



Into the Light

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one

ELLIE

No one told me living my dream would be so constantly terrifying.

It was a warm and sunny Thursday in October, my favorite month, but instead of enjoying it, I was stressed out. My shop, Moonbeam Jewels, was brimming with people, an unusual occurrence for an autumn weekday. This warmer weather we'd been having led to a late influx of tourists in Moon Harbor, and the fear of not being able to pay my bills in the winter kept me hustling. But while my bank account appreciated the extra tourist dollars, I had to admit I was ready to have my quiet town back.

A calm settled over the place in the off season. Locals banded together to enjoy the spaces usually overtaken by outsiders. The streets would be empty and the barstools ready and waiting for us. But for now, I was trying to wrangle every last sale I could.

This was the first year I actually made a profit. It wasn't much, but it was all mine, and all due to my vision and hard work. So while other business owners in town were flush with cash this time of year, I was cautiously saving and counting every single penny. Which wasn't that different to how I normally lived, just a few more pennies to account for. Which felt pretty darn nice.

"Hey, Ellie!" my soon to be sister-in-law Alex walked through the door with two cups of coffee in her hands and god bless her for that.

“Hi. Please tell me one of those is for me. I haven’t had a sip of caffeine since seven this morning.”

Alex smiled and handed one over.

“But of course. Sara made you some special new latte she said you were obsessed with.”

“Oh heck yes. Salted caramel dirty chai. It’s to die for.” I took a sip and closed my eyes in delight.

“Ooh, I should have had her make two.” Alex looked around and shimmied behind the counter. “This place is a madhouse. You need any help? I’m free all afternoon.”

“Well I wouldn’t ask, but I won’t turn it down if you’re offering.”

“You can always ask, babe.”

And I knew I could, but I refused to. My brother Sam was always trying to help, and I secretly adored him for it, but I also hated that he thought he needed to. I could do this on my own. I had to do this on my own.

“Maybe just for a little bit, so no one feels ignored,” I said, and Alex nodded in understanding. She was also a business owner, heading up her own IT and web design company. And our other best friend, Sara, owned The Witch’s Brew, the best cafe for miles. It was a cool coincidence that we all had different passions, yet similar paths. And I admired their success, wanting to be at their level one day, that is, not so worried about my bank account.

We greeted customers, and answered simple questions for the next half hour. I had to admit it was convenient having help in the store when it was so busy. Maybe I’d

consider hiring a part time employee next season. At a lull in the shop, Alex came back to the counter to stand with me again.

“You’re going to Rafael’s thing tonight, right?”

Shit. I’d been trying to think of an excuse for days to get out of Raf’s birthday party at the Anchorage tonight, but came up empty.

“Uh, yeah. I should be there. What time is everyone meeting again?”

“Sam reserved some tables at eight. We’re getting old, that’s party time for us,” she laughed. I was years younger than everyone else in my friend group but it didn’t always feel like it. Eight o’clock sounded just fine to me. “Did you get him a gift yet? He’s so hard to buy for, no one even knows what he likes.”

“No, I’ll have to figure that out after I close up.” That was a lie. I already had his gift picked out. Raf was an enigma for the most part, but not to me. Because I’d always paid him more attention than I should have. Which was why I didn’t want to go to his party tonight.

I’d spent years nursing a crush on my older brother’s friend—one of his best friends—and the man acted like I didn’t exist. At least, most of the time. The only time he paid me any attention was when he was trying to act like another overprotective big brother and chase away dates. I already had one of those, I didn’t need another. And I certainly didn’t want to think of Raf as a brother figure. I also sure as hell didn’t want him thinking of me as a sister. But I’d recently come to the conclusion that it was all I’d ever be to him. So I was trying to preserve my heart by keeping my distance as much as I could.

But Raf didn’t ask for much. He was always there for everyone else and never made anything about him. So I’d be a pretty big jerk if I missed his birthday, the one day

we forced him to be the center of attention for two hours. I'd go. I'd smile, bring a gift, be nice. But my heart would break the whole time. And I'll probably end up eating a pint of Ben & Jerry's alone in bed afterward.

"Excuse me, miss?"

I shook my head free of that image and turned to see an older lady with her hand up, looking for assistance by the glass display case on the side wall of the store. The case that held all the most expensive pieces. I tried to not let my excitement turn me giddy, and plastered on my warmest welcoming smile.

"Hello, there. How can I help you?"

"I was just admiring this necklace here." She pointed to a piece I'd made with sea glass set in eighteen karat gold. Score.

"Ah yes, that's from one of my favorite collections."

"Do you make all of these?" she asked, as I pulled the piece from the case and set it on a black velvet display board.

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“Yes, I do.” I smiled proudly. “This necklace has a charm made from sea glass I found at the cove down by the lighthouse.” I pointed in the direction of our town’s main landmark. People loved that stuff.

“Oh, my word. How lovely.” She ran a wrinkled hand down the chain. “How much is it?”

I always had a moment of panic when people asked about pricing. Because the perpetually broke girl in me could never imagine spending this much on something that wasn’t a necessity. But I was a salesperson. A small business owner. And these tourists were not broke girls. They, more often than not, had more money than I could ever imagine. So I pulled up my big girl panties and faked the confidence I needed.

“This piece is three hundred and fifty.” My sales smile made my cheek tick but I kept it up and watched her eye the piece again, toying with the charm.

“It really is lovely,” she said, pulling her hand back and looking in the case once more. “I’ll take it.”

“Wonderful. I’ll wrap it up for you.” I took the necklace and turned to grab a box from the shelf behind me, letting out all the breath in my lungs as I did.

That was how each sale went. Well, the bigger ones at least. I didn’t know if I’d ever get used to taking people’s money for the things I made. Impostor syndrome was a real bitch. But I’d long since decided to ‘fake it til I make it.’

I tied a royal blue bow around the box and placed it in a paper bag. Alex gave me a

smile and an approving nod from across the store. After running the lady's credit card, I thanked her and moved on to the next person with money to burn. And while a little part of me did a giddy dance inside at each and every sale, another very real part of me, flashed a warning. Don't get too comfortable. Don't get cocky. Don't act like you've made it.

I didn't think I'd ever get used to success. And a big part of me never wanted to. Being a broke girl was what gave me the drive to start my business. The drive to work hard—sometimes seventy hours a week—to make a living and not have to go back to substitute teaching, or worse, a regular old nine-to-five. So I was fine being a perpetual broke girl, whether my bank account had money in it or not.

I just really rather liked when it did.

* * *

After I closed up for the day, I headed out to pick up Rafael's gift. The sidewalk was still full of people strolling and window shopping. The breeze coming off the harbor was cool enough to give me goosebumps but still warmer than usual for early October. The sun was setting and it cast a sparkling orange glow over the water. I took a moment to appreciate the view, one I often took for granted.

I'd grown up in Moon Harbor. I left it for college in Vermont, but knew I would move back as soon as I'd graduated. When my parents died, I almost considered leaving forever. But those years away made me realize this was my home and staying here allowed me to keep a piece of them with me forever. It's not that I felt I needed to stay... I just wanted to keep that connection. It was my home, even more so after they had passed.

Laughter made its way toward me, carried on the breeze. I saw the tables outside Landry's restaurant were filled. Families and friends eating, chatting, laughing.

Making memories. It was easy to forget to do that sometimes when I was so focused on surviving. Maybe this was a good reminder to do a little living. Tonight could be a start. If I had to go out and celebrate the man I secretly wanted but could never have, then I should at least force myself to have a good time. Enjoy the night with my friends. Make some memories.

I walked another few blocks and turned into McClintock's. This shop had been around since before I was born and while it mostly catered to tourists, it was a Moon Harbor classic for a reason. Gus, the old man who owned the shop, and practically like an uncle to me, sat behind the counter, looking ready to call it a night.

"Busy day, Gus?"

"Busier than I've seen this time of year in over a decade. How are you doing down there?" He asked, throwing a thumb in the direction of my shop.

"Oh pretty good. Happy to get a last minute boost before winter."

Gus grunted and nodded, his white hair flopping around his ears.

"I'm here to pay for the knife."

"I've got it back here for ya." Gus bent down to pick up a small box from one of the shelves behind the counter. He opened it and laid it down so I could see it again. A bespoke pocket knife with a mahogany handle sat neatly in a black box. The handle was inlaid with gold in the shape of an anchor. It was hand made by an artist up in Bangor. I'd seen it a few months ago and knew it'd be perfect for Raf. He'd had a similar one, but lost it last spring when a wave almost took him out to sea.

When he'd told me the story, I'd almost had a heart attack.

He'd been tying down some of the extra traps they'd had on board when some of the ropes got tangled. It had been raining all day and the wind had picked up to over fifty knots. But the bulk of the storm hadn't hit yet and was coming toward them quicker than they could get away.

The Stella Rose was the fastest lobster boat around, but this storm was quicker and harsher than anyone expected. Waves crashed over him, throwing him overboard. He managed to grab the rail as he flipped over it, and scrambled back on deck, soaked to the bone in freezing water.

He'd almost died. But he was more upset about his knife.

I shook my head to rid myself of the image and looked up at Gus.

"It really is stunning."

"Sure is. Matty does great work."

"How much?" I asked, rifling through my purse to find my wallet. Gus looked me over, one eye narrowing.

"Well, now, Ellie, let's just say fifty." My shoulders dropped and I cocked my head at him.

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“Gus. No. I know it’s worth way more than that.”

“Yeah, but I’m not gonna make a profit on you. Plus, it’s for Rafael, right?”

“Come on, Gus, I’m not a kid anymore. I know how this works, remember? I own a business on Harbor Street too. I can pay retail.”

“It’s not about that. I wouldn’t feel right takin’ that much money from you. I’ll sell it to you for cost. Now stop arguing.” I huffed, but he just shook his head and smiled as I handed over cash.

“Well I’ll remember this next time you get Cheryl a birthday gift from my shop, old man.”

“Yeah, yeah. Now get out of here, I want to close up.”

I leaned forward to give him a kiss on the cheek and grabbed the bag from the counter.

“Thanks, Gus.”

“Don’t mention it. Just be sure to sing real loud tonight. Raf don’t like that attention on him. Give him hell.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Oh I sure will.”

two

RAFAEL

I sat in my truck looking at the sign for the Anchorage Lounge. I'd been here far too long, and my time for avoidance was just about over, judging by the vibration of my phone. My friends were looking for me and I didn't want to let them down. But damn, I really did not want to be at my own birthday party.

I hated being the center of attention, and birthdays were the worst because not only was everyone's attention on me, but I was also bogged down by the reminder that people even cared enough to throw a party for me. And I knew I didn't deserve it. There was no way in hell I deserved it. But if I ignored it like I wanted to, then I'd make my friends feel bad, and that was the last thing I wanted.

So here I sat, ready to go into a party thrown for me that I didn't want, by people who cared about me way more than they should. This happened every year since moving to Moon Harbor but I still wasn't used to it. Probably would never be.

My cell phone buzzed again, and I looked down to see Sam's name on the screen. I swiped to answer.

"Yeah?"

"Fashionably late to your own party, huh?"

"... I've been in the parking lot."

"Figures. Want me to bring you a beer?"

I sighed. It was tempting, but being coddled was even worse than unwanted attention, so I opened the door and stepped down.

“Nah, I’ll be right in.”

“Try to look like you’re having a good time. At least for a few minutes.”

“Okay, okay. I’ve got my smile on.”

Sam’s laugh came through the phone and then it clicked off. I pocketed it and walked around the corner to the front of the building. Strings of globe lights hung from the roof of the bar to the building across the street, creating an ambient glow. The tables that had been out front all summer were packed away for the winter, but large glass doors in the front of the building opened up to create a flow from inside to out. Groups of people lingered on the sidewalk, but I didn’t recognize any of them. The town still had visitors.

I walked in and surveyed the space. Every stool along the wooden bar to the left was filled. The tables scattered throughout were filled with people too. A classic rock song pumped through the stereo. It wasn’t as crazy as July would have been but it was still too full of people for my liking. I scanned the right wall of the space, which was set up as a sort of VIP area, with comfortable couches and tables, roped off from the rest of the floor. Toward the back, I found them, sitting at a small table, surrounded by balloons. My chosen family. Though at this moment, I’d rather have chosen people who forgot my birthday.

“Here he is, man of the hour!” Theo’s booming voice rang out, and faces in the crowd turned. I made a beeline for the group and accepted a man hug and pat on the back from him. “Happy birthday, man.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Happy birthday, darling,” Sara said, wrapping her arms around me in a fierce hug. I hugged her back with only a moment of hesitation. Progress, I guess.

Sam came up to me next, giving me the hand-clasp-man-hug combo.

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“Nice smile, man, I almost believe you want to be here.” He laughed, then his fiancée, Alex, took a turn.

There were others, too, hanging around who raised their beers and glasses in acknowledgement. But the one person I was most wanting—and dreading—to see, hung back against the wall.

Ellie Waters, the girl of my damn dreams, stood off to the side, watching and waiting in a little red dress that made my mind go to dark places. When she saw me, she gave a little wave, but didn’t shift. As the group around me dispersed and the crowd moved in, I made my way over to her. The sky high heels on her feet just about brought her to my chin. I leaned down into her space. Not too much. Not to be a fucking creep. But enough to keep me sane.

“Hey, El.”

“Hi.” Her big blue eyes looked up at me through long lashes that fluttered and the combination of her wide-eyed innocence and sexy outfit had my mind doing flips. “Happy birthday, Raf.”

She leaned into me and wrapped her arms around my waist, resting her head against my chest. I could smell the vanilla sugar of her shampoo, the one she’d used for years. I knew this because I never failed to notice her scent. Maybe I was creepy, but I didn’t care.

She squeezed me a little bit tighter, and damn, did it feel good. But it was over all too quickly, as she backed up again and straightened non-existent wrinkles out of her

dress.

“You want a drink?” I asked her, looking for something easy and innocent to talk about while I forced myself to forget how good she felt in my arms.

“I should be getting one for you, birthday boy.” She laughed, a musical sound, and her eyes lit up. The way she laughed was my favorite thing about Ellie. Well, one of many favorite things. God, I had to stop thinking about her right now before I made a fool of myself.

Ellie had been the object of my desires for way too long. At first, I figured it was just a stupid crush, just an attraction, and one that was undoubtedly wrong on multiple levels.

First of all, she was my best friend’s little sister. That’s a fucking no-go. Add to that, I do mean little. Ellie was barely eighteen when I met her, and I was twenty-four. Way too old to be messing with someone so innocent and sweet.

After she came back from college a few years later, I could admit that she was more mature, but there was still no way I could cross that line. I’d promised Sam I’d look out for her, protect her, while he was overseas in the Marines. And keeping my word was paramount. How could I promise that in one breath and then admit I wanted her in the next? It would’ve made me a scumbag. So I kept my feelings bottled up and pined for her in secret.

Over the years, we’d developed a real friendship. And it meant a lot to me, more than I’d ever admitted to anyone. Ellie was one of the few people who I let in, although she’d probably deny that. I wasn’t good at talking about my feelings. But if there ever was a time I did, it was probably with Ellie or Sam.

Now Ellie was all grown up. Almost twenty-seven. But she was still too good for me.

Too sweet, too innocent, too from-the-right-side-of-the-tracks. I was a monster. An asshole fisherman with a shitty past and nothing to offer her. I'd kill for things to be different. But life was what it was.

"You coming?" she asked, breaking me out of my thoughts.

"Yep, right behind you." I followed Ellie as she walked toward the bar along the back wall. It was smaller and more crowded than the main one, but closer to our table. I hadn't let myself look down yet, but damn me, when I did, I noticed Ellie's ass swaying in that little red dress. The dress I now realized was way too short for her to be wearing in public. I glanced at the people surrounding our path and noticed all the men we passed were checking her out. Their gazes went straight to her ass. And, okay, same. But what the fuck?

Ellie was a curvy girl—woman—with an incredible body. The kind of body I would die to get my hands on. But it wasn't in the cards, and knowing that she was on display for these other fuckers to ogle and drool over made my jaw tick. I doubled my steps to catch up and block her back from view, not giving these other guys the chance. As she stepped up to the bar, I bumped into her, not on purpose, but I didn't exactly hate it. That sweet ass of hers rubbed up against the bottom of my groin, and I let out a strangled groan.

She turned to me.

"Um, what are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"Have you ever heard of personal space?"

"Have you ever heard of wearing a dress that covers you properly? What the fuck are

you wearing, a napkin?”

Yikes, that did it, because she fully turned around to face me now, her eyes rolled back and her lips in a snarl. And dammit, being this close—and El being so short—gave me the most perfect view of her cleavage, taunting me with the forbidden.

“You’ve got to be joking. I’m not a child, this is a bar. Apart at a bar, for god’s sake, and I can wear what I want.”

“Yeah well, people were looking.” Assholes were looking. Guys who weren’t good enough for you were looking. I didn’t say that though, instead, I moved my mouth but no more sound came out.

I forced myself to look away so I wouldn’t react to the jiggling of her breasts as she gestured with her arms. Because fuck.

“Who cares? What if I want people to look at me? What if I like the attention? You can’t expect me to cover up like a nun for the rest of my life, Raf.”

“El, that’s not what I meant.” But once again, I didn’t know what else to say because I couldn’t just come out and admit, you look hot as fuck and my dick got hard the second I laid eyes on you and it’s driving me insane and if anyone else so much as glances at you, I want to rip their eyes out.

No. I couldn’t admit that. So I shrugged. Shrugged. Like a fucking clown.

“God I’m so stupid,” she said, with a slight shake of her head. “I thought I’d try to look nice tonight. For you. For your birthday, I mean.” She shook her head, then looked away. “What a waste.” She squeezed by me and dashed off before I could even register what happened.

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“Ellie, wait!” I tried to follow, but the crowd of people next to me at the bar started shifting and I lost sight of her.

This birthday party was going great.

* * *

More people came and went, mingling and wishing me a happy birthday while drinking their fill of beer and champagne. I socialized as much as I could, but by ten-thirty, I was tired of talking so much. I sat down next to Theo and Sam, nursing a Sam Adams and listening to them complain about the World Series.

I’d seen Ellie throughout the night, but she hadn’t gotten close enough to me to talk to... To apologize for being a dick. But the interaction was just one more sign that I needed to keep my distance from her. Friends or not, every time I was around her, I got close to going off the rails in one way or another. Maybe she was right and I had no reason to be so protective. But I’d be damned if some douchebag frat boy staying at his parents’ vacation home was going to get a free look at her ass.

Ellie’s words got to me, though. Did she think of me as just another older brother? Probably. I’ve tried my best to act like that over the years because there was no way I could speak the truth or show that I wanted her. But part of me, a deep-seated part that I hid under as much nonchalance as I could, hated the idea.

I didn’t want Ellie to look at me like a brother. I wanted her to see me like the man who wants her. For her to give me a shot like she gave to all those douchebags she dated over the years. I wanted her to want me.

But she deserved so much better than me. So much better than those douchebags, too, and I'd always let her know it. But I couldn't just pretend like I was any better.

As much as I didn't want to stir the pot, I felt like I had to bring it up so I could apologize and clear the air. Not the fact that I wanted her, but the other stuff. That I shouldn't be so protective, but I couldn't help it and maybe she should just appreciate the fact that I'll always look out for her.

Okay, now that I said it in my head, I realized it wouldn't go over well. I'd come up with something better.

Not that she was giving me a chance tonight. She'd been avoiding me the entire time and I was ready to call it. I'd hung out with my friends, I'd seen my acquaintances. There was nothing else for me here, and my bed was waiting for me at home.

"Man, you need to get laid." Theo blurted out.

I coughed as I choked on the beer I'd just taken a sip of.

"Sorry, what? You talking to me?" I asked.

"Yes I'm talking to you, Deniro. You're sitting here all quiet, looking bored on your own birthday. Why don't we find a chick for you?"

"Theo, calm down. Not everyone needs to hook up all the time." Sam chimed in.

"I know that. You know I don't hook up anymore, but my man here doesn't have a hippie of his own, so maybe hooking up with someone will help him find one."

"Nah, I'm good, man." I smiled, but shook my head. Theo had been the ultimate king of one-night-stands before he got together with Sara. He was known for only wanting

to hook up, and making that clear as day beforehand. No one had any expectations of him being something more than a few hours of fun. All that changed when he finally admitted his feelings for Sara.

Once again, a small part of me, one buried away underneath all the logical parts, thought with great optimism that maybe, just maybe, if I admitted my feelings to Ellie—like Theo had done with Sara—then somehow it would all work out. She'd want me too. Sam wouldn't kick my ass. Somehow I'd redeemed my past and earned the right to someone so perfect. And we'd live happily ever after.

But that was just a stupid daydream. So when the thoughts appeared as I sat there in the Anchorage, I shoved them down deep. None of that could, or would, ever happen.

“Dude, when's the last time you've hooked up? When's the last time you've had any kind of date or situationship or whatever the kids are calling it these days?”

“When did you become one of the town gossips? Why do you even care so much?” Sam laughed, fake-punching Theo in the arm.

“I'm just saying, a man's gotta get his dick wet sometimes.” Theo pointed at me. “And he's not. So what gives?”

“Oh, that's lovely,” Sara said as she appeared at Theo's side with a glass of champagne in her hand. And awesome, Ellie and Alex appeared right behind her, hearing the whole exchange too.

“Sorry, babe,” Theo said, pulling Sara down onto his lap. “I know it sounds crass. But it's true.” Theo dug in his heels. “Raf is in the prime of his life.” He turned back to me. “If I was a girl, I'd fuck you.”

“Uh, no. I would definitely not be interested in Theodora, but thanks anyway.”

Everyone laughed, Theo gasping in mock offense. But Ellie just looked around, as if trying not to engage in the conversation. And that confirmed she was still pissed at me.

“I don’t think he has a problem finding women. I think he’s just far more choosy than some people used to be,” Alex said, pointedly at Theo.

“It’s true, I hear girls at the cafe all the time talking about him.” Sara casually mentioned, as if I wasn’t in the room.

“Wait, really? Who?”

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“Dani Jenkins, Marie Castellano, that girl Andrea who works at the pool in the summers...” Sara rattled off names and my cheeks heated.

“Guys. What the hell, I’m right here.”

“Wait, I thought Dani was a lesbian?” Theo asked.

Sara barked out a laugh. “Why, because she turned you down?”

Theo had the decency to look chagrined by this discovery. But when I chanced a look at Ellie, she was still standing off to the side, seemingly uninterested in the conversation.

I was about to get another beer as an excuse to talk to Ellie again, but by the time there was a lull in the conversation, she had moved over to another table and was laughing with some of the other townies who’d shown up tonight.

The guys were now back to bickering about baseball, so I got up to get a new beer anyway. People still crowded around in groups, the body heat and drunken energy radiating through the place. I carefully shoved my way through the drunk tourists until I reached the bar. I held up my bottle when the bartender looked at me, and he nodded in recognition. I set the empty down on the polished wood and tapped my hands while I waited.

“Rafael?” a feminine voice from my left called my name. I turned and did a double take.

“Annie?”

“Hi! Oh my god. It’s been forever.”

She moved to hug me and I wrapped my arms around her shoulders, embracing my old friend.

“What are you doing here?” I asked her.

“Wait, do you live here now?”

“Yeah. For like nine years now.”

“Oh lord, we are old.”

I laughed at that, because man, did it feel true.

“I’m on a work trip. We’re doing a tour of bed and breakfasts to try to get our products in some of the places up here. It’s a beautiful town.”

“Yeah, it’s not bad. It’s been good to me.”

“I can’t believe I ran into you.” She slurred her words and swayed a little bit, the result of the empty glass in her hand. “I’d love to catch up before I leave. Let me give you my number.”

“Yeah, me too.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket and handed it to her to tap her number into.

“Text me tomorrow. But after nine. I’m gonna be so hungover.” She laughed, handing the phone back to me. I pocketed it again, laughing too.

“It was really nice to see you, Annie.”

“You too, Raf.” She hugged me again, this time lingering a little longer than before. When she pulled away, she rested her hand on my cheek for a moment and just looked at me. All the thoughts I had about the past—the ones I usually kept locked away—came swirling back into my head. We shared a moment, and then just as quickly as it started, it was over. She dropped her hand and backed away, returning to her group on the side of the bar.

The bartender had come back with my beer, so I grabbed it, threw a ten dollar bill down to cover it, and then turned to go back to the table. But I came face to face with Ellie, who was just standing a few yards away, staring at me.

Had she been there the whole time?

There was an expression on her face I couldn’t decipher. Or maybe, it was a mix of expressions. But I knew for sure, it wasn’t a happy one, despite the smile she suddenly forced onto her lips. I knew every single one of Ellie’s smiles and that one wasn’t one of them. It was stilted, strained. Her eyes were glassy and she wouldn’t look at my face.

I stepped up to her. “Hey, El,” I said over the loud beats coming through the speakers at the DJ station. She raised her hands up and held out a small gift bag I didn’t notice she was holding.

“This is for you.”

“Aw, Ellie, you didn’t have to—”

“It’s your birthday, Raf. Yes I did.” She held it out closer to me, and I took it out of her hands. We stood there, in the middle of the bar, with people dancing on one side,

people drinking all around us, the music blasting, intoxication taking over. But all I could think about was how beautiful she was. How much I wanted her.

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And how I would never be able to have her.

“Thank you,” I replied.

“Happy birthday.” She finally looked up into my eyes and I knew for sure then, there was something happening in them. But she tried to play it off, giving me a bigger version of that fake smile. “Hope it’s a good one. You deserve the best.”

I didn’t know how to respond, but she didn’t give me a chance. I looked down at the gift in my hands, and when I looked up, she was backing away.

“I’m heading out,” she said. “I’ll see you around. Enjoy your night.”

And then she turned and left. Once again, I wanted to go after her, and once again, the crowd swallowed her up and I lost sight of her. Or maybe I just forced myself still so that I wouldn’t reach out and do something I shouldn’t.

