



# Fall With Me

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**Category:** Romance, Young Adult

**Description:** Jill Freyss-Charon is just trying to get through the year. After losing her father in a horrific car accident, she is eager to return to her summer job at a horse ranch where she knows everything will be just as it always is each summer.

But when a tanned young man washes up on the beach outside her tent one night, half-drowned and begging to be given shelter until morning, any hope of normality immediately vanishes.

Jill has dated Griffin Alexander's type before, and soon regrets taking him in when he decides to stay on at the ranch. She finds she is repelled by him, and doesn't believe his crazy story about being kidnapped and held to ransom... until three words escape his lips that send her head into a tailspin.

...Three words that threaten to unravel her painful past and bring her closer to this man she is trying to avoid - which will put her in more danger than either realizes.

**Total Pages (Source):** 23

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:57 am*

## Chapter 1: Griffin

I went with Imogen to the Full Moon Party. Koh Phangan at its best. That was the last thing I clearly remember; everything else filters back hazy, like it's been covered in a layer of gauze. I had a few drinks, a few pills, danced my ass off, and then woke up here, in some cramped little room on the lower level of a boat. I can tell it's a boat even though there are no windows and the door is locked. The rocking motion. The sea salt air. Footsteps above me, muffled voices, and no one responds when I bang on the door. There's only the thin shaft of pale light that trickles in from under the door. There's no one in this room but myself, and I don't need a mirror to know my face has been battered. My left eye is swollen shut and my jaw is tender to the touch. Still have all the teeth, though my lip is split, but that could just be because I'm dehydrated.

I stand up, sway on my feet. The room lurches and I nearly fall, but I don't. Even in this condition, I've got good sea legs. Dad always said so. That's the only time Dad and I ever seemed able to stand each other—when we were out on his yacht. Still, he'd have to make sure he took his meclizine an hour before getting onto the boat or he'd be puking over the side and wailing that he wanted to get back to the harbor.

I make it to the door and try it again, as though it might have somehow unlocked itself. I pound on it. "Let me out of here, assholes!" I shout.

There's a pause above me, then laughter. I don't recognize the voices.

I sit down. My head feels funny. It feels funny in such a way that I know someone must've slipped something into one of my drinks, or given me a pill that wasn't what

they claimed it to be. Was Imogen in on this, too? No. She was just some silly girl on vacation from Dublin or Wicklow or one of those dumpy Irish cities.

I don't know exactly how long I sit for, my back against the wall. The fuzziness in my head has started to clear, although there's still a bitter taste in my mouth, like I licked a battery or something. Heavy footsteps approach, pause outside. The door inches open.

"Stay right where you are," a low voice growls.

Two men step in. I recognize neither, though if I were expecting pirates, these two aren't far off the mark. The taller one's grizzled and looks like he hits the bottle a little too often. His face is riddled with pockmarks and his teeth are terribly crooked. The younger, shorter one actually has a red bandana wrapped around his head.

"Where's the eyepatch?" I ask him.

He shoots me a look. "Did we say you could talk?"

He throws something down at my feet. It's a plastic bottle, half-filled with water. While I'm grateful for the drink, I'm a little disappointed that the receptacle is not a bota bag or something a little more authentic. "Is this bottle BPA free?" I ask after I take a sip.

Bandana continues to glare at me but the older one chuckles. "A pretty boy and a wise ass," he says. "Aren't you a catch."

I take another sip. The water stings the cut on my lower lip, but I welcome the pain because it's sharp and it helps clear the cloudiness from my head. "I didn't know we were fishing. You should've told me—I would've brought my gear. Where are we, anyway?"

“That’s not really any of your concern.”

“So what exactly is going on?”

“We know who you are.”

“Excellent. And who might you be?”

“You don’t need to concern yourself with that,” Snaggleteooth says. “For the time being, you stay here. We’ll let you go, pretty boy, when your daddy-o pays up.”

I laugh. “Is this a joke?”

“No.”

We stare at each other. “How much?” I finally say.

He smirks. “7.2 million.”

“That’s kind of a random number, isn’t it?”

“Don’t see how that’s any of your damn business.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

Snaggleteooth rubs the lower part of his face. “Well then I suppose we’ll have to follow through with what we said we’d do to you. And honestly, I’d be just as happy watching the sharks rip you to pieces as I would gutting you myself. It’s an exquisite pleasure to play a hand in watching lazy, self-entitled pieces of shit like you meet their ends. So your daddy-o either pays or doesn’t. Don’t matter much to me—either way, I’ll be a happy man.”

His eyes shine in such a way that tells me he is speaking the honest to god truth. He winks, then the two leave the room, locking the door behind them. There's no way my father would pay that much money. Not for me, anyway. Maybe for my brother, Cameron, but there's no sign of him here, and anyway, he would never let himself get in a situation where abduction would be possible. He's just not that kind of guy. I, on the other hand, apparently am.

"Shit," I say, to no one in particular.

I'm going to have to get myself out of this one.

## Chapter 2: Jill

It's bittersweet, this graduation. I attend because most of my friends are up there on stage, while I'm sitting in the audience. I can't help but wonder how things might have worked out differently if the accident hadn't happened. Dad would be alive. Mom would not be in a wheelchair. I would be up there graduating, too.

Of course, I shouldn't be thinking like this, and I know it. I'll graduate next year—hopefully—and then I can still do everything I imagined I would. Get a job, my own place, try to carve out a life of my own. Except I won't be traveling to any far off city; I can't leave Mom, even though she's told me more than once that I shouldn't let any of this get in the way of what I want to do.

I get home that evening after celebrating out on the town with my friend, Jessica, and her family, who flew in from the Midwest. Mom's nurse, Sharon, is on her way out, but she stops at the door and asks me how my day was.

"It was good," I tell her. "The graduation was really nice."

"It'll be your time soon," she tells me. Sharon is slightly heavysset with short, curled

blond hair, exactly the way you'd picture a nurse, minus the white uniform and nurse's cap. "Your mom's still awake; I think she wouldn't mind if you stopped in there for a few minutes."

I drop my purse on the kitchen table next to a pile of mail. I walk down the hallway and into the living room, which, since the accident, has been converted into Mom's bedroom. The blinds aren't closed all the way on the bay windows and the moonlight filters in, casting the room in a milky glow. Mom's wheelchair sits near the bed like a faithful steed.

"Hi, Mom," I say.

She's lying in bed but turns her head to look at me. Even though the room is dimly lit, I can see that her eyes have that cloudy look they sometimes get when she's on her pain medication.

"Hi, honey," she says. "How was graduation? I'm sorry I couldn't make it to the ceremony—I really would've liked to see you get your diploma. I know how hard you've worked for it."

I sit in the wingback chair beside her bed. Underneath the sheet and lightweight cotton blanket, her body is little more than skin wrapped around bones. We looked a lot like, my mother and I; before the accident, people used to ask if we were sisters. She always got a big kick out of that, but it was true: she looked great. She did yoga regularly and was training to do her first half marathon. Her vibrant blond hair showed no signs of going gray, and she had bright blue eyes, like sapphires with the sun shining through them. I'd overheard my father say that to her admiringly on more than one occasion.

"It wasn't my graduation, Mom," I gently remind her. "You'll get to see me graduate next year."

“Somehow, I doubt that.” She smiles thinly and sighs. “You should go to bed, sweetheart. It’s late. You’ve got to be up early tomorrow.” She reaches over and squeezes my hand. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll be back to visit on Sunday,” I tell her. “I’ll email you pictures, too.”

“No, I’m glad you’re going down there. It would do you some good to get away. Lorrie and Bill need you. I just wish I could go with you.”

I’ve been working at Sea Horse Ranch, down in Half Moon Bay, since I was thirteen. My mom’s childhood friend, Lorrie, and her husband, Bill, own it, and they’d hired me one summer to muck out stalls and help take care of the horses. As I’d gotten older, my duties expanded to include teaching lessons, training horses, finally culminating in supervising the teenagers who attended the ranch’s summer camp program. Working there was, in a way, like a rite of passage in my circle of friends, yet they had all moved on; they’re living in places like New York City and Boston as newly minted college graduates, on their way to fulfilling careers. I try not to think of myself as the one who got left behind, but the truth of it is, I’m the only one who’s still here. I’m the one who’s going to spend my summer shoveling horse shit and supervising unruly teenagers.

At some point, the ranch got a reputation for being a good place to send teens whose parents felt they were headed down the wrong path. Bill and Lorrie didn’t mind; they’ve always been do-gooder types who would welcome anyone into their home, and they truly believe that nothing can’t be cured by a day outside spent on horseback.

It’s when I’m about to leave that I notice the orchid. It’s sitting on a small side table by the window, half a dozen large white blossoms dangling from a curved stem. The flowers look so luscious they might be edible.

“Isn’t it gorgeous?” Mom says, when she sees where my gaze has gone.

“Yes,” I say, though I’m already certain I know who sent them, which makes them a lot less beautiful.

“Sean sent them.”

“I figured. But, that’s better than him stopping by in person.” I fight the urge to not go over there and swat the plant off the table, how the shattering ceramic would be music to my ears.

“Jill Freyss-Charon,” Mom says. “There is no need to speak that way, especially after someone just did something so thoughtful.”

“You’re right,” I say, though she’s not—there is nothing thoughtful about Sean Wentworth whatsoever. Calculating, sure. Manipulating, absolutely. But thoughtful? No.

“He just adores you, honey. I don’t know why you won’t give him another chance.” She looks at the orchid again and smiles. “It made me happy to get it. It’s been awhile since I last felt happy.”

Since the accident, Mom’s memory has been a touchy thing. Her short-term memory is shot; I don’t know how many times I’d told her I would not be graduating, but I would be going to the ceremony anyway to watch my friends get their diplomas. When her memory is working, all she seems able to recall is how depressed she is, which, considering she used to be the most optimistic person I knew, is pretty depressing in and of itself. She also seems only to remember the very best things about Sean; she’s somehow convinced herself that the accident was the reason Sean and I broke up, and therefore, was inadvertently her fault. All untrue, of course, but she refuses or is incapable of remembering it as anything else.



“I’ve got to get going, Mom,” I say. I go over and kiss her forehead. “I’ve got to pack and then get down to the ranch. I’ll give you a call tomorrow, okay?”

I go to my room and throw some clothes into my old gym bag. I’d broken up with Sean not long after my parents’ car accident, though it’s something I should’ve done a lot sooner. He was originally from Belvedere but was living in Palo Alto and attending Stanford when we met. Dad and I had gotten ice cream at his favorite ice cream shop and were sitting in Dolores Park, watching jubilant dogs chase Frisbees. It had been one of those unseasonably warm days in early April and the park was packed; people lay out under the hot sun, bare-chested or in bathing suits. They lounged in groups on spread-out blankets, drinking Anchor Steam or PBR. Sean and his group of friends were on a blanket maybe twenty feet away, and I could see him watching me out of the corner of my eye.

“There’s a young man over there that seems particularly intent on staring at you,” Dad said.

“I think he just wants some ice cream.”

“I’m going to throw my trash away and then go buy a pint of the salted caramel to bring home to your mother. I’ll meet you back here in fifteen.” He smiled as he got up, and I tried not to feel annoyed. I’d gotten used to men staring at me and had pretty much perfected the art of ignoring it. For the first fifteen years of my life I’d been made fun of because of my height—was called giraffe, beanstalk, twig, could never find pants that were long enough. And then something happened my junior year of high school and suddenly the boys at school and random men out in public began to notice me. If it was supposed to make me feel good, it didn’t, because as far as I knew, nothing had changed. What had changed? It just made them seem like assholes who were more interested in the way someone looked than who they actually were as a person.

## Page 2

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But I'd had to get used to guys staring, which Sean was doing, rather blatantly. By the time Dad had dumped his napkin into the trash can, Sean was striding over, blond curls peeking out from under his San Francisco Giants ball cap.

Yes, he could've been an Abercrombie and Fitch model. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his beige cargo shorts and grinned. "Hey," he said. "I realize how incredibly random this is going to sound, but could I borrow your notes from Logic? I lost my notebook somewhere between here and campus and we've got that big test tomorrow."

At the time, it had seemed cute, charming, even, and certainly wasn't what I was expecting the first words out of his mouth to be. After I told him he'd apparently mistaken me for one of his classmates—There's no way I would forget your face—he asked if he could sit down, then he asked if he could take me out to dinner at La Folie that evening.

I raised an eyebrow. "Don't you have a logic test to study for?"

But we did end up going out that night, and when he called a few days later, I agreed to meet him down in Palo Alto. My parents were thrilled; I'd never had a serious relationship and, since I was fast approaching twenty-two, I think they were starting to wonder if I'd ever date anyone.

For a while, Sean was as charming as he'd been that first day. But then little red flags began to unfurl, then wave frantically. He didn't like it when I walked ahead of him, which I did sometimes because I'm a fast walker naturally, and, though he was tall, he shambled along like he was in no particular rush to get anywhere, ever. Or he'd

get upset if I said I was going to do something and didn't—something minor, say, like go for a run when I got done with class.

“But you said you were going to,” he'd argue, as though I'd personally offended him. “You told me that's what you were going to do.”

My parents loved him, though, because none of that was on display when he was around them. To the outside world we probably seemed like the ideal couple, and people were constantly telling us what a lovely pair we made and how they couldn't wait for the wedding. Nothing made me want to run screaming from the room faster than the idea of getting married to Sean Wentworth.

Breaking up with him after my parents' car accident seemed like the natural thing to do. Everything else in my life was completely shattered; might as well let this go, too. It took almost a week. He refused to accept that I wanted to end the relationship, then he got angry, then he cried, then he made threats, and finally, it was over.

Except it's not, I think, as I take my bag into the bathroom and pluck my toothbrush from the holder. I drop that, my hairbrush, a stick of deodorant, and some shower gel into the gym bag and try to forget about that orchid. It'd been over a month since I'd heard or received anything from Sean and I thought maybe we really had finally come to the end. Apparently not. Luckily, though, I'm headed down to the ranch for the summer, and for as worldly and cultured as Sean likes to think he is, he's really not one for being out in the great outdoors.

I drive down to the ranch, the sun dipping below the horizon to my right. I park in front of the cabin like I've had for the past four years now. It was a cute little one-bedroom cottage that I've come to think of as my summer home. I step inside with my duffel bag containing several pairs of jeans, my Sea Horse Ranch t-shirts, and a few pairs of shorts and tank tops. Lorrie's been in ahead of me and opened the windows, but the cabin still feels a little stuffy. It's familiar though, the knotty pine

panel walls, the wide floorboards with the braided rugs. The cabin is basically a large room that makes up the kitchen, living room, and dining area, and then a small hallway that leads to the bathroom and the bedroom. Everything looks exactly how I remember it. I sit down on the couch for a minute and lean my head back against the cushions. At least I have this, I think. While it might not sound like the most exciting summer job for a college student, it's exactly what I need right now. Though the rotation of campers changes each year, everything else here is pretty much the same. And so many things in my own life have changed, so many things have not worked out the way I imagined they would, but there is still this, and other than Bill and Lorrie announcing that they're selling the ranch and shutting down operations, I don't see how anything could possibly make this summer anything but normal.

And for that, I am grateful.

I join Bill and Lorrie at their house for dinner, and we sit out on the back deck overlooking the barn and the paddocks.

"How is your mom?" Lorrie asks as she scoops quinoa salad onto my plate. "I'm going to try to get up there in the next week or so. I feel terrible I haven't been better at visiting."

"We know you're busy," I say. "And she's doing the best she can. I'm going to try to see her every Sunday, if that's okay with you guys."

"Of course it is," Bill says. "Take whatever time you need. I mean, you're certainly an integral part of the ranch around here, but family first."

"Speaking of family," Lorrie says, "Allison has decided to work here this summer. We're hoping you can kind of take her under your wing. She's familiar with a lot of the stuff, obviously, but I'm sure she'll have plenty of questions."

I force a smile. “Great,” I say. “I’d be happy to help.”

Allison is their daughter, the baby of the family, who, in my mind, will forever be eight and throwing a tantrum about something. The past few summers she worked up in the city at some retail job in Union Square, and I wonder what must have happened to make her resign herself to work here. She’s not exactly the outdoors-y type, though it’s been a while since I’ve seen her so perhaps things have changed.

I get my answer bright and early the next morning. During the summer, I get up at six every day except for Sundays. I go down to the barn and feed the horses, turn them out, then muck out the stalls before going to the lodge to help with breakfast. I don’t mind getting up early, when it’s still semi-dark out and the birds are the only things awake. I like that special time—early in the morning and twilight—when the sun could be about to rise or set. I fill an oversized travel mug with strong, hot coffee and sip it as I go about my work. I’m just finishing up the last stall when I hear someone walking down the barn aisle.

“Hi, Jill.”

I don’t have to turn to know who that voice belongs to. Yet, I do turn, and there she is, all five feet two of her. She’s got a great body, even though she’s short, a fact that she’s well aware of and—based on what she’s wearing—clearly uses to her advantage. She has always been someone who’s gotten what she wants.

“Hi, Allison,” I say. I dump another pitchforkful of manure into the wheelbarrow. She takes a step back so the errant bits of shavings don’t mar her impeccable outfit: a peach-colored romper with gold sandals that lace up her tanned calves.

“Mom and Dad probably told you already,” she says. “But I’m a junior counselor this year. Second in command only to you.”

“Excellent,” I say. “Glad to see you came dressed to work.”

She laughs. “Well, I’m actually heading over to the lodge right now to help get things set up for the arrivals. But I wanted to come find you and say hi and give you the good news. I really think it’s going to be a lot of fun, us both being counselors.”

I stop shoveling shit for a second and look at her. I am seven inches taller than she is and it’s hard not to see her as a kid, an annoying little sister, even though she’s seventeen. She’s got silver hoops in her ears and pale pink blush on her cheeks.

“Did your parents happen to go over with you exactly what it means to be a counselor?” I ask. “Did they give you any of the details?”

“Well . . . sort of. I think they thought you’d go over most of it. Since you’ve been here so long, and everything.”

“One of the main jobs is the upkeep of the horses. So that means getting down here by six o’clock in the morning and helping muck out stalls, feed, and scrub water buckets. Brandon isn’t coming back this year, either, so there’s another new counselor onboard, too.”

“Yeah, Karen or something. Well, maybe she’ll be more of a morning person and she’ll want to get up early and do the horse chores and I can take the late morning shift.”

I go back to mucking out the stall so I can roll my eyes without detection. “Yeah, I’m sure she’ll be totally open for that,” I say. “She’ll be here around ten, so maybe that’s something you can talk to her about.”

“Awesome!” Allison says, completely missing—or ignoring—the sarcasm in my voice. “I’ll be sure it’s one of the first things we go over.” She skips off. I watch,

feeling a thread of tension slip its way in between my shoulder blades.

Shake it off, I tell myself. This is nothing to get upset over.

Okay, so maybe it's not what I was expecting. But she's their daughter, and it's a minor change in the grand scheme of things, really. And I honestly doubt she'll last more than a week if she has to get up early to do chores.

I can handle this.

### Chapter 3: Griffin

Being shut up in this tiny space is something like being in one of those sensory deprivation tanks. I start seeing things in the darkness, little bursts of color, like tiny fireworks. I wonder if it's because I've been closed up in here or it's just a lingering effect of the LSD.

There's a gentle rocking motion. It's enough to lull you back to sleep, but that's impossible right now; I've been swimming the depths of unconsciousness for so long that my muscles feel as though they've got electric currents running through them. I never was one who was good at staying still.

So I get up. I touch the walls, which are glossy wood. I knock into a pole that's hanging horizontally along one of the walls and I realize I am in a walk-in closet. Above me, I can hear the two guys talking, though I can't understand what they're saying. I go over and stand under where it sounds like they are and I hit the ceiling a few times with my fist.

"Hey fellas!" I shout. "I'd like to come out of the closet now."

It's a pathetic joke, but I smile anyway. I've always been good at cracking myself up

and, occasionally, other people, too.

To my surprise, the door opens. It's Snaggleteeth, who stands there, holding the door handle, letting a shaft of pale yellow light into the room. He stares at me, eyes narrowed.

"Have I accrued enough good behavior points to warrant a trip on deck?" I ask.

"You're going to do something for us," he says. He pushes the door open the rest of the way.

"Okay." I smile as I walk past him. "That was a joke about coming out of the closet, though. I'm not gay."

He shoves me. "We're not fucking fags!" he shouts. "That's not what you're going to do for us. Jesus."

I'm in a bedroom. There's a queen-sized bed flanked by two mahogany side tables. There is a mirror on the ceiling.

"Nice touch," I say, looking up at it.

We go up on deck. The other guy is up there, pacing, drinking a can of PBR.

"Stay classy," I say, nodding at the beer. Actually, I wouldn't mind one of those right now myself. It does feel nice to be out, though. I walk over and take a piss off the side of the boat. The boat, it turns out, is not the seventy-foot pirate vessel I'd imagined, but rather, a mere forty-foot cruiser, similar to the one my old man had before he upgraded. "My dad had a boat like this. It was bigger."

"Then your dad shouldn't have any trouble paying your ransom," says Bandana.



I shrug and look out toward the horizon. Nothing but blue sky, blue water. Sun straight overhead. “He’s kind of an asshole, if you want to know the truth. If you’re so eager for money, it probably would’ve been better to choose a man whose paternal leanings ran a bit deeper.”

“Your father doesn’t seem to want to take this matter as seriously as he should,” Snaggleteeth says. “He seems, in fact, to think it’s a hoax. A ruse. A prank that maybe you are in on. So you’re going to call him and tell him otherwise.”

There’s only the two of them, as far as I can tell, Snaggleteeth and Bandana. I try to piece together how this might’ve all gone down, but it’s just one big blank, like that part of my memory was erased entirely.

“And it’s not just the money,” Snaggleteeth continues. “That’s part of it. But my boss wants something else from your dad, too. A confession, of sorts.”

## Page 3

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I snort. “A confession? To what? Being a giant asshole? Good luck with that one, buddy.”

He pulls a phone out of his pocket. “Call him.”

“I don’t know his phone number.” This is actually the truth. I never have to call him, and even if I did, I’d just go to the listing under contacts and press the call button. Dad’s number is programmed in my phone under Asshat, which, on the rare occasion he does call me, always gives me a smile when Asshat Calling shows up on the screen.

“Just press call,” Snaggleteeth snaps. I wonder whose phone this is. I press call and bring the phone up to my ear. There isn’t anything in sight except for water, but we must be near land because the phone has reception. Or they have one hell of a cell service provider.

“Hey, who’s your cell phone provider?” I ask.

They both ignore me. The phone is ringing. It rings exactly two and a half times and then Dad’s voicemail picks up. Which means he pressed the ignore button. Great, Dad. Thanks.

This is Carl Alexander. Leave a message and I will get back to you at my earliest convenience . . .

“You want me to leave a message?” I ask.

Snaggletooth grabs the phone from me. “Goddammit,” he says. “He really doesn’t give a shit, does he?”

“I’ll tell you what,” I say. “If you guys let me go, I’ll fly home to New York and threaten to move back in, unless he gives your boss the 7.2 million and the confession. Me doing that is far more likely to get you what you want, trust me. Here, give me the phone and I’ll call him back and leave that on his voicemail.”

“Fuck.” Bandana throws his beer overboard.

Snaggletooth shoves the phone back into his pocket. “The condition of your release is twofold, the confession, actually, being the more important. So if we get the money but no confession, we kill you. If we get the confession but no money, we kill you. If we get both . . . maybe we’ll kill you anyway.” Snaggletooth comes over and stands next to me. “Why don’t you get your ass back down below.” He pulls out a diving knife, an Atomic Ti6, made of titanium, a nasty looking motherfucker with a serrated blade. I have the very same model—which I had strapped to my leg last summer when I went diving off of Kadavu Island—though I widen my eyes and take a step back.

“I don’t like knives,” I say, shuddering. “And I’ll go back down if you want, but it really wouldn’t make a difference if I’m up here. It’s not like there’s anywhere I can go. I can’t swim,” I lie.

He stares at me, running a tongue over those picket fence teeth.

“It’s true,” I continue. “My dad was always after me to join him swimming at the country club, but I had better things to do. Like playing polo and eating caviar.” That would actually be my brother, Cam, but they don’t have to know that. The only thing caviar is good for is smearing on your front teeth for primo photo ops.

Bandana looks at me in disbelief. “So you can ride a horse but you can’t swim?”

“Right,” I say, thinking of all my swim team trophies my mother proudly displays on the mantelpiece in the sitting room. “So if this were the Wild West and you boys had kidnapped me on horseback, I might be in okay shape, but out here on the water . . .” I smile and shrug. “I’m as good as dead anyways. Hope you weren’t planning on getting that money. Or that confession.”

Bandana glances at Snaggletooth and then looks back at me. “You’re lyin’,” he says. “Your dad will pay. Shit, to a guy like him, we’re not even askin’ for that much to begin with.”

“Maybe he’ll liquidate my trust fund. It’s about ten million. He might not want to deal with the headache of having to do that, though. He’ll probably just tell you to kill me. Have you talked to him? Have you talked to dear old Dad?”

“We talked to him in Thailand,” Bandana says defensively. “And he sounded very concerned.”

I laugh. “Then you must’ve dialed the wrong number.” I try to imagine Dad taking that call. It probably lasted all of 2.6 seconds before he hung up. “There is someone else I could try calling,” I offer. They look at me skeptically. “Unless you’ve kidnapped him, too.” But I know that’s impossible, because Cam would never let himself get into a situation where he would be kidnapped. Cam does not dance to techno, nor imbibe anything more toxic than a glass of cognac with Dad every now and then. Cam probably sleeps with his fucking eyes open, if you want to know the truth. And maybe, just maybe, if anyone can help get me out of this mess, it will be him.

Snaggletooth grudgingly hands the phone back. “Don’t even think of trying to call the authorities,” he says. “You’ll be dead before you get word one out.”

“Don’t worry, buddies; the authorities are no friends of mine either.” They watch me carefully as I dial. The phone rings exactly once and he answers.

“Hello?” His voice is smooth, like water running over sea glass or caramel getting drizzled over ice cream. I can’t remember the last time I talked to my brother, yet every time I hear his voice, I can’t help but think: This time will be different. This time he’ll decide he actually likes me.

“Cam,” I say. “It’s Griffin.”

Silence.

“Your brother,” I add. Snaggletooth is watching me closely.

“Are you sure we got the right guy?” I hear Bandana whisper loudly. “No one in his family seems to know him.”

“Griffin,” Cam says finally. “Carl said you might be calling.”

“Oh, did he? Then maybe he filled you in on my . . . situation.”

“And which situation would that be? Tripping on acid in Tokyo? Losing your passport in Belize? Getting thrown into a Mexican jail? Would you like me to go on? I could go on.”

“Actually—”

“This is nothing you haven’t heard before, Griffin, so I’m not really sure why I’m bothering to repeat myself, but some of us work for a living. Some of us go out into the world and try to make something of ourselves, instead of thinking life is a twenty-four hour party. Whatever situation you’ve gotten yourself into this time, I highly

doubt I'd be able to help you out."

"You're not even a little curious?"

"Would you like me to be honest?"

"Of course."

"No, I'm really not. This might come as something of a shock, but I'm not trying to live vicariously through you."

"Man, and to think I bought that fluorescent pink mankini with you in mind—"

"Griffin, shut up. Seriously, shut the fu—"

"I've been kidnapped. I'm out on a boat in the middle of the ocean with these two guys who say they're going to kill me if Dad doesn't make some confession and pay seven million dollars."

"You're so full of shit—what?"

A gust of wind blows just then, almost drowning out the last part of what he said. But I hear it—something in his voice changes. Instead of silky smooth, his voice almost breaks, like liquid being poured over ice. It's a rare tone for him, one he only uses when he's very interested or excited about something, and in the twenty-four years I've known him, he's never used it with me.

"What did you just say?" he says. "They want what?"

"Money! And a confession. They say Dad has—"

My back is to him, so I don't see Snaggleteeth come up next to me until it's too late. He snatches the phone from me and shoves it back into his pocket.

"That call is clearly going nowhere," he growls.

I stare at him. "But . . . but it was! He actually sounded interested, you asshole! I was getting somewhere! Let me call him back."

"That's enough!" Snaggleteeth snaps. "Like I said before—we don't care whether we kill you or get the confession and money. Hell, maybe we'll kill you AFTER we get them. How about that? How does that sound?"

Maybe it was just my imagination. Cam has never given a shit about me, even when we were kids, so it's probably just some pathetic delusion that he seemed to actually care, brought on by the drugs and lack of sleep and food. The sun beams down on me. There is not a cloud in the sky. It could be any day, any nice day where you're going out to do something fun, maybe with someone you like, someone who likes you back. A day when you don't have to spend any money, or try to impress anyone. I can't recall the last time I had a day like that, and suddenly, I feel very tired. Blame the sun, blame the salt air, blame the fact that I haven't eaten anything in at least a day. I look at Snaggleteeth, still fingering the knife blade.

"That sounds great," I tell him.

#### Chapter 4: Jill

Karen is twenty, with frizzy red hair and the type of pale skin that burns, never tans. She's wearing khaki shorts and already has her Sea Horse Ranch t-shirt on, even though the campers won't be here until tomorrow.

