had inflicted so much damage found mere inches from his hand.

I flip through page after page of handwritten reports and evidence logs, trying to find anything that speaks to what caused their altercation that night. But everything else in the house was in perfect order, not even a book fallen from a shelf or a pillow out of place. The bodies lying on the bedroom floor were the only smudge found in the perfectly happy facade.

Darkness has fallen by the time I make it through all the paperwork and can see the shadow of the first photograph behind the page I just finished reading. I play with the edge of the page, putting off the inevitable for a few seconds longer as my heart starts to race. The life-giving muscle pounding right through the skin of my chest. As if it's beating all the harder to spite the death I'm about to see.

Whose ghost awaits me on the next page?

Mother? Father?

Or both, waiting for this macabre last embrace?

I flip the page and the sight that greets me has my hand flying up to cover my mouth as I race for the bathroom. Barely making it in time to lift up the lid to the toilet before emptying my stomach of everything I've eaten today. I keep heaving long after there's nothing left but bile in my stomach. The picture I just saw burning itself into my mind, unable to ever be unseen. And I know instinctively it will not be a memory that ever fades blissfully into the gray matter.

Pushing down the handle to flush the toilet, I sit back on the tile, body chilled by the light sheen of sweat covering my skin. Stomach still knotted as soft shudders hit me in random intervals. Maybe Sheriff Reynolds was right. Maybe I should have let their grisly ghosts rest in peace and saved myself this trip to a haunted wonderland.

Some innate part of me bucks at the thought though and I stand up, walking to the sink and splashing some water on my face before looking in the mirror. Seeing the almost exact replica of the death I just saw staring back at me from the photograph. But there's something harder in my eyes, even though I'm alive, than my mother's lifeless ones ever held.

You are Eleanor Delacroix. You wear shine and snark like it's going out of season and you do not crumble. You survived this once and you'll survive it now too.

I walk back out to the living room and check my phone, surprised to find that it's already two a.m., before sitting back down and collecting the now scattered file on the couch. Dropping all the paperwork onto the floor, I look down at the first photograph again, seeing my mother's lifeless body. The bullet hole in her chest that's cracked her open and stained her pretty clothes with blood. She didn't deserve this. She might have been mysterious and shallow and contradictory... but she had loved me. That much I had been sure of after reading her journals.

In a way, I had been her greatest accomplishment.

I flip through the photographs for a while, the horror of them all jumbling up in my mind before realizing I'm never going to be able to really *see* anything this way. You don't understand a book by only reading a page or a movie by only viewing a scene. You have to understand how the whole thing fits together.

Scotting down to the floor, I start to lay the photographs out around me. Ordering them by what part of the room they catalog. Starting with the corners of the room and putting them the farthest away from me before working my way in until it's as if I'm standing in the center of it all. I place the last

photograph at my feet and turn in a slow circle, seeing the dizzying multitude of gruesome images staring back at me. The horror of them presses against my skin, but I force myself to mentally check out, to shut down my emotions and pretend that this is someone else's mystery I'm solving. To only care about what story the blood has to tell.

I turn in circle after circle after circle, until I'm dizzy and feel like I'm losing my mind. Because it's exactly like Sheriff Reynolds said, obvious what had happened here, but something keeps nagging at me as I turn round and round. Each circle I make causing my nerves to spike higher and higher until I'm damn near turning like a spinning top.

But, what, is the question.

I sit down and heave a shaky breath, head pounding as I stare at the photographs of my father and mother. Hating this instinctive feeling that I'm missing something. Like all the pieces of the puzzle are floating right there in front of me but I'm blind to the right one.

What are my eyes seeing, my intuition understanding, that my brain hasn't caught up to yet?

I sit utterly still for so long, eyes burning from lack of sleep until I'm pretty sure I've been trailing my eyes between my father and mother for the past hour. Looking at the way their bodies are splayed out prone on the floor, seeing the way his head was turned toward her, eyes open, seeking her even in death. And she...

Her eyes were on the doorway.

He was staring at her, even in death, and her eyes were turned to the doorway.

Why would she be looking out the doorway in her last moment of life?

Fear for me? Or something else?

I quickly grab up every photograph I have of the doorway, swiping my hand across the floor to clear a space before laying them out in neat lines. Heart thundering with fear and excitement as my eyes jump from one picture to the next.

Trying to figure out what she was looking at. All the pictures show the doorway as open except for the second to last one.

In that photograph, the door was almost completely closed.

The faint spray of my mother's blood misted across it and the wall to the left.