So that I wouldn’t taint her like I did so many other things in life.

three

ELLIE

Nursing a hangover at The Witch’s Brew, I stirred my coffee and sat with my regret from the night before. My brother had always said I let my temper get the better of me and I hated that in this case, he was right.

What should have been a great night celebrating Raf's birthday turned into me throwing a hissy fit and leaving early. And when I got home and thought about it, I knew Raf hadn't meant any harm. In fact, in his warped head, he wasn't judging me, but instead was trying to protect me. I was just so tired of being the "kid sister." The one who everyone thought needed protection, who wasn't seen as a woman in her own right, but a child who needed to be looked after. Especially when it came to Raf.

But my foolish crush on him wasn't his fault. And while I had the right to be annoyed about being treated with kid gloves, I didn't have the right to be a jerk about it, especially on his birthday. Regret sat in my gut, warring with my pride. I should apologize. I knew I should. But my stubborn streak held me back, for now.

"Hey, where'd you disappear to last night?"

I looked up to see Alex approach my table and take a seat, setting down her cup and saucer and a plate of treats. I must have really been in my own head if I didn't even notice her walk in and order all that. I grabbed a mini chocolate chip muffin and shrugged.

"I wasn't really feeling up to staying long."

Alex narrowed her eyes at me and took a sip of her coffee. And then went in for the kill.

"Okay, what's going on with you two?"

My heart rate kicked up. "What do you mean?"

"Are you fighting or something? I saw you guys talking and you both looked heated, or bothered, or something weird. And then you left, and he sulked like a lonely puppy for the rest of the night."

He sulked? Interesting.

“Oh, no. I don’t know. He was being over-protective, acting like my skirt was too short or something. And I got fussy. I guess that’s nothing new.”

“I had to stop Sam from saying something, too.”

“What the hell? Why does everyone treat me like I’m a kid?” So much for feeling remorseful. My mood soured and annoyance took its place.

Alex sipped her coffee and shrugged. “The guys are dumbasses sometimes, even if their hearts are in the right place. But I agree, you’re a grown woman and they need to chill. Which is why I told Sam that. I didn’t know Raf gave you shit, too.”

“Yeah, he’s been a real thorn in my side ever since I grew boobs.”

Alex laughed. “Sam said he asked the guys to look after you while he was overseas. Maybe Raf just can’t get past that.

“Yeah, but that was years ago. You’d think he would have moved on by now.”

But I didn’t want him to move on. I wanted him to move forward—to see me as a woman and not a kid. It was probably time I admitted to myself that it would never happen. The crush I had on Raf was just that. A stupid crush that would go nowhere. Maybe letting go of it and moving on was the only path forward.

“Anyway,” I continued, “I didn’t mean to make him sulk. It was his birthday, he should have been celebrating.”

“Ah, you know him. He’s not one for being the center of attention. He left not long after you did. I did see him talking to some woman.” Alex took a croissant from the

plate and nibbled at it, flakes falling onto the table in front of her. “I wonder if they hooked up or something?” She waggled her eyebrows and I could do nothing but plaster a wide smile on my face, hoping it looked relaxed and not maniacal, but that might be asking too much.

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Raf didn't date much, but anytime he did, I pretended with all my might that I was unaffected and happy for him. Like a friend should be. Not secretly wishing he'd choose me instead.

Never that.

But if he had gone home with that pretty girl I saw him talking to, maybe it was for the best. Another sign telling me I need to stop pining for him and start living my life.

"Oh! I almost forgot," Alex said, pulling out her phone and swiping her finger over it, searching for something. "I wanted to get your opinion on the flowers. The florist couldn't get the peonies I wanted, so we'll have to do dahlias and roses instead. What do you think?"

She handed me the phone and I looked at the beautiful bouquet samples, but my mind was a thousand miles away, overcome with a desire to move on from Raf once and for all. And that made me realize I'd been living in a fantasy instead of embracing real life.

Sam—my only immediate family member—was getting married to the love of his life in two weeks and here I was, feeling sorry for myself over an unrequited crush. I shook my head to clear it, and focused on Alex.

"I think they're beautiful." I passed the phone back to her and smiled. "I'm sorry if I've been preoccupied lately. What can I do to help?"

"Don't be silly, you've been working hard. Everything is pretty much all set, other

than this last minute flower fiasco. But I think they'll still be pretty, right?" Her shoulders drooped and she blew out a breath. "I didn't want to make a big deal out of the wedding, but the whole town will be there and I'm kind of stressed about it at this point."

"Aw, Alex, I'm sorry. You should have told me sooner!"

"I just didn't think that many people would care," she said with a laugh. And I felt for her, because she was coming into a life that was so very different from her own.

Before Alex moved to Moon Harbor, she'd been alone for her whole adult life. And she'd had a strained relationship with her mom before she died. Then last year, she discovered the truth about who her father was, and was almost killed in the process.

Alex was an incredible woman. She deserved so much better than what she'd gotten in her past, and I'm glad she had it now. But it still couldn't be easy going from being alone all the time to being engaged to one of the most popular guys in Moon Harbor. She was basically the town darling now, and getting way more attention that she was comfortable with.

When our parents died, even though Sam was still in the military and not home much, the town sort of all adopted us. I went to live with our Uncle Peter and Aunt Anne, but everyone in town stepped up in some way. Theo and Raf were there to look out for me. Gus and his wife Cheryl took me to dinner every Thursday night until I went to college. And I never had a shortage of invitations on holidays.

I was used to everyone always knowing my business. I couldn't imagine what it was like for Alex to experience that all of a sudden.

"Are you doing okay with it all? I know the wedding is ending up way bigger than you envisioned."

“Yeah. It was overwhelming at first, but I’ve got a handle on it now. I mean, the town has been so welcoming and loves Sam. It’s not a bad problem to have.” She laughed and took another sip. “I’m just trying to keep my anxiety in check. Sara’s been giving me meditation advice.”

“That’ll help, I’m sure. But try not to worry about the guest list too much. Yeah, it’s a lot of people. But you know how this town is. Everyone’s probably just honored to be included and excited for a chance to go to a fancy party.”

“True.” Alex sat up. “Oh, speaking of! Are you bringing a date? I didn’t want to ask earlier because I knew you’d broken up with Derek, but it’s getting closer.”

Ugh. I knew it was, and she’d need to know for the place setting count. But I’d been foolishly avoiding the topic. I figured since Raf was Best Man and I was Maid of Honor, maybe we’d just sit together. Now I was only thinking how stupid that sounded. And I’d resolved to move on, so... Moving on was what I’d do. One way or another.

“Uh, yes. I haven’t exactly decided who, but I will be bringing someone.” I spoke as if trying to convince both of us, but Alex had the decency to not show any surprise or confusion on her face. She simply smiled and nodded.

“Perfect, I’ll put you down for two.” She stood up and grabbed her now-empty cup. “I have to run down to the hotel to finalize everything.” She leaned down and kissed my cheek. “I’ll see you later.”

“See ya,” I said, watching her walk her cup over to the bus bin behind the counter and say goodbye to Sara. I grabbed the last mini muffin and shoved it in my mouth.

I needed to find a date, and I needed to do it fast.

four

RAFAEL

Later that week, I stood on the deck of the Stella Rose as she cut through the Atlantic like a hot knife through butter. She was the fifty-four foot Downeast style Mussel Ridge I'd worked on for over three years, and I was obsessed with her almost as much as I was with Ellie. But at least I didn't have to hide my love for the Stella.

She was beautiful—the perfect mix of artistry and strength. Her hull was a midnight blue that blended into Maine's deep waters. Her cockpit contained top of the line monitors that made my jaw drop when I first stepped aboard. And she had the horsepower behind her to power us through almost anything.

The Captain, Roger Thorne, poached me from my old gig after we bonded one night at the pub. I wasn't much of a talker, but he'd caught me on the night the Red Sox made it to the playoffs and I'd already had more than a few pints of Sam Adams. He told me he'd been saving for years to launch his own boat and was finally making it happen the following season. He just didn't mention he made it happen with the nicest commercial craft in Moon Harbor.

Usually lobstermen worked in teams of two, but there were four of us on the Stella. Roger named me first mate two summers ago, and brought on an apprentice deckhand to assist Jackson, the sternman. Together, we were able to set more traps, and bring in more lobster, than most of the boats in the nearby area. The only one docked in Moon Harbor that was bigger was the Fortuna Fin, the boat we joked had gone “corporate.”

I'd started on smaller boats, just pulling traps, and was fine with it. I had no delusions of grandeur or working my way up. I just wanted to be on the water and lobster fishing was the best way for me to do it.

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I came to Moon Harbor to get away from Boston. Working on any of the boats in town had been a dream, and the best consistent money I could find out here. I was grateful for the work and for the opportunity to learn the industry. But I had to admit, I felt pride for this vessel and this position I earned.

Despite being smaller than the Fortuna, the Stella Rose was more modern, faster, comparable in strength, and had just as much storage space, allowing us to consistently max out our legally allotted eight hundred traps with a smaller crew. It was a point of pride, and one we loved to point out to the Fortuna crew whenever we crossed paths.

“We might get off in time for happy hour, boys,” Roger said as he steered the Stella toward the harbor. It was his recurring joke because, while we did often make it off the boat in time to grab a happy hour drink, none of us ever did since we were disgusting by then and all of the watering holes in town would kick us out if we showed up like that.

This was Moon Harbor, and the tourist industry was still tops.

Most days we set out at four in the morning, and spent the next ten or twelve hours pouring sweat, even in the cold months, from the hard labor. But we loved our job, and I don’t think any of us would trade it for anything.

“I got a hot date tonight with Angela, that chick from the yacht club. Wicked hot,” Jackson said, while hosing off the deck.

“You mean the waitress from the yacht club?” Kirby, the apprentice, asked. “The tall

one?”

“She’s not that tall. You’re just mad ‘cause you’re a small fry.”

“Hey, no hate. I’m just saying, don’t let her wear heels.”

I rolled my eyes and clapped Jackson on the back. “Good luck, man. Make sure you hold the door and shit.”

“Good advice from the man who never dates,” Roger called over his shoulder, making the others laugh.

“Yeah yeah.”

“Hey, I can see if Angela has any single friends, man.”

I shook my head, mostly in exasperation. “I’m not desperate for a set-up, but thanks.”

“You sure? You kinda should be.”

“Yeah, how long has it been since you hit it, man?” Kirby chimed in.

I laughed and threw the mooring rope at him. “None of your fucking business.”

“Well maybe you should work on that, so we can keep it that way. I don’t need your bad women-juju rubbing off on me.”

“All right, man, sure.”

Maybe it had been years since I’d been with a woman, but I wasn’t about to tell them that—or why. None of them would understand. Ellie’s face flashed in my mind again,

as it had continuously since my birthday. Something about the way she looked when she saw me with Annie nagged at me.

Ellie hadn't ever been outwardly flirtatious with me. I mean, not any more so than she was with Theo. And she dated on and off—mostly assholes I wanted to punch in the jaw—but I never got the feeling she was hung up on me or anything. Until I saw that fake, overly enthusiastic smile she gave me after seeing Annie and I hug.

Could it be that she was jealous? No. But maybe?

I shook my head to clear it of these thoughts, because they'd do me no good. I couldn't be with her, and wishing it so, or wondering if she wanted it, would just drive me crazy.

I worked quietly as we unloaded the traps and finished up for the day. Which wasn't unusual, but instead of clearing my head with the monotony of the task, my mind kept swirling with what-ifs and maybes. By the time I walked down the dock to the parking lot across the street, I was wondering if I shouldn't head over to Ellie's right now, just to see what she was up to.

“Raf!”

I turned on my heel right before reaching the lot. Annie jogged to catch up to me, carrying paper shopping bags in each hand. She almost reached up to hug me, but I could see she noticed my sweaty brow and sea-scented work clothes and thought better of it.

“Annie, hey. Sorry, you caught me at my worst.”

She laughed. “No problem at all. You didn't text me, you know.”

I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand. “Yeah, I’ve been working. Off for two days now, though.”

“Well I’m leaving first thing tomorrow and I really did want to catch up with you.” She looked at her smartwatch. “You want to grab some dinner in a bit?”

I hesitated, and she called me on it.

“Come on, what else do you have to do?”

The truth was, I’d been meaning to go see Ellie so I could open my birthday gift from her. I didn’t do well with gifts, but I had a feeling this one was special by the way she looked at it as she handed it to me. Like she was psyching herself up. I figured the least I could do was bring over a pizza and her favorite wine and open it with her. But I hadn’t seen Annie in years, and if she was leaving tomorrow, this would be my only shot at catching up. Something I didn’t really feel comfortable doing, but knew I had to.

“All right, yeah. Let me go home and shower and I’ll meet you at Landry’s at, say, six?”

“That works for me. I’ll go drop these off at my hotel and see you then.”

* * *

Landry’s was one of the restaurants in Moon Harbor that consistently catered to tourists and townies because the food was just that good, but the atmosphere was still casual. The weather turned this week, the temperature finally dropping to normal autumn numbers, so they’d removed the outdoor seating. I stood against the brick wall and waited for Annie.

The trees lining the sidewalk were orange now, and a few of the leaves started floating in the cool breeze. One fell to the ground in front of my feet and I stepped on

it, but it wasn't as satisfying a crunch as I'd wanted. Still too bright in color. Too much life left.

"Hey!" I heard Annie's voice from down the block and turned to see her walking over to meet me. Her long tan coat was open and flying behind her.

She approached and we hugged. It was awkward, but welcome, on both sides.

"Should we get a table?" she asked, pulling back.

"Yep." I turned and opened the door, letting her walk in first, of course because my mom taught me manners. Hopefully Kirby remembered to do the same.

The hostess sat us at a table at one of the windows, with a view of the sidewalk and harbor across the street. I worked it, I knew the water like the back of my hand, but I never tired of it. It was my lifeline. The only constant I had.

"So..." Annie started, but paused, and smiled, clearly unsure of where we should start. We hadn't seen each other in years, and the circumstances around that were fucked, so I sure as hell didn't know where to start either. But I tried.

"How've you been?"

A waitress, one of the new younger ones I didn't recognize, dropped off two glasses of water and said she'd be back to take our order.

I let out an awkward sigh and repeated the question.

"Good." She nodded, still smiling, but it was a little forced.

"Truly?"

She let out a laugh. “Yeah. I mean, I have been for the past few years. The first few... I don’t know. We all just muddled through, right?”

I bowed my head, and she continued.

“I finished school, and bounced around jobs for a while. But I do sales and marketing now. Not what I ever thought I’d be doing, but I love it.”

“That’s great, Annie. I’m happy for you.”

“And you?” Her eyebrows raised up, expectant, hopeful.

“I’ve been good.”

“Really?” She couldn’t hide the doubt in her voice, but I didn’t blame her.

“Yeah,” I said, running a hand through my short hair. This wasn’t a topic I’d ever expected to talk about again. The words got stuck in my throat, tossed with the emotions clawing their way out of my chest.

I took a sip of my water and started over. “Yeah, actually, I’ve been great up here. Not at first, but over the years. It’s been a long time. I’ve made a home here.”

Her eyebrows knitted together like she still doubted me, but only for a moment, before she smiled again and reached across the table to grab my hand.

“I was so sorry to hear about your mom. I can’t imagine what that was like for you.”

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I sat up straighter, not expecting for her to go for the jugular so soon. But it got it out of the way. I never spoke about my mom and I had started to think that was a problem. Because instead of moving past my grief, I pushed it down, forced the memories away. I looked out at the water again. Took a calming breath.

“Yeah, that was painful. I miss her a lot.”

“Of course, I’m sorry.”

I took my hand out from under hers and used it to lift my glass for another sip. Because I couldn’t talk about it. Especially not with Annie.

“I really am sorry, Raf. For everything. But especially when I heard about your mom. I know she loved you more than anything,” she said, with the kind of look people give when they want to say something consoling but feel awkward about it. I just nodded.

“She did.” I couldn’t admit that my loving mom grew to hate me toward the end. How she couldn’t even look at me after everything that happened.

“How’s everyone else doing?” I didn’t really care, but it was better than talking about Mom.

“Oh, I don’t really keep in touch with the old crowd. Not really.” She looked down at the table and picked at her straw wrapper. “I, um, do see Heath sometimes. He delivers food for Pacini’s Pizza. Sometimes we order it at my office and he’s been the one...” Her voice trailed off.

“Damn. I thought he’d be an engineer by now.”

Annie shrugged, and now it was her eyes that flitted away to watch the harbor.

“He dropped out of MIT not long after everything. But he’s doing better now, from what I see. He had a rough time with it. Got deeper into the drugs for a while. Not just weed and coke, either.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. I lost touch with him, and then everyone else went their separate ways, too. But he looks healthy now.”

I didn’t know what to think. I didn’t really want to think about any of this. Horror stories from my past—things I’d long since locked away deep inside—swirled through my mind.

“You can’t blame yourself for any of it, Raf.”

I wasn’t surprised Annie said those words, but I didn’t want to hear it. Because she was wrong. I could blame myself, and I did. Every damn day since it all happened.

“Melissa made a choice. It hurt us all.”

“She needed help, and I ignored her.”

“That’s not how it happened, and you know it. Melissa was... She was hurt. She was sick. She made mistakes, and it pushed us away. We all felt the guilt of it. But none of us could have stopped it from happening. She made that choice.”

“I could have stopped it, and I chose to not answer her call. I chose to give up on her.

That's on me."

And it was. We broke up and I abandoned her when she needed me most. It doesn't matter how it got to that point, it doesn't matter how tough she made things. I should have picked up the phone. I should have gotten her help long before she shot herself in the temple.

The guilt ate me alive for years, and it still does sometimes. Hearing about Heath's issues didn't help. But nothing could be done now. Except make sure it ends with them.

My whole life people around me got hurt. I was like some sort of magnet for shit luck and pain. A curse. Years ago I told myself I'd never let anyone get close to me again. And the first year away from Boston, I'd kept it that way. I stuck to myself, did my work on the water, went home alone to a roof over my head. It was a simple life. It worked.

But through the years, I'd made friendships. I'd gotten close to people again and forgotten my place. Ellie's face flashed in my mind and I shook my head. I wanted her more than anything in this world. But beyond the fact that her brother would kill me if I touched her, I was clearly no good for her. My past is proof. There was no way I would subject her to my cursed life.

I wouldn't survive it if something happened to her.

Regret for my past, and my present, consumed me.

Heath ruined his life. Melissa killed herself. My mom was dead. And all of it was my fault.

I couldn't let it happen again.

five

RAFAEL

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After my decision to back off, I'd made it all of one fucking day staying away from Ellie. But it wasn't really my choice. I kept telling myself that, but I didn't believe my own bullshit.

I'd run into her on Harbor Street, attempting to carry a big box from the curb up to her apartment. She lived above her shop, but the door to the stairs was around the corner, and Ellie, being all five-foot-nothing, was dragging the cardboard along the pavement with all her might. It was adorable and pain-inducing all at the same time.

There wasn't a chance in hell that she'd actually ask for help. So I'd had to step in. I wasn't about to let her strain her back when it was something I could do one-handed.

So here I was, walking into her tiny apartment, just the two of us, when I was supposed to be keeping my distance. Her vanilla shampoo wafted over to my nose and her laugh had my dick stirring like it was Pavlov's bell.

"I could have done this myself, you know."

"I know. Where do you want it?"

She pointed to a corner of the living area and I set it down, easy as pie. I knew that Ellie could have, and would have, completed the task. She was strong and capable, and knew how to take care of herself. But god help me, I wanted to make life easier for her. I wanted to see her smile. Which was exactly what I was supposed to be avoiding.

"What's in here, anyway?"

“Oh, just a new coffee table I ordered. It was on clearance.” She rushed to say the last part, like I’d judge her for spending money on herself.

“You deserve to treat yourself.”

I knew she worried about money. But I also suspected she thought others didn’t see how hard she worked. After getting her degree and deciding to not use it, she’d mentioned feeling like people thought it was a mistake, or frivolous, to open up her own shop.

I didn’t know if people actually felt that way, or if it was just her own insecurity, but it didn’t matter. Ellie worried about it, and I wanted to put her at ease. She worked hard as hell and built something for herself. She had a lot to be proud of.

“Want some help putting it together?”

“No, it’s okay, I can do it.”

“I know you can, but why don’t you let me do it for you? You can repay me with a beer.” I knew she’d feel better if it seemed like I was getting something out of the deal. But the truth was, doing this for Ellie was what I got out of it. I might have been kidding myself thinking I could stay away from her. And no doubt, I’d try again tomorrow. But doing this for her tonight would make me happy.

“All right. How about I order a pizza too?”

“Sure. Pepperoni?”

She smiled and it put my soul at ease. “Of course.”

I unpacked the box and got to work. It was a simple enough project, and would have

only taken me ten minutes if I wasn't wasting time just to spend more of it here with Ellie. By the time she went to pick up the pizza a few doors down, I'd finished the entire thing and the coffee table now rested in between her sofa and TV hanging on the wall.

I cleaned up all the packing material and took it downstairs to the recycling bin on the street behind her building and decided to wait for her to get back.

These fall nights were my favorite thing about Maine. The evening air was crisp and almost too cool. But after the summertime humidity, I loved it.

I leaned against the brick wall and listened to the bustle of Harbor Street just on the other side of the building. I lived out in a quieter part of town, so it was always interesting to me when I visited Ellie's apartment or Theo's townhouse, before he moved in with Sara. I liked the solitude and the nature around my place, but I couldn't deny downtown Moon Harbor had its own kind of charm.

The sun was about set, but darkness hadn't taken over yet. Still, I worried that Ellie was taking a bit too long. Until I heard voices. I pushed off the wall and looked down the alley, seeing Ellie, holding a pizza box, and talking to her dipshit ex, Derek, as they walked toward where I stood. My mood soured on the spot. I walked up to break up this little reunion.

"Hey El, don't let this get cold," I said, taking the pizza out of her hands and eyeing Derek like the motherfucker he knew I thought he was.

"Oh hey, thanks," she said, then turned back to Derek. "Well, it was nice to see you. I should get going."

"Yeah, we have plans," I said, fully aware I sounded like a dick, but uncaring.

Derek eyed me back. The asshole actually looked me up and down like he thought I would be intimidated.

“Right. Well, it was great seeing you. Give me a call.” And then this motherfucker actually kissed her on the cheek.

I clenched down on my teeth in order to stop myself from saying anything else, and slipped my hand onto the small of El’s back, guiding her to the door and making sure Derek saw it.

“Bye, Derek,” I called over my shoulder. I caught him staring at my hand, like I knew he would be, and couldn’t hide the smirk that crossed my face. I might have had no shot with Ellie, but I sure as hell would do whatever I could to make sure Derek didn’t have a chance, either.

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“Again with the protective bullshit? I’m allowed to talk to boys, you know.”

I opened the door and held it open for her to walk in first. She climbed the stairs with a huff and I pretended it wasn’t adorable.

“That guy’s an asshole.”

“He’s not that bad. And he was being perfectly nice tonight.”

“There’s a reason you broke up, though, right?”

At the top of the stairs, Ellie turned right, opened her apartment door, and held it for me this time.

“Well, it was complicated.” She shut the door behind me and walked to the fridge to grab a couple beers. “That whole thing with Lucas and the Coastal League. It made me uncomfortable and it was easier to just break things off.”

And I didn’t complain about that at the time. Last spring, before Theo and Sara got together, Derek introduced Sara to his friend Lucas, who turned out to be a fucking maniac. Ellie dumped Derek not long after, which put me at ease. She was way too good for Derek and I still didn’t trust him after the shit his friend pulled. But now that they were talking again, my hackles were up.

“I think you did the right thing the first time and should ignore that guy.”

“What does it even matter to you? I can’t be single forever and if you haven’t

noticed, the dating pool here is pretty shallow.”

“What are you talking about, there’s lots of guys around.” She handed me a Sam Adams and made a point to roll her eyes so far back, I’m surprised she didn’t strain them. It was bullshit, and we both knew it. There were a good number of guys around town but most of them were married, or too old, or too young. And the only ones left weren’t good enough for her. Period. But that was just my own assessment.

“Why do you need to date anyway? Nothing wrong with the single life.”

“You would sure know.”

“Ha.” I grabbed a slice of pizza and took a swig of the beer.

“No, of course there’s not. I like being by myself just fine. But... I don’t know. I guess I want more.” She sat down next to me on the couch and I tried to not think about how her thigh was only inches away from mine. “Don’t you ever feel that way?”

I didn’t know how to answer that. Of course I wanted more. But I only wanted it with Ellie and I couldn’t just admit that to her.

I shrugged. “I guess. But it’s not really in the cards for me.”

“Why not?”

Another shrug. Man, I was a killer conversationalist. “I don’t know. Just not meant to be.”

Ellie put her pizza down and turned to face me, her knee sliding against my thigh.

“Well, what if the right woman came along? Wouldn’t you want to see where it could go?”

I had to be careful. There was a very loud part of my mind that wanted her to be talking about herself. That she was the right woman. And all the little flirtations throughout the years meant something to her.

But the other part of my head, the one I had to force myself to listen to, was screaming at me that she wasn’t. That she was just talking. And even if she was talking about her and I, it wouldn’t matter. Because I was no good for her. Plus, she was Sam’s little sister. I was here to look out for her, not be her man.

“I mean, it doesn’t really matter. I can’t go down that road.”

“Why not?”

She leaned in closer. Almost imperceptibly. But vanilla flooded my senses and I breathed a little deeper. It took everything I had in me to say the next sentence.

“I’m no good for anyone.”

Her sharp intake of breath and raised eyebrows showed her hand. “Why would you say that?”

My turn to shrug. “It’s true, Ellie.”

“No, Raf, I know you. There’s so much good in you. Do you really not see that?”

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“You know me now, but you don’t know all of me. Trust me, it’s better this way.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Her eyes showed off her pain at my words. And I’d give anything to be able to open up to her. Tell her everything. Let her comfort me. Take my shot, and see if she wanted me even a fraction of the way I wanted her. Visions of me holding her, her arms around me, my lips covering every inch of her skin, floated across my eyes. It was almost painful. Being this close, wanting her so much. And knowing it could never be.

