



ANGELS
& ASSASSINS
NOVELLA

A FIGHTING
CHANGE

K. ALEX. WALKER

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For more information, address:

ZachEvans Creative LLC
Re: Sage Hill Publishing
610 East Zack Street
Suite 110-3091
Tampa, FL 33602

info@zachevanscreative.com

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PREVIEW CHAPTER

No matter where Ayesha went in the room, she felt Joel's eyes on her.

Their six-man team lined one wall, their tuxedo jackets gone as they surveyed the wedding guests mingling, dancing, and engaging in loud conversation. Yet, it didn't matter how many people danced in the space between them; a path remained from her to Joel and from Joel to her.

As a joke, Larke asked the DJ to play "Heathens" by Twenty-One Pilots. If any of the guests didn't know how dangerous the six of them were, they had to have some idea, especially with Giorgio spaced in such a way that he appeared to be the fulcrum that operated either side of the lever.

Ayesha looked down at her glass. Once the wedding was over, things would go back to normal. The atmosphere, Gage and Tayler, and the dance had put her and Joel in a weird headspace. He was looking at her like he wanted to slice her dress into shreds with a combat knife, and she had to keep looking away not to put stock in it.

It didn't matter what she and Curtis had talked about. Nothing could happen between her and Joel. Nothing *would* happen between her and Joel.

"But Curtis, I do sometimes feel like I'm screwing him up, if I'm being honest," Ayesha said. "A kid raising a kid, basically. Somewhat."

"You know the guys think I'm old as hell, right?" Curtis asked. "Don't tell them how old you are. They'll think I'm a pervert."

"Curtis, I'm twenty-six."

"And I'm thirty-four. Shit, I was in the third grade when you were born. Practically a grown man."

“Please. You probably still used those fat crayons in the third grade.”

“I still use them now.”

Laughing, she buried her face in the mattress.

“Even if we do screw Jojo up,” Curtis said, chuckling, “he’s ours to screw up.”

“I don’t want him to have to go through therapy to recover from his childhood.”

“Eesh, he has a father whose job is to kill people undetected.”

“He doesn’t know that!”

“Some shit’s gonna rub off. Like, he’ll accidentally take C4 to show and tell or something, and then I’ll have to tell all his friends it’s Play-Doh while the FBI tackles me to the ground.”

“Oh, my God.” She laughed even harder. “You’re perfect, Curtis. Josiah is in great hands.”

“Neither one of us is perfect but, in my opinion, imperfect people can be amazing parents.”

“So, we do our best?”

“We do our best,” he echoed. “And love each other to the end.”

She smiled, staring at his handsome face and watching the rise and fall of his chest. Each breath meant that his heart still beat, and once he came home, she’d lie on that chest and listen to it every night as they drifted off to sleep.

“Curtis, do you think you’d be able to remarry if something happened to me?”

He scoffed. “Yeah.”

“Damn.”

“I’m just kidding, mama!” His laugh crackled through the laptop speaker. “To be honest, I don’t know. With Jojo, and if we ever have more kids, it would be hard. I’d want her to love them, you know? And it’s not easy to ask someone else to love kids that aren’t theirs.”

“That’s fair.”

“How about you? Same question, Mrs. Savea.”

“Same answer,” she said. “He’d have to feel like somebody you would have picked for me yourself.”

“Well then, let me think, now.” He looked up at the ceiling. “What kind of man would I pick for you? I mean, Gage is single at the moment.”

“And, no offense, Gage is seriously hot.”

“There you go.”

“Stop it.” She giggled. “For you, I’d pick someone understanding, patient, and who doesn’t care about rubbing your size seventeen feet when they’re sore.”

“You’re essentially telling me that you never want me to remarry.”

“Just about.”

“Actually, wait. Let me really think about this.” He tapped his chin, focus just off-screen.

It was impossible to tell where he was. Everything was dark, and she made out a few silhouettes here and there that looked like everything and nothing at all.

Sometimes it was easy, like when he stayed in luxury villas and expensive hotels. Times like now, when he was in the middle of nowhere underneath tents and inside caves, all she could do was pray that, when their call ended, he remained safe until they spoke again.

“The man I’d pick for you...he’d work you like a miner, picking and picking until he breaks down those walls,” he said. “When you’re frustrated, he won’t wilt. When you’re angry, he won’t rise to match you but helps you calm down. When you’re sad or depressed, he doesn’t let you turn him away. And I know it’s asking for a lot, but I’d prefer if he pulled along well with the guys. These are my brothers, and I don’t want some fool coming into your life who doesn’t know what being part of this family is like.”

“Are you still pawning me off on Gage?”

“Or Dez. They’re both single right now.”

“What about Giorgio?”

“Ayesha, I love you, but you’re not the woman for Giorgio. She’s out there, somewhere, but I’d rather you stay single or get ten cats and a python before you try to tame that beast.”

She nodded. “Noted. And I love you too, Curtis.”

He grinned. “You love me, baby?”

“I always will.”

“Go ahead and call me ‘Big Daddy’ one good time.”

“Bye.”

After the wedding, she and Joel would reset. Then, before she knew it, her thoughts would settle, and he and Sydney would get back together. That was the likeliest outcome based on what she’d observed so far. Sydney was the queen of his heart, and the last thing either of them needed was to mess up their friendship when the boys loved him the way they did.

She looked up.

Joel raised a glass to his lips, gaze locked with hers, the jewel-encrusted watch on his wrist sparkling and emphasizing his exposed forearms.

Maybe they could sleep together—once. Afterward, they could pretend it never happened and return to normal. Something told her he could scratch one hell of an itch.

She shook her head, hoping that if she did so enough, her brain would eventually return to a whole egg rather than the yolk the evening had turned it into. It would also help if he stopped looking at her, tempting her. All it would take was one slight tilt of her head, and he would follow her up to her room. The boys were off with their honorary grandparents, which meant she’d have all night to wear Joel the fuck out.

She hopped up from her seat.

The first server she came to, she snatched another glass from their tray. There wasn’t any alcohol at the wedding, but she downed the colorful virgin cocktail like a shot and then crushed the ice between her molars.

Green flashed at the corner of her eye.

Sydney.

Even better, it was Sydney and Kofi.

They were on the dance floor, bodies moving together to N.E.R.D and Rihanna. They weren’t as close as she would have liked, but she searched for Joel’s gaze—the search took less than a second—and tipped her head at Kofi and Sydney. He followed, watched them for a moment, and then turned back to her.

Ayesha swallowed more ice.

That should have worked. He was still in love with Sydney. All signs pointed to it. Had he been one of her clients, she might have chalked some of that “love” up to fear; Joel was more concerned about failing at another

relationship, in general, than failing at a relationship with Sydney again. Then she had a hunch that Sydney did want children, and if he found out, it would devastate him. But it wouldn't devastate him primarily because it was Sydney.

Over the last several months, she'd picked up on an insecurity she wasn't sure whether he fully knew existed. Joel believed he was good enough to be a husband, but he wasn't good enough that a woman would ever look at him and find him worthy of forever and family.

He set his glass on a passing tray, pushed off the wall, and it almost looked like he was headed in her direction. Then, as he stepped around gyrating and bumping bodies, it dawned on her that he *was* heading in her direction.

This wedding needed to end, casting off its spell. If it didn't, and soon, she would spend the night with Joel Lattimore. She would ride him until the wheels fell off.

Someone grabbed her elbow.

She looked up into clear gray eyes.

"Hey, your name's Ayesha, right?" the man, one of Tayler's hot Cuban cousins, asked. "I'm Isaac. Would you like to dance? I've been meaning to ask you all night."

She turned back to Joel, who'd stopped in his pursuit. He'd cocked his head to the side, studying Isaac, and she got the sudden urge to tell Isaac to run. Then Joel faced her again and shook his head.

It wasn't discreet.

It wasn't slight.

It was a clear and obvious, "*You better not.*"

"Sure," she said. Maybe dancing with Isaac would help cool her foolish blood. "I'd love to."

Isaac took her hand, and Joel watched them the entire way toward the dance floor. Considering that the universe liked to mess with her, Isaac walked them right past Joel, who reached out and grabbed her.

Not her wrist.

Not her hand.

He wrapped an arm around her waist.

"One second, Isaac," she said.

Joel flashed Isaac a look before looking down at her. "Come upstairs with me."

“I can’t.”

“I don’t mean to my room. I mean to the roof. You can see the opera house and the harbor from up there. We haven’t had much time to talk or hang out all night.”

“I can’t,” she repeated.

“Why not?” Joel pointed in Isaac’s direction. “Not because of him?”

“No, that’s not why.”

“Then why?”

“Because I don’t want to go to the roof,” she said. “If we go upstairs, I want to go to your room.”

Before she further incriminated herself, she walked off. The entire way, she felt Joel’s eyes on her as if she was the only planet in the universe and him, her center—her sun.

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FROM THE AUTHOR

*A Fighting Chance starts between
The Protector and The Anarchist.*

A Fighting Chance technically isn't your initial introduction to Joel Lattimore—he first shows up in *The Wolf*—but it *is* an intro to his story and how he went from FBI Special Agent to becoming a member of Team Alpha.

This version is also a completely different story from the former AFC as part of my ongoing initiative to polish the series. Honestly, I hope this group remains a part of your reading lives for a long while. I mean, if you've got the time, I've got the...storyline?

Now, don't come for me with pitchforks and eReaders, but...this is Part I of Joel and Ayesha's story.

::ducks::

Still, I didn't write a 65K "novella," only to end it by leaving you in the dark. I want you wanting, feening for Book 8.

::diabolically pets cat with robotic arm::

No emergency life happenings barring, I promise you won't have to wait long for it.

Hint, hint—don't skip the epilogue.

KoKo

- K.

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CHAPTER 1

He'd never felt sun hotter than this.

This place, compared to the rest of Luanda, was like facing the red, craggy surface of Mars right after turning away from an outline of Earth's swirling, blue water-covered exterior.

Gone were the high rises, highways, and lights that obscured the stars no matter how dark the hazy sky. Last night, they'd slept in a five-star hotel overlooking the Gulf of Guinea in the South Atlantic Ocean. Today, as the jeep's tires smashed stones and kicked up dust through rural Angola, Joel felt like shit.

Not even twenty-four hours ago, he'd half-wittedly marveled at the ocean and the vibrancy of the city while lounging poolside. Then, he'd gone up to his room to order room service using a luxury charge card. But here, trash littered the streets. Sheets of cloth acted as makeshift roofing for houses no more stable than a stack of cards in a gust of wind. Everything seemed to be made of cinderblock, blanketing the city in an infinite shade of beige.

After a civil war that had spanned nearly three decades, Angola was slowly rebuilding, which meant the majority of its economy relied on imported goods. In addition, oil, aka liquid gold, attracted many foreigners, driving up the cost of living and putting a decent life far out of reach for the people whose roots were buried deep in the land. People whose lineages could be traced back to the trees, the dirt, and the stones without a single genealogical deviation.

Joel looked around, soaking up the city, and smiled whenever he spotted a child exhibiting the smallest amount of joy. Kids were true gems, always

finding ways to squeeze happiness from the driest cloth.

When Julien told them their next assignment was in Luanda, he'd initially been confused. Luanda was one of the most expensive cities in the world, so he'd been hard-pressed to believe child soldier recruitment could happen in and around such a developed area. After all, the civil war had been over for nearly twenty years, and there'd been no significant uprisings since.

However, the United States was one of the wealthiest countries in the world, but children died every day of starvation inside its borders. It wasn't what the world saw; arguing for a nation's strength and riches would be difficult if it couldn't care for its most vulnerable citizens. That was the same case here, and, ironically, much of the poverty in Angola and the poverty back home had similar origins.

Denis Neto, their driver, raised his voice above the jeep's noisy engine as he explained how the civil war had destroyed the country's infrastructure. Along with the oil boom, the diamond trade was another catalyst that drove income inequality, making rebuilding efforts difficult. Most Angolans survived on less than two dollars per day and lived without running water. Yet, regardless of how much profit the country saw, corruption sustained the poverty, allowing its wealth to remain predominantly in the hands of its more "elite" citizens.

Denis brought the jeep to a stop in front of a tall white building. Air conditioning units protruded from the walls, and for a structure that looked on the newer side, it was obvious no one lived there. In the distance, a community of houses made from grass, straw, and linens all faced the building as if hoping to one day grow up to be painted, solid, and multi-storied.

"Today, we're meeting with John Mbatha and Benarld António," Denis explained, wiping his forehead with a cloth as they headed for the structure's front door. "Benarld is the head of Angolan Special Forces, and John came up from Recces, Special Forces in South Africa. You have already spoken with Interpol and the UN, correct?"

Gage nodded. "Yes. It's who called us in."

A command post had been set up inside the building. Despite being indoors, tents were draped all over the bottom level's dust-covered black-and-white checkered floor. Uniformed soldiers moved from tent to tent, some on phones while others were perched in front of computer screens

wearing headsets. Fans of various sizes filled the space with white noise, more so tossing the warm air around than cooling it.

“This used to be an ex-pat compound,” Denis said, leading them toward the back of the room. “However, issues with razing in the nearby villages drove many of the foreigners out.”

Dez looked around, a pair of decorated Ray-Bans nestled between the thick strands of hair on top of his head—a gift from Thandie, which she gave them all just before they left.

“So this just sits here?” he asked. “Not even ten kilos from here, people are living in substandard housing.”

Denis shrugged. “The landlords see holding onto an empty building as more lucrative than giving it to someone in need. Now, come. I’ll introduce you to John and Benarld.”

A few soldiers looked up as they passed, and Joel prayed they didn’t look like the stereotypical “white knight” coming in to “save the day.” All except for Mike, though it was possible they had a completely different view of him. China paid Angola for its oil and provided aid, which gave the economy a critical boost to assist with restoration efforts.

John and Benarld greeted them with handshakes, John wearing a camo military uniform and a garnet-colored beret while Benarld wore a plain white T-shirt and cargo pants. Gage did the introductions, and with the exception of Giorgio, they nodded in greeting. Giorgio’s “murder for hire” appearance and “murder for free” expression spoke louder than any *hi* or *hello*.

Benarld waved them over to where a map lay, spread out on top of a plastic table that looked like it would have otherwise been found in a banquet hall.

“Have you been briefed already?” he asked.

“Barely,” Gage said. “From what we understand, there’s been a rise in forced recruitment in the areas surrounding Luanda. As a result, children were taken from their homes, which has resulted in a hostage situation, and negotiation efforts have been futile.”

Benarld nodded. “Yes. You see, back in the late nineties, during the Angolan Civil War, there was a security council known as MONUA—Mission d’Observation des Nations Unies à l’Angola, translated as the United Nations Observer Mission in Angola. It was a peacekeeping initiative that included soldiers, observers, and law enforcement from

seventeen countries. MONUA reported several instances of forced recruitment in Angola, many of which were known but could not officially be confirmed.”

“Recruitment solely for the civil war efforts?” Julien asked.

Benarld nodded again. “Yes. And although the MONUA initiative was disbanded in 1999, three years before the war ended, several special councils were created that are still active today. Their purpose is to track information on the enlistment of child soldiers in regions around the globe, from Afghanistan to Yemen.”

“What started the Angolan Civil War?” Joel asked.

“It started as a guerilla movement between two political parties, the MPLA and UNITA, both vying to govern the new republic. Angola was once under Portuguese colonial rule, but the Portuguese withdrew from the country in 1975, which led to destabilization. That destabilization gave the civil war its legs.”

Benarld positioned himself at the head of the table and stood overlooking the map. Gage took the side nearest him, scanning the spread-out image of the surrounding terrain, arms folded over his chest. The rest of the team positioned themselves based on what tactical responsibility Gage had assigned them from that point on throughout the end of the mission.

Benarld continued. “The MPLA, the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola, and UNITA, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, were the two major forces involved in the conflict. Both parties believed they knew what was best for the country, the MPLA with significant support from the Soviets and Cuba, while UNITA received support from the Chinese. The Chinese also supported UNITA during the Angolan War for Independence from the Portuguese. Lesser reported is the support UNITA received from the United States, the U.S. aid more than likely on account of the tension between the Soviets and the Americans at the time. Still, I have always found it ironic that these two parties, with their opposing ideologies, claimed to be fighting for Angola’s total independence from colonial rule. Yet, they ended up devastating the country and killing nearly a million of its people. To this day, our land bleeds between the dried cracks of a ravaged earth.”

The team went silent.

Joel looked down at his shoes, inhaled, and exhaled as he raised his head. The night before they left for this assignment, he and his wife,

Sydney, had what was probably the most significant argument of their on-again, off-again relationship. Their “seesaw love,” as his sister often put it.

Back when he was an FBI agent, he’d gotten shot in the middle of D.C. after being caught in a turf war between the Serbian mafia and the Bratva. The way the case was handled left a bad taste in his mouth, so he took a hiatus from the Bureau. During that hiatus, Julien contacted him about an opportunity based on how well they’d worked together in North Carolina.

Once he learned what he would be doing and the purpose this new role would add to his life—along with the hefty payouts—he didn’t hesitate, which was how he ended up here. However, whenever he came home with a fresh wound or a blank look in his eyes that lasted days on end, he saw how it affected Sydney.

They’d been together, in some capacity, since high school. Still, no matter how long they spent away from each other, she never took off his ring—first promise, then engagement, and finally, wedding—and he was sure he would die with his on his finger. Everything he’d done in his life, since the age of sixteen, he’d done to keep her happy.

Whatever Sydney wanted, he gave her.

As an FBI agent, he wasn’t able to give her big ass houses and the luxury lifestyle she was accustomed to. Her father, Robert Donovan, was a legendary boxer whose name was spoken in the same vein as Ali, Sugar Ray, and Foreman. Her mother, Aida Louise Alcott-Donovan, had an Emmy sitting on their mantel next to her Tony Award.

Now, with this new career, he could give her everything he’d dreamed of giving her—everything Mr. Donovan had assured him he would never be able to provide for his “accustomed to a comfortable lifestyle” daughter. The middle-income, middle-class kid who fell in love with the pretty rich girl before she ever noticed him had measured up.

Finally.

But the more Benarld talked, the more a gnawing ache settled in his gut. His work with the FBI had made a difference for the nation in many ways for which he would forever be grateful, but this work gave him *global* purpose. The guys he fought alongside weren’t his teammates; they’d quickly become his brothers. As long as they needed him, he planned to be there.

John’s finger landed on the map, pulling him out of his thoughts. “Here is Malanje,” John said. “And the reports are coming out of southern

Kalandula.”

Dez leaned over the map. “That’s a good four hundred kilometers from here. What’s that, about a five-hour trip?”

“Yes. The plan is to rest up here and then head in later tonight to this encampment.” John’s finger moved less than an inch to the left. “This is where we received the first surveillance images of children in captivity.”

“Age,” Giorgio said.

John bristled, the natural reaction most had to the sound of Giorgio’s voice. “The youngest, we believe, might be around seven. Right now, the boys are being used to transport arms and supplies. Recces intercepted a shipment of AK-47s they believe was headed that way.”

“What’s their end goal?” Joel asked.

“We believe it’s related to guerilla warfare whose purpose is to funnel its way into the more developed areas of Angola,” Benarld said. “An act of domestic terrorism perpetrated on foreigners. Preliminary reports have shown there to be more girls than boys, and we believe this is the case for two reasons. The first reason is that, by nature, people are less likely to expect violence from women and girls, and women are more likely to work in domestic positions that put them close to foreigners. The other reason is that it may be easier to reprogram girls on account of them being left out of demobilization and reintegration projects after the civil war.”

“Was the belief that they didn’t need the programs since they didn’t participate in the brunt of the combat?” Gage asked.

Benarld hummed an affirmative. “The girls were mostly used as porters, spies, cooks, and were aligned as soldier wives, so this wasn’t seen as similar to the trauma that affected the boys, who were holding the guns. Unfortunately, that left a generational blight on many of the female children in the region who are now adult women and have had no chance to resolve that trauma, which allows it to repeat, leaving the girls categorically more susceptible.”

The silence returned.

The ache in Joel’s stomach grew.

Denis, after earlier being called over to one of the tents, returned to the table. “Your team was called out because our interference could lead to a political disturbance,” he said. “This situation cannot go public. One, it would hurt Angola’s image, and two, it might cause countries to withdraw their trade agreements.”

“Which could lead to them trying to take the oil by force,” Gage said.

Denis pointed in Gage’s direction. “Correct. More conflict is the last thing Angola needs right now. It would end us, and I would die for my country. I refuse to watch it perish while I have breath in my body.”

Joel released another exhale.

John tapped the map. “In this particular encampment, we estimate a minimum of one hundred children, ninety percent of them girls. They’re a sort of pipeline, and we anticipate this raid will allow us to tap into the more significant figureheads behind the entire operation.”

Dez, brows narrowed, traced the path of an orange line woven between two forested areas. “From what we were told, Recces and Angolan Special Forces have already taken a position here. We can use this back road to secure the rest of the tactical perimeter. Has contact been made on the inside yet?”

Denis, John, and Benarld let them know that there’d been no contact with anyone inside as of that moment. It was the initial plan, trying to negotiate a hostage rescue agreement, but every attempt fell flat.

Dez raised his head. “And the building?”

Benarld waved them over to a scale model of the building where the encampment was located. Julien took a scan of the model, and soon, they had a 3D projection of the blueprint on his tablet screen. While Julien, Giorgio, John, and Denis looked at the screen, the rest of the team studied the miniature rendering.

“It’s going to have to be an upper-level intrusion,” Mike said. “Since the beginning of the surveillance, there’s been no movement in two specific areas. No heat signatures, life forms—nothing. My best guess is that these are probably storage rooms. Lattimore, this is where we breach.”

Benarld looked back and forth between them, eyes wide. “That’s the fourth floor.”

“We can get in,” Joel reassured him. “The only real issue is that these guys could be the trigger-happy sort. If all the children are being housed in one location, they could be expecting to go the mass murder route if pushed. So, it’ll be reconnaissance and then contact.”

The first look was always to get an overview of the target. On some assignments, they’d do multiple days’ worth of surveillance before taking action. The point was never to leave crumbs. Ten times out of ten, once they were called in, the expectation was to send all hostiles to the afterlife.

“And if they detect you?” Benarld asked.

Mike continued to study the model. “They won’t.”

Gage raised his head and called the rest of the team over. Everyone followed his directive—until the end of the assignment, Recces and Angolan Special Forces would be part of the team, which meant they all fell under Dez and Gage’s command.

“Here’s what we’re working with,” Gage began. “Phase one is infiltration. Huang and Lattimore will breach to plant devices to give us a damn-near-perfect visual of the interior. Thermals can do plenty, but a scan will give us the most accurate layout to properly seize the building and the life forms inside. Phase two: we identify and flag as many friendlies as possible. Those who we’re unable to tag will be an on-the-spot decision.”

“And phase three?” Denis asked.

“Violent contact,” Gage said, without a blink, twitch, or hitch in his voice. “The way we operate is to go in, retrieve the hostages, and kill everyone else.”

John, Denis, and Benarld looked at each other. Then they looked over at Giorgio, who’d removed a blade, and it now looked as though he wore a glove made of blood.

Benarld nodded. “You lead. We’ll follow.”

After finalizing the details of what they hoped would be less than a twenty-four-hour strategy, they retreated to rest up to move at ten hundred hours.

CHAPTER 2

Joel found an isolated corner of the room, pulled out his phone, and tapped Sydney's name in his recent contacts list. Should things go south tomorrow, he didn't want the last words they exchanged to be an argument.

On the fourth ring, she picked up.

"Hey," he greeted.

She responded with silence, and he only knew she was there because he heard her breathing quietly into the speaker.

"Syd?"

"Joel, do you love me?"

Knowing where this line of questioning was headed, he answered carefully, giving himself time to prepare for the following question.

"Of course, I love you, Sydney. When have I ever not loved you?"

"Do you love me more than you love your team?"

Sighing, he massaged the space between his brows. "Syd, that's like asking me if I love you more than Audrey or my parents."

"Well, do you?"

"Love you more than my sister or the people who gave me life? There's no way I can answer that."

Another bout of silence passed between them. Before he left, they'd done more than argue, and that she didn't start the conversation with that information meant he had his answer.

"So, the pregnancy test?" he asked.

Again, she didn't respond.

"Sydney?"

“I’m not pregnant,” she whispered, and it was already difficult enough to hear her with the commotion around him. “It was negative.”

“I’m sorry, baby. How do you fe—”

“It wouldn’t have been positive.”

He sat up straighter. This was what his gut had been trying to clue him in on. When he first noticed that they’d had sex for months straight without her mentioning cramps, backaches, or headaches, he’d asked her about her last period. She’d responded with a look he hadn’t been able to place, but it wasn’t anything close to a look of hope or excitement that they could be on their way to being parents.

“Sydney, are you on birth control?” he asked.

Nothing.

And if she didn’t answer soon, he’d explode.

“Sydney.”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“About a year now.”

She’d spent several years as a professional boxer. She had belts, titles, and accolades, but he never imagined she’d ever take a swing at him, not like this.

“So, you’re not ready,” he said, trying not to jump to conclusions. “That’s okay, baby. You could have told me. If you weren’t ready, why did you make me think you wanted this? I would’ve waited. You know that.”

“Because of how happy you were.”

“Is it because of what happened before?”

“No.”

“Okay. So, you’re just not—”

“Joel, I don’t want kids.”

If she’d hit him in the stomach the first time, this time, she’d aimed at his chest.

“I don’t want to be a mother.”

“Wait...” He closed his eyes and massaged his forehead hard enough to leave an indentation in his skull. “Syd, we *talked* about this. This conversation was part of that sixteen-week pre-marital counseling program we did through your church. What made you change your mind? Is it me? Is it the job?”

“Those don’t help, but if I’m being honest, I don’t see myself giving up my life and freedom just to be a mother,” she said. “Add that ‘the job’ could kill you and leave me as a single parent, and I see no upside.”

He tapped his head against the wall behind him.

Be reasonable, Joel.

This is her body.

You’re not entitled to her body.

“I don’t know what to say. I want to be supportive, Syd. I do. But this was important to me. This was so important to me. We had entire conversations about kids, finances. How we planned to handle disagreements. Hell, we even talked about end-of-life decisions. Sydney, you told me you wanted to have my baby. That you couldn’t wait to...”

His voice trailed off.

During one of their counseling sessions, she’d looked him in the eyes and told him she couldn’t wait to have his baby. To bring their child into the world. And it nearly buckled his knees. There was so much power in that statement, especially since he’d always envisioned himself being the kind of father he’d grown up with.

“Syd, we’ll talk about this when I get home,” he redirected. “This isn’t a conversation you have over the phone. But, tell me something. Am I pushing you? Is that what it is? Maybe I talk about kids too much, and it feels like—”

“Joel, I can’t do this anymore.”

He sighed. “You’re right. We’ll talk at home.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

An icy flush covered his face. “What *do* you mean?”

“Joel—”

“Sydney,” he lowered his voice, “we were fine when we left. Fine. Yeah, we had another argument about me flying out with the team, but we were fine. What the fuck could have happened between then and now?”

“You’re getting belligerent, and it’s hard to talk to you when you get like this,” she said.

He took several steadying breaths. Once he felt his anger had calmed to a manageable level, he tried again. “I guess I’m just confused,” he continued. “Where is this coming from?”

“If you have to ask that, you haven’t been listening.”

“I listen to every word that leaves your mouth, Syd. I’ve loved you since I was sixteen years old. I fucking live to make you happy, keep you happy. So what did I do?”

“Joel, it’s not just one thing. I want you home every night. I don’t want to go months without seeing you, sometimes days without hearing from you, worrying whether you’re alive. Then, those days I don’t hear from you, who’s to say I’ll ever hear from you again? And who’s to say that when you’re gone, you don’t get lonely? These are the things I spend hours agonizing over.”

A record screech sounded so loud in his head, it shocked him no one else heard it. “Lonely? Like...cheating on you? I know you’re not talking about me *cheating* on you. Syd, when I’m out here, I think about two things—protecting my brothers and walking through the front door into your arms. That’s it.”

She returned to silence. At least, this time, her sniffing let him know the call hadn’t dropped.

“Sydney, don’t do this.”

“I’m not at home. I’m in Forest Hills.”

“At your parents’ place?” he asked. “Okay, I’ll come straight there after I land. We’ll talk. We’ll work this out. We *can* work this out.”

“I got an apartment.”

There was no more controlling his feelings. No more hiding his agony. She wasn’t “leaving” him. She’d *left* him. She’d fooled him into thinking everything was fine, kissing him at the private airstrip like she wanted to take him to the backseat of the car and ride him until his eyes crossed.

Nothing that he could pick at or pinpoint from the last several months—hell, the last year—pointed to this.

Nothing.

Now, he sat in a room full of soldiers, preparing to rescue children in significant danger, with fucking tears in his eyes.

Like a jackass.

Vision blurry, he looked out at the room. Dez had carved out a space in a low-traffic corner, his head on his pack and his eyes closed. Mike had gone in search of somewhere less chaotic to meditate. Julien and Benarld continued to examine the projection model of the building, and Gage had moved near the front door, smiling, his phone to his ear.

“Joel,” pain distorted her voice, “I’m so sorry.”

He cleared his throat and covertly swiped at his eyes. “No, you’re not. If you were sorry, you’d do this face-to-face. Admit it, Syd. You planned this.”

“You think this was easy for me?”

He didn’t know if he cared.

Not right now.

“Joel, how didn’t you know? We’ve done nothing but argue, and not just in the last year. Our relationship? It hasn’t been good. No one should have to work *this* hard to make a relationship work. Then I look around and see Gage and Tayler, Larke and Dez, Julien and Ari. That’s when I knew something was wrong with us. We’re not like them.”

“Relationships are different.”

“But fundamentally the same,” she shot back. “They let their husbands go to war without batting an eye. I’m not like that. I can’t do that.”

“*Let* them?”

“Yes, let them.”

“Sydney, that’s bullshit. It’s hard on them, and you know it.”

“Then why not ask them to stop?”

“Can you just call a soldier home from his military commitment?” he asked. “And, if it’s such a problem, why’d you tell me you were fine with joining the team?”

“I didn’t know what it would entail.”

He scoffed. “More bullshit. You saw all those zeroes and thought, ‘Hmm, maybe I can put up with Joel for a little bit longer despite how fucking miserable it is being married to him.’”

“Again...belligerent.”

“Fuck it.” He shook his head. “You’re not leaving me. We’re going to make this work. When I land, I’m coming to your apartment and bringing you home, dragging you by your ankles if necessary.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that I might not want that?” she asked. “Maybe *this* is what I want? You say you love me, right? Love my decisions.”

“We’re *married*, Sydney, and you made this decision without even spitting in my direction.”

“Would you have let me leave?”

“Fuck, no.”

“There’s your answer.”

He flipped up an index finger. “So, one, you don’t want to be married to me or have kids with me. Anything else I should know? Maybe you don’t love me anymore? Maybe you never did.”

“I still do,” she said, as if attempting to reassure him. “I will *always* love you. Like you said, we’ve been together since we were sixteen. But love is not enough. We want different things. We’ve wanted different things for a while.”

“So what, you want a divorce? And I swear to God if you get quiet again...”

“Do you think we have a healthy relationship if you’re talking to me like this?”

“Sydney, I’m hurting!”

Several heads turned in his direction.

He waved them off.

“I’m hurting,” he repeated, quieter. “You just blew a fucking hole in my chest. How do you expect me to act?”

“Joel, in the past, whatever I asked you for, no matter what I asked you to do, you always managed to find a way to compromise. But when I asked you to leave the team, what did you say? No. That they’re your brothers. That it’s not like it was in the FBI. Babe, they might be your ‘brothers,’ but I’m your *wife*.”

The fight slowly left his body. “I said give me time, Sydney. I begged you. I *did* want to find a way to work things out for us both.”

He heard what sounded like a doorbell. Then he heard her sister’s voice, and if Sasha was there, Sasha helped her move. She and Sasha were close, so there was no way Sasha hadn’t known, likely eons before he did, that she would ask him for a divorce.

Not only did Sydney leave him.

So had her family.

“Joel, I want you to leave the team,” Sydney said. “Today. Right now. Come home right now, and all this will be water under the bridge.”

There was no way to make her understand. These days, bullets flew by his ears more often than they ever had, even back when he was a Marine, and yet, he’d never felt this fulfilled.

“Leave now, and I’ll come home.”

He panned his gaze around the room. He belonged here on this team, and he would be on this team even after it was no more and they left it all

behind to be husbands, fathers, and perhaps even legitimate businessmen.

“Syd...I can’t.”

“I know,” she said, the defeat in her voice more transparent than glass. “Look, I have to go, but be careful, okay? Please be careful. And I fully admit that how I did this wasn’t exactly mature, so I’d like for us to still talk when you get in. Call me. I’ll come to the house.”

It wasn’t that she’d come “home.” It wasn’t that she’d invite him to her place and risk him finding out where she lived—as if he couldn’t find out on his own.

To her, it was now “the house.”

His house.

An oversized bachelor pad.

Back when he was in the military, and Sydney was in her sophomore year of college, they broke up to “explore other relationships.” Then, after finishing his service commitment, he returned to D.C. to work on the degree that would help carry him into federal law enforcement.

On his first day of classes and the first day of her last semester, they ran into each other. That night, they did more than “run” into each other. One thing led to another, then another, and roughly three months later, she was pregnant.

Unfortunately, they lost the baby.

Not long after, he proposed, and she accepted despite her father’s reservations about whether he would make a good husband. Then she graduated, and she and her father decided to expand their Donovan Foundation, which focused on creating career avenues for underserved youth boxers, to New York and California.

Expansion meant her being out of the DMV area for nearly two full years, collectively. So, he told himself that he had school to focus on and that their relationship could survive the distance.

Instead, their relationship struggled.

They talked on the phone, video conferenced, and saw each other when she was in town, which had been as short as twenty-four hours and no longer than a week or two at a time.

Still, they made it, and they got married on a blistering Saturday afternoon after the air conditioning went out in the AME church her family had attended for decades. Things improved at their reception, which was

held less than a ten-minute drive from the White House at the Waldorf Astoria on Pennsylvania Avenue.

His sister, Audrey, had told him, multiple times, that he and Sydney struggled because they were trying to hold on to versions of themselves that no longer existed. They fell in love as teenagers, but their love didn't grow with them. Now, they were different people searching for the person they fell for all those years ago, but they refused to accept the truth; that piece of their soul grew smaller with each passing season.

"Yeah, I'll call you when we wrap things up here," he conceded. "It might be a few days, but I'll definitely call. And I'll be careful."

"Thank you."

"I love you, Syd."

"I love you too, Joel."

She hung up.

He lowered the phone and stared at the screen. Every version of his future had Sydney in it. If he didn't love Sydney Donovan, he couldn't envision himself loving anyone else.

Gage headed his way, and he plastered on as neutral of an expression as possible; the man could read white letters on white paper in the middle of a blizzard.

"You should be resting, Lattimore."

He cleared any lingering emotion from his throat. "I know. Just checking in with Syd."

"Everything okay?"

"No."

"What happened?"

"Later."

"Something you can fix?"

"Don't know."

Gage eyed him. "You good to go tonight?"

"It's kids. For them, I'll put all this shit behind me until they're home safe. So, yeah, I'm good to go."

"All right. I'll make one more round before I settle down myself. If anything changes, let me know. We're not going to lose anybody." Gage started off. "Let Sydney know that. If it helps."

Joel turned his backpack into a pillow and dropped his head on top. His gut told him it wouldn't change a thing, but that didn't mean he couldn't

hope.

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CHAPTER 3

The convoy of vehicles rolled to a stop a few miles from the compound. The full moon and star-ridden sky would put them at a disadvantage, but they would have cover from the trees until they reached EN 140, the national road that spanned from Cariango to Mussende in the Angolan province of Cuanza Sul. Crossing over the different segments of the road would leave them vulnerable, but as Gage had told them repeatedly on the drive over: “Stick with me. Stick to the trees. *Stick with me.*”

Joel hopped down from the jeep and caught the bag Dez tossed his way. They strapped on body armor, secured helmets, and ensured all their weapons were loaded with extra cartridges on hand. Balaclavas dangled around their necks, which they would pull up once they were closer to their target position.

Adrenaline pushed Joel’s blood through his veins at twice the speed as he adjusted the strap on his night vision goggles.

A gloved hand landed on his shoulder.

“You good, rookie?” Dez asked. “How about I take you for some ice cream after this, hmm? Maybe we could play a game of catch, slugger?”

Anyone who didn’t know them would have probably assumed he was the youngest because of how they treated him, being the new guy. However, that title belonged to Julien. Next was Mike, who was only a couple of months younger than Giorgio. He and Dez were the same age, only a few weeks apart, and with Curtis gone, Gage took the title of the oldest.

“You’re joking, but that would be amazing,” he said.

Dez’s expression turned serious. “What’d I tell you on the first day you started training with us?”

“To never forget why we do this and who we do this for.”

“That will get you from point A,” Dez moved both hands in a slight arc, “to point B. Once you get there, you’ll find the strength to keep going. What helps me is carrying something I can see, hear, smell, feel, or touch that centers me when my mind is elsewhere.”

He nodded.

Right now, all he had was his wedding ring, but after his last conversation with Sydney, he wasn’t sure he wanted to rely on it if things got dire. Instead of ducking, he might open himself up to a shot.

“You have something of Larke’s?” he asked.

“A playlist,” Dez said. “And something else.”

“It’s panties, isn’t it?”

“Of course not.”

Joel flipped the cover down on his goggles. “It’s panties. You’re disgusting.”

“You two boys about ready to head out with the grown-ups?” Gage asked, a rifle perched against his chest.

Joel turned on his goggles. “Yes, *Dad*. We’re ready.”

CHAPTER 4

Their boots sank into the earth with each step, and the scent in the air promised more rain on the horizon. No words were exchanged as they walked, and Julien had granted John and Benarld access to their comm links to coordinate a strategy throughout the operation. They were supposed to be just outside the rainy season, but heat continued to bear down on the region during the day, while heavy rainfall cooled the landscape by the time evening rolled around.

A drop of water fell onto Joel's goggles.

Rain would provide them both an advantage and a disadvantage—the droplets would cloud their equipment, reducing their visibility, but they would be able to use the sound to further cover their approach.

John's voice sounded in his ear. "Fellas, I forgot to mention that the structure they're in used to be a hospital. However, the sick now use the Kalandula Municipal Hospital several kilometers to the east."

The droplets grew in size.

John's voice faded as the rainfall grew heavier.