"Show me everything," she says, as we walk down to the barn. "Bill and Lorrie said

how you're like the horse whisperer or something. Did you read that book? The Horse Whisperer?"

I look at her. "No," I say.

"Oh. Well, it's really good. So is the movie, actually. We should watch it some night. It's one of those movies I never mind seeing whenever it's on."

"I really don't like watching movies."

"You don't?"

"I mean, once in a while, I guess, but it mostly seems like a waste of time."

I give Karen a tour of the barn. Karen is replacing Brandon for this summer, and though Brandon has always been somewhat gruff and of few words, I miss him and wish that he could've been here for my last summer.

"So I guess the owners' daughter is also going to be a counselor here?" Karen says. "Allison? I think I met her when I first got here. She's so pretty. So are you. I'm definitely the ugly duckling of the group." She laughs in such a way that I can tell this actually bothers her more than she is caring to let on.

"Horses don't care what you look like," I say.

"I know." She sighs. "So . . . do you have a boyfriend?"

"No. This place will keep you pretty busy. I mean, you'll definitely have down time, but relationships take up a lot of time. When you could be doing other things. Like showering. Or napping." She gives me a somewhat horrified look and I smile. "I'm joking. Sort of. Come on; let's go tack up a few of the horses so I can take you out



and show you the trails.”

I didn't go with my parents into the East Bay because I had a headache. I had a headache because I'd been up most of the night, arguing with Sean, and then having that really hot makeup sex that almost makes the whole argument worth having to begin with.

My parents were going to visit their friends in Walnut Creek. I was invited along because the friends owned horses and had just gotten a new one that was giving them some trouble.

“Carol is sure this is something you'd be able to figure out,” Dad said as they were leaving. It was one of the last things he said to me.

“Maybe next time.” It felt like there was a swarm of bees clustered behind my right eye.

My parents were driving back to the city that evening when they drove their car off the Bay Bridge. The bridge had been under construction for a while, and there was a dangerous S curve that a freighter had driven off of a few months ago. Drivers were supposed to slow to 35 to navigate the curve, but most plowed on through, keeping up with the flow of traffic.

It was a tragedy and also a miracle, because no one could imagine how my mother survived the plunge from the upper deck down to the pavement on Treasure Island.

It was touch and go with my mother for a while, though. Her hospital room and the ICU waiting room became my new home for nearly a month last summer. I didn't go back to the ranch that year and I put my classes on hold. Uncle Nate flew in and after the shock had started to wear off, started talking about conspiracies, adamant this wasn't due to negligent driving and poorly-lighted warning signs.

“Mike has always been a very defensive driver!” Uncle Nate raged, as though that fact alone meant my father could never be involved in even the most minor of traffic accidents.

For a while, I dismissed it as shock, his unique way of processing grief. Dad was his only brother, after all. And it was Dad who helped Uncle Nate in the early days of his business. Dad was really the only one who believed in him when my uncle said he wanted to start his own luxury cruise business.

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Of course Uncle Nate would have difficulty accepting it.

But then the police closed the investigation, citing it as an unfortunate accident. The few witnesses that there were had little compelling evidence to offer otherwise; and it hadn't been the first accident to occur there either. There were several editorials in the newspaper, letters of outrage, concerned citizens demanding that the city do something to better protect the general population. Perhaps it was a preventable tragedy, but it was only a tragedy at that.

No one wanted to hear Uncle Nate's insistence that it was actually something more.

I take it as a bad sign that I'm already feeling annoyed with the campers and they've only been here two days. It's a smaller group this year, fifteen kids, seven boys and eight girls, a few repeats, including Simon, who has been coming here for the past four years and specializes in following me around like a puppy.

"When you're working with the horses," I'm telling a group of five of them, the ones with no horse experience, "you want to make sure to be calm and not make any sudden movements. Horses are very receptive to whatever energy it is you're putting out there, too, so you've got to act accordingly. If you respect them, they will respect you."

We're in something of a heat wave for this time of year; there hasn't been any fog and the temperature's approaching the mid-seventies. Clover, the chestnut mare, stands in front of me, eyes half closed, dozing in the warmth of the day. You could detonate a bomb next to Clover and she'd do little more than swish her tail and maybe shift the weight from one side to the other.

“So before you put the horse’s tack on, you have to groom them,” I say. “Each horse here has their own groom box. You’ll each be assigned to a horse for the three weeks that you’re here. It will be your responsibility to take care of the horse, which includes grooming, exercising, and evening feeding. I’ll go through what all the stuff in the groom box is and then I’ll tell you who you’re assigned to.”

Brett, the tall boy with tattoos on his knuckles, eyes Clover warily. “What if you’re like . . . respecting the horse but he ain’t feelin’ you and isn’t respecting you back?”

“I guarantee you that won’t happen here,” I tell him. “And generally, when you give respect, you get it. That’s not something that just applies to horses.”

He gives me a wary look, like I might be lying or trying to pull a fast one on him, but I just give him a smile and raise my eyebrows.

“It’s true,” I tell him. “Remember that and you shouldn’t have any problems.”

When I get back to my cabin that evening, there’s a pink orchid sitting on the small dining room table, plus a note from Lorrie. This came for you today, but there was no card and the delivery guy couldn’t/wouldn’t give me any more info. It’s beautiful, regardless!!

I put her note down next to the terra cotta pot. A few of the little nuggets of bark have fallen onto the table. The plant actually looks a little menacing, like it could extricate itself from its confines and start scuttling around the cabin.

I take a shower, and as I’m toweling off my hair, my phone starts to ring. I already know it’s going to be him before I even look to see who the incoming call is, but I answer, because he’ll just keep calling if I don’t.

“Do you like the orchid?” he asks.

“It’s lovely. And completely unnecessary to send.”

“I thought that drab little cabin of yours could use some cheering up. I’m sure you could use some cheering up.” I can practically hear his smirk.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“Really, though, Jill. I know it’s coming up on the one-year anniversary of your dad’s death, and I just . . . I wanted to call and see how you’re holding up.”

“I’m okay, Sean, really. Thank you for thinking of me, though.”

“I think about you a lot. I’d like to drive down there and see you. Or take you out to dinner next time you’re in the city. I’m subletting my cousin’s apartment here in the marina for the summer—you should come check it out. It’d be great to have you around.”

“I don’t think so,” I say. “I mean, I’m just pretty busy with work and then when I’ve got free time I need to go see my mom.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing your mom.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “Listen, I’ve got to go. I had a long day and I’m beat.”

“Jill, hold on. I really thought you’d be ready to talk now.”

“Talk about what?”

“About getting back together. You know we belong together. I understand that what happened last year was pretty fucking traumatic and you needed some space. I get

that. But it's been almost a year and I think that we're both ready to get things back on track."

That's the problem with people like Sean. They're used to getting exactly what they want, all the time, and have no fucking clue how to accept 'no' as an answer.

"Sean, our relationship is over. Which means you can stop calling me and also stop sending flowers. To both me and my mother. Okay? Goodbye."

"I love it when you play hard to get," I hear him say before I'm able to disconnect the call.

## Chapter 5: Griffin

I've never had so much time to just sit and be alone with my thoughts.

It's a little unnerving.

I'm generally the sort who likes to keep moving, who likes to be doing something—or someone—pretty much all the time. Perhaps at one point Dad thought that such a characteristic would be beneficial in business, but he has since determined otherwise. Somewhere along the way he made up his mind that I wouldn't be following in his footsteps, and he basically told me to go do whatever I wanted so long as it didn't involve getting thrown in jail—presumably he didn't want to have to put up the bail—or get involved in any scandals that might tarnish the public's impression of him. I doubt he ever had a conversation like that with Cam. When I was twenty-five my trust fund would be released to me. At which point he's probably hoping to never have to see me again. From what I've gathered, Cam hasn't touched his trust fund yet and instead has followed in Dad's footsteps and is making money out of money. Or something. Honestly, I'm not entirely sure what either my dad or Cam do, but it's lucrative and gives them the idea that they are somehow better than

everyone else.

Mom always liked to refer to us as her “good boy” and her “wild one.” I’ll let you decide who was who. But clearly it was apparent early on that Cam could do no wrong. In every holiday photo, he’s looking straight into the camera, perfect smile, not a hair out of place. It was always on account of me we had to do half a dozen or more retakes, my dad’s smile getting tighter and more forced with each one, until the official Alexander Family Christmas photo always resulted with Dad scowling. Somehow, though, the look on Cam’s face never faltered.

For a few minutes, I let the self-pity wash over me. I sit there and wallow in it. What if these fools actually are for real and they kill me? I think of Imogen, and her lovely, perky tits, and the sad fact that I only got to spend one night getting to know them. And then there’s Harper, and her beautiful gazelle legs, and Amanda, and her tiny waist and voluptuous ass, and Stella, who really did give the best head ever, and Marion, who screamed so loud when she came that I actually had ringing in my ears for a day afterward, and Alicia, Laura, Tess, Zoe, Kelly, Rebecca, Katy, Elizabeth . . . I can’t even remember all their names. All lovely ladies.

But perhaps this is a fitting end. I mean, not to be all dramatic or anything, but I haven’t really done much in way of a positive contribution to the world. Don’t think that I don’t know it. It’s just easy to get caught up in all of it, in the lifestyle, in upholding this certain image, though what that image is I can’t quite say. All I know is, word gets out there, and people expect you to be a certain way, and, for some reason or another, you try to do exactly that.

I stand up and feel my way over to the door. I’ll just break the news to them myself. Carl Alexander III is not going to pay your ransom. He is not going to confess and he is not going to give two shits if you kill his son or not. In fact, he might even applaud you if you do, or perhaps wish he could’ve done the deed himself. Maybe they’ll let me go. Or maybe they’ll kill me like they said they would, because it would be just as

fun.

I bang on the door. “Guys! Open up. I’ve got to tell you something. It’s big. You’ll want to hear this.”

There’s a moment of silence, it’s almost unreal, like someone pressed the universal mute button or something, and then I hear one of them shout—shriek, really—and the boat lurches violently one way, then the other. I lose my footing and fall to one knee before I’m able to catch myself. There’s more screaming, followed by thunderous footsteps. The door flies open a minute later.

“A fucking whale hit the boat!” Bandana screams. “Get your ass out here and help us!”

They’re trying to bail the water out, but I can tell the second I get out there that the boat’s fucked. It’s going down, and it’s going down fast, and from the look on Bandana’s face, I’d be surprised if any of them can do more than the dog paddle.

The whale is nowhere to be seen, though I’ve heard of this happening once or twice. Some juvenile whale who breached and misjudged the distance between here and there. Like driving after you’ve skied, or on one too many hits of LSD. Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.

I dive into the water. It’s cold but tolerable, and I don’t think they even notice that I’m gone. I don’t look back.

I swim.

I swam competitively all throughout school, not because I particularly loved it but because I was good at it and also because girls can’t resist a swimmer’s body. The broad shoulders, narrow waist, the tight, toned muscles. So while my parents thought



I was doing it for the glory of all those championships, really, I was doing it for the glory of being with all those girls, and yes, there were plenty of them.

This is what I think about as I swim. What I try not to think about is the fact that I could be going in the wrong direction and may never see solid ground again, or that I might be headed straight for a shark or an infestation of jellyfish. No, I push those thoughts to the very back of my mind and instead think of Sadie-Heather-Jen-Tara-Gwen-Alexa-Nicole . . . the list could go on forever . . .

I stop periodically. Tread water. Dead man's float. If something about my situation doesn't change soon, that's exactly what I'll be, dead man floating. The sun is setting. My lips are dry, cracking, my muscles ache, but they're nowhere near failing. These babies can go all night, and it's looking like they're going to have to. My brain buzzes from lack of sleep, but this isn't the first time yours truly has had to do something completely strung out.

Other things I think about aside from the girls: this alleged confession my father needs to make, worth approximately the same value as 7.2 million dollars and his son's life. Or maybe worth more than that.

My father is the CEO, president, and chairman of the Concord Frazier Group, a multinational conglomerate holding company. CFG owns a few airlines, several insurance companies, several more manufacturers, and a popular soft drink company. They even jumped on the natural food craze bandwagon a few years ago with Organica, that whole food company that touts itself as being "as natural as if you just dug it out of the ground, but as convenient as if you just pulled it out of the microwave."

My relationship with my father wasn't always so contentious. Somewhere, in some forgotten-about desk drawer somewhere, there might even be a photograph or two of Dad and I. Look, there I am, seven years old, at Yankees Stadium, Cam, ten years

old, sandwiched between me and Dad. Or at nine, on Dad's yacht, me with a huge grin on my face because I love being out on the water, Dad trying to look like he's not about to toss his cookies.

Something happened, though, right around the time I turned thirteen. Maybe it's because I grew taller than him, or because my voice got deeper than his, or any number of things, but one day it seemed like Dad woke up and decided he just didn't like me anymore. He didn't laugh at my jokes, he didn't come to my swim competitions, he said he was busy with work and that was that. It's like he made up his mind and never looked back, which is basically how he lives his life. Maybe it's because he realized Cam could fulfill everything he wanted in a son, so I was just extra, unnecessary, a needless liability.

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I'm about to start swimming again when I see movement against the sky. Birds, flying away from the setting sun. Birds fly back to land at dusk. I smile, and feel my lip split, but I don't care. I'm going the right way. Land is near.

### Chapter 6: Jill

Sitting by the campfire is basically a part of every evening, but the main event that I think most of the kids look forward to is the Beach BBQ, which starts around six-thirty and doesn't end until well into the night, when the tired campers crawl into the tents they've pitched in the sand at the edge of the beach. The other part of the fun is the fact that Bill and Lorrie turn in before the party commences, leaving the supervising up to me and the other counselors.

The things that have gone on at the Beach BBQ are the stuff of legends, but the fact is, no one's ever been hurt, lost, or gotten killed and the general consensus is that it's the best part of the whole experience. It always takes place one week after the campers have arrived, kind of as a reward, as a way to say, Congratulations, you've made it this whole week—only two left to go.

The kids are excited for the barbeque. It distracts them while we're out on the morning trail ride, and at one point, Brett nearly falls off when his mount takes a misstep and stumbles coming down a gentle incline.

When we get back, Allison is complaining because she doesn't want to have to help get all the food ready.

"I'm not really that good in the kitchen," she says, as she eyes Brett, who's playing

Frisbee with a few other kids.

“All you need to do is either make burgers or slice tomatoes,” I tell her. “It’s not rocket science.”

“Um . . . I’ll be right back,” she says, and before I can say anything else, she flounces out of the kitchen.

“Must be nice to be the owners’ daughter,” Karen says. “She’s probably the only person I haven’t really learned that much from since I’ve been here. I’ll slice the tomatoes.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“Although she is lucky,” Karen continues, her gaze going out the window where Allison has seamlessly integrated herself into the Frisbee game by standing so close to Brett it looks like she’s got a hand in his pocket. “All the boys really seem to like her. Can I tell you something? I’ve never even had a boyfriend before. I’ve only ever been kissed once, and that’s because someone dared someone else to do that. Isn’t that terrible?”

It kind of is, but I smile and shake my head. “You’re not necessarily missing out on much,” I say.

“My parents are pretty strict Christians and it was kind of drilled into me at a young age that you’re supposed to wait until you get married. Or find the person that you’re going to marry.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that. Some guys would probably find that pretty attractive, actually.”

“Yeah, but does anyone do that anymore? You’ve . . . you’ve been with a guy, right? You’ve probably been with lots of guys.” Her eyes widen. “I mean . . . I didn’t mean to make it sound like that. I just meant that you’re really pretty, too, and I’m sure you have no trouble getting guys. I’m not saying that you like sleep around or anything.”

“It’s okay,” I tell her, suppressing a smile. “And yes, I’ve been with a few guys. But really, Karen? There’s nothing wrong with waiting. If that’s what you want to do. And sometimes it can be a while until you find the right person. Or maybe you’ll end up meeting someone who’s the right person for that time in your life, and then you’ll move on. You’re still young.”

“Maybe you could give me some pointers.”

I laugh. “I’m really not the person to ask for that sort of thing. Allison might be a better bet. Maybe that’s what you could learn from her.”

Karen reaches for another tomato. “I’ve just always wanted to do things the right way, you know? I play by the rules. I guess that was kind of drilled into me by my parents, too. I’ve never even had a beer before. I’m waiting until I’m twenty-one. Seven more months.”

She’s lucky in a way, I think. She’s got a totally clean slate. No baggage from past relationships. That sounds pretty good to me right about now.

Down on the beach, Bill and a few of the campers have built a fire and they’re grilling burgers. I go around and help the kids that need assistance with their tents—some of them can’t get it staked in right, and a few—including Brett—are chasing each other up and down the beach with the rods, jousting. Then I go pitch my own tent a little further down the beach as a way to patrol the parameters after everyone’s supposed to be turned in for the night.

We all eat, and sit around the fire while Lorrie tells a ghost story that I've heard every year but always still scares me the same. Bill gets his guitar out and a few of the guys get up to try their hand at night-Frisbee.

By the time full dark has settled and the fire is throwing long shadows across everyone's faces, I notice Brett and one of the other guys sneak off back toward the trail leading to the ranch. It's not so much that I want to be known as the cool counselor; rather I get that some things are just more fun with alcohol. So yes, I turn a blind eye when they not-so-covertly haul a thirty-pack down to the beach and haphazardly try to stash it under an old quilt.

Karen comes up behind me and taps me on the shoulder. "They've got beer," she mumbles. "How did they get beer?"

"Who knows. They figure out a way every year. Allison probably got it for them with her fake I.D."

"They're underage! I should tell Bill."

"It's okay." I give her a look. "Why don't you supervise the marshmallow roasting; let me worry about the beer."

I decline to add that when I say worry, I really mean help myself to one or two.

I watch as the kids covertly go over to the quilt and help themselves to a can. They go in twos or threes, like they've got this whole thing coordinated, leaving some of them by the campfire while others have wandered down closer to the surf. There's giggling and shouting and everyone's having a good time. Bill is playing "Teach Your Children" and a few of the kids are even singing, the chorus part anyway.

"I wish we had some fireworks!" someone shouts.

“Let’s make some!”

They dissolve into giggles like it’s the funniest thing ever.

I walk over to the quilt, which Brett is sitting near, Allison next to him.

“I’m not going to bust you,” I tell him as he hurries to hide the can, “on the condition you give me one.”

He grins. “I knew you were down,” he says, and tosses me a warm can.

“Actually, I’ll take two. And I better not find the beach covered in empties in the morning.”

“Yes, Mom,” he says.

I drink one of the beers in the shadows by my tent and then go help make s’mores. I’ve got the technique for toasting the perfect marshmallow, and I end up making a dozen or more s’mores and passing them out to the campers who seem only capable of burning the marshmallows or dropping them into the flame.

“Is there anything you can’t do?” Simon asks dreamily from next to me, after I hand him what is probably his fourth s’more.

“There’s plenty,” I tell him. “You should go sit next to Heather,” I add. Heather is a little mouse of a girl who has alternated between following Simon and Allison around, contenting herself with the scraps of attention they throw her way every so often.

“Who?”

“Heather. Here. Give her this s’more.” I pass another graham cracker sandwich to him and nudge him toward her. “I’ve got to get something from my tent.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No, you stay here.”

“Can I put my tent next to yours?”

“No, Simon. Yours is perfectly fine where it is. Or you can go back to the ranch, if you don’t want to camp.”

He gives me a hurt look. “I never said that.” Invariably, some of the campers will go back when Bill and Lorrie do, if for no other reason than they don’t feel like sleeping out in the sand. And sometimes, it’s the biggest, toughest-acting kids that don’t want to be the ones sleeping out in a tent.

I give Simon’s shoulder a pat. “Well, then, you should go enjoy yourself. Go have some fun, Simon. I’ll be back.”

Hours later, the giggles and shrieks have subsided and the campers are all in their respective tents. I lie awake in mine, knowing it will probably be a few more hours at least before I finally fall asleep.

Sean and I tried to go camping once, in Bolinas. It was a disaster and a half. We ended up leaving around eleven that night because he just couldn’t handle sleeping on the ground.

“I thought there was going to be, you know, lodging,” he said as we left.

“It’s a campground,” I replied, trying not to sound as disgusted as I felt.



“Well, we went camping before when I was a kid and we stayed in a cabin. You know, with beds, running water.”

“That’s not camping; that’s staying in a cabin.”

I remembered looking at him as he stuffed our gear back into the car, and wondering, What the hell is wrong with you? It seemed like not the sort of thought you’d want to be having about your boyfriend.

It annoys me that I’m even thinking about this, and then I start thinking of that ridiculous orchid that’s still sitting on the kitchen table, and the one that’s sitting on my mother’s side table. I unzip the sleeping bag and get up, leave the tent. There’s a light breeze that carries a few hushed whispers from the campers’ tents my way, but everything seems to be in order. Most of them are probably already asleep.

I walk down to the water, let my toes be submerged in the edge of one of the waves. The water is cold and frothy and the moon is high in the sky. It’s one of those lovely nights when I should be feeling more at peace than I currently do.

I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. I turn and squint, and in the milky light of the moon, I can see someone stumbling out of the water. He’s a good fifty yards away from me, and I wonder how on earth one of the campers managed to sneak past me, and what the hell he’s doing in the water at this time of night.

I storm down there. He trips, doesn’t make a move to get up, just lies there on his back, half in, half out of the water, arms splayed, staring up at the sky.

“Jesus Christ, how many beers did you have?” I ask. “And you better sleep this off by morning . . .”

But I stop abruptly, probably five feet away. The full moon has made it bright enough

that I can see this is clearly not Brett or one of the other campers. I don't know who it is, and not just because he's brought his hands up and is covering his face like he's got the worst headache ever.

"Fucking hell," he says, before trying to sit up. He makes it halfway and then twists to the side and throws up. It sounds like mostly water.

I take a step closer. "Are you okay?"

He doesn't seem to hear me over the retching, though, and when he's done he rolls over onto his forearms and his knees, his forehead on the sand. Perhaps I should be more fearful of strange men that wash up onto the beach, but this one is clearly in no condition to do anything that might put me in harm's way.

I take a few steps closer and kneel down. "Hey. Where did you come from?"

Finally, he looks at me. For a few long seconds, he doesn't say anything. Then, he laughs, a dry, hacking sound that quickly dissolves into a brutal cough. He pushes himself up and stands, swaying a little.

"I would think," he says, his voice rough like gravel, "that I were in heaven if I didn't feel like such shit."

"Well, this isn't heaven; it's Fulton Beach." I look out to the expanse of ocean that is reflecting the moon's light in milky-colored ripples. I see no boat, no vessel, not even a raft or a stick of driftwood. "And you're not supposed to be here. Where did you come from? Where are you trying to go?"

"Sweetheart," he says. "If I knew that, I'd be there by now."

"Do you need to go to the hospital? I can call an ambulance."

“No.” He shakes his head. “No, don’t call anyone. Just . . . just give me a minute. Let me try . . . let me . . . Goddamn. Do you have any water?”

I can see how dry and cracked his lips are and how the salinity of the water has irritated the skin around his mouth. He has been swimming for a long time, I realize.

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“Sweetheart,” he says. “I really need to lie down.”

“Come with me,” I say, wanting to get him out of sight before Karen sees. “But stop calling me sweetheart.”

“Sure, okay. What’s your name, then?”

“Jill.”

“I’m Griffin. Thanks for saving me.”

“I haven’t done anything yet.”

He staggers next to me, one leg or the other giving out periodically but he doesn’t fall. He collapses into the tent and just lays there as I pull a water bottle from the little cooler I brought with me. I twist the cap off and hand it to him, and he sits up long enough to gulp a few mouthfuls before lying back down.

“Don’t drink so quickly,” I say. I try to scrutinize his face in the darkness. I twist the knob on my LED lantern and a whitish glow fills the tent. He is no one I have ever seen before. “Seriously. Where are you from?”

“I would tell you,” he says, “but sweetheart, you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Try me,” I say.

He lets his eyes fall closed for a second, before reopening them. He’s got those

enviable, long, thick lashes that only guys ever seem to have, and his eyes as blue and bright as pools of tropical water. “I was kidnapped. It started off really lovely and all; I was having the total Eat, Pray, Love experience, traveling the world, except in my case it was more like Drugs, Rave, Fuck, and I was partying in Thailand and I was kidnapped and woke up to find myself on some yacht in the middle of the ocean. And then a fucking whale sank the boat. Like Moby Dick or some shit. So I started swimming.”

He takes another sip of water. I narrow my eyes. “You’re full of shit,” I tell him. I know his type, which isn’t all too different from Sean, actually, just maybe a little more adventurous. The privileged rich boy who happens to be so ruggedly handsome, people are constantly falling over themselves just to get in their good graces. And these boys know this, relish this, and just like to mess around with people because they know they can get away with it.

“Sweetheart, you’re the one who asked what happened.”

“I asked because I thought you’d tell me the truth. And you really need to stop calling me sweetheart. My name is Jill.”

“Okay, okay. Jill. I’m not exactly sure what I need to do to convince you that I’m telling you the truth, but that’s what happened.”

“If that’s what happened, we should call the police. If you were the victim of a kidnapping, you need to report that. It’s a crime.” I cringe inwardly, thinking I sound exactly like Uncle Nate.

“The police aren’t going to be able to do anything. This wasn’t about me at all.”

“You were kidnapped but it wasn’t about you?”

“No. It’s something to do with my father. They wanted him to pay a ransom. Which shows how little they know my father. Going to the cops is only going to piss my father off and I’ll probably end up having to see him, which I try to do as infrequently as possible.”

I feel a twinge as he says this, the same quick, sharp feeling I always get whenever I hear someone saying these sorts of things about their parents. Sometimes I couldn’t help but wonder why people who had parents they hated, or whose parents didn’t give two shits about them, why they still got to be alive and my dad, who was a friend as much as a parental figure, was dead. I know it’s an immature way to feel, but the reaction was involuntary; all I could do was acknowledge it and then try to let it go.

“So you were kidnapped, you swim who knows how many miles and wash up on a beach, and you’re just going to do nothing.”

“I never said that.”

“Well . . . what am I supposed to do with you? This is a camp for teens. Random guys washing up on the beach in the middle of the night isn’t going to go over too well with the owners. The campers’ parents expect them to be safe.”

“I’m safe. I like kids. Kids like me. I was a big brother in another lifetime.” He stretches, his broad expanse of torso expanding and contracting. “Christ. Can I get out of these clothes? Do you mind? I’m sorry; I’m getting your sleeping bag soaked.”

“What? I . . .” I don’t have anything with me for him to put on, but he’s already pulling his shirt off, and he’s got this incredibly smooth skin wrapped over long, toned muscles. I look away.

“What I’d really like, though, is to be able to get a little rest. And then we can figure things out in the morning?” He yawns, and I suddenly imagine him as a little boy,

getting tucked into bed for the night.

He is someone's son, I tell myself. He used to be a little boy.

"Fine," I say, suddenly too tired to do anything but agree. I nod to my sleeping bag. "It's all yours. I'll put your clothes out here to dry off. Put them back on when you wake up in the morning."

"Thank you, sweetheart," he mumbles, already half asleep.

## Chapter 7: Griffin

I'm not sure how long I slept for, but when I open my eyes, the tent is filled with a muted light and from somewhere in the distance, I hear what sounds like a shitload of kids talking, laughing.

I lie there in the tangle of the sleeping bag, head pounding, muscles feeling like they're about to either explode or liquefy, or maybe both. I sit up slowly, my equilibrium shifting, swaying like I'm still out on the boat even though I'm not. I am here, on dry land. I am on a beach and I am alive and I've got the nastiest fucking headache to prove it.

I reach for the water bottle and take a sip, then another. My lips feel like little more than parchment paper, like they could flake off at any second. What I wouldn't give for a hot shower. Jesus Christ.

I'm trying to summon the energy to get myself up when the flaps on the tent are suddenly yanked back.

"Jill, you overslept!" a voice says, and then stops abruptly. A girl is peering in at me. She's young, maybe sixteen or seventeen, and clearly not expecting to find me in

here. “Oh,” she says. She’s got big greenish-blue eyes and long brown hair she’s piled up on the top of her head in one of those messy bun things that are so much fun to pull out. She smiles. “Hi. You are certainly not who I was expecting to find in here. Where . . . where is Jill?”

“I don’t know.” I start to crawl forward, and then I realize I’m naked. “Hey, could you toss me those clothes that are out there?” The girl backs up, letting the flap of the tent fall. I can’t tell if she’s horrified or in shock, but a second later, she sticks her arm back into the tent and hands me my clothes, which are still damp and encrusted with sand, but I put them on anyway. I crawl out of the tent, the flap brushing my back as I make my way out. The sun is reflecting off the water in such a way that it’s painful to look at it. I squint and wish I had my Ray-Bans.

“I’m Allison,” the girl says. “Are you and Jill . . .?” She lets the sentence trail off.

“I know Jill,” I say, though I refrain from adding whether it’s biblically or not. I have a feeling Jill wouldn’t appreciate that one too much.

“My parents own this place.”

I glance down at her. “Your parents own the beach?”

“Well . . . sort of. They own the ranch. I’m a counselor here. But you aren’t one of our campers.”

I feel as though I look like the shit someone just scraped off the bottom of their shoe, but from the way Allison is smiling at me, my outward appearance must not reflect that. Or, she’s really hard up, but she’s a cutie, so I doubt that’s the case.