Yeah, I wanted to open myself up to Ellie.

But that would be too selfish. I was no good for her and I had to keep my distance. That’s just how it was. Another fractured piece of my cursed life.

* * *

Later that night, I got home and banged my head against the wall. Or at least, it felt like it. But when I passed by my kitchen table, I saw the gift bag Ellie had given me, tissue paper peaking out, still unopened.

I’d wanted to open it with her, but it just hadn’t happened. And if tonight was any indication, it probably wouldn’t happen any time soon. I needed to keep my distance, I kept reminding myself, like a mantra I repeated over and over again.

I grabbed the bag and went to sit on my own couch, thinking too hard about the whole situation. There was something intimate about being given a gift. Maybe that sounded crazy to other people, but I could never get used to it. Not that it happened

often, anyway.

But add on the fact that this was from Ellie, and it made it all too real, too important. Ellie, the only girl I ever loved—holy fuck, I loved her—how had I not realized that before now? My hands shook as I processed the realization, the tissue paper crinkling.

I reached in and found a simple black box with an M on it, the McClintock's logo. I ran my thumb along the edge, wondering why it was so hard for me to just open the damn thing. Finally, I lifted the box lid off and all the breath wooshed out of my lungs.

A pocket knife sat nestled in silk, the mahogany handle polished and gleaming under the light of my ceiling fan. Inlaid with gold was an anchor, a symbol of my work, my ocean, my life. Ellie knew it. She also knew I'd lost my old favorite pocket knife on the boat during a storm. But what Ellie didn't know was that my mom had given me that knife when I turned eighteen. She knew I wanted to work on the water one day. She knew I loved it. It killed me that she never got to see me make that dream a reality, and it killed me to lose the knife.

But this one was beautiful. And far too nice for a dirtbag lobsterman like me. I pulled it out of the box and opened it, the steel shining so brightly, I could see my reflection in the blade. It slid open and closed with ease, and the handle was a perfect fit in my hand.

But damn.

The meaning behind it, and the meaning Ellie didn't even realize it held, meant so much to me. I felt a lump form in my throat and I swallowed it down, not wanting to be overcome with emotion. Missing my mom, the pain from my past—especially made all too real with the visit from Annie—and Ellie's thoughtfulness... Ellie...

My thoughts came too quickly now, emotions I normally kept in check, kept hidden deep down underneath a calm exterior, bubbled up to the surface. They all washed over me and overwhelmed my senses. Tears I didn't realize had come were now dripping off my face and onto my jeans as I bowed my head.

I didn't know how long I sat there like that, rubbing my thumb along the knife handle as I cried for the first time I could remember in over a decade. But as I breathed in deep, I felt a release. Nothing was fixed and nothing was changed—it was all still heavy as hell—but I carried a little less of it.

At some point, I stood up and walked into my bedroom, taking off my clothes and getting under the covers. I set the knife on the nightstand next to me, and picked up my phone. I hit the first speed dial number and waited.

“Hello?”

“Hey El.”

“It's late.”

“I'm sorry.”

“No, it's fine. I was just reading. What's up?”

“I just wanted to thank you. I opened your gift.”

“Took you long enough, jeez.” Her light giggle drifted through the phone and soothed me. I saw her radiant smile in my head. “I hope you like it.”

Jesus, she was perfect. “I love it. El, seriously... it means more than you know.”

Rustling sounds came through the speaker. “It’s not a big deal.”

“No, trust me. It is.”

“I just saw it and thought of you.”

There was so much I wanted to say. So much warring inside of me. Knowing that I should stay away from her, but not being able to. I wanted to confess my love. I wanted to tell her about my past. I wanted to go to her and hold her in my arms if she’d let me.

But I couldn’t do any of it. So I just sighed and leaned back against my pillow. She stayed quiet too, as if knowing I just needed to sit with her for a moment.

Until, “Raf?”

“Yeah?”

“I uh, I care about you a lot.”

My smile was automatic. And even though I didn’t know exactly what she meant by it, and even though I couldn’t—wouldn’t—do anything with that knowledge anyway, it made my chest swell with a feeling I’d never experienced before. Not with any woman I’d ever been with. So I couldn’t help the words that came next.

“I really care about you too, Ellie. More than you know.”

six

ELLIE

I’d been flying high all day from the tender phone call with Raf the night before. I knew I shouldn’t get my hopes up. It wasn’t like he’d actually said he wanted me, but he cared about me. More than I knew.

I mean, I knew he cared about me. Of course he did. We were friends and he’d been a protector-type for years, not that he’d ever let me forget it. But what did more mean? Was that him admitting to his feelings? In a cryptic, closed-off way that only Raf could do?

Or maybe he just meant in a brotherly way and I was being an idiot again. I went

through all of the signs, years of interactions. They played on a loop in my head, even without me wanting them to. And I could see explanations for both sides, which drove me nuts.

I closed up the shop at six and headed over to the pub to grab some take-out. Tonight was supposed to be dinner with the gang, but everyone flaked. I knew that coupling up made it harder to hang out as a group, but it didn't stop me from feeling the loneliness take hold.

I could have gone to Sam and Alex's place. It was a second home for me. But they were about to get married and I really didn't want to be the annoying little sister that was always hanging around.

As I opened the door, a wave of music and conversation hit me. The pub was usually loud, and maybe it was just me, but it seemed even louder tonight. I headed over to the bar and sat on the stool at the end. Televisions hanging around the place displayed various games, but none of the sound could be heard over the music and buzz of conversation.

"Hey El," the bartender called as he filled a pint.

"Hey Toby. Just a Sam Adams and a to-go menu please."

"Sure thing."

He dropped off the menu and came back with a full pint glass a minute later. I thanked him and took a long sip, perusing the menu and trying to decide between the barbecue burger and the fish and chips.

"Well, fancy meeting you here."

I turned my head toward the familiar voice. “Hey, Derek.”

He climbed up on the stool next to me and smiled.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

“Oh not bad. Just picking up some dinner.”

“Ah. You and Rafael again?”

“What? No.” I laughed, but even to my own ears, it seemed a little forced.

“I just thought... I don’t know, he seemed a little territorial last night.”

“Oh,” I waved my hand away, “that’s just his default setting.”

Derek laughed. “Gotcha. Well, how about you stay and join me for dinner.”

That caught me off guard, but it really shouldn’t have. I’d gotten the feeling last night that he was interested in starting things up again. And I didn’t really have a reason to not consider it. Did I?

I thought of Raf and the phone call last night. But then I remembered him saying he couldn’t be with anyone, and that’s just how it was. He confused me left and right, and no matter how much I wanted him, he was clearly either not interested or not able to be with me. For whatever reason.

“Come on, El. It’s just dinner. My treat, but no strings attached.”

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I cocked my head to the side, considering. I suppose it couldn't hurt. I needed to find a date for the wedding, anyway. Maybe this was fate.

"Okay, thanks," I said with a smile.

While we waited for our food, we caught each other up on the months we'd missed from each other's lives.

He'd been in Portland, mostly, but came up to Moon Harbor every once in a while for work. He was a scientist who worked with marine life, and his lab had a satellite location on the coast up here. I hadn't seen much of him, so I didn't know how often he was in town, but I had to admit, it was nice to see him now.

"Look, I need to say this. I'm so sorry about everything that happened with Lucas. I had no idea he was so crazy, I swear I never would have brought him around."

I waved him off, and just then, our food arrived. I waited for Toby to move to the other side of the bar before I spoke again.

"I know. It wasn't your fault. He had serious issues, but I swear, I never blamed you. I think it was just... So much happened at once, and I guess I got scared. I just figured it would be best to be on my own for a while."

"I can't blame you for that. How has single life treated you?"

"Oh, it's good. Aside from most of my friends being paired up and feeling like the odd one out," I said with a laugh.

“Maybe that’s why I thought you and Rafael were together. Your little group is so connected.”

I nodded. “We sure are.” I grabbed a french fry and popped it in my mouth.

“Makes sense then why I saw him on a date with another woman the other day at Landry’s. They looked close.”

My hackles rose and it took everything I had to keep eating and look unaffected. Raf was with a woman?

“Ah, when was that?” I asked, using all of my energy to keep my voice steady and casual.

Derek eyed me and then took a bite of his reuben. “The day before yesterday. I guess that’s why I was a little surprised to see him with you last night, and acting so possessive.”

I huffed out a fake laugh. “Yeah, well. We’re just friends. He’s like another older brother.”

He looked me up and down and then smiled. “Right.”

My hackles were up. I wasn’t stupid, and knew he was saying these things to try to get in my head about Raf. Tip the scales in his own favor, maybe. But it didn’t matter at the moment. Whatever his motive was, he let me know some very important information.

I’d been pining after Raf while he’d been dating someone else. And Derek was right about something. Raf had been possessive of me and weird toward Derek last night. And then the sweet phone call? Ugh, I felt the confusion from all of his mixed signals

swirl around me and cloud my judgment.

I took a long sip of my beer and set it down a little too roughly, the liquid sloshing. If Derek was going to be sneaky, and Raf was going to be hot and cold, then I could take things into my own hands. At least then, I'd be the one in control.

I looked over at Derek and smiled sweetly.

“What are you doing on Saturday?”

seven

ELLIE

The night before the wedding, we gathered at Il Petrini for the rehearsal dinner. Besides being the best and most fancy restaurant in town, it was also the one that Sam and Alex had their first date at, and where they ate right before Sam proposed.

It was also one of my favorite spots in town. The interior was a standard high-end restaurant—at least by Moon Harbor's standards—but it housed a hidden courtyard that was magical. Like a portal to another world.

I stood at the back, near a stone fountain and admired the fairy lights strewn across the open sky. The courtyard was surrounded by four high brick walls and they had outdoor heaters on, so despite the cool night air, I was toasty in my sleeveless emerald green dress.

Tables were normally scattered throughout the space to create intimate areas for dining, but tonight, they were arranged in one long table, running from front to back. It was draped in a white table cloth, and covered in flowers. Not Alex's desired peonies, but beautiful red and orange blooms to match the season. Tealights in clear

glass cups were interspersed with the flowers. Each place setting had a menu, calligraphed by hand in gold ink.

Everything was perfect, and possibly, the most beautiful space I'd ever seen. The happy couple had been here to set up, but went over to my apartment just down the street to change for the evening. I stayed here to make sure everything was all ready, and to welcome any early arrivals.

Sara and Theo walked in then, carrying boxes of the cupcakes Sara had made for dessert. I hurried over to help them.

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“There’s a dessert table over here,” I motioned to the right corner of the room where a small table, decorated to match the main one, was set up, already displaying a tray of cannoli from the restaurant’s pastry chef.

“This is fucking fancy,” Theo said, looking around the place.

“Charming, dear.” Sara elbowed him in the ribs.

“It really is, though. They did an incredible job.”

Just then, a cellist appeared in the doorway, and walked over to the back corner to set up.

“I didn’t even know we had a cellist in Moon Harbor,” Theo commented under his breath, and I giggled. I didn’t either. But soon, the courtyard was filled with beautiful music.

“They really went all out,” Raf said, appearing behind me. I nodded at him, but otherwise ignored his presence. I was still too confused.

“I think the cellist works for the restaurant,” Sara said, “but you’re right. Everything is gorgeous. They could have hosted the wedding itself here.”

“This would be a perfect spot for a wedding,” I said, “I mean, I know their wedding will be perfect for them. They have so many people to invite, it only makes sense to have it at the hotel. But this...” I trailed off and looked around, falling more and more in love with the space the longer I was in it.

Why did I never come here? I should start taking myself on dates.

I turned back to the dessert table to help Sara. We finished displaying the cupcakes and made sure everything looked perfect.

Theo had dragged Raf away, but they came back a minute later with glasses of champagne for all of us. I looked over to the opposite corner and saw a small bar set up, now manned by a bartender in a white shirt and black bowtie. Raf handed me a flute and then tapped his to it. His eyes burned into my soul.

“Cheers, El.”

“To the happy couple,” I said, deflecting whatever the hell look was on his face. He nodded, and we each took a sip.

Soon, the guests arrived. Gus and Cheryl McClintock, Our Aunt Anne and Uncle Peter, and even Alex’s long lost family, the old Sheriff Olsen and his son, Drew. She’d been connecting with them over the past year and while they weren’t close, they were definitely making strides.

I greeted everyone, keeping my smile wide, and refusing to think about Raf, but that was made difficult by the fact that he kept appearing nearby. Normally I’d love every chance I got to be close to him. But now I was just confused.

Luckily Sam and Alex arrived and we all sat down to dinner. Raf was placed across the table from me, but since it was so wide, it was much easier to talk to the people next to me, a fact I took and ran with.

I chatted with Sara about the season slowing down, and then with Cheryl about when I thought Alex would have babies. We ate and drank, and enjoyed ourselves. The night was perfect, but then Raf and Theo stood and announced it was time for a toast.

Theo went first and, ever the showman, told embarrassing stories about Sam's early twenties. I wasn't really listening, though, because my eyes were on Raf. I tried all night to avoid him, and now there he was, on display and staring right at me with his soulful brown eyes.

Theo finished his speech and a raucous round of applause and laughter surrounded me. I joined in for effect, but felt lost. When it died down, Raf spoke.

"A lot of people have been waiting for this. The union of the sweet new girl and the town hero. And it's finally almost here. This time tomorrow, those two lovebirds will be husband and wife." Some more cheers erupted and Theo whistled.

"We're celebrating, not just because of love, which of course deserves its own celebration, but because of the hardships these two people faced in finding each other again. Neither of them had an easy life. But they didn't let it make them jaded. They didn't let it close them off to love and to the possibilities.

"Sam is my best friend, and I can't tell you how much I admire him. He's taught me a lot about life, even without trying to. Just leading by example."

Raf looked at me again, tilting his head like he was speaking in code, just for me. "Giving us the hope that we're all good enough for love."

He raised his glass then. "I'm so glad we're here celebrating tonight, because these two deserve it more than anyone I know. And their inspiration to us all, won't ever be forgotten. To Sam and Alex."

"Sam and Alex," a chorus of voices responded, and we all sipped. Alex had tears in her eyes and Sam stood up to hug Raf. I kept the smile on my face and played the part of a doting, supportive sister. But inside, I couldn't help but think about whether or not he meant what he said.

* * *

“El, wait up!” I heard Raf’s voice, but chose to keep walking down Harbor Street, though my tired and sore feet made me slow down anyway. The night had been a huge success, and after saying goodbye to everyone, and helping the staff clean up, I finally snuck out to make my way back to my apartment. Raf obviously wasn’t going to make it that easy.

He soon caught up to me and I couldn’t ignore him any longer so I decided to play nice.

“That was a really beautiful speech.”

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“Oh, thank you. I mean, you know I’m not good at public speaking, so I just sort of spoke from the heart.”

“Did you mean it then? You believe you’re good enough for love now?” Shit, I didn’t mean to say that. I didn’t mean to talk about this at all. I started walking again, but my feet were properly killing me now, so I stopped to take my heels off.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“You can’t be serious.”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t walk barefoot on these cobblestones, who knows what you could step on. And the alley?” He pointed to the alley a block away that I’d have to walk down to get to my door. “Fuck no.”

Before I realized what was happening, Raf scooped me up, one hand behind my back, the other under my knees, and carried me down the street.

“Rafael! Put me down.”

“Nah.”

“I’m serious! I can walk, I’m not going to step on any glass or needles. This is

downtown Moon Harbor, for Christ's sake, they have a committee just to prevent stuff like that."

He laughed, but kept walking. I ignored how easy it seemed for him to carry my weight.

"I would have driven you home, you didn't have to walk."

"It's just down the street."

I looked up at him, wondering how the hell he thought he could get away with being so handsome.

"Are you going to answer my question?"

"What question?"

"The thing in your speech. About you being worthy of love. I mean, if you're dating then you must believe it, and I'm just glad you haven't closed yourself off like you were saying the other night."

"What do you mean dating?"

Shit. I shouldn't have said that.

"Oh, nothing. I just heard that you were on a date earlier this week and I figured, you know, that's good. You're not closing yourself off."

"I wasn't on a date."

"You uh, you weren't?"

“Nope.” He adjusted his grip as he turned down the alley.

“Then who were you with?” I smacked a hand over my mouth. “I’m sorry, that’s none of my business.”

Raf just smirked. “Who gave you this very salacious information?”

My cheeks reddened and even in the dark of night, I knew he could tell.

“Just. Derek. He might have mentioned it.” My voice was mousy from the embarrassment. This all made me sound so stupid.

Raf’s smirk went from jovial to angry.

“What the hell is he telling you lies like that for? To get in your pants again?”

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“What? What does that even matter? And it wasn’t a lie, exactly, it was an assumption. He saw you with a woman.”

“Yeah, I had dinner with an old friend from Boston. The same one I ran into the night of my birthday.”

“Oh.” My face was a beet now. Past red and onto purple.

“And you can’t tell me that douchebag didn’t have ulterior motives by telling you that. He saw us together the other night. Probably wanted to make sure I was out of the way so he could pounce.”

“Well what does that even matter, anyway?”

“I guess it doesn’t, but Derek doesn’t know that.”

“Well I invited him to be my guest at the wedding, so you better play nice tomorrow.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“Yes, why?”

“Because you can do so much better than that asshole.”

“What’s your problem? You don’t even have a reason for disliking him.”

“You are who you hang around, and his friend was a fucking psycho.”

“That wasn’t his fault.”

We both became silent for the last twenty steps, neither knowing what to say.

“Right. Well, whatever,” I said as he approached my door. Raf slid me down his body until my feet touched the ground. I ignored how good it felt to be that close to him and how hot it made my skin.

“Annie is just a friend,” he blurted out. “One I haven’t seen or heard from in a million years. We were just catching up.”

Joy filled my heart but I played it cool. “Okay.”

“And yes,” he said, “I did mean what I said in that speech, but it’s complicated. I really can’t be with anyone. Because I also meant it when I said I’m no good for anyone.”

“Raf—”

“Just,” he held a hand up as he gathered his thoughts. “Believe me when I say that.”

I shook my head, my face falling. “I believe you think that. But that’s all.” I unlocked my door and headed inside. When I turned around to close the door, Raf was still standing there, looking at me.

“Lock this,” he said, gesturing to the door handle.

I did.

eight

ELLIE

I stood at the back door of the ballroom, off to the side, and waited for my cue to walk down the aisle. Sara had just left, floating away like a magical siren. I looked down at my own dress, making sure it wasn't tucked into my underwear or anything. But it was perfect.

The flowy dusty rose chiffon draped over my body and stopped just above the floor. A slit in the side gave a view of my leg up to mid-thigh as I walked. Even with my short stature, the dress looked gorgeous and I thanked god I had a sister-in-law with excellent taste. I turned to Alex and squeezed her hand.

"You make a beautiful bride. I'm so happy you'll officially be my sister."

She squeezed my hand back and blinked in rapid succession, trying not to cry. "I love you, El. I'm happy too."

I fought back my own tears as I turned around and, at the hand signal from Jessie, the wedding planner, set off down the aisle. The sight of the room caught me off-guard, despite seeing it earlier. Now that it was filled with our loved ones, all in their Sunday best, and the lights were turned down for ambiance, it was breathtaking. Candle-lit lanterns hung from the ceiling, casting light and shadows every-which-way. Fabric the same dusty rose color as our bridesmaids dresses draped the walls and on the altar at the front. The flower arrangements I remembered from Alex's photos lined the front of the room. And there in front of them, were the men in my life. My eyes went straight to my brother, who looked so proud, so strong, and so happy, I could cry.

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He nodded as we made eye contact, and I knew he was also holding back tears. Because as much as we loved this town and our extended family here, we really only had each other for so long. Seeing him embrace love and find his match was one of the best things I'd ever experienced. Because it wasn't just getting to watch my brother fall in love. It was also expanding our family—giving us a future that was so much brighter than our painful past. And that was a precious gift.

When I looked next to him to see Raf and Theo, my heart swelled even more. They all looked so handsome in their tuxedos. Theo's devilish grin was firmly in place, his hands in his pockets and eyes surveying the crowd. Rafael's hair was perfectly groomed, his face freshly shaved. And those muscles of his sure filled out the tux.

I could tell he was looking at me, but I purposely avoided eye contact with Raf as I continued down the aisle. I smiled at the guests watching me and did my best to be a good Maid of Honor. But every part of me kept pulling me back to him. When I reached the front, I winked at Sam and turned to stand next to Sara.

The music changed and everyone stood. A moment later, Alex appeared at the back of the aisle like an angel. Her white gown's skirt matched ours with its flowy fabric. But the bodice was beaded lace that sparkled in the spotlight that was now on her. She'd decided to walk alone, as she hadn't known her father until recently, and even now, their relationship was complicated. But it worked out for the best.

She looked heaven-sent as she glided toward us, a bouquet of dusty pink roses and purple dahlias in her hands. I glanced over to Sam, who now definitely had tears in his eyes. His face contorted in the sweetest way, as Theo and Raf patted him on the back.

Alex continued down the aisle, all grace and beauty, beaming at Sam. And when she got to the front and handed her bouquet to me, my brother couldn't help himself and sneaked a kiss from her. Everyone laughed, and the minister made a joke, but I wasn't listening because it was at that moment that I accidentally made eye contact with Raf.

There was something in his expression, some unknowing emotion I didn't dare to guess, that made me shiver. His eyes flitted down my body and up again, and for a moment, held mine. But then he looked away, and I shook off his spell, turning my attention back to the happy couple.

Or at least, I tried. But I couldn't stop thinking about the man just ten feet away from me. The man who I'd wanted for years, who made it very clear, he wanted nothing from me except friendship. But I had male friends and none of them looked at me the way he did. As I stood there, my blood started to boil with anger at his mixed signals. But now was not the time. So once again, I put my foot down regarding Raf. Tonight was too important to spend it confused about a man and his contradictions.

I forced my eyes over to the minister and listened to the ceremony. Beautiful words for a beautiful couple. But focusing was harder than I wanted it to be. Every time my thoughts strayed, I mentally slapped my wrist. Pretty soon it was over and time for Sam to kiss the bride. I'd held up pretty well. But as they turned to walk back up the aisle, I realized I now needed to walk with Raf. He stepped toward me, the intense look still firm on his face, and held out his arm for me to take.

I almost didn't take it. But everyone was still watching, so I slipped my hand on his elbow and tried to keep my distance. Apparently he had other ideas.

He pulled me closer to his side, so that our bodies touched. A zap of energy shot down my spine at the feel of his hard muscled leg against mine. And then he leaned down and whispered in my ear, so softly, but with his signature deep timbre.

“We need to talk.”

* * *

Whatever Raf wanted to talk about, he didn’t get the chance. We were whisked outside to take photos during the sunset by a very high strung photographer.

Standing on the back deck of the hotel overlooking the water, we posed, groups at a time. The water glistened with the light from the falling sun. The salt air was cool, but the breeze from the bay was surprisingly warm, and felt like a stroke of luck made just for the wedding. Seagulls squawked in the distance but it was relatively quiet and as I looked around at my loved ones, all joyous and dressed to the nines, I tried to commit this moment to memory. To always look back on this night and remember how happy we all were.

Sam and Alex had already taken photos before the wedding, a newer “first look” tradition that was supposed to cut down on post-wedding photos. But it didn’t feel like that was accomplished.

The photographer arranged and rearranged us over and over again. Sam and me. Alex and me. Alex and Sam and me. All of us. Then just the girls. Then just the boys. Then all of us again. I never realized how exhausting taking wedding photos was. And throughout all of it, every time Raf leaned down to my ear and opened his mouth, he got scolded for ruining the shot. It would have been funny if I hadn’t been so nervous about what he wanted to say.

“Okay, men, I’d like you to slide behind the women. Yep, back and just a hair to the left. And wrap your arms around their waists.”

Oh hell. What is this, prom? Raf’s hands seared my skin through the fabric of my dress. We’d never really been this close before, at least not for more than a quick hug.

And now, the salt and pine and man-scent that was all Raf wafted up to my nose as he positioned his body flush with my back. I tried to focus. I really did. But all I could think about was the fact that Raf's dick was resting at the top of my butt.

Do not wiggle. Repeat. Do NOT wiggle.

Trying like hell to remain as still as possible, I posed for the camera, hoping my face didn't look strained. I could just imagine having to stare at a photo on the wall of Sam and Alex's house every time I went over. Oh yeah, I look constipated because Raf was up my ass. Or at least, I wished he was. But all too soon, I felt the heat of him leave me and a breeze cooled down my entire back side. He'd stepped away, and too soon. The photographer looked annoyed, but at that moment, Jessie interrupted and with a shrill voice practiced in getting people's attention, announced that we were to head inside to get ready for the introductions.

When I turned to chance a look at Raf, all I saw was him turning away from me and walking toward the door.

nine

RAFAEL

After taking photos, which was torture in its own right, we gathered in a small private room off the ballroom for drinks. The band would announce us soon and we'd have to walk out in front of all the guests which was the last thing I wanted to do. But Ellie would be on my arm, so it was worth it.

A waiter came in carrying a silver tray of champagne flutes. I grabbed two and walked over to Ellie, who was still doing her best to ignore me. She stood by the window, looking out at the Harbor. I approached behind her, forcing myself to look away from her and to the view instead.

The water was dark, but the lights of the hotel sparkled off it. The moon was low in the sky, not quite full, but bright enough to illuminate the trees to the north.

If I could let myself be a romantic person, I would take her hand and lead her out to the patio to stand there together, under that moon. I would tell her how beautiful she looked tonight. How beautiful she always looked. And then I'd take her cheek in my hand, slide my other hand to her waist. And I'd lean in and claim her lips.

It would be perfect, because Ellie was perfect. But that's exactly why I couldn't do any of it. She was far too good for me. So instead, I nudged her shoulder with mine. I could sense her head turning toward me, and held out the champagne, my eyes still on the water because if I dared to look at her right now, my willpower would go straight out this very window.