Gage raised a hand, the signal for when they reached EN 140. They then stood around for several minutes, waiting to see whether a vehicle would pass through, but there were no engine sounds or headlights.

On the other side, the treeline broke to reveal the small village they would have to cross over to make it to the second part of the forest. In these rural areas with no electricity or running water, it was difficult to determine what was occupied and what was vacant.

Gage and Dez ventured ahead to clear the structures. The rest of the team kept an eye out for passersby or possible hostiles.

A shadow caught Joel's eye.

After silently alerting the team, he observed the person as they moved along the edge of the treeline near the farthest house, several yards from Dez and Gage's current location.

It didn't move stealthily, which was a good sign, and this person didn't appear to be trying to remain hidden. Still, he didn't look away. Although his unit in the Marines saw little combat, one thing that continuously unnerved him was a person showing up where he hadn't been expecting them, doing something entirely too innocuous.

The person, who appeared to be a male of average height with a husky build, stretched their arms above their head. A cigarette dangled from their lips. Then, they lowered their hands, and a splashing sound followed.

Gage's voice buzzed against his eardrum. "You have eyes, Lattimore?"

"Yeah. Civilian taking a piss."

Gage and Dez cleared the rest of the community.

After urinating, the person hung around outside for a few additional seconds before slapping their hands on their thighs and heading inside one of the housing structures.

"Clear," Joel said. "Not a hostile."

They continued on.

Crossing the road came without incident, and the other border dropped them back into a thicket of trees. They had one more, narrower road to cross before they had a straight shot to the abandoned hospital. That road, the Est. Quedas de Kalandula, led to the Kalandula Falls.

It felt sordid that anything as dangerous as forced recruitment could occur in the same area as a beautiful gift of nature like the Kalandula Falls. It was somewhere he would have taken Sydney, and he could see them standing on the rocky surround, holding each other as they marveled at, by volume, one of the largest waterfalls in Africa—their private jet had included a shitload of reading material on the area.

Maybe they could make it an annual thing, visiting everywhere from the Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe to the Denmark Strait between Iceland and Greenland.

Focus, Joel.

The encampment came into view, darker than the night that surrounded it. For it to have been a hospital, it stood isolated in the middle of a dark green thatch of grass with no nearby satellite buildings. A broken, rusted-

through chain-link fence with a single string of barbed wire running across the top created a border around it. There were dozens of windows, and with them all unlit, the only thing that would tell them whether the abductors had prepared for their arrival was a nozzle flash. By then, it could be too late.

Mike took wire cutters to an already broken section of the fence, widening the opening. After Julien gave the all-clear, Dez went through first while Gage remained behind. Once everyone was accounted for, he stepped inside.

Joel handed off his rifle to Giorgio, who'd remained as quiet as a teardrop on cotton during the trek.

"You good, Lattimore?" Mike asked.

"Why is everyone asking me that?"

"Because we're a team." Mike strapped on his climbing equipment with a finesse that came from years of experience. "One mind, one heartbeat. If shit's off with you, it can throw shit off with us. So, I'll ask you one more time. Are you good?"

He stared at the hooks and links to the climbing equipment, his mind blank. He'd done this dozens of times, but all of a sudden, he felt like a toddler faced with an algebra problem.

"Some shit happened with Syd," he said. "She got an apartment."

They froze.

"Why?" Julien asked.

"Because," he closed his eyes and willed himself to remember the steps to secure the equipment, "she doesn't want to be married to me anymore."

They stepped back as if he'd told them he had a contagious illness. In some ways, it probably felt as though he did. If his relationship fell apart, only time would tell whether he was an outlier or the first domino.

Mike ran his fingers through his hair. "I, uh, wasn't expecting to hear that shit."

"I know, and I'll admit it messed me up a little, but I've got this." The steps came back, and he resumed his task. "We're hashing that out when I get back stateside. Right now, I'm focused on getting these kids to safety. Wolfe, you once told me that our minds don't work the same way when we're in the zone, so we have to get our mental shit together when we're on the ground. I've got my mental shit together."

They mumbled their understanding.

Mike double-checked his ropes, likely on account of his earlier fumbling, but he didn't complain. The last thing he needed was to find out he'd fucked something up when he was three stories high.

Gage reiterated their rendezvous point location.

They split up.

After giving the ring on his left hand a twist underneath his glove, Joel headed to the south side of the building.

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CHAPTER 5

Making sure to stay clear of the windows, no matter how flimsy they appeared to be, Joel continued his ascent until he reached his entry point on the fourth floor.

The building was old, so there was no glass to break. Where a latch and notch to lift the window had been once upon a time, a gaping wide opening stared back at him, covered by a thin piece of cloth.

Before entering, he listened for any movement. These guys weren't exactly skilled, so their breathing, though quiet, would be erratic and shallow, fueled by adrenaline-infused anticipation. The device in his ear would further amplify their inexperience. However, hearing nothing, he climbed through the window and unhooked his equipment.

Mike was right; it was a storage room.

Old hospital beds covered in dust and debris were pushed against one wall. A cockroach the size of Europe skittered along the concrete floor, which was packed with so much dirt, it was like a carpet made of loose soil.

Joel made his way into the hall, which was equally dilapidated, tiles missing in large chunks from the ceiling with feathery, cottony material hanging out like guts. More beds, these the type on wheels, lined the walls, some completely upended.

In under twenty minutes, he and Mike had the entire floor mapped.

Once they were done, they reconvened in a south-facing room on the top floor that was a replica of ninety percent of the others—one window, a dirty floor, and enough dust to make a winter coat. The window in this room faced the back of the building, and from this high up, he could even see the village they'd passed through.

Julien's voice echoed in their ears. "Thank you, gentlemen. Now, sit back and let me demonstrate the power of LiDAR technology. What's LiDar, you ask?"

Mike rolled his eyes.

During times like these, when Julien had them at his mercy, they always ended up receiving an impromptu lesson in new tech, old tech, or modified systems developed by Mr. Hunter himself.

"To start, LiDar is an acronym for 'light detection and ranging,'" Julien explained, far too giddy for their current circumstances. "Now, thermal imaging relies upon radiation, and it's basically saying, 'Hey, by comparing your body heat to the temperature around you, I can spit out an image that will let you know all who's inside this place.' LiDar, on the other hand, employs a laser and then builds a 3D scan based on the distance the light traveled before being reflected back to the laser. So, not only can I see the who, but I can also see the what. Now, *could* I have used thermal imaging to—"

"Hunter," Mike whispered.

"Yeah, my bad."

While Julien worked, Joel walked to the window and peered out through the glassless opening. Despite knowing Gage, Giorgio, Julien, and Dez's approximate locations, he saw nothing that suggested there was anything but thickets of grass scattered along the ground.

Something bright shined in his eye.

Frowning, he raised his rifle and peered through the scope. The male figure from before was back, and this person had to have a bladder the size of a six-week-old puppy's. Either that, or they'd drank all night, and their body was purging itself of the alcohol. He'd certainly had similar nights in his twenties, most notably during his and Sydney's off-periods.

"What is it?" Mike asked from behind him.

"Thought I saw a nozzle flash." He lowered the rifle. "But it's the same person from before."

"Again?" Mike joined him. "Once is a coincidence. Twice is deliberate. Did you get a good look at them?"

"Looks like a male around five-ten. Smoker. Husky, probably around two-fifty. I'm a hundred percent certain it's the same person. Hey, Wolfe? You getting this?"

First, there was silence.

Then Gage's voice came through. "Yeah. I let John and Benarld know, so they're sending some guys to check it out. As for us, we don't have time. The kids are where we expected them to be. The problem is, Julien and Dez have been watching the scan for the last few minutes, and there's been no movement in that room."

They'd prepared for suicidal madmen. However, they'd only *mentally* prepared for showing up and having to rescue lifeless bodies rather than live hostages. While the worst-case scenario was never far from their minds, it was the last place they went when kids were involved. If they'd showed up too late and the kids were harmed—or worse—only one of them would have to go in.

Giorgio could wipe out a continent under the right circumstances, and hurt children was one of those circumstances. They'd joked several times that if more teams like theirs existed anywhere, they would always lack a sixth man. Imitations could try, but there was no other Giorgio Pozza.

Gage didn't have to give the command; with this new information, the plan had changed. In seconds, the rest of the unit would enter the building. Hopefully, they would leave with all the children alive, shielding their innocent eyes from the carnage.

Mike went one way.

Joel went another.

John and Benarld's men surrounded the structure but remained on guard of the exterior. When it came to stealth missions, the smaller the team, the better.

"In position," Joel announced.

Mike's command followed.

Then, he waited.

Because of their earpieces, he heard the clicks and clinks of their equipment as the rest of the team navigated the building, voice after voice announcing when they'd cleared a room. He didn't hear any doors open, but he heard the faint noise of metal rolling over a hard floor—a smoke canister.

One word followed, from Dez.

"Go."

On cue, Joel turned around and leaped from the edge of the window off the side of the building.

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CHAPTER 6

Joel and Mike stormed the rear entrance.

Childlike coughs rose around them.

Unlike the others, this area appeared to be multiple rooms joined together. The places where the walls had been knocked out remained incomplete openings with jagged cinderblock edges.

Through the smoke, they funneled the children toward the entrance, where John and Benarld waited with a unit of soldiers.

“Pozza’s in motion,” Gage said. “Me and Hunter’ll cover him. Focus on extraction.”

There wasn’t much chaos for a room full of smoke and kids. The children didn’t appear to need to know who they were and why they were there; all they needed to trust them was a path to the exit. John and Benarld speaking to them in Portuguese and the region’s native dialect likely also helped. Nearly all the kids in the area spoke Portuguese and at least one native dialect, while some understood a bit of English.

“Você està seguro,” Benarld said.

You are safe.

“Não estou aqui para te machucar.”

I’m not here to hurt you.

Joel reached for a little girl cowering in the corner, and she scurried further against the wall. To help ease her fears, he removed his goggles and lowered his mask.

“Você està—”

He barely got the words out.

She rushed forward into his arms, wrapped hers around his neck, and held on tight. “Você voltou,” she squeaked out. “Obrigado.”

You came back.

Thank you.

Then she buried her face in his shoulder.

John tapped his shoulder, and he tried to hand the little girl over, but she was stronger than her tiny body appeared. Based on looks alone, she couldn't be any older than five or six, but he had to use all his strength to pry her from his body.

John carried her out.

The little girl screamed and flailed, her shrieks the impetus for chaos as the sound of gunshots vibrated against his eardrum. On autopilot, he, Mike, and Dez left the hostage retrieval and rescue to the soldiers and headed toward the gunfire.

One mind, one heartbeat.

Joel's heart pounded in his ears. His mind tried to split, as it usually did in these scenarios, but he shoved the images to the back of his head. One of these days, he knew he wouldn't be able to stop it from showing him a multitude of things—his niece smiling with her missing front teeth, his sister sending him a look when he was being his usual ridiculous self, his parents.

Sydney.

However, he didn't want to do the “life flash before eyes” thing unless that moment, God forbid, truly came to pass.

They found Julien, Gage, and Giorgio standing over a lone gunman. Giorgio cradled a little boy who barely looked older than three while Gage's rifle dangled in his right hand. It appeared the intel had been off about the age of the youngest hostage.

“This was the only one,” Gage said, without looking up. “He ran when he heard the intrusion and grabbed the little guy to use as a shield. What kind of person do you have to be to threaten to shoot a baby to save yourself?”

Joel looked around the room.

A metal arm extended down from the ceiling with wires spilling from its wide-open end. One wall was made up of two cabinets with a cut-out in the middle. Old piping peeked through the cut-out's cracked tile wall, and

above it, a mirror swung haphazardly, threatening to fall to bestow useless bad luck on the ghosts that roamed the hallways.

“Think this used to be a surgical suite,” he said.

John appeared in the room’s doorway. “The only one in the building, most likely,” he said. “We have the children.”

As if snapping out of a trance, Gage looked away from the man on the ground and over at John. “I don’t like that there was just one man with a gun in charge of all those kids.”

John shook his head. “Neither do I. But the rest of the building is clear. We can wrap this one up.”

On the way out, Joel heard Mike add a quiet, “For now.” It might have been the end for John and Benarld, but they knew from experience that something else was brewing. Something that would probably land them right back in Angola in under twelve months.

Joel, the last one in their procession, took one more visual sweep of the room before walking through the doorway.

When they reached the middle of the dark corridor, shattered glass resonated behind them. After dangling for over a decade, the mirror in the surgical suite had finally crashed to the ground.

CHAPTER 7

They returned to the white building with the checkered floor and nonfunctioning A/C units. Benarld took a team of soldiers with him to escort the children to a church where the children's families waited. Those who didn't have families would be assigned to social aid workers who would assist Benarld with the children's next steps.

Giorgio disappeared somewhere on the even more derelict second floor of the structure with a look that said he hadn't caused enough bloodshed to satisfy his thirst. Mike always took time to decompress once they completed all their objectives, disappearing as well.

Dez and Gage debriefed with John.

Julien called Ari.

Joel found himself shirtless in a makeshift medical tent, sitting on a cot while Dr. Engela Nkosi, a South African physician who'd traveled with Recces, passed a needle through a wound in his arm. At some point, either upon entry or exit, he'd gotten slashed by a window shard. Because the building had looked like a bacterial infection breeding ground, Gage ordered him to get the cut looked at before they headed back.

Each time he hissed or sucked in a breath, Dr. Nkosi sent him a look, holding back a smile she hid from her face, though not from her eyes. Eventually, he reacted purely to tease her. Once they were stateside, his life would unravel, so he'd do whatever he could to distract himself until then. As long as he was here, he and Sydney were together.

"One more noise, and I will leave you here," Dr. Nkosi warned.

He nodded. "Got it."

She raised her hand to make another loop.

He groaned.

“Hah! You see? That time, I did not even touch you. I have infant patients who handle stitches better than you, Mr. Lattimore.”

“Sorry.” He grinned. “It’s been tense around here. Just trying to lighten the mood, no matter how brief that period might be.”

She glanced down at him, her eyes like deep brown gemstones. “Do you always cause trouble for women? Because I have not forgotten that there is a ring on your finger.”

“I guess you could say that my, for lack of a better word, *playfulness* is a coping mechanism,” he explained.

“I don’t know your face. You are new?”

“Yeah. You’ve worked with this team before?”

She closed another loop. “Yes. Several times. I have done this for them several times as well.”

“Am I your worst patient?”

“Yes.”

He scrunched his face in faux disappointment and watched her work as she closed the last stitch. Then she patched him up with a clean roll of gauze and sent him a few more glances, her dark eyes daring him to make a sound.

Once done, she straightened, cradling the rest of the roll in her right hand. “You didn’t answer my question from before. Do you always cause trouble for women? I am sure, despite your wife waiting for you, you still get them to do what you want because you have a nice smile and eyes like a galaxy.”

“No, no trouble,” he said.

“So, you are faithful?”

“Very.”

“Well then, I hope your wife knows how lucky she is that you are faithful.”

With that, she walked off.

He watched her leave as he rose to his feet. She was an attractive woman, and had he been a single man, he was pretty certain he could have gotten her naked and sweaty underneath him on top of the cot’s paper-thin mattress. Then, later, she would tell him he was no longer good enough for her, if he’d ever been, and leave their relationship when he was thousands of miles on the other side of the globe.

Gage called for them to meet him upstairs.

He shrugged on his shirt, left the tent, and climbed the precarious stairs to the second floor, where he found everyone, including John, in what was once a one-bedroom apartment. Dez sat on the kitchen counter chewing on an apple while the rest of the team spread out around the living room.

“The little girl you had,” John began. “The one who clutched you. What did she say to you?”

Joel leaned against a wall and folded his arms. “She said, ‘You came back. Thank you.’”

“When I took her, she kept asking me to return to you,” John added. “She said you took her away from the ‘bad man’ and kept her safe.”

“Tell him what she said the bad man looked like,” Gage prodded.

John held his arms out at his sides as if adding another several inches to his lean frame. “Puffy. And she said he spoke with an accent and smoked cigarettes. A white man.”

The room momentarily fell silent.

“Then it was surveillance, like I suspected,” Mike said. “The person Lattimore saw wasn’t there for the kids. They were there for us. I don’t know who’s stupid enough to fuck with us, but they better hope those cigarettes kill them before we show up.”

Even though most of them were quiet, they all turned in Julien’s direction, and it was odd to see him without a laptop, tablet, or some other electronic device in his hands.

Julien shook his head. “I don’t know. I really don’t fucking know.”

Which was more than a bad sign. Julien was the group’s one-man think tank. Sometimes, he had so much intel, he was like the team’s psychic. If Julien didn’t know who appeared to be tailing them, it wasn’t a situation they could deal with lightly.

“We’ll head back,” Gage said. “John, keep us posted?”

John nodded. “Definitely, but there’s more. One of the children told us that we weren’t the first group to show up. The first group took the ‘rest of the men,’ which is why there was only one when you arrived. They also let us know there are more children, so I have a feeling we will see each other again soon.”

Giorgio’s growl penetrated the darkness.

They headed downstairs.

An hour later, Denis showed up with the jeep.

As they headed back this time, the sun was only beginning to break the horizon. No children played, and the approaching morning turned the beige sand orange. The trash remained, piled seemingly higher than when they arrived.

Houses remained shut.

People slept.

For the people inside those homes, this was a moment of peace. A moment where slumber offered them a slight reprieve, nourishing their dreams with coated steel walls being turned into gold and the fleeting promise of an easier life.

As if they were all thinking the same thing, no one spoke. Regardless of what the team had just accomplished, their actions were a drop in the bucket. Therefore, whatever they could offer, they would. Right now, that was silence—respect for these few moments of dawn's solitude.

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CHAPTER 8

The guys didn't ask him anything else about his and Sydney's situation on the ride to the airstrip to head home, the jet, or after they landed. Even if they had, he wouldn't have had anything to offer.

Gage and Giorgio continued on to California.

Mike headed to Texas.

Dez and Julien asked him whether he would be all right to head out on his own, a roundabout way of trying to determine where his mind was, but he told them it was fine. He also didn't ask Julien to find where Sydney now lived; he didn't want Julien involved in their drama when Julien had his own wife and a daughter to care for.

Still, he received a text on his way home.

Julien

8815 Connecticut Ave NW Washington, DC 20008

From Ari.

Sydney said it was okay.

Joel, staring at the message, shook his head. "What games are you playing, Syd?"

Considering no one met him at the airstrip, he'd had to hire a driver.

As the driver ambled up the long driveway of the home he wasn't sure he'd ever share with Sydney again, the massive structure stood like a monument, much too large for two people.

He thought back to rural Angola, to the tin and grass houses with the cloth roofs. Had it been up to him, he would have gone with something that

didn't cross over into the two-digit millions, but it was Sydney who'd taught him that it wasn't a character flaw to enjoy luxury and convenience—the finer things in life.

To her, marble floors were simply “the kitchen,” while he couldn't get over the heated floors and full-body, post-shower air dryer in the owner's suite upstairs.

He thanked the driver, exited the car, and headed to the front door. It unlocked as he approached, and the heavy double doors slowly opened, welcoming him inside.

Regardless of Sydney and her apartment and her thinking he would let her slash a knife through their story without a fight, he imagined her hurrying down to meet him in the foyer, arms open. Those open arms would then turn into him making love to her, sometimes no further than that entryway.

As he walked through the house, his shoes echoing and bouncing off the walls, he realized things had gone missing. They were minor—accent pieces, pillow cushions. Plants and their vases. The, admittedly, ugly black and white oversized wall art that used to hang above the sofa in living room number one.

He dropped his stuff and surveyed the rest of the house. She'd said she'd gotten an apartment, so it shouldn't have surprised him to find things missing. But when he reached the owner's suite and noticed the bare mattress in the four-poster bed frame, the missing chairs, and the empty space at the foot of the bed where a bench used to sit, it hit him.

Sydney moved out.

Sydney had moved out.

A yellow envelope on the nightstand called ominously to him, and he walked over, the muscle in his jaw twitching. He reached inside, pulled out the first sheet of paper, and read the first few lines before shoving it back inside.

Petition for Dissolution of Marriage

“Oh, no.” He shook his head, tossed the envelope onto the bed, and headed downstairs. “Hell fuck no, Syd. You don't get to do this.”

He grabbed his keys and burst through the garage door, ready to toss Sydney over his shoulder and drag her back home, if necessary.

* * *

She came to the door wearing a robe, her hair in a half ponytail with strands framing her face, doing her best to look as if she'd just woken up—like he wasn't married to her. Like they hadn't spent nearly twenty years of their lives together.

“Don't act like you weren't up, Syd.”

He stepped inside and looked around. For the last seventy-two hours, he'd felt like he had no idea who he'd married, but this place was Sydney Donovan all the way. The apartment showcased its high-end wood floors and upscale appliances like successful children.

“How many bedrooms does this place have?” he asked.

She shut the door and leaned against it. “Three.”

“Three bedrooms with this view off Connecticut Avenue?” He did a quick calculation in his head. “Mrs. Lattimore, this place is probably around ten grand a month.”

“Joel, you didn't call first.”

“Call before I come? Why? You were expecting company?”

“No.”

He gestured to the living room's white modular chaise sectional. “Can I sit, or do you want me to stand? That way, I won't get too cozy. Gotta make sure I leave at some point, right?”

She raised both hands. “I deserved that. You can sit. We do need to talk.”

He took a seat.

Then he stood.

“I can't sit.”

“Because you're agitated.” She walked to the kitchen, and he lost himself in the smooth curves of her body, visible even in her robe, until common sense kicked him in the brainstem.

“Are you hungry?” she asked. “I made dinner. I kind of figured you'd show up here tonight, especially since I told Ari you could come.”

“I'm not hungry, and you're stalling,” he pointed out. “Sit down, Syd. We *need* to talk.”

She wrung her hands, nodded, and walked over. Neither of them lowered onto a cushion.

While he knew he was supposed to be pissed at her, this close, he could smell her body wash and feel the heat from her body. His groin constricted, and he nearly cursed it out loud. Now was not the time. It didn't matter how good she smelled, how cute she looked, or the fact that he knew what he would find underneath if he tugged on the robe's strap—his wife. His beautiful, conniving wife.

"I already told you how to fix this," she said.

He stretched his arms wide. "Fix? Sydney, you moved out. You never told me there was a problem. You never—"

"You see?" She pointed at him. "I don't like when you do that. I *have* told you there's a problem, but Joel, you only hear what you want to hear."

"When did you tell me?"

"All the time!"

He dragged his tongue across his top row of teeth. "Well, I'm listening now. Talk to me. Tell me."

"It's not...it's not just one thing."

"Then tell me them all." He flopped down onto the couch. "No matter how long it takes, tell me everything. All your gripes, your complaints."

She took a seat next to him. "Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously."

"Could you see us staying together if we never have kids?"

A golf-ball-sized lump manifested at the base of his throat. "What is it about the kids?"

"I don't want to be a mother."

"But what changed? Before—"

"Before, I told you things I shouldn't have, knowing I wasn't sure about motherhood or raising a family. Honestly, baby, I told you I couldn't wait to have your child because I knew it was what you'd want to hear."

"Hypothetical question," he began. "If I'd slept with someone on this last assignment—"

"Did you?"

"No."

"Joel, did you?"

"Can I finish?"

She motioned for him to continue.

"If that had happened, and I came back here and never told you about it, or better yet, I told you I'd never cheat on you and have never cheated on

you. Would that be a lie?”

“Joel—”

“Is it a lie, Syd?”

She licked her lips. “Yes.”

“Regardless of whether that’s what you would want to hear, that your husband’s faithful, it would still be a lie. No matter how you spin it, if you knew, back when you said that to me, that you weren’t sure, you lied to me.”

She sucked in a breath. “But you were so—”

“Still a lie.”

“Can you not...don’t cut me off, please?”

He grated his molars together. “Sorry.”

“It’s not just the kids,” she went on. “You’ve changed. You’re tenser. Angrier. Then, when you come back from assignments, you’re not even the same man I know. Sometimes, if I’m being honest, I’m a little afraid of you.”

He resisted the urge to grab his stomach. Retired or not, this woman could land a wallop of a punch. If he survived this conversation bruise-free, it would be a miracle.

“I’d never hurt you. You have to know that.”

“I do, but like I said,” she laid a hand on his knee, “you’re not you when you’re like that. Even the way you talk to me now is more aggressive than it used to be.”

“Like how? When?”

“Like now.”

“Sydney, am I supposed to be happy that you don’t want to be married to me anymore?”

“I never said I didn’t.”

He hacked out a laugh. “Oh? Then what’d you leave for me at the house? On the nightstand? It wasn’t a children’s book.”

“There’s something else,” she said. “Something bigger. The biggest issue.”

He knew what it was.

But he didn’t cut her off, as requested.

“Joel, I keep having the same dream—me with two little kids, twin boys, and we’re crying over a casket. They keep asking me why you left us.

Then you get lowered into the ground, and no matter how much dirt gets thrown into the hole, it never fills.”

The lump in his throat grew.

Tears she'd been holding at bay flooded over, and she tossed her face into her hands, shoulders shaking as she cried. He reached over and pulled her up against him, and she cried harder.

“Why didn't you tell me this?” he softly asked. “Why would you just leave?”

His shirt muffled her response.

With a gentle tug, he coaxed her onto his lap and drew further back onto the cushion. When she removed her hands, slowly swelling eyes stared back at him.

“I did tell you,” she whispered.

“Sydney, no. You didn't.”

“I told you I was worried about what would happen to you. That I was scared you might not come back one day.”

“And you can't see how that's different from what you're telling me now? Don't you think Larke has the same concerns? Tayler? Ari? Hell, whether or not she'll admit it, Mo?”

“How much do you know about Ayesha Savea?” she asked.

He sighed.

It wasn't much.

All he knew was that she was the widow of the fallen member he'd, in a roundabout way, replaced. She had a young son named Josiah and Theo, a baby boy, and she'd been early into her pregnancy with Theo when Curtis died.

“We've met a few times,” he said. “She seems really sweet. Quiet but sweet. I assume much of that has to do with grief, though.”

“I had lunch with Ari and Larke, and she was there. She joined us, and she brought the boys. She looked so,” Sydney looked up at the ceiling, “depressed. Tired. Like, if she could do it all again, she wouldn't have had kids.”

He frowned. “Did she say that?”

“She didn't have to.”

“I doubt she regrets her kids.”

“You weren't there.”

“After that lunch, is that when you started having the dreams?” he redirected. Ayesha was grieving, yes, but all he saw when he looked at her was a woman who, despite the losses life had bestowed upon her, loved her boys with everything in her.

“Look at what she lost to this life.”

“All of us carry the same risk, Syd.”

She scrambled off his lap and put a few feet of distance between them. “Gage and all of them? In your mind, you guys aren’t part of a Black Ops unit. To you, it’s a brotherhood.”

“I don’t see what’s wrong with that.”

“You’re not them, Joel,” she choked out. “You’re not anything like them.”

He stood. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“They recruited you onto the team to take Curtis’ place. And, in taking Curtis’ place, that means you’re expendable. Should shit go down again, you’re the body they want to take the bullet or fall on the grenade or whatever.”

He stared at her, lips slightly parted and his brows so low, they might as well have been touching the ground floor of the building.

“Sydney, you couldn’t be more wrong.”

“Then why did they recruit you?”

“Because I already knew them. Because I fit. Because I can do the challenging shit, and I was mentally done with the FBI by then. Julien said they’d had their eye on me for a while, but I was still with the Bureau.”

“And if you’d said no?”

“Then I would have said no,” he said. “But, if memory serves me correctly, you were ‘ecstatic’ about me doing this too.”

She jutted a hand at him. “I lied to keep you happy! Why don’t you understand that?”

“I do, but do you expect me not to care that you did? Do you expect me to brush it off like it’s nothing? Tell me, Sydney, how should I react to you lying about us having kids? To you demanding that I give up the most purposeful career of my life? To you telling me you want to split up while I’m overseas and then leaving divorce papers behind at the house before we even had a chance to talk? How should I react? You’ve made all the decisions for us up to this point. Make this one too.”

“Joel...” She closed her eyes and massaged her temples. “I’m trying not to get loud with you.”

“Why? This place is expensive as shit. The neighbors aren’t going to hear—”

“Joel, you’re mine!” Her voice cracked, and she glared at him with narrowed eyes and damp eyelashes. “I don’t care about Dez, Giorgio, Julien, Mike, or Gage. I’m not married to Dez, Giorgio, Julien, Mike, or Gage. I’m married to *you*. So, I don’t care about what they would do. I care about what you would do, and you’re one hundred percent the type to toss your fucking body on top of a grenade, like Curtis stupidly did, without thinking about the fact that he was leaving behind a kid and a wife. Do you think they’d do that shit for you? And look at how Curtis left Ayesha. What’s she doing now? Struggling with two little boys, one of them an *infant*. Curtis dying changed her heart, changed her forever. The way she talks about Curtis? She’ll never love again. You can’t love again after loving like that and losing everything.”

At the moment, he had no response, but she was wrong about the guys. Gage, Dez, Giorgio, Julien, and Mike would do the same for him.

Without question.

The knowledge that they would look out for each other to the bitter end kept them on their toes. He didn’t want to lose them, just like he didn’t want to tragically lose his older sister. In a perfect world, they would be a seven-man team. However, in a perfect world, Sydney would have never lied to him.

“You don’t know that she’ll never love again,” he said, in defense of Ayesha without knowing whether she even wanted to. “You’d be surprised what the right love can do to a broken heart.”

Sydney waved a hand. “You’re reaching.”

“Syd, you’re wrong.”

“You really think they’d die for you?” She snorted. “Joel, I love you. I’ve loved you since I was sixteen. They don’t have your best interests at heart. I do.”

“And that’s the only way to fix this? To leave the team?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“And then what?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I want a family, Syd.”

“You and I can be a family.”

“I want to be a father.”

“We can get dogs.”

“I want a son, a daughter.” He would even take an alien-human hybrid if that alien-human hybrid acknowledged him as its father.

“And I understand that,” she said. “But, at the end of the day, it’s my body. You can respect that, right?”

He scanned her from the top of her head to her pink, decorated toenails before settling his gaze back on hers. “Sydney, I respect your body. Love your body. I’ve worshipped, tasted, licked, and filled your body. This isn’t about me disrespecting you. This is about you lying to me, even after we went through counseling, and then you walking out before giving me the courtesy of an honest conversation.”

“If I’d said, back then, that I didn’t want kids, would you have still married me?”

He shrugged. “We’ll never know now, will we?”

“You wouldn’t have.”

“You talk about me not hearing you, not listening, but you’re clearly not understanding. You lied. You could have even said you weren’t sure, but you told me you...” He cleared his throat. “You told me you couldn’t wait to create a life with me. To create a connection to me that no one could ever take from us. The way you said it and the way you made me feel? I remember thinking, she wants me to be the father of her children? *Me*? She sees *me* as worthy of that role? But you didn’t. You never did.”

“Joel—”

He turned and headed for the door.

“Joel, don’t go.” Her grip circled his wrist. “Joel, please.”

He tried to pull away, but she held on tighter.

“Joel, please don’t go. I’m sorry. Please, Joel. Please.”

He stopped in the middle of reaching for the door handle, head down. He didn’t turn to look at her, but when she released him, he didn’t continue his exit.

“Baby, I’m sorry.” She wrapped her arms around him from behind. “I’m so sorry. Tell me you love me.”

He didn’t.

Her hands lowered, and he felt her fiddling with his belt, but he didn’t stop her there, either. As much as she’d hurt him, her arms weakened him.

Her tears softened him. When he loved, he loved completely, but for the first time since they'd declared their love for one another all those years ago, he didn't believe she felt the same.

For her, he would have given up so much. For her, he *had* given up so much. Yet, in order to get what she wanted, in order to prevent him from ever saying no, she'd lied and made him go from feeling like the luckiest man in the world to the biggest sucker ever to walk the earth's surface.

Still, he didn't stop her when she removed his belt and unhooked the button on his waistband. He didn't stop her when she reached inside his underwear and gripped him, her pleas growing longer and needier.

"Joel, I'm sorry. Tell me you love me."

She squeezed.

He groaned.

"Don't go. Tell me you love me."

He turned around, plucked her off her feet, and they fumbled until he kicked in the correct door that led to her bedroom.

The sun had gone down, and the curtains were closed. The bedroom was darker than midnight, but he managed to find the bed, set her down, and unravel the knot at the front of the robe. Underneath, she was completely naked.

"Why are you naked?" He tugged his shirt off over his head. "Were you waiting for somebody?"

"Tell me you love me, Joel."

He spread her legs, lowered his pants and underwear just enough to free his cock, and shoved inside her so hard, she slid on the mattress.

Her fingernails sank into the skin on his back. He pulled out and drove again, bending his head to suck on her neck.

She cried out, her back arching, and held him firmer. Whatever pain he'd been in temporarily subsided as her body enveloped him in warm, tight familiarity.

"Damn you, Sydney."

He thrust harder.

She met him stroke for stroke.

"Syd, don't you know how much I love you? I would have done anything for you, for us."

She shook her head. "Not anything."

“You could choose to trust me.” A groan slipped out when he felt the first promise of orgasm. “We can get through this.”

He pulled out and buried his head between her legs. She threaded her fingers through his hair and held his mouth against her hot flesh until she cried out, shuddering, the mattress shaking. Then he raised his head and entered her again.

Pent-up frustration, strife, love, and lust shot from his body into hers. It was as if the orgasm was as angry as he was, leaving his cock with so much force, it immediately spilled out of her down over his shaft.

Leaving the team wouldn't fix it.

Having a child wouldn't fix it.

Nothing would.

This wasn't about what they wanted. The crux of this issue was something they'd ignored for entirely too long. Something his sister might have been right about. He and Sydney had grown into two different people, but their relationship didn't grow with them.

* * *

The next morning, he expected to wake up to Sydney asleep beside him, the night before forgotten as he leaned over to place a kiss on her temple. Instead, a handwritten note waited on the pillow beside him.

Joel,

Let's file the papers.

Let's not contest it.

I love you so much.

- Syd

And, despite months of pleading and bargaining, sleeping together and sleeping apart, desperate lovemaking, and long periods of painful no-contact, Joel walked out of his lawyer's office on an overcast Thursday afternoon as a single man for what felt like the first time in sixteen years.

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CHAPTER 9

One year later

Outside of enemies, adversaries, and a few select teachers from high school who'd had "it" coming, Joel was confident that he could attest that there weren't many people who didn't like him.

Until today.

Sweat dripped down Ayesha Savea's temples. Dark patches created damp land masses on the back of her black leotard. Her lacy circle skirt had wrinkled, and looking at her tights, he knew it would be hell for her to get out of them later due to wet skin.

The Diaz-Wolfe wedding was happening.

Finally.

After setbacks upon setbacks, random global assignments, and a baby, Gage and Tayler had rescheduled their wedding date several times, although no one ever wondered whether it would happen.

Because of all the strife the couple had endured, everyone agreed to do everything possible to make their special day a perfect one. One of those things included learning a choreographed routine, and seeing as how he and Ayesha were the only two unattached people in the family, they were matched up as bridesmaid and groomsman.

"Alexa, pause music," he said.

The music abruptly stopped pumping through the studio's surround sound speaker system.

Ayesha despising him was mainly speculation. She'd never had a harsh word to say to him on account of her pleasant personality. She was kind,

and it was easy to see what had drawn Curtis to her. Lately, however, she'd been more quiet than usual.

Curt.

Standoffish.

Their friendship officially developed when, after a particularly rough night, he'd shown up at Dez and Larke's. She'd been visiting at the time, and she stayed up to listen to his sob story over running into Sydney on a date only a few weeks after he and Sydney separated. The next day, to thank her for putting up with him, he took her and the boys to Clemyjontri Park.

Since then, they'd been friendly.

Nevertheless, this week, it seemed as though every word he spoke made her cringe and clench her jaw, to the point where he imagined his words brushing her skin like stripped wire.

"Want to go again?" he asked.

She coughed into her elbow. "I need a minute. No, five. Five minutes. I keep messing up the steps."

"It's not an easy routine."

"Yet, we've been practicing for months, and I'm still not..." She shook her head. "Never mind. Five minutes."

She went to the far end of the mid-sized dance studio, sat cross-legged on the floor, grabbed her water bottle, and took a long drink. Hoping to break with the tension between them, he followed and took a seat next to her, leaving a little over an arm's length worth of space.

"So, Ayesha, I was thinking. What if we—"

She stood, walked to the door, and left.

"—break the steps into smaller pieces," he quietly finished.

Sighing, he gave his attention to the studio's wall of floor-to-ceiling windows. In the distance, the Pacific Ocean sparkled under the high afternoon Malibu sun. With everyone in California to spend a few weeks with Gage and Tayler, Tayler had scheduled for them to get some practice sessions in, adding a few extra for him and Ayesha. Now, he wondered whether Tayler might have to accept two fewer people as part of her wedding reception dance routine.

The door creaked.

Ayesha entered, uselessly smoothing the frizz-sprung strands from her bun, and walked directly to the center of the shiny laminate floor.

She raised her head, chin firm. "Ready."

He stood and made his way over.

As he drew closer, he noticed her eyelids were redder than when she'd left, and he wanted to reassure her that she would pick up the steps in no time, but it wasn't his place to say. For all they knew, she might never get it all down.

Instead of waiting for him to reach out, she took his hand. Then, once he was in place, she gave the *play* command.

The song started.

He placed his hand at her waist, their bodies facing the same direction. Then they began, moving in sync, step for step, across the smooth floor. They were supposed to look at each other, something the instructor had drilled into them repeatedly, but Ayesha stared straight ahead.

After they made a full rotation around the center of the room, he twirled her until she faced him, drew her close, and dipped her slightly.

"Ayesha, look at me."

"Can't. Concentrating."

They segued into a waltz, the part she'd stumbled over the last time. This time, she aced all the foot placements, sparing her ankles from a sprain or fracture.

They swung out and then came back together in a quick step, and a smile spread across his face. She could be hard on herself sometimes, but she was doing an excellent job.

Next came a breakdown in the middle of the song, where Tayler had them doing Charleston-esque quickstep footwork. By the time the wedding was over, he would be ready for a national dance competition, and as eager as he'd been to see Giorgio do the routine, even if he'd had to watch it with his last breath, Mike had paired up with Mo.

After the breakdown, they had a series of twirls. The twirls were supposed to end with him lifting Ayesha into his arms, but his phone was hooked up to the speaker system. Because his phone was hooked up, the music paused to announce, "Sydney is calling."