“You didn’t tell me your name,” she says, tilting her head and giving me a coy look.



“Griffin.”

“Are you going to be around for a while?”

“Uh—”

“Because I wouldn’t mind seeing more of you. You should stay. You can be my guest. My parents won’t mind at all.”

It makes my face feel like it’s about to crack, but I give her my most winning smile. “Sweetheart, that’s the first good news I’ve heard in a while.”

## Chapter 8: Jill

After Karen and I herd the fifteen bleary-eyed teenagers back down the footpath to the ranch for breakfast, I double back to go find Griffin. He can eat something and then be on his way, wherever that might be.

But he’s not there when I return. I look down the beach, but there are only some gulls, and, in the very far distance, a person walking a dog. The waves slide up the beach and back, and I wonder if Griffin disappeared just like how he had arrived.

I break down my tent and check the area for any debris that the campers might not have picked up before they had left and only find one empty beer can and a lollypop wrapper. They’re a decent bunch of kids, I think, as I carry my stuff back to the ranch.

I’m heading over to the barn, debating whether or not to mention anything to Bill and Lorrie about Griffin. A small part of me wonders about him, but if he’s truly gone, then what’s the point in bringing him up? Oh, guess what, last night some guy washed ashore and I let him sleep in my tent and then when I went back this morning

he was gone. Uh-huh.

But then I hear Bill calling my name. He's standing on the porch of their house, a little Craftsman bungalow, built atop a gently sloping hill that overlooks the barn.

"Jill!" he says, waving. "Can I steal you for a moment?"

"Sure," I call back. I dump my gear and turn and walk toward the house. He waits for me on the porch, and as I approach, I try to read his expression. He seems as affable as always.

"Sounds like last night was a success," he says. "Everyone seems happy. Let's go into my office for a minute."

We walk inside and down a short hallway to his office. And there, sitting on the faded blue couch, is Allison. Next to her is Griffin. He looks a little more put together than he did last night, though that isn't saying much. His hair is messy and black and flecked with sand. He's got probably a week-old beard going. But underneath all that dark hair you can see he's got this perfectly square cut jaw and his eyes are large and bright blue, framed by those thick black lashes.

Bill goes and sits behind his desk, leans back in the chair. "Allison came to me with an interesting proposition this morning, but I thought we should talk to you about it. It seems her friend—Griffin, is it?"

Griffin nods. "Yes, sir."

"Bill, please. None of this 'sir' business. Griffin is interested in joining our team for the summer."

"One of Allison's friends," I say slowly. I can see Allison out of the corner of my

eye, arms crossed, foot tapping. I can practically feel her glare boring a hole into my side. “Actually, I don’t think that would be the best—”

“It would be good if there’s another guy around,” Allison cut in. “Especially since Brandon’s not here this year. It would be good for the guy campers.” She gives me a level stare and in that moment there is nothing more I’d rather do than reach over and slap her across the face.

“I do have some outdoor experience,” Griffin says. “I actually used to go to a camp like this myself, when I was younger. In the Catskills. I’d love the opportunity to have some new outdoor experiences. This seems like a great place.”

Bill looks from me to Griffin to Allison, then back to me again. “Jill,” he says. “If this young man would like to stay on with us, I don’t see a problem with that. A friend of Allison’s, after all, is a friend of ours.”

My mouth falls open and I shoot a look at Allison, who is now staring straight at her father, a tiny smirk on her face.

“That’s not—” I start to say.

“Of course, if any problems arise,” Bill is saying to Griffin, “we’re going to have to ask you to leave immediately, but we like to be inclusive here at Sea Horse Ranch. We don’t like to turn people away. Especially if you’re eager for some new outdoor experiences, as you say you are.” Bill smiles broadly at the three of us, like he wants to gather us all in a big group hug. “Why don’t you get back out there and help Lorrie and Karen get everyone ready for the trail ride. It’s the perfect day for it.”

Allison is elated, and can barely keep herself from jumping up and down.

“This might work out,” I hear Bill say to himself as we file out. “Not that Karen isn’t

working out, but it'd be nice to have another male around, since Brandon's not here."

Griffin gives me an apologetic smile but then Allison pulls on his hand and he turns and follows her. I watch them walk off. A scrub jay screeches from the branch of one of the live oak trees. The grating noise seems an appropriate soundtrack for how I imagine the rest of this day—the rest of this summer—is going to go.

## Page 7

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On Sunday, I drive back home to see Mom. The whole way back, my hands clench the steering wheel, my shoulders inch up closer and closer to my ears until I have to consciously remind myself to relax. Still, by the time I actually get to the house and am inside, I can feel how tight my shoulders have gotten again.

“Is camp not going well this year?” she asks after we talk for a few minutes. I thought I’d been doing a good job disguising my irritation, but apparently not. “Did something happen?”

I debate not telling her. What, after all, is there that she could do about it? If anything, it will just upset her, and she doesn’t need that right now. So I give her a modified version.

“There’s this guy there who I’m not really getting along with,” I say. “I just . . . I wasn’t expecting him to be there.”

“You can get along with anyone, Jilly,” Mom says. “You’re a very friendly person. Can you try to see the good qualities in him? I’m sure he must have one or two.”

“It’s not even that I’m not getting along with him, per se; he reminds of Sean, I guess.”

“Ah.” Mom smiles faintly and looks over at the orchid. “You really should give him another chance, sweetie. He clearly cares about you so much.”

“Why? Because he sends flowers?” I rub my eyes. “Can we talk about something else?”

I leave some time after dinner, when Sharon shows up for the night shift. I give Mom a kiss and tell her I'll see her next week.

"Drive safely," she says. "And don't forget that your uncle will be out here Sunday. I think he'd like to take us out. Something simple, brunch maybe. I think I might be up for that. It's been a while since I last went out, but I think I feel up for it."

I grit my teeth but force a smile. "Great," I say tightly. Uncle Nate visits every few months, claiming he wants to make sure that we're doing okay and that the money he sends is being spent properly, but really it's because he wants to go on another tirade about his conspiracies concerning my parents' car accident, his favorite theory being that one of my dad's former bosses paid someone to cause the accident. At this point, no one else wants to hear about it. We are obligated to listen because we're family, but that doesn't mean I still don't think he's full of shit.

"It'll be nice to see him," Mom says. "He's family, Jilly. He's your father's little brother, and he's taking care of us."

I stiffen. "I might not be able to cover all the expenses, Mom, but I work really hard to try to make ends meet around here."

"I know you do, honey. But you're still so young and have your whole life ahead of you; you shouldn't be shouldered with a burden like this. There's nothing wrong with accepting help from family. Uncle Nate wants to help."

I shake my head. "We're not a charity case."

"You're right; we're not. But he is family, and he wants to help. And try to get along with that boy at camp. You'll just make yourself miserable if you don't."

On my way out of the living room, I pass the framed picture hanging on the wall. It's

the last photo taken of Dad, Mom, and me. We're standing on Baker Beach, the Golden Gate Bridge behind us. All smiling. All with no clue how very wrong things would go in just a few short months for our little family. She has a point, I suppose. There's a good chance he'll be there all summer.

When I get back, the campers are all out on the archery field. They're standing there in a line, bows in hand, facing the targets. Griffin is in the middle of this line, and as I approach, I can hear him talking to the campers.

"When you're at full draw, your body forms a T, if you're in proper alignment," he's saying. There is movement on the line, as some of the archers readjust themselves.

Even Allison is there, right next to him, gamely trying to get control of her bow.

"Good," Griffin says. He's lowered his own bow and is walking up the line, inspecting each person's stance.

"Can you help me get in the right stance? I can't figure it out," Allison says.

He sees me as he walks back over to her and he gives a little wave. "Now here's a girl who looks like she knows how to shoot an arrow. Care to join us?"

"No, that's okay," I say tightly. "I was wondering if a group would like to get together and take a ride down to the swimming hole."

"Okay!" says Simon. No one else moves. Normally, taking the horses swimming is one of the most popular activities, but right now they're looking at me like I just suggested we all sit in a circle and pull out each other's toenails with pliers.

"Griff is giving us an archery lesson," Allison says. "He's an expert." She points to one of the targets, where three arrows surround the yellow bullseye.

“And here I thought he was teaching you how to knit a sweater.” I look at Simon. “Guess it’s just you and me,” I say. He hurries after me and we walk off the field, toward the paddocks to get the horses.

“I don’t care much for archery to begin with,” Simon says.

I glance at him. He’s shot up in the year since he was here last summer, and at some point, maybe, he’ll be attractive, but right now he looks like a gangly colt who is still trying to get used to his new body dimensions.

“It’s okay if you wanted to stay there,” I tell him.

“Nah. I’d rather take the horses out.” He jams his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “Who is that guy, anyway?”

“Apparently someone who is good at everything,” I mumble. Simon looks at me quizzically. “I don’t know where he came from. He’s a friend of Allison’s.”

Simon snorts. “I’d say a little more than friends.”

I ignore the remark, though it slides under my skin like a splinter. “I didn’t realize he was a professional archer.”

“He said he learned in Scotland. One of his friends is part of the Royal Company of Archers.”

“Well, isn’t he well-traveled.”

“He is a pretty cool guy,” Simon says. “Or he seems that way. He seems like he’s good at a lot of things.”



“He’s arrogant. And he happens to be good-looking, and rich, apparently, so I guess that means he can get away with doing whatever he wants.”

Simon squints at me. “How do you know all that stuff about him?”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t, really. He’s just another handsome rich boy, and they’re all basically the same.”

“Okay,” he says after a minute. “I’m not rich,” he adds.

I shoot him a look. “Good. Stay that way.”

After Simon and I put the horses back out to pasture, I head back to my cabin to lie down for a bit before the afternoon activities. Allison is lounging in the hammock under the oak tree by my cabin, one leg hanging off the side. She sits up when she sees me.

“Hey,” she says. “I was wondering where you were. I have a really big favor to ask.”

I push my sunglasses up on top of my head. “And what might that be?”

“I was wondering if you would do the afternoon trail ride. It’s only with like six kids; the rest are going on a hike with Bill.”

“I just went for a ride.”

“Yeah, with Simon. You shouldn’t have gone if it was just going to be the two of you.”

“Maybe you should try not telling me what to do, considering you’re asking me for a favor and all.”

Allison smiles and gives me a sisterly look. “I’m just joking, Jill. Geez. It’s cute how much Simon likes you, actually. So will you do it? Do the trail ride? I was going to take Griff up to the city.” She leans toward me and says in a conspiratorial whisper, “Griff has a trust fund.”

I try to refrain from rolling my eyes. “That must make him so much more attractive.”

“Hello, are you blind? He doesn’t need anything to make him more attractive. He’s like the hottest guy I’ve ever seen.”

I let out a low whistle. “Well, then, that’s quite the honor.”

She narrows her eyes, as though she can’t decide whether that jab is an insult to her or not.

“You shouldn’t be jealous.”

I laugh. “I’m not.”

“Okay, sure. Well. Thanks for doing the trail ride. We might not be back until tomorrow, too.”

“I’ll be waiting with bated breath.” I go into my cabin and lie down, trying to stave off the headache I feel building behind my eyes.

The six kids that stick around for the trail ride are five girls, plus Simon. Instead of heading to the beach, I take them inland, over golden grass and through groves of cypress trees. The fog has pulled back and the day is bright, the sound of heat bugs fills the air. The horses kick up dust as they plod along. It is warm without being overly hot, the kids are chatting happily, and I should be enjoying myself but I’m not.

I can picture Allison zipping up Highway 1 in her sporty little red Honda Del Sol, Griffin in the passenger seat. The fact that this bothers me is bothering, and when Peaches, the palomino mare I'm riding, reaches out to grab a mouthful of leaves from a passing branch, I jab her with my heels harder than I meant and she skitters forward, ears pinned back.

"Sorry, girl," I mumble, patting her neck and smoothing down a section of her cream-colored mane. I resolve to put the whole thing out of my mind. When that doesn't prove possible, I resolve to not let it bother me. Is it that people like Allison always get what they want? Is it that I can see exactly the kind of summer Allison's going to have, and the reason her summer is going to be so great is because Griffin has shown up, which therefore means my own summer—which I'd been counting on being as predictable as it's always been—is now completely shot to shit.

But I shouldn't let it get to me. I really shouldn't.

That evening, we cook up the trout Bill and the campers caught that afternoon. I watch as all the campers clamor to sit near Griffin; they're like a bunch of puppies.

"You shot a lion in Africa?" I hear one of them gasp.

"Wow, that's so cool!"

"Was it scary?"

"What kind of gun did you use?"

He gamely tries to answer all their questions. I set my fork down.

"There is nothing even remotely cool about going on a hunting trip like that," I say.

"It's disgusting."

Everyone stops and looks at me.

“How is it any different from, say, deer hunting?” Allison asks sweetly.

“There is a huge difference between hunting for sport and hunting because you’re actually going to use what you kill. Hunting for sport like that is ridiculous and pathetic.”

“I wasn’t actually the one to shoot the lion,” Griffin says. “I was pretty young at the time.”

“People hunt for all sorts of reasons,” Bill says. He gives me a look. “We shouldn’t put down others just because we don’t happen to agree with everything they do.”

I’ve only eaten about half the food on my plate—and the trout really is good—but I stand up from the picnic table. “I’m going to get started on the mess in the kitchen,” I say, which mostly no one hears because they’ve all turned their attention back to Griffin. He gives me a curious look as I walk by and it’s all I can do not to dump my plate of food on his head.

In the kitchen, I busy myself wiping up fish scales and vegetable peelings. The sound of laughter comes in through the open window and I glance out to see Griffin telling some story, gesturing with his hands, everyone is cracking up.

I’m not exactly sure why I feel this much rage toward him. In a way, Allison does have a good point—it is good for the campers to have a younger male around, someone other than Bill. And clearly, Griffin is able to relate to the kids and they adore him. But it is not the way I envisioned this summer going. This is the one solace I had, dependable in its total predictability, and now that’s completely gone to hell.

I decide to clean the entire kitchen. While they're out there eating dessert, I sweep and mop the floors, clean out the fridge, scrub the sink. It feels good to have something to pour all this energy into and I'm so focused on what I'm doing that I don't realize he's come into the kitchen until he clears his throat and says, "Hey."

I stop scrubbing and brush my hair back from my face.

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He sets his plate on the clean counter. “You really shamed me back there, you know. About the lion hunting.”

I can’t tell if he’s joking or not; his expression is difficult to read.

“It wasn’t my idea,” he continues. “It’s something my father wanted to do. He thought it would be a good father-son bonding experience or something. The African Serengeti is totally the place I’d choose for something like that.”

“Well, your dad sounds like a real gem.”

Griffin smiles. “Oh, he is. You have no idea. Except when it came down to actually taking the shot, he couldn’t do it.”

“So is that supposed to make it better?”

“I’m not saying that. But, yes, maybe. Seeing as I wasn’t the one who actually did it.” He reaches across me and turns the water on, runs his plate under the faucet. His arm touches mine and I take a step back.

“Look,” he says. “I wanted to tell you—”

“Unless you’re telling me you’re leaving, there’s really nothing to say,” I snap.

Something that might be a hurt look crosses his face. I try not to roll my eyes.

“I don’t know what I did to make you decide I’m this terrible person, but—”

“You showing up here was enough. I’ve had an incredibly shitty year and I figured the one thing I could count on was coming back to my summer job—the same summer job I’ve had for years now—and knowing that at least this would be the same as it’s always been, that at least I had that to look forward to. But no, I don’t even have that, because you show up—claiming you were fucking kidnapped, which is the biggest load of shit, by the way.”

He holds up his hands. “Look, sweetheart—is it because you feel like I’m stealing the spotlight from you or something? Because that’s really not what I’m trying to do at all. Allison said you were—”

I laugh. “Allison knows nothing about me. And I don’t care about this proverbial spotlight, I just want things to go back to how they used to be.” I say the last part of this sentence in a shaky voice, and I’m mortified to feel tears pricking the corners of my eyes.

He looks at me, confused. “Are you okay?”

But I don’t answer. I turn and leave the kitchen, refusing to let him or anyone else see me cry. A sob rises up in my throat that I try valiantly to keep from surfacing but it’s too late, and I’m probably not out of earshot when I burst into tears.

I actually go and cry on my bed for a good five minutes. Finally, I stop, a few residual hiccups left over.

Get a grip, I tell myself. I sit up, my face soggy. This is pathetic. It doesn’t have to ruin my summer, it doesn’t have to do anything. Griffin is here, and most likely, Allison will keep him preoccupied the whole time. End of the fucking problem.

Chapter 9: Griffin

I've got to admit that it's nice not having anything.

I haven't run through an official inventory yet, but somewhere between here and Koh Phangan is my North Face rucksack with my passport, my iPhone, a wallet containing ID, debit card, cash, the keys to my apartment in Tribeca. Also clothes, a pair of Gucci sunglasses, a bottle of Clive Christian No. 1. Perhaps all that stuff is floating in the Great Pacific garbage patch, or maybe it's been sold on the black market and some kid in Bangkok is rocking my sunglasses and two thousand dollar bottle of cologne.

But it's nice, basically being stranded here at this horse ranch in Northern Cali. For the first time in a long time I really feel like I'm taking a break. Like this is something different, a change of pace. I find myself actually looking forward to getting up early. You'd think, then, that I'd wouldn't do anything that might jeopardize this pastoral existence I've somehow stumbled into, but I decide it's time to call my father. Allison lets me use her phone and I walk down to one of the paddocks and lean against the split-rail fence while I wait for him to answer his phone.

"Carl Alexander," he says in a clipped tone when he picks up.

"Hey, Dad, how's it going?"

There's a pause. "Griffin?"

"Yes, Dad. Who else would be calling you Dad?" That's another distinction Cam made for himself early on. I don't actually have any memories of Cam calling our father "Dad." It was always "Carl." Carl, would you let me borrow your Mercedes, or, better yet, buy me one of my own? Carl, you won't believe how Griffin fucked up again. Carl, would you pass the peas?



“There was some static on the line. I’m out on the golf course. It’s windy. I don’t usually answer my phone when I’m golfing.”

“Yet you did this time.”

“Yet I did. So would you like to tell me what exactly it is I can help you with?”

“Oh . . . you know. Just had a quick question. Did you receive any strange calls from someone? From someone, say, oh, I don’t know, claiming that they had kidnapped me?”

He coughs, once, twice. “Excuse me one minute,” I hear him say in a muffled voice to whoever he’s out golfing with. He gets back on the phone. “I may have received a rather unorthodox call. Clearly, though, you are all right. Am I correct?”

“You always are.” Or at least you think you always are.

“So then I was also correct in assuming that the call was a prank. Yet another pathetic extortion attempt by people who are too lazy or too stupid to amass large sums of money on their own. It’s really not difficult, you know.”

“What? Extorting you? Because there actually were two men, who are probably dead now, who said they were going to kill me unless you paid them 7.2 million dollars. And confessed to something. What on earth could you possibly have to confess to, Dad?”

There’s a lot he could confess to, I’m sure. A thing or two I might even be privy to, if you want the truth, though I’m no snitch. I wonder, though, just what sort of things he’s done that has pissed off someone so badly they’d demand that much money and a confession.

“Is there something you need, Griffin? Because if not, I’ve got things to get back to.”

“Of course. Don’t want to keep the putting green waiting. But yes. While I was being kidnapped, I lost my wallet. Can you believe it? So I need some money.”

“Call your mother. She’s probably at home. She can transfer whatever you need into your bank account. You might also want to consider getting a job. Getting your life together and stop living off my dime. That thought ever cross your mind? You think your brother would call me with some ridiculous story like this? Get back in touch when you’ve got some good news to share. Like I said, I’m in the middle of something important right now, so it’s not really a good time to be talking about this.”

“Okay, great!” I say. “Try not to go eight over par this time! Bye, Dad!”

I throw the phone down and wonder how it’s possible my father is such a fucking douchebag.

I take a few calming breaths. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Ommmm. I had relations with a yoga teacher once, and aside from being wonderfully flexible, she taught me how to breathe. How most people go through their whole life not really being conscious of breath, and how, in almost any situation, taking a step back, looking inward, and focusing on breathing, will help you feel better almost immediately.

I pick up the phone and dial Cam’s number.

“It’s Griffin,” I say when he picks up.

“I know who it is,” he snaps. “Where are you? What the hell is going on?”

“Well, I’m okay, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“So you’re not . . . you’re not kidnapped?” A hard edge is starting to creep into his tone.

“I was kidnapped. And managed to escape, with the little help of an overzealous cetacean.”

“A what?”

“A whale.”

He lets out a noisy breath. Cam, I can assure you, is not one of those people who pays much attention to the way they breathe.

“Griffin,” he says, his voice low. “I am going to ask you this one time. Once, you got that? And you better tell me the truth.”

“Okay.”

“Are you just fucking with me here?”

“No! Do you seriously think I’d call you out of the blue and tell you that I’d been kidnapped?”

“The answer to that question is so blatantly obvious I’m not even going to dignify it with a response. So what happened, then? Where are you now?”

I tell myself the concern in his voice is because he actually does give a shit about what happens to me. “I’m in California. Half Moon Bay. Nice place, actually.”

“Are you coming back to New York?”

“Eh . . . not right now—”

“Because I’d really like to speak to you. In person.”

I straighten. “You what?”

“You should come back to New York. I’ll come get you at the airport. I need to talk to you.”

“Uh . . . well. Okay. Okay, maybe I can do that. I mean, I will eventually, but I was sort of enjoying myself out here. I’ve got a job, even. Cool, huh?”

“A job? You, Griffin Alexander, all of a sudden have a job? What, are you settling down now? You need to get your ass back to New York, because I really need to talk to you about this.”

Hmm. This is interesting. If I’m not mistaken, it almost sounds like there’s a note of desperation in his voice. “I talked to Dad, you know.”

“You did?”

“Yes. He didn’t seem all that concerned. About anything, except golfing.”

“Listen, Griffin. There’s a meeting I’ve got to get to—I’m already late. Is this your phone number? I’m going to call you back.”

“No, it’s not. I lost my phone. I don’t have a phone. Which is actually kind of nice—”

“You need to be available so I can reach you. Can you get a phone?”

“I guess, but—”

“No, I’ll send you one. Tell me your address. Tell me where to send you a phone. Do you need anything else? I can send you whatever you need.”

“Um . . . just my yellow Speedo thong for the days I’m not wearing the mankini.”

There is a pause, and then he actually laughs, though it sounds forced. “Just give me your mailing address.”

I give him the address. “I’ll express mail it,” he says. “Be expecting a package. And my call. Goodbye.”

He hangs up. I stare at the phone for a while and wonder if that conversation actually just happened.

See, the thing about Cam is that he’s never acted like he’s given two shits about me. Ever. I was always the annoying little brother, the tagalong, and then I was the obnoxious wild child, where it seemed like my sole purpose for existing was to fuck up and make Cam look like the golden boy he is.

But I’ve always wanted him to like me. Pretty much everyone he comes in contact with does, and usually only the very successful men and very beautiful women are given the privilege of his company.

It’s just as likely he’s getting his assistant to go buy a phone to express mail to me, but I like to think he’s hurrying down to the Mac store, stuffing an iPhone into a padded envelope, and writing my name on it himself. Waiting in line at the post office or FedEx or wherever. There is, of course, a part of me that doesn’t think this package will ever show up, that doubts my brother will call, but a larger part of me hopes he will. And if he does, then . . . maybe I should have got myself kidnapped

sooner.

I go for a swim, which, even after all I've been through, is still my second favorite way to let off some steam and clear my head. The water is cold but refreshing. I follow the footpath back to the ranch, but stop before I actually come all the way out into the clearing. Jill is walking into the main pasture where they keep most of the horses, and several of the horses are ambling over toward her. She pets them, and it looks like she's talking to them though I can't hear what she's saying. She pulls something out of the back pocket of her jeans and then runs her hand down one of the horse's legs. The horse lifts its foot to her and she bends, using the pick she's pulled from her pocket to dig something from the horse's hoof. When she's done, she gives the horse a hearty pat on the neck, and the horse bumps its nose against her shoulder, as if to say thanks.

She looks different, around the horses, even from this distance I can tell. More at ease, more like who I think she might've looked like when she was younger, when you're still carefree and don't have to deal with all the stresses of life.

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I stand there for a few more minutes. She looks at peace. It doesn't matter if anyone's ever told her about yoga breathing before—in this moment, she's totally content. I've seen a lot of girls in my time, but watching her out there in the pasture, I think she looks like no girl I have ever seen before.

### Chapter 10: Jill

Brunch with Uncle Nate is grueling. Mom is thrilled to be out, though, and so for that, I am thankful, even though I know an excursion like this is going to leave her drained and exhausted for the next few days.

I always thought my uncle was a more severe version of my father, and since Dad died, it's become even more so. The lines on his face have gotten deeper, his shoulders have gotten rounder—though whether that's from stress or working out, I couldn't tell you—even his voice seems louder. He yanks at the collar of his black polo shirt, as though it's choking him, even though he's only got one of the buttons fastened.

For the first half of the meal, we manage to stay on relatively neutral topics. School. Mom's health. My summer job.

"How is it going with that young man?" Mom asks.

"Young man?" Uncle Nate says. He blots at the corners of his mouth with his napkin. "Is there a special man in your life?"

I laugh. "Uh, no."

“A young man showed up at camp and he and Jilly weren’t seeing eye to eye on everything,” Mom says.

“Can’t get along with everyone,” Uncle Nate says sagely. “That is an unfortunate fact of life. Even your father, bless his soul, couldn’t get along with everyone.” He takes a sip of his water, ice clinking around the glass. “Hard to believe it’s almost been a year.”

Cue conspiracy talk in five, four, three, two, one—

“It’d be easier to accept and move on if someone was paying for the crime. If it was acknowledged in a court of law that—”

“Nathan. It was an accident.” Mom reaches one pale hand out and touches Uncle Nate’s thick wrist. “I was there.”

“But we can’t expect you to remember everything clearly, especially considering all that you’ve been through. You experienced severe trauma, Annabel. You’re still experiencing it. Life as you knew it has been completely upended. Your husband was killed. You’re in a wheelchair, for god’s sake! You don’t want the person responsible to pay for this?”

“It was an accident,” Mom says softly.

“No, no it wasn’t. I might not have the hard evidence to take to the cops, but this all goes back to the when Mike worked for CFG. He didn’t give me all the details, but he was onto something. Something with one of those food companies, the baby formula they manufactured. Labeling it as one thing but dumping all these harmful ingredients into it. He didn’t get the chance to give me the specifics, but he was planning to report it to the proper channels.” Uncle Nate sits back and looks at us, as if rehashing his theory for the nine millionth time might jar something loose from our memories.



“Dad didn’t talk to me about his job,” I say. Dad always had various white-collar jobs, but his real love was being outside, doing things with his hands. No, when Dad and I spent time together, we talked about nature, about astronomy, we talked about the weather and the types of clouds, we went bird-watching, clamming—we did all the things Dad couldn’t do when he was at work. “And I think we should also stop talking about it. I don’t think he’d want us sitting around speculating about it.”

“Dammit!” Uncle Nate slams his fist on the table. The silverware jumps; the glasses rattle. The people seated closest to us stop talking and look. “Why am I the only one who is not going to rest until this has been resolved? Until this family gets the justice it deserves?”

“Because you don’t know when to just leave something alone?” I ask, which is something Dad himself would say—though in a much fonder tone—about Uncle Nate from time to time.

“You people just want to try to go on with what’s left of your lives while whoever did this is out there probably doing more of the same twisted shit. I can’t just sit back and not take action. It’s not in my blood.” He looks at me. “Your father and I might have very different ways of going about things, but essentially, it’s the same thing: We will not let an injustice slip through the cracks. We will not allow those who have committed crimes, for Christ’s sake, to get off scot-free.”

“So what?” I say, annoyed that the conversation has once again turned into this. “Are you saying you’re some vigilante now? That you’re going to go out and seek justice for us in your own way since you’ve basically got nothing to go on?”

“What if I told you I was working on a way to get the person who I believe is responsible for this to come forward? To finally own up to it? Would it matter to you the WAY in which I went about it?”

“Actually, yes.”

Uncle Nate stares. “Is that so?”

“Well, it seems a little hypocritical of you to go off and do something illegal in order to prove that someone else is guilty of doing something illegal.”

“Even if it meant getting some measure of justice for your father?” He looks at Mom. “For your mother?”

“Is justice going to bring Dad back? Is justice going to magically fix Mom’s spinal cord?”

Uncle Nate waves a hand at me dismissively. “You know I love you, Jill. But you’re shaming this family right now. If it was you who had been killed or injured, your father wouldn’t rest until he found out who did it. I can guarantee you that.”

“The only guarantee I’d like from you is that you won’t bring this up anymore. Because I’m sick of hearing about it. Do I wish Dad hadn’t died? Of course. More than you probably know, Uncle Nate. But that doesn’t change the fact that he’s dead, and you making me crazy with these ridiculous conspiracy theories of yours is not how I want to spend the rest of my life.”

We stare at each other. He’s a man used to winning these sorts of stare downs, but not this time. He finally looks away and picks up his water glass again, takes a sip.