She took the glass from my hand and bumped my shoulder back in response. I couldn't help the smile that formed on my lips. We just stood there, sipping the bubbly and watching the lights sparkle on the water. Like we were in a damn movie or something. Or maybe it was just my mind playing tricks on me. Maybe none of this was as poetic as I made it out to be. But that was how it always was when I thought of Ellie. Poetic. And god help me, I never wanted it to change.

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“All right, everyone, it’s time to do your entrances!” The voice of the wedding planner rang out from behind us but neither of us moved. And I didn’t want to think too hard about that. But it was hard not to.

“Hey man,” Theo clapped me on the back, breaking me out of the moment. It was for the best, but I couldn’t help the twinge of anger I felt. “We’re gonna do some tequila shots when we get out there. I need you as wingman, because Sam’s already balking.”

“Sure thing.”

“We haven’t even had dinner yet,” Ellie said, rolling her eyes. Theo wrapped his arm around her shoulders and turned on the charm. My blood heated up by a few degrees, but I ignored it.

“Come on, El, we’re pre-gaming. It’s a celebration.” He kissed her on the cheek and she rolled her eyes harder, but laughed at him, too. We all turned to walk to the door leading to the ballroom.

Theo joined Sara at the front of the line, as they’d be going out first. He slid his arm around her waist and planted an intimate kiss in the crook of her neck. The kind of move that told you they were a secure couple who couldn’t keep their hands off each other. And I loved that for them. My friends deserved happiness, especially after all that came before it. But as Ellie took her place next to me, I felt envious for the first time. Or maybe, I was acknowledging my envy for the first time.

What I’d give to be able to wrap my arm around Ellie. To touch her without pretense

or worry that I was coming on too strong. To feel her skin under my lips, and taste her sweetness. When the photographer had us pose with my arms around her, I might have jumped a little too quickly at the opportunity. Feeling her body against mine was all too perfect. But I didn't want to be a creep, and keeping my dick in check was a challenge when Ellie's ass was right there in front of it. So I backed off, knowing it was the only way to preserve my sanity.

The wedding planner opened the door and signaled for Theo and Sara to walk out into the ballroom. I heard the band announce their names and roles. And then it was our turn. I offered Ellie my arm again, and she took it.

“And now, the sister of the groom and Maid of Honor, Eleanor Waters and the Best Man, Rafael Marroquin.” A voice rang out over the speakers and the band played an upbeat tune as we walked into the ballroom, now set up with round tables filled with our friends and fellow townies.

Everyone's eyes were on us and it gave me the sort of sinking feeling I got whenever the boat hits an especially large wave. I wasn't good at any of this stuff, but Ellie was. I looked over to see her eyes bright, her face lit up with a smile that could heal me if I were on death's door. She raised her bouquet into the air and did a little wave with it. Everyone was smiling back, some were clapping, some were cheering. And despite my discomfort, I smiled freely at the girl on my arm and how damn lucky I was to even know her.

We got to the dance floor and joined Sara and Theo, turning back to the door from the side room. And then the band announced the happy couple and the room went even wilder. Sam and Alex emerged holding hands, and Sam brought them up into the air and did a fist pump with his other hand. Alex laughed at him and beamed.

The band started playing “At Last” and Sam swept his bride into a slow dance. Everyone watched for a minute—a decidedly awkward tradition—until the wedding

planner lady came over and gently shoved us to the floor to join them. I wasn't much of a dancer but the chance to have Ellie in my arms and a few minutes to finally talk to her excited me enough to get another smile out of me.

I settled my hands on her waist, pulling her close but not enough to raise eyebrows. I would have preferred to feel her body against mine, but this was a classy affair. She draped her arms over my shoulders and smiled up at me.

"We finally have a—"

"Didn't you want to talk about—"

We said at the same time, and I shook my head, a nervous laugh coming out. Why was I nervous?

"Why did you really bring Derek? Are you guys back together?"

Ellie's mouth dropped open and her brows knit in confusion for just a moment before she smoothed her face out and looked away. We still swayed to the music, but I felt her stiffen.

"I don't know. I needed to bring a date. Why do you care?"

"You didn't need to bring a date. I didn't bring one. What, is it like some bad etiquette or something?"

"No, I... I don't know."

"So are you back together?"

"No. We're talking, I guess, I don't know where it'll lead. Why do you care?" she

asked again. I couldn't very well keep avoiding the question. Ellie was too feisty to let it go.

"I'm worried about you."

She stopped dancing for the briefest moment, but recovered. "You're worried about me?"

"Yeah."

She huffed out a laugh, but even I could tell, it was humorless.

"You don't need to worry about me, Raf. It seems to me, you've been doing that for far too long."

"Can't help it."

"Well, who I choose to date or not date is none of your business. Especially since you can't even give me a reason why you're concerned."

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I couldn't pretend her words didn't cut me, at least a little. I didn't want any of her life to be "none of my business." All of Ellie was my fucking business, except... She wasn't. She really wasn't, and I had to stop pretending like I had any say in the matter. But I couldn't.

"Look, I'm not trying to be a buzzkill or anything, but that guy is bad news. He's the one who brought Lucas here, who knows how deep his knowledge of that shit went. I don't like him."

She huffed again. "He's been over this a thousand times, with the police and with me. He had no clue Lucas was so crazy and violent, and he never would have been friends with him otherwise."

"Yeah well of course he'd say that now."

Her body stiffened and she shook her head and rolled her eyes, sure signs I'd pushed her too far. I didn't want to argue with her, but seeing her with that guy, and knowing he could be bad news, was too much. I tried a new tactic.

"I thought you didn't even want him? You broke up with him pretty fast last spring."

"Yeah, well he wants me. Imagine that! Someone actually wants me, and isn't afraid to show it. So maybe that's the person I should be spending my energy on."

I didn't have a response to that, because of course I didn't. There was no way I could admit that I'd kill to have her. That I wanted her more than my next breath. So I faltered and looked for a lifesaver and said the first thing that came to mind.

“I’m just trying to be honest. I thought you valued my opinion.” And even as I said it, I felt the weight of the mistake. I deserved the verbal ass-kicking she was about to lay on me, judging by her twitching eye.

She took a deep breath and looked at me.

“You know, Raf, you must think I’m pretty stupid.”

What? That was like a gut-punch.

But then she continued. “There might have been a time where I cared about your opinion a little too much—probably a lot too much—but that time is over. I don’t give a shit what you think.”

She dropped her arms to her sides and started to walk away, but turned back. And then stabbed me in the heart.

“I waited for you for so long. To care about me the way I...” She shook her head. “I was so stupid. Thinking you could care for me like that. And that’s my fault. But I’m done now.”

Her eyes glistened, and I reached out but she held up a hand to stop me. “You don’t have to worry about me, or who I’m dating, or what ‘trouble’ I’m getting into. You’re off the hook. You can have your life back, okay?”

“El—”

“You don’t have to worry about me, because I don’t want anything to do with you anymore.”

I knew the band kept playing because their hands moved along their instruments. The

singer swayed as he sang into the microphone. The people around me smiled and danced. But I heard none of it.

I stood in the middle of the floor and watched the only woman I've ever loved walk away from me, and straight into the arms of another man.

ten

ELLIE

I'd spent the last few days at home, ignoring everyone and everything I could. The wedding had gone off without a hitch, and no one seemed to have witnessed the fight between Raf and me. But as soon as the cake was eaten, and the couple had their send-off, I disappeared.

I didn't want to be around people, I didn't want to risk running into Raf, and I sure as hell didn't want to deal with Derek. I'd thanked him for being my date, but said I wasn't feeling well and needed to head home. He was understanding, and drove me the five blocks, despite my protest. It reminded me of being carried the night before, and that gave me a whole other load of thoughts.

I'd locked myself inside, showered off the day, put on comfy jammies, and had been in bed ever since. I didn't even open the shop, which prompted Sara to text me relentlessly until I told her I was sick.

And I was sick. I was like a stupid, lovesick puppy. I just wanted to cry, and sleep, and eat tons of chocolate. But my chocolate supply had dwindled, so I was stuck just crying and sleeping.

It felt like I was going through a breakup, but without the relationship. I couldn't even vent to my friends because none of this was real. It was just a thing that existed

in my head. And maybe that was what hurt the most. That none of my feelings were even valid because they weren't actually real. Or at least, what I was mourning wasn't real.

I flopped over to my side and hugged my pillow, but then the buzzer went off. I thought about ignoring it, but then my phone buzzed too.

Sara: I have a key and I'm coming up.

Damn. Why did I think it was a good idea to give her a key? If I died, I could have just rotted here. No biggie.

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I figured I'd stay in bed and lean into the whole "sick" thing, so I didn't move. But then Sara appeared in my bedroom doorway carrying a bag of food and I burst into tears.

She set the bag down and ran to me, sitting on the edge of the bed and pulling me into a hug.

"You're not sick, are you?"

"No," I cried. She held me and I let the tears fall. A few minutes later, I sniffled the last of the tears and she handed me tissues from the box on my nightstand. I blew my nose while she got up, and when she came back, she handed me a warm cloth to wipe my face.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't know. It's stupid."

"It's certainly not if it's making you cry and stay in bed for three days."

I sighed.

"Come on," she said, pulling me to the kitchen. "I brought soup in case you really were sick, and baked goods and ice cream in case you weren't."

"That's perfect."

* * *

An hour later, filled to the brim with Sara's cookies and lemon squares, I was ready to talk about it. I had worried that admitting my feelings out loud would somehow mess with the group dynamic. But it was only Sara here, and I knew I could trust her to keep it quiet. So I took a deep breath and blurted it out.

"I'm in love with Raf."

"Well, of course you are."

"What?"

"Sorry, should I have acted surprised?"

"Ugh. How long have you known? Does everyone know?"

"I doubt it, no one else has the gift."

Sara was pretty woowoo, but her instincts and insights were almost always spot-on. I didn't know if I believed in magic or psychic ability, but I believed in Sara.

"Well, I told him I didn't want anything to do with him anymore."

"Oh wow. I thought you were going to say you confessed your feelings for each other."

"No way, I'm tired of—wait a minute. For each other? Raf doesn't have feelings for me."

"Oh, yes he does. He just can't admit it for some reason." She shook her head and

grabbed another cookie. “That boy has a backstory. He just keeps it locked up.”

“We’re close. I’ve thought maybe he wanted me before. But every time he does something that makes me think that, he turns around and does something else to ruin it. He’s so hot and cold and I’m so sick of it.” Now that I was talking, I couldn’t stop, and Sara seemed to sense it, so she put her cookie down and listened.

“I’ve tried to keep him at a distance, but then he reappears. And it’s almost like he does the same. But I can’t take feeling like I’m wanted one moment, and then rejected the next. I don’t know how to handle it.

“He was angry I brought Derek as my date to the wedding, and I don’t know, it just set me off. Like how is that any of his business to care about when he’s had a million chances to be with me but chooses not to? Am I just supposed to wait around?”

I didn’t expect an answer, but I was out of breath and tired of the whole thing. I stuffed another cookie into my mouth.

“I completely understand where you’re coming from. It’s not fair to you at all. It’s not fair to either of you. But I fear it’s more complicated than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve sensed he’s wanted you for years. Why do you think he never dates anyone? Why do you think he always wants to take you home and be around you? But something is holding him back.”

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“Why can’t he just figure it out? Or then at least stop giving me mixed signals. If he doesn’t want me, fine, but he should stop making me think he does.”

“It’s not fair to you. And I hope that he’ll change. Or at least, maybe this knocked some sense into him. You can’t avoid him forever, but I support you in putting up a boundary. If you don’t want to see him for a while, then you shouldn’t.”

“Thank you.”

“No thanks necessary, my love. However, it’s almost Halloween, so I’m going to need you to end your self-imposed imprisonment and prepare for the party we’re throwing.”

“I’m not in the partying mood.”

“Hush, it’s still three days away. You’ll feel differently by then. Plus, it’s a great time to dress up, look hot, and flirt with random guys. It’ll help you get your mojo back.”

“That sounds even less appealing. But maybe you’re right.”

“Of course I am. Do you have a costume?”

“No, but I’ll get one.”

She smiled and kissed my cheek. “Perfect.”

eleven

RAFAEL

I'd been laying low for a few days after the wedding. I went straight to work, and straight home. Ellie was probably still mad at me, and I knew I deserved it. I never meant to confuse her, but it'd become hard to hide my feelings, even if I never expressed them clearly.

But leaving her confused and unsure of herself was fucked up. It was my doing, and that made me feel like shit. Just one more reason I knew I should stay away. I was no fucking good for her.

After a long day on the water, Kirby and Jackson had convinced me to meet them back at the pub for some dinner. Apparently they and some of the new guys from the Fortuna Fin crew had a weekly thing going. And since I had nothing else to do, and no excuses came to mind quick enough, I'd been roped into it.

After I'd showered off all the sweat and sea stink, I drove back downtown to meet the guys. The pub was finally back to mostly locals during the week, and I relaxed at seeing a less crowded space. Too many people around made me anxious, and I was already dreading the dinner.

"Hey man, over here," Jackson called from a table in the back. I made my way through the other patrons and sat at the large, but mostly empty table.

"Where's everyone else?"

"Not here yet, they got back to port late." Jackson said.

"Yeah, because that boat sucks ass. We got a pitcher, so drink up," Kirby said, sliding an empty pint glass my way.

Pretty soon, we were eating and shooting the shit and it wasn't all that bad. I even thought I could maybe hang out with these guys more often.

"I told that chick, there's no way I'm dressing up. But she said 'no costume, no play' so I'm not risking it. I gotta go grab something that doesn't make me look stupid."

"You going to that, Raf?"

"What?" I'd zoned out watching some college football game I didn't care about on the screen above the table.

"That Halloween party. Isn't your friend Sara the one throwing it?"

"If the sheriff is there, how good can it be? I might dip early."

"I guess I forgot about it. I don't know, I haven't seen anyone since Sam's wedding last week."

"I ran into Sara and Ellie Waters down at the costume store down in Ingleside. Let me tell you, if all the girls are shopping for slutty costumes like that, I don't care if the whole sheriff's department is there, I'm posting up and looking at the view," Kirby said, laughing like a hyena.

I had to stop myself from lashing out. That wouldn't do any good, and would only alienate me from the few friends I had outside of my normal circle. But shit. Ellie looking for a 'slutty' costume to wear in front of guys like this made me want to rage. And she'd be annoyed by that, but I couldn't help it. I shot Sara a text asking about the party and if I really needed a costume. Ellie wanted me to leave her alone. Fine. She wanted nothing to do with me? Fine. But I'd be damned if I didn't look out for her. I'd been doing it for years, I wasn't about to stop now.

Sara texted me back quickly, saying that yes, I absolutely did need a costume, fucking great. The party was on Friday night at the Anchorage. I texted back that I'd be there.

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The guys were still talking about the women they were hoping to hook up with, and I'd grown weary of the conversation. So when my phone rang and I saw Annie's name pop up, I was intrigued, and ready to use it as an excuse to call it a night.

"I gotta take this call, guys. I'll see you tomorrow." I threw a couple twenties down on the table and ignored their shit talking as I walked away.

By the time I got to the quiet outside, I'd missed the call. But it was weird that she had called me, so I immediately pressed redial. It rang twice.

"Raf?"

"Annie. What's going on?"

"I'm sorry to call you. I know this is weird." Her voice sounded strained. As if she'd been crying, maybe? The wind had picked up and the trees were swaying, lining the sidewalk with crunchy leaves, finally.

"No, it's fine." I said, as I walked over to the parking lot and got in my truck. "Are you okay?"

"I, uh... I'm not sure, Raf. I really need to talk to you."

Now the intriguing curiosity I'd had was a full-blown eerie feeling. Something wasn't right.

"You can talk to me, Annie. Tell me what's going on."

“I can’t. Not on the phone.”

“Okay...”

“If I come back to Moon Harbor next week, can you meet up with me?”

“Uh... I mean—”

“Please, Raf,” she cut me off, her voice insistent and anxious. “I need to see you. I need to talk about things in person.”

“Okay, yeah, of course. What day?”

“I don’t know yet. As soon as I can get there. I’ll text you.”

“All right. Annie, are you okay?”

“I’m safe, but no, I’m not okay.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I promise I’ll explain it all when I see you.” My gut churned.

“Okay. Take care of yourself. Let me know if you need help with anything.”

“I will. Bye.” She ended the call before I could respond.

“What the fuck?” I whispered to the empty air in my truck.

I didn’t know Annie well anymore, but I’d known her well back in the day. And I’d never heard her like this. Never experienced such a strange feeling. There was

something seriously wrong, but I couldn't imagine what, or what she needed with me. We hadn't been in each other's lives for a decade. None of it made sense, and all of it made my blood run cold.

twelve

ELLIE

The Anchorage was loud and bustling, filled to the brim with sexy nurses, slutty kittens, and all of the Stranger Things characters.

I'd decided on a mermaid costume, but in true Halloween fashion, the bottoms were less of a tail and more of a, well, bikini. It had a little ruffle made to look like a fin. My top actually covered my stomach, but it was so low-cut, I had to use double-stick tape to make sure I didn't flash everyone. Though, as I walked through the room to try to find my friends, I felt like that had been a modest decision.

Sara had said to meet her at the same roped-off area we were at for Raf's birthday, so I shoved my way toward the right side of the room, since I couldn't see past the dance floor and filled up tables surrounding it.

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It almost felt like I got hit on with each step I took, which was so not my normal experience. I knew that dressing like this would be a curse more than a blessing, but I was ready to throw caution to the wind and just have one night of debauchery. One night where I let myself show off and have fun and not worry about what Raf was thinking.

A waitress wearing a sexy angel outfit and carrying a tray of test tube shots offered me one.

“They’re on the house!” she yelled, over the thumping bass. I took one and tipped her out of the little pocket on my hip—the only spot I could fit my cash, ID, and condom.

I knocked the shot back, and thought it tasted vaguely like apple cinnamon, then kept walking to my destination. Nothing like a little liquid courage.

“Ellie, you’ve arrived!” Sara, in all her glory, was decked out in the most extravagant Jessica Rabbit costume I’d ever seen. In fact, I didn’t think it was a costume, it looked more like an actual sequined couture gown. The slit up her leg was downright scandalous, and the dramatic makeup and bright red wig capped it off.

When we went shopping the other day for my costume, she had perused the options, but didn’t find anything for herself.

“This is what you meant when you said you’d ‘throw something together?’” I asked her, incredulous. She shrugged and winked at me, then handed me a cocktail that appeared to be smoking.

“Hey Ellie, looking hot, yet wildly inappropriate,” Theo said as he approached from behind. He wore a pinstriped suit and fedora.

“Oh shush. What are you supposed to be?”

“I’m a gangster.”

“He didn’t want to be a Roger Rabbit,” Sara said, smirking. “Landry’s over there,” she said, pointing to our friend at the next table over. “She’s here as a guest, I begged her to request the night off.”

Landry worked for Sara at the Witch’s Brew, but also here at the Anchorage. Her parents owned Landry’s downtown, named after her of course, but they didn’t have a good relationship, so Landry had left home at eighteen. She’d worked her butt off ever since to support herself. I was glad to see she didn’t have to work the party tonight. She deserved to let loose.

I drank the mystery cocktail and chatted with Landry and some of our other friends. Sam and Alex were on their mini-honeymoon, ‘glamping’ in Acadia National Park. They planned to go to Scotland in the spring, but wanted to get away for a little bit now. I was happy for them, but their absence was felt, especially when Raf arrived. I didn’t see him approach, only knew he was there when Sara called his name.

“Rafael! A pirate. How fitting for our man of the sea.” She hugged him and handed him his own smoking drink, which seemed to confuse him. I knew he noticed me, since I was standing only a few feet away, but I ignored him completely, focusing intently on a story Landry—dressed in yellow plaid as Cher from Clueless—was telling about her last date. It sounded miserable and the thought of dating almost made me want to go home and crawl under my blanket.

“—and then he had the audacity to Venmo request half the cost of my iced tea. An

iced tea! Are you kidding me?! I sent him the full dollar-ninety-five.”

The girls around us erupted in conversation at that, but I frustratingly caught myself peeking at Raf to see what he was doing. It wasn't even anything, just sitting next to Theo and talking like they do every other place they go. But then Landry shrieked at one of her friends and the noise caught his attention.

He looked over this way and his eyes found me almost immediately, tracing a path up and down my body, and not even trying to hide it. My cheeks grew hot and my nipples tightened. He knew I was angry at him, but he didn't seem to care right then.

I'd seen Raf check me out before. I'd known, even if I thought he wasn't into me like that, that there were times when he appreciated my body. But never once had he looked at me like this until tonight. Like he wanted to devour every inch of me. Like he was holding himself back from taking me right here in the middle of a crowded room.

I shivered and he smirked. Asshole.

I turned around to ignore him and pretend to be involved in Landry's conversation again, just in time for them to pass around some shots that looked like blood. We toasted to the night, and I felt the liquid course through me. I wasn't anywhere near drunk, but I felt lighter than normal, and figured that would do me good tonight.

A few minutes later, the girls decided to dance, so they dragged me to the floor and I let loose. The music was so loud, I couldn't hear anything the girls were saying, but it didn't seem to matter. Lights flashed around us, strobing, making all of our movements look skewed and bizarre. House music blared from the speakers, and the DJ, dressed as a zombie, commanded the dance floor like this was Ibiza, not our little New England town.

I couldn't move without bumping into others, but it didn't seem to matter. The dancing crowd moved as one, teeming with energy.

I felt a hand on my waist, and turned, seeing Derek behind me, dressed up as a cowboy. He said something, but I couldn't hear it, so I shrugged. He laughed and started dancing next to me, occasionally grabbing my waist in an effort to keep me close.

I'd been honest with him the night of the wedding that I wasn't sure what I wanted. That I probably wasn't in the right state for a relationship, but if he wanted to hang out as friends and maybe do something casual, I could probably handle that. He seemed eager to agree. I'm not sure if it's because he thought he had an 'in' and could wear me down, or if he only wanted something casual too. But either way, he was here for it, and I didn't worry about leading him on, since I was up front about my wishes.

More test tube shots were passed around, this time neon green liquid that looked like ooze but tasted like pineapple. Suddenly Theo appeared and said something into Derek's ear, then dragged him off toward the sitting area again. I didn't bother to watch or go after them. I was having the time of my life dancing my heart out.

But then I felt someone tap me on the shoulder. I swiveled around to find Raf standing close to me. Too close. Our bodies were almost touching, and with people dancing and moving around us, we were jostled into each other more than was safe for my psyche.

I tilted my head up to look into his eyes. They were hungry. He leaned down and spoke in my ear.

"Dance with me."

I shook my head. Who did he think he was? I turned away from him, but he slid his hands to my hips and started moving behind me. My ass immediately backed up against him, like it had a traitorous mind of its own.

I felt him lean down and speak again. His mouth was so close to my ear, I could hear him through the music, but could also feel the vibrations of his words as they traveled down my spine.

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“You look so fucking good tonight, El. You’re driving me crazy.”

We moved together, and I backed up even more so that I was flush against his body. I’d never felt this good. I didn’t know what was happening or where this came from, but I didn’t care. All of my willpower to avoid this man went straight out the window.

His hands slid along my exposed skin. My waist, up my ribs, down my arms. Raf had never acted like this and I almost thought it was a fever dream. But when I turned around to face him again, I saw the hunger in his eyes once more. I moved my hands up to wrap around his neck, our bodies flush, my breasts pressed up against him. His eyes zoned in on them, and I felt him twitch against my stomach.

Holy shit. I felt Raf’s dick twitch against my stomach. His costume pants were tissue paper-thin and I could feel everything. He was hard as a rock and it was because of me. There was no denying it, and he didn’t try to hide it. He just kept running his hands all over me, causing goosebumps in their wake, despite the heat of the dance floor. I swayed to the beat, and with each movement, I passed over his cock,

I thought back to how I cried over this man and his mixed signals, and now I was completely complicit. Guilty of sending mixed signals of my own.

But god help me, I couldn’t stop myself.

thirteen

RAFAEL

Fuck me.

Ellie was in the sexiest little costume I could have ever imagined, and while my first thought was pure rage at the guys who were ogling her, I forced that down so I wouldn't piss her off even more.

Logically, I knew she was a grown woman who could do what she wanted and dress how she wanted. But the caveman side of me wanted to haul her over my shoulder and hide her away from those assholes with prying eyes.

And okay, maybe I was no better. I was a fucking scumbag just like the rest of them, because the idea of hauling her away also included me claiming her like the beast I was.

How the hell could I function when the woman of my dreams was right here, rubbing against me, wearing flimsy fabric that barely covered her perfect tits, round ass, and that pussy I'd kill for?

I told myself to stay away. Ellie told me to stay away. And I fucked everything up with one look at her. I was no better than the worst lecher here. Of course, I wanted Ellie for more than just her body. She was perfect to me and I wanted her for everything she was. But it didn't matter. One little Halloween costume drove me feral and I was past the point of caring.

We moved to the music, her body swaying against mine, each pass dragging across my hard and aching cock. I wasn't much of a dancer, but it didn't matter tonight. I was fully immersed in what Ellie wanted to do, and that meant dancing. And thank fuck for that, because I couldn't stop touching her. Feeling her soft skin under my fingertips. And this was the perfect excuse for that.

She turned around again, moving her hips to the music and shoving her perfect plump

ass back in my crotch. I swear I thought I'd die on that dance floor, and I was okay with it.

I leaned down to speak in her ear, and smell her vanilla scent while I was at it.

“What are you doing, angel?”

She looked back at me and rose up to reply. I dropped my head down so I could hear her. Her breath against my own ear sent shivers down my whole body.

“What am I doing? What are you doing? I told you to leave me alone.”

“Turns out I can't do that.” My hips jutted forward on their own accord. She responded by circling her hips in the most devilish way.

“Was Theo your wingman?” She asked, pointing to where he was talking to Derek at our table. I smirked.

“Lucky coincidence.”

“Yeah, I'm sure.”