But there's a bloodless space there, hidden at the edge where the door meets the wall, starting a bit below the doorframe and continuing on to the floor. As if...

As if someone was standing there, turned to the side, so that only the faintest impression of them was left behind.

And my father couldn't have been in two places at once.

So who else was there that night?

I flick my eyes between the photographs of the doorway again, looking for any other trace of evidence and find a coppery-haired young woman pushing the door open in one photograph.

And then standing in front of it in a few of the others, face turned down and away from the camera.

To keep it open. To hide the blank space within the blood.

I stare at that photograph of Leah Reynolds, trying to reason with myself to not jump to conclusions, but every instinct in me is screaming that I'm right.

"For a minute there, I thought it was Nadia's ghost when I saw you."

Her words ring through my mind. That humorless laugh that left her mouth.

My mother's ghost, haunting not only me but her too.

She fucking knew. She knew someone else was there that night. And for whatever reason... she covered it up.

I snatch up the photographs of her at the door and the one with the blank space in the blood spatter, staring at them in my hands as I coil tighter and tighter with tension. And when I hear Tiff's voice in my head, bitching to me at the bar one day

about how she still lived with her mom in the blue house on Mulberry Lane... I snap.

Keeping the photographs grasped tightly in my hand, I march over and snag my phone and keys off the arm of the couch before walking right out the front door. Too worked up to even stop and lock it behind me. Let Kyle and Kurt try to come for me right now.

I'd fucking eviscerate them.

I jerk open Franny's door, throwing myself into the car and placing the photographs on the passenger seat. My breath comes quick as I open up my phone and search for Mulberry Lane. I trace the route through town with my eyes, quickly memorizing it and seeing that it's only five minutes away, which puts my estimated arrival time at a minute past four a.m.

Perfect.

Time to rise and fucking shine, Sheriff.

I reverse out the driveway so fast my tires skip when I come to a halt before turning the wheel and shooting off up the road like a race car driver. Taking the turns along the route way faster than I should and only slowing down when I reach Mulberry Lane four minutes later. I rake my eyes along either side of the street for any sign of a blue house and find my mark about halfway down.

The house is a pretty two-story painted slate blue with white shutters. The gardening in the front of the yard is as impeccable as the rest of the house. Perfectly suited to the uptight sheriff.

I bring Franny to a screeching halt in front of the house and grab the photographs from the passenger seat. My stomach twisting with rage and anxiety as I throw open the door and charge up to the house. Not even bothering to turn off the car or close the door behind me. The white door looms before me, pristine, without a mark on it, as if no one has ever dared to sully it by knocking. It looks as perfectly false as I suspect the person sleeping inside is. I give the door a silent fuck you and

start banging on it as hard as I can, not stopping or missing a beat despite the pain in my fist until it flies open a few minutes later.

“El?” Tiff’s anxious voice greets me, her body wrapped in a pink robe. “What’s going on? Are you okay?” Her eyes flick behind me, running the length of the street as if looking for anything out of place.

“Where is your mother?” I grind out, brows dropping at her appearance.

She is not who I want.

Her brows drop in confusion and she shakes her head as if trying to clear the dregs of sleep. “My mother?”

“Yes,” I snap furiously. “Where is she?”

“Uh—she, she went out of town yesterday,” she stutters out, taken aback at my tone. “Was going for a short vacation she said.”

That fucking bitch.

That conniving, covering-up, motherfucking bitch.

She wasn’t getting away with this.

“El?” Tiff’s quiet, nervous voice pulls me from my thoughts and I see the anxious look on her face. “El, what’s going on? What’s that in your hand?”

It dampens some of the anger in me, that scared childlike look on her face, the worry in her tone. I don’t want to drag her into this hell. No matter what her mother has or hasn’t done to me. I love Tiff and she doesn’t deserve to have this kind of damage done to her. To lose her innocence like mine was torn away from me. By the actions of others.

“Just...” I heave a breath. “Just let me know if you hear from her, okay?”

“Of course, but El—El!”

But I’m already gone. Walking quickly across the yard and throwing myself back into Franny before driving away and turning toward the marina. Jace will know how to get in touch

with his aunt, or he'll know who will know where to find her. I don't need Tiff for that.

I make it to the marina in record time, parking in my usual spot and practically running down the dock, photographs in hand. Praying that he managed to make it back to the boat to crash and didn't fall asleep at Zane's. That Zane isn't here to witness the crazy I'm about to unleash. Gripping the rail of the boat, I pull myself over and charge into the cabin.