“Please . . . can we just enjoy our time out?” Mom says. “I’d just like to enjoy the three of us being here together and not talk about that other stuff right now.”

“You never want to talk about it,” Uncle Nate says huffily. He takes a deep breath. “But fine. Tell me more about this young man, Jill. He’s a love interest of yours?”

“Definitely not,” I say. I take a sip of orange juice even though I’m not thirsty. “We actually don’t get along. I’m hoping he’ll be leaving soon, but I don’t think that’s going to happen.” As if I could be so lucky.

After we get Mom back home and settled, Uncle Nate acts like he’s going to leave, but instead asks me to walk with him out to his car.

He pulls his wallet out of his back pocket and extracts a check from it, which he hands to me. “If you need more, let me know,” he says.

I grit my teeth and fold the check without looking at the sum, which I know contains a lot of zeros. “Thank you,” I manage to say.

He rubs his hand across the lower part of his face and then folds his arms across his chest. “Jill,” he says.

I look at him. “I know you think I can’t let things go,” he continues, “and maybe you’re right, but I know this wasn’t an accident. I just know it. As much as I know how much your father loved you and your mother, and how proud of you he was.”

I stuff the check into the pocket of my jeans and take a step toward him. He is only a few inches taller than I am. “You are free to do what you want,” I tell him. “But neither Mom nor I need to hear any more about your conspiracy theories, or whatever illegal activities you’ve decided to do to try to get justice. Do you understand me? And this has nothing to do with how much I love my father or how very much I wish that none of this shit happened to begin with.”

He uncrosses his arms and for a second I think he’s going to hit me, because people just don’t talk like that to Uncle Nate, but instead he just holds his hands up as though admitting defeat.

“I guess it’s just something I don’t understand. Maybe it’s because you’re women. Maybe women process things differently.”

“It has nothing to do with that.”

“Well, what is it, then? You don’t want me to talk about this stuff in front of your mother because it upsets her—okay, I won’t. But I’d appreciate it if you would enlighten me as to why you are so content to just sit back and do nothing. YOUR FATHER IS DEAD.”

“I FUCKING KNOW THAT!” I scream back. The neighbors across the street had been sitting on their front porch, but they quickly get up and move inside.

“Well, if you know that then I don’t understand why you don’t want to DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT! It was no accident, Jill, mark my words. What kind of sign are you waiting for? What the hell needs to happen to make you realize that there is something more going on here?”

I pull the check from my pocket and rip it up into tiny pieces and throw them in his face where they flutter down like confetti. “We don’t need your money. We don’t need you coming around here trying to tell us that we don’t care when in fact we do. Just because we don’t happen to deal with things the same way you do doesn’t mean it doesn’t bother us. Don’t you get that? Or have you just got it all figured out? Go off and do whatever it is that you think is going to prove something that’s un-provable. Go ahead. We don’t need to hear about it.”

“Some day you will,” he snaps. “I hope to god that someday, somehow, something will make you realize that this wasn’t just an accident.”

He gets in his car and peels away, leaving me standing there in a cloud of exhaust.

Bill and Lorrie have taken the kids on a hike, so Karen and I stay back and work in the kitchen to get things ready for the cookout we'll have later. This cookout is a more toned down version of the Beach Party BBQ. There won't be any camping out on the beach and everyone will probably be back and in bed by ten, but we still have an enormous amount of food to prepare. Karen is making a giant bowl of fruit salad and I'm patting out circles of ground beef into burgers.

"I just feel so fortunate for this opportunity," Karen says as she slices strawberries. "Especially since Griff got here."

I squeeze the handful of ground beef that I've got and feel it ooze through my fingers. Better than a stress ball. "I didn't realize him showing up would drastically alter the quality of your time here."

"Well, it's just that I get to work with someone who's clearly so gifted in . . . many areas, really."

I stifle a laugh. "And you too," Karen adds quickly. "I mean, you're so great with the horses. And he's so great at so many things. Did you see him swimming today?"

"No, I missed out on that exquisite pleasure."

She stops chopping fruit and leans toward me. "I think he's the hottest guy I've ever seen. Allison is so lucky!"

The screen door peels open and Griffin walks into the kitchen, alone.

"Where's Allison?" I say.

He shrugs. "I don't know. I heard you ladies might need some assistance in here getting the stuff for the cookout ready."

He walks over to where we're standing and grabs a handful of raspberries from one of the containers.

"You're not going to wash that first?" Karen asks. "You don't know what pesticides it's got on it."

He pops the raspberry into his mouth. "Sweetheart," he says. "I smoke cigarettes. Do you think a chemical or two on a piece of fruit is going to bother me? You should be congratulating me for making healthy eating choices."

She blushes. "Congratulations."

I roll my eyes. "You shouldn't smoke. It's disgusting."

He leans against the refrigerator and tosses a few more raspberries into his mouth. I look down at the burgers, but I can see him watching me.

"Why Jill," he says. "I didn't realize you cared. I'm touched." He smiles.

"I don't care about you," I say. "I care about the fact that you're smoking around the horses, and setting a bad example for the kids here."

"I've actually cut way back," he says. "It must have something to do with being out here in all this fresh air. My lungs just don't know what to do with themselves."

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“Well, you and your lungs could come over here and help us get the rest of this food prepared, if you’re looking for something to do.”

“Sure,” he says. “You’re the boss.”

“Actually, I’m not.” I push the bowl of ground hamburger toward him. “Because if I was, you wouldn’t still be around. Here, you can help me make the burgers.”

He grins and starts to reach for the bowl. “I’m happy to squeeze some beef for you, baby—”

“God, can you just shut up? Do you have to act like such a moron all the time? And wash your hands first! I don’t even want to know where they’ve been.”

Karen is staring at me, her mouth hanging halfway open. I shoot her a look. Griffin slinks over to the sink, but I know he’s still got a smile on his face.

“It’s unhygienic,” I tell Karen. “You of all people should care about that.”

“It’s just . . . you don’t have to be so harsh,” she says.

“If he’s going to be working here, he’s got to set a good example. The campers look up to him. Why they look up to him still remains a mystery to me—”

“Hey, hey, easy,” Griffin says. He runs his hands under the water, soaping his arms all the way up to the elbows, like he’s a doctor about to go into surgery. “Sweetheart, you need to settle down. I’m not trying to get anyone worked up here or anything,

okay? I just wanted to—”

“You just nothing. Don’t come in here and start telling me what to do. In fact, we don’t actually need your help in here; why don’t you go back out and find some adoring campers to fawn over you, because that’s clearly where you excel. Your presence is not needed or wanted in here.”

He finishes rinsing the suds from his forearms. From the corner of my eye, I can see Karen giving me a horrified look.

“Okay,” he says slowly. “I guess I will go do that, then.” He slinks out of the kitchen.

“What is your problem?” Karen asks. “Why did you yell at him like that? He just wanted to help!”

I grit my teeth. I can feel the stress building in my neck and shoulders. “I think we can handle it in here,” I tell her. “As long as we stop talking about it and just get to work. Okay?”

She nods but then looks at the door where Griffin has just disappeared.

Great. Someone else who is on his side.

## Chapter 11: Griffin

The phone that Cam sent me arrived, and I might be mistaken, but I’m pretty sure he did in fact address the envelope himself. I choose a whimsical ring tone and leave it my pocket, though it hasn’t rung yet. Allison has been bugging me to give her the number, but I don’t, claiming I don’t know, which actually is the truth.

Later that night, I see Jill heading to her cabin. I watch her as she walks, the big



strides she takes with those long legs. She's wearing cutoff jean shorts, with probably a four- or five-inch inseam, but there's still a lot of slender thigh there on display.

I jog after her. "Hey," I say as I approach.

She turns. "What do you want?"

I smile. "Nice night for a walk." It's foggy and there's a fine mist falling, but whatever.

She doesn't look amused. "So take a walk, then."

"Care to join me? I'm not really that familiar with the area. I wouldn't want to get lost."

"I'm tired. It's getting late. I want to go inside, take a shower, and go to bed."

"Want a back massage?"

"No, but I bet Allison would."

"Aw, come on Jill," I say. "Can't you at least pretend you like me? Let's just take a little walk, and then I promise I'll never speak to you again, if you want."

She stares at me. She's got a long, thin nose, and a small mouth, but full lips. I have never had a girl turn me down before, and the fact that she so clearly hates me is such a turn on that I almost tell her. But I don't. Because this is new. And fun.

"So if I take a walk with you now, you won't speak to me for the rest of the summer?"

“Yes. Well, only if you want it like that.”

“Okay,” she says. She pulls the hood of her sweatshirt up. “I definitely want it like that. It’s a deal.”

We walk down to the beach. She stays about five feet away from me, but I match her stride for stride.

“Are we having a race?” I ask.

“I’m naturally a fast walker.” But she slows a little and looks at me. “Was there a purpose to this walk or did you just need to burn off the last of your energy?”

“I don’t know. I thought maybe we could try to make amends. I just see you and you seem so miserable and I hope I didn’t have a role to play in it.”

“It really doesn’t have anything to do with you,” she says after a minute. “I mean, was I expecting you to show up here like this? No. But whatever. Clearly you’re not a psychopath and you’re good with kids, so in that regards, it’s working out.”

“Why Jill,” I say. “I do believe that’s the first compliment you’ve ever given me.”

“And probably the last.”

“So what else does it have to do with, then?”

“It’s just a bad time of year.”

“Summer is the best time of year.”

“Yeah, not when it’s the season that your parents were in a car accident that killed

your father and paralyzed your mother.”

“Oh.” Good one, asshole, I think. “I didn’t realize . . . I’m sorry.”

She stuffs her hands in the front pocket of her sweatshirt and starts walking fast again. “How were you supposed to know?”

“I wasn’t, I guess. I’m still sorry. When did it happen?”

“Almost a year ago.”

“Oh, wow. So it’s still pretty recent.”

“Yes.”

“It always seems like it’s the wrong people who end up dying. This probably sounds horrible, but I don’t think it will bother me too much when my old man finally kicks it. Which will probably happen never, because he’s one of those assholes who’s going to live forever.”

She glances at me. “That’s kind of a horrible thing to say. But I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t had those thoughts before myself.”

We walk quietly for a few minutes, and I think I am starting to understand why she’s been as hostile as she has. Though tragedy has not been a prevalent theme in my life, usually it seems like people seek routine, the familiar, to help them get through it. Her summer job here is routine; I am not.

“So you don’t get along with this lion-hunting father of yours?” she says, breaking the silence.

“That’s one way of putting it. And considering he was going to refuse to pay my ransom, I’d say the feeling is probably mutual.”

“You’re still going on about that.”

“It’s the truth. And I know—no one believes me. Well, I think my brother might. He express mailed me this phone the other day, so he could call me—since my other one got lost the night I was abducted—and he hasn’t called yet, but I think he’s going to.”

“So you were kidnapped but your brother wasn’t?”

“Yes. My brother is not the sort that would ever get kidnapped. He wouldn’t let himself get into that sort of situation. Whereas me, on the other hand, I’m always getting into those situations. It’s kind of amazing I hadn’t been kidnapped before.” I glance at her. There is no trace of a smile on her face. Usually all I have to do is even think of opening my mouth to say something and the girl is usually falling over herself, laughing at what I’m about to say. Which actually can be a little unnerving sometimes. “You and my brother would probably get along really well,” I say. Yes, she’s just the kind of girl Cam would go for, and he’s probably just the kind of guy she would be into. Griffin the Matchmaker. Happy to help.

“If your brother is even half as annoying as you are, I’d say not,” she says.

“Jesus, girl! Are you this prickly with all guys, or do I just bring it out in you?”

Finally, she gives me a wry smile. “Don’t say ‘prick’ in front of me.”

I laugh. “Okay, fair enough.”

We’re both quiet for a minute. She’s looking at me, and I wonder what she’s thinking about, but I don’t ask. It is actually nice to be standing here with her, not saying

anything.

She shakes her head and starts walking again. “Is your father famous or super rich or something?” she asks.

“He’s definitely rich, and in his mind he’s famous. He’s Mr. Big Man on Campus at Concord Frazier Group, who I’m sure you’ve never heard of, which perfectly illustrates how famous he really is.”

An odd look crosses her face. “What . . . where?”

“Concord Frazier Group. It’s basically a company that owns a bunch of other companies. Pretty boring shit. But to the old man, it’s the most important thing in the world.”

She stops walking and stares at me for a minute. I cannot, for the life of me, read the expression that has crossed her face. “I have to go,” she says. She turns and strides down the beach.

## Chapter 12: Jill

I hurry away, a strange feeling rooting itself firmly in the center of my chest. I can hear Uncle Nate’s voice clearly, echoing through my head: This all goes back to when Mike worked for CFG. Concord Frazier Group. Dad oversaw the management team that ran Organica, owned by the Concord Frazier Group.

My thoughts whirl around my head. Dad worked for Griffin’s father? It seems so implausible, so unlikely that this could be the case. What are the chances of his son washing up on the beach of the summer camp that I worked at?

It was no accident, Jill, mark my words. What kind of sign are you waiting for? What

the hell needs to happen to make you realize that there is something more going on here?

I can hear Uncle Nate's voice like he's right there, yelling in my ear.

Maybe it's nothing, I tell myself.

Maybe it really is just a coincidence.

But what if it's not?

I glance behind me a few times, to see if Griffin's following me. He isn't; he's moved further down the beach in the opposite direction. I walk back to my cabin and go inside, shut the door, both the screen door and the wooden one.

I go back and forth between believing that it's just an insane coincidence and that it's the sign Uncle Nate was talking about.

Suddenly, I recall something else Uncle Nate said that day at brunch.

I can't just sit back and not take action. It's not in my blood.

A cold feeling settles over me, even though I'm still in my sweatshirt with the hood pulled up and the cabin is actually rather warm.

Maybe Griffin really has been telling the truth all along.

## Chapter 13: Griffin

The problem with people like Allison is they're used to getting what they want. I should know.

So when she finds me Saturday morning and asks if I want to take a drive up to San Francisco with her, it's clear she's not so much asking as expecting.

"Shouldn't we stay here?" I don't actually feel like driving up to San Francisco.

"We could. But Mom and Dad are taking the campers down to Watsonville for the day."

"Watsonville?"

"Their friends own a raspberry farm. They're going to get a tour and work a little."

"Maybe we should go, too."

"Don't worry about it; Mom and Dad plus Jill and Karen can handle it. I already cleared it with them."

"With Jill?"

"She's not your boss. With Mom and Dad. They think it's a good idea."

I relent, mostly because after our beach walk the other night, I don't think Jill ever wants to see me again, though I'm not exactly sure what happened.

That's what I think about as we drive up to the city. I'm usually not one to replay events over in my head and try to figure out where I went wrong, but the entire scene has been running in my mind like a movie on repeat.

I'd thought we were actually on the path to making amends, with her opening up about her parents. Well, sort of opening up. It felt like if we were getting some place. Like maybe she was starting to not see me like the gigantic asshole she so clearly

thinks I am.

But then she just took off like that. What had I been talking about? My dad? Is my dad such a toxic person that even mentioning him in conversation causes people to retract? I mean, what the fuck?



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“We should go shopping for a little while and then there’s this great bar I want to take you to,” Allison says.

“What? Bar? It’s ten o’clock in the morning. And you’re sixteen.”

She gives me a coy look. “I have a fake I.D. And I wouldn’t expect someone like you to care what hour of the day it is when it comes to indulging.”

She is so smug and so self-assured that for a second, I want to reach over and slap her, but then I realize it’s just because she reminds me exactly of myself.

“I don’t have my I.D.,” I tell her.

She smirks. “Don’t worry; I know the doorman. He’ll let you in.”

“Whatever you want, sweetheart.”

“You want to be here, don’t you?”

“Sure I do.”

“Or would you rather be heading down to some fruit farm with Jill?”

“I never said that.” Though in a way, yes, I would.

“Not that I want to talk shit or anything, but Jill is one of those people who’s better with animals than people. I mean, that’s why my parents keep her on here, because

she's so good with the horses."

"She seems pretty good with the campers."

"She's okay. But she's a prude, too."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"She just doesn't know how to have fun. Why does she give you such a hard time? Why can't she just be cool about things, you know? Life is too short; it's silly to be that uptight."

"She is dealing with some pretty heavy shit right now, though."

Allison looks at me, eyebrow raised. "Has she been talking to you about that?"

"A little."

"That's surprising."

"Do you know anything about it?"

"All I know is her parents were in a car accident and her dad died and her mom's in a wheelchair for life. They drove their car off a bridge, onto Treasure Island. A huge clusterfuck."

"Sounds intense. Bad way to go."

"Don't worry about Jill. Let's talk about something else. This is boring." She reaches over and puts her hand on mine. I start to pull it back, but she tightens her grip. I look at her, but she's staring straight ahead, weaving her car in and out of traffic.

Suddenly, the phone in my pocket starts to ring, and I pull my hand from hers and answer.

“I was wondering if you’d call,” I say. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Allison watching me, one eyebrow raised slightly. Oh, it’d be so easy to fuck with her. “Are you wearing that underwear I sent you?”

She stiffens, and I stifle my laugh.

“Griffin!” Cam’s voice is loud enough that I’m sure Allison can hear it’s a guy and not, say, some girlfriend or something. “I’ve been trying to get in touch with you for the past three days! I didn’t just send you a phone for you to NOT answer it.”

“Huh?” I say. “I didn’t get any missed calls. I’ve had this thing on me the whole time. I didn’t think you’d actually call.”

“Well, I am, and I have been. Now that I’ve got you on the phone, though, I need you to tell me EVERYTHING that happened. I talked with Carl, and he wasn’t that helpful.”

“Is that so,” I say mildly. “Well, where do you want me to start?”

“From the beginning. Where were you, who were these men, what did they say? Did you go to the police yet?”

“No, I didn’t. Honestly, Cam, the guys are probably dead.”

Allison’s head swivels toward me.

“The last thing I remember was being at the Full Moon Party.”

“The what?”

“Full Moon Party. A rave, basically. Yes, I did some drugs. But just the usual amount, not enough to knock me out. So at some point, I’m guessing someone must’ve slipped me something, in my drink, or gave me something that wasn’t actually ecstasy, acid, K, or cocaine.”

“You did all those things?”

“Well, sure. Some pot, too. Oh, and a little GHB. That’s probably what got me. I don’t usually do that stuff.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Griffin? I mean, seriously, life is just one big rave for you, isn’t it?”

“Yes, the world is my dance floor. God is a DJ, didn’t you know?”

“Continue,” he says, his voice tight. “With the story, not your drug addiction.”

“So I was there, the music was bangin’, the vibe was tight, it was a good time. And then I don’t really remember anything until I wake up stuffed in some walk-in closet on someone’s yacht.”

“And then . . .?”

“And there were these two guys there—sorry, I didn’t catch their names—and they said that they’d been in touch with Dad and unless he paid 7.2 million—kind of a random number, huh?—and confessed to something, that they’d kill me. And then they said Dad wasn’t really taking them seriously and had me call him, and guess what—he didn’t take me seriously, either, and that’s when I called you.”

“So you have no idea who these guys were.”

“No. Never seen them before. And, like I said, will probably never see them again. Because a whale breached, hit the boat, the boat sank, and off I swam. Guess those years of swimming lessons finally paid off, huh?”

He’s quiet, though I can practically hear the cogs turning in his brain.

“What’s up, Cam? Do you know something about this?”

“No,” he snaps. “I don’t. But I find it highly disturbing that these men would follow you to Thailand and kidnap you and then try to extort our father. Don’t you?”

“Well, duh.”

“Yet instead of doing anything about it, you get yourself a job in California. What are you doing, anyway?”

“Working on a horse ranch.”

He snorts. “Seriously?”

“No, I’m actually a male prostitute. That seemed a more lucrative way to go.”

We talk for a little longer. Cam grills me, but after a few minutes it’s pretty clear that I don’t have any juicy tidbits that are going to help him figure out whatever it is he needs to figure out. I don’t actually believe him when he says he doesn’t know anything about it, because if he didn’t, why on earth would he suddenly be taking such an interest? There is a part of me that wants to believe maybe he really is just as highly disturbed as he claims to be that someone kidnapped his little bro. Yeah, sure, okay.

We get off the phone. Allison looks at me. “Who was that?” she says. “What the fuck were you talking about? Kidnapped? A boat?”

“It was nothing,” I tell her. “A story I made up. That was actually an ex-girlfriend. She wants to get back together. Wanted to. I just . . . I just had to make up a story so she’d back off.”

Allison smiles. “That’s so sweet you’d do that for me.”

I tuck the phone back into my pocket. “I guess I’m just that kind of guy.” For the rest of the ride, I’m left wondering what kind of guy my brother is.

## Chapter 14: Jill

The Raspberry Pilgrimage—as it became known—is an all-day affair that sends us down to Watsonville in the two Econoline buses with Sea Horse Ranch painted on the side. The couple who owns the raspberry farm is long-time friends of Bill and Lorrie’s, and the kids will get to spend the day helping out, not just with the raspberries but also the cows, chickens, sheep, goats, and beehives.

Griffin and Allison are noticeably absent from our adventure. While we drive south on the 1, they’re headed north, to San Francisco. And though this would probably shock him, I’m disappointed Griffin isn’t here.

When you find out something that is surprising or you’re not expecting to hear, your mind can do any number of things. It can go completely blank. That’s what happened when I found out about my parents’ accident. For a moment, I was incapable of registering a single thought. And then, when one thought finally was able to form, it was a single short word, on repeat: No.

But then, other times, your mind can go completely into overdrive, and that’s what

happened the other night with Griffin. I stayed up all night thinking about it. Wondering if this was the sign Uncle Nate was talking about. Wondering what I would do with this information that only I knew.

The best thing I could come up with is instead of ignoring him for the rest of the summer, I've decided to get to know him better. Uncle Nate is right; if Dad's death wasn't an accident, of course I want to get to the bottom of it, and this really does seem too coincidental to just ignore. I even thought of calling Uncle Nate and letting him know, but something stopped me.

No, the voice said. Do this on your own. Only go to him if you find something.

Though what I'm expecting to find, I'm not sure. From the very little I know about Griffin, it's clear he and his father don't exactly have a stellar relationship, so it's doubtful he even knows anything about it, but there's always the chance he knows something without even realizing it.

I'm preoccupied with those thoughts all day, watching absently as the kids pick berries and chase chickens and milk the goats. When we finally load everyone back onto the two buses, I'm glad, because I can sit and zone out and try to figure out exactly what my plan is.

We get back to the ranch and the sun is just setting. Bill gets a fire going and the kids sit around, toasting marshmallows and talking about their farm adventures.

"That goat cheese was actually pretty good," Brett says. "I thought it'd be kind of nasty, but it wasn't. I wouldn't mind going back down there."

Several of the kids nod in agreement. It's nice to see how they've settled into camp here, the new friendships that have been forged. I see Simon sitting next to Heather, and they're both laughing, and for a moment I forget all the other stuff and feel happy

for these kids, that they're having a good time here, regardless of whatever trouble they have in their lives back home.

When Bill breaks out his guitar and starts strumming, I slip away.

I walk down to the beach and let myself flop down in the sand. There isn't a cloud in the sky and I look up at the explosion of stars, toward the east, and pick out the Summer Triangle—Vega, Deneb, and Altair.

This will not be my life next year, I think. I'm not exactly sure where I'll be or what I'll be doing, but it sure as hell won't be this.

I catch movement out of the corner of my eye, in the northern part of the sky. A shooting star. If I'd caught it in time, I could've made a wish. But I didn't.

I let my eyes fall closed and the rhythmic sound of the waves pull me toward sleep. I stay like that for a while, in that limbo between sleep and awake when you could be dreaming or not. From somewhere down the beach, someone coughs. I open my eyes and turn my head, rivulets of sand sliding into the neck of my t-shirt.

For a moment I think it's Simon, walking down to the water, but this person's gait is too coordinated, too assured in an easy, almost gliding way. Then he lights a cigarette and sits down. I consider lying there until he leaves, or getting up and slipping away somewhere else, but instead, I stand and walk over.

"You shouldn't smoke," I tell him. I try to keep my tone light, though, friendly, like I'm making a joke and not reprimanding him.

He turns his head and exhales and I step to the side before the cloud envelopes me.

"Well, hi there," he says. "Was wondering where you ran off to."



“I thought you were staying in the city.”

“Just a day trip.”

“I see.”

I look down at the top of his head, his hair thick and tousled and black as ink.

“Sit,” he says. “Keep me company.”

“No thanks. I was just about to head back.”

“Please?” He looks up at me. “I wanted to tell you something.”

I hesitate. “Surely whatever you have to tell me you can say to me when I’m standing up.” Be friendly, I remind myself.

“Come on,” he says, patting the sand. “I won’t bite, I promise.”

“Fine,” I say. “For a minute. And you have to put that out, though.” I nod at the cigarette. “It smells awful.”

“Fair enough.” He takes one more drag and then submerges the cigarette into the sand. “Don’t worry—I’ll bring that with me when I go.”

“You better.” I dig my toes into the cool sand. “I’m not an uptight bitch, you know,” I say. “Yet for some reason, being around you makes me feel like one.”

“You just need to loosen up, is all.”

“Everything was going fine before you showed up.” I think of my mother, I think of the one-year anniversary of my dad’s death that is rapidly approaching. “Actually, it wasn’t fine, but that’s beside the point.”

He nudges me with his elbow. “You want to talk about it?”

I laugh. “With you? No.”

“I’m a good listener.”

“Sure you are.”

“Well, if you ever change your mind . . .”

I look out toward the water, the way the reflection of the moon shimmers on the tops of the waves. “Didn’t you have something you wanted to tell me?”

“Yes.” He waits until I look at him to begin talking. “I am madly in love with you and want to get married. And have children. We would have beautiful children.”

“Is it beyond your capacity to have a serious conversation?” I start to get up.

“Wait,” he says. “I’m sorry. Don’t go. There really is something I want to say, and it’s actually of a serious matter. Semi-serious, anyway.”

“If it’s not, I’m going to punch you.”

He grins. “How’d you know I like it rough?”

I sock him, lightly, on the shoulder. His arm is solid muscle and my hand probably hurts more than his shoulder does.

“What I wanted to say,” he continues, “is ‘thank you.’ For helping me out that first night. And going along with it when Allison was giving her dad that story. I could tell you were pissed.”

“Nothing I said would’ve made a bit of difference,” I say. “You made the decision, shacking up with the owners’ daughter. She gets what she wants, and they’re not going to let some employee tell them otherwise.”

Griffin laughs. “There’s no shacking up going on there, sweetheart, I promise.”

“Yeah, okay,” I say skeptically. “Griff.”

He holds his hands up. “Hey, I’m not saying she isn’t hot. But she’s what—sixteen? Seventeen? All set with the statutory rape charges, thank you very much.” “Well, you might want to let her in on that, because she certainly seems awfully enamored with you. And honestly? Knowing Allison, you’re probably not even close to being the oldest guy she’s been with.” Okay, so that was something of a cheap shot but whatever.

He grins. “Are you . . . jealous?”

I stand. “Please. Don’t think you’re the first good-looking rich boy I’ve ever met.”

“So you do have some experience, then.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Allison said you were kind of a prude.”

“Oh really?” Definitely don’t feel bad about that cheap shot now. “That’s funny, because Allison doesn’t actually know me. I was involved with a guy who was very much like you, if you want to know the truth, and we broke up because I couldn’t stand him. Because he’s arrogant. And an asshole. All things you’re proving to be as well.” I bite my lip. “I mean, you’re just—”

“Ouch. So . . . this ex-boyfriend of yours. He a big guy? Think I could take him?”

“I think I would love to see the two of you battle it out to the death. Really, I’m just trying to get through this summer.”

“Now I’m really curious. You should tell me what’s going on with you. I’m not lying when I say I’m a good listener.”

“Speaking of lying . . . I’ve been thinking about it. Any sane person would come clean by now if they weren’t being honest about the whole kidnapping thing. Right?”

“Probably.”

“And you’re still adamant that it happened.”

“Correct.”

I sit back down, facing him. “Look me in the eye and tell me that you’re not lying.”

He turns his face so he’s looking directly at me. It’s been probably a day since he’s shaved and his face is covered in dark stubble. His eyes, though, are a clear, bright

blue. His expression is serious.

“I would never lie to you.”

“So you really were kidnapped?”

“I was really kidnapped. Is there anything else you’d like to know?”

I look back toward the water and wrap my arms around my knees. “A lot,” I say. “But there’s plenty of time for that.”

He smiles, and for a minute I almost feel bad that he thinks I’m being nice because I actually like him.

On Sunday, I go visit Mom. I make us grilled cheese paninis with tomatoes and basil, which is one of her favorite lunches, and we sit at the kitchen table, the window open, a cool breeze blowing through.

She doesn’t eat much of her sandwich, though, and she winces every time she reaches forward to get her glass of water.

“Are you doing okay?” I ask.

“I’m fine,” she says, wincing again. “I’ve got this pain in my shoulder is all. And my back and my neck and my head . . .” She laughs a little and waves her hand. “It’s nothing, Jill.”

But she’s got a sad look on her face, and for a minute I want to tell her what I’m up to, that if Uncle Nate actually is right about their accident, then I am going to do everything I can to get to the bottom of it.