“You like messing with me, don't you? Putting this ass up on me, showing off those tits. You know it's driving me wild.”

She turned around then once more, looking up at me. There it was. I'd just admitted how much I wanted her, in so many words. There was no hiding it anymore. I thought Ellie was the sexiest woman in the world and I would no longer deny it.

Instead of responding, though, she just turned and left, slipping through the crowd and disappearing. But I wasn't about to let her go that easy. I followed her, my height

and her distinctive outfit giving me an eye on her path to the exit. It took a couple minutes of shoving my way through the crowded dance floor, but I finally reached the doors and pushed outside.

The air was a cold slap in the face and my first thought was that Ellie would be freezing in that little costume. I looked both ways and saw her slip around the corner.

“El, stop,” I called as I followed her. When I rounded the corner, I found her toward the back of the alley, leaning against the brick wall. She looked like sin.

“Go away, Raf.”

“No. You must be freezing.”

“I’m fine.”

“What’s going on?”

“I needed some air.”

“Come on, El.”

“Don’t ‘come on, El’ me. What the hell were you doing in there? Just trying to make sure Derek and I don’t get back together or were you trying to mess with my head some more?”

I knew she had every right to feel that way after the way I’ve acted. But I couldn’t control myself anymore.

I stepped forward, putting my hands up on the wall, boxing her in. I leaned in close and smelled her scent again before I spoke next to her ear.

“I’m sorry for fucking with your head. I never meant to do that. I swear, I never meant to.”

“Well what makes you want me all of a sudden?”

“All of a sudden?” I rested my forehead against hers, an intimate invasion of her personal space and I couldn’t be sorry for it. “Angel, I’ve been stroking myself,

coming to only you for years. No one else. No dates or porn or girlfriends. You. Only ever you. And I've been punishing myself the whole time for it because it's wrong."

"It's not wrong."

"Oh yes it is, but I don't know if I can bring myself to care anymore."

She tilted her head, giving me access to her ear and neck. I didn't even think she meant to do it, but I used it to my benefit. Bending lower, I brushed my lips against her neck, and holy fuck, was that a thrill. She whimpered and the sound went straight to my cock, which despite the cold, was still rock hard. I moved my lips against her, leaving a trail of almost-kisses up to her ear, where I spoke again.

"There is no one, anywhere, who wants anyone as much as I want you." I rolled my hips against her to show how hard she made me, not that she had any doubt after the dance floor.

A little gasp sounded in her throat and I smirked. But then my phone rang in my pocket, breaking the spell. Ellie shook her head slightly, and I ignored it. Our faces were so close. I could feel her breath fan over my face. I could lean down the smallest bit and claim her lips. Finally find out what it would be like to kiss the girl of my dreams.

But then my phone rang again.

"Fuck."

A little voice told me to check it. The spell was broken for real when I grabbed it from my back pocket and saw Sam's fucking name pop up on the screen.

Ellie looked down and saw it too. And she knew, whatever this was, wasn't

happening anymore.

I pushed off the wall and answered the call.

“Yeah?”

“Hey man, sorry to bug you.”

“It’s all right, what’s up?” Ellie gave me the death stare.

“I tried calling El a few times and it went straight to voicemail. I know she was heading to that big party tonight. Can you make sure she gets home safely? I don’t like all those assholes who think Halloween is a time to prey on girls.”

All the energy in me deflated. I looked over at Ellie, and she was pissed. She could hear the conversation, Sam’s voice coming out loud and tinny from the phone speaker.

“Of course, man.”

“Thanks, bro. You’re the best.”

“No worries.”

I tapped the ‘end’ button and pocketed the phone again.

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“I hope you know how ridiculous that is. My brother calling you, treating me like I’m a child, expecting you to drop everything to babysit me.”

I didn’t know how to respond. I saw her point of view, of course. She was a grown adult, and not many other grown adults had their brothers looking out for them like that. But I knew where Sam was coming from too. Wasn’t that the original reason I came tonight? To make sure she wasn’t preyed on by horny assholes?

Only, I became the horny asshole. Fuck.

Ellie saw the war I was having all over my face, and huffed out a sigh.

“Whatever,” she said. “I’m going home. Feel free to follow behind me like a prison guard, since I can’t be trusted to get there on my own.”

I felt bad. I really did. I felt confused and ashamed and still so damn hungry for her. But Sam’s call put into perspective just how fucked up I was for lusting after my best friend’s little sister so much.

I watched her walk down the alley and back to the main street, and I followed behind, because of course I did. Ellie only lived a few blocks away, so we walked, separately, but together, until she got to her door. She grabbed a hidden key from under a flower pot, no wonder since her costume didn’t exactly have storage space, and unlocked the door.

When she turned around to close it, she looked me in the eye and shook her head, disappointed, angry, and who knows what else. I thought about how it was

reminiscent of the night of the rehearsal dinner. Me fucking up, but still making sure she got home safe. Seemed like a theme.

“I’m locking it,” Ellie said, closing the door. I heard the deadbolt click in place.

This time, she beat me to it.

fourteen

ELLIE

A few days after the party, I was helping my last customer and closing up shop when Raf walked in. I did a double take, not expecting to see him any time soon after the disaster of Halloween, but there he was, strolling in like it was no big deal. His big frame stood out like a bull in a china shop, and when he saw me with a customer, he pretended to be interested in the beaded bracelets in the front case.

I took my time packing up the sea glass pin I’d just sold, placing it in a box and gift wrapping it to perfection. I always prided myself on my packaging but today, it also had the added benefit of making Raf wait.

The customer, a cute little old lady with white hair, thanked me profusely and then shuffled to the door. Raf hurried over to open it for her, causing me to scowl. He really had to be perfect, didn’t he?

“Oh, thank you, young man!” The lady called as she left.

“My pleasure, Miss.”

She erupted into a fit of laughter and turned down the street. I stood there watching with my arms crossed.

“Hey, El.”

“What do you want?”

“To talk to you.”

“I don’t know what you could possibly want to say.”

“I know. And I’m sorry. I got carried away the other night.”

My back straightened, and he rushed to explain before I ripped him a new one.

“I don’t regret it. I mean, I do, if it hurt you. I never want to hurt you. But I don’t regret showing you how much I want you.”

“But what’s the point of it if you can’t do anything about it? If the second you see my brother’s name, you back off like I’m untouchable.”

“I just feel so much guilt. I’ve been looking out for you since you were a kid, and Sam trusts me. I’d hate him to think that I’ve been taking advantage of you both.”

“But you’re not, right? I mean, you’d only be taking advantage if you, I don’t know, say... Danced with me, touched me, led me on, and then poof, decided ‘nah, not for me.’”

He hung his head.

“Okay, I see your point, but that’s not how it was.”

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“Well I don’t know how it was because you never explain it!”

“I’m sorry, El. I’m just... I’m no good for anyone.”

“You’ve said that but I don’t believe you. It doesn’t make sense.”

“I’m just no good!” I’d never really heard him raise his voice, but I know it was out of frustration toward himself and not toward me, so I let him continue. “I’m... I don’t know, I’m cursed, okay? Everyone who gets too close to me gets hurt. And I’d die if that happened to you. You’re the only woman I’ve ever wanted. The only one I really care about. But if I ruined you, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself. So, yeah, my guilt because you’re my best friend’s little sister is real, but it’s way more than that.”

I stared at him, unsure what to say. I wanted to laugh, I wanted to cry, I wanted to scream. He wanted me, but he couldn’t have me. He could have me, but he’d ‘destroy’ me, so he didn’t want to risk it. I was torn between pity and anger and love.

He shook his head, a slow reckoning. “The last thing I want to do is hurt you.”

“Did you mean it?”

“Mean what?”

“That I’m the only woman you want?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you want me? If it’s just because of the thrill of me being off-limits or whatever bullshit, then yes, you should feel bad. But if it’s because you like me for who I am, then that’s nothing to feel guilty for.”

“Of course it’s because of who you are. You’re the most incredible person I’ve ever known.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. My heart hurt from the exquisite pain. The pleasure of finally hearing those words, only to know that it’s all for naught. I didn’t know what else to say, and if he wasn’t going to explain why he was so cursed, then there wasn’t anything more to hear. A tear fell from my eye, sliding down to my cheek. I knew he saw it, because his face looked even more pained.

“I’ve waited my whole life for you. For you to see me, for you to want me.”

“Wanting you was never a question.”

The stabbing pain in my chest splintered off and shot through the rest of my body. I didn’t know love could hurt this badly. I didn’t know I could be a casualty in a war I never agreed to.

“You should probably go, Raf.”

He didn’t move, but he didn’t fight me on it. Just kept looking at me, at my face, as more tears streamed down it, softly. Resigned.

But then I turned away first. I knew I needed to. And a moment later, I heard the door

open and close.

He was gone.

I slid down to the floor and let myself cry for this man one more time. They were quiet tears of confused anguish. After a few minutes, I collected myself and counted the till, put the money in the safe, and turned off the lights.

I normally locked the front door from the inside and went out the back door to my apartment door in the alley. But tonight I wanted to wallow in baked goods again, so I went out the front, locking it behind me, and walked down the street toward the Witch's Brew. It was already dark and Harbor Street was mostly empty.

As I walked, I got the sense that there was someone following me. I didn't often feel nervous in town. I walked almost everywhere and knew almost everyone. But tonight, it felt different. I stopped to pretend to look into the window of a dress shop, and then casually turned my head back to see if anyone was there.

I didn't see anyone, but it was hard to tell in the darkness. Normally the street lights were bright, but two of them had recently gone out and hadn't been replaced yet.

I told myself I was being silly and started walking again. As soon as I reached the Witch's Brew, I threw the door open and hustled inside.

"Ellie, you look like you've seen a ghost! Are you all right?" Sara asked.

The place was empty except for a couple at a table in the back. I walked up to the counter.

"I don't know, I got a weird feeling. Like someone was watching me. Or following me."

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Sara looked concerned. “You know, our intuition is a huge safety mechanism. If you felt something, it’s for a reason.”

“I’m sure it’s fine.” I shook my head, attempting to shake off the weird feeling. “I came for sustenance.”

“Ah. The sweet kind?”

“Of course.”

She grabbed a large white to-go box and began filling it with treats from the glass display case. The best thing about having a friend who owned a cafe, is that she often gave me the leftover baked goods at the end of the day. I always tried to pay, but she wouldn’t have it. So I’d drop cash into the tip jar when she wasn’t looking.

We talked for a little while about the Halloween party and what she planned for next year. I didn’t dare tell her about Raf after all that time I spent crying over him earlier in the week. I was so confused, but at this point, the back and forth was embarrassing.

It was getting late and I just wanted to curl up in bed with a book, so I said goodbye.

“You want me to walk you? You shouldn’t go by yourself.”

“No, no. I’m fine, I promise.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’ll text you when I get home.”

“You better.”

I gave her a kiss on the cheek and left with my box of goodies. The first block of the walk was fine. But as I passed the dress shop again, goosebumps erupted all over my body and the hair on the back of my neck stood up.

I looked around in all directions, not even trying to be sly about it. But I didn’t see anyone. I quickened my pace and soon passed my storefront. I peeked around the corner to make sure no one was hiding around it or lurking on the cross street, and then slipped down it. But when I looked back, I was chilled to the bone.

Across the street, on the promenade next to the harbor, was a man, around my age, maybe a bit older. He just stood there, watching me. When I looked right into his eyes, he didn’t try to look away, or go about his business. No. He stared me down, and the look on his face was deadly. Wild, almost.

He was far enough away that I was safe, and he didn’t even attempt to move closer, but I broke out into a run anyway. Around the back of the building, I shoved my key into the lock and slammed the door behind me, deadbolting it and running up the stairs.

In the safety of my apartment—the upstairs door locked and deadbolted too—I felt a little silly getting spooked by someone who was probably just a tourist or a weirdo. I probably let my out of control emotions get the better of me. I’m sure there’s some psychology involved there.

But as I unpacked the pastries and made myself a cup of tea, I noticed the goosebumps didn’t go away, and the hair on the back of my head wouldn’t settle.

fifteen

RAFAEL

I tossed and turned all night. I don't think I slept a single minute, my mind was stuck on Ellie and the pain I'd caused her. But this time, instead of being so sure that it was all a sign I should stay the hell away from her, I was seriously considering the alternative.

What if I went to her? What if she forgave me for all of the stupid shit I'd put her through—the mixed signals and the over-protectiveness and the guilt from Sam—what if none of that mattered and we could be together?

I'd never known a woman who was so perfect, let alone perfect for me. Was I messing up both of our lives by being so stuck in my head and clinging to this bullshit?

I didn't know the answer. I didn't know the right path, but I knew the wrong path was one without Ellie. So I needed to do whatever it took to make things right.

I stood on the deck of the Stella Rose and watched the horizon for when the harbor came into view. It was one of my favorite things. Being on the water, seeing nothing but blue, and then watching the land appear, rising from the sea, getting closer to the harbor I called home. I only realized then, that my first thoughts of home all involved Ellie.

“You really look like shit, man,” Roger said. I didn't even see him approach.

“Yeah, I didn't get much sleep last night.”

“Figures. But I've known you for a long damn time, man.”

“Yeah, so?”

“You ever gonna get that girl?”

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What the fuck? How the hell did he know that's what I was thinking about? My face must have betrayed my thoughts because he just laughed.

"You're not as hard to read as some people think." He slapped me on the back and walked back to the cockpit.

I didn't know if I believed in signs, but if I did, this might be one. And I'd be stupid to ignore it. Not when Ellie was the goal.

sixteen

ELLIE

Still on the lookout for any creepy men hanging about, I spent the next evening after work walking down to the local outdoor supply store to stock up on safety items. I closed up earlier than usual so I could walk there and back before it got dark. I'd seen with my own friends and family just how quickly a threat could turn into real danger. I wasn't taking any chances.

I grabbed a pepper spray keychain, a door stopper alarm, and a necklace that had GPS and a hidden whistle in it. The clerk told me to test it at home because it was so loud, I'd scare people if I did it here. That sold me on it.

As I walked out the door, I turned my head back to thank him, which was a mistake, as I quite literally ran into Derek. We bumped into each other, I yelped, and he grabbed me by the shoulders to settle me.

“Woah Ellie! Are you okay?”

“Derek, hi. Yes, I’m fine, sorry. I didn’t see you there.” I backed out of his grasp, which wasn’t strong, but left me feeling uneasy nonetheless. I guess I was even more spooked by that guy last night than I thought.

“My fault, I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“No worries, it happens. Are you doing some shopping?” He looked down at the bag in my hand. I don’t know why, but I slid it behind me, out of view.

“Yeah, just heading home now though.” I started walking, and he fell into step next to me.

“Maybe we could grab dinner? You kind of disappeared the other night at the party. I was hoping to spend some time with you.”

“Ah, I’m sorry about that. And I appreciate the offer, but I think I’m just going to go home and read my book.”

I had to bite my tongue from giving an excuse, or another apology. I reminded myself how I told Derek before that I didn’t know if I wanted to pursue a relationship. That we could try to be friends and see what happened. The people pleaser part of me felt strained. But I held my ground.

He nodded in understanding, and said “maybe another time.”

“Yeah, maybe. I’ll see you around,” I said, hurrying home as the sun set.

* * *

Back at the apartment, my tea kettle whistled and I turned off the flame on my tiny two-burner stove. I poured the water over a bag of chamomile. Sara would balk at it, but I didn't have the funds for loose leaf.

As I bobbed the tea bag in and out of the water, I thought about Derek and how wrong it felt to be with him. Not bad, exactly. Just, wrong. And then I thought about Raf, and how even though he insisted we weren't meant to be, it felt so right every time we were close. The way he looked at me, the way he touched me the other night. I was on fire just thinking about it.

Why did it have to feel so right? And why did he keep giving me mixed signals?

I knew Derek wanted more with me, but I didn't know what to do about that. I liked him. And if my mind wasn't so occupied by Raf, I thought I would be able to really explore something with him. But no matter how hard I tried to move on, Raf was there at the center of everything. Every time.

I took my tea into the living room and settled on the sofa. I'd planned to watch a movie before reading, but my mind needed stimulation, so I grabbed my kindle and picked one of the new romance releases I was excited for. Not even two minutes later, my doorbell rang, startling me.

I wasn't expecting anyone, so I went to the buzzer and pressed the call button.

"Hello?"

"It's me." Raf's deep voice filled the apartment through the little speaker.

"What are you doing here?" I don't know why I asked this. Normally I just buzzed him up, but things were weird with him right now, and I was confused. I rested my head against the wall, and traced my finger along the edge of the beige speaker.

“We need to talk.”

“We’ve been doing a lot of that lately and nothing good has come from it.” The words were true, but the moment I said them, regret boiled inside me.

Silence.

And then, “Please.” A whisper. “Let me up.”

I was at war with myself, my finger hovering over the “unlock” button. Maybe he’d been right this whole time. What good could come from me falling in love with my older brother’s best friend? But like always, his pull on me outweighed everything else.

I unlocked the deadbolt next to me, and then pressed the button on the speaker and heard the familiar buzz and click. A moment later, Raf’s quick footsteps on the stairs. And then the twist of the doorknob.

He opened it, his tall frame dwarfing the doorway. I stood only a few feet away. Neither of us moved.

“You wanted to talk?”

“Yes.”

“So talk.”

His face looked pained. For the first time, I saw the anguish he must have always kept deep inside him. Because now, it was displayed as clear as day. His downturned lips, the circles under his eyes, the crease between his eyebrows that was more pronounced than ever.

He was the most handsome man I'd ever seen, but tonight, the grittiness of grief took hold of his features.

"I've tried like hell to stay away from you."

"Nice opener."

He just looked at me with that fierce stare of his and my mouth snapped shut.

"God, El. I've thought about what I should say to you a thousand times. And now that I'm here, I'm drawing a blank." He took a step forward, closed the door behind him, and looked down at me. His eyes raked over my body, and I felt a flame lick my skin with each pass. I stood, frozen to the spot as Raf's eyes drank me in. My eyes shifted away, his stare too powerful.

He raised his hand up and held my cheek. My mind went haywire, synapses firing left and right, no rhyme or reason. I had no idea what was happening or what my response should be. Raf was touching me. In an intimate way. What the hell was going on?

But then his hand slid down to my jaw, and his thumb caressed my lips. I held my breath, blinked. And when I opened my eyes and found the courage to look up into his, I was done for.

Hunger. It was plain as day. His eyes were filled with hunger. A need. A longing. But there was no time for thinking anymore. He raised one eyebrow—just the slightest bit—and it was a question.

Is this okay? Did you want this?

And yes, yes I did. I blinked again, raising my chin up, moving my lips toward him.

And then, the storm hit. A violent turbulence of everything Rafael.

His lips crashed down onto mine in a fierce claiming. His hand dug in on the side of my neck, while the other gripped my waist and pulled me closer to him. Our bodies aligned in a sizzle of heat.

His lips weren't gentle, but I didn't want them to be. They were hungry and demanding. Just like I'd fantasized about so many times, but infinitely better. I opened to him and his tongue advanced, swirling with mine as a moan hit the back of my throat. I forgot about my own hands until I realized they'd been tugging at his T-shirt. I swooped them under it to get closer to him. I needed to touch his skin more than I needed my next breath.

He growled and picked me up as if I were a feather pillow. My legs wrapped around his waist and he turned us, my back now against the door, and not once did his mouth move from mine.

My arms moved to rest over his shoulders, fingers digging into his short hair as the kiss deepened. I bucked against him. Every sensation I'd ever felt combined in that moment to turn into some sort of tornado of passion. I didn't understand, had never felt anything like it before, but I didn't question it. This was Raf. This was the man I'd wanted for years. And he was kissing me like his life depended on it.

I couldn't help but buck my hips again. I needed him. Needed something. And when he growled in response, I felt the vibrations all the way down to my core.

I snapped my head back against the door and tore my lips from his.

"Please, Raf."

"Please what, angel?" His breaths were harsh, but his eyes held mischief and desire...

So much desire.

He moved his mouth to my neck, kissing along the side and I forgot I had even spoken. But then my own desire took over again and I bucked against him once more.

“Please. I need you.”

He nipped at my neck, and then carried me to the bedroom. Laying me on the bed, gentler than I expected, he knelt over me. And just stared.

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I felt my cheeks getting hot, and wondered if something was wrong. But then he moved his hands to my tank top, pushing it up to expose my breasts. They fell to my sides with gravity, but I had no time to worry about self consciousness, because he dived in. He held them in his hands, laved at my nipples with his tongue, nipped softly at the skin with his teeth.

My hips gyrated to the rhythm of his mouth and the feel of his hands. And then I whimpered. He finally took pity on me and moved down to where I needed him most.

He approached my waistband, slipping his fingers inside it, and pulled it down, as if in slow motion, following the path of my skin with his lips.

He kissed every exposed inch, over and over, on each leg, until he was kneeling at my feet. And then he kissed his way back up. His two day-old stubble scratched my skin, contrasting with his soft, full lips. It was heaven.

For a moment, I thought I'd died and actually gone to the big place in the sky. Was this too sinful for that? Maybe. But I wouldn't have it any other way.

When he reached the top of my thighs, he lifted his head to look at me.

“Can I taste you?”

His fingers hovered over the sides of my yellow cotton panties—ones I'd surely die of embarrassment over at a later date. He was waiting for my response. And having his mouth on me seemed way better than overthinking the situation, so I nodded, a little too enthusiastically.

His lips turned upward into a grin that reached his eyes. And then he pulled my panties down and off me. His calloused hands brushed over my thighs, and then spread them apart.

“You don’t know how many times I’ve fantasized about this, El.”

“Wha—really?” I lifted my head to look at him, unsure what to think. But Raf just nodded as he stared at my pussy with that same look of desire. He dipped down to kiss my thighs again, and I rested my head back down.

Every move he made heightened the sensations and he hadn’t even gotten to my core yet. His lips and tongue made their way over my upper thighs, to my mound, over it, then around again. He even went back down to kiss my lower thighs and up again. It was the most excruciating pleasure I’d ever had. He was teasing me. Teasing every inch of me. And I couldn’t get enough.

But apparently my mouth had other ideas because without meaning to, I screamed out his name. He chuckled, his breath tickling my skin, and then swirled his tongue on me. Not quite where I needed it most, but pretty damn close.

“You’re so wet for me.” He licked a slow, torturous path and grinned. “God, I love the way you taste. Even better than my fantasies.”

I moaned and he growled.

And then... Sweet baby Jesus, then... he finally got me.

He circled my clit, his lips leaving fiery kisses and suction in their wake. His whiskers were rough against me as his tongue flitted in the most decadent rhythm. I rose up, high, higher. Trying to get as close to bliss as I could.

But Raf's hold turned commanding. Rough. His hands sank into my soft thighs and held them down with delicious pressure. I felt his deep, throaty moan against my most sensitive skin and my nerves lit up like a Christmas tree, sending sparks throughout my body.

I called out his name, I whimpered, I knew my vocal chords were working, but I couldn't tell you what they said.

"Louder."

"Huh?"

"Louder, angel. Scream for me." His tongue lashed at my clit, harder now. "Call my name out when I make you come."

Raf was like a possessed form of himself. His voice was guttural, raspier, even deeper than usual and I writhed in response, every synapse firing, every sensation heightened until I crested the peak, and fell off the other side.

It turned out, I did scream his name. Over and over again, without even meaning to. Or maybe my subconscious meant it, and the rest of me was just along for the ride.

Raf continued to lick lazy circles around me as I heaved in breath after breath. My body felt like I'd just run a marathon. Exhilarating adrenaline and sore muscles gave way to a dreamy euphoria.

My eyelids grew heavy as I felt his hands massage my body. Stroke up my legs, my stomach, my breasts. Every soft, bare part of me now knew Raf's touch. And something about that lulled me into the most restful trance I'd ever experienced.

Somehow, sleep overtook me.

But not before I felt Raf pull me against him, his arms encircling me, holding me tightly and swaying like the ocean as I drifted away.

seventeen

RAFAEL

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I knew where I was before I even opened my eyes. Ellie's signature vanilla scent, now mixed with her own musk that I'd now die for, hit my nose as consciousness flooded through me.

My arms still wrapped around her body. I felt her soft skin and her lush curves under my palms. I pried one eye open and saw her brown hair splayed across my chest. A patchwork quilt covered our bottom halves but her breasts were still bare, pressing against my clothed abdomen. I'd have given anything right now to go back in time and take my shirt off before falling asleep, just so I could feel her skin against mine.

She stirred and turned her head to look at me, her eyes still filled with sleep.

"Hi." It was a soft greeting, a whisper and a smile, that melted the steel cage around my heart.

"Hey."

She blinked a few times, and then sat up suddenly. Her tits bounced with the movement, and I wasn't a good enough man to look away. My jeans tightened around my dick.

"Oh my god." She clapped one hand over her mouth, and the other over her chest, her cheeks reddening, and her eyes wide.

"What's the matter?"

"You—we—oh my god." Her voice was growing frantic and rose an octave.

“What? Do you regret it? Oh my god, Ellie, I thought you wanted to.” Did I misread the situation? I stood up from the bed, feeling sick. My head spun with memories of last night. “I’m so sorry. Holy fuck, I’m sorry.”

“No, Raf, stop.” I turned to look at her, my stomach sitting somewhere around my feet. “It’s nothing like that. I’m just embarrassed because you went down on me and I passed out from it.”

A deep breath wooshed out of me, the relief palpable as I bent forward for a moment, my hands on my thighs.

“Jesus, you scared me.” And then I laughed. A loud, raucous guffaw that came out of me so purely, that it made me laugh even harder.

“I’m mortified!” She wrapped the quilt around her, and burrowed her head underneath it so all I could see was an Ellie-shaped patchwork mound on the bed. And that made it even worse. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d laughed so hard. It was a joyous feeling, but I tried to tone it down because Ellie was not having it.

“Raf shut up!” She yelled from underneath her quilt, which only made the laughs come stronger. I took some deep breaths.

Eventually I calmed down and sat back on the bed next to her.