Hearing Sydney's name broke his focus.

Ayesha, waiting for the support, leaped.

The next thing he knew, he was hovering above her, balancing on one palm. His other hand cradled the back of her head, which was so close to the floor, one of his knuckles grazed the vinyl surface. Sweat dripped from his soaked hair strands onto her exposed collarbone, blended with the

beaded moisture on her skin, and trickled down her chest, disappearing beneath the black spandex.

“You okay?” He quickly scanned the parts of her body not covered by his. “Shit, you didn’t hit anything, did you?”

She stared up into his face, her chest rapidly rising and falling.

“Ayesha?”

“No.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before opening them again. “Well, technically, I hit everything else, but my head’s fine.”

He stood, pulling her up with him. Still flustered, he yanked too hard, and she crashed into him, but then she immediately stepped back as though his midsection was covered in spikes.

“*Sydney is calling.*”

“You should probably get that.” Ayesha pointed at his pants pocket. “Wouldn’t be surprised if it’s everyone trying to figure out what’s taking us so long.”

He removed his phone, accepted the call, and turned away as he brought the phone to his ear.

“Hey, Syd.”

“Hey, babe. What’s taking you guys so long? Gage already has the burgers on the grill.”

“We had a hiccup, but we’ll be there soon.”

“What hiccup?” Sydney asked. “Is Eesh okay? Because she wasn’t feeling that well this morning. I’m surprised she went at all.”

He and Sydney still talked.

In actuality, they did more than talk.

The divorce papers might have said they were no longer together, but at night, their bodies disregarded the memo. At night, their bodies fit together the same way they always had, like fingers sliding inside a pair of gloves.

Tayler had paired him and Ayesha together because they were technically single, but Sydney still spent time with the family. Sydney had been his—lover, wife, and confidante—once upon a time. She also had dance experience, which her father had signed her up for to help with her footwork in the boxing ring. They would have knocked this routine out in no time.

He swiped his hand over his head, scattering sweat all around him. “I don’t know. She seems like something’s bothering her, but I didn’t ask.”

Sydney responded to someone in the background before returning to their conversation. “Josiah wants to know when you’ll be back.”

“Hey, Ayesha?” he called. “Ready to head out? Josiah’s asking for you.”

Ayesha nodded. “Yeah. I’m done.”

“It’s you he’s asking for,” Sydney clarified. “But I’ll let everyone know you two are on your way back. See you soon.”

“Okay. Love y—”

She hung up.

Shaking off a wave of uneasiness, he went to grab his things, trying not to leave a puddle in his wake. Many other times since the split, she’d ended the conversation with “Love you.” It was how he knew that her hanging up had nothing to do with no longer loving him. She would have returned the sentiment if she’d heard it.

“Did she say what Josiah wanted?” Ayesha asked.

He swiped a towel down over his face. “No.”

She grabbed her things, tossing her bag over her shoulder. Although she removed the cap on her water bottle, she didn’t take a drink. Instead, she played with it, flicking it back and forth, opening and closing.

Joel wiped the towel through his hair, mind straying farther and farther from the studio. Sydney slipped up like that so often, calling him “babe” or “baby” when she answered the phone, he no longer believed it was a mistake. Other times, she treated him like they’d just met, and he was the guy she wasn’t sure about—as if they weren’t exes who climbed into bed with each other more often than they probably should.

The way he saw it, they were divorced, but divorce didn’t equal “no longer in love.” He wasn’t seeing anyone, and neither was she, so his gut told him they should have been on their way to reconciliation.

Sure, the issues that separated and eventually broke them up lingered, but he’d never loved anyone except Sydney. He wouldn’t know how to love anyone else, even if he could. Not the way he loved her. And what would be the point of pursuing anything if it would always remain lukewarm when he thrived on torrid nights, heat, and passion?

“Ayesha, do you think you could love anyone else after Curtis?” The question shot out like a torpedo, and as much as he wished it hadn’t, he had no desire to take it back.

Ayesha’s eyes opened wide. “Where’d that come from?”

“Doesn’t matter. What’s your answer?”

“None of your business.”

She headed for the door.

He crossed the room in four steps and grabbed her hand. “You can’t answer that simple of a question?”

“A simple question?” She yanked her hand out of his. “If you think that’s a simple question, then that’s even more evidence you don’t need to be asking it.”

“What is your problem? We used to be...friendlier, but ever since I got here, I’ve been trying to be nice to you, start up conversations and whatnot, and you’ve blown me off every single time. Still, I must be a glutton for punishment because I keep trying.”

“Joel,” she stared into his eyes, “maybe you *are* a glutton for punishment.”

He narrowed his. “Well, at least there’s a possibility for me and my ex-wife to get back together.”

He was irritated.

Sometimes, when he was irritated, he transformed into *Joel Petty*. Ayesha deserved none of it; she didn’t owe him friendship, never mind a conversation, and it wasn’t her fault he couldn’t move on and continually tried to close the distance Sydney kept opening up between them.

“I wasn’t referring to you and Sydney, you jackass. I was referring to me and you, right now.” Ayesha took a step closer to him. “And if Curtis was still alive, at least he’d want me.”

He gnawed on his bottom lip.

Her eyes dared him to say more.

“I asked you a question,” he protested.

“Then you lashed out in the most juvenile and insensitive display I’ve seen since Theo was six months old.” She dragged her tongue over her top lip. “Newsflash, Joel Lattimore. Not everything’s about you. People can be going through shit that has nothing to do with you, but keep trying me if you want to. I’ll take you the fuck down. Today is not the day.”

He looked from one rust-colored eye to the next. Her boys, Theo and Josiah, had the same eyes, with slight variations between the levels of green and brown. A dark, nearly black ring circled each iris, and he wondered whether it had always been there or if it manifested when people were being a complete ass to her, knowing she didn’t deserve it.

“Know what?” He tossed the strap of his duffel bag over his shoulder.
“Walk back to Gage’s.”

He left the studio, heading for the elevators.

She didn’t call after him.

When the elevator opened on the bottom floor, he walked to the car, the dry West Coast air a stark difference from the humidity blanket back in the DMV area. Then he stood in front of the gleaming emblem of a horse rearing on its hind legs, faced the front doors, and waited.

Ayesha exited less than five minutes later and stopped in front of him, their gazes once again locked tighter than a bank vault.

“Give me your bag.”

She tossed it at him.

It landed with a smack against his chest, stinging a little because of the sweat there that hadn’t yet dried.

With no further words, she got in on the passenger side. He tossed the bags in the back, slid behind the wheel, backed out of the parking space, and made a silent declaration to get back to Gage and Tayler’s as soon as possible.

* * *

The only sound inside the Panamera came from the engine’s quiet, almost inaudible hum and the soft music filtering through the speakers.

Joel drummed his fingers on the middle console.

Ayesha tapped hers a few inches away.

“Do you mind?” She looked from his face to where his arm rested, taking up a significant portion of the middle console.

“Nope.” He slid his hand over until their forearms touched. “I don’t.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Be clearer next time.”

“Have you always been this petty?”

He shrugged.

She sneered.

The silence returned.

Eventually, Robin Thicke’s voice filled the dead air, and he and Ayesha reached for the touchscreen at the same time.

He pulled back. “Go ahead.”

“It’s not the song.” She tapped the skip button. “It’s just, I’m sensing a theme. I think Larke’s been sharing so many playlists, she accidentally shared her and Dez’s, um, ‘date night’ selection.”

“Sex Therapy” came on next.

She smashed the pause button. “Quiet’s fine.”

“Are you sure?” He slid her a glance. “The sound of my breathing won’t make you want to strangle me? Maybe I blink too loud?”

“If memory serves me correctly, you were the one who thought you could say whatever you want to me and not get called out for it. I didn’t start this. You did.”

“Technically, you started it.”

She turned in the seat, facing him. “How?”

“Since I got here, you’ve said only a few words to me. If you can help it, it’s like you don’t want to breathe the same air I do.”

He felt her studying him.

Then she faced forward again. “I’m sitting in a car interior with the windows up, knowing I smell like an onion salad. I don’t hate you. I barely care about you.”

A pang cascaded across the expanse of his chest. “Don’t say shit like that, Ayesha. I want you to care about me. I mean, I care about you. Call me crazy, but I’d like it if we were closer. I might never be as close to you as the guys, seeing as how they’ve been around since before Josiah was born, but the way things have been between us over this past week won’t work.”

The side of her face grew noticeably firmer, and she stared out at the coastline. The closer they got to the house, the fewer cars they met on the road. Already, he could see the house in the distance, a modern structure overlooking the beach that felt warm, welcoming, and familial despite its size.

“Do you hate me because I joined the team?” he asked. “Did I do something before Malibu? Did I say something? Not say something?”

“I don’t hate you, Joel,” she repeated. “I merely...despise you.”

He laughed.

She cracked a smile.

“If it makes you feel any better, I don’t see me being on the team as me trying to take Curtis’ place,” he added. “I would never do that, and I don’t want you to feel like I’m imposing. Julien even said that, had Curtis been

alive, they would have still tried to recruit me for no other reason than to drive Gage crazy.”

The smile grew.

The pain in his chest dulled.

“It’s not easy to be around you,” she said. “Whenever I look at you, I see where Curtis used to be. Times like these, when everyone’s together and having fun, I miss him even more. Curtis used to love when everyone got together.”

The pain in his chest spiked again, but for less selfish reasons. He’d been so caught up in his divorce drama, he never once stopped to think about how difficult it probably was for Ayesha to see him and Sydney, who weren’t together, still acting as if they were. There they were, playing around with love like they had all the time in the world, when Ayesha knew firsthand how untrue that notion was.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He raised a brow. “*You’re* sorry? For what?”

“For saying I didn’t care about you.”

“Ayesha, I was an asshole to you for absolutely no reason. *I’m* sorry. You don’t owe me anything, and I was acting like I’m entitled to your attention.”

“Not for no reason. Sydney’s a reason.”

“I’m pathetic, aren’t I?”

“Not because of that.” She smiled. “But the argument could be made about whether you might be pathetic, in general.”

He lightly poked her arm. “Whatever.”

The smile softened her irritation, smoothing out the tightness that had been present on her face all day. Then a car horn blared behind them, not-so-subtly letting him know the light had turned green when it felt like it had turned red only seconds ago.

“So, what happened?” he asked, pulling off. “What’s the cause of your shitty day? Talk to me. Get it off your chest.”

She leaned so far into the seat, he wondered whether she realized it couldn’t swallow her whole. “It’s Curtis’ family,” she said. “After he died, my relationship with them got worse. It wasn’t that great to start with, but it’s never been this bad.”

“They don’t like you?”

“Never have. They wanted someone different. A Samoan princess. At least, so they claimed. The two families were close, so Curtis marrying this ‘princess’ seemed set in stone. To them, she was the better choice for him—bronze skin, long jet-black hair, and honestly, much prettier than me on a good day.”

He scoffed. “I doubt that.”

“I’ll show you a picture sometime,” she insisted. “She’s seriously gorgeous. But, according to Curtis, the family focused so much on her looks that she never got to explore who she was outside of her beauty.”

“So, no personality.”

“That’s what he said.”

“Did Curtis defend you when his family said things about you?”

“Yeah. Since the beginning.”

“Is that what happened?” he asked. “They said something to you about her that got under your skin?”

“Oh, no.” She flicked her wrist. “I know Curtis loved me, so I never worried about her. What happened is...so, a little bit before me and the boys left Maui, I ran into one of Curtis’ sisters. I let her know we’d be in Malibu for a couple of weeks, so I asked if they wanted me to drop the boys off to spend time with them and Curtis’ grandmother before we left. She said yes, but only Josiah.”

“Why only Josiah?”

She sighed. “Because Curtis’ grandmother...has been spreading a rumor all over...that Theo isn’t Curtis’ son.”

He nearly slammed on the brake. “*What?*”

“According to her, the timing isn’t right, and someone in the family, some cousin or another, swears she saw me with a man Theo looks like more than he looks like Curtis.”

“Do they know what they’re saying?” he asked. “What that kind of accusation implies? And how is the timing off?”

“I found out I was pregnant with Theo early. Since my symptoms were identical to Josiah’s, I took a test, and then I got my first ultrasound at six weeks. I also carried Theo for forty-two weeks. I was trying not to induce, but when we reached that point, the risks to Theo were too great.”

Based on what he’d heard from everyone else, Julien had been tracking hospital admissions. When they heard Ayesha had been admitted, the guys flew out to make sure she wasn’t alone when Theo was born, regardless of

how tense their relationship had been with her at the time. As far as they were concerned, Ayesha was family, and there was no way they would let their sister have a baby alone.

“Man, I’m sorry about that, Ayesha.” He covered her hand with his and squeezed. “That’s fucked up. If you’d like, I can make a visit.”

“To do what?”

“I don’t know. Kill people.”

She burst out laughing.

He grinned, and all the pain in his chest dissolved. Anyone but her. He couldn’t handle someone in “the family” hating him, and, in his opinion, when he and Ayesha did get along, it was extremely well. He could talk to her about anything, and while the fact that she was a therapist probably had something to do with it, she treated him more like a friend than a client. Then, when she did open up to him, it made him feel like she was comfortable enough to talk to him about anything.

“Mike told me you’re the team’s comedic relief,” she said. “That you’ve diffused tension in some of the most challenging moments the team’s ever faced. He said the same thing about Curtis. So, regardless of what you might say or believe, in some ways, you are filling Curtis’ place.”

“I don’t mean to—”

“I know you don’t, and I don’t mean it that way. It just feels...it feels like his spirit’s back, in some ways. I think that’s why the boys, at least Josiah, latched onto you so quickly.”

That was one reason.

It could have also been due to him bribing Josiah with video games and soccer lessons, and him sharing his food with Theo. Now, when he was eating, Theo climbed onto his lap and waited for a bite from “their” plate.

“That’s why being around you is hard,” she added.

“I remind you of him.”

“Your personality. They’re very similar. It didn’t matter what I was going through. Curtis could *always* make me smile.”

He turned onto the private road that led up to the house. The car hit a bump, and the entertainment system, tired of being silenced, popped back on. “Sex Therapy” flowed through the speakers.

“Do you think Dez does a little dance,” he rolled his body, “for Larke when they listen to this?”

She snorted a laugh. “I mean, I *have* seen random glitter on Larke before.”

“Glitter?”

“From Dez’s Magic Mike body lotion.”

A laugh squeezed from his throat as he stopped the car in front of the house.

“Actually, I see Larke being the performer.” She wound her shoulders, sending the motion down her midsection to her hips like a corkscrew before bringing it back. “She probably sets up a pole in their bedroom and everything.”

When he didn’t respond, she looked over.

“That was pretty impressive,” he said. “You’re complaining about following Tayler’s dance routine when you can do that? Girl, you’ll be fine.”

She shook her head and looked down to unlatch her seatbelt. Then, so far under her breath he nearly didn’t hear it, she said, “So much like him.”

CHAPTER 10

“Mama?”

“Yes, Theo?”

Ayesha continued to set barbecue glazed chicken in a Pyrex dish while her son called her from Gage and Tayler’s deck. Everyone else was on the beach, but if she was on the deck, Theo was on the deck. With the depth of the clingy stage Theo was currently going through, he would follow her into a house fire.

“Mama!”

She looked up. “Yes, baby?”

He extended a chewed-up piece of grilled pepper in her direction.

“*Puppa.*”

“Is it a yummy pepper?”

“*Co-Geish. Puppa.*”

“Uncle Gage gave you that pepper? Did you say ‘thank you’ to Uncle Gage?”

Theo danced to music only he could hear, stomping his sandal-covered feet, and went back to munching on the pepper.

Tayler’s cooking was magic if Tayler could get her baby boy to eat a grilled pepper. While she didn’t have many issues with Theo’s palate, she would’ve never expected him to eat, never mind enjoy a vegetable not mixed in rice or stew. Josiah, on the other hand, had his father’s appetite. She’d yet to find something he didn’t like.

Sydney walked up the deck steps, her body toned yet curvy in all the right places and her brown skin shimmering in a white bikini. A matching white coverup fluttered around her ankles, her feet bare.

Ayesha, after catching herself staring, quickly looked away. Sure, she'd had two babies, but it wasn't as if she'd looked like *that* before them in the first place. Then again, she was in California. Before she left, maybe she'd take Tayler, with her fantastic legs and ass, with her to a cosmetic surgeon and point.

Curtis' voice suddenly echoed in her head.

"Eesh, baby, don't say that." Curtis wrapped his arms around her, his hands so massive, they nearly covered her entire lower abdomen. "Five months ago, you gave birth to my baby boy, our son, our little Josiah, and you went from beautiful to a combination of cute, gorgeous, and sexy that just," he groaned, "does something to me. I didn't think I could want you more than I already do, but looking at you turns me on so much, I'm sure I'll need your therapeutic services."

She laughed. "You'll need me to shrink your head?"

"It's the only thing on my body you can shrink." He pressed against her. "So don't talk about yourself like that. And if you're not ready for me to show you just how perfect I think you are, you better run."

Sydney crouched in front of Theo. "Hi, puka. Oh my god, you're so cute. I have to stop myself from just...squeezing you."

Theo hit her with one of his "I know I'm cute" grins, and he received the response he was going for—Sydney's squeal.

Ayesha slowly shook her head.

With how liberally he wielded that grin, she half believed her son would grow up to be the one who brought nineties R&B back, merely for the concert screams and shouts. And, of course, the squeals.

"Up, Theo?" Sydney opened her arms. "Can Auntie pick you up?"

Theo hopped in place. "Up, up, up."

Sydney picked him up and set him on her hip, and Ayesha found herself staring again. How Sydney acted with the kids made it difficult for her to see children as the sole reason she and Joel split up. She didn't act like someone who didn't want to be a mother; she acted like a woman who was afraid to.

“Ayesha, you’re not done with this yet?” Sydney asked. “We miss you down on the beach. I’m trying to relax with *all* my girls.”

“You don’t miss me,” Ayesha teased. “Where I go, Theo will follow, and you’re trying to steal my baby.”

Sydney nuzzled Theo’s cheek. “Maybe.”

“Take him.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” She finished the last piece of chicken and set aside the basting brush. “And yeah, I’m just about done. I’ll bring the rest of the food down. Where’s Joel? He promised to help me.”

Sydney looked back over her shoulder. “Think he’s still teaching Josiah how to swim.”

“I might be able to manage if you hold Theo.”

“Gladly.”

Turning up the cuteness, Theo set his head on Sydney’s shoulder, pepper juice staining his lips and chin. Sydney nuzzled him again, placed her head on top of his, and rocked him, humming Roberta Flack like a lullaby.

Ayesha looked out at the water just as Joel and Josiah emerged, playfully shoving at one another, and she knew if Joel walked up and saw Sydney rocking and singing to Theo, he’d propose all over again.

“Actually, there’s something else,” Sydney said. “I was wondering if I could talk to you about something. Privately.”

Ayesha nodded. “Of course.”

Sydney looked back again.

Joel was now headed their way.

“Ayesha, this can’t get back to Joel.”

“Confidentiality is what I do for a living, Sydney. But, if you’d like, I can send you the waiver I use at my practice.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I trust you. I’m just...” Sydney took a third glance at Joel. “How did you feel when you first found out you were pregnant?”

Ayesha found herself also now checking for Joel, who’d reached the bottom of the deck steps.

“Like, emotionally?” she whispered.

Sydney’s voice matched hers. “Symptomatically. It’s not like it was the last—”

“Hello, ladies.” Joel walked directly over to where Sydney stood, strides long and purposeful, and blew a raspberry against Theo’s cheek. “Hey, baby boy. I miss you down on the beach.”

“*Mitt you beash,*” Theo echoed.

He blew another raspberry and then faced the table, his eyes indistinguishable from the water behind him.

“Sorry I’m late, Ayesha.”

She looked down at the assortment of glass and foil containers. “It’s no biggie. How’d Josiah do?”

“The boy’s a fish. Are you sure Curtis didn’t teach him?”

“He could have, but Josiah told me himself he didn’t know how to swim and wanted you to teach him.” She raised her head but didn’t meet his gaze head-on. “Looks like he’s having fun. Thanks for doing this for him.”

Before she could point out what to carry, he grabbed as many dishes as he could hold, his large hands and long arms swallowing twice what she would have been able to transport in one go. Behind him, Theo groaned as he tried to wiggle out of Sydney’s arms, reaching for Joel.

“Lattimore,” she tipped her chin at Theo, “looks like you’ll need one of your arms.”

“Hey, buddy.” Joel set down a few of the containers, took Theo using only one arm, and kissed the soft curls on top of Theo’s head.

Considering the level of Joel’s desire to be a father, seeing Sydney with Theo should have brought him to his knees. Yet, he hadn’t taken as little as a second to stare at her while she’d cradled a tiny toddler in her arms with a look that could have been misconstrued as her wanting a child of her own.

“Jo!” Theo wrapped his arms around Joel’s neck, then shoved his pepper toward Joel’s mouth. “Jo, *puppa.*”

“Don’t eat that,” Ayesha warned. “I’m one hundred percent sure it’s covered in...particles.”

Joel laughed. “You eat your pepper, buddy. Want ‘Jo’ to teach you how to swim too? Hey, Ayesha, have you noticed that he doesn’t call me ‘uncle’ like everyone else?”

“Maybe he doesn’t see you as an uncle,” she said.

Joel bounced Theo, who giggled like he was on a carnival ride. “Is that right, Theo? I’m not ‘uncle’ Joel? Too formal?”

Sydney studied him, head slightly tilted. “I mean, Theo doesn’t have a father. Maybe he sees you as his father.”

Ayesha winced, and she looked from Joel to Sydney, praying they hadn't noticed. Theo had a father. Just because he wasn't standing in front of them didn't mean Theo didn't have a father.

Joel's head snapped around. "Syd, really?"

Sydney's jaw dropped, and she sucked in so much air, it could have been mistaken for one of the waves crashing against the shore.

"Oh, god. I didn't...Ayesha, I didn't mean it like that."

"Syd, Theo has a father," he said. "Just because Curtis isn't standing in front of us doesn't mean he doesn't have a father."

Ayesha looked down at where she'd curled her fingers around Joel's wrist. She didn't remember reaching out, and it wasn't until he faced her that she realized she'd grabbed him.

Sunlight cascaded around him with the vast Pacific as a backdrop. Damp hair clung to his forehead, and a droplet of seawater glistened on his eyelashes. His brows had wrinkled in the middle, taking his browbone so low his irises looked like they were locked behind a dark, feathery prison.

Then, it all calmly vanished.

"You okay?" he asked.

She looked from him to Theo, who was also staring at her, still munching on the now soggy, wrinkled piece of grilled bell pepper. He wasn't only asking if she was okay with what Sydney had said. In two words, he'd asked her if what Sydney said had triggered what she'd confided in him about regarding Curtis' family.

"Yeah, I'm okay."

He smiled, and had she been Sydney, she wasn't sure she wouldn't have given him a baby just for the hell of it.

Just to keep him.

"Good." He ticked his head toward the beach. "Let's take this food down before people start getting *hangry*."

Sydney rushed forward. "I'll help you. And really, Ayesha, I'm so sorry."

She shook her head. "No harm done, Sydney. We're good."

* * *

The setting sun brought their beach day to an end.

Everyone went inside, showered, and cleaned up, and after putting all the children to bed, they listened to Joel and Dez animatedly tell stories that had them laughing until they cried.

Sydney caught Ayesha's eye, motioned toward the balcony with her head, and then left where Joel had been sitting on the floor, his back pressed against her shins.

Ayesha followed and found Sydney sitting at the edge of a lounge chair, tugging on both sides of the slouchy cardigan she'd casually tossed over a romper. Next to Sydney, she felt like a teenager in the nightclothes Josiah had volunteered to pick out for her—a green cotton T-shirt with an avocado on the front that read, "I Will Guac Your World," and red and purple checkered cotton pajama bottoms.

"It doesn't matter if they match, Mama," he'd argued. *"You look beautiful."*

There'd been no arguing with that logic.

"So, I think I might be pregnant," Sydney began.

Ayesha sat on the lounge chair across from her. "Have you taken a test?"

"No, but Ayesha, I can't be pregnant. I've never missed a pill, but I didn't get a period with this last pack."

"Okay. Well, how do you feel?"

"Tired. Achey. My breasts are sore, and I've been nauseous all day. Do those sound like early pregnancy signs? It's been so long."

They did, but they also sounded like illness and anxiety. However, Sydney didn't eat much at their beach barbecue, and Tayler and Mike did most of the cooking. Only illness, or in this case, a possible pregnancy, would stop anyone from consuming anything Mike and Tayler made, especially together.

"You've been pregnant before?" she asked.

Sydney stroked the column of her throat, as if trying to keep food down. "Eons ago."

"Honestly, Sydney," she shrugged, "you're really going to have to take a test. That's the only way to know for sure."

"I can't."

"What if I help you—"

"The baby might not be Joel's."

"Oh." Ayesha leaned back. "Oh."

Laughter floated through the open balcony doors. Sydney looked toward the sound, working her bottom lip with her teeth. Tears collected at the bottom rim of her eyelids.

“This is *Joel*, Ayesha. How do I tell him that? How do I tell the former love of my life, who everyone knows I’m still sleeping with regardless of what me and him believe, that he’s a possibility?”

“Who’s the other potential father?”

“You remember when Tayler’s cousins came to visit?”

“The Ghanaian cousins or the Cuban cousins?” Ayesha flicked her fingers. “Like it matters. They were all fine.”

“That’s what I’m saying. It’s unnatural.” Sydney leaned closer and lowered her voice. “But you remember Kofi, right?”

A few months ago, while the guys were on assignment, Tayler introduced them to her racing cyclist cousin, who’d stopped by for a visit with his brother when they were all in Malibu. It had been the only safe time to visit with the guys, namely Giorgio, out of the country.

All she recalled of Kofi was a lovely smile and cycling shorts that had held a package that looked like it could only be delivered by freight.

“Yeah, I remember Kofi. So you slept with Kofi, and now he might be the father? Well, the other father?”

“I didn’t sleep with Kofi one time,” Sydney said. “I slept with him many times. Many, many times. We’ve been...we’re together. We’re dating.”

“And does Kofi know you might be pregnant?”

“I told him.”

“Does he know it could be Joel’s?”

“No.”

“So, you told him but didn’t tell Joel.” Ayesha leaned even closer, dropped her voice even further. “Sydney, statistically, who is more likely to be the father of this potential baby?”

The collected tears burst through their dam. Sydney’s nostrils flared, and she faced away from the doors.

Ayesha left her seat and sat beside her, using her body to block the line of sight from the house to the balcony. If Joel caught her crying, with the state Sydney was in, she would likely blurt everything out, and that wouldn’t bode well for either of them.

“Do you love Kofi?”

Sydney shook her head. “No. I like him, though. I like what I find out about myself when I’m with him. Joel is fit and active and sexy—*god, he’s so sexy*—but I like that me and Kofi have sports backgrounds. We connect on that a lot. Right now, he’s still conditioning for the Tour de France, but when I told him, he wanted to come down to be with me when I took the test.”

“I don’t mean to sound like a mother,” Ayesha began, “but do you and Joel use condoms?”

Sydney shook her head.

“And Kofi?”

“Most of the time, honestly, but there were a few times when things got hot and heavy and…” Sydney buried her face in her hands. “I hate myself so much right now, Ayesha. What would my mother think? Oh, god, my father? They raised me better than this.”

“Sydney,” she gently pried Sydney’s hands away from her face, “you’re an adult, and this isn’t the nineteen twenties. There’s nothing wrong with women exploring their sexuality. You want to date and get to know yourself as someone other than ‘Joel’s girlfriend’ or ‘Joel’s wife.’ That’s understandable considering the number of years you two spent together. However, here’s the part you’re not going to like.”

Sydney’s bottom lip trembled. “That I’m a sleazy bitch? A whore? Trash?”

“First of all, don’t call yourself those ever again. You’re a human being worthy of love and compassion and understanding, but you’re also a human being who’ll have to face consequences. It’s part of the journey. Joel’s holding on to you, and you like him holding onto you.”

“I do.”

“And you know it’s not fair.”

“I know that too.”

“But, before you tackle that, if there’s a baby inside you, it won’t disappear just because you didn’t take a test. Sydney, honey, you need to buck up and pee on a stick.”

Sydney held her hands in a loose grasp. “Okay.”

“Who else knows?”

“Just you right now.”

“But you’re closer to everyone else.”

Ari and Tayler could have helped.

Even Larke was closer to Sydney than she was, though she wouldn't have recommended asking Larke anything about pregnancy at the moment. This was her and Dez's second attempt, and Dez almost didn't want to try again after they lost the first baby, but Larke had reassured him that she was okay.

Then came the second one.

And it was unfairly brutal.

This pregnancy came with a cluster of ailments that shuffled Larke in and out of the hospital. When Dez had to leave, Larke either stayed with Ari or one, or more, of them flew in to wait on her, hand and foot, despite her protests.

Then Dez had to fly out only thirteen hours after Larke was discharged from a two-week stay, and she'd had to talk him through an *extremely* emotional moment. That same night, she told herself that if things didn't work out a second time, and they still wanted children in the future, she would offer to be a surrogate.

"You're easy to talk to, Ayesha," Sydney said. "There's something calming about you. I really wish you didn't live all the way out in Maui. I do."

Ayesha pushed back tears and stood, pulling Sydney up with her. "Come on. I'll run to CVS and pick up a test. You stay here and take a moment to decompress. Whatever happens," she gave Sydney a quick, tight hug, "I'll work through it with you."

"Ayesha, this'll break Joel's heart."

It would do more than break his heart. It would cause irrevocable damage to his soul, his psyche, and his self-confidence. If Sydney went on to have a child with someone else while he was still as in love with her as he was, it would destroy him.

A personality like Joel's couldn't die.

Not again.

"Does he know you're dating?" she asked.

Sydney shrugged. "I'm not sure. He saw me out once."

"Sydney, you haven't done anything wrong."

"Ayesha, he loves me."

"And love doesn't promise us eternal happiness," she said. "Love isn't guaranteed to save a marriage, and it's definitely not guaranteed to save a life."

Curtis' last words echoed through her mind, but she couldn't hear them. For reasons that continued to escape her, they never came to her with the deep timbre of his voice.

Instead, they showed up as words on unlined paper in handwriting nearly as lovely as he'd been. It had been part of his dossier, a pre-written goodbye note all the guys had in their file, praying they never had to use them.

“Eesh, I love you.

“And I'm sorry.”

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CHAPTER 11

Ayesha grabbed a pair of keys from Gage's wall collection; Gage had let her know she could take whatever car she wanted, but she couldn't touch any of the bikes until he taught her how to ride.

As she made her way to the garage, Joel's voice rang out behind her.

"Ayesha? Are you leaving?"

She spun around. "I'm just running down to CVS."

"Now? This late?"

"It's an emergency."

"Oh. I'll come with you, then."

Her stomach dropped. "It's okay, Joel. I'll be all right."

"Ayesha," he gently cupped her chin, "argue all you want, but you're not leaving here alone."

"So, I'll ask Mo."

"Is it a feminine hygiene thing?"

She nodded. "Yes. Yes, it is."

He folded his arms across his broad chest and studied her face, squinting. "One, you're lying. Two, I have a sister and a mother, so I've done my share of 'emergency' shopping. And three, Mo's probably in a pretzel at the moment."

Ayesha snapped her fingers. "Damn you, Giorgio."

"If it makes you feel any better," he said, doing a poor job of hiding his amusement, "I'll give you space when you go pick up your, I don't know, sixty-count box of extra ribbed condoms or whatever."

She sucked in a gasp. Then, brimming with a laugh, she searched for something to toss at him, but all she had was the key fob.

A key fob for a Porsche 911 Carrera.

She'd sooner throw herself.

She shoved him in the chest, turned, and headed for the garage. Joel easily fell into step next to her, his long strides somehow remaining in sync with hers.

"Can we go back to when you thought I hated you?"

"I'm sorry, by the way," he offered.

She stole a glance up at him. "Joel, I won't break apart because you teased me about ribbed condoms. That part of my life's not over just because I don't want it right now."

Plus, she'd had sex since becoming a widow. It was with only one man, and she'd done it because of how desperately she'd needed someone to hold her, but she and Curtis had talked about what they'd once thought was unlikely to happen. Flat out, he'd told her he wanted her to love again.

Love, she wasn't sure about, but she wouldn't mind someone warming the cold space on the bed next to her again someday. Probably after Theo left for college.

She slid behind the wheel, and Joel hopped over the closed door onto the passenger seat.

"I'm telling Gage you did that."

He grinned. "I'm glad we ironed out our issues. I've really missed talking to you, Ayesha."

"Joel, it was a week."

"If we count by the hours, it was almost eight days. Then, with you in Maui, I don't get to see you or the boys as much as I'd like."

She nearly asked him how much he would have liked to see the boys, as she could use a break now and again, but the words never made it past her thoughts. And leaving Joel with Theo without a three-day course on Theology would be cruel and unusual punishment.

The engine roared to life.

She nearly moaned.

Curtis would have loved this car.

"Man." Joel shook his head. "I love this car. I'm *this* close to asking it for its number."

She elbowed him. "Stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

Having things in common with Curtis.

Had Curtis still been alive, he and Joel would have been thick as thieves, and it would have been six guys driving her crazy. All except for Giorgio. Giorgio was the perfect older brother—unhinged and always on her side.

“Nothing,” she lied. “I was trying to get us back to having bad blood between us.”

“So I can feel lost again?” He puffed out a quick, almost disbelieving chuckle. “Ayesha, even though I one hundred percent feel like part of the family, I still get this feeling of...I’m not even sure how to explain it.”

“Kind of like being on the outside?” she asked. “Like, you know you love them, but you feel like everyone’s part of a circle that remains open-ended because of you?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

She backed out of the garage. “I get that.”

“When I talk to you, that feeling disappears for a little while. I know how close you are to them, and we might never get that close, but I’d love for us to be friends again.”

Ocean breezes tossed the awry strands of her hair about, and she tilted her nose in the air to take in the smell of the sea. She lived in Maui, so this was nothing new, but Maui came with isolation and loneliness made worse by Curtis’ extended family’s insinuations and accusations.

This was her family.

Curtis’ family.

He lived inside each and everyone one of the guys, and he’d loved them as fiercely as she did. When she left, at night, once the boys were in bed, she would cry until she ached.

“Joel,” she stopped at a light and looked over at him, “we never stopped being friends.”

Another grin spread across his face, and she watched it appear from start to finish. Between a smile like Joel’s and what she remembered of Kofi, she fully understood Sydney’s predicament. Who could easily walk away from a man like this? But what choice did Sydney have if her and Joel’s futures, regardless of their pasts, couldn’t align?

A horn blared from behind them.

Ayesha jumped, faced forward, and pushed down on the gas pedal.

* * *

As promised, Joel gave her space when she walked down the aisle where, thankfully, both the feminine hygiene products and pregnancy tests were shelved.

To be safe, she bought two, along with a box of saltines, anti-nausea candy, and a couple of bottles of Gatorade. The entire time, she successfully kept what she'd bought from Joel.

But the universe hated her.

Joel studied the box he'd picked up from the garage floor after the handle tore on the paper shopping bag and sent everything sprawling.

"Ayesha," he raised his head, "you're not...you can't possibly be... you're not pregnant, are you? Actually, let me reframe that."

It wasn't the right moment to smile, but she came close. Reframing his thinking was something they'd talked about together. Something she did multiple times a day. Still, negative thoughts fell through the cracks, but the point wasn't to do it perfectly.

"Are you pregnant?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No."

She swore she heard him quietly sigh in relief, but even if she was, there was no guarantee her third child would be another Theo. Theo was sweet. A sweet ball of energy. An adorable, sometimes trying ball of energy that had developed the ability to get out of all diapers, regardless of whether she'd strapped him into suspenders.

"Then who's pregnant?"

She squinted at the test. "Wait, did I pick up a pregnancy test? Let me take a look at that."

"Ayesha, either you're a terrible liar, or I'm really good at reading you for some reason." Joel tapped the box against his palm. "Let's see, it can't be Larke—wouldn't make any sense. Tayler just had a baby. It could be Mo, but I don't think she'd send you if she's still lying about her and Giorgio. So, that leaves Ari and..." His eyes opened wide. "Ayesha, *who's* pregnant?"

"Ari."

"Ari's pregnant?"

"She might be. That's what the test is for."

"I mean, it would make sense. Those two are always at it, and they did say they wanted another kid." He stared at the test a while longer and then bent to pick up the rest of the spilled contents. "Does Julien know?"

“No, and don’t say anything. Please.”

“Of course.”

One crisis averted, she followed him inside, put the food in the pantry, and went in search of Ari. When she heard Ari’s moans from behind a closed door and down the hallway, she searched for Mo instead.

Though muffled, and she’d had to get all the way to Mo’s door before she heard any sounds, it was the same thing. With all the sex going on, known or clandestine, maybe she should have picked up extra tests.

At the end of her search, she’d recruited only Larke. Tayler fell asleep, which was par for the course with her and Gage being first-time parents, and Larke was avoiding what she referred to as “Dez’s acrobatics” due to not feeling seductive. Rather than the truth, which Dez wouldn’t have taken lightly, she told him she didn’t feel well.

They stood outside the door while Sydney took the tests, and Ayesha put herself on Joel-watch. If he saw them, went looking for Sydney, and couldn’t find her, he’d figure it out.

“Hey, Ayesha?”

She jumped, nearly falling down the stairs.

Apparently, she sucked at Joel-watch.

He walked toward her from the other side of the hallway, carrying Theo, who was sucking on his middle and ring finger, a habit she’d been trying to break for months. Upon seeing Theo, her brain momentarily pushed Sydney’s predicament aside.

“Is he okay?” She searched Theo’s face, limbs, and plucked his fingers from his mouth to examine them. “Did something happen?”

Joel gently tickled Theo’s stomach. “He’s fine. I was walking by and heard him playing, so I went in and got him before he woke Josiah up. We’re gonna take a walk on the beach, if that’s okay with you, Mama.”

She pressed the back of her hand to Theo’s forehead. “And you’re sure he’s okay? Did you take his temperature?”

“Ninety-eight point six.”

“Diaper?”

“Changed him.”

“Is he hungry?”

“Made him some formula, but he didn’t want it. He did eat some of my sandwich, though. Next time, I’ll get Mike or Tayler to season the formula.”

She laughed. “That’ll work.”