Instead, though, I get up and go to the counter where her array of various medications are kept. The painkillers, the antidepressants, the anti-seizure pills. I twist the cap off the bottle of the Vicodin and give her one.

“Here, take this.”

She does, like an obedient child, and I imagine that’s how she must feel and I hate that this is what her life is.

“Mom,” I say. “Let’s plan on doing something fun soon. Would you be up for that?”

She puts the pill in her mouth and washes it down with a sip of water. “What did you have in mind?”

“I don’t know. Something, though. It doesn’t have to be anything big, but I’d really like it if you were able to go out and just . . . I don’t know. Have a good time.”

“You’re a sweetheart. Yes, that sounds nice. Why don’t you think of something and let me know. Hopefully I’ll feel up for it.”

“Why don’t you think about a few things you might feel up for doing. You don’t have to tell me right now, but we can try to plan for it the next Sunday or something.”

She nods. “How are things going at the ranch? Lorrie called me the other day and we had a nice chat. How’s everything with that boy you weren’t getting along with?”

“Better.”

“That’s good. What’s his name?”

“Griffin. He’s actually . . . a little more interesting than I might have first thought.”

Mom smiles. “In what way?”

“Oh, you know . . .” I shrug. “There’s just some things about him that I didn’t realize at first, I guess.”

“That’s great, honey. I’m happy to hear that. I’m glad you guys were able to figure things out.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I say, even though, really, I haven’t got anything figured out yet.

## Chapter 15: Griffin

Some of the campers and I are playing a raucous game of disc golf when I see Jill walking over. She’s wearing her usual four-inch inseam cutoff jeans and work boots and a Sea Horse Ranch t-shirt that’s on the flimsy side, which is a good look for her.

“We’re going to be heading out for the hike pretty soon,” she says. “Why don’t you guys go get your packs and then head over to the lodge and Karen will give you your bag lunches.” She looks at me. “Are you joining us?”

I hadn’t planned on it, as Jill had always seemed intent on keeping our activities as separate as possible, but a hike would be fun, and if she’s offering, well . . .

“I’d be happy to,” I say. A few of the kids cheer and then hurry off to get their daypacks. “Where are we hiking?”

“We’re going to drive up to Pacifica and hike Sweeney Ridge.”

I grin. “And are you extending the invitation because you’re hoping to push me off the ridge once we make it to the top?”

She gives me a patient smile. “I hadn’t thought about it, but now that you bring it up . . .” Her gaze goes to the retreating backs of the campers as they head down the hill toward their cabins. “I would have full-on mutiny on my hands if I did that. Those kids sure do like you.”

I pull a pack of gum from my pocket and take a piece out, then offer one to her. She pauses but then takes it. “It’s because I carry this around with me,” I say, sliding the gum back into my pocket.

She unwraps her piece of gum and puts it in her mouth. “I could carry around all the gum in the world and they wouldn’t adore me half as much as they do you.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” Without really thinking about it, I sling my arm around her shoulders. She doesn’t pull away, though, or try to shrug me off. “I’ll teach you everything I know.”

## Chapter 16: Jill

Sweeney Ridge is the longest hike we take with the campers, and it’s one of my favorite places. If it’s a clear day, as it is today, some of the views you get of the Bay Area are absolutely stunning. Dad and I used to come here a lot, and as we pull into the parking area, it’s hard not to think about him and wish that he were here, too. But the kids are all excited, especially to see the abandoned Nike Missile Base covered in all its graffitied glory.

We take the Mori Ridge and Baquiano Loop, which is a seven-mile loop with about a 1400-foot elevation gain. It will be a challenge for some of the campers, but a lot of the trail is actually paved, and I’m hopeful they’ll all hang in there and be able to see the 360 degree view of the Bay.

Some of the campers have stayed behind to go canoeing with Lorrie, Allison, and



Karen, so I lead the small group and Griffin brings up the rear. Behind me, I can hear Simon and Heather talking, giggling. I glance over my shoulder and they're not quite holding hands, but they're close enough to.

We come to an area of unpaved trail where there is a line of flagstones that you can walk across like lily pads. Dad and I used to make a game of it—who could cross all the stones without falling off, or, as I got older and more coordinated, who could hop across the stones, or skip across them.

That's what I'm thinking about as I step on the first one, and then Simon starts to say something and I turn, right as I'm about to step onto another rock. I turn my head only slightly, just so my ear is a little closer, but it throws me off balance and I slip. There's the pain as my ankle twists awkwardly, which is quickly eclipsed by the feeling of the back of my head slamming into the rock I was just standing on.

I lie there for a moment, dust rising up around me. A few of the campers have gathered around and their faces take up my entire line of vision, which is slowly draining of color.

“Jill? Are you okay?”

I blink. The pain in my head is not enormous, but it's insistent and I know that trying to sit up—which I very much want to do—would not be a good idea. The colors continue to bleed away, until it looks like we've been transported back in time and are in a black and white movie.

“How odd,” I say, though my voice is barely a whisper.

“Go get help!” someone yells, and someone yells something back, and both their voices sound very far away. There is a sensation of falling, of dropping away, and suddenly, all I can see is a very narrow tunnel of sky. It would be easy enough to

resist, I think, but it also, in a strange way, feels good, so instead of fighting it, I give in to the sense of falling, I let go, curious to see where I'll land.

Nowhere, apparently, because it feels like only a second has passed when I reopen my eyes. Color has returned, though the colors seem harsh and a little too sharp. Griffin is there now too, leaning over me.

"I'm okay," I say, trying to brush his arm off of me. Sitting up now is painful but possible, but as I start to, he puts his hand on my shoulder and holds me down.

"You shouldn't get up yet," he says. "You just knocked yourself out. You might have a concussion."

"I'm fine," I tell him. "I don't have a concussion. How long was I out for?"

"A minute, maybe. A little less."

"I'm fine, then. Let me sit up."

He looks at me skeptically and for a second I think he's not going to let me, but then he does, rocking back on his heels.

"I didn't realize I'd turned so clumsy," I say. I glance around to see the worried looks on the campers' faces and I feel bad for scaring them. "Though this is a good lesson to always carry a First Aid kit with you," I tell them. I touch the back of my head where a small lump is starting to form.

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*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:57 am*

“Come on,” Griffin says, leaning down. He picks me up easily, as though I were nothing more than a small child. “Let’s get you back.”

“You can put me down,” I say. “I bumped my head, not broke my leg.”

“Just think of it as me repaying you for helping me out that first night.” He glances over his shoulder. “Hey, Brett, will you carry Jill’s pack?”

I let him take a few steps and then I twist myself from his arms, land on the ground slightly off-balance. I grab his arm to steady myself.

“Listen,” I say. “I appreciate you wanting to help me. But you carrying me back to the van because of a very minor—emphasis on minor—head injury, is just such a cliché.”

“Cliché?” He grins. “I was thinking more along the lines of romantic.”

“Ooooooh,” one of the campers says. A few of them giggle.

“It’s okay. I don’t need you to be romantic with me.”

He drops his head a little, so his mouth is right by my ear. “Why do you always have to play hard to get?” he asks softly. “Let me carry you back. I want to.”

“Well, I don’t.” The pain has settled into a steady thrum that matches my pulse. It is no worse than a low-grade headache. “Really, I’m fine.”

He takes my hand. “At least let me hold your hand then. We don’t want you losing your balance again.”

He entwines his fingers around mine, his grip gentle, nothing like the vice-lock that Sean used to use whenever he’d hold my hand.

“Okay,” I say finally. “You can hold my hand until we get back to the main trail, and then you’re letting go.”

He smiles. “You’re really something else.”

Though he probably doesn’t mean it as such, I decide to take it as a compliment.

After I reassure Bill and Lorrie half a dozen times that I’m fine and don’t need to take a trip to the E.R., I go lie down for a while. I try not to replay the scene over and over again, though it’s hard not to and I feel a little embarrassed but also proud of the kids for how well they handled it.

There’s a knock at the door, and then Karen steps in. “Brett told me what happened,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just going to take a little nap and then I’ll be good to go.”

“Do you need anything? Can I make you some tea?”

“That’s okay. Thank you, though.”

She turns toward the door but then stops. “Did Griffin really carry you all the way back?”

“He tried,” I say with a smile.

A dreamy look crosses her face. “I’d totally knock my head against a rock if it meant he would carry me back to camp. I can’t believe you didn’t let him.”

“Griffin is very amicable; I’m sure if you ask him he’d be happy to carry you around.”

She gives me a curious look, as though she’s trying to decipher whether I’m joking or not. I kind of am, although knowing Griffin, he’d probably be down for doing something like that.

“Well, let me know if you need anything.”

“I will, Karen. Thank you.”

She leaves and I let my eyes close. I don’t know if I actually fall asleep or not; it’s one of those in-between states where you could be awake or could be asleep, where you’re having dreams but still able to hear all the noises around you.

I don’t know how much time passes but then I hear another tap at the door. I pry open one eye.

“Come in,” I say.

It’s Griffin, and he comes over and sits at the edge of the bed. “Hey, sweetheart,” he says. “How are you doing?”

“I’m okay.” The headache has receded to a dull ache. “Karen was just in here checking on me a little while ago. Don’t be surprised if she asks you to carry her around at some point.”

He smiles. “I’m not even gonna ask. Just prepare yourself for a few more people to

come check in on you after me.” I give him a quizzical look and he touches my forehead. “Head injury, and all. You know, you want to take the proper precautions. No slipping into a coma and dying.”

“I doubt this is even a concussion. I’m actually going to get up in a few minutes.”

He tucks a few loose strands of hair behind my ear. “Eh, you don’t need to. We’ve got it covered. Karen and Allison took some of the kids swimming and the rest are out on a trail ride with Lorrie. It’s pretty quiet out there right now, actually.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“You kind of scared me for a minute back there, you know.”

“I was out for like half a second.”

“It was a little longer than that.”

I groan. “I don’t want to talk about it. It’s embarrassing. In front of all the campers.”

“Don’t be embarrassed. It could’ve happened to anyone.”

“I didn’t see you losing your footing and knocking yourself out.”

“Not this time, but . . . trust me, sweetheart, I’ve done some legitimately embarrassing things in my time, half of which I can’t even remember.”

“Well, thanks for helping. And for offering to carry me back.”

“I wish you would’ve let me.”

“And relinquish my last shred of dignity? I don’t think so.”

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with helping someone out. You helped me out, right? That’s what friends are for.”

“I didn’t realize you considered me a friend. I have been kind of awful to you.”

He smiles and pats my arm. His hand is warm, and my skin tingles slightly where he’s touching me.

“I won’t hold it against you,” he says. “Girls are usually pretty nice to me, so finding one who wasn’t was actually somewhat refreshing. Rest up, sweetheart. I’ll come back and check on you in a little while.”

I watch him leave. He pauses at the doorway and glances back and smiles, and I can’t help but return the gesture.

## Chapter 17: Griffin

There’s a large wall calendar hanging on the tack room door in the barn, and after I come back from putting the last two horses out to pasture, I stop and study the dates. It’s almost the end of June; I don’t know when camp is officially over, but at some point I’ll need to figure out what my next move is going to be.

It’s almost a little strange, the effect that being here has had on me. In a way, I feel like a different person. The old Griffin probably wouldn’t have even stayed here past the first few days, would’ve flown back to New York, regrouped, and headed off on another adventure. Maybe somewhere a little more relaxing than Thailand, say, the Shetland Islands or Ishigaki. But this new Griffin, he’s thinking of something different. As I stand there and stare at the white boxes and black numbers, I realize that I’d like to actually go out and work. Live a normal life. I don’t want to be the

international party boy anymore, living off my dad's dime. Though it isn't a lot, what Bill and Lorrie are paying me is the first money I have ever received in return for my efforts. And there is satisfaction in that, and a sense of accomplishment, even though if what I'm accomplishing doesn't amount to much more than hanging out with some kids and feeding horses hay.

"I didn't realize we had such a riveting wall calendar."

Jill comes up and stands next to me. She's got a few shavings stuck in her hair, and I reach over and pick them out. I'm not sure what did it, but things with Jill have definitely been going better. Better than better, even. Maybe knocking herself out on the hike actually did her some good.

I look back at the calendar. "Yeah, the squares are so symmetrical. I've never seen a calendar with such symmetrical squares. I'm actually just trying to figure out what my plan is going to be once things wrap up here. That's in what, August?"

"Yeah. Kind of hard to believe it's almost July."

"July is one of my favorite months."

"Is it?"

"It is. Good things always seem to happen for me in July."

"My birthday's in July."

"Well, there's even more reason, then. When?"

"July second. Though the older I get, the less I look forward to it."



“Why? Birthdays are always fun; it doesn’t matter how old you are. And you, sweetheart, are not that old.”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I guess good things have never really happened for me on my birthday. Or in the whole month of July, for that matter.”

“Well, why don’t you let me take you out?”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t have to; I want to. I will even write the date down so I don’t forget it.” I rip a corner from the calendar and use the pen that’s hanging from a piece of twine. Take Jill out. Friday, 7/2. Something about the date seems familiar, though probably it’s the birthday of some other girl I once knew. I show her what I’ve written and then fold the paper and tuck it into the pocket of my jeans. “So.” I look up. “Where should we go? Or would you prefer I plan the whole thing?”

“Well, I hate to disappoint you,” she says, “but I’ve already got birthday plans. I’m going to do dinner at my mom’s house, and maybe watch a movie, and then come back here and go to sleep.”

“Dinner and movie with Mom sounds nice; the rest sounds terribly boring. Maybe you hate your birthday so much because you haven’t done anything fun.”

“That’s an excellent theory, but unfortunately I’m not going to change my plans. Why don’t you tell me about your plans.”

“What? For your birthday?”

“No, for what you’re going to do after camp.”

“Oh. Well, I haven’t gotten that far yet. I have no idea, really. But you want to know something, Jill? Just being here at the ranch, and getting to do all the things I’ve been doing—this might sound kind of silly, so don’t laugh—but it’s like it’s opened my eyes to other possibilities, other things I could be doing with my life than just being some rich man’s son. ‘Cause that’s great and everything for a while, but I want to do something different. I want to work. Doing what, I don’t know, but I just don’t want to waste any more time being a waste, spending someone else’s money. It’s actually a very, very nice feeling to earn your own money.”

She smiles. “It is, isn’t it? My uncle is pretty well off, and he’s been helping pay for my mother’s medical expenses, and I think he’d probably be willing to just pay for everything, if we let him, but I just couldn’t be okay with him doing that. Not that I don’t appreciate what he’s done, but I’ve never wanted to take money that I didn’t earn. Something my dad taught me, actually. He had a really great work ethic.”

“What is it with the rich relatives always trying to foot the bill?”

She doesn’t smile when I say this, even though I was trying to make a joke. Not so funny, I guess. But I watch her for a second and her lips turn up at the corners in a tiny smile.

“Fuck the rich relatives,” she says.

I laugh. “Couldn’t have said it better myself.”

Though Jill isn’t letting me take her out on the actual date of her birthday, I think I can probably get her to agree to go out the next night. I’m not exactly sure what’s caused her sudden change in feelings toward me, but it’s nice, and I’m not going to question it. And I find myself thinking about the fun things we might be able to do, and no, I’m not just talking about getting her into bed. Which is odd, I’d be the first to admit it. Any girl I’ve ever taken interest in before has mainly been because of her

carnal potential. Maybe it's because Jill spurned me at first, or maybe there really is something different about her, I don't know, but I sure would like to find out.

Then there is the small problem of Allison. In the past I could've just bounced—gone somewhere else, disappeared, as there are few things worth sticking around for if you've got a lovesick girl hounding your ass—but now, it seems, I have found something that is worth it. A few things, and one of those being Jill.

Cam calls me again one night when I'm lying in bed.

“Are you calling to check up on me?” I ask. “Christ, what time is it?”

“Have you noticed anything strange? I'm worried that you might still be in danger.”

Now this is interesting. If there's one thing my brother doesn't do, it's worry, and certainly not about me.

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“Everything is fine,” I say. “I fit right in here. Who would’ve thought, right?”

“I’ve actually got some business meetings in San Francisco coming up,” he says. “I was thinking of leaving a day or two ahead of schedule and coming down there.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Would you be available?”

“What, for like a lunch date or something?”

“Sure, Griffin, I’ll take you out to lunch.”

“Well, I’ve got a job now, so maybe I should take you out to lunch.”

Still, he doesn’t laugh. If anything, his voice is tight and he sounds tired.

“It might be better to talk in person,” he says finally.

“I met this girl,” I say. “Her name’s Jill. She works here, too. She actually helped me the night I washed up on the beach. Romantic, right?”

“Sounds absolutely Hallmark.”

“Looking back on it, it kind of was. Or maybe more Lifetime movie or something. But she’s great. You could meet her if you came out here. And the funny thing is, she didn’t like me at first—like, at all—but then, I don’t know. Something changed.

Something happened. And . . . I know how corny this sounds, but she's really like no girl I've ever met."

"I think I'm about to vomit."

"I know, I know how it sounds! It's hard to explain. I mean, I've met a lot of girls, and they're all great and everything, but . . . there's just something about her."

"Listen, Griffin, I'm ecstatic that you've discovered true love, but that's not why I'm calling. And watch yourself with women, especially the ones that you think you might actually have genuine feelings for. Mostly, that just leads to trouble and more trouble. Anyway, I'm going to try to get a little sleep, so I'll let you know about my travel plans, okay? It'll just be easier to discuss this in person."

"Sounds good," I say. "I'll make sure my calendar's clear."

We hang up, and the sleep I was so close to falling into before he called is suddenly miles away. It's funny, I think. Cam thinks that I know something, but it's pretty obvious he's the one that's got all the info. Maybe he just doesn't realize it yet.

## Chapter 18: Jill

Birthdays had always been Dad's thing. He loved any reason to celebrate, but especially birthdays.

"Your birthday in particular," he'd always say to me.

But Dad was good at making everyone feel special, and though he never saw the need to spend much money on a party, lots of people were always invited, he'd dedicate the whole day to making all sorts of good food, and the festivities would go well into the night, with everyone reluctant to leave because they were having such a good

time.

I've been so caught up in other things that it doesn't occur to me that this is my first birthday without Dad until I wake up in the morning and realize I'm not going to hear him say happy birthday and give me a hug.

We have an afternoon cookout, and some of the campers have made a cake for me, which is cute. Karen gives me a haphazardly wrapped gift of bubble bath, and Simon gives me a bouquet of flowers he picked himself. I catch Griffin's eye across the picnic table and he winks.

I drive up to Mom's some time in the later afternoon. "Here's the birthday girl!" Sharon says when I come through the door. She gives me a hug, and as she does so, she whispers in my ear, "Your mom's having a bit of a rough day today. She was up waiting for you, but she decided she wanted to go back to bed."

I nod. "Okay," I say. "I'll just go in there and see her."

"Oh, and a young man stopped by earlier, also." Sharon turns and goes to the counter. There's another orchid, this one a lurid magenta, like someone had colored it in with a marker. "He was very sweet, and he was asking when you'd be by. Sean, I think he said his name was?"

I grit my teeth but try not to let my annoyance show. "How long was he here for?"

"He visited with your mom for a little bit. It actually seemed to brighten her spirits quite a bit."

"Great." I sigh and look back at the plant. "Want an orchid?"

Sharon looks at me uncertainly. "Oh . . . should I have not let him in? Your mother

was so happy to see him, I just . . . I didn't even . . .”

“It's okay,” I tell her. “You couldn't have known.”

I say goodbye to Sharon and go sit in the wingback chair. “I see Sean was here,” I say.

“He remembered your birthday.” Mom has dark circles under her eyes, her skin seems thin, papery. Any happiness she was feeling earlier has clearly vanished without a trace. “Uncle Nate sent a card. It's over there on the coffee table.” She sighs. “It was nice to see Sean. I told him he was welcome to stop by after we got back from dinner. Except I don't think I'm going to be able to go out, sweetie. I just don't think I have it in me. I'm so sorry.”

“It's okay, Mom.” Though actually it isn't; the fact that she told Sean to stop by later makes my skin crawl, but I don't say anything. “We can stay in. I'll make you something. Do you feel like eating?”

“No, not really. And you shouldn't have to make yourself something on your own birthday. Why don't we order takeout. Maybe from that Thai place you like. Or whatever you want.”

So we order Thai food and watch a movie. And while I sit there with a plate of spring rolls and pad thai balanced on my lap, I try not to think about what sorts of things we might be doing if Dad were still alive, I try not to think about how much better everything would be, in every possible way, if he hadn't died.

Mom has a few bites of spring roll and watches maybe half an hour of the movie before she falls asleep. I finish eating, then I go over to the coffee table and open the card from Uncle Nate. It's a generic Hallmark card, which he's signed his name to. A folded piece of paper flutters to the ground—more money—and I don't bend down to

retrieve it.

I do the dishes and fold up the take-out containers. Sharon is sitting at the kitchen table, working on a crossword puzzle.

“Are you hungry?” I ask. “There’s plenty of food leftover. I’m sorry; I should have asked you when we ordered.”

“Oh, I already ate,” she says. “And I was trying to make myself scarce, at least for the time being. It’s so good for her when you’re around.”

It’s still early, so I go and sit back in the chair and finish watching the movie. Sharon comes in and wakes Mom up and has her take about half a dozen pills. After she’s done washing them down with water, she looks at me, as though she’s surprised to see me still sitting there.

“Is it still your birthday?” she asks.

I nod. “Still my birthday.”

A sad look crosses her face, and I realize she’s just as eager for this day to be over with as I am. The movie credits are scrolling up the screen and I watch them for a minute, before I realize she’s crying.

“Mom,” I say. I reach over and take her hand, which feels limp and fragile, like toothpicks in a silk sack. “Don’t cry, Mom. It’s okay. I know today is hard. It’s hard for me, too.”

“I hate to hear you say that. I hate that this is how we have to feel now. I don’t want to feel this way, but it doesn’t seem to matter what I do. The only time I feel better is when I get my medication, and that’s because I don’t really feel anything at all.” Her



fingers twitch, and then her grip tightens, momentarily, on my hand. “Please see Sean when he comes by later.”

I resist the urge to pull my arm back. “Why?”

“At least just talk to him for a few minutes. Could you do that for me?”

“I don’t understand what difference it makes to you.”

“I want to know that things are going to be okay for you,” Mom says. She blinks and wipes at her eyes. “I just don’t know how long I’m going to be around for—”

“Oh, Mom,” I say. “Please don’t talk like that.”

She sighs and rests her head against the pillow. “I never used to understand the people who thought life was such a hassle to live. People that never seemed happy, no matter what happened to them. But I get that, now. I’m in pain every day. Even the simplest task is either impossible or near-impossible to do on my own. Do you know how hard that is? I just want to be realistic about things.”

I press my lips together and take a deep breath. “Mom. I’m not saying I think what you’re going through is easy. I know it’s not. But . . . but that doesn’t mean you won’t be able to enjoy things, too. It doesn’t mean you’re not going to have good times.”

“I’m in pain all the time. I’m on eight different medications that make me feel like I’m underwater or wrapped up in gauze. Like there’s this constant fog in my brain. Is that any way to live?” She wipes at her eyes again and then forces a smile. “I’m sorry, Jilly. I didn’t mean to get into all that. Some days are harder than others.”

I swallow the ache in my throat. “I wish I could make it better for you.”

“You are. Just knowing that you’re out there, working toward what you want. It makes me happy to think of you out there, going to school, working with the campers, hanging out with your friends. Your father’s gone. I’m practically gone. Sean cares about you. He remembered your birthday! I don’t want to think about you being out there all alone. Not that I don’t think you can’t be happy on your own, of course, but everyone should have someone. Someone to come home to.”

“There’s plenty of time for me to meet someone,” I say. “Sean and I . . . we gave it a good go. But I don’t think he’s the right guy for me. Don’t you think it’s more important that I wait and find the right guy?”

“Yes. But sometimes I wonder if you’ve set your standards too high.”

“Is there such a thing?”

“There is, Jilly. You know that. You can be hard on people sometimes. And am I saying that I just want you to be with any old person? No, of course not. But I remember how happy you and Sean used to be together. It reminded me of the way things were between your father and I.”

I do my best not to groan. “Mom, my relationship with Sean was nothing like what you and Dad had. I’m kind of too busy for that now, anyway. Once camp is over I’ve got to get back to school and actually graduate. And eventually, maybe, I’ll meet someone.”

“I know you will. And you’re right—there’s no rush. I’ve just been missing Dad. It’s hard to believe that it’s been almost a year since we last saw him, isn’t it?”

I nod.

“I keep thinking about that last weekend we spent together. It’s really like my last

clear memory I have from before the accident. When he took me on the helicopter ride in Napa?" She laughs. "I'd always wanted to do one of those helicopter tours, and I never thought it would happen because your father was so afraid of heights."

I laugh too, thinking about the way Dad used to psych himself up before ascending the ladder to clean the gutters out every fall, before he finally hired our next-door neighbor's son to do it.

"But your father knew how much I wanted to go, and even though he kept his eyes squeezed shut half the time, by the end, I think he had a pretty good time. I know I did." Her smile fades a little. "It really was beautiful. I'd love to relive that day, over and over again."

I swallow. "I wish you could, Mom."

He's just as handsome as I remember him, slightly more filled out. He's tanned, and he looks genuinely happy to see me, so when he asks if I will just give him five minutes and hear him out, I agree.

"God," he says. "Look at you." He glances over his shoulder toward the kitchen, where Sharon is still sitting at the table. "Could we talk somewhere a little more . . . private?"

"Like where?"

"Your bedroom?"

"Is that really necessary?"

He pauses as though actually giving consideration to the question. "No, but I would appreciate it if we could talk privately for a few minutes."

If he had said yes, it was necessary, I probably would've walked out the door right then, but I relent and we walk upstairs.

We stand there for a moment, not saying anything.

“So what did you have to tell me that you couldn't say down there?”

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He's wearing a Ralph Lauren polo with wide stripes and khaki shorts. It's odd to stand here and look at him and know exactly what his body looks like under those clothes, and to know that he knows exactly what my body looks like under my clothes.

"Let me take you out to dinner." He smiles, and the smile lines around his mouth are deeper than I remember.

"I can't, Sean. I'm heading back soon. I can't be out too late. I appreciate you stopping by, though, and the flower, of course."

"I know orchids are your favorite."

Actually, they're not, but I don't saying anything.

"It's more than nice to see you. Come on, let me take you out. It's your birthday. It's still early. There's plenty of time."

"Sean, I appreciate the offer, I really do. But I don't think it's a good idea. I'm not at the point in my life right now where I want to be involved with anyone."

"Jill," he says. "I have thought about you every day since we've been apart."

"We've been broken up almost a year. There is no way I believe you've thought about me every day for almost a year."

"Well, I have. I don't see why you wouldn't believe something like that. I've missed

you. And I know you've missed me, too." He brushes my hair back from my face. He leans closer. "I want you, Jill. I want us to get back together. That's the way it's supposed to be. I understand why you thought you needed to break up with me; you've been through a lot. It's been a hard year for you. But us not being together has only shown me that we are supposed to be together." His mouth is right there next to my ear. His fingertips trace the curve of my jawbone.

"You are the most beautiful girl I've ever seen." He kisses my throat, and his hand moves down the other side of my neck, over my collarbone, under my shirt, onto my breast. I pull back.

"Sean—stop."

"Jill." He exhales roughly and pulls me back to him. "It's your birthday. Let me make you feel good on your birthday."

"This is not why I agreed to come talk to you in my bedroom. I thought you had something important you wanted to tell me."

"I do. My body has an important message to communicate with yours. No words required, though."

"Jesus Christ, Sean, stop. I have to get back to the ranch. I've had a long day."

"I know, I can tell. I can always tell when you're stressed out. So just think how good you'll feel if you let me—"

"For Christ's sake, Sean, no. Get off of me."

I push him off and start to stand, but he yanks on my arm.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I stare at him. “Excuse me?”

“I want you, Jill. You. Do you know I could walk out there and have literally any girl of my choosing? But I want you.”

I jerk my arm from his grasp. “The only reason you want me is because I broke up with you, and you can’t stand not being in absolute control of everything all the time. And if you’re so certain you can go have whichever girl you want—go! Go out there and do that. Just leave me alone.”

A grin spreads across his face. “God, do you know how sexy you are when you get heated?” He grabs my arm again and tries to pull me onto his lap.

“Let go!”

It happens so fast I’m not exactly sure what’s going on, except suddenly I’m on the bed and he is on top of me, clawing at my shirt.

“Don’t tell me you don’t want this.” His voice is a growl in my ear, his weight crushing, pressing me down into the mattress.

I stop struggling. So this is how I’m going to spend the first birthday without Dad. This is how it’s going to go down. Sean’s hands roam the length of my body and he kisses my forehead, bites my earlobe, starts to give me a hickey on my neck. He shifts to one side, moving off of my right leg. I judge the distance and try to position myself accordingly, then I jerk my leg up, my knee smashing into his balls. He screams, maybe it’s fuck or cunt, I can’t really tell, and I push him off. I stand for a moment and watch him writhing on the floor.

“Thank you, Sean,” I say, straightening my shirt. “Getting to knee you in the balls was actually the best birthday present I could have asked for. I’m going downstairs. You have two minutes to get the fuck out of this house—and don’t even think of going in there and talking to my mom—before I call the cops and have them throw your ass in jail. Thank you for making this birthday all the more memorable.”