“I’m serious, you rocked me to sleep with oral. I didn’t even get to reciprocate, I was fucking comatose! Oh my god.”

“Ellie, come here.” I wrapped my arms around the mound and scooted her closer to me. “Let me see you.”

She slowly slid the quilt down to show her reddened face and messy hair. And fuck,

she was adorable and sexy and the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen all at once.

I leaned forward and pressed my lips to hers in a chaste kiss that I'd hoped showed my intentions. I wasn't going anywhere. I broke it off and leaned my forehead against hers.

"Ellie, last night was fucking magical. I could do that—without reciprocation—every night of my life and never get enough of it. You don't know how long I've wanted to do that. To do anything with you."

Her big blue eyes looked up at me and I backed up to see them clearly. I'd never get tired of those eyes.

"Really?" she asked.

"I promise."

"It's still embarrassing, though."

"Nah, that's legendary. My oral skills made you come so hard you went comatose. That's lifetime bragging rights."

"Don't you dare tell a soul." We laughed, but then reality hit us both at the same time. If we were doing this, we'd need to tell Sam, and then he might want to kill me. I'm sure she could see my concern all over my face. "Don't. You're stressing about it, I know you are."

"I mean, yeah."

"Do you want me, though? Was last night just a fluke? Tell me now, because I can't handle the hot and cold thing anymore, not after what we did together."

I pulled her onto my lap and ran my hands along her body. The body I'd spent years dreaming about. The body I could now touch.

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“Hell no, it’s not a fluke.” I kissed between her neck and shoulder, felt her shudder underneath me. “El, I was scared before. There’s still a lot about me and my past that you don’t know, and we’ll get to that. But I can’t stay away from you. You’re all I’ve ever wanted.”

A crease formed between her eyebrows and she rested her palm against my cheek. It felt too good to be soothed by Ellie. I didn’t deserve it. But I wasn’t good enough to turn it down.

“What do you mean, your past? Tell me.” I leaned into her hand, and then turned my face to press a kiss against her palm.

“I promise I will. But right now, I just want to live in this moment.”

She looked at me, probably unsure for a moment, but then nodded.

“You’re all I’ve ever wanted, too.”

My heart fluttered like a damn butterfly at her words. The entire night and morning felt like chasing a high, but I was hooked. No doubt about it. I only hoped that the comedown wouldn’t destroy us.

eighteen

ELLIE

I’d thought I’d felt happiness before, but after last night with Raf, I was in a perpetual

state of delight. I spent all day cleaning the shop, dusting the shelves, and doing inventory. All things I hated, but today I did them with a spring in my step.

Raf had to leave early for work, but not before giving me the most passionate kiss I'd ever experienced. I floated through my morning routine, daydreaming about seeing him again. And once I started working, I was so happy and carefree that I didn't realize how late it had gotten.

The sky outside the window had darkened, and I still needed to count the till. I hurriedly got to work on my closing procedures, packing up my expensive pieces, moving them and the cash to the safe. I locked the back door and decided to go out the front again to pick up some beer and food. Raf said he'd come over after work and I wanted to surprise him with dinner.

I grabbed my keys and locked the front door behind me, then turned right to head to the liquor store. It wasn't on Harbor Street, but it was on one of the cross streets near McClintock's. I walked briskly, happily thinking about Raf and how good he made me feel last night. Which was my first mistake.

The farther away from my shop I got, the more I realized Harbor Street was deserted again. Fog had descended on the town, blanketing the streets in a misty haze. The darkened sky made it even more difficult to see, so I turned on my cell phone flashlight to light a path. But then, as I picked up the pace, I felt that familiar chill in my bones from the other night.

I looked to the side, and then behind me, but the fog made it impossible to see anything. I heard footsteps behind me, so I stopped. They stopped too. I knew that wasn't good.

I hurried along faster, following the light, but then realizing I was only making it easier for whoever was out there to see me. I was literally lighting their way through

the fog. I turned off the light and shoved it in my bag. I moved quietly now, keeping my steps even. The goosebumps were back, the hair on the back of my neck was up again, and I couldn't do anything but keep going until I reached an open store, anywhere I could escape into.

A strange and overwhelming scent of clove surrounded me. I looked to the side. But then it happened. I almost felt like it was a nightmare. It didn't seem real. I took a step forward but something pulled me back into a wall of muscle. In what seemed like slow motion, a hand in a blue latex glove came up over my face and covered my mouth. All I could think was "don't breathe" in case he was trying to drug me, but I didn't feel a cloth.

Then the slow motion ceased and real life took over again. I was capable. I was tiny compared to whoever this was, but I was feisty. Fuck him.

He held one hand around my left side and his other over my face. But that left my right arm free, and I was holding my keys in that hand. I couldn't scream or use my whistle because he covered my mouth, but I flipped the cap of the pepper spray. I had one shot. If I missed, I'd get myself instead. Hell, I was so close to this guy, I'd probably get myself either way. But it was worth it to fight back.

I figured he wasn't drugging me since I hadn't passed out yet. So I let the anger fuel me, took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and readied my finger on the nozzle. Then, as fast as lightning, I bent my elbow upward, aimed as best as I could, and let that sucker loose.

A moment later I fell to the ground, coughing and sputtering. I crawled over to the street and as soon as I could stand, I ran. My eyes stung, but not nearly as bad as I expected, so I must have aimed well. Tears ran down my face, my lungs burned, but the adrenaline of getting away pumped through my veins. I could barely see from the stinging, and the fog didn't help, but through my tears I was able to make out the red

neon liquor sign a few buildings away.

I didn't stop running until I pushed through the door.

* * *

Theo had me wrapped in a blanket in the back seat of his truck. He'd been at home when the liquor store clerk called 9-1-1. I knew the other deputies could handle it, but I called Theo anyway, and since he and Sara lived nearby, he was here before they were.

"Sam's still out of town, right?"

"Yeah, he gets back tomorrow."

"Okay. Why don't you come back to our place tonight? I don't want you staying at your apartment by yourself."

"Oh, I—" But I was cut off by a booming voice, panic-stricken and angry. Raf.

"Where is she?! I don't give a fuck what your job is, where is Ellie?"

Theo hopped off the running boards and whistled at him from across the parking lot. Raf sprinted over.

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“Will you calm down, man? Jesus.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled as he moved past Theo and hopped up into the truck.

“Holy shit, angel. Are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

“I’m okay. I’m okay.” I leaned into Raf as he put his arms around me and held me close. His back blocked us from view, but even so, I didn’t care if Theo saw. All I wanted was to stay in this man’s arms forever.

His hand came up and stroked my hair, and he kissed my forehead. It was the most intimate touch and something about that made me release all the pent-up energy I’d been stuck with.

Sobs came harsh and fast, the tears flooding my face as I cried out. He wrapped his arms around me even tighter and rocked me, whispering words of encouragement and praise.

“You’re incredible. You saved yourself. You’re okay. I’m so proud of you.”

Over and over, he spoke and swayed me gently, until the tears ran out.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why I cried so hard.”

“It was traumatizing, and the adrenaline is wearing off, see?” He pointed to my hands, which were shaking. “Did you talk to Theo yet? Make a statement?”

“Not really, he put me in here because I was in shock, I guess.”

Raf nodded. “All right, let’s get this over with so I can get you home.”

“I don’t want to be alone tonight. Theo said I can stay with him and Sara.”

“No, angel. You’re coming home with me.” He took my face in both hands and pressed his lips to mine. His kisses made everything better.

He got out of the truck, and then walked around to the other side to open the door and help me out. Then with his arm around me, and me nuzzling against him as close as I could, we walked over to Theo and his deputy.

“You ready to give a statement, El?” I didn’t miss the way his eyes went to Raf’s arm around me, but he didn’t say anything.

I told him everything, from the moment I left my shop. The footsteps, the fog. I told him about the weird feeling I had, and how I used the pepper spray.

The whole time Raf’s jaw clenched tighter and tighter and I knew he wanted to punch something. Theo was angry as hell too, but he was trying to keep things calm so he could do his job.

“I didn’t see him, though. I don’t know if it was the same guy as the other night.”

“Wait—”

“What guy?”

The men both asked. Oops.

“I might have forgotten to mention that.” That didn’t make it any better. I shrugged out from under Raf’s grip, needing space for this.

“Okay, the other night, I was walking to the Witch’s Brew and I got the weirdest feeling. Like I knew someone was following me, or watching me. Same with the way back home. When I was heading inside, I turned and saw a guy there, watching.”

“Where?”

“Across the street on the promenade. He was staring at me with this evil look on his face.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I don’t know, I thought maybe I overreacted! It could have been a coincidence, it could have been nothing. I bought all these supplies to keep me safe, though. It’s why I had the pepper spray in the first place.” I pointed to my necklace. “See, this is a whistle and has GPS. I’m not stupid.”

“Jesus Christ,” Theo said. “Okay, you didn’t see the guy tonight, but you said he pulled you back against him and he felt tall and muscular, right? Does the guy from the other night match that description?”

“Oh shit.” The guys gave each other a look. “I don’t know, it was dark, but... I think so.”

“Have you ever seen him before?”

“No, he was definitely a tourist.”

“Okay, look. I’m angry as hell you didn’t tell anyone about this thing the other night. But you did good today, kid.” Theo fake-punched my shoulder and then kissed my cheek. “You gonna crash at our place?”

“No, I’ll take care of her,” Raf said, his voice conveying a finality on the subject.

“Okay. Don’t let her out of your sight.” Theo looked around the parking lot and out to the street. The fog had lifted a little, but it still cast an eerie haze over the town. “I don’t like this situation one bit.”

nineteen

RAFAEL

Ellie didn’t talk much on the drive to my place, which was understandable, but still made me anxious. She was always bubbly, always bright. Even when she was pissed, she’d at least speak up and let you know why. But this quiet, scared Ellie was a different side of her.

I reached my hand over and rested it on her thigh, sliding it up and down, squeezing her skin lightly. I needed to touch her, but needed her to know I was here for her too. The rage that someone messed with her, that she could have been hurt, was alive and well inside me, growing more fiery and lethal by the minute, but I did everything I

could to tamp it down. Being here for Ellie was the most important thing. I could get out my aggression later.

Ellie's hand came to rest on top of mine, and I felt my chest loosen just a little. I looked over at her. She was leaning against the window, her eyes closed. She looked so peaceful, so perfect. I always knew I'd do anything to protect her, but in that moment, the clarity and realization of just how far I'd go for her, hit me like a ton of bricks.

I pulled into my driveway and jogged around the front of the truck to open Ellie's door, but she beat me to it.

"You don't get off that easy,"

"What do you mean?" she asked, as she turned to hop down.

"Let me take care of you."

Before she hit the ground, I picked her up, her legs wrapping around my waist easily. The memory of the last time I'd had her in this position flooded my brain and my cock stirred.

I walked to the porch, up the two small steps, and to the door. Ellie was a good foot shorter than me, so carrying her was an easy task. And I'd thought that taking care of her, that holding her, would keep my aggression at bay. Normally Ellie calmed me. But something about her being in danger fucked with my head.

I held on to her, but instead of calming down, I felt pumped up. I walked us inside, my movements jerky, my energy buzzing like a damn live wire.

"Raf."

I grunted. It was only then I realized I'd backed her up against the wall, reminiscent of the other night.

"Raf," she said again, pointedly. I finally met her eyes. They were different now, like the ocean on a stormy day.

"You need me." It was a statement. She knew. Ellie knew me better than I gave her credit for. She could read me like a book. I nodded once.

She thrust her hips against my torso. I couldn't help but return the motion. And god, I wanted to be romantic. I wanted to treat her like a queen, like she deserved. Especially for our first time. But this feral part of me couldn't be tamed right then. I needed to claim her. I needed to fuck her like she's mine. Because she was mine now.

I crashed my mouth down onto hers. Our tongues tangled, our lips bruised. The blood pulsed through my body, hot and frenzied and I could barely keep my control. Ellie wrestled her mouth off of mine and spoke.

"Stop holding back."

Confusion hit me, because I knew how crazed I felt.

"You're shaking, Raf."

I looked down to my hands where they gripped her waist to see that she was right.

"I know what you need, but you're trying to hold back. I don't need you to be careful with me. I want you."

"I don't want to hurt you, angel."

“You won’t. I promise. And if you do, it’s because I’m telling you I want it.” My eyes shot up to hers again and I saw the desire in them. “I don’t want you to be gentle, Raf. I want you to take me the way you need to.”

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My body shuddered at the thought. Ellie was giving me a gift. Not just herself, which was the greatest gift I could ask for, but the permission to be myself. To give in to this intense energy, this fierce need, inside me.

I growled at the thought of fucking Ellie the way I wanted to. Hard and deep and raw. Claiming her in every way. I needed her now.

I pulled her away from the wall and walked us down the hall to my room. Dropping her to the bed, I lifted her shirt up and over her head. She leaned back on her elbows and watched me kneel on the floor in front of her. She lifted her hips up as I pulled down her leggings—the same fucking leggings that tempted me for years—and dropped them on the floor. When I saw the lacy black thong she wore, I nearly busted through my zipper.

“You wear this for me?” I asked, sliding a finger underneath the fabric. Her skin was so damn soft.

She nodded. “Do you like it?”

“Yes.” I wrapped my hands around the sides of it and pulled it down. “But it belongs on the floor with the rest of your clothes.” I dropped it and stood to take off my henley. My muscles twitched as I watched Ellie watch me. I wasn’t often vain, but seeing my girl with a look of pure desire on her face as she looked at my body gave me a sense of satisfaction I’d never known existed.

Now that Ellie was naked and lying on my bed—mybed—I was ready to ravish her. But we needed to be on the same page first.

“I don’t have any condoms, angel. I had no reason to buy them before.”

She just looked at me, so I elaborated. I needed to be clear about this, so she knew I wasn’t blowing smoke up her ass.

“I meant it when I said I haven’t been with anyone in years. Not since I realized I wanted you. So tell me now and I’ll keep my jeans on and eat that pretty pussy again just the way you like it.”

“I want you, Raf, but I need you too. If you trust me, I mean. I’m good. I promise.”

She had that defiant and headstrong look on her face I knew and loved. I moved to the bed and leaned down over her, but not touching her body. Until I brought my lips down to kiss her collarbone. I slid my mouth down to the valley between her breasts, kissing every inch of skin.

“You sure, angel? You want me to fuck you raw?”

She nodded.

“Just the way I want?”

Another nod, but her eyes closed this time as my tongue flicked her nipple.

“Nice and hard?” I reached my hand down, my fingers playing a smooth rhythm on her clit. She lifted her hips up to get more pressure, more friction. It was the sweetest sight. And then she opened her eyes.

“Yes! Fuck me now.”

My spitfire.

I didn't need to be told twice. I stood up again, and kicked off my boots, then unzipped my jeans, releasing my cock. I sighed in relief as I pumped it in my fist, once, twice.

Ellie's wide eyes didn't move from me. Her mouth slackened, her tongue peeking out to lick her lips as she watched me drop the jeans to the floor and step out of them. I stroked it as I stepped closer to her, almost in slow motion, as my eyes devoured her naked body splayed out for me on my bed.

"Look at you," I said, pumping a little faster now. "You're naked and ready for me, aren't you?"

She nodded and slid her own fingers down to her pussy, but I held up a hand.

"Uh uh. That pussy is mine. Mine to take. And mine to please."

"Then get over here and do it."

Fuck. Ellie could have made me come right then, just from her words alone. I always knew she was a little hell cat, but I never expected she'd be so forward in bed. I fucking loved it.

I climbed on top of her, raising her legs up to wrap around me. Reaching down to feel her, I had to bite my lip to keep from moaning.

"Damn, angel. You're so wet and ready for me, aren't you?"

Her eyes were closed, mouth still slack. "Yes."

I've dreamed about this moment for years. Fantasized about what I'd do to her and how it would feel. I couldn't wait any longer.

“Open your eyes.”

She did, and the stormy ocean in them heightened my senses. I lined up my tip to her entrance and pushed inside her.

“Goddamn, Ellie.”

It was the singular greatest feeling of my life.

I slid in, inch by inch, until I bottomed out and our bodies were one. I leaned down to take her lips in a kiss that grew more fierce with each swipe of my tongue and pass of my lips.

Little sounds of need came from her throat, a cross between a moan and a whimper.

“Move, Raf.”

“Say it nicely.”

She moaned and thrust her hips up. “Please.”

I bit her lip and leaned up to adjust my angle, sliding out as slowly as possible to elicit more of those godly sounds from her. But the energy pulsing through my veins couldn't be contained. As much as I wanted to tease her, I needed to fuck her. Now.

I pulled out and then slammed back in, driving into her as deep as I could. She called out. She begged for it. And then I was off.

I thrust into her, creating a frenzied rhythm, in and out, as deep as I could go. Those sounds in her throat never ceased, getting louder with each thrust, spurring me on.

I'd never experienced this before. The pleasure, the high, the primal urge to be as rough as I could to claim her like a fucking caveman. I felt wild, almost out of control, but every time I looked down at Ellie, I saw the bliss on her face. I heard the "yes" she whispered over and over like a prayer. I felt her legs tighten around me and her pussy clench down on my cock.

I knew fucking Ellie would be unlike any other—I knew she was my ultimate fantasy—but nothing prepared me for how incredible the reality would be.

"God, you feel so good. So fucking perfect for me."

She smiled and swiveled her hips up to meet me, thrust for thrust. I almost passed out from the euphoria.

I rose up higher on my knees and pushed her legs up to rest on my shoulders.

"Fuck!" I called out as I drove inside her, impossibly deeper from this new position.

"Yes! Raf please!"

"What do you want, angel?"

"I want it hard," she cried out as she lost control. I was holding her in place, I was pumping into her as deep as my cock could go and still, I went harder. Faster. Giving her everything.

My hand slipped down and I circled my thumb on her clit, Ellie's entire body now

tensed up, she was close... So close.

“Raf!” She cried, and hearing my name on her lips while my cock was inside her, while she writhed that tight little pussy on it, taking all of what I gave her, was better than anything. Any high, any wave of the ocean. Ellie was the only thing I needed.

“I’m coming!”

And she did, her muscles contracted, her pussy squeezed my cock like a vice while her face scrunched up, and then relaxed, as she rode out her orgasm.

I kept going, though. Kept punching into her pussy as hard as I could. The smile on her face said all I needed to know. But then she spoke.

“Use me, Raf. Fuck me hard until you come for me.”

The orgasm that had been building got violently close to the edge. Years of fantasizing about this led me to this point and none of it was ever as good as the real thing.

I grunted as I fucked, barely recognizing the sounds that I was making, barely recognizing the feral urges I felt to claim this woman. But soon I couldn’t hold on any longer. Ellie was languid, her body pliant for me as I drove my cock into her over and over again.

And I was ready for it. I was ready to claim her as mine.

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“You want my cum, angel? You want it deep inside you?”

“Yes, Raf! Come for me.”

She opened her eyes again, finding mine and staring into my soul. Every sensation I felt was heightened to a level I’d never known possible.

I called out her name as I spilled myself inside her, ropes and ropes of my cum filling her up as I kept thrusting. I couldn’t stop.

But then ecstasy overtook me and I felt the last bit of myself spilling into her. I moaned as the final moment of my release took me soaring.

Collapsing onto the bed next to her, I pulled her into my arms. Her head rested perfectly in the nook of my shoulder and her arm and leg draped over me, our bodies still needing to be as close as possible.

I panted, out of breath, as she tenderly caressed my chest. I’d never experienced such a perfect moment in all my life, and I didn’t want it to end. As my breathing normalized, my lips found her head and I placed kisses on it. Over and over, I kissed my angel.

The feral part of me had been satisfied for the moment. She was mine now, and I needed to keep it that way.

twenty

ELLIE

When I woke up the next morning, I was in Raf's arms again, his skin hot against mine. And the memories of the before heated my insides just as much.

He stirred underneath me, and I felt his soft kisses on my head again, just like the way I fell asleep last night. Part of me thought this was all a dream. It was just too good.

I turned my head to look at him.

"Good morning." Placing my own soft kisses on his chest, I could feel his heartbeat quicken under my touch.

"Hey, angel." His voice was still full of sleep. It felt strangely intimate and I thought I could get used to hearing that every single morning. His hand caressed my back, his touch feather light, causing goosebumps all over my still-naked body. I pulled the covers up and he laughed.

"You gonna get in your blanket fort again?"

I slapped his stomach as my face reddened. "Shut up!"

The laughter continued to my chagrin. "It's okay if you need to do that everytime we have sex. I'll make sure to stock up."

"Oh my god, you're the worst." But he made me smile. Smile so hard my cheeks hurt.

Then suddenly, I was on my back, Raf hovering over top of me, a smile still on his face, but his eyes were filled with lust. He leaned down and took my mouth in one of

his rough, claiming kisses.

His face was normally clean-shaven, but his early morning stubble scratched my skin. I relished knowing what it felt like to kiss him in the morning now, when I didn't before. When no one else did, either. It was another form of intimacy, and I craved more.

He broke the kiss, but trailed his lips down my cheek to my neck. His lips and tongue and teeth set me on fire.

"You know what I need," he said in between bites. And I did.

I wrapped my legs around his torso and felt him slide into me, all the way to the hilt. I'd never been with anyone so perfectly made for me. Every inch of him hit nerves I hadn't even known existed. Each thrust was like paradise.

"I love the way you fuck me," I said, breathless. That spurred him on more, and I preened. He drove into me harder and harder, his grunts telling me all I needed to know about how good he felt, but then he opened his mouth and it was even better.

"Fuck yes you know what I need. You let me take this pussy just how I like." His words were a groan, his voice deeper than ever.

He reached down to touch me, and I practically levitated off the bed.

"Look down here at this, angel. Look at the way I'm fucking you." He leaned up and I tilted my head down. His huge cock was pistoning in and out of me and his thumb was doing magic on my clit. It was the most erotic sight I'd ever seen.

And it flung me over the edge.

I called out, crying his name as I rode each wave of my orgasm. He shifted my legs to the side, thrusting deeper and deeper as he sought his own release, and once again, I was at his mercy. I was his to fuck, his to use, and I didn't want it any other way.

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His grunts got louder and his movements more jerky as he got closer. A smile played on my lips while I watched him chase his orgasm inside of me. Harder, faster, higher... Until he moaned, each muscle tensing, his abs and biceps flexing, as he spent himself.

It was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

I reached out for him and pulled him down to me, taking his lips in a fiery kiss. After a moment, he turned and flopped down next to me, pulling me to him, just like last night.

"God damn, El. You're incredible."

"I don't know about that."

He turned his face toward mine and found my eyes while he traced my bottom lip with his finger.

"I do. I mean it. Even before this," he pointed between us, "I always knew you were amazing. And I wasn't good enough for you. But now that I've had you for myself, I don't think I can let you go."

"I don't want you to let me go. And what are you talking about? Of course you're good enough for me. What does that even mean?"

"Come on, El." He sat up, then. "You're beautiful and smart, and grew up in Moon Harbor with a good, upstanding family who loves you."

I didn't bother bringing up the fact that my parents were dead, because even so, he was right. They were wonderful parents and gave me a good life.

"Sam is not gonna be happy that his friend fucked his sister. I don't care which way you slice it. He's never gonna think I'm good enough."

"Stop worrying about Sam. He's a non-issue."

"I'm pretty sure my jaw won't see it that way when he comes swinging."

"Raf, please." I flipped my hand up like it was no big deal. "I love my brother but he has absolutely zero say in my love life. And I'd like to think he's smart enough to recognize that he's your friend for a reason. Why would you be good enough as a friend but not my boyfriend?" And shit. I slapped my hand over my mouth because I didn't mean to say that word. But it was out now, and Raf just smirked at me, before his face grew serious again.

"Guys don't think like that. I made a promise to him when you were young and he was overseas. I told him I'd look out for you. I gave my word."

"Yeah, and you did look after me. A little too much, I might add," I said, elbowing him. "But that was years ago. I'm not a kid anymore. And frankly, I wasn't even a kid then."

"Still close to it, and still off limits. You're my best friend's little sister, El. It's against all the rules."

"Ugh, you guys and your stupid rules. I think I deserve to have the only say about my romantic entanglements. My brother can mind his own business. Besides, you're my friend too."

“True.” He tilted his head and smiled again. ““Romantic entanglements?””

My face felt hot all of a sudden. “I mean, yeah. Whatever this is.”

His smile just grew wider.

“Anyway,” I said, dragging out the last syllable. “I don’t care if you’re Sam’s best friend. You’re mine now. However you want to classify it.”

But then his face turned serious again.

“It’s not just that. I’m literally from the wrong side of the tracks, El.”

“What do you mean?”

“I grew up in Eastie,” he said, referencing the Boston neighborhood I knew was a bit rough. “My dad was in and out of prison my whole life. I got in trouble left and right growing up. Ran around with a bad group. Violence. Drugs. All of it.”

“I didn’t know that.” My heart sank for him. I thought I knew him so well, but he really did have a whole life before moving here that I knew nothing about. Not that it changed my feelings for him.

“When I came to Moon Harbor, my life changed. I changed it.”

I nodded, understanding. “You did.”

“But that doesn’t mean I’m not still the same guy from Eastie. The same asshole who grew up getting into fights more than doing my homework. I never went to college, I never did any of the things that people look up to.”

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“What do you mean? You just said it yourself—you changed your life around. You got out of East Boston, and made something of yourself.”

“Yeah, a fisherman.”

“Yeah, a fisherman. A successful, hard worker, who’s respected in this town.”

He looked at me like he disagreed, but I stood my ground.

“Raf, you’re the best man I know. There’s a reason I’ve had a crush on you all these years.”

He leaned forward to kiss my shoulder, but I kept going.

“If anything, your past makes your present even more of a success story.”

“I don’t know if I agree. But I’m too selfish to give you up, so I’ll have to get used to it.” He pulled me to him and we kissed again.

This time, it was a tender meeting of our lips. A sweet and gentle union. It was, all at once, everything and nothing like I’d imagined. And my heart melted for the man I’d grown to love.