“So, are we good to go?” He held Theo up in front of his face and took his voice several octaves higher. “Can I *peas* go for a walk on the *beash* with ‘Jo,’ Mama? With any luck, I’ll fall asleep before we hit the sand, and I’ll sleep all night without waking you up once because Jo is a miracle worker.”

“Only luck could do something like that,” she said. “And yes, you may.”

“Thanks, Ayesha.” He planted a quick peck on her cheek and headed downstairs, regaling Theo with a story he swore “really happened” about a house he used to own down the street from Jupiter’s Red Dot.

Ayesha watched them, smiling, but the smile faded when she thought about one of her biggest regrets—that Curtis never got the chance to know that he was going to be a father for the second time.

Josiah, who’d had Curtis in his life for several years, had questions after his death, so she knew Theo would show up with the hard hitters as he grew older. What she’d tell him, she didn’t know. What she did know was that Curtis would have spilled over with love for his baby boy, the same way he’d gushed over Josiah.

“Psst, Eesh.”

She turned around to find Larke waving at her and hurried down the hallway.

“What’s the verdict?”

Larke didn’t have to answer. The pure elation on Sydney’s face in the bathroom doorway provided a response.

“Negative,” Sydney held up one test, then the other, “and negative.” Sydney, her expression unreadable, stared at one of the tests. “I might not be pregnant, but this whole situation tells me that I need to be upfront with Joel about us.”

“Which ‘us’ do you mean?” Larke asked. “You and him, or you and Kofi? I would advise against you telling him about Kofi until you take some time to figure out how you’ll break the news.”

Ayesha sent her a covert nod. Both she and Larke had seen Joel at his lowest. News about Sydney seeing someone, and that relationship being so involved that she thought she could have been on the road to parenthood with that person, needed to be handled carefully.

Perhaps professionally.

“I won’t tell him about this incident or Kofi,” Sydney clarified, “but we can’t keep acting like we’re still together. The problem is, the more we do, the less it hurts. When we’re faking it, I don’t remember that it’s not real.”

“You’re trying to stave off the pain of not being together,” Ayesha explained. “You two have been together since you were kids, so ending that, for good, won’t be easy on either of you. But unless you’re trying to get back together, it’ll have to end at some point.”

Sydney left the bathroom doorway and flopped down on the guest room bed. “I know, but I still love him, Ayesha.”

Something Ayesha couldn’t immediately place meandered through her, tickling her nervous system as gently as Joel had tickled Theo’s belly, but she mentally brushed it away. Sydney looked ready to get something off her chest; she needed to be present and all ears.

“So, confession,” Sydney began. “Our disagreement over children isn’t the only reason me and Joel split up. There were other things. Other things I’ll tell you guys another time. But, recently, I asked myself, what if he did what I asked? That’s why I served the divorce papers—to try to force his hand. Joel’s always done whatever I asked because he loves me and because that’s the kind of guy he is. I thought I could make this happen too, but then I realized it might not only be about us compromising. It’s like...I want him to do what I want, but the only way we’ll have a successful relationship is if he’s selfless and I’m selfish.”

Larke took a seat on Sydney’s right.

Ayesha took the left.

Sydney continued. “Dating Kofi made me realize that there are things about myself I would have never discovered with Joel. Then there’s the fact that Joel, amazing as he is, sees me a certain way, and I hide parts of myself not to muddy that image. He thinks I’m perfect, but I haven’t been fair to him for over ninety percent of our relationship. I was the girl Joel thought he could never get. Now that he’s grown and *sexy* and confident, I still expect him to chase me like the girl he could never get. If he doesn’t, I, for lack of a better word, pout.”

Ayesha wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “That what you just did? My job would be a lot easier if the majority of my clients could do that. It’s hard for us to admit to our shortcomings, but over time, it’s empowering.”

“Here’s the caveat, though. I find myself pulling away from Kofi whenever he does whatever I ask.”

“You want to be challenged.”

“I think so.”

“But not by Joel.”

Sydney took a moment to answer, her lips pressed together. “I don’t think me and Joel work unless we’re living in the past or having incredible sex. Like...incredible. Shit’s insane. I mean, Kofi’s not lacking, but Joel’s got a mon—”

Ayesha held up a hand. “The Sydney Express has derailed.”

Sydney hugged her midsection. “The truth is, I want to be able to date and sleep with Kofi or whoever, without feeling guilty. But thinking about Joel even finding someone else attractive? It *kills* me.”

“Sydney, you’re going to have to change your expectations,” Ayesha said. One of her less admirable traits was the inability to coat the truth in sprinkles and icing. “Look, neither of you are bad people. Good people get divorced every day. There’s always this need for drama or to point the finger at a cheater or an abusive spouse. That’s not always the case. Sometimes, it’s as simple as growing apart. What you can’t do, however, is make selective rules. What applies to him applies to you. You neither own nor control him. He neither owns nor controls you. That’s selfish thinking, and it won’t end well unless you realize life doesn’t owe you the favor of having things both ways.”

Sydney groaned and fell back on the bed, her taut boxer’s arms stretched above her head. “Damn, Ayesha. You don’t pull your punches for shit.”

“Unless your name is Josiah, Theo, or Thandie, I won’t coddle your feelings. Once he’s old enough, Grey gets added to that list.”

“I see that.”

The back door chimed.

Joel and Theo were back, and hopefully, Theo had left enough of Joel’s DNA behind for them to identify him.

Dez poked his head inside the bedroom doorway. “Knock, knock. Hey, baby. I made you some tea.”

Larke cocked her head to the side. “Tea?”

“Because you’re not feeling well, sweetheart.” He held out a hand. “And I saw some Saltines and those nausea lollipops we have back home in the kitchen. I can get you some if you’d like.”

Larke gave Sydney a hug and then floated over to Dez, fingers slipping between his.

“Are you feeling any better?” he asked, his voice growing quieter as they disappeared down the hallway. “Whatever you need, just tell me, okay?”

Ayesha, after hugging Sydney, went to her room just as Joel set Theo in one of the extra cribs Tayler and Gage had picked up to keep at their place. With how things were going, they would all need extra cribs for the next several years.

She leaned against the trim. “You’re alive.”

“He didn’t give me any trouble, to be honest.” He smoothed Theo’s hair, the ringlets flattening before popping back up again. “We talked, and he told me about the *moo*, the *khy*, and the ‘*tars*, and it was quite fascinating, let me tell you.”

She laughed.

“Then, he fell asleep.”

“Just like that?” she asked.

“Just like,” he snapped his fingers, “that.”

“You won’t always be that lucky.”

“It’s okay. Even if it had taken an hour, I don’t think I’d mind. Actually, Ayesha, I’ve been meaning to tell you...never think, for a second, I won’t come flying down to Maui if you need someone there. Call me, text, email, smoke signals—whatever. After everything you’ve done for me, I’ll come. I swear I’ll come. As soon as I can.”

The thing she couldn’t place, like brush strokes through her nerve fibers, reappeared, but Joel didn’t give her a chance to analyze it.

“Want to walk on the beach with me?” he asked.

“You need to talk?”

He shrugged. “Or just want to.”

“Let me change into something lighter.”

“No problem. I’ll wait for you downstairs.”

CHAPTER 12

They walked in silence, bare toes sinking into the wet sand. Every so often, Joel glanced at Ayesha, and every so often, he caught her smiling as if a sweet memory came across her thoughts. Those hairs that seemed to love being free of the bun whipped through the air whenever a breeze blew, which was often.

Apparently, dressing lighter had meant removing her contacts, so a pair of clear-rimmed glasses sat on her nose bridge, and a light sweater covered her mismatched pajama top and bottom.

Looking at her this way, content and a beacon underneath the moonlight, he wondered what had gone through Curtis' mind the first time he saw her. If Curtis had started at *cute* that eventually made its way to *beautiful*, or whether her beauty hit him all at once, that very first time.

"How'd you and Curtis meet?" he asked.

She huffed a quiet laugh. "Okay, so I'm nineteen and working at this restaurant, right? A real ritzy, upper-echelon kind of place. I took a year off from high school to 'find myself,' and I never did, so the day I met Curtis, I'd already put in my two weeks' notice to start school at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa that summer. He walked into the restaurant and stopped traffic, not only because he was wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and boots when everyone else had on suits and dresses, but also because he was the most beautiful man I'm sure almost everyone there had ever seen."

"Was that just his style? Casual?"

"Yeah." She smiled again, the same nostalgic pull of her mouth, this time with a bit of wistfulness. "And as fine as I found this man, I pulled off

being the ever-professional server. But then, the whole time he's ordering and talking to me, he doesn't make eye contact once."

"He was nervous."

She looked up at him. "How'd you know?"

Because men either stared at things they found beautiful or made an effort not to look at them, afraid they'd end up staring so long, they would immediately go from infatuated stranger to creepy fucker.

"Just a hunch," he said.

"It stays that way, him ignoring me," she continued. "Then he pays for his meal and leaves. When I go to pick up the receipt, I notice he wrote something on the back. I'll never forget what it said. *'I hope I didn't come off as rude. I'm not usually the nervous type, but you're so cute, I could barely look you in the eyes. I would really like to take you out to dinner sometime. If that's too much, let's get coffee. If you think you'd be interested, I'm standing by the window.'*"

"Was he?"

"Yep."

"Do you still have that receipt?"

"No. It got ruined when my apartment had a roof leak, but it was so early in the relationship, losing it didn't sting as much as it does now. Back then, I would have never known how much..." She dragged in a breath and let it gradually flow from her lungs. "Anyway, I have other things of his. Two pretty important ones are asleep back at the house."

Their arms crashed together, and they both offered quick apologies, increasing the gap between them.

"Why'd you ask me that?" she asked. "Just curious?"

"Yeah. I never knew him, you know? And if we have similar personalities, we might have gotten along."

Their shoulders brushed, and they offered a second wave of apologies, but his were a little less sincere. He didn't mind that their shoulders had brushed, or that when they did, the tips of her fingers passed over his knuckles.

In fact, it was kind of nice.

He and Sydney were still having sex, but they didn't touch and hold like they used to. It wasn't until after they separated that he realized they'd stopped touching and holding way before that first conversation about splitting up.

On one hand, he wanted that familiarity back. The feeling of being at home in someone's arms. On the other, it felt like he was forcing something that, deep down, neither he nor Sydney could admit didn't work anymore and hadn't worked in a long time. Despite the danger of the assignments he now went on, regularly, what he found most threatening was letting go of the hold he had on his and Sydney's relationship.

"It's because you're cute," he found himself admitting. "That's how I knew he was nervous. I was just thinking, if it were me, the same thing would have probably happened."

She didn't respond.

And he mentally chastised himself.

Sometimes, he did come across as flirty, even when he wasn't trying to be. All he'd meant was that he could understand Curtis' predicament. Ayesha *was* cute; however, he wasn't actually supposed to ever tell her that.

In another life, one where he wasn't wrangling with divorce, and she wasn't the widow of the close friend of his closest friends, he would have searched until he found moments; moments to take her hand, moments to make her smile, moments to feel her touch. Had they been different people, he would have eventually had to come to terms with the fact that friendship was what he *said*. It wasn't exactly what he *felt*.

"I'm sorry for being standoffish," she said, after a long silence. "I would have regretted missing out on this."

"Missing out on what?"

"Your friendship."

He clutched at his chest. "Be still my beating heart."

She nudged him with her arm. "Stop."

"Remember that night you stayed up late to talk to me? That night at Dez and Larke's."

"After Sydney's date?"

"Yeah." He ran his fingers through his hair, amazed at how thinking about it still hurt, though a little less than it did back then. "That night was...hard. I mean, I've never had those thoughts before. I've been depressed, but to think about...ending my life?"

"Joel, what you do in this world isn't easy."

"I expected to be mentally tougher than that."

"Because you can shoot a gun?" she asked. "Because you save lives? Do you know what the difference is? When someone shoots a gun at you,

nine times out of ten, they were always your adversary. They're trying to injure your body. When it's someone you love, that bullet goes past the soft tissue and lodges itself into the core of you."

"Why'd you stay up with me?"

"Joel," her brows softened, "why wouldn't I?"

"You're right." He nodded. "It's what you do."

"So, without my training, I wouldn't have?"

"Is that what that sounded like to you? Are you doing that thing where you flip my words so I hear what I'm actually saying underneath what came out of my mouth?"

She shrugged. "Maybe."

"So why'd you stay up with me, then?" he asked. "We barely knew each other back then."

"You're still worth my time, Joel."

He stuffed down a ball of emotion bigger than his head.

"And look at where we are now," she went on.

He released a dry laugh. "Yeah, look at where we are, me taking jabs at you using your husband because I'm immature as fuck."

"You're right. That was immature."

He looked down, hiding a grin.

"You're not like that with the others," she pointed out. "When someone tells you that you've done something wrong, you accept it. Even during your arguments with Sydney, the way you've explained it to me, it was always you saying you're hurt, but in a way that she didn't feel hurt by you saying it. Yet, with me, you went straight for the dead husband."

"I...don't know. I've thought about it, and there's something about you that gets under my skin."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

"Don't be sorry that I get under your skin? You know what else burrows into skin? Ticks."

"Then," he shrugged, "infect me, Mrs. Savea."

She shoved his arm.

He barely moved.

With Sydney, he argued to avoid putting distance, or any further distance, between them. He argued with reconciliation in mind. Even with the guys, when he fucked up, he never considered saying it was the

opposite. As a child, it was likely why his parents had called him “the peacekeeper.”

Yet, with Ayesha, he struck out.

He jabbed.

He *pushed*.

And it made him wonder—what did he think would happen if she came closer? What exactly was he afraid of?

“Either way, I’m glad the band’s back together,” he said.

“The band?”

“You on the guitar, Josiah on the piano, Theo on the drums, and me,” he cleared his throat, “on the vocals.”

She laughed, and watching her laugh made his smile rival the span of the ocean. When she was like this with him, it felt as if, in some ways, this was her letting him in.

Living in Maui, alone, with two young boys was more challenging than the face she showed everyone, so if these moments, these laughs and playful shoves were all she could give him right now, he’d take them and keep them safe until she was ready to offer more.

“So, Joel,” she abruptly stopped walking and faced him, “if you were serious about what you said earlier, you’re welcome to come to Maui anytime. If I’m being honest, it gets lonely for the boys. So lonely.”

“And what about you?” he asked.

“It’s...really hard. Some days, I feel like I’ve spent my entire life making bad decisions.” Her eyes opened wide, and she frantically waved her hands in front of her face. “Not the boys. I don’t mean the boys. I mean, working and being a single mother. I swear, even with all that’s happened, I don’t regret Josiah and Theo a day in my life.”

He grabbed her hands, steadying them. “It’s okay. I didn’t take it that way.”

“I just don’t want to mess them up.”

He held his breath.

Finally, she was letting him in.

“But the boys would really enjoy you coming around more,” she said, and it was amazing how quickly this woman could erect emotional walls. “I can tell they really enjoy spending time with you.”

“Although I’m not ‘Uncle Joel,’” he teased. “And I’m just now realizing that Josiah doesn’t call me uncle, either.”

“Maybe ‘Uncle Joel’ sounds weird?”

“Maybe it’s too close to ‘Billy’ Joel?”

She laughed until she had to squash a coughing fit with her forearm, and his brain screamed for him to release her hands. No matter how much he craved human comfort, stealing it from her was borderline unethical.

“You are a trip, Joel Lattimore.”

He grinned. “If I can be honest with you, Ayesha, I’ve wanted to be a father my entire adult life. When I showed up at the house from the airport, and all the kids came rushing to hug me, I found myself wondering...what does this feel like for Julien when Thandie drops everything, screams his name, and comes running? What’s it like when Josiah turns the house upside down looking for you?”

“How quickly we forget what happened when Theo woke up,” she said.

“You mean when he screamed my name like he was looking forward to seeing me specifically? You set him on his feet, and by the time I blinked, he was hugging me with those little arms.” He cleared a trace of tightness from his throat. “Yeah, Co-Geish, Co-Desh, Co-Jojo, Co-Pike, and Co-Juwiwian all eventually got their hugs, but he saw ‘Jo,’ and that was that.”

She burst out laughing again, her voice briefly going hoarse. “I think we should all agree to call Julien, Juwiwian, from now on.”

It was definitely a more interesting name.

“But you know why he’s like that, right? Joel, Theo loves you. I’ve never seen anything like how he’s attached himself to you, but he loves you with his whole tiny heart.”

“You’re about to see what it looks like for a grown man to bawl like a newborn,” he warned.

“As for Josiah,” she continued, still laughing, “I think the thing about you that reminds me of Curtis is the same thing that makes Josiah gravitate toward you.”

He slid his thumb along the base of hers. “Maybe Theo picks it up from Josiah?”

“Maybe.” She gently eased out of his hold. “Ready to head back?”

He let his hands fall to his sides. “Sure.”

“Are you staying in your room tonight or creeping into Sydney’s?” She stood on tiptoe and mimicked what he assumed was him sneaking into Sydney’s room.

“You look like a Dr. Seuss character,” he said.

She mimed turning back covers. “Hmm, what do we have here? *Sydney? Naked?*”

“Ayesha?” He tried, and failed, to rein in a massive grin. “You better run.”

* * *

He waited until everyone turned in for the night, tossed his legs over the side of his bed, and headed to Sydney’s room.

But he neither crept nor tiptoed.

He knocked softly. “Syd?”

“Come in,” she said.

He entered the room, quietly shut the door, and climbed into the bed behind her. As he went to wrap his arms around her, she flipped over and faced him.

“Hey,” she whispered.

“Hi,” he whispered back. “You looked beautiful today.”

She thrust her fingers through his hair, which she knew was his weakness. It didn’t matter if he was tired or his mood was off. All it usually took was her fingers stroking his scalp to change his mind.

Since that first night at her apartment, if they were together, she wanted to spend ninety-five percent of that time with him inside her.

Had this been a new relationship, it would have been a wonderful arrangement, but things between them were supposed to be deeper than this. The sex was fine on its own, but when layered with intimacy, it was outstanding.

“I can’t believe I’m about to say this, Syd,” his cock twitched, “but what if we didn’t have sex tonight? I miss holding you. Being close to you.”

“You can hold me with your dick inside me.”

He didn’t answer, needing close to all his focus to keep an erection from popping up and bringing this argument to an abrupt end.

She removed her hand from his hair. “Okay.”

“Rain check?” he asked.

“Rain check.”

“Thank you.” He kissed her forehead. “Now, tell me about how things are going with the foundation. You guys are in D.C., New York, and

California now. Where's the next—Syd, wait.”

She closed her fingers around his cock. “Joel Lattimore, you are so damn good-looking.”

“Syd, I want to talk to you. I miss talk—”

She squeezed.

Instinctively, he thrust into her grip.

“We haven't spent any time together alone, outside of having sex, since we signed those papers,” he tried again. “As much as I'd love to fuck you, and you know I do, I miss you, Sydney.”

She stroked.

His restraint unraveled.

“This is me trying,” she said. “I can't help it. When I'm near you, I get like this.”

For a moment, his mind placed him back on the beach. Back to holding someone's hand and talking and getting the chance to know them deeper than what they felt like when he was balls deep inside their flesh.

“Fuck me, Joel Lattimore.” She continued to stroke, squeezing his head until she teased out a drop of fluid. “Please, make love to me. I want you. I need you.”

“Is that all you want?”

Was he the idiot in thinking that them sleeping together meant more than it actually did? For all he knew, she could be seeing someone else.

Then again, this was Sydney.

If she did start seeing someone new, someone she was serious about, she would end things with him. If there was one thing he knew, it was that, in spite of the divorce, she still cared enough about him not to turn the remaining shreds of his heart into ash.

She rose onto her knees, pulled down his waistband, and took him into her mouth. Eventually, the warm, tight movements of her tongue and hollowed cheeks pushed aside his reservations, and he thrust with each bob of her head until they were moving in tandem.

She sucked away his remaining restraint.

He pulled himself from her mouth, and they tore at each other's clothes until they were both naked, hot skin against hot skin. She didn't touch him, didn't caress him the way she usually did.

He ignored it.

She went to ride him, but he flipped her onto her back and entered her, his hips forcing hers down into the mattress. She was still warm around him, still tight, and she felt as good as ever, but something was missing.

He thrust.

She rose to meet each one.

He drove deeper and harder until she could do nothing but sink her fingernails into the muscles in his shoulders, latch her legs around his waist, and hold on.

He waited for her to moan his name.

She didn't.

Grunting, he hooked one of her legs over his arm, bending her knee back to her chest, angling her so the head of his shaft tapped and stroked the places inside her that were the most sensitive. He knew everything about this body, which was why the realization that something had changed increased with each stroke.

"I'm coming." She sank her fingers into the muscles in his ass, pulling him even deeper. "Baby, I'm coming."

A loud, gasping moan tore from her throat, and he hoped everyone else had fucked themselves to sleep. They all knew he and Sydney were hooking up, but he liked to fool himself into thinking they were hiding it well.

Her body contracted around him in waves, and not once did she stroke him how she used to, languishing in the feel of his skin underneath her fingertips while she climaxed.

Not once did their lips touch.

And not once did she say his name.

"Joel," she looked down, "you didn't come."

"I'm fine." He pulled out and rose onto his knees, the blood slowly returning to the rest of his body.

She climbed onto hers and faced him, her head slightly angled to look up into his face. Then she took his hands, tears collecting along the rims of her eyelids, but he pulled away.

Only a few minutes ago, he'd longed for her touch.

Now, it felt foreign.

"I love you," she said. "Tell me you love me."

He cradled the side of her face and leaned forward.

She stiffened.

“I was only going to kiss you goodnight, Syd,” he said. “What’s wrong? Did I do something?”

She closed her eyes, sending the tears down her cheeks. “No.”

“Then what’s wrong? That was different. You can’t tell me you didn’t feel how different that was.”

“It was.”

“So what’s wrong? Is it...is it someone else?”

Her eyes opened. “Maybe.”

The admission hit him so hard, he had to hide his groan with a winded, “Oh.”

“Joel—”

“No, it’s okay. Good night, Syd.”

He kissed her forehead. Then, before he looked even more pitiful in front of his ex-wife, he left the bed, dressed as best as he could in the dark, and returned to his room. The entire way, his thoughts taunted him:

It’s over.

It’s over.

Sydney’s found someone new.

Joel won’t.

Joel can’t.

*Because Joel loves Sydney,
and Sydney used to love Joel.*

It’s over.

It’s over.

Sydney’s found someone new.

Joel won’t.

Joel can’t.

*Because Sydney’s heart can love again,
but Joel’s heart is so terrified,
it lies.*

CHAPTER 13

There was more than one reason Ayesha knew Joel crept into Sydney's room at night.

She stared at the wall that separated her room from Sydney's. She wasn't sure if they were just that loud, considering the walls weren't thin, but she heard every rustle, squeak, gasp, and moan.

And it made her chest ache.

Everyone at Gage and Tayler's had someone to love, except for her. Once again, Ayesha Savea was the odd man out.

The moans grew louder.

The ache in her chest ballooned.

Enough tears ran from her eyes to fill a swimming pool, and the more she tried to hold them in, the more they fell. Eventually, she had to bury her face in her pillow because her cries transformed into loud gagging and coughing hiccups.

Right now, there was no reason to cry, no reason to hurt. Yet tonight, missing Curtis hit her harder than it had since the months following his death; the months she'd dream of him walking through the door, only for her to wake up and realize he was never coming back.

There was nowhere to go to catch a glimpse of him. There was no hope of getting jealous over seeing him with someone else. Even if it had been solely to tear her off his body, she would have taken his ire, his annoyance, and even his disgust to be able to hold him again, one last time.

Before she could no longer muffle the cries—and the last thing she wanted was to wake the boys or for someone to hear her and come searching—she left the bed and searched until she found Josiah's Bluetooth

headphones. Then, after linking them to her phone, she climbed back under the covers and closed her eyes.

Glenn Lewis' "Fall Again" poured from the headphones, and it wasn't what she wanted to hear. It was the last thing she wanted to hear.

Still, she let it play.

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CHAPTER 14

Over the course of the last several months, if Joel wasn't on assignment, he was in Maui. If he wasn't in Maui, he was on assignment or preparing for one.

Something happened between him and Sydney back during the Malibu get-together, but Ayesha didn't ask either of them. She and Joel only discussed Sydney when he brought it up, and she never pried for more than he was willing, and ready, to share at any given moment.

But Joel wasn't here today, and today was a day she could have used a friend.

"So, because of these behavioral issues, Theo won't be able to continue here."

Ayesha held her chin firm.

Theo sat on her lap, fingers in his mouth, staring at his former teacher, Mary Kauai, like once they left, he'd return to remind her what happened to snitches.

There weren't endless options for childcare in Maui, and this was the fourth place that now said her son couldn't step back inside one of their classrooms.

At home, he didn't bite, scratch, or scream, but it was like the minute she dropped him off, he turned into a different child.

Having a career *and* being a single mother was starting to look as impossible as Curtis' family told her it would be. And while she didn't have to work because of Curtis' payout and life insurance, sitting at home would turn her hair gray before she turned thirty. Plus, she loved what she did for a living.

“Does he not get any discipline at home?” Mary asked.

Ayesha cocked her head to the side. “Do you think that’s your place to ask? You told me that another kid provoked him, and he defended himself.”

“He gets provoked because he’s tiny.”

“He’s tiny because he’s not even two yet.”

The older woman scanned her slowly, a grimace on her golden-brown face. “You know he’s like this because there’s no father in the home.”

Ayesha stood so fast, she barely had time to move Theo to her hip. “He doesn’t have a father in the home because his father is dead.”

“Oh? Then why did his great-grandmother tell me that his real father is some man they saw you leaving a hotel with? A man with a Spanish accent?”

She nearly bit, scratched, and screamed at the woman herself. Hawai’i wasn’t small, and the islands that made up the nation should have been spread out far enough that news didn’t travel at warp speed.

Yes, she’d booked a hotel with a man with a Spanish accent. Yes, she’d slept with that man in that hotel. But that was months after Theo was born. How could a man she’d slept with after Theo was born be his father?

“And Curtis was a massive man,” Mary continued, the grimace stuck to her face. “So why is Theo so ‘tiny’ if he’s Curtis’ son?”

They wanted her to lose her cool. They wanted her to do something that would give them a reason to further their gossip, and she wouldn’t put it past Curtis’ grandmother to call child protective services if she gave them the slightest bit of ammunition.

According to Curtis’ grandmother, she could “make all the suspicions go away” by taking Theo for a paternity test, but the woman would go to hell waiting for the results.

Did they not understand how much she loved Curtis? To her, he was perfect. There would never be another Curtis, and while they’d wasted their time snubbing her and asking him to walk away from their relationship, she’d been writing the names of all the future children she wanted to have with him in her journal.

“Maybe Theo’s better off not being enrolled here,” she hissed. “I don’t want him educated by someone who can’t even do basic math.”

She turned to leave, closing her ears to any response the wretched woman might have tossed her way, and exited the house-turned-child care center. It wasn’t even the nicest house in the area.

When she reached the SUV, she went to set Theo down to open the door, but he fussed and clung tighter. Frustrated and beyond embarrassed, she crouched, peeled him off her body, and set him on his feet. His bottom lip trembled, and his head rocked as he sniffed.

“Mama.” He raised his arms. “Up.”

“Theo, you can stand here for a few seconds while Mama opens the car door, right?”

He wiggled his arms. “Mama, up, *peas?*”

Her heart gave a hard tug.

There went another thing that was her fault—Theo thinking “please” was a magic word to get people to do whatever he wanted. Curtis had trusted her with the care of his children, but some days, she felt like a fucking joke. If he’d lived, he probably would have left her.

Hardening her emotions, she opened the door. Only then did she pick Theo up to set him in his car seat, and he continued to sniff, his cries sputtering like someone starting a lawnmower.

She got in, pushed to start the engine, and looped around to the end of the daycare’s circular driveway.

Then the wailing began.

And she let him wail.

Despite having to continuously wipe tears from her eyes to see the road, she let him wail.

Her son wasn’t “bad.”

A child took a toy he’d been playing with, and he shrieked, scratched them, and followed his scratch with a bite—his third strike. But that didn’t mean he was inherently bad. Ever since he was kicked out of the first childcare center, he’d had a target on his little back.

Theo was being unfairly blamed for something he had no control over. She was the one who’d watched “Surprise My Husband” videos on the internet. She was the one who’d thought it would have been “so sweet” to surprise Curtis and record his reaction, withholding his pending fatherhood from him for another week.

Like an idiot.

For a while after Curtis’ death, she’d feared losing her mind. Had it not been for Josiah and Theo, maybe she would have.

For a moment.

Although she'd pushed them away, Gage, Dez, Mike, Giorgio, and Julien would have come back into her life, picking her up from where they would have found her walking, barefoot and hair unwashed for months, along Route 380.

She'd stressed while pregnant.

Grieved while pregnant.

At first, she had Curtis' extended family, but when they found out she was pregnant, they fell off one by one, and it never mattered how far along she said she was. To Curtis' grandmother, Theo had always been "another man's baby."

All that stress, grief, and isolation had affected her and the child growing in her body. He'd inherited his stress response from her during one of the most trying periods of her life. Had she leaned on the guys earlier, she might have coped better.

But she shut them out.

She shut out the men she'd called her brothers. The men who'd loved Curtis like all six of them had grown up calling the same people "Mom" and "Dad."

People called Giorgio a beast.

Yet, that "beast" made midnight bottles and stayed up with Theo during Theo's most colicky nights, quietly telling her, "Rest, *mladshaya sestra*," which she'd later learned was him referring to her as his "little sister."

Why didn't she lean on them sooner?

Now, she didn't know what to do. She had a client scheduled for psychotherapy in less than an hour, and she had nowhere to take Theo or anyone around to watch him.

Back when he was an infant, she'd take him to the office. The space had a small cut-out that she'd fashioned into a nursery. Many of the people in their community had known Curtis, so none of the clients ever took issue with a baby in the office. Some even asked if Theo could sit in-session with them, and his presence had brought them the comfort they'd needed to open up.

Once he became mobile, she hired a nanny, and it appeared that would wind up being the case again. Until then, she was on her own.

It was difficult, and she feared she was giving the boys a life they'd need therapy to recover from, but they never saw that part. They saw a

happy, caring, loving mother who would walk across flaming stones with open sores on her feet if it meant guaranteeing their joy.

“*Mama,*” Theo called with more agony in his voice than the ending to a Shakespearean tragedy.

She turned onto the street that led to their house. “Yes, Theo?”

“*Appo.*”

“Apple? You’re hungry?” She glanced at the clock. “Yeah, they charged me for your food this week, yet I conveniently had to come pick you up before snack time.”

The house came into view.

“*Mama, appo.*”

“As soon as we get home, I’ll cut up an apple for you, sweetheart.”

“*Mama! Mama, Jo! Douk.*”

“Look?” She glanced in the rearview mirror to find him pointing out the window and followed his finger. “Look at w—”

It was like Theo had a sixth sense for this man.

Joel stood at the front door, his phone in one hand and the other in his pocket. He’d told her he would be coming down for a visit, but then the team was called away on assignment. However, she talked to Tayler early that morning while Tayler was on her way to meet Gage. That meant Joel couldn’t have gone home.

He’d come straight to Maui.

When he spotted the SUV, he smiled, waved, and made his way over to the garage, looking healthy and uninjured in a plain T-shirt, a casual pair of summer shorts, and low-top sneakers. Although he continually joked about trying to match Gage on the bench press, there was nothing wrong with the way he looked.

She barely had time to park before Theo started whining and reaching toward the window as if she was purposefully keeping him away from his best friend.

Joel opened the door, removed the buckles and straps, lifted Theo out of the car seat, and Theo did his usual—set his head on Joel’s shoulder while sucking his fingers. Soon, she’d probably start hearing rumors that Joel was Theo’s father if one of Curtis’ family’s sentinels saw how Theo acted around him.

“Hey, sorry to drop in on you like this,” he said. “I didn’t have time to call. I flew straight here after we debriefed.”

She grabbed her purse and shut the driver's side door, all of a sudden so hungry that her hunger pangs felt like butterfly wings.

"Oh, it's fine. Plus, my phone was in my purse. That's probably why I didn't hear it go off."

He nuzzled Theo, who released a spoiled little half-laugh. "Wasn't expecting to find the two of you."

"I have an appointment in," she checked her phone, "forty minutes, but I was stopping at the house to pick up snacks to take with me."

She entered the house through the garage door, Joel on her heels. Realistically, he wasn't *that* close, but she picked up her pace to add space between them. Then she set her purse on the kitchen counter, gripped the stone edge, and looked down at the floor. Before she could stop them, the words came tumbling from her mouth.

"They kicked him out."

"Kicked who out?" Joel asked. "Theo? You mean the new daycare?"

"Yeah." She raised her head. "That's why he's with me in the middle of the day."

"It's the fourth one. Was it biting again?"

"And scratching. And screeching."

They both directed their gazes to the silent, finger-sucking blob in Joel's arms. As if he knew they were talking about him, Theo closed his eyes and snuggled further against Joel's side. Like an animal playing dead to avoid a predator, his fluttering eyelids gave away that he was pretending to be asleep to avoid the consequences of his actions.

"I don't know..." Her voice broke, and she waited for the automatic urge to clear it away and scramble to keep her poise, but the urge didn't come. Right there, in front of Joel, she was about to let herself tumble. "Joel, I don't know what to do. I could put him in another school, but I'm afraid the same thing's just going to happen."

"Ayesha?"

"So, I read a study that talked about prenatal stress on a child's long-term health." She swiped at her eyes, nearly scratching her eyeball with a fingernail. "In Theo's case, I stressed so much, I'm wondering if I somehow...transmitted my stress response to him. That's why he can't self-regulate."

Joel's large hand warmed her shoulder; she'd been so wrapped up in her tirade, she didn't see when he came closer.

“Ayesha, honey? You need to breathe.”

“Joel, I messed up my baby.”

“Ayesha, breathe.”

“Curtis trusted me with his children, and I’m letting him down. I know I am. God, what am I doing to Josiah, then? What if his issues come later? Joel,” she stared into his eyes, “what if I change Josiah? My sweet, sweet Josiah? Oh, my god...what if he turns into a serial abuser? Then there’s the preschool to prison pipeline, and what if Theo ends up—”

“Ayesha,” Joel moved his hand to the space between her shoulder blades and gently massaged, “right now, all I need for you to do is get more air.”

She closed her eyes and timed her breaths.

When she realized she still hadn’t left for her appointment, her eyes popped open.

“It’s only been thirty seconds,” Joel said, voice calm. “Close your eyes and breathe for me. You’re not late, and you’re not a bad mother.”

“Can I ask you for a favor?”

“Anything.”

The words stopped at the tip of her tongue.

As if he’d heard them anyway, he pulled her into him, and she smothered her face against his shirt. It smelled freshly washed, and the freshly washed scent mixed well with his cologne. This last assignment had to have been on the lighter side if he’d had time to change *and* spritz on cologne.

After several minutes, her breathing calmed.

“How are we feeling?” he asked.

She stepped back. “My makeup stained your shirt.”

“I don’t care about the shirt. I care about you.”

“Better.”

“I’ll watch Theo, okay? We’ll talk more when you get home. Then, we’ll find somewhere else. Somewhere better. But, when I’m here, he’ll be with me.”

“Joel, I can’t ask—”

“And I’ll grab Josiah from school. Did you remember to add my name to the list of approved Peter Piper picked a peck of precious people picker-uppers?”

She managed a laugh.

“Who came up with that, anyway?” he asked. “Precious people picker-uppers?”

“Yes, you’re on the list, and I think the executive team at the school came up with it.”

He removed a piece of lint from her brow. “Did you run into anyone from Curtis’ family today? They’re usually a trigger for you.”

“Not his family, but his teacher knows Curtis’ grandmother, and she had a lot to say about who she thought was Theo’s real father.”

“Where’s this school again?”

She studied his face. “Joel, no.”

“It’s just to talk.”

“And you’ll make things worse. They’ll start gossiping about how you’re Theo’s real father.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Joel, promise me you won’t go to the school and cause a scene.”

He smoothed her hair, and she wondered if she was wrong about their last assignment. He’d never touched her this much, so it was possible they’d had a more challenging time than the story his outward appearance told.

“I promise I won’t go to the school and cause a scene,” he said.

“Thank you.” She wiggled Theo’s foot. “And this troublemaker hasn’t had lunch yet.”

“Got it.”

“Don’t try to give him anything from the ocean.”

“I remember. Now, did you eat?”

“No, but there’s a cafeteria in the building.”

“Eat something.”

“I will.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise I’ll eat something, Joel,” she said. “And I promise I’ll be back before six.”

“Take whatever time you need.”

She squeezed his forearm and rose onto her toes. He bent, and she touched a soft, grateful kiss to his life-saving cheek. Before she’d fully removed her lips, she felt him smile, and for whatever reason, it made her smile as well.

“Before six,” she reiterated, grabbing her purse. Then, after peppering Theo’s face with kisses, she headed out.

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CHAPTER 15

After watching his mother walk through the garage door, *and then* listening to the car pull out of the garage, Theo raised his head and looked around, panic moving in phases over his face.

“Mama?”

Joel looked down. “You can’t be serious, buddy.”

“Where Mama go?”

He peeled Theo from his side and held him at arm’s length, Theo’s feet dangling. “What was that? What’d you just say, Theo?”

“Jo, where Mama go?”

“Buddy, I think that’s a full sentence. That’s a full sentence. I have to text Ayesha.”

“Jo, appo.”

“Right. First, let me get you something to eat. How about you play while I make you a quick lunch, hmm?”

He set Theo on the floor and grabbed his phone as he made his way to the refrigerator.

Joel
Ayesha.

You won’t believe this.

Theo just said, “Jo, where Mama go?”

Figuring she’d take a while to text back because she was driving, he sliced a quarter of an apple into bite-sized chunks and then started on

something Theo wouldn't say no to if he was offered gold as an alternative—a gooey grilled cheese sandwich.

Once he was done, he checked his phone.

Ayesha

A full sentence?????!!!

One that makes sense????

Aww!!

How's it going so far?

Joel

You *just* left.

Ayesha

I know, but can you see him?

If not, he's peed on something.

Joel

No, he hasn't.

Ayesha

I promise you.

Walking into the office now.

Talk to you soon.

He set the juice back in the refrigerator and went in search of Theo, suddenly nervous.

“Theo? Where are you, buddy?”

He rounded the corner.

And froze.

With the hem of his shirt tucked underneath his chin, Theo stood with his hands wrapped around his “winky” while a seemingly never-ending stream of urine irrigated the soil in a plant pot that held a decorative fern.