I speed down the 1, and consider, briefly, how easy it would be just to yank the wheel to the right and go sailing off the cliff, into oblivion. Not that I would ever do that, but it’s astonishing how easy it would be. And I also realize how easy it would be to make it look like an accident even if it wasn’t.

It’s still light out when I get back to the ranch, and I can’t bear the thought of going in and being in my tiny little cabin. It’s movie night, so the campers are all in the main lodge, so I take my shoes off and walk down to the beach, sit in the sand, and start to cry.

Sometimes it really does feel good to cry, especially when you’re alone and the sound of the waves crashing pretty much drowns out any other sound. I lift my head up from my knees and that’s when I see through blurred vision that I am not, in fact, the only person on the beach.

I stand and turn away, but it’s too late, he’s walking toward me, hurrying toward me, in fact, so quickly that I can’t even wipe the tears and snot from my face before he’s there.

“Jesus,” he says. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Except I’m not, because I can’t stop crying and my voice is shaky and my breath catches in my throat and I feel like I’m about to hyperventilate. And I’m so mortified that Griffin is here witnessing this that when he puts his arms around me and pulls me into him, I don’t resist. No, I just stand there and sob and I feel one of



his hands go to the back of my head and he strokes my hair and says, Shhh in my ear, which sounds just like the ocean. I don't know how long we stand like that, but it's long enough for my tears to have totally soaked the front of his shirt. Finally, I can draw in a raggedy breath.

"I'm sorry," I say, lifting my head. I twist away and he lets go.

"Turning twenty-three really isn't all that bad," he says.

I smile, despite myself. My hair is sticking to my face and I brush it back, trying not to envision how grotesque I probably look. "That's not what I'm upset about."

"I know it's not. But still, you're not supposed to be sad on your birthday. Come on; let's take a little walk."

He holds his hand out and gives me a half smile. It would be easy enough to just turn away, to say I was tired or wanted to be alone, but I reach out and take his hand and let him lead me down toward the beach.

We walk a little ways without saying anything. His fingers are intertwined in mine and he moves his thumb in a circular motion over my wrist bone. He's humming a song, something that sounds familiar but I can't quite place. I tilt my head a little closer to try to hear it better.

"You ever come down here before?" he asks as we approach the jetty that marks the end of Fulton Beach. He hops up onto one of the rocks and then holds his hand out to help me up.

"I've been here a few times," I say, hoisting myself up. The jetty stretches thirty or forty feet into the water and gets almost completely engulfed at high tide. It is that time of year when the sun will set exactly in line with the rocks, so for that moment

before it dips below the horizon, if you stand at the beginning of the jetty it looks like the sun and the rocks are connected.

But he walks out, toward the end, where the waves crash against the lower part of the rocks, surf spraying in the air. He sits on the largest rock and pats the spot next to him. Straight ahead, the sky is a brilliant palette of orange, red, and pink. I take a deep breath and watch as the sun continues its plunge toward the horizon.

“Everyone should get to see the sun rise or set on their birthday,” he says. He looks at me and smiles. “Happy birthday.”

In the short time since we’ve been sitting, it’s already gotten darker, though the sun hasn’t completely disappeared yet. The light is gorgeous, soft, and bending, the kind that could make anyone look beautiful. Griffin doesn’t need any help in that area, but still, the effect is stunning. The light throws shadows across his face, accentuating the square cut of his jaw, the elegant, gentle slope of his nose.

“So what’s the matter, sweetheart,” he says. “It kills me to see you looking like this.”

I shoot him a look. “God, you are so full of shit.” But I smile as I say this, and already I’m starting to feel a little better.

“I’m trying to be less full of shit, though. I really am. And regardless of how full of shit I happen to be, I am an excellent listener.”

“So you’ve said.”

“So I have. Try me. And if I suck, then you can punch me in the face and never have to speak to me again.”

“You’d let me mess with your pretty face?”

He grins. “Ah ha! I knew you thought I was hot.”

“I said pretty. And there’s a difference.”

“You’re pretty. Seriously, though. Level with me.”

I look out at the waves rolling up the beach, the white crests tinged pink with the setting sun. “Her life has completely changed. And I can tell that she tries really hard to put on this strong front and pretend that she’s not in pain all the time or that it doesn’t bother her she can’t remember anything, but the fact is, she’s got to have round-the-clock care. And she will for the rest of her life. I just hate seeing her like that, and I hate that there’s nothing I can do to change it.”

“I’m really sorry, Jill. That fucking sucks.”

“Yeah, it does. So that’s what I was kind of losing my shit over. I just don’t know what to do. Because I don’t think there’s anything that I can do. It was just so sad, right before I left we were sitting there talking and she started telling me how she kept thinking about the last time she and my dad went out somewhere together, how he’d taken her on this helicopter ride—which is actually pretty funny because he’s so afraid of heights—and how she wished she could do that again. And the one-year anniversary is coming up in a few weeks. And I know that’s got to be hard for her. She and my dad were really one of those couples that were still in love, that still really liked to go out and do things and be together.”

“I wouldn’t know anything about that,” Griffin says. “My parents are like roommates that fight all the time. Or that’s how it used to be, anyway. Now they just stay as far away from each other as possible, which usually means my mom stays at the penthouse in New York and my dad travels around doing whatever the fuck he wants.”

“Traveling around doing whatever the fuck you want . . . kind of sounds like what you were doing before you were . . . kidnapped.” I smile.

“Hey. I really was kidnapped. I don’t know why you won’t believe me.”

“Because any normal person who is kidnapped would call the police. Or would do . . . something.”

“Something?”

“Yes, something! I don’t know exactly what—I’ve never been kidnapped before. Why would someone kidnap you, anyway? To get to your father?”

“That was their plan, I think. But it just shows how they know absolutely nothing about my father. Probably to him, they were doing him a favor. Poor bastards.”

“But what do you think they wanted?”

“Money. He’s got plenty of it. And a confession, too, I guess.”

“What kind of confession?” I try to keep my voice light.

Griffin shrugs. “Who knows. I’m sure there’s plenty of shit my dad could cop to, but never will.”

“Like what?”

He waves his hand like he’s shooing a fly away and looks out at the water. “I’m sure my dad’s pissed off plenty of people in his lifetime. Just like I’m sure my dad’s been pissed off at many people—myself included. He can be kind of ruthless when it comes to that sort of stuff. One track mind, if you know what I mean.”

I try to sound nonchalant. “I don’t.”

“It’s all about the money. You know, the whole money equals power equals you must have a giant dick equals you are therefore superior to everyone else and can go around doing whatever the fuck you want.”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:57 am*

“But . . . isn’t that what you do?”

“It was. Like I told you though, sweetheart, this whole experience has kind of given me a second chance at things. Listen, I’m going to tell you something and I don’t want you to laugh at me.”

I look out at the horizon. There is a tiny slice of sun left.

“What would ever give you the idea I’d do something like that.”

“I just . . . I kind of came to this realization the other night. I’m glad the whole kidnapping thing happened.”

“Alleged.”

He nudges me with his elbow. “Alleged, yeah, yeah. Okay. If this alleged kidnapping didn’t happen, I’d still be in Thailand—or no, I probably would’ve gone back to Europe and been over in Ibiza or some shit—still partying my ass off, getting laid, that sort of thing. Staying up all night and being strung out the next day. Getting to see the sunrise only because I hadn’t gone to sleep the night before. But instead, I get to be here. Where I’m actually doing something. These kids? They’re pretty cool. They’re fun, they’re into this shit. You know, and it’s cool to be outside, to just kind of be in nature, and not be on anything and thinking that the trees are having a conversation with you.”

The last sliver of sun disappears. “You talk to trees?”

“I might’ve mixed some K with some molly and some really dank bud and thought I was conversing with a tree before, yes.”

I shake my head. “I can’t even imagine the life you live.”

“But that’s the thing—I don’t want to live like that. I mean, I’m not saying I want to go live the life of a monk or something, but I really like being here. I like what I’m doing here.”

“You want my job next summer? There will be a position available.”

“Where are you gonna be?”

I hug my legs and let my chin rest on my knees. “I don’t know. Somewhere else. I’m going to graduate next year.”

“That’s cool. What are you studying?”

“Sociology.”

“You like it?”

“Yes. But at the same time, I’ll be glad to graduate and move on. I’m ready for that.”

“I enrolled in a few semesters of college. I was in the middle of pledging the fraternity but then I dropped out and actually went to Greece instead, which, honestly, was way better.”

“Want to know something? I’ve never even been out of California.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Well, California is a big state . . .”

“It’s okay. It’s pathetic. So it’s hard for me to imagine what it’s like to be so well-traveled. Never mind Greece or Thailand, I’d just love to visit the other side of this country.”

“The East Coast?” He shrugs. “You’re not missing much. But I’ll probably be heading back there at some point, to see my mom. She gets a little frantic if I don’t come spend a weekend with her at the house in the Hamptons every August. Maybe you should come with.”

“Well, I don’t know about that . . .” I say. “Maybe.” I wonder that if I went back to New York with him, if there’d be the chance to find something out. Something that might make a difference. What are the chances? “Maybe a little trip wouldn’t be so bad.”

“I’m really not a bad guy, you know.”

I think of Sean, the feel of his crushing weight, his certainty that he’s always right, no matter what. “I know,” I tell Griffin.

I let him walk me back to my cabin, long after the sun has set. He doesn’t try to kiss me, but instead gives me a hug and whispers, “Happy birthday.” He smiles and touches his index finger to the tip of my nose, then heads toward his own cabin.

Only after he’s disappeared from view do I realize that I really wouldn’t have minded if he had tried to kiss me.

Chapter 19: Griffin



It's true; I almost kissed Jill on her birthday. But I didn't, for some reason, which is strange, because it means I was exercising restraint, which is not generally a quality I would associate with myself. Some of the campers and I are helping Bill hack up one of the live oak trees that isn't so alive anymore, and I try to pinpoint exactly why I didn't kiss her. I certainly wanted to. And I don't think it'd be overreaching on my part to say that she probably would've been open to it, since she's had that change of heart.

But then she started asking about my dad, which for me is about the biggest boner killer in existence. And I'd been feeling pretty good about having this second chance at my life, at maybe doing something right, but when the topic of dear old Dad came up, it got me wondering whether or not this "new life" I was going to try to forge for myself was actual just a pathetic delusion of grandeur. A favorite phrase of Dad's, actually. I mean, maybe I was no different than he was. Hadn't I spent the last seven or eight years traveling around, basically doing whatever the fuck I wanted? I don't care about money as much as Dad, but maybe that's just because it's always been there. It's never been something I've had to be concerned about or worry about where it was going to come from.

I turn the saw off and walk over to Bill, who's showing some of the campers how to properly buck a log. It's so easy to see he's completely in his element; in fact, Bill is one of those guys who seems like he's always in his element, regardless of where he is. Unlike, say, my dad, who can only feel that way if he's surrounded by all the luxury he's become accustomed to, and about half a dozen ass-kissers, to assure him he really is top dog.

But it's Bill I want to be like, I realize, as I stand there. Bill, in his worn-out jeans, faded Sea Horse Ranch shirt, and black Stetson. He just seems so content in his element. He sees me looking at him and gives me a smile, then lets the kids go at the log themselves. He walks over.

“Griffin,” he says. “How’s it going?”

“Good,” I say.

“You’re pretty good with that thing.” He nods at the saw.

“Thanks. I’ve had some practice.” I glance over at the campers, wrangling with the log. “Hey, Bill, could I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Did you always know you wanted to do this?”

“The ranch? I suppose I did. My great-grandfather built the place, and I just never had the desire to leave. You know how some people get bit by the traveling bug and just can’t seem to stay in one place for long?”

I smile. “Sounds familiar.”

“Oh, I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with that, but I just always felt like this place where I grew up was the place that I was meant to be. Some people think that sort of thing sounds awfully boring, or like I missed out on a lot in life, but really, I wouldn’t have done it any other way.” His gaze too, goes over to the campers. “I mean, look at them. They’re all having a great time out here—they always do. I get to share this piece of my life with them for a few weeks every summer, and I couldn’t ask for more than that. I guess if I’d been born in a city, or had parents who didn’t care much for the outdoors, it might’ve taken me longer to find this, but one way or another, I would have.”

“Well, I really appreciate you letting me stay on here, Bill. I’m having a blast. I kind of feel like this is what I’ve been looking for all this time, even though I didn’t know

I was looking for something to begin with.”

“A lot of the time that’s how it goes: What you’re looking for finds you before you even knew you needed it. Or wanted it. I’ll tell you though, Griffin, you’ve got a good way about you. With the kids, especially. And there are a lot of great opportunities out there for someone like yourself.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, of course. I could put you in touch with a few people, if you’re interested. My pal John runs a teen rehab center up in Marin, and he’s always asking me to send qualified people his way. I’ll give you his number later. You should give him a call.”

I nod. “That would be great.” Maybe once all this over, I’ll just stay in California. The idea doesn’t sound half bad. “Oh yeah, there’s one other thing I wanted to ask you,” I tell him. He looks at me. “How are things looking for Sunday? I was thinking I might take Jill out after she’s done visiting her mom. You know, since it was just her birthday and all.”

“Absolutely,” Bill says, without hesitation. “We’ve got it covered. Jill deserves to go out for a good time, anyway. She works hard. You two go have fun.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I think we will.”

## Chapter 20: Jill

On Saturday night, Griffin finds me as I’m coming back from the barn. He lopes over and slings an arm across my shoulders. “Sweetheart,” he says. “What do you have planned for tomorrow night?”

“Just going to visit my mom. Head back here. Why, what’s up?”

“How would you feel about me accompanying you up to the city? I can give you and your mom some time to visit, if you want and then I thought I could take you out.”

I glance at him. “You’re really not going to let this go—taking me out for my birthday, are you?”

“We can pretend it’s for something else.”

I think about this for a minute. “Okay,” I say. “We can do that. I’ll probably be leaving here around two, two-thirty. And you can come meet my mom, if you’d like. I’m sure she’d be thrilled to meet you.”

He grins. “Ah, so you’ve told her about me? Only good things, I’m sure.”

“She’ll be glad to meet you. She keeps wanting me to get back together with my ex, which is never going to happen, and I think she envisions my life being completely devoid of companionship or something.”

He pulls me a little closer and turns his head so his mouth is right by my ear. “I will gladly be your companion.”

We get to my cabin and stand there for a moment, his arm still around me. For a fleeting second, I actually consider asking him in. But instead I just slip out from under his arm.

“So I’ll meet you here tomorrow afternoon,” I tell him.

He winks. “Sounds good, sweetheart.”

As expected, Mom is very pleased to meet Griffin, so much so that I wonder if I should have brought him over before. I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen her

look so happy.

It's a mild day, so we sit outside on the deck, and Mom asks Griffin questions about all the different places he's been, and he does have some good stories. He's wearing a black t-shirt and a pair of jeans, a pair of aviator sunglasses, and he does look deliciously handsome. At one point, I slip away and go upstairs to my room. I'm generally a jeans and t-shirt type girl myself, but I do have a few seldom worn, dressier outfits, and I dig one out of the back of my closet. It's a simple cotton dress, navy blue and tan stripes, giving it sort of a nautical look. I put it on and look at myself in the full-length mirror. I'm not used to seeing myself in a dress, but it doesn't look bad.

Griffin whistles when I step back outside. "Look at you," he says.

Mom smiles. "It's so nice to see you dressed up!" she says. "And that is one of my favorite dresses."

"Well, I figured since we're going out after this it might be good if I wore something that didn't smell like a horse barn."

When we're getting ready to leave, I see a different orchid sitting on the kitchen table. It's as lurid as the others ones, and for a moment, I hate Sean for making me dislike orchids so much.

"When did that come?" I ask.

"A few days ago," Mom says. "It's always nice to get flowers."

"Sure," I say. This must be the I'm sorry I tried to rape you orchid. I honestly can't believe he had the gall to send it after that, but then again, perhaps it shouldn't be surprising.

“My ex likes to send orchids,” I tell Griffin.

He laughs. “How lovely. Did you know that ‘orchid’ comes from the Greek word for ‘testicle’?”

I think about the last—and hopefully final—time I saw Sean, and I can’t help but laugh either. “Then that is actually very fitting,” I say.

Griffin takes me out to dinner and then we walk around the Castro. It’s a warm night and the sidewalks are crowded, people are spilling out from the bars. We go by a café with big windows, music blaring. Griffin stops and looks in. “Hey, let’s check this out,” he says.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:57 am*

There's a drag show going on inside, the place is packed. We squeeze in through the crowd, and because I'm walking behind Griffin, I see the way every man in the place stops and gives him the eye, some with their mouths hanging open.

A makeshift stage has been set up in the corner, and the MC is a six-foot-tall, burly man, wearing a pink wig and a lace corset. The music thrums and we have to shout to hear each other over it.

The drag queens are actually having a contest, to see who will be on the cover of next year's annual drag calendar. They come out in all sorts of get-ups: sequins, lace, leather, with spike heels and feather boas. Griffin laughs and claps; at one point he whistles loudly with his fingers, and that gets the MC's attention.

"Merciful lord in heaven!" she gasps. "I do believe I am looking at the finest specimen of male I have ever seen! Are you a mirage? Maria, shine the light over there; I must find out if my eyes are deceiving me!"

Then all of the sudden, there's a blinding light on us, and the whole place erupts, and there are wolf whistles and cat calls and someone starts shouting: GET ON STAGE!

And then it seems like the whole place is chanting it, and Griffin is standing next to me just losing his shit laughing. He leans toward me. "Should I do it?" he shouts in my ear.

The spotlight is still on us. I have a feeling if I tell him no, the men in this place would rip me to pieces.

“Yes!” I shout back.

The chant dissolves into jubilant cheers as Griffin makes his way from where we were standing to the stage.

“Well, hello,” the MC says when Griffin finally gets up there. The MC makes a big show of blinking, rubbing his eyes, blinking again. “You really AREN’T a mirage. Because honey, let me tell you, I’ve seen—and been with—a few good-looking men in my day, but you . . . you take the cake, sweetie.”

The crowd roars. Someone near me starts shouting, “STRIP!” and pretty soon, the whole place is screaming.

“I bet you can dance, too,” the MC says. She sticks the microphone in Griffin’s face.

“I’ve been known to bust a move or two,” he says in between laughter.

“You certainly can’t tease us like that!” the MC says. “And I think I’m speaking on EVERYONE’S behalf when I say we’d like to see one or two of these moves.”

The DJ is spinning some upbeat club stuff, and Griffin doesn’t hesitate. He starts dancing, and he is actually quite good. Without missing a beat, he pulls his shirt off and flings it out into the crowd. Perhaps it’s the lighting, or the way he’s moving his body, but he looks so incredibly hot, it’s almost breathtaking. And clearly I am not the only one who thinks so. When the song ends, the noise from the crowd is deafening. Griffin gives the MC a hug and then jumps down off the stage.

“How’d I do?” he asks when he gets back over to me.

I’m still laughing. I’m laughing so hard, in fact, that tears are rolling down my cheeks, and I can’t remember the last time that I had so much fun. Without even



thinking, I put my arms around him and give him a hug.

“You were awesome!” I shout into his ear.

I let go of him, and the guy standing next to me nudges me with his elbow. “You lucky bitch,” he says.

When we get back to the ranch, Griffin wants to take a walk on the beach. It’s late, but we’re both still too pumped up from the evening to go to bed, so I agree. He takes my hand as we make our way down the trail, and we walk down onto the sand, the waves crashing in front of us.

“I had a lot of fun tonight,” he says. “Thanks for letting me take you out.”

“You’re a riot. That thing at the café? I seriously can’t remember the last time I laughed that hard. And those guys loved you.”

We stop, and he lets go of my hand. He turns so he’s facing me; we’re close enough to embrace but for a moment we both just stand there. He smiles.

“You’re beautiful.”

I look down at the sand, then back at him, trying to ignore the tingling feeling that’s swirling in my chest. “For someone who’s been with as many girls as you have, I’d think you’d have a better line than that.”

“It’s not a line,” he says. “It’s the truth.”

He brings his hands up to either side of my face and waits until I meet his eyes before he speaks again. “And yes, maybe I have been with a lot of girls, but that only means I happen to know what I’m talking about. And you, sweetheart, are beautiful.”

He brings his hands down to my shoulders and lets his head drop toward mine, slowly, his eyes falling halfway shut. But he doesn't kiss me; he stops, his mouth maybe an inch from mine, lips parted slightly.

We stand like that. He's not going to kiss me. He's going to let me kiss him, if I want to. If I choose not to, maybe he'll give my shoulders a squeeze and then back away, tell me to keep my chin up or something.

I tilt my head back a little, closing the distance. Less than an inch.

He stays still. His breath is warm on my face, something tingles in the air between us. I touch my lips to his and kiss him very softly. His eyes fall closed the rest of the way and he lets out a noise that's a cross between a sigh and a groan. He moves his head away and I feel his mouth near my ear.

"I want you," he whispers. "Give me more."

His grip tightens on my shoulders, his hands moving down my arms to my waist. He slips one hand under my shirt and his palm is warm, first on my hip, then moving across my abdomen. He brings his face to mine again and this time I pull him toward me, wrapping my arms around his neck, kissing him, mouths wide open, tongues entwined. We pull apart only so he can slip my dress over my head. The feeling of our bare skin touching is electric. He tilts my head back so I'm looking up at the sky and he slowly kisses the length of my neck. His fingertips trace lightly over the contours of my ribcage, my shoulder blades, and then he's unfastening my bra and it falls away.

"Very nice," he says, gently squeezing my breasts.

I can't help the groan that escapes from my mouth when he takes my nipple into his mouth. He runs his hands down my back, he squeezes my ass and then slaps it gently.

He brings his hands back around and pushes at the waist of my skirt, lowering himself to his knees. He slips my underwear off, running his hands from the innermost point of my thigh down past my knee, down my calf, the way you would to a horse to get it to lift its leg. I step out of the bathing suit; one leg, then the other. He brings his hands back up to my thighs and pushes my legs apart, lowering his head, his tongue making slow circles over my clit. He slides one finger, then another, easily into my vagina and I feel my stomach muscles contract as my breath catches in my throat. My legs have been reduced to jelly and I'm not exactly sure how it's physically possible that I'm still upright.

He reaches a hand up to my breast and squeezes my nipple.

"I need to lie down," I gasp.

He lifts his head but keeps his fingers inside me. "Whatever you want, baby," he says.

The sand is cool on my backside. He repositions himself over me, his forearms on either side of my head. He leans down and we kiss; I run my hands over his shoulders, his biceps, the skin warm, stretched smooth over the thick muscles.

"Wrap your legs around me," he says.

I do, and I feel the head of his cock brush lightly against my labia. He shifts his hips and the head slides in, less than an inch. He holds it there, and I arch my back, trying to get him to go deeper.

"What are you doing to me," I say, pressing my face into his upper arm. He swivels his hips in slow figure 8s as he kisses my throat. Suddenly, he pushes himself all the way in so our pubic bones touch and my body jerks underneath; the sensation is so intense, I think that I'm about to either black out or explode in pleasure.

“Come for me,” he whispers in my ear.

I’ve never been able to orgasm through straight sex, but I can tell that I’m close. There’s a tingling warm sensation filling my pelvis, traveling down my legs all the way to my toes. It builds like a crescendo, with the ebb and flow of his movements, and if he stops now I’ll lose it, it’ll be gone, even if he starts again, so I dig my fingernails into his back and say, “Don’t stop.” It comes out breathless and my voice catches in my throat and I wrap my legs around him tighter and right as the feeling is about to peak he shifts his hips upward slightly and he hits some new spot, some place that Sean and the handful of other guys I’d ever been with never even came close to finding and I’m arching my back, trying to keep him in me as deep as he can and my brain is buzzing, a million beautiful fireworks exploding in front of my eyes.

“Good girl,” he says when we’re finished. He rolls off me and onto his side and props his head up on one hand. “You’re a lot of fun.”

It still feels as though there’s an electric current running through my body, everything is tingling, there is a residual buzz that seems to have settled over me like a fine mist.

I wrap my arms around his neck and he tilts his head forward so our foreheads are touching.

“I want to tell you something,” I say. Usually I am not so direct, not so willing to just put something out there. But there is something different about him. He feels safe, yet also exciting, and it’s like this wall that I didn’t even know I had up is starting to crumble. “I am really happy you washed up on the beach that night.”

“And that you got to be the one to rescue me. I always wanted to be rescued by a beautiful lady.”

“And I’m the one that got to rescue you.”

“Thank God it was you and not Allison.”

We both laugh, and then he leans down and kisses me. I don’t think I have ever felt so good.

But the next morning when I wake up, I don’t feel good. I feel nervous, or anxious, and I skip breakfast so I won’t have to see Griffin. I hadn’t been with anyone since Sean, and while the experience with Griffin was about a million times better than anything I ever had with Sean, I can’t help but wonder how this is going to change things between us and I’m not sure I’m entirely comfortable with the idea of that.

Or maybe it meant nothing.

That, if I’m to be honest, is scarier than anything else, but of course I can’t admit that outside the confines of my own head. It’s been so long since I actually liked someone that I can’t quite believe it’s happening, or, if it is, it’s not going to last.

So, I drink a glass of water and head down to the barn. I feed the horses, and in the distance, I can hear some of the campers talking and laughing as they make their way to the lodge. I’m letting the horses out to pasture when Karen comes in and says good morning.

“Griffin was looking for you,” she says. “I told him I figured you’d be down here.”

“Here I am,” I say. “Did he say what he wanted?”

“No.”

“Well . . . if he comes down here, tell him you haven’t seen me, okay?”

She gives me a funny look. “Why?”

“Just—”

“You really should give him a break, you know. He’s not a bad guy. In fact, you want to know what I think?” She leans in toward me. “I think he likes you. Like, a lot more than Allison. Which kind of doesn’t make any sense, because you’ve been so mean to him. Is that the secret?”

“What? What secret? What are you talking about?”

“That if you want a guy to like you, you should be a giant . . . bitch to him.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” I wave my hand. “Let’s just get to work, okay? And seriously, Karen, I’m the last person on earth you should be asking for advice in that department.”

We start mucking stalls. It’s monotonous, but the repetition is calming and if I focus on what I’m doing, there really isn’t much room for other thoughts to intrude. I take my wheelbarrow out back to dump, and on the way into the barn, I can hear Griffin talking to Karen.

“Is Jill here?” he’s saying. I stop and take a few steps backward, away from the barn door.

She stutters. “Um, Jill? No, no, I don’t think so.”

“Oh. I figured she’d be down here. You need a hand, then? How many stall you have left to do?”

“Is there . . . is there a message you want me to relay to her?”

Nice, Karen, I think, and try not to roll my eyes.

“That’s okay,” he says. “I’m sure I’ll run into her eventually. Here, I’ll help you finish up. Where’s the other wheelbarrow?”

Hearing that, I leave the wheelbarrow where it is and turn and run around the side of the barn, all the way back to my cabin.

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*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:57 am*

There's no way to avoid him once lunch rolls around, though. I'm in the kitchen with some of the campers, making egg salad sandwiches. By the time I realize that he's strolled in through the door, it's too late to run anywhere, and besides, I'd have to somehow make it past him to get to the exit.

Luckily, though, the campers clamor around him, they want to know if he'll do archery with them later, a few of them want to go kayaking. Just the sight of him makes me simultaneously want to run away and go over and jump on him. At one point, he looks right at me, and I look away, quickly, but not before he gives me a wink, which, luckily, no one else picks up on. My heart feels like it's about to beat out of my chest. I spoon out more egg salad onto the slices of bread.

"How's the sandwich-making coming along?" he asks. He walks over, his arm brushing mine.

"Fine," I reply.

He lowers his voice. "I missed seeing you this morning."

"I . . . I was busy."

"Meet me at the beach trail later tonight."

His voice is so quiet I can barely hear what he says. I can see a few of the campers watching, straining to hear what we're saying.

"Okay," I say finally, my own voice barely a whisper. "I will."



He didn't give me a specific time, so I wait until it's dark, and even then, I consider not going. Before I leave, I stand in the bathroom and look in the mirror.

"There is seriously something wrong with you," I tell my reflection. Wouldn't any other normal person be ecstatic that this was happening? A normal person wouldn't try to avoid the person she'd just slept with if she actually liked him in return.

Finally, I make myself go outside and head toward the trail. He's there, as I approach, and I wonder how long he's been waiting. He comes over and touches my shoulder.

"Hi there," he says. "I was just starting to think that you stood me up." He takes my hand. "Come on; let's go for a walk."

We basically take the same walk we took the other night, and I can feel myself getting tense. He must, too, because he stops and looks at me.

"You okay?"

"Yes."

We walk down to the water and I kick my flip-flops off and let the waves roll over my feet.

"I missed seeing you today," he says. "I had a pretty great time last night."

I look out at the water but don't say anything.

"Did you?" he asks.

"Yes." I take a deep breath. "Of course I did. I'm sorry; I don't know what my problem is. It's been a long time since . . . since I've been in a situation like this, I

guess. I don't really know what I'm doing, if you hadn't figured that out."

He smiles. "I think I'd most definitely have to disagree with that last statement, sweetheart. But, I feel a little weird about things too. It happens."