"Jace!" The door to the bedroom is shut and I walk toward it, calling out again. "Jace!"

He pulls open the door just as I reach for the handle. "Ellie?" His eyes squint down at me, voice coming out worried. "What's wrong?"

"Come look at this." I walk over and flip the switch for the light above the small table before laying the photographs out on it. "Look." I point, nodding my head toward them.

He walks over while rubbing at his eyes and blanches when he sees the photographs before his expression quickly turns worried. "What am I supposed to be seeing here?" He flicks his eyes to me.

"Look, there." I run a finger over the blank space in the blood spatter. "Someone else was there, Jace."

"There, when..."

"When it happened." I nod insistently and point to the photograph again. "Look."

His eyes search my face for a moment before he leans down to inspect the photograph, brows dropping as he looks it over. "Blondie..." He starts hesitantly, rising back up and turning to me. "You don't know that for sure. It could have been a robe hanging on the back of the door or—"

"I know, Jace." My voice cracks and I lift my chin stubbornly, looking up fiercely into his concerned eyes. "I know. I went through every evidence log, looked at every photograph. There was nothing hanging on the back of that door." I shake my head. "Someone else was there that night. I would bet my life on it," I tell him adamantly, reaching out

and bringing the photographs of his aunt to the front before pointing to her. “And your aunt knows something. I don’t know what, but she knows something. She covered it up and just left town to go on fucking vacation in case I managed to figure it out. Tell me, Jace, when has she ever taken a vacation? Because she really doesn’t strike me as the type.”

Jace stares at the photographs for a long time, eyes narrowed in thought and darting between them before he slowly nods. “Okay.” He blows out a breath, lifting his eyes back to mine. “Okay.”

“I need you to find her,” I rush out urgently.

“Okay.” He brings a hand to the back of his head, looking back down to the photographs and grimacing. “Okay, I’ll make some calls and see what I can find out. But Ellie...” He steps forward and grips my hips, eyeing me with concern. “It’ll take some time. People aren’t even up yet. And have you slept at all tonight?”

I dart my eyes away, shaking my head.

“That’s what I thought.” He wraps his arms around me, tucking me under his chin. “Let me try to figure out where she went... but you, you need to go get at least a few hours of sleep, yeah?”

I wrap my arms around him, some of the tension leaving my body as I breathe him in and mumble my response into his chest. “I don’t think I can.”

“You can’t function or think properly without sleep, both of which you’ll need to do when we find my aunt.” He presses a kiss to the top of my head. “Just try, please, for me?”

I’m silent in response, knowing logically that he’s right but everything in me is screaming to not rest until I have my answers.

“I’ve got this, okay?” He presses another kiss to the top of my head and gives me a squeeze. “I promise.”

I turn my head to the side, looking down at the photographs on the table before giving a reluctant nod.

“Good.” He walks us back toward the bedroom, still holding me in his arms, not letting go until I hit the end of the bed. Stepping back, he gives me a sad smile. “Just try, okay?”

“Okay,” I answer softly, sitting down on the bed and feeling like I just ran a mental marathon.

He leans down, pressing a soft kiss to my lips before pulling back and walking to the door. “I’ll let you know if I find anything, okay?”

“Okay,” I echo, watching him close the door.

A feeling of surreality takes over as I sit on the bed as if I’ve floated away into someone else’s life. A life of a girl whose parents’ deaths might not have been as cut and dry as she believed. I sigh wearily and grab one of Jace’s discarded shirts from the floor, stripping off my clothes and pulling it on before climbing underneath the covers. But the sense of a living dream stays with me as I stare up at the ceiling, feeling the boat gently sway beneath me as I try to rack my mind for memories of the night my parents died. To reach into the recesses of my mind and unearth something. And eventually, the combination of the boat rocking and the exhaustion weighing me down wins out, pulling me into a sleep that’s filled with true dreams.

Dreams of a night-forest-eyed boy telling me everything is going to be alright and that he’ll read me a fairy tale so I can go back to sleep.

The sound of raised voices pulls me from my sleep and has me wondering if maybe I’m still dreaming as I crack my eyes. I listen for a second, realizing that there are two of them arguing back and forth heatedly as I try to quickly blink away the grogginess of sleep. I hear Jace yell something I can’t quite make out and then a loud crash sounds, causing me to jerk up in bed and scramble for the door. My hand is already turning the knob and pulling open the door when the demanding voice on the other side hits me. It’s the voice that haunts me.

“She’s fucking here, isn’t she?” he grates out.