Then, before he was finished peeing, he released his winky, dripping urine all over the wood floor and squatted as if getting ready to play in the floor urine.

Joel rushed forward and plucked him up off the ground. Something wet dripped onto his calves, but he didn't look down.

It hadn't been fifteen minutes yet.

Holding Theo underneath one arm, he walked to the nursery. "Baby boy, you wouldn't, by any chance, know where your mama keeps the cleaning supplies, would you?"

Theo clapped his hands and echoed "cleaning supplies" as best as he could, and Joel felt a spritz of something on his face.

"How'd you still get pee on your hands?"

Theo's only response was a hearty giggle.

* * *

Josiah screamed his name and raced over, nearly trampling smaller children who were probably the same age.

At first, he didn't recognize Josiah; he and Ayesha had talked about Josiah probably needing glasses, and she'd sent him pictures of the ones Josiah said he liked, but this was his first time seeing Josiah with them on.

Joel crouched.

Josiah slammed into him, squeezing tight. "Does Ma know you're here?"

How long had he been gone that Josiah now said "Ma" instead of "Mama," and Theo had graduated to sentences? What would he miss next? Facial hair and prepositions?

"Oh, wait! Of course, she knows." Josiah released him. "You have Theo."

He stood and opened the car door. "Yeah, she knows. How was school?"

"Same old, same old." Josiah tossed his things onto the backseat, climbed in next to Theo, and buckled his seatbelt. "Where's Ma? At home?"

"She went to work. It's just the three of us. I figured we could have a boys' day."

"Ma's really not coming?"

Joel slipped behind the steering wheel. With how much he'd been in Maui these last several months, Giorgio had a car from his extensive

collection shipped from California to Maui. While he was grateful, he'd never been more irrationally afraid of damaging a vehicle.

"No. Why?"

Josiah slid a glance at his brother. "Have you ever watched Theo alone?"

"No."

"Oh, no."

"Why? What's wrong? I figured we'd make a stop that I have to make, and then we'll head to the park. Unless you're hungry."

Josiah shook his head. "I'm not hungry, but maybe we shouldn't go to the park."

"Why not?"

"Do you know what you're getting yourself into?" Josiah pointed to himself. "I'm good, but Theo's a terror. He pees on everything."

So, he'd learned.

Plus, he wasn't sold on Josiah's proclamation of being "good." He might not have been a terror, but he had his ways.

He started up the car. "We'll be all right. By the way, do you know Theo's teacher's name?"

"Mary," Josiah looked up at the ceiling, "something. Why? Do you need to talk to her?"

"Yeah. I need to speak with her about something since your mom's busy."

"We can go to the park near Theo's school," Josiah said. "She's always there with her great-grandsons. Don't tell Ma, but one of them said something bad about Theo, so I pushed him down in the dirt."

"What did he say?"

"That Theo's not my real brother."

"Then he deserved a face full of dirt." He headed for the school's exit. "Just don't tell your mother I said that."

"I won't."

"Do you know the way to that park from here?" Joel asked.

"Yeah!" Josiah bounced in his seat. "It's not even that far. I can tell you where to go."

"Thanks, Siah."

"No problem, Joel."

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CHAPTER 16

“Is your name Mary?”

A woman much older than he'd been expecting, and too old to feasibly handle a child with Theo's level of energy, raised her head.

“My name's Mary.” The woman rose from her bench seat, gaze flicking to Theo in his arms. “Who are you?”

“Did you tell Ayesha Savea that you don't believe Theo's Curtis' son?”

“I, uh...who are you now?”

“Theo's stepfather,” he lied, a little too smoothly. “I'm Ayesha's husband.”

She glanced at the ring on his finger. “She didn't tell me she remarried.”

“Is she required to?”

“No, but—”

“I'm not here to chat. I'm here because I don't,” he paused, “f-u-c-k around when it comes to the woman and children I love. Now, do you want to tell me exactly what you said, or should I visit you at home?”

She swallowed, taking him in from head to toe. “I didn't mean anything by it. By any chance, were you the man with her at the grocery store?”

“Who else would be with her at the store but her husband? Don't change the subject.” He crouched, set Theo on the ground, and kissed the top of his head. “Go play with your brother, buddy. I'll be there in a minute.”

Theo ran off, calling for “Jojo.”

Joel stood again. “Now, what the fuck is wrong with you? Don't you have any couth? Any fucking decorum? Ayesha's out here doing her best, and your judgmental ass tries to shame her for it? She's a good woman, you

fucking harpy. A wonderful mother. Curtis thought so, and I think so. I'm not in her life to replace him, but you better be damn sure I'm going to take care of her, even if it means visiting people like you to set them straight. Don't let another negative word about Ayesha come out of your mouth, and if someone starts talking about her, how about you grow the fuck up and defend her? This shit isn't easy. And, if you can't do that, I'll come back here, and I will fucking murder you."

The woman's face paled. "What?"

He leaned closer. "I will. I swear to God, I will. As long as I'm walking this earth, nobody is going to disrespect Ayesha or our boys and live to talk about it. So, the next time you see her, apologize."

Mary's mouth trembled. "Yes. I will."

"And if you catch someone talking shit about her, defend her. Defend her like you personally know how difficult it can be to be a woman with a career raising children, never mind raising them on her own. Defend her like you know what it's like to tragically lose someone you love, repeatedly replaying whether the last thing you said to them was enough, and if they took how much you loved them into their final moments. Defend her like you know she's a damn good mother who, like the rest of us, has hard days, and it would be fucking helpful if people would show more kindness and civility than cowardice poorly disguised as bad manners."

Mary's head bobbed, tears slipping into the lines and creases that covered her face. "I will. I swear, I will."

"You're goddamn right, you will, because she doesn't deserve that. You know she doesn't deserve that. Plus, you know Curtis' family never liked her. Why would you believe anything they say? And I'm sure you knew Curtis as a kid. Fuck, you look like you taught Moses. Was Curtis anything like Theo?"

"Must you?" She swiped at her eyes. "I know I'm an old woman."

"And you know Theo is Curtis' son. What, we both can't be ignorant?"

She huffed. "Yes, I knew Curtis as a child. Curtis was a handful. Theo might not look like him as much as his brother does," she sighed, "but he *does* look like him. It was like caring for Curtis all over again. I couldn't manage back then, and I was over thirty years younger."

"So why spread rumors?"

"I...I don't know."

"Are rumors worth your life?"

“No, but you weren’t serious, were you?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Not serious? Lady, I’m not right in the head. I’ll kill you. Insult my boys, insult my woman, and I’ll fuck you up. I will knock you the fuck down right in front of the finish line. Do we have an understanding?”

“Yes, we do. And tell Ayesha I’m sorry.”

“What’d I just say?”

“You’re right, you’re right. I’ll tell her myself the next time we cross paths.”

“*If* you do. Nice meeting you.”

He walked off.

At the edge of the section that housed the swings, he spotted Theo sitting by himself, one hand in his mouth and the other playing in a small pile of mulch. While he knew kids Theo’s age weren’t naturally inclined to play together, he couldn’t help but feel like the other kids intentionally didn’t want to play with his little guy.

“Joel?” Josiah ran over to him. “Can we go to a different park? A better one? The kids are being mean to Theo here, and it’s making me so angry.”

Joel scooped Theo up off the ground and dusted off his jeans. “Yeah, of course. Let’s go.”

* * *

They went to a different park, one closer to Ayesha’s house and reminiscent of Clemyjontri Park in Virginia, where he’d taken the boys before—with Ayesha.

With Ayesha, they were Theo and Josiah. Without her, they were Wolverine and Sabretooth.

“*Jo! Jo! Douk!*”

He yawned and waved in Theo’s direction. “I’m looking! I’m looking! Great job, buddy!”

Theo continued across the playground bridge, and he glanced across the park to verify that Josiah was still hanging from arched monkey-bar-looking structures with kids who looked to be his age.

The Energizer Bunny had nothing on Theo.

Josiah, on the other hand, had less physical energy, but he required a horde of mental energy. Also, whenever he told Josiah he couldn't do something, Josiah argued and grumbled under his breath that his uncles would have said yes. That grumbling then led into Josiah walking on his ears and suddenly interested in doing only the things he'd told him weren't safe to do.

He had no idea who the hell these kids were.

“Joel! Hey, Joel!”

Josiah marched toward him, a girl beside Josiah with her hands on her hips. The fact that he saw them after opening his eyes meant he had to have drifted off at some point.

Outside.

In the middle of a park.

The barely four hours of sleep he'd gotten the night before didn't help things, but he was the one who'd decided to come straight to Maui after leaving the other side of the globe. As much as he'd tried to convince himself to go home, this was where he was always going to end up.

Josiah stopped in front of him and jutted a hand in the girl's direction. “Can you please tell this *kid* that there's no way Aang would beat Naruto in a fight?”

The girl scraped dark, sweaty bangs off her forehead. “Who are you calling a kid? I'm only three days younger than you.”

“You were born in a whole different year.”

“Because of *your* birthday, not mine.”

Joel waved his hands. “Back up, back up. Now, what's the debate?”

Josiah's lips parted.

The girl stepped in front of him. “Aang could beat Naruto in a fight.”

“No, he could not!” Josiah yelled.

“The only thing Naruto knows how to do is that stupid Rasengan.”

“He can do way more than that, and he's got the Nine-Tails sealed inside him. The Nine-Tails is the most powerful demon of all the tailed beasts, which makes Naruto the most powerful Jinchūriki.”

“If he didn't have that demon, he probably couldn't even learn genjutsu.”

Josiah slapped his hand against his forehead. “Think about it. He *had* to be powerful to have the Nine-Tails sealed inside him and not die as just a baby.”

“Oh, my god.” The girl rolled her eyes and dragged her fingers down one cheek, turning half of her face into a character from *The Corpse Bride*. “His dad was the Hokage, so he knew *how* to seal the demon inside Naruto so Naruto wouldn’t die. Aang, on the other hand, mastered all four,” she stuck four fingers in Josiah’s face, “elements at twelve. The youngest Avatar to ever do that.”

Josiah swatted her hand away. “Strong but stupid. If he was so strong, then why the hell did he get frozen in an iceberg?”

Joel grabbed Josiah’s arm and pulled him where he could see him better. “First of all, Siah, watch your language,” he said. “Second, can’t you two just agree that they’re both powerful, so it doesn’t matter who’s stronger? They were both destined or prophesied to save the world.”

At least, he hoped that was the case. He had no clue who any of these characters were, but it was safe to assume they had or would have a hand in saving a city, country, or the entire universe.

“So they wouldn’t fight each other,” he continued. “They would find a way to make peace.”

Josiah and the girl stared at him like he was the dumbest person on the planet. Then they stormed off, mumbling about how “old people” didn’t know anything and that they should try the maze activity next.

Joel leaned forward, his elbows on his thighs and his fingers making tight circles at each temple. “I think...my head...is splitting in two. What the hell did they even just ask me?”

A man took a seat next to him. “Don’t be too hard on yourself. It wasn’t an easy question. They get into debates like that every time they’re both here. Give it a minute. Another argument’s coming.”

“Did I, at least, handle that one well?”

“Not at all.” The man’s eyes followed both children around the maze. “Honestly, right now, Josiah’s her only friend.”

“Is it because of her leg?”

“Mm-hmm. Losing it put a dent in her confidence, and I think because kids don’t understand, they avoid her. Either that or they coddle her.”

“But not Josiah.”

The man grunted out a laugh. “Not Josiah, and that’s what she needs, I think. To be seen as capable. To be argued with a little.”

“Maybe they’re fated,” Joel said.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I argue with his mother the same...never mind. I *do not* know where I was going with that.”

“Jo! Jo!”

They both looked up.

“Douk!” Theo did one-fifth of a flip, planting both palms on the ground and kicking his legs in the air before righting himself again. “I *diyit!*”

“You sure did, buddy!” He sent Theo two thumbs up. “Great job. Next stop, Junior Olympics.”

The man smiled. “Is that Theo?”

“Yeah.”

“I never met Theo.”

“I’m guessing Ayesha doesn’t bring him to the park much.”

“I’ve been here ten minutes and can see why,” the man said. “So what, you’re friends with Ayesha? Or maybe her brothers-in-law? Curtis’ friends.”

“Both, technically, but I knew the guys first. We work together. Did you know Curtis?”

The man tapped his chest. “I did. And I know his family. A miserable set of people if there ever was one, but they have a lot of influence around the islands.”

“So I’ve heard.”

Thirty seconds passed, so he checked for Theo, who would have eaten a handful of gravel if an older girl hadn’t wrenched the gravel from fists that could lock tighter than alligator jaws. At times, Theo had more strength in those pairs of pliers he called hands than he, a two-hundred-plus pound adult male, had in his entire body.

“I’m Nikora, by the way,” the man said. “Sometimes, I go by Nik.”

Joel tipped his head, one eye on Theo. “Joel.”

“You seem different, Joel. I mean, I’ve met all of Curtis’ friends, I think. Let’s see. There’s Mike, uh, Gage, Dez, Julien, and the scary one. Giorgio. They’ve all been here doing what you’re doing, but you seem different. My intuition might be off, and you can tell me if it is, but you like Ayesha, don’t you?”

“Yes, but not in the way you’re thinking. I’m divorced, and you know her situation.”

As much as his divorce had hurt, he knew Ayesha’s pain ran significantly deeper. It was most evident in the moments her anxiety spiked,

and those were the moments he had a near-uncontrollable need to be there for her, but she would let him in only to put up another wall.

“Why not?” Nik asked. “She’s not your type?”

“As in looks?”

“Sure.”

“Honestly, Nik, between you and me...Ayesha’s my type in every way, which is unusual because she and my ex-wife are very different. Everything from looks to sense of humor to Ayesha’s personality is a ten out of ten for me.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“The timing’s not right.” He groaned. “Again, ignore that. I don’t know what I’m saying. Ayesha and I are friends. There’s nothing more there.”

“I thought the same thing when I first met the woman who eventually became my wife. I almost didn’t take the leap, but I took the chance, and she ended up being my dream girl.”

“Where’s your wife now?” There was a certain sadness in the man’s voice, a certain longing. Numerous times, he’d heard the same thing in Ayesha’s, but she wouldn’t let him in. He’d cried on her shoulder, and she knew all the details of his deepest hurt, yet she wouldn’t let him in all the way.

“I lost her a couple of years ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I appreciate that. But, on a different note, I should warn you—Curtis’ family is full of gossips. If they see you out here with the boys, they’ll say Theo’s yours.”

Joel studied Theo, who had enough sticks and twigs to fill a rainforest in his curly hair. It was looking like bath time would include a shampoo, and he knew curly hair could be particular depending upon the product and method, but how could he figure that out without bothering Ayesha? How could two kids be as taxing as a five-day hike in sweltering temperatures? And when did they get tired? *Did* they get tired?

“Do you want him?” he asked.

Nik burst out laughing. “If I take him, do I get his mother too?”

“You’re toeing the line, my friend.”

“Says the man who is ‘just friends’ with Ayesha Savea.”

Joel shrugged, a chuckle pushing through his exhaustion. Nik, still laughing, shook his head.

Their laughter slowly faded.

Joel watched Nik's gaze drift back to Josiah and the girl, whose body language suggested the pair had gotten caught up in another debate. Something about the other man's expression told him it wasn't only a wife he'd lost, and the pain appeared to be recent.

"Can I offer you some advice, Joel?" Nik asked, his voice slightly weaker. "Yes, it's important to take time to heal, but...take risks when it comes to love. Neither of us is stupid, though my wife was known to call me hardheaded at times. I know you feel something for her."

"You knew Curtis, right?" Joel asked. "Do you think he would have wanted Ayesha to do the same? To take risks when it comes to love?"

"Curtis loved Ayesha like Kauai loved Naupaka. He cared only for her happiness, so if she found a man to make her happy, I'm sure he would want her to be."

"I don't want to overstep any boundaries."

"Joel, Curtis is dead. The boundaries are Ayesha's. If she opens up to you, tells you that she wants to trust you with her heart...that's when you go."

Joel nodded. "You're right. It's a little sexist, isn't it? Waiting for 'divine permission' from Curtis when she's capable of knowing who she wants and doesn't want in her life."

"Jo! Douk!"

Joel looked up.

Theo did another "flip," and enough branch pieces and leaves to fill the Black Forest joined what was already tangled in Theo's hair.

"Time," Nik said.

Joel looked over at him. "Time?"

"All that's left is time to heal. When the healing's done, my friend, it's going to hit you hard. Please...don't waste it."

A shriek rose above the clamor.

Joel shot to his feet. "That's Theo. How'd I know that was Theo? There's like four million kids out here."

In the middle of an asphalt path, Theo fell to his knees, bawling like his life was coming to an end. One denim-covered kneecap was centered in the middle of the "O" in a "ONE WAY" sign, while the other hugged the letter's outside curve. He'd buried his face in his dirty hands, and a leaf fell from his hair with each tearful spasm.

Joel hurried over, picked him up, and checked for bruises and bleeding wounds. “Theo, what’s wrong? Did you fall? Did somebody hurt you? Talk to me, baby boy. What’s wrong?”

“Ma,” Theo hiccuped, “Ma.”

“You want Mama?”

Dirt smeared Theo’s face like war paint. “Co-Desh.”

“What?” He searched the smears for cuts. “What about Uncle Dez?”

“Co-Geish.”

He stopped searching, seized by an irrational stab of hurt. “Wait, you want Uncle Dez and Uncle Gage? Instead of Jo?”

“Co-Juwiwian.”

“How about we go home, okay? We’ll go home, get some food. Want to watch a movie while we wait for Mama?”

Theo went to stick his fingers in his mouth, but he held both hands in one of his. With how Theo’s hands looked, one suck and he’d wind up with tetanus, vaccinations be damned.

Theo shrieked, tugging at his trapped hands.

“Theodore Savea.”

It was all he said, and, apparently, all he had to say. Theo quieted and set his head on his shoulder.

Setting aside his bruised feelings, he searched the playground for Josiah, spotted him in the maze area, and waved him over.

Josiah sprinted toward him, sweat on his forehead and trickling down his temples. “Are we leaving? But I haven’t even finished playing with my best friend.”

“Who’s your best friend?”

Josiah turned and pointed at the girl with the bangs. From a distance, the two of them had been indistinguishable from Tyson and Holyfield, and now they had the nerve to be best friends?

“No.” Joel shook his head. “No, I’m not doing this today. We’re leaving. It’s been a long day.”

“But Joel—”

“Josiah, do you see that exit sign? Head for it.”

Josiah folded his arms, and although he grumbled, he stomped toward the exit without further argument.

Joel followed, scanning the playground area for Nik, and spotted him standing beneath a tree talking to a woman who so closely resembled

Josiah's frenemy, she could be no one else but the girl's mother.

He tossed up two fingers.

Nik did the same.

In front of him, Josiah mumbled all sorts of words under his breath, but as long as he didn't hear any "mothers" or "fuckers," they were fine. Unfortunately, he had zero punishment options in his back pocket. If Josiah called him "a little punk ass bitch," at the moment, he would have to take it like a little punk ass bitch.

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CHAPTER 17

Neither boy fell asleep on the ride back.

Josiah continued his low mumbling as they entered the house. Ayesha had gotten tied up at work, so he gave Theo a bubble bath and washed his hair with the cutesy hair products he found in Ayesha's bathroom. While detangling Theo's hair, he sent Josiah to take a shower. Luckily, it only took three requests and one final firm command.

He *did not* know who the hell these kids were.

What happened to the toddler who fell asleep without a fuss in Malibu? What happened to the kid who thought Joel Lattimore was the best thing since sliced bread? Where were *those* kids?

While Josiah showered, and with Theo attached to him like a barnacle, he dumped pasta into a large pot, thawed frozen meatballs and seared them in another, then covered them with a jar of pasta sauce.

Afterward, he spread blankets on the living room floor. And, nearly three hours after leaving the park, he finally set plates of spaghetti and meatballs and garlic bread on the blanket. Then he queued up the first movie that appeared in the streaming library.

He sat on the floor.

Theo crawled into his lap.

"Oh, so now I'm your friend again?"

Knowing Theo would have never stayed in his high chair with him and Josiah on the floor, he'd added extra food to his plate and grabbed a tiny fork. As the opening credits rolled, they ate.

Josiah appeared in the living room wearing a Batman pajama set. "I'm done," he said, a folder outstretched. "You're supposed to sign it. I could

have done my homework after I ate since it didn't even take me that long, but I did what you asked."

"By the way, Josiah," Joel took the folder and set it on the coffee table, "did you find them?"

"Find what?"

"The tools to fix your attitude."

"Joel, you're not being fair. All I wanted—"

"Was to do what? Walk into this room and eat this food because I *know* you're hungry, and you and your brother love spaghetti and meatballs? Which is why I made it in the first place? Siah, don't play with me. Get down here, and fix your attitude on the way, my friend."

Josiah flopped down in front of his plate, and Joel kept an eye on him out of the corner of his eye. Josiah could instantly adopt a sour mood, but food was his kryptonite.

Obviously trying to hold on to his reluctance, Josiah picked up his fork, stabbed at his food, and shoved the fork into his mouth. Not even halfway through the meal, Josiah moved closer until their sides touched.

"Joel, I'm sorry I had an attitude," Josiah whispered. "I didn't mean to be mean to you."

The pressure in the room leveled off.

Joel gave him a tight hug. "Hey, it happens. It's part of being human. Sometimes we're happy, and other times, we're grumpy. But it takes a big man to apologize. I'm proud of you, and you're forgiven."

Josiah held up a fist, and he crashed his against it. Then they made explosion sounds and wiggled their fingers like the characters Hiro and Baymax from *Big Hero 6*, one of Josiah's earlier favorite movies before *Trolls* came along.

Not long after, the boys fell asleep.

As he didn't want to send them to bed without seeing Ayesha, he let them sleep on the blankets while he tidied up. It didn't matter how tired he was; Ayesha did this every day by herself. There was no way in hell he was letting her come home to a dirty house.

"Joel?" Josiah sat up, rubbing at his eyes. "Where are you going? Are you leaving?"

"No, I'm not leaving," he said. "I'm going to clean up."

"Can I help?"

"Are you sure you're not too tired?"

Josiah shook his head. “No, I want to help.”

“Then I’d love your help, but before you do that, can you cover your brother a little more with that blanket?”

* * *

In no time, the kitchen sparkled, and because of how quickly they finished, he and Josiah started a load of laundry. Realistically, Ayesha didn’t have to put so much on herself as she could hire a housekeeper to take care of the menial chores, but something told him hiring help would come with guilt.

And gossip.

Ayesha wasn’t immune to either.

It was one of the things he liked most about her, that humanness. That imperfection. She wouldn’t admit it, but she didn’t have to—he could see how important it was for Curtis’ family to see her as a competent mother.

Outside of the boys, they were her last link to him. Without Curtis to challenge their negative views, she absorbed every snide word they tossed her way until she convinced herself that Curtis would have been equally disappointed in how she handled the boys.

But he saw her influence in the way Josiah and Theo treated others, as well as how they treated each other. Naturally, as siblings, they would butt heads from time to time, but they loved one another. They *loved* their mother. Love like that wasn’t innate; they mimicked what Ayesha showed them daily.

Had it been up to him, she would leave Maui. For people who claimed to love Curtis, it was reprehensible the way they treated the mother of his children. His widow. The love of his life. If they weren’t interested in changing, then they could all fuck off. The team was also Curtis’ family. They could be all the family Ayesha needed.

Josiah entered the laundry room where he stood sorting clothes, absentmindedly staring at a tall jar of wool balls, wondering how soon was too soon to text Ayesha again to see how things were going at work.

“I found it!” Josiah raised a white bottle with a green cap. “You have to use this detergent for me and Theo. The other one makes us itchy.”

Joel tossed in a load, starting with the boys’ clothes, and poured the detergent into the compartment at the front of the washing machine.

Josiah stood beside him. “Did you need my help with sorting out the clothes? I help Ma sort out the clothes.”

“I’ve got that all down.” He tapped the button to start the washer. “I appreciate you offering, though.”

“Can you help me with something now, then?”

“Of course.”

He followed Josiah to the front room.

At some point, Josiah had moved his brother to the sofa and propped a throw pillow beneath Theo’s head, and he didn’t know how Ayesha couldn’t see how good of a job she was doing. While he and his older sister were the best of friends now, rather than let him sleep, she would have walloped him awake with one, or more, of the pillows.

“It’s my homework,” Josiah said, grabbing the folder from the coffee table. “Before you sign it, can you look over some of these problems for me?”

Joel took the folder to the dining room table and took a seat. Josiah stood next to him, one hand on the back of his chair.

“It’s math turned into a crossword puzzle. I’m pretty good at multiplication and division and stuff, but I was wondering if you could check my answers for me.”

All it took was a quick scan to see that all the answers were correct, but Joel took his time, pointing and nodding and asking Josiah how he arrived at his solutions. The issue, he realized, wasn’t third-grade homework. With Theo asleep, Josiah wanted to use some of this time to get one-on-one attention.

“I think you’ve pretty much aced this, Siah,” he said. “So, I sign it and put it in your cubby, right?”

Josiah, chewing on the inside of his bottom lip, nodded, rising and lowering onto his toes. “Yeah. You sign right under Ma’s name.”

“After I do this, do you have another minute? I’m going to check on the pool, and I feel like you’d be an expert at helping me with that.”

Josiah’s eyes lit up. “I’d love to help!”

He signed the homework, tucked it in the cubby, and they went to the pool deck, feet bare on the stone surround.

The pool was an architectural masterpiece, designed to look like it had been plucked from a corner of the island and dropped behind the house. Saltwater trickled down over natural-looking artificial rock formations,

creating a variety of waterfalls. Tall palms and bushels of vibrant hibiscus flowers enclosed the body of water, and when he wasn't facing the house, it felt like stepping into a lagoon.

It was something Curtis had wanted forever. Yet, according to Ayesha, they barely used it, considering they were within walking distance of a private beach. However, he understood. Childhood dreams rarely disappeared; instead, they were tucked aside to make room for adult realities. A part of him wanted to dedicate one room at his place to transform into a Christmas village with a train and trolley running through it—merely to appease the little boy inside him.

“The pool guy was here not that long ago,” Josiah informed him.

Joel kneeled at the edge and ran his fingers through the lukewarm water. “Do you remember all that he did?”

“Um,” Josiah tapped his chin, mouth wrinkled, “he tested to see if there was acid in it.”

“Okay, he tested the pH.”

“He used a big brush on the sides.”

“Wow, Josiah. You remember a whole lot. Your brain is probably the size of an elephant.”

Josiah beamed. “Oh, and he cleaned the filter. He said everything was good since we barely use it.”

“Maybe we should change that. It would be a good place to continue your swimming lessons. In here, it would be easier to move up to diving.”

Josiah walked over, small feet slapping the stone, and kneeled next to him. “Did you have a pool when you were a kid, Joel?”

“Not at my house,” he said. “We had one at the apartment complex where we lived. Then, when my folks moved, there was one in the community clubhouse.”

“Did your dad teach you how to swim?”

“He sure did. And he’s a great teacher.”

“Maybe he can teach me?”

“He probably could, but I like giving you swimming lessons. We get to chat and catch up and make jokes.”

Josiah shrugged. “Ma says it all the time. I’m just terrific company.”

Joel smiled. “That you are, my friend.”

They stood and surveyed the pool, taking multiple laps to check for any errant foliage that might have made it through the mesh surround or toys

begging for rescue from their toddler overlord on the pool floor.

“Hey, Joel? See that tree over there?” Josiah pointed to a tall palm in a plant pot. “It almost didn’t make it.”

“Theo?”

“Yeah. He’s got a bladder like a camel.”

Joel burst out laughing.

Josiah’s skin flushed, his smile so broad that it completely erased their mini-disagreement earlier from their history timeline.

The way he could sometimes be petty, Josiah was occasionally grumpy. Their mother was anxious, and Theo was a biting urinator. They were *The All-Rights*; nowhere near *The Incredibles*, but not terrible either.

He rolled up his jeans, took a seat on the stone, and let his feet dangle in the water. Josiah flopped down next to him and did the same. The skies were clear and blue, dotted with puffy clouds, which shined amber against the rays from the sunset. The temperature was perfect, and the first few times, he’d told himself it was why he started coming so often. Most people wouldn’t deny themselves paradise if they had access to it.

That was the excuse he’d found for coming; he never quite managed to come up with a plausible one for staying.

“You didn’t know my dad, right, Joel?” Josiah asked, legs kicking in steady movements through the water.

Joel shook his head. “No, I didn’t have the pleasure.”

“Oh.”

“What’s one of your favorite things that you remember about him?”

Josiah didn’t hesitate. “He was super funny. Like...the funniest. Once, he even made Uncle Giorgio laugh.”

Joel’s brows shot up. “Impossible.”

“Totally possible. I saw it happen.”

“He must have been hilarious.”

“He was. You’re funny too, Joel. You make me laugh. And Ma.” Josiah continued to pass his legs through the water, looking around as if it was his first time seeing the tropical design. “I know I don’t look like it, but I think about my dad a lot. But even though I think about him, I’m scared to talk about him. It’s like...I don’t know. I’m just scared.”

“Are you afraid it’ll hurt?”

“I don’t know. I mean, it still hurts even if I don’t. I think I’m scared because it might hurt Ma and my uncles because they loved my dad too,

you know? I don't want to make them cry or anything. They cried at my dad's funeral. Uncle Giorgio didn't cry, but I could still tell how sad he was."

Joel looked down at him, Josiah's focus consumed by a shrub speckled with yellow hibiscus flowers. The glasses made him look older and younger at the same time, and he was hit by another irrational stab, this time of fear. It was as if all it would take was one blink, and Josiah would be ten years older.

It was irrational to wish Josiah could stay this young forever, as there were joys, achievements, and accomplishments he deserved to experience in adulthood. Still, the world could be a shitty place. One day, Josiah would have to face it alone, and it seemed unfair that he couldn't protect him from all the bullshit. If he'd had his way, he would have stood in front of them forever, taking everything life hurled until he was bloodied if it meant they would remain safe, always.

"Josiah, do you know anything about what your dad and uncles do?"

"A little bit. My dad told me he couldn't talk about it much, but everything he did was to make the world safe for me and Ma."

"By the way, why'd you start calling your mom, Ma?"

Josiah shrugged. "Because I'm getting older. I'll be the man of the house soon."

"Did she tell you that?"

"No. My Tutu, that's my dad's grandmother, told me that. She said I would have to grow up quick but strong to take care of Ma and Theo because Ma won't be able to do it by herself."

Joel bit down on his tongue. He had a response for Josiah's "Tutu" that he'd keep to himself for now, but that was too much pressure to place on a young boy. Eight-year-olds were supposed to care about school, games, and friends, not taking their deceased father's place in the household. That would never be Josiah's responsibility, and if Ayesha didn't expect it, then "Tutu" was out of place to suggest it.

"Why'd you ask me if I knew what you, my dad, and my uncles do?" Josiah asked.

Joel momentarily set aside his discontent. "Because, a lot of times, when you work in teams and you're on that team for a long time, you become more than teammates. You develop a lifelong bond. Just like they'd never want to lose you, Theo, or your mom, they didn't want to lose your

dad. But it happened, and losing someone you love, as you know, hurts like hell.”

Josiah nodded and looked down at his legs, nibbling on his bottom lip.

“But guess what, Josiah? Sometimes, talking about the people we miss doesn’t make things worse. It makes things better. You get to share the stories that made you laugh, the things that make you smile. So, don’t worry that you’ll make your uncles or your mom cry. Even if they do, it’ll be happy tears. You might even remember something they didn’t, and they’ll get that memory back because of you.”

Josiah remained silent.

He reached over, ruffled his hair, and pulled him in for a quick side hug. With as much as he loved his own father, he could only imagine what Josiah was going through. Although his parents were still relatively young, these days, he thought more and more about their mortality.

One day, they would no longer be around, and it seemed impossible, somehow. Right now, he could send a text to his father and receive one back in roughly twenty-four hours to forty-eight hours—Archie Lattimore was a crappy texter.

Why couldn’t that last forever? What was the harm in having that last forever?

“Joel, I have to tell you something.”

He gave Josiah his full attention. “What’s up?”

“I don’t want anything to happen to my uncles.” Josiah looked down, fiddling with his fingers. “And I don’t want anything to happen to you, either. I like when you come to Maui and stay in the guest house and spend time with me, Theo, and Ma. My uncles used to, but I know they can’t as much because they have babies and stuff.”

“So you miss them.”

“Yeah. It’s lonely sometimes. And I don’t mean it in a bad way, like I don’t love Theo and Ma. I mean, it gets lonely for all of us. Well, me and Ma. I don’t think Theo understands just yet.”

“I’ll be here as often as I can,” Joel reassured him, flowing over with pride, gratitude, and the general feeling of being cared for.

Josiah raised his head. “So you won’t leave? I heard you and Ma talking one time, and Aunt Syd doesn’t want you to be around us anymore?”

“Oh, no. That’s not it. That’s not it at all.”

“You told Ma that she wants you not to go out on assignments with my uncles anymore.”

He gently gripped Josiah’s shoulder. “That’s not it. Sydney, she gets scared sometimes. Scared I won’t come back.”

“Is she mad at you?”

“No, she’s not mad at me.”

“If everybody goes, everybody comes back. I know it sounds stupid because of what happened to my dad, but—”

“Josiah, it doesn’t sound stupid at all. In fact, it sounds smart. Genius.”

Tears splashed onto his cheeks. “I just figured that, because of what happened with my dad, everybody will protect everybody else better because they know what bad things can happen now, but you have to do it together. I don’t want anything to happen to my uncles, Joel, and I really, really don’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

He pulled Josiah in for another, longer hug.

Maybe Sydney had a point. If something happened to him, he was the only one who wouldn’t have to weather its effects; it was the people left behind who suffered. Sydney simply didn’t want to be subjected to that.

“Josiah, I promise that everything I do, from here on out, will be to make sure I come back to you, Theo, and your mom.”

“Can I have one more promise?” Josiah asked.

“Of course. Anything.”

“I didn’t get to see my dad leave the last time he did because I was at school, and he wasn’t supposed to be gone long. I thought I could just see him when he came back, but I never saw him again. Can you promise me that, when you leave, you’ll see me first? Me, Theo, and Ma? Even if it’s only on the computer, Joel, please don’t leave without saying goodbye.”

His heart wrenched.

Twisted.

Ached.

If Curtis’ spirit was anywhere nearby, it settled inside him for a moment. Just then, Josiah felt like his own flesh and blood.

Curtis’ last action was so instant, there would have been no time to think it over. If he’d had even a split second more, he would have hesitated. He would have thought about Josiah, about Ayesha. And they would have wound up throwing a funeral for six rather than one.

“I promise.”

“Jo.”

They let go simultaneously and faced the patio doors where Theo stood watching them. Theo grimaced, his brows furrowed as he made a smacking sound with his mouth and tongue.

“Crap.” Joel hopped up and raced over. “He’s gonna puke.”

“How can you tell?” Josiah asked, running next to him.

Theo uttered a small cry, hiccuped, and then vomited a mashup of garlic bread, spaghetti, and meatballs all over the patio floor.

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CHAPTER 18

Ayesha rushed into the house a full two hours later than she'd told Joel she would be. Her last session ran over, and she'd had to request an emergency mental health evaluation and involuntary psychiatric hold for only the second time in her career.

On the way home, she'd called to find out what all three guys wanted for dinner, but Joel told her that she was fine to come straight to the house.

All she'd done since Theo was born was worry, and while she'd done the same with Josiah, she'd had Curtis to lean on. She'd been worrying for so long, relaxing felt threatening, but Joel continued to do that—dangle opportunities to exhale in front of her that she desperately wanted to grab, but she feared getting too comfortable.

“Hey, boys?” She kicked off her shoes. “I’m home. I’m sorry I’m so late —”

Her heart stopped.

For a moment, she couldn't breathe.

Joel stood in the middle of the kitchen, rocking a sleeping Theo in his arms and singing the main song from *Trolls*. Josiah sat on a stool at the kitchen island, watching them with a smile on his face she hadn't seen in a long time.

A long time.

To Josiah, it was a new song, but it had been sung at least twice, to her knowledge, by Cindy Lauper and Phil Collins. As a baby, she would sing to Theo while giving him a bath or setting him to sleep, as she'd done with Josiah. After the movie was released, Josiah would request that she sing

“True Colors” at least twice before any other song. Though he never sang along, he would lean against her side while he listened.

Josiah looked up.

He didn’t call out to her, and the smile didn’t waver. All he did was continue to stare at her while Joel sang.

Although Curtis was never far from her mind, these days, it was like he was right in front of her. She saw him all over Josiah’s face and heard him in Theo’s laughs. For a while, she’d panicked when she’d go a few hours, or worse, a day without thinking about him.

She looked over at their wedding photo on the wall, a black-and-white snapshot of one of the happiest moments of her life.

The only time she’d felt his presence stronger than right then, at that moment, within that hour, and with each passing second, was back when he was alive. It was like he’d walked into the room, wrapped his arms around her, and kissed the side of her neck.

Eesh, even when I’m gone, you’ll feel me.

You’ll feel me in the bed next to you at night, as you take Josiah to school, and I’ll be there, holding your hand, during your most challenging moments.

Look for me.

Look for me in Josiah’s smile.

Look for me in your memories.

And keep me close to your heart.

Then, when you find love again, you’ll know it’s right because all around you, you’ll feel that I never truly left. That I’m still right there by your side.

I promised to love you forever, and no matter how that needs to happen, that’s what I intend to do. In life or death, I will always be your one and only.

Eesh, I love you.

And I’m sorry.

- Curtis

She held in a gasp.

Finally, she heard his voice.

Finally, they weren't only words on a page.

Joel turned around. "Hey, I didn't even hear you come in. We missed you. By the way, Theo threw up a little earlier, and he felt a bit warm. Then I noticed him tugging on his ears, and I remembered he gets ear infections a lot."

She swallowed, words trying to form.

"Since you gave Gage and Tayler the authority to make medical decisions for the boys, I called them, and they talked to Theo's pediatrician. Then, get this, the pediatrician made a house call, which I didn't know doctors still did. He sent a script in, and I took the boys with me to pick it up. We got there like five minutes before the pharmacy closed and just back about ten minutes ago."

Joel ticked his head at the stove.