What started as a girlhood crush, had blossomed into something real, something significant. And I didn’t know what the future held, but I knew one thing. Raf had my heart. Now and forever.

twenty-one

RAFAEL

Later that day, I parked my truck in the downtown lot off of Harbor Street and walked down the block to the Seaside Inn, where I was supposed to meet Annie. She'd sent me a text the day before with the time and place. I still hadn't told Ellie about her, and it felt dishonest, but the truth was, I was too chickenshit to tell her the whole story so soon.

Ellie looked at me like I was the greatest man in the world, and I didn't want that to change. Maybe that was selfish. But her wanting me was the greatest gift I'd ever received. I couldn't risk losing it. It was naive of me, and I knew I was playing with fire, but I justified it to myself by making a promise I'd tell her one day.

I was curious what Annie wanted, and why she couldn't just tell me over the phone. We hadn't seen each other in years before the other week, so it didn't make sense that all of a sudden, there was something important she had to say. But she was a good woman, and we used to be important to each other. So I'd decided to give her the time and meet with her.

As I got closer to the Bed and Breakfast, the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I couldn't explain why, but something felt off. A crowd of people stood on the sidewalk, blocking the path to the property.

I pushed through the crowd, gaining a path easily enough due to my broad shoulders and height. But when I got close enough to see what was going on, I didn't know what to think.

Theo stood at the bottom of the steps, talking to a couple of his deputies. An officer was blocking off the area with crime scene tape. Three police cruisers were parked

haphazardly on the adjacent street.

I attempted to walk on to the property where it wasn't taped yet, but the officer stopped me.

"Hey, you can't go in there. Crime scene."

"What happened? I'm supposed to meet someone here."

"Can't say."

The conversation got Theo's attention and when he saw me, he flinched. What the hell? He jogged down the steps and approached.

"Hey Raf," he said, placing a hand on my back and guiding me over to a quiet spot near the bushes.

"What's going on?"

"Do you know an," he glanced down at his notepad, "Annie Felton?"

"What happened to her?"

"So you do?"

"Come on, man. Is she okay? I was supposed to meet her here right now."

He looked both ways, confirming no one else was in earshot. His brow was furrowed, and he avoided my eyes for a beat too long.

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“I’m sorry, man. She was found earlier this morning. She’s dead.”

The wind had been knocked out of me with those two words. I didn’t know what to think, or how to feel. I tried to make my mouth form words, but I kept coming up blank. None of this made sense. I shook my head, not comprehending.

“I don’t understand. What happened?”

Theo looked around again, then leaned forward even closer.

“Look, I’m not supposed to say anything right now. I could get in major shit if it gets out that I did, okay?”

I nodded, still not sure what was going on.

“I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this. But it’s a homicide.”

I don’t know how I stayed upright when my knees felt weak at those words. My gut churned and nausea consumed me.

“I saw the texts to you on her phone. I know you know her, and you’ll tell me how later. But that makes you a person of interest right now, so I’m not supposed to be talking to you about it.”

If I thought I felt sick before, that pushed me over the edge. I bent down, then squatted on the ground so as not to lose my balance. My head hurt, my throat constricted. Everything was spinning. What the fuck happened?

I vaguely noticed Theo calling out for something, and then a moment later, he squatted down next to me and handed me a bottle of water.

“Are you okay, man?”

“I’m just confused. Why would anyone want to kill Annie?”

“I’m going to find out, I promise you. But it might get worse before it gets better.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that, she was a tourist here. She checked in alone, and from what people saw, she traveled here alone. You’re the only connection to her that we know about. So I need you to be honest with me, and trust the process, okay?”

I’d been friends with Theo for years, and I did trust him. But where I came from, cops couldn’t be trusted and those feelings came back in a harsh way as I stood back up and looked around at the whole operation. Someone from the newspaper was here, a photographer was taking photos and the crowd on the sidewalk had their phones out.

The other officers and deputies were going in and out of the building, bags of evidence under their arms. The coroner arrived in a white van.

Back in Eastie, scenes like this were common. But no one cooperated with the police. No one knew anything, even if they did. I didn’t want to let those old experiences taint me, muddy the waters of my life here, and the people I knew were good and honest.

But I couldn’t help it. This was wrong, on so many levels. I didn’t know what happened to Annie, but I knew, without a doubt, that I was about to be blamed for it.

twenty-two

ELLIE

News always traveled fast in Moon Harbor, so it was no surprise that my phone notifications blew up at the mere inkling of a murder on Harbor Street. But what I didn't expect was to see multiple texts from various townies that all said the same thing.

Rafael had been arrested.

When the first text came through, I thought it'd been some kind of sick joke. But then another, and another. And when Cheryl McClintock called to say the same thing, I almost dropped my phone. I rushed to the window of my shop, where I could see the Sheriff's Department across the street. There was some kind of hubbub going on, because a bunch of cruisers had just pulled in, but I couldn't see the parking lot.

"What the fuck?"

I texted the girls' group chat and waited for Sara or Alex to respond. They surely heard something, too. Especially Sara. The Witch's Brew was a constant haven for gossip.

I chewed on my nails and ignored my stomach ache. I would go crazy if I just sat here. I had no customers in the shop, but that could change at any moment, so I took advantage of the quiet and put the 'closed' sign up. I grabbed my bag and walked out, locking the door behind me. My phone buzzed with a text.

Alex: What the hell is happening?

Sara: Theo said Raf is with him, but refused to elaborate. I'm

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going to kill him.

Me:I'm going over there right now.

I dropped my phone in my bag and rushed across the street. The sheriff's office was located in the Town Hall building, an old stone structure that sat on the Harbor. I jogged up the steps, ignoring the sinking feeling in my gut. When I reached the glass doors and pulled one open, I sidestepped an elderly man on his way out, and approached the main desk.

Jeff Ryan, a deputy who'd recently gotten a DUI and was still on desk duty looked up at me. I'd known him since we were kids, so I didn't bother explaining.

"Where's Theo?"

"Uh, I don't know, Ellie, he's busy."

"Buzz me in."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Buzz me in, Jeff. Or I'm going to tell every single woman in town what a tiny dick you have."

"What the hell, you've never seen my dick."

"Doesn't matter. Gossip doesn't care about truth."

He looked behind him, then shrugged and pressed the button that unlocked the interior doors.

“You’re a gem,” I called as I walked through the doors and hurried down the hall. I heard him muttering something in response, but didn’t stick around to hear it, nor did I care.

I turned the corner and rushed to Theo’s office door, not bothering to knock as I opened it wide.

He sat at his desk, his work phone to his ear, listening intently. When he saw me barge in, he gave me an incredulous look and mouthed “what the fuck?” but didn’t disrupt his call, or tell me to leave. No one else was in the room with him.

“Uh huh. Yeah. Alright, roger that.” He hung the phone up and then slowly looked up at me with the kind of brotherly annoyance that Sam often wore on his face.

“What the hell, Ellie?”

“Where is Raf? What have you done with him?”

Theo stood. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“No, you must be kidding me. What is this? He’s one of your best friends, why is he even here?”

At that moment, my brother appeared behind me. “What the fuck is going on, man? Ellie, why are you here? Where’s Raf?”

“Jesus Christ,” Theo said, rolling his eyes. “Does everyone have a secret key card I don’t know about?”

“Why won’t you tell us what’s going on?”

“Why are you here, though?” my brother asked again.

I pointed at Theo. “He arrested Raf!” I shouted, my voice harsh.

“What the hell?” Sam rounded on Theo.

“I didn’t arrest anyone. Yet.”

“Yet? What’s that supposed to mean? And where is Raf?”

“I’m right here.”

I turned, and saw Raf standing in the doorway. I couldn’t hold back. I didn’t care that my brother and Theo were right there, or that we were in the damn sheriff’s office. I went to him and threw my arms around his neck, burrowing my face in his chest. His arms came around me too, holding on to me tightly.

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Someone cleared their throat. I pulled back, but caught Raf mouthing “it’s okay” to me, before I turned to face the others again.

“Will someone explain what the hell is going on? I get a call from Gus about some murder, and Raf being taken away in handcuffs from some motel.” Sam said. My chest tightened. A motel?

“Christ almighty, this town.” Theo shook his head.

“Who was murdered? And why was Raf arrested?”

“He wasn’t arrested.”

I looked at Raf. I didn’t know what was going on and I felt my anxiety rise with each passing moment. He took a deep breath and led me to one of the chairs in front of Theo’s desk.

“Annie was murdered.”

My mouth dropped open, and my stomach sank. I didn’t know what to think, but I knew this had to be painful for Raf. I reached for his hand.

“Who the hell is Annie?”

“My friend,” Raf answered Sam with a bite to his voice. “An old friend, anyway.”

“We really shouldn’t be talking about all this right now.”

“Spare me the police bullshit, Sheriff. We’re all family in this room. You can’t possibly think Raf had anything to do with this?”

“Come on, Sam, give me a break. I have to keep this investigation moving properly. I have to dot all the i’s and cross all the t’s and make sure that no one can say anything about impropriety, or else another agency will take over. And then how will that help Raf?”

“Well what does this have anything to do with Raf in the first place? I mean, okay, he knew her, but that doesn’t mean anything,” I said. “What about the guy who attacked me?”

“I really can’t talk about it, but obviously, we’re looking at all the angles.”

“I can talk about it. I have nothing to hide,” Raf said, turning to me. “I didn’t kill her, I think that should go without saying. But I was supposed to meet up with Annie today.” He turned to me then. “I’m sorry, I should have told you earlier.” My heart beat faster, and I couldn’t deny that I felt sick from all of this. But I trusted him, and I trusted him to tell me more when we were alone.

I ignored the questioning look Sam had on his face and turned to Theo.

“When was she killed? I mean, obviously we know Raf didn’t do it, but he needs an alibi, right? Isn’t that how this works?”

“Not that I can even talk about it with you, Eleanor, but I won’t know for sure till I hear back from the medical examiner.”

“Well he was with me all morning.” I avoided Sam’s eyes and took Raf’s hand. “And all night.”

Theo's eyebrows shot up into his hairline, and he looked at Raf, who gave a quick nod.

Then came what I'd been afraid of, but not surprised to see happen.

"The fuck you were. What do you mean 'all night and all morning?' And why are you holding hands?" Sam's voice raised with each word, but I was no stranger to his overprotective theatrics. Raf, on the other hand, winced. He stood up and looked at Sam.

"Ellie spent the night at my place."

Silence shrouded the room for a solid minute.

"Like, she came over as a friend and passed out there, right?"

"Come on, Sam, don't be dense," I chimed in. Which was probably a mistake.

Sam lunged at Raf, grabbing him by the collar and throwing him up against the wall. Raf didn't try to fight back.

I screamed, and Theo rushed around his desk to try to break it up, but he wasn't fast enough. Sam threw a right hook that connected with Raf's jaw. Theo grabbed him from behind at the same time a deputy burst through the door.

"We're okay!" Theo shouted at the deputy to diffuse a potential gun-drawing scenario. It was utter chaos.

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“You fucked my little sister?!” Sam screamed.

I ran to Raf, who was bent over, holding his chin. I helped him straighten, and saw that while his jaw was red and already starting to bruise, he didn’t appear to need medical attention. I rounded on my brother.

“What the fuck?”

Theo held out a hand to stop me from getting to Sam, which was probably a good idea, because I had the strong urge to break his nose.

“El, this doesn’t concern you,” Sam said, but Theo turned to him.

“Sam, I beg of you not to finish that sentence, you’re only making a fool of yourself.”

“What? You’re okay with this?” Sam gestured wildly.

“Sam, I get that it’s going to be an adjustment, but put your big boy pants on and make it. You have no say in my romantic life. I’m a grown woman and I fell in love. It just so happens to be with your friend. Someone who is also my friend, I might add. Someone who you trust and care about, who you were just defending three minutes ago.”

“You’re in love with me?”

Oh. The embarrassment coursed through my veins.

I turned around to see Raf, still holding his jaw, but looking like he'd just won the lottery. Was that smile because of me? He walked up to me, putting a hand on my cheek. I didn't know what to say. It was the truth, of course. I'd loved Raf since I was eighteen years old. Maybe it was different then, but through the years, our friendship grew, and so did my love for him. He was all I ever wanted, and I might as well start admitting it. If it scared him off, so be it.

I nodded. "Of course I'm in love with you."

"Ellie... I really wish I didn't have to do this in front of these two assholes," he said, eyeing Sam and Theo who'd ceased struggling with each other to watch us. "But I'm in love with you too. So devotedly, obsessively, head over heels in love with you, and everything about you. You're my life."

Tears sprung into my eyes and I jumped up into his arms, my legs wrapping around him the way I fit so perfectly. The way we'd gotten used to holding each other. His arms encircled me in the most calming way, and I cried into his neck.

In the chaos of this whole afternoon, I relished the moment our love became real.

twenty-three

RAFAEL

"Here, for your face." Back at Ellie's apartment, Sam handed me an ice pack. She'd brought us here to make up, and then promptly left to go back downstairs to work, leaving us alone with awkward energy permeating the air. I sat on her couch and put the ice against my stinging jaw.

I was still riding high from hearing Ellie loved me, and telling her the same. It was the least romantic way I wanted to do it, but now that it was out there, my heart had

grown three sizes and I felt an overall sense of relief.

But that didn't negate the confusion and sadness I felt for Annie, or the overwhelming guilt I had for breaking the guy code and pissing Sam off. I was here with him, though, so first thing's first. I had to come to terms with fucking up, and take the step to apologize.

"Look, man. I'm sorry."

"Ellie wouldn't want you to apologize."

"You're right, she wouldn't. And I'm not apologizing for being with her. I can't apologize for loving her. But I do apologize for not going to you first and talking about it."

Sam let out a long sigh and sat down on the other side of the couch.

"The truth is," he said, "she's right. I have no say in her love life. And it doesn't matter that you're one of my best friends. She's an adult and she can make her own choices."

I agreed, but it still didn't sit right with me.

"You know, this just happened, right? All these years, I tried to keep my feelings bottled up. I never wanted to seem like I was hanging around for the wrong reason."

"I know, man. Fuck, I feel bad you felt that way all these years and didn't think you could be honest. And Ellie, too."

"Marriage has matured you."

He laughed. “Maybe. Finding Alex again was the biggest blessing of my life.” He shook his head, considering his words. “I don’t know, I guess I just feel bad that you guys felt that way all this time and didn’t pursue it because of me.”

“Well not just because of you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, man. I’m not good enough for her. I knew you’d think it, but I didn’t want to saddle her with a fuck-up like me.”

“What the fuck, Raf? Why do you think that?”

The surprise in his voice caught me off guard, but I continued.

“Ellie deserves the best. She should be with someone from a good background, someone who went to college, and has a good job, and can provide for her.” I let out a humorless laugh. “Someone who doesn’t come home smelling like lobster every night.”

“That’s bullshit. You’re one of my best friends for a reason. You’re a good guy. And Ellie works hard as hell. I don’t give her enough credit. She doesn’t need someone to provide for her.”

“Maybe not, but she deserves it.”

“Sure, but I don’t know if you’ve noticed this, Raf... You’re doing real well for yourself.”

“I guess.”

“I know so. And you’ve always been there for us. You’ve been good to her over the years, and I was probably way too stupid to see what was right in front of me.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, we were too stupid to realize we liked each other too.”

He laughed and held out his hand to shake. I grabbed it and we hugged too. I let out a long breath, realizing I’d been more worried about this conversation than I thought, and that I really shouldn’t have been.

“I’m sorry about your friend, man. Were you close?”

The reality of the murder came flooding back, and with it, the nausea. I stood up and walked to the kitchen to grab a glass of water.

“I don’t know. I hadn’t seen her in years. Since before I even moved to Moon Harbor. I guess back then, yeah, we were close. We ran with the same crowd. I’d tried to get out of my neighborhood, so I started taking classes at one of the community colleges. That’s where I met Annie, and all the others. We were still little asshole rebels, but not like the ones I grew up around. We were dumb kids. Drugs, staying out too late partying. Stupid shit.” I couldn’t finish that story. I didn’t know how. So I glossed over it.

“Eventually my mom died and I moved away. I hadn’t talked to any of them since. And then she happened to be here in town recently. We ran into each other, caught up a bit, and she left to go back to Boston.”

“Seems really random. What was she doing back here?”

I shook my head. “That’s just it, I don’t know. She called me and said she needed to talk. That she didn’t want to do it over the phone and she’d be coming back to Moon

Harbor. I was heading over to meet her when I saw all the police cars.”

“What would anyone here want to hurt her for? It had to be random, a robbery gone wrong or something.”

“I guess that’s the only thing that makes sense. Theo said I was the only one in town that had a connection to her, so I’m a person of interest.”

“Fuck that. But he has to do his job, I guess. He’ll clear you, and figure out what really happened.”

“Yeah. I hope so.” But my head was spinning. I had a bad feeling about this, and it wouldn’t go away.

* * *

By the time Ellie came upstairs an hour later, Sam had left, but ordered us delivery from the Thai restaurant down the street as a parting gift. We sat on the floor watching TV and gorging ourselves on green curry and Khao Pad.

We hadn’t talked much since she got home, and even though we’d been affectionate, there was a sense of trouble hanging over us. Ellie broke the silence.

“I’m sorry about Annie.”

I could tell Ellie had been wanting to talk, so I was glad she said something. I knew her even better than I realized, every mannerism giving away her thoughts or actions before she showed her hand. I liked that. But right now, I wanted to get everything on the table.

“Thank you. I’m sorry too. She was a good person.” I put my half-empty container of

food down on the coffee table and turned to her. Now or never.

“And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I was meeting up with her today.”

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“No, Raf, you don’t have to explain, we’re not like, official or anything, and you can see whoever you want, and I know you said you were just friends, so I trust you—”

“El,” I interrupted, reaching for her hand and putting it in between both of mine.

She laughed. “I’m sorry. I guess I do feel a little awkward.”

“First of all, if you don’t think we’re official, then I have some work to do. You’re my girl. You’re my everything. So get that straight.”

She smiled and leaned forward to press a soft kiss to my lips. I cherished it, but needed to get all this out before I changed my mind.

“I do want to talk to you about my past some more.”

“Okay.”

“Annie hadn’t been a part of my life since I moved away from Boston. So when I ran into her the night of my birthday, it was a huge shock. It was nice seeing her, but there’s a reason I left that part of my life behind.”

Ellie scooted closer to me, so that our legs touched. The proximity gave me strength.

“I ran around with Annie and our friend group starting when I was eighteen. We’d gotten close fast. Partied a lot, did things we shouldn’t have, like drugs, street racing. Stupid shit. I thought it was better than the neighborhood gangs I grew up around, but the truth is, it wasn’t. We were just as irresponsible, just as dumb. None of this really

matters to the story, I just needed you to know, we weren't mature by any stretch of the imagination.

"A couple years later, I started dating Melissa, one of the girls in the group. We got pretty serious pretty fast, but like I said, we weren't mature. I didn't know what 'serious' meant back then. I just knew she took it more seriously than I did."

"Uh oh. Did you break her heart?"

I sighed. "Yes, but there's more to it than that. One day, Melissa and our friend Nico were messing around with coke. Too much coke. I'd been working, so I wasn't there. But Nico had a heart condition."

"Oh shit."

"Yeah. He collapsed and died. Melissa was a wreck. And I didn't handle it well. I'd already started to hate the party scene, the same shit we'd been doing over and over. But Nico dying... It was like something broke in me.

"I'm ashamed of the way I blamed her. I tried not to, but I did. And I broke up with her. I couldn't handle her anymore and she wasn't using it as a wake-up call, she was slipping more and more into bad shit. I remember being so disgusted with her. And I still feel guilty about that. Nico made his choices, it wasn't Melissa's fault, but I blamed her and hated to see what she'd become."

"That's understandable."

"Maybe. But after the break-up, she spiraled even further out of control. She called me every day, begging me to take her back and I wanted nothing to do with her. Things at home started to suffer, because my mom was disappointed in the way I was living. It didn't matter that I was trying to get away from it, she was heartbroken that

I'd fallen into a bad pattern to begin with.

"I felt so lost. My mom was my everything, and now we were arguing all the time. I'd lost one of my best friends, I'd dumped my girlfriend, everyone was at each other's throats over it all. And then Melissa started dating one of our friends, Heath.

"At first I was relieved. She was someone else's problem now. But she didn't stop contacting me. It was incessant. I was sick of it. Annie had told me how badly Melissa was doing. Still on the drugs, her mental health was spiraling. But I didn't want to hear it. I knew she and Heath were toxic with each other. I knew they weren't doing well, but I didn't want anything to do with it.

"She called me, begging me to pick her up one night. She was incoherent, she sounded so out of control. I told her to fuck off. That I couldn't help her."

Ellie reached for me, and it was only then that I realized my eyes were full of tears.

"She uh, killed herself that night."

"Oh Raf. I'm so sorry."

"The guilt I felt... The guilt I still feel about it... It's consumed me for years. If only I had listened to her that night. If only I'd helped her. All of it replayed in my head for months.

"My mom was so disappointed when she found out. So heartbroken. She had her issues with Melissa, but knew that she was troubled and felt sorry for her. To my mom, I'd become someone unrecognizable. Not just from this, but from years of me fucking up by that point. She never looked at me the same way again after that, and her heart gave out a few weeks later. She died in her sleep and I found her the next morning."

“Oh my god. Raf, I’m so sorry.” Ellie climbed into my lap and wrapped me in her arms. I let the tears flow. I cried for my mom, for Melissa, for the guilt I’d had inside me all these years. I’d never let myself feel it, only ever bottled it up. And now the stopper had come off and I was freeing myself from it.

I held on to Ellie so tightly. She was my lifeline. And she didn’t say a word, just held me as I let it all out.

Eventually the tears stopped and I looked into Ellie’s eyes. The calming ocean blue eyes that held me steady.

“Thank you.”

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“You don’t have to thank me.”

“I do, El. I’ve never talked about this before. You’re bringing me back.”

She wrapped her arms around me again, this time even tighter. And we sat like that, for minutes or hours, I didn’t know. But when I finally found the strength to stand up, I carried her into the bedroom where we still held onto each other, and drifted off to sleep.

twenty-four

ELLIE

The glowing light from the other room left a ray on the wall through the cracked door. When I slid my hand over to the space next to me, I only felt the cold sheet. No Raf. I reached for my phone to check the time. Three in the morning. I put it back on the nightstand and sat up.

Padding along the wooden floors, I went out to the living room and found him sitting on the couch, focusing intently on his phone. He looked up and smiled, but it wasn’t his normal smile. It was pained, drawn. Purely for my benefit.

“Can’t sleep?”

“Whenever I have trouble sleeping, I play this stupid game,” he flashed his phone screen to me and I saw colorful graphics, but didn’t recognize what it was. “It’s not helping tonight. Only making me more alert.” He laughed at that, but I didn’t.

“You want to talk about it?” I sat down next to him.

“Nah. We did that.” He entangled his arm with my knee, and rubbed his thumb over my bare skin. “I think it was that I’d never talked about it, now that I did, it was like a release. But everything came back. It’s not buried deep anymore, my mind keeps going over and over it.”

“Well, that makes sense. I’m really sorry, Raf. I had no idea you’d been through all of that. I wish I could have helped you through it.”

“I didn’t let you know. That was on me.”

I leaned forward to kiss him, his ocean and pine scent going straight to the pleasure center of my brain. I climbed into his lap, absently noticing he dropped his phone and slid his hands to rest on my ass. Deepening the kiss, I rolled my hips into him, feeling him grow hard beneath me. I didn’t know what to say to make Raf feel better, but I knew I could do this. I could give him pleasure and in turn, take my own. The heady feeling of power rushed through me and my pulse quickened.

I broke the kiss. “Remember, I know what you need.”

He made an “mmm” sound in the back of his throat and thrust up once, telling me all I needed to know. He was ready.

I slid off him onto my knees on the floor and stared into his eyes as I unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans. His cock sprang out, impossibly hard, and my eyes couldn’t help but drift to it. From this view, he was even bigger than I realized. He ran his hand through my hair and down to my cheek.

“You see something you like?” he asked, with a smirk. I realized my mouth had dropped open and my eyes went wide. I was salivating for him.

I looked back into his eyes, nodded and shrugged. And then dove in.

He leaned his head back and moaned as I took the tip of him into my mouth, sliding my tongue around it and using my cheeks to give him gentle suction. His moans made me ache for him, and spurred me on. I licked up the entire length, teasing my movements to drive him wild. After all, I knew what he needed.

We had this primal connection, Raf and me. Some way, somehow, we knew each other deeper than we even realized. And that knowledge gave me a power I relished as I was on my knees for him.

He started to thrust, little movements of his hips he was unsuccessfully trying to control. I finally gave in and took him deep into my throat like he wanted.

“Ahh.” His sigh of relief echoed throughout the apartment and I giggled.

I bobbed my head, up and down, taking him as deep into my throat as I could. It was wet and sloppy, our sounds mingling to create a sinful soundtrack. He moved his hand to the back of my head, pressing down, not quite controlling my movements, but guiding them. His other hand came down to wrap around my neck, to feel through my skin just how deep he was, just how much I was choking on his delicious cock.

“Fuck, angel. You know how to work this cock. Take it deep.”

I felt myself getting wet, my pussy pulsing with need, but I didn't want to stop, I wanted to suck Raf's cock all night. I bottomed out, and he held me down. Five seconds... Ten seconds... And then choking, and up again, where he held my face in his hands and looked at me like I was the most glorious thing he'd ever seen. I felt like it, too. This power delighted me. I'd never loved sucking dick so much. I'd never craved it like this.

I increased my rhythm now, up and down on him, using my hand too, and I felt him tense. His thighs were bouncing, his grunts were becoming louder and louder. I excitedly kept going, not daring to change the rhythm for a second.

But out of nowhere he pulled me up and off him. I almost pouted, but then he yanked my shorts down.

“I need to come deep inside this pussy. Come here and ride me.”