"Has it ever happened to you?"

"Well . . . yeah. This is different for me, too."

"How so?"

"I don't need to get into all the down and dirty details, but . . . let's just say I've had my fair share of romantic liaisons. But never with someone I really, truly liked, if you can believe that. Never had a girlfriend before. Never in a long-term relationship or anything like that."

"I was with Sean, and it was awful."

"I always assumed relationships would be awful, which was why I avoided them at all costs."

"Not that Sean was the great love of my life or anything, but I'd like to avoid any more heartache, if possible. It just seems easier not to be involved, you know?"

He doesn't say anything for a minute. The waves continue to wash over my feet, pulling the sand out from under them each time they roll back.

"It is better for the heart to break, than not to break," he says. "That's from a Mary Oliver poem. And though I've never been in a relationship before, I happen to agree wholeheartedly with that quote."

I look at him in surprise. “You read Mary Oliver? She was one of my dad’s favorite poets.”

“I spent a few summers on Cape Cod. She’s a great poet.”

He steps in front of me and gives me a hug. His mouth is right next to my ear. “We don’t have to talk about this right now,” he whispers. “I just wanted you to know that you don’t have to be afraid. I know it’s probably a little scary, but it’s different for me, too. And you don’t have to be scared, okay?”

He kisses my forehead and I let myself relax into his arms, and in that moment, he’s right, it doesn’t feel like there is anything to be afraid of at all.

## Chapter 21: Griffin

There is one week of camp left. I’m not exactly sure when the idea occurs to me, maybe it was even a dream I had. Woke up with the idea. But it makes sense: Bring Jill home to New York. Not for good, of course, just for a visit, some fun times, and maybe Dad will see that not only have I decided I want to be a contributing member of society and no longer live off his dime, but I’ve found a girl that I really want to be with. He’d appreciate something like that, and Jill is just the kind of girl you’d want to bring home to the family.

I let the idea percolate for a few days. We could go stay with Mom in the Hamptons, wander around the city, do all the sorts of things I imagine you’d do if you were in a relationship. Though it’s hard to say if Jill and I actually are in a relationship, though I’d certainly like us to be, and surprisingly, I find that I am actually nervous to talk to her about it.

I stand in front of the bathroom mirror and look at my reflection, knowing that to everyone else in the world I might look exactly the same, but I am not. I take a deep

breath, watch my shoulders rise up toward my ears, then exhale, down they go. I am not the same person. I leave the lodge bathroom and go over to the phone hanging on the wall by the kitchen entrance. I dial Dad's number.

"Hi, Dad," I say when he picks up.

"Griffin," he says. His tone is hard to read. "Are you still out in California?"

"Yes. Having a good time, actually."

"What can I do for you?"

"I know you're busy with golf and the country club and everything, but I'm thinking of coming through town soon. I'm going to bring my girlfriend with me."

"Your girlfriend," he says flatly.

"Yes. Try to hide your surprise."

"I'm not surprised; I'm just trying to figure out why you felt the need to call and inform me of these trivial details."

"Well, I was thinking you might want to see me, and maybe meet her, and it'd be nice if we could all get together for dinner. Or lunch. Or whatever."

He sighs, as though I just asked if he'd be willing to donate a kidney to charity or something.

"I'm not really so sure I need to meet your flavor of the week, Griffin. This all seems a little unnecessary."

“She’s not a flavor of the week, Dad. It’s actually kind of . . . kind of serious.” I get a warm feeling in my chest as I say the words.

“And what? You feel you need my blessing? That’s never mattered to you before.”

“I just think it’d be nice if we could try to, you know, salvage our relationship. We didn’t used to hate each other, you know.”

“For Christ’s sake, Griffin, I don’t hate you. But you’ve made it very clear your priorities in life, and I’ve allowed you to live as you want. I’m not clear as to why you suddenly feel the need to call me and start talking about our relationship. I’m your father; not your therapist. You’re an adult. I think I’ve shown my respect for you by allowing you the freedom to do as you please. Not everyone is so lucky.”

“You’re right,” I say. “Cam is coming out here to see me, though. That’s interesting, isn’t it?”

He’s quiet for a minute. “Your brother is also free to live his life as he chooses. And while he has, without a doubt, made far better choices than you, he is still allowed to do what he wants. And if he wants to fly out to California to see you, then so be it. Good for him.”

“It’s mainly for business,” I say.

“I know. And if I’m to be frank with you, I honestly have no interest in meeting your girlfriend. Zero. I’m a busy man, Griffin, and this just isn’t something I’ll be able to fit into my schedule.”

“Well, we’re coming to New York. We’ll be by the house. Our paths might cross.”

“They might,” he says, sounding resigned. “Or they might not. Either way is fine with

me.”

“Things are different. I’ve been doing some things differently, Dad. I thought you might like to hear about it.”

“Like I said: If I see you, I do. At this point in your life, Griffin, I doubt any changes that you’ve made are really going to be that surprising to me.”

It would be easy enough to get mad, but instead I just smile and say goodbye. He’ll just have to wait and see in person.

## Chapter 22: Jill

On Sunday, Mom tells me that Uncle Nate is going to Lanai for a few weeks and has a layover in San Francisco. He wants to take us out to lunch.

“Do you think you’ll be able to get away from the ranch for a little while that day? I know it’s right in the middle of the week,” Mom says. “I think it’d be good if you could make it. He says he has something he wants to tell us.”

“Hmm, I wonder what that could be,” I say, though I’m sure I already know. And I can’t help but wonder if he starts talking his conspiracy theories again, if I might just say something, even though I still don’t have anything concrete to go off of.

When I get back to the ranch, I talk to Lorrie and get the time off, even though it’s a Thursday and it’ll be right in the middle of the day.

“Would Griffin like to go, too?” Lorrie asks me with what may or may not be a coy smile.

It’s hard not to smile back, though in response I only say, “I don’t know why he

would.”

“I’m sure your mom would like to meet him. Your uncle, too. We could spare the two of you for a few hours.”

Though I doubt the idea would’ve occurred to me on my own, once Lorrie brought it up, it seemed perfect. It would be good for Mom, and I have a feeling that Uncle Nate will actually really like Griffin.

I find Griffin and a few campers sitting outside, cleaning the fishing gear. His back is to me as I approach, and he’s telling them all a story about a fishing trip he went on in Alaska. I pause for a moment and watch the faces of the kids that I can see; even though he’s been here for a few weeks now, the campers are every bit as enamored with him as they first were.

“You had to club the fish?” one of them asks.

“Don’t let Jill hear about it!” another one replies.

“Don’t let me hear what?” I say.

Griffin turns and sees me, a big smile breaking out on his face. “Hey, there, sweetheart,” he says.

I see a few of the campers shoot worried looks at each other, and then at Griffin, and I wonder if that’s really how they see me, as someone who’s going to come roaring in here and ruin their good time because they happen to be talking about clubbing fish.

“Looks like you guys are having fun over here,” I say, sitting down. I look at Griffin. “I won’t stay long, but I was wondering if you’d like to get lunch on Thursday in the city.”

“Stay as long as you’d like,” he says. “And yes, I would love to go with you to the city.”

I’m aware of the looks the kids are giving us—confused but curious. It would probably do them some good to see me being nice to Griffin; perhaps they wouldn’t get that look on their faces next time I walked up.

“My uncle is going to be in town,” I tell them. “He travels a lot but he likes to come by and visit when he can.”

Griffin smiles. “Ah, the traveling uncle. Sounds like a good guy. Count me in.”

I return his smile, and try to ignore the surprised looks on all the campers’ faces.

But at breakfast on Thursday morning, it’s clear that Griffin is in no shape to be doing much of anything, never mind take a trip up to the city. He’s pale, his eyes bright, and when I brush my fingertips across his forehead, he’s very hot.

“You don’t look like you’re doing so well,” I say. “Why don’t you go lie down.”

He shivers a little, even though he’s wearing a sweatshirt with the hood pulled up and it’s pretty warm in the lodge. “I don’t know what is wrong with me,” he says. “I felt a little off last night but figured I’d just be able to sleep it off. I never get sick.”



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“Go back to bed,” I tell him. “I’ll get you some aspirin and some tea.”

He coughs into the sleeve of his sweatshirt. “I think you might be onto something there.”

I drink a cup of coffee and make him lemon tea with honey, which my dad always made for me when I was sick. I set that, plus a slice of dry toast and a few aspirin, onto a tray. I pass Allison as I’m leaving.

“Have you seen Griff?” she asks.

“He’s sick,” I tell her. “He went back to bed.” Her eyes go to the tray. “I’m bringing this to him, and then I’ll be back.”

“Why don’t I take it to him.” She holds her hands out.

“I don’t think so.”

She narrows her eyes and takes a step toward me. “What are you doing, Jill?” she hisses. “What game are you playing?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. He’s sick; I’m bringing him some medicine and some tea.”

“Yet you won’t let me bring it to him. Why? Do you really think he’d rather you brought it than me?”

“Actually, yes, I do.”

She looks as though she’s about to pitch a fit but then thinks better of it.

“This isn’t a competition,” I say. “So there’s really no need for you to get upset about anything. Why don’t you go eat breakfast with Brett? He’s got an empty spot next to him.” And then I walk away, not caring if the conversation was done in her mind or not.

He’s huddled on the bed, buried under several blankets. I put the tray on the table and go over with the aspirin and a glass of water. He sits up, his eyes bleary, hair messy.

“Christ, I feel like shit.” He pops the aspirin into his mouth and washes them down with a sip of water. “But thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I think I might have to bail on lunch today. Probably wouldn’t make such a good first impression.”

I smile. “That’s okay. There’s tea, too, and some toast, if you feel like eating.”

“Thanks, sweetheart. I don’t right now, but I might later.” He lies back down. “Would you . . . would you lie here with me? Just for a minute. I won’t breathe on you, I promise.”

I consider refusing, but only for a second. I stretch out next to him and he wraps the blanket around us both. I can feel how hot his face is against my neck.

“Thank you,” he says, his voice raspy and dreamy sounding. “I turn into a big mushball when I get sick. Just want to snuggle. When I was a kid, though, and got

sick, my mom wouldn't even come into the same room. She'd practically start wearing one of those face masks, and make the maid take care of me. She was kind of a bitch, the maid, but she always made sure I drank plenty of fluids and took my medicine. She certainly wasn't one for snuggling."

"I can't believe you had a maid."

"Eleanor. That was her name. Shit, I wonder what happened to Eleanor."

"I ran into Allison on the way out, when I was bringing the tray out here. She wanted to do it. She said you'd rather if she brought it."

I feel his laugh, rather than hear it. "Well, I think the desire to snuggle would've been nixed if she was the one who brought it."

"So . . . what happened between you guys? If you don't mind me asking." I consider that now might not be the best time to get into this sort of conversation, but then I think that maybe it is . . . with his guard down, he probably won't gloss over the truth, though I can't say whether or not it would change anything.

"We kissed. It could've gone a lot further, trust me, but I was serious when I told you I'm all set with the statutory charges. I have a good instinct, sometimes, when it comes to this sort of thing. The girls that are going to start trouble if you get too involved. And she is definitely one of them. Does that . . . does that bother you?"

"What, your great instinct?" I say, though I know that's not what he's referring to.

"No, that Allison and I kind of hooked up. It really was just a kiss. Not even a very good one at that. Not like you."

I laugh. "No, it really doesn't bother me."

“I’m not just saying that, you know. About you being a really great kisser.”

“Well, coming from someone with as much as experience as you have, I guess I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“I’m not as experienced as you might think. You’re my first, actually.”

“You can’t see my face right now, but I’m rolling my eyes.”

“Well, you’re my first girlfriend.”

There’s a long pause, and I replay the words he’s just said about a dozen times in my head before he says, “If that’s okay with you. Which I hope it is. I’ve never had an actual girlfriend before, and knowing you makes me realize that I’d like one.”

Since we’re lying there, basically spooning, he can’t see my expression, but if he could he’d see I am smiling, that in fact, I have a huge grin that I can’t wipe off my face.

Uncle Nate seems to be in relatively good spirits during lunch. “Isn’t there supposed to be someone else here?” he asks. “I heard you were bringing a date along.” He smiles as he says this, as though he’s genuinely happy to hear that I might be involved with someone. When he smiles, he looks a lot like Dad.

“He’s sick,” I tell him. “But he really wanted to come and meet you guys.”

“It’s the boy she wasn’t getting along with,” Mom says. “Remember?”

Uncle Nate raises his eyebrows. “Glad to hear you’ve turned that around.”

We go to a little café that Mom likes and sit outside. Overhead, the clouds are starting

to break up and the sun peeks out. I am, in fact, almost done with my turkey club sandwich before Uncle Nate starts talking about Dad.

“I wanted to make a point to be in Lanai on the anniversary of Mike’s death,” he says. Lanai was where my parents went on their honeymoon, one of the first destinations when Uncle Nate launched his cruise business, the place of some of my favorite childhood vacation memories. I set my sandwich down. “I told myself on the way out here that I wasn’t going to bring it up again. Because, believe it or not, after the last time we got together, I did some reflecting. And while I will always know in my heart of hearts that the accident was not just an accident, I can see why you might want to just try to put the whole thing behind you. This is not to say that I am going to do that, but I believe that you’ve made it abundantly clear you don’t want to hear about it any longer. And I’ve got to respect that; I know Mike would want me to. And maybe . . . maybe there really is nothing to be done. I just don’t want to believe that.”

Mom reaches across the table and takes his hand. She’s barely touched her lunch. “Accepting what happened doesn’t mean we don’t miss him any less,” she says. “But if you can find it in yourself to try to move on too, I think you’ll be less stressed out about everything. Mike wouldn’t want you to be like this, Nathan. You know he wouldn’t.”

I don’t say anything. I wonder, suddenly, if it’s silly to think that anything could come of me actually meeting Griffin’s father, if there really is any evidence to uncover. He annoyed the shit out of me every time he brought it up, but now that Uncle Nate is sitting here, maybe admitting defeat, I want to tell him that I might have discovered something that could lead to something else. Except . . . that would mean bringing Griffin into it, and for some reason, there is a little tiny voice that is telling me not to. That it would be a very, very, bad idea.

The feeling stays with me after I say goodbye and am driving back to the ranch. After my parents’ accident, I remember lying in bed awake at nights and trying to think if

there'd been some feeling, some voice telling me not go with them that day. I couldn't recall anything, which made me feel relieved, if nothing else, because if there had been a premonition, why wouldn't I have tried harder to make them stay home, too?

But your mind will go in all sorts of directions trying to untangle the knotted mess of tragedy, and mine certainly did. Like, what if they had left five minutes later? Or earlier? Would it still have happened? What if I had gone with them, and looked at that horse? Maybe we would've stayed longer. Or: My parents loved each other and had such an awesome relationship. Did Mom wish she had died, too? They did everything together; did she wish they had also met their end together? And then of course, the ever-pervasive, all-consuming, relentless one word question: WHY?

I thought there really wasn't an answer for that. But maybe there is.

## Chapter 23: Griffin

I'm finally starting to feel better the day that Cam is supposed to arrive. The fever has lifted, only traces of that bone-deep exhaustion remain. I can't remember the last time I saw Cam, and I think it's unfortunate I won't be in top form, but who knows, maybe things will actually go better that way.

Jill and Karen take some of the campers out on a trail ride, which I skip out on since my head still feels a little funny. I get a bottle of water and walk down toward the entrance to the ranch. I sit down in the shade of one of the trees, my back against the trunk. It's one of those days where every time the wind blows, warm, fragrant air wafts over you and you can't help but feel better. I think it's a good omen, I think it means that this visit with Cam will go well.

I lean my head back against the tree and let my eyes close. I'm just starting to feel that heady feeling when you're about to doze off when I hear the sound of a car

approach. I open my eyes and see a sleek black BMW slowly coming down the driveway. I stand, a smile stretching across my face. The car stops and I go over to the window.

“Cam—” I start to say, but stop. It isn’t Cameron. They’ve got similar coloring—the blond hair, tan skin, light blue eyes—and they’re both what you might refer to as lady killers, but it is definitely not Cam.

“Oh,” I say. “Sorry, thought you were someone else.”

The guy peers up at me. He’s wearing a San Francisco Giants hat, slightly askew on his head.

“Hey, guy,” he says. “Not sure if I’m in the right place or not. Is this uh . . . is this Sea Horse Ranch?”

I glance up the driveway, to the large wooden sign he just drove past with the words SEA HORSE RANCH carved out by hand.

“Yeah, bro,” I tell him. “You’ve got the right place.”

“You work here?”

“Yeah. Official camp greeter.”

“Cool if I drive down there? I’m looking for someone.”

“Sure.”

He shifts, and when he moves, I see that next to him on the passenger side seat is a white orchid.

“Nice orchid,” I say.

“Thanks. It’s for one of the girls who works here. You probably know her. Jill Freyss-Charon.”

I smile. “I do know her. Biblically, in fact.”

He gives me a confused look. “Huh? Jill doesn’t go to church.”

I stifle my laugh and take a step back from the car. “She’s on a trail ride right now, but feel free to hang around. I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to see you.”

He throws me a look that says he can’t tell if I’m being sarcastic or not. He starts to drive off but then stops abruptly, the tires skidding on the sandy gravel.

“Hold the fuck on!” he says, and then the car door’s opening and he’s out, right in front of me. “I know what that ‘biblically’ shit means, dude. You’re fucking Jill? Who the fuck do you think you are? We only broke up because of that shit with her parents. She needed space, so I gave it to her, because I’m that kind of guy.”

“Is that so,” I say.

His eyes narrow. “I don’t know what she told you about the other night, but I didn’t mean for it to go down that way.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about, but I only cross my arms and give him my best disappointed-in-you-look à la Carl Alexander.

“It was pretty bad,” I say. “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“What did she tell you?” He yanks his hat off and runs his hand through his short



blond curls. “You do realize you’re only getting one side of the story, right? Did you even think about hearing my side?”

“Well, considering we just met for the first time three minutes ago, no, it never really crossed my mind.”

“Let me tell you my side, then. Jill and I have history, right? I knew the first time I saw her she was the one for me. I could see our whole future together. Really, I could. And we had good times, together, man, and then the shit with her parents happened and she said she needed space. Which I totally get, right? And I wanted to give that to her, because I care about her. But then somewhere along the line she decides that it’s going to be this permanent thing. She just makes the choice, without even talking to me about it first. Can you believe that shit?”

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I think of all the girls that I've been with, all the beds I've slipped silently out of before sunrise, all the conversations we could've had but didn't. "Yeah, actually, I can."

"Well, it's fucking bullshit! And then, the night of her birthday, I went over there because I wanted to talk. Just to talk. But she didn't want to listen. And I just . . . I . . . I'm not proud of how I handled it."

I look at him more closely now, wanting to ask, Well what the fuck did you do? Instead, I give another disapproving shake of my head. "There are much better ways to handle a situation than doing what you did."

"It's not like I was going to rape her," he says. "She didn't have to kick me in the nutsack the way she did. I couldn't walk right for three days."

I bite my lip. "So your side of the story is you tried to sexually assault her but she kicked you in the balls?"

"It's not a sexual assault if you're not hurting the person. If it's someone you've already been with. We were together!"

"Listen, bro. I'm not that much older than you, but I think I can impart a little wisdom, if you're open to it."

He rubs his hand across the lower part of his face and then finally nods. "Okay," he says.

“Don’t fall in love with potential. Potential doesn’t actually exist yet. So you’re basically falling in love with an idea that may or may not actually happen. It’s easy to do, but if your idea of how you think someone is and then the reality of who they actually are don’t align, well, then, you’re screwed. So when I hear you say that you knew the second you saw Jill that she was the one for you, that tells me you fell in love with the potential of what you guys could have had. You fell in love with what type of person she could be.”

His brow furrows, and for a second, I think he’s about to cry.

“Try taking a few deep breaths,” I say. I pat his shoulder. “Dude, you’re young, you’re a good-looking man, I’m sure there are a million girls out there who would love to hop in the sack with you.”

This seems to lift his spirits. “There are,” he says.

“So instead of wasting all this time and energy—and not to mention, orchids—on someone who doesn’t want to be with you, go find someone who does. It might surprise you how happy you can be.”

He nods slowly. “You might be right,” he says. “What was that you said? ‘Don’t fall in love with potential?’”

“Yes.”

“That’s real, man. That’s some deep, true shit right there.”

“True shit. Exactly.” I bite down harder on my lip to keep from laughing.

“Well, thanks,” he says. “Tell Jill I stopped by, okay? And tell her I’m sorry, and I won’t bother her anymore.”

“Sure.”

He starts to walk back to his car but stops and comes over and actually gives me one of those big, back-slapping frat boy hugs. And just as he is doing that, Cam pulls into the driveway and that is the first sight my brother has of me, embracing my girlfriend’s meathead ex-boyfriend.

Cam takes me out to lunch to this small little café, just south of San Francisco. We’re just after the lunch rush, and the place is pretty empty, but he still requests the back corner table, and when the waitress comes over to ask us if we want a refill on our drinks, he gives her a harsh look that sends her scurrying away.

He looks good, my bro, although older than I remember. I guess that happens. And he keeps tapping the tabletop with his forefinger and looking toward the entrance of the restaurant like he’s expecting someone else to come through the door.

“So how’s life?” I ask.

“Life is fine,” he says. I’m about halfway done with my burger, but he hasn’t touched his shrimp salad. “But I’ve got to admit, Griffin, I’m a little perplexed about this whole kidnapping situation.”

“I know you are. And I was too, for a little bit, but Dad’s not going to tell me anything. Hell, Dad wouldn’t give two shits if it happened again and the guys actually did kill me this time.”

“Are you worried about that? About it happening again?”

“Should I be?”

He stares at me. “No,” he says finally. “No, I don’t think you should be.”

“That’s good. ‘Cause, you know, I wouldn’t want to have to live the rest of my life looking over my shoulder, wondering when I’m going to be abducted next.”

“So did these guys say anything else to you? What did they look like? Would you recognize them if you saw them again?”

“Uh . . . no, I don’t really remember them saying anything of great importance. They seemed surprised Dad wasn’t cooperating, but all that told me was they had no idea who they were actually dealing with.”

“No, they didn’t.”

“And would I recognize them if I saw them again? Yeah, probably. But really, Cam, I doubt that’s ever gonna happen. They probably went down with the boat. Maybe they washed up in San Francisco Bay or something. Maybe I’ll get the call to come identify the bodies.”

“You’re fairly certain they’re both dead?”

“Fairly.”

He gives a brisk nod. “Okay. Excellent. Great.” He signals the waitress for the check and then we leave, even though I haven’t finished eating and he hasn’t touched his meal at all.

He drives me back to the ranch. I ask him if he wants to come meet Jill.

“Who?” he says, giving me a blank look.

“My girlfriend.”

He looks at the clock on the dashboard, then at his watch. “I don’t think so,” he says. “I’ve got to get going. This was primarily a business trip, after all. And I wanted to make sure everything with you was okay,” he adds quickly.

We sit there for a minute, the car idling. “Okay then,” I say. “It was good to see you. We’ll be coming back to New York at some point, if you’re around. Maybe you could meet her then.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

He looks at me, neither of us saying anything. Then he holds out his hand. “I’ll see you,” he says.

I shake his hand, then get out of the car, and try not to feel like I’ve just been interrogated and then dumped on the side of the road.

I’m walking down to the beach when I hear Jill call my name.

“Hey,” she says. She’s wearing a white tank top and cutoffs, flip-flops on her feet. Her toenails, I notice, are painted pink. “Where’s your brother?”

“Here and left already. He had a bunch of business meetings to get to, I guess.”

“Oh. Did you guys have a good visit?”

“Um, yeah, I guess so. I don’t know, we’ll probably get to hang out with him in New York, maybe. Or maybe not. He’s a busy guy. Whatever. It went fine.” I try to shrug off the disappointment that I feel that it didn’t go a little better. “But, you know who showed up while you guys were on the trail ride?”

She reaches over and takes my hand. “No. Who?”

“I’ll give you a hint: He was delivering an orchid.”

“What?! Sean was here?”

“He stopped by.”

“Oh my god. Did you tell him to leave and never come back?”

“We actually had a nice little chat. After we got past some initial . . . hostility. And what was this he was going on about—your birthday? Did he try to do something to you?”

She looks down at her feet. “Try being the operative word in that statement.”

“But you’re okay?”

“I can take care of myself.”

“So I’ve noticed.”

“I can’t believe he actually told you that.”

“He wanted me to hear his side of the story.”

She gives me a skeptical look and then bursts out laughing. “Are you serious?”

“Fraid so, sweetheart. But we actually had a good talk. I don’t think you’re going to have to worry about him anymore.”

Jill smiles. “Why thank you, then,” she says. She pulls me off the trail, far enough into the woods that you wouldn’t be able to see us from the path. There’s a little

sandy clearing, and she stands in front of me, puts her arms around my neck. “I think I need to repay you for that monumental favor you just did for me.”

She pulls her arms back and runs her hands down the front of my shirt, lightly over my torso. She unbuckles my belt, pops the button on my jeans, and then kneels down in front of me as she lets my jeans fall around my ankles.

“Oh,” I say.

I have, what you might call, a turbulent libido, and just the sight of her, kneeling in front of me with my cock a few inches from her face, gets me instantly hard. She takes me into her mouth, moving her tongue in circles around the tip of dick. I put one hand on her head but don’t try to direct her movement; I let my head fall back and fall into the sensations rippling up and down my body. Her mouth is soft and wet, and my ass clenches when she takes me in far enough that I can feel the back of her throat. She moves her head a bit and I can feel my inner thigh muscles quiver.

“I need to be in you,” I say. “Now.”

Her shorts come off, underwear down, and I lie on the ground. “Ride me,” I tell her. “Ride me like you ride those horses every day. Get on top and fuck the shit out of me.”

And she does. I hold her hips and look up at her gorgeous face, the way her top teeth bite down on her lower lip, how she closes her eyes when she moves her hips back and lets me get in really deep. She pauses for a moment to catch her breath and I tell her to turn around, to face the other way, but to do it while I’m still in her. She stretches those long legs out and very slowly rotates, so now I’ve got the perfect view of the symmetry of her back, her slender midsection, that glorious fucking ass. Holy shit.



And the girl can ride. I already knew that, but . . . she swivels, rolls her hips forward and back. I grab her ass cheek with one hand, lick my forefinger, and then slowly slide it up her butt. I don't think she even notices. A lot of girls are wary about backdoor entry, but if you do it right, they'll come like they never have before.

Which is exactly what she does, and I am not far behind.

Ahhhhh.

## Chapter 24: Jill

We have a family cookout on the last day of camp, and I even drove up to the city to pick up Mom and bring her down. The kids are all happy to see their families, but sad that their time here is coming to an end. They all sit around Griffin, and as I watch, I realize they're all taking turns sitting next to him, writing their email addresses and phone numbers onto a piece of paper for him.

"Will you be getting a new phone soon?" one of the girls asks.

Even Karen jots something down on the piece of paper. At this point, it wouldn't surprise me if they started asking Griffin to autograph their t-shirts or something.

Eventually, Griffin finds his way over to the table I'm sitting at with Mom. "Jill's mom!" he says, and he leans down and gives her a hug. "I've heard a lot about you—I'm glad we finally get to meet in person."

He sits down next to her and has Mom charmed in about two point five seconds. It's actually interesting to watch him interacting with all the parents, the way they're equally taken with him as their kids have been for the past three weeks. I think that must be interesting—to be so likable. It's a talent, really.

“So I haven’t really decided what the plan is going to be after this,” Griffin is saying to Mom. “I’m going to go back to New York for a little while and see my own mom and stuff. I was actually kind of hoping Jill might come with me.”

Mom beams and looks at me. “I think it’s a great idea if you go to New York,” she says. “It’d be like a vacation. You deserve a vacation.”

Even though it won’t be exactly a vacation, per se, I’m thinking that it sounds like a pretty good idea, too.

Later, though, I start wondering if it actually is a good idea. Things with Griffin have been going extraordinarily well, but I think that’s in part because we’re here at the ranch. Because in between us being together, we’ve got work to do, there are always other people around, plenty of distractions. If I go to New York with him, there won’t be work and the people around us will be strangers.

But what about the original plan, I remind myself. The original plan was that I didn’t like Griffin and somehow found a way to get to New York with him to try to find out information about Dad’s death. That plan seems skewed now, because I actually do like Griffin. Maybe it was a dumb plan to begin with.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:57 am*

I'm almost finished mucking out the barn when Griffin appears and leans over the stall door, arms hanging down.

"Hey, sweetheart," he says. "You need any help?"

"No." I keep my back to him. "Almost done."

"Want to go for a swim after this?" I feel his hands on my waist and I stiffen.

"I don't think so. I've got some stuff to do."

"Hey." Slowly, he turns me around so I'm facing him. "You okay?"

"I'm fine." I shake my head and smile, even though the smile feels forced. "I was just . . . I don't know. Thinking that maybe New York wouldn't be such a great idea right now."

He touches his forehead to mine. I stand like that for a few seconds and then pull my head back.

"What about New York isn't a good idea?" he asks. "We don't have to go, if you don't want to. But I think you'll have a good time. I know I'll have a much better time if you're there."