"Oh, and I made dinner, if you haven't eaten anything. I noticed you had a couple of jars of pasta sauce, and my Nonna's probably rolling in her grave, but I made half-homemade spaghetti and meatballs. If you give me a minute, I'll heat it up for you. Do you want garlic bread?"

Both boys were in their pajamas.

The kitchen was immaculate.

Josiah's backpack was on its peg, and the cubby above it was open, which they did when he finished his homework and needed her to sign his log to say she'd checked it.

Hands trembling, she walked over, opened the folder, and there was Joel's signature on the line right after hers.

"Ayesha?"

The signature blurred.

"Ma?" She felt Josiah's presence next to her. "Why are you crying? Did you have a bad day at the office?"

"And Theo's okay," Joel added. "The pediatrician said it's the usual, and I made sure you wouldn't have anything to worry about except him getting better."

Josiah peered up into her face. "I love you, Ma. Ma, I love you."

She pulled him close and bent, placing her cheek on top of his head. "I love you, Josiah. Josiah, I love you."

"Are you sad?"

"I'm not sad."

“Are these your happy tears?”

“Yes, these are my happy tears.”

“I helped Joel, so we got a lot of important stuff done. We cleaned the kitchen, did the laundry, checked the pool, and he’s getting us some new stones and trees for the backyard. Oh! Can he stay in the guest house again? I wanted him to stay in the house, house, but he needs a break from little kids. Me and Theo did a real number on him today.”

Smiling, she looked up into Joel’s face. “If he wants to.”

“He wants to,” Joel said.

They studied each other for what felt like eons. Then, once she’d collected herself, she took Theo and went to tuck both boys into bed. She and Josiah tucked Theo in, and then she sat with Josiah for a few minutes, catching up before covering his face with kisses until he giggled.

“Good night, Ma,” Josiah said, turning over.

She turned off his light. “Good night, my love.”

On her way to the kitchen, Joel intercepted her in the hallway, took her hand, and directed her to the dining table. A steaming plate of food waited, sprinkled with parmesan and garnished with parsley. Two thick slices of garlic bread sat on a plate beside it.

“Figured you’d need two slices.” Joel released her hand and pulled out her chair. “What would you like to drink?”

She took a seat. “Water.”

“Is that what you really want?”

“No. Red wine. Not too much.”

“I’ve got you.”

He walked off.

The next thing she knew, she was following him. When he reached into a high cabinet for a wine glass, she closed her arms around him from behind and pressed her cheek to the center of his back.

“Thank you, Joel. Thank you so much. For everything. For the boys, for dinner. For everything.”

He covered her clasped hands with one of his. “You don’t have to thank me.”

“I want to.”

He eased out of her grasp, turned, and drew her close again. She squeezed, and he held on tight.

“Joel, your friendship means the world to me. I can’t tell you how lucky I feel to be able to get the chance to know you better. To know you like this. You’re an amazing human being. An incredible friend. Joel, you’re one of the best people I know, and if I can be honest, now that you’re in our lives, I never want to know what it’s like to live without you again.”

To someone else, her statement would have probably sounded like something more.

Deeper feelings.

A declaration.

But there was no way she would miss an opportunity, ever again, to tell the people she loved and cared for how grateful she was that they were in her life.

When he finally replied, his voice was strained and weaker than usual. “Did that degree teach you how to say exactly the right thing at exactly the right time?”

“Nope.” She took a step back. “Followed my heart that time.”

“You should keep doing that, then. Keep following your heart. You might be surprised where it leads you.”

“Maybe.” She glanced behind him at the picture on the wall. “Maybe not.”

“I have an idea.”

Taking her hand again, he led her to the living room. Then he brought the food, set it on the coffee table, and poured her a glass of wine.

He disappeared, and when he returned, it was with a laundry basket spilling over with clean children’s clothes. “You eat, I’ll fold,” he said, taking a seat next to her. “But before we get into how your day went, I kind of have a confession. I, uh, did something.”

She twirled spaghetti onto her fork. “And what something did you do?”

“I might have talked to Mary.”

“Joel, no.”

“And I might have told her we’re married.”

She eyed him.

“I’ll fix it,” he promised.

“Yes, you will.” She swallowed a forkful of spaghetti. “Oh, wow. This is jar sauce? Mr. Lattimore, I am impressed.”

“Impressed enough to forgive me?”

“Nope. You probably just opened up a can of worms. It won’t be long before this gets back to Curtis’ grandmother.”

“I’ll fix it with her too,” he said. “Give me her address.”

She eyed him again. “No.”

“It’s just to talk.”

“No.”

“I won’t even threaten to kill her.”

“Wait, you threatened to kill Mary?”

He squinted. “Did I?”

“How about we leave it alone for now? If something arises,” she tapped her chest, “I’ll handle it before you get us kicked off the island.”

“You could always come to D.C.,” he suggested. “Come stay with your husband.”

“Maybe. I do miss him when he’s gone.”

“Shh, for one second?”

She looked toward the bedrooms. “Is it Theo?”

“No, it’s my heartbeat, spelling out your nam—”

She smacked him with a pillow.

“Spelling out your n—”

She smacked him again.

“Woman, let me finish.”

“Besides threatening to kill innocent older women,” she set the pillow on her other side in the event she’d need it again, “what else did you do today?”

“Nearly die,” he said.

“Joel, you didn’t even have them a full day. It’ll be easier next time, trust me. Parenting is like a muscle.”

He pinned her with a glare, and she pressed her lips together to hold in a laugh.

“It’ll be easier. I promise.” She stroked his arm. “You did a good job. Such a good job. The best job. I should buy you a T-shirt that says *Number One Dad...*”

Then they both added, “*For A Day.*”

He burst out laughing.

She reached for another bite, but it took her a moment to figure out how to navigate it into her mouth when she could barely hold up herself.

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CHAPTER 19

Joel, yawning, scrubbed a hand down his face and waited for Ayesha to come to the door. Initially, he'd planned to stay in Maui for at least two more weeks, but a call came in. He had to be on a plane in less than an hour, but even though it was five in the morning, he wouldn't leave without seeing them first.

She opened the door.

Theo was asleep in her arms.

"I wanted to make sure I saw you guys before I left," he said. "Is Josiah u—"

Josiah crashed into him, and he crouched to better return the hug.

"Be safe, Joel," Josiah said, the words muffled against his shirt. "Please don't die, okay? Come back. Please, come back."

"I'll come back."

"To Maui."

"I'll come back to Maui," he promised. "If I can't, I'll send for you guys to come to me."

After he found the strength to release Josiah, she angled Theo so he could kiss Theo's forehead and smooth his hair, exactly what his mother used to do before he left for school in the mornings.

"I have something for you." Ayesha pulled a long rectangular case from behind her back. "It's not much, and if you don't like it—"

He squeezed her hand, took the case, and raised the lid. Inside, nestled in silky white fabric, sat a sterling silver fountain pen. Words that looked distinctly Polynesian were engraved along the pen's sleek body.

“That’s Hawaiian,” she said. “In English, it says ‘To Joel: Number One Dad...For A Day.’”

A rush of emotion almost bowled him over. A rush he hadn’t planned for.

“I got it engraved in Hawaiian, so most of the people who see it don’t think you’re some deadbeat parent because it’s an inside joke, you know?” she explained. “But if it’s weird, I can take it back. I just thought it would be kind of a quirky—”

“It’s not weird.” He paused, needing a moment for gratitude and appreciation to release his neck from their chokehold. “Ayesha, this means more than I could ever tell you. It’s not weird. Not at all.”

This pen would travel the world with him, no matter where the team went, and he would keep it on him even if he had to staple it to his chest.

He leaned in, kissed her cheek, and hugged her as tightly as he could with Theo between them. Then, as he leaned back, he kissed her cheek a second time.

“Be safe,” she said.

He nodded. “I will.”

“Before we know it, you’ll be back, and the months will fly by, and it’ll be time for the long-awaited Wolfe-Diaz wedding.”

“Yeah.” He sighed through a laugh. “Before we know it.”

Eventually, he coaxed his legs to move to the car parked in the driveway. However, before he got inside, he turned and took one more look behind him. Ayesha sent him an eager wave and then readjusted Theo.

He waved back.

“I almost forgot!” Josiah yelled. “I love you, Joel!”

Hopefully, he made it to the airport in one piece; he already knew he wouldn’t be able to see a damn thing on the drive.

“I love you too, Josiah,” he yelled back.

After one final wave, he got in behind the steering wheel and drove off, peering at them in the rearview mirror until they vanished from sight.

CHAPTER 20

“Dez has the rings,” Joel said.

Dez looked up. “Dez, who? Not this Dez. I don’t have the rings.”

Gage’s gaze, full of fire, brimstone, and promises of death, darted among the five of them. “One of you blokes better have the rings, or all of you will die.”

They turned to Julien.

Julien tossed up his hands. “Seriously, fellas? I don’t have the answer to everything, and I don’t have them either. Dez is the best man. He’s supposed to have the rings.”

Gage headed for Dez.

Joel planted himself in the center of Gage’s warpath. “Look, there is no way in hell we lost those expensive ass rings,” he argued. “And who’s prepared to face Tayler’s wrath first if we did?”

“What is problem?” Giorgio asked, the most dangerous of them all yet unfairly the best-looking groomsman in his custom-tailored black Attolini tux.

“The rings,” Gage said. “Dez lost them.”

Dez’s jaw dropped. “No, I didn’t. Don’t put that on me.”

“After I kill all of you,” Gage swung a finger around the hotel suite, “Tayler’s going to kill me, so,” his shoulders fell, “I guess I’ll be seeing you soon. We’ll be Team Alpha in heaven.”

Mike snorted a laugh. “Our asses will be turned right the fuck back around at the pearly gates.”

Giorgio, brows knitted, reached into his jacket pocket and produced both rings. “This what you want?”

They all stared at him, slack-jawed.

“Tayler, she ask favor.” Giorgio tossed the rings to Dez. “To...put write inside.”

“I think you mean she asked you to have them engraved,” Mike said.

“Da.”

Dez slipped the rings into his jacket pocket. “So, we’re good to go? We have everything?”

They nodded.

“How about you, Wolfe?” Joel asked, dusting off Gage’s already immaculate tuxedo jacket. “Are you ready?”

“To marry Tayler?” Gage scoffed. “I was ready the day I laid eyes on her.”

They headed for the door.

Five of them headed for the door.

“But before we leave,” Gage leaned against the chest of drawers, one large hand spanning the left side of his chest, “any of you blokes have a defibrillator?”

Sighing, they returned to the middle of the suite and positioned themselves as if Gage were a palm tree that needed to be braced in order to take root. Then they all but carried him to the door, headed for the long-awaited ceremony at the Sydney Opera House.

“Here comes Gage Wolfe,” Joel said. “Our ‘fearless’ leader.”

* * *

Gage managed to remain upright all the way to the altar, and the minute Tayler appeared, Joel watched all the uneasiness vanish from Gage’s face.

Tayler’s father, determined to walk his daughter down the aisle, surprised Tayler by asking Julien to be his “legs.” Then, once Tayler made it to Gage, Mr. Diaz kissed her forehead, and Julien helped him back into his wheelchair.

Several times throughout the ceremony, Joel caught Sydney looking at him, and he’d found himself wondering if she was thinking back to their wedding.

Though they’d barely spoken since Malibu, when she showed up, they picked back up like nothing ever happened. He’d expected her to walk in

with someone on her arm, but she came alone, though one of Tayler's cousins, Kofi, could barely keep his eyes off her.

It wasn't like he could blame the man.

She wore a dark green, strapless dress that graced her ankles with each step. A high slit and sky-high heels showed off her toned legs, and she wore her hair silky straight with loose curls brushing her shoulders and down her back, between her shoulder blades.

Had they still been together, she would have instead been draped in an elegant deep purple, but that honor was given to Larke, Ari, and Mo.

And Ayesha.

Ayesha wore purple like royalty.

All the bridesmaids and the matron of honor—who was also a new mother—had their hair styled to match Tayler's jeweled, pinned-up locs. So, soft twists framed both sides of Ayesha's face, and he couldn't count on one hand how much they'd discreetly smiled at or waved to each other during the ceremony.

It was his first time seeing her dressed up. At most, she would wear light makeup to go into the office or when they went out to eat with the boys, the whole group, or the few times it was just the two of them. Although both looks were very different, either way, she looked stunning.

When they weren't giggling like teens hiding a secret, they sent discreet waves to his parents. Archie and Jemma Lattimore had flown in a week prior to the wedding, and by the end of the same day they flew in, Josiah was calling them Grandma and Grandpa. Theo, copying his brother, went with Gumma and Gumpa. With Josiah, Thandie, Theo, Grey, and now, Monroe, his parents, Larke's, Mo and Ari's, Julien's mother, and Tayler's father were in grandparent heaven.

After the ceremony, they returned to the hotel for the reception. The seating arrangements had kept him and Sydney together, and she'd stroked his knee and nudged his shoulder with hers while the guys went around giving their speeches. They'd spent so long apart and without saying a word to each other, having her near felt more than nice. It almost felt necessary.

Even during their separations and break-ups in the past, they would still talk. They still checked in. Something had felt off, and when Sydney took the seat next to him, the off feeling vanished.

Mo and Ari gave the final speech, and they both made Gage tear up. Once Mo and Ari were done, they would segue into the dance routine.

Joel looked across the table, but Ayesha was staring down at her lap. Before, he'd wanted Sydney as his partner. Now, he couldn't see himself dancing with anyone else.

Because of Ayesha, Josiah, and Theo, he no longer felt tangential. They'd closed his open-ended loop, and he hoped it was the same for Ayesha. The three of them gave him more purpose when he didn't think there was more to be found, and he gave them his time, his protection, and the assurance of his promises.

Had his and Ayesha's friendship blossomed much later, at a time when he could give her everything she deserved, with the way he felt whenever she looked at him, he would have been convinced he was falling in love. But he would never risk their friendship. Having her in his life was more important than life itself.

The DJ announced it was time for the newlyweds' first dance. Ayesha closed her eyes, her chest rising and falling in steady motions. Joel left his seat, walked to the other side of the table, and crouched in front of her legs.

"Hey."

She opened her eyes, and he spotted the panic before a word left her lips.

"Joel," she leaned so close, their noses nearly touched, "I'm going to ruin Tayler and Gage's wedding."

"Ayesha—"

"*Ruin.* My best friends, I'm gonna just...shit on their day."

Oddly, he wanted to smile, but she was having a genuine panic, so he would save his amusement for later. Also, he now knew her well enough to know that they would eventually laugh about this later.

"Ayesha," he took both of her hands into his, "breathe for me, honey."

She looked around the venue. "Do you think I have time to see the boys before I fuck everything up?"

"They're with my parents. You're never seeing them again."

She laughed.

He rubbed small circles on the backs of her hands with his thumbs. "There you go. Relax, Eesh. You've got this. You can do this. You've already done it at least a dozen times."

The right side of her mouth curved upward. "I think that might be the first time you've ever called me 'Eesh.'"

"That's how confident I am in you."

“Well, we’ll both screw up if your hair gets into your eyes.” She reached up and fixed his hair, her fingers gliding through the strands and over his scalp.

“Ayesha.” He moved his grip to her hips. If she didn’t stop soon, his hands would move even lower, underneath her dress, back up, and then between her legs. “Hey, Eesh? I think you fixed it.”

“One second.”

Blood pooled in his groin.

He squeezed her hips.

Startled by the unexpected and, admittedly, intimate contact, she jumped. Their eyes met, and they exchanged no words, but it was clear that she understood.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I, uh, didn’t know. I’ll try to be more careful next time.”

“It’s like an on switch.”

She scrunched her nose. “Ugh.”

“Gets me going. Every time.”

“Let’s go.”

He stood and helped her to her feet.

As they walked off, he looked over his shoulder and found that Kofi had taken his vacated seat. The energy between him and Sydney was odd, but he figured Tayler’s cousin had probably asked Sydney out, and she turned him down. It was all for the man’s best, anyhow. Kofi chatted away, but all of Sydney’s attention was aimed in his and Ayesha’s direction.

He and Ayesha stopped in their designated spot on the dance floor, Ayesha so nervous that her pulse beat against his palm. He positioned her in front of him, tucked his fingers beneath her chin, and raised her head.

“Don’t forget. Eyes on me.”

She looked down at her feet. “I need to concentrate on my steps, and—”

“Ayesha.” He raised her head. “You’ve got this. Trust yourself. Trust *me*.”

They changed positions, standing side by side. The guitar intro to a song called “Fall Again,” which he’d never heard before Larke suggested it, one he now knew all the lyrics to, started up.

They moved in sync across the shiny floor.

Ayesha kept her eyes on him.

After they'd made a full rotation, he twirled her until she faced him, drew her close, and dipped her slightly. When he righted her again, her eyes immediately reconnected with his, their bodies sliding together before they segued into the waltz.

She moved flawlessly.

He spun her out and pulled her back to him, closer than they'd ever practiced, but she didn't miss a step, rocking against him.

They both swung out this time and came back together, bodies touching, over and over until they reached the quickstep that took them to the breakdown in the middle.

It didn't matter how he spun her, twirled her—those eyes always came back to his.

Instead of holding hands, again like what they'd practiced, their fingers slid together. Her palm glided along his. His thumb caressed the length of her ring finger. Her fingertips danced over his knuckles. Her forearm brushed his sleeve. His fingernails grazed her elbow.

And his heart nearly broke his ribcage.

They arrived at the last turn.

Ayesha leaped.

He caught her against him.

And they never broke eye contact.

The walls could have collapsed, and neither of them would have noticed.

Several heartbeats later, he slid her down his body onto her feet, and they finished with a slow mambo-salsa combination.

Ayesha smiled up at him.

He returned the smile with a wink, leaned down, and touched a kiss to her brow, helpless to stop himself had he cared to try. Then, cradling the back of her head, he pulled her to him. She turned her head, placing her cheek against his chest.

Whether he was willing to admit it to himself, he knew she was carving a way into his heart. The problem was that she didn't get there the way most people did. Everyone else had been issued a passport. Ayesha, however, stepped right over the border.

It didn't matter that there were guns aimed in her direction or tanks surrounding the perimeter. It didn't matter that, all around, there were signs that said "barbed wire" and "danger minefield" in bold red print.

She saw them.

Yet, she didn't turn around.

She kept coming, and as she came, he watched her. He watched her cross the border, braving the spiked strips of wire and fields littered with hidden explosives. He watched her continue despite the guns and the tanks, and no matter how much he wanted her to turn back, he could hear himself whisper, "*Keep coming. Please, Ayesha, keep coming.*"

The music faded.

The room erupted in applause.

The walls and ceiling returned.

An imaginary crowbar pried him and Ayesha apart, the only way he would have let her go, and as he stared down at her, she stared up at him.

Ari crashed into her from behind. "Eesh! *Ahh!* You did so good! You were nervous, but you did so good! Me and Julien almost messed up our own routine because we were *captivated* by you and Joel."

Eventually, Larke, Tayler, Ari, and Mo pulled her aside. Even then, he didn't look away. And, even as the four of them surrounded her, neither did she.

CHAPTER 21

No matter where Ayesha went in the room, she felt Joel's eyes on her.

Their six-man team lined one wall, their tuxedo jackets gone as they surveyed the wedding guests mingling, dancing, and engaging in loud conversation. Yet, it didn't matter how many people danced in the space between them; a path remained from her to Joel and from Joel to her.

As a joke, Larke asked the DJ to play "Heathens" by Twenty-One Pilots. If any of the guests didn't know how dangerous the six of them were, they had to have some idea, especially with Giorgio spaced in such a way that he appeared to be the fulcrum that operated either side of the lever.

Ayesha looked down at her glass. Once the wedding was over, things would go back to normal. The atmosphere, Gage and Tayler, and the dance had put her and Joel in a weird headspace. He was looking at her like he wanted to slice her dress into shreds with a combat knife, and she had to keep looking away not to put stock in it.

It didn't matter what she and Curtis had talked about. Nothing could happen between her and Joel. Nothing *would* happen between her and Joel.

"But Curtis, I do sometimes feel like I'm screwing him up, if I'm being honest," Ayesha said. "A kid raising a kid, basically. Somewhat."

"You know the guys think I'm old as hell, right?" Curtis asked. "Don't tell them how old you are. They'll think I'm a pervert."

"Curtis, I'm twenty-six."

"And I'm thirty-four. Shit, I was in the third grade when you were born. Practically a grown man."

“Please. You probably still used those fat crayons in the third grade.”

“I still use them now.”

Laughing, she buried her face in the mattress.

“Even if we do screw Jojo up,” Curtis said, chuckling, “he’s ours to screw up.”

“I don’t want him to have to go through therapy to recover from his childhood.”

“Eesh, he has a father whose job is to kill people undetected.”

“He doesn’t know that!”

“Some shit’s gonna rub off. Like, he’ll accidentally take C4 to show and tell or something, and then I’ll have to tell all his friends it’s Play-Doh while the FBI tackles me to the ground.”

“Oh, my God.” She laughed even harder. “You’re perfect, Curtis. Josiah is in great hands.”

“Neither one of us is perfect but, in my opinion, imperfect people can be amazing parents.”

“So, we do our best?”

“We do our best,” he echoed. “And love each other to the end.”

She smiled, staring at his handsome face and watching the rise and fall of his chest. Each breath meant that his heart still beat, and once he came home, she’d lie on that chest and listen to it every night as they drifted off to sleep.

“Curtis, do you think you’d be able to remarry if something happened to me?”

He scoffed. “Yeah.”

“Damn.”

“I’m just kidding, mama!” His laugh crackled through the laptop speaker. “To be honest, I don’t know. With Jojo, and if we ever have more kids, it would be hard. I’d want her to love them, you know? And it’s not easy to ask someone else to love kids that aren’t theirs.”

“That’s fair.”

“How about you? Same question, Mrs. Savea.”

“Same answer,” she said. “He’d have to feel like somebody you would have picked for me yourself.”

“Well then, let me think, now.” He looked up at the ceiling. “What kind of man would I pick for you? I mean, Gage is single at the moment.”

“And, no offense, Gage is seriously hot.”

“There you go.”

“Stop it.” She giggled. “For you, I’d pick someone understanding, patient, and who doesn’t care about rubbing your size seventeen feet when they’re sore.”

“You’re essentially telling me that you never want me to remarry.”

“Just about.”

“Actually, wait. Let me really think about this.” He tapped his chin, focus just off-screen.

It was impossible to tell where he was. Everything was dark, and she made out a few silhouettes here and there that looked like everything and nothing at all.

Sometimes it was easy, like when he stayed in luxury villas and expensive hotels. Times like now, when he was in the middle of nowhere underneath tents and inside caves, all she could do was pray that, when their call ended, he remained safe until they spoke again.

“The man I’d pick for you...he’d work you like a miner, picking and picking until he breaks down those walls,” he said. “When you’re frustrated, he won’t wilt. When you’re angry, he won’t rise to match you but helps you calm down. When you’re sad or depressed, he doesn’t let you turn him away. And I know it’s asking for a lot, but I’d prefer if he pulled along well with the guys. These are my brothers, and I don’t want some fool coming into your life who doesn’t know what being part of this family is like.”

“Are you still pawning me off on Gage?”

“Or Dez. They’re both single right now.”

“What about Giorgio?”

“Ayesha, I love you, but you’re not the woman for Giorgio. She’s out there, somewhere, but I’d rather you stay single or get ten cats and a python before you try to tame that beast.”

She nodded. “Noted. And I love you too, Curtis.”

He grinned. “You love me, baby?”

“I always will.”

“Go ahead and call me ‘Big Daddy’ one good time.”

“Bye.”

After the wedding, she and Joel would reset. Then, before she knew it, her thoughts would settle, and he and Sydney would get back together. That was the likeliest outcome based on what she’d observed so far. Sydney was the queen of his heart, and the last thing either of them needed was to mess up their friendship when the boys loved him the way they did.

She looked up.

Joel raised a glass to his lips, gaze locked with hers, the jewel-encrusted watch on his wrist sparkling and emphasizing his exposed forearms.

Maybe they could sleep together—once. Afterward, they could pretend it never happened and return to normal. Something told her he could scratch one hell of an itch.

She shook her head, hoping that if she did so enough, her brain would eventually return to a whole egg rather than the yolk the evening had turned it into. It would also help if he stopped looking at her, tempting her. All it would take was one slight tilt of her head, and he would follow her up to her room. The boys were off with their honorary grandparents, which meant she’d have all night to wear Joel the fuck out.

She hopped up from her seat.

The first server she came to, she snatched another glass from their tray. There wasn’t any alcohol at the wedding, but she downed the colorful virgin cocktail like a shot and then crushed the ice between her molars.

Green flashed at the corner of her eye.

Sydney.

Even better, it was Sydney and Kofi.

They were on the dance floor, bodies moving together to N.E.R.D and Rihanna. They weren’t as close as she would have liked, but she searched for Joel’s gaze—the search took less than a second—and tipped her head at Kofi and Sydney. He followed, watched them for a moment, and then turned back to her.

Ayesha swallowed more ice.

That should have worked. He was still in love with Sydney. All signs pointed to it. Had he been one of her clients, she might have chalked some of that “love” up to fear; Joel was more concerned about failing at another

relationship, in general, than failing at a relationship with Sydney again. Then she had a hunch that Sydney did want children, and if he found out, it would devastate him. But it wouldn't devastate him primarily because it was Sydney.

Over the last several months, she'd picked up on an insecurity she wasn't sure whether he fully knew existed. Joel believed he was good enough to be a husband, but he wasn't good enough that a woman would ever look at him and find him worthy of forever and family.

He set his glass on a passing tray, pushed off the wall, and it almost looked like he was headed in her direction. Then, as he stepped around gyrating and bumping bodies, it dawned on her that he *was* heading in her direction.

This wedding needed to end, casting off its spell. If it didn't, and soon, she would spend the night with Joel Lattimore. She would ride him until the wheels fell off.

Someone grabbed her elbow.

She looked up into clear gray eyes.

"Hey, your name's Ayesha, right?" the man, one of Tayler's hot Cuban cousins, asked. "I'm Isaac. Would you like to dance? I've been meaning to ask you all night."

She turned back to Joel, who'd stopped in his pursuit. He'd cocked his head to the side, studying Isaac, and she got the sudden urge to tell Isaac to run. Then Joel faced her again and shook his head.

It wasn't discreet.

It wasn't slight.

It was a clear and obvious, "*You better not.*"

"Sure," she said. Maybe dancing with Isaac would help cool her foolish blood. "I'd love to."

Isaac took her hand, and Joel watched them the entire way toward the dance floor. Considering that the universe liked to mess with her, Isaac walked them right past Joel, who reached out and grabbed her.

Not her wrist.

Not her hand.

He wrapped an arm around her waist.

"One second, Isaac," she said.

Joel flashed Isaac a look before looking down at her. "Come upstairs with me."

“I can’t.”

“I don’t mean to my room. I mean to the roof. You can see the opera house and the harbor from up there. We haven’t had much time to talk or hang out all night.”

“I can’t,” she repeated.

“Why not?” Joel pointed in Isaac’s direction. “Not because of him?”

“No, that’s not why.”

“Then why?”

“Because I don’t want to go to the roof,” she said. “If we go upstairs, I want to go to your room.”

Before she further incriminated herself, she walked off. The entire way, she felt Joel’s eyes on her as if she was the only planet in the universe and him, her center—her sun.

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CHAPTER 22

The DJ transitioned into a nineties segment, which began with Montell Jordan's classic: "This is How We Do It." The song wasn't slow, by any means, but the man who'd asked Ayesha to dance had placed himself too close to her body, gyrating his pelvis less than six feet from hers.

Joel returned to the wall.

Gage joined him and handed him a glass of something so cold, had his blood not been as hot as it was, it would have numbed his fingers.

"I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to give me an honest answer," Gage prefaced. "Lattimore, do you have feelings for Ayesha?"

Joel frowned. "What kind of feelings?"

"Lattimore."

"Ayesha and I are just friends."

"Well, you don't look like—"

"But who the fuck is that, and why does he have his hands on her?" He downed the drink, which turned out to be ginger ale, in one gulp. "Do you know him?"

"One of Tayler's cousins," Gage said. "Name's Isaac. He's been fully vetted—not a threat."

The term "threat" was relative. At the moment, Isaac looked like someone who should have had a red dot somewhere on his light gray suit. The light gray didn't even look right with Ayesha's outfit; the purple in her dress perfectly matched the groom and groomsmen's ties and pocket squares. Naturally, that meant she looked better with him than anyone else in the building.

“Isaac’s a tax accountant.” Gage, arms folded, studied the mismatched couple. “Nothing we found suggests that he’s anything we need to worry about. Tayler was iffy about inviting him, but she changed her mind at the last minute.”

“What’d you say, taxes or terrorist?”

“You can’t make shit up just to kill him, Lattimore.”

Joel grunted a response.

“Let me tell you something you might not want to hear.” Gage aimed a finger at the left side of his chest. “Ayesha? She’s making her way in there, mate, and although I’m not sure you can do anything to stop it, you’re not ready for her to be there. You can’t offer Ayesha what she needs right now.”

“I’m telling you, it’s not like that.”

It couldn’t be. Ayesha was the last person he could have “it” with. For one, he’d poured half his life into loving one woman and still failed. In what world could he make Ayesha happy, especially since he didn’t have another sixteen years to try, only to fail again? Also, if he lost her, it wouldn’t be only losing a wife. He’d lose his entire family. Then, if he fucked around and got himself killed, that would be twice she’d have her heart shattered. He agreed that she deserved better than him, but Isaac sure as fuck wasn’t it.

“Lattimore, it *is* like that,” Gage insisted. “But you need time. A lot of time. If you disagree and think you’re ready, let go of Sydney, then.”

Scratching the back of his head, he peeled his eyes away from Isaac and Ayesha. Sydney and Kofi were still dancing, but as if Sydney felt him looking, she turned his way. Hope sprung in his chest, twirling and twisting, and it made no sense; how could hope still be there when—he journeyed back to Ayesha—something else was starting to take root?

It was also possible that he was wrong about what the twisting in his chest signified.

He wanted Sydney to want him.

He wanted her to regret leaving him.

With *Joel Petty* brewing inside him, he wanted her to hope they would get back together and beg him the way he’d begged her. He wanted her to look at him and realize that how she ended their relationship could have been handled better, and it would forever be one of the biggest mistakes she’d ever made when it came to their history together.

“Do you think if Theo and Josiah weren’t in the picture, you’d feel differently toward Ayesha?” Gage asked.

Isaac twirled Ayesha, and the man’s twirls were shit. Ayesha floated when she danced. With Isaac, she didn’t so much as glide, and the eye contact she gave him was about as passionate as she would look at an empty cardboard box.

“Do you mean if I’m getting emotionally attached because she, Josiah, and Theo are basically a ready-made family?” he asked.

“It’s what you want.”

“Honestly, Gage?” It wasn’t the answer that would help his current predicament, but it was the truth. “It’s an excellent question, and I don’t have an answer for you, but I do see what you’re getting at.”

“You need time,” Gage reiterated. “And I won’t let you rush into anything, not with her. You would never hurt Eesh intentionally, but it doesn’t matter. Hurt her, and I’ll fuck you all the way up. I promise you.”

Joel grinned. “You know who you sounded exactly like just now? Mrs. Tayler Wolfe. I know I’ve told you a thousand times, but congratulations, brother. You’re a lucky man.”

“Don’t I know it.”

They bumped fists.

“And, again, it’s not like that with Ayesha,” he continued. “I just don’t want *Isaac* trying to make dinner for her and the boys. And do you think *Isaac* will know what to do when Theo gets an ear infection? Do you think he’ll know when Theo’s about to throw up, or that cuddles and belly rubs help make his tummy feel better?”

“No,” Gage said, the corner of his mouth twitching.

“And what about when Josiah needs help going over his homework? Or when he wants someone to read one of his books to him at bedtime? Who’ll do that if Ayesha’s not around?”

“Not Isaac.”

“Right. Plus, what the fuck would *Isaac* make Ayesha for dinner when she has to work late? Nothing. He probably wouldn’t even wait up for her to talk or because he wants to see her face before he goes to sleep.”

Gage snorted. “Isaac probably can’t even cook. Ham and cheese sandwich making motherfucker.”

“Exactly.” Joel smacked his palm with a fist. “I’m the only one who makes breakfast, lunch, and dinner for Ayesha, Theo, and Josiah. I take care

of them. I love taking care of them. *Isaac* probably doesn't even know her 'check engine' light's on right now."

Isaac's pelvis grazed the curve of Ayesha's ass. Joel pushed up off the wall, but a hand shoved him back against it before he could blink.

Two hands.

He groaned. "Really, Giorgio? You're siding with Gage?"

Giorgio frowned. "Siding? Like, for house? I do not understand. This man, he is mark."

Gage let up. "Pozza, is Isaac a mark, or did he accidentally brush against Mo when he was looking for the bathroom, and since then, you've been hunting him?"

Giorgio's frown deepened. "I do not understand."

"Giorgio, I will put a fucking tranq in you if you leave this wall," Gage warned. "Fucking hell. At my own wedding, I have to monitor you boys like you're Theo and Thandie. And Pozza, if Isaac's a mark, how much is he worth?"

Giorgio shrugged. "Trillion."

"Stay on this wall."

Giorgio mumbled something in Russian.

Joel faced the dance floor again, but Ayesha and Isaac were nowhere to be found. He searched the room for Julien, the human GPS tracker, but he and Ari were in a dark corner attempting to conceive a baby using their tongues alone. Mike had recently reconnected with his wife, so they wouldn't see him until the end of the century.

Dez came storming over to them. "Do any of you know an asshole named Isaac?"

"Yeah," Joel said. "Why?"

"Tayler said he was talking to Larke earlier."

"About what?"

"Does it fucking matter?"

They would have to do better.

They all would have to do better.

It was a wonder how they'd convinced anyone to go out with them, never mind marry and have children with them. In every other situation, they would be bold, walking red flags.

Tayler hurried over, hiking up her reception dress. "Hey, I heard you guys were looking for Isaac," she said. "But before I say anything, I have to

let you guys know something. Isaac's a flirt, and he tries to play it off, but I'm pretty sure, earlier, I heard him ask Larke to go down on h—"

Dez disappeared.

"Oh, and he even had the nerve to grab Mo's—"

Giorgio left.

"But the last time I saw him, it was on the elevator with Ayesha. I heard something about going up to her hotel roo—"

Joel headed for the elevator bay.

Yes, they were crazy, but if people would stop giving them reasons to be, every once in a while, they might be able to play sane.

Deciding to forgo the elevator, he took the stairs. When he passed the second floor, his phone buzzed in his pocket.

Tayler

Except for the Ayesha part, none of that was true, but Isaac took advantage of my disabled father and swindled him out of close to twenty-five grand.

Fuck. Him. Up.

CHAPTER 23

“I just need to use your bathroom really quickly,” Isaac said, wiggling in place. “I don’t think I’ll make it up to mine.”

He’d asked to walk her to her door, and she let him, assuming he wouldn’t be foolish enough to try anything. What did people see when they looked at The Lethal Six? Regardless of whether she could handle herself, she would never be above calling one of them, or all, to handle whatever situation arose.

She opened her door and gestured inside. “Come on in.”

Isaac rushed past her.

She let the door close behind her, walked over to the bed, took a seat, and kicked off her shoes. This situation would have never happened had Curtis been alive. Still, she pulled her legs onto the bed and tucked them under her to give a hypothetical scenario some real consideration.

Curtis wouldn’t toss Isaac off the balcony, as there was too much risk to those passing by at the street level. However, she could see him locking Isaac up somewhere he couldn’t escape, and when all was quiet, return for him later. Then he might have dropped Isaac in the middle of the woods and played a sordid mashup of Duck Hunt and Pinball with a sniper rifle.

The guys never shared precisely what they did or how they did it, but she knew enough to imagine versions and scenarios she was sure weren’t far off.

A fist pounded on the door.

“Eesh? Open up. It’s me.”

“Joel?” She left the bed, went to the door, and dragged it open. “What are you—”

“And Dez and Giorgio.” He stepped inside the room. “Are you alone?”
Dez and Giorgio entered with him.

Giorgio remained by the door while Dez sat at the desk, reclining in the flower-pattered desk chair. Something had happened, and though she didn’t know why, the fact that all three had slipped back into their tuxedo jackets made her uneasy.

“I’m not alone,” she said. “Isaac’s in the bathroom.”

Joel frowned. “Doing *what*?”

“He said he needed to use the bathroom.”

Dez snorted.

Giorgio looked like only his physical presence was in the room, and it was never a good sign when he started mentally checking out. If Isaac hoped to live to see his next birthday, hopefully, Tayler’s cousin hadn’t accidentally breathed too close to Mo.

The bathroom door opened, and Isaac stepped out, wearing only a pair of briefs. On the crotch area was a picture of a mouth suggestively licking an ice cream cone.

“Ayesha, I know you felt the energy betw—”

Joel grabbed him by the neck and shoved him in Giorgio’s direction. Giorgio brandished some kind of wire that looked like it would slice right through Isaac’s neck, but Gage entered the room and used Isaac’s dark, wavy hair to steer him away from Giorgio.

“What’s going on?” Isaac asked.

Ayesha returned to the bed and sat on the edge. “Isaac, I was rooting for you,” she said. “Just once, I want a man to surprise me.”

Gage dragged Isaac toward the door. “Don’t worry, mate. We won’t harm you. I mean, all you did was make unwanted sexual advances toward my sister, but why would we harm you for that, right? Also, my lovely wife told me you stole money from my father-in-law and nearly left him destitute. Is that true? Choose your answers wisely, now, because I lied earlier.”

Giorgio and Dez left with Gage.

Joel stayed behind, and she watched as he rechecked the bathroom and then the chest of drawers, like she was secretly about to sleep with a Ken doll.

Once finished with his search, he sat beside her on the bed. She sighed, rose onto her knees, and “walked” behind him to remove his jacket. She slid

it off his shoulders and arms, left the bed to toss it over the desk chair, and then returned to her spot, moving further to the center of the mattress.

He sat with his back against the headboard, one long leg stretched on top of the duvet while the other remained on the floor. Before doing so, he'd removed his shoes, and she smiled when she noticed his socks. They had to be Josiah's handiwork, a marshmallow draped in chocolate and squeezed between graham crackers with the words, "There's s'more where that came from" around it.

"Want to tell me why you're here?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No."

"I guess that's fair."

"Gage asked me a really good question earlier," he said. "Want to know what it is?"

"No."

"I guess that's fair too."

Their eyes met.