He didn't have to ask twice. I shoved my thong to the side and climbed on his lap, sinking down onto that perfect cock. I might have even lost consciousness for a moment as I fully seated myself.

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“Fuck, I love how wet you are for me.”

When I opened up my eyes, he was watching me. His hands dug into my thighs, his hips thrust upward, urging me to move.

I held onto his shoulders and swirled my hips to start. His eyes fluttered closed and his mouth opened in pleasure. I wanted to give this man everything.

I started moving faster. I pumped my hips up and down, feeling that deep pleasure only Raf could give me. Like we were made to fit each other. His hands moved to my ass and his fingers dug into the flesh there, and then slapped it. It only spurred me on.

I bounced on him now, riding him hard and delighting at the sounds coming out of his mouth. He was close again.

“Mmm I want you to come deep inside me, babe. Is that what you want?”

“Fuck yes.”

“You like when I bounce on this dick?”

He nodded. “Come on, angel. Give it to me. Make this cock come for you.”

He reached around and did that magical work with his thumb on my clit again. My muscles tensed, I felt them pulsing around him, but I kept going, kept riding him, drawing out that orgasm I knew was close.

And then it hit. It hit both of us at the same time.

He grunted, I screamed. Our sounds mingled as our bodies flew off the edge together. I felt paralyzed then, not in control of my movements, but he held me. He wrapped his arms around me as he poured himself into me and I rode out this wave of bliss.

His movements slowed, still pumping in and out of me while I lay draped over him, like the soft waves that don't crest before they meet the shore.

"Goddamn, El."

I giggled, but didn't move. My head was on his shoulder, my arms dangling behind him.

Eventually he stood, carrying me as I was, and laid me in bed. A moment later, I felt him clean me up with a warm washcloth. Then another moment later, the bed shifted and he curled his body around me.

"I love you so damn much, El."

I turned and nuzzled into him. "I love you, too."

Nothing had ever felt so right.

twenty-five

ELLIE

We woke up late and spent the day making love—slow and sensual this time, where Raf looked into my eyes with every deep thrust, where he whispered promises of love and devotion I'd only ever dreamed of hearing from him. And after he tenderly

washed me in my shower that was entirely too small for him, we enjoyed a lazy day in bed.

It was heaven.

Which should have been the first sign of trouble to come.

The buzz from the doorbell startled me. When I answered it and heard Theo's voice, my stomach sank. I looked over to Raf. His face fell, but just for a moment. He recovered quickly, never wanting to show weakness or cause me distress.

We got dressed and walked downstairs, where Theo was in uniform, his face stricken. He leaned against his cruiser, but stood up straight when we stepped outside.

"I need you to come in."

"You're arresting him?"

"I have to. But I'd like to do it without a spectacle."

"Why are you doing it at all?"

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“I can’t get into that. Trust me, I don’t want to be doing this.” He took a step forward and looked Raf in the eye. “Come on, man. It’s me. You know I believe you. But I have to do my job properly or someone else will come and do it for me.”

“He’s right, El.”

“What are we going to do? You can’t even tell us what’s happening?”

Theo shook his head, clearly warring with himself. But then he looked around, and stepped closer.

“Look, we found Raf’s fingerprints on a glass from Annie’s hotel room.”

“What?” The word passed through my lips in a whisper. The air felt thick.

“What the hell, man. I was never in there. I swear on my mother’s grave, I was never in that room.”

I felt sick, my stomach sinking, a chill running from my head down to the tips of my toes. I didn’t want to doubt Raf, but I didn’t know how else that could be explained.

“Come on, we’ll talk about it at the station.”

“Ellie, you have to believe me. You know me.”

I nodded, but my throat constricted and I couldn’t speak. Nothing would come out, and I realized I didn’t know what I would have said in the first place.

Theo didn't use handcuffs, and he let Raf ride up front. He arrested him without the spectacle, because he trusted Raf.

But instead of trusting the man I love, I stood there, questioning everything. I watched as Raf kept repeating over and over "I didn't do it, Ellie." Theo said something to me before he got in the car, but I couldn't even hear it. All I heard was "I didn't do it, Ellie. You know me." over and over on a loop.

I did know him. But I froze. The shock of it all froze me, and I didn't stand up for him the way he would for me. The pained look on his face as he pleaded with me to believe him would be forever burned into my memory.

I watched Theo take him away, and sank to my knees knowing that I just broke Raf's heart.

twenty-six

RAFAEL

The booking was a fast process, probably because I was friends with most of the people who arrested me. But giving fingerprints and having my mugshot taken damn near took me out.

After growing up the way I did, with my father in and out of prison, and my friends all criminals, I really thought I'd avoided it once I moved out of Boston. That now, here in Moon Harbor, I'd created a life that mattered. A life that was good and true. It all came crashing down.

I sat in Theo's office and tried to not let it consume me. The stress, the fear. The disappointment I felt when I realized Ellie didn't know if she could trust me. My heart felt like it'd been speared.

I couldn't blame her. After everything, I still couldn't blame her. But it hurt more than I ever could have imagined.

Theo walked back in and sat down at his desk.

"I guess I should thank you for not putting me in the holding cell yet."

"Well I'm trying to keep it that way. We have some people from the state doing all sorts of oversight after what happened with Sheriff Olsen. They're still not convinced he didn't know more about what his wife and son did. But when I took over, I promised that I would run a clean department. So I have to make sure everything is done by the book."

"Right." I appreciated it, but I was the one with my life in the balance, not him. Platitudes didn't mean much right now. He seemed to know that, though.

"I shouldn't tell you anything about our investigation. But besides knowing you and your personality, looking at this objectively, I have concerns about this so-called evidence."

"I told you I was never there in that room. The only time I saw Annie in over a decade was at Landry's weeks ago. We ate dinner, we caught up, talked about some of the people we used to know. That was it. I said goodnight, and we went our separate ways."

"And she left the next day?"

"That's what she said. The next morning.

"You don't know why she came back to town?"

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“No. She called me and said she needed to talk about something. Made it sound really important. But she didn’t want to talk on the phone.” I shook my head. “I’m telling you everything I know. She said she’d come back to town the following week and would text me when she could meet up. I said okay.”

“Did she sound like herself?”

“I mean—” I started to talk, but stopped, my mouth hanging open as I thought about the question. “Like I said, I knew her a long time ago, so I can’t be sure. But no, she sounded off. Scared, maybe. Or sad. I don’t know. Her voice was strained.”

Theo nodded, thinking about it all. I thought about it too. I thought about why this happened, why I was involved, and how, once again, maybe I could have done more to help someone before they met an untimely end. The guilt never ceased.

The phone rang on Theo’s desk and he picked it up.

My mind wandered back to Ellie and if I’d even get to see her again. If I’d get to hold her again, or if she’d even want me to.

Theo slammed the phone down and grinned like the Cheshire Cat. This had better be good news, or I was about to go down for assault on an officer too.

“That was the M.E. Time of death was eight o’clock the night before her body was found. The night you were with Ellie.”

I sucked in the deepest breath I could and let it rush out.

“So you believe me? That I was at home with her all night?”

“Of course I believe you, but that part doesn’t matter. There’s no security cameras at the B and B, so that was a bust. But there are some in the surrounding area. You’re not on any of them all night long.”

“Holy fuck, man. Why didn’t you tell me that earlier?”

“I needed to confirm the time of death. Sorry for keeping you in suspense.”

“But what about that glass in her room? I don’t understand that.”

“Well I have a partial theory on that. When was the last time you were at the pub?”

I stared at him, confused, but he held up a hand and I thought about it.

“Uh, I was there with a couple of the guys from work, must have been last week. Actually, shit, it was when Annie called me.”

Theo nodded and made a note of that in a notepad on his desk.

“I recognized the glass as one from O’Reilly’s pub. Their pint glasses all have faded white O’s on them. Very distinctive. There’s no way it should be in that room, right? Unless you and she were at the pub and you left with it. Or, unless someone wanted it to be there.”

I just stared at him, dumbfounded, trying to take it all in.

He continued, “Her room at the B and B was clean. She hadn’t even slept in the bed. Her suitcase was mostly untouched. No food wrappers or anything. So why the fuck would she have a pint glass in there with someone else’s fingerprints? She hadn’t

even touched it.”

I tried to put it all together in my head. What did Annie want with me, why did someone else want her dead, and how did my fingerprints end up in her room when I know I never set foot in there?

“You mean you think someone framed me.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I think.”

twenty-seven

ELLIE

I didn’t know what to do. I spent the first thirty minutes without Raf up in my apartment, pacing like a caged lion. I finally realized that would do nothing helpful, so I texted the girls’ group chat and explained what happened. Alex said I shouldn’t be alone and that she’d be by to pick me up as soon as she could.

Sara was at work and told us to come there, but there was no way I could handle being around the public. Especially not small town, gossipy, Moon Harbor public. Ugh. I thought about what the rumor mill was already spinning about Raf and it made me sick.

I grabbed my phone and keys and ran downstairs to wait for Alex outside. But when I stepped outside, I realized the back door to the shop was ajar. I didn’t remember leaving it open, but sometimes Sam came by to drop off new products he made and sold there.

If he was working at a time like this when his best friend was in jail, I was going to lay into him. I threw the door open and walked into the store room, but he wasn’t

there. The light was on in the showroom, so I pushed through the swinging door.
Only there wasn't anyone there.

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I flipped the light switch down and turned around to leave, but something stopped me.

A blue latex glove lay on the floor by the light switch. My eyes widened and I tried to run, but I was too late. A blow to the back of my head took me down and everything went black.

twenty-eight

RAFAEL

After getting my phone back from intake, or whatever the hell they called it, I tried to call Ellie but she didn't answer. She was probably still convinced I was a liar and possibly a murderer. My chest ached at the thought.

Theo and I walked outside and he was about to drive me home when we saw Alex pull into the parking lot like a wild woman.

“Woah there, slow it down, Benning. Or is it Waters, now? Did you change your name?”

“Shut up, where's Ellie? Is she with you?”

“No, she's not here. Why?”

“She was worried about you, and I said I'd pick her up. She said she'd wait for me, but when I got to her apartment, the door was locked and the door to the shop was

open and no one was there.”

The ache in my chest had turned into a full-blown gash. It was as if someone had cut me open.

“Stay together,” Theo said, before running to his police cruiser and hightailing it out of there. There was no way I’d wait around for something to happen to her.

“I can’t just sit around and do nothing.”

“I grabbed her phone. It was on the floor of the shop. Maybe there’s something in here.” Alex punched in the passcode everyone knew Ellie used—her parents’ wedding anniversary—and started scrolling through it.

“Fuck. She wouldn’t go anywhere without her phone. She had to have been taken, for sure.”

“Wait a second. GPS.”

“What?”

“Ellie. She got a new safety necklace, a whistle thing. It has GPS in it.”

“Holy fuck, that’s so smart.”

“Right?” My girl was so fucking smart. God, I wanted to wrap my arms around her and never let go.

“Okay, do you know how to access the data? Did she set it up?”

“Shit. I don’t know, I just remember her saying it in passing after she was attacked.” I

dragged my hands through my hair and started pacing. “Why didn’t I ask her about it?”

“There’s no point in regrets now. Let’s just figure it out.”

“She got it at that shop down the street.”

“Okay, get in the car.”

Alex drove like a bat out of hell for the four blocks it took to get to the outdoor supply store. She double parked on the wrong side of the street and flipped off the driver who honked at her when she got out of the car. I never realized how much of a badass Alex was, but I was damn glad she was here with me right now.

We ran inside so fast, the clerk put his hands up like we were going to shoot him.

“You sold a whistle necklace with GPS the other day, right?”

“Yeah, to that Ellie Waters girl. I told her the whistle was loud as hell and she shouldn’t use it outside unless it was an emergency. Told her to test it out at home.”

“Okay, whatever,” Alex said, shaking her head. “Is there a way to find her using that GPS signal?”

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“If she set it up, yeah. You have to connect it to a phone. There’s an app for it. Otherwise, the authorities can access it, but it takes—”

“Show us.” I said, my voice booming a little louder than I meant, but it worked all the same. Alex unlocked Ellie’s phone again and handed it to him.

A bead of sweat trickled down his temple as he took the phone and started looking. After a minute of him swiping around, he smiled triumphantly and turned the phone around to show us the screen.

Alex looked at me.

“Holy fuck.”

twenty-nine

ELLIE

The pain in my head was throbbing in time to the beat of an old eighties song. I remembered it because my dad used to sing it to me when I was young. Maybe he was singing it to me now, and I just needed to find him.

I opened my eyes. Well, one opened. The other stayed shut. It might be swollen? I tried to touch it, but my hands wouldn’t move. Come to think of it, my arms hurt too. Were they tied together?

The eye that opened could only see grass. It was dark now, but there was an ambient

light coming from somewhere. I slowly realized I was laying on my stomach in the grass, my hands tied behind me.

What the hell happened? I tried to jog my memory, but the last thing I could remember was being in bed with Raf. We were laughing and kissing. It was only good. So why did I have a sinking feeling in my stomach?

Oh, you mean besides the fact that you're tied up and injured? Good thinking, Ellie.

No, it was something else. Did Raf and I have a fight? Likely, but no. That wasn't it.

A rustling sound to my left caught my attention and I stilled. Footsteps approached and rough hands grabbed me from behind and propped me up in a sitting position. I whimpered in pain, which made me feel even more vulnerable. Whoever was behind me just laughed. Fucking psycho.

"Don't worry, this'll be over soon. I just need to do some damage control."

The voice was not at all distinctive, but I committed every word, sound, inflection to memory. If I survived this, I needed to have ammunition.

Maybe he was one of those dumbasses that liked to open up to their victims and tell them everything. Alex told me after she was kidnapped, she survived partly because of her knowledge of true crime. She said it helped to keep her attacker talking. I guess it was worth a shot.

"Who are you?" So basic, but whatever.

"Shut up."

"Come on, you literally attacked me, kidnapped me, have me tied up in some... Wait,

where are we? Are we in a graveyard?"

"You were a lot hotter when you were knocked out."

"Yeah well, I can't see you, but I'm sure you'd be a lot hotter if you weren't beating and kidnapping innocent women."

Slap.

He backhanded me across the face. It hurt like a bitch, but the adrenaline rushed through me, keeping me steady.

"Who are you? I'm just going to keep asking, so you might as well tell me."

"I'm no one to you. Don't worry about it."

"Well, seeing as I'm your victim, your logic is a little flawed. Unless you want to let me go."

"Shut up."

He moved around to the front of me now and I saw him. It was the same man from the promenade. He lit a cigarette, no, a clove cigarette and took a drag. So it's definitely the same guy I pepper sprayed, too. Fucking cloves. Who smokes those anymore?

"Okay, if you're not going to tell me, I'll have to guess. Let's see. Ah, are you one of the kids my brother might have bullied in middle school? Look, he was a dick back then, no doubt about it. But he's grown now, he's got his life together."

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“Oh my god, do you want me to kill you right now?”

I laughed. As I talked, I'd felt around and realized he'd used duct tape to bind my hands together. I remember in one of Alex's true crime podcasts, they'd mentioned how it's actually easy to get out of duct tape if you wiggled your hands together just right.

“Okay, so not a bullied kid. Are you a competitor of mine? Maybe you make your own handmade jewelry and you're trying to eliminate the competition.”

Leaning forward, he grabbed my face, squeezing my cheeks until they hurt.

“I'm going to skin you alive. Just wait.” He smiled and looked deep into my eyes with his terrifying, maniacal gaze, but I refused to look away. I would not show weakness.

He shoved me back, and I realized I was propped up against a gravestone. Taking his phone out of his pocket, he looked at it, swiping and typing some things out.

“Perfect. Now that your boyfriend is out of lockup, I can finish this shit and get the hell out of here.”

“What?” Raf was out of jail? And what did that have to do with this? “What are you trying to do?”

A deep, booming voice caressed my ears. I knew that voice anywhere. Raf.

“He’s trying to kill you and frame me for the murder. Just like he tried with Annie.”

“Well, plot twist. Here he is. Long time, no see.”

“Heath. What the fuck are you thinking?”

Heath? Raf’s old friend, Heath? The one that was dating Melissa when she...

“You are the biggest asshole around, and you want to know what I’m thinking?”

Heath’s movements were wild, his hands swinging around like wrecking balls.

“I don’t know what I ever did to deserve this, bud.”

“Don’t you fucking call me ‘bud.’ You’re such an asshole. I thought you were off dead somewhere. You moved away and I never had to think about you again.”

“Until you ran into Annie, right? Maybe you were delivering food to her—”

“Shut the fuck up, like you’re better than me and I’m just delivering food. You always did have that superiority about you.”

Raf held his hands up in acquiescence. “I didn’t mean anything by it. Just that, it’s how you saw her, right? And she told you she ran into me up here.”

“She was so excited, like it was some wonderful thing. Rafael, the prodigal son.”

I don’t think that was how the biblical story went, but I kept my mouth shut. Raf had managed to keep Heath talking, and I assumed, prayed, that help was on the way.

“Well, you always thought you were so smart. So much better than us. Quitting the drugs, quitting the partying. Moving away. You didn’t even know the truth.”

“What truth, man?”

“Melissa, that bitch. Always trying to run back to you. Every little fight, every little mistake I made. I was never good enough. You were probably fucking her the whole time behind my back.”

“Wow, no.” He shook his head. “No, Heath. I wasn’t. We broke up, and she started dating you. She was troubled. She killed herself.”

Heath laughed. A deranged, hideous laugh that made my blood run cold.

“You still think that, huh? After what you know I’m capable of? You think that bitch had the strength to do that? No, she was weak as hell.”

“So you killed Melissa, then.”

“Yup, just like Annie, and just like your little girlfriend here—” Heath turned to look at me, but that was a costly mistake. Raf tackled him, landing on top of Heath and punching him in the face. Heath tried to fight back for a moment, but it was useless. They were both tall and muscular, but Heath couldn’t compare to Raf’s brute strength, or the adrenaline that he must have had, hearing all of that, knowing I could have been next.

Sirens sounded and red and blue lights flashed around the graveyard. Raf landed blow after blow on Heath’s face, but stopped when Theo pulled him off. He’d been knocked unconscious.

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Raf ran to me then, kneeling in the grass, pulling out the knife I'd given him for his birthday and cutting me free. I sobbed as his arms encircled me. I don't know how long we sat there, holding each other, or how we got into Alex's car to go home. But we were safe. And we were free.

thirty

ELLIE

"I'll take another, please. Thank you, Sara."

She smiled at me as she plopped a fourth blueberry pancake on my plate. Raf snickered and took a sip of his coffee.

"What? Sweet food is my comfort food."

"I didn't say a word, angel." He kissed my pancake-stuffed cheek and laughed.

"Are you really feeling better, though?" Sara asked as she sat down with us.

"Yes, actually. I think I spent more time crying in the past month than I have in years, so I'm glad to be past it all." I laughed, because it was most definitely true.

We'd come to Sara and Theo's house for breakfast. It was the first outing I felt comfortable making since that awful night last week. Plus, it was better than going to Theo's office to get the update he wanted to give us. Speaking of...

“Save some for me, El.” Theo thudded down the stairs in his uniform and boots.

“Uh uh, Sheriff. You’re on the clock. These pancakes are for our guests.”

“That’s bullshit.” He stole my fork and stabbed a piece, shoving it in his mouth before any of us could stop him. I slapped his arm and he winked at me, before settling into the chair across from Sara.

“All right, so what did you want to talk to us about?”

“Well, the District Attorney will contact you about all this, but I wanted to tell you first. Heath has confessed. He wants to cut a deal.”

“A deal?”

“He’ll plead guilty to Annie’s murder, and your kidnapping, El, as long as we keep him here in Maine and the Boston DA agrees not to prosecute the murder of Melissa.”

“Why?”

“I think he likes the idea of the Maine prison system more than the Massachusetts one. He’ll serve life in prison. No parole. And, you guys will be spared from having to testify and relive it all again.”

“Did he tell you why he did it?” Raf asked. This past week, he’d been so loving and supportive of me. But I knew he was hurting. The trauma from his past came out in full force and almost destroyed his whole life. It would take time to heal. But I was here and we’d go on that journey together.

“It was like you thought. He ran into Annie and she told him about you. Something

set him off. He told her about how Melissa really died, and we think that's why Annie came back. She wanted to tell you, and maybe figure out what to do next. She had a card in her wallet of a homicide detective back in Boston."

Raf nodded, taking it all in. I squeezed his hand under the table.

"Oh, and the twist."

"Twist?"

"Heath had gotten a job as a deckhand on the Fortuna Fin in order to learn more about you and your schedule. Hung out with the other lobstermen, made friends with Kirby, played a little mind game, and next thing you know, you're invited to dinner. He said he got that glass from the night you went out to the pub with the guys."

"Kirby?"

"He didn't know he was being played. Felt bad as hell when we questioned him."

"Well shit. Okay."

"Is it over now?" I asked.

Theo nodded. "Mostly. When the deal goes through, he'll have official sentencing, you can go to that if you really want to, but otherwise, it's done. He's off to state prison."

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I shook my head. It was so much to take in. “Thanks, Theo.”

“Of course, El.” He got up and left for work, and Sara cleared the table, insisting that neither of us lift a finger.

I felt Raf’s arm come around my shoulders, and I snuggled into him.

“Promise you’ll always wear that GPS necklace?” He asked.

I laughed. “Yes, I promise. But I really hope we never need to use it again.”

“No kidding.”

“Hey, thanks for coming to save me.”

“We saved each other. Over and over. My life was so dark before you.”

I grabbed his hand and held it tight. “I love you.”

He tilted his head down and captured my lips in the most tender kiss. The kind that sweeps you off your feet, that makes every thought in your head go silent. I made a wish at that moment, that I’d never go a day without this kind of kiss.

And I knew Raf would make it come true.

epilogue

RAFAEL

The sun's rays made the water shine like sapphires. I looked over to where Ellie sat, but her sapphire eyes were closed as she basked in the sun. I steered the little deck boat I'd borrowed from Roger out toward a secret cove on the northern coast of Moon Harbor. It was one of my favorite spots, and I knew it was perfect for today.

"Angel, don't fall asleep, we'll be there in a minute." She laughed, and my heart melted. I didn't think I'd ever get over her laugh.

"I'm not," she said. "I'm just enjoying the warm weather." Which was exactly what I wanted. I'd waited throughout the frigid winter for the first warm day so I could take her out on the water.

She got up and came to stand next to me, nuzzling against my side. I wrapped my arm around her and held her close. This was one of the most perfect days of my life. I just needed it to stay that way.

"I think I could get used to this," Ellie said, watching the waves crash against the cliffs. "Maybe we should get a boat."

I liked that she said "we" so casually. As if it were just a plain fact that we'd do everything together.

"Well that's what I actually wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, see, I told you I borrowed this boat from Roger, but that wasn't quite the truth."

“Oh it wasn’t? Are you lying to me now, Marroquin?”

“Well, I wanted to see what you thought about it. If you liked being out here on the water with me.”

“I do.” She looked around again, taking in the view. I stopped the engine and let us float in the cove.

“Good. Because this was sort of a test drive. I put an offer down and if you liked it, I thought I would buy it for us.”

Her head snapped back toward me.

“Are you serious?”

I nodded. “This one is only a year old, but Roger wants to upgrade. He offered me a good deal if I wanted it.”

“Wow.”

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“What do you think?”

“Well, it’s not my decision, it’s yours.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. It’s most definitely your decision.”

She smiled and pressed her lips against mine.

“I love it. But I just want to make sure you, well, we can afford it.”

“Oh, well when I said it’s ours, I didn’t mean financially. I don’t expect you to pay for it.”

“Oh. But what if I want to?”

“I’ll tell you what, El. I’m gonna buy this boat and put your name down on the title. You can make payments or not, it’ll still be yours.”

“Wait, no.”

“Yep.”

“Raf, no offense, but how can you afford that? I’m barely scraping by. And you’re out here buying a boat?”

“Come on, angel. You’re doing far better than scraping by.”

She shrugged one shoulder and smiled. Ellie was used to being modest, but she had reason to celebrate. Moonbeam Jewels won the Chamber of Commerce Moon Harbor Business of the Year award in December. She'd created something that was all hers and her hard work was finally paying off, not just financially, but in her own sense of worth and how everyone else saw her. To the townies in Moon Harbor, she was no longer little orphan Ellie. She was an artist and small business owner. And she was killing it.

But I still had my own worth I needed to prove. Maybe because of my background, or maybe just because I'd worked hard as hell over the years. But I was proud of myself too. But I needed her to know that I was ready to provide for us.

"El, I'm in my thirties. I work full time, don't have any kids, haven't dated anyone in a decade until you, and don't have any expensive hobbies. Until now, I guess," I said, looking around at the boat again.

She just looked at me, dumbfounded.

"I've worked hard and put a lot in savings."

"Well don't you worry I might be a gold digger now? Apparently my boyfriend has money."

"No, because I want to take care of you, El." She started to huff, so I took her hand and continued, "I know you can take care of yourself. You built a business on your own and it's thriving. But I want to take care of you. Build a life with you." I brought her hand to my lips and kissed her knuckles. "But since you brought it up, I want to talk to you about the 'boyfriend' thing."

Her face fell. "What?"

"The 'boyfriend' thing." I reached into my back pocket and got down on my knee. "I

think husband would sound better.”

Ellie squealed and tears formed in her eyes.

“Eleanor. You’ve been my whole life, ever since I met you. I’m sorry it took me so long to admit it. But now that I have, there’s no way I can go any longer without you by my side. Without you as my wife. Will you marry me, angel?”

I opened the box and showed her the ring I’d designed with the help of one of her jeweler friends. It was a diamond surrounded by aquamarine stones in the shape of a sunburst halo. I thought it was fitting for my angel and her ocean eyes.

“Raf, yes. Of course. Yes!” She sank down onto her knees and threw her arms around my neck.

I captured her lips in the sweetest kiss.

We floated for hours on the sea together—making love, making dreams, and planning our happily ever after.

The end.