I let go of the pitchfork, and it falls onto the shavings with a muted thump. "Listen," I say. "It's not actually New York. I mean, it kind of is, but it's like, I'm your girlfriend. I'm your girlfriend and you want me to go to New York with you and meet

your parents.”

“And that freaks you out a little?”

“Well . . . yeah!”

I wonder if it’s incredibly shitty of me not to tell him that the whole reason I started being nice to him in the first place was because I wanted to find out information about his father. If it wasn’t for wanting to know that, I’d probably still be hating him. The basis for our relationship is a lie, and I can’t help but think that means the whole thing is going to blow up in my face.

He brings his hand up to the side of my face. “Does it feel like things are moving too fast?”

“It feels like things are just . . . moving. In a direction that I never thought would happen. I mean, I didn’t expect for this to happen. None of this. I thought this was just going to be my boring summer before I went back for my last year of college. This was not expected.”

He smiles. “Are you telling me you don’t like surprises?”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“Jill, if you don’t want to go to New York, you don’t have to. Or, if you want to come to New York but not meet my family, you don’t have to. Or, if you want to come to New York and pretend the whole time you don’t know me, we can do that, too.” He leans down and kisses me, really just rests his lips against mine for a few seconds. “Mmm.”

“It’s not that. I . . .” The words are there, on the tip of my tongue. I think your father

had something to do with my dad's death. And I need to find out. At the same time, I'm scared to, because if he does, what does that mean for us?

## Chapter 25: Griffin

SFO is one giant clusterfuck. I've never minded airports, regardless of the holdups, the delays, the bitchy TSA workers, or the shitty, overpriced food, but by the time we make it through security, Jill's shoulders have inched their way toward her ears and she's too wound up to even sit down.

"Come here, sweetheart," I say. "Let me give you a shoulder rub."

"No, I'm fine."

So I sit, and I try to envision exactly how this little trip of ours is going to go. I've talked with Mom about it, but haven't had any further communication with Dad. Whether or not Mom passed on the specifics of our travel plans is hard to say, and really depends on her mood. It's possible she told him everything—mistakenly believing she was rubbing in his face the fact that we were coming back to see her, but then again, it's also just as likely she hasn't breathed a word. That would actually be better; taking him by surprise might be our best option.

I'm not exactly sure why I'm so eager for Dad to be there, other than I want him to see that I did get my life together. I have changed. You did not think I could, but look. I have.

We take a cab to the penthouse. It's early afternoon, so it's hard to say whether Dad will be home or not, but when the elevator lets us off on the top floor and I hear Debussy being pumped through the speakers, I know that Dad is home.

We leave our stuff in the entranceway, and I lead Jill through the maze of rooms,

aware, for maybe the first time, how over-the-top everything is here. The Persian rugs. The marble, the crystal chandeliers. The fucking gold-framed oil paintings. I glance at Jill, but her expression is hard to read. She doesn't look impressed, so that's good.

"I bet my dad's in his study," I say.

"Great," she says. "Let's go there."

She seems rather eager to meet him, which should please Dad at least. Look, Carl, here's someone who's actually excited to see you. Though I'm sure once she's been around him for a few minutes, that will change rather quickly.

The heavy mahogany door to Dad's study is open partway, and I push it open the rest of the way.

"Hello, Dad. Looks like our paths are going to cross, after all. This is my girlfriend Jill."

Dad's back is to us; he's pouring himself some cognac, Hennessy XO, his favorite, which of course he won't offer to us, but something very odd happens when he turns to face us. A strange expression crosses his face, and he almost drops his balloon snifter. This is interesting; Carl Alexander could be three sheets to the wind and he would never, NEVER fumble his cognac. He recovers, though, and holds out his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Jill." He continues to stare at her, and I continue to stare at him, because he seems completely ill at ease. Is he really so flummoxed by the fact that I have a girlfriend? That she exists? That this wasn't just some little stunt I pulled?

"Have we met before?" he asks. "You look very familiar."

He smiles as he says this. Jill does not return the smile. In fact, her mouth is set in a tight line, and she's looking rather uncomfortable, or mad, or some combination of both.

"Hello," she says finally.

They stand there and stare at each other.

"Well, this is cozy," I say, after the silence has stretched to almost a minute. "Is Mom here?"

"She's out shopping, but I expect she'll be returning shortly. She knew you were coming." Dad sets his glass down. "Perhaps we should all go out and get something to eat when she returns."

I try to keep my jaw from falling to the floor. "Okay," I say. I look at Jill. "That sounds good. Do you feel up for it, Jill?"

Finally, the tiniest of smiles touches the corners of her mouth. "Yes," she says. "I do."

## Chapter 26: Jill

It was the look that crossed Griffin's father's face when we stepped into his study. He knew who I was. Everyone has always said how much Dad and I looked like each other, and Carl's reaction only made me more certain that he knows something about Dad's accident.

Griffin seems equally perplexed, though I'm not exactly sure why. After Carl invites us out to lunch, we go into the living room to wait for his mom to get home. And when she arrives, it's clear that, looks-wise, anyway, it's she who Griffin takes after.

She's tall, and has the same jet-black hair, which has been swept up on top of her head. Her eyes are a paler shade of blue than Griffin's, but her nose is the same, and the mouth.

"Darling!" she exclaims, dropping an armload of shopping bags. "I was hoping I'd be back before you got here. I just spoke with your brother; he's stuck in meetings downtown and won't be able to make it, but he told me to send his regards. And that he'll try to catch up with you later." She gives him a hug, the bangles on her wrist jangling. "How was the flight? How long are you here for? What plans do you have?"

She lets go of him and he turns to me. "Mom, this is my girlfriend Jill. Jill, this is my mom."

I stand up and we shake hands. She appraises me, quickly, coolly, but apparently she deems me acceptable because she smiles.

"It's lovely to meet you," she says.

"I thought we could all go out and get something to eat," Carl says, appearing in the doorway. "We can go have a nice lunch and get all caught up."

"Let me just go freshen up," Griffin's mom says. She gives him a kiss on the cheek and leaves the room in a flurry. Carl, Griffin, and I stand there, saying nothing.

"Did you have a place in mind?" Griffin asks.

"There's a good steakhouse that just opened," Carl says. He looks at me. "Do you eat meat, Jill?"

"Yes."



“Then I think this is the perfect place.”

Griffin’s mom comes back a few minutes later and we leave, Carl keeping his eye on me the whole time.

Lunch is like a game of cat and mouse that only Carl and I are aware we’re playing. He asks me questions and I give him vague answers. Where did you grow up? What does your father do for work? How did you meet my son?

Griffin and his mother seem oblivious, though occasionally I’ll catch Griffin looking at Carl in surprise.

“So what is it that you do?” I ask after our salads are brought out.

“I’m a businessman,” he replies, as vaguely as I responded to his questions.

“Clearly a successful one,” I say.

He pauses, his drink halfway to his lips, and he gives me a look as though he can’t tell if I’m being sarcastic or not.

“So, I must’ve missed it, but tell me again,” Griffin’s mom says, “How did the two of you meet? Was it over in Thailand?”

I defer to Griffin on this. Carl downs his drink and says nothing.

“Well,” Griffin says. “My Thailand trip got cut short, actually. Another story for another time though.” He shoots a look at Carl, who has folded his hands in front of him and is looking off into the middle distance. “Jill and I met out in California, near the horse ranch she works at. The place I’ve been working at, too.”

“Oh, darling, you got a job! You didn’t tell me that.”

“Yeah, it’s actually a lot of fun. I’ve been having a good time.”

His mom smiles and pats his arm. “You always did like being outside. A job and a girlfriend! How lovely.”

Carl is mostly quiet for the rest of the meal. Whenever I look in his direction, though, he is looking right at me, and he doesn’t avert his gaze when I return the stare. I’m still not sure if he knows exactly who I am, but just the way he’s acting tells me that he knows something.

I wake up while it’s still dark, and for a while I lie in bed next to Griffin and watch the sky turn from inky, midnight blue to a light gray. If I’m going to do something, I might as well do it now. There might not be another chance.

I slip out of bed. Griffin stirs but does not wake. His mouth is slightly open, one arm thrown above his head. He looks entirely at peace.

I walk down the hallway to Carl’s study. I pause outside the door and listen; everything’s quiet. I peek in. The built-in bookshelves are lined with leather-bound tomes. The desk sits at the back of the room, by the windows. There are paintings on the walls, and I wonder, as I step into the study, if there’s a safe hidden behind one of them.

I go over to the desk. I don’t know what I’m looking for, maybe something that might somehow shed some light on anything, but I am suddenly overcome with the certainty that there is something, and I’ll know it when I see it.

I open a few drawers. There are papers, documents, one drawer full of pens and paper clips. I ruffle through the papers and see nothing that really makes any sense. I get to

the bottom right hand drawer and pull. It doesn't budge.

I straighten, and look around the room. If there's a key, he probably keeps it on him, or in his briefcase or something. I open the top middle drawer again and extract the silver letter opener. Picking locks was never one of my specialties, but I'd done it on a few occasions and hoped I might get lucky once more.

I slide the letter opener into the lock when I hear a noise behind me. I freeze, thinking that maybe it's someone just walking past the study, but out of the corner of my eye I see Carl step into view.

"Isn't this interesting," he says. "I'd ask you what the hell you thought you were doing, but I don't think you'd give me an honest answer."

I stand. "I'm looking for something."

"For something," he repeats. "And what might that something be?"

I say nothing.

"I knew you looked familiar," he continues. "You're a dead ringer for your father. And then I asked Griffin what your last name was. Freyss-Charon . . . your father was Michael Charon, wasn't he?"

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:58 am*

He has the oddest look on his face. Like he's happy and perplexed and extremely agitated all at the same time. He chuckles. "My son finally finds a decent woman to be with and she turns out to be the daughter of Michael Charon. Am I correct, Jill? Is Michael Charon your father? And your mother . . . Annabel Freyss? Is that correct?"

I nod, and he laughs, a deep belly laugh even though, as far as I can tell, nothing funny has been said.

He stops laughing and takes a step toward me, then another. I back up, narrowly missing the edge of his executive desk.

"There's something I want you to understand," he says. "I am a very wealthy man. Wealth is a good thing. Unfortunately, you can't always amass large amounts of wealth by only doing good things. Sometimes, the things you must do are . . . less than desirable, shall we say. It's simply a fact of life. It has always been that way, and it will continue to be that way until the end of time. If it wasn't me, it would be someone else." He rubs his palms together. "Do you understand what I'm saying, Jill?"

"Sure," I say, taking another step back. Each step he takes toward me, I take one away from him. I hope I am getting closer to the door. I hope Griffin will get back here soon. "I get it. You're rich. Congratulations."

He raises an eyebrow. "I can see why my son likes you. You're both wise-asses who probably know a little too much for your own good. Like your father. Did you know I knew your father? He used to work for me."

“Yes, I knew that,” I say.

“Tragic, what happened to him. Your mother, too. You see, your father, Jill, was one of those ignorant men who liked to get in the way if he felt things were not being carried out in a fair and just manner. Rather noble of him, if you think about it, but naïve. For a while, I considered him one of my best employees. He really cared about doing a good job. But then he started sticking his nose in places it didn’t belong. Started asking questions, and then, when he didn’t like the answers, started demanding that we change the way we did things.”

“So he wanted things done right,” I say. “I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it; it just depends on what your definition of ‘right’ is. And unfortunately for your father, our definitions didn’t quite match up. And he wasn’t willing to just accept that. So something had to be done. He had to be taken care of. Though I’d like to assure you, I certainly was not the one to do it. I actually had very little involvement in the whole thing, if you want to know the truth. But people will do all sorts of things to protect what’s important to them.” He takes another step. “Are you still following me, Jill?”

Hearing him say my name makes my stomach turn. He stares at me with his pale blue eyes, like nothing more than Arctic ice with the tiniest bit of light shining through. His lips are thin and his face is tight, pinched. I look at him and see nothing that resembles Griffin in the least.

“I’m going to go,” I say. My voice trembles and I swallow. “I’d rather not have this conversation with you, Mr. Alexander.”

And then he’s there in front of me lightning fast, his face inches from mine. It seems impossible that he could’ve crossed that distance so quickly, but here he is, his breath hot on my face. He grins. He is only a few inches taller than me, and slim, but he is

surprisingly strong. When his hands wrap around my throat, I am surprised that I can't immediately remove them. I can't budge them at all, and in fact, he's only squeezing tighter and it feels like he's about to crush my windpipe. I flail wildly at his face, his arms, but it's like he's locked in and there is nothing that will loosen his grip. My body tingles. The color drains from everything, his face, the room, it's all black and white. A sound like white noise, or the ocean waves, starts to build in my ears, and gets louder, louder. My mouth falls open but no sounds comes out, there's nothing but the rushing noise and this intense pressure like a balloon filled to the point of popping and then . . . nothing.

## Chapter 27: Griffin

I wake up with a jolt, like someone just dumped a bucket of ice cold water over me. I can tell by the light it's still early, earlier than I'd be getting up at the ranch, even. I sit there for a minute, trying to remember if I'd just been having a crazy nightmare or something. I look to my right and see that Jill's side of the bed is empty. There is a bathroom connected to this room, and I can see that the door is open and the light is off. A strange feeling is coursing through my veins, like someone just shot me up with a dose of anxiety and fear. I kick back the covers and get out of bed, feeling like some sort of animal that can sense a particularly bad storm before it hits.

It's quiet in the hallway. I stand there for a second and wonder if maybe I'm going crazy. What the hell do I think could actually be happening? But then I hear something; it sounds like Jill, though I can't make out exactly what she's saying. I hurry down to the study.

He lets go of her the second I step into the room and Jill collapses in a heap on the floor. He stumbles back as though she's pushed him, and he's laughing.

"It's too late," he says. "There's nothing you can do."

I rush over to her and can see the marks he's left on her throat, bright red, stark against her white skin. Suddenly, her body jerks slightly and she coughs, this terrible, dry wheezing sound. I'm kneeling down next to her when her chest heaves; her eyes are still closed but she's gasping and coughing, trying to draw in a breath.

"Jilly," I say. "You're okay. Come back to me." The color slowly starts to return to her face and her eyes flutter.

"I don't believe it," my father says from behind me. Out of the corner of my eye I see him move toward his desk, where I know he keeps his .45, top right hand drawer. He'll shoot us both, but the drawer is locked, so it buys me enough time to bypass him before he can reach the desk and take him down.

We land hard on the ground but he twists out from under me, scrambling to get onto his feet. He kicks, connects with my side, but I don't feel a thing. I grab his leg and yank him toward me. I clench both fists and let his face have it; he screams when the cartilage in his nose shatters, he spits up blood and fragments of teeth.

I went on a fox hunt, once, when we vacationed in Devon, England. I don't remember much about that vacation, except the way the hounds ripped apart that little red fox once they had it cornered in front of a crumbling brick wall. They couldn't have been called off; they'd tasted blood, they were in a frenzy, they didn't stop until there was nothing left. I think of this, suddenly, of those dogs, and I think I could be just like them and go on pummeling my father's face until there's nothing left.

But I stop.

I stand up, slowly, as he spits up more blood and rolls to his side, groaning. Jill is sitting up, leaning against the wall, rubbing the side of her neck. Her eyes widen as I approach and I realize it's because I'm covered in blood.

“It’s not mine,” I say, kneeling down in front of her. “Come on, we have to get you out of here.” I pull one of her arms over my shoulders and gently help her stand. I pull my phone out of my pocket and dial 911.

“I need a police officer over here,” I say, giving the dispatcher the address.

“Come again?” she says.

“This is not a prank,” I say and repeat the address. I look at my father, who is rolling onto his hands and knees. “I need an ambulance, as well. Send an officer now. Send a few. Do whatever you have to do and get someone down here.”

“What do you think you’re doing.” His voice is muffled because he’s talking into the Persian rug, leaving great big blood smears all over the wool.

“I think I’m doing what someone should’ve done a long time ago.”

He raises his head, which is almost unrecognizable. It’s a good look for you, Dad, I think. “You think I’ll end up going to prison?” One of his front teeth has been knocked out. “You think they put people like me in prison?”

“I think they love putting people like you in prison.”

“And on what charges?”

“Oh, I don’t know Dad, I didn’t go to law school, remember? But let’s see . . . attempted murder, maybe? Or if that doesn’t suit you, I’m sure they could look into some of your offshore accounts. Or they could—”

“You had my father killed.”



Jill has stepped back into the room. The marks on her neck are already turning hideous shades of violet and midnight blue; I can see the impressions his thumbs made. Her voice is raspy, like she's got a severe case of bronchitis. She coughs and winces, but looks right at him.

My father stares at her for a minute and then looks at me. "Is this worth it?" he says. "Is some stupid whore worth it to you? You'll lose your inheritance. You'll get nothing. We will cast you out from this family, you can count on that."

"Doesn't matter," I say. "I don't actually want to be a part of this family. This family kind of sucks."

"You're an ungrateful piece of shit."

"No, Dad, you're wrong. I used to be. I'm not anymore."

I can hear the approach of sirens.

"You destroyed my family," Jill says, taking another step toward him. I put my hand on her shoulder and she stops but doesn't move back. "All for what? For money? Is that all that matters to you?"

My father looks down for a moment, as though he's actually considering this.

"Yes," he says. "When it comes down to it, that's all that really matters to anyone."

The blare of the sirens sounds like it's right outside the window. "Not to me," I say. I hear footsteps on the stairs. "Goodbye, Dad."

We spend the day at the hospital. I sit in the corner on a hard plastic chair while Jill gets evaluated. They take photos of her neck, and two detectives come in and take her

statement.

At one point, I get up and go out to get a soda. One of the detectives, a middle-aged guy who actually has a rather spectacular handlebar moustache, follows me.

“So this was your father?” he asks. “Your father did this?”

I slide quarters into the slot and look at my choices. When being interrogated by the law, nothing beats a Coke. I make my selection.

“That is correct,” I say. “Like we already told you.”

“Why do you think your father would do something like this?”

“For all the reasons Jill told you.”

“So in your mind, it’s within the realm of possibility that your father would have another man murdered.”

I retrieve the cold can and pop the tab. “Well, sure,” I say. “I mean, he just tried to kill my girlfriend, with his bare hands. I’d say ordering a hit on someone probably wouldn’t give him much pause.”

“Your mother seems to disagree.”

“You’ve talked to her?”

“Yes. We’re also trying to get in contact with your brother, Cameron. He’s not answering his phone, though. Do you know his whereabouts?”

“No.”

“While we know your brother was not officially affiliated with your father’s business, they did work closely together, correct?”

“I have no idea.”

“Do you think your brother knew anything about this?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

I take a sip of the drink, the fizzy sugariness coating my throat. “That’s a really great moustache,” I say.

He ignores the comment. “Does it surprise you to hear that your mother does not think your father is capable of doing something like this?”

“Look, I’m happy to help in whatever way is necessary, I really am. My parents have grown apart over the years, and honestly, my mom most likely had no clue what my father was up to in regards to anything. So if you’re asking me if she’s lying—she’s probably not. Hook her up to one of those polygraph machines, if you want.”

“That probably won’t be necessary.” He strokes that glorious moustache and then turns to walk off. “We’ll be in touch if we’ve got any more questions.”

“Great,” I say, wondering how exactly he plans on doing that since the only phone I’ve got is one I don’t even know the number to.

Finally, we leave the hospital. I want to go to my apartment, but Jill insists we go see her uncle, who is sending a car for us.

“I really need to talk to him,” she says. “I need to tell him he was right. That he was right all along.”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 5:58 am*

The car picks us up and takes us to the Upper East Side. The doorman lets us in and we take the elevator up to the penthouse, where her uncle is waiting when the doors open.

“Uncle Nate,” Jill says, and she runs to him and hugs him. “You were right about everything. I’m so sorry I didn’t listen to you.”

“Jill—what on earth is going on?” He lets go of her and scrutinizes her face, gripping her by the shoulders. Then he sees me and does a double take.

“Who . . . what are you doing here?” he says finally.

“Uncle Nate, this is Griffin. This is my uncle Nate,” Jill says.

I hold my hand out. Her uncle has the oddest look on his face, as though he recognizes me, though I’m fairly certain I’ve never seen the guy before in my life.

“Nice to meet you,” I say.

He’s still giving me a look like I just told him I eat shit for breakfast or something.

He stutters. “Hello,” he finally says, coughing. We shake hands, his palm slick with sweat. I wipe my hand on my jeans.

“Are you okay, Uncle Nate?” Jill asks.

He coughs again and shoots me a look, then turns his gaze to her. “Yes, Jill.

Everything's fine." He looks at her more closely. "What happened to your neck?"

We go and sit in the parlor. They start talking, and from what I get from the conversation, it sounds like Jill's uncle knew about this all along. After a little while, though, I zone out, and try to make sense of the fact that not only is my father a giant asshole, he's responsible for the death of one person and nearly killing someone else. So he's even more of a giant asshole than I thought he was. More ruthless, more sociopathic, just completely fucked up. What will happen now? It's hard to picture good old Dad in Sing Sing, but if I'm honest, that's exactly what I hope will happen.

I get up and use the bathroom. When I come back, Jill and her uncle are still talking, so I sit back down. From somewhere behind me, I hear the door open and footsteps approaching.

"Nate, you in?" a male voice calls.

I recognize that voice. It takes me a second, but then it clicks, and when he appears in the doorway, I'm not surprised to see he's got a pockmarked face and picket fence teeth.

"Bruce," Nate says, jumping up as Snaggletooth steps into the room. "This is my niece, Jill. And her boyfriend. Griffin."

The three of us stand there and I can feel the pieces falling into place, practically hear the click click as they align like gears on a watch.

Nate coughs again and Bruce extends his hand. "Nice to meet you both," he says.

"Have we met before?" I ask.

He too stutters and then clears his throat and shoots a surreptitious glance at Nate.

“No, I guess you’ve just got one of those faces,” I say, giving him a wink.

They start talking about the Yankees-Red Sox game coming up, and that’s as deep as the conversation gets. So I let it lie.

When I finally look at my phone, I have thirty-seven missed calls, mostly from Cam, a few from my mother.

“What the fuck is going on?” he shouts when I finally call him back. I hold the phone away from my ear. “Dad was arrested?! You had something to do with it?”

“You mean Carl? Yes, Carl was arrested. Would you like to know why? Oh, because he almost killed my girlfriend. Is Carl going to be adjusting to a new life of three hots and a cot? I’d say so, and for a long ass time.”

“DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOU’VE DONE?”

“The right thing, for once in my life. Look, Cam, I think Dad was involved in a whole bunch of shit we had no idea about. Like, bad stuff—”

“Oh my god.”

It sounds like he’s hyperventilating. Or crying. Maybe both.

“I’ve got to go. I’ve got to fucking go. Jesus Christ. You have NO IDEA how badly you’ve just messed things up, you moronic piece of shit! FUCK YOU, Griffin. FUCK!” He screams this last part, his voice cracking, and then the line goes dead. I stare at the phone for a minute. I take three deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth, then slip the phone back into my pocket.

Chapter 28: Jill

Testifying against the man who tried to kill me is not as cathartic as you might imagine. The courtroom is packed, and the entire time I'm being questioned I feel as though I'm stuck in a terrible dream where I'm on stage for a school play and I've forgotten all my lines. But I am able to look out into the sea of faces and find Griffin, and all he has to do is give me a little smile and I know that yes, I can get through this. Afterward, we fly back to California. There is no need to follow the rest of the trial or the ensuing media circus. The second session of camp starts up, and both Griffin and I dive back into the routine, glad for the distraction.

It's the night of the Beach BBQ, which has pretty much wound down to a few campers giggling in their tents. Griffin and I set up separate tents next to each other, but we both wind up outside, lying in the sand, looking up at an impossibly clear sky that looks like crushed velvet.

"Maybe you should be down there patrolling the shore for any more kidnapped men who happen to wash up," Griffin says. He's holding my hand, running his thumb in slow circles over my wrist bone. "You know, one that might be more handsome and better in the sack than I am."

I laugh. "You're actually the only person I want to be with. Even if your father did try to kill me."

"Oh yeah, that. Well, there's also the whole getting kidnapped by your uncle, so maybe it's a fair trade-off. Clearly, our families are both completely fucking insane."

"So then we probably are, too? I mean, it seems like such a bad way to start a relationship. That's what the basis of our relationship is: My uncle had you kidnapped; your father tried to kill me."

"Lift your head up a little," he whispers.

His breath is warm against my ear. I do, and he slides his arm under my neck and



pulls me toward him. I turn so I'm lying more on my side and drape my arm across his face, nestle my own face in the crevice where his shoulder meets his neck. "It doesn't matter what our families tried to do. Or actually, it does, because that's what got us together to begin with. So am I glad it all happened? Yes and no. Nobody wants shitty things to happen to other people, but sometimes they do, and sometimes good things come of it. Not to get all New Age-y on you or anything. But really, the way I see it for myself, anyway, getting kidnapped gave me this second chance to actually live a life that wasn't a total fucking waste. I don't know if it would've happened otherwise, or it might've taken a lot longer. And then I met you, and actually get to be with you, well, that just tells me for once I made the right choices."

It's an interesting way to look at things. And who knows? Maybe he's right. Maybe every bad thing that happens is just an opportunity for a second chance, for a better way of doing things. It has certainly brought the two of us closer, and we both, in a way, have a second chance at things, and I think that just maybe that means things will work out.

## Epilogue - Griffin

The day of Jill's graduation is warm and sunny. We drive over from our apartment in Hayes Valley to her mom's house to help her get ready for the ceremony. When Annabel is ready, I wheel her outside and help her get into the car.

"I just wish her father could be here to see this," she says. "But I'm really so proud of her."

The ceremony is long, and during a particularly verbose speech, I find myself daydreaming, thinking about the past year. I'd be lying if I didn't say that I occasionally miss the old days, but it's a fleeting type of longing, and not something I'd ever go back to if I could. My days now have a steadiness to them that I think of as a kind of rhythm, a balance that I never had before. I like nothing more than waking up in the bedroom of our third-floor apartment, the sun gently filtering in

through the curtains Jill and I picked out. I get up, make coffee, we have breakfast together. We get ready; she goes to the Sutter St. Women's Center, where she's doing an internship when she doesn't have class, and I head up to Marin, where I'm working as an intake counselor at the Morning Glory Rehabilitation Center. I get a paycheck every two weeks, directly deposited into my bank account. We pay our bills, we go out sometimes, still have great sex. Life is good.

I talk to Mom occasionally; I'm trying to get her to come out and visit, though she's resisting, for whatever reason. She is still recovering from everything that happened, and though she isn't living a life of poverty, Dad's legal fees depleted a significant portion of his wealth. Cam has disappeared. No one has heard from him, I've looked for his face on the cover of those supermarket tabloids, but nothing. The phone he gave me never rings, though I still keep it on my dresser and check it once in a while.

I don't know if I'll ever go visit my father in prison. Unlikely, but I occasionally think of writing him a letter. The only problem is I don't know what I'd write. Does he deserve a second chance as well? I'm not sure.

Annabel and I both yell our heads off when Jill's name is called, and she walks across the stage and gets her diploma. She's the hottest girl up there, by far, and I stick my fingers in my mouth and give her the loudest whistle I can.

When the ceremony is over, it takes us a little while to find her in the crowd. She comes over, diploma in hand, and I give her a bouquet of flowers (not orchids!) and a hug.

"Congratulations, sweetheart," I say. "You're a graduate."

"I am!" she says gleefully. She gives me a kiss. "Thank you for everything."

"Me? I hardly did a thing." I lean toward her, my mouth against her ear. "But I'll tell you one thing: I can't wait to take you home and properly celebrate."

She looks at me and grins. “I like the sound of that,” she says.

Much later that night, after Jill and I have celebrated her new status as college graduate in our own way, I get up to get a glass of water. The moonlight filters in through the curtains and throws narrow rectangular strips of lights across the hardwood floor. Seeing it reminds me for a second of the thin shaft of lights I first saw when I came to in that walk-in closet on the yacht, and I wonder: Maybe everything really does happen for a reason? I always believed you made your own destiny, the path you were supposed to follow was whatever one you chose to go down. But for everything that’s happened since I landed in Koh Phangan and made my way to the Full Moon party makes me think otherwise.

I set the glass down in the sink and head back into the bedroom. Jill is lying there, the sheet draped halfway across that long, gorgeous body of hers. For a moment, I lean against the doorframe and watch her sleep. I could do this for the rest of my life, I think. I could wake up next to this woman for the rest of my life and be totally and completely content.

I walk toward the bed when my dresser suddenly starts glowing. It’s the phone, Cam’s phone, and it rattles lightly against the wood as it vibrates, once, then twice. Text message. I go over and pick it up. It is from a number I don’t recognize, but the message is clear enough:

This is not over yet.

I think about texting something funny back, but then don’t. I wait to see if any more messages follow, but after a minute the screen darkens and then shuts off completely, though I can still see those five little words as if I were looking right at them.

I turn the phone off completely and put it in my sock drawer. Then I crawl back into bed, back into this wonderful bed where a very short time ago I was experiencing all the ecstasy and bliss a human is pretty much capable of. Now, though, I only feel a

tightening knot of uneasiness in my chest, swirling down toward my gut, full of the certainty that Cam will make good on his promise and that this is nowhere near from over.