"Eesh, you were so worried about the dance, and yet, you killed it. You trusted yourself. Yeah, you were scared, and you had reservations, but you trusted yourself. You should do that more often. You're good at a lot of things. So many things." He slowly scanned her face and outfit. "Jesus, you look gorgeous tonight."

"As opposed to all the other times when I look ugly?" she teased.

He rolled his eyes.

She grinned. "So do you."

"I look beautiful?"

"So beautiful."

He searched her eyes, chewing on his bottom lip. "Can I tell you Gage's question now?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because we both know how this ends." She pointed to the ring on his finger and then tapped the one on hers. "Say we held each other. Kissed. Made love all night. At the end of the day, you're not ready...and neither am I."

"My future might not be with Sydney."

"That doesn't mean it's with me."

"So, why do I feel like this?"

She motioned around. “The wedding. Weddings have been well-documented to mess with people’s emotions. Also, you’re vulnerable. Maybe you’re lonely now that you and Sydney aren’t sleeping together anymore.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“Time will tell.” She eased down onto her side. “In the meantime, maybe you shouldn’t come to Maui *as* much. We don’t want everyone else thinking we’re...you know.”

He shook his head. “I can’t do that. I can try to be more discreet, but I can’t just come less.”

“You’re right. The boys would miss you. Theo would disown me, I’m sure.”

“Gage asked me if I’m starting to feel the way I do because I’m desperate for a family,” he said, anyhow. “If it was just you and not you, Siah, and Theo, whether my feelings would be different.”

“And you told him...”

“I don’t know.”

She moistened her lips. “Okay.”

“Can you fall for someone before you fall out of love with someone else?”

“No.”

“No? You’re sure about that?”

“Yep. In the history of humankind, it’s never happened. Think I watched a documentary about it on NatGeo.”

He eased onto the bed and lay on his back, gaze fixed on the ceiling. “Why do you run from me?”

She shrugged. “I run. You push.”

“Are you afraid to be more than this?”

“Yes.”

“Me too.”

She stared at the side of his face, at his pulsing jaw and his slow, contemplative blinks. His hair had fallen back over his forehead, and she wanted to reach up to move it, but then she recalled what had happened the last time.

“Let’s get everything out.” He turned his head, his eyes stealing the breath right out of her lungs. “Tonight, right now, let’s say what we want to say.”

“Then, we’ll go back,” she added. “We’ll go back to how things were. We’ll say our piece, and then we’ll forget any of this ever happened.”

His focus shifted slightly, as though he was looking from one eye to the other. “Forget you taking off my jacket? Forget the way you look right now? Forget the pen you gave me?”

She plodded through an exhale. “You start.”

“Down at the reception,” he began, “when you said you didn’t want to go to the roof but wanted to come to my room, what did that mean?”

“I wanted to go to your hotel room,” she said. “And I wanted you to take my clothes off. I wanted to make love to you, kiss you and hold you and smell you, and run my fingers through your hair while you’re inside me. I wanted to be close to you. So close to you.”

His pupils dilated, darkening the usual royal blue hue of his irises. “And what would have been wrong with that?”

“I’m not in a position where flings can provide me any benefits, especially not with you. You’re too important. Imagine us having just a sexual relationship when you’re such a big part of Josiah and Theo’s lives. That’s not fair to you, me, or their father’s memory. If it’s you, it’ll have to be more than that.”

“And you don’t think we can be?”

“What did you want to put on the table?” she redirected, an ache settling in her chest. Even if she had to lie to herself about them until whatever was happening between them ran its course, she would lie. “What did you want to get out so we can put it behind us?”

He reached out and slid her across the bed, up against him. Then he dropped a kiss on her brow, between them, and at the tip of her forehead, right at her hairline.

“Since we danced,” he ran his hand the entire length of her back, “I’ve wanted to get you back here.”

“Holding me?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Now my confession makes me look like a horndog.”

He laughed. “You were just being honest. I appreciate that you were honest. And, for the record, I would have gladly taken your clothes off.”

She stroked his shoulder, kissed the base of his neck, and pressed her cheek against his chest.

Even if she had to lie.

And she would have to lie.

“That was nice,” he said. “Really nice.”

“*This* is nice.”

“I have one more thing, though,” he continued. “We’re heading back to Angola soon, hopefully for the last time, to wrap up an assignment. I want you and the boys to come stay with me for a few days, and then I’d like it if the three of you came to see me off.”

“But, after tonight, we’re going back to being just friends,” she said. “No forehead kisses, no holding each other, and no crazy lovemaking fantasies.”

“Can we at least agree that if in, let’s say, two years, we’re either back here or the feelings are stronger, we’ll have to start being honest with ourselves?”

“I can agree to that.”

“Are you coming to D.C.?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Can I kiss you one last time?”

“Where?”

He kissed her forehead, the tip of her nose, and near the corner of her mouth, less than an inch away from her lips.

She groaned. “You horrible, horrible man.”

Laughing, he held her tighter.

CHAPTER 24

After planting one last kiss on Ayesha's forehead, Joel slipped out of her grasp, covered her up to her shoulder, stuck his feet into his shoes, and left the hotel room.

Everyone in the wedding party except for Tayler and Gage had rooms on the same floor. Tayler and Gage moved to the penthouse suite, but Tayler spent the night before the wedding with Larke. The groomsmen crashed with Gage after their "wild" bachelor party, which had included sailing in Sydney Harbour, an eight-kilometer hike, a few rounds of pool, a gourmet food tour, and a near-boxing match with a jacked, six-foot kangaroo.

He rounded the hallway corner and came to an abrupt stop. Sydney stood outside his door, head down and wringing her fingers.

It was at least two in the morning.

She was still wearing the green dress, and not a hair was out of place to say she'd gone to sleep at some point, but she'd exchanged the heels for bedroom slippers.

"Sydney?"

She looked up and smiled. "Hey."

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." She hurried over and wrapped her arms around him, and his automatically closed around her. "You left earlier, and I've been looking for you. I came up here at least four times. Where were you?"

"Just...out."

It made little sense to say he was coming from Ayesha's room, especially this late. Regardless of how he explained it, Sydney wouldn't

understand, and he didn't want Ayesha in the middle of his and Sydney's drama, either.

"Why were you looking for me?" he asked.

"I just missed you."

"Syd, why were you looking for me?"

"That's it, I swear." She went to run her fingers through his hair, but he moved away.

"Not tonight, Syd."

"Joel, I swear that's not why I'm here. I really just missed you. I think something about today set me off. Remember our wedding?"

He unlocked his room door, gestured for her to walk in, and followed her. "Of course I do. It was beautiful. Hell, Ali was there. Laila was there. Angela Bassett. It wasn't your typical wedding, that's for sure."

She laughed. "They came for my parents."

"They still came, and Laila came for you." He removed his belt and shoes, too tired to do anything but toss them over the back of a chair. They should have been in bed hours ago; in the morning, they had brunch with Gage and Tayler, and then they would see them off for their honeymoon in Aruba.

Sydney took a seat on the bed. "Do you mind if I stay?"

"We're only going to sleep."

"That's fine."

"Then, no. I don't mind."

He kneeled in front of her and helped her out of her shoes while she steadied herself using his shoulders. Then, he undressed to his underwear and slipped into a pair of shorts. She didn't bring anything with her, so he helped her out of her dress and unhooked her bra before giving her one of his shirts to sleep in.

They climbed into bed.

She gravitated toward him, and he kept her anchored against him with a hand at the small of her back. Despite the heat he felt being generated by her body, she didn't reach for him like she'd done in Malibu.

"Good night, Joel."

"Night, Syd."

She rested her cheek against his chest.

The ghost of Ayesha's kiss swept across the base of his neck.

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CHAPTER 25

Ayesha woke up to the sound of small fists banging on her hotel room door. Yawning, she rolled out of bed, stretched, and the minute she opened the door, Josiah nearly bowled her over. Tayler and Gage walked in behind him, Tayler holding Theo while Gage carried Grey, who looked bright and fresh-faced, like he'd been up and ready to play for hours.

“Good morning, Ma,” Josiah sang.

Theo stretched his arms outward. “Mama!”

She placed a loud kiss on Josiah's cheek and then took Theo into her arms and did the same.

“Gumma *oot-tairs*,” Theo informed her.

“Grandma Jemma and Grandpa Archie are upstairs on the roof helping set up for brunch,” Josiah translated. “Me and Theo couldn't wait that long to see you, though.”

“And I'm glad you couldn't wait because I couldn't wait to see my beautiful boys.” Ayesha gave them another round of kisses, then rose onto her toes and stroked Grey's soft cheek with an index finger. “Hi, cutie.”

Theo tapped her on her shoulder. “Baby, Mama. Mama, douk. *Baby*.”

“Oh, is that right? This is a baby? Wonder what that makes you.”

Gage looked down at Grey, who was captivated by Theo, the only other person in the room who appeared relatively close to his size. It was the same way Curtis used to look at Josiah—pride, awe, and fear wrapped in a bubble, especially when they were that tiny, light, and seemingly breakable.

“Do you need to shower and stuff, Ma?” Josiah beamed up at her, hopping in place. “Me and Theo can wait with Auntie Tay and Uncle Gage until you're ready.”

Theo held her tighter. “No.”

“Theo, there’s food upstairs.”

“No.”

Ayesha adjusted him so he could see her face. “Theo-Saurus, can you stay with Titi Tayler and Co-Geish until Mama gets squeaky clean?”

Tayler licked her lips and rubbed her stomach. “We’ll eat grapes, Theo. Yummy, yummy grapes.”

“*Gape?*”

“And pineapples,” Tayler added. “Want to eat some pineapples with me, Theo?”

Tayler reached for him, and he allowed her to gently coax him from the arm lasso he had around Ayesha’s neck.

“*I eat pine-appul whip Titi Tay-Yuh.*”

“What about me?” Gage asked.

Theo smiled and held Tayler tighter.

“Sorry, baby, but out of the two of us, I’m his favorite.” Tayler kissed Theo’s cheek. “Let’s go, puka. Come on, Siah. We’re on the hunt for some yummy grapes and pineapples.”

“See you in a minute, Ma!” Josiah called, taking Tayler’s hand. “I love you!”

“*Lub you!*” Theo echoed.

“I love you too,” Ayesha replied.

Ayesha noticed Tayler glance at the desk area before she left, but it wasn’t until she was alone in the room that she turned around and saw what was there.

Joel’s tuxedo jacket.

Of course.

Day one of them being discreet, and she was already caught with his clothes in her hotel room.

She picked it up to place on a hanger, and something fell out, nearly dropping onto her toes. Suddenly short of breath, she stooped, picked the pen up from the floor, and flipped it around.

It wasn’t just any pen.

It was the pen she gave him.

Still trembling, she returned it to the jacket pocket, placed the jacket on a hanger, and disappeared inside the bathroom. Unfortunately, even after a

shower, brushing her teeth, applying light makeup, and touching up her hair, her body didn't fully relax.

She slipped into a lightweight, form-fitting summer dress. However, her unsteady hands made it next to impossible to latch the hook on her heeled sandals. If she didn't get it in the next two tries, she'd go to brunch wearing sneakers.

Firm knuckles pounded on her door. "Hey, Eesh? It's me."

Too bent to move, she unlocked the door from her phone. Joel entered, looking way too good when it wasn't even ten in the morning yet. She'd agonized over making sure her dress went with her hair and was the right length for her shoes, and he still looked better in a button-up, shorts, and low-top leather sneakers.

"Good morning," he said.

She spared him a glance. Anything more, and she'd stare. "Good morning."

"Hey," he looked around the room, "by any chance, did I leave my—"

"I hung it up. It's in the closet."

He went to the closet, dug around in the jacket, pulled out the pen, and clipped it inside the pocket on the front of his button-down. Then he closed the closet, the jacket still inside, and faced her grunting, distorted form.

"Need help?"

"Desperately."

He kneeled in front of her and easily latched both shoes in less than sixty seconds. Then she stood and checked herself out in the mirror. Mo and Ari had suggested that she buy the dress when they went shopping before the wedding, and she initially wasn't convinced it would look good, but the way it hugged her frame...were those *curves* she saw?

She started to squeal her excitement until she remembered her present company—unnecessarily. Joel wasn't looking at her, too busy scrolling through her phone.

She took another turn in the mirror, but then, out of the corner of her eye, she watched as he covertly scanned the length of her body, back and forth, over and over. He took her in so slowly and intently that he didn't even notice her staring at him.

The hotel room blurred behind her, and she went so still, she was sure her heart stopped in the process. They'd talked about returning to a point-blank platonic relationship, but this was worse. Before, she'd get

goosebumps if he absent-mindedly stroked her hair or face. However, catching him secretly watching her made the goosebumps mature and settle into the warmest parts of her body. Parts that wanted to be acquainted with the warmest parts of his.

She faced him.

He turned back to his phone.

“Ready?” she asked, swaying on her feet.

“Uh, yeah.” He reached out to steady her. “You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Think I stopped breathing for a second. All the bending and twisting to fasten the heels, you know? But I’m good now.” She pointed at the closet. “You’re not taking the jacket?”

“I’ll come back for it. I just had to get something out of the pocket.” He gestured ahead of him. “After you, milady.”

“That sounded flirty.”

“No, flirty would be if I picked you up and walked into brunch with you draped across my forearms.”

The door shut behind them.

“Could you?” she asked.

“Don’t tempt me.”

They headed for the elevators, walking step for step, and if they didn’t pick up their pace at some point, they’d miss brunch, lunch, and dinner.

“Why not?” she prodded.

“Ayesha,” he chewed on his bottom lip and scanned her again, ignoring the secrecy this time around, “please don’t tempt me.”

* * *

From the rooftop, they had a spectacular view of Sydney Harbour. Ships, yachts, and sailboats passed beneath the Sydney Harbour Bridge, leaving foamy white trails behind them in the dark body of water. There was even a pirate ship, which was where Theo and Josiah had gone with Joel’s parents when, with no outstanding catered brunch food to distract them, they’d grown bored and fidgety.

Taylor and Gage had picked the perfect weekend to get married, the weather in the mid-seventies with clear skies that didn’t look like rain would arrive at any point during the day.

Ayesha shoved away thoughts of going home in the morning. Right now, she would do her best to enjoy her time with the sisters she never had, but always wanted. Plus, it wasn't like she couldn't call them. Sure, video and phone calls weren't the same as Tayler falling all over her while laughing or having Mike's wife's head on her shoulder, Xara drifting in and out of sleep. However, it was still possible to spot the wicked gleam in Mo's eyes when she was going to say something wild via a screen.

"Now that I've gotten rid of the *menfolk*," Mo gestured to the guys poised against the rooftop railing, "I have a question for," she turned to Sydney, "you, my pet."

Sydney propped her chin on her hands and batted her lashes. "Yes?"

"I came looking for you this morning, but you weren't in your room."

They all faced her.

"I was in my room this morning," Sydney said.

"What time did you get back?"

"Around five-thir—I mean, I was there all night."

Mo pointed around the table. "Was that, or was that not a slip-up? Why would someone who was in their room all night get back around five-thirty?"

"Valid question," Ari co-signed.

Ayesha topped off her glass of sparkling cider and took a sip, angling around Xara, who'd latched onto her side. Mike had yawned all throughout brunch, and she was sure neither one of them got more than thirty minutes of rest the night before. While all the rooms were reasonably close, Mike and Xara's was at the end of the hall. Now, she understood why.

"So, where were you?" Larke asked. "I noticed Kofi following you around all night like a lapdog. Did you give in?"

Some of the fire left Ayesha's chest.

"No, nothing happened between me and Kofi," Sydney informed the table. "That's over. There's no bad blood or anything. I just...had an epiphany."

The fire returned.

Ari circled a finger in Sydney's direction, her and Mo's accents flipping on like a switch the minute the plane landed at Kingsford Smith Airport. "Sweetheart, you haven't answered the question."

Larke raised a hand. "I might be able to help. You see, this morning, me and Dez went searching for Joel. With Monroe with my parents, we were

trying to see if he wanted to join us for an early workout. However, we spotted a mysterious Sydney-looking figure emerging from Joel's room wearing a man's T-shirt."

Ayesha downed more cider.

Tayler's fingers slipped between hers.

"Did you spend the night in *Joel's* room?" Mo asked.

Sydney sighed.

Then, lowering her head, she nodded.

Mo and Ari scooted their chairs closer to Sydney. Ayesha looked out at the harbor, but looking toward the harbor meant looking in the same direction where the guys stood.

Joel sipped his drink and looked off to the side. Then, as he returned to what appeared to be an animated debate or discussion between Julien and Dez, he searched the table until his eyes landed on her.

"Explain," Ari said. "Does this mean what I think it means?"

"Nothing happened," Sydney insisted. "I swear. We slept, and this morning, we talked before I went back to my room."

"About what?" Larke asked.

"Stuff. The wedding. Our wedding."

Ayesha, exhaling like she hadn't taken a breath in minutes, tore her gaze from Joel's. "And he still doesn't know about Kofi, right?" she asked.

"Neither Kofi nor the incident, which is the part I'm struggling with right now because, honestly," Sydney glanced at Joel, who'd gotten himself caught up in the debate, "I miss him. I miss him like crazy."

Ayesha drained her glass.

Tayler squeezed their joined hands.

"But," Sydney slapped her palms on the tabletop, "one thing at a time. I think I'm going to ask him out."

"Like on a date?" Tayler asked.

Sydney nodded. "Yeah. I want to try again, but I want to start from the beginning."

Ayesha punched down whatever feelings thought they were going to leave her body at a time like this. This wasn't something that should have unnerved her. At the end of the day, she wasn't part of the equation.

She'd never been.

Joel reminded her of Curtis, but he wasn't Curtis. Eventually, her foolish mind would grasp that. Curtis was gone. She was alone, and

honestly, it was easier that way.

“Can I play devil’s advocate?” Ari asked. “If you two get back together, will you tell him about the Kofi situation? What if he finds out? I know I’m married to the master of information discovery, but, Eesh,” Ari turned her way, “wouldn’t it be easier to hash that out so they don’t have something *else* hanging over their rekindled relationship?”

Ayesha went to take a sip of her drink, saw her glass was empty, and swallowed a groan. “Um...uh...well, yes. Under these circumstances, with the back and forth and the rockiness of everything, being upfront with each other will make for a stronger relation,” she coughed, “ship.”

“You okay?” Tayler asked, rubbing her back.

“Yeah.”

“Eesh.” Tayler angled her head to peer directly into her face. “Are you okay?”

No.

She nodded. “Yeah, yeah. I’m fine.”

“Can I change the subject?” Tayler asked. “As the newlywed, you guys can grant this one harmless request, right?”

They gave her a quick round of applause.

“Let’s have the next get-together in Maui. Everyone’s leaving tomorrow, and I’ve had so much fun during this whole wedding week and weekend that I miss you guys already. I don’t want to wait too long to do this again. How about it, Eesh?”

Ayesha smiled. “I would *love* it if everyone came to Maui.”

“Then, it’s settled. We’re heading to Maui next.”

Cheers went up around the table.

Ayesha’s face warmed.

The guys walked back over and reclaimed their seats. At first, Joel went to sit next to Sydney, but then he asked the table to shift and took the seat next to her. Then he pulled out his phone and handed it to her.

“They found a beach,” he said.

“Did your mom buy Theo this outfit?” she asked. Theo smiled at the camera, dressed in a one-piece, long-sleeved toddler swimsuit covered in sharks. “When did she find the time?”

“Told you, he’s hers now. Josiah’s my dad’s.” He draped an arm across the back of her chair. “Keep scrolling. They sent *a lot* of photos.”

“What were the cheers for?” Mike asked, rubbing at his sleep-deprived eyelids.

“We were talking about our next family get-together,” Tayler said. “What do you think, baby? Can we go to Maui? Spend some time with Ayesha?”

Gage reached over, and Ayesha instinctively moved out of the way before he could mush her in the side of her face.

“Of course, we can go to Maui and spend some time with this ankle-biter,” he said.

“Tayler, smack Gage for me, please,” she requested.

Tayler smacked him on his thigh.

“Tayler, I’m your *husband*.”

“But she’s my best friend,” Tayler countered.

“So if Larke asked you to—”

“Tay, smack Gage for me, please,” Larke said.

Tayler smacked him again. “What were you saying now, baby? If Larke asked me to what?”

Ayesha, laughing, continued to scroll through the photos of Josiah and Theo. They were so doggone cute, and she missed them, but she tried not to think about it, or they would manifest in a puff of smoke and wouldn’t let her rest until they fell asleep later that night.

Joel tapped her shoe with his.

She tapped back.

He nudged her with his elbow.

She did the same.

He ran his finger down the back of her neck.

“Look at Theo in this picture.” She held the phone close to his face. “Doesn’t he look like he’s...flirting?”

He squinted at the screen. “Maybe. A little.”

“I hope he remembers what I told him.”

“The guy’s trying. Cut him a little slack. Sometimes, it’s hard to resist a pretty face.”

“Not for me.”

He lowered his voice. “Ouch. My heart is bleeding.”

“Good. I was thirsty.”

He laughed.

A few minutes later, she tapped his shoe with hers.

He tapped back.

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CHAPTER 26

There was no way he was making lasagna for him, Josiah, and Ayesha and feeding Theo grilled cheese. Theo was only a picky eater where seafood was concerned. If it swam in the ocean, it would never swim in his belly.

“Ayesha, I swear, if you make Theo a grilled cheese sandwich while I’ve had that sauce simmering for hours, I will physically fight you when I get home.”

Josiah’s school break and their trip to Angola had lined up perfectly, so Ayesha and the boys came to spend the week with him in D.C. Tomorrow, they would see him off at the private airstrip, and the entire week, he’d found himself wondering why he and Ayesha kept tiptoeing around each other.

He hated the pretense.

But, for her, he would keep it up.

They’d made an agreement, and he didn’t want to go back on it, mess things up, and forever lose the possibility of one day being more than what they currently were.

“What if I make him a small one?” she argued.

“No. I’ll fight you.”

“How much longer will you be?”

“I’m almost done. I have two more things, and I’ll be right back, okay? Hang on for me. Can you hang on for me?”

She sighed. “I guess.”

“Thank you. I’ll see you soon.”

He ended the call, smiling to himself, and went to the other side of the store in search of fresh parsley.

“Girl, how’d I get myself into something like this?”

He looked up.

Although he’d immediately picked up on the voice, he needed visual confirmation.

A couple of aisles over, Sydney read the label on a bottle of wine, holding her phone against her ear. He started to make his way over but stopped when he heard his name.

“I don’t think there *is* a right moment to tell Joel. Plus, he’s been spending all that time with Ayesha, and I don’t know how I feel about it.” She set the bottle down and picked up another. “I know, I know. I’m not saying she’d do that. It’s just that, I know Joel, and the way he looks at her sometimes, Larke...there’s something there.”

He went closer.

“You’re right. I am. No, don’t mince your words. I’m being a complete hypocrite. Here I am, worried about him and Ayesha, when I can’t say, ‘Joel, remember when we were in Malibu? So, I thought I was pregnant and didn’t say anything.’”

His blood flashed cold.

He thought back to the trip and going to CVS with Ayesha. She’d claimed the pregnancy tests were for Ari, but she’d seemed uncomfortable. Obviously, she’d been lying about something, but he would have never guessed that.

If Sydney had thought she was pregnant, why wouldn’t she have wanted him to know? That wasn’t something she should have had to deal with on her own, without his support, regardless of what the test said.

“He’s going to ask why I didn’t say anything, Larke,” she continued. “I don’t know if I can look the man I’ve loved for sixteen years in the face and tell him that me and Kofi were dating pretty heavily back then, and there was a high chance it would have been Kofi’s baby.”

“What the fuck?”

Sydney’s head popped up.

Her mouth fell open.

“Syd, what’d you just say?”

“Larke, I’ll call you back.”

“Is that why Kofi followed you around all night at Tayler and Gage’s wedding?” he asked. “Because you two had history?”

She stuffed her phone into her purse. “Yes. He, um, wanted to get back together.”

“Did he know you thought you might be pregnant?”

She nodded.

“Why’d you tell him and not me?”

She pressed her lips together, and realization dawned on him.

“Syd, are you serious right now?”

“Just so you know, me and Kofi got tested before we started sleeping together, and we were monogamous—”

“Monogamous? *You were sleeping with me!*”

Several heads turned in their direction.

“Actually,” he set the shopping basket on the floor, “let me go. I can’t look at you right now.”

It had been one thing to leave him the way she had; she did what was best for her, and he eventually understood and accepted that. Hell, he was getting over it.

But she’d used him.

She’d *used* him.

Like a jackass, he’d crawled into her bed and asked her to let him hold her like he used to, and she’d coaxed him into sex because she didn’t need to be held. Someone had already been doing that for her.

He left the store and headed for the parking garage, but she caught him just before he reached his car, circling her deceitful fingers around his elbow.

“Joel, wait.”

“Sydney,” he swallowed, but it didn’t clear the tightness from his throat, “would it have been my baby or Kofi’s?”

“I...don’t know for sure.”

“That close together?”

“Joel, I liked him, but I love you. Plus, you would have wondered why I wanted to stop having sex. What was I supposed to tell you?”

“The truth!”

“And risk losing you?”

“You can’t...” He squeezed the bridge of his nose. “You can’t possibly be this selfish.”

“I am. When it comes to you, I just am.”

“What would have happened if you were? If the tests said you were pregnant?”

Tears squeezed from both corners of her eyes, and he knew she was sorry. He knew she felt terrible about what she’d done, but it was impossible to do anything at the moment but hurt.

“I would have eventually had to say something,” she said. “Once the baby got here, it would have been...obvious.”

“Would you have had Kofi’s baby?” he asked. “Raised it with him? Married him? Stayed with him?”

“Joel, I’m sorry.”

“Sydney, I don’t know how to handle this relationship with you. *You* asked for the divorce. Even before we finalized the whole process, I begged you. I tried to find ways to work things out. We slept together. We slept apart. I would have bled to keep you. What do you want from me?”

Tears dripped from her chin. “I want to get back together. I want you back. I’ll even have your kid if that’ll get you to come back.”

He laughed, a dry and mirthless rattle in his chest. “*My* kid? What, you’ll disappear after it’s born?”

“Joel, if you agree to leave the team, I will give you a baby.”

She didn’t get it.

He wanted a family, not only a child.

It wasn’t as though he’d tried to force her into wanting children. It was what she’d *told* him she wanted. She’d lied about them being on the same page. Then, the reasons he’d wanted to stay together had more to do with loving her than anything else. As a couple, they’d put so much time into them, it had made little sense not to stay together.

At the time, he didn’t want anyone else. Back then, he couldn’t so much as imagine wanting someone else.

“Who all knew?” he asked. “Who all knew about Kofi and the pregnancy and Joel, the idiot who thought he was the only man his ex-wife was fucking?”

She looked up at the sky. “Larke, Mo, Ari, and Tayler. Then later, Xara. None of the guys knew.”

“And Ayesha?”

She chewed on her top lip.

“Sydney, did Ayesha know?”

“Yes. I told her first. She bought the tests.”

“So, she knew. She looked me in the face...” His voice trailed off. “Sydney, this isn’t easy for me, and I know it hasn’t been easy for you either. I’m tied to you in a way I don’t think anyone who’s never been in a long relationship would understand. But, things have changed. I’m changing. There are things I’m discovering about myself that I would never have if it hadn’t been for...”

A traitor.

The woman who’d pretended to be his confidante. A woman he’d started to develop what he now realized were misplaced feelings for. What was that thing called in therapy when someone developed fake feelings for their therapist?

When Ayesha was with everyone else, did they laugh at him? Did they look at him with pity, him pining after a woman in an entire relationship, and his ridiculous ass never knew?

He was pissed.

So pissed.

But the thing that hurt most wasn’t what he’d expected to hurt the worst.

“Whose baby would you have wanted it to be?”

Sydney shrugged. “Joel, I don’t know.”

“Okay.” He nodded. “Bye, Sydney.”

“Is this ‘bye’ forever?” she called after him.

He opened the car door. “Syd, let’s be honest. Could it ever be?”

* * *

“Couldn’t find what I was looking for at the store, so I grabbed takeout.” Joel dropped three brown paper takeout bags on the kitchen island. “Hey, Ayesha, can I talk to you for a minute?”

Ayesha pointed to the steaming pot on the stovetop. “You told me I was on noodle duty.”

“We won’t need them anymore. Hey, Josiah?”

Josiah looked up from where he sat reading in the living room. Theo played on the floor in front of him, stacking huge Lego blocks.

“I brought takeout. Got your favorites. I have to talk to your mom for a bit, so can you help Theo?” He grabbed Ayesha’s wrist. “Thanks, buddy. You’re the best.”

He shut off the stove and then dragged her, stumbling, to the owner's suite, shutting the door behind them.

"Did you know about Kofi?" he asked.

Her expression gave nothing away. "It depends. There are certain things I'm not at liberty to say."

"Syd's not your client."

"She's a friend."

"Oh? Then what am I?"

"Joel," she went to touch him, but he pulled away, "what happened?"

"I ran into Syd while I was picking up ingredients to make dinner for you and the boys," he explained. "I overheard her on the phone with Larke. Then she came clean. I know Syd was seeing Kofi, and that she thought she was pregnant with his kid."

Ayesha searched his face but didn't comment.

"The tests you bought...were they for her?"

She still didn't comment.

"Were they for Ari, then?"

"No. They weren't."

"Did you know she told Kofi she might be pregnant? Did you know he knew, and I didn't?"

"Joel, I keep the things you tell me in confidence," she said. "If a friend comes up to me and asks me not to tell someone something, you want me to go back on that?"

"Remember what we talked about before?" he asked. "Instead of us returning to our friendship the way it was, how about we change it up a little? After I leave for my next assignment, how about you leave for Maui and never come back here?"

She took a half step back. "What?"

"And I won't come back to Maui."

"Yes, you will," she shot back.

"No, I won't."

"I bet you will."

"Why would I?"

"What exactly are you trying to do right now?"

"I'm trying to hurt you, Ayesha," he said, his voice gradually going hoarse. "But I don't think I can. I don't think I'll ever..." He swatted the air,

as though the words buzzed around his head. “Look, you can stay while I’m gone, but when I come back, *if* I come back—”

She jabbed a finger in his direction. “That’s not fair. Don’t say that. Don’t put it out there into the universe. If not for me, do it for Theo and Josiah.”

“Why? They’re not mine.”

The words cut so deep, he felt where he wounded her.

The corners of her mouth gave a slight tug downward. “You’re right. You are so right.”

“Eesh, no.” He squeezed the skin between his eyebrows until they almost touched. “I didn’t mean to say that. I did not mean to say that.”

“What did you say that was wrong?”

“I love them like they are.”

“But they’re not. I was positioning you in their lives as if they were, and that’s not fair to them or Curtis’ memory. And, at the end of the day, you’re going to come to the realization that you want to go back to Sydney.”

All the muscles in his body seized. “Why do you keep saying that? Is that what *you* want to happen so you don’t have to make a decision about how you feel about me?”

“I keep saying it because it’s true! Because you still love her.”

“I do! But I lo—”

He clamped his mouth shut.

She went still.

He didn’t breathe, afraid that if he did, he’d keep talking. She looked at him as though he’d nearly said the word that would have sent them straight to the gallows. Her chest rose and fell so rapidly, it made him dizzy.

“Hey, Ma?” Josiah knocked from the other side of the door. “Is it okay if I give Theo more rice? He says he’s still hungry. I didn’t give him that much the first time.”

Ayesha snapped out of her trance. “Um, yeah. Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Can you and Joel come eat soon? It’s why I only gave Theo a little bit of rice. I want us all to eat together.”

“We’ll be right out,” Joel reassured him.

Josiah’s footsteps raced down the hallway.

“We’re friends, Joel.” Ayesha wrapped her fingers around the door handle so tight, he noticed her hands shake. “*Friends.*”

He sighed. “I’m trying.”

“Try harder.”

“Eesh, it’s not easy. You know it’s not. We’re too good toge—”

“Joel, please...try harder,” she said. Then she opened the door and stormed out, never once looking back.

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CHAPTER 27

“Ma?”

Ayesha’s eyes fluttered open.

Josiah stared down into her face. “Ma, Joel’s not here. Where’d he go? Did he leave already? He wouldn’t leave without telling us, right?”

She reached for her phone on the nightstand and squinted at the screen.

Fuck.

“Are we too late?” Josiah asked.

They were.

The guys were scheduled to take off in fifteen minutes, and the airstrip was a little over twenty minutes away, but there was no way she could look her son in the eyes and tell him that.

“Get your shoes. I’ll grab your brother. We can make it.”

Josiah dashed off.

She scooped Theo up out of the bed beside her, slapped on her glasses, and stuck her feet into a pair of Nike slides. Theo groaned and whined, but she grabbed her phone and purse and hurried to the front door where Josiah waited, his shoes on his feet, a folder in one hand, and the car keys in the other.

My boy.

She took the keys.

They dashed out of the condo.

Josiah raced ahead and pushed the button for the elevator. Ayesha said a silent prayer when it immediately opened, and she said another one when they made it to the garage floor, uninterrupted.

She set Theo in his car seat, slipped his limbs through the straps, and Josiah helped her secure the buckles before fastening his own seatbelt.

As they peeled out of the garage, she tried to call Gage, but it went to voicemail. Then Dez, Mike, Julien, Giorgio—they all went to voicemail.

That meant they were in the air.

“Ma, Joel wouldn’t leave without telling us, right?” Josiah asked, his fingers drumming wildly against the window. “Right, Ma?”

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CHAPTER 28

Joel watched Gage check his watch, glance at the private jet, and then look toward the road that led to the tarmac for what felt like the millionth time.

“Lattimore, they were right behind you, right?”

He didn’t answer.

“Joel, were Ayesha and the boys right behind you? Better yet, why didn’t they just come with you?”

He still didn’t answer.

“Joel, I will fucking kill you.” Gage grabbed him by the front of his shirt. “Where are Ayesha, Josiah, and Theo?”

“They were still sleeping when I left. I, uh, didn’t wake them up.” They were supposed to come with him, but he didn’t wake them up. Rather than drive and have Ayesha drive his car back, he’d used a car service. After what happened between them the day before, it had seemed like the most appropriate thing to do.

Gage released him. “What?”

“Me and Eesh kind of had a fight, so I didn’t think she’d want to see me.”

Dez made his way over. “Are they okay? I can’t get a signal for shit out here, and I don’t give a damn who’s waiting for us. I won’t get on that plane before I see them.”

“Fuckwit here left without telling them,” Gage spat. “Apparently, he and Ayesha had a fight, so he left them at his place, asleep. I’ll keep trying her phone, but I’m not leaving without seeing them either.”

Dez took a deep breath and clasped his hands in front of his face. “Joel, let me explain something to you. This isn’t the Joel Lattimore show. When

we leave, it's not just *our* kids and *our* significant others that we need to say goodbye to. It's everyone. Every-fucking-one. We might go out there, some shit happens, and we don't come back, and because you were in your fucking feelings, I might not get to see my *sister* and my *nephews* before I leave?"

Joel nodded. "I know. I fucked up. I'm sorry."

"Don't give me that placating shit, and let me walk away before I snap your fucking neck."

Dez stormed off.

Gage raised his phone in the air. "Mate, you better hope I either get a signal, Julien manages to find one, or they show up in the next five minutes. If not, I guarantee at least one of us won't make it home."

An SUV came racing down the road—his very own Aston Martin DBX. He'd told Ayesha that she didn't have to rent a car or use one of Dez's or Julien's. He'd assured her he would take care of it. That he would take care of her.

The SUV came to a stop, and Josiah hopped out, still wearing his pajamas. Ayesha exited next, still wearing the pink, cottony dress he'd last seen her in late last night. She'd tossed on a pair of slides, and rather than pinned up or in a ponytail, which was how she usually wore them, her braided hair strands hung loose, spilling down her back.

While she grabbed Theo from the backseat, Josiah raced over, and Gage caught him in a hug.

Joel stepped off to the side.

The rest of the guys hurried over, dishing out departing hugs and unnecessary apologies; it wasn't their fault they'd nearly missed the chance to say goodbye.

When Ayesha walked up, they did the same.

Neither Ayesha nor Josiah looked his way, and Theo, eyelids lazily opening and closing, returned hugs as best as he could, belting out sleepy screams and giggles. Whereas most children woke up at the crack of dawn, if Theo wasn't roused, he slept in. The trade-off, however, was that he operated at one hundred percent from the moment his feet hit the floor until bedtime.

Gage kissed Ayesha's cheek. "We'll see you when we get back, okay? We'll be in Maui before you know it. Need anything before we leave? You guys are okay?"

She nodded, eyes red. “Yeah, we’re okay. Please be safe.”

Joel started to face her, a dictionary’s worth of apologies going through his mind, but a small fist struck his midsection. Then came another, and another, until they were raining down on him. Josiah coughed, cried, and punched, and he only stopped because Dez gently pulled him back out of reach.

“How could you leave like that?” Josiah screamed, his face and lenses covered in tears. “What if you didn’t come back? My dad didn’t come back, and I didn’t get to say goodbye to him. I told you that, Joel. I told you! I never got a chance to tell my dad how much I love him and that he was the best dad in the world, and I didn’t get a chance to hug him, so tight, one last time. How could you leave like that? You promised me, Joel. You promised!”

He dropped to one knee. “Josiah—”

“No, don’t say my name. Never say my name, my mom’s, or my brother’s name again! You’re a liar!” Josiah tossed a red folder at him. “Take your stupid gift. I should’ve never made it for you. I hate you, and I hope you don’t come back.”

“Josiah,” Ayesha called. “Don’t say that. It’s fine to be angry, but don’t say that.”

Joel reached out and tried to draw Josiah close, but Josiah screamed his hurt, anger, pain, and how much he hated him and wished they’d never met.

“I’m sorry, Josiah,” he choked out. “I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry. Please forgive me. I messed up. I’ll never ever do that again.”

“Did I do something? Do you not like me anymore?”

“Josiah, I love you. You didn’t do anything. Everything’s my fault. This is all on me. You didn’t do anything.”

“So, how could you leave like that?” Josiah asked, voice breaking. “After you promised. What if something bad happened, and I never saw you again? What if I never got to tell you I love you and say goodbye? We’re supposed to be best friends, Joel. How could you leave like that?”

Agony split him apart.

Josiah’s entire body went slack, and he drew him in for a hug while Josiah cried on his shoulder. Through his own tears, he could barely see the landscape as he held Josiah tight, rocking him, apologizing repeatedly, and promising that he would never do “something so stupid” again.