My hand drops in shock and I stand there uselessly, body completely locked up.

His back is to me. Jace in front of him with a hand pressed to his jaw. His hair is buzzed down now, body leaner as if he's lost some weight but still... I don't need to see the tattoo of our words winding up his left arm or even hear his voice again to know that it's him. His presence reaches out and brushes against my skin with a palpable caress. As if it's a lover who's missed me.

The breath leaves my body in a whoosh as I breathe his name. "Coop."

He turns at my voice, eyes locking with mine and turning enraptured as a pained expression flashes over his face. Silence fills the cabin as we stare at each other for a long moment before his gaze starts to rake my face. Devouring it slowly, inch by inch, then dropping down. I see his eyes turn dark when they land on my bare legs, his jaw clenches and his teeth grind.

He brings his night-forest eyes back to mine and arches a brow. "Hey, Princess."

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A Very Unedited Letter of Acknowledgment:

So should I start with “Hey, Princess”?

Just kidding. Kind of. I am sorry for that brutal cliffhanger though! But it was always how the story existed in my head and I want to make sure to stay true to that. No matter how painful or frustrating it might be at times. So let’s get down to that, shall we?

Entangled came to me at a weird time in my life. I had just finished writing my first manuscript and then I sat back, literally minutes after I finished... and I wrote the prologue for Entangled. El, Coop, and Jace had been rattling around in my head for about a month at that point and they just wouldn’t let me be. So I wrote the prologue and then I ignored it for two months while I did absolutely nothing but tell myself I should be focusing on the story I had already written.

Well that didn’t happen did it? And I can now say I’ve never been happier that I listened to that voice in my head whispering well now that you know you can do it, what can you do with it? But enough about me! Let’s get real here. This story wouldn’t have happened without the support of so many people.

Most importantly! To you, the reader. I cannot thank you enough. It truly means the world to me that you took the time to read this story. I hope you love El, Coop, and Jace as much as I love bringing them to life for you. I cannot wait to share the rest of their story with you. Fair warning, it’s going to be a crazy ride!

A HUGE thanks to Ellie McLove and the entire team at My Brother’s Editor. Y’all made this book a hundred times better with your fine tuning. And seriously Ellie... Thank you so much for editing this book with a broken hand! You’re a rockstar.

To my amazing cover designer, Clarissa Kezen. Thank you for bringing my vision to life and dealing with my multitude of requests to change the tiniest details. You’re a saint for putting up with me.

To my mini. I hope you're not too embarrassed when you grow up and (possibly?) read my books one day. Just know that my world starts and ends with you and I wouldn't have it any other way, lovey. You made me, me.

To my mama. I wouldn't be half the person I am today without you. You have continuously shown me what it means to pick yourself back up when you fall. This book never would have happened without your support. Thank you for all that you do and all that you are.

To my sestra, Morgan. Coop AND Jace (surprisingly lol) will always be yours first. If only because you put up with my constant texts and musings for months on end while I obsessed over every aspect of this story. I undoubtedly owe you a few bottles of beaujolais.

To my family, in particular, my sister. Even if you never read my books so that we can still sit across from each other at thanksgiving.... I still love you!

To Carly. Who when I told her I wanted to go back to writing, told me I should try writing smut. I never would have had the guts to try it out without you lighting the spark girl!

To all the guys I've ever loved. I never would have had the life experience to write romance without y'all. So thanks for the good times, great rides, and epic heartbreaks. I wouldn't change a second of it, seriously.

And last but most sincerely... a very heartfelt thanks to all of the bookstagrammers, booktokers, and bloggers who took a chance on a first time author and agreed to read the ARC of Entangled. Y'all are the powerhouse behind every indie author's success and I hope you enjoyed this story... because if not that sucks for both you and me lol. But regardless, I appreciate it all the same. Y'all are awesome! An epic world unto itself that I had the pleasure of discovering and am proud to be a part of today.

And that's a wrap!

XO,

R. Phillips

About the Author

R. Phillips is a contemporary and new adult romance author who loves to write stories full of angst, plot twists and a generous sprinkling of salacious scenes. She is a native Texan, reader first, and frequently imagines her book scenes to songs. She spends her days chasing after one formidable little human and a rambunctious Airedale Terrier while her nights are spent writing in the company of a cat named Maybe.

Rachael is a lover of coffee, tex-mex, and is probably too particular when it comes to her choice in red wine. She credits any success to the long line of strong women she comes from who gave her a steely spine, taught her to know her mind, and to always rise.