“I promise, with everything I am, I’ll never do that again, Josiah,” he said. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I love you, okay? I messed up. You didn’t do anything wrong. I love you.”

“I’m still mad at you,” Josiah said, voice muffled against his shoulder. “But I’m sorry I said I hope you don’t come back. I didn’t mean it.”

Joel held him at arm’s length. “I know.”

“And I don’t hate you. I’m mad at you, real mad, but I still love you. I want to make sure I tell you that.”

“I love you too.”

Josiah walked over to the rest of the team for another round of hugs before going to Tayler and wrapping his arms around her midsection. Xara took Grey, and Tayler bent to hug Josiah, kiss his cheek, and whisper in his ear.

Joel stood and faced Ayesha. “Can I say goodbye to Theo?”

She nodded.

“Hey, buddy.” He took Theo, held him close, and pressed a series of kisses against the curls on top of Theo’s head. Although half asleep, Theo returned the hug, giggling with each kiss. He whispered the same apologies and told him he loved him. How much he loved him.

After releasing him, he handed Theo to Gage instead of returning Theo to Ayesha’s arms. Even if she rejected him, pushed and scratched at him, he couldn’t leave things like this.

“Come here, Eesh.” He grabbed her wrist and lightly tugged, and he didn’t miss how easily she came to him.

Although she kept her hands clasped against his chest, he wrapped his arms around her. He took in the scent of her hair, but it wasn’t enough, so he picked her up and ran his nose along the arch of her neck. She smelled like his house, his sheets.

“Hug me back, Eesh.”

She didn’t move.

“Ayesha, hug me back, or I’ll kiss you,” he whispered, right next to her ear. “I swear to God, I’ll kiss you, and it won’t be soft, quick, or gentle.”

She still didn’t move.

He leaned back and set her on her feet, gaze lowering to her mouth. Then, slowly, she returned the embrace.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean any of the things I said—none of them. I was an asshole because I was hurt, and instead of rising above it, I

tried to bring you down to my level.”

She nodded. “I’m sorry too. I didn’t mean any of it, either.”

He released her but kept her close, his hands on her waist. Just like when they danced, she kept her eyes on him, absentmindedly fiddling with the tag at the back of his shirt.

“Eesh, do I still have your friendship, or did I fuck around and lose you? Please don’t tell me I lost you.”

“Friendship is all I can offer you,” she said.

“I’ll take it.”

“Then it’s yours.”

“I’m sorry.” He leaned in again and kissed her cheek. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” As he leaned back, he kissed her cheek again. “I’m sorry.”

“We’ll talk when you get back?”

He nodded. “We will. I’ll be back. I promise.”

He released her, gave Josiah another hug, and took Theo, giving him another kiss before he handed him back to Ayesha.

Then, as he headed toward the jet, he picked up the folder Josiah had tossed, the Gulfstream on the airstrip before him nothing but a giant white blur.

CHAPTER 29

Luanda, Angola

Before he could talk himself out of it, Joel pressed the button on his tablet screen to initiate the call. They had about fifteen minutes left before they had to head out, and something told him to check in. There were no ominous feelings or any foreboding in his gut which, before starting an assignment, wasn't exactly a good sign.

The call picked up.

Sydney's face appeared. "Hey, bab—Joel."

"Syd? What are you doing in Maui?"

"I flew back with Ayesha and the boys." She took the tablet to the living room and flopped down on the sofa. "So, what's up? Are you in a tent?"

He tried to make it less obvious that he was searching behind her. They didn't have much time, and he wanted to make sure he saw who he'd called to see.

"Yeah, it's our current setup," he said.

"Where are you?"

"Angola."

"Doing what?"

He raised an eyebrow.

She laughed. "Just kidding. You know I had to ask. I want to make sure my man's in a situation where he'll be coming home."

Based on the last conversation they'd had, which had technically been an argument, he would have never expected her to act this light and playful

with him. Her betrayal still hurt, but this wasn't the time to hash any of that out.

"What do you keep looking for?" she asked.

"We only have a little bit of time. I was hoping to see...everyone."

Sydney's expression changed. "Why? Did something happen? Are you afraid something's going to happen?"

"Anything's possible, Syd. I just want to make sure I see everyone."

"Didn't you see Ayesha and the boys when they dropped you off at the airstrip? Thanks for telling me you were leaving, by the way."

"I figured, after our last conversation, you wouldn't want to be there."

She resettled in the chair. "Here's what I don't understand. You want a baby, right? I want you to do something less dangerous. I gave you your compromise."

"That's not a compromise. You're still trying to control the situation."

"That's what Ayesha said." She wrinkled her nose. "We stayed up late last night talking, and she said lack of control makes me uncomfortable and anxious. Which is why things didn't work out with...never mind."

She studied him.

He said nothing.

In no version of today was he going to talk about her secret relationship and the reasons it didn't work out, and he for damn sure wouldn't do that right now.

Theo screamed somewhere off-camera. The screaming then morphed into a combination of screams and giggles, and he pictured Ayesha blowing raspberries on Theo's stomach, which she tended to do after a bath.

"Is that Theo?" He smiled so wide, he'd probably created a dimple in his cheek. "Those giggles, man."

Sydney continued to study him. Then she stood, walked through the house, and when she appeared on screen again, it was with her head next to Theo's on Ayesha's bed. Theo's neck was covered in baby powder, some in his hair, turning the dark curls gray. All he wore was a diaper while Ayesha applied baby lotion on his legs.

"Say 'hi' Theo," Sydney said.

Theo looked at the screen, his expression blank.

"Hey, baby boy. It's me."

A broad smile spread across Theo's face. "Joel!"

A mallet struck him in the ribcage. “Oh, my god. What’d you just call me?”

“Mama,” he tapped Ayesha on the wrist, “it Joel. Hi, Joel! It Theo!”

“Hi, Theo. Where’s your brother? Where’s Jojo?”

“Jojo? Jojo in sower.”

“He’s in the shower?” These days, he went from his usual self to tear-filled and weak-voiced within minutes of talking to or being around the boys. “Buddy, I can’t believe you called me Joel. You have no idea how happy that makes me. I miss you.”

“I *mitt* you. Lub you!”

“And I love you more, Theo.”

Gage poked his head inside the tent, phone to his ear. “Lattimore. Five minutes.”

He nodded.

Gage left.

“Syd, can you finish getting Theo dressed for me real quick?” he heard Ayesha ask, though her face had yet to appear on the screen.

Sydney agreed, set the tablet on the nightstand, and held up Theo’s pajama bottoms in front of him. “Okay, SuperTheo. Are you ready to make a mighty leap into your jammie-jams?”

Joel watched them and was hit with the feeling that Sydney wasn’t telling him the truth about motherhood. Still, what would have been the point in her saying she didn’t want to be a mother if she genuinely did? It wasn’t as though he wouldn’t have been on board, unless he was the problem.

Josiah raced into the room, making speeding car engine noises and wearing a dark blue kid’s robe.

He popped his head in front of the tablet and opened his mouth. “Joel, look!” He pointed to a space where a canine used to be. “It fell out last night. The,” Josiah crooked his index and middle fingers on each hand, “‘tooth fairy’ left me a twenty-dollar bill, but then the ‘tooth fairy’ forgot my tooth on Ma’s dresser.”

Joel laughed. “Good help is hard to find these days.”

Mike appeared this time, letting him know it was time to go.

“Guys, I have to go,” he said, rising to his feet. “I just wanted to call because I haven’t talked to you since I left, and I wanted to let you know how much I love you and can’t wait to see you again.”

“Did you open my gift yet?” Josiah asked.

“Not yet. I’m saving it.”

Josiah grinned.

“Ayesha?”

The tablet jerked.

He heard Josiah say, “I’ll hold it, Ma,” and then Ayesha’s face appeared. She still had braids in her hair, but whereas the last ones were completely straight, these had curly pieces between the braided strands.

“Be safe, Joel,” she said.

“I will.”

“I’ll see you when you get home.”

Josiah turned the tablet to where Theo had taken a seat on Sydney’s lap.

“See you when you get home, babe!” Sydney yelled. “Love you!”

“Tee you, you home, babe!” Theo echoed. “Lub you!”

“Love you, Joel!” Josiah added.

He ended the call, left the tent, and went to join where the rest of the team was gearing up. Before strapping on his equipment, he reached inside his pocket and tapped Ayesha’s gift three times.

CHAPTER 30

Joel's lungs burned, his arm throbbed, and he was certain he'd fractured a bone in his shoulder. A high-pitched ringing in his ear deafened him to the noises around him, so he repeated his statement.

"Dez, I'm hit."

It was Gage who answered. "Hit? What's hit?"

The burning lungs leaped to his shoulder as he searched for Giorgio.

The shot had gone off.

He'd heard the shot go off.

If Giorgio wasn't standing, that meant he didn't get there in time, and that wasn't a bullet Giorgio would have survived. As inhuman as Giorgio was, his head was still only a skull and gray and white matter. If Giorgio got hit, Giorgio was either already dead or on his way out, and there was no way in hell he could tell Mo that.

"Lattimore, fucking answer me! What's hit?"

"Where's Pozza?" he asked.

"Fuck this."

The ringing in his ears slowly died.

Then he heard a child's cry.

He turned toward the sound, looked up, and all the air temporarily left his body. Giorgio was standing over him, still holding the little girl, looking down at him with an expression he was one hundred percent sure he'd never seen on Giorgio's face.

"Pozza," he let his head fall back to the concrete, "you're okay. Thank God you're okay."

Giorgio handed the child off to someone, kneeled beside him, and examined his shoulder. Not long after, Gage's face appeared, and if he wasn't mistaken, the big man looked concerned.

"What's hit?" Gage asked again.

Joel shook his head. "I don't know."

"One to ten?"

"Not bad. Five, six."

"Flesh," Giorgio said. "In. Out. Lattimore will need stitch. After stitch, I kill."

"For what?" Joel asked.

"Lattimore, you take my bullet."

"Pozza, I'm sorry, but I'd do it again. We're a team. Plus, I'm more expendable than anyone else right now. Mo would have—"

A blade went into the floor next to where he lay, the tip penetrating the concrete surface.

Joel clamped his mouth shut.

This was the sixth compound they'd cleared since their first appearance in Luanda, but this time, they ran into over a dozen gun-wielding kidnappers.

At first, they sent Giorgio and Mike in to quietly neutralize the hostiles. Then, the next thing they knew, shots rang out. Mike and Giorgio were some of the most stealthy human beings on the planet, so there was no way someone had heard them. More than likely, someone had tipped off the men inside.

After the gunfire started, the rest of the team breached the compound, cleared it out in no time—Mike and Giorgio left little for them to do—and they found the last child, a tiny boy, hiding in a cabinet.

As terrifying as Giorgio was to most, children didn't fear him. In fact, it was the exact opposite—children walked right up to him. Random toddlers would sit at his feet to play in the mall or ask him to pick them up so they could play with his hair.

The boy spotted Giorgio and crawled toward him. Joel had kept an eye out while the rest of the team did a final sweep. That was when he noticed movement among the dead bodies.

A man's head had appeared between the limbs.

A gun followed.

At the last possible moment, he shoved Giorgio and the girl out of the way and lodged a bullet in the man's trachea. In the process, he took a shot to the shoulder and then fell onto the same shoulder.

Giorgio and Gage rolled him to give Dez access to his back. Then he heard Dez say, "This doesn't make any sense."

"What doesn't?" Gage asked.

"The angle."

"Was I right? I was right, wasn't I? I hit somebody out in the woods, and I'm telling you, it wasn't one of these guys."

Mumbling followed.

Julien and Mike left his side.

"There's a mark on this window," Mike said.

"And this guy's bullet's still in the chamber," Julien added. "The shot didn't come from..."

The rest of Julien's words fizzled out.

Next, he felt himself being hoisted, and as Giorgio and Dez helped him to the exit, the rest of the team remained on alert, almost as if there was still a threat in the woods, waiting for them to let their guard down.

CHAPTER 31

“No hissing and moaning this time?” Dr. Nkosi asked, examining the injuries to his shoulder.

Joel plastered on his most innocent smile and shook his head. “No, doc. I’ll be good.”

“How unfortunate. I rather like hearing you hiss and moan.” She pointed at his left hand with her chin. “I see you still have that ring on your finger. Are you still faithful?”

“That’s a tricky question.”

“Why is that?” She leaned over him, pressing different parts of his shoulder, a beaded necklace around her neck touching his exposed collarbone. Every so often, she looked down, searched his face, and slowly shook her head.

“The ring doesn’t mean the same thing it used to,” he found himself sharing. “Me and my wife got divorced.”

“Is that an offer?”

“Just making conversation.”

“What did you do?” She motioned around. “Or was it all of this? She didn’t know how to handle it any longer?”

“It was a big part of it.”

“And there’s someone new.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Why do you say that?”

“You were different.” She shrugged. “The last couple of times you all came and I saw you, it wasn’t the same. The rest, they have their moments, but you can tell when they have talked to those they love. It’s like going

from walking on Mars and returning to Earth. But you? You never came back. It was six bodies and five minds. Five heartbeats.”

“And now?” he asked.

“Now, I’m jealous. Everywhere I go, I have to walk, but not you. You float. It’s how I know when there’s someone—all of you, your feet never touch the floor. Except for the quiet one. He is a hard read.”

“Hell, we can barely read Pozza.”

She laughed, eyes twinkling.

Once she finished tending to the wounds as best as she could with their limited resources, she helped him into his shirt, her palms not-so-innocently skating over the muscles in his stomach and chest.

“When you return stateside, you will need surgery on your shoulder,” she said, walking backward to the tent opening. “This will probably be our last time meeting. I’m going to Germany to practice.”

“That’s unfortunate,” he said. “But you’ll do an amazing job there.”

She scanned the length of his body, the corner of her bottom lip between her teeth. Then, sighing, she turned around and left.

Chuckling to himself, he reached for his gift from Josiah, and he smiled from the middle of his chest when he pulled out what was inside.

*The Amazing Adventures of Secret Agent
Joe L. Attimore*

Written by Josiah Nikora Savea

Josiah had created a book out of his mother’s thick cardstock—or “the good paper” as Ayesha called it—which he stapled over lined wide-ruled paper. On the “cover” was a picture of a dark-haired man wearing sunglasses, a trench coat, and a detective’s hat. However, the man wasn’t alone; six other men surrounded him, all wearing various spy and secret agent outfits. One had a hand on Joe L. Attimore’s shoulder, and that man had long hair, tribal tattoos, and a halo above his head.

He was also smiling the biggest.

Joel tucked one hand behind his head and opened to the first page.

Chapter One

The Peculiars & The Normies

At Miss Henson's School for Rotten Boys, there were exactly zero rotten boys and exactly one rotten Miss Henson.

Of these rotten boys, there were the peculiars and the normies, which was rather strange because the normies were quite peculiar, and the peculiars were perfectly average. And of those average peculiars was the strangest of them all, neither a runt nor the strongest boy in the school.

They called him Joe, which was short for Joe L. Attimore, and Miss Henson swore to all who would listen that his name came to her in a dream.

But the owner of The Attimore Store: Shoes for the Average Joe, disagreed, especially since it was rumored it was how Joe L. Attimore was found—as a baby and so tiny that he could fit inside a men's size twelve work boot...

CHAPTER 32

As the escalator at the airport descended, Joel spotted tiny feet stomping in mini Converse sneakers. Next to those little feet, larger yet still-quite-small feet hopped in place. Then Josiah and Theo's faces came into view.

Theo had on a pair of khaki shorts and a T-shirt that read, *I Like Long Naps, and I Cannot Lie*. Josiah wore a T-shirt that said, *Leaf Me Be! Can't You See I'm Reading?!* with denim shorts and slip-on sneakers. Rather than round out the punny trio, Ayesha wore a teal romper and sandals. Instead of braids, her hair was twisted to her scalp with twists hanging over the side of her face like bangs.

"Are you ready?" she called out to him, smiling.

One of his arms might have been in a sling, but he still had another that functioned perfectly fine for hugging these three.

He nodded. "I'm ready."

Both boys screamed his name and dashed for him. Several people in the airport turned to look at them and smiled.

When he reached the bottom of the escalator, he kneeled. Although Josiah had rushed over, he slowed his pursuit and leaned forward to give him an excited yet slightly subdued hug around the neck. Theo smacked into him at full speed and wrapped his arms around his middle.

And it was everything.

"I missed you guys," he said. "So much."

Theo tapped him on the chest. "Joel? Wah happen you arm?"

"I got a booboo," he said, picking him up.

Josiah turned sideways and skip-walked next to him as they headed toward Ayesha. "Yeah, he would've been here sooner, but he had to have

surgery.”

“Purgery?” Theo gently stroked his injured shoulder. “Joel, you booboo hurt?”

“Not anymore.” He nuzzled Theo’s hair. “Not anymore. And by the way, Mr. Josiah Nikora Savea, I’ve read your book at least ten times.”

Josiah’s face flushed. “Did you like it?”

“It’s easily one of the best books I’ve ever read. Where did you come up with the name of the main guy? Mr. Joe L. Attimore?”

Josiah shrugged. “It just came to me. It was super random.”

“It sounds really familiar, but I can’t quite put my finger on where I’ve heard it before.”

Josiah giggled.

“Are you sure you’re okay with carrying Mr. Theonoceros?” Ayesha asked, scanning him like she was searching for additional injuries. “I can take him.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“At least let me take the duffel bag so you’re not carrying that *and* Theo.”

“I’ve got both, Eesh.” He bent, his focus split between her lips and her cheek, but then he caught himself. They’d agreed to return to where they’d been, maybe even taking platonic to another level. However, as chaste as a cheek kiss could be, as long as he placed his lips somewhere on Ayesha, his kisses would be the furthest thing from innocent.

“Sorry, force of habit,” he said.

She waved him off. “All set?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I brought you something to eat, by the way,” she said, walking beside him, holding Josiah’s hand. “There’s no way you got something to eat with that short layover you had. It’s sushi. That way, Theo lets you eat in peace.”

When they reached Ayesha’s dark gray Grand Cherokee, she took Theo and secured him in his car seat. Then he exchanged the duffel bag for the sushi and went to get in on the passenger side. As he slid onto the seat, a fleeting image of a small face with hazel eyes, a pink mouth, and curly hair flashed through his head.

Someone’s baby.

Someone’s baby *girl*.

Ayesha looked over at him. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” He shook the image free. “Think I’m just tired.”

“Well, the guest house is all set up and awaiting your arrival.”

She started up the car and backed out of the spot, and he stared at the side of her face, hoping it was discreet. He hoped she continued to look behind her a bit longer, giving him this moment to take her in.

For now, they’d give each other space. He’d fall back and pretend she wasn’t the best part of his every day. However, he’d wait for her signal. He wouldn’t push—well, he would probably push a little—but he’d wait for as long as he could.

Once they started, they would never end.

“By the way, Eesh, I like Josiah’s middle name. Nikora. It’s Hawaiian, right? Because I met a guy with the same name in Maui.”

“It’s Māori,” she said. “And it’s Curtis’ name.”

Another image flashed through his mind, this time of the photos at Ayesha’s house.

“My dad had two names,” Josiah explained. “Well, three. Curtis Nikora Iokua Savea.”

“So Josiah’s middle name is Nikora, while Theo got Iokua,” Ayesha added. “Everyone calls him Curtis except his grandmother.”

“What does she call him?”

“Nik.”

He thought back to the day in the park.

There was no way.

It couldn’t be.

It had to be a coincidence.

A lookalike.

Maybe he was misremembering. That day, he’d been so stressed out, he could’ve made a mistake. It was easier to recognize someone from a photo after seeing them in person than the other way around, but if that were the case...

“Josiah, that first time I took you and Theo to the park, do you remember seeing a man sitting next to me on the bench?” he asked.

“No,” Josiah said.

“What about a man talking to your friend’s mother? The girl who you argued with over the cartoon?”

“It’s not a cartoon. It’s Naruto and Avatar: The Last Airbender.”

“I’ll get it right next time, but did you see the man talking to her mother when we were leaving?”

“Joel, her mother wasn’t at the park.”

“How do you know?”

“Because her mother died in the same car accident where she lost her leg.”

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EPILOGUE

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TWO YEARS LATER

Ayesha wiped her hands, tossed the paper towel, and left the bathroom only to run smack dab into a solid chest. The person wrapped their arms around her waist to steady her—and didn't let go.

“Ayesha?”

She looked up. “*Adrián?*”

“Querida, you look beautiful.” He drew her close. “It’s so good seeing you.”

She returned the hug and spotted Joel, Gage, and Tayler watching them over Adrián’s shoulder. “You too.”

“I’m beautiful?”

“Nice seeing you too, I mean.”

“I know. I’m joking.” He tightened his embrace. “Are you here alone?”

He still looked good, still had that slight Brazilian accent that used to leave her searching out his touch before it was even one o’clock in the afternoon. Back then, he was slimmer and more toned. Over the years, he’d packed on a good deal of muscle, but he still reminded her of Jon Kortajarena in a black wetsuit on the cover of *Vogue*.

“No, I’m with someone,” she said.

He released her, the disappointment clearly evident on his face. “That’s too bad. For me, not for him. How are the boys?”

“Good. Actually, I have to get back to my friends.”

“Of course. Of course. Say hi to Theo and Josiah for me.”

They didn’t have a clue who he was.

She nodded. “Will do.”

He squeezed her wrist.

She stepped around him, headed back to the table, and reclaimed her seat next to Tayler. Joel continued to stare in the direction of the restrooms.

“Somebody you know?” he asked.

She resisted the urge to turn around. “Somebody I used to know.”

Adrián Queirós used to work out of a massive office space down the hall from hers. She never entirely understood what he did, but he’d been successful at it from the looks of things.

One afternoon, Adrián stopped in to introduce himself because he was new to the building, and he ended up staying and chatting and playing with Theo for close to an hour. She’d thought nothing of it or about him. He was attractive, and she’d noticed, but that was it.

They ran into each other again in the building’s café during lunch. A few days later, when he didn’t spot her in the café, he brought up a container of food, which she’d appreciated because she’d worked through lunch and had been breastfeeding at the time.

After that, they regularly spent lunch together. She let him know she was a recent widow and not looking for anything serious, and he told her he’d recently ended a long-term relationship himself.

A month later, he kissed her in the parking lot. She’d craved human touch, human comfort, so she kissed him back.

It kept happening, going from lips lightly brushing in the tenuous space between pleasure and guilt, to open-mouthed and desperate within a matter of weeks.

One month, Gage flew in and took Josiah and Theo back to California to spend time with him, so she and Adrián agreed to meet somewhere outside the office for a late afternoon lunch. That somewhere turned out to be a restaurant in a luxury hotel overlooking the Pacific.

After they ate, they kissed.

And kissed.

Adrián booked a room, and they had sex for the first time.

When Theo was with the nanny, Adrián was with her in her office. On the days she didn’t have Theo, despite those days being few and far between, they had sex in Adrián’s office and, eventually, at his Maui estate.

Then, one morning, she woke up in his arms and found him staring down at her. After gracing her with a soft smile, he’d said, “*Ayesha? I’m afraid I might be falling in love, querida.*”

So, they broke things off.

That same week, he shut down his office.
After that, she never saw him again.

* * *

Dmitri Sokolov continued his search, for the first time regretting the nine-bedroom estate he called home—technically, one of his homes—in Santorini, Greece. Nine bedrooms and seven bathrooms gave his woman too many places to hide, and while he did enjoy the games they played, he could feel that Sydney wasn't hiding because he'd find her naked somewhere.

“Dorogaya,” he called. “Where are you hiding, my love?”

He stood outside the next bathroom he came to and placed his ear against the wall. He heard what sounded like someone in pain, so he dragged the door open.

There she was.

Sydney was sitting tucked in a corner, her face so wet with tears that, at first, he thought it was sweat.

“Sydney?” He kneeled in front of her. “What’s the matter? What’s wrong?”

“Dmitri, I never missed a pill. How could this happen?”

He tried to move her to check for any wounds or injuries, but she shook her head and looked directly into his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said. Then she handed him something, maneuvered around his body, and left the bathroom, coughing between her cries.

He looked down.

Although he wasn't exactly well-versed in how to read these things, these tests wanted to make sure there was no doubt about their results. All three of them, every single one, had the same word in the small viewing window:

Pregnant

Pregnant

Pregnant

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AFTERWORD

Hi, it's me again.

If you've already read *Hidden In the Shadows*, then you know that there's a continuation of Joel and Sydney's ascent into romance interwoven within Mike and Xara's chapters.

If you haven't, when you get there, you'll get a chance to see the effects of those walls between Joel and Ayesha going back up over the course of two years. You'll see them trying to reset and attempt to go back through the motions.

When you're reading their parts, keep this story in mind. See if you can pick up when they're being honest, when they're not, the moments where Ayesha tries to lie to herself, and the times where they try, like hell, to pretend like they don't want the same thing.

As always, I love you, and you are so loved.

- K.

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Gage Wolfe & Tayler Diaz
Grey

Dez Harding & Larke Tapley
Monroe

Joel Lattimore & ~~Sydney Donovan~~

Julien Hunter & Arihi "Ari" Jonesboro
Thandie

Giorgio Pozza & Moana "Mo" Jonesboro

Mike Huang & Xara Merritt

Curtis Savea (deceased) & Ayesha Price
Josiah Savea
Theodore Savea

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Day 1, Spring 2008
Tehran, Iran
1432 hours
Team: Alpha
Status: Destabilization

Julien shielded his eyes as he was shoved from behind, staggering into what appeared to be some kind of trailer or bunker. He'd been pulled out of bed, drugged, and thrown into the back of a moving vehicle. Then he was blindfolded and brought here after traveling through a series of tunnels.

Wherever the hell *here* was.

It took a minute for his eyes to adjust to the fluorescents, but when they did, he saw that he wasn't alone. Another man sat across from him, chair pushed back and his feet on top of a table in the middle of the room. The bottoms of the man's boots were caked with mud, still wet. He wore jeans and a black shirt and studied a knife in his hand that he flicked from its case before putting it back in again. His hair, a blond more on the golden side, looked pale beneath the cheap, terrible lights.

Julien sat on the other side of the table in a surprisingly comfortable chair. "You know what this is?" he asked.

The man's piercing green gaze found his before it danced away again. And, for a split second, he was sure he'd recognized this man from somewhere.

"Silent but deadly type, I gather," he added.

"I don't know why I'm here either," the man said, voice deep with a hint of an accent that pulled him somewhere he couldn't seem to avoid altogether—Australia.

It had been the same with Ari, the accent there but subdued for whatever reason. Then again, just like not all Americans or Brits had the same intensity to their brogue, the same could probably be said of Australians.

He ticked his head to the side and rubbed at a sore spot on his neck. "If it wasn't for some kind of dart they shot into me, they wouldn't have gotten me."

The man's brow lifted. "That right?"

"I'm not an easy man to catch."

“But you’re here.”

“Which tells me this is something I’ve never seen before.” He leaned forward slightly. “Are you working with Tribu?”

“Who?”

“Guess not.”

The man flicked the knife again. Then, as though suddenly satisfied, he slipped it into his pocket, dragged his feet off the tabletop, and let them drop to the floor.

“You military?” he asked.

Julien laughed. “Uh...no.”

“How old are you?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“Not my fault you look barely old enough to be this far from your mother’s teat.”

They rivaled each other in height and size, but something about the man screamed Armed Forces.

Julien ticked his head again.

“Something wrong with your neck?”

For someone who’d had little to say early on, this guy was sure the conversationalist now.

“I’m guessing they got you without putting a dart in your neck?”

The man grinned. “Nah, that wouldn’t have worked. I’m the only one who’s a good enough shot to land that. Was like shooting a hamster, you’re so damn skittish.”

Julien shoved to his feet, hands planted on the top of the table. “*You* shot me?”

The man nodded. “I shot you.”

Before he knew it, he was around the table. He’d intended to get in the man’s face and see what information he could glean, but his fist wasn’t in the mood for diplomacy. It shot out, but the man jerked to the side, narrowly avoiding the blow.

“Kid, you need to calm the fuck down before I send you to the principal’s office.”

Julien charged and slammed him to the floor. Somehow, the man was able to get in control of the tackle, roll him onto his back, and wrap a thick, veiny hand around his throat. He’d been trained to fight by Tribu, but if this

man indeed was Armed Forces or higher, this wouldn't be much of a match. A guy like this had been trained to kill.

Julien reached out, grabbed a leg on one of the chairs, and brought the chair crashing down on his opponent's back, forcing the man's grip to release. Once fingers were no longer threatening to crush his windpipe, a gush of air rushed into his lungs, and he took a few seconds to catch his breath before he was on his feet again. But, by the time he was, the man was already up and stalking toward him.

"Hey, hey, hey!"

An equally large frame was suddenly between them. The man stopped advancing, and Julien finished collecting the breaths he needed to get his lungs back in working order.

"And you are?" the green-eyed Australian asked the newest body in the room. Julien glanced at the door and noticed there were actually two new bodies.

"Dez," the new guy answered. He gestured to his companion. "This is Curtis."

"What is this, the Girl Scouts?" Julien asked. "I need to know where I am, and why I'm here."

His original opponent went back to his chair.

"I can't answer that for you," Dez said. "We were grabbed. When we woke up, we were here and followed the directions to this room. Me and Curtis know each other from before. Doesn't make the situation any less suspicious."

Julien pointed across the table. "If you got a dart to your neck, you can thank him for putting it there."

Dez and Curtis squinted at the Aussie.

"You made that shot?" Curtis asked. Then he looked at Dez, both men communicating in silence.

They righted two fallen chairs and took a seat. Julien remained standing, unsure of what was going on and not wanting to get too comfortable with three huge, deadly looking men in the room. If any of them came out alive from this Royal Rumble, it needed to be him.

"Look, we don't know why we're here, but we might have an idea," Curtis said. He pointed to the Aussie. "You military?"

"Australian Special Forces," the Aussie replied. "Reconnaissance, intelligence, tactical assault, anti-terrorism...and the like."

“You have a name, brother?”

“Gage.”

“Nice to meet you, Gage.” Curtis turned to Julien next. “You?”

Julien shook his head. “Julien. And no, I’m not military.”

All three men looked confused.

Dez pointed to himself. “U.S. Special Ops. Started out in the Navy, went through special warfare, and was eventually recruited for the SEALs.”

“Marine Corps Special Forces,” Curtis added.

“And you,” Dez cocked his head at Julien, “you’re...nothing?”

Realizing that a fight was probably not forthcoming, at least not in the next several minutes, Julien allowed himself to take a seat. “Not military,” he explained. “I’m just a black hat hacker.”

“That’s putting it lightly,” Gage argued. “I was following orders, trying to put that damn dart in you for at least a week, but it was like you had eyes all over. Like I said, skittish. Got some background on you before I shot you. He’s done liaison work with JSOC, special reconnaissance. He’s also got some remote surveillance training, mainly U.S.-based. So, you might not have signed any papers, but you were still working in uniform...son.”

Julien shook his head. Based on appearance alone, the three other men probably only had a couple of years on him.

But his suspicions were confirmed.

It had felt like someone was watching him, but he’d assumed it was Tribu because he’d recently gone AWOL. And no one left Tribu, not on their own.

It wasn’t a blood in, blood out type of situation. Instead, there was an exit process that a few had taken advantage of. It had been essentially wiping their slates clean, even going so far as to getting bone marrow transplants to induce chimerism—creating a second DNA profile—and reshaping their fingerprints using fine-tuned laser tech. He liked to think he was smarter than the people who’d tried to keep a leash on him, or at the very least, always two steps ahead. It hadn’t made him any less paranoid, however.

“We’re not here for no reason,” Curtis pointed out. “I overheard talk coming down the pipe. Apparently, there’s been a need for some kind of counter-terrorism task force.”

Gage reclined in his chair. “You three are American. So why bring in an Aussie?”

Curtis motioned to himself. “American by birth, but take one look at me, and people automatically put me in the Samoan category. Took a lot of shit when I first joined the Marines from assholes who don’t understand how citizenship works.”

“You?” Gage asked Dez.

Dez nodded. “American. What about the kid over here?”

“Just cause I’m clean-shaven doesn’t mean I’m ‘the kid,’” Julien argued. “And I was born in South Africa. But yeah, I’m U.S. based.”

“Where in South Africa?” Dez asked.

Julien shrugged. “No clue. Found out not too long ago.”

“So, you think this is a clandestine recruitment process?” Gage asked. “A ghost unit for a teeny little counter-terrorism group?”

The door opened.

Several men filtered in this time, some wearing military uniforms from their respective countries. They were all chatting, trying to figure out where they were and why they’d been brought here. Julien recognized most of the insignias on the men whose affiliations and ranks were visible. This was not recruitment for a *teeny* little counter-terrorism group.

The last one who came in brought a completely different vibe. The rest of the men, he would consider soldiers. This last one screamed mercenary and murder-for-hire.

Suddenly, an air horn sounded.

Each man, except for the mercenary, went on high alert. Then the walls fell away, leaving them in the middle of an open desert. Across from them was a bustling market.

Julien took in a quick scan of their surroundings. “We’re in Tehran?”

Considering they were the men he’d initially been developing a connection with, he looked to Dez. Dez, however, was focused on something in the distance.

Julien followed Dez’s gaze.

Cold sweat broke out above his brow, his lip, and across his forehead. A man in the distance ambled toward the market. The size of his legs didn’t match the size of his chest, and his gait was slow but not quite tentative. It was more along the lines of terrified.

A sharp sting went up his arm. When he looked down, he found that he’d been shot again. Only this time, the shot left a flat blue disc embedded

in his skin. Every other man had also been shot, but none of their discs were blue.

He scanned the group until he found who else had blue discs: Gage, Curtis, Dez, the mercenary, and another man he hadn't seen come through the door.

"The colors represent our units," he yelled.

Again, no one paid him any mind.

The other men scrambled and attempted to delegate not only what the discs meant but also the roles each man was to take. So he jogged over to where Gage, Curtis, and Dez stood.

"You see him, right?" he asked. "The guy over at the market. The one who's looking a little puffy."

Curtis tipped his chin toward the bustling crowd. "Good eye, kid. It has to be C4 or something like it. Dez, what are you thinking in terms of blast radius?"

"Hard to tell without knowing what kind of apparatus he's working with." Dez shifted his focus from assessing the man to surveying the area. "It can be anywhere from sixty all the way up to five-hundred meters' worth of damage."

"I'm thinking it's some kind of realistic training exercise," Julien said. "That means there has to be a weapons cache somewhere around here."

The mysterious man was suddenly behind them. The mercenary had pulled away from the rest of the larger group, with them though not officially "with" them.

Gage pointed to a building adjacent to the market. "My gut's telling me that's where the weapons are. If there's an M21, M40...anything long range with a scope, I can take out the target, easy."

They broke off from the larger group and headed over. The mysterious man and the mercenary followed. As they neared the building, Julien realized that the scared man, who they were now sure was strapped to the nines with explosives, wasn't alone. Several yards away stood men with black cloths draped over their faces, watching him and waiting.

They arrived at the building to find it locked.

Curtis kicked the door, and it opened from the other side, the mystery man appearing before them as if welcoming them into his home.

Julien glanced up at an open window.

The mystery man had somehow scaled the building and made it inside without any of them noticing.

They sifted through the weapons stash.

Julien set aside rifle after rifle, ignoring the quizzical looks he *felt* on his neck from Gage, Curtis, and Dez. Although he knew how to use a gun—several guns, actually—that wasn't what he was looking for.

When he found the device, he faced his unofficial group. "I'll override communications in the market," he informed them. "I can use this to herd people out, get as many civilians away from the blast as possible. There's an EMP device in here too, which tells me this bomb isn't wall-shielded but something more from the Cold War era."

Gage attached a scope to an M40 bolt-action rifle, his poise giving away that he'd spent time at the major or captain level of his respective military hierarchy. "I'll focus on the target, but once the shit hits the fan, his boys *will* come looking for blood," Gage instructed. "Curtis, Dez? You look like you can handle some blood." He turned to the mercenary. "You look like you've caused bloodshed."

The mercenary didn't respond with so much as a facial expression.

Gage continued to give orders, and they eventually found out the mysterious man went by the name of Huang. And, in under a minute, everyone had an assigned task.

Julien made his way to a corner of the market, situating himself where the bomb-strapped man was visible. A thick, American voice cut through the crowd noise.

"Sir, you don't have to do this. Let's talk about this."

It was one of the other soldiers, flanked by five men, all with green discs embedded in their biceps. From the looks on their faces, not all agreed with the strategy, but time had been too precious to continue arguing. Plus, in his experience, he'd found it was usually futile to argue with a red-blooded American.

The bomb-strapped man mumbled something in Sorani. In this region, he would have expected Farsi first, with Azerbaijani coming in a close second.

"I understand you're worried about your wife and children," the American continued, demonstrating that he also understood the language. "We can help you."

The man continued to mumble, crying, his thumb hovering over what looked like a trigger.

“Get away from there,” Julien quietly hissed.

This wasn't a typical hostage situation. Still, there was no doubt in his mind the man would blow himself up if it meant his family remained safe. His own adopted mother, a Puerto Rican woman who was barely five feet tall, often told him the same thing.

The American continued to negotiate.

Fed up, Julien went ahead with what he'd set out to do.

He heard the moment everything went down, power being stolen from electronic devices like a specific ionization or magnetic frequency dying in the air. The bomb-strapped man looked around, skittish, like the hamster Gage had compared him to, and then raised his thumb.

“Get the fuck out of there!” Julien called to the soldiers. “Get back!”

The thumb descended.

Julien leaped behind a wall, waiting for the explosion and praying he'd calculated the blast radius correctly. When he realized he hadn't been relegated to thousands of pieces of flesh splattered in the desert, he stood.

The man lay on the ground. Crimson fluid created a pool around his head. His shirt had come open, revealing the bomb.

The still active bomb.

“Hey, kid!” Gage ran toward him. “The bomb! Defuse it!”

Gage then continued past him into the mass of masked men emerging from the other side of the market, who were now brandishing automatic weapons. However, the mercenary was the first to get there, and after Dez put a bullet in one of the men's heads from a distance that probably had warranted a close-range attack instead, all hell broke loose.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Don't forget to leave a review!

I'm a creative creature from the Caribbean who likes animals, Star Wars, quirky humor, and any kind of media that deals with people finding love in an otherwise impossible time.

Connect With Me:

Mailing List:

Text BOOKADDICT to 66866!

Blog - <http://www.kalexwalker.com>

Website - <http://www.kalexwrites.com